Leon Trotsky

Role in Soviet government

As war commissar, Trotsky faced the formidable task of building a new Red Army out of the shambles of the Russian army (post WWI) and preparing to defend the communist government against the imminent threats of civil war and foreign intervention. Trotsky chose to concentrate on developing a small but disciplined and professionally competent force. His abandonment of the revolutionary ideal of democratization and guerrilla tactics prompted much criticism of his methods among other communists. Trotsky’s military policies were resisted unsuccessfully by a coalition of ultra-left (communist) “purists” and rival party leaders, --notably **Stalin**-- with whom Trotsky had a bitter rivalry.

With the triumph of the communist forces and the end of the Russian Civil War in 1920, Trotsky, retaining his office as commissar of war, turned his attention to the **economic reconstruction of Russia**. He first proposed a relaxation of the stringent centralization of War Communism to allow market forces to operate. Rejected in this, he endeavored to apply military discipline to the economy, using soldiers as labor armies and attempting to militarize the administration of the transportation system.

During the Civil War and War Communism phase of the Soviet regime, **Trotsky was clearly established as the number-two man next to Lenin**. In intellectual power and administrative effectiveness, he was Lenin’s superior and did not hesitate to disagree with him, but he **lacked facility in political manipulation to win party decisions.** Trotsky took a prominent part in the launching of the Comintern (a communist party) in 1919 and wrote its initial manifesto.

The struggle for the succession

**When Lenin was stricken with his first cerebral hemorrhage in May 1922, the question of eventual succession to the leadership of Russia became urgent.** **Trotsky,** owing to his record and his **charismatic qualities**, was the obvious candidate in the eyes of the party rank and file, but jealousy among his colleagues on the Politburo prompted them to combine against him. As an alternative, the Politburo supported the informal leadership of the troika composed of Joseph **Stalin**….

Lenin characterized Trotsky as a man of “exceptional abilities” but “too far-reaching self-confidence and a disposition to be too much attracted by the purely administrative side of affairs.” Just before he was silenced by a final stroke in March 1923, Lenin invited Trotsky to open an attack on Stalin, but Trotsky chose to bide his time, possibly contemplating an alliance against Zinovyev. Stalin moved rapidly to consolidate his hold on the Central Committee at the 12th Party Congress in April 1923.

Stalin banishes Trotsky

In 1924, Lenin dies, and Joseph Stalin becomes as the leaders of the USSR. Against Stalin’s stated policies, Trotsky calls for a continuing world revolution that would inevitably result in the dismantling of the Soviet state. He also criticizes the new regime for suppressing democracy in the Communist Party and for failing to develop adequate economic planning. In response, Stalin and his supporters launch a propaganda counterattack against Trotsky. In 1925, Trotsky is removed from his post; and is later expelled from the Soviet Union outright.

He was received by the government of Turkey and settled on the island of Prinkipo, where he worked on finishing his autobiography and history of the Russian Revolution. After four years in Turkey, Trotsky lived in France and then Norway and in 1936 was granted asylum in Mexico. Settling with his family in a suburb of Mexico City, he was found guilty of treason in absentia during Stalin’s purges of his political foes. He survived a machine-gun attack on his home but on August 20, 1940, fell prey to a Spanish Communist, Ramon Mercader, who fatally wounded him with an ice-ax. He died from his wounds the next day.

POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Describe Trotsky’s personality/character/skillset (in the context of the revolution)? What personal attributes helped him achieve political success, and win Lenin’s respect? Underline details to support your answer.
2. Describe Lenin’s relationship with Stalin.

1. Who was Trotsky’s rival? Who killed Trotsky? Why?

Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) was the dictator of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from 1929 to 1953. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union was transformed from a peasant society into an industrial and military superpower. However, he ruled by terror, and millions of his own citizens died during his brutal reign. Born into poverty, Stalin became involved in revolutionary politics, as well as criminal activities, as a young man. **After Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) died, Stalin outmaneuvered his rivals for control of the party.** Once in power, he collectivized farming and had potential enemies executed or sent to forced labor camps. Stalin aligned with the United States and Britain in World War II (1939-1945) but afterward engaged in an increasingly tense relationship with the West known as the Cold War (1946-1991). After his death, the Soviets initiated a de-Stalinization process.

The early years…

Stalin grew up poor and an only child. His father was a shoemaker and alcoholic who beat his son, and his mother was a laundress. As a boy, Stalin contracted smallpox, which left him with lifelong facial scars. As a teen, he earned a scholarship to attend a seminary in the nearby city of Tblisi and study for the priesthood in the Georgian Orthodox Church. **While there he began secretly reading the work of German social philosopher and “Communist Manifesto” author Karl Marx, becoming interested in the revolutionary movement against the Russian monarchy.** In 1899, Stalin was expelled from the seminary for missing exams, although he claimed it was for Marxist propaganda.

After leaving school, Stalin became an underground political agitator, taking part in labor demonstrations and strikes. He adopted the name Koba, after a fictional Georgian outlaw-hero, and joined the more militant wing of the **Marxist Social Democratic movement, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin**. Stalin also became involved in various criminal activities, including bank heists, the proceeds from which were used to help fund the **Bolshevik Party**. He was arrested multiple times between 1902 and 1913, and subjected to imprisonment and exile in Siberia.

Joseph Stalin’s Rise to Power

In 1912, Lenin (then in exile in Switzerland) appointed Joseph Stalin to serve on the first Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Three years later, in November 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. The Soviet Union was founded in 1922, with Lenin as its first leader. During these years, Stalin had continued to move up the party ladder, and in 1922 he became secretary general of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, a role that enabled him to appoint his allies to government jobs and grow a base of political support.

After Lenin died in 1924, Stalin eventually outmaneuvered his rivals (primarily **Trotsky**) and won the power struggle for control of the Communist Party. By the late 1920s, he had become dictator of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union Under Joseph Stalin

Starting in the late 1920s, Joseph Stalin launched a series of five-year plans intended to transform the Soviet Union from a peasant society into an industrial superpower. His development plan was centered on government control of the economy and included the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture, in which the government took control of farms. Millions of farmers refused to cooperate with Stalin’s orders and were shot or exiled as punishment. The forced collectivization also led to widespread famine across the Soviet Union that killed millions.

Stalin ruled by terror and with a totalitarian grip in order to eliminate anyone who might oppose him. He expanded the powers of the secret police, encouraged citizens to spy on one another and had millions of people killed or sent to the Gulag system of forced labor camps. During the second half of the 1930s, Stalin instituted the Great Purge, a series of campaigns designed to rid the Communist Party, the military and other parts of Soviet society from those he considered a threat. Cities were renamed in his honor. Soviet history books were rewritten to give him a more prominent role in the revolution and mythologize other aspects of his life. He was the subject of flattering artwork, literature and music, and his name became part of the Soviet national anthem. His government also controlled the Soviet media.

POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. Describe Stalin’s personality and character. How did he use his personal “assets” to move up the political ladder? Underline details to support your answer.
2. How would you describe Stalin’s feelings towards Lenin? How did Stalin handle threats?
3. Describe Russia under Stalin’s control. Write **3** or more complete sentences.