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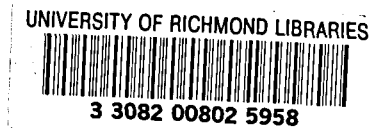
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Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Power in Communist Russia,
1921-1923

An Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts
and Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Department of History

By

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Richmond, Virginia
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Leon Trotsky stood as one of the most prominent Bolshevik members in Russia from the onset of the revolution in 1917 until his expulsion from the Communist Party and exile in 1927. He earned respect for his Marxist philosophy, organizational abilities, and brilliance as a public speaker. After the Revolution of 1917 and immediately following the Russian Civil War, Trotsky stood second only to Lenin within the Bolshevik Party in the eyes of the public. Trotsky, though joining the Bolshevik Party only on the eve of the revolution, had proved his abilities in inspiring the masses and also in creating the Red Army from the remnants of Russian Army, which was decimated by the effects of World War I and the revolution. His prominence at this time has led many historians to study and evaluate his career, and its rapid decline. Historians have been intrigued by how a man so brilliant, so popular in the eyes of the public, could have failed to take the reins of the Soviet government after Lenin's illness and eventual death left the Communists searching for new leadership. Stalin's rise to power and the tension created in the world by the Soviet emergence as a world power under Stalin's authoritarian control have only heightened interest in Trotsky's demise.

Two schools of thought have dominated most thinking regarding Trotsky and his career. One asserts that Stalin was the natural and inevitable successor to Lenin. This view was common during the Cold War, as many historians tried to argue against the whole notion of Communism by asserting that a leader like Stalin is the only kind of leader that sort of system will produce. The idea is that the Soviet state lends itself to dictatorial control and, even if Stalin had not been the individual to take power, a Stalin-like regime would still have been the result, regardless of who was at the top. This kind of thinking was dangerous because it discouraged the researching the alternatives to

Stalin. It created an environment whereby people would not study this period because there seemed to be no point. Stalin was destined to be the leader; there were no alternatives. Dmitri Volkogonov's work, Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary, shows some of this type of thinking. Volkogonov argues that Trotsky suffered from the authoritarian controls that he himself had instituted during the civil war. In this way, Volkogonov implies the same kind of inevitability, the kind of measures the Soviet state had to take to survive lent itself to control by a dictator. What makes this so interesting is that it did not come from a western historian, but rather from a Russian. Stephen Cohen challenged these ideas in his biography of Nikolai Bukharin. Cohen rejected the notion of historical inevitability, and he tried to prove that there were alternatives to Stalin, that one of them was Bukharin.

Cohen's book inspired my study. Trotsky may be seen as another alternative to Stalin, just as Bukharin was. I am not the first to see Trotsky as a viable alternative. But too often historians researching Trotsky have romanticized his life to the point that it defies reality. It is an easy trap to fall into as Trotsky from afar seemed so perfect, almost a foil to Stalin: a brilliant man, imaginative and bold, a speaker with enough fire to turn a crowd into a revolutionary force. Stalin did not seem to have any of these characteristics, and many people wonder how he could have prevailed. They also wonder what life would have been like had Trotsky, and not Stalin, taken control of the Soviet Union. How different would the world be? Trotsky has come to be one of Stalin's most famous victims, and for many historians his undying devotion to the Party has turned his life into one of a martyr. Isaac Deutscher's three-volume work on Trotsky, though obviously the most impressive work on the subject, in some ways falls into this trap. It is clear from the

title, identifying Trotsky as a prophet, that some sort of romanticism exists. Deutscher's work goes a long way toward answering some of the questions about Trotsky's life, and it is no doubt a starting point for this paper as well. But it is apparent that in some ways Deutscher falls victim the romantic notion of Trotsky as a person.

I have tried to avoid these ways of thinking, and get a clearer picture of Trotsky's fall from prominence. My work instead focuses on the period of the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP), in which many of the decisions being made affected the future of the Soviet Union. This is the environment in which the struggle for power took place, for it is at this time that Lenin's role in the Party began to diminish, and many Party leaders began to make moves to take control. This paper culminates with the historic Twelfth Party Congress of 1924, which for all intents and purposes ended Trotsky's significance in the Party.

In order to fully understand Trotsky's position in the Communist Party in 1922, it is important to take a brief look at his earlier political and revolutionary history in Russia. Trotsky's first work of significance came in 1902, as a member of the editorial board of the newspaper Iskra. It is here that Trotsky first met Lenin and began to work with major Bolshevik and Menshevik leaders. At this time, most of the major Communist leaders still worked together, and Trotsky began to distinguish himself within these circles as an able thinker, writer, and political theorist. The collaboration among these different Communist circles did not last long, as Lenin began to think more and more that professional revolutionaries needed to lead a Marxist revolution, rejecting the popular belief that revolution should come through the working class as a natural social and political movement.

Trotsky was one who denounced Lenin's more radical tone, and his disagreements with Lenin, which later became so significant and magnified, began at this point. Trotsky's book Our Political Tasks, written in 1904, in large part as a reaction against Lenin's notions of a reorganization of the Party, argued that the Party should not lead the revolution, but rather the social classes should lead. Trotsky was fearful of a movement that was not led by the masses, but rather by a small group of political vanguards. He wrote a prophetic statement that it seems he would unfortunately forget, "the party organization will substitute itself for the party, the central committee will substitute itself for the organization, and finally, a dictator will substitute himself for the central committee."¹ Trotsky also disagreed with Lenin over whether workers should be allowed to join the party, as Lenin maintained that only professional revolutionaries should comprise the political vanguard of the party. Trotsky's book was further characterized by personal epithets hurled at his former and would be political mentor. Some have argued that this was an example of Trotsky's youth, his romantic, impulsive temperament rebelling against authority.² But perhaps more importantly, this disagreement with Lenin shows much about Trotsky's strengths as an intellectual but weaknesses as a politician. His unyielding pride, self-assured individualism and independent judgement shone through in his disagreement with Lenin.³ Trotsky's stance against Lenin left him isolated in the political world. He was a revolutionary with no cause, and he had attacked the Bolsheviks but ultimately did not agree with the conservatism of the Mensheviks. He tried to seek a balance between the two factions but his attempts at reconciliation were completely unsuccessful. Lenin was already

¹ Leon Trotsky, Trotsky's Notebooks, 1933-1935 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 31-32.

² Robert Wistrich, Fate of a Revolutionary (New York: Stein and Day, 1979) 29.

displaying the unyielding will that succeeded in the times of crisis and revolution. He made up his mind about how he wanted the revolution to be run and was not willing to change his stance for anyone.

Trotsky's isolation rendered him largely inactive for the next decade. Slowly but steadily he and Lenin came to be on the same side on many issues, and as time passed the insults of the past seemed to fade away. Trotsky had changed many of his opinions regarding the work of the Communists, and he now favored revolution in the same way that Lenin did: with the leadership of a political vanguard made up of political revolutionaries and not the working class. They would not wait for the social forces to align themselves the proper way, for capitalism to develop in Russia, for the necessary period of development, and ultimately for the proletariat to throw off the chains of oppression and begin a new order in society. Trotsky agreed with Lenin's notion to seize opportunity where it presented itself. Trotsky finally reconciled fully with Lenin in May 1917, and he and his intellectual followers were allowed into the Bolshevik Party at the behest of Lenin. Despite the predominantly peasant nature of Russia, Lenin and the Bolsheviks saw the opportunity for revolution in 1917. World War I had left the country poor and bitter towards the Tsarist government. Bolshevik promises of "peace, bread, and land" were enough to attract the support of the masses. Lenin was further convinced that revolution would follow in the West, providing Russia with the necessary industry to survive as it set the example for communism throughout the world.

It is undeniable that the years of revolution and civil war were Trotsky's high point, standing alongside Lenin.⁴ His rise in the Bolshevik Party, which for so long he

³ Ibid., 36.

⁴ Dmitri Volkogonov, Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 101.

stood outside of, vilified as a Menshevik, was remarkable. He entered the party directly into its upper echelon, and displayed an ability as an orator and political agitator that gained him notoriety and popularity with the masses. His rise was not so well received by many others within the Bolshevik Party, the so called Old Guard, who had been by Lenin's side since the beginning, and knew well his dispute with Trotsky. These men grew jealous of Trotsky and his abilities, and Trotsky's own personality further hindered the relationship between him and the Old Guard. To the end of Trotsky's life he displayed an arrogance that lent nothing to personal relationships. It is evident even in his diary kept while in exile, which shows a disdain for many works written at the time. Unlike Lenin, Trotsky did not mince words if he felt that someone was missing the point. He was quick to point out flaws in someone's argument, and cared not for how this would affect his relationship with that person. Lenin himself wrote in his famous Testament, that while Trotsky "is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present [Central Committee] . . . he has displayed excessive self-assurance."⁵ This simple passage goes a long way toward showing how popular Trotsky may have been in the upper reaches of the Party. Even Lenin, probably his biggest supporter, was put off by parts of Trotsky's personality. His personality in no way endeared him to the band of career Bolsheviks who were known as the Old Guard. "The Old Guard was a formidable body of men. They were bound together by memory of heroic struggles."⁶ These men had ties to the Party long before Trotsky was even a member; now this "semi-Menshevik" was becoming so powerful he would not even recognize them. Everything about Trotsky,

⁵ Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, Lenin's Fight Against Stalinism (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975) 64.

including his fertile mind and oratorical boldness, gave the Old Guard a feeling of inferiority.⁷ His lack of friends in the upper reaches of the Party became that much more significant during the struggle to succeed Lenin, which was in fact a struggle for the most part limited to the upper reaches of the Party, and did not really involve rank and file members.

Stalin's rise in the Party was in direct contrast to Trotsky's. Stalin was a Bolshevik from the beginning, but he did not impress anyone with his amazing abilities or fertile mind, and much of his early political and revolutionary career was characterized by anonymity. For much of his early political career Stalin was a relative unknown. Stalin had been a committeeman and organizer, and did not distinguish himself in any theoretical discussion, preferring to stay in the middle on most arguments. Stalin was in every way a member of the Old Guard, and in every way that Trotsky was offensive to the Old Guard, Stalin stood in sharp contrast to him. His rise to power was not as obvious as Trotsky's, and had not come so suddenly and on the heels of the revolution. He had proved himself to be a solid organizer for Lenin, and his rise through the Party, though not as rapid or impressive as Trotsky's, was significant nonetheless. By the civil war both men held important posts in the Party, and it was during the civil war that Trotsky and Stalin first clashed with each other.

Trotsky played perhaps the most significant role in the Bolshevik Party during the civil war. The reason for this is that he for the most part constructed the Red Army on his own as Commissar of War. He headed the Revolutionary Military Committee, and riding a train to all the fronts directed the operations in the field of the Soviet army. Stalin

⁶ Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed--Trotsky: 1921-1929 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) 21.

frequently ignored the orders given by Trotsky, and on more than one occasion failed to meet the objectives set out for a certain area. Stalin continually tried to go over Trotsky's head, and for that reason Lenin many times had to serve as mediator between them.⁸ It is apparent from the time of the civil war that these two men could not work well together. The seeds of disagreement were planted here, and it is no wonder that Lenin predicted in his Testament that a struggle between these two men could lead to a split in the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky's arrogance inspired jealousy and distrust from the Old Guard, and Stalin would emerge as its leader. When a struggle for power would take place, Trotsky would find himself for the most part alone in the upper reaches of the Party.

The civil war was significant not only because of the tensions it generated between Stalin and Trotsky, but also the harsh tone that was introduced by Trotsky. Trotsky showed a willingness to do just about anything in the name of the revolution; he was willing to stand by the notion of the end justifying the means. Trotsky did what was necessary to reorganize the military, an organization that was nearly ruined but needed to battle the counter-revolutionary White Armies. Trotsky had to adopt harsh policies, and repression became a key part of the military structure. Part of the reason for this was the need for Tsarist officers as military specialists, and Party members seriously doubted the loyalty of their former oppressors. Trotsky demanded order and discipline from the specialists and from Party factions, and promised to handle either one "with complete mercilessness" should they become a problem.⁹ The danger with the policies of strict

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Volkogonov, 140-2.

⁹ Robert V. Daniels, ed., A Documentary History of Communism. Volume I: Communism in Russia (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984) 93.

discipline and harsh realities occurred when they spread to the public at large. The policy of war communism, with its industry directed toward the production of war materials and the policy of grain requisitioning, created an environment in which the peasants resented the government and the working class was decimated by service time in the army. The strict discipline that Trotsky demanded from his soldiers was now demanded of the peasants in the form of supplying the government with what it needed. Certainly this was not what many Bolshevik leaders had in mind at the inception of their revolution.

The civil war changed many party leaders' attitudes and goals, all in the interest of preserving the revolution. But how far would all this change go before the original goals they were trying to protect were subverted? Trotsky had used any means during the civil war to rebuild the army and defeat the White Armies. He did not have many opponents of his military policy, but he made no effort to court friends either. When he faced opponents within the Party leadership, Trotsky would appeal directly to Lenin rather than smooth over relationships.¹⁰ Many of the changes that occurred during this time were at Trotsky's behest, and Trotsky's popularity was never higher than during the revolution and civil war. Trotsky embraced Bolshevik Jacobinism: ruthless centralism and iron discipline. His self-confidence led him to excesses that, while protected by Lenin's hand, did not seem that extreme.¹¹ In his work Terrorism and Communism, Trotsky advocates the militarization of labor, and also the use of violence in the interest of revolution.¹² Trotsky did what was necessary to survive, but in this we find the seeds of a political machine founded on discipline and guaranteeing a revolutionary dictatorship. Trotsky's decline begins immediately following the civil war and the

¹⁰ Ibid., 186.

¹¹ Wistrich, 102.

policies he helped create. It would not be long before he was fighting against the centralism and unyielding discipline tinged with notions of violence and intimidation that he once supported. Within less than a decade following the civil war, Trotsky was dropped into the “memory hole” as Stalin rewrote history to his own liking.¹³ The struggle between Trotsky and Stalin, begun during the civil war, was only heightened by the end of the war and the advent of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The period following the civil war called for a change in policy from the hardships of war communism and “terrorism and communism.” The revolution of 1917 had itself seemed so easy, but it was quickly followed by years of civil war. The promises that the Party made of “peace, bread, and land,” were put on hold until the opponents of Bolshevism were defeated. Now that the civil war had ended, the Party had to face two harsh realities. The first was that the country was decimated by years of war and mismanagement, and the renewal of industry and agriculture was essential to the survival of the country. Those in the working class who had escaped death and starvation at the front had left the cities, and in 1921 Moscow and Petrograd had respectively only one-half and one-third of their former inhabitants. Russia’s national income was less than one-third and industrial output less than one-fifth of their pre-war levels.¹⁴ The peasant class was alienated and withholding grain from the government for its own benefit. The second problem and the more shocking one to the Bolsheviks was an absence of proletarian revolution elsewhere in Europe. Lenin believed, unlike the Mensheviks and most other Marxists in Russia, that a socialist revolution could occur in

¹² Daniels, 121-123.

¹³ Volkogonov, 193.

¹⁴ Leon Trotsky, The Challenge of the Left Opposition: 1923-1925 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975) 19.

predominantly peasant Russia without a well developed industry so long as a political vanguard in the form of the Bolshevik Party directed this revolution. He did not believe they needed to wait for social forces to align themselves properly, but he did believe that a key component of the success of the revolution had to come from further revolutions in the more industrialized West. Lenin and Trotsky both believed that Russia would need the help of an industrialized country to sustain its economy, and neither man gave much thought to what would happen if no revolutions followed. Each man firmly believed that revolution in the West was a foregone conclusion, especially considering the hardships of World War I. Much of the early policy of the Bolsheviks was done as a type of holding pattern, to maintain the country only so long until the necessary help from the West would arrive. This attitude is apparent in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, negotiated by Trotsky in March 1918. The Bolsheviks had no desire to remain in a war they identified as a war between imperialist nations, but they first used the treaty negotiations as a platform for propaganda. They remained confident that any treaty would be rendered useless anyway if the German Revolution were to come. Lenin sought immediate peace whatever the cost, and hoped for a German revolt. "It is the absolute truth that without a German revolution we are doomed."¹⁵ This separate peace that was ultimately signed was harsh towards the Russians. Germany was allowed to remain in all lands already occupied while Russia was forced to surrender all occupied lands. Russia was also forced to pay an indemnity of three billion rubles, payable over

¹⁵ Lenin's Report on War and Peace given to Seventh Party Congress, 7 March 1918, in Robert V. Daniels, ed., A Documentary History of Communism and the World (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1994) 18.

seven years.¹⁶ This treaty was agreed to by the Russians despite its strict conditions because Lenin and the Bolsheviks held the belief that proletarian revolution would succeed in Germany and void that treaty. The notion of survival at any cost is also apparent in the harsh policies of war communism. Amidst these circumstances, the Bolshevik Party began in 1921 a new course in the form of the NEP. But coupled with the relaxation of policies toward the masses, the Bolshevik Party decided the only way through these problems was through discipline and unity within itself, so that the political vanguard could provide a unified front without the problems of dissension.

Trotsky was very much in line with these views, and at the 10th Party Congress in March 1921, he said that the Party had an historical birthright to rule, and it was obliged to maintain its dictatorship over the working class and therefore the country.¹⁷ In as much as the 10th Congress was characterized by a relaxation of discipline for the country at large, it was also characterized by a tightening of discipline within the Party. In response to the "Workers' Opposition" and the "Democratic Centralism" group, the congress passed a resolution proposed by Lenin and supported by Trotsky to "realize the . . . impermissibility of factionalism of any kind."¹⁸ Trotsky could never fully resolve this conflict in his own mind, for he fully supported the notion of party unity, but also supported ideas of intellectual freedom. With the 10th Congress and this resolution, many of Trotsky's followers lost key positions to supporters of Stalin, who were more suited to maintaining party unity and making sure that others did as well. The Bolshevik Party was facing an uncertain future, but through all its policy shifts, one thing remained

¹⁶ Lenin "Theses on the Question of Immediate Conclusion of a Separate and Annexationsit Peace," in *Ibid.* 15.

¹⁷ Wistrich, 112.

¹⁸ Daniels, 139.

constant even then: Stalin and Trotsky were on opposite ends of every issue. The disagreements between these men sprung from an instinctive antagonism of temperaments, backgrounds, political inclinations, and personal ambitions.¹⁹ Lenin had kept their disagreements in the background for much of the civil war, but it would be thrust into the fore with the advent of the NEP.

The struggle for power in the Soviet Union was brought into the open with arguments involving the future of Russia and the policies of the NEP. Lenin did not hold the disagreements between Stalin and Trotsky in check any longer. Lenin took an active role in the arguments that involved the future of Russia, and he much more than Trotsky understood how strong his opponent really was. The NEP was an important policy because it introduced capitalist ideas into the economy with the idea of building socialism in Russia. The NEP was a controversial plan and there were many policy issues that caused great debate within the highest reaches of the Party, in the Central Committee and in the Politburo. The most important of these issues, around which the struggle for power was magnified, were the monopoly of foreign trade, the Georgia and nationalities question, and finally the issue of state planned economy. Trotsky did his best to play an active role in all these debates, but the everyday routine of the bureaucracy was lost on Trotsky. Many of Trotsky's talents, such as boldness and oratorical genius which served him so well in the revolution and the civil war, were ill-suited for the bureaucratic routine and organization that characterized the Party in Lenin's last years.²⁰ In this environment Stalin, the organizer and administrator, excelled and advanced. He not only worked the

¹⁹ Deutscher, 54.

²⁰ Robert D. Warth, Leon Trotsky (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977) 114

bureaucratic apparatus of the country to his advantage, but he had none of the personal attributes that alienated Trotsky from the rest of the Politburo.

It is important to note at this point that, while in theory the Central Committee (CC) was the policy making body of Russia, in reality the Politburo, comprised of a few members of the CC, was the real policy making body of the Russia. Lenin exercised considerable influence in the Politburo, and for this reason he was essentially the sole ruler of Russia, though in theory the government was supposed to be controlled by the Party as a whole. What this meant is that whoever controlled the Politburo controlled the country, and this is why the Politburo was constantly changing into different alliances and factions. As long as Lenin was alive, all these groups dared not challenge his authority, but it would not be long before Stalin recognized the necessity of allies within the Politburo. Trotsky found it unseemly to engage in a struggle for personal power, and he was generally inept as a politician.²¹ Trotsky's prominence and reputation were based in the successes of the revolution and the civil war, and in the public's eye he still held great esteem. But these political battles were to be fought in the upper reaches of the Party. Trotsky's position was again strong with the support of Lenin, but without Lenin Trotsky was simply a man without allies in the Politburo. His position within the Party in the 1920s was perhaps not as strong as many people believe.

Lenin and Trotsky had not begun on the same side of many of these issues, but arrived there slowly. Lenin began to question the problem of excessive bureaucracy, but he believed that it existed only in the government, with all its non-Party officials and people with a lack of understanding for Marxist doctrine. Trotsky was arguing that the dangers of bureaucracy had bled into the organizational structure of the Party as well as

the government.²² But it is clear that Lenin was not satisfied with conditions in the country and had clear reservations about the success of the NEP and the Party in building socialism. In his political report to the 11th Congress in the spring of 1922, Lenin expressed doubts that the NEP it was operating the way they wanted after one year. He said quite bluntly, "the machine refused to obey the hand that guided it."²³ Lenin continued by saying that the Communists were not directing, but were in fact being directed, by the machine. He was already fearful of the machine that was growing in Russia, and that if not run properly would continue to run the Party. Lenin said that the right people were not performing the right tasks, in that men who were great revolutionaries were directing industry, of which they know nothing. These statements were not exactly the same as those of Trotsky, but in essence both men were beginning to argue the same points. Trotsky was arguing for proper economic planning, but also for education and the training of people to become specialists who would know the right things to do. Lenin argued the same basic point, the need for specialists to do what they know best. From these beginnings, Lenin and Trotsky would come together completely on the issue of the monopoly of foreign trade.

The basic issue of the state monopoly centered on a resolution passed by the CC on 6 October 1922 in Lenin's and Trotsky's absence, which weakened the state monopoly of foreign trade. What this monopoly meant was that the state served as middleman between internal and external markets. The Russian government could buy flax from peasants at 4.5 rubles per unit, and sell it to Britain at 14 rubles per unit. This meant that the state would make a profit anytime these transactions occurred. By the

²¹ Ibid., 113.

²² Lenin and Trotsky, 14-15.

same token, Soviet factories produced tractors for 1000 rubles, while the same tractors were produced in America for 500 rubles. Since the state controlled the market, it could buy tractors from America for 500 rubles, then sell them to peasants for 1000 rubles. This not only turned a large profit for the government but it also protected Soviet industry by preventing America from underselling Soviet tractors. All this was contrary to the interests of the peasants, so it created a large environment for smuggling. The resolution that passed weakened some of the restrictions placed on peasants, and gave them the freedom to legally sell goods on the world market and keep profits for themselves.²⁴

Trotsky and Lenin both saw danger in this resolution, and the conflict began when Lenin sent a letter to Stalin on 13 October 1922 criticizing the decision. Lenin wrote that the decision was made too hastily, without enough discussion. He felt it was one thing to deal with individual smugglers, but this resolution would mean that many peasants would be smuggling. Lenin felt that the monopoly of trade was just beginning to pay off, and that this resolution only introduced chaos into the situation. He thought that just because the apparatus was imperfect one should not throw away the monopoly. Lenin asked Stalin to wait until he and Trotsky were allowed to speak on the issue themselves.²⁵ Lenin would wait until December to ask Trotsky for his support, but he found Trotsky was fully supportive of his views. Trotsky wrote, "maintaining and *strengthening* the monopoly of foreign trade appears absolutely imperative."²⁶ Trotsky at this time displayed more political knowledge than he would in later struggles with Stalin. He warned Lenin that their opponents would not attack straight on, but rather with flanking

²³ Ibid., 75.

²⁴ Ibid., 113.

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

²⁶ Ibid., 119. The italics were included in the original version of this letter written by Trotsky.

maneuvers or false attempts to improve the monopoly that would actually undercut it. Lenin asked that Trotsky defend their position, since his health prevented him from attending the December plenum to discuss the issue. He sent a letter to Stalin telling him to continue the debate without him, that Trotsky and he were in full agreement on the issue and that he would speak for both of them.²⁷ It is possible that the idea of Trotsky and Lenin working together made Stalin quite apprehensive, and necessitated his need for the support of two other Politburo members, Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev. These three would join together in a triumvirate whose purpose was to keep Trotsky out of power.

Lenin's actions and words are more telling to us now than they must have been to Trotsky at the time, in regards to the strength of their opponents and the danger of the state apparatus. Lenin was extremely apprehensive regarding their chances of victory, and asked Trotsky to announce their solidarity on this issue at the Plenum, and to fight with all his might against the possibility that their opponents would delay the issue.²⁸ Lenin was so fearful of their defeat that in several different letters he guaranteed that they would appeal this to the Congress and if necessary the rank and file in order to succeed. It is interesting that a man who has had no problem exerting his will and getting his way within the Party, a man who was the unquestioned head of Russia, should be so apprehensive about an issue that he had staked such a claim on. Lenin must have felt that on some level his opponents were gaining strength, and his fears of the apparatus and its hold in the Party led him to believe that he could be defeated. What Lenin did not realize

²⁷ Ibid., 123.

²⁸ Lenin to Trotsky, 15 December 1922, *The Trotsky Papers, Volume II, 1920-1922*, ed. Jan M. Meijer (Paris: Mouton, 1971) 785.

is that no one would stand up to him, but what Trotsky failed to recognize then and continually thereafter was the strength of his opponents and the gravity of the struggle.

Lenin's fears were forgotten in absolute joy when he and Trotsky won the argument regarding the state monopoly at the December Plenum. He sent a letter to Trotsky, congratulating him for taking the position "without a single shot, by a simple maneuver."²⁹ He urged that Trotsky not stop but continue the attack and raise the issue at the next session of Congress.³⁰ This in itself goes to show to an even greater extent Lenin's fears of his opponents. It had not been in Lenin's nature to continue the assault after victory is gained, but rather make pains to smooth over any bruised egos and move on. This was a personality difference he had from Trotsky; he was willing to have an argument and win without insulting his opponent. This is evident in his treatment of Kamenev and Zinoviev after their deviation in 1917 at the revolution's most critical hour. He did not harp on their mistake or continue the attack, but instead smoothed things over and allowed them back into the fold. But in this instance, he encouraged Trotsky to continue the attack and take the issue to the Congress, which he had originally identified as a last resort should they be defeated at the Plenum. The fact that Lenin was so surprised at the ease of their victory and that he wanted to continue the attack goes a long way to show how much he thought of his opponents. They had passed the initial resolution behind his back, and Lenin feared that the apparatus and bureaucracy would make it impossible to reverse this decision. Lenin was more and more coming to the belief that Stalin was performing badly within the Party. He no longer shielded him from

²⁹ Lenin to Trotsky, 21 December 1922, *Ibid.*, 789

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Trotsky, and instead joined Trotsky's side in arguments against Stalin. This development was heightened in the argument over Georgia and the question of nationalities.

Georgia was a significant problem in the Bolshevik plan to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Georgia had been under Menshevik rule during the civil war from 1918-1921. In February of 1921, the CC authorized the Red Army to invade Georgia and establish Bolshevik rule. The Politburo had acted on information from Stalin, as Commissar of Nationalities, and Grigory Ordzhonikidze, military commander of the Caucasian front, that assumed there was powerful popular support for a Bolshevik uprising in Georgia.³¹ Lenin had always supported self-determination for nationalities, and so along with the order to invade Georgia, Lenin sent a letter to the 11th army telling them to behave with respect toward the sovereign institutions of Georgia. He asked that they show particular attention and discretion towards the Georgian population, and that anyone violating this order even in the slightest way be prosecuted.³² As late as February 1922 Trotsky showed his support for occupying Georgia, writing to the Politburo that the Red Army should stay in Georgia, lest they leave it to "the mercy of imperialism."³³ By September of 1922, Lenin was beginning to have questions about the way Stalin and the Red Army were acting. He sent a letter to Kamenev and to the Politburo stating that Stalin had a tendency to rush things, and that his resolution regarding the union of the republics needed amending.³⁴ Here again we see the diplomacy with which Lenin dealt with people. But in the same way that his diplomacy disappeared by the end of 1922 on the trade monopoly question, so too would it disappear with respect to Stalin and the

³¹ Lenin and Trotsky, 127.

³² Lenin, letter dated 10 March 1921, *The Trotsky Papers*, 369.

³³ Trotsky to Politburo, 10 February 1922, *Ibid.*, 679.

³⁴ Lenin, letter dated 27 September 1922, *Ibid.* 749.

nationalities' question. Perhaps Lenin's ire was heightened by Stalin's response to his letter. It is significant in the sense that he openly disagreed with Lenin, which is quite out of Stalin's character. He was a relative unknown for so long and even in the 1920s, when debates raged about the future of Russia, he stayed in the middle, and never really took the brunt of anyone's assaults. This was a large factor in his success, allowing his enemies to tear each other down while he sat by and watched. But in this letter, he not only disagreed with Lenin but showed some of the tactics that he later perfected when arguing with someone. Stalin quoted from Lenin's letter, using his own words against him. He wrote that Lenin in fact rushed things, and he wondered if the partisans of independence would be emboldened by Lenin's words.³⁵ What later emerged and what angered Lenin was that Stalin was not just repressing the Mensheviks but had gone so far as to intimidate the Georgian Bolsheviks, whose leaders were P.G. Mdivani and F.Y. Makharadze.³⁶ Lenin no longer displayed any patience or diplomacy with Stalin. The Georgia case, coupled with the trade monopoly issue, had raised serious doubts about Stalin's abilities.

Lenin wrote "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomilation'" on 30 December 1922. In it he expressed regret for not having stood up sooner on the issue of Georgia, but he had believed his recovery from illness would come in time for either the October or December plenary sessions of Congress, at which point Lenin could address the issues in person. If things had gone so far that Ordzhonikidze had to apply physical violence then clearly the autonomilation plan was "radically wrong and badly timed."³⁷

³⁵ Stalin, letter dated 27 September 1922, *Ibid.* 753-55

³⁶ Deutscher, 50

³⁷ Lenin and Trotsky, 133.

One must remember that this operation was undertaken on the advice of Stalin, and Lenin certainly remembered it himself. Lenin wrote that Stalin allowed haste and infatuation with administration, a strong insult in Lenin's view, to play a fatal role. He said, directing his criticism at Stalin, "in politics spite generally plays the basest of roles."³⁸ Lenin questioned Stalin's abilities in office, but he also questioned the apparatus that allowed such events to happen. Ordzhonikidze was wrong for his actions, but so was Feliks Dzerzhinski, a member of the Central Committee who played an active role in the Georgia affair alongside Stalin, for his casual attitude regarding the resort to violence. Both of these men acted inexcusably, with a Russian frame of mind³⁹ and without restraint. Lenin wrote that these actions do not come from a communist apparatus, but rather from Tsarism only minimally consecrated Soviet. Lenin wrote that this apparatus was not our own, but a Tsarist apparatus that had been tinged with Soviet oil. He was fearful of an imperfect machine that was still exercising control.⁴⁰

In a continuation of his notes dated 31 December 1922, Lenin railed against Stalin personally.

The Georgian [Stalin] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of 'national-socialism' (whereas he himself is a real and true 'national-socialist,' and even a vulgar Great Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity.⁴¹

Lenin was essentially accusing Stalin of bourgeois-nationalist sentiments. He wrote that Stalin did not understand the basics of the proletarian class struggle. The fact that Lenin would hurl such a comment at not just a Communist, a member of the Party, a

³⁸ Ibid., 134.

³⁹ This is another insult from Lenin; he would rather they act with a Bolshevik mind. National pride had no place in international communism.

⁴⁰ *The Trotsky Papers*, 803.

⁴¹ Lenin and Trotsky, 136.

lifetime revolutionary, but a member of the Politburo, goes to show how far his opinion of Stalin had fallen. Lenin was fearful of the apparatus, but also of the people who were benefiting from it. Lenin wanted to continue the attack on Stalin, not just on the trade monopoly but on all fronts. Lenin must have felt that his absence from inner party affairs had lessened his influence, and he now saw an enemy in Stalin. He found an ally in Trotsky, who was in agreement with him on all the important issues. But what is important is how Trotsky failed to see what Lenin must have seen in Stalin: a powerful opponent who either as a result of the apparatus or simply the manipulator of it wielded great influence. Lenin wrote that Ordhonikidze must be punished, but that "the political responsibility for all this truly Great Russian nationalist campaign must, of course, be laid on Stalin and Dzerzhinski."⁴²

Lenin sent out two letters, dated 5 and 6 March 1923, and both labeled top secret. The first was to Trotsky, asking him to undertake the defense of the Georgian case, because it was under "persecution" by Stalin and Dzerzhinski, and he "cannot rely on their impartiality."⁴³ The second was to the Georgians Mdivani and Makhardze expressing his support for their cause and his indignant feelings for Ordhonikidze's rudeness and the connivance of Stalin and Dzerzhinski.⁴⁴ This letter was copied to Trotsky, but also to Kamenev, who undoubtedly showed it to Stalin. Stalin now knew that Lenin was not holding anything back, and Trotsky later claimed that Lenin wanted to form a bloc with him to clean up the bureaucracy, and his first victim was to be Stalin. Trotsky also later wrote that Lenin promised a bombshell for the 12th Party Congress, he

⁴² Ibid., 137.

⁴³ Ibid., 139

⁴⁴ Ibid.

also warned Trotsky not to trust any rotten compromise from Stalin in regards to the Georgia question.⁴⁵

Trotsky responded to Lenin's warnings with his "Thoughts on the Party: National Question and the Education of Party Youth." He said the nationality issue boiled down to a struggle between proletarian Russia and the peasantry of Turkestan, Ukraine, and Georgia. In the same respect that the world is divided by the West European proletariat and the East peasantry, the Soviet Union must be the proving ground for the relationship between these two forces in a communist backdrop. The issue cannot be colored with thoughts of nationalism.⁴⁶ Trotsky argued that alienating and insulting the Georgian peasantry through predatory or nationalist sentiments would only lead them to Menshevik and bourgeois elements.⁴⁷ He felt that the party needed a refresher course, its youth a beginner course, on the national question. Trotsky returned to the same theme he would use in all arguments: the need for education so that people will know how to act in the right communist fashion. Trotsky had no problem standing for what he believed in, and with Lenin's support anything was possible. These were the two most prominent members of the Party, and for this reason many have identified him as the natural heir to Lenin's throne. But it must be remembered that Trotsky, though popular with the people, was alone in the Politburo, where the struggle was to take place. Lenin was his only support, and when another stroke incapacitated Lenin, Trotsky was left to himself to defend their positions. But many have argued that Trotsky still had enough ammunition with what Lenin had recently said to defeat his opponents, so why did he not act? In this respect we must look at what Trotsky was doing and thinking during this time period.

⁴⁵ Deutscher, 90.

⁴⁶ Lenin and Trotsky, 140-41.

Trotsky's main focus during these years was economic planning. It is prevalent in his discussions on any issue, be it the trade monopoly or even the nationalities. Trotsky reiterated the notion that planning was needed to function as a government. More specifically, Trotsky wanted to grant legislative powers to the State Planning Commission, Gosplan, so that it was not just a body planning initiatives but also acting on them. As early as 7 August 1921, Trotsky sent a letter to a Plenum of the CC to free Gosplan from the bureaucracy and to grant it power to act on its plans.⁴⁸ For a long time Lenin was not supportive of Trotsky's notions of a planned economy, for he believed that the economy itself was not developed enough to plan effectively.⁴⁹ The two leaders continued to disagree in April of 1922 when Lenin wrote a letter regarding the functions of deputies in government. These deputies headed the different departments in the government, such as the Deputy of People's Commissars or the Deputy of Agriculture. In theory, these men should be the top decision maker within their department. Lenin wanted these deputies to oversee and make sure that orders were executed properly in regards to the economy, and in so doing oversee the functioning of the apparatus. Trotsky thought that officials in government should not have deputies overseeing them, but rather they should be properly trained to know what is right and act accordingly. He felt that the problem was not that officials ignored and did not carry out orders, but rather that these government administrators were so badly trained that orders were carried out incorrectly. Trotsky criticized the haphazard decision making at the top.⁵⁰ He thought that economic disorganization was the key problem, and this was the point where

⁴⁷ Ibid., 140-41.

⁴⁸ The Trotsky Papers, 579-83.

⁴⁹ Deutscher, 42.

⁵⁰ Lenin and Trotsky, 81.

Gosplan was most needed. Trotsky believed that so many departments were given overlapping tasks and on top of that other departments were charged with overseeing the different acting departments, that it created utter chaos. He felt that if all planning and organizational activity were centralized in Gosplan, much of this chaos and disorganization would be removed.⁵¹ He disagreed with Lenin on the notion that inspectors such as those in the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (Rabkrin) could help revitalize the apparatus and assure the proper planning and execution of orders.⁵²

Trotsky's attacks on Rabkrin were in every way an attack on Stalin, for it was Stalin who headed Rabkrin from its beginning until he was appointed General Secretary in 1922.

Trotsky had no faith in Rabkrin's ability to produce good officials and administrators from non-party workers and peasants. For this he felt that only proper schooling would do. Trotsky was extreme in his criticism of Rabkrin, "We must not shut our eyes to the fact that those who work in Rabkrin are mainly officials who have come to grief in various other fields."⁵³

Trotsky was obsessed with the notion of central planning, and it was his main focus even when arguing other points. But Trotsky's desire for a planned economy came from a realization of the disorganization that existed in the government. He, before Lenin, understood that the apparatus, the machine, the bureaucracy, had bled into the Party from the state and was threatening to bring the Party down. When Lenin came to this realization toward the end of his life, he was willing to go to extreme measures to stop its advance. He wanted to form a bloc with Trotsky to fight the bureaucracy and with their early success on the trade monopoly question, he wished to carry the attack

⁵¹ The Trotsky Papers, 735.

⁵² Lenin and Trotsky, 71.

into the next Congress. On the Georgia question, the full realization of the bureaucracy came to Lenin and the fact that Stalin was a motivating force behind it. Lenin promised a bombshell for the 12th Congress, and one can only imagine that it in some way was similar to his postscript to his Testament, in which he calls for the removal of Stalin from the position of Party General Secretary (GenSec). It is clear that the prospect of the bureaucracy overrunning the Party had frightened Lenin to no end. Yet it seems Trotsky had these same fears for much longer. So why did he not act as decisively as Lenin?

When Stalin was appointed to the position of GenSec in 1922, Lenin had tried to get Trotsky to accept the position of Deputy Chairman of People's Commissars, essentially a vice-premier. In title this would make Trotsky second only to Lenin in the government, and many have argued that this would have assured Trotsky's position as heir to Lenin. Trotsky declined the position, believing it to be a demotion since there were already three deputy chairmen.⁵⁴ His attacks on government help to better explain the reasons for his refusal. While many believe that this would have given him a better position and leverage against Stalin, it is clear that at the time Trotsky did not believe that this position held any real power. In September of 1922, Stalin arranged passage of a resolution in the CC, while Trotsky was absent, appointing Trotsky to the position of vice-premier. Lenin had also asked Trotsky in private to once again accept the position of vice-premier, and Trotsky again argued that the position was useless so long as the abuses of the bureaucracy were tolerated in the Party's leading bodies.⁵⁵ In a response to the Politburo at the beginning of 1923, Trotsky outlined his reasons for not accepting the position. He said that if the CC appointed him to the position he would agree, but the

⁵³ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁴ Warth, 115.

decision would be irrational and counter to all of his organizational and administrative plans. The existence of the Deputy Chairman position was harmful in that it took good people from specific posts and put them in an undefined post responsible for everything and yet nothing.⁵⁶ Trotsky for so long argued that there needed to be more centralization, not more departments, and to accept this position would have been a complete contradiction for Trotsky. It did not make sense for him to accept a post that he had been criticizing for so long. What benefit would it serve, other than to possibly further his career? Some have argued that this was Trotsky at his best, turning down a position that could glorify his own name because he did not feel it bettered the Party, acting as a true Communist should. But that in many ways misses the point. Whether or not Trotsky really did have large aspirations was not the issue. The issue was that Trotsky felt the position was meaningless, to the point whereby his accepting it would in his mind not help him at all, but rather act as a demotion, reducing his importance in the government. Trotsky told Lenin that the Orgburo, Politburo, and Secretariat had been making all the major decisions of the Party, regardless of the interested department or deputy chairman.⁵⁷ The deputy chairmen were out of the loop, and until a reorganization of the government was effected the position of deputy chairman was meaningless. To Stalin he replied that appointing him the Deputy Chairman to oversee the Supreme Council of the National Economy would only divide responsibility and introduce uncertainty and confusion where clarity was needed.

Stalin attacked Trotsky, saying that he turned down the vice-premier position because he wanted something bigger. The comparisons to Napoleon were inevitable.

⁵⁵ Deutscher, 68-9.

⁵⁶ Trotsky to Politburo, 15 January 1923, The Trotsky Papers, 819.

The communists at this time frequently compared their situation to that of the French Revolution, not only for guidance but also for things to avoid. Trotsky, as the charismatic head of the Red Army, stood as the natural equivalent to Napoleon. Who would people look at as a dictator in the wings: the obscure functionary Stalin, or Trotsky, the man with the support of the military who had played an authoritarian role in the civil war and in dealing with the Workers' Opposition?⁵⁸ The whisper campaign was impossible to stop, and whatever friends Trotsky did have in the upper echelon of the Party now had reason to mistrust him. A man who had been a Bolshevik for less than half a decade now stood as the potential successor to Lenin; this was wholly unacceptable to many in the Politburo, and specifically Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Stalin. Trotsky took great pains to dispel the accusations that he was angling to become dictator, perhaps in many ways at the expense of his own political career.⁵⁹

Trotsky and Lenin forged an alliance that grew stronger over time. As Lenin became more and more appalled by the strength of the bureaucracy, he became more and more inclined to support Trotsky's views on issues such as the trade monopoly and the Georgia question. By the end of 1922, Lenin would also come to terms with Trotsky's ideas about state planning, and as he promised to form a bloc with Trotsky he supported him as much as he could in such poor health. Trotsky wrote many years later that his and Lenin's solidarity guaranteed the passage of questions in the Politburo without dispute.⁶⁰ But as Trotsky also wrote in his later, exile years, Lenin held the central lever of power as the unofficial head of the Politburo. The second lever of power, that of implementing

⁵⁷ Ibid., 821.

⁵⁸ Wistrich, 124-25.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁰ Leon Trotsky, Trotsky's Diary in Exile, 1935 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 85.

central decisions, was Stalin's as the GenSec. When Lenin fell ill, Stalin was given the central lever of power, though it was seen as only provisional, until Lenin returned.⁶¹ Stalin used this time to advance his own aims, and used as much of his influence as GenSec and support of his allies Kamenev and Zinoviev to position himself at the head of the Soviet Union. Trotsky's observation regarding the levers of power in the Soviet Union, given the benefit of hindsight and importantly ignoring his own role in the struggle, is still in many ways at the heart of the issue. Trotsky, with the support of Lenin in the Politburo, was unstoppable. When Lenin's last stroke left him completely incapacitated, Trotsky was left only with his own words and the last words of Lenin as his defense. He faced a group of Old Guard Bolsheviks who mistrusted him and despised him, three of whom organized on the principle that they could not bear to see Trotsky in charge of the country. But still people want to believe that Trotsky had many opportunities to confound his opponents and take charge of the Party, specifically at the 12th Party Congress. He and Lenin had quite recently quieted opponents on the trade monopoly and most especially on the Georgia question. Finally, Lenin's last known writings carried a few mini bombshells in their own right, and it was these writings that people argue should have been Trotsky's main focus at the 12th Party Congress.

Lenin's fears of the way in which the Party had developed, into a band of a few men controlling a bureaucracy from the top, were highlighted in his recommendation to the 12th Party Conference for the reorganization of Rabkrin. His criticism of Rabkrin is undoubtedly a criticism of Stalin, and Lenin again does not mince words. "Rabkrin does not enjoy at the present moment a shadow of authority. Everybody knows that a worse

⁶¹ Leon Trotsky, The Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1929 (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1975) 40.

organized institution . . . does not exist.”⁶² Lenin began by recommending that Rabkrin be reduced to about 400 members, whereas about 100 nonparty workers should be elected to increase the Central Control Commission (CCC). Lenin wrote that the Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat had gained too much power, and that the power should be returned to the CC. He thought the CC should have meetings every two months, and, when combined with an enlarged CCC, would represent a true supreme party conference.⁶³ It is interesting that Lenin was making the same criticisms of the power structure of the Party that Trotsky had made to him when declining the position of Deputy Chairman. He further enforced Trotsky’s emphasis on education in building the proper state apparatus. He thought that proper schooling, combined with stricter requirements before acceptance into Rabkrin, would help improve the overall structure.⁶⁴

Lenin’s attack on the bureaucracy continued in the notes from his Testament, in which he fully supports Trotsky’s notion of giving legislative function to Gosplan. He remarked that it seemed silly that he was once opposed to this idea, since it seemed only natural that Gosplan, with all the expertise, should act on its own knowledge. It should have independence and self-reliance, governed by its own officials and their conscientiousness. Further agreeing with Trotsky’s opinions, Lenin argued that these men could come only from a proper education system, training Russians how to be good communists and know the way to enact proper communist policies. Though Lenin does call for a periodic check on these officials, since he believed it inevitable that they would at some point be poisoned with bourgeois ideas, he argued that this inspection should

⁶² Lenin and Trotsky, 47.

⁶³ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 93.

come from within Gosplan, and not Rabkrin.⁶⁵ This was the last issue that Trotsky and Lenin had disagreed on, and in some of his last writings Lenin came fully into agreement with Trotsky. His tone in this work is slightly more favorable to Trotsky than his earlier Testament had been, but was not nearly as harsh towards Stalin as his postscript to the Testament, dated 4 January 1923.

Lenin's Testament, as it is now called, began as a warning to the members of the Politburo about the stability of the Central Committee. Lenin correctly prophesized that the danger of a split in the CC lay in the relationship between Stalin and Trotsky. Lenin recommended an increase in the size of the CC, and the return of legislative powers to the CC. He was fearful that the government had gotten to a point where it was simply in the hands of a few people, and that these people could split and cause a huge rift in the Party and the country. Lenin wished to return the control of government to more of the Party at large, rather than simply a few select people. Included in his Testament was an evaluation of the key people within the Politburo. He identified Trotsky as a man of outstanding ability and perhaps the most capable man in the Party. But he criticized Trotsky for his excessive self-assurance. Many people have interpreted this statement differently, either as a critique of his leadership abilities or a warning to Trotsky to change his ways. The point is that Trotsky should have taken more from this sentiment than he did. Stalin, as the GenSec, "has unlimited authority in his hands, and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution."⁶⁶ We have seen the evolution of Lenin's opinion of Stalin and the machine that he had learned to manipulate. Lenin had dropped many hints as to his true opinion of what

⁶⁵ Lenin's notes dated 27 December 1922, *The Trotsky Papers*, 799. Also found in *Lenin and Trotsky*, 85.

⁶⁶ *Lenin and Trotsky*, 64-5.

should be done to Stalin, and in his postscript he says it quite bluntly. “Stalin is too rude and this defect . . . becomes intolerable in a general secretary.” He recommended the removal of Stalin, and his replacement with someone who is “more tolerant, more loyal, more polite, and more considerate to the comrades, less capricious, etc.”⁶⁷ This may be simply the words of a man angry at another for insulting his wife. But it is clear that Lenin’s opinion of Stalin had deteriorated over time, and it all culminated in an incident with Lenin’s wife, in which it seems Stalin was extremely rude to her over the phone. Whether or not this was the bombshell Lenin planned for the 12th Congress is unsure, but Lenin’s words give ample ammunition to Trotsky for use in an argument. He even went so far as to say that Stalin should be removed from the position of GenSec, the basis of his power and the center around which the machine rotated.

With Lenin’s strong words, the beginning of March was a bleak time for the triumvirate of Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Stalin. The Georgian affair had been the latest defeat, and Lenin’s warnings to Trotsky not to accept a rotten compromise from the triumvirs seemed to spell doom. But Lenin’s final stroke, the one that incapacitated him, emboldened the triumvirs. Trotsky had a meeting with Kamenev in which he agreed to not punish Stalin and to turn over all of Lenin’s notes on the issue to the Politburo. Trotsky agreed in an article on March 20, appearing in *Pravda*, that he would not upset the status quo provided an effort for serious change occurred. Despite Lenin’s warnings, Trotsky entered into the 12th Party Congress by making a rotten compromise with the triumvirs.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁸ Warth, 126.

The 12th Congress was characterized by homage's to Lenin and Trotsky, and some to Kamenev and Zinoviev, while almost none were given to Stalin. On the surface it appeared as every other congress had since the revolution, as though nothing was different. But underneath the surface, the triumvirate was closing ranks. This congress was in reality dominated by the triumvirate: Kamenev presided over it, Zinoviev enunciated policy, and Stalin manipulated the Party machine.⁶⁹ Trotsky remained passive throughout the entire congress, and the great irony was that when the Georgian issue was raised, it was in fact Stalin who spoke in their defense. Trotsky said nothing, and honored the agreement he had made with the triumvirs to remain silent and to not publish Lenin's notes on the issue so long as serious change was enacted.⁷⁰ Most people are astounded at this congress. How could Trotsky not stand up and defend the Georgians? How could he not follow through with Lenin's wishes and publish his Testament, and ultimately remove Stalin from his position of power? Some people believe that Trotsky's position was so strong, he could have barely lifted a finger and been successful at the 12th Congress.

This kind of thinking misses some key points in Trotsky's character. The first was his undying devotion to the Bolshevik/Communist Party. When he joined the Bolshevik Party after years of estrangement, he came to it after years of contemplation. He always said in his own defense that he did not arrive at the decision to be a Bolshevik haphazardly, but after years of consideration. What this meant was that his devotion was that much stronger, when he joined he joined fully and without regret. Trotsky had supported the notion of Party solidarity from the 10th Congress, and was not one to go

⁶⁹ Deutscher, 97.

⁷⁰ Lenin and Trotsky, 21.

back on his word. Trotsky defended the Communist Party in Russia until almost the end of his life. In many speeches around the world, he remained convinced that the bureaucracy of Stalinism was only a cancer, and though a potentially deadly one, it was a problem that could still be fixed. Despite the failings of Stalinism, Trotsky continued to defend the Soviet Union. He argued that even though it was flawed it was still the only country that featured a dictatorship of the proletariat. At the very least it put the interests of the proletariat above all others.⁷¹ This sort of devotion, to a party which had exiled him and sent him away as an outcast, with a leader who would rather have him dead, says a good deal about Trotsky's silence. He did not need to attack his fellow Party members in the Politburo, for whatever he thought of their intelligence they were all still ultimately Communists and would do what was right. Everyone in the Politburo was telling him that the notes on the Georgian issue and Lenin's Testament should not be published. Trotsky had agreed to not push the arguments, so who was he to break such an agreement?

Trotsky's devotion to the Party is further evidenced by a speech he gave to the 13th Party Congress, at which point he was being vilified for his "Left Opposition," and under persecution for writings such as "The New Course," and "Lessons of October." These writings had come after the 12th Congress, and were in many ways what people felt Trotsky should have been doing all along. The "New Course" harped on his ideas of organization in the economy, but also called for the younger generation to take a more active role in the affairs of the Party. Trotsky was criticized for trying to manipulate the younger generation against the Old Guard. "Lessons of October" was an introduction to

one of Trotsky's books in which he looks back at the Russian Revolution, glorifying his own role and reminding people of Zinoviev and Kamenev's dissension from Lenin at this time. He was again criticized for giving an unclear account of the events, and for bringing up events from the past that were now irrelevant. In the midst of all this uncertainty, Trotsky delivered a vote of confidence to the Communist Party.

"None of us wants to be or can be right against the party. In the last analysis, the party is always right, because the party is the sole historical instrument that the working class possesses for the solution of its fundamental tasks."⁷²

Trotsky's devotion to the Party is almost sad in its defeatist nature. But more of that speech gives a better idea of what Trotsky was thinking. "The Party could not make any decision, no matter how incorrect and unjustified, that could shake by even one iota out total devotion to the cause of the Party, and the readiness to shoulder the responsibility of party discipline under all circumstances."⁷³ To many people these famous words from Trotsky's speech in 1924 have taken on a romantic quality. Here was a man ready to sacrifice himself, to do what the Party told him against perhaps his better judgement, because he was certain in the overall rightness of its cause. In some sense it is as though his sacrifice was the means to a greater end. But the problem with this argument is that Trotsky had shown a willingness to say what he believed to be right before. In late 1922, he spoke out on the issues of economic planning and the Georgia case, only then with the support of Lenin. He would do so again after the Twelfth Congress, when his position in the Party was much less secure and his words did not

⁷¹ Leon Trotsky, The Russian Revolution (London: H. Atkinson, 1946). Trotsky's speech was delivered in Copenhagen in November 1932.

⁷² Leon Trotsky, speech delivered May 1924, in Naomi Allen, ed., The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-25 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975) 161.

carry with them the weight they once did. Yet in 1923, with essentially the same arguments raging, he is willing to submit to the will of the Party, even if it is wrong, simply for some notion of the defense of the proletariat. This idea of his devotion and solidarity to the Party is not wrong, but it has been exaggerated and romanticized too far. A simple devotion to the Communist cause does not fully explain why Trotsky did almost nothing at the 12th Congress, as all his opponents maneuvered against him and ignored the wishes of Lenin. Trotsky's devotion to the Party had never meant willing submission, it meant arguing for what he thought was best for the future of the Party. The two more significant influences preventing him from action were the idea that it was not his place to cause a stir in the Party, and also that he saw no need for him to attack his opponents.

Since Lenin was the one who had initiated the struggle against the bureaucracy and in some ways against Stalin, Trotsky thought it was his battle to be fought. Further complicating the situation was the problem of Lenin's health: his last stroke had not killed him but had left him completely incapacitated. Despite this condition, doctors for a long time thought that he had a chance for recovery. Trotsky held Lenin in very high esteem. Though Trotsky did not seem to keep many close friends, Lenin was at the very least his mentor and also his peer. Whenever Trotsky references Lenin and his writings, it is always with a great amount of respect and awe, and in some ways almost affection. Trotsky had worked closely with Lenin for a long time, and though a very arrogant man with regard to ideas, he held Lenin in the highest esteem. Trotsky did not want to take up Lenin's fight and have people think that he was aiming for Lenin's mantle. He was already struggling with rumors about his potential Bonapartism, and he did not want to

⁷³ Ibid, 162.

fuel these rumors by taking Lenin's fight "when Lenin was struggling with death."⁷⁴

That to him seemed cold and calculating, and ultimately he believed that it was not his battle to be fought.

At the 12th Congress, Trotsky focused only on economics, and specifically on economic planning. To Trotsky, economic planning was his most important issue, he had talked about it when discussing the trade monopoly, and in some ways when talking about the nationalities question. Economic planning meant more to Trotsky than it did for anyone else. It also involved issues such as the reorganization of the government and the rebuilding of a proper Party apparatus. To Trotsky, the failings of economic planning were the failings of the party apparatus and the Stalin-led bureaucracy that was controlling it. Trotsky's plans for reorganizing the economic planning were symptomatic of his greater plans to ultimately reorganize the government into a more effective and functioning body. Trotsky recognized the Party's responsibility in the creation of the bureaucracy. "This machine . . . did not drop onto our shoulders, but was created by us under the pressure of historical necessity." But Trotsky looked to the 12th Congress as a chance to change the way government was run. "Who is responsible? We all are, and we shall answer for it."⁷⁵ Trotsky's arguments for economic planning were not an example of him giving up, it was simply what he thought was most important at that time. When he discussed economic planning it did not signify that he did not care about what was going on with inner Party affairs. Trotsky had for so long identified Gosplan as the most important issue facing the Russian government. It only makes sense that this is what he talked about, this is to him what the future of Russia depended on.

⁷⁴ Lenin and Trotsky, 51.

⁷⁵ Trotsky, "Tasks of the 12th Congress," 5 April 1923, in *Ibid.*, 107.

Trotsky's arrogance also may have contributed to his lack of political maneuvering and foresight. Trotsky must have felt on some level that any opponents were still too fearful to make a move for power in the wake of Lenin's harsh words. Ultimately this opinion stemmed from an underestimation of his opponents in the struggle and also the type of struggle that he was involved in. Though Trotsky had had disagreements with Stalin in the past, he failed to recognize him as a true adversary, worthy of his time. Trotsky, like everyone else, looked mostly to Zinoviev out of the three triumvirs as his most dangerous opponent. This underestimation of Stalin as an adversary was coupled with his failure to understand the importance and nature of the struggle. While the triumvirate was for the most part angling quite simply for political position, Trotsky was arguing on the plain of ideas.

Trotsky viewed this highly political battle as simply an argument of ideas, and this highlights not only his lack of political savvy, but also his underestimation of his opponents in this struggle. Not only did he fail to recognize the gravity of the struggle he was in, but he also identified his main adversaries as Kamenev and Zinoviev, not Stalin. The fact that Stalin was organizationally master of the Party by 1923 was lost on Trotsky, though a dying Lenin had become increasingly aware of this phenomenon. Trotsky was not alone in his underestimation of Stalin, as even those who aligned with the GenSec misjudged him, but took sides with him out of a fear of Trotsky as leader.⁷⁶ In that faction, most would agree that at the time, Zinoviev was the most prominent Bolshevik behind Lenin and Trotsky.⁷⁷ Trotsky made this same mistake, and as he argued on a plain of ideas, he focused his attacks on the theories of Kamenev and Zinoviev. The

⁷⁶ Wistrich, 125.

⁷⁷ Deutscher, 76-77.

faction continued to maneuver politically against Trotsky, as they knew they had to first distance Trotsky from Lenin, and then try to show the weaknesses in his arguments. A second Politburo was formed, comprised of all the Politburo members except for Trotsky and of course the ailing Lenin, which began to formulate policy in Trotsky's absence.⁷⁸ The existence of such a body reinforces the idea that Trotsky was truly isolated in the Party, and that as this political battle took shape, Trotsky's position was not strong at all. He had no allies in the Politburo, and failed to identify Stalin as a threat.

Trotsky's opinion of Stalin remained poor until his death. He wrote in exile, that Stalin is "the most outstanding mediocrity in our party."⁷⁹ Trotsky refused to acknowledge even after his loss in the struggle with Stalin, that the man held any positive attributes, even in politics. He wrote that those who attribute Stalin's success to his "personal forcefulness . . . or at least to his exceptional cunning," are no more than "idle fools and observers."⁸⁰ Trotsky instead identified Stalin's rise to power as stemming "from causes lying deep in the dynamics of historical forces."⁸¹ This explanation is probably comforting for Trotsky, since it identified his own fate as simply a victim of historical forces, but it also goes to show how little he thought of Stalin. Trotsky refused to give any credit to Stalin for his success in the political battle, instead writing that he benefited from the same forces that relegated Trotsky to exile. To Trotsky, Stalin was neither a thinker, a writer, nor an orator. Trotsky felt no need to acknowledge Stalin as an adversary, because he was nothing more than a Georgian peasant, a mediocrity. Stalin took power not with personal qualities but with the aid of an impersonal machine that had

⁷⁸ Volkogonov, 244.

⁷⁹ The Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1929, 76.

⁸⁰ Trotsky's Diary in Exile, 1935, 24.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

grown in the Soviet Union.⁸² Much of Trotsky's biography of Stalin, left unfinished in 1940 with his death, is simply criticisms aimed at Stalin, and show how little he continued to think of Stalin as a person. Trotsky felt no need to break his silence on the nationalities issue or the foreign trade monopoly, because Stalin would not dare go against Lenin's words. Trotsky believed that a man of so little capabilities could not be a threat, certainly not against Lenin and Trotsky, the two most prominent communists. His underestimation of Stalin, though in many ways understandable and quite common at the time, aided his relative inactivity on many of the important issues in the Soviet Union and gave Stalin enough time to consolidate his power and his control of the bureaucracy within the Party.

By the time Trotsky broke his silence, in October 1923, all the cards were stacked against him. Stalin had control of the machine, as he really had had for a couple of years and as Lenin had realized on his deathbed. But the 12th Party Congress was a last chance of sorts for Trotsky to bring down that wall, throw the curtain up and reveal the wizard pulling the strings for what he really was. Trotsky was an intelligent man but one cannot totally fault him for missing the struggle that was happening under his nose and an enemy in the form of Stalin. There is no question that Trotsky's arrogance had left him vulnerable, and that he underestimated until his death the abilities of a man who had manipulated so many of the Bolshevik elite. But can Trotsky really be blamed for that? Stalin's own allies, Kamenev and Zinoviev, underestimated his abilities and also the strength of the bureaucracy that he controlled. They did not fully come to realize his strength until their own efforts against him in 1926 fizzled before they really even started.

⁸² Leon Trotsky, Stalin (New York: Stein and Day, 1967) xv.

Trotsky's arguments for the future of Russia in such works as "The New Course" and his speeches on economic planning are interesting in some ways for their Marxist philosophy, but in no way should be considered as a real part of the struggle of the Left Opposition. Those works were written in the hope of an appeal to the common people, the rank and file who could turn the tide in Trotsky's favor, as they had in 1917 with the revolution. Trotsky had already lost the battle within the Party, as Stalin's machine appointed his own supporters through and through. The "Lenin levy," in which the Party admitted hordes of new members at Stalin's behest to honor Lenin's death, brought in 200,000 uneducated workers who were lost in Trotsky's confused discussions of the oppression of classes and other complicated arguments regarding Marxist theory. These people identified easily with Stalin's simple ideas of socialism in one country, in that they were tinged with an optimism for the future and a good bit of nationalist pride. Trotsky was painted as a pessimist, who had no faith in the ability of the Russian worker, but instead felt the need for help from Western Europe in order to survive.

Trotsky's struggle, late in its beginnings, failed to recognize the social vacuum that he lived in. The disintegration of the working class from the time of the revolution, because of war, famine, and hardship, made it even less of a political factor in the 1920s than it had been in the revolution. The passivity of the masses corresponded to an increase in the autonomy of the party apparatus, with Stalin at the helm. The struggle was confined to the upper reaches of the Party, where Trotsky had no friends. His effort to take the struggle to the masses was based on a belief in the revolutionary, fighting potential of the proletariat. But whatever speeches and rallies not stopped by the Party, were met with a general lack of care from the masses.

The romanticism surrounding Trotsky is not unjust. For as much as communism has been criticized, Trotsky was an intelligent man who came to the conclusion that Marxism was the best way to better the lives of the oppressed peoples of the world. Whatever harsh measures he had taken during his career did serve some better purpose, and Trotsky constantly had to fight the contradiction of his beliefs between the necessity for harsh controls but also his compassion and belief in freedom of thought and expression. Trotsky was a brilliant man, but it was a brilliance suited for revolution, not for day to day administration and the backstage politics that went on in the time of excessive bureaucracy. His brilliance was in theories, and in giving speeches, not in maneuvering for power and jockeying for allies. If Trotsky did not think much of you, he would not try to win you over for the purpose of an ally. When Kamenev and Zinoviev became his allies in 1926, it was because they came to him, and admitted their wrongs, he had not gone to them. Trotsky's arrogance had further ruined his chances. He assumed too little from his opponents, and he assumed that Lenin's words would be enough even if the man was not there to support them. Trotsky did not figure that anyone could challenge him in a theoretical debate, but he failed to realize that this was not a theoretical debate. This was a political battle, one in which Trotsky's talents were inappropriate and ineffective.

Finally, one must question whether or not Trotsky ever wanted to be the head of the Soviet Union. There is no denying that Trotsky wanted all of his ideas to be set into action, but does that mean that he wanted to be the head of the government. In many ways that may be a mantle that historians have placed on him in wondering how different things would be if Trotsky had taken control and not Stalin. For a man who believed

strongly in Marxist theories, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, why would he become an individual dictator unless he felt it bettered the Marxist cause? Trotsky could still exert great influence in the Party without being its unspoken leader. This lack of desire to take control of the Party is evidenced by his failure to even truly recognize a power struggle. While Trotsky was arguing ideas regarding the future of the Soviet Union, his enemies were aligning against him. They understood what Lenin's illness and eventual death would mean, that there would be a vacuum at the top of the Party that someone would have to fill. For Trotsky, Lenin's death would show the organizational weakness of the Party and would endanger the entire revolution because it had lost its best leader. If there was to be another unquestioned leader, perhaps Trotsky assumed people would ask him to do it, probably not Kamenev and Zinoviev and certainly not the Georgian Stalin. Trotsky's arrogance and lack of political foresight, but also to his credit a sincere devotion to important Party affairs, made him miss the opportunity to seize control of the Party and the country from Stalin. Though the window of opportunity was small, it was real, and Trotsky's lack of political savvy and maneuvering has left historians wondering what would have been if he had taken control.

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