

Phil Sheppard
Video Production

TEACHERS' NOTES

LEON TROTSKY

By PAUL LATHAM

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INTRODUCTION

Leon Trotsky was one of the most prominent political and intellectual identities of the twentieth century. But he was also unique in that nobody of his stature was so diminished in his own lifetime and in his own country. Trotsky has created much controversy not only in his own lifetime but in following generations. Lenin referred to Trotsky as 'the ablest man in the Party.' However the historian Alec Nove played down the importance of Trotsky stating 'he had a few glorious hours in and just after the Revolution, but he was speedily eased out of his seat of power and was increasingly ineffectual.'

LEON TROTSKY – HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A revolution overthrowing Romanov rule had been expected in Russia for some decades prior to 1917. Perhaps the most remarkable feature about the revolution was not that it occurred, but that the Tsarist regime lasted as long as it did. The Tsars had shown that they would not voluntarily give up their absolute power and the Tsarist system was too rigid and autocratic to allow for any reform from within. To many the only alternative was to overthrow the system.

While a number of revolutionary groups sprang up over Russia, it was not until the emergence of Lenin and the Social Democratic Party and the subsequent split of this party in 1903 into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, that revolutionaries became more organised and effective. The humiliating loss to Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 and demonstrations over workers' rights culminated in *Bloody Sunday* and the Revolution of 1905. Revolutionary councils or soviets sprang up and in order to keep power and the Tsar was forced to grant the October Manifesto, proclaiming fundamental liberties and the creation of an elected parliament or Duma.

Russia entered World War I against Germany in August 1914. The outbreak of war brought about an outburst of patriotism and tended to unite the country. By 1917 army morale was collapsing, there were severe food shortages and strikes broke out in Petrograd, previously known as St Petersburg. The Duma set up a Provisional Government with the intention of taking over the government. The Petrograd Soviet also aimed to seize control. Realising that his position was hopeless the Tsar abdicated in what was known as the 1917 March Revolution. The Provisional Government became Russia's new official government, until elections could be held. However in order to rule the government needed to co-operate with the Petrograd Soviet.

After Lenin's return to Russia in April 1917, with the aid of the German High Command, the Bolsheviks continued their campaign against the Provisional Government. Lenin issued the April Theses calling for a second revolution. The Provisional Government's decision to remain in the war brought more desertions and more discontent at home.

During the upheavals of the *July Days* the Bolsheviks were discredited when it was claimed they were being financed by the Germans. Bolshevik leaders were arrested and Lenin fled to Finland. An uprising, led by the right wing army officer General Kornilov took place in August 1917. To help defend Petrograd, Alexander Kerensky, the leader of the Provisional Government allowed the Bolsheviks to use their forces to counter the Kornilov threat. The Bolsheviks claimed credit for saving the government. On November 7, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in a bloodless coup and established a Council of People's Commissars with Lenin as chairman and Trotsky as foreign minister. Lenin ended the war with Germany by signing the very harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in February 1918. Leon Trotsky organised the Red Army to fight forces opposed to the Bolsheviks known as the *Whites* in the ensuing civil war. The *Cheka* or secret police were used to strike fear into those opposed to the Bolsheviks.

During the Civil War the Bolsheviks introduced measures known as *War Communism*, in which factories were nationalised, private trading was banned and food was rationed. While it did not achieve all it aims it was able to keep the Red Army supplied with food and equipment. In March 1921 following the Kronstadt Uprising which was brutally suppressed,, Lenin introduced the *New Economic Policy*. Under the NEP food production and industrial output increased. Russia was given a new constitution in 1923 and became known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).After a series of strokes, Lenin died in January 1924. However the question of a successor had not been determined. This led to a fierce power struggle between Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. Trotsky was gradually outmanoeuvred by Stalin, dismissed as War Commissar in 1925, expelled from the *Politburo* in 1926 and finally banished from the USSR in 1929.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Romanov; autocratic; October Manifesto; Bolshevik; Menshevik; Duma; Provisional Government; *July Days*; commissar; *Reds*; *Whites*; *Cheka*; NEP; Politburo
2. Research: The origins and aims of the Bolsheviks. How did they differ from the Mensheviks?
3. Map Study: The Civil War and foreign interventions 1918-1922
4. Construct a timeline of the key political and military events in Russia 1905-1921
5. Outline the reasons why the Provisional Government found it easier to win power than hold power?
6. Debate the importance of the slogans *Peace, Bread and Land* to the Bolshevik victory
7. Discussion: Was Trotsky or Lenin more important to the survival of Russia 1918–1923?
8. Film Study: What reasons does the film put forward for two revolutions occurring in 1917?

LEON TROTSKY – BACKGROUND AND RISE TO PROMINENCE

Leon Trotsky was born into a Jewish landowning family in 1879 near Odessa. He was called Lev Davidovich Bronstein but changed his name to Leon Trotsky when he first escaped from Siberia at the age of 22. He was educated in Odessa and Nikolayev and became involved in revolutionary activity at an early age. He was influenced by the doctrines of the *Narodniki* or Populists and in 1898 was exiled to Siberia where he married Alexandra and had two daughters. He escaped from Siberia in 1902 and later joined with Lenin in London where plans were made for a Marxist movement in Russia. He also began writing for the Social Democratic paper 'Iskra.' However he sided with the Mensheviks against Lenin and the Bolsheviks after their split in 1903.

Trotsky returned to Russia in 1905 following *Bloody Sunday* and became chairman of the St Petersburg Soviet. He was again arrested and again escaped from Siberia in 1907. He travelled to Europe and began a relationship with Natalya Sedova with whom he had two sons. From 1907 to 1912 he lived in Europe and the USA, and was acknowledged as an influential revolutionary writer. With the widening of the split between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, Trotsky remained critical of Lenin. When war broke out in 1914 he condemned it as a capitalist-imperialist struggle.

When the March Revolution occurred Trotsky was in New York. He returned to Petrograd in May 1917 and met with Lenin who had returned the previous month. Lenin's April Theses convinced Trotsky to join the Bolsheviks in July. Trotsky was involved in the anti-government *July Days* and was imprisoned. During the Kornilov coup in August he was released with other Bolsheviks as the Provisional Government needed help to respond to this threat. He was elected Chairman of the Bolshevik controlled Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies in September. His work on the Military Revolutionary Committee allowed the Bolsheviks to gain the support of the Petrograd troops. Trotsky was prominent in masterminding the successful Bolshevik coup against the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky, when his troops occupied a number of strategic communication points, the main railway stations and key bridges. The Bolsheviks effectively isolated the Provisional Government in the Winter Palace. Lenin remained in hiding until the Provisional Government collapsed. While Lenin was undisputed leader of the Bolsheviks, Trotsky's organisational skills were paramount to the success of the Bolsheviks.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: *Narodniki*; *Bloody Sunday*; Marxism; April Theses; capitalist; imperialist; *Iskra*
2. Research the different political and social influences that helped shape Trotsky
3. Map Study: Locate the position of St Petersburg(Petrograd); Odessa, Siberia
4. Construct a timeline of the political career of Trotsky in the period up to 1918

5. Debate: Lenin was the strategist of the November Revolution and Trotsky its tactician
6. Discussion: What impact did Trotsky have on the Bolshevik success in the November Revolution?
7. From your viewing of the film what aspects or events shaped Trotsky in his rise to prominence?

FROM REVOLUTIONARY LEADER TO EXILE

Following the November Revolution, Trotsky was appointed Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Realising the importance of a peace treaty for Russia's survival, Trotsky played a key role in negotiating the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany in March 1918. With Civil War raging throughout Russia Trotsky changed roles from Commissar for Foreign Affairs to Commissar for War. Although he had no military experience, Trotsky was responsible for defending the Bolshevik Revolution from both domestic and foreign enemies. Trotsky transformed the ragtag red militias into an effective and disciplined force, the Red Army. Trotsky employed former tsarist army officers and had political commissars spying on troops to ensure loyalty. He travelled endlessly along the front in his special train to organise and inspire his troops. Trotsky made up for any military shortfalls by his energy, leadership and ruthlessness. In 1921 he was ruthless in putting down the revolt at the Kronstadt naval base.

At the end of the Civil War Trotsky held two key roles as Commissar for the Army and Commissar for Transport. He had the support of the Army, was a member of the Politburo, the Party's leading theorist and was the most popular of the Bolshevik leaders with the Russian people. He was also in favour with Lenin and saw himself as the logical successor to Lenin. However during this period Stalin had assumed much bureaucratic control of the Party. Stalin could outmanoeuvre Trotsky by virtue of the key administrative positions he held. Stalin owed his success not to his ideas, but to his tactical skills. The struggle between the two had largely been won and lost before the death of Lenin in 1924. While Trotsky argued for the restoration of party democracy and a restriction of bureaucracy in both government and party, his opponents countered that this could not be reconciled with his role as the architect of war communism and the militarisation of labour. Critics also pointed out his Menshevik past and his conflicts with Lenin.

By 1925 Trotsky's position in the party was declining and his supporters decreasing. At the Party Congress Zinoviev and Kamenev used their influence to turn Congress against Trotsky and he was removed from his position as War Commissar. In 1926 Stalin's supporters had Trotsky voted off the Politburo and the Central Committee. Trotsky tried to make one more challenge in Congress in 1927 on the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution; however Stalin's proposal that Trotsky be expelled from the Party was overwhelmingly approved by Congress. In January 1928 Trotsky was deported under escort to Alma Ata in Turkestan on the Soviet-Chinese border. He continued to agitate for change and kept contact with his supporters.

However in 1929 agents of the GPU, the successor of the Cheka, charged him with counter-revolutionary activity and he was deported from the USSR. The process of turning Trotsky into a political non-person had begun.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Treaty of Brest Litovsk; Kronstadt Uprising; GPU; Congress
2. Outline the methods used by Trotsky in creating an effective Red Army
3. Research the importance of Trotsky's train to Bolshevik strategy
4. List the advantages and disadvantages held by Trotsky and Stalin in their power struggle
5. Debate: Trotsky failed to use all the means at his disposal to challenge Stalin
6. Discussion: To what extent was Trotsky opposed to the principle of 'socialism in one country'?
7. Film Study: What does the film reveal of the factors leading to Trotsky's fall from grace?

EXILE AND EVALUATION

Trotsky was in exile for eleven years from 1929 until 1940 and resided in Turkey, Norway, France and finally Mexico. His status as a Soviet exile was somewhat of a diplomatic embarrassment to these countries. During his years in exile Trotsky continued his opposition to Stalinism and in lectures and articles sought to show that Stalin had usurped authority in the Soviet Union and had betrayed the Leninist Revolution.

In 1938 Trotsky helped establish the *Fourth International*, an organisation that purported to represent the true socialist principles he espoused in his work on *permanent revolution*. This was in direct opposition to the COMINTERN which he maintained had degenerated into Stalin's concept of *socialism in one country*. While Trotsky believed the *Fourth International* was his greatest achievement, some historians question whether Trotsky's career after 1929 was of any political value. It was argued that he was like an impotent onlooker who could protest about Stalinism but was not there in a position to counter it. Other historians believed his importance in exile was as a revolutionary theorist whose revolutionary experience enabled him to clarify a more realistic interpretation of Marxism. His analysis of *permanent revolution* was also regarded as the basis for many anti-colonial freedom movements of the twentieth century. For Trotsky, Stalin's greatest fault was not that he was an autocrat but that he was a heretic.

Stalin acted against Trotsky by making him a useful scapegoat for Soviet failures. Trotskyism became a term to cover all counter-revolutionary evils. He also tried to remove Trotsky's legacy. Documents and articles about him were destroyed and reference to him was erased or banned. Trotsky became a blur in history. He was even air brushed from political photos of the period. Stalin was attempting to turn Trotsky into a political non person.

Even today Trotsky has not been rehabilitated in his own country and it appears that controversy will accompany evaluations of Trotsky and his place in history. Despite all of this, Stalin still viewed Trotsky as an unacceptable challenge and Stalinist agents were required to remove Trotsky permanently. This was finally achieved on August 20 1940, when Ramon Mercader smashed an ice pick into Trotsky's skull at his residence in Mexico City.

Trotsky held power for only four of his 42 years in politics. He was a brilliant propagandist, orator and theoretician. However a number of weaknesses damaged his reputation and standing among his contemporaries. His intellectual superiority was often viewed by his colleagues as arrogance, his past association with the Mensheviks made many Bolsheviks distrust his real motivations and in a society ingrained with anti-Semitism he was sometimes considered an outsider. Trotsky remained a fanatic throughout his life and there is little doubt that revolution consumed him, perhaps explaining why he was prepared to a life of isolation and exile.

For forty three years of my life I have remained a revolutionist; for forty two of these I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I had to begin all over again I would of course try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged

Leon Trotsky, February 27, 1940, Mexico

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: COMINTERN; *Fourth International*; *Socialism in one country*; *Permanent revolution*; Trotskyism
2. List Trotsky's major political weaknesses
3. Research the main political differences between Trotsky and Stalin
4. Outline the reasons why Stalin regarded the exiled Trotsky as a threat
5. Discussion: Why are there significant divisions among historians in regard to Trotsky's historical significance
6. Debate: The Fourth International was Trotsky's greatest political achievement
7. Film study: From your study of the film, to what extent do you think Trotsky was responsible for his own downfall?