Stalin in October

Slusser, Robert M.

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Why, finally, did Stalin miss the October Revolution? The simplest answer, and one that contains perhaps 75 percent of the truth, is that the Bolshevik seizure of power was a team effort, and Stalin was not a team player. If one adds that he was not perceived to be a team player by those who organized and directed the operation, one can add another 5 percent to the probability of our thesis.

To move still closer to a full explanation of Stalin's default, one must shift one's attention from Stalin as an individual and focus on two complex clusters of data which helped shape the events in which he was involved: the structure of power at the time of the October Revolution and the nature of Lenin's contribution to the Bolshevik victory.

The Structure of Power Immediately Preceding the Bolshevik Revolution

The structure of Bolshevik and Soviet power in Petrograd on the eve of the October Revolution was unique in Bolshevik history.

Take first the party itself and its official policy-making body, the Central Committee. In the final three and a half weeks of October 1917, the CC was torn by internal dissension arising out of Lenin's demand for an immediate uprising and the varied responses to this demand by other members of the CC. Lenin's two most articulate
opponents were Kamenev and Zinoviev, hitherto among his most trusted and reliable supporters.

The CC’s inner policy-making body, the uzkii sostav, had ceased to function—its final recorded session took place on August 23. Lenin, the party’s recognized leader, remained in hiding until the final week in October and during much of that time was forced to convey his views to the CC in the form of directives and letters. The only regular sessions of the CC he attended in person prior to the seizure of power were those of October 10 and 16.

The point is not that Lenin was not providing leadership—he was, and to an increasingly urgent degree, wielding his most powerful weapon, his pen. But there was a great difference between Lenin present and Lenin absent.

For Stalin, the rapid changes in the locus of power in the party—the eclipse of the uzkii sostav, the shift by Kamenev and Zinoviev to outright opposition, Lenin’s absence from Petrograd, the rise of Trotsky—created a situation in which it became increasingly difficult for him to find a solid footing. How little Stalin understood what was taking place is revealed by his unsigned editorial note in Rabochii put’ for October 20, in which he deplored the sharpness of Lenin’s attack on the two “strike-breakers” and asserted that “basically we [including Kamenev and Zinoviev] remain of one mind.”

By his own decisions and actions, arising out of his customary sense of caution when confronted with a new challenge, Stalin took no part in the work of the two bodies that played leading roles in the seizure of power—the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), set up by the Petrograd Soviet under Trotsky’s direction, and the Bolshevik Military Organization (MO), which functioned as a manpower reservoir for the MRC, but with which Stalin had broken his close ties by his high-handed behavior in mid-August. Aware though he certainly was by October 24 of the MRC’s existence, and with the path open to him of taking an active part in its operations if he so desired, Stalin failed to grasp the potential inherent in the MRC’s rapid expansion and bold assertiveness. On Stalin’s part were caution and distrust, on the MRC and MO’s side a concentration on immediate tasks which left little room for concern lest Stalin miss out on the fun.

Lenin’s Contributions to the Bolshevik Victory

After Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s attack on his “cult of personality,” Soviet historians and their masters on the Communist Party Central Committee were faced with a serious problem: in rewriting party history, including the history of the October Revolution, what

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The party’s answer was clear and unequivocal: Trotsky’s posthumous disgrace as an enemy of the party, if not an unperson, was to continue, and his true stature in the events of October was to be denied as fervently as it had been under Stalin. To do otherwise, the party ideologists must have felt, would be to risk undermining the party’s claim to power based in part on its monopoly of historical interpretation of the revolution.

The downgrading of Stalin’s role and the continued denial of Trotsky’s importance left the party ideologists no choice but to enlarge the role of Lenin. In post-1956 party history, therefore, Lenin’s figure, already a commanding one before 1956, was inflated to superhuman proportions. Not only did Lenin, in the new Soviet historiography, provide the impetus and the theoretical basis for Bolshevik strategy, but he was also given credit for the day-to-day preparations for Bolshevik victory, including detailed masterminding of the strategy that led the Bolsheviks to power.

To overcome the awkward absence of contemporary documentation that would support this inflation of Lenin’s status, surviving veterans of the revolution were encouraged to rewrite their memoirs and reminiscences, assigning a central position to Lenin and ignoring or denying the role played by Trotsky. One of the survivors, Podvoisky, proved to be especially suited to this kind of revisionism, publishing new memoirs in which Lenin’s steady and sure guidance of the MRC’s operation was prominently featured. Soviet historians of the revolution, led by Academician I. I. Mints, made their contribution in the form of monographs and collections of documents in which Trotsky’s name was either absent or denigrated. Mints then cited his own editorial work as proof that Trotsky had played no significant role as leader of the MRC.

It is regrettable that Soviet historians took this path rather than candidly admitting past errors and reevaluating the situation confronting the party in October 1917. The effort to assign total credit for Bolshevik strategy to Lenin suffered from serious weaknesses and condemned Soviet historians to propagate a version of the revolution which cannot be brought into accord with the facts.

An insurmountable obstacle to accepting the “Lenin did it all” interpretation is the impassioned letter he wrote to the CC on the eve of the seizure of power, late on October 24, 1917, in which he ex-
pressed his agonized fear that nothing was being done to overthrow the Provisional Government and that the chance of victory was being blindly thrown away—this at a time when the Military Revolutionary Committee was well on its way to nailing down a total triumph over the decrepit Kerensky government. If Lenin had been personally directing the operations of the MRC, it is inconceivable that he would have written the letter dated the evening of October 24. Only a man gripped by an almost physical sense of doom could have written that anguished appeal for action.

It is probable that Stalin made a significant contribution to Lenin's befuddlement. Since mid-July Stalin had served as one of the liaison agents charged with keeping the party leader informed on the current state of affairs. A Stalin out of touch with the fast-breaking drama of insurrection on October 24 was a poor source of information for Lenin.

Another reason for doubting the "Lenin did it all" interpretation is that the strategy advocated by Lenin—a nationwide armed uprising—was not the form taken by events. What actually took place was a well-coordinated seizure of power in the nation's capital, followed at varying intervals of time in Moscow and other urban centers throughout the Russian Empire. This is not to deny the importance of the peasant revolt and the army mutiny, which provided the indispensable background for the power shift in Petrograd. But peasant revolt and army mutiny were ongoing processes, not a sudden, sharp explosion in late October.

The task set for Soviet historians by party ideologists is an almost impossible one. On the one hand, they must portray Lenin as the dominant figure in the seizure of power. On the other hand, they are required to show Trotsky as an evil-minded spoilsport who nearly wrecked Lenin's strategy by his insistence on timing the insurrection to coincide with the convening of the Second Congress of Soviets. For Lenin, waiting for the Congress of Soviets was a betrayal of the party's revolutionary mission—delay could be fatal, botching a unique opportunity. Yet without Trotsky's insistence on timing the action to occur at the same time as the congress, the events of October would have lacked any significance broader than that of a minority party's effort to seize power at the moment of the existing government's mortal weakness.

Lenin was wrong in mid-July when he asserted that a military-right-wing dictatorship had been established, at a time when the Kerensky government was staggering from one disaster—the political crisis and the failure of the offensive—to another, the Kornilov mutiny. Having made a faulty analysis in July, Lenin advocated a strategy
for the party—a nationwide armed uprising—which was equally faulty. (It was their well-founded distrust of this strategy which sparked Zinoviev's and Kamenev's break with Lenin in October.)

Logically, Lenin should have revised his strategy at the end of August when the clash between Kerensky and Kornilov revealed the weakness of the government and its loss of control over the army. Lenin immediately saw the party's opportunity, but he continued to speak in terms of an armed uprising when existing conditions made possible a much more direct attack on the Provisional Government.

Lenin's miscalculation in mid-July was linked with his general view of the soviets. Unlike Trotsky, Lenin never had the experience of serving in a soviet. His attitude toward the soviets was purely instrumental: in his view they were tools to be picked up or discarded as political conditions changed. He had little sense of their appeal to workers and soldiers, for whom they provided a deeply satisfying mode of expressing their aspirations in the ongoing revolution.

Although Lenin changed his concept of the soviets' role in early September, he still failed to see the way in which they could be linked with a Bolshevik drive for power. Tacitly discarding the right-wing-military dictatorship construct of mid-July, Lenin still spoke in terms of a nation-wide armed uprising at a time when the Provisional Government needed merely a well-coordinated push to stagger to its fall.

**Lenin's Positive Contribution**

Lenin's contribution to the Bolshevik victory, nevertheless, was decisive on two counts. First, by tirelessly demanding that the party prepare itself for the seizure of power, Lenin supplied a sense of drive which could not be ignored. Under the enormous pressure of his impassioned call for immediate action, his old leadership team split asunder—Kamenev and Zinoviev came out in open opposition, and Stalin wavered. Had it not been for the energy and enthusiasm of a new pair of leaders, Sverdlov and Trotsky, Lenin's urgent appeals could not have been translated into action. Stalin, meanwhile, sought his bearings in the power structure of an earlier, less hectic time. His move to shield Zinoviev from Lenin's wrath, together with his unsuccessful attempt to blunt the edge of Kamenev's proffered resignation from the Central Committee, shows how little he understood the new situation.

Paradoxically, however, Lenin's second vital contribution to the Bolshevik triumph was his provision of the myth of armed uprising to transform the seizure of power into one of Marxism's most revered and potent symbols. Because of the timing of the action—not merely
the convening of the All-Russian Second Congress of Soviets but also
the breakdown of discipline in the army, the tacit support of the
Petrograd workers, the rapid deepening and spreading of the peasant
revolt—the necessary conditions were present in which party spokes-
men could maintain that what took place on October 24–25 in Petro-
grad was in fact the armed uprising that Lenin had been demanding.

The consequences of this situation for Stalin were far from favor-
able. By October 24 he had come to accept an armed uprising as the
next item on the party’s agenda; in his October 24 editorial he pro-
vided his own interpretation of the Leninist vision. Since Lenin ne-
eglected, however, to alter his strategic goal to correspond to the al-
tered “current situation,” Stalin was left rudderless and adrift. Lenin’s
position in the party and in history was immeasurably strengthened
by the apparent coincidence between his strategic vision and the
epoch-making events of October 25, 1917, notwithstanding the fact
that the seizure of power took place at a time and under circumstances
not of his choosing. Lacking Lenin’s stature and vision, Stalin could
not so easily surmount his own shortcomings. In the future he would
always be dogged by a sense of having somehow missed the revolu-
tion.

The Implications for Stalin’s Later Career

Does it really matter that Stalin missed the revolution? A good case
can be made, as Tucker has shown, for viewing Stalin as an up-and-
coming party official whose contribution to the overall success of
Bolshevik policies in 1917 was creditable if not outstanding.7 Granted
the merits of Tucker’s defense of Stalin’s record in 1917, that record
was nowhere near what Stalin’s own sense of destiny was to demand.
A number of consequences followed from Stalin’s perception of the
inadequacies of his performance in 1917.

First, and a necessary precondition for any further progress toward
a more satisfying record, was to discredit, defeat, and destroy the
image of Trotsky as one of the principal architects of Bolshevik victory
coequal with Lenin. That task, not too difficult, given Trotsky’s blun-
ters and underestimation of Stalin, was completed by 1929, when
Trotsky, stripped of his power, was deported. Like Banquo’s ghost,
however, Trotsky refused to lie down and die, and it took Stalin
another eleven years finally to destroy him and silence his accusing
voice.

A much more difficult problem for Stalin was to rewrite the history
of the revolution in his own terms. In a sense, Stalin never solved this
problem. The general outlines of the history of the revolution were
too well established to provide an opportunity for the kind of reconstruction which would have been needed. Even in the party history written on his orders in the late 1930s—the famous “Short Course”—Stalin and his stooge-historians failed to create a plausible image of Stalin as Lenin’s coequal leader of the Bolshevik party in 1917. Something more was needed—the demonstration that Stalin was capable of planning and directing a revolution even more sweeping, even more fundamental than Lenin’s 1917 triumph.

The “revolution from above,” which Stalin directed in the 1930s—the collectivization of agriculture, the construction of a heavy industrial base, and the profound social transformation that accompanied these shifts—was, among other things, Stalin’s demonstration that he, even more than Lenin and far outclassing Trotsky, was capable of “making a revolution.” Yet there was more to Stalin’s “second revolution.”

For Stalin there still remained the unacceptable presence of witnesses from 1917 who knew the hollowness of his claim to having played a leading role in the revolution. Among the motives that led Stalin to unleash the Great Purge, in which Old Bolsheviks were a prominent category of victims, this urge to destroy and silence awkward witnesses was prominent. The sadistic intensity with which Stalin pursued and destroyed those who failed to “remember” his role as he wanted it portrayed grew directly out of his bitter memories of his missteps and shortcomings in 1917.

Ultimately, then, it was Stalin’s self-perceived failures in 1917 which helped drive him to the heights and depths of his own revolution, out of which emerged a new society, a new Communist party, and a new nation.

**Note:** While this book was in press, A. M. Sovokin published an article, “V. I. Lenin in the Days of October” (Voprosy istorii KPSS, 1987, no. 4), which can best be described as the latest “Lenin did it all” interpretation of the October Revolution. Stalin is not directly mentioned, but his concept of “creative Marxism” is applied three times to Lenin. A 1953 article by Podvoisky is cited in support of the assertion that Lenin personally directed the uprising, and Trotsky is portrayed as its evil genius. Soviet historians will have to do better than this.