



Chapter 1 - From prison to power

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Trotsky was born Lev Davidovitch Bronstein in 1879 into a land seething with conflict. Nineteenth century Russia was a backward country. Unlike Western Europe and the USA, modern industry began to develop only late in the century.

The vast majority of the people were poor peasants working the land, often using ancient farming methods. Until 1861 serfdom still existed, a medieval system under which peasants were the property of the landowners, bought and sold along with the land itself.

Although by Trotsky's day serfdom had been abolished, the 20 million former serfs were hugely in debt to landowners as a result of having to buy their land at inflated prices. For many, life was not so very different than before, often working even less land than they had when they were serfs.

Russia's political system was equally ill attuned to the development of a modern capitalist country. The small bourgeoisie had no real political representation ? all power was in the hands of the Tsar, and the clique of priests, generals and noblemen at his court.

There was neither a parliament nor freedom to organise political parties. Newspapers and literature were censored. Jews were persecuted by law, their towns and villages regularly attacked in vicious pogroms.

The many different nationalities within the Tsar's empire were denied the right to independence or to use their own languages in schools and public life.

But there was change in the air. When capitalism began to develop in Russia it did so at a feverish pace. In the first decade of Trotsky's life the number of workers employed in the metal industry increased sixfold; by the time the First World War erupted in 1914 there were 5,000,000 workers in Russia.

While the working class was still only 3 percent of the population ? much smaller than in Western Europe ? it was highly concentrated in a number of big firms set up with money from foreign capitalists. So despite its size it held enormous power in its hands, if only it would use it.

Lev Davidovitch was not born into a working class family. His father was a well-to-do farmer in the Ukraine. As Trotsky wrote in his autobiography:

?My childhood does not appear to me like a sunny meadow as it does to the small minority; neither does it appear like a dark cave of hunger, violence and misery, as it does to the majority. Mine was the greyish childhood of a lower-middle-class family, spent in a village in an obscure corner where nature is wide, and manners, views and interests are pinched and narrow.?

The young Lev, fascinated by literature and science, was delighted to escape this suffocating village life and go to high school in Odessa, the biggest city in south Russia. Though brilliant at his studies, he soon got into trouble.

He was disgusted by the petty restrictions and injustices, the hatred of the religious authorities for Jews and Catholics. When one teacher tried to victimise a fellow pupil, Lev Davidovitch organised a protest, getting his class to stand and boo the teacher.

In the crackdown that followed a few classmates pointed the finger at Lev. While his stand had illustrated Lev's courage and leadership qualities, his subsequent fate taught him the value of careful planning and the treachery of informers. And he had learnt first hand of the vindictiveness of the authorities. He was expelled.

A young revolutionary

By the time he was 17 Trotsky the student was immersed in revolutionary agitation. His father came to talk him out of it ? or failing that to starve him into submission. ?You will either quit this business and get to work, or you will quit spending my money?, he declared.

For many middle class students that would be the end of it. But neither parental threats nor poverty were going to stop Lev Davidovitch. His family, like countless others before and since, mocked him for wanting to change the world. But Trotsky did not ?grow out of it?. He actually did it.

He got involved with a small group of young people ? mainly students ? who would gather at the shack of a radical gardener called Shvigovsky, drinking and talking politics into the night. They were mostly Populists.

The Populist, or Narodnik, movement had been fighting Tsarism in various ways for decades. Some believed that the mass of the peasantry was the force that would change Russia, and hundreds of young idealists had left their universities and comfortable homes for the countryside, to ?Go to the People? with the message of democracy and freedom. They were almost all arrested.

Other Populists lost patience with the masses altogether, and tried to provoke them into action by individual terrorism, by bombing and shooting the hated oppressors.

One thing all Populists were agreed on was that little could be expected of the tiny Russian working class, and that the Marxists, for all their ?scientific? theories of proletarian revolution, were unrealistic and dogmatic.

The young Trotsky agreed with the Populists. Marxism, with its stress on class and economics, sounded too cold and grey to explain the complexities of the world. He once gave a toast at a new year's party:

?A curse upon all Marxists, and upon those who want to bring dryness and hardness into all the relations of life!?

But events were about to push Trotsky towards Marxism for good.

For many people it is enough to talk. The number of ?revolutionaries? who never get further than fine words in cafés and pubs is countless. Trotsky was not one of these. He presented a member of the Shvigovsky group with a picture marked with the words ?Faith without Deeds is Dead.?

So in 1897, at the age of 18, he threw himself into active politics among the workers of the town of Nikolayev.

Using primitive equipment Trotsky and his comrades produced leaflets which were distributed in the main factories, denouncing the conditions of work and the greed of the employers.

Workers were encouraged to come to secret study groups, to discuss how to change the world. By the end of the year the Southern Russian Workers' Union had 200 members.

Prison and Exile

The authorities were too scared to rely on the power of open argument and debate. In January 1898 the police moved in and arrested Trotsky. He endured the first of several jail sentences.

Terribly lonely, with no books to read and without paper or pen, he tried to stay sane by making up poems in his head while he paced up and down his tiny cell.

His relief at being transferred to a larger prison in Odessa was enormous, for there was a prison library, visits were

allowed, and he learnt the special prisoners' code for tapping messages to each other on the walls of the cells. He taught himself French and German by reading translations of the Bible, and began a more serious study of Marxism.

His activity in Nikolayev had already confirmed for him the role and importance of the working class; now, reading the works of the Italian Marxist writer Labriola, he found in place of 'dryness and hardness' a theory of history that held out the prospect of real and lasting change.

In prison Trotsky married Alexandra Sokolovskaya, a committed Marxist from the Nikolayev circle with whom he had constantly argued. Together they were exiled to Siberia for four years. In this desolate land he remained active, writing, studying Marxism and discussing ideas with other political prisoners. His grasp of Marxism, and his adherence to it, became firmer.

He argued against Populism, and the tactics of individual terrorism. The Tsar, the landlords and the capitalists were too strong to be overthrown by a handful of daring fighters: for that, mass action would be necessary.

And far from inciting the masses to act, isolated shootings and bombings were ineffective, leaving the masses confused and passive. Instead a mass political party would have to be built, based on the industrial working class. This was the only way to win freedom and socialism.

Already in 1898 representatives of workers' organisations had gathered in Minsk to found a Marxist political party, the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP). In 1902 Trotsky got hold of copies of the newspaper *Iskra*, ('The Spark'), which was published by Marxists abroad, and a copy of *What is to be Done?*, a pamphlet written by V. I. Lenin.

These publications rejected individual terrorism, but also argued passionately against those within the Marxist movement - the 'Economists' - who wanted the new party to limit itself to encouraging the strikes for better pay and conditions that were raging across Russia.

Instead *Iskra* argued for a centralised political party, and an all-Russian party newspaper. It campaigned for a political struggle that would go beyond trade union demands and lead the most advanced sections of the working class towards the overthrow of the Tsar and the fight for socialism.

The task of the party was not to trail behind the spontaneous ideas of the masses, but to raise their courageous struggles to higher, directly political goals. Trotsky wrote an essay from Siberia in 1901 which put forward a similar view.

The revolutionaries were getting organised, and to the exiles in Siberia this could mean only one thing: escape. When Trotsky expressed doubts about leaving his wife and child, Sokolovskaya put the future of the revolution above their personal lives, declaring 'You Must!'

He made out a fake passport, for the first time using the name of Trotsky, one of his former prison warders. Hidden in a hay cart, he made his way back from exile, linking up with other *Iskra* supporters on the way. He was advised to get out of Russia, and went first to Vienna and Zurich before heading on to London, and his first encounter with the leaders of the RSDLP and the editors of *Iskra*.

Trotsky and Lenin

Trotsky had learned many things in prison and exile, but good manners were not among them. He arrived at Lenin's house in London at the crack of dawn and woke his hosts from their well-earned sleep with three violent raps on the door.

With Lenin still in bed, Trotsky plunged into a full report of the situation in Russia while Lenin's wife Krupskaya had to go and pay his cab fare.

Trotsky later recalled that Lenin took him on a long walk through London 'to get acquainted, to give me an

examination. And the examination was indeed 'on the whole course' . . . ?

Lenin quickly became aware of the new arrival's gifts. Right away Trotsky's articles began appearing in Iskra, and Lenin among others was soon pushing hard for the newcomer to be placed on the editorial board.

But here he met with resistance from the founding father of Russian Marxism, George Plekhanov. Plekhanov was resentful at the rise within the party of new forces, more closely connected to the movement in Russia. Personal motives such as rivalry and spite can play a dangerous role in politics, and this was not to be Trotsky's only experience of it.

But these petty tensions were soon to be dwarfed by a veritable civil war in the party. The Second RSDLP Congress finally convened in July 1903, first in Brussels, and then, to escape police harassment, in London. Trotsky attended as a delegate of the Siberian organisation, and as a firm supporter of Iskra's policies.

The congress witnessed the division of the party into two definite factions: the Bolsheviks (majority) led by Lenin, and the Mensheviks (minority) led by Lenin's former ally, Martov.

The divisions centred on Lenin's drive to combat 'Economism' and his desire to build a party composed of disciplined members working under the direction of party bodies.

The Mensheviks, on the other hand, favoured continued cohabitation with the Economists and the Jewish workers' organisation, the Bund. To the Bund's claim that the party should submit to their views as the sole representatives of the Jewish working class, Trotsky rose to reply that he and many other Jewish comrades opposed to the Bund's line, also regarded themselves as representatives of the Jewish proletariat.

The Economists and the Bund, like the Mensheviks, also favoured a much looser and less disciplined membership structure. The Mensheviks actually won the day on the membership question, but after both the Economists and the Bund walked out of the congress, Lenin had a slight majority and was determined to use it.

The Party backed Lenin's proposal to remove two older members of the Iskra editorial board, reducing it to Plekhanov, Lenin and Martov, a clear majority for Lenin's hardliners. Martov was beside himself and refused to serve on the editorial board, flouting the wishes of the Congress.

The Congress ended in disarray, with the Mensheviks (Martov's minority) and Lenin's Bolsheviks (majority) at each others' throats. But soon after the Congress Plekhanov switched sides, unable to bear the thought of a lasting political break with his long-time comrades.

Trotsky backed the Mensheviks. This he would later deeply regret - it was a serious political mistake. As he wrote in his autobiography,

'My whole being seemed to protest against this merciless cutting off of the older ones when they were at last on the threshold of an organised party. It was my indignation at his [Lenin's] attitude that really led to my parting with him at the Second Congress. His behaviour seemed unpardonable to me, both horrible and outrageous. And yet, politically it was right and necessary, from the point of view of organisation. The break with the older ones, who remained in the preparatory stages, was inevitable in any case. Lenin understood this before anyone else did . . . I thought of myself as a centralist. But there is no doubt that at that time I did not fully realise what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order.'

The Mensheviks did indeed develop into an anti-revolutionary party. Lenin saw this possibility earlier than anyone else. Trotsky, in contrast, had enormous respect for the older members of the editorial board; he believed, like Plekhanov, that a split was always a bad thing, and unity always good. In this he put organisational and even personal matters before political principles.

When the Mensheviks began to put hopes in the capitalist Liberals and to shield them from criticism, Trotsky resigned from their faction in September 1904. But he did not join the Bolsheviks, arguing instead for unity at any price. For the next 14 years this caused him to play a role within the party that was often negative and obstructive.

The Dress Rehearsal

It was the events of 1905 that were to catapult Trotsky to a leading role in the Russian Revolution. On 23 January he arrived at the Geneva offices of Iskra, where Martov gave him the latest news about the protests against the Tsar by Russian workers in the capital, St Petersburg.

The reports were dramatic. Demonstrators had tried to hand in a petition to the Tsar but his troops opened fire, killing thousands of workers. This terrible massacre became known as Bloody Sunday.

Russia was in turmoil. The revolution was surely not far off. Trotsky secretly made his way back into Russia and headed for St Petersburg, where he kept in touch with both factions of the RSDLP, and then took refuge in Finland after his second wife, Natalia, was arrested on a May Day demonstration.

He did not return to Russia until October, when strikes by printers and railway workers began to spread across the country. The workers demanded an 8-hour day and, encouraged by the Mensheviks, they began to add political slogans including the demand for parliamentary elections and free speech.

The government retreated and offered a compromise, which the workers only saw as proof of their power and of the Tsar's weakness. The deal allowed for a parliament, but workers would not be able to vote in the elections. Freedom of speech and organisation were however to be allowed. The workers were jubilant.

But Trotsky had not been fooled. At a mass meeting on 18 October he called on the workers to have no trust in the Tsar and to defend their freedoms by direct action. He wrote in a revolutionary newspaper:

'We have been given freedom of assembly, but our assemblies are encircled by troops. We have been given freedom of speech, but censorship remains inviolate. We have been given freedom of study, but the universities are occupied by troops. We have been given personal immunity, but the prisons are filled to overflowing with prisoners . . . we have been given a Constitution, but the autocracy remains. Everything has been given, and nothing has been given.'

Trotsky rapidly increased his influence among the St. Petersburg working class through his role in the Council of Workers' Deputies (Soviet). This had met on 13 October with one delegate for every 500 workers. It issued an appeal for a general strike.

The Soviet won widespread authority because it involved all the workers' organisations, striking factories, parties and unions. Because its delegates could be recalled at any time by the workers who had elected them, it closely reflected the mood of the masses.

The Bolshevik leaders ? in Lenin's absence ? were suspicious of the Soviet as a rival to the party. This sectarianism greatly weakened their role. Trotsky had no such qualms. He threw himself into the work of the Soviet, drafting appeals and proclamations, writing for its newspaper and speaking in its name.

By November it was plain that the rank and file soldiers were beginning to show sympathy for the workers. The peasants were beginning to revolt, demanding land.

Trotsky was convinced that the campaign for the 8-hour day would not be won without the overthrow of the government; he raised the slogan 'Eight Hours and a Gun!'. Under Trotsky's influence, the Soviet voted to prepare for an armed uprising.

This did not materialise; the strikes in St Petersburg were getting weaker and the troops seemed likely to remain loyal. But in Moscow the Bolsheviks ? now back under Lenin's influence ? had been preparing for just such a rising. Soldiers

had gone so far as to send delegates to the local workers? Soviet. Lenin wrote to party fighting contingents in October:

?The contingents may be of any strength, beginning with two or three people. They must arm themselves as best they can (rifles, revolvers, bombs, knives, knuckle-dusters, sticks, rags soaked in kerosene for starting fires, ropes or rope ladders, shovels for building barricades, pyroxylin cartridges, barbed wire, nails against cavalry, etc.)?

The revolutionaries fought courageously but by 17 December they had been defeated. Trotsky was arrested and brought to trial. There, in a brave and defiant speech, he refused to condemn the rising. To the prosecution?s claim that the Soviet organised the uprising, he declared:

?If you tell me that the pogroms, the murders, the burnings, the rapes . . . are the form of the government of the Russian Empire ? then I will agree with the prosecution that in October and November last we were arming ourselves, directly and immediately, against the form of government of the Russian Empire.?

Trotsky was sentenced to exile for life in Siberia. He was 26 years old. But within a month he had escaped, destined not to return to Russia again until 1917, when revolution once more swept the country.

Against nationalism

In exile in Europe Trotsky met the leaders of the German and Austrian Social Democrats. How different he found them from the Russian revolutionaries! These were people completely adjusted to peaceful conditions, who expected to come to power by gradually building up their support in elections and parliament. They led comfortable bourgeois lives.

Trotsky was repelled by their ?undisguised chauvinism, or the bragging of a petty proprietor, or holy terror of the police, or vileness towards women.? When Trotsky protested about an article in the Austrian social-democratic paper which contained racist sneers at the Serbians, the party leaders dismissed the whole incident, claiming that workers were not interested in foreign policy.

On the eve of the First World War the Austrian party was failing to resist the poison of nationalism which was about to turn the whole of Europe into a slaughterhouse. As Trotsky observed:

?They wrote about war and revolution in their May Day manifestos, but they never took them seriously; they did not perceive that history had already poised its gigantic soldier?s boot over the ant-heap in which they were rushing about with such self-abandon. Six years later they learned that foreign policy existed even for Austria-Hungary.?

The mighty German party was also not what it seemed. Trotsky began to wonder openly whether the great hope of international socialism might become an obstacle to the revolution in the years to follow.

Nevertheless, he still failed to arrive at the harsh conclusions drawn by Lenin. Despite his mounting recognition of the anti-revolutionary nature of Menshevism, Trotsky continued to campaign against division in the Russian party, telling the fifth RSDLP congress, ?if you think that a schism is unavoidable, wait at least until events, and not merely resolutions, divide you.?

And indeed pressure from the rank and file in 1910 did lead the two factions to agree to expel their extreme wings: the Bolsheviks were to part company with the ultra-leftists who wanted the party to boycott elections altogether, and the Mensheviks were to break with their right wing, the ?Liquidators?.

These latter were completely opposed to revolution and wanted to dissolve the underground RSDLP and set up a new liberal-style legal party.

The Mensheviks broke the agreement, however. Meanwhile the Russian workers gave a clear signal that the time for internal wrangles was at an end. Strikes mounted and the years of reaction were drawing to a close.

On 4 April 1912, 500 miners were killed or injured when troops opened fire on strikers in the Lena goldfields, by which time Lenin had already called a conference and established the Bolsheviks as a completely separate party. The

Bolsheviks threw themselves into work among the masses, greatly building up their support in the workers' movement. By 1914 they had 2,800 workers' groups in Russia. The Mensheviks had only 600.

In the summer of 1912 Trotsky made an enormous political mistake. Ignoring the issues of political principle, he convened a meeting in Vienna, the 'August Bloc'. This involved all factions except the Bolsheviks, from the ultra-leftists to the most right-wing Liquidators. The only thing that united this motley crew was hatred of the Bolsheviks. It fell apart achieving nothing but confusion.

Trotsky himself later realised the nature of his mistake:

'Politically I differed with the Mensheviks on all fundamental questions. I also differed with the ultra-left Bolsheviks . . . In the general tendency of policies I stood far more closely to the Bolsheviks. But I was against the Leninist 'regime' because I had not yet learned to understand that in order to realise a revolutionary goal a firmly welded centralised party is necessary. And so I formed this episodic bloc consisting of heterogeneous elements which was directed against the proletarian wing of the party . . . Lenin subjected the August bloc to merciless criticism and the harshest blows fell to my lot. Lenin proved that in as much as I did not agree politically with either the Mensheviks or the [ultra-lefts] my policy was adventurism. This was severe but it was true.'

After the failure of this initiative, Trotsky travelled to the Balkans, which, then as now, was a seething cauldron of nationalism, oppression and war. In a series of brilliant reports for the socialist press, he caught the horror of war and 'the look of men doomed for sacrifice'.

His articles waged war on anti-semitism, bigotry and war itself. But he never advised the victims of oppression to lay down their arms. He distinguished at all times between reactionary wars fought for profit, and the justified resistance of nations whose fundamental freedoms were being denied.

Compared with what was to follow, the carnage in the Balkans was a minor skirmish. In August 1914 the boot came smashing down on the European ant-hill. As the First World War began, the European peoples were swept up in a wave of patriotic feeling. This much Trotsky had been expecting; he hoped the mood would turn sour soon enough.

But nothing could prepare him for the shock that was to come. The social-democratic parties lined up with their capitalist enemies and supported the war drive, urging their working class supporters into the slaughter. The Second International was dead in all but name.

Of all the major European socialist parties, only the Bolsheviks remained true to their internationalist principles. By July 1915 Trotsky was beginning to wonder whether this was related to the whole history of the struggle inside the RSDLP and the subsequent split.

A meeting of internationalists was convened in Zimmerwald, Switzerland in September 1915. Lenin pushed for a revolutionary policy. He put forward the slogan 'Turn the Imperialist War into a Civil War' and called for a new, Third International.

But Trotsky's formula was adopted, calling simply for peace without any side annexing territory or defeated states paying compensation to the victors, and for the right of all nations to determine their own future.

How isolated the internationalists must have felt at this dark time. One wit observed that all the internationalists in the world could have fitted into a couple of coaches. But the small forces that stood against the stream when it ran with blood would be borne aloft by the tidal wave of revolution that followed the war.

Revolution

In Russia Tsarism was rotting on its feet. Tsar Nicholas listened more closely to a mad priest named Rasputin than to his own ministers. Humiliated and weakened by continual defeats in the war with Germany, the noblemen and liberal capitalists were losing patience with the monarch.

The soldiers, weary of war, were deserting in droves. On the land and in the cities, discontent was steadily rising. In February 1917 it burst into the open, dragging Tsarism down for good.

On 23 February, International Working Class Women's Day, masses of women took to the streets demanding bread. The next day women textile workers struck, and without waiting for their leaders they sent flying pickets to the massive metal factories, calling their brothers out in support.

The call for bread was soon drowned out by the cry for an end to the monarchy and the war. The police broke up demonstrations, but the army and the Cossacks were not so firm. Trotsky wrote how women workers took the lead in winning over the soldiers:

‘They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: ‘Put down your bayonets – join us.’ The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes his mind up first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened, a joyous and grateful ‘Hurrah!’ shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded. Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals – the revolution makes another forward step.’

Within a matter of days the revolution outstripped the events of 1905. The Tsar stood down, and a Provisional Government was set up, containing bourgeois ministers who were soon to be joined by Mensheviks and Populists from the misnamed Socialist Revolutionary Party (‘Srs’).

But this was not the only power in the land. Remembering the lessons of 1905, the workers and soldiers hastened to re-establish Soviets, this time on a wider and more lasting basis than before.

On the one hand stood the new government of the capitalists, which owed its very existence to the rebellion of the workers; on the other stood the Soviet, an organisation of workers’ power.

The Soviet immediately established control of food supplies, set up its own armed militia and secured freedom of the press by launching a boycott of any newspapers that accepted government censorship.

This dual power could not last. Trotsky understood that:

‘Either the bourgeoisie will actually dominate the old state apparatus, altering it a little for its purpose, in which case the Soviets will come to nothing, or the Soviets will form the foundation of a new state, liquidating not only the old government apparatus, but also the domination of those classes which it served.’

With the bosses still in power, the struggle was far from over. But with Lenin in exile, the Bolshevik leaders, Stalin and Kamenev, trailed behind events, clinging to old slogans that the revolution itself was rendering outdated.

Like the Mensheviks, they believed that the revolution would have to stop given that a modern capitalist democracy had been established. They wrote in the Bolshevik paper Pravda, ‘what matters now is not the overthrow of capitalism but the overthrow of autocracy and feudalism.’

History had given the working class a tremendous opportunity to finish the revolution by taking power themselves through the Soviets. But successful revolutions do not happen automatically. They need leadership. The victory of the socialist revolution required conscious decision-making and action.

There were three conditions for the Bolsheviks’ eventual success. The first was the role of Lenin himself. On his return to Russia he brushed aside a welcoming party from the Mensheviks that asked him to support the Provisional Government.

Instead, he declared that the revolution was not over, that the workers should have no confidence in the government, and that all power should pass to the Soviets.

Such a government would pull Russia out of the war, give land to the peasants and hand control of the factories over to the workers themselves. These arguments were set out in Lenin's famous 'April Theses'.

Even Lenin's powerful influence within the Bolshevik party would not have been enough on its own. At first the other Bolshevik leaders refused to follow Lenin's advice.

But the mass of rank and file workers and soldiers were losing confidence in the Provisional government. In Kronstadt, an important naval town, the local Soviet declared that 'the sole power in the City of Kronstadt is the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies'.

In the militant stronghold of Vyborg in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), the workers of one machine factory proclaimed 'the only power in the country must be the soviets of workers', soldiers' and peasant deputies, which we will defend with our lives.'

This was the second condition for a revolutionary victory. The compromisers in the Bolshevik leadership were caught between the revolutionary arguments of Lenin and the determination of the rank and file of the party.

The third vital factor was the role of Trotsky. He arrived back in Russia early in May and went straight to the meeting of the Petrograd Soviet, which was under the leadership of Mensheviks and SRs, who supported the Provisional Government.

They tried to ignore his presence, but the great days of 1905 were not so easily forgotten. To cries of 'Trotsky! We want Comrade Trotsky!', he was allowed to speak. He opposed support for the government and called for the Soviets to take sole power, in terms that were markedly similar to Lenin's position. By the summer Trotsky and his small group of supporters had joined the Bolsheviks.

Trotsky's great skill as a public speaker was now allied directly to the influence and power of Lenin's highly organised mass revolutionary party.

He addressed meeting after meeting in factories, halls and squares across the city, holding audiences spellbound with what one observer described as 'the powerful rhythm of his speech, his loud but never fatiguing voice, the remarkable coherence and literary skill of his phrasing, the richness of his imagery, scalding irony, his soaring pathos, his rigid logic, clear as polished steel.'

Trotsky's brilliant success as a speaker consisted in his ability to understand and express the most deeply held needs and longings of his audiences, and to link them in clear and dramatic language to the necessity for revolution.

All Power to the Soviets!

The government, now an alliance between Mensheviks, SRs and capitalist ministers, banned a Bolshevik demonstration planned for June. Instead they held an official march, hoping that it would be a way of letting off steam.

But on the march they were terrified to see how the workers were taking up the Bolsheviks' slogans with great enthusiasm, particularly the calls 'Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers' and 'All Power to the Soviets'.

Many Bolsheviks, particularly in the party's military organisations, thought the time had come to take power from the Provisional Government. But at the First Congress of Soviets from across Russia in June, the SRs had 285 delegates, the Mensheviks 248 and the Bolsheviks only 105.

The time was not yet right for a Bolshevik seizure of power; the majority of the Russian working class was not yet behind them.

In St. Petersburg (now renamed Petrograd) the fervour of the revolutionary workers and soldiers had reached boiling point. Against the advice of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks' leading Central Committee, they staged an armed demonstration in early July. At first, the party leaders struggled to contain the situation but to no avail.

Preferring to struggle and lose alongside the revolutionary workers than to cut themselves off from them for good, the party joined the fight. By 5 July troops loyal to the Provisional Government started arriving in Petrograd; a bloody counter-revolution had begun.

Revolutionary workers and soldiers were beaten up and arrested across the city. The Bolshevik headquarters was occupied and smashed up. Trotsky found himself once again in jail.

In the months that followed these 'July days' Russia was led ever deeper into crisis by the reactionary Provisional Government. In the countryside the peasants continued to seize the land from its former owners. Discipline collapsed in the army. Bolshevism, though weakened, continued to build up support in the factories.

Aware that this could not go on much longer, the upper layers of the army started to lose patience with the government of moderate socialists. A military dictatorship, they believed, was the answer. Then they would sweep away all the revolutionaries and Jewish 'troublemakers', and put the rightful Tsar of all the Russians back on his throne, as God intended.

Kerensky, the SR leader of the government, was caught in the crossfire. He wanted to declare martial law himself, but the head of the army, General Kornilov, had other ideas. Kornilov marched his troops on Petrograd, planning a coup.

In a blind panic, the government issued the order to defend Petrograd. But they had no chance without the support of the most revolutionary workers and soldiers, and they knew it. A group of sailors' representatives came to visit Trotsky in prison, asking whether they should fight with Kerensky against the coup, or try to overthrow them both.

Trotsky's reply was a fine example of revolutionary realism. He advised them to deal first with Kornilov, all the better to overthrow Kerensky afterwards.

The Bolsheviks came back out of hiding and the Soviets issued a call to defend the revolution arms in hand. The workers boycotted anything connected with the coup. Kornilov's army found it could not use the railways or the telegraph system.

Armed workers confronted and won over Kornilov's confused and unwilling rank and file. The revolt collapsed with scarcely any violence.

As Trotsky had predicted, the effect on Kerensky and the moderate socialists was equally shattering. The Provisional Government appeared weak and indecisive. It had brought the revolution to the edge of ruin. Had not Kerensky and his capitalist allies been plotting with Kornilov just before the coup attempt? And had the Bolsheviks not been warning of this all along?

Throughout September the Bolsheviks won ever more support in the Soviets throughout the country. On 23 September Trotsky was once again elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. Lenin argued strenuously within the party for an immediate armed seizure of power. He met stiff resistance among other Bolshevik leaders at first.

The art of insurrection

Trotsky on the other hand supported an insurrection, but shrewdly calculated that the best way to take and hold power would be for the rising to be organised under the authority of the Soviet.

The Soviet backed his proposal that 'If the Provisional Government is incapable of defending Petrograd, it must either make peace [with Germany] or give place to another government.'

The Soviet established a Military Revolutionary Committee, under Trotsky's guidance, to prepare for the seizure of power.

By 22 October, preparations were nearly complete. At a mass rally called by the Soviet, Trotsky asked the assembled thousands of workers and soldiers to defend the revolution to the last drop of blood.

On the next day he risked his life, going personally, without a bodyguard, to a meeting of soldiers at the Fortress of St Peter and St Paul, where loyalty to the Soviet was in doubt.

After making a speech to the assembled soldiers, he returned to report that they would obey only the orders of the Military Revolutionary Committee, and that their 100,000 rifles would be at the service of the revolution.

During the night and morning of 24/25 October, Soviet forces moved to take control of all the key positions in the city, the railway stations, food stores, telephone exchanges, power stations and post offices. There was no resistance ? government forces were in disarray. At 10.00am on 25 October, the Military Revolutionary Committee announced:

?The Provisional Government has been overthrown. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers? and Soldiers? Deputies . . . ?

That evening the Second Congress of Soviets from all over Russia met in Petrograd. Sixty per cent of the delegates were Bolsheviks. Martov, on behalf of his faction of Mensheviks, declared that a common government should be formed out of all representatives of socialist parties, including the mainstream Mensheviks and the right wing SRs, who had opposed Soviet power and were calling for negotiations at once with the deposed Provisional Government.

Trotsky rose to reply to them in one of his most famous and dramatic speeches:

?The masses of the people followed our banner, and the insurrection was victorious. And now we are told: renounce your victory, make concessions, compromise. With whom? I ask: with whom ought we to compromise? With those wretched groups who have left us or who are making this proposal? But after all we have had a full view of them. No-one in Russia is with them any longer.

A compromise is supposed to be made, as between two equal sides, by the millions of workers and peasants represented at this Congress, whom they are ready, not for the first time or the last, to barter away as the bourgeoisie sees fit. No, here no compromise is possible. To those who have left and to those who tell us to do this, we must say: you are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out; go where you ought to be: into the dustbin of history!?

For the first time in history, the workers were masters of the state, a new type of state under their direct control. The October Revolution proved the boundless energy and creativity of the working class, and the necessity of a tightly organised revolutionary party to lead the struggle for power.

Against the cowardly arguments of Mensheviks and reformists of all types, it proved that for the working majority to overthrow the power of the privileged minority, there can be no alternative to force.

It showed the whole world that workers? power and socialism are not mere dreams or dry theories, but the necessary outcome of centuries of struggle.

Still only 38 years old, at the head of the revolutionary masses, a member of the world?s first victorious workers? government, the October revolution turned Trotsky from an obscure agitator working in desperate isolation into a powerful leader of a proletarian state.

He was now at the height of his influence. But Trotsky was no mere place-seeker; this was far from the end of his revolutionary career. Leon Trotsky?s most important struggles lay ahead.

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