Essays in Modern History (1914-89)

25 key questions answered

Russel Tarr

Edited by Andy Dailey

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DEDICATION

To all my students, past and present, who have made history teaching so enjoyable over the years.

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FOREWORD

I first met Russel Tarr in Athens, Greece in Summer 2005 when I was giving my first History workshop for the International Baccalaureate. It was the hottest summer in my memory as the building had no air-conditioning and had the decor of a nuclear bomb shelter. Despite this, Russel and I enjoyed discussing a wide range of historical and professional issues over several days. Since then we have remained in close contact as historians, colleagues, and friends. Russel is an exceptional educator and historian who is held in high regard in the international teaching community.

His *Essays in Modern History* is a much needed and very welcome work. As historians and students of history, we usually have one or two areas of expertise through our studies. Most of us have studied one or two periods of time or major historical events in our studies. However, Russel's interests, studies, and teaching covers the entire 20th century with special attention to the causes and consequences of World War One, the Spanish Civil War and the Korean War; the rise of dictators such as Stalin, Franco and Castro; the rule of Lenin, Mao and Pinochet; the foreign policies of Hitler and Mussolini; Cold War crises and conflicts in Germany and Vietnam; and the success of various post-war US Presidents. This depth and breadth of knowledge is exceptional and

assures us that this work on twentieth-century history is not limited in terms of scope.

By reading the twentieth-century essays presented here, one can appreciate the thorough research that has been invested in addressing the questions. Written in accessible prose, Russel's exemplar essays display a masterful use of quotes and weighing of evidence with discerning analysis. Editing this work was a pleasure; it is an excellent book which every teacher and student of modern history will find invaluable.

Andy Dailey
El Fashn, Egypt, August 2020

INTRODUCTION

Since beginning my career as a history teacher in the 1990s I have made a regular habit of writing essays along with my students – sometimes in timed examination conditions, and sometimes as more extended pieces for publication in magazines such as *History Review*. As well as helping to consolidate my own essential knowledge of each topic, these have served to provide useful discussion points during classroom feedback sessions and as revision material in the examination season.

What follows is a collection of those essays answering some of the most engaging questions covering the period 1917-1989 which have frequently appeared in examination papers. It is hoped that they will provide teachers and students not only with some helpful pointers in terms of the main perspectives on interesting topics in modern history, but also some indications about the stylistic demands of essay-writing.

Russel Tarr
Toulouse, France, August 2020

3. HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS LENIN AS RULER OF RUSSIA, 1918-1924?

Between 1917 and 1924 the Bolshevik party went through a trial which transformed it from a revolutionary splinter group into a party of government. During that period, it faced intense opposition from a bewildering array of political, military, social and national groups. By the time of Lenin's death, the regime was, despite all the odds, still in power – but at what cost was this success achieved and to what extent was it superficial rather than real?

Politically, Lenin clearly faced overwhelming opposition following his seizure of power in 1917. The Social Revolutionaries – the party of the peasants - had more support in the countryside, whilst the Bolsheviks - the party of the proletariat, or industrial workers – did not command the overwhelming support of the Soviets. Nevertheless, having made so much political capital out of the Provisional Government's failure to call a Constituent Assembly throughout 1917 in order to form a new government, Lenin had no choice but to call elections immediately. For the Bolsheviks, the results were depressingly predictable: they gained barely a quarter of

the available seats, whilst the SR's gained almost half. The Assembly met in January 1918. After electing the SR leader Victor Chernov as Chairman, it promptly refused to accept the Bolshevik suggestion that parliamentary democracy be abandoned in favour of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' through the Soviets.

Given his precarious position, Lenin's response to this setback at first sight appears reckless: he contemptuously dissolved the Assembly, calling this "true democracy" because he knew the needs of the proletariat better than they did themselves. He then expelled opposition parties from the Central Executive Committee and declared that "our party stands at the head of soviet power. Decrees and measures of soviet power emanate from our party". By the time of Lenin's death, political opposition parties had been formally banned and the Bolshevik Party (renamed the Communist Party in 1919) reigned supreme.

The most important cause for Lenin's political triumph was the weakness of his opponents. The Social Revolutionaries in particular had suffered for years from bitter splits over such issues as the validity of terrorism, participation in the Duma, Russia's Parliament, and support for the Provisional Government in 1917. So it was no surprise that when the moment came, they were deeply divided over whether they should participate in the new Bolshevik government. Ultimately, seven leftist Social Revolutionaries joined the government at the end of 1917 and helped to draft the decree which legitimised the seizure of the land by the peasants. This not only exacerbated the divisions in the Social Revolutionary Party, but consolidated the position of the Bolsheviks in the countryside as the party that legally awarded land to the peasants.

The weaknesses of his opponents made it much easier for Lenin to crush them. In summer 1918, a failed rebellion by the SR's in Moscow and an assassination attempt on Lenin persuaded the Bolsheviks to unleash the 'Red Terror'. This was presided over by the CHEKA, a policing force formed shortly after the October Revolution under the leadership of Dzerzhinsky ("we stand for organised terror: this should be frankly stated"). Within months, membership of the Menshevik and SR parties - which failed to respond by creating their own armed wings - had fallen by two thirds. Trotsky argued that "We raise the sword not to enslave or oppress, but to free all from bondage" and Lenin concurred that "There is absolutely no contradiction between Soviet democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers". In contrast,

Whilst the Constituent Assembly undermined Lenin's political opponents, the peace treaty signed with Germany in March 1918 served to unite his military opponents. Upon seizing power, Lenin was determined to secure "peace at any price"; the war had already brought down the Tsar and the Provisional Government, and if the Bolshevik regime was not to go the same way, then the war needed to end. Moreover, both Lenin and Trotsky felt that with a world revolution around the corner, the treaty would soon be rendered redundant. Realising that this policy was nevertheless controversial, Trotsky played for time, stringing out negotiations for as long as possible in a tactic he called "no peace, no war". Exasperated, the Germans re-invaded Russia and forced the Bolsheviks to move their capital from Petrograd to Moscow before they eventually signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Under this punitive treaty, Russia ceded Finland, the Baltic states and Poland - a million square kilometres of territory containing 80% of her coal mines and 30% of her population. Even within the Bolshevik party, the treaty

was deeply unpopular; Lenin secured its ratification by the Central Committee only by threatening resignation, and even then by only a majority of one.

Given the unpopularity of the Treaty within Lenin's Bolshevik party, it is hardly surprising that it united anti-Bolshevik military forces. Three 'White Army' commanders posed a serious threat to the Bolshevik regime based around Moscow: Kolchak attacked from the East, Denikin from the South, and Yudenitch from the West. This movement, which had in total over 250,000 troops, was united by a hatred of the Bolsheviks and a desire to restart the war against Germany. This latter objective won them the support of Russia's former allies, who invaded Russia themselves: Britain and France took control of Murmansk and Archangel in the North, whilst the Americans attacked from the Far East, helping Japan to take control of Vladivostok. At one stage, the Bolsheviks had lost control of almost 75% of Russia. However, against what appeared to be overwhelming odds, by spring 1920 all three enemy armies had been defeated.

One reason for the military success of the Bolsheviks is that the Whites had no common cause and so were deeply divided. Moreover, many of the White generals (for example, Denikin and Kolchak) hated each other and so their patriotic rallying cry of 'Russia: one and indivisible' was both hopelessly vague and utterly hypocritical given their reliance on foreign aid. In contrast, the Bolsheviks were united under the leadership of Lenin, who pragmatically reinstated 48,000 experienced Tsarist officers. He in turn was ably supported by Trotsky, who covered 65,000 miles in his mobile train headquarters inspiring the Bolshevik Red Army, which eventually numbered over 5 million disciplined and motivated soldiers.

Secondly, the Bolsheviks possessed a geographical advantage. Firstly, their position in the compacted heartland of Russia gave them a strategic advantage. It not only made it easier for them to coordinate their defence, but also gave them the largest chunk of the population and most of the war industry. Moscow and Petrograd stayed in Bolshevik hands for the entire Civil War, and the symbolic importance of this fact was expressed by the White leader Lebedev, who said that "In Moscow, we would get the whole brain of our country, all her soul, all that is talented in Russia." In contrast, the three main White armies were located at opposite ends of Russia – Denikin and Kolchak were 10,500 kilometres apart and had to communicate via Paris.

Finally, Lenin handled the issue of national minorities more effectively than the Whites. By 1918, there were thirty-three sovereign governments in Russia, but whereas the population of the Russian heartland controlled by the Reds was ethnically homogenous, their opponents needed the support of national minorities, which was awkward given their slogan of "Russia, one and indivisible". In contrast, Lenin denounced the Tsarist empire as "a prison of nations" and promoted the idea of self-determination in the hope that national minorities would vote to stay part of the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, when it became clear that the national minorities were not going to be persuaded into supporting Bolshevism, Lenin was persuaded by Stalin and others that they would have to be beaten into submission instead. By 1921, the Bolsheviks had regained control of Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. However, Finland and the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia declared independence and Marshal Pilsudski secured Polish independence in the Treaty of Riga in March 1921.

The Civil War created further economic dislocation and

pushed Lenin towards a drastic policy called "War Communism" including the rapid nationalisation of all industry, taking control away from the workers, and the requisitioning of all "surplus" food from the peasants. Whilst this succeeded in meeting the immediate needs of the Bolshevik state, it created deep resentment in both the proletariat and the peasantry which eventually escalated into outright rebellion.

The peasantry, at the outset of the Civil War, preferred Lenin's programme of peace, land and worker control to that of the Whites, who wanted to restart the war with Germany and resisted both land reform and worker's rights. Four out of five peasants conscripted into the White armies promptly deserted. However, by early 1918 the honeymoon was over. Chronic food shortages in Petrograd and Moscow pushed the Bolsheviks towards a policy of requisitioning all surplus grain. In 1918 over 7,000 members of requisition squads were murdered, and during 1920 and 1921 a number of violent peasant uprisings occurred in the Ukraine, the Urals, and western Siberia, all suppressed with large concentrations of Red Army troops.

The proletariat provided the key to solving the problem of the peasantry since it could provide the countryside with the industrial goods it needed, which would then give them an incentive to deliver foodstuffs for the towns and the army. Initially, the proletariat formed the bedrock of Bolshevik support and Lenin used workers' factory committees as a means of directing economic policy. However, the economic crisis convinced Lenin to introduce compulsory labour for all citizens and limited the influence of the Soviets by setting up a Supreme Council of the National Economy (*Vesenkha*). This rapidly evolved into an organ of the state staffed by former bourgeois specialists ("knowledgeable, experienced, businesslike people").

On the one hand, Lenin's nationalization of industry and the efforts of Vesenkha to control and coordinate the economy enabled the Bolsheviks to organize munitions production and army supply much better than the Whites. This in itself was a considerable achievement and an essential ingredient of Bolshevik victory. On the other hand, the withdrawal of support for the soviets was ideologically divisive. Economically too, Vesenkha was powerless to counteract the reduction in food, raw materials, and fuel resulting from the loss of control over the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Total industrial production continued to fall until 1920, when Russian industry produced approximately 14% of what it had in 1913.

By 1921, Lenin's policy of War Communism had brought the country to the verge of chaos. In the countryside, around 6 million peasants had died of starvation and reports circulated in the foreign press that mothers were tying their children to opposite corners of their huts for fear that they would eat each other. In Moscow and Petrograd, thousands of workers went on strike in February 1921, blaming the Bolsheviks for "fraud, theft and all criminality". However, it was the Kronstadt naval rebellion in March 1921 that gave the regime its greatest scare and destroyed its credibility to the greatest degree. The Kronstadt sailors had been described as "the pride and joy of the revolution" by Trotsky, as they had helped overthrow the Provisional Government in 1917 and crushed opposition to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly the following year. In 1921, however, 16,000 soldiers and workers signed a petition calling for "Soviets without Bolsheviks".

Though the rebellions were mercilessly crushed, Lenin compared the communist state to a man "beaten to within an inch of his life" and, describing Kronstadt as "the flash which lit up reality better than anything else" promptly replaced War

Communism with the New Economic Policy (NEP). This permitted private ownership of small-scale industry and ended grain requisitioning in favour of a tax in kind (eventually settled at 10% of the harvest), with peasants able to sell their surpluses on the open market. By the end of 1922, the crisis began to ease, and by 1923 grain production had increased by 50%.

However, whilst agriculture recovered rapidly, industry did not. Therefore, whilst agricultural prices fell, industrial prices continued to rise. This meant that farmers could not afford to buy industrial goods and were tempted back towards subsistence farming. By the time of the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, industrial prices were running at three times the level of agricultural prices and Trotsky compared the growing gap between agricultural and industrial prices to the blades of a pair of scissors.

By Lenin's death, industry was well on the way to recovery and the economic "scissors crisis" was largely over, but socially the policy remained deeply divisive. Rumours circulated that NEP really stood for "New Exploitation of the Proletariat", many of whom remained frustrated with the slow progress towards socialism and detested the new breed of enterprising peasants (*kulaks*) and the traders known as Nepmen.

In political terms, its transformation from a party of revolutionary opposition to one of beleaguered government had a profound impact upon the Bolshevik Party. Within months of taking power, debate and internal democracy became an impossible luxury. By 1921, the official instrument of government - Sovnarkom – had been sidelined by the smaller and more cohesive Politburo, which lay at the heart of a single-party state which dealt with dissent through summary executions during the Civil War. As Steve Smith puts it, the crisis

of the Civil War was characterised "as much by certain principles being jettisoned as about others being confirmed".

Consequently, the growing power of the state only served to aggravate divisions within the Bolshevik Party. During the period of War Communism, the Workers' Opposition - led by Shiliapnikov and Kollantai - opposed the reduction in the power of the trade unions and the Soviets. Moreover, another Bolshevik faction known as the Democratic Centralists resented the "dictatorship of party officialdom" and had called for more involvement in the decision-making process by rank-and-file Bolsheviks.

Lenin's Decree on Party Unity (1921) banned formal factions, but his partial revival of capitalism in the NEP that same year created still deeper divisions. The right-wing of the party vigorously defended the gradual, peasant-based socialism of the NEP; they were led by Bukharin, who encouraged peasants to "enrich yourselves through the NEP". However, the left-wing Communists quickly came to feel that more emphasis needed to be placed on a programme of rapid industrialization; they were led by Trotsky, who described the NEP as "the first sign of the degeneration of Bolshevism". Lenin tried his best to keep the two wings of the party together by refusing to make clear whether the NEP was a short-term tactical retreat or represented a radical rethinking of communism, but this merely postponed rather than avoided internal party conflict.

In conclusion, by 1922 - the year the USSR was formally proclaimed - it was clear that Lenin had succeeded in dealing with the immediate threats which it had faced upon taking power. However, over the course of that year, Lenin suffered three strokes which left him partially paralysed and politically incapacitated. This served to highlight the cost at which success

had been bought. As principles had been compromised and policies had become inconsistent, the Bolsheviks had become so divided that Lenin had dispensed with debate and democracy and relied upon brute force and personal dictatorship to hold the regime together. In the short term, this meant that the party rapidly fragmented following his illness, allowing Stalin to play factions off against each other in order to secure his own ascendancy. In the longer term, it set a tragic ideological precedent which the 'Man of Steel', Stalin, was to exploit with disastrous effects for the state in the years following Lenin's death. Far from "withering away" as Marx had envisaged, the state had become all-powerful. Lenin had replaced one dictatorship with another.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Russel Tarr has a degree in Modern World History from Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University and a History teaching qualification from Birmingham University. He has been a full-time teacher of History and Politics since 1997 and is currently Head of History at the International School of Toulouse in France.

His previously published works include *Luther and the Reformation in Europe 1500-64* and the two volumes of *A History Teaching Toolbox*. He also writes regularly for the international press and delivers freelance training courses to history teachers.

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