

Power struggle  
between leon trotsky  
and joseph stalin  
history essay



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In 1922, when Vladimir Lenin became incapacitated, there was a clear need of a successor for the Soviet Union. As he was slowly dying, a power struggle emerged between Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin. These two had developed a deep hatred and rivalry for each other. Even though Trotsky “ had been widely viewed as the heir of Lenin, it was relatively easy for Stalin to combine with the other Bolshevik leaders in order to head off this threat” (Paley 10)<sup>1</sup>. In Lenin’s “ Final Testament”, Lenin could already see that Stalin was quickly and surreptitiously gaining power. Stalin’s position of General Secretary gave him the ability to appoint people to important positions. Lenin was also reluctant to see Stalin as his successor because he thought that Trotsky could do a much better job. Lenin believed that Trotsky was the best man in the central committee for the job. The date of January 21st, 1924 was no ordinary date for Russia. It marked the death of the country’s leader Lenin, and now Stalin and Trotsky would truly compete for leadership. Unfortunately, Stalin won by exiling Trotsky, and in 5 years was in complete totalitarian control of Russia. Trotsky would have been a better leader than Stalin due to their contrasting past histories, ideological beliefs and contrasting beliefs of socialism.

Stalin and Trotsky each had their own experiences growing up which impacted and influenced them to become revolutionaries. Joseph Stalin was born in 1879 in Georgia, which at that time was in southern Russia. He was the son of a poor shoemaker, and the only child in his family to survive past infancy. Not much else is known about his childhood, except that he lived with a priest, and received a religious education. In 1889, he was expelled from his seminary because he failed to go to his examinations. In the future,

Stalin would say that he was really kicked out because he was a revolutionary. His original name was Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, however in 1913 he used the pseudonym Stalin, after becoming a Bolshevik revolutionary. Changing his name also allowed Stalin to have a Russian sounding name like Lenin. Stalin was known as a hard worker, but “ unlike Lenin he was neither a great thinker nor a great writer” (Killingray 3)<sup>2</sup>. Even though Stalin wasn’t the brightest of revolutionaries, he was still smart enough to win the power struggle with Trotsky. On the other hand, a great deal is known about Trotsky’s life and childhood. Leon Trotsky was also born in 1879, but in the Kherson Province, in Ukraine. His original name was Lev Davidovich Bronstein. He didn’t have that great of a childhood mostly because his parents were always busy with their jobs on the farm. For the first part of his life, he and his family lived in the country, where he learned to appreciate seclusion. Despite his parents always being occupied, his “ lack of affection only developed in him a more affectionate attitude towards others” (Garza 19)<sup>3</sup>. When Lev was 9 years old, he moved to Odessa, with his uncle Monya. When Trotsky was 10, for the first time his revolutionary side was shown. While in school in Odessa, he stood up for a fellow student who experienced an injustice. A teacher acted cruel to this particular student only for the reason that this student was slower than the rest of the class. In order to retaliate against this unjustness, Lev “ organized a protest, in which students drove their teacher into a rage by making a howling noise with their mouths closed” (Garza 21)<sup>4</sup>. Trotsky was known for absorbing as much knowledge as he possibly could in school. When Trotsky was 17, he fully believed “ that revolution was the only route to a better life for the working class of the world” (Garza, 25)<sup>5</sup>. For this reason, he joined the Bolshevik

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party under the leadership of Lenin. After the revolution was successful, Trotsky assembled and organized the Soviet Red Army. During the civil war preceding the Revolution, Trotsky faced a new enemy known as the White Army. While Trotsky was organizing the Red Army, Stalin was “ behind the scenes...[sitting] on the Revolutionary War Council and whispered malicious rumors in Lenin’s ear about Trotsky’s military tactics” (Garza 68)<sup>6</sup>. Despite Stalin’s efforts to ruin Trotsky’s reputation, Leon had proven himself a military genius when the British troops in Estonia and Latvia threatened to attack Petrograd. Stalin suggested using a defeatist strategy by abandoning Petrograd and sending all the troops to Moscow. However, Trotsky was in direct opposition to this plan, and told Lenin to let him try to save Petrograd. He persuaded Lenin to allow him to attempt to save the ancient city. Trotsky came to Petrograd determined to convert every civilian to an armed soldier. Trotsky ultimately succeeded mainly due to his persuasive speeches and confidence. British tanks were in the suburbs and their navy was ready to attack and shell the city at any time, although due to Trotsky’s excellent leadership, the city held out. Had Stalin been in command of Petrograd, the city would have been lost to the British. Despite Stalin’s and Trotsky’s contrasting youths, they were both revolutionaries, but with different sets of beliefs.

Stalin and Trotsky each had a different outlook on how the Soviet state should be run. Even after Trotsky was exiled, Stalin was not in complete control of the communist party. Stalin still had a few so-called “ rivals”, who had helped him get rid of Trotsky. He may have had the most power, although was not yet to the level of power that he craved, because he had to

share power with the rest of the communist party. One by one, Stalin got rid of other important people in the communist party, so that he alone could have total control and power. In 1929, Stalin was at the head of Politburo, where he was able to emerge as the real leader and dictator of Russia. In order to eliminate any other possibilities of resistance, Stalin issued the "Great Purges" in 1936 (Paley 13)<sup>7</sup>. In these Great Purges, high ranked officials of the communist party were accused of crimes against the Soviet State. Even though in most cases, the people were perfectly innocent, they were executed only because there was the slight possibility that they may have held opposition to Stalin. High-ranking officials were not the only ones who were victimized in this "campaign of terror". A man by the name of Raskolnikov wrote a letter to Stalin concerning the great purges: "No one, as he goes to bed, knows whether he will escape arrest in the night.... You begun with bloody vengeance on former Trotskyites... [then] went on to destroy the old Bolsheviks" (Killingray 28)<sup>8</sup>. By using the great purges to his advantage, Stalin was betraying Lenin's original methodology by killing the Lenin's old revolutionary friends. With no one left to oppose him, Stalin was pretty much an absolute ruler of the Soviet Union. When Stalin gained complete power, he wanted to make sure that he would never meet any resistance or opposition. He felt that the only way that this goal could be accomplished was by completely dominating and controlling all aspects of people's lives. Stalin even went as far as to use literature and art as "a puppet of the totalitarian state" (Trotsky 20)<sup>9</sup>. Despite being exiled from Russia, Trotsky was able to write criticism on Stalin. He was very angry with the way that Stalin ruled Russia, and he took no mercy in his writings about Stalin. Trotsky argued that Stalin had betrayed the original purpose of

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Lenin's revolution, by using the Soviet Union as his "personal dictatorship". Trotsky also accused Stalin of running a bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. (Paley 11-12)<sup>10</sup>. During Stalin's reign, many efforts were made to industrialize in order to compete with the other modern nations in the world. These efforts came to be called the "the five years plans". Sure these plans may sound to be beneficial, although in reality, millions of people died as a direct result of these 5-year plans. Since all efforts were made at industrializing, there were constant shortages of food for the peasants. Also, Stalin forced all the peasants to join collective farms. These collective farms were basically giant farms in which the peasants worked together to produce food for the Soviet State. One problem that Stalin encountered was a group of wealthy peasants who were called the Kulaks. They did not want to join the collective farms, so Stalin saw this as opposition to his power. He immediately ordered them to either be executed, or be sent to work camps in Siberia. Another problem that was evident was that the peasants as a whole were opposed to this whole idea of "collectivization". Stalin ordered the Red Army to kill many of the peasants who were not in compliance with Collective farms. While it is not certain what Trotsky would have done were he the ruler of Russia, "it is possible that Trotsky would have followed a similar policy had he risen to power. But the policy was pursued ruthlessly by Stalin, despite the fact that he was of peasant background himself" (Paley 14)<sup>11</sup>. So if Trotsky was the leader of the Soviet Union, he would have most likely tried to modernize Russia, although not at the same level that Stalin did. While Stalin wanted to achieve his goal regardless of the costs, Trotsky would have shown an idealistic approach to the same goal of modernizing. It is almost certain that Trotsky would have followed Lenin's original principals

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and methods to create the best Soviet State possible, with a minimal cost of lives. But as a result of Stalin's rule, millions and millions of innocent people died.

Stalin and Trotsky not only had different principles and beliefs on how the Soviet State should be run, but they also had differing views on how socialism should work. While Stalin wanted "Socialism in one country", Trotsky along with Lenin wanted worldwide Socialism. Stalin knew that his idea would fail if it was not brought out at exactly the right time. He waited until his campaign against Trotsky had brought down the popularity of Trotsky. Then Stalin proposed his theory in 1925. Stalin's own original supporters Zinoviev and Kamenev opposing this plan, although it was too late, because Stalin had become too powerful (Garza 79)<sup>12</sup>. The only reason as to why Stalin proposed this theory so late was because it was in direct conflict with Trotsky's theory of worldwide revolution. In order to actually succeed his theory of "Socialism in one country", Stalin had to make the ideal and perfect socialistic/communist state. He could only accomplish this by making the Soviet Union a dictatorship, with him making all of its important decisions, and thereby making Russia a totalitarian state. Trotsky believed that it was important if not vital that capitalist countries in the west would have a communist revolution. If this occurred, Russia would easily have allies and friends. Although if there is no communist revolution in capitalist countries, then Russia would have a hostile relationship with the capitalist nations. The only reason as to why Stalin beat Trotsky over this matter was because "he had the support from other members of the Politburo who feared Trotsky" (Killingray 5)<sup>13</sup>. The real turning point came

when Lenin abandoned Trotsky on this idea. This happened because Lenin saw the waves of failed world revolutions, and that keeping communism in Russia should take priority above all else. Ironically enough though, Stalin wasn't the first to come up with "Socialism in one country".

The question of whether Russia would have been better off without Stalin is more fact than opinion based. Sure he may have industrialized Russia, but at what cost? Stalin had millions of people killed directly and indirectly just to accomplish his goal of "socialism in one country". If Trotsky was the leader, he would have followed in Lenin's footsteps, instead of completely betraying the October Revolution like Stalin did. In conclusion, if Trotsky were the leader of Russia, he would have done a better job than Stalin due to their contrasting past histories, ideological beliefs and contrasting beliefs of socialism.