

Lenin's last struggle

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One hundred years ago, on December 23, 1922, Lenin began writing one of the most politically significant documents in the history of the Soviet Union. It consisted of a series of notes that were to be published as a letter to the upcoming Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party. The Bolshevik leader, who had not fully recovered from the stroke he had suffered earlier in the year, was fully aware that the state of his health might prevent him from participating in the Congress.

These notes, which were to go down in history as Lenin's Testament, included an assessment of the principal leaders of the Bolshevik Party. It was not the intention of Lenin, who viewed leadership as a collective process rooted in relationships that reflected political tendencies within the party, to propose a formal successor. Lenin's relationship to the Bolshevik Party was of such a politically and historically unique character that it could not, in any case, be duplicated by any other individual. He was, however, deeply concerned that tensions within the party, under conditions of objective economic and social crisis and differences over policies, could lead to dangerous factional conflicts within the central leadership.

Intending to prevent destructive conflicts, Lenin evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of leading members of the Central Committee.

In the note of December 24, Lenin wrote:

Comrade Stalin, having become Secretary-General, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution.

This assessment was followed by the following appraisal of Trotsky:

Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand, as his struggle against the C.C. on the question of the People's Commissariat of Communications has already proved, is distinguished not only by outstanding ability. He is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C.C., but he has displayed excessive self-assurance and shown excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of the work.

Lenin then warned:

These two qualities of the two outstanding leaders of the present C.C., can inadvertently lead to a split, and if our Party does not take steps to avert this, the split may come unexpectedly.

Lenin continued to add to these notes during the days that followed.

Among the most critical issues with which Lenin grappled as he wrote his notes concerned the relationship of socialist republics within the Soviet state established in 1922. Lenin, fearful of the revival of Great-Russian dominance within the USSR, had insisted upon the right of socialist republics, such as Ukraine and Georgia, to secede from the union.

In notes dated December 30, 1922, Lenin expressed the concern that the Soviet government might fail to provide sufficient protection against Great-Russian oppression. Within this context, Lenin's comments on Stalin—especially as he examined the latter's abusive conduct to representatives of national minorities in Georgia—became increasingly harsh. Clearly referring to Stalin's behavior, Lenin warned against “the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is.”

Lenin continued, “I think that Stalin's haste and his

infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious ‘nationalist-socialism’, played a fatal role here. In politics spite generally plays the basest of roles.”

On January 4, 1923, Lenin added the following paragraph to his note of December 24:

Stalin is too rude and this defect, although quite tolerable in our midst and in dealing among us Communists, becomes intolerable in a Secretary-General. That is why I suggest that the comrades think about a way of removing Stalin from that post and appointing another man in his stead who in all other respects differs from Comrade Stalin in having only one advantage, namely, that of being more tolerant, more loyal, more polite and more considerate to the comrades, less capricious, etc. This circumstance may appear to be a negligible detail.

But I think that from the standpoint of safeguards against a split and from the standpoint of what I wrote above about the relationship between Stalin and Trotsky, it is not a [minor] detail, but it is a detail which can assume decisive importance.

In the weeks that followed, Lenin’s political hostility toward and personal contempt for Stalin increased. The Bolshevik leader turned to Trotsky for support in the struggle that he planned to wage against Stalin at the scheduled Party congress. On March 5, 1923, he wrote:

Top secret

Personal

Dear Comrade Trotsky: It is my earnest request that you should undertake the defence of the Georgian case in the Party C.C. This case is now under ‘persecution’ by Stalin and Dzerzhinsky, and I cannot rely on their impartiality. Quite to the contrary.

I would feel at ease if you agreed to undertake its defence. If you should refuse to do so for any reason, return the whole case to me. I shall consider it a sign that you do not accept.

Lenin then sent the following letter to Stalin:

You have been so rude as to summon my wife to the telephone and use bad language. Although she had told you that she was prepared to forget this, the fact nevertheless became known through her to Zinoviev and Kamenev.

I have no intention of forgetting so easily what has been done against me, and it goes without saying that what has been done against my wife I consider having been done against me as well.

I ask you, therefore, to think it over whether you are prepared to withdraw what you have said and to make your apologies, or whether you prefer that relations between us should be broken off.

Four days later, on March 9, 1923, Lenin suffered a stroke that brought his political career to an end. He died on January 21, 1924. In the aftermath of Lenin’s death, unprincipled maneuvering by Stalin and his factional supporters blocked the reading of the Testament at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1924. It was to be concealed from the Soviet public for 40 years. Not until 1964 did the Soviet government—11 years after Stalin’s death—allow the inclusion of Lenin’s Testament into a new edition of his *Collected Works*.

When Lenin wrote the Testament, the extent and significance of the divisions that were developing within the Bolshevik Party were not yet known. Lenin’s Testament and the accompanying notes and memos were an anticipation of the unfolding conflict. In the months that followed, Trotsky continued and developed, in real political time, Lenin’s anticipatory critique of bureaucratism and national chauvinism.

In October 1923, 10 months after Lenin had written his Testament, the Left Opposition was founded. The emergence of the Trotskyist movement marked the continuation of Lenin’s last great struggle.



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