

Part 2: The New Economic Policy and Lenin's last struggle

Lenin, Trotsky and the Origins of the Left Opposition

David North
22 October 2023

This is the second part of a lecture that David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party (US), gave at the University of Michigan in November 1993 as part of the celebration by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), of the 70th anniversary of the Left Opposition. The lecture reviews the political origins of the Left Opposition, which was founded in October 1923, in the context of the objective situation confronting the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution and the different political tendencies within the Bolshevik Party. The first part was posted on October 20, 2023.

The New Economic Policy

It is necessary to clarify the relationship between state power and the society within which it is exercised. History, as it is commonly taught in schools and universities, makes a fetish of state power: It casually attributes miraculous powers to those who hold power, as if that power places them above the society and its contradictions. Marxism demystifies the concept of state power and shows that it is fundamentally a historically determined social relationship between classes. The Bolsheviks came to power under a certain set of international and national conditions. Power, of course, in the hands of a revolutionary movement that knows what it wants to achieve can effect profound changes in the course of social development, but it is not omnipotent. A revolutionary party which conquers power does not become from that moment on the sole determinant of the historical process. It cannot simply dictate to society what it wants. It does not create social relations out of its inner being. A revolutionary party that comes to power becomes an immense factor in the course of social development. But the limits of that influence are conditioned by a mass of antecedent historical factors, not to mention a complex of international political and economic variables.

The party not only influences, it is also *influenced* by the social conditions that it confronts upon taking power. The Bolshevik Party could, through decrees, abolish private ownership of the means of production, *but it could not abolish a thousand years of Russian history*. It could not abolish all the different forms of social, economic, cultural and political backwardness which had developed in Russia over those many centuries. It could not make an illiterate peasantry literate overnight. It could not teach political and social culture to masses who had never experienced it. The Bolsheviks understood that it was not only they who were shaping social forces in Russia. They were being shaped by the

society within which they had taken power. The Bolsheviks set their sights so consistently on the world revolution because they understood very well that unless the working class of Western Europe—which had access to the most advanced technology, science and culture—made those resources available to Soviet Russia, the Bolshevik regime would be overwhelmed. By 1921, the greatest danger facing the young workers' state was not the threat of an imperialist military attack, but rather the legacy of social backwardness and the unfavorable relationship of class forces.

By early 1921 it had become increasingly clear that the social foundation of the regime, despite its victory over the Whites in the Civil War, was weakening. The great industrial centers had undergone a disastrous deterioration. Many of the best workers, who were in the Bolshevik Party, had died at the front. Many of the survivors had been drawn into the state apparatus. The old Bolshevik workers were pulled away from their workplace. At the same time, the peasantry was increasingly restless, and by early 1921 it had become clear that the policy of War Communism could not be continued. "War Communism" was not communism in the sense that Marxism conceives of communism as a form of society based on the highest development of the productive forces, where all the wealth of society can be distributed fairly among masses because there is a plethora of goods available. Rather, it was a system of centralized production and distribution required for the purpose of clothing, feeding and arming the Red Army. The uprising in Kronstadt in March 1921 made it clear to the Bolsheviks that it was necessary to change course.

The Bolshevik government also realized in 1921 that it had to reckon with a more protracted development of revolution in Western Europe. The Western European bourgeoisie had weathered the storms that followed the war. A new equilibrium, however tenuous, had been established, and it was necessary to work out a long-term strategy that would enable the Bolshevik government to survive until a new revolutionary wave. Also, the Bolsheviks recognized that a significant factor in the defeat of the previous revolutions had been the inexperience of the new Communist parties. The crisis of working class leadership that had been exposed by the betrayal of the Second International in August 1914 would take, it had become clear, longer to overcome. The founding of the Third International could only begin the process of creating a new revolutionary vanguard. The setbacks to the European working class between 1918 and 1921 provided practical proof that an enormous amount of political education was required before the young parties of the Third International could place themselves at the head of the masses.

What was the Bolshevik Party to do in this period? In March 1921 at the 10th Party Congress, Lenin issued the call for a general retreat. He advocated what became known as the New Economic Policy (NEP),

which had been initially proposed by Trotsky in 1920. Its purpose was to rebuild the Russian economy by restoring the shattered relations between town and country, pacifying the peasantry and reviving trade and industry on the basis of wide-ranging concessions to capitalist elements within Soviet Russia. It was what Lenin frankly described as a form of state capitalism. The aim was to create conditions in which the peasants would once again plant and harvest their crops in the hope of realizing a profit, would provide these crops to the cities, feed the urban masses, and, in this way, revive the Soviet economy. Characteristically, Lenin conceded that NEP represented a setback. He said, in effect: "This is a retreat. We are making this retreat because we are confronted with an unfavorable international situation and the necessity of developing a more long-term strategy. Our initial hope that the Soviet revolution would set into motion very rapidly a world revolution has not been realized, and we have to adopt a different policy."

The NEP made far-reaching concessions to private trade and industry. In the countryside, the peasantry was allowed to lease and farm their own land, hire labor, and, after paying a monetary or tax-in-kind, sell their surplus on the market. There emerged rapidly a strata of wealthy peasants known as *kulaks*. Within the cities, private trade and business flourished, personified by the so-called Nepmen, which included not only petty traders but large-scale entrepreneurs. By 1922 a commercial stock exchange was in existence in Moscow.

The consequences of the NEP

Lenin had, as I pointed out, characterized the adoption of the NEP as a retreat forced upon the Bolshevik regime by the defeat of the first wave of revolutionary struggles in Europe. The concerns that he and others had expressed over the political impact of the NEP were to some extent assuaged by the economic successes the policy produced. The economic situation was stabilized. With the aid of large harvests in both 1921 and 1922, Soviet Russia had escaped disaster. However, the NEP, though necessary and correct, had, so to speak, its "downside," whose consequences, though not altogether obvious, were extremely dangerous to the long-term health of the Soviet regime.

While stabilizing the economy of Soviet Russia, the NEP was of direct benefit principally to the non-proletarian classes of Russia. The successes of the NEP strengthened the position and self-confidence not only of the wealthier strata of the peasants, but also of a strata of businessmen who felt that they had a new lease on life. There emerged an extremely influential group of NEP industrialists, ironically known as "Red managers," many of whom had been part of the old Russian bourgeoisie, who once again achieved considerable stature, politically as well as economically, in the new situation.

Revival of nationalist tendencies

The economic policies of the NEP inevitably found their reflection in fundamental political changes. First, there was a significant change in the size and composition of the Bolshevik Party. On the eve of the February Revolution, there were no more than 10,000 members of the Bolshevik Party. In the course of the year, it grew very rapidly, and while there are many different estimates of its exact size, one can say with reasonable certainty that the membership of the Bolsheviks had grown to at least 45,000 by October. It may have been considerably larger. Whatever its

exact size, the Bolshevik Party included the overwhelming majority of the politically conscious and militant elements in the working class. The party continued to expand during the Civil War, especially as the prospects of final victory increased. Of course, those who joined toward the end of the Civil War were often of a very different caliber than those who had signed up at the beginning. Thus, the fact that the party had more than 386,000 members by 1921 was seen by Lenin as cause for some anxiety. Frequently, he spoke of the "scoundrels" who had infiltrated the Bolshevik Party in pursuit of a career and privileges. The 10th Congress of March 1921 initiated a political purge to remove such elements from the party. Thousands were expelled from the party.

Despite this purge, the mood within the party underwent a significant change. By 1921, after four years of revolution and civil war, which had already been preceded by three years of the world war, a sort of political exhaustion was to be observed within the Bolshevik Party. After all, how long could men and women live on the edge of the knife? Historical conditions in which heroism is the everyday mode of life are by their very nature exceptional. There comes a point—and it's been seen in every revolution—when a reaction against the "heroic mode of life" sets in. By 1921, it appeared that the Bolshevik regime had secured itself against its greatest internal and external enemies. And as the danger of overthrow or collapse receded, there emerged among many of those who had endured so much to ensure the victory of the revolution a desire to enjoy somewhat more comfortable conditions in what remained of their lives and to reap, to some extent, the fruit of their past efforts.

What imparted to these moods a special political significance were the objective conditions which prevailed in Soviet Russia, where the central and overriding fact of life was the contradiction between the social character of the revolution and the general backwardness of Russia. Though the regime had secured itself against immediate threats, the population lived under conditions of desperate want. As party members were drawn into the work of a rapidly growing state apparatus, they were placed in a social position which endowed them with privileges not known to the vast majority of workers. Though these privileges may not appear to have been exceptionally extravagant, they were sufficient to become a factor in the political outlook of many of those who now enjoyed them.

The NEP produced another phenomenon of great political significance: the revival of nationalist sentiments. The Russian Revolution had been made by the Bolsheviks in the name of proletarian internationalism and the international revolution. Never in world history had there been a party which had so decisively broken with the national traditions of the country in which power had been conquered. In fact, a substantial section of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party had lived for years outside Russia. By the time Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917, he had lived in exile for almost 20 years. Since 1900, he had spent only about a year and a half—during the maelstrom of the 1905 Revolution and its immediate aftermath—in Russia. Trotsky had lived in emigration for the 10 years preceding 1917, and that was not unusual. Most of the leaders of the Russian Revolution were men who had acquired years of experience in the international workers movement. Many were fluent in several languages. Lenin, I believe, was fluent in four languages—Russian, English, French and German. Among the principal party leaders, Stalin was exceptional precisely in his lack of international experience and his inability to speak any foreign language.

But in 1917 even Stalin would not have challenged the internationalist conception of the Revolution that prevailed within the Bolshevik Party. And, indeed, the classes that were overthrown denounced the Bolsheviks as a political force completely alien to Russia. It was not an accident that the main charge hurled against Lenin by the bourgeoisie in 1917 was that he was a traitor to Russia, paid for by "German gold." In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, those who lived in emigration viewed the Bolshevik Party as the violator of all they cherished in the culture of old

Russia.

But with the introduction of the NEP, tendencies that emphasized or at least called attention to the specifically national character of the Revolution became increasingly common. At first, this tendency found its most explicit expression among a group of emigrés who advocated reconciliation with the Russian Revolution. In an article that appeared in the 1921 volume *Changing Landmarks (Smena Vekh)*, a writer by the name of Nikolai Ustryalov argued that no matter what the Revolution might call itself—socialist, communist, internationalist—it was, in the final analysis, a product of Russian history and Russian culture.^[1] The New Economic Policy, Ustryalov wrote, was not merely a tactical retreat undertaken by the Bolsheviks to win time for the international revolution. It was, rather, the return of the Revolution to its real Russian roots; and the Soviet state, despite the claims of its leaders, was destined to evolve into a Russian bourgeois state. Rather than opposing the Revolution, Ustryalov urged that its natural Russian and bourgeois development be encouraged.

Ustryalov's arguments were closely followed within Soviet Russia and struck a responsive chord. To some extent, Ustryalov's views were welcomed as an acknowledgment of the stability and growing prestige of the Soviet regime. But the response also reflected a resurgence of nationalist sentiments within Soviet Russia, to which large sections of the Party—most of whom lacked the broad international experience and theoretical knowledge of the pre-1917 cadre—were by no means immune. A body of literature began to emerge with popular authors, such as Boris Pilnyak, who depicted and glorified the Russian character of the Revolution.

This development was rooted in the social contradictions of the Russian Revolution. It was led by a proletarian party but depended on the support of millions of peasants, who constituted the majority of the population. But the attitude of the peasantry to the Revolution was ambivalent. The peasantry had supported the *Bolshevik* Revolution which gave them land. But in *communism* and international working class solidarity, they were hardly interested.

The revival of nationalist sentiments expressed not only the outlook of the peasantry but also the sentiments of the personnel of the growing bureaucracy, which came more and more to see the revolution from the standpoint of the privileges which this revolution had created for those who occupied privileged positions in the new national Soviet state. Lenin, with his political acumen, recognized this.

The last days of Lenin

In March 1922, after one year of the NEP, Lenin gave the political report to the 11th Party Congress. He dealt at length with *Changing Landmarks* and sought to explain the deeper political significance of Ustryalov's arguments. For Lenin, the importance of *Changing Landmarks* consisted precisely in the fact that its observations on the course of the Russian Revolution were not without foundation and, in fact, reflected real social processes within the Soviet state.

For Lenin, it was by no means unthinkable that the NEP might become the point of departure for a profound degeneration of the Russian Revolution. "By being straightforward like this, Ustryalov is rendering us a great service," Lenin told the Congress.

We, and I particularly, because of my position, hear a lot of sentimental Communist lies, Communist fibbing every day, so that we get sick to death of them, but now instead of these Communist

fibs, I get a copy of *Smena Vekh* and it says quite plainly, "Look, things are by no means what you imagine them to be. You are slipping into the ordinary bourgeois morass with Communist flags inscribed with catchwords stuck all over the place."^[2]

Lenin continued:

We must say frankly that the things Ustryalov speaks about are possible. History knows of all sorts of metamorphoses. Relying on firmness of conviction, loyalty and other splendid moral qualities is anything but a serious attitude in politics. A few people may be endowed with splendid moral qualities, but historical issues are decided by vast masses which, if the few do not suit them, may at times treat them none too politely.^[3]

Had Ustryalov been speaking merely for himself or the few thousand emigrés living in embittered exile there would have been no cause for political concern. But, Lenin warned:

Smena Vekh adherents express the sentiments of thousands and tens of thousands of bourgeois or of Soviet employees whose function it is to operate our New Economic Policy. This is the real and main danger, and that is why attention must be concentrated mainly on the question: Who will win? I have spoken about competition. No direct onslaught is being made on us now. Nobody is clutching us by the throat. True, we have yet to see what will happen tomorrow but today we are not being subjected to armed attack. Nevertheless, the fight against capitalist society has become a hundred times more fierce and perilous because we are not always able to tell enemies from friends.^[4]

Lenin then identified a central contradiction of the Soviet regime:

If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take the huge bureaucratic machine, the gigantic heap, we must ask: "Who is directing whom?" I doubt very much whether it can be truthfully said that the Communists are directing the heap. To tell the truth, they are not directing, they are being directed. Something analogous happened here to what we were told in our history lessons when we were children: Sometimes one nation conquers another, the nation that conquers is the conqueror and the nation that is vanquished is the conquered nation. This is simple and intelligible to all. But what happens to the culture of these nations? Here things are not so simple. If the conquering nation is more cultured than the vanquished nation, the former imposes its culture upon the latter; but if the opposite is the case, the vanquished nation imposes its culture upon the conqueror. Has not something like this happened in the capital of the R.S.F.S.R.? Have the 4,700 Communists (nearly a whole army division, and all of them the very best) come under the influence of an alien culture? True, there may be the impression that the vanquished have a high level of culture. But that is not the case at all. Their culture is miserable, insignificant, but it still at a higher level than ours. Miserable and low as it is, it is higher than that of our responsible Communist administrators, for the latter lack administrative ability.^[5]

With this speech Lenin raised a political theme that was to dominate the final troubled year of his political life. As early as January 1921, Lenin had defined the Soviet regime as a “workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions.”^[6] As the complex task of administrating an immense and backward country generated the need for an ever-larger state bureaucracy, and as the regime was compelled to recruit from among the officials of the old Tsarist state apparatus, who before long swamped the relatively small number of experienced revolutionary cadre, Lenin became increasingly alarmed over the changing social character and outlook of the Party. Lenin recognized the terrible contradiction that confronted the Soviet regime. The NEP had been necessary to save the revolution, but it also accelerated the conditions which could lead, under certain variants of development, to its destruction.

Barely two months after he gave this speech, Lenin suffered a massive stroke. He lost the power of speech and was paralyzed. But he made a surprisingly rapid recovery, and by the early autumn of 1922 he returned to his position in the leadership. However, the situation that he now encountered within the Party and state convinced him that his earlier warning was being substantiated even more rapidly than he had anticipated. Lenin’s apprehensions were accentuated by a situation in the leadership that had been produced by a decision that had been made shortly before Lenin had fallen ill. That was the appointment of Stalin as the general secretary of the Party.

This office gave Stalin the ability to determine who should occupy positions in both the Party and the state. Under Stalin, the office of general secretary became the center of a vast patronage operation, and Stalin single-mindedly exploited the unlimited opportunity to use that post to place his cronies in important positions. In this way, Stalin was gradually able to build up a huge personal network of supporters who owed their careers and comforts to his patronage. At the same time, those whom Stalin did not trust often found themselves pushed off onto the sidelines. One of Stalin’s favorite methods for isolating Trotsky consisted in appointing his closest supporters—such as Adolph Joffe—to ambassadorial postings outside Soviet Russia. The practice of appointments was extended to virtually all areas of Party organization, and this drastically undermined the ability of the membership to exercise any sort of political control over the leadership. It became more and more common for the leaders of local Party organizations to be appointed by the general secretary, rather than elected by their constituency.

When Lenin returned to political activity in late 1922, he was horrified by the changes that had occurred during his absence. It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that Lenin could hardly recognize the party that he had founded. Of course, he recognized all the old faces, but somehow he sensed that the rules of the game had changed. Men whom Lenin had selected and educated and whose rise to great heights were the product of historic events which had to such a great extent been shaped by his vision and genius were now pursuing their own political ends, and generally without the necessary awareness or even concern with the class interests that those ends ultimately served.

It was a crucial question of state policy that convinced Lenin that within the new and unpleasant Party environment a right-wing political orientation was gradually taking shape. He learned that during his absence Stalin agreed with proposals by Bukharin and Sokolnikov to abandon the state monopoly on foreign trade. This greatly alarmed Lenin because it meant depriving the Soviet regime of one of its most important means of regulating and limiting the economic strength of the capitalist forces whose activities and influence were greatly increased by the NEP. The capitalists in the countryside and the city could sell to each other. They could sell to the state. But they could not sell directly to foreign governments and foreign corporations. All foreign trade had to go through the hands of the state. The Bolshevik regime feared that if the Russian capitalists and wealthy peasants were able to once establish direct links

with international capital, the workers’ state would face an overwhelming and uncontrollable economic force. Therefore, when Lenin learned that the decision had been made to abandon the monopoly, Lenin was deeply alarmed. Moreover, he was angered by the indifference with which his inquiries had been met. In this critical situation, Lenin turned to Leon Trotsky. He was relieved to learn that Trotsky also opposed the proposal to abandon the monopoly.

Lenin proposed to Trotsky that they form a political bloc against the abandonment of the monopoly. When Stalin learned of this, being quite agile in his political footwork, he understood that caution was the better part of valor, and so he withdrew his support for the abandonment of the monopoly. Lenin welcomed this victory, and he wrote to Trotsky: “It looks as though it has been possible to take the position without a single shot, by a simple maneuver.”^[7]

Lenin’s note had suggested that they press ahead with their political offensive. He met with Trotsky to discuss the growing weight of the bureaucracy, and, as Trotsky later recalled, they arrived at an agreement to form a bloc against bureaucracy “in general” and against the Organizational Bureau headed by Stalin “in particular.”

By this time, in December 1922, Lenin realized that his days were numbered. He was suffering from extreme insomnia, and he recognized other symptoms that had preceded his first major stroke. In these difficult circumstances, Lenin’s anxiety over the state of the Party, and especially of its leadership, was aggravated by another incident. In late 1922, the Bolshevik government was in the final stages of working out the new constitutional arrangements between the national republics which was to result in the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Lenin, an irreconcilable opponent of Russian nationalism, was determined that these arrangements should not result in the supremacy of the Russian nation over the other national groupings within the proposed Soviet federation. He insisted that every effort be made to accommodate the aspirations and sentiments of the nationalities that were to be part of the Soviet federation. Among the most sensitive discussions were those with the Georgian Bolsheviks, who expressed displeasure with what they interpreted as encroachments on their legitimate rights. Lenin had displayed some displeasure with their attitude, but his views changed as he became aware of the arrogant and provocative behavior of Stalin, Dzerzhinsky and Ordzhonikidze. To Lenin’s genuine horror, he learned that Ordzhonikidze had actually used physical force against one of the Georgians in the course of the negotiations.

Lenin saw in this event the symptomatic expression of a deep political sickness within the Bolshevik Party, a sickness that was itself the product of the social contradictions of the Russian Revolution. Only within this political context can one understand the extraordinary series of documents that Lenin dictated in the final weeks of his political life. These documents include what became known after his death as Lenin’s Testament.

First of all, Lenin reviewed in a memo dated December 24, 1922 the leading personalities in the Bolshevik Party, but his focus was on two individuals whom he judged as “the two outstanding leaders of the present C.C. [Central Committee],” Trotsky and Stalin. His evaluation of Trotsky was highly complimentary. His “outstanding ability” made him “the most capable man in the present C.C.”^[8] This praise was, however, tempered by the observation that Trotsky had shown “excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of the work.” It is likely that this mild criticism reflected the lingering tensions that had arisen during their famous dispute over the trade unions some two years earlier.

But Lenin’s criticism of Stalin was of a very different order: “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.”^[9]

Even more important than his brief characterization of the two men was Lenin’s astonishingly prescient observation that the danger of a split

within the Bolshevik Party found its sharpest expression in the relations between Stalin and Trotsky. Why, one might ask, did Lenin attribute such vast political significance to the relations between these two men? Lenin repeatedly inveighed against the vulgar tendency to reduce complex political problems to the level of individuals and their subjective intentions. He was certainly not changing his approach to political problems. Rather, it must be the case that Lenin recognized in the chronic tension between Trotsky and Stalin the expression of real social conflicts within the Bolshevik Party that were themselves the reflection of the social contradictions that threatened the Russian Revolution.

Despite Lenin's episodic differences with Trotsky at different periods of their political lives, Lenin undoubtedly understood the historic character of Trotsky's achievements, and of his respect and admiration there exist the independent statements of Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and Adolph Joffe, who was to recall that he had personally heard Lenin acknowledge that the development of the Russian Revolution had vindicated the theoretical positions that Trotsky had defended prior to 1917. Moreover, in strictly objective terms, Lenin must have recognized Trotsky as the foremost political representative of the international program and aspirations of the Russian Revolution.

It was precisely in this respect that Stalin represented within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party the political antithesis of Trotsky. Nine months earlier, Lenin had referred to the essay of Ustryalov, whose nationalist views expressed "the sentiments of thousands and tens of thousands of bourgeois or of Soviet employees." Now, in the person of Stalin, Lenin saw the embodiment of a resurgent Russian bureaucracy, steeped in chauvinism, that constituted the greatest danger to the future of the revolution.

This interpretation of Lenin's Testament is substantiated by the extended memos that he dictated in the days that followed. On December 30, 1922, Lenin turned his attention to the dispute with the Georgians, and he dictated a devastating evaluation of the activities of Stalin and his henchmen. "If matters had come to such a pass that Ordzhonikidze could go to the extreme of applying physical violence," Lenin declared, "we can imagine what a mess we have got ourselves into."

But it was not Ordzhonikidze upon whom Lenin placed central responsibility for the "mess." The chief culprit was Stalin, whom he now described as a "Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is." He referred contemptuously to Stalin's "spite," noting that "In politics spite generally plays the basest of roles."

Lenin concluded this memo as follows: "Here we have an important question of principle: How is internationalism to be understood?"^[10]

In the same memo, Lenin denounced Stalin as "a real and true 'nationalist-socialist,' and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully."^[11]

As he worked through the political implications of his analysis, Lenin came to the conclusion that Stalin's authority within the leadership had to be drastically reduced. Therefore, Lenin wrote, on January 4, 1923, the famous addendum to his testament: "Stalin is too rude, and this defect, although quite tolerable in our midst and in dealings amongst 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."^[12]

A Party congress was scheduled to be held in April 1923. Lenin did not know whether he would be physically able to attend it. Therefore, he devoted all his energies to two interrelated tasks: First, he wrote two major articles in which he sought to analyze the problems in the apparatus of the Soviet state ("How We Should Reorganize the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection" and "Better Fewer, But Better"); and second, he prepared for

a political showdown with Stalin. The articles themselves presented so devastating an assessment of Stalin's management of the Party and state administration that an effort was made to block the publication of "Better Fewer, But Better." In fact, it was actually proposed in the Politburo to publish the article in a dummy edition of *Pravda* that would consist of only the one copy that was to be shown to Lenin. But in early 1923 such a political fraud could not actually be carried out.

Lenin, despite the intrigues that surrounded him, was, in the words of his secretary, "preparing a bomb against Stalin." This was to consist of a documented record, which was to be presented to the 12th Congress, of Stalin's abuse of authority, examples of which included not only his persecution of the Georgian Bolsheviks, but also his insulting behavior toward Lenin's wife. In relation to the last-named episode, Lenin, on March 5, 1923, demanded and received an apology from Stalin. For all his skill at skulduggery, Stalin was no match for Lenin in a political fight.

It was not contrition that Lenin wanted from Stalin. Rather, the written apology provided Lenin with yet another piece of documented evidence of abusive behavior that he needed to obtain approval from the upcoming congress for Stalin's removal from the post of general secretary.

Had it not been for the stroke that put an end to his political life just three days later, Lenin would have delivered his "bomb" at the 12th Congress. But his sudden removal from the scene meant a drastic change in the relation of forces within the leadership of the Russian Communist Party. Just six years earlier, it had been Lenin's timely return to Russia that enabled him to change the Party's compromising attitude toward the Provisional Government and set it on the course toward the conquest of power. Now, as the Thermidorean reaction against the Soviet revolution was gathering strength, Lenin's untimely illness delayed by several vital months the launching of an open struggle against the bureaucracy.

Concluded

[1] Nikolay Ustryalov (1890-1937) is known as the main ideologist of National Bolshevism. Having been a supporter of the counterrevolutionary White armies during the civil war, once the Bolsheviks had consolidated power and introduced the New Economic Policy, he changed his political attitude toward the Soviet government. In the collection of essays *Smena Vekh* (Changing Landmarks), which was first published in Prague in 1921, he and his co-thinkers outlined a nationalist interpretation of the Russian revolution. They became known as the "smenavekhovtsy." In the inner-party struggle of the 1920s, the Left Opposition would often refer to the ideas of Ustryalov as the most consciously anti-Marxist articulation of the nationalist program of "socialism in one country."

[2] Vladimir Lenin, Opening Speech to the 11th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, March 27, 1922. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/27.htm>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Vladimir Lenin, "The Party Crisis," January 19, 1921. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jan/19.htm>

[7] Note by Vladimir Lenin to Leon Trotsky, December 21, 1922. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/21.htm>

[8] Vladimir Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," note from December 25, 1922. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/congress.htm>

[9] ?Vladimir Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," note from December 24, 1922. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/congress.htm>

[10] Vladimir Lenin, "The Question of Nationalities or Autonomization," December 30, 1922. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Vladimir Lenin, Addendum to the "Letter to the Congress," January

4, 1923. URL:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/congress.htm>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)