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Revision

The USSR's transition to socialism

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Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How successful was Lenin as leader following the October [November] Revolution of 1917?

Student answer with commentary

It would appear at first sight that Lenin was very successful as leader, not only had he masterminded the overthrow of the Provisional Government, but he was able to consolidate Bolshevik power in the following years, withdrawing Russia from the First World War and securing victory in the Civil War. He had thus secured the establishment of the world's first communist regime. However, such a view is simplistic and ignores many failings, such as the land lost in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the impact of the Civil War on the Russian population and the abandonment of many Marxist principles with the establishment of NEP.

The opening paragraph set outs the debate and issues that will be considered in the essay and offers a balanced view as to whether Lenin was successful. A strong response will follow this argument through the main paragraphs to a supported judgement in the conclusion.

Lenin's triumph in November 1917 would suggest he was successful, he had taken his minority party into power, overcoming opposition from within it to the revolution, he dissolved the Constituent Assembly and established a one-party state. However, he had expected the revolution to be the first stage in a proletarian uprising, but when this did not happen, he was forced to adapt his plans and Russia became an isolated revolutionary state. Lenin attempted to argue that an international rising would occur in the future and that Russia needed to consolidate its own revolution. However, such adaptability was a clear sign of failure as he had underestimated the desire for a Marxist revolution and would never succeed in establishing mass support for his communist state.

The opening sentence introduces an idea that will be developed through the paragraph. Although the question dates require an examination of his leadership after the November revolution, the point made in the paragraph is relevant and the response links it to developments in 1918 with the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The final sentence

continues to pursue the line of argument established in the opening sentence and reaches a judgement about success.

Despite this, he was able to secure communist rule in Soviet Russia with victory in the Civil War. This followed the withdrawal of Russia from the First World War, something much of the population wanted and the Provisional Government had not pursued. However, it also led to the loss of large amount of Russian land, which, while not a failure for the Bolsheviks, was a disaster for Russia as they lost valuable agricultural and industrial land. The Civil War did result in the defeat of Bolshevik opponents, with the Reds securing victory over the Whites. However, much of this success was due to Trotsky and his leadership of the Red Army rather than Lenin, and also resulted in considerable damage to the economy of the country, from which it would struggle to recover. The death toll was also substantial and although it might be argued that the development of the Cheka and secret police was a success in consolidating Bolshevik power, it was more an indication that the necessity for an oppressive regime indicated a lack of support and was indicative of Bolshevik failures.

A number of issues are considered in this paragraph, and once again there is a balanced debate as to whether both the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and victory in the Civil War should be viewed as a success. The argument links back to that pursued in the previous paragraph and again argues that there was a lack of support for the regime, reaching a supported interim judgement.

Furthermore, Lenin was unable to sustain War Communism as an economic policy. Although it had brought industry and agriculture under central control and provided the Red Army with many of the tools needed for victory, it led to peasant resistance, the Tambov rising and ultimately damaged industrial and food production. However, it was the Kronstadt Rising in 1921 that ultimately convinced Lenin that War Communism was unsustainable. Despite many Bolsheviks viewing the policy as a success – it introduced what they believed was true communism by ending private ownership – the rising showed that the Cheka terror, grain requisitioning and commissars spying on workers was unacceptable. Although Lenin was able to successfully crush the rising, he was forced to abandon War Communism and introduce his New Economic Policy, which to many communists was an ideological failure as it abandoned Marxist principles.

The paragraph continues the approach of a balanced discussion about War Communism and unrest. Detailed knowledge is shown with reference to both the Tambov and Kronstadt risings, and although the judgement could be developed, there is an indication that the policies pursued should be viewed as a failure.

In the short-term it might be argued that NEP was a success as it met Russia's need for food, encouraging the peasantry to grow more grain as it was no longer requisitioned. Lenin, it might be argued had been successful as he had shown a pragmatic response to the economic problems facing the country. In practice his policy appeared to be a success as grain production rose from 37 million tonnes in 1921 to 56 million by 1923. However, he angered many within his party as it allowed private trading, allowing the rise of a new class of profiteers (the Nepmen) and ended what many, such as Trotsky, believed was essential, the attack on the peasantry. The policy also threatened to split the party, but in this instance Lenin was successful. At the tenth party congress he introduced a resolution 'On Party Unity' to prevent factionalism and criticism of government or central Committee decisions. He also banned all other parties and was therefore successful in establishing a one-party state and, with the ending of internal criticism, a dictatorship. With this he had also successfully ended criticism of the NEP, seen in the support a former critic, Bukharin, gave.

The paragraph continues to pursue a balanced approach, but this time concludes on a more positive assessment of his leadership. The argument is well-supported with reference to both grain production and the support he obtained from Bukharin.

By the time of his death in January 1924, he had guided Russia through an extreme situation in the years 1917–24, particularly during the years of Civil War, where there was no alternative to his policy of imposed terror. His successes can be seen in the victory in the civil war, the defeat of foreign intervention and the establishment of some stability following the upheaval of two revolutions in 1917. Although it can be argued that Lenin was successful in establishing an authoritarian regime, the regime was little different to that seen under the tsars and he had also laid the foundations for Stalin's regime. Despite his ban on factionalism, divisions remained within the party, which became even more apparent after his death. More importantly, he failed to leave a clear successor, and this would plunge Russia into years of terror and repression as Stalin was able to secure the leadership.

The conclusion is strong and, although balanced, does follow from the main body of the essay. The overall judgement acknowledges that, depending on your viewpoint, some successes might be identified, these were outweighed by the regime he established and how he paved the way for Stalin's totalitarian regime.

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