**Zinoviev and Kamenev: from Lenin’s closest collaborators to Yagoda’s trophies**

By Chris Corin, History Review, 2006

Chris Corin restores two Old Bolsheviks to their rightful places in Soviet History.

Library shelves overflow with biographies of Lenin and Stalin while Zinoviev and Kamenev are neglected. In 1923 and 1924, however, contemporaries saw Zinoviev and Kamenev as more important than Stalin in the triumvirate that emerged once Lenin became incapacitated. Their experiences between 1917 and 1927 shed light on developments within the Bolshevik regime, and in particular on: the degree of opposition allowed within the party in 1917 when, with Kamenev taking the lead, they defied Lenin twice in three weeks on major issues;

* the decision to seize power and on whether to share power with other socialists;
* Zinoviev’s role in the inauguration of the cult of Lenin;
* the extent to which Stalin was underestimated and able to outmanouevre his rivals in the struggle for power after Lenin's illness and death.

**Who were they?**

Grigori (Grisha) Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev were Lenin’s closest collaborators before the revolution. Their friendship dates from this special period in their lives, and in Lenin’s, when they were exiled in Europe together after 1908. Zinoviev returned to Petrograd with Lenin in April 1917 and fled to Finland with him after the July days. The Mensheviks referred to Zinoviev, before the revolution, as ‘Lenin’s mad dog’. Even his critics agree he was an impressive orator who could play on the emotions of a mass audience, but his speeches lacked substance. He was vain, ambitious and cowardly and flaunted the rewards and trappings of office. Carr writes, that ‘No leading Bolshevik of this period incurred so much adverse personal criticism or appears to have been so widely disliked’ as Zinoviev. Daniels argues that his ‘very mediocrity was the reason for his prominence both under Lenin and afterwards. To Lenin he was a pliable instrument, noted for his readiness to perform dirty jobs for the leader. To the rest of the leaders he was acceptable because he was not strong enough to fear.’ He was appointed first president of the Comintern (Communist International founded to co-ordinate and direct the world communist movement) at a time when world revolution was eagerly awaited.

Catherine Merridale describes Kamenev as a ‘schoolmasterly figure, serious, a little stiff, reflective’. His strengths were his literary fluency and personal charm. He built up the party in the Caucasus and played a part in bringing his nemesis, Stalin, into the Bolshevik camp. Kamenev was a prolific writer and an excellent editor; even the police recorded that Pravda was unusually successful under his editorship. His courage could not be doubted: he was prepared to stand up to Lenin in 1917 and to Stalin at the 14th Party Congress in 1925. He had a reputation for moderation and toleration of other Marxist groups; during the Civil war he sought to reduce the scope of Cheka violence.

**Their Opposition to Lenin**

It was Kamenev’s moderation that infuriated Lenin when he returned to Russia in 1917. When they met on the Russo-Finnish border Kamenev was greeted with: ‘What is this that’s being written in Pravda? We saw several numbers and really swore at you’, as Lenin attacked the line taken by Kamenev, and by Stalin, of conditional support for the Provisional Government. However, Kamenev was consistent throughout 1917. He did not believe that Russia, as predominantly a peasant country, was ripe for socialism but was prepared to work with like-minded members of other socialist parties. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks would win a majority in the soviets and that the principle of majority rule should be scrupulously respected.

Zinoviev initially supported Lenin but, traumatised by the July failure, feared that the party would be finished if it tried to seize power by force, and at the end of August 1917 he wrote a pamphlet, What Not to Do, which warned against this. Kamenev and Zinoviev may have been the only dissenters when the crucial vote on seizing power was taken, but at least three of the absentees from the Central Committee would have opposed the resolution, and Lenin had a greater struggle winning agreement than the voting figures suggest.

Kamenev took their opposition further by publishing their letter to the party in Gorky’s newspaper, Novaia zhizn. It argued that neither the majority of the people in Russia nor the international proletariat were for the Bolsheviks. Seizing power would be ruinous. Lenin was of course furious. He accused Kamenev and Zinoviev of ‘strike breaking’, adding that ‘I will fight with all my might to secure the expulsion of both of them from the party’. Stalin argued against their expulsion and published a conciliatory letter from Zinoviev in the party newspaper he edited – the occasion of his first major clash with Trotsky. Nevertheless, the views and conduct of Zinoviev and Kamenev, and indeed of Stalin, justify Trotsky’s verdict that: ‘If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petrograd, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik would have prevented it from occurring – of this I have not the slightest doubt.’

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks were not so flush with talent that they could cast aside Kamenev and Zinoviev. Kamenev, the acceptable moderate face of Bolshevism, led the coalition negotiations. He appears to have been strongly in favour of coalition with the SRs and the Mensheviks and negotiated with them and the railwaymen’s trade union. He was prepared to consider a socialist coalition without Lenin and Trotsky. However, the Cossacks were soon defeated outside Petrograd and Lenin went for the purely Bolshevik government he had always wanted. Kamenev, Zinoviev and three other leading Bolsheviks resigned to put pressure on Lenin to form a coalition with the Left SRs. The opposition declared that ‘a purely Bolshevik government has no choice but to maintain itself by political terror … we cannot follow that course.’

This was a serious split, but Zinoviev was quick to recant – not for the last time. Kamenev held out for longer and in mid December the Left SRs did join the government, and this alliance, although short-lived, was very important in keeping the Bolsheviks in power. Zinoviev and Kamenev’s position amongst the leading Bolsheviks was not compromised and their political partnership was cemented.

**The Cult of Lenin**

Although the cult of Lenin is associated with Stalin and he is seen as orchestrating his funeral, Zinoviev played a more important part initially. Adulation really began a week after Lenin had been shot in 1918; Zinoviev made a long address of which 200,000 copies were published. Nina Tumarkin writes that, for Zinoviev, ‘Lenin became a leader of cosmic structure, a mover of worlds’. Here is an example of his over blown style: ‘Someone powerful and strong has disturbed the petty-bourgeois swamp … He is really the chosen one of millions. He is the leader by the grace of God. He is the authentic figure of a leader such as is born once in 500 years in the life of mankind.’

Stalin’s famous ode to Lenin was not included in the thousands of pamphlets distributed during or just after Lenin’s funeral. Tumarkin describes Zinoviev’s speech as much more powerful and bearing directly on the cult of Lenin. It ended with Zinoviev quoting Kamenev at the 12th party congress: ‘When each of us will be faced with making a responsible decision, let us ask ourselves: “What would comrade Lenin have done in my place?”’ Zinoviev constantly underlined his long association with Lenin and generously larded his speeches with quotations from, and references to, the dead leader. All the contenders produced books in the 1920s explaining Leninism to the rest of the party and claimed to be his authentic interpreter and executor, while representing their rivals as betrayers and distorters. Carr argues that ‘The cult of Leninism and the convention that absolute fidelity to Lenin was the main and indispensable qualification for leadership of the party, was one of many sinister developments in party history initiated by Zinoviev.’

**Defeating Trotsky**

Since Lenin’s last illness in March 1923 a triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin had taken control. Zinoviev was regarded as its senior member and, as Carr puts it, ‘evidently feeling the mantle of Lenin on his shoulders’, volunteered to make the principal report at the 12th party congress in 1923. He did not aspire to rule alone and spoke very much in collective terms, partly to combat the widely perceived threat from Trotsky – the Soviet Bonaparte. The Bolsheviks had studied the course of revolutions and saw that they could lead to a Cromwell or Napoleon – the charismatic and restless Trotsky embodied these fears. Indeed, as Zinoviev later admitted, for two years the triumvirate and the other three members of the Politburo met weekly to discuss all key questions in advance and to combat Trotsky.

Stalin’s growing power was noticed. Zinoviev resented the way he engineered an enlargement of the Central Committee from 27 to 40, overturning the majority previously held by Zinoviev’s supporters. In July 1923 Zinoviev wrote to Kamenev complaining bitterly: ‘You are simply letting Stalin mock us … we will not tolerate this any longer … In practice there is no triumvirate, there is Stalin’s dictatorship.’ Zinoviev met with colleagues to decide what to do about it but there was no real follow-through, and Stalin’s grip on the party organisation remained. Zinoviev and Kamenev needed Stalin to help combat Trotsky’s criticism of the triumvirate’s economic policies and his demand for more freedom of discussion in the party. Trotsky was decisively defeated at the party conference in January 1924 with only three votes cast against the motion condemning him.

Zinoviev’s antagonism towards Trotsky was largely personal: Trotsky had usurped him both as number two in the party and as its great orator. A particularly painful blow to Zinoviev’s not inconsiderable vanity occurred in the Civil War when Trotsky had to rush to the rescue of Petrograd – where Zinoviev was panic-stricken and lying on a sofa. They were on opposite sides in every major party controversy until Trotsky was defeated. In 1923 Zinoviev was the first to use the word ‘Trotskyism’ in public as a term of abuse and he created a momentous precedent at the 13th party congress in 1924 when he invited Trotsky ‘not merely to submit to the decision of the majority but to confess himself in error’.

Zinoviev and Kamenev saved Stalin when Lenin’s testament, which proposed Stalin’s removal as General Secretary, was read to the central committee. Zinoviev responded that ‘Lenin’s fears have not proved well founded’, and with Kamenev supporting Stalin too and Trotsky remaining silent the testament went no further. A potentially fatal weapon against Stalin had been defused. Trotsky underscored the negative reference to Zinoviev and Kamenev in the testament in his Lessons of October – a biting attack on Kamenev in particular – as Lenin’s principal opponents in 1917.

The triumvirate made this the occasion for a showdown with Trotsky. Kamenev and Zinoviev proposed that he should be removed from the Politburo but were opposed by Stalin, who argued that ‘the method of expulsion, of blood letting, was dangerous and infectious’. Trotsky resigned as Commissar for War and remained aloof when Stalin turned his attention to Zinoviev and Kamenev.

**The Zinoviev Opposition**

By the beginning of 1925 Stalin had gained control of the Moscow party organisation and made moves to undermine Zinoviev’s authority in the Comintern and in Leningrad. Leningrad was the most heavily industrialised city in the USSR and the home of the proletarian vanguard of the revolution; the Leningrad party were never enthusiastic about the NEP and distinctly unhappy with Bukharin’s exhortation, ‘Peasants enrich yourselves’. Alarmed by Stalin’s growing organisational threat and conscious of his dependence on the Leningrad organisation, Zinoviev could not ignore their views and, although he initially defended the turn towards the peasants, within weeks he became the principal opponent of the peasant policy.

This opposition, in the second half of 1925, is important as a prelude to the United Opposition. Zinoviev’s book Leninism (1925) raised the 3 central issues:

* the policy towards the peasants. He argued that Lenin had always seen NEP as a retreat and under Bukharin it had become ‘state capitalism’, an emotive phrase for the Bolsheviks;
* socialism in one country: Zinoviev argued that the final victory of socialism would be decided on an international scale and not by Stalin’s doctrine of socialism in one country, which maintained that socialism could be built in Russia without the assistance of revolution elsewhere, a complete distortion of Leninism;
* greater democracy in the party. Zinoviev attacked the monopoly of the Secretariat.

The defeat of the Zinoviev opposition came at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925 and during its aftermath. Both phases reveal much about Stalin’s methods. There was much manoeuvring for position before the Congress; Zinoviev removed every supporter of the Moscow leadership from the Leningrad delegation but Stalin ensured he had a comfortable majority overall. The climax came at the end of Kamenev’s bold speech directly challenging Stalin’s leadership:

We are against creating a theory of the vozhd [leader]; we are against making anyone into the vozhd. We are against the Secretariat, by actually combining politics and organisation, standing above the political body … I have reached the conclusion that Comrade Stalin is incapable of performing the role of unifier of the old Bolshevik high command.

There was applause from the Leningrad delegation; but from the majority there was a wall of abuse, as well as cheers for Stalin.

The reactions revealed where power lay. Rykov responded that ‘the party will never fall on its knees before anyone, before Stalin, before Kamenev or before anyone else.’ Yet within a week Stalin’s team, led by Molotov, had swept into Leningrad. In less than three weeks they had spoken directly to over 60,000 factory workers who overwhelmingly approved of the decisions of the party congress and condemned factious opposition. Zinoviev and his supporters were deposed and Kirov was installed as the new Leningrad party boss.

**The United Opposition**

The three issues Zinoviev had raised showed agreement with Trotsky and through the more emollient Kamenev overtures were made to him. Not all Trotskyists were convinced; one cryptic response was: ‘neither Stalin nor Zinoviev – Stalin will cheat and Zinoviev will rat’. Nevertheless the United Opposition was formed and the clash was bitter, epitomised by Trotsky’s famous denunciation of Stalin as ‘the gravedigger of the Revolution’.

Although Stalin described the United Opposition as ‘a combination of castrated forces’, he was concerned about the combination of Zinoviev and Trotsky. During his summer holiday in the south he directed events through his letters to Molotov. These suggest that Stalin either treated Zinoviev’s opposition with greater seriousness than Trotsky’s or thought that tactically it was best to deal with Zinoviev first. Stalin considered Zinoviev the leader of all schismatic tendencies in the party. He was more dangerous than previous opposition leaders because he had been more central in Bolshevik affairs, was still Comintern chief and knew how the leadership functioned. Stalin wrote in 1926: ‘I think pretty soon the party will punch the mugs of Trotsky and Grisha [Zinoviev] along with Kamenev and turn them into isolated splitters.’ He pressed for Zinoviev’s removal from the Politburo, adding ‘people won’t be sorry for Zinoviev because they know him well’.

Denied party outlets, the United Opposition had to work through secret meetings, illicit circulation of documents and public demonstrations. This allowed accusations of factionalism. A secret meeting in the forest outside Moscow was used as an excuse to expel Zinoviev from the Politburo. The United Opposition revived in 1927 after foreign policy setbacks galvanised Trotsky into attack, and the ‘Declaration of the 83’, a comprehensive critique of the leadership, produced further accusations of factionalism. A desperate bid to stir up support through public meetings in Leningrad and Moscow marking the 10th anniversary of the revolution was further evidence, and they were expelled from the party. Zinoviev and Kamenev, in a grovelling submission, admitted their errors, recanted their anti-Leninist views and asked for reinstatement. This surrender was rejected and they waited six months before being readmitted.

Further humiliation was in store in the nine years that followed. The chronology shows how Stalin toyed with them as they yo-yoed in and out of the party. They were the key figures in the first great show trial of 1936 and were shot immediately afterwards. Stalin’s promise to spare them in return for their confessions was bogus. Kamenev was dignified; Zinoviev was not. Yagoda, the head of the NKVD, had the bullets dug out of their skulls, labelled Zinoviev and Kamenev, and kept them as trophies.

**Conclusion**

Zinoviev and Kamenev identified the wrong danger man. Although uneasy at times about Stalin, they were prepared to work with him to defeat Trotsky, and they saved him in 1924. Like the other contenders they underestimated Stalin and overestimated the strength of their own position. Kamenev continued to misread the situation: he thought Stalin had become a ‘total prisoner’ of Bukharin’s line on the peasants in 1925, and in 1926 he declared optimistically to Trotsky, ‘It is enough for you and Zinoviev to appear on the same platform and the party will find its true Central Committee.’ Zinoviev’s ‘impregnable fortress’, the Leningrad party machine, crumbled in his hand when faced by Stalin’s attack in December 1925, ‘leaving him helpless in the face of an adversary infinitely astuter and better prepared for the fray’ (Carr).

Zinoviev may have inaugurated the cult of Lenin but Stalin was able to outdo his rivals in his claims to be Lenin’s most loyal disciple. Stalin’s formulation of socialism in one country, which he maintained came from Lenin, was in fact a distortion. However, it was more optimistic, realistic and appealing to the party’s rank and file than Trotsky and Zinoviev’s stress on the need for revolution elsewhere in Europe if Bolshevism was to survive in the Soviet Union. The use Stalin made of his organisational strength, and of the illusion that he was a background figure, was astute. He was content that Zinoviev and Kamenev led the attack on Trotsky, and that Bukharin, initially backed by Zinoviev, led the turn to the peasants. It made Zinoviev and Kamenev’s changes appear opportunistic and shifty.

They played their part, Zinoviev more than Kamenev, in the development of an increasingly intolerant party and so contributed to their own downfall. Zinoviev’s tirades against Trotsky’s ‘factionalism’ in 1924 conflicted sharply with his pleas for greater democracy the following year. As Mikoyan said in 1925, ‘When Zinoviev is in the majority he is for iron discipline, when he is in the minority he is against it.’ The experience of Zinoviev and Kamenev demonstrated that dissent was possible in the party in November 1917, notwithstanding Lenin’s anger, but by November 1927 it meant expulsion, and a decade later death.

**Issues to debate**

* How serious were the disagreements between Zinoviev-Kamenev and Lenin in 1917?
* Why did the duo lose out to Stalin in the faction struggles that followed Lenin’s death?
* What were the most significant contributions the two made to Soviet history?

**Further Reading**

* E.H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin* (Macmillan, 1979)
* S.F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Russian Revolution* (Alfred Knopf, New York, 1973)
* R.V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1960)
* C. Merridale, ‘The making of a moderate Bolshevik: an Introduction to L.B. Kamenev’s Political Biography’ in J. Cooper, M. Perrie and E.A. Rees (eds), *Soviet History, 1917-1953*. Essays in Honour of R.W. Davies (Macmillan, 1995)
* R. Service, *Stalin* (Macmillan, 2000)
* I.D. Thatcher, *Trotsky* (Routledge, 2003)
* N. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in the Soviet Union* (Harvard University Press, 1997)
* B. Williams, *Lenin* (Longman, 2000)

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