

Provide an evaluation of source material:
The acceptance of the Peace of Brest-Litovsk

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk was one of the first important events in Lenin's rule of Russia. In many ways its outcome was embarrassing for Lenin, but the ultimate result was the peace that he had wanted from the outset. The text is from a speech given by Lenin at the seventh Bolshevik party congress three days after the treaty had been signed on 3 March 1918. In short, it is concerned with countering the primary argument against signing the treaty, and with criticising his colleagues for preventing the treaty being signed two months earlier.

The first section provides the arguments against a Bolshevik faction's hope and belief that the German Revolution, as part of the pan-European socialist movement, would soon be under way. The initial Bolshevik belief was that for a Revolution to be successful it would need to happen across Europe, and Germany was seen to be the key to the central European Revolution. Lenin acknowledges that the likelihood of the German Revolution starting soon is low, although he concedes it will eventually be "inevitable". He later went on to accept that Revolution will in fact be more likely to succeed if carried out on a smaller country by country scale. This idea of playing for time was supported by the left of the Bolshevik party, led by Bukharin.

The final paragraph implicitly criticises Trotsky's unique policy of 'neither war nor peace', and it tries to illustrate the fact that the left's view of Revolution is untenable. The entire passage is a self-congratulatory statement for the fact that had the party supported Lenin's conviction for peace that he had held since the coming to power, the extreme terms ultimately imposed on Russia by Germany would not have come about.

Lenin had wanted peace since he took power after the October Revolution. He felt that it was the time to for the party to deal with "internal enemies", rather than the "foreign enemy" (McCauley, 1993, p23). In the long term he believed that a solid communist movement would lead to the defeat of Imperial

Germany, and he did not want to jeopardise Communist rule in Russia by fighting when he could easily lose. On a practical front he was also very conscious of the fact that Russia had no army which could defend the country against a German offensive.

The left of the party, under Bukharin's influence, did not agree with Lenin's stance and they felt that peace would be an admission of their defeat, and Imperial Germany's victory. His solution to the lack of a Russian army was to involve the peasants in partisan warfare. Although as this never had chance to happen so could never be proved, Hosking (1985, p61) suggests that this proposal "resemble[s] the methods of later successful Communist leaders".

Trotsky's policy of 'neither war nor peace' was based on the mistaken belief that Germans could not launch an offensive against Russia; as there could be no war, there was no need for a peace treaty. He was shown to be quite wrong and Germany initiated a new offensive on 18 February 1918. In response to this Russia had the option of either fighting or surrendering, but knowing the state of the army Lenin threatened to offer his resignation from the party if peace was not chosen.

In order for peace to be obtained quickly, Russia was obliged to give up a large portion of her western territories: "34% of her population, 32% of her agricultural land, and 54% of her industrial concerns" (Wood, 1995, p51), and had to pay a huge indemnity. These losses constitute the "humiliating peace" that Lenin refers to in his speech. Had the earlier terms been accepted, as Lenin had wanted, Russia would only have lost Lithuania, Courland and Poland to the German sphere of influence. Trotsky also acknowledged the embarrassment of the revised treaty by not signing it himself, rather he sent Sokolnikov in his place.

Although the surrendered territory was extensive it did not impact on Russia's main geographic region of power, and there was a greater element of the collective Bolshevik pride being hurt. McCauley suggests that the party consoled itself with the thought that come the European socialist revolution the treaty would

be torn up (p24). In actuality, the Bolsheviks declared the treaty to be “null and void” (Westwood, 1995, p272) at in November 1918 (the end of the First World War) when Germany was defeated.

The fragment of the speech shows Lenin’s tempered style of dictatorship through which he was able to govern the country according to his personal beliefs without resorting to the tyrannical mode of government favoured by his successor.

(776 words)

Bibliography and References

Hosking, G (1985) *A History of the Soviet Union* London: Fontana

McCauley, M (1993) *The Soviet Union 1917 – 1991 (2nd Edition)* Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd

Westwood, JN (1995) *Endurance and Endeavour – Russian History 1812 – 1992 (4th Edition)* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wood, A (1995) *The Russian Revolution (2nd Edition)* Harlow: Longman Group Ltd