



History 7042
Additional Specimen Question Paper 2N (A-level)
Question 02 Student 1
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2N (A-level): Additional specimen question paper

02 Why was there no outright successor to Lenin as leader of the USSR on Lenin's death in 1924?

[25 marks]

Student response

Lenin's death early in 1924 should not have been unexpected. He had been very ill, virtually incapacitated by strokes some time before, and the situation had worsened during the previous months. Yet his death still came as a great shock to most Russians. This was because Lenin had become an almost iconic figure inside Russia, although he was hated by non-Communists. Lenin was admired or loved by many Russians: he had led Russia through revolution, the chaos of civil war and the beginnings of recovery from 1921 onwards.

Particularly for committed Communists, it was difficult to imagine a Bolshevik Russia without Lenin at its head, leading the Party towards the promised socialist utopia. It was almost as if before 1924, the idea of a Russia without him had been pushed to the very back of people's minds. It seemed almost disloyal to think of Russia without Lenin, and this is why it appeared that no preparation had been made for a post-Lenin future, including the question of the leadership.

To some extent the idea that nothing had been prepared is misleading, because there was already the beginning of a power struggle going on among leading Communists in the Party before Lenin's death, even if somewhat beneath the surface. This was partly out of genuine love and respect for Lenin. Although there were powerful personalities in the Party, no-one wanted to be seen as power-hungry or over-ambitious, or anxious to step into Lenin's shoes. Communist such as Trotsky could be imposing figures in their own right, but they had always accepted Lenin's leadership largely without question, so as not to appear disloyal to the sick leader.

Although some manoeuvring had been going on within the upper ranks of the Party before 1924, it was also difficult for anyone to present themselves as an obvious successor to Lenin because there was no clear mechanism to elect a new leader. Lenin's power had depended more on his drive, personality and achievements than on any formal position. In any case, the Party was not a democratic organisation in the commonly accepted definition of the phrase. The party had a 'top-down' structure: power emanated from the top downwards. There were various levels of organisation in the Party, from the Politburo at the summit to local soviets in the workplace and villages, and representatives of the Party came to Moscow for regular congresses. However, key decisions were made by relatively few Communists, with responsibility either for deciding policy, carrying it out, or both. Below the surface, and openly after Lenin's death, these individuals argued among themselves. The Politburo, the Orgburo and the Secretariat were the key organisations. Although the Politburo listened to views from those lower down, it alone decided policy.

This undemocratic organisation had also been strongly influenced by the 'ban on factions' which Lenin had introduced along with the New Economic Policy in 1921. The ban permitted policy debates among the leading Communists, but not lower down the Party. Within the leadership, once a policy was agreed, it had to be followed to the letter by the rest of the Party, without question. The Party of course was the driving force in the country, more so than the official organs of government. Russia was not yet in the condition it was to become in the 1930s under Stalin. His was a dictatorship in which anybody who dared to question or challenge official policy was in danger of being 'purged' or further persecuted as a traitor. And yet even in 1924 nobody was quite sure how far they could go in expressing themselves freely when debating policy. No-one wanted to lay themselves open to the charge of challenging the 'world view' of socialism promoted by Lenin. It could be seen as contravening Lenin's ban on factions if a Party member seemed intent on leading a particular group. Astute politicians like Stalin realised this early on, so that when he pursued a particular line of argument, he usually presented it as coming from Lenin himself, and he was just 'interpreting' Lenin. In this way it was more difficult for his opponents to challenge him directly for fear of appearing to go against Lenin's will.

Lenin himself bore a lot of responsibility for creating the succession problem. He had certainly thought hard about the succession, and indeed worried about it, because he thought himself indispensable. Yet in his Testament, put together and modified during his last months, he did not make a smooth succession a likely outcome. Lenin recognised that his colleagues had some qualities, but he did not suggest that any of them were fit by themselves to step into his shoes. Many assumed that Trotsky would become leader. He had been prominent in the revolution and civil war. But he also had personal weaknesses. He assumed he was cleverer than everyone else, he did not cooperate easily with colleagues and his perceived arrogance did not go down well. Some worried about Trotsky's power as head of the Red Army. Lenin was not overly concerned about any of this, but he did express doubts about Trotsky's ability to take the Party in the 'right' direction. Lenin had worked closely with 'Old Bolsheviks' like Zinoviev and Kamenev, but doubted their leadership potential. There was also the whiff of indecisiveness about them because of their opposition to the timing of the revolution in 1917. Bukharin was very popular, but Lenin regarded him as relatively inexperienced and too preoccupied with his area of expertise, which was Marxist theory, to be a leader.

And then there was Stalin. Stalin largely controlled access to Lenin during the last months of his life. He had also performed valuable services to the Party, but seemed a more shadowy, 'behind the scenes' operator compared to more flamboyant colleagues. Very importantly, Lenin had fallen out with him for political and personal reasons, so that in the final version of his Testament, he openly criticised Stalin and urged colleagues to remove Stalin from his Party positions.

In the absence of a ringing endorsement of any potential candidate, it seems that Lenin, without actually saying so, anticipated some sort of collective leadership to follow him. But if and when Lenin's views became known, because of the differences amongst the leading Bolsheviks, it would have probably been difficult to make such an arrangement work smoothly.

There were other obstacles in the way of arriving at an outright successor, even if someone wanted the role. Some Communists actually wanted a collective approach to leadership, since it seemed to be more 'socialist' to rely on a collective approach than on a single person, especially one who might not have Lenin's qualities.

Even before 1924, there were divisions in the Party, despite the ban on factionalism. The divisions concerned both policy and personality. Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev had formed the Triumvirate, because they feared Trotsky succeeding to the leadership. Trotsky and Stalin had fallen out long before 1924. At this stage, no-one quite realised the extent of the power that Stalin was already acquiring through his role as Party Secretary, in charge of the Party machine. Partly this was due to Stalin's colleagues' underestimation of him, as well as them not appreciating the potential which the post offered..

Later the divisions hardened, although alliances also shifted, especially as a split between the 'Left' and 'Right' of the Party emerged. All Communists agreed that Russia should work to achieve socialism, but there was disagreement how this should actually be achieved. There were genuine policy debates, but they were intermeshed with personal rivalries. Stalin was eventually to come out on top because he was underestimated and probably cleverer and possibly more ambitious than the others. Luck was also crucial at critical times, such as when the decision was taken not to publish Lenin's Testament with its damning criticism of Stalin.

These divisions hardened during the mid and late 1920s, but they were already present in 1924. The fact that they already existed, combined with the lack of a mechanism for electing a leader, the dominating influence of Lenin even though he could not even speak by 1924, and the fact that leading Communists did not see eye to eye on policy as well as for personal reasons – all made it very difficult to hope for an outright successor to Lenin to emerge quickly and smoothly in 1924.

Commentary – Level 5

This is a very effective answer. It takes some time to adopt a wholly analytical approach and the opening paragraphs appear contextual rather than focused, but the importance of the context is then explained. Thereafter, there is a consistent and analytical focus on the issues which made succession difficult and this is a Level 5 answer.