Tackling the Documents paper at AS

Kerensky, Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution

Chris Corin. Worthing College and Edexcel Regional Consultant

THE ABILITY TO EVALUATE SOURCES is an essential skill for the historian and testing it is an important part of the AS examination. Without sources there is no history and we need to be able to exploit our sources to the full but not to go too far and place more weight on them than they will bear.

To evaluate any collection of sources you must know the context. Essentially, you are testing them against your own knowledge and understanding - for example, you should not be taken in by a source in which Hitler is speaking of his peaceful intentions but you will look carefully at the context and think about his purpose at that time. In preparing for a source paper it is just as important to revise thoroughly as it is for an essay paper.

Faced with the sources, it is important to focus on them closely and not be distracted by the question. Look at its origin as well as its content. You need to read it phrase by phrase, it has been carefully chosen. As your understanding of the sources grows you will start to evaluate them. You will become sensitive to the purpose of the author and the words that have been used. Matching this with the source's origin and cross-referencing with the other sources you test your thoughts on its reliability - do they contradict or complement each other. Coming back again to your own knowledge, and to something which is particularly important for the final question in a source question like the one below, you need to think about what is *not* there as well.

Allow yourself time to think and plan, and your answers will be much more effective than if you are in a rush to write.

A worked example

These documents cover the period from June to October 1917.

SOURCE A: A letter from Zinoviev and Kamenev, published in Gorky's newspaper, *Novaia zhizn* (New Life) on 18 October 1917.

> To call at present for an armed uprising means to stake on one card not only the fate of our Party, but also the fate of the Russian and international revolution. … A majority of workers and a significant part of the army is for us. But the rest are in question. We are convinced, for example that if it now comes to elections for the Constituent Assembly, then the majority of peasants will vote for the Socialist Revolutionaries. … If we take power now and we are forced into a revolutionary war, the mass of the soldiers will not support us.

SOURCE B: A modern historian on Kerensky.

> Kerensky was hailed as the man to reunite the country and to halt the drift towards civil war. He was the only major politician who had a base of popular support yet who was broadly acceptable to the military leaders and the bourgeoisie. Kerensky was the ideal figure to bring the coalition back together: as a member both of the Soviet and the Duma circles which had formed the Provisional Government he made a human bridge between the socialist and liberal camps. This placed him in a unique position….
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> This [July] was the high summer of the Kerensky cult. Success and adulation went to Kerensky's head. He began to strut around with comic self importance, puffing up his puny chest and striking the pose of a Bonaparte.
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> 'The prestige of Kerensky and the Provisional Government', wrote Kerensky's wife, 'was completely destroyed by the Kornilov Affair; and he was left almost without supporters.' Beyond the corridors of the Winter Palace, all Kerensky's decrees were ignored. There was a vacuum of power; and it was only a question of who would dare to fill it.
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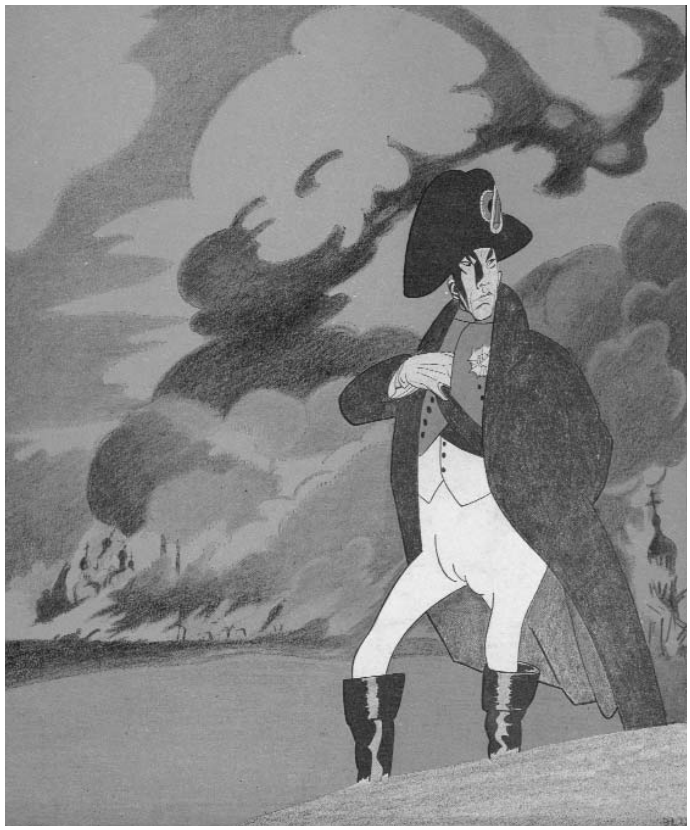
> Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 1996.

SOURCE C: A hostile German cartoon mocking Kerensky's Napoleon Bonaparte image.



Source D: A description of the October Revolution by Milyukov, leader of the Kadet party, a former member of the Provisional government and a Professor of History.

> Kerensky asked help from the same troops that had marched on Petrograd in September to execute Kornilov's plan. What happened under Kornilov was repeated exactly but still more rapidly. The troops, composed largely of Cossacks, did not wish to fight for Kerensky, and dispersed. …
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> General dissolution [of Russia] began under the Provisional Government. … The disorganisation resulting from the extraordinary military effort, the extreme lassitude of the

army, the economic disarray, all this prepared Russia for Bolshevism. … Lenin had only to sanction an accomplished fact to assure the sympathy of the soldiers, peasants and workers.

P.A. Milyukov, *History of the Second Russian Revolution*, 1959.

SOURCE E: Trotsky on the role of Lenin in the October Revolution.

Had I not been present in Petrograd in 1917 the October Revolution would still have taken place - on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petrograd, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring - of this I have not the slightest doubt!

Questions and comments

(a) Why, according to Source A, did Zinoviev and Kamenev oppose the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917? (6 marks)

There are two dangers with this low-tariff question; writing too much or just repeating the source. The question targets comprehension and inference from the source. You need to show that you understand Zinoviev and Kamenev's reasoning. They believed a rising would be too risky. The Bolsheviks did not have enough support and if it resulted in a civil war they would be defeated.

(b) Use your own knowledge to explain 'the Kornilov Affair' (Sources B and D) and its significance. (10 marks)

This is a stimulus question which targets use of own knowledge to explain the importance of a key event, you must address the significance of what happened as well as explaining what the Kornilov Affair was. In Source B Kerensky's wife points out the disastrous impact on Kerensky, in addition you will need to bring in how it also discredited the moderate socialists because of their association with Kerensky and transformed the position of the Bolsheviks. Within a month they had won majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets.

(c) What is the value of Sources C and D for the historian studying attitudes to Kerensky in 1917? (10 marks)

Here you are assessing how valuable these sources are specifically in relation to attitudes to Kerensky, you are not answering a general question on the usefulness of cartoons or memoirs. You must look at both the content and the nature of the sources. Both sources have their limitations. Milyukov is a historian looking back on events in which he had participated, but as a member of the Provisional Government he had his own prejudices and in his history he wants to put over his interpretation of events. He stresses the lack of support for Kerensky by October. He focuses on disintegration that has set in rather than the popularity of the Bolsheviks. Source C is a German rather than a Russian source and the foreign cartoonist and Germany was at war with Russia but the fact that he is mocking Kerensky's Napoleonic pretensions shows how well known they were. The burning city in the background is a reference to Napoleon's defeat in1812 and the message is that disaster awaits Kerensky, too.

(d) How far does Source A support the view put forward by Source E on the importance of Lenin's leadership in October 1917? (10 marks)

In answering this question which targets cross-referencing to make a judgement, the nature of the sources as well as their content needs discussion. On the face of it Source A does support Source E. Zinoviev and Kamenev were at the top of the Bolshevik party and were to remain so in spite of their opposition to the seizure of power. The strength of their opposition is shown in their revealing Bolshevik plans in a non-party newspaper - an act of treachery in Lenin's eyes. Lenin's determination was crucial, although when he won over the central committee finally on 10 October only Zinoviev and Kamenev opposed him. In Source E one could argue that Trotsky would have been keen to stress his own importance and the lack of revolutionary fervour of others like Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin. However, it is Lenin's role which is stressed which is all the more significant as the Marxist Trotsky has given such crucial importance to the role of an individual in making the revolution.

(e) Using Sources B and D and your own knowledge discuss the extent to which the weaknesses and mistakes of their opponents were the main reasons why the Bolsheviks seized power successfully in October 1917. (24 marks)

This question is an essay carrying 40 per cent of the marks and you must allow enough time to answer it effectively. It is vital to plan it so that a well organised, coherent answer is produced with a sense of direction and argument. It tests analysis and judgement based on sources and your own knowledge, if you use one but not the other you cannot achieve more than half marks. Source B focuses on Kerensky and the collapse in support for him after initial enthusiasm. Source D agrees on the lack of support for Kerensky but is less concerned with the individual and brings in ' "the general dissolution" of the country, the impact of the war, the state of the army and the economy, and the sympathies of 'the soldiers, peasants and workers.' This opens up a discussion of the appeal of Lenin's slogan of 'Peace, bread, land' and 'All Power to the Soviets' and indicates that the wider context in which political leaders operated will need covering. This is where your own knowledge comes in and the lack of decisiveness on the part of the SRs and the Mensheviks, something which is not really referred to in the sources, should be mentioned. You should have worked out in your own mind in your revision the extent to which you feel the Bolsheviks seized power or merely picked it up (the interpretation that Sources B and D appear to favour). Or did they ride to power on a wave of popular support in Petrograd and peasant land hunger? Your view on this is at the heart of your answer to the question.

Chris Corin teaches History at Worthing College where he is Accreditation Manager. He is the author, with Terry Fiehn, of *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, Hodder Murray, 2002.

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