Did Lenin change the course of history?

Or ‘History is the story of great men’.

**Key points of intervention**

**April Theses**

Lenin forced these through despite much opposition in the party, though he was in tune with the militant rank and file. The April Theses became the basis of party policy – uncompromising opposition to war, and the handing over of power to soviets – which brought the Bolsheviks much support and made them the only credible opposition party to the Provisional Government. The April Theses gave them a clear focus which cut through the indecisiveness of other socialist parties.

**October Uprising**

Lenin pressurised the unwilling Bolshevik Central Committee into staging the October uprising. They resisted his demands on several occasions (he faced outright opposition from Zinoviev and Kamenev). It is very likely that the Bolsheviks would not have got into power if they had not acted when they did.

**Socialist coalition**

Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks rule as a one-party state. He forced this through against the opposition of leading Bolsheviks who wanted a socialist coalition. If this had happened, a very different Russia would have emerged and the Civil War would have taken a very different form, if it had taken place at all. Lenin crushed the Constituent Assembly, which was the legitimate government elected by the Russians.

**Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Red Army**

Lenin pushed through the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk despite the opposition of the left Communists; he realised that they had to have peace to survive. He supported Trotsky in creating a traditional hierarchical Red Army using ex-tsarist officers, against serious opposition in the party from leading Bolsheviks such as Stalin. Trotsky would not have got this through without Lenin and if he had not, then the Bolsheviks might well have lost the Civil War.

**New Economic Policy**

He persuaded a very reluctant party to accept the economic compromises of the NEP, based on his record and standing in the party. There is a good chance that the Bolsheviks would have been overthrown if they had continued with War Communism.

**THINKING POINT:**

*R. Service, ‘Lenin, Individual and Politics in the October Revolution’, Modern History Review, September 1990.*

‘Great historical processes are wrought not only by individuals. There were other mighty factors at work as well in Russia in 1917. The conditions for a seizure of power with the sanction of exhausted workers, war-weary soldiers and angry peasants could hardly have been more favourable... Lenin died before he had the chance to face up properly to the consequences of the kind of revolution he had led. He was a man who helped to shape his times: but his times also moulded him.’

Is there a distinction to be made here between men like Napoleon and Bismarck who rode to greatness on the back of already existing forces and men like Lenin and Cromwell who helped to mould these forces they were to use to such effect?