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Lenin in 1905 : A revolution that shook a doctrine

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The year 1905 saw the first encounter between Leninism and revolution. Until 1905 Lenin had been concerned with working out the theory and everyday practice of the instrument of the revolution, the vanguard Party. He had elaborated its structural requirements and operational methods. He had developed some of his most important concepts – the necessity of Party *centralisation*, the *discipline* by which it must be ruled, and the role of the Party in guiding the masses and organising them into *cadres* in order to counteract the defects of a spontaneity which he had forcefully stressed. Finally, Lenin had stressed, especially in *What Is to Be Done?* the prime importance of a party of professional revolutionaries constituting, as it were, a political and military order capable of both struggling against police repression and providing a bulwark against opportunism. These ideas represented the first systematic and coherent conception of an *elitist Party* having the task of *directing* the activity of the proletariat.

The 1905 Revolution affords the first opportunity to observe the flexibility of Lenin's views, the pliability of his ideas, and the essential characteristic of his revolutionary genius: his ability to understand the meaning and ramifications of events, his grasp of the fresh possibilities which arise out of new facts and play sudden havoc with analyses – including his own – long taken for granted; and last but not least, his will and capacity to learn from the masses and successfully apply the lessons of the movement. That he could do this was due not to shrewd and somewhat cynical calculation on his part, but to his profoundly revolutionary and democratic conviction that the people are the agents of their own liberation, and to the temperament of a militant who readily

abandons; the drabness of theory in order to commit himself fully to the struggles unleashed by the masses. Leninism is a doctrine, but it is also, a pragmatic attitude oriented toward revolutionary action which deepens and invigorates the doctrine and prevents it from becoming rigid. This is evidenced by the manner in which Lenin reacted to the 1905 Revolution, and which in many respects foreshadows an attitude that made him, in 1917, the principal architect of the Bolshevik victory.

We will trace the evidence by examining the following: the conception and structures of the Bolshevik organisation as they were transformed by the revolutionary events; Lenin's views regarding the nature of the Party, the role of the masses, and revolutionary strategy; and, finally, his attempts to get his own followers to accept his views.

1905 and the Bolshevik Revolution

The January 1905 events took most Russian revolutionaries by surprise. The Bolsheviks in particular had not anticipated these events and reacted to them generally with misgivings, hesitations, and even some hostility. Although in the ensuing months popular agitation spread throughout the country, they did not readily alter their attitude. But the movement developed so rapidly, and its success, although short-lived, was so spectacular, that the events could not fail to leave a profound mark on Bolshevism. The Leninist organisation shaped by the 1905 Revolution was different from its original form, as elaborated by Lenin.

Lenin had presented the general principles underlying his organisational views not only in *What Is to Be Done?*; and *One: Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, but also in numerous articles, reports and speeches. *A Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks*, which dates from September 1902, is in many respects the most interesting of these documents. This letter does not contain mere generalities; it furnishes information that enables us to understand Lenin's concrete views of the revolutionary Party. In this letter he describes his conception of the relationship between the revolutionary organisation and the mass of workers, and provides details concerning the structure and functions of the Party. The local committees, themselves subject to the leadership of the Central Committee, should direct "all aspects of the local movement", and consist of "fully conscious Social Democrats who devote themselves

entirely to Social Democratic activities.”¹ The authority of the committees must extend even to a number of technical matters and to sections quite competent to deal with questions affecting their own localities, and their relations with the local leadership must be governed by the principle of centralisation and by strict hierarchic subordination. In this connection Lenin emphasised that “the elective principle and decentralisation [are] . . . absolutely impermissible . . . and even altogether detrimental to revolutionary work, carried on under an autocracy”.² Finally, there are at the base “factory (mill) committees” consisting of “a very small number of *revolutionaries*, who take their instructions and receive their authority to carry on all Social Democratic work in the factory *directly from the committee*”. Lenin emphasises that “every member of the factory committee should regard himself as an agent of the committee, obliged to submit to an its orders and to observe all the ‘laws and customs’ of the ‘army in the field’, which he has joined and from which in time of war he has no right to absent himself without official leave.”³ It is clear that this approach places great stress on the strict necessity for army-like discipline and on the almost unlimited prerogatives of committees whose composition reflects the predominance and even absolute hegemony of professional revolutionaries. In keeping with Lenin’s views and the requirements of the epoch, however, the nomination of Party cadres – Bolsheviks well as Mensheviks – followed the system of co-optation, the democratic principle of eligibility being almost unknown in the practice of the Russian Social Democracy.

This Leninist approach was put to a severe test by the revolutionary events that occurred in 1905 and 1906. Lenin himself was the first to realise this. He had until then defended the idea of a Party with a very restricted membership. In February 1905, however, he stated that “we must considerably increase the membership of all Party and Party-connected organisations in order to be able to keep up to some extent with the stream of popular revolutionary energy which has been a hundredfold strengthened ... Recruit more young workers, extend the normal framework of all Party organisations ... *Hundreds* of new organizations should be set up.”⁴

Lenin developed these ideas as the 1905 Revolution unfolded. They had a twofold meaning: on the one hand, they marked the transformation of the elitist conception of the Party into that of a mass

Party; and on the other, they implied a reorientation of the relationship between the revolutionary organisation and the masses ie, a new way of viewing the problem of spontaneity.

The decision to broaden Party membership – and notably, to grant a more active role to working-class elements whose role until then had been almost negligible – had a profound effect on the nature of the Leninist organisation. In 1905 the Bolshevik and Menshevik groups in Russia had a combined membership of only 8400. By 1907 the number had risen to 84,000 (46,000 Bolsheviks and 38,000 Mensheviks). One year after the outbreak of the revolution, Lenin, anticipating the actual development of the revolutionary organisation, had already, for the first time, described it as a “mass party”.⁵ This expression, however, referred not only to the number of recruits, but also to the structures and methods of action of the Party, concerning which Lenin stated. “The new form of organisation, or rather the new form of the basic organisational nucleus of the workers’ party, must be definitely much broader than were the old circles. Apart from this, the new nucleus will most likely have to be a less rigid, more “free”, more “loose” organisation.”

Previously a staunch advocate of absolute committee powers, Lenin now held that the “previous formal prerogatives [of these committees] lose their significance at the present time.”⁶ He advocated, moreover, a profound change in the activities of the Social Democracy; without sacrificing its clandestine organisations, it was nevertheless “absolutely necessary” to create . . . new legal and semi-legal Party organisations”.⁷ Lenin, although the principal initiator of the clandestine Social Democratic Party, and although he remained convinced of the necessity of maintaining the underground character of some activists and aspects of the party, observed: “Our Party has stagnated while working underground . . . it has been suffocated . . . it has been suffocating underground during the last few years. The “underground” is breaking up.”⁸

Origin of democratic centralism

In *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, Lenin had explained that the debate between the Bolshevik adherents of centralism and their Menshevik opponents could be reduced to the basic question of “bureaucracy versus democracy”.⁹ In *What Is To Be Done?* he had

already stated that in a context in which Russian socialism was forced underground and exposed to constant police repression, respect for democratic principles should be sacrificed to the requirements of security and effectiveness. Such principles “amidst the gloom of the autocracy and the domination of the gendarmerie [are] ... nothing more than a *useless and harmful toy*”¹⁰. The 1905 and 1906 upheavals swept away these concepts, which Lenin himself rather inappropriately described as “bureaucratic”. The revolution in fact was hardly three years old when he affirmed “the *full* assertion of the elective principle could be applied to a much larger extent than it is today”.¹¹ The adoption of the elective principle throughout the Party was a basic condition for democratisation. There was another condition: restriction of the almost arbitrary powers of the committees and, at the top, of the Central Committee. Urged on by Lenin, the Bolsheviks adopted this course. The Bolshevik Congress of April 1905 declared itself in favour of “committee autonomy” with respect to the Central Committee, and the latter’s authority was seriously affected. A year later, Lenin expressed his satisfaction at the “democratic basis” of the St Petersburg organisation. He explained that “*all* the Party member and *decide* questions concerning the political campaigns of the proletariat, and that *all* the Party members *determine* the line of tactics of the Party organisations.”¹² For many months, in fact, life in the Bolshevik organisations was very intense; there were prolonged and vigorous debates, which saw a clash between various tendencies. The reunification of the Bolshevik and Menshevik committees into a single movement underlined the necessity of allowing delineated ideological tendencies to confront each other openly.

It was in this period and climate that a principle arose which the communist movement would make its own, at least on paper, and which is constantly referred to nowadays – the principle of democratic centralism. It reflected originally the accommodation between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions; although adopted by the (Unity) Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, held in Stockholm in 1906 and dominated by the Mensheviks, it was nevertheless incorporated into the statutory rules of the Party at Lenin’s insistence. It was Lenin who offered a resolution at the congress stating that “the principle of *democratic centralism* in the Party is now universally accepted”.¹³ The resolution itself was extremely laconic, but the ensuing discussion revealed the

significance which Lenin attached to democratic centralism. He declared, for instance, that it was necessary “really to apply the principles of democratic centralism in Party organisation, to work tirelessly to make the local organisations the principal organisational units of the Party in fact, and not merely in name, and to see to it that all the higher bodies are elected, accountable, and subject to recall”.¹⁴ The eligibility and revocability of the cadres — their genuine representativeness — were therefore integral to wider autonomy for the sections.

There was more. Democratic centralism, in Lenin’s view, also implied “universal and *full freedom to criticise*, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a *definite action*; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the *unity* of an action decided on by the Party”.¹⁵ And on the same theme: “If we have really and seriously decided to introduce democratic centralism in our Party . . . we must have these [Party] questions discussed in the press, at meetings, in circles and at group meetings.”¹⁶ And in connection with the debate in the Russian socialist movement on the chances for armed insurrection, Lenin added: “In the heat of battle, when the proletariat is straining every nerve, *no* criticism *whatever* can be permitted in its ranks. But before the call for action is issued, there should be the broadest and freest discussion.”¹⁷

Freedom of discussion. Unity of action. The question remains as to who has the power to issue these “calls for action” which suspend the right of free criticism. Lenin’s answer was unequivocal: only the Party *Congress*, and not the Central Committee, has this power. He considered it even legitimate to wage an “ideological struggle” *against* Central Committee resolutions which he considered “mistaken”. On several occasions the Bolsheviks, at Lenin’s urging, refused to carry out decisions made by the Central Committee elected at the Stockholm Congress. By invoking the principle of democratic centralism in those instances, Lenin recognised implicitly that this principle restricted the powers of the Central Committee with respect to a more broadly based body — the Congress.

There was still another aspect to this definition of democratic centralism: the right of a minority to exist and express itself freely within the Party. To be sure, Lenin had already invoked these minority rights in 1903 and 1904, but his attitude in this respect became particularly explicit in 1905 and 1906. The reunification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, moreover, added a new dimension to the problem. It became necessary to

safeguard the revolutionary strength of the Party against ideological confusion. Lenin drew the following conclusions: "There can be no mass party, no party of a class, without full clarity of essential shadings, without an open struggle between tendencies."¹⁸ He thus recognised the *rights of tendencies*, and even of *factions*, which he described, at the Stockholm congress as "quite natural."¹⁹

To be sure, this broad and "liberal" definition of democratic centralism and minority rights – broader and more liberal than in many parties that profess to be democratic – was advanced at a period when the Mensheviks constituted a majority. It was nevertheless not fortuitous that the principle of democratic centralism should have been adopted, and that Lenin should have decided to translate this principle into reality, at a time when Leninism, under the impact of revolutionary events and the offensive of the masses, was for the first time coming to grips with its very reason for existing – the revolution.

From cadre organisation to the spontaneity of the masses

Without ever scorning or consistently distrusting the revolutionary possibilities of the working class, Lenin had nevertheless based an important part of the theories expounded in *What Is To Be Done?* on the conviction that these possibilities – which are latent, and frustrated by the dominant influence of bourgeois ideology – must be "stimulated" from the outside. The initial statement of his theories reflected Lenin's belief that the overwhelming majority of workers are capable only of spontaneous actions which, in themselves are essentially job-oriented and cannot effectively challenge the "system" and generate socialist consciousness. This pessimism had now been shown to be unjustified: without a powerful outside "stimulus", and without an organisation capable of instigating, orienting, and directing the activity of the masses, these masses were developing a basically political and revolutionary movement of extraordinary breadth and depth. The proletariat, moreover, frequently evidenced greater clarity of purpose and more lucid judgment than the leaders who were supposed to guide them. Drawing, for example, the lessons from the December 1905 Moscow insurrection, Lenin recognised that "the proletariat sensed sooner than its leaders the change in the objective conditions of the struggle and the need for a transition from the

strike to the uprising".²⁰ This statement dates from August 1906. Six months later, Rosa Luxemburg had declared that "the masses as usual at any turning point of the battle only push the leaders spontaneously to more advanced goals".²¹

This is not the only analogy to be found at that time between Lenin's ideas as transformed by the revolutionary events and those of Rosa Luxemburg, whose views seemed to be confirmed by Lenin's. In March 1906, Lenin expressed himself in a manner strikingly similar to the theories which Rosa Luxemburg had developed in *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union*. He writes: "Mention a period in Russian or world history, find any six months or six years, when as much was done for the free and independent organization of the masses of the people as was done during the six weeks of the revolutionary whirlwind in Russia."²² Like Luxemburg, Lenin now declared that the general strike, although due to the initiative of the masses and not of a Party, was a form of organisation. He spoke very highly of "the organisational abilities of the people, particularly of the proletariat."²³ This amounted to a substitution of the masses for the Party in one of its essential functions, and came close to rehabilitating the proletarian spontaneity which had formerly – especially in *What Is To Be Done?* – so violently attacked.

Lenin's distrust of working-class spontaneity had led him in 1903 to draw up Party statutes designed to provide a "bulwark" against opportunism and prevent the entry into the organisation of doubtful, vacillating, unworthy elements incapable of becoming part of the elite, of the proletarian vanguard. These fears had now been swept away. Referring to the possibility that as a result of a "sudden influx of large numbers of non-Social Democrats into the Party . . . the Party would be dissolved among the masses . . . [and] cease to be the conscious vanguard of its class, its role would be reduced to that of a tail", Lenin warned against exaggerating this danger: "It would be simply ridiculous to doubt that the workers who belong to our Party, or who will join it tomorrow will be Social Democrats in 99 cases out of a 100." Moreover, there was no need to "invent bugaboos . . . in every live and growing party there will always be elements of instability, vacillation, wavering. But these elements can be influenced, and they will submit to the influence of the steadfast and solid core of Social Democrats."²⁴

In January 1905, Lenin was still urging the Social Democracy to “dominate [the] . . . spontaneous movement of the masses”, thus using an expression that corresponded to the very essence of his theory concerning the relationship between the Party and the working class. In June of that same year, he had denounced the slogan of “worker’ initiative” as dangerous. A few months later, having absorbed the lessons of the revolution, he was discovering the great virtues of proletarian spontaneity and initiative.

Lenin and Permanent Revolution

Until 1905 Lenin had paid little attention to the problem of revolutionary strategy, confining himself to accepting the basic Marxist approach to the question of the sequence of bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution. At most, he had suggested that in the Russian context the peasantry might be called upon to play a positive role in the struggle to destroy the old, semi-feudal social order. He remained in any case convinced that the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution were two distinct processes separated by an historical stage, characterised politically by liberal democracy and economically by capitalist development. Faithful, in this respect, to an orthodoxy he had not yet come to view as inadequate, he did not anticipate the contradictions that would result from the “classical” Marxist perspective as soon as its assumptions were applied mechanistically to largely pre-capitalist societies such as Tsarist Russia. One example will suffice: how could a successful bourgeois revolution be imagined in a country where the bourgeoisie, contrary to its history in Western Europe, played a secondary role in the development of society, and lacked dynamism and a spirit of enterprise in economic as, well as political domains?

The outbreak of revolution in 1905 forced Lenin to confront the problems of revolutionary strategy and go beyond the generalities he had until then considered sufficient. In the summer of 1905, he wrote a long and important pamphlet, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, in which he subjected the attitude of the Russian bourgeoisie to very severe criticism, judging it both incapable of leading a revolution and hostile to its victory, he thought that the bourgeoisie’s revolutionary function would have to be assumed by the working class. The

latter's numerical weakness, however, forced it to seek allies who, in Lenin's view, were to be found not in the intelligentsia or the urban middle classes, but in the population of the countryside. This was the origin of the formula of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry". But in spite of the effort of political imagination necessitated by this approach, Lenin remained a captive of certain formulations. He continued to emphasise the distinction between the bourgeois revolution and the socialist revolution, and remained convinced that the revolutionary alliance of workers and (poor) peasants did not negate the essentially bourgeois character of the political, economic, and social upheaval that was to shake Russian society. Only Trotsky and Parvus developed a theory which, taking into consideration revolutionary dynamism in all its creative richness and complexity, rejected the old dogmas, and broke at last with orthodoxy. This was the origin of the idea of permanent revolution.

Desirous of playing up the antagonism between Lenin and Trotsky, the historians of the Soviet Union have emphasised the irreconcilable nature of their views in regard to permanent revolution. Those familiar with Lenin's propensity for sharp and often acid polemics and verbal violence, however, cannot fail to be struck by the moderate tone of his criticism of Trotsky's theories regarding permanent revolution. The future founder of Soviet Russia had not had the occasion to read the study in which Trotsky elaborated his ideas. Lenin, moreover, modified his own views as the revolutionary upsurge of the masses pushed forward; the contrast between the "classicism" of his earlier views and the character of his new ideas is at times so striking that one readily finds an almost "Trotskyist" point of view in his writings of that period. Here, too, his pragmatism and his characteristic tendency to reject doctrinal considerations in favour of the lessons and requirements of action induced Leninism to come to terms with reality.

Alluding to the Marxist theory regarding the bourgeois and socialist stages of the revolution, Lenin declared in the spring of 1905: "If we interpret this correct Marxist scheme . . . to mean that we must measure off in advance, before any ascent begins, a very modest part, let us say, not more than one step, if, in keeping with this scheme and before any ascent begins we sought to *"draw up a plan of action in the revolutionary epoch"*, we should be virtuosi of philistinism.²⁵ As for the transition from the

bourgeois revolution to the proletarian revolution, he stated in *Two Tactics of Social Democracy* that it might be short and could be hastened by the Party's attitude. Pursuing his analysis, he added that there was no real gap between the bourgeois and proletarian stages: "The complete victory of the proletarian revolution will mark the end of the democratic revolution and the beginning of a determined struggle for a socialist revolution."²⁶ A few months later he distinguished between the different stages of revolutionary development, and stated that the period in which the bourgeoisie would adopt an overtly hostile attitude toward the revolution would be followed by another period which he described as follows: "On the basis of the relations established [during the preceding period] a new crisis and a new struggle develop and blaze forth, with the proletariat now fighting to preserve its democratic gains for the sake of a socialist revolution. This struggle would have been almost hopeless for the Russian proletariat alone and its defeat would have been as inevitable as the defeat of the . . . French proletariat in 1871, had the European socialist proletariat not come to the assistance of the Russian proletariat." And Lenin concluded: "in such conditions the Russian proletariat can win a second victory. The cause is no longer hopeless. The second victory will be the socialist revolution in Europe."²⁷ Since these different stages were likely to succeed each other very rapidly, and since, moreover, these stages seemed to be part of a continuous process, his analysis, although quite summary, was nevertheless extremely close to that of Trotsky. As a matter of fact, in an apparently innocuous article written by Lenin in September 1905, there appears the following, typically "Trotskyist" sentence: "From the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half-way."²⁸

On the one hand, permanent revolution; on the other, uninterrupted revolution. Lenin used this formulation but once. But he used it. Is it not significant that it crops up at the moment when the revolutionary storm, having shaken Lenin's theories on organisation, also put his strategic concepts to the test? After the defeat of the proletariat in 1906 and the restoration of Tsarism, Lenin apparently abandoned the perspective of "uninterrupted revolution", which he had envisaged in 1905. It took until 1917 for this perspective to reappear, assert itself, and triumph.

Lenin's struggle against the Bolsheviks

In 1905, therefore, the organisational principles and strategic concepts of Bolshevism, both as theory and instrument, underwent a profound transformation. For the true nature of this phenomenon to be understood, it remains to be shown that in order to bring about this change Lenin had to engage in frequent struggle against his own followers and that these struggles, moreover, were waged against those who based their opposition on the very principles of Leninism, in other words, that the maturation, democratisation, and radicalisation of Bolshevism were achieved through a confrontation between Lenin and numerous Bolsheviks who clung to, formulations and schematic views elaborated by Lenin himself. This was, for instance, the case with respect to the change in Party structures. Lenin had to oppose those whom he eased *Komitetchiki*, committee bureaucrats, who, as he had done in 1902, cautioned the Party against the temptation of "playing at democracy". The debates at the April 1905 Bolshevik Congress in London were particularly stormy. With far from unanimous support, Lenin insisted on the need to "proletarianize" the Party cadres. But the cadres of professional revolutionaries openly expressed their distrust of the workers whom they considered incapable of taking on functions of leadership. Listening to their spokesmen, Lenin says, "I could hardly keep my seat."²⁹ He submitted an amendment to the statutes obligating the Party to increase the number of workers in the Bolshevik committees. The amendment was rejected. According to Krupskaya, Lenin "was not greatly upset at his point of view receiving such a severe rebuff at the Congress ... because he realised that the approaching revolution was bound to radically cure the Party of this incapacity to give the committees a more pronounced worker make-up."³⁰

This was, in fact, what happened. But the tone of some of Lenin's letters clearly indicates the strength of the opposition he encountered in his own organisation. In a letter addressed to a St Petersburg Bolshevik in February 1905, he wrote: "Be sure to put us in *direct* touch with new forces, with the youth, with newly formed circles . . . So far *not one* of the St. Petersburgers (shame on them) has given us a *single* new connection . . . It's a scandal, our undoing, our ruin! Take a lesson from the Mensheviks, for Christ's sake."³¹ And again: "You must be sure to organise, organise, and organise *hundreds* of circles, completely pushing

into the background the customary, well-meant committee (hierarchical) stupidities. This is a time of war. Either you create *new*, young, fresh, energetic battle organisations everywhere . . . or you win go under, wearing the aureole of ‘committee bureaucrats’.”³² In another letter addressed to the Bolshevik combat committee of the capital in October 1905, he urged his followers to send “for heaven’s sake . . . all ‘functions, rights, and privileges’ to the devil”.³³

His revolutionary flexibility was already beginning to clash with the conservative inertia of the Party structures, although the latter were still not far removed from their origins.

A similar confrontation took place in connection with role to be granted by the Bolshevik organisation to the most original creation of 1905 – the Soviets. Many of Lenin’s followers, in fact, regarded them with distrust and hostility. Were the Soviets not the result of spontaneous mass action, an outcome of the spontaneity against which Lenin had warned them? Didn’t they represent an institution that could hardly be said to have a structure, that lacked a hierarchical and ideological framework, that was independent of the Social Democratic which Lenin – yes Lenin himself – had proclaimed as absolutely necessary? In this regard, Lenin was unprepared to grasp and accept the phenomenon of Soviets. This was especially the case with respect to the most famous Soviet, that of St Petersburg, which, moreover, was controlled by the Mensheviks. In fact, Bogdanov, who was at the time the leading member of the Russian Bureau of the Bolshevik organisation, went so far as to maintain that the Soviet might become the nucleus of an anti-socialist party. In his view, the Bolsheviks should force it to accept their program as well as the authority of their Central Committee, after which it would be absorbed into the Party. With the approval of many Leninists, Bogdanov added that if the Soviet refused to follow this course, the Bolsheviks should withdraw their support and denounce its political line. Krasin, the Party representative in the St Petersburg Soviet, demanded officially that it accept the program and authority of the Social Democracy.

Lenin’s attitude was much more flexible than that of his comrades. On the eve of his return to St Petersburg in November 1905, the Bolshevik organ *Novaya Zhizn* published an article expressing profound distrust of the Soviets. In his reply Lenin stated that the author of the article in question “is wrong in raising the question . . . ‘the Soviet of Workers’

Deputies or the Party?' I think that it is wrong to put the question in this way and that the decision must certainly be: both the Soviet of Workers Deputies and the Party."³⁴ Going counter to the views of his followers in the capital, Lenin declared: "I think it inadvisable to demand that the Soviet of Workers Deputies should accept the Social Democratic program and join the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party." Adding that the "Soviet of Workers' Deputies should be regarded as the embryo of a provisional revolutionary government", Lenin was in fact pleading for its autonomy with respect to the political parties.³⁵

The official newspaper of the St Petersburg Bolsheviks *refused* to publish Lenin's point of view.

This tension between Lenin and his followers, by whose hesitations and timidity he was so distressed, can be traced in other instances as well. For example, the "Bloody Sunday" which precipitated the 1905 Revolution was regarded with great reserve by the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks, who had misgivings about primitive character and certain religious aspects of the demonstration led by the priest Gapon. Lenin, on the contrary, was enthusiastic. From January on, he urged on the struggle and its radicalisation, following with mounting hopes the progress of the revolutionary offensive. These feelings were not shared by all Bolsheviks. At their London congress in April 1905 Bogdanov, one of the most important leaders of the organisation, expressed the view of what was undoubtedly a considerable portion of the membership when he urged the cadres to insist above all on "the importance of discipline", and to persist in this course "unabashed by unreasonable accusations that they are slowing down the development of the revolutionary mood of the masses".³⁶

These misgivings concerning the spontaneous action of the proletariat that had little or no organisation persisted throughout 1905, together with a very pronounced hesitation to commit the Party to an armed insurrection. Lenin, on the contrary, defended this course with all his strength, but had to compromise with the more moderate elements, notably on the wording of the resolutions which the Bolsheviks at the London Congress devoted to the problem of insurrection. Lenin, however, declared at the Congress that "we underestimated the significance and inevitability of the uprising".³⁷ He expressed the desire of seeing a discussion not only of the principle of armed uprising, but also of its practical preparation. He kept returning to this theme throughout the

summer and autumn of 1905. Judging by the tone of his appeals, it would appear that his views were not favourably received by his followers.

June 20, 1905: "Away, then, with all doubts and vacillations. Let it be realised by one and all, now and without delay, how absurd and discreditable are all pretexts today for evading this urgent task of the most energetic preparation of the armed uprising." And he added an urgent warning against "the danger of delays".³⁸

October 16, 1905: "It horrifies me – I give you my word – it horrifies me to find that there has been talk about bombs for *over six months*, yet not one has been made! And is the most learned people who are doing the talking . . . Go to the youth, gentlemen! That is the only remedy!" And he insisted: "Go to the youth. Form fighting squads *at once* everywhere . . . Let groups be at once organised of three, 10, 30, etc, persons. Let them arm themselves at once as best they can, be it with a revolver, a knife, a rag soaked in kerosene for starting fires . . . the evil today is our inertness."³⁹

Last days of October 1905. "All delays, disputes, procrastination and indecision spell ruin to the cause of the uprising." Twelve years later, almost to the day, Lenin used the same language to break down similar resistance on the part of his adherents. We have here a striking and characteristic analogy: Lenin's attitude in 1905, in effect, foreshadows his attitude in 1917. Lenin in 1905 – the first challenge to a doctrine by its author, Lenin's first revolt, as it were, against Leninism.

This revolt contained the seeds of a revolution. But before 1917 history would again furnish a demonstration *a contrario*. The Revolution of 1905 had revealed the profoundly democratic component of Lenin's strategy. The triumph of the counter-revolution, beginning in 1907, brought with it on the other hand an intensification of the authoritarian elements also present in his theories. The proletarian victories of 1905 had imposed on Lenin, more than on the Leninists, a revision, sometimes agonising, of certain of his ideas. But this revision was as ephemeral as the revolutionary successes which were its cause. When Tsarism succeeded in re-establishing itself and the period began, in 1908, which is known in the history of the Russian workers' movement as the "years of reaction", Bolshevism was reduced to the dimensions, and acquired the characteristics, of a sect. The defeat and discouragement of the masses, the imprisonment and death of thousands of militants, the departure into

exile of the socialist leaders, the return of even more severe conditions of clandestinity than existed before 1905, forced the organisation back into its old rut. It was then, that authoritarian tendencies developed, an urge to monolism, a propensity to dogmatism, and other negative traits which the historian cannot ignore when he draws up the balance sheet of Leninism.

These dark years ended shortly before the First World War with the unleashing of a revolutionary offensive, which was braked but not broken by the war. And it was then, and more than ever under the pressure of the masses, that Lenin achieved what remains his greatest historical merit: to have realised in 1917 the exceptional and decisive identification between a class and its party.

The ebbing of the revolutionary tide, the failure of the world revolution, the withdrawal into itself of Soviet Russia, sounded the knell of this symbiosis. History, however, even while recording its disappearance, cannot forget it and must preserve its lesson. This lesson is simple: revolutionary parties, even those which claim to *direct* the masses, fulfill their functions only in privileged moments when, renouncing the role of guide for that of cadre, they reverse the relation connecting them with the proletariat and submit to the liberating impetus which emanates from it.

Translated by Alfred Ehrenfeld.

Notes

All references to Lenin's writing in the following notes are the English-language edition of the Collected Works of Lenin.

1. *Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks*, (September 1902) *Collected Works*, 1961, vol. 6, p. 237.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.
4. *New Tasks and New Forces* (February 1905), 1962, vol. 8, pp. 217-219.
5. *Should We Boycott the State Duma?* (January 1906), 1962, vol. 10, p. 99.
6. *The Reorganisation of the Party* (November 1905), 1962, vol. 10, pp. 33-34.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
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