



## **A History of the Bolshevik Party by Alan Woods**

**There have been many books and potted histories of Russia, either written from an anti-Bolshevik perspective, or its Stalinist mirror image, which paint a false account of the rise of Bolshevism. For them, Bolshevism is either an historical "accident" or "tragedy". Or it is portrayed erroneously as the work of one great man (Lenin) who marched single-minded towards the October Revolution. Alan Woods, in rejecting these "theses", reveals the real evolution of Bolshevism as a living struggle to apply the methods of Marxism to the peculiarities of Russia. Using a wealth of primary sources, Alan Woods uncovers the fascinating growth and development of Bolshevism in pre-revolutionary Russia.**

For convenience the parts are divided up into a number of pages: these divisions do not appear in the printed book. If you are interested in getting a paperback copy check the price details below.

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"Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution" is intended as a companion volume to Ted Grant's "[Russia: from Revolution to Counter-Revolution](#)".

The online publication of this book is part of the [In Defence of Marxism](#) project. If you think you can help us in any way have a look at these [suggestions](#).

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Author’s Introduction**

### **Why Study the History of Bolshevism?**

*“In the year 1917, Russia was passing through the greatest social crisis. One can say with certainty, however, on the basis of all the lessons of history, that had there been no Bolshevik Party the immeasurable revolutionary energy of the masses would have been fruitlessly spent in sporadic explosions, and the great upheavals would have ended in the severest counter-revolutionary dictatorship. The class struggle is the prime mover of history. It needs a correct program, a firm party, a trustworthy and courageous leadership—not heroes of the drawing room and of parliamentary phrases, but revolutionists, ready to go to the very end. This is the major lesson of the October revolution.”*<sup>[1]</sup>

A revolution, by definition, represents such a turning point whereby the process of human development is given a powerful new impetus. Whatever one thinks of the Russian revolution of October 1917, there can be no question about its colossal historical significance. For more than three quarters of its existence, the 20th century was dominated by it. And even now, at the dawn of a new millennium, the world is still

affected by its reverberations in a most fundamental way. The study of the Russian revolution therefore requires neither explanations nor apologies. It belongs to that category of great historic turning points that compels us to speak in terms of a before and an after, like Cromwell's revolution in England or the great French revolution of 1789-93.

There are many points of similarity between the October revolution in Russia and the great bourgeois revolutions of the past. At times these parallels seem almost uncanny, even extending to the personalities of the principal *dramatis personae*, such as the similarity between Charles I of England and Louis XVI of France and tsar Nicholas, together with their foreign wives. But for all the similarities, there is a fundamental difference between the Bolshevik revolution and the bourgeois revolutions of the past. Capitalism, unlike socialism, can and does arise spontaneously out of the development of the productive forces. As a system of production, capitalism does not require the conscious intervention of men and women. The market functions in the same way as an ant-hill or any other self-organising community of the animal world, that is to say, blindly and automatically. The fact that this takes place in an anarchic, convulsive and chaotic manner, that it is endlessly wasteful and inefficient and creates the most monstrous human suffering, is irrelevant to this consideration. Capitalism "works" and has been working—without the need of any human control or planning—for about two hundred years. In order to bring such a system into being, no special insight or understanding is called for. This fact has a bearing on the fundamental difference between the bourgeois and socialist revolution.

Socialism is different from capitalism because, unlike the latter, it requires the conscious control and administration of the productive process by the working class itself. It does not and cannot function without the conscious intervention of men and women. *The socialist revolution is qualitatively different to the bourgeois revolution because it can only be brought about by the conscious movement of the working class.* Socialism is democratic or it is nothing. Right from the beginning, in the transitional period between capitalism and socialism, the running of industry, society and the state must be firmly in the hands of the working people. There must be the highest degree of participation of the masses in administration and control. Only in this way is it possible to prevent the rise of bureaucracy and create the material conditions for the movement in the direction of socialism, a higher form of society characterised by the total absence of exploitation, oppression and coercion, and therefore by the gradual extinction and disappearance of that monstrous relic of barbarism, the state.

There is also another difference. In order to conquer power, the bourgeoisie had to mobilise the masses against the old order. This would have been unthinkable on the basis of the declared aim of establishing the necessary conditions for the rule of Rent, Interest and Profit. Instead, the bourgeoisie put itself forward as the representative of the whole of suffering humanity. In the case of 17th century England it was supposed to be fighting for the establishment of god's kingdom on earth. In 18th century France it advertised itself as the representative of the rule of Reason. Undoubtedly, many of those who fought under these banners sincerely believed them to be true. Men and women do not fight against all

the odds, risking everything, without that special motivation born of a burning conviction of the rightness of their cause. The declared aims in each case turned out to be pure illusion. The real content of the English and French revolutions was bourgeois and, in the given historical epoch, could have been nothing else. And since the capitalist system functions in the manner we have already described, it did not make much difference whether people understood how it worked or not.

The present work, unlike most others on the subject, does not set out from the view that revolutions belong only to the past. On the contrary. The present world situation provides ever more proof that the progressive role of capitalism is now completely exhausted. The material conditions for socialism have long been mature on a world scale. The possibility exists for creating a world of undreamed-of plenty. Yet countless millions live in abject misery. Looking round the world today, Lenin's book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* has a specially modern ring. The power of the big banks, monopolies and multinational companies has never been greater. And they have no more intention of surrendering it without a fight than the degenerate absolute monarchs of the past. The first condition of human progress is to break the power of these modern overlords. In order to bring this about, it is first necessary to defeat and overthrow the resistance of that class which holds power in present-day society: the bankers and monopolists who dominate not only through their economic power but also through their control of the state and their monopoly of culture.

In order to accomplish these tasks, it is necessary that the working class possess a party and a leadership which is adequate to it. Unlike the French and English revolutionaries of the 17th and 18th centuries, the modern working class can only transform society on the basis of a scientific understanding of the world in which it lives. This is provided by Marxism, the only really consistent and scientific kind of socialism. The history of Bolshevism provides us with a model of how this can be achieved. In all the annals of history it would be difficult to find another example of a growth so astonishing as that of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, when it passed from 8,000 to more than a quarter of a million members in the space of nine months. Yet this feat did not occur as the result of spontaneous combustion. It was the end result of decades of patient work, commencing with small circles and passing through a whole series of stages, in which spectacular advances were followed by bitter defeats, disappointment and despair. The life of every man and woman knows similar moments. The sum total of such experiences is life itself, and the way in which an individual overcomes the problems of life and absorbs the lessons of all kinds of different circumstances is what enables him or her to grow and develop. It is just the same with the party. But individuals also learn valuable lessons from the experience and knowledge of others. How difficult life would be if we insisted on ignoring the accumulated knowledge of those around us! And in the same way it is necessary to study the collective experience of the working class in different countries and thus to avoid mistakes that have already been made, for, as George Santayana once pointed out, "he who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it".

## Is a Party Needed?

The whole history of the class struggle over the last hundred years provides the answer to this question. Marxism does not at all deny the importance of the role of the individual in history, but only explains that the role played by individuals or parties is circumscribed by the given level of historical development, by the objective social environment which, in the last analysis, is determined by the development of the productive forces. This does not mean—as has been alleged by the critics of Marxism—that men and women are merely puppets of the blind workings of “economic determinism”. Marx and Engels explained that men and women make their own history, but they do not do so as completely free agents, but have to work on the basis of the kind of society that they find in existence. The personal qualities of political figures—their theoretical preparation, skill, courage and determination—can determine the outcome in a given situation. There are critical moments in human history when the quality of the leadership can be the decisive factor that tips the balance one way or another. Such periods are not the norm, but only arise when all the hidden contradictions have slowly matured over a long period to the point when, in the language of dialectics, quantity is changed into quality. Although individuals cannot determine the development of society by the force of the will alone, yet the role of the subjective factor is ultimately decisive in human history.

The presence of a revolutionary party and leadership is no less decisive for the outcome of the class struggle as is the quality of the army and its general staff in the wars between nations. The revolutionary party cannot be improvised on the spur of the moment, any more than a general staff can be improvised on the outbreak of war. It has to be systematically prepared over years and decades. This lesson has been demonstrated by the whole of history, especially the history of the 20th century. Rosa Luxemburg, that great revolutionary and martyr of the working class, always emphasised the revolutionary initiative of the masses as the motor force of revolution. In this, she was absolutely right. In the course of a revolution the masses learn rapidly. But a revolutionary situation, by its very nature, cannot last for long. Society cannot be kept in a permanent state of ferment, nor the working class in a state of white-hot activism. Either a way out is shown in time, or the moment will be lost. There is not enough time to experiment or for the workers to learn by trial and error. In a life and death situation, errors are paid for very dearly! Therefore, it is necessary to combine the “spontaneous” movement of the masses with organisation, programme, perspectives, strategy and tactics—in a word, with a revolutionary party led by experienced cadres.

A party is not just an organisational form, a name, a banner, a collection of individuals, or an apparatus. A revolutionary party, for a Marxist, is in the first place *programme, methods, ideas and traditions* and only in the second place, an organisation and an apparatus (important as these undoubtedly are) in order to carry these ideas to the broadest layers of the working people. The Marxist party, from the very beginning, must base itself on theory and programme, which is the summing up of the general historical experience of the proletariat. Without this, it is nothing. The building of a revolutionary party always begins with the slow and painstaking work of assembling and educating the cadres, which forms the backbone of the party throughout its entire lifetime. That is the

first half of the problem. But only the first half. The second half is more complicated: how to reach the mass of the workers with our ideas and programme? This is not at all a simple question.

Marx explained that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. The mass of the working class learns from experience. They do not learn from books, not because they lack the intelligence, as middle class snobs imagine, but because they lack the time, the access to culture and the habit of reading that is not something automatic, but is acquired. A worker who returns home after working eight, nine or ten hours on a building site or on a conveyor belt, is not only physically but mentally tired. The last thing he or she wants to do is to study or go to a meeting. Far better to leave such things to “those who know”. But if there is a strike, the whole psychology is transformed. And a revolution is like a huge strike of the whole of society. The masses want to understand what is going on, to learn, to think and to act. Of course, the actions of the masses, bereft of experience and the knowledge of tactics, strategy and perspectives, find themselves at a disadvantage when faced with the ruling class, which, through its political and military representatives, has had a long experience and is far better prepared for such situations. It has in its hands a whole battery of weapons: control of the state, the army, the police and the judiciary, the press and the other mass media—powerful instruments for moulding public opinion and for slander, lying and character assassination. It has many other weapons and auxiliary forces: control of the schools and universities, an army of “experts”, professors, economists, philosophers, lawyers, priests and others willing to swallow their moral scruples and rally to the defence of “civilisation” (that is, their own privileges and those of their masters) against “chaos” and the “mob”.

The working class does not automatically arrive at revolutionary conclusions. If that were so, the task of party-building would be redundant. The task of transforming society would be a simple one, if the movement of the working class took place in a straight line. But this is not the case. Over a long historical period, the working class comes to understand the need for organisation. Through the establishment of organisations, both of a trade union and, on a higher level, of a political character, the working class begins to express itself as a class, with an independent identity. In the language of Marx, it passes from a class *in itself* to a class *for itself*. This development takes place over a long historical period through all kinds of struggles, involving the participation, not just of the minority of more or less conscious activists, but of the “politically untutored masses”, who, in general, are awakened to active participation in political (or even trade union) life only on the basis of great events. On the basis of great historical events, the working class begins to create mass organisations, to defend its interests. These historically-evolved organisations—the trade unions, co-operatives, and workers’ parties—represent the germ of a new society within the old. They serve to mobilise, organise, train and educate the class.

The masses, newly awakened to political life, must seek out that political party that is most capable of defending their interests; the party that is most resolute and audacious, but also that shows itself to be most far-sighted, that can point out the way forward at

each stage, issuing timely slogans that correspond to the real situation. But how to decide which party and programme is the right one? There are so many! The masses must test the parties and leaders in practice, for there is no other way. This process of successive approximation is both wasteful and time-consuming, but it is the only one possible. In every revolution—not only Russia in 1917, but also France in the 18th century and England in the 17th century—we see a similar process, in which, through experience, the revolutionary masses, by a process of successive approximations, find their way towards the most consistently revolutionary wing. The history of every revolution is thus characterised by the rise and fall of political parties and leaders, a process in which the more extreme tendencies always replace the more moderate, until the movement has run its course.

In all the voluminous history of the world working class movement, it is impossible to find a history so rich and variegated as that of the Bolshevik Party before 1917. A history that spanned three decades and included all the stages of development from a small circle to a mass party, passing through all the stages of legal and illegal struggle, three revolutions, two wars, and was confronted with a vast array of complex theoretical problems, not only on paper but in practice: individual terrorism, the national question, the agrarian question, imperialism and the state. And it would also be impossible to find anywhere else such a vast and rich treasure house of Marxist literature dealing with the whole gamut of problems from A to Z with such astonishing profundity as in the writings of the two greatest revolutionaries of the 20th century—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Davidovich Trotsky. Yet the modern reader who wishes to acquaint him- or herself with this material will come up against an insurmountable problem. Almost the entire literature on the history of Bolshevism has been written by hardened enemies of Bolshevism. With a very few honourable exceptions, such as the work done by the French Marxist historians Pierre Broué and Marcel Liebman, it is impossible to find a history of the Bolshevik Party worth the trouble of reading. But both Broué's and Liebman's subject matter is somewhat different to that of the present work, and, while their works can be recommended, they deal only partially with the subject with which we are concerned here, namely how the Bolsheviks prepared themselves for the task of taking power in 1917.

### **About the Present Work**

The present work is written by a committed Marxist who has devoted the whole of his adult life to fighting for the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. In thus declaring an interest, I do not regard it as a disadvantage, but quite the contrary. My standpoint is one that does not regard the history of Bolshevism as a merely academic interest, but as something living and relevant to the present day. My acquaintance with the history of Bolshevism is not confined to book knowledge. Forty years of active participation in the Marxist movement provide one with many insights which are not available to the writer whose interest is merely academic. Karl Kautsky, in the days when he was still a Marxist, wrote a book which must surely be one of the finest examples of the method of historical materialism—*The Foundations of Christianity*. In that book he describes the early Christian movement in a way that was only possible for someone who had had first-hand

knowledge of the German Social Democracy in its heroic early days, when it was struggling in harsh underground conditions against the Anti-Socialist Law in Germany. True, the social content of both movements was radically different, as was the historical moment in which they were developing. Yet for all that, the parallels between these revolutionary movements of the dispossessed against the state of the rich and powerful are just as striking as the differences.

Many of the situations that faced the pioneers of Russian Marxism are very familiar to me from personal experience: not just the work of fighting for the ideas of Marxism in the British Labour movement, but experience of the revolutionary movement in France 1968, in Portugal in 1975, and in Spain during the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the underground movement against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile—all these provided me with ample occasions to observe at first hand precisely the kind of situations that confronted the Bolsheviks in their long fight against the tsarist regime. In addition, I have had personal experience over many years with the work of revolutionaries in Third World countries in Latin America and Asia—especially Pakistan, which presents the features of a semi-feudal society strikingly similar to tsarist Russia. In addition, thirty years ago as a student in the USSR, where I obtained a lot of material which I used in writing this book, I was able to meet and talk to people who had participated in the Bolshevik Party, including, on one occasion, two old ladies who had worked as secretaries for Lenin in the Kremlin after the revolution. I believe that these experiences have provided me with many insights of the true nature of Bolshevism.

Finally, I owe a great deal to Ted Grant, my comrade, friend and teacher for the last forty years. I consider Ted not only to be the greatest living exponent of Marxism, but also a direct link—one of the last surviving links—with the great revolutionary traditions of the past: the Left Opposition and the Bolshevik Party itself. Thanks to his work over the past sixty years, the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky—the theoretical and practical leaders of October—have been kept alive, extended and developed. The present work is intended as a companion volume to *Russia—From Revolution to Counter-revolution*, in which Ted traces the processes that took place in Russia after the October revolution. I believe that, between them, these two volumes provide a comprehensive history and analysis of Bolshevism and the Russian revolution, from its earliest beginnings to the present day.

I am conscious that it is not the custom of academic historians of Bolshevism to “declare an interest”, as I have done here. That is unfortunate, since the vast majority of them, despite a superficial veneer of impartiality are, in fact, clearly motivated by prejudice against, or even outright hostility to, Bolshevism and revolution in general. Moreover, commitment to a definite standpoint by no means precludes objectivity. A surgeon may be passionately concerned with saving the life of his patient, but for that very reason will distinguish with extreme care between the different layers of the organism. I have attempted to deal objectively with the subject under consideration. Since the purpose of this book is to allow the new generation to learn all the lessons of the historical experience of Bolshevism, to gloss over the problems, difficulties and errors would be both stupid and counterproductive.

When Oliver Cromwell had his portrait painted, he sternly admonished the artist to “paint me as I am—warts and all!” The same truthful attitude, the same forthright realism always characterised the thinking of Lenin and Trotsky. Where they made mistakes, they did not mince words in admitting it. After the revolution, Lenin said on one occasion that they had committed “many stupidities”. This is a far cry from the histories of the Stalinists which presents a false picture of the Bolshevik Party that was always right and never wrong. The present work outlines the strong side of Bolshevism, but does not hide the problems. To do so would be to do serious damage to the cause of Leninism not in the past but in the present and the future. In order that the new generation should learn from the history of Bolshevism it is necessary to paint it as it was—“warts and all”.

I have deliberately used non-Bolshevik sources as much as possible, particularly Menshevik authors like Dan, Axelrod, and Martov, and also the Economist Akimov. At least some bourgeois writers, while critical of Bolshevism, have taken the trouble to cite a lot of relevant material. Books like David Lane’s work on the early history of the Russian Social Democracy, or Robert McKean’s *St Petersburg Between the Revolutions* contains a wealth of material that cannot be found easily elsewhere. McKean’s book is no doubt intended as an antidote to the exaggerated picture of the strength of the Bolsheviks in the years before 1917, and would be far more valuable if the author had not been swayed by his hostility to Bolshevism. Most of the others are far worse.

Having studied this material for more than thirty years, the conclusion I have come to is this: the best source for re-discovering the history of Bolshevism is the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. They are an inexhaustible treasure-house of information and ideas which, taken together, make up a detailed history of Russia and the world for the entire period under consideration. The problem is that it is a vast amount of material—45 volumes of Lenin in English, and about ten more in Russian. Trotsky probably wrote even more, but the publication of his works is more scattered. His brilliant autobiography *My Life*, the monumental *History of the Russian Revolution* and his under-rated last masterpiece *Stalin* provide a wealth of material for the history of Bolshevism. The problem is that the aspiring student of Bolshevism who attempts to read all this material would require an enormous amount of time to do so. I have therefore deliberately included a large number of quite lengthy quotes from these sources, although this has made the text both longer and more cumbersome. Despite these objections, it seemed necessary to me, for two reasons: 1) in order to avoid any suggestion of inaccuracy in quoting and 2) to stimulate the interest of the reader in reading the originals. For, at the end of the day, there can be no substitute for reading the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

Without the Bolshevik Party, without the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Russian workers, despite all their heroism, would never have taken power in 1917. That is the central lesson of the present work. If one examines the history of the international workers’ movement, one sees a whole series of bloody and tragic defeats. Here for the first time, if we exclude the brief but heroic episode of the Paris Commune, the working class succeeded in overthrowing their oppressors and beginning the task of the socialist transformation of society. As Rosa Luxemburg expressed it, *they alone dared*. And they succeeded brilliantly. This is the “crime” for which the bourgeoisie and its hired

apologists can never forgive the Bolsheviks. To this day, the ruling class lives in mortal fear of revolution and dedicates no small amount of resources to combating it. In this, their task has been greatly facilitated by the crimes of Russian Stalinism. The betrayal of the ideas of Lenin by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia finally led to its logical conclusion—the greatest betrayal in the whole history of the labour movement—the destruction of the USSR and the attempt of the ruling bureaucratic caste to move in the direction of capitalism. Now, 80 years after the revolution all of the gains of October are being destroyed and replaced with “free market” barbarism. But it is never sufficient for the ruling class to overthrow a revolution. They must eradicate its memory, cover it with dirt and lies. In order to accomplish this feat, they require the services of faithful academics who are eager to place themselves at the service of maintaining the “free market economy” (read: “the rule of the big banks and monopolies”). This is what explains the blind hatred of Lenin and Trotsky that still characterises the writings of all the bourgeois historians of the Russian revolution, ill-concealed behind a mask of false impartiality.

### **How the Bourgeois ‘Explain’ October**

The Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle, when he wrote about the great English revolutionary Oliver Cromwell, complained that before putting pen to paper he first had to dig out Cromwell from under a mountain of dead dogs. History in general is not impartial, and the history of revolutions least of all. Ever since the October revolution, the Bolshevik Party and its leaders have been the object of particular hatred of all the forces hostile to the revolution. That includes not only the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats, but all kinds of petty bourgeois anarchist and semi-anarchist elements, and, last but not least, the Stalinists who rose to power over the dead body of Lenin’s party. It is impossible to find a single decent history of the Bolshevik Party from any of these sources. Though the Western universities continue to churn out a never-ending stream of books on this or that aspect of the Russian revolutionary movement, the hostility towards Bolshevism, and a poisonous attitude towards Lenin and Trotsky, are present from first to last.

The most common explanation for the October revolution that is given in Western history books is that it was not a revolution at all but only a coup d’état carried out by a minority. But this “explanation” explains precisely nothing. How is it to be explained that a tiny handful of “conspirators”, numbering not more than 8,000 in March, were able to lead the working class to the seizure of power only nine months later? This implies that Lenin and Trotsky were possessed of miraculous powers. But to resort to the supposedly miraculous powers of individuals as an explanation of historical events again provides us with no explanation, but only refers the inquirer to the only place where superhuman (that is, supernatural) qualities can originate—namely, the realm of religion and mysticism. We are far from denying the vital importance of the individual in the historical process. The events of 1917 are perhaps the most striking confirmation of the fact that, under certain circumstances, the role of individuals is absolutely decisive. Without Lenin and Trotsky, the October revolution would have never taken place. But to say that is not enough. The same Lenin and Trotsky had been active in the revolutionary movement for almost two

decades before the revolution, and yet for most of the time were unable to carry out a revolution and for long periods were without any influence with the masses. To attribute the victory of October solely to the genius (benevolent or malevolent, depending on your class point of view) of Lenin and Trotsky is clearly nonsense.

The proof that the Russian revolution involved an upsurge of the masses virtually without precedent in history is too voluminous to quote here. Thirty years ago, while I was a post-graduate student in Moscow, I recall a conversation I had with a woman, then very advanced in years, who had participated as a member of the Bolshevik Party in the revolution somewhere in the Volga region. I cannot remember the exact place, or even her name, but I remember that she had spent 17 years in one of Stalin's labour camps, along with so many other Bolsheviks. And I remember another thing. When I asked her about the October revolution, she answered with two words, which cannot be adequately translated: "Kakoi pod'yom!" The Russian word "pod'yom" has no equivalent in English, but means something like "spiritual upsurge". "Such uplift!" would be a lame rendition of this phrase, which, more than a mountain of statistics, conveys the intensity with which the mass of the population embraced the revolution—not just the workers, poor peasants and soldiers, but also the best representatives of the intelligentsia (this woman had been a school teacher). The October revolution attracted all that was best, all that was alive, progressive and vibrant in Russian society. And I remember how this woman's eyes shone as she relived in her mind the joy and the hope of those years. Today, when all the usual gang of professional cynics are lining up to pour dirt over the memory of the October revolution, I still recall the face of that old woman, heavily lined with long years of suffering, yet radiant in her memories in spite of all that later befell her and her generation.

One strand of bourgeois history in the last period was to attack Bolshevism by resurrecting its political enemies, Economism, and particularly, Menshevism. One of the principal "resurrection men" is Solomon Schwarz. His basic thesis is that "fundamentally Bolshevism stressed the initiative of an active minority; Menshevism, the activation of the masses." From this initially false assertion the author derives his conclusion quite naturally that "Bolshevism developed dictatorial conceptions and practices; Menshevism remained thoroughly democratic."<sup>[2]</sup> The present work will show that this assertion is baseless. It will show that the Bolshevik Party was characterised throughout its history by the widest possible internal democracy. It is a history of the struggle of ideas and tendencies in which everyone spoke their mind freely. Internal democracy provided the necessary oxygen for the development of the ideas which ultimately guaranteed victory. This is a very far cry from the totalitarian and bureaucratic regimes of the "Communist" parties under Stalin.

The latest offering from the school of anti-Bolshevik history is Orlando Figes' book *A People's Tragedy, the Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, (London, 1996). Here we are presented with a vision of the revolution straight out of Dante's *Inferno*. This objective and scientific academic describes the October revolution variously as a "conspiracy", a "coup", a "drunken rampage". It was "more the result of the degeneration of the urban revolution (?), and in particular of the workers' movement, as an organised and

constructive force, with vandalism, crime, generalised violence and drunken looting as the main expressions of this social breakdown.”<sup>[3]</sup> Figes is well aware that the outbreaks of disorder and drunkenness perpetrated by backward elements were rapidly suppressed by the Bolsheviks. They constituted *episodic incidents* of no importance, yet here the *incidental* is presented as the *essence* of the revolution. Naturally, for a “scientific” defender of the established social order the essence of any revolution must be disorder, madness and chaos. What else can be expected from the masses? They are too ignorant and backward to understand, let alone rule. No, such a responsible task should be left to those of us who are intelligent. Let the hewers of wood and drawers of water attend to their business and leave the running of society to the graduates of Cambridge University.

Are we being unjust to Mr Figes? Maybe we are misreading the message of his very thick book? Let the author speak for himself. At the Congress of Soviets, a decisive majority voted for the transfer of power to the soviets. This is a slight difficulty for Figes’ central thesis (not characterised by excessive originality) that the October revolution was just a coup. But not to worry! Orlando has the answer to every conundrum. The reason why the masses voted for soviet power was that *they were too ignorant*: “The mass of the delegates, who,” writes Mr Figes, “*were probably too ignorant to comprehend the political import of what they were doing*, raised their hands in support (weren’t they in favour of soviet power?).”<sup>[4]</sup>

It should be noted in passing that the argument that the majority of people who vote in elections are “probably too ignorant” to understand the political issues involved is *an argument against democracy in general*. What is Figes trying to say? That up until the time the Bolsheviks and their allies got a majority in the soviets, the workers and soldiers were fully aware of what was required, but in October they were suddenly “*probably too ignorant*” to know what they were doing? Such an argument will fool no-one. That the delegates at the Congress of Soviets had not the benefit of a Cambridge education has, regrettably, to be admitted. In compensation, they had learned a few things in the course of a bloody war and nine months of revolution. They knew quite well what they wanted: peace, bread and land. And they knew that the Provisional Government and its Menshevik and Social Revolutionaries backers would not give them what they wanted. They also learned in the course of experience that the only party that would give them these things was the Bolsheviks. All this they understood pretty well without passing any exams.

Of course, anyone is entitled to write history from an anti-revolutionary standpoint. But then it would be far better to declare from the outset that the real intention is to show that revolution does not pay, and that consequently, convince the reader that he or she would be far better off accepting the capitalist system for fear of worse to come. Alas, human frailty being what it is, such an admission seems rather more than these historians can cope with.

## **The Stalin School of Falsification**

The other main source of the history of Bolshevism is the huge body of literature on the subject that was published over decades in the USSR and widely disseminated in the past by the Stalinised Communist Parties abroad. From all this, it is equally impossible to obtain a truthful impression of the history of Bolshevism. Having usurped power in conditions of backwardness where an exhausted working class proved unable to keep control in its hands, the bureaucracy was compelled to pay lip service to Bolshevism and October. In the same way the bureaucracy of the Second International paid lip service to “socialism” while carrying out a bourgeois policy, and the Pope of Rome pays lip service to the teachings of the early Christian Church. The ruling bureaucracy in the USSR, while placing Lenin’s body on a mausoleum, betrayed all the basic ideas of Lenin and the October revolution, covering the spotless banner of Bolshevism with filth and blood. In order to consolidate its usurpation, the ruling caste was forced to exterminate the Old Bolsheviks. Like all criminals, Stalin wanted no witnesses who could speak out against him. This fact determined in advance the destiny of history books in the USSR.

It is frequently asserted that Stalinism and Bolshevism are basically the same thing. Indeed, this is what lies behind all the calumnies of the bourgeois historians of Bolshevism. But the democratic workers’ state established by Lenin and Trotsky in October 1917 had absolutely nothing in common with the bureaucratic-totalitarian monstrosity presided over by Stalin and his successors. The victory of Stalin and the bureaucracy, the result of the isolation of the revolution in conditions of crushing backwardness, poverty and illiteracy, meant the wholesale abandonment of the ideas, traditions and methods of Lenin and the transformation of the Third International as the vehicle of world revolution to a mere instrument of the foreign policy of the Moscow bureaucracy. In 1943, having been cynically used by Stalin as an instrument of Moscow’s foreign policy, the Communist International was ignominiously buried, without even calling a congress. The political and organisational heritage of Lenin was dealt a heavy blow for a whole historical period. This fact has heavily coloured the view that many people have of the history of Bolshevism. Even well-meaning writers (not to mention the malicious ones) cannot help reading into the past all kinds of elements from the horrors of the later Stalinist regime which are entirely alien to the democratic traditions of Bolshevism.

In order to triumph, Stalinism was obliged to destroy every last vestige of the democratic regime established by October. The Bolshevik Party inscribed on its programme in 1919 the famous four conditions for Soviet power:

1. Free and democratic elections with right of recall of all officials.
2. No official must receive a salary higher than that of a skilled worker.
3. No standing army but the armed people.

4. Gradually, all the tasks of running the state should be performed by everyone in turn. When everybody is a bureaucrat, no-one can be a bureaucrat.

These conditions, which are spelled out in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, are based upon the programme of the Paris Commune. As Engels explained, this was no longer a state in the old sense of the word, but a semi-state, a transitional regime intended to prepare the way for the transition to socialism. This was the democratic ideal which Lenin and Trotsky put into practice after the October overturn. It had absolutely nothing in common with the bureaucratic and totalitarian monstrosity that replaced it under Stalin and his successors. Moreover, that regime could only be brought about on the basis of a political counterrevolution, involving the physical extermination of Lenin's party in the one-sided civil war against Bolshevism—the Purge Trials of the 1930s. Let us just cite one figure to prove the point. By 1939, of Lenin's 1917 Central Committee, only three were left alive: Stalin, Trotsky and Alexandra Kollontai. The rest, apart from Lenin and Sverdlov who died naturally, were either murdered or driven to suicide. Kamenev and Zinoviev were executed in 1936. Bukharin, whom Lenin described as “the Party's favourite” was executed in 1938. The same fate awaited tens of thousands of Bolsheviks under Stalin. One lone voice remained to denounce Stalin's crimes and defend the genuine heritage of Bolshevism. That voice was stilled in 1940, when Leon Trotsky, lifelong revolutionary, leader of the October insurrection and founder of the Red Army, was finally murdered in Mexico by one of Stalin's agents.

To those who persist in identifying Stalinism with Leninism, we are entitled to direct the following question: if the regimes of Lenin and Stalin were really the same, *how did it come about that Stalin could only come to power by physically annihilating the Bolshevik Party?*

Under Stalin and his successors, everything connected with the October revolution and the history of Bolshevism was shrouded in a thick fog of distortion by the official mythology that passed for history in the USSR after Lenin's death. The real traditions of Bolshevism were buried under a thick layer of lies, slanders and distortions. The relation between the party and the class, and also, crucially, between the party and the leadership, was presented in the form of a bureaucratic caricature. The official Soviet histories present an over-simplified and one-sided picture of the relation between the Bolshevik Party and the mass movement. The impression is created that at every step the Bolsheviks were the commanding force that led and directed the revolution with the ease of a conductor waving his baton before an obedient and disciplined orchestra. From such versions one can learn nothing about either the Bolshevik Party, the Russian revolution, or the dynamics of revolution in general. This is, of course, no accident, since the purposes of history under the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not to teach people to make revolutions, but to glorify the ruling caste and to perpetuate the myth of an infallible leadership at the head of an infallible Party, which had nothing in common with Lenin's Party, except a usurped name. In the same way all monarchies, but especially a dynasty that has usurped the throne, seeks to rewrite history to present its predecessors in the most superhuman and awesome light. Needless to say, any resemblance to the truth here is purely accidental.

The old Stalinist histories are virtually worthless as sources. To depict the history of Bolshevism as these people did—i.e. as a perfectly straight ascending line, leading irresistibly to the assumption of power—is to leave behind the realm of serious history and enter that of hagiography. I have used only one Soviet history here: the multi-volumed *Istoriya KPSS* (History of the CPSU) published in the USSR under the relatively “liberal” regime of Nikita Khrushchov in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is probably the most detailed history of the Party published in the Soviet Union. It is useful for the mass of material it contains, much from unpublished party archives. But basically it is as one-sided as all the other Stalinist histories, and even the factual information should be treated with care.

### **‘New Lies for Old!’**

This is not the place to deal with the events in Russia from Lenin’s death to the present day. That subject is the theme of the companion volume to the present work, *Russia— from Revolution to Counter-revolution*, already referred to. Suffice it to say that the isolation of the Russian revolution in conditions of frightful economic and cultural backwardness led inevitably, first to the rise of a privileged bureaucratic ruling caste that completely eradicated the traditions of Bolshevism and physically annihilated the Bolshevik Party, and finally liquidated the only progressive conquests of October that remained—the nationalisation of the economy and the plan. The result, as predicted by Trotsky in 1936, has been the most terrible collapse of the productive forces and culture. The Russian people have paid an appalling price for the attempt of the bureaucracy to transform itself into a ruling class and to re-inforce its power and privileges by moving in the direction of capitalism.

As we predicted from the beginning, this would inevitably meet with the resistance of the working class at a certain stage. True, this process has been retarded. How could it be otherwise? The long period of totalitarian rule, the partial discrediting of the idea of socialism and communism as a result; the immense confusion and disorientation caused by the collapse of the USSR; and then the unprecedented collapse of the productive forces which stunned the workers for a time. Finally, and most importantly, the absence of a real Communist party standing on the programme, methods and traditions of Lenin and Trotsky—all this has thrown the movement back. But now things are changing in Russia. Despite the lack of leadership, the working class is gradually drawing the necessary conclusions on the basis of experience. Sooner or later the movement of the workers will place firmly on the agenda the need for a genuine Leninist programme, policy and leadership.

With the collapse of Stalinism, the old histories have been consigned to a well-merited oblivion. But their place has been taken by a new and even more odious form of anti-Bolshevik falsification. The movement towards capitalism in Russia has spawned a new breed of “historians” anxious to do the bidding of their new masters by publishing all kinds of alleged “revelations” about the past. The fact that what they write now completely contradicts what they wrote yesterday does not appear to bother them in the slightest, since the aim is not (and never was) to establish the truth, but only to earn a

living and please the Boss (which is pretty much the same thing here). For decades, these creatures churned out falsified histories of Bolshevism and the Russian revolution, representing Lenin much as the Orthodox church produced the lives of the Saints, complete with miracles, and with just as much scientific validity. They fawned on the Stalinist bureaucracy that paid them handsomely for producing this rubbish to order and generally conducted themselves as model servants of the totalitarian regime. Now the Master has changed, they have jumped with the alacrity of a performing dog at a circus. From singing panegyrics to Stalin, Brezhnev and Gorbachov, they have graduated to singing the praises of the “Market”.

These modern Russian writers share the morality and values of all the other “new Russians”—the values of the market, that is to say, the jungle. In order to ensure the new-found wealth obtained by the simple expedient of plundering the people of Russia, it is necessary to pour dirt on Russia’s revolutionary past, for fear that it may also represent Russia’s future. Just as there is a ready market in Russia for Mercedes Benz and pornography, so there is money to be made in slandering Lenin and the October revolution. And where money is concerned, the “new Russian” intellectuals are no less enthusiastic than the assorted thieves, speculators and spivs who now call the shots in Moscow. A whole new literary genre has evolved, which entails the following: a former Party or KGB hack “discovers” in the archives some “startling new revelation” relating to Lenin. This is then presented to the public in the form of a “learned” study signed by some academic or other who invests the “new” information with a spurious halo of “scientific objectivity”. After a few months, the “startling revelations” are published in the West, to an approving chorus. Then the comments from the Western media are published in the Russian press, but not before being suitably embellished by all sorts of lurid and quite fictitious additions. In fact, practically nothing of these “revelations” is new, and absolutely nothing is startling, unless it be the willingness of some people to believe anything at all.

Among other things, Lenin stands accused of advocating the use of violence—*during the Civil War!* But what is war, except the utilisation of violence to some end or other—the continuation of politics by other means, in Clausewitz’s famous dictum? True, the Bible informs us that to take the life of another is a mortal sin. But this dictum never prevented Christian monarchs and politicians from employing the most violent means to support their own interests. Those who weep crocodile tears over the fate of tsar Nicholas conveniently ignore the bloody cruelty that was the hallmark of his reign from the first day. Maybe the present work will jog their memory. And perhaps they will be surprised to learn that the October revolution was a relatively peaceful affair, and that the terrible bloodshed occurred only as a result of the slave-holders’ rebellion of the White Guard, backed by world imperialism. In the three years after the October revolution, the Soviet republic was invaded by no fewer than 21 foreign armies: British, French, German, American, Polish, Czech, Japanese and others. As always, when it is a question of putting down a slave uprising, the ruling class acted with the most appalling cruelty. But this time it was different. The former slaves did not meekly submit but fought back and won.

The violence of the landlords and capitalists was met by the violence of the oppressed workers and peasants. And it is this that they cannot forgive. Trotsky organised the working class into the Red Army and, by a combination of military skill and courage with a revolutionary and internationalist policy, succeeded in defeating all the forces of the counterrevolution. This undoubtedly involved the use of violence that was not strictly in accord with the Sermon on the Mount. The enemies of the revolution pretend to be horrified. But their rejection of violent means is not at all absolute. The same people who slander the memory of Lenin and Trotsky do not bat an eyelid when they mention an American President who ordered the atom bomb to be dropped on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or a British Prime Minister who ordered the incineration of men, women and children in the blanket bombing of Dresden. Such actions, you see, are not only acceptable, but praiseworthy (“they shortened the war and reduced Allied casualties...”). The organisers of the campaign against Lenin and the Bolsheviks are well aware that the October revolution was fighting a desperate war of *self-defence*. They know that, if the Whites had won, they would have implanted a ferocious dictatorship in Russia and the workers and peasants would have paid a terrible price. Therefore, the hullabaloo about Lenin’s alleged violence must be seen for what it is: cynicism and hypocrisy of the lowest order.

This slander is not only baseless, but frankly stupid. If Lenin was really an agent of German imperialism, it is impossible to explain the behaviour both of Lenin and the German army in the period after October. In fact, it was not Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but the Russian bourgeoisie that longed for the intervention of the German army in 1917. There are plenty of witnesses to prove that the propertied classes in Russia would have preferred to surrender Petrograd to the Germans rather than see it fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks.

True, the German general staff hoped that Lenin’s return to Russia would help to destabilise tsarism and weaken it militarily. It is not unusual for imperialist powers to see in internal disorders a means of weakening an enemy. In the same way it is the duty of revolutionists to make use of all contradictions between the imperialists to further the revolution. Lenin was well aware of the calculations of Berlin. That is why, when he was blocked by England and France from crossing Allied territory to return to Russia, forcing him to return through Germany, he imposed the strictest conditions, specifying that no-one should either enter or leave his train en route. He knew that the enemies of Bolshevism would brand him as a “German agent.” But he took the necessary steps to answer this calumny in advance.

As Trotsky explained years later to the Dewey Commission: “He explained openly to the workers, the first Soviet in Petrograd; ‘My situation was such and such. The only way possible was to go across Germany. The hopes of Ludendorff are his hopes, and mine are totally different. We will see who will be victorious.’ He explained everything. He concealed nothing. He said it before the whole world. He was an honest revolutionist. Naturally, the chauvinists and patriots accused him of being a German spy, but in his relationship with the working class he was absolutely impeccable.”[\[5\]](#)

Throughout the First World War, not only the Germans but the Allies also used their stooges in the labour movement to buy support among left groups in other countries. But to allege that the Germans had bought the Bolsheviks with gold and that there existed an actual bloc between the Bolsheviks and German imperialism is not only monstrous but extremely stupid. It flies in the face of all the known facts about the political conduct of the Bolsheviks both during and after the war. For example, Volkogonov tries to show that German money was channelled to the Bolsheviks via Sweden when it can easily be shown that Shlyapnikov, the representative of the Bolsheviks in Sweden, publicly denounced the activities of the pro-German wing of the Swedish Social Democracy and would have nothing to do with the German agent Troelstra, whilst Lenin's attitude to Parvus during the War is documented in the relevant chapter of the present work. One could say a lot more on the subject of Mr Volkogonov's lies and distortions, but, as the Russian proverb says: a fool can ask more questions than a hundred wise men can answer. And this observation holds good, not just for fools, but for far less well-intentioned people.

### **Leninism and the Future**

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the bourgeois critics of Marxism were jubilant for a short time. But all their euphoria has quickly turned to ashes. The crisis of capitalism reflects itself, at this stage, in the pessimism of the strategists of capital. But as the crisis unfolds, it will also be reflected in the crisis of the mass organisations of Labour which over the last decades have experienced a process of reformist and bureaucratic degeneration far worse than that suffered by the Second International in the period prior to 1914. For a long time the Labour leaders treated Marxism as a dead dog. They wholeheartedly embraced the market and all the latest economic nostrums of the bourgeoisie. The apparent vitality of right-wing reformism in the post-war period, at least in the advanced countries of capitalism was merely an expression of the fact that capitalism went through a prolonged period of expansion, similar to the twenty years or so before the First World War. But this period is now at an end. As I finish the closing chapter, the news is everywhere of a developing crisis in world capitalism.

Never since 1945 has the world been in such a state of ferment. Long ago Marx and Engels predicted that capitalism would develop as a world system. Now this prediction has been fulfilled in almost laboratory conditions. The crushing domination of the world market constitutes the most striking fact of our epoch. The triumph of globalisation has been heralded as the final victory of the market economy. But this victory carried within itself the seeds of a catastrophe. Far from overcoming the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, globalisation merely creates a new and vastly greater stage upon which the contradictions are manifesting themselves. The deep slump in Asia manifests itself as an unprecedented accumulation of unsold goods (overproduction, or "overcapacity") is accompanied by a paralysis of what used to be the main motor force for world economic growth, Japan. On the other side of the world, the uncontrolled upward movement of the stock exchange is provoking fears of a financial collapse in the USA. The nervousness of the bourgeois finds its expression in constant alarms on the world's stock markets.

The old argument about the alleged superiority of the “free market economy” now sounds like a sick joke to millions of people. Under the banner of “privatisation”, the big banks and monopolies are engaged in looting the state; under the banner of “liberalisation”, they force the weak bourgeoisie of the ex-colonial countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to open their markets to the exports from the West with which they cannot compete. This is the real reason for the chronic indebtedness of the Third World and the permanent crisis that afflicts two-thirds of the world’s population. Everywhere we see wars and conflicts over markets and meaningless frontiers for which the peoples must pay a dreadful price for the world crisis of capitalism. This situation bears a far greater resemblance to the world as it was one hundred years ago than the period of relative stability that followed the Second World War. The convulsions in Asia, Africa and Latin America are not as far away as they seem in Europe and North America. The catastrophe that resulted from the break-up of Yugoslavia shows that the same processes can affect the supposedly civilised peoples of the West unless the jungle logic of capitalism is eliminated and replaced with a rational and harmonious system on a world scale.

Ironically, the main detonator of the present crisis was the spectacular collapse of “free market” policies in Russia. This represents an important turning-point not just for Russia but for the whole world. The temporary mood of exultation which predominated among the strategists of capital after the fall of the Berlin Wall has evaporated like a drop of water on a hot stove. In place of the old song about the alleged death of Marxism, socialism and communism, they are now singing a very different refrain. The writings of the bourgeois economists and politicians are filled with forebodings and dark warnings about the clock being put back. In Russia, a social explosion is being prepared which will place on the order of the day a return to the traditions of 1917. On a world scale, the crisis of capitalism is entering a new and convulsive stage. The revolution in Indonesia is only the first act in a drama which will unfold over the coming months and years and will find an expression, not only in Asia, Africa and Latin America but in Europe and North America too.

In this revolutionary re-awakening, Russia will not occupy the last place. Lenin was fond of a Russian proverb: “Life teaches”. The lesson of the attempt to move towards capitalism in Russia has been a brutal one. But now the pendulum is beginning to swing in the opposite direction. The alarm of the capitalists and their Western backers is well founded. If the leaders of the CPRF were genuine Leninists, the Russian workers would now be on the eve of taking power. The working class is a thousand times stronger than in 1917. Once they started to move, nothing could stop them. The problem, as in February 1917, is the lack of leadership. The role being played by Zyuganov is even worse than that played by the Mensheviks in 1917. In all the speeches and articles of the leaders of the CPRF there is not one atom of the ideas of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. It is as if they had never existed. That is an indication of how far the Stalinist reaction against October has thrown the movement back. The regeneration of the Russian workers’ movement can only be brought about by a return to the genuine traditions of Bolshevism. The history of Bolshevism remains the classic model of the theory and practice of Marxism in its struggle to win the masses. *It is necessary to go back to Lenin,*

*and also to the ideas of the man who, together with Lenin, stood at the head of the October revolution and guaranteed its success, Leon Trotsky.*

The conduct of the leaders cannot hold back the movement forever. The workers are striving to find a way out of the crisis through their own class action. In so doing, they are re-discovering the revolutionary traditions of the past—the traditions of 1905 and 1917. The re-emergence of soviets, although they are variously styled: committees of action, strike committees, committees of salvation, is a clear proof that the Russian proletariat has not forgotten its revolutionary heritage. The movement will continue and grow, despite Zyuganov and co. —with the inevitable ebbs and flows. Was this not always the case? That is precisely the main lesson of the present work. And there is another lesson which we must never forget. Nothing can break the unconscious will of the working class to change society. Bolshevism is merely the conscious expression of the unconscious or semi-conscious strivings of the proletariat to change the fundamental conditions of their existence. No force on earth can prevent the inevitable movement of the Russian workers. Over a period, through experience, the new generation will rediscover the road back to Bolshevism. The traditions are still there, and the revolution will find a way.

## NOTES

For reasons of convenience, where the same work is cited several times in immediate sequence we have placed the reference number at the end of the last quote.

[1] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, p. 166.

[2] S. S. Schwarz, *The Russian Revolution of 1905, the Workers' Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism*, p. 29.

[3] O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy, the Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, p. 495.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 491 (my emphasis).

[5] *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, p. 316.

## Explanatory Notes

### 1) On Russian Weights and Measurements:

1 dessyatine (desyatina) = 2.70 acres (1.09 hectares)

1 verst = 1.067 kilometres

1 pood = 36.11 pounds (16.38 kilograms)

## 2) On the Russian Calendar:

Until the revolution the old Russian (Julian) calendar was different to that used in the West (the Gregorian calendar). This produced a discrepancy of 12 days in the 19th century and 13 days in the 20th century. The Bolsheviks modernised the calendar, along with much else. The dating of events that occurred before 1918 therefore presents some difficulty. The choice is quite arbitrary and different writers use one system or the other. Whatever other anomalies may be incurred, it seemed undesirable to start referring to the November revolution, the March revolution and the massacre of the 21 January! In general, therefore, I have preferred to keep to the Old Style, but occasionally both dates may be given. To change into the modern calendar, add 13 days (New Style). OS=Old Style; NS=New Style.

## 3) On Spelling:

The Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet contains several letters which do not exist in the Western (Latin) alphabet. Moreover, there is no universally accepted system of transliteration. Where certain spellings have become popular, I have retained this spelling. Frequently repeated names are spelt the English way (e.g. tsar Nicholas). Otherwise, I have tried to keep as closely as possible to the Russian orthography.

## 4) A Brief Glossary:

**Cossacks:** A special caste with a strong military (but also communal-democratic) tradition. They were used by the tsarist regime as auxiliaries of the police against strikes and demonstrations. Although they consider themselves as a separate race, the Cossacks are in fact Russians and Ukrainians, the descendants of runaway serfs who made their homes in the wild frontier areas to Russia's South and East where they were frequently at war with Russia's enemies, the Poles and Turks.

**Junkers:** The name (of German origin) given in tsarist times to military cadets from officers' schools.

**Kulak:** A rich peasant. The word actually means "a fist", probably an ironic reference to the tight-fistedness of these elements.

**Muzhik:** The Russian name for a peasant. Sometimes used colloquially to mean "a man".

**Okhrana:** Short for *Okhrannoye Otdelyeniye* or Department of Safety. It was the tsarist secret police, founded in 1881, which operated a vast network of spies, informers and agents provocateurs who infiltrated the revolutionary movement and whose operations extended to many countries.

**Pogrom:** A racially-motivated attack in which mobs, usually organised and directed by agents of the state, attack minorities. The victims were most often Jews, but also included other minorities, such as the Armenians in Azerbaijan.

**Cadets** (sometimes written Kadets): The acronym for Constitutional Democrats, the main bourgeois liberal party in Russia which emerged from the earlier Liberation (*Osvobozhdeniye* in Russian) League.

**Social Revolutionaries** (SRs): A petty bourgeois party, descended from the Narodniks, which advocated a kind of “peasant socialism”. They split into a right and left in 1917. The Left supported the October revolution and for a time were in a coalition government with the Bolsheviks.

**Soviets:** From the Russian word meaning advice or council. The soviets were democratically elected workers’ councils composed of delegates from the workplace. They first emerged during the 1905 revolution as organs of struggle or extended strike committees. Disbanded during the period of reaction following the defeat of the 1905 revolution, they re-emerged in February 1917, and, after October 1917, were transformed into organs of power and constituted the basis of the Soviet system, the most democratic and direct system of popular government ever devised. Under conditions of extreme backwardness and the isolation of the revolution in Russia, the soviets eventually lost power in the period of Stalinist reaction against October. Although power was in the hands of the workers’ soviets in name, by 1930 this was really a fiction. Power had passed into the hands of a privileged bureaucratic caste. In 1936, Stalin introduced a new constitution which formally liquidated the soviet power, replacing soviet democracy with a caricature of a bourgeois parliamentary democracy, in which the population was allowed to vote for a single party which routinely “won” 99 per cent of the vote. Although the country was still called the “Soviet Union”, it had absolutely nothing in common with the regime of soviet democracy established by Lenin and Trotsky in 1917.

**Duma:** An ancient Russian word, virtually synonymous with *soviet*, meaning a council. During the reign of Nicholas II the State Duma was the name given to the national parliament. There were also local *dumas*, the equivalent of local councils.

**Zemstvo** (Russian plural, *zemstva*): Semi-official local organs of self-government. Shortly after the Emancipation of the serfs, Alexander II attempted to loosen the strings of the autocratic regime, permitting a measure of local self-government through the establishment of the zemstvos, mainly in the provinces of central Russia. In practice, the experiment in “democracy” was extremely limited. There were no zemstvos in Western Russia, Poland, the Baltic states, the Cossack areas, Siberia, Central Asia or Turkestan. Control of the zemstvos was in the hands of the rural gentry. They had virtually no powers and were dependent on the whims of the local governor, who was appointed by the central government. In effect, their remit was limited to local affairs: roads, schools, public health, famine relief and so on. The zemstvos were the focal point of the moderate liberal opposition.

**Zemsky Sobor:** a name given in the 19th century to a democratically elected parliament, roughly equivalent to a constituent assembly.

## **Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism**

[section 1 of 7]

### **The Death of an Autocrat**

On 1st March 1881 the carriage of tsar Alexander II was passing along the Catherine Canal in St Petersburg, when a young man suddenly threw what looked like a snowball. The explosion that followed missed its mark, and the tsar dismounted, unharmed, to speak to some wounded Cossacks. At that moment, a second terrorist, Grinevetsky, rushed forward and with the words “it is too early to thank God”, threw another bomb at his feet. An hour and a half later, the Emperor of all the Russias was dead. This act marked the culmination of one of the most remarkable periods in revolutionary history—a period in which a handful of dedicated and heroic young men and women took on the combined might of the Russian tsarist state. Yet the very success of the terrorists in eliminating the figure at the apex of the hated autocracy simultaneously dealt the death-blow to the so-called Party of the People’s Will which had organised it.

The phenomenon of the Russian Narodniks (“populists”, men of the people) was a consequence of the extreme belatedness of Russian capitalism. The decay of feudal society proceeded faster than the formation of the bourgeoisie. Under these conditions, sections of the intelligentsia, especially the youth, broke away from the nobility, bureaucracy and clergy and began to look for a way out of the social impasse. However, when they looked around for a point of support within society, they could not be attracted by the crude, backward and underdeveloped bourgeoisie, whilst the proletariat was still in its infancy, unorganised, politically untutored and small in numbers, particularly in comparison with the many millions of peasants who made up the dumb, oppressed and crushed majority of Russian society.

It was therefore understandable that the revolutionary intelligentsia should look to the “people” in the person of the peasantry as the main potential revolutionary force within society. This movement had its roots in the great turning-point in Russian history in 1861. The emancipation of the serfs that took place in that year was by no means, as has been frequently suggested, the result of the enlightened benevolence of Alexander II. It flowed from the fear of a social explosion after Russia’s humiliating defeat in the disastrous Crimean War of 1853-56, which, like the later war with Japan, served to cruelly expose the tsarist regime. Not for the first, nor the last time, military defeat revealed the bankruptcy of the autocracy, providing a powerful impetus to social change. But the Edict of Emancipation solved none of the problems and, indeed, made the lot of the mass of the peasants considerably worse. The landlords naturally made off with the best plots of land, leaving the most barren areas to the peasants. Strategic points such as water and

mills were usually in the hands of the landlords who forced the peasants to pay for access. Worse still, the “free” peasants were legally tied to the village commune or *mir* which had collective responsibility for collecting taxes. No peasant could leave the *mir* without permission. Freedom of movement was hampered by the system of internal passports. The village commune, in effect, was transformed into “the lowest rung of the local police system”.<sup>[1]</sup>

To make matters worse, the reform allowed the landlords to cut off and appropriate one-fifth (in some cases, two-fifths) of the lands formerly cultivated by the peasants. They invariably chose the best and most profitable parts —woods, meadows, watering places, grazing grounds, mills, etc.—which gave them a stranglehold over the “emancipated” peasant. Year after year, a greater number of peasant families sunk hopelessly into debt and impoverishment as a result of this swindle.

The emancipation of the serfs was an attempt to carry through reform from the top to prevent revolution from below. Like all important reforms, it was a by-product of revolution. The Russian countryside had been shaken by peasant uprisings. In the last decade of the reign of Nicholas I, there were 400 peasant disturbances, and an equal number in the following six years (1855-60). In a space of 20 years, 1835-54, 230 landowners and bailiffs had been killed, and a further 53 in the three years before 1861. The announcement of the emancipation was met by a further wave of disorders and uprisings, brutally suppressed. The hopes placed by an entire generation of progressive thinkers on the ideas of reform were cruelly betrayed by the results of the emancipation, which turned out to be a gigantic fraud. The peasants, who believed that the land was rightfully theirs, were cheated in all directions. They had to accept only those allotments laid down by the law (by agreement with the landlord) and had to pay a redemption fee over a period of 49 years at 6 per cent interest. As a result, the landlords retained approximately 71,500,000 desyatins of land, and the peasants, representing the overwhelming majority of society, only 33,700,000 desyatins.

In the years after 1861, the peasantry, hemmed in by repressive legislation on “poverty lots” and impoverished by the weight of debt, staged a series of desperate local uprisings. But the peasantry, throughout history, has always been incapable of playing an independent role in society. Capable of great revolutionary courage and sacrifice, its efforts to shake off the rule of the oppressor have only succeeded where leadership of the revolutionary movement has been taken up by a stronger, more homogeneous and conscious class based in the towns. In the absence of this factor, the peasant “jacqueries”,<sup>[A]</sup> from the middle ages onwards, have inevitably suffered the cruellest defeats. The result of the scattered nature of the peasantry, its lack of social cohesion and lack of class consciousness.

In Russia, where capitalist forms of production were still at the embryonic phase, no such revolutionary class existed in the towns. Yet a class, or more accurately caste, of largely impoverished students and intellectuals, the *raznochintsy* (those without rank) or “intellectual proletariat” proved exceptionally sensitive to the subterranean mood of discontent which lay deep within the recesses of Russian life. Years later, the terrorist

Myshkin declared at his trial that “the movement of the intelligentsia was not artificially created, but was the echo of popular unrest.”<sup>[2]</sup> As always, the ability of the intelligentsia to play an independent social role was no greater than that of the peasantry. Nevertheless it can act as quite an accurate barometer of the moods and tensions developing within society.

In 1861, the very year of the Emancipation, the great Russian democratic writer Alexander Herzen wrote from exile in London in the pages of his journal *Kolokol* (The Bell) urging the youth of Russia to go “to the people!” The arrest of prominent publicists like Chernyshevsky (whose writings were influenced by Marx and who had a big impact on Lenin and his generation) and Dimitri Pisarev, demonstrated the impossibility of peaceful liberal reform. By the end of the decade of the 1860s, the basis of a mass revolutionary movement of populist youth had been laid.

The appalling conditions of the masses in post-reform Russia moved the best sections of the intelligentsia to anger and indignation. The arrest of the most radical of the democratic wing, Pisarev and Chernyshevsky, only served to deepen the alienation of the intellectuals and push them further to the left. While the older generation of liberals accommodated themselves to the reaction, a new breed of young radicals was emerging in the universities, immortalised in the figure of Bazarov in Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons*. The hallmark of this new generation was impatience with the fumbling of the liberals, whom they treated with contempt. They believed fervently in the ideas of a complete revolutionary overturn and a radical reconstruction of society from top to bottom.

Within 12 months of the Emancipation, the “reforming tsar” had moved towards reaction. There was a clamp-down on intellectuals. The universities were placed under the oppressive vigilance of the reactionary Minister of Education, Count Dimitri Tolstoy, who imposed an educational system designed to crush independent spirits and stifle imagination and creativity. The schools were forced to teach 47 hours of Latin a week and 36 hours of Greek, with a heavy emphasis on grammar. Natural science and history were excluded from the curriculum as potentially subversive subjects—and the system of policing the mind was rigidly enforced under the baleful eye of the school inspector. The heady days of “reform” gave way to the bleak years of police surveillance and grey conformity. The move to reaction was intensified after the unsuccessful Polish uprising of 1863. The revolution was drowned in blood. Thousands of Poles were killed in battle, hundreds were hanged in the repression that followed. The brutal Count Muravyov personally hanged 128 Poles and transported 9,423 men and women. The total exiled to Russia was twice that number. Peter Kropotkin, the future anarchist theoretician, witnessed the sufferings of the Polish exiles in Siberia where he was stationed as a young captain of the Imperial Guard: “I saw some of [them] on the Lena, standing half naked in a shanty, around an immense cauldron filled with salt-brine, and mixing the thick, boiling brine with long shovels, in an infernal temperature, while the gate of the shanty was wide open to make a strong current of glacial air. After two years of such work, these martyrs were sure to die from consumption.”<sup>[3]</sup>

But, beneath the permafrost of reaction, the seeds of a new revolutionary revival were swiftly germinating. The case of Prince Kropotkin is a striking example of how the wind blows the tops of the trees first. Born into an aristocratic family, this one-time member of the Imperial Corps of Pages was, like many of his contemporaries, affected by the terrible suffering of the masses and driven to draw revolutionary conclusions. A keen scientist, Kropotkin, vividly describes in his memoirs the political evolution of an entire generation: “But what right had I to these higher joys,” he asked himself, “when all around was nothing but misery and the struggle for a mouldy bit of bread; when whatever I should spend to enable me to live in that world of higher emotion must needs be taken from the very mouths of those who grew the wheat and had not bread enough for their children?”

The cold cruelty towards the Poles showed the other face of the “reforming tsar”, a man who, in Kropotkin’s words, “merrily signed the most reactionary decrees and then afterwards became despondent about them”.<sup>[4]</sup> The corrupt and degenerate system of autocratic rule, the dead hand of bureaucracy, the all-pervasive whiff of religious mysticism and obscurantism roused all the living forces of society to revolt. “It is bitter,” wrote the poet Nekrasov, “the bread that has been made by slaves.” The revolt against slavery spurred the revolutionary student youth to search for a way out. Echoing Herzen, their watchword became: “*V Narod!*” (To the people!). To these courageous and dedicated youth, the words uttered by Herzen made an indelible impression: “Go to the people... That is our place... Demonstrate... that from among you will emerge not new bureaucrats, but soldiers of the Russian people.”<sup>[5]</sup>

### **‘Going to the People’**

This movement of mainly upper-class youth was naive and confused, but also courageous and utterly selfless, and left behind a priceless heritage for the future. While criticising the utopian character of their programme, Lenin always paid warm tribute to the revolutionary valour of the early Narodniks. He understood that the Marxist movement in Russia was raised on the bones of these martyrs, who cheerfully gave up wealth and worldly comforts to face death, prison and exile for the sake of the fight for a better world. Theoretical confusion was only to be expected in a movement as yet in its infancy. The absence of a strong working class, the lack of any clear traditions or model from the past to light their path, the dark night of censorship which prevented them from having access to most of the writings of Marx, all this deprived the young Russian revolutionaries of the chance to understand the real nature of the processes at work in society.

To most of the youth, Marx was seen as “just an economist”, whereas Bakunin’s doctrine of “implacable destruction”, and his calls for direct action, seemed to be more in tune with the spirit of a generation tired of words and impatient for results. Pavel Axelrod, in his memoirs, recalls how the theories of Bakunin gripped the minds of the radicalised youth with its striking simplicity.<sup>[6]</sup> The “people”, according to Bakunin, were revolutionary and socialist by instinct—going right back to the Middle Ages—as shown by peasant revolts, the Pugachov uprising, and even brigands, who were held up as a

good example to follow! All that was required to ignite a universal revolt, he maintained, was for the students to go to the villages and raise the standard of revolution. Local uprisings would soon provoke a general conflagration, bringing the whole existing order crashing down.

In a striking passage, Trotsky graphically recaptures the spirit of these youthful pioneers: “Young men and women, most of them former students numbering about a thousand in all, carried socialist propaganda to all corners of the country, especially to the lower reaches of the Volga, where they sought the legacy of Pugachov and Razin.<sup>[B]</sup> This movement, remarkable in its scope and youthful idealism, the true cradle of the Russian revolution, was distinguished—as is proper to a cradle—by extreme naiveté. The propagandists had neither a guiding organisation nor a clear programme; they had no conspiratorial experience. And why should they have? These young people, having broken with their families and schools, without profession, personal ties, or obligations, and without fear either of earthly or heavenly powers, seemed to themselves the living crystallisation of a popular uprising. A constitution? Parliamentarianism? Political liberty? No, they would not be swerved from the path by these western decoys. What they wanted was a complete revolution, without abridgement or intermediate stages.”<sup>[7]</sup>

In the summer of 1874, hundreds of young people from upper or middle class backgrounds went out to the villages, burning with the idea of rousing the peasantry to revolution. Pavel Axelrod, one of the future founders of Russian Marxism, recalls the radical break which these young revolutionaries had made with their class: “Whoever wished to work for the people had to give up university, renounce his privileged condition, and his family, turn his back even upon science and art. They had to cut all the bonds which linked them to the highest social classes, burn their bridges behind them. In one word, they had to voluntarily forget about any possible road of retreat. The propagandist, so to speak, had to effect a complete transformation of his inner essence, so that he would feel at one with the lower strata of the people, not only ideologically, but also in his habitual everyday behaviour.”<sup>[8]</sup>

These courageous young men and women had no definite programme, other than to find a road to “the people”. Dressed in old working clothes bought from second-hand stalls in markets, clutching false passports, they travelled to the villages hoping to learn a trade which would enable them to live and work undetected. The wearing of peasants’ clothes was not the theatrical gesture it might appear at first sight. Kropotkin points out that: “The gap between the peasant and the educated people is great in Russia, and contact between them is so rare that not only does the appearance in a village of a man who wears the town dress awaken general attention, but even in town, if one whose talk and dress reveals that he is not a worker is seen to go about with workers, the suspicion of the police is aroused at once.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Unfortunately, this admirable revolutionary spirit was founded upon theories which were fundamentally unsound. The mystical idea of a “special Russian road to socialism” which could somehow leap from feudal barbarism to a classless society, skipping the phase of capitalism, was the source of an endless series of errors and tragedies. A false theory

inevitably leads to a disaster in practice. The Narodniks were motivated by revolutionary voluntarism—the idea that the success of the revolution can be guaranteed by the iron will and determination of a small group of dedicated men and women. The subjective factor, [C] of course, is decisive in human history. Karl Marx explained that men and women make their own history, but added that they do not make it outside of the context of social and economic relationships established independently of their will.

The attempts of the Narodnik theoreticians to establish a “special historical path” for Russia, differently from that of Western Europe inevitably led them down the road of philosophical idealism and a mystical view of the peasantry. The theoretical confusion of Bakunin—a reflection of the very underdeveloped and inchoate class relations in Russia—found a ready audience among the Narodniks, seeking an ideological justification for their vague revolutionary aspirations.

Standing reality on its head, Bakunin portrayed the *mir*—the basic unit of the tsarist regime in the village—as the enemy of the state. All that was necessary was for the revolutionaries to go to the village and rouse the “instinctively revolutionary” Russian peasants against the state and the problem would be solved, without recourse to “politics” or any particular form of party organisation. The task was not to fight for democratic demands (since democracy also represented a form of state and therefore another expression of tyranny) but to overthrow the state “in general” and replace it with a voluntary federation of local communities, based on the *mir*, purged of its reactionary features.

The contradictory elements of this theory rapidly became evident when the Narodnik youth attempted to put it into practice. The revolutionary exhortations of the students were met with sullen suspicion or outright hostility by the peasants, who frequently handed over the newcomers to the authorities.

Zhelyabov, one of the future leaders of the *Narodnaya Volya* party (People’s Will), graphically described the Narodnik youth’s desperate efforts to win over the peasants “like fish beating their heads against the ice”. [10] Despite the terrible conditions of oppression and exploitation, the Russian peasant, who believed that “the body belongs to the tsar, the soul to God and the back to the squire”, proved impervious to the revolutionary ideas of the Narodniks. The shock and disappointment of the intelligentsia is echoed in the words of a participant:

“We ourselves were too blindly assured of the imminence of the revolution to notice that the peasants had not nearly as much of the revolutionary spirit as we wanted them to have. But we did notice that they all wanted the land to be divided up among them. *They expected the Emperor would give an order and the land would be divided up ... most of them imagined he would have had it carried through long ago if he had not been prevented by the big landowners and the officials—the two arch-enemies of both the Emperor and the peasants.*”

The naive attempt to pass for peasants frequently had its tragi-comical side, as one of the participants, Debogori-Mokrievich, recalls: “The peasants did not want to let us stay the night in their cottages: quite obviously they did not like the look of our dirty, ragged clothing. This was the last thing we expected when we first dressed up as workmen.”[\[11\]](#)

Sleeping out in the open, hungry, cold and tired, their feet bleeding from long marches in cheap boots, the spirits of the Narodniks were dashed against the solid wall of peasant indifference. Gradually, inexorably, those who had not been arrested drifted back, disillusioned and exhausted, to the towns. The movement of “going to the people” was swiftly broken by a wave of arrests—more than 700 in 1874 alone. It was an expensive defeat. But the heroic and spirited speeches of defiance hurled from the dock by the arrested revolutionists served to kindle a new movement which began almost immediately.

The Narodniks swore by “the people” in every other sentence. Yet they remained completely isolated from the peasant masses they idolised. In reality, the entire movement was concentrated into the hands of the intelligentsia: “*The Populists’ worship of the peasant and his commune was but the mirror image,*” wrote Trotsky, “*of the grandiose pretensions of the ‘intellectual proletariat’ to the role of chief, if not indeed sole, instrument of progress.* The whole history of the Russian intelligentsia develops between these two poles of pride and self-abnegation—which are the short and long shadows of its social weakness.”[\[12\]](#)

But this social weakness of the intelligentsia merely reflected the underdeveloped state of class relations in Russian society. The rapid development of industry and the creation of a powerful urban working class which was to be brought about by a massive influx of foreign capital in the 1890s was still the music of an apparently remote future. Thrust back upon their own resources, the revolutionary intelligentsia sought salvation in the theory of a “special Russian road to socialism”, based upon the element of common ownership which existed in the *mir*.

The theories of guerrillaism and individual terrorism which have become fashionable among certain circles in recent times repeat in caricatured form the antiquated ideas of the Russian Narodniks and terrorists. Like the latter, they try to find a base in the peasantry of the Third World, in the lumpenproletariat, in fact, any class except the proletariat. Yet such ideas have nothing in common with Marxism. Marx and Engels explained that the only class capable of carrying through the socialist revolution and establishing a healthy workers’ state leading to a classless society was the working class. And this is no accident. Only the working class, *by virtue of its role in society and in production*, especially large scale industrial production, possesses an instinctive socialist class consciousness. Not accidentally, the classical methods of struggle of the proletariat are based upon *collective mass action*: strikes, demonstrations, picket lines, the general strike.

By contrast, the first principle of every other social class is the individualism of the property owner and exploiter of labour, both big and small. Leaving aside the

bourgeoisie, whose hostility to socialism is the first condition of its existence, we have the middle class, including the peasantry. The latter is the social class least able to acquire a socialist consciousness. In its upper reaches, the wealthy peasant, lawyer, doctor, parliamentarian, stand close to the bourgeoisie. However, even the poor landless peasant in Russia, although formally a rural proletariat, had a consciousness very far removed from his brothers in the cities. The one desire of the landless peasant was to possess land, i.e. to become transformed into a small proprietor. Individual terrorism and “guerrillism” in all its multiplicity of forms, are the methods of the petty bourgeoisie, particularly the peasantry, but also the students, intellectuals and lumpenproletariat. It is true that under certain conditions—particularly in the present epoch—the mass of the poor peasants can be won over to the idea of collective ownership, as we saw in Spain in 1936. But the prior condition for such a development is the revolutionary movement of the working class in the towns. In Russia, the working class came to power by mobilising the poor peasants, not on the basis of socialist slogans, but on the basis of “land to the tillers!” This fact, in itself, shows how far the mass of Russian peasants stood from a socialist consciousness even in 1917.

To the Narodniks, lacking in a sound theoretical basis, and setting out with a confused and amorphous concept of class relations (“the people”), the Marxist argument of the leading role of the proletariat sounded like so much hair-splitting. What did the working class have to do with it? Clearly Marx and Engels had not understood the special situation in Russia! The Narodniks, in as much as they considered the role of the workers in the towns, regarded them as an aberration—as “peasants in factories”, capable of playing only the role of auxiliaries to the peasantry in the revolution—precisely the opposite to the real relationship of revolutionary class forces, as subsequent events demonstrated.

As a crowning paradox, despite all the prejudice of the Narodnik theoreticians, almost the only area where the revolutionary appeals got an echo was among the despised “town peasants” as they called the factory workers. Like the modern guerrillas, the supporters of *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Freedom) adopted the policy of taking revolutionary workers out of the factories and sending them to the countryside. Plekhanov, before he became a Marxist, participated in this kind of activity and was able to see the consequences: “The factory worker who has worked in the city for several years,” he wrote, “feels ill at ease in the country and goes back to it reluctantly... Rural customs and institutions become unendurable for a person whose personality has begun evolving a little...

“These were experienced people, sincerely devoted to and profoundly imbued with Populist views. But their attempts to set themselves up in the countryside led to nothing. After roving about the villages with the intention of looking for a suitable place to settle down (at which some of them were taken to be foreigners), they shrugged their shoulders at the whole business and finished by returning to Saratov where they established contacts among the local workers. No matter how astounded we were by this alienation from the ‘people’ of its urban children, the fact was evident, and we had to abandon the idea of involving workers in a purely peasant business.”[\[13\]](#)

According to the Narodnik theory, the town worker was further away from socialism than the peasant. Thus, a Narodnik organiser in charge of work amongst the workers of Odessa complained that “the men in the workshops, spoilt by urban life and unable to recognise their links with the peasants, were less open to socialist propaganda”.<sup>[14]</sup> Nevertheless, the Narodniks did conduct work amongst the workers and obtained important results. The initiator of this pioneer work was Nikolai Vasilevich Chaikovsky. His group established propaganda circles in the workers’ districts of Petersburg, where Kropotkin was one of his propagandists. Reality forced sections of the Narodniks to come face to face for the first time with the “worker question” which, expelled by Bakuninist theories by the front door, persistently flew back through the window. Even at this very early period, the Russian working class, despite the extreme smallness of its numbers, was beginning to set its stamp upon the revolutionary movement.

The attitude of the workers to the “young gentlemen” was instructive. The Petersburg worker I.A. Bachkin recommended to his fellow workers: “You must take the books from the students, but when they begin to teach you nonsense, you must knock them down.” It was possibly Bachkin of whom Plekhanov was thinking when he passed the remark about the unwillingness of the workers to go to the villages to work. Bachkin was arrested in September 1874 and, upon his release in 1876, he told Plekhanov that he was “ready, as before, to work for revolutionary propaganda, but only among the workers... ‘I don’t want to go into the country on any account’ he argued. ‘The peasants are sheep, they will never understand revolution’.”<sup>[15]</sup>

While the Narodnik intelligentsia wrestled with the theoretical problems of the future revolution, the first stirrings of class consciousness were emerging in the urban centres. The emancipation of the serfs represented a collective act of violence against the peasantry in the interests of the development of capitalism in agriculture. The landlords were, in effect, “clearing the estates” for capitalism, as Lenin explained, accelerating the process of inner differentiation of the peasantry through the crystallisation of a class of rich peasants (*kulaks*) at the top and a mass of impoverished peasants at the bottom. In order to escape the grinding poverty of village life, the poor peasants migrated in massive numbers to the towns, in search of jobs. In the period 1865-90, the number of factory workers increased by 65 per cent, with those employed in mining increasing by 106 per cent. A.G. Rashin gives the figures of the number of workers in European Russia (in 1,000s) as follows:<sup>[16]</sup>

**Year**

**Factories and workshops**

## **Mining**

### **Total**

1865

509

165

674

1890

840

340

1,180

The development of industry experienced a particularly powerful impetus during the 1870s. The population of St Petersburg grew from 668,000 in 1869 to 928,000 in 1881. Torn from their peasant backgrounds and hurled into the seething cauldron of factory life, the workers' consciousness underwent a rapid transformation. Police reports chartered the growing discontent and audacity of the workforce: "The crude, vulgar methods employed by factory employers are becoming intolerable to the workers," complains one such report. "They have obviously realised that a factory is not conceivable without their labour." Tsar Alexander read the reports and pencilled in the margin: "Very bad."

The growth of this labour unrest permitted the establishment of the first organised workers' groups. The Southern Workers' Union was set up by E. Zaslavsky (1844-78). Son of a noble but impecunious family, he went "to the people" in 1872-73, became convinced of the uselessness of this tactic and began propaganda work amongst the workers of Odessa. Out of these worker-circles, with weekly meetings and a small subscription, the Union was born. Its programme started from the premise that "the workers can get their rights recognised only by means of a violent revolution capable of destroying all privileges and inequality by making work the foundation of private and public welfare".<sup>[17]</sup> The Union's influence grew rapidly until it was smashed by arrests in December 1875. The leaders were sentenced to hard labour. Zaslavsky himself got ten years. His health undermined by the harsh conditions of imprisonment, he became deranged and died of tuberculosis in prison.

A more substantial development was the Northern Union of Russian Workers, set up illegally in the autumn of 1877 under the leadership of Khalturin and Obnorsky. Victor Obnorsky, son of a retired NCO, was a blacksmith, then a mechanic. While working at different factories in St Petersburg, he became involved in workers' study circles, and had to flee to avoid arrest to Odessa, where he came into contact with Zaslavsky's Union. He travelled abroad as a sailor, where he was influenced by the ideas of the German Social Democracy. Returning to St Petersburg, he met P.L. Lavrov and P. Axelrod, the leading lights in the Narodnik movement. Stepan Khalturin was an important figure in the revolutionary movement of the late seventies. Like Obnorsky, a blacksmith and a mechanic by trade, he began his activity in the Chaikovsky group, where he worked as a propagandist. In his series of pen portraits of Russian worker militants, Plekhanov has left an enduring picture of this working-class revolutionary:

"When his [Khalturin's] activities were still on the right side of the law, he willingly met students and tried to make their acquaintance, getting every kind of information from them and borrowing books. He often stayed with them until midnight, but he very rarely gave his own opinions. His host would grow excited, delighted at the chance to enlighten an ignorant workman, and would speak at great length, theorising in the most 'popular' way possible. Stepan would gaze carefully, looking up at the speaker. Every now and then his intelligent eyes would reflect an amiable irony. There was always an element of irony in his relations with the students... with the workers, he behaved in a very different way... he looked upon them as more solid and, so to speak, more natural revolutionaries and he looked after them like a loving nurse. He taught them, he sought books and work for them, he made peace with them when they quarrelled and he scolded the guilty. His comrades loved him dearly: he knew this, and in return gave them even greater love. But I do not believe that even in his relations with them, Khalturin ever gave up his customary restraint... In the groups he spoke only rarely and unwillingly. Among the workers of Petersburg, there were people just as educated and competent as he was: there were men who had seen another world, who had lived abroad. The secret of the enormous influence of what can be called Stepan's dictatorship lay in the tireless attention which he devoted to every single thing. Even before the meeting began, he spoke with everyone to find out the general state of mind, he considered all sides of a question, and so naturally he was the most prepared of all. He expressed the general state of mind."<sup>[18]</sup> Khalturin

was an outstanding representative of a type: the worker-propagandist active in the circles in the first period of the Russian labour movement. Yet even he was drawn into terrorist activities in the subsequent period, organising a spectacular attempt on the tsar's life.

### **'Land and Freedom'**

In the meantime, the remnants of the Narodnik movement were attempting to regroup their forces in the towns under a new banner. In 1876, Zemlya i Volya was set up by the Natansons, Alexander Mikhailov and George Plekhanov. The new underground organisation was headed by a General Council with a smaller elected Executive Committee (or Administrative Centre). Subordinate to these bodies were a Peasants' Section, a Workers' Section, a Youth (Students') Section and, a new development, a "Disorganisation Section", an armed wing for "protection against the arbitrary conduct of officials". The programme of Zemlya i Volya was based on a confused idea of "peasant socialism"—all land was to be transferred to the peasants and self-determination was to be granted to all parts of the Russian empire. Russia was to be run on the basis of self-governing peasant communes. However, all this was subordinate to the central objective of the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracy, which was to be carried out "as speedily as possible"—the extreme haste being due to the idea of preventing the undermining of the peasant commune (the *mir*) by capitalist development! Thus, the real originators of "socialism in one country" were the Narodniks, who sought to deliver society from the horrors of capitalism by espousing the idea of a "special path of historical development" for Russia, based on the supposed uniqueness of the Russian peasantry and its social institutions.

On 6 December 1876, an illegal demonstration of anything up to 500—mainly students—assembled on the steps of Kazan Cathedral, with cries of "land and freedom" and "long live the socialist revolution!" The demonstration was addressed by a 21-year old student called George Plekhanov, whose revolutionary appeal led to the beginning of years of exile and underground life. Born in 1855, the son of an aristocratic family from Tambov, Plekhanov, like many of his generation, cut his teeth on the writings of the great school of Russian democratic authors—Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, and, above all, Chernyshevsky. While still an adolescent, he joined the Narodnik movement, participating in dangerous missions, including the release of arrested comrades and even the liquidation of an agent provocateur. Arrested several times, he always succeeded in escaping from his tsarist captors.

Following his daring speech, Plekhanov was forced to flee abroad, but his prestige was such that he was elected, in his absence, as a member of the "basic circle" of Zemlya i Volya. Returning to Russia in 1877, the future founder of Russian Marxism led a precarious underground existence. Armed with a knuckleduster and a pistol which he kept under his pillow at night, he went first to Saratov, on the lower Volga, where he was subsequently put in charge of the "worker section" of Zemlya i Volya. The young man's first-hand experience of work with factory workers had a profound effect on his thinking, which undoubtedly helped him to break with Narodnik prejudices and find a road to Marxism.

In December 1877, an explosion in the gunpowder store at an arms factory on Vasilevsky Island killed six workers and injured many more. The workers' funeral turned into a demonstration. Plekhanov wrote a manifesto which ended with the words: "Workers! Now is the time to understand reason. You must not expect help from anyone. And do not expect it from the gentry! The peasants have long been expecting help from the gentry, and all they have got is worse land and heavier taxes, even greater than before... Will you too, the workers in towns, put up with this for ever?"[\[19\]](#)

The author got his reply far sooner than he, or anyone else, expected. The economic boom which arose from the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78) created the conditions for an unprecedented explosion of strikes, spearheaded by the most downtrodden and exploited section of the class, the textile workers. Not for the last time, the more oppressed and volatile textile workers moved into action far more quickly than the big battalions in the metal industries. The workers went to ask for help from "the students", through the agency of a number of individual worker-revolutionaries.

Plekhanov, as head of the worker section of *Zemlya i Volya*, found himself virtually in control of the movement. Unfortunately, the Narodniks had no idea what to do with a workers' movement which did not really enter into their scheme of the universe. In the space of two years, St Petersburg saw 26 strikes. Not until the massive strike wave of the 1890s was this to be equalled. The members of the Northern Union played a prominent part in these strikes, and, by the first months of 1879, it reached its high-water mark, with 200 organised workers and another 200 in reserve, carefully distributed in different factories. They were all linked to a central body. The workers' circles even had a library, also carefully split up between different underground groups and widely used even by workers outside the Union. The resourceful Khalturin set up an underground print-shop. Obnorsky entered into agreements with a workers' group in Warsaw, "the first example of friendly relations between Russian and Polish workers", as Plekhanov observed with satisfaction.[\[20\]](#)

But within months of the appearance of the first issue of its illegal journal, *Rabochaya Zarya* (Workers' Dawn), the police smashed the Union's print-shop and the bulk of its membership was swept away by a wave of arrests into hard labour, imprisonment and exile. The result of the break up of this first solid organisation of the working class was catastrophic. Khalturin and others drew pessimistic conclusions and went over to terrorism. It took ten years and countless unnecessary sacrifices for the movement to get the terrorist bug out of its system.

From its very outset, the revolutionary movement in Russia was divided by the polemics between "educators" and "insurrectionists", the two lines being broadly identified with the respective positions of Lavrov and Bakunin. The failure of the movement "to the people" brought this disagreement to the point of an open split. In the period 1874-75, there were thousands of political prisoners in Russia, youngsters who had paid the price of their defiance with the loss of their freedom. Some were later released on bail and kept under surveillance. Others were exiled to Siberia by administrative order. The rest merely rotted in gaol awaiting trial. Of those who remained active and at liberty, some decided to

return to the villages, but this time as school teachers or doctors, devoting their time and energies to humble educational work and waiting for better days. But for others, the realisation that Bakunin's theory of an "instinctively revolutionary peasantry" was false meant that an entirely different road had to be found.

Zemlya i Volya was never a mass organisation. A few dozen, mainly students and intellectuals in their 20s and 30s, made up its active membership. But the seeds of dissolution were present from the outset. Lavrov's supporters looked to "open the people's eyes" by peaceful propaganda. "We must not arouse emotion in the people, but self-awareness,"<sup>[21]</sup> he argued. The frustrated attempts to provoke a mass movement of the peasantry by means of propaganda gave rise to a new theory whereby Bakuninism was stood upon its head. From "denying politics" and especially political organisation, a section of the Narodniks effected a 180° turn and set up a secret, highly centralised terrorist organisation—the Narodnaya Volya—designed to provoke a revolutionary movement of the masses by means of the "propaganda of the deed".

The latest military humiliation of tsarist Russia in the Russo-Turkish War revealed anew the bankruptcy of the regime and gave fresh heart to the opposition. The leaders of Narodnaya Volya were determined to wage a war against the autocracy in a kind of terrorist single combat which would encourage "from above" the flame of revolt. A section of the youth was now burning with impatience. The words of Zhelyabov, future leader of Narodnaya Volya, sum the whole thing up: "History," said Zhelyabov, "moves too slowly. It needs a push. Otherwise the whole nation will be rotten and gone to seed before the liberals get anything done."

"What about a constitution?"

"All to the good".

"Well, what do you want—to work for a constitution or give history a push?"

"I'm not joking, just now we want to give history a push'."<sup>[22]</sup>

These four lines show up starkly the relation between terrorism and liberalism. The terrorists had no independent programme of their own. They borrowed their ideas from the liberals, who leaned upon them to give emphasis to their demands.

In the autumn of 1877, nearly 200 young men and women were brought to trial for the crime of "going to the people". They had already spent three years in gaol without trial and there were numerous cases of ill-treatment meted out to the prisoners by brutal warders and officials. For the revolutionaries the systematic ill-treatment, torture and humiliation suffered by the prisoners was the last straw. One particularly atrocious case caused widespread indignation in July 1877. When General Trepov the notorious Petersburg police chief had visited the Preliminary Detention Centre, a young "political" called Bogolyubov refused to stand up. He was sentenced to 100 lashes on Trepov's orders. A decisive turning point was passed in January 1878 when a young girl by the

name of Vera Zasulich fired a shot at Trepov. This action, which Zasulich had planned and executed all on her own, was intended as a reprisal for the ill-treatment of political prisoners. After the Zasulich affair, the swing towards the “propaganda of the deed” became irresistible, particularly since, against all expectations, the jury had found her not guilty.

Initially, the use of terror was conceived as a limited tactic for freeing imprisoned comrades, eliminating police spies, and for self-defence against the repressive actions of the authorities. But terrorism has a logic of its own. In a short space of time, the terrorist mania took possession of the organisation. From the outset, there were doubts about the “new tactics”. In the pages of the official party journal critical voices were raised: “We must remember,” says one article, “that the liberation of the labouring masses will not be achieved by this (terrorist) path. Terrorism has nothing in common with the struggle against the foundations of the social order. Only a class can resist against a class. Therefore, the main bulk of our forces must work among the people.”<sup>[23]</sup>

The adoption of the new tactics caused an open split in the movement, between the terrorists and the followers of Lavrov who argued in favour of a prolonged period of preparation and propaganda among the masses. In practice, the latter trend was moving away from revolutionism, advocating the politics of “small deeds” and a “little by little” gradualist approach. The right wing of Narodism was becoming indistinguishable from liberalism, while its more radical section prepared to stake everything on the force of the bullet and the “revolutionary chemistry” of nitro-glycerine.

In the recent period, attempts have been made by the modern terrorists to distinguish themselves from their Russian forebears. The Narodnik terrorists, it is asserted, believed in individual terrorism, substituting themselves for the movement of the masses, whereas modern proponents of “armed struggle” or “urban guerrillaism” see themselves only as an armed wing of the mass struggle, whose purpose is to detonate the masses into action. Yet the supporters of Narodnaya Volya never claimed to be acting as a self-sufficient movement. Their stated objective was to initiate a mass movement, based on the peasantry, which would overthrow the state and institute socialism. Their aim was also supposed to be the “detonation” of the mass movement by giving a courageous example.

However politics has a logic of its own. All the appeals of the Narodnaya Volya in the name of the masses, merely served as a smoke-screen to reveal a deep-seated distrust in the revolutionary capacity of those same masses. The arguments advanced more than a century ago in Russia to justify terrorism have a strikingly similar ring to the arguments of “urban guerrilla” groups in more recent times: “We are in favour of the mass movement, but the state is too strong,” and so on and so forth. Thus, the terrorist Morozov affirmed:

“Observing contemporary social life in Russia the conclusion is reached that, *because of the arbitrary conduct and violence of the government, no activity at all is possible on behalf of the people.* Neither freedom of expression, nor freedom of the press exists to work by means of persuasion. In consequence, for every vanguard activist it is necessary,

first and foremost, to put an end to the present system of government, *and to struggle against it there is no other means than to do it with arms in hand*. As a consequence, we will fight against it in the style of William Tell, until we reach the moment when we win free institutions under which it will be possible for us to discuss without obstacles in the press and in public meetings all the political and social questions, and decide upon them by means of the free representation of the people.”[24]

The Narodniks were courageous, but misguided, idealists who confined their targets to notorious torturers, police-chiefs guilty of repressive acts and the like. More often than not, they subsequently gave themselves up to the police in order to use their trials as a platform for the indictment of existing society. They did not plant bombs to slaughter women and children, or even to murder ordinary soldiers. On the rare occasions they killed individual policemen, it was to get hold of weapons. Yet, despite this, their methods were completely incorrect and counterproductive, and were roundly condemned by the Marxists.

The allegedly “modern” theories of urban guerrillaism only repeat in caricature form the old pre-Marxist ideas of the Russian terrorists. It is quite ironic that these people, who frequently lay claim to be “Marxist-Leninists”, have not the vaguest idea that *Russian Marxism was born out of an implacable struggle against individual terrorism*. The Russian Marxists scornfully described the terrorist as “a liberal with a bomb”. The liberal fathers spoke in the name of “the People”, but considered the latter too ignorant to be trusted with the responsible work of reforming society. Their role was to be reduced to passively casting a vote every few years and looking on while the liberals in Parliament got on with their business. The sons and daughters of the liberals had nothing but contempt for Parliament. They stood for the revolution, and, of course, “the People”. Except that the latter, in their ignorance, were unable to understand them. Therefore, they would resort to the “revolutionary chemistry” of the bomb and the revolver. But, just as before, the role of the masses was reduced to that of passive spectators. Marxism sees the revolutionary transformation of society as a conscious act carried out by the working class. That which is progressive is that which serves to raise the consciousness of the workers of their own strength. That which is reactionary is that which tends to lower the workers’ own opinion of their role. From this point of view, the role of individual terrorism is a wholly reactionary one. Thus, the policy of individual terrorism is most harmful to the cause of the masses precisely when it succeeds. The attempt to find short-cuts in politics frequently leads to disaster. What conclusions are the workers supposed to draw from a spectacularly successful act of individual terrorism? Only this: that it is possible to attain their ends without any necessity for the long and arduous preparatory work of organising trade unions, participating in strikes and other mass actions, agitation, propaganda and education. All that would be seen as an unnecessary diversion, when all that is needed is to get hold of a bomb and a gun, and the problem is solved.

The history of the 20th century provides some tragic lessons in what happens when revolutionaries try to substitute the heroic actions of an armed minority for the conscious movement of the working class. Most often—as with the Narodnaya Volya—the attempt to challenge the might of the state by such methods leads to a terrible defeat and the

strengthening of the very apparatus of repression that was meant to be overthrown. But even in those cases where, for example, a guerrilla war succeeds in overthrowing the old regime, it can never lead to the establishment of a healthy workers' state, let alone socialism. At best, it will lead to a deformed workers' state (a regime of proletarian Bonapartism) in which the workers are subjected to the rule of a bureaucratic elite. In fact, such an outcome is pre-determined by the militaristic structure of terrorist and guerrillaist organisations, their autocratic command structure, lack of internal democracy and, above all, the fact that they function outside the working class, and independently of it. A genuine revolutionary party does not set itself up as a group of self-appointed saviours of the masses, but strives to give an organised and conscious expression to the movement of the workers themselves. Only the conscious self-movement of the proletariat can lead to the socialist transformation of society.

A section of the old Zemlya i Volya movement attempted to resist the trend towards terrorism, but was swept aside. An attempt to reach a compromise at the Voronezh Congress of June 1879 failed to stop the split which finally took place in October of that year with a formal agreement of both sides to dissolve the organisation. The funds were divided and both sides agreed not to use the old name. The terrorist faction adopted the name of Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will), while the remnants of the old school "village" Narodniks took the name of the Cherny Peredel (Black Redistribution), echoing the old Narodnik idea of an agrarian revolution. It was from the latter organisation, led by Plekhanov, that the first forces of Russian Marxism were to emerge.

## NOTES

[A] This refers to the numerous peasant uprisings that took place in France during the late Middle Ages. They invariably had an extremely violent character.

[B] Emilian Pugachov, a Don Cossack, led a great uprising of the Cossacks and serfs against the gentry in 1773, in the reign of Catherine the Great. The rebellion initially met with success, with the mass seizure of land and the capture of a string of imperial fortresses. The rebels took Kazan and could have taken Moscow but, despite riots which broke out in a number of towns, the peasant rebellion proved incapable of linking up with the urban masses against the common enemy—the gentry and the autocracy. Although the rebels proclaimed the abolition of serfdom, they lacked a coherent political programme capable of creating a broad revolutionary movement of the masses. This fatal weakness, plus localist tendencies, lack of organisation and discipline, eventually undermined the revolt. The rebellion disintegrated and Pugachov was executed in Moscow in January 1775.

Stepan Razin, another Cossack rebel, sailed up the Volga at the head of a pirate fleet in 1670 calling on the peasants to rise. Betrayed by the Ataman of the Don Cossacks, Razin was captured and sent to Moscow where he was executed on 6 June 1671.

[C] By the "subjective factor" Marxists mean the conscious factor in history—the action of men and women to change their lives and destinies, as opposed to the objective conditions, established by social development, which provide the basis for such actions.

Most specifically, it refers to the role of the revolutionary party and leadership in the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.

[1] See Bernard Pares, *A History of Russia*, p. 404.

[2] Quoted in Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, p. 29.

[3] P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, vol. 1, p. 253.

[4] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 20 and 25.

[5] Quoted in S.H. Baron, *Plekhanov. The Father of Russian Marxism*, Spanish edition, p. 21.

[6] See P. Axelrod, *Perezhitoe i Peredumanno*, pp. 111-2.

[7] Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, p. 28.

[8] From Axelrod, *The Working Class and the Revolutionary Movement in Russia*, quoted in Baron, *Plekhanov*, p. 25.

[9] Kropotkin, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 119.

[10] D. Footman, *Red Prelude*, p. 86.

[11] Quoted in D. Footman, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 and 49 (my emphasis).

[12] Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, p. 25 (my emphasis).

[13] Quoted in Fyodr Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*, pp. 162-3.

[14] Quoted in F. Venturi, *The Roots of Revolution*, p. 511.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 800 in both quotes.

[16] A.G. Rashin, *Formirovaniye Rabochego Klassa Rossiy*, p. 12.

[17] Quoted in Venturi, *op. cit.*, pp. 515 and 516.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 543.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 548.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 556.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 556.

[22] Quoted in Footman, op. cit., p. 87.

[23] Quoted in J. Martov, *Obshchestvennoe i Umstvennoe Techeniye v Rossii 1870-1905 gg*, p. 44.

[24] Quoted in Baron, op. cit., p. 56 (my emphasis).

## Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 2 of 7]

### The Birth of Russian Marxism

The prospects for Plekhanov's tendency could hardly have been more bleak. The old tactic of "going to the people" was played out. The peasants were no more receptive to the blandishments of the Narodniks than before. Many old Narodniks finally gave up hope and voted with their feet, returning to a more convivial existence in the towns. Probably influenced by his earlier experience as head of the "workers' section", Plekhanov proposed to the members of the Cherny Peredel that they should conduct agitation among the factory workers. Plekhanov sought links with his former worker contacts, among them Stepan Khalturin of the Northern Union of Russian Workers. But the tide was running strongly in favour of terrorism even among the advanced workers. Khalturin himself participated, in February 1880, in an attempt against the life of the tsar. The supporters of Cherny Peredel were utterly isolated. The final blow came in January 1880 when, shortly after the appearance of the first issue of the group's journal, the police descended on the underground print-shop and mopped up practically the whole organisation in Russia. The future of the non-terrorist trend in Narodnism, as Trotsky later observed, could not be an independent phenomenon, but only a brief and shadowy transition towards Marxism.

On the other side of the divide, the supporters of Narodnaya Volya appeared to be making spectacular gains. Incredibly, a tiny organisation of no more than a few hundred men and women turned the tsar into a virtual prisoner in his own palace. For a time, the tide flowed irresistibly in the direction of Narodnaya Volya, which represented the most determined and revolutionary elements of the youth. The new organisation, highly centralised and operating in the strictest secrecy, was headed by an Executive Committee, consisting of A.I. Zhelyabov, A.D. Mikhailov, M.F. Frolenko, N.A. Mozorov, Vera Figner, Sophia Perovskaya, and others. In comparison with the old Narodnik movement, the programme of Narodnaya Volya represented an advance, inasmuch as it stood for a clearly *political* struggle against the autocracy. Lenin, who always paid tribute to the selfless heroism of the *Narodnovoltsy*, while implacably criticising the tactic of individual terrorism, wrote later: "The Narodnaya Volya members made a step forward when they took up the political struggle, but they failed to connect it with socialism."[\[25\]](#)

The programme of Narodnaya Volya envisaged a “permanent popular representative body” elected by universal suffrage, the proclamation of democratic liberties, the transfer of land to the people, and measures to place the factories in the hands of the workers. The movement attracted many of the most courageous and self-sacrificing elements, including Khalturin of the Northern Workers’ Union. He showed great daring and initiative in obtaining a job as a carpenter on the imperial yacht. Having gained official confidence as a model workman, managed in February 1880 to plant a powerful bomb inside the Winter Palace, where he was engaged on repairs, blowing up the tsar’s palace in the middle of his capital! However, the response of the state was to step up repression, creating a virtual dictatorship under General Melikov. The case of Khalturin is particularly tragic. Early on, he sensed the contradiction between the need to build the labour movement and terrorism, as Venturi explains: “Khalturin was constantly divided between the zeal for coercion and his duties as a workers’ organiser. He gave vent to his feelings by saying that the intellectuals had compelled him to start from scratch after every act of terrorism and its inevitable losses. ‘If only they gave us a bit of time to reinforce ourselves,’ he said on each occasion. But then he too was seized by that thirst for immediate action which led him to the scaffold with them.”[\[26\]](#)

The very successes of the terrorists, contained the seeds of their own disintegration. The assassination of the tsar in 1881 unleashed a reign of repression in which the terror of the individual against ministers and policemen gave way to the terror of the entire state apparatus against the revolutionary movement in general. “Russia was divided into a number of districts,” Kropotkin recalled, “each of them under a governor general who received the order to hang offenders pitilessly. Kovalsky and his friends who, by the way, had killed nobody by their shots, were executed. Hanging became the order of the day. 23 persons perished in two years, including a boy of 19 who was caught posting a revolutionary proclamation at a railway station: this act was the only charge against him. He was a boy, but he died like a man.”[\[27\]](#)

A young girl of 14 was transported for life to Siberia for trying to rouse a crowd to free some prisoners on their way to the gallows. She drowned herself. Prisoners spent years in remand prisons—dens of typhoid fever—where 20 per cent died in a single year awaiting trial. Brutal treatment by warders was answered by hunger strikes, which were dealt with by forced feeding. Even those who were acquitted were still exiled to Siberia, where they slowly starved on the pitiful government allowance. All this fed the indignation of the youth who burned with the desire for vengeance. Victims of the White Terror were replaced with new recruits, who merely ended up as new victims in the infernal cycle of repression-terrorism-repression. A whole generation perished in this way, and at the end of the day, the state, which does not rest on individual generals and police-chiefs, emerged stronger than ever, despite the fact that Narodnaya Volya succeeded in assassinating a whole number of prominent tsarist officials.

The new Procurator General, the minister Pobedonostsev, promised a reign of “iron and blood” to wipe out the terrorists. A series of draconian laws gave the government sweeping new powers of arrest, censorship and deportation, which affected not only the revolutionaries, but even the most moderate liberal tendencies. National oppression was

stepped up, with the suppression of all publications in non-Russian languages. Laws were passed to strengthen the grip of the landlord on his peasants. A wave of reaction swept through the schools and universities, designed to crush all forms of independent thought and break the rebellious spirit of the youth. Contrary to the expectations of the terrorists, there was no mass uprising, no general movement of opposition. Very soon, all the hopes born of a generation of self-sacrificing heroism were reduced to ashes. The terrorist wing of Narodnism was swiftly decimated by a wave of arrests. By 1882, its centre liquidated and its leaders in gaol, the Narodnik movement broke up into a thousand fragments. Yet in the hour when the death-knell of the old Narodnism was sounding, a new movement was rapidly gaining ground in the rest of Europe, and a new class balance of forces was emerging in backward Russia itself.

For years, the ideas of Marx and Engels (albeit in an incomplete and vulgarised form) had been familiar to Russian revolutionaries. Marx, and especially Engels, had engaged in polemics with the theoreticians of Narodnism. But Marxism had never had a sizeable following in Russia. Its denial of individual terrorism, its rejection of a special “Russian road to Socialism” and of the alleged leading role of the peasantry in the revolution was too much for revolutionary youth to swallow. In comparison with Bakunin’s “propaganda of the deed”, the idea that Russia would have to pass through the painful school of capitalism seemed to smack of passivity and defeatism.

The old generation of Narodniks had a barely concealed disdain for theory. Insofar as they resorted to ideological argument, it was really as an afterthought, to justify the practical twists and turns of the movement. In turn they had put forward the idea of the central role of the peasantry, of Russia’s alleged “special historical mission”, Pan Slavism, and terrorism. Having broken their heads against a solid wall, the ideologists of Narodnism, instead of honestly admitting their mistakes and attempting to work out an alternative strategy and tactic, proceeded to reaffirm the old bankrupt ideas, and, in so doing, sank ever deeper into a morass of confusion.

The first act of the new trend represented by Plekhanov and a tiny handful of collaborators, was to build firm foundations for the future on the basis of correct ideas, theory, tactics and strategy. This was the great contribution of Plekhanov, without which the future development of Bolshevism would have been unthinkable. Though still, in his own words, “a Narodnik to the fingertips”, Plekhanov sought an answer to the problems posed by the crisis of Narodnik ideology in a serious study of the works of Marx and Engels. Forced to flee abroad in January 1880, he had met and discussed with French and German Marxists then engaged in a fierce ideological struggle with the anarchists. This encounter with the European labour movement was a decisive turning-point in Plekhanov’s development.

In the Russian underground, only a few works of Marx and Engels had been available, mainly on economic questions. Like others of his generation, Plekhanov was acquainted with the Marx of *Capital*, which the tsarist censors regarded as too difficult and abstract to be dangerous. It is doubtful whether the censors themselves could understand it, so how, they thought, could the workers make head or tail of it? Freed, for a time, from the

pressures of direct participation in the revolutionary struggle in Russia, Plekhanov and the others, had the enormous advantage of access to literature which was unobtainable there. It was a revelation to him.

Plekhanov's study of Marxist philosophy, the writings on the class struggle and the materialist conception of history cast a whole new light on the perspectives for the revolution in Russia. One by one, the old ideas of terrorism, anarchism and Narodism crumbled under the onslaught of Marxist criticism. He later summed up the experience: "Anyone who did not live through those times with us can hardly imagine the eagerness with which we threw ourselves into the study of Social Democratic literature, amidst which the works of the German theoreticians naturally occupied the first place. And the more closely we became acquainted with Social Democratic literature, the more we became aware of the weak points of our earlier views, the more we became convinced of the correctness of our own revolutionary development... The theories of Marx, like Ariadne's thread, led us forth from the labyrinth of contradictions with which our minds were stuffed, under the influence of Bakunin."[\[28\]](#)

However, the break with the past was not easy to accomplish. Deutsch and Zasulich in particular still had illusions in the terrorists. In fact, when the news reached the group of the assassination of the tsar, all of them, with the exception of Plekhanov, were in favour of going back to Narodnaya Volya. The experience had to be gone through. But in any event, Plekhanov understood that the cadres of the future Russian Marxist workers' party could not drop from the clouds. Narodnaya Volya represented the tradition of a whole generation of struggle against tsarism. Such a movement, steeped in the blood of countless revolutionary martyrs, could not be light-mindedly written off. Precisely because of its traditions, the Narodnik movement, even in the period of its degeneration, still attracted many of the young men and women, confusedly seeking a road to social revolution. Such a man was Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's brother, executed for his part in a plot against the life of Alexander III in 1887. Lenin himself had Narodnik sympathies and almost certainly began his political life as a Narodnaya Volya supporter. To save such people as this from futile terrorist gestures was the first duty of the Russian Marxists.

Despite the smallness of its forces, Plekhanov's group caused alarm in the leading Narodnik circles, which immediately tried to stifle the voice of Marxism by bureaucratic means. The group's attempts to find a road to the revolutionary youth in Russia soon came up against a stone wall of obstacles erected by the right wing Narodnik leaders who controlled the party press. The editors of *Vestnik Narodnoi Voli* (The Narodnaya Volya Herald) refused even to print Plekhanov's work *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, his pioneering work directed against anarchism. At first, Tikhomirov, the then leader of Narodnaya Volya, seemed inclined to accept the group's request to join the organisation as a tendency, but after the publication of *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, Tikhomirov quickly changed his mind and prohibited the admission of an organised group into Narodnaya Volya. First, they would have to dissolve, then each application for membership would be considered individually. The impossibility of a reconciliation was

now clear to everyone, and in September 1883 the Marxists formed the Group for the Emancipation of Russian Labour.

At the time of the split, the group contained no more than five members: Plekhanov, Axelrod and Vera Zasulich were all well-known figures in the Narodnik movement. Vera Zasulich enjoyed European fame as a result of the Trepov affair. Lev Deutsch (1855-1941), Zasulich's husband, had been an active Narodnik propagandist in South Russia at the end of the 1870s. The role of Vasily Nikolaevich Ignatov (1854-85) is less well known. He had been exiled to Central Russia for participating in student demonstrations. He put up a large amount of money which enabled the group to start its activity before he died, tragically young, of tuberculosis which effectively prevented him from playing much of an active part. Deutsch having been arrested in Germany in 1884, was sent to Russia to receive a long prison sentence, Ignatov's death effectively reduced the group to just three people.

Ahead of them lay many years of hard and lonely struggle in the shadow of tedious anonymity. It takes a peculiar kind of courage for a small minority to take a conscious decision to struggle against the stream, isolated from the masses, in harsh conditions of exile, with only the slenderest resources and against apparently overwhelming odds. Not for the last time, the forces of Russian Marxism were reduced to the role of "a voice crying in the wilderness". The only thing that sustained them was their confidence in the ideas, theory and perspectives. This, in spite of the fact that their ideas appeared to fly in the face of reality. The workers' movement in Russia was still in its early stages. True, there were the beginnings of a strike movement, but that fell quite outside the scope of the socialists. Such workers' groups that existed were still dominated by Narodnik ideas. The still feeble voice of the Emancipation of Labour Group was not heard in the factories. Even the students, still under the spell of anarchist and terrorist tendencies, proved difficult enough to reach.

In a letter to Axelrod written as late as March 1889, Plekhanov wrote: "Everyone (both 'liberals' and 'socialists') unanimously say that the young people will not even listen to those who speak out against terrorism. In view of this we will have to be careful."

As soon as it was formed, the Emancipation of Labour Group was faced with sharp attacks from all sides for its alleged "betrayal" of "revolutionary" Narodism. From exile, Tikhomirov wrote to his comrades in Russia warning them not to have anything to do with Plekhanov's group. The stream of slanders and misrepresentations had an effect. The old Bakuninist, Zhobovsky, commented sarcastically: "You people are not revolutionaries but students of sociology." The constant theme of these attacks was that the ideas of Marx could not be applied to Russia, and that Plekhanov's programme had been "scrupulously copied from the German".[\[29\]](#)

The 1880s saw the decisive victory of the ideas of Marxism in the European labour movement. In their isolation from the movement in Russia, the Emancipation of Labour Group members instinctively drew closer to the mighty parties of the Socialist International. Plekhanov and his comrades wrote for its press, and spoke at its

congresses—especially those of the German party, the party of Marx, Engels, Liebknecht and Bebel. They derived moral comfort from the solid achievements of European Social Democracy. The forces of Russian Marxism were small, but they formed a detachment of a mighty proletarian army, numbering millions in Germany, France, Belgium. Here was a living proof of the superiority of Marxism, not in the language of *Capital* but in the statistics of trade union memberships, party branches, votes and Parliamentary fractions.

Even the support of European Social Democracy was, however, less than wholehearted. For years its leaders had entertained friendly relations with Narodnik leaders like Lavrov. Privately, the Social Democratic leaders looked askance at what appeared to be no more than an eccentric sectarian splinter group. The sharpness of Plekhanov's polemics against internationally known figures of the Narodnik establishment caused consternation. "To tell the truth," wrote Plekhanov, "our struggle against the Bakuninists sometimes gave rise to fears even among the Western Social Democrats. They considered it inopportune. They were afraid that our propaganda, by causing a split in the revolutionary party, would weaken the energy of the struggle against the government."

Particularly painful must have been the reservations expressed by Engels in his correspondence with Vera Zasulich. Engels accepted the impossibility of building socialism in a backward country like Russia as the starting point of his analysis. Marx himself, in the preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, and other writings, did not rule out the possibility of building a classless society in Russia on the basis of the village community (the *mir*), but *linked it firmly to the perspective of the socialist revolution in the developed capitalist countries of Western Europe*. "If the Russian revolution," he wrote, "becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development."[\[30\]](#)

In his letter to Zasulich dated 23 April 1885, Engels expresses himself cautiously about Plekhanov's book *Our Differences*. On the one hand, old Engels conveyed his pride that "in the Russian youth there exists a party which accepts frankly and unambiguously the great historical and economic theories of Marx and which has broken decisively with all the anarchistic and frivolously slavophile traditions of its predecessors".[\[31\]](#)

Such was not the case with many of the leaders of the Socialist International who looked askance at the tiny handful of Russian Marxists.

Already based on powerful parties with mass support, in their hearts the Western labour leaders were sceptical about the possibilities for creating a revolutionary Marxist workers' party in Russia. Outwardly respectful of Plekhanov and his group, they privately scratched their heads in bewilderment. What was the point of all these endless disputes about obscure points of theory? Was it really necessary to split over such questions? Why couldn't these Russians get their act together?

Their sceptical attitude seemed to be justified by the smallness of the group and the slowness of its progress. By comparison, the Narodniks had a much bigger organisation,

more resources and infinitely greater influence inside and outside Russia. Yet the seemingly insignificant group of Plekhanov represented the embryo of a mighty mass revolutionary party—a party which, within the comparatively brief span of 34 years, was destined to lead the Russian workers and peasants to the conquest of power and the establishment of the first democratic workers’ state in history.

### **The Emancipation of Labour Group**

*“The revolutionary movement in Russia can triumph only as a revolutionary movement of the workers. For us there is no other way out, nor can there be.”* (Plekhanov—speech to the International Socialist Congress, Paris 1889.)

Hegel once remarked that “When we want to see an oak with all its vigour of trunk, its spreading branches, and mass of foliage, we are not satisfied to be shown an acorn instead.”<sup>[32]</sup> Yet within the embryo of a healthy plant or animal is contained all the genetic information necessary for its future development. It is no different with the development of a revolutionary tendency. The “genetic information” here is represented by theory, which contains within itself a rich store of generalisations based upon past experience. *Theory is primary: all subsequent development stems from this.* Despite the smallness of its size, the primitiveness of its organisation and rather amateur methods, the great contribution of the Emancipation of Labour Group was to lay down the theoretical roots of the movement. Of necessity, the initial work of the group was confined to winning the ones and twos, of educating and training cadres, of hammering home the fundamental principles of Marxism.

“With all our hearts,” wrote Plekhanov, “we seek to work for the creation of a literature which is accessible to the understanding of the whole peasant-worker *masses*; we, nevertheless are obliged *for the time being* to confine our popular literary efforts to the narrow circle of more or less ‘intellectual’ leaders of the working class.”<sup>[33]</sup> The writings of Plekhanov during this period served to lay the theoretical basis for the building of the party. Many of them remain classics to the present time, although they do not receive sufficient attention by students of Marxism. Not by chance, Lenin strongly recommended the re-publication of Plekhanov’s philosophical writings after the revolution, when the two men had long been political enemies. *Socialism and the Political Struggle, Our Differences*, and, above all, Plekhanov’s masterpiece, *On the Development of the Monist View of History* are masterly re-statements of the fundamental ideas of dialectical and historical materialism.

Plekhanov’s onslaught threw the Narodnik leaders into disarray. Unable to provide a coherent answer to the Marxist case, they resorted to bitter complaints and spiteful allegations about the new group. *Vestnik Narodnoi Voli* (no 2, 1884) alleged that “for them [the Marxists] the polemic with Narodnaya Volya is more topical than the struggle with the Russian government and with other exploiters of the Russian people”.<sup>[34]</sup>

How often have Marxists heard such allegations throughout our history! For the crime of insisting on theoretical clarity, for attempting to draw a clear line of demarcation between

itself and other political tendencies, Marxism is always accused of the sin of “sectarianism”, of being against “left unity” and so on and so forth. It is one of the great ironies of history that one of Plekhanov’s main Narodnik critics, Tikhomirov (“NV”), who accused the group of disrupting revolutionary unity and submissively accepting the yoke of capital, himself later went over to the camp of Monarchist reaction. Not for the first or last time, the advocator of unprincipled “unity” ended up by uniting with the enemies of the working class!

The work of penetrating the movement in Russia, however, proceeded with painful difficulty. The illegal transportation of literature posed enormous problems. Professional people and students, studying abroad, were enlisted to carry illegal literature when going back home on holiday. At various times, members of the group were sent into Russia to establish contacts. Such journeys were extremely hazardous and frequently ended in arrests. People from the interior who managed to establish direct contact with the Group were few and far between, and cherished like gold nuggets. In 1887-88, there was an attempt to set up a Union of Russian Social Democrats abroad, headed by the student Rafail Soloveichik who had left Russia in 1884. But he clashed with the Group, went back to Russia, was arrested in 1889 and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, during which he became mentally deranged and committed suicide. Another member of the same group, Grigor Gukovsky, a young student in Zurich, was arrested in Aachen and handed over to the tsarist government. Sentenced to prison, he also committed suicide. There were many such cases. The arm of the tsarist authorities was long. The Group constantly faced the danger of infiltration by police spies and provocateurs. One such spy was Christian Haupt, a worker who was engaged by the police to infiltrate the Russian Social Democratic organisations in exile. Unmasked by the German Social Democrats as a police spy, Haupt was expelled from Switzerland.

Worst of all was the sensation of complete political isolation, aggravated by the inevitable rows and squabbles of exile life. The émigré Narodniks, stung by Plekhanov’s criticism, gave vent to their hurt feelings by heated protests at being called “Bakuninists” and demands for public apologies. The overwhelming majority of the exiles were Narodniks, and implacably hostile to the new group which they regarded as traitors and splitters. Years later, Plekhanov’s wife recalled that “the Narodnaya Volya people and N.K. Mikhailovsky at that time controlled the hearts and minds of the Geneva émigrés and the Russian students”.[\[35\]](#)

“After the murder of Alexander II, a period of rigid hopelessness overcame the whole of Russia... The lead roofs [prisons] of Alexander III’s government contained the silence of the grave. Russian society fell into the grip of hopeless resignation, faced as it was by the end of all hopes for peaceful reform, and the apparent failure of all revolutionary movements. In such an atmosphere, there could only emerge metaphysical and mystical tendencies.”[\[36\]](#)

This is how Rosa Luxemburg recalled this bleak decade of reaction. The new tsar, Alexander III, was a giant of a man, strong enough to bend a horseshoe in his hand, but an intellectual pygmy. The real ruler of Russia was Pobedonostsev, the tsar’s former

tutor, Procurator of the Holy Synod, who believed that Western democracy was rotten, that only the Russian patriarchal system was sound, that the press must be silenced, that schools must be under Church control, and that the tsar's rule must be absolute. Village priests were expected to report any politically suspect parishioners to the police, and even their sermons were subject to censorship. All non-Orthodox and non-Christian religions were persecuted. Tolstoyans were regarded as particularly dangerous to Church and State. Tolstoy himself was excommunicated. All student protest was ruthlessly put down.

These were hard times. On all sides there was retreat, ideological backsliding and cowardly apostasy. The old Narodnik trend was in a complete impasse. Having burnt their fingers with terrorism, the "extreme revolutionaries" effected another 180° somersault and eventually ended up in the camp of the liberal philistines, preaching a cowardly policy of "small deeds" and harmless cultural-educational work. Commenting on the decay of Narodism, Martov wrote: "The fall of the revolutionary *People's Freedom* was at the same time the collapse of Populism as a whole. Broad circles of the democratic intelligentsia were profoundly demoralised and disappointed in 'politics' and their own heroic mission. A modest 'cultivation' in the service of the liberal segments of the possessing classes: this was the sign under which the part of the intelligentsia that had remained loyal to Populism entered the grey epoch of the 1880s."[\[37\]](#)

For the first ten years or so of its existence, the Emancipation of Labour Group was forced to fight a weary battle against the stream. In order to find a road to the young generation, Plekhanov was obliged to seek collaboration with all kinds of confused and semi-Narodnik elements. One such group published a small journal *Svobodnaya Rossiya* (Free Russia) which, in the leading article of its first issue, argued the impossibility of "organising the workers and peasants around revolutionary action" and argued against putting forward ideas which might frighten liberal sympathisers. Contact with Russia resembled a game of blind man's buff. The situation with the exiles could hardly have been worse. The frustrations of the Group are shown in the correspondence of Plekhanov with his closest collaborators. Even the literary activity of the Group was fraught with difficulties. The Emancipation of Labour Group lived in an atmosphere of continuous financial crisis. Being small in number, and with limited scope for raising cash, they usually depended on what are known in the American theatrical world as "angels", wealthy sympathisers prepared to finance their literary ventures. Sometimes, these people were not even socialists, such as Guryev who put up the cash for the "three-monthly" *Sotsial Demokrat*. In general, the publications of the group came out on a very irregular basis. At times, the task must have seemed well-nigh hopeless. In the summer of 1885, Plekhanov wrote to Axelrod in terms verging on desperation: "But really we are standing over an abyss of all sorts over debts, and don't know and cannot think what to catch hold of to stop ourselves falling in. Things are bad."[\[38\]](#)

Throughout the dark days of the 1880s, Plekhanov and his family lived in extreme poverty. At times he gave private lessons in Russian literature for a small salary, living in the cheapest "pension" owned by a butcher who fed him exclusively on soup and boiled meat! Bad food and living conditions undermined his health. For a while he was dangerously ill with pleurisy, the effect of which lasted the rest of his life. Working under

enormous difficulties, suffering remorseless pressure from all sides, the Emancipation of Labour Group was held together by faith in its ideas, but also by the colossal moral and political authority of Plekhanov. Within the Group, Plekhanov reigned supreme. Their very isolation made the members rally round in a closely knit circle, welded together by strong political and personal ties. Not for nothing did they later acquire the nickname of “The Family”. And Plekhanov was the indisputable head of the “household”—intellectually, he towered above the others, and yet there existed between them a strong sense of mutual dependence born of years of struggle and sacrifice in a common cause. In such circumstances it was hardly surprising that personal and political questions should become intermixed. Plekhanov was a tower of strength to the others, giving them moral support in times of doubt and personal crises.

The tragedy of people like Axelrod and Zasluch had a two-fold character. Under different historical conditions, these talented individuals could have played a far bigger role in the shaping of events. Long years of isolation in exile had a disastrous effect upon their psychological and intellectual development. Working under Plekhanov’s shadow, their evolution became stultified to the extent that, when conditions changed, they were unable to adapt and were lost to the revolution. Due to the conditions in which the Group was compelled to work for decades, traces of a narrow propaganda circle mentality would almost inevitably tend to creep in. Such factors did not have a fundamental significance in the early years, the long, slow period of theoretical preparation and tiny propaganda circles. Only at a later date, when the Russian Marxist movement was faced with the necessity of stepping over the limitation of the propaganda phase did the negative features of the Emancipation of Labour Group emerge.

For two decades, the membership of the Emancipation of Labour Group stayed virtually the same. Of its founders, V.N. Ignatov died too early to leave much of an imprint. Lev Deutsch was the heart and soul of the organisational side of the work, such as the arrangements for printing and distribution of literature. Pavel Axelrod was a talented propagandist who made a big impression on the young Lenin and Trotsky. His name was for a long time inseparable from that of Plekhanov. Vera Zasluch, a sincere, warm-hearted and impulsive person, suffered more than most from the trauma of exile. Ever impatient to close the gap between the Emancipation of Labour Group and the new generation of revolutionaries in Russia, she was forever taking up the cudgels on behalf of the youth, overcoming the resistance of Plekhanov and encouraging new initiatives—usually unsuccessful—with the youth groups in exile.

The patient work of the Marxists eventually bore fruit. The real reason for the whimpering of the Narodniks about “sectarianism” and “splitters” was the effect which the ideas of Marxism were having on their own followers. It is difficult to overestimate the impact which works like *Our Differences* (1885) had on the young revolutionaries inside Russia who were avidly looking for a way out of the impasse of Narodnism, which was now in a phase of self-evident decadence. The rightward shift of the Narodnik leaders reached its culminating point with the open renegacy of Tikhomirov—the target of many of Plekhanov’s polemics—who in 1888 published a pamphlet with the title *Why I Ceased to Be a Revolutionary*.

The collapse of the old revolutionary Narodism had a profound effect among the youth inside Russia, producing a polarisation between the pro-liberal reformist elements and the best elements of the youth, striving to find a road to revolution. Towards the end of 1887, S.N. Ginsburg, having recently returned from Russia, wrote in a worried tone to the Narodnik leader P.L. Lavrov: “*Our Political Differences and Socialism and the Political Struggle* have had their influence, and a strong one, which we must come to terms with... The importance of the individual, the importance of the intelligentsia in the revolution, are completely destroyed by them, and I have personally seen people who have been crushed by his theories. And the main thing is his tone, bold as if he was convinced of his rightness, his negation of all that has gone before, the reduction of all predecessors to a nil—all this is definitely having an influence.”<sup>[39]</sup> Ginsburg’s letter shows how, unbeknown to the exiled Marxists, new groupings were crystallising in the interior, discussing the failures of the past, drawing up a balance sheet and seeking a new way. Here the ideas of Plekhanov fell upon fertile ground. By the 1890s, the Group began to enjoy an enormous authority in the eyes of the increasing numbers of Marxist youth, and the name of Plekhanov was known in every underground propaganda circle and every police station in Russia.

## NOTES

[25] Lenin, *Collected Works, Working Class and Bourgeois Democracy*, vol. 8, p. 72; henceforth referred to as LCW.

[26] Venturi, *op. cit.*, p. 706.

[27] Kropotkin, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 238.

[28] Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[29] Quoted in Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 166 in both quotes.

[30] Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 100-1.

[31] Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 364.

[32] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 75.

[33] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 132 (my emphasis).

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[35] *Perepiska GV Plekhanova i PB Aksel’roda*, p. 87.

[36] J.P. Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg*, vol. 1, p. 44.

[37] Quoted in F. Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[38] *Perepiska GV Plekhanova i PB Aksel'roda*, pp. 66 and 21.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

## Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 3 of 7]

### Combined and Uneven Development

By the end of the 1860s, there were only 1,600 kilometres of railway lines in the whole country. In the following two decades this figure had increased 15 times. In the ten years between 1892 and 1901, no fewer than 26,000 kilometres of railway lines were built. Alongside the traditional industrial centres of Moscow and St Petersburg, new ones sprang up in areas such as the Baltic, Baku and Donbass. Between 1893 and 1900, the production of oil experienced a two-fold increase and that of coal went up three times. True, the development of industry did not have the organic character of the rise of capitalism in Britain, described by Marx in *Capital*. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 provided the material premise for the development of capitalism. But the Russian bourgeoisie came on to the stage of history too late to take advantage of the opportunity. The puny and underdeveloped forces of Russian capitalism could not compete with the powerful developed bourgeoisie of Western Europe and America. In common with the ex-colonial countries today, Russian industry was heavily dependent upon foreign capital which exercised a crushing domination over the economy, principally through its control of the banking and financial system:

“The confluence of industry with bank capital,” wrote Trotsky, “was also accomplished in Russia with a completeness you might not find in any other country. But the subjection of the industries to the banks meant, for the same reasons, their subjection to the Western European money market. Heavy industry (metal, coal, oil) was almost wholly under the control of foreign finance capital, which had created for itself an auxiliary and intermediate system of banks in Russia. Light industry was following the same road. Foreigners owned in general about 40 per cent of all the stock capital of Russia, but in the leading branches of industry that percentage was still higher. We can say without exaggeration that the controlling shares of stock in the Russian banks, plants and factories were to be found abroad, the amount held in England, France and Belgium being almost double that in Germany.”[\[40\]](#)

The penetration of Russian society by foreign capital gave a sharp impetus to economic development, shaking the giant out of 2,000 years of barbarism and into the modern era. But precisely this gave rise to an explosive social situation. Large numbers of peasants were torn from the changeless routine of village life and thrust into the inferno of large-scale capitalist industry.

The Marxist theory of combined and uneven development found its most perfect expression in the extremely complex social relations in Russia at the turn of the century. Side by side with feudal, semi-feudal and even pre-feudal modes of existence there sprang up the most modern factories, built with French and British capital on the latest models. This is precisely the phenomenon we now see in the whole of the so-called Third World, and was most strikingly revealed by the development of South-East Asia in the first half of the 1990s. This provides a most remarkable parallel with the development of Russia exactly a hundred years earlier. And it is entirely possible that the political outcome could be similar. The development of industry in such a context acts as a spur to revolution. Russia shows just how quickly that can occur. Out of the stormy development of Russian capitalism in the 'eighties and 'nineties came the equally stormy awakening of the proletariat. The wave of strikes in the 1890s was the preparatory school for the revolution of 1905.

In just 33 years—from 1865 to 1898—the number of factories employing over 100 workers doubled—from 706,000 to 1,432,000. By 1914, more than half of all industrial workers were actually employed in plants with over 500 hands, and nearly one quarter in plants with over 1,000 hands—a far higher proportion than in any other country. Already in the 1890s, seven big factories in the Ukraine employed two-thirds of all the metal workers in Russia, while Baku had almost all the oil workers. Indeed, until 1900, Russia was the largest oil producer in the world.[\[41\]](#)

Nevertheless, despite the tempestuous upsurge of industry, the general picture of Russian society remained one of extreme backwardness. The mass of the population still lived in the villages, where the rapid development of class differentiation was given a powerful impulse by the crisis in European agriculture in the 1880s and early 1890s. The falling price of grain ruined whole layers of the peasantry, the appalling nature of whose existence is starkly portrayed in Chekhov's short stories, *In the Ravine* and *Muzhiks*. The rural semi-proletarian, deprived of land, hawking his labour around the villages, became a common sight. On the other end of the social spectrum the new class of emerging rural capitalists, the *kulaks*, growing rich at the expense of the village poor, could afford to buy land from the old landowners—a situation reflected with great wit and insight in Chekhov's famous play *The Cherry Orchard*.

In spite of all the attempts of the tsarist regime to shore it up, the old village community, the *mir*, which according to the Narodnik theoreticians was to provide the basis for peasant socialism, was rapidly breaking up along class lines. Those unable to find work in the village swarmed into the towns, providing an immense pool of cheap labour for the newly established capitalist enterprises. The rapid growth of industry produced a growing class polarisation within the peasantry, with the crystallisation of a class of rich peasants or *kulaks* and a mass of landless rural poor who increasingly drifted to the towns in search of work. The fierce arguments between the Marxists and Narodniks about the inevitability or otherwise of the development of capitalism in Russia were being conclusively settled by life itself. Lenin's earliest works, such as *New Economic Developments in Peasant Life*, *On the so-called Market Question* and *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* were written to settle accounts with the Narodniks. But unlike the

earlier writings of Plekhanov, these works are based on the irrefutable language of facts, figures and arguments.

The development of capitalism in Russia also meant the development of the proletariat which soon served notice on the whole of society of its intention to place itself in the front rank of the struggle for change. The highly concentrated character of Russian industry rapidly created industrial armies of workers, organised and disciplined, and placed at the strategic points of society and the economy. The graph of the strike movement clearly indicates the rising confidence and class consciousness of the Russian working class in this period.

**1880-84**

**1885-89**

**1890-94**

Number of strikes

101

221

181

Number of workers involved

99,000

223,000

170,000

(Source: *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 96)

Starting in the spring of 1880, industry was hit by a crisis which lasted several years. This was a period of mass unemployment, in which the employers ruthlessly pushed down the already miserable wages of the workers. In addition to all the other problems, the workers were continually oppressed with all kinds of petty restrictions and arbitrary rules designed to keep them in subservience. Chief among these was the custom of imposing fines for a whole series of real or imagined offences against the employers. The indignation and accumulated discontent of the workers finally exploded in a wave of labour agitation in 1885-86 in Moscow, Vladimir and Yaroslavl, which culminated in the strike at the Nikolskoye Mill owned by T.S. Morozov.

The 11,000 workers at the Morozov works had their wages cut no fewer than five times in two years. At the same time, swingeing fines were imposed for singing, talking loudly, walking past the manager's office with a cap on, and so on. These fines frequently amounted to a quarter of a worker's wage, and sometimes one-half. On the 7 December 1885, all the pent-up rage and frustration at the years of petty vexations, theft and arbitrariness burst forth with elemental force. The leader of the strike, Pyotr Anisimovich Moiseyenko (1852-1923) was an experienced revolutionary, an ex-member of Khalturin's Northern Union, who had served a term in Siberian exile. A remarkable man, one of those natural leaders of the working class, Moiseyenko later wrote: "I first learned to understand, then to act."

The enraged workers vented their anger by smashing up the factory food-store, where the truck system compelled them to buy food at inflated prices, and the home of the hated foreman Shorin. Alarmed by the violence of the outbreak, the governor of Vladimir province drafted in troops and Cossacks. The workers presented the governor with their demands, but were met with repression. Six hundred workers were arrested. Troops surrounded the factory and the workers were forced back to work at the point of a bayonet. Nevertheless, such was the mood of the workforce that the factory was not fully operational until one month later.

The Morozov strike ended in a defeat. Yet the effect it had on the minds of workers all over Russia prepared the way for the mass strikes of the coming decade. In the trial of the strikers held in Vladimir in May 1886, Moiseyenko and the other defendants put up a spirited defence which turned into such a devastating indictment of factory conditions that the charges were quashed and the workers' case upheld. The verdict of the Morozov trial sent a shock-wave throughout Russian society. Thoroughly alarmed, the reactionary

paper *Moskovskiy Vedmosti* protested: “But it is dangerous to joke with the masses of the people. What must the workers think, following the not-guilty verdict of the Vladimir court? The news of this decision spread like lightning through the whole of this manufacturing area. Our correspondent, who left Vladimir immediately after the announcement of the verdict, heard of it at all the stations...”[\[42\]](#)

The Morozov strike showed the enormous potential power of the proletariat. The lesson was not lost on the tsarist regime, which, for all its support for the factory-owners, decided that it would have to make concessions to the workers. This it did on 3 June 1886 when the Law on Fines was passed, limiting the amount which could be imposed and stipulating that the proceeds should not be appropriated by the employers, but be deposited in a special benefit fund for the workers. As always, reform is a by-product of the workers’ revolutionary struggle to change society. Like the “Ten hour bill” legislation passed in Britain in the last century, the Law on Fines was an attempt to pacify the workers and prevent them from moving in a revolutionary direction, while simultaneously trying to lean on the workers to curb the demands of the bourgeois liberals. Such “benevolent” legislation did not prevent the savage repression of strikes and the wholesale arrest and deportation of workers’ leaders in the coming period. Nor did the new law have the desired effect of dampening down the strike movement. The Morozov strike inspired the workers with fresh courage, while the concessions granted by the all-powerful autocracy showed what could be gained by boldly fighting for their interests. In 1887, the total number of strikes exceeded those of the two previous years put together. Two years later, police chief Plehve was forced to report to Alexander III that in turn 1889 was “richer than 1887 and 1888 in disorders called forth by factory conditions”.[\[43\]](#)

The elemental upsurge of the strike movement indicated the increasing awareness of the workers of themselves as a class and a force within society. The more advanced strata, represented by people like Moiseyenko, were groping for ideas which could shed light upon their condition and show the way forward. This movement had a two-fold significance. On the one hand, these spontaneous outbreaks, frequently accompanied by acts of Luddism[\[A\]](#) which bore witness to its as yet unorganised and semi-conscious nature, announced to the world the emergence of the Russian working class on the stage of history. On the other hand, it furnished irrefutable proof of the correctness of the theoretical arguments of Plekhanov and the Emancipation of Labour Group. In the white-heat of the class struggle, the basis was now laid for the coming together of the still numerically weak forces of Marxism and the powerful, but as yet incoherent forces of the Russian proletariat.

From the Marxist point of view, the importance of a strike goes far beyond the fight for immediate demands over hours, wages and conditions. The real significance of strikes, even when lost, is that the workers *learn*. In the course of a strike the mass of workers, their wives and families, inevitably become aware of their role as a class. They cease to think and act like slaves, and begin to raise themselves up to the stature of real human beings with a mind and will of their own. Through their experience of life and of struggle—particularly of great events—the masses begin to transform themselves.

Beginning with the most active and conscious layer, the workers become profoundly discontented with their lot, and keenly feel their own limitations. Defeats, still more than victories, force upon the worker-activist the burning need for a clear understanding of the workings of society, of the mysteries of economics and politics.

The growth of capitalist industry itself produces a mighty army of the proletariat. But even the best army will be defeated if it lacks generals, majors and captains well schooled in the business of war. The stormy strike battles of the 1880s proclaimed to the world that the heavy battalions of the Russian proletariat were ready and willing to fight. But they also revealed the weakness of the movement, its spontaneous, unorganised and unconscious nature, its lack of direction and leadership. The army was there. What was necessary was to prepare the future general staff. This conclusion now dawned irresistibly on the consciousness of the best workers. And with the serious and single-minded approach which characterises worker-activists the world over, they settled down to learn.

### **The Period of Small Circles**

The fierce ideological battles of the previous decade had not been fought in vain. An increasing number of young people in Russia now looked towards Marxism as a means of changing society. For these young men and women, the watchwords were no longer “Go to the people”, but “Go to the workers”! Under the prevailing conditions, the work had to be conducted on strict underground lines. The usual method of the underground propaganda circle was to set up a kind of school in the factory districts where, under the guise of adult education classes, they would expound the basic ideas of socialism to small groups of workers. This is a period of many names—mostly strange and unfamiliar to the modern reader. The small groups which sprang up in one town after another must have appeared to the tsarist authorities as the result of some virulent and inexplicable virus.

Despite all their efforts, the Narodniks were completely incapable of linking up with “the people”, nor could they ever hope to do so, on the basis of false theories, programme and methods. Yet this seemingly intractable problem was now solved with complete ease by the Marxists. A solid bridgehead was rapidly constructed to link the latter with the workers. In all the major centres of industry, study circles, educational classes and “Sunday schools” sprang up, providing the seed-bed for a whole new generation of working class revolutionary Marxists, the backbone of the future party of October. Thus began the so-called period of propaganda or *kruzhovshchina* (based on the Russian word for study circle). Here after an exhausting day’s work under appalling conditions, many a horny-handed factory worker, fighting off mental and physical fatigue, spent long hours wrestling with the difficult chapters of Marx’s *Capital*—that same book which the tsarist censor considered too dry and abstruse to represent a danger. So great was the workers’ desire to learn that many a volume of *Capital* was torn apart in order to distribute it, chapter by chapter, among the largest possible number of people.

Through the pages of the police archives, the faces and numbers of arrested revolutionaries passed with monotonous regularity—just so many bacilli isolated and

removed for the health of the body politic. Most of these men and women have long passed into obscurity. And yet upon the bones and nerves of these heroes and martyrs, the Russian workers' movement was constructed. Perhaps the most vivid account of how these early Marxist propaganda circles functioned is contained in Krupskaya's book about Lenin. Contact was made through a workers' study circle, where the teaching of the "3 Rs" would be skilfully combined with at least the elementary ideas of socialism. Such a group was the Smolensk Sunday Evening Adult School, in the working class stronghold of Schlisselburg, where Nadezhda Krupskaya gave classes. The young lecturers were popular with the workers, with whom they established a very close *rapport*. "Workers who belonged to the organisation," wrote Krupskaya, "went to the school to get to know people and single out those who could be drawn into the circle and the organisation."[\[44\]](#)

Elsewhere she recalls: "It was a kind of silent conspiracy. We were actually able to talk about anything in the school, although there was rarely a class without a spy; one had to refrain from using the terrible words 'tsar', 'strike', etc. and the most fundamental problems could be referred to. But, officially, it was forbidden to discuss anything at all: on one occasion they closed down the so-called recapitulatory group, because an inspector who had put in an unexpected appearance discovered that the ten times table was being taught there, whereas, according to the syllabus, only the four rules of arithmetic were allowed to be taught."[\[45\]](#)

At the same time that Plekhanov and his collaborators were establishing the Group for the Emancipation of Russian Labour abroad, the first genuine Social Democratic (i.e. Marxist) circle appeared in St Petersburg, set up by a young Bulgarian student, Dimitar Blagoev (1856-1924)—the future leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party. In 1884, his group took the name "The Party of the Russian Social Democrats" and even began to publish a paper—*Rabochii* (The Worker). However, the group did not last long before it was smashed by the police. But the process was now too far advanced to be halted by police action. The following year another Social Democratic group was formed in the capital, this time with closer links with the working class. The group of P.V. Tochissky included apprentices and craftsmen and styled itself the "Brotherhood of St Petersburg Artisans".

Further afield in the Volga area of Central Russia, in Kazan, Nikolai Fedoseyev (1871-98) organised a group of students, one of the members of which was a young student by the name of Vladimir Ulyanov, later known as Lenin. The first seeds had been planted, and the first recruits had been won, albeit in tiny handfuls, in Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara, Saratov, Rostov-on-Don, and other towns in the region. This group disintegrated when Fedoseyev was arrested in the summer of 1889. Many years later, in December 1922, Lenin was to write a brief note on Fedoseyev to the Party History Commission in which he paid a warm tribute to "this exceptionally talented and exceptionally devoted revolutionary".[\[46\]](#)

Working against tremendous odds, under intolerable difficulties and always at personal risk, the Marxist propagandists stubbornly persevered in their task. Many of them never lived to see the result of their labour. They never fought in the final great battles, nor did

they see the old, hated structures of society topple. Their role was the hardest task of all. The arduous task of *beginning*; of building the movement out of nothing; of patiently winning over the ones and twos; of explaining, arguing, convincing; of attending to the thousand and one mundane, routine day-to-day tasks of building an organisation, which pass unobserved by historians, but which lay at the heart of a great historical enterprise. Despite all the difficulties, the slow, patient work of the Marxists now began to bear fruit. Marxist groups were springing up all over Russia. In imitation of the Emancipation of Labour Group, they called themselves Leagues of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class. At the same time, the movement of the workers was assuming a mass character. Then, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, something happened which completely transformed the situation.

In 1891 and 1892, a terrible famine swept the country, causing widespread starvation in the villages and a steep rise in food prices. Famine, cholera and typhus affected 40 million souls, whole villages perished, especially in the Volga region. Hungry peasants flooded into the towns, willing to accept work at any price. This, combined with an economic upturn, which paradoxically coincided with the famine, produced a wave of strikes, especially in the Centre and West of Russia, the centres of the textile industry. They were accompanied by clashes with police and Cossacks, notably in the strike of the Polish textile workers in Lodz in 1892.

The famine served to expose the bankruptcy of the autocracy and the corruption and inefficiency of the bureaucracy. The fate of the starving millions had a profound effect upon the youth. The student movement flared up again in Moscow and Kazan. The general stirring of society also had an effect on the liberals. Silenced by the reactionary regime of Alexander III, the Zemstvos were re-awakened to life by the famine. All over Russia, well-to-do liberals based on the Zemstvos launched famine relief campaigns. The Zemstvo liberals, many of them ageing left-overs from the “going to the people” movement of the 1870s, eased their consciences by setting up soup kitchens. They did their best to give the struggle against the famine a harmless, non-political colouration, in line with their general policy of “small deeds”. But the social and political ferment provoked by the famine and the chaotic response of the tsarist administration served to stir up the intelligentsia, and providing numerous new recruits for the Marxists, who were locked in furious combat with the representatives of the liberal Narodnik trend. The bitterness of the struggle is reflected in an episode recalled by Krupskaya of one of Lenin’s first interventions, shortly after he arrived in St Petersburg:

“The conference was disguised as a pancake party... The question came up as to what ways we should take. Somehow general agreement was lacking. Someone said that work on the Illiteracy Committee was of great importance. Vladimir Ilyich laughed, and his laughter sounded rather harsh (I have never heard him laugh that way again). ‘Well, if anyone wants to save the country by working in the Illiteracy Committee,’ he said, ‘let him go ahead’.”[\[47\]](#)

Watching the situation attentively from afar, Plekhanov immediately understood that a fundamental change was taking place which demanded a shift in the methods hitherto

employed by the Russian Marxists. The famine had exposed the bankruptcy of the autocracy to an unparalleled degree. The idea of a representative assembly, a Zemsky Sobor, began to gain ground among the liberal intelligentsia. Plekhanov seized the opportunity with both hands. In his pamphlet *All-Russian Ruin*, published in *Sotsial Demokrat*, issue 4, Plekhanov explained that the causes of the famine were not natural but social. Setting out from the chaotic situation brought about by the corruption and ineptitude of the tsarist authorities, he showed the need to conduct widespread propaganda and agitation, linking the concrete demands of the masses to the central idea of the overthrow of the autocracy.

Of course, the slogan of a Zemsky Sobor in the hands of the liberals was given a completely reformist and therefore utopian character. But Plekhanov, displaying a keen revolutionary instinct, advanced this demand as a militant, fighting slogan, as a means of mobilising the masses and attracting the best sections of the democratic intelligentsia to the idea of an open struggle against tsarism. "All those honest Russians," he wrote, "who do not belong to the world of mere money-makers, *kulaks*, and Russian bureaucrats must at once begin to agitate for the Zemsky Sobor."[\[48\]](#)

Plekhanov's article represented the first concrete attempt to come to grips with the question of how to relate the workers' movement to the movement of other oppressed classes against the common enemy, tsarism. Under conditions of tsarist enslavement, temporary and episodic blocs with the most radical elements of the petty bourgeoisie or even the bourgeois liberals were inevitable. Such agreements, however, in no sense presupposed the existence of programmatic agreement. On the contrary, the prior condition thereof was precisely that every party should march under its own banner: "March separately and strike together." While defending the liberals and petty bourgeois democrats against tsarist persecution, and occasionally arriving at episodic agreements for practical questions such as the transportation of illegal literature, defence of arrested comrades, etc., the Marxists simultaneously subjected them to a merciless and unremitting criticism for their vacillations and confusions. Such a policy was designed to make use of each and every opportunity to push the movement forward whilst strengthening the position of Marxism and the independent class standpoint of the proletariat, in the same way that a mountain climber skilfully makes use of every chink and crevice in order to haul himself up to the summit.

The main thrust of Plekhanov's argument was that the "total economic ruin of our country can be averted only by its complete political emancipation". The appalling problems of the masses directly posed the question of revolutionary struggle against tsarism, in which the working class would play the key role. While, at this stage, no-one yet spoke of the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia, the skilful use of revolutionary-democratic demands, like the convening of a Zemsky Sobor, undoubtedly played an important agitational role in marshalling the revolutionary forces around the Marxist programme. This policy had nothing in common with the latter-day policies of the Mensheviks and Stalinists who, under the guise of "uniting all progressive forces", try to subordinate the working class movement to the so-called progressive bourgeoisie. Both Plekhanov and, especially, Lenin poured scorn on the idea of a "People's Front" which a

section of the Narodniks were peddling even at this time. Before he became a Menshevik, when he still defended the ideas of revolutionary Marxism, Plekhanov answered those who accused him of frightening the liberals with the following rebuff: “In any case, we consider that the most harmful kind of ‘frightening’ is the frightening of socialists with the spectre of frightening the liberals.”[\[49\]](#)

### **From Propaganda to Agitation**

The new emphasis upon mass revolutionary agitation caught many by surprise. Future Economists like Boris Krichevsky were not slow to criticise the Emancipation of Labour Group for its “constitutionalism”, not understanding the need to advance democratic slogans alongside the elementary class demands of the proletariat. At the same time, many of the old hands even in Russia were reluctant to recognise the changed situation. The old habits of small propaganda circle activity died hard. In many cases, the transition to mass agitation was only accomplished after painful arguments and divisions. In his article *On the Tasks of the Russian Social Democrats during the Famine in Russia* (1892), Plekhanov gave the classic Marxist definition of the difference between propaganda and agitation: “A sect can be satisfied with propaganda in the narrow sense of the word: a political party never... A propagandist gives *many* ideas to one or a few people... Yet history is made by the masses... Thanks to agitation, the necessary link between the ‘heroes’ and the ‘crowd’, between ‘the masses’ and ‘their leaders’ is forged and tempered.”

Plekhanov stressed the urgent necessity for the Marxists to penetrate the broadest layers of the masses with agitational slogans, beginning with the most immediate economic demands, such as the eight-hour day: “Thus all—even the most backward—workers will be clearly convinced that the carrying out of at least some socialist measures is of value to the working class... Such economic reforms as the shortening of the working day are good if only because they bring direct benefits to the workers.”[\[50\]](#)

This gives the lie to the reformist opponents of Marxism who argue that the Marxists are “not interested in reform”. On the contrary, throughout history, the Marxists have been in the forefront of the struggle for the improvement of the lot of the workers, fighting for better wages and conditions, shorter hours and democratic rights. The difference between Marxism and reformism does not consist in the “acceptance” or otherwise of reforms (you only have to pose the question to see its patent absurdity). On the one hand, is the fact that serious reforms can only be won by mobilising the strength of the working class in struggle against the capitalists and their state and, on the other, that the only way to consolidate the gains made by the workers and to guarantee all their needs, is to break the power of Capital and carry out the socialist transformation of society. The latter is, however, unthinkable without the day-to-day struggle for advance under capitalism which serves to organise, train and educate the working-class, preparing the ground for the final settling of accounts with its enemies.

The conditions for the transition to mass agitational work were prepared by the development of Russian capitalism itself. Throughout the decade of the 1890s, the graph

of the strike movement continued on the upturn, and at the heart of the movement stood St Petersburg. Here were the heavy battalions of Russian labour—the metal workers, 80 per cent of whom were concentrated in big factories like the Putilov works. St Petersburg was the place where the working class was growing fastest. Between 1881 and 1900, the working class of the capital grew by 82 per cent—Moscow grew by 51 per cent in the same period. A relatively high proportion of the Petersburg proletarians were literate—74 per cent against 60 per cent for the rest of Russia.

It was a new and youthful population. In 1900, over two-thirds of St Petersburg had been born outside the city, and over 80 per cent of its workers. They came from all over the Empire—hungry, penniless peasants, desperately seeking work. Those who were lucky entered the big textile and metal factories. The decisive sector in St Petersburg was the metal industry, whereas in Moscow, textiles predominated. Well over half the workers of St Petersburg were employed in big factories of 500 or more, while nearly two-fifths worked in giant works of over 1,000. The unlucky ones became beggars, street vendors or prostitutes.

The working day was long—between 10 and 14 hours—and conditions and safety were appalling. Workers often had to live in overcrowded factory barracks, where bad housing was made worse by polluted air and water and defective sewage, giving St Petersburg its reputation as the most unhealthy capital in Europe. The conditions of the textile workers were particularly barbaric, working very long hours doing monotonous jobs amidst deafening noise, in unhealthy, hot and humid conditions, the results of which, in the words of a government inspector, “...can be visually confirmed by [the workers’] outward appearances—emaciated, haggard, worn out, with sunken chests: they give the impression of sick people, just released from the hospital.”[\[51\]](#)

About half the textile workers were women. This particularly exploited section of the class, mainly newly arrived peasants and unskilled labourers, proved to be extremely volatile. The revolutionary potential of the textile workers had already been demonstrated in the strikes of 1878-79, when the first confused attempt was made to link up the strikes and the revolutionary movement. These strikes frightened the authorities into making concessions. The First Factory Act of 1 June 1882 prohibited the employment of children under 12 years of age from working in factories, and limited the working day for children between 12 and 15 to between eight and 15 hours. A further Act of 1885 prohibited night work in certain branches of industry, and so on.

The workers were not destined to enjoy the fruits of their victory. The strikes were the reflection of an economic boom, related to the Russo-Turkish war, but, in the slump which followed, the capitalists took their revenge. Throughout the 1880s, a severe depression caused massive lay-offs and unemployment, especially in the metal industry. Thousands of workers and their families were reduced to destitution. Those who remained in the factories had to keep their heads down and grit their teeth while the factory owners ruthlessly lowered wages. At the start of the 1890s, the economy began to pick up once more. The change was particularly noticeable from 1893 onwards. Major construction on the railways further stimulated growth in the metal industry in St

Petersburg and the south of Russia. Oil and coal fields were booming. And at once the fresh breezes of the class struggle began to blow. The idea of agitation immediately caught the imagination of the youth inside Russia. Already many of the youngsters were growing impatient with the limitations of work in the propaganda circles. The trail was blazed by the Social Democrats in the western areas of Lithuania and Poland, where the Lodz strike and May Day demonstration of 1892 indicated the explosive nature of the situation.

Tsarist Russia was, to use Lenin's celebrated phrase, a "veritable prison-house of nations". In the period of rampant reaction following the assassination of Alexander II, national oppression was intensified. Under the grim surveillance of Pobedonostsev, the twin watch-dogs of autocracy—the police and the Orthodox Church—cracked down on everything which smacked of dissent—from independent thinkers like Leo Tolstoy to Polish Catholics, Baltic Lutherans, Jews and Moslems. Marriages consecrated in Catholic churches were not recognised by the Russian government. Under Nicholas II, the church property of the Armenian Christians was confiscated by the state. The places of worship of the Kalmyks and Buryats were closed. Forced russification was accompanied by what amounted to compulsory conversion to the Orthodox faith.

The development of industry took place very early on in the western fringes of the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. More industrialised than the east, more literate, and with a strong German influence, these areas were quickly penetrated by the Social Democracy. However, the workers' movement here was immensely complicated by the national question. Oppressed by tsarist Russia, the Polish and Baltic workers and peasants had a double yoke to bear. The dismemberment of Poland, carved up between Russia, Austro-Hungary and Prussia, created a bitter legacy of national oppression, the effects of which were to have serious consequences for the future development of the labour movement. Memories of the defeat of 1863 and the horrific repression that followed kept alive a hatred for Russia among Poles.

The Russian authorities, especially sensitive about unrest in the Polish provinces, cracked down ruthlessly on the first Polish Social Democratic groups with arrests, torture and long sentences of hard labour. But the movement, like a hydra-headed monster, reacted to the lopping off of one head by immediately sprouting two new ones. The Baltic soon became a focal point of Marxist agitation and propaganda, serving as the entry-point for illegal literature and correspondence between the émigré Emancipation of Labour Group and the Marxist underground in the interior. Bernard Pares comments on the state of affairs in Poland: "Warsaw University had been completely russianised, and Poles were taught their own literature in Russian; in 1885 Russian was introduced into primary schools as the language of teaching; Polish railway servants were sent to serve in other parts of the empire; in 1885 Poles were forbidden to buy land in Lithuania or Bolhynia, where they had constituted the majority of the gentry."[\[52\]](#)

### **The Jewish Workers' Movement**

Paradoxically, tsarism encouraged the industrial development of Poland as a “shop window” and in a vain attempt to head off the nationalist movement. But the very development of industry was undermining the regime and creating a fever of discontent in the towns and cities of Russia’s western borderlands. Conditions and wages were appalling, but profits of 40-50 per cent were usual, while profits of 100 per cent were not uncommon. The super-exploitation of the workers created favourable conditions for the spread of socialist propaganda. In the midst of this lunar landscape of bleak reaction, the party known as Proletariat—the “hopeful forerunner of the modern socialist movement in Poland”[\[53\]](#)—was launched by the student Ludwig Warjinski. Warjinski’s group of socialist students formed circles of workers and embryonic trade unions. In 1882, the different groups coalesced to organise Proletariat, which led a series of strikes, culminating in a mass strike in Warsaw, which was violently put down by troops. Many of the leaders of Proletariat were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Four were hanged. Warjinski himself was not so fortunate. Sentenced to 16 years hard labour in the notorious Schlüsselburg Fortress near St Petersburg, he died a slow death.

After the arrests, Proletariat practically fell to pieces. By the time the young Rosa Luxemburg joined the movement, only remnants were left. Leo Jogiches, the son of a wealthy Jewish family, used his considerable personal income to finance the setting up of a new socialist group in Vilna in 1885. The Vilna Social Democrats later played a pioneering role, developing the technique of mass agitation among the workers, which was later taken up by the Marxists all over Russia. The young forces of the Polish proletariat received a powerful impulse from the newly-awakened forces of the Jewish working class.

The majority of Jews lived in Poland and the western provinces, which were declared from 1881 to constitute the only place where Jews were allowed to live. Jews were dismissed en masse from all administrative posts and excluded from most professions in 1886. Only 10 per cent of Jews were allowed to go to university (five per cent in Moscow and St Petersburg). From 1887, the same rule was applied to secondary schools. In 1888, all Jews in receipt of government scholarships were registered as Orthodox. Children were baptised against the wishes of their parents. Jews who became Orthodox were given a divorce with no questions asked. Special taxes were imposed on Synagogues and kosher meat. As a means of dividing and disorienting the workers, the authorities organised bloody pogroms against the Jews; houses were sacked and men, women and children killed and maimed by lumpenproletarian mobs in connivance with the police.

The sizeable Jewish population in these areas, with its numerous artisans and small businesses, lived permanently on the brink of the abyss. The most oppressed layer of society, the Jewish workers and artisans, naturally provided fertile ground for the spread of revolutionary ideas. Not by accident, Jewish revolutionaries provided the Marxist movement with a number of leaders out of all proportion to their specific weight within society. Cosmopolitan Vilna, with its large concentration of Jewish workers and artisans, was one of the earliest strongholds of Social Democracy in the Russian Empire. From 1881 right up to the October revolution, the outbreak of these barbaric acts of racial savagery were a permanent threat hanging over the heads of the Jewish people. The

pogromists stirred up the backward Polish and Russian peasants against the Jews, making use of religious prejudice (the most common time for pogroms was Easter), and the hatred of the Jewish trader and money-lender. But the overwhelming majority of the Jews were poor workers and artisans. In 1888, a government commission reported that 90 per cent of Jews were “a mass that lives from hand to mouth, amidst poverty and most oppressive sanitary and general conditions. The very proletariat is occasionally a target of tumultuous popular uprisings [i.e. pogroms]...”[54]

The Jewish workers’ movement in western Russia, Poland and Lithuania had a long history. The strike wave which swept through these regions beginning in 1892 produced a ferment among all oppressed nationalities, especially the Jews, who suffered the most extreme national oppression. Cultural life began to stir in a kind of national renaissance. Breaking free from the dead-weight of a culture fossilised for 2,000 years, the Jewish intelligentsia became open to the most radical and revolutionary ideas. In place of the old exclusivism and isolationism, they eagerly sought contact with other cultures, particularly Russian culture. As early as 1885, a section of the poor *yesivah* students, training to become Rabbis, helped to launch the Narodnik revolutionary organisation in Vilna. Now Jewish workers joined the struggle, eagerly learning Russian in order to read books and discover the new ideas for themselves.

Jewish workers had organised friendly societies or *kassy*, which collected funds for mutual benefit for as long as anyone remembered—possibly ever since Jews were expelled from the guilds in Germany and Poland. The structure of these societies recalled that of the medieval guilds themselves, or the early British craft unions, with their solemn initiation rituals, annual guild holidays and strict secrecy concerning all their affairs. The artisans and workers organised in the *kassy* were conservative in outlook, hostile to socialist ideas and usually connected with the synagogue. Yet, the double burden which the Jewish workers had to bear, being oppressed as workers and as Jews, created exceptionally favourable conditions for the spread of revolutionary and socialist ideas. “A spontaneous movement,” wrote Akimov, “swept like a strong wind through the lower depths of Jewish society, through strata which had seemed immobile and incapable of comprehending or guiding themselves by any conscious ideas.”[55] Precisely because of this, the Jewish socialist workers and intellectuals played a role in the Russian revolutionary movement out of all proportion to their numbers.

The funds raised by the *kassy* were originally used not just for sick benefits and the like, but for clubbing together to buy a copy of the *Torah*! However, in the new climate of class struggle, the workers’ funds were used increasingly for labour disputes. The first documented strike of Jewish workers took place in Vilna in 1882—a strike of hosiery workers in which, significantly, the women played a major role. The most active elements were the Jewish craftsmen and artisans—jewellers, stocking makers, locksmiths, tailors, carpenters, printers, shoemakers. By 1895, there were 27 craft organisations in Vilna alone, with a total membership of 962. “Within the Jewish labour movement itself, it was the craftsmen who pioneered, and the cigarette and match factory workers who lagged behind.” This class composition of the Jewish labour movement, no different to its fraternal organisations in the rest of Russia, was undoubtedly a factor in

the conservative role played by the Bund, the Jewish organisation, in the early years of the RSDLP. The most advanced sections of Jewish society were far from being affected by the kind of Jewish nationalism later advocated by the Zionists. On the contrary, they saw the salvation of the Jewish people in the rejection of the age-old, hide-bound traditionalism and entry into the mainstream of Russian cultural and political life. “We were assimilationists,” wrote a socialist activist of this period, “who did not even dream of a separate Jewish mass movement. We saw our task as preparing the cadres for the Russian revolutionary movement, and acclimatising them to Russian culture.”[\[56\]](#) The Jewish Social Democrats wore Russian dress carried Russian books and spoke Russian as much as possible.

In the socialist circles, a whole generation of Jewish youth was awakened to political and cultural life. Particularly striking was the courage of young Jewish girls from working class backgrounds, determined to participate in the movement, despite the implacable hostility of their elders: “I see them now,” recalled a participant, “crate makers, soap workers, sugar workers—those among whom I led a circle... Pale, thin, red-eyed, beaten, terribly tired. They would gather late in the evening. We would sit until one in the morning in a stuffy room with only a little gas lamp burning. Often little children would be sleeping in the same room and the women of the house would walk around listening for the police. The girls would listen to the leader’s talk and would ask questions, completely forgetting the dangers, forgetting that it would take three-quarters of an hour to get home, wrapped in a cold, torn remnant of a coat, in the mud and deep snow: that they would have to knock on the door and bear a flood of insults and curses from their parents: that at home there might not be a piece of bread left and they would have to go to sleep hungry... and then in a few hours arise and run to work. With that rapt attention, they listened to the talks on cultural history, on surplus value... wages, life in other lands... What joy would light their eyes when the circle leader produced a new number of *Yidisher Arbayer*, *Arbayer Shtimme*, or even a brochure! How many tragedies young workers would suffer at home if it became known that they were running around with *Akhudusnikers*, with the ‘brothers and sisters’, that they were reading forbidden books—how many insults, blows, tears! It did not help. ‘It attracts them like magnets’ mothers wailed to each other.”

Here, in Lithuania and Belarus, the Jewish workers and the wholly russified Jewish intelligentsia were carrying on a kind of agitation which was far more broadly based than the limited propaganda activity common in Russia proper. They published leaflets written in the language of the mass of Jewish workers—Yiddish—which dealt with the immediate demands of the masses. At this time, a 19-year old student called Julius Martov, expelled from St Petersburg for revolutionary activity, arrived in Vilna, already a thriving centre of the Social Democracy. Martov recalled how the issue of agitation was raised by the workers themselves, compelling the Marxists to go beyond the limits of circle work: “In my work,” he wrote, “I twice detailed talks on the aims and methods of socialism, but real life kept interfering... Either the members of the circle would themselves raise the question of some event that had occurred in their factory... or someone from another work-shop would appear and we would have to spend the time discussing conditions there.”[\[57\]](#)

The success of the Vilna group led them to publish a pamphlet which caused quite a stir at the time: *On Agitation*, written by Arkady Kremer and Martov, became known as “The Vilna Programme”. Despite traces of “spontaneism”, the document, with its central idea that the task of the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves aroused a lot of interest in the period 1893-97 when furious discussions were taking place everywhere on the turn to agitation. It basically represented a healthy reaction against the narrow “small circle” mentality and a desire to forge contacts with the masses. The new pamphlet threw down a bold challenge to existing conditions: “The Russian Social Democratic movement is on the wrong path,” it proclaimed. “It has locked itself up in closed circles. It should listen for the pulse beat of the crowd and lead it. Social Democrats can and must lead the working masses because the proletariat’s blind struggle inevitably leads it to the same goal and the same ideal which the revolutionary Social Democrats have consciously chosen.”[\[58\]](#)

### **The Petersburg League of Struggle**

In the autumn of 1893 the Petersburg Social Democrats were only just recovering from the arrest of their leader, Mikhail Ivanovich Brusnyev. Up to this time, the orientation of the group can be seen in Brusnyev’s own words: “Our main and fundamental role [was to] turn the participants... in the workers’ circles into fully developed and conscious social democrats, who could in many ways replace the intellectual propagandists.”[\[59\]](#) Already by 1891, the group was able to mobilise 100 people at the funeral of the old revolutionary N.V. Shelgunov. There were contacts in the big factories and all the main workers’ districts. The work had been started by young students, but gradually the class composition of the group underwent a change. The students painstakingly set about the task of creating working-class cadres or “Russian Bebel”, as they expressed it. After the wave of arrests which carried off Brusnyev and many others in 1892, the group had been reorganised by S.I. Radchenko. It included a group of students from the Technical Institute, some of whom were destined to play a significant role in the development of the party, including Nadya Krupskaya, Lenin’s future wife and lifelong companion.

The basic method of the group was to organise study circles of workers from the main factories. Through individual worker contacts, others were drawn into the circle in the way described above by Krupskaya. The original contacts developed theoretically and themselves became organisers of other circles. In this way an ever-wider network of worker study circles was established. Lenin, who had arrived in St Petersburg in the autumn of 1893, participated as a lecturer in these circles under the alias, Nikolai Petrovich. Lenin’s work in the circle is described by Krupskaya:

“Vladimir Ilyich was interested in the minutest detail describing the conditions and life of the workers. Taking the features separately he endeavoured to grasp the life of the worker as a whole—he tried to find what one could seize upon in order better to approach the worker with revolutionary propaganda. Most of the intellectuals of those days badly understood the workers. An intellectual would come to a circle and read the workers a kind of lecture. For a long time, a manuscript translation of Engels’ booklet *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was passed round the circles. Vladimir Ilyich

read with the workers from Marx's *Capital*, and explained it to them. The second half of the studies was devoted to workers' questions about their work and labour conditions. He showed them how their life was linked up with the entire structure of society, and told them in what manner the existing order could be transformed. The combination of theory with practice was the particular feature of Vladimir Ilyich's work in the circles. Gradually, other members of our circle also began to use this approach."[\[60\]](#)

The circles did valuable work in assembling the working class cadres in ones and twos. But they also created certain conservative habits of mind which later proved an obstacle to the development of the movement. The young Martov confessed his mortification when an older worker-Marxist, a member of Brusnyev's group, instead of inviting him to join the organisation, presented him with a pile of books on ancient history and the origin of the species: "Brought up in the previous period of complete social stagnation," Martov writes, "S... apparently could not imagine any other way of training a revolutionary than having him work out, over a period of years, a complete theoretical world-view, the crown of which would be admittance to practical work. For us, who had already read the speeches of the SPD workers of 1 May 1891, and had been shaken by the bankruptcy of the regime in the face of the famine, it was psychologically inconceivable to condemn ourselves to such a long period of waiting."[\[61\]](#)

The "Vilna turn" caused a big impact on the movement in Russia and was hotly debated in the circles. Martov brought a copy of the pamphlet to St Petersburg in the autumn of 1894. In her *Memories of Lenin*, Krupskaya recalls that: "When the Vilna pamphlet *On Agitation* appeared the following year, the ground was already fully prepared for the conducting of agitation by leaflets. It was only necessary to start work. The method of agitation on the basis of the workers' everyday needs became rooted deeply in our party work. I only fully understood how fruitful this method of work was some years later when, living as an émigré in France, I observed how, during the tremendous postal strike in Paris, the French Socialist Party stood completely aside and did not intervene in the strike. It was the business of the trade unions, they said. They thought the work of the party was simply the political struggle. They had not the remotest notion as to the necessity for connecting up the economic and industrial struggles."[\[62\]](#)

By 1895, Lenin's group had about 10-16 members, who between them organised the work of between 20 and 30 workers' study circles, which in turn had up to 100-150 contacts.[\[63\]](#) The group was connected to the workers' circles through area organisers. By the end of the year, it was active in practically all the workers' districts. In November, a decisive step was taken when a newly established Social Democratic group, including Martov, fused with the "veterans" to form the St Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of Labour—a name which was adopted in solidarity with Plekhanov's Emancipation of Labour Group, apparently at Martov's suggestion. A division of labour was established in the group's activities—finance, contact with groups of revolutionary-minded intellectuals, the printing of leaflets, etc. The group maintained contact with the underground print-shops run by a group of Petersburg Narodniks, and so on. The leaders of the group were Lenin and Martov.

“Well, brother, I can’t think what’s gotten into them these days, sending us all these political *muzhiks* all of a sudden! Before they used to bring us all upper class people and students, real gentlemen. But now in walk the likes of you—just a common muzhik—a worker!”[\[64\]](#)

With these words the prison warder of the Taganskaya prison greeted the arrival of M.N. Lyadov, one of the leaders of the Moscow Workers’ League in the year 1895. In his own way, the old warder had grasped the profound change which had taken place in the Russian revolutionary movement in the 1890s. The more or less rapid growth of the Petersburg League reflected a change in the objective situation. The upsurge in the strike movement presented unprecedentedly wide opportunities for agitation through popular leaflets. The latter enjoyed instant success and served to bring the small forces of Marxism into contact with ever wider layers of the workers. The young people, mostly new recruits with little understanding of Marxist theory, threw themselves enthusiastically into the work of factory agitation, mostly on “bread and butter” issues. This had spectacular results, meeting with instant success among even the most benighted, ignorant and oppressed layers of the class.

In just one strike, according to Fyodr Dan, the League put out more than 30 leaflets.[\[65\]](#) Agitation was conducted as a dialogue with the workers. The League would carefully listen to workers’ grievances, take note of their demands and collect reports of the struggles in different factories. They would then return this information to the workers in an agitational form, together with organisational directives, exposures of the manoeuvres of management and the authorities, and appeals for support. Thus, the strike movement of the 1890s became a gigantic preparatory school of struggle, serving to educate a whole generation of workers and Marxists. In the absence of an organised, legal labour movement, the tiny leaflets caused a sensation. The appearance of a leaflet would cause a buzz of expectation on the shop floor. Whenever they could escape the watchful eye of the overseer, the workers would gather in small groups (the favourite location being “the club”—i.e., the factory toilet), where the leaflet would be read aloud to a chorus of “Well said!” and “Absolutely right!” Takhtarev recalls that a typical reaction would be: “To the director! Send it to the director!” and that in a very short time, “rumours about the leaflets circulated throughout the factories of St Petersburg. Soon the intelligentsia no longer needed to seek out the workers, who avidly inquired after the ‘students’ and requested leaflets”.[\[66\]](#)

The success of the new approach is reflected in Trotsky’s autobiography: “We found the workers more susceptible to revolutionary propaganda than we had ever in our wildest dreams imagined. The amazing effectiveness of our work fairly intoxicated us. From revolutionary tales, we knew that the workers won over by propaganda were usually to be counted in single numbers. A revolutionary who converted two or three men to socialism thought he had done a good job of work, whereas with us, the number of workers who joined or wanted to join the groups seemed to be unlimited. The only shortage was in the matter of instruction and in literature. The teachers had to snatch from each other in turn the single soiled copy of the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels that had been translated by many hands in Odessa, with many gaps and mutilations of the text.

“Soon we began to produce a literature of our own: this was, properly speaking, the beginning of my revolutionary work, which almost coincided with the start of my revolutionary activities. I wrote proclamations and articles and printed them all out in longhand for the hectograph. At that time we didn’t even know of the existence of typewriters. I printed the letters with the utmost care, considering it a point of honour to make them clear enough so that even the less literate could read our proclamations without any trouble. It took me about two hours to a page. Sometimes I didn’t unbend my back for a week, cutting my work short only for meetings and study in the groups.

“But what a satisfied feeling I had when I received the information from the mills and workshops that the workers read voraciously the mysterious sheets printed in purple ink, passing them about from hand to hand as they discussed them! They pictured the author as some strange and mighty person who in some mysterious way had penetrated into the mills and knew what was going on in the workshops, and 24 hours later passed his comment on events in newly-printed handbills.”[\[67\]](#)

The reaction of ordinary workers to the leaflets is reported by Takhtarev, writing while the comments were still fresh in his mind, in 1897:

“Just think of the times we live in!... We used to work and work, and never see daylight. You could see it with your own eyes how they swindled us, but what could you do about it?... But now we have our boys who notice everything, everywhere, and take it down. Tell it to the *Soyuz* (League), you hear, we have to let them know about this.’

“Who passes the leaflets?’

“Students, I suppose. God grant good health to those people who print the leaflets.’ Whereupon the worker devoutly crossed himself.”[\[68\]](#)

By energetically participating in agitation, the small forces of Marxism were able to play a role out of all proportion to their size. The small hectographed leaflets met a ready response. Often the mere appearance of these leaflets would suffice to plunge a whole factory into a ferment and discussion, exercising a major influence on the course of a dispute. Precisely the success of this agitation soon attracted the attention of the tsarist police. Well aware of the explosive mood of the workers in Petersburg, the authorities developed a healthy respect for what the leaflets could achieve. When, in February and April of 1896, a leaflet appeared voicing the demands of the workers in the shipbuilding yards in Petersburg, the Minister of the Interior, fearing a strike, ordered an investigation, which advised the port commander to concede the workers’ demands.

However, the transition from propaganda in small groups to mass agitation was not carried out painlessly or without internal strains and tensions. For many, the underground had become a way of life. It had a certain routine to which one became accustomed. A prolonged period of existence in small, underground circles fostered a certain narrow “circle-mentality”. Paradoxically, despite the difficulties and dangers, it had a certain “cozy” side. The conditions of circle life did not demand much outward-going activity.

One moved exclusively among comrades or advanced workers, in circles where everyone knew practically everyone else. By contrast, agitation among the masses seemed like a leap in the dark. Routine would be disrupted, ideas and methods radically altered. No wonder the proposal was met with mistrust and hostility on the part of a layer of the “old men”. Krassin and S.I. Radchenko warned of dire consequences if the new tactic were pursued: it would undermine the underground work, cause mass arrests, put comrades in danger, and disorganise the work.

The question of the “new turn” was thrashed out, first of all in the narrow circles of the veterans, and then presented for discussion at broader gatherings of workers, where extracts from Kremer’s pamphlet *On Agitation* were read out and debated. The St Petersburg worker-propagandist, V.I. Babushkin, recalls his reaction to the new proposals: “I absolutely rebelled against agitation, though I saw the undoubted fruits of its work in the general upsurge of enthusiasm among the worker masses; for I was very much afraid of another such wave of arrests [as that which carried off some of the ‘old-timers’, including Lenin, in December 1895] and thought that now all would perish. However, I proved to be mistaken.”

Martov recalls how this same Babushkin protested angrily to him about the new methods: “Here you begin throwing leaflets in all directions and in two months you’ve destroyed what it took years to create... The new youth, brought up in this agitational activity, will tend to be superficial in outlook.”<sup>[69]</sup> Subsequent development showed that Babushkin’s fear was not entirely without foundation. Some of those who enthusiastically espoused “agitation” and poo-pooed theory and “circle narrowness” were not merely superficial, but downright opportunists. However, despite an element of youthful exaggeration, the reaction against the “circle mentality” was a necessary corrective to a conservative trend which, had it remained unchecked, would have converted the massive movement into a sect. Many years later, Trotsky was clearly thinking of this period when he wrote that: “Every working class party, every faction, during its initial stages, passes through a period of pure propaganda, i.e. the training of its cadres. The period of existence as a Marxist circle invariably grafts habits of an abstract approach onto the problems of the workers’ movement. Whoever is unable to step in time over the confines of this circumscribed existence becomes transformed into a conservative sectarian.”<sup>[70]</sup>

An example of how the work was being held back by conservative attitudes was the discussion that took place among the Marxists in Moscow on how to intervene in the May Day of 1895. Mitskevich recalls the horrified reaction when he proposed to organise a clandestine meeting in the woods: “When I put the question to my comrades, they decided to celebrate inconspicuously and not to raise a ruckus. They were anxious not to spoil our work and they feared arrest. The comrades said: ‘It’s too early to speak up, our forces are still too small for open action: the idea of a big celebration—that’s an idea for the intelligentsia’.”<sup>[71]</sup> But life itself was preparing a big surprise—a sudden turn in the situation which stood all the old schemas on their head.

On 23 May 1896, a strike of the spinning assistants at the Russian Spinnery in the Narva district of St Petersburg signalled the outbreak of a mighty wave of strikes. The textile

workers improvised flying pickets which rapidly extended the strike. The lightning speed with which the strike spread was an indication of the explosive mood that had built up over the preceding decade. A major strike wave gripped the capital, and for the first time, the St Petersburg Marxists found themselves at the head of a mass movement of the working class.

The changed conditions brought about by the strike wave provided the small forces of Marxism with colossal opportunities to spread their influence. Yet in the initial period, opportunities were frequently missed because of the resistance of the more conservative layers to the new methods. Thus, during the important strike of 2,000 weavers in Ivanovo-Voznesensk in October 1895, the leaders of the local Workers' League initially opposed the proposal that they should send agitators to contact the strikers, and approach other factories to organise support for the strike. Eventually a compromise solution was reached that the League would accept no responsibility for the strike but that individual members would be allowed to participate at their own risk! Similar disputes arose in practically every social democratic circle. But gradually the new methods were accepted, and obtained spectacular results.

The Marxists did not limit themselves to agitation on economic questions, but also tried to place political ideas before the workers. After the arrests of December 1895, the Petersburg group published the leaflet: "What is a socialist and a political criminal?" In the first period of agitation, while setting out from the immediate grievances of the workers, every attempt was made to raise the workers' horizons to broad political questions, linking the struggle for immediate demands to the central objective of the overthrow of the autocracy. By means of a bold participation in agitation, the influence of Marxism grew by leaps and bounds among ever wider layers of the working class. Despite the smallness of their forces, and the tremendously difficult objective situation, the Marxists had at last broken down the barriers separating them from the masses. The road was now open for the creation of a strong, united party of the Russian proletariat.

## NOTES

[A] Luddism is the name given to a movement of the English workers in the early years of the industrial revolution. The rise of unemployment was blamed on the introduction of machines, which the workers smashed.

[40] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 32.

[41] Figures from F. Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*, p. 150 and B.H. Sumner, *A Survey of Russian History*, pp. 324-331.

[42] Quoted in LCW, *Explanation of the Law on Fines Imposed on Factory Workers*, vol. 2, p. 38.

[43] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 100.

- [44] N.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 17.
- [45] N.K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin, (1893-1917)*, p. 6.
- [46] LCW, *A Few Words About N.Y. Fedoseyev*, vol. 33, p. 453.
- [47] N.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 12-3.
- [48] Quoted in V. Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 16.
- [49] G. Plekhanov, *Sochineniya*, vol. 1, p. 403.
- [50] Quoted in V. Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 17 in both quotes.
- [51] Quoted in G.D. Surh, *1905 in St Petersburg: Labour, Society and Revolution*, p. 54.
- [52] B. Pares, op. cit., p. 465.
- [53] P. Frolich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 20.
- [54] Nora Levin, *Jewish Socialist Movements 1871-1917*, p. 16.
- [55] V. Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 209.
- [56] Quoted in N. Levin, op. cit., pp. 226 and 234.
- [57] Ibid., p. 240 in both quotes.
- [58] Ibid., pp. 240-1.
- [59] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 159.
- [60] Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin, (1893-1917)*, pp. 6-7.
- [61] J. Martov, *Zapiski Sotsial Demokrata*, p. 92, quoted in A.R. Wildman, *The Making of a Worker's Revolution-Russian Social Democracy 1891-1903*, p. 37.
- [62] Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin, (1893-1917)*, p. 7.
- [63] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 222.
- [64] I. Verkhovtsev, (ed.) *Bor'ba za Sozdanie Marksistskoi partii v Rossii (1894-1904)*, p. 3.
- [65] F. Dan, op. cit., p. 205.

[66] Quoted in A.R. Wildman, op. cit., p. 63.

[67] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 110.

[68] Quoted in Wildman, op. cit., p. 64.

[69] Ibid., p. 53 in both quotes.

[70] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, p. 153.

[71] Quoted in Wildman, op. cit., pp. 54-5.

## Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 4 of 7]

### ‘Legal Marxism’

Alexander III died on the 1st of November 1894, and was succeeded by his son, Nicholas II. On the glittering occasion of the new sovereign’s marriage in January the following year, the Zemstvo liberals plucked up their courage and presented a petition—in the form of a congratulatory address: “We cherish the hope,” it said, “that the voice of the people’s needs will always be heard on the heights of the throne.” Nicholas’ cutting reply represents a veritable classic of a political demolition job: “I am glad to see representatives of all classes assembled to declare their loyal sentiments. I believe in the sincerity of those sentiments which have ever been proper to every Russian. But I am aware that of late, in some Zemstvo assemblies, there have been heard voices of persons who have been carried away by senseless dreams of the participation of Zemstvo representatives in the affairs of the internal administration. Let it be known to all that I, while devoting all my energies to the good of the people, shall maintain the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as my unforgettable father.”

The assembled ranks of the Zemstvo gentry were forced to listen while this bucket of icy slops was poured over their heads. The message was not even read by the tsar, who dispatched an underling to do it for him. “A little officer came out,” writes an eyewitness, “in his hand he had a bit of paper; he began mumbling something, now and then looking at that bit of paper; then suddenly shouted out: ‘senseless dreams’—here we understood that we were being scolded for something. Well, why should one bark?”<sup>[72]</sup> In a scene worthy of a great artist, the young empress was said to have stood stiff and rigid, not bowing to the delegates as they crept past. Rodichev, the author of the “Tver petition”, was not even admitted to the reception and was forbidden to live in St Petersburg for his pains. More than any amount of words, this amusing little cameo shows up the utter impotence and cowardice of the liberals of Zemstvo Russia on the eve of the 20th century.

These were the years when the bourgeois intellectuals retreated into themselves, playing with spiritualism, mysticism, pornography and “art for art’s sake”. Art and literature saw the rise of symbolism, with its mystical overtones, and the “decadent” school. All this was merely a reflection, not just of a *fin de siècle* malaise of the intellectuals, but of the general feeling of impasse and helplessness which followed the shattering of Narodnaya Volya. As Marx once observed, history repeated itself—first time as tragedy, second time as farce. In a pathetic caricature of Narodism, liberal youth would dress up in peasant clothes and become “Tolstoyans”, participating in welfare and charity schemes for the relief of famine, campaigns against illiteracy, and the like.

The growing influence of Marxist ideas among the intelligentsia produced a peculiar phenomenon. The striking successes of Marxist ideology in the struggle against Narodism began to interest a layer of bourgeois intellectuals in the universities, who became fascinated with Marxism as a socio-historical theory, without ever really grasping its revolutionary class content. The young bourgeoisie was striving to find a voice of its own, to assert its own interests and provide a theoretical justification for the inevitability of capitalist development in Russia. Some of the ideas put forward by Marxism in the struggle against Narodism were eagerly grasped by a section of the intellectual spokesmen of the bourgeoisie. For a short time, “Marxism” in a bowdlerised, academic form, enjoyed a certain vogue among “left” liberal professors.

In the initial stages, when the forces of Marxism were small and lacking in influence, and the socialist revolution was as yet the music of an apparently distant future, these well-to-do intellectual dilettantes seemed actually to represent a definite trend in Russian Marxism. Given the appalling difficulties of the illegal revolutionary movement, their services were readily accepted. They gave money, collaborated in the publication of Marxist literature and, in the absence of a real Marxist press, facilitated the appearance of Marxist views, albeit in a watered-down form, in the pages of all-Russian legal journals. This situation offered certain possibilities for the Marxists, who were permitted to write in the pages of legal bourgeois journals like *Novoe Slovo*, *Nachalo* (not to be confused with the *Nachalo* published by Trotsky in 1905) and *Samarsky Vestnik*—always provided they did not “go too far”, of course. In this way there arose the strange hybrid monstrosity of “Legal Marxism”, the main representatives of which were P.B. Struve, M.I. Tugan-Baranovsky, S.N. Bulgakov and N.A. Berdyayev.

Because of the censorship, all the early works of Marxism in Russia had to come out in book form, which made it an expensive business. Struve met the cost of publishing his book out of his own pocket. Such was the thirst for Marxist ideas, even in a bowdlerised form, that it sold out in two weeks. Potresov, who had inherited a private fortune, used his money to finance the publication of Plekhanov’s *Monist View of History*. Given the immense difficulties of illegality, it was clearly necessary to exploit each and every legal opening to spread the ideas of Marxism. What could not be said openly in legal publications could be supplemented by the underground party press. Thus, for many years, the Russian Marxists could not call themselves “Social Democrats”, but had to use phrases like “Consistent Democrats” instead. As Trotsky pointed out many years later, they did not get off scot-free from this. A number of people associated with the party

turned out to be precisely “consistent democrats”—and some not so consistent—but not at all Marxists! For the development of a healthy Marxist current it is necessary above all to be able to say *what is*. Only the development of a genuine illegal Marxist journal could serve to mend the damage done by the Legal Marxists and their shadow, the Economists. This was the great achievement of Lenin’s *Iskra* (The Spark).

Despite all the problems and overheads, the collaboration with the Legal Marxists was a useful and, in any case, unavoidable stage in the development of the movement in the early days. The great majority of those who flirted with Marxism in their youth later broke with the movement and passed over to the side of reaction. But at the time they played a useful role. Some, at least, appeared to have undergone a genuine conversion. But the majority soon recovered from their “socialist measles”. It was all too easy to explain away shortcomings in their mode of expression by the exigencies of legal work, the need to escape detection, arrest and so on. So long as the main tasks of the movement were of a more or less theoretical character, and directed mainly against the Narodnik enemies of the bourgeoisie, this collaboration, in fact, proceeded on a more or less satisfactory basis. It was a Legal Marxist—Struve—who wrote the manifesto of the first congress of the RSDLP!

Theirs was an anaemic and emasculated view of Marxism, a “decaffeinated” Marxism, lacking life, struggle and revolutionary vitality. Not accidentally, the Legal Marxists rejected dialectics in favour of Neo-Kantian philosophy. Despite its appearance of uniqueness, and the somewhat special role it played in the early days of the movement in Russia, the same kind of abstract, undialectical and essentially non-revolutionary “Marxism” regularly reappears in the rarefied atmosphere of the universities of all countries, at every stage in the development of the movement. They were, in fact, an early example of what later became known as “fellow travellers”. Despite their intellectual flirtation with Marxism, in their lifestyle and psychology they remained firmly rooted in an alien class. Many years later Struve was to sum up the mentality of the Legal Marxists in the following passage: “Socialism, to tell the truth, never aroused the slightest emotion in me, still less attraction... Socialism interested me mainly as an ideological force—which... could be directed either to the conquest of civil and political freedoms or against them.”[\[73\]](#)

On the face of it, the ideas of the Legal Marxists may now appear to be of merely historical interest. Yet, upon closer examination, one can already discern the outline of future and more portentous disputes. The basic idea underlying the argument of Struve and co. consisted in the following: the material conditions for socialism are absent in Russia, a backward, semi-feudal country; the struggle against tsarism is a struggle for bourgeois democracy, not socialism; the workers’ party should therefore set aside all impossible illusions and realistically rely upon the good offices of progressive bourgeois liberals to usher in the new order. Such, in essence, are the future theories (in reality, the same theory) of Menshevism and Stalinism. In an embryonic form the two fundamentally opposing conceptions of the revolution—reform or revolution, class collaboration or an independent proletarian policy—had already made their appearance in the polemics of Lenin and Plekhanov against the Legal Marxist and Economist trends in the second half

of the 1890s. At this time, no-one who considered themselves a Marxist questioned the idea that Russia was on the eve of a *bourgeois-democratic* revolution. This idea flowed from the entire objective, socio-economic and historical situation. The main struggle was against the autocracy, against feudal barbarism and the heritage of “bureaucratic and serf culture”, as Lenin was later to describe it. The central plank of the Marxists’ argument against the Narodniks was precisely the inevitability of a capitalist phase of development and the impossibility of a special independent path of “peasant socialism” in Russia.

For the Legal Marxists the prospect of a socialist revolution was reduced to a hazy theoretical prospect sometime in the dim and distant future. Such a perspective was quite safe, and basically committed them to nothing. To them, the revolutionary aspect of Marxism seemed quite unreal, whereas the economic arguments about the inevitable victory of capitalism in Russia seemed pre-eminently practical. Just how far these lifeless schema stood from genuine revolutionary Marxism can be seen from the marvellously profound insights in the last writings of Engels’ old age, and in particular his correspondence with Vera Zasulich and other Russian Marxists. While underlining the impossibility of building socialism in a backward peasant country like Russia, old Engels laid heavy stress on the need for *a revolutionary-democratic overthrow of the autocracy, which would then open the way for the socialist revolution in Western Europe*. In the afterword to *On Social Relations in Russia*, written in 1894, Engels poses the question in this way:

“The Russian revolution will also give a fresh impulse to the labour movement in the West, creating for it new and better conditions for struggle and thereby advancing the victory of the modern industrial proletariat, a victory without which present-day Russia, whether on the basis of the [village] community or of capitalism, cannot achieve a socialist transformation of society.”<sup>[74]</sup> By a brilliant application of dialectics, Engels shows how the victory of socialism in the West, in turn, would interact upon Russia, enabling it to proceed straight from semi-feudal conditions to communism. Here revolutionary dialectics are counterposed to the formal logic of “evolution”. Cause becomes effect and effect cause. The Russian revolution, even on a bourgeois-democratic basis, would impel the all-European proletarian revolution, which in turn interacts upon Russia to produce a root-and-branch social transformation. The victory of the socialist revolution in the West enables the Russian workers and peasants to carry through the proletarian revolution in Russia and begin the socialist transformation of society. Under *these* circumstances it would not be theoretically excluded that the old Narodnik idea of the transformation of the village commune to communism might be possible.

Such a bold formulation never entered the heads of Struve or Tugan-Baranovsky, with their abstract formulas, which represented a lifeless and mechanical caricature of Marxism. In her memoirs, Krupskaya recalls that Struve “was himself a Social Democrat of a sort at that time”, but adds that “he was quite incapable of doing any work in the organisation, leave alone underground work, but it flattered him, no doubt, to be called on for advice”.<sup>[75]</sup> These few lines faithfully convey the essence of this layer of bourgeois and middle class intellectuals who “travelled” with the Party, considering themselves to be of it, but never really being in it, and always with one foot in another camp. Through

the medium of this layer the pressure of alien classes were, unconsciously or half-consciously, brought to bear with dire results upon the young and immature forces of Marxism.

Struve, for a time, veered to the left as a result of the general movement of the intelligentsia, under the pressure of the working class in the stormy period of the 1890s, in the direction of Marxism. The relentless ideological criticism from Lenin and Plekhanov also played a role. There is little doubt that the withering criticism of the Russian bourgeoisie in the Manifesto of the First Congress, written by Struve, echoed the fierce controversies with Lenin a couple of years earlier:

“And what does the Russian working class not need? It is completely deprived of what its comrades abroad freely and peacefully make use of: participation in the running of the state, freedom of the written and spoken word, freedom of association and assembly—in a word, all those weapons and means by which the West European and American proletariat is improving its position while struggling for its ultimate emancipation, against private ownership and capitalism—for socialism. But the Russian proletariat can only conquer the political freedom it needs by itself alone.

*“The further you go to the East of Europe, the weaker, more cowardly and baser the bourgeoisie becomes in the political field, and the greater the cultural and political tasks which fall to the lot of the proletariat. On its own strong shoulders the Russian working class must and does bear the cause of winning political freedom. This is an indispensable, though only a first, step towards the realisation of the great historical mission of the proletariat, towards the creation of a social order in which there will be no room for the exploitation of man by man.”*[\[76\]](#)

Like many of the intellectual fellow travellers of Marxism, Struve never came to terms with dialectics. This fundamental theoretical weakness, alongside the usual middle-class hankering after the flesh-pots, the liking for an easy existence and an organic incapacity for personal sacrifice, serve to explain his subsequent development. Struve later broke with Marxism. In 1905 he joined the bourgeois Cadet Party and ended his days as a White émigré. Berdyayev ended up as an apologist for religious mysticism. The others underwent a similar transformation. Struve’s 1898 Manifesto, with its harsh condemnation of the Russian bourgeoisie, thus constitutes an ironically appropriate epitaph both on Struve and the phenomenon of Legal Marxism in general.

### **Lenin and the Group for the Emancipation of Labour**

In the winter of 1894-95, at a meeting in Petersburg of representatives of Social Democratic groups from various parts of Russia, a resolution was passed in favour of a more popular literature for workers to be published abroad. Lenin and E.I. Sponti from the Moscow Workers’ Union were made responsible for negotiating this question with Plekhanov’s Group for the Emancipation of Labour. In the spring of 1895, first Sponti and then Lenin went to Switzerland to establish contact with the Group. The impact

caused among the émigrés by this breakthrough is conveyed in the correspondence of Plekhanov and Axelrod:

“The arrival of E.I. Sponti and then, to a much greater degree, of V.I. Lenin (Ulyanov), were a great event in the life of the Group for the Emancipation of Labour; they were practically the first Social Democrats who had arrived abroad with a request from those who were carrying out the active work of the Social Democratic circles for business-like negotiations with the Group.”<sup>[77]</sup> Up till this moment, the members of the exiled Emancipation of Labour Group had been reduced to the role of onlookers and commentators on the great struggles taking place in Russia. The experience of past failures with people coming from the interior had also made them wary. But the newcomers soon convinced them that there now existed a real basis for the spread of Marxist ideas in Russia. The forces of the young generation joined hands with the exiled veterans. The two emissaries returned to Russia with a commitment on the part of the Group to begin the publication of a Marxist journal, *Rabotnik* (The Worker), while a more popular paper would be published in the interior with the title of *Rabocheye Dyelo* (The Workers’ Cause). The future of Russian Marxism seemed assured.

However, shortly after Lenin’s return to Russia disaster struck. On the night of December 19, as the first issue of *Rabocheye Dyelo* was being prepared for the printers, the police carried out a large-scale raid that carried off most of the leaders. When arrested, Lenin calmly denied that he was a Social Democrat, and when asked why he had illegal literature on him, shrugged his shoulders and said he must have picked it up in the flat of somebody whose name he had forgotten. In a courageous attempt to deceive the police into thinking they had arrested the wrong people, the remaining leaders, with Martov at their head, issued a mimeographed proclamation to the workers: “The League of Struggle... will carry on its work. The police have failed. The workers’ movement will not be smashed by arrests and exile: the strikes and struggles will not end until the complete liberation of the working class from the capitalist yoke is achieved.”<sup>[78]</sup> The ruse failed, and on 5 January 1896, Martov and the others were arrested.

While in prison, Lenin made plans for a major theoretical work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, and even managed to maintain correspondence with the organisation by the skilful use of crude but effective clandestine methods. Messages were written in milk between the lines of books which would show up in yellowish brown when held up to a candle. He made an “inkwell” out of bread and would pop it in his mouth when a guard approached. “Today I have eaten six inkwells,” he wrote. One proclamation, *To the Tsar’s Government*, written in this way, was hectographed and distributed in hundreds of copies. The police went frantically looking for the author, never dreaming that he was already the guest of His Majesty. Despite everything, Lenin preserved his sense of humour, writing to his mother: “I’m in a far better position than most of the citizens of Russia. They can never find me.”<sup>[79]</sup> Some of the prisoners fared less well. One of the leaders of the Petersburg League, Vaneyev, who was arrested with Lenin, caught tuberculosis—still the scourge of Russian gaols today—and never recovered. Another went insane.

The arrests of the “veterans” had an extremely serious effect on the immediate development of the organisation. By removing from the scene the most experienced and politically developed cadres, the leadership fell into the hands of younger people, some of whom were completely raw. The average age of the “old-timers” was actually around 24 or 25. Lenin’s party name was *Starik* (the Old Man). He was 26! The youngsters who now occupied leading positions were 20 or less. They were enthusiastic and dedicated, but politically untutored. The difference soon made itself felt. The striking success of the agitation movement exercised a powerful influence upon the minds of the youth and the intelligentsia, which was moving away from the discredited ideas of Narodism and individual terrorism. New recruits entered the movement. But the general theoretical level was lowered. The battle against the old narrow, propaganda-circle mentality had been won. But in their eagerness to extend the mass influence of the Social Democracy through the vehicle of economic agitation, a section of the more impressionable students was inclined to present the issue in a one-sided way. In 1895-96 there appeared in Petersburg a group in the Technological Institute led by the talented and energetic medical student K.M. Takhtarev which began to argue that the Social Democrats should not see themselves as “leading” the workers but only as “serving” them by helping out in strikes.

Such was the growth in the influence of the Marxists, that the arrested leaders were very quickly replaced. But the quality of the leadership had suffered a severe blow. The tendency led by the student Takhtarev swiftly gained the ascendancy over the “old timers”, who everywhere were pushed to one side. The practical successes of agitation seduced these “activists” seeking an easy way out of the complex problem of building a revolutionary party. At first, almost imperceptibly, they began to adapt themselves to the prejudices of the most backward layers of the working class, arguing that political ideas were too difficult for the masses, and that, anyway, politics was of no concern to the workers interested in improving their economic conditions.

### **The Economist Controversy**

As frequently happens, a serious political difference first expressed itself on a seemingly accidental secondary issue. Before being sent into Siberian exile, in February 1897 Lenin and several other leaders were allowed three days in Petersburg to put their affairs in order. They used the time to hold a discussion with leading members of the League. A heated meeting took place between them and the new leadership, who were preparing to set up separate groups for workers and intellectuals. A sharp disagreement emerged on the question of a “workers’ fund” organised on non-political lines. Without denying the possibility of work in such areas, Lenin, supported by Martov and others, placed the main stress on the need to build up the League of Struggle as a revolutionary organisation. The new leadership, in effect, proposed watering down the programme of the League in order, allegedly, to make it more attractive for workers. Such a dilution of the organisation at an early stage of its development would have been fatal. Lenin argued firmly for the education of worker-cadres who should then be given key positions, but without reducing the organisation to the level of the most backward workers. “If there are any conscious,

individual workers deserving of confidence,” he argued, “let them come into the central group [of the League] and that’s all.”[\[80\]](#)

What lay behind the attitudes of the “youngsters” was an opportunist desire to find a “short cut” to the masses, an impatient desire to reap where they had not sown, together with a barely-concealed contempt for theory. Such, in broad outline, were the common features of all the different varieties of “Economism”, a phenomenon which, more than a worked-out theory or policy, represented an ill-defined mood among certain layers of, particularly, the student youth which had entered the Social Democracy in the 1890s, and who lacked the same solid theoretical grounding that had characterised the earlier generation of Russian Marxists. For the first generation of Russian Marxists, economic agitation was only one part of the work, which always linked agitation with propaganda and tried to draw out the broader issues. The League had succeeded in winning over members from the old Narodnik movement by arguing a political case. On the other hand, the main task in relation to the strike movement was, while setting out from existing levels of consciousness, to raise the level of understanding of the workers and to make them realise through their own experience of struggle the necessity for a complete social overturn. Local agitational leaflets were too limited in their scope to do this. What was needed was a Marxist paper which would not only reflect the life and struggles of the proletariat but would also present the workers with a *generalisation* of that experience, in other words, a revolutionary political organ which would serve to unite the strike movement with the revolutionary movement against the autocracy.

It was precisely on this project that Lenin and Martov were working before they were arrested. But the new leaders of the St Petersburg League of Struggle had other ideas. It should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a *cadre* organisation, still in its early beginnings, attempting to lay down basic principles both in politics and organisation—moreover, a group working in dangerous underground conditions, having only just been hit by a punishing wave of arrests. For Lenin, organisational forms were not shibboleths or mathematical axioms, but part of a living process which changed and adapted with circumstances. His stand on this issue was thus not determined by abstract principles, but by the demands of the moment.

The phenomenon we have just described was not confined to Russia. It coincided with the campaign of Eduard Bernstein in Germany to revise the ideas of Marxism. Everywhere the slogan was raised of “freedom of criticism”, as a guise under which to smuggle alien and revisionist ideas into the party. The same controversies began to surface in the emigration, in the Union of Russian Social Democrats, an organisation set up in 1894, mainly composed of students who had recently joined the Marxist movement. The Union was organisationally independent of the Emancipation of Labour Group, and had effective control of contacts with Russia. They were responsible for collecting funds, the print shop, organising the transportation of clandestine literature and maintaining contacts with the interior. However, in order to preserve its control of the ideological field, the Emancipation of Labour Group insisted on the right to edit the Union’s publications, including the journal *Rabotnik*.

With the majority of the leaders in Siberian exile, only the exiled Group for the Emancipation of Labour remained to conduct a struggle against the new trend. Towards the end of 1897 the student S.N. Prokopovich who up till then had been collaborating with the Emancipation of Labour Group, began to raise similar differences. This must have been a painful blow to the Group, at a moment when at last it looked as though their collaboration with the youth inside Russia was proceeding on a sound basis. Anxious to avoid a break, at first Plekhanov adopted an unusually conciliatory tone. In a letter to Axelrod dated the 1 January 1898, he wrote: "...We must publish his work on agitation: in my view it's not bad, and we must encourage 'young talents' otherwise you know they'll be complaining that we keep them down."[\[81\]](#)

A large part of the initial friction between the two groups undoubtedly sprang from the resentment of the youth at the political protagonism of Plekhanov. They felt slighted and put down by the old timers, and resented the rigorous ideological control exercised over them. Despite Plekhanov's attempts to be conciliatory, the conflicts became more frequent. The students soon seized on what was, admittedly, the weak side of the Emancipation of Labour Group's activities: organisation. They began to pick holes on organisational questions, demanding to see the accounts which were certainly in a chaotic state. Having scored a point here, the youth went on to other issues. The little circle around Plekhanov found itself increasingly beleaguered on all sides. Short of funds, and heavily dependent upon the "youngsters" in the Union of Russian Social Democrats for contact with Russia, the group was now in serious difficulties. The effect of the strains upon the morale and nerves of its members began to show, with increasingly tense relations between Plekhanov and Axelrod. By April 1898, there were clear signs of demoralisation, with Axelrod asking himself whether the group had any reason to exist and Vera Zasulich, alleging illness, talking about dropping out of activity.

In his biography of Plekhanov, S.H. Baron sums up the attitude of the students towards the Emancipation of Labour Group: "Was not the dedication of the Group's principal figure, Plekhanov, to abstract theoretical and philosophical works a patent demonstration of his alienation from Russian reality?... Arguing that they had lost contact with the situation in Russia and were ill-informed concerning its needs, the veteran Marxists were disqualified from leading the movement. Even if the Group had a more realistic vision of the demands of the time, their slowness and inefficiency rendered them incapable of fulfilling the leading role to which it laid claim. While the reins continued in its hands, essential tasks could not be attended to. Those who had founded and given a great initial impetus to the movement had become converted into an obstacle. Yet they refused to make way for those who were better qualified, and who had both a clear awareness of the necessities, and the energies essential for dealing with them. Another similar accusation they made towards them was that the hypercritical attitude of the Group and its intolerance towards divergent opinions impeded the development of new literary minds urgently needed by the movement... Organising the opposition to the veterans, attacking their prerogatives, showing scant respect for their authority, the critics unleashed a kind of guerrilla war against the Group. What they clearly intended was to reduce the power of the veterans, and maybe they even thought about displacing them completely and themselves taking over the leadership of the movement."

To some extent, the tensions between the Emancipation of Labour Group and the newer generation of young people from Russia were comprehensible. Having conducted a stubborn struggle for Marxist theory, Plekhanov was reluctant to take a chance on allowing the newcomers to participate in literary and theoretical work. The subsequent political evolution of the latter showed that Plekhanov had good grounds for apprehension. On the other hand, Plekhanov was not the easiest individual to work with. His aristocratic aloofness and lack of sensitivity rankled and gave cause for resentment, especially among younger colleagues whose feathers he systematically ruffled. Not for nothing did the young Trotsky, who later also fell foul of the old man, characterise him as *matre de tous types de froideur* (past master of all shadings of coldness). However, what lay behind this campaign was the egotism of the intelligentsia, aggravated by the usual frustrations, personal conflicts and exaggerations of exile life. On the other hand, the contempt for theory, and demagogic appeals for “practical politics” and “activity” flowed from the arrogance of the intellectuals, which served for a fig-leaf to cover up their profound ignorance. Baron summarises Plekhanov’s views on these people thus: “Their preoccupation with matters of practical administration characterises them as mere bureaucrats, men lacking in revolutionary passion, and with too narrow a spirit to be able to respond to the grandiose perspectives of the movement.”[\[82\]](#)

As usual, Vera Zasulich attempted to conciliate between Plekhanov and “the youth”. But by the end of 1897, things took a serious turn. Until then, the conflicts between the Union and the Emancipation of Labour Group had been mainly confined to organisational, rather than political questions. But the recent appearance of the journal *Rabochaya Mysl’* (Workers’ Thought) brought about a radical change in the situation.

### ***Rabochaya Mysl’***

At this stage, it would not be correct to say that the “Economist” deviation already existed as a fully-fledged current. But this discussion revealed alarming tendencies and an incipient opportunist trend which gave the “veterans” cause for concern. Their worst fears were confirmed with the appearance of *Rabochaya Mysl’*, the first issue of which came out in St Petersburg in October 1887. This expressed the ideas of the new tendency in the most open and crudest fashion. The first issue had clearly laid down the attitude of the journal:

“As long as the movement was no more than a means to soothe the conscience-stricken intellectual (!) it was alien to the worker himself... the economic base of the movement was obscured by the constant attempt to remember the political ideal... The average worker stood outside the movement... The struggle for economic interests was the most stubborn struggle, the most powerful in terms of the numbers of people it was understandable to, and in terms of the heroism with which the ordinary person would defend his rights to existence. Such is the law of nature. Politics always docilely follows economics, and as a general result political shackles are snapped ‘en route’. The struggle for economic status, (?) the struggle against capital in the field of everyday vital interests and of strikes as a method of this struggle—such is the motto of the workers’ movement.”[\[83\]](#)

The basic idea expressed in these lines is that workers cannot understand and do not need “politics”. The logic of this is that the revolutionary party is an irrelevance. Behind the demagogic advocacy of the independence of the workers from the intellectual leadership is really the independence of the workers from Marxism. The danger implicit in this idea was clear. If the Economists’ arguments were accepted, the party would be dissolved into the politically untutored mass of workers. Already at the meeting between the new leaders of the Petersburg League and Lenin and Martov, when they were released on parole in February 1897, Takhtarev had proposed that delegates of the trade union (Central Workers’ Group) be automatically allowed to participate in the League. Lenin defended the recruiting of workers into the party, but opposed blurring the distinction between the party, representing the most advanced section of the workers, and the broad organisations of the class, particularly at a moment when the party was fighting for its existence under the difficult and dangerous conditions of illegality.

Naturally enough, the Economist trend in general, and *Rabochaya Mysl’* in particular, has got an excellent press from the present-day bourgeois critics of Bolshevism, who are willing to indulge in the most barefaced distortions in order to back any and every tendency against Lenin. The gist of the distortion is approximately as follows: the Economists were democratic, in favour of “opening up the party” to the workers, whereas Lenin was a conspiratorial elitist, determined to keep the leadership in the hands of a small clique of intellectuals, dominated by himself. A classic case of this is A.K. Wildman’s book, *The Making of a Worker’s Revolution*, which is an ill-disguised attempt to use the Economist controversy as a stick to beat Lenin. Unfortunately, “facts are stubborn things”. After searching frantically, Wildman finally discovered that there was actually a worker (just one) on the editorial board of *Rabochaya Mysl’*. But the leading lights of *Rabochaya Mysl’* were all intellectuals from Takhtarev’s group. Most of them ended up as liberals and bitter enemies of socialism, which explains their sympathetic treatment in bourgeois history books. And lo and behold! On page 130 of his book, Wildman is compelled to admit that “despite their control of the leadership, the adherents of *Rabochaya Mysl’* failed to bring worker representatives into the Soyuz Bor’by (League of Struggle), in flagrant contradiction of their theoretical commitments”. (My emphasis.)

Nor did the attempt to curry favour with the “masses” by talking down to them meet with much success. A genuinely revolutionary workers’ paper should not merely reflect the current position and consciousness of the workers, but, setting out from the present level of consciousness, should strive to raise it to the level of the tasks posed by history. Alongside agitational articles dealing with the daily lives and problems of workers, it should include more general articles (propaganda) and also some theory. Even such an ardent admirer of *Rabochaya Mysl’* as Wildman had to admit that “after a few columns, the endless recitation of ‘swindles’ and ‘gyps’ by the bosses and bully ragging by the shop stewards [i.e. foremen], interspersed with blustering expressions of indignation, become wearisome”.<sup>[84]</sup> A worker might buy such a paper once or twice, but then, realising that it is a mere repetition of what he already knows, that no attempt is made to raise his level of understanding or teach him anything new, would invariably get bored

with it and stop reading it. After all, why should one buy a paper that tells you what you already know?

The intellectual theoreticians of *Rabochaya Mysl'* who in words put the worker on a pedestal, in practice showed their contempt for the workers by talking down to them in the pages of their journal, which was merely a glorified strike bulletin. In their desire to be “popular” and produce a “mass paper”, the Economists were tail-ending the working class. The fact was shown up during a strike at the big Maxwell and Paul factory in December 1898. The striking workers, faced with brutal police tactics, chose to defend themselves. The workers’ letters that fell into the hands of the Social Democrats showed how much more advanced and revolutionary they were than the Economists were prepared to admit. One woman worker from the Vyborg district wrote:

“You don’t know what a shame it was for me and all of us. We didn’t half want to go down the Nevsky Prospect [the main upper-class street in the centre of Petersburg] or into the city. It’s really sickening to die in a hole like dogs where no-one can even see you... And another thing I want to tell you: though they captured lots and lots of us—perhaps there are no more left at all—all the same we will stand fast.” Another worker remarked: “It’s a pity we didn’t have a banner. Another time we’ll get hold of both a banner and pistols.”<sup>[85]</sup> The local Social Democrats welcomed this development, and sent an enthusiastic article to the editors of *Rabochaya Mysl'* abroad. The émigré editors appended a statement criticising the workers for exposing themselves to repression. When the St Petersburg group received this issue, they were so incensed that they refused to distribute the journal for several months.

In Kremer’s famous pamphlet, *On Agitation*, the relation between economic agitation and the political struggle is spelt out clearly, when it states that “No matter how broad the workers’ movement is, its success will not be assured until the working class stands solidly on the basis of political struggle”, and that “the attainment of political power is the principal test of the fighting proletariat... Thus the task of the Social Democrat consists of constant agitation among the factory workers on the basis of existing petty needs and demands. The struggle provoked by this agitation will train the workers to defend their own interests, heighten their courage, give them assurance of their own powers and an awareness of the necessity for union, and, in the final analysis ultimately confront them with more serious questions demanding a solution. Prepared in this way for a more serious struggle, the working class will move on to the solution of its most pressing questions.”

However, the Economists interpreted this in an entirely one-sided manner. Economic agitation and crude “activism” were elevated into a panacea. Revolutionary theory was effectively relegated to an unimportant secondary role. In this way, a correct idea was turned into its opposite, giving rise to the anti-Marxist “theory of stages”, which was later to have such a disastrous effect in the hands of the Mensheviks and Stalinists. “Political demands”, wrote the Economist Krichevsky, “which in their nature are common to all Russia, must correspond initially to the experience extracted from the economic struggle

by a given stratum of workers. It is only on the grounds of this experience that it is possible and necessary to move on to political agitation.”[\[86\]](#)

These lines express very clearly the opportunist nature of Economism, which flows from the desire to find a short cut to the masses by watering down the programme of Marxism and abandoning “difficult” demands alleging that the masses are not ready for them. At bottom, this phenomenon was analogous to the politics of “small deeds” advocated by the liberal Narodniks. It fitted in perfectly with the cowardly opportunism of the Legal Marxists, who themselves really represented the left-wing of bourgeois liberalism. Implicit in the ideas of the Economists was the fear of confronting the tsarist authorities, by avoiding political demands and attempting to present the activity of the Social Democrats as a “private affair” between workers and employers on the labour front, leaving the question of the state to others. In reality, the meaning of all the arguments of the Economists was that the Social Democrats should passively adapt themselves to the narrow limits of legality or semi-legality offered to them by the tsarist state.

By confining themselves to economic demands they hoped to avoid the wrath of the authorities. In this sense, Economism was the mirror image of the position adopted by Legal Marxism. It was tantamount to abandoning the revolutionary struggle and handing over the leadership of the movement to the liberals. Such a scheme, however, flew in the face of the facts. If the Economists were willing to adopt a hands off policy in the revolutionary democratic struggle against tsarism, the tsarist state was by no means prepared to stand aloof from the struggle between workers and capitalists. Strike after strike was broken up by the police and Cossacks. Wave after wave of arrests carried off the most active and conscious sections of the workers’ movement.

According to the report of the Bolshevik delegation to the 1904 Amsterdam Congress of the Second International, the average life of a Social Democratic group in Russia at this time was no more than three to four months. The constant wave of arrests carried off the older, more theoretically trained and experienced members, who were replaced by raw, half-prepared youth. This fact was an important element in the rapid rise of the Economist current during the latter half of the 1890s. A party which has such a high turnover, and is obliged to replenish its leadership with a constant influx of inexperienced and theoretically untutored young people, inevitably suffers from a certain ideological dilution and a general lowering of its political level. When the majority of these young people are students and intellectuals, the risk of political degeneration and the influx of alien ideas becomes magnified a thousandfold. A revolutionary party which loses its cadres loses its backbone. Losing its theoretical magnetic North, it is inevitably blown off course. Instead of intervening in the movement of the class in order to provide it with a conscious political direction, such a party is capable only of tail-ending the movement. The Russian Marxists had a graphic word for this tendency: *Khvostism* (tail-ism). Whereas revolutionary Marxism represents the most conscious thinking part of the working class, Economism and all the other schools of reformism personify a different and opposite part of its anatomy. Economism was never a homogeneous ideological trend.

Despite all the problems and setbacks, the new movement was growing rapidly. Social Democratic groups sprang up in Tver, Arkhangelsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Saratov, Kharkov, Kiev, Yekaterinoslav, Odessa, Tiflis, Batum, Baku, Warsaw, Minsk, Riga and many other important centres. For the first time one could speak of a genuinely all-Russian Marxist organisation. The situation in which these groups were forced to function was, however, not conducive to ideological clarity and organisational cohesion. Contacts between them were difficult, irregular and constantly being disrupted. Arrests frequently led to the disruption of some groups and the emergence of new ones. Under the circumstances the task of establishing a firm and authoritative leadership inside Russia proved well-nigh impossible. Inevitably the local Social Democratic groups tended to have a somewhat limited outlook. The absence of stable links with a national centre, the problems created by illegal conditions and the immaturity and inexperience of the majority of the membership, meant that much of the work had a rather local and amateurish character. The Economists' lack of concern with theory and their narrow insistence on the practical tasks of mass work and agitation was only the other side of the same coin. Possibly, the Economist deviations of a part of the Russian youth could have been put down to a case of ideological measles, were it not for the fact that they coincided with a far more serious international phenomenon.

### **Bernstein's Revisionism**

On the 50th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1898 Plekhanov was horrified to read in *Die Neue Zeit* an article by Bernstein, the prominent German Social Democratic leader, which questioned the basic ideas of Marxism. "Why, this is a complete denial both of revolutionary tactics and of communism," wrote Plekhanov. "Those articles nearly made me ill." This was only the opening shot in a sustained campaign which Bernstein waged in the German party press in favour of "revising" Marxism. Bernstein argued that Marxism was out of date. The supposedly "modern" theories of the present-day Labour leaders are only clumsy plagiarisms of notions far more ably expressed by Bernstein a hundred years ago.

Among other things, Bernstein argued that the concentration of industrial production was taking place at a much slower pace than had been foreseen by Marx; the great number of small businesses showed the vitality of private enterprise ("small is beautiful", as they say nowadays!); instead of polarisation between workers and capitalists, the presence of numerous intermediate strata means that society is much more complex ("the new middle classes"); in place of "the anarchy of production", capitalism was capable of being controlled to the extent that crises were less frequent and less severe (Keynesianism and "managed capitalism"); and the working class, apart from being a minority of society was only interested in the immediate improvement of its material conditions of existence ("upwardly mobile").

Of course, these ideas did not drop from the sky. They reflected the pressure of a prolonged period of capitalist economic upswing which lasted for nearly two decades, coming to an end with the First World War. This period of relative social calm and also of relative improvements in the living standards of at least the upper layers of the

proletariat in Germany, Britain, France and Belgium gave rise to the illusion that capitalism was well on the way to solving its fundamental contradictions. The rapid growth in power and influence of the workers' parties and trade unions also spawned a new caste of union officials, parliamentarians, town councillors and party bureaucrats who, in their living conditions and outlook, became progressively removed from the people they were supposed to represent. This stratum, reasonably well-off and lulled by the apparent success of capitalism, provided the social base for revisionism, a petty bourgeois reaction against the storm and stress of the class struggle, a yearning for the creature comforts and the desire for a peaceful and harmonious transition to socialism—in the dim and distant future.

Axelrod's reaction to Bernstein's articles in *Die Neue Zeit* (New Times) was initially more tolerant than Plekhanov, who was outraged by them. In fact, both Axelrod and Zasulich were shaken to the point of demoralisation by the controversy. The impressionable Vera Zasulich, in particular, was tormented by doubts. Only Plekhanov remained absolutely firm, rallying his colleagues and launching himself into the fray. His articles against Bernstein and Konrad Schmidt (on philosophy, in defence of dialectical materialism) show Plekhanov at his finest: an indefatigable fighter in defence of the fundamental ideas of Marxism. The most prominent representatives of the left-wing of the SPD, Rosa Luxemburg and Parvus, launched a fierce counter-attack. But what shocked Plekhanov more than anything else was the reaction of Kautsky.

Generally regarded as the guardian of Marxist orthodoxy *par excellence*, Kautsky was also a personal friend of Plekhanov. But now he not only permitted the use of *Die Neue Zeit*—the journal of which he was editor—for this anti-Marxist diatribe, but also he initially refrained from criticising Bernstein in print. In the light of subsequent history, Kautsky's silence was significant. For all his scholarly theses on revolution and the class struggle, Kautsky's Marxism had an abstract, scholastic character. Whereas Plekhanov regarded Bernstein as an enemy to be attacked, unmasked and, if necessary, driven out, Kautsky still saw him as an erring companion, whose theoretical eccentricities ought not to spoil an agreeably friendly relationship. Kautsky's attitude is clearly revealed in a letter he wrote to Axelrod on the 9 March 1898, congratulating him on his articles against Bernstein in the following terms: "I am most interested in your opinion of Eddie. Indeed, I'm afraid we're losing him... However, I have still not given him up as a bad job and I hope that when he enters into personal—if only written—contact with us, then something of the old fighter will return to our Hamlet (sic), and he will once again direct his criticism against the enemy and not against us."[\[87\]](#)

When finally pushed and prodded by Plekhanov to make a public reply, Kautsky was careful to invest this with the softest possible tone, almost apologising for taking him up: "Bernstein has obliged us to re-consider things and, for that, we should thank him." Infuriated by this, Plekhanov wrote an open letter to Kautsky with the title *Why Should We Thank Him?* in which, among other things, he sharply posed the question: "Who will bury whom? Will Bernstein bury the Social Democracy, or the Social Democracy, Bernstein?"[\[88\]](#)

While the members of the Emancipation of Labour Group reacted sharply to Bernstein's attempt to water down the revolutionary teachings of Marx, he had his admirers among the Russians. Before this, the Economist deviations lacked a coherent theoretical content. Now, beginning with the exiles, they eagerly seized on Bernstein's ideas as a justification for their opportunist tendencies. Although *Rabochaya Mysl'* sought to avoid politics like the plague, nevertheless it had a very definite political line—a reformist and anti-revolutionary line: “The development of factory legislation,” it declared, “workers’ insurance, the participation of workers in profits, the development of trade unions will gradually transform capitalist society into socialist society... Not the aggravation of poverty of the proletariat, not the aggravation of the conflict between capital and labour, not the aggravation of the internal contradictions of capitalist production will lead to socialism, but rather the growth and development of the strength and influence of the proletariat.”[\[89\]](#)

The ideologues of *Rabochaya Mysl'* were students and intellectuals through whom the pressure of the bourgeois-liberals was brought to bear upon the workers' movement. Their open admiration for Bernstein was no accident. They represented a specific Russian variant of the international phenomenon of revisionism, which in turn was an expression of the interests of the middle-class “progressives” in the West who had drawn close to the workers' movement when it was clear that the latter had definitely established itself as a powerful social agency and therefore a potential source of jobs, prestige and income. Indeed, from the very earliest days of the German Social Democracy, Engels had continually warned against the pernicious influence of the university “Katheder Sozialisten”, people like Dühring who graciously deigned to offer their services to the labour movement with a view to prodding it along the road of reformist class collaboration.

However, the parallel holds good only within certain limits. The social context in which Economism arose was very different to that in which German revisionism was born and prospered. Just as the Russian bourgeoisie represented a feeble and anaemic growth in comparison to mighty German, French and British capitalism, so the Russian Bernsteinists were very much the poor relations of international opportunism. They had no ideas of their own, other than the shifting fads, moods and prejudices of the intellectuals. What ideological baggage they possessed was lifted from the Germans and British. Reformism has a material base. Capitalism in Britain, Germany and France still had a progressive role to play in the development of the productive forces. The period of economic upswing which preceded the First World War, the amelioration of the lot of a section of the masses, and the consequent softening of relations between the classes was the social and economic premise for the rise of Bernsteinite revisionism. But the seeds which prospered in the soil of economic progress in the West proved virtually barren in the harsh and rocky terrain of Russia. Here there was no large labour aristocracy, but a mass of pauperised proletarians, slaving in large-scale industry. Only in one area did the ideas of Economism find the necessary raw material to get an echo in the working class.

With the most experienced leaders now almost all in gaol, the level of the average member fell to an extremely low point. The ideas of Economism became widespread in

the local committees. The practical consequences of this were seen as early as May Day 1899, when the young group in Petersburg put out a leaflet calling for a ten-hour working day, in contrast to the internationally accepted slogan of the eight-hour day, an action which was denounced in the first issue of *Zarya* as “a betrayal of international Social Democracy”.[\[90\]](#)

In order to place the movement in Russia on a firm footing, it was necessary to put an end to this state of affairs. The pressing need for a united party with a stable leadership and, above all, an all-Russian Marxist newspaper, was felt by everyone. Only with the launching of Lenin’s *Iskra* did the unification of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party become a viable proposition. But before that an attempt was made to launch the Party through a founding congress.

## NOTES

[72] *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. xxii, no. 34, p. 350 in both quotes.

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, p. 410.

[75] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 29-30.

[76] *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh s’yezdov. Konferentsii y plenumov tsk*, vol. 1, p. 15 (my emphasis).

[77] *Perepiska GV Plekhanova i PB Aksel’roda*, p. 127.

[78] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 228.

[79] Quoted in R. Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin*, p. 112.

[80] Quoted in Wildman, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

[81] *Perepiska GV Plekhanova i PB Aksel’roda*, p. 182.

[82] Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-5 and 255.

[83] Quoted in F. Dan, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

[84] A.K. Wildman, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[85] Quoted in Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 71.

[86] Quoted in F. Dan, *op. cit.*, pp. 216 and 218.

[87] *Perepiska G.V. Plekhanova i P.B. Aksel'roda*, pp. 208-9.

[88] Baron, *Plekhanov—the father of Russian Marxism*, p. 238.

[89] Quoted in Wildman, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[90] Quoted in Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 262.

## Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 5 of 7]

### The First Congress of the RSDLP

At ten o'clock in the morning of 1 March 1898 (17 March, Old Style), a group of nine people gathered together in the flat of the railway-worker Rumyantsev in the western town of Minsk. The purpose of the gathering was ostensibly the name-day of Rumyantsev's wife. In the next room a stove was kept burning, not because of the cold, but to burn compromising papers in the event of a police raid. With the close proximity of a mounted police barracks, and the fact that the nine persons concerned were the leaders of Social Democratic groups from Moscow, Kiev, Petersburg and Yekaterinoslav, as well as the *Rabochaya Gazeta* (Workers' Journal) group and the Jewish Social Democratic organisation, the Bund, such precautions were clearly necessary. Under these conditions, the first and last congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party took place on Russian soil under tsarism. For some years the need for a congress to formalise the existence of the Party, elect a leadership and unify the local groups had been evident. From his prison cell, Lenin had earlier managed to smuggle out a draft programme for the Party, painstakingly written in milk between the lines of a book.

Some progress had already been made. The underground groups had agreed to rename themselves Leagues of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class and even to produce an illegal paper with the title *Rabocheye Dyelo* (Workers' Cause). A clandestine committee was set up in Kiev for the purpose of printing the journal, the first issue of which appeared in August 1897 (although for reasons of clandestinity, it was dated November). The Kiev organisation was also entrusted with the arrangements of the congress, since it had escaped the worst of the arrests. Nevertheless, the idea of convening a congress inside Russia under these conditions was fraught with difficulties. Certain groups—such as the young group in Petersburg, the Odessa and Nikolaev groups, and the Union of Social Democrats Abroad—were not invited on the grounds of being security risks. The Kharkov group, on the other hand, declined to participate arguing that the setting up of the Party was premature.

It was no accident that the First Congress was held in Minsk. The Polish and western areas, as we have seen, were hotbeds of anti-tsarist revolutionary agitation where the two

aspects of social and national oppression combined to create an explosive atmosphere. The strike movement of the 1890s acted as a focal point for the accumulated rage, bitterness and hatred of the oppressed nationalities, particularly the Jews. The movement of Jewish workers and artisans led to the setting up of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia in 1897, a year before the First Congress of the Russian Party itself. For the first two or three years after its formation, as Zinoviev remarks, the Bund was "the strongest and most numerous organisation of our party".<sup>[91]</sup> At the time of the First Congress, the Bund enjoyed far greater resources and a larger membership than Social Democratic groups in the rest of Russia, with 14 local organisations (or "committees" as they were then known) in Warsaw, Lodz, Belostok, Minsk, Gomel, Grodno, Vilna, Dvinsk, Kovno, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Berdichev, Zhitomir and Riga. Lesser committees also existed in many other areas, including Kiev, Odessa and Brest-Litovsk.

However, the Bund's organisation was always more akin to a trade union movement than a revolutionary party. Even Akimov had to admit that the political level of its leadership was low: "I regard this as an unquestionable shortcoming of the Bund: the Jewish proletariat lacks theoreticians."<sup>[92]</sup> In reality, as we have already seen, the bulk of its members were not proletarians but artisans and craftsmen. The chief authority consisted of a central committee (CC) of three, elected at the biennial congress. At local level the Bund organised trade union groups (often misleadingly translated as "trade councils") propaganda committees and committees of intellectuals, discussion groups and agitation committees, all of which seem to have functioned more or less separately. The trade union groups gathered together 5-10 members of the Bund in a given trade. These were appointed by the CC and appear to have met regularly to discuss trade union matters. Only after August 1902 did the Bund, under the pressure of *Iskra*, set up revolutionary committees which grouped together the most advanced workers separate and apart from the trade union groups. The whole structure of the Bund was organised on a completely un-Marxist basis, with workers in trade union groups shut off in watertight compartments from intellectuals who worked autonomously in their own committees.

Despite the shortcomings of the Bund, the Jewish socialist workers and artisans played an important role in the early days of the movement. The fact that the first congress was held in Minsk was a recognition of that role. Only the Bund had the resources to organise such a congress under the very noses of the tsarist police. It is a tribute to their organisational skills that the congress successfully completed its course in six sessions which took place over three days. As no minutes were taken, practically all that is known of the proceedings is contained in the resolutions. Under the pressure of the Bund, it was agreed that "the General Workers' Union of Russia and Poland enters the party as an autonomous organisation, independent only in those questions especially relating to the Jewish proletariat".<sup>[93]</sup>

This concession to the national prejudices of the Bund was to give rise to a major polemic in the next period, when the national question occupied a central place in the deliberations of the Russian Marxists. While implacably opposing the oppression of national minorities in all its manifestations, and defending the rights of oppressed

nationalities including the right to self-determination, Lenin insisted on the necessity to maintain the unity of the workers' organisations and fought against any tendency to divide them on national lines.

The Social Democratic movement, as we have seen, made spectacular progress among the Jewish workers and artisans on the western borderlands of the Russian Empire. The leadership of the newly-formed Jewish workers' organisation, the Bund, however, identified closely with the reformist standpoint of the Economists. The lack of a strong leading centre had the effect of aggravating the tendencies of local particularism, which had especially harmful effects on the relationship between the non-Russian socialists and their Russian counterparts. The leadership of the Bund began to develop a narrow, nationalist, standpoint which, if left unchecked, would have had extremely dangerous consequences for the Jewish workers themselves, as an oppressed minority. Osip Piatnitsky recalled that, in 1902 "the Jewish workers were organised earlier and work among them was easier than among the Lithuanians, Poles and Russians. The directing centre of the Jewish workers did not do any work among non-Jews, and did not want to work among them."

At the same time, the existence of national divisions had led to the splitting of even the most basic organisations of the working class. There was not a single union in western Russia which accepted as members workers of all nationalities. The parties themselves, divided on national lines, maintained their own unions—the Lithuanian Social Democrats, the Polish Social Democrats, the PPS, and, of course, the Bund, which played an extremely negative role in perpetuating divisions which were seriously hampering the cause of workers in general, and Jewish workers in particular. The instinct of the Jewish workers was in favour of unity, but the leaders insisted on keeping them separate. Piatnitsky mentions a meeting of a Bund committee which he attended, "where the fact was discussed that, owing to their lack of class consciousness, the Russian workers were hindering the economic struggle of the Jewish workers, since, when the latter went on strike, the Russians took their places. Their decision on this question displayed the wisdom of Solomon: a few Russian workers must be induced to agitate among their own comrades".[\[94\]](#)

The narrow craft traditions, and the small-scale and artisan character of much of the industry in this area, was the social base upon which the Jewish Social Democratic organisation, the Bund, grew up. The jewellers, cobblers, tailors, engravers, typesetters and tanners of Vilna proved more amenable than the Petersburg textile and metal workers to the ideas of Economism. Even here, however, the real reason for the phenomenon lay with the ideological confusion of the leadership. Vladimir Akimov, the extreme Economist, in his book on the early history of the Russian Social Democracy, is obliged to admit that the Vilna Social Democratic workers complained that the party was "not political enough":

"It was the workers themselves, who demanded the introduction of a 'political' element into the Social Democratic agitation. It was they who were determined to expose the wrongs of the political system, to bring out the people's lack of rights, to formulate the

interests of the workers as a citizen. But the revolutionary organisation, which hoped to guide (!!) the labour movement towards Social Democratic ideas, was afraid that it would not be understood by the working masses (!), that it would lose its influence if it now raised its own demands for 'political' rights as the demands of the proletariat. Was the working class already well enough educated politically to appraise, to recognise its own interests? The leaders were not certain of this and hesitated to act.”[\[95\]](#)

These few lines convey, better than anything else, the contemptuous attitude of the Economists towards the workers in whose name they purported to speak. The underlying idea is a complete lack of confidence in the ability of ordinary working people to understand the need for political struggle. Yet the necessity for social and political change confronts the workers at every stage in the struggle. Arising out of the economic struggle against individual employers, the workers inevitably draw the conclusion at a certain moment in time of the need to effect a thorough going transformation of society. And long before that, as the entire history of the working class movement from Chartist times onwards demonstrates, the proletariat understands the need to fight for every partial political and democratic demand which serves to strengthen its position, develop its class organisations and create the most favourable conditions for a successful struggle against its oppressors.

In view of the bloody history of Russian tsarism, the maintenance of a principled position on the national question undoubtedly posed colossal difficulties. It was a measure of the degree of mistrust and tension between the nationalities that the Lithuanian Social Democrats, after some hesitation, decided not to attend the congress of a “Russian” party, much to the chagrin of Dzerzhinsky who later wrote: “I was the severest enemy of nationalism and considered it the greatest sin that in 1898, whilst I was in prison, the Lithuanian Social Democracy did not enter the united Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.”[\[96\]](#)

Similarly, the congress made some concessions to the pressures of the local committees, jealous of their local autonomy: “The local committees,” says the resolution, “will carry out the depositions of the CC in the manner which they consider most suited to local conditions. In exceptional cases, the local committees reserve the right to refuse to carry out the demands of the CC, informing it of the reasons for the refusal. In all other matters, the local committees will function in a completely independent manner, being guided only by the party programme.”[\[97\]](#)

A Central Committee of three was elected; it was agreed to issue a manifesto; the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad was recognised as the party’s representative in the exterior; and *Rabochaya Gazeta* was named as its official organ. However, the hopes aroused by the congress were not destined to be fulfilled. One of the participants, Tuchapsky, recalls in his memoirs: “We left the Congress with a feeling of cheerful faith in our cause. Arriving in Kiev I gave a report back to the League and the Workers’ Committee. The congress resolutions were fully approved. It looked as if the work would now go forward still better and more successfully than in the past. But only a week after my return the Kiev organisation was smashed.”[\[98\]](#)

Before the month was out, five out of the nine participants had been arrested, including one CC member. The sole achievement of the CC was to publish the agreed Manifesto, written by Struve, who, while already moving to the right, made a surprisingly good job of it—his last service to the cause he was soon to betray. The First Congress had achieved everything it was able to achieve. The Party at least existed as a potential, a banner and a Manifesto. But conditions in Russia made it impossible to effect unification of the party on a principled basis. All the congress could do was to point the way. From 1898 until 1917, no further congress of the Party was to be held on Russian soil. The experience had served to demonstrate the impossibility, under conditions of illegality, of building a viable political centre inside Russia. The centre of gravity of the organisation inevitably passed to the exterior, where the forces of revolutionary Marxism, under conditions of relative security, could regroup and prepare for the next stage: the translation into reality of what had been attempted in Minsk in 1898.

In practical terms, the congress had changed very little. Trotsky, who had heard about it in prison at Kherson, commented that “a few months afterwards, no-one talked about the congress anymore”.<sup>[99]</sup> After the initial wave of excitement, the local committees sank back into the routine of local work, producing endless leaflets and proclamations in connection with the strike movement, which continued to spread. The groups inside Russia continued to function with little or no contact either with each other or with any kind of political centre. To the prevailing political confusion was added organisational chaos and amateurish methods of work.

### ***Rabocheye Dyelo***

Paradoxically, the convening of the First Congress coincided with the lowest ebb of the Group for the Emancipation of Russian Labour. Relations with the émigré youth were at breaking point. A congress of the Union of Social Democrats Abroad convened in Zurich in November 1898, only served to underline the isolation of the Emancipation of Labour Group. At the meeting, the youngsters had a majority and used it to capture control of the Union. In view of the now sharp differences of opinion within the Union, the veterans in the Emancipation of Labour Group had no choice but to resign from their positions. The leadership of the Union—notably Krichevsky, Ivashin and Teplov—were inclined towards the Economist position, but were embarrassed by the overt reformism and Bernsteinism of the *Rabochaya Mysl'*, the most extreme expression of Economism, represented in the Union by S.N. Prokopovich and his wife Y.D. Kuskova. They therefore decided to wind up *Rabotnik*, and launch a paper of their own, *Rabocheye Dyelo*, in line with the decisions of the Minsk congress.

Whereas *Rabochaya Mysl'* represented a clear and open defence of Bernstein's theory and Economism, *Rabocheye Dyelo* represented a trend which, as Lenin observed, was “diffuse and ill-defined, but for that reason the more persistent, the more capable of reasserting itself in diverse forms”.<sup>[100]</sup> The paper was published as the organ of the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad from 1899 to 1902, with the editorial board in Paris and its print-shop in Geneva. Its editors included such prominent spokesmen of Economism as B.N. Krichevsky and A.S. Martynov. Martynov later graduated from

Economism, via Menshevism, to Stalinism, without having to modify his fundamental principles at any stage.

From the outset, the *rabochyedeltsy* tried to play hide-and-seek with the ideas of Marxism, claiming that their differences with the Emancipation of Labour Group were not political but organisational and tactical. However, the link between *Rabocheye Dyelo* and Bernsteinism is indicated by the articles which appeared in the European socialist press, written by the editors of *Rabocheye Dyelo* in defence of Bernstein and Millerand, the opportunist French socialist leader who joined a bourgeois coalition in the early years of this century. To the supporters of *Rabocheye Dyelo* must go the honour of inventing the notorious theory of stages, later appropriated in a modified form by the Mensheviks and then by the Stalinists. This crudely mechanical and reformist theory held that before the workers were ready for socialist revolution, they had first to pass through a number of stages. First, purely economic agitation, then political agitation linked directly to economic agitation, and then purely political agitation! In fact, the Russian workers did not wait for the Economists to inform them when they were ready for political agitation, but proceeded to take up the political struggle, as shown by the rising graph of political strikes and demonstrations in the early years of this century.

This was the blackest moment in the life of the Emancipation of Labour Group. Isolation and the stresses of the factional struggle brought to the surface all the accumulated frictions within the group. Particularly serious was the row between Axelrod and Plekhanov which now came to a head. Axelrod had reason for complaint. For years, he had had to carry the burden of the work with the Union, taking the brunt of the attacks of the youth, while Plekhanov was absorbed in literary work, and of late had neglected even that. For a long time Plekhanov ignored Axelrod's pleas to intervene against the new trend; rather, he tried to collaborate with the new journal, which was beginning to gain support. The reasons for his attitude were probably varied: partly, he was tied up with the struggle against Bernstein, and begrudged the time and effort in getting involved in what seemed like pettifogging squabbles. Partly he underestimated the danger, attributing it to a transient phase and youthful fads. Most probably of all he was afraid of a split with the youth which would cut their links with Russia and lay themselves open to the accusation that they were undermining the work of the comrades in the interior. The apparent lack of a point of support within Russia was a serious problem for Plekhanov and his colleagues.

But by early 1899, Plekhanov could hold back no longer. The last straw was when Bernstein boasted that the majority of Russian Social Democrats were closer to his ideas than to Plekhanov's. The Legal Marxists Struve, Bulgakov and Berdyayev also publicly lined up behind the revisionist tendency. Most alarmingly of all, from December 1898, the Economist youth dominated the St Petersburg Social Democrats. Realising that the formerly amorphous trend of Economism now represented a specifically Russian variant of Bernstein's revisionism, Plekhanov set to work on a major counterblast, the famous *Vademecum for the Editors of Rabocheye Dyelo*, which appeared in 1900. He followed it up with a further article, *Once Again Socialism and the Political Struggle*, published in the new theoretical journal *Zarya*, in which he criticised the attempt of *Rabocheye Dyelo*

to blur the differences between the conscious revolutionary advance guard and the mass of the working class:

“The entire working class is one thing,” he wrote, “and the Social Democratic party is another, for it forms only a column drawn from the working class—and at first a very small column...I think that the political struggle must immediately be started by our party which represents the advance guard of the proletariat, its most consistent and revolutionary stratum.”[\[101\]](#) Plekhanov now threw himself into the struggle, regardless of whether it would cause a split. His new-found confidence received a powerful impulse as a result of events taking place thousands of miles away, in Siberia.

From the depths of the Siberian wilderness, Lenin and the other Social Democratic exiles followed with alarm the unfolding of events. Paradoxically, it was relatively easy for them to maintain at least a certain level of political activity. The era of Stalin’s and Hitler’s concentration camps had not yet dawned. The treatment of political exiles varied considerably, from extreme harshness to relatively liberal conditions. But in the main, the tsarist authorities were content to rely upon the vast distances which separated the urban centres from the isolated settlements on the banks of the Yenisey river as sufficient defence against the spread of revolutionary ideas. Political prisoners were not generally locked up. There was no need for it. They were kept under surveillance by local officials whose zealotry in the pursuit of duty was often conspicuous by its absence. As a result, the exiled revolutionaries could follow events with relative ease, receiving books and newspapers, conducting correspondence, and even holding illegal meetings. Lenin, while working on his monumental *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, keenly followed the polemics of Plekhanov against Bernstein. News of the crisis in the Union, and the resignation of Plekhanov came as a painful blow. The victory of the Economist trend caused consternation among the exiles. Lenin began to write a series of polemics, such as *Our Immediate Task, A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social Democracy* and *Apropos of the ‘Profession de Foi’*[\[102\]](#) in which the ideas of Economism are subjected to merciless criticism.

An event which enraged the exiles was the appearance of the notorious *Credo* written by Kuskova early in 1899. The author of the document herself always protested that it was not meant for publication. However that may be, there is no doubt that the *Credo* has the merit of expressing in a particularly clear way the fundamental ideas of Economism. Lenin drafted the famous *Protest of the Russian Social Democrats*[\[103\]](#) by way of reply and convened a meeting of 17 exiles which met in the Siberian village of Yermakovskoe late in the summer of 1899. The meeting unanimously adopted Lenin’s text which was sent abroad where it was published by Plekhanov.

The words of the *Credo* are worth quoting: “The change [in the party] will not only be towards a more energetic prosecution of the economic struggle and consolidation of the economic organisations, but also, and more importantly, towards a change in the party’s attitude to other opposition parties. *Intolerant Marxism, negative Marxism, primitive Marxism (whose conception of the class division of society is too schematic) will give way to democratic Marxism, and the social position of the party within the modern*

*society must undergo a sharp change. The party will recognise society: its narrow, corporative and, in the majority of cases, sectarian tasks will be transformed into social tasks, and its striving to seize power will be transformed into a striving for change, a striving to reform present day society on democratic lines adapted to the present state of affairs, with the object of protecting the rights (all rights) of the labouring classes in the most effective and fullest way...*

“The talk about an independent workers’ political party merely results from the transplantation of alien aims and alien achievements to our soil... For the Russian Marxist there is only one course: participation in, i.e. assistance to, the economic struggle of the proletariat, and participation in liberal opposition activity.”[\[104\]](#)

The logic of the *Credo* could not be clearer: the working class should not strive to create its own revolutionary party, but should confine itself to “practical” trade union work and leave the political task of reforming the present system to the bourgeois liberals.

Lenin’s polemical writings against the Economists, beginning with the *Protest* are a classical re-statement of the basic ideas of Marx and Engels on the question of the proletariat and its party. The proletariat only gradually begins to realise its historical potential, to become a real force as opposed to an undeveloped potential, to the degree to which it organises as a class, independent of other classes.

The history of the workers’ movement begins with the unions, the basic organisation of the class which were “not only a natural, but also an essential phenomenon under capitalism and... an extremely important means for organising the working class in its daily struggle against capital and for the abolition of wage-labour”. But once established, the trade unions cannot confine their sphere of activity to economic demands, but inevitably tend to move into the political plane. Here, what is involved is not the sporadic struggles of individual groups of workers against their employers, but the struggle of the proletariat as a whole against the bourgeoisie as a class, and its state. Of necessity, the proletariat and its party enters into contact with other classes, the peasantry and the middle class, and has to establish working relations with other groups, but it does so from the standpoint of its independent interest as a class. Indeed, its role is to place itself at the head of all other oppressed and exploited layers to carry out a fundamental transformation of society. “Only an independent working-class party,” wrote Lenin, “can serve as a strong bulwark in the fight against the autocracy, and only in alliance with such a party, only by supporting it, can all the other fighters for political liberty play an effective part.”[\[105\]](#)

Thus, at the very earliest beginnings of the movement in Russia, the dividing line was clearly drawn between two trends. The first, a revolutionary Marxist trend, which based itself upon the working class and linked the perspective of a revolutionary overthrow of tsarism to the struggle for the hegemony of the working class in the camp of revolutionary democracy, implacably opposing all attempts to subordinate it to the liberals and “progressive” bourgeois. The second, a reformist current which, whilst paying lip-service to Marxism, effectively preached the policy of *class collaboration* and

subservience to the liberals. This, in essence, was the basis of the disagreement between Marxists and Economists. In different guises, the same struggle reoccurred many times in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement, and with other names—although basically the same argument—continues to the present day.

In reality what is required is the creation of cadres, educated in the theory and practice of Marxism and integrated in the working class movement, starting with its most active and conscious layer. The class-composition of the party must be decisively proletarian. Students and intellectuals can play an important role, fertilising the movement with their ideas and assisting its development, on one condition—that they have decisively broken with their class and placed themselves not only in words but in everyday practice on the standpoint of the proletariat. The problem with the Economists was that they saw, not the face of the proletariat, but only its backside.

That the movement in Russia should begin with the intelligentsia is not at all surprising. This is almost a law, and still more so in the case of Russia, given the whole history and conditions of the Russian revolutionary movement of the 1870s and 1880s. But under the new conditions, the whole situation was becoming transformed. A new generation of worker-revolutionaries was rapidly coming to the fore, the first graduates of the “university” of the Marxist circles of the 1890s. For the first time, in many areas workers began to take the running of the committees into their own hands. This was not, as some have falsely maintained, the result of the democratic theories of the Economist intellectuals, who, as we have seen, despite their workerism proved to be extremely reluctant to move over and make room for the workers in the leading committees, as Lenin demanded. It was almost entirely as a result of the constant wave of arrests, which continually carried off the more experienced leaders.

The need to escape detection and arrest, the most basic requirements of existence under the police regime, and not any preconceived theory of organisation, was the reason why the dominant trend in Social Democracy at this time was based upon a highly centralised conception of organisation. The word of the centre was law, and there could be no question of normal democratic functioning. A small central directing committee, not subject to election, was renewed by co-option. Subordinate to it were a series of commissions—for propaganda, agitation, fund raising, printing, and so on. Under existing conditions, this mode of operation was absolutely necessary. Even then, it did not prevent the infiltration of the organisation by agents provocateurs, who frequently succeeded in obtaining key positions in the party. However, the principle of centralism was often carried too far by the intelligentsia who dominated the committees. Lenin from the outset insisted on the need to train worker-cadres and bring them onto the leading bodies. But this work often clashed with the narrowness and insensitivity of the leading layer, who jealously guarded their prerogatives and interpreted the idea of centralism in a one-sided way, always finding a hundred reasons for not being able to co-opt fresh workers onto the committees.

The situation was completely upset by the wave of arrests in the latter half of the 1890s. Overnight, a layer of workers who had never had experience of leadership was forced to

take over the reins. The worker Prokofiev describes his reaction to the sudden arrest of the leaders of the Moscow organisation in 1893: "I was depressed, sick and ashamed. I was left suddenly without leaders. This was an irreparable blow. When I told my comrades, we groaned and sat around as at a funeral," but then they concluded that "...there was nothing to do but to hold out and continue the work ourselves. So we set out and began to work on our own." Workers like Babushkin in St Petersburg came into their own in this period. Exiled in Yekaterinoslav in the south, then a turbulent centre of revolt, Babushkin showed himself able to run an organisation unaided.

The general disorganisation, together with the baneful influence of Economist ideas, meant that in several areas the organisation was divided between a group for workers and a separate one for intellectuals. This erroneous method existed in Yekaterinoslav, where it inevitably created conditions for the growth of mistrust and mutual antagonism. "I remember," writes Babushkin, "that the *intelligentsy* often criticised the unliterary language of the leaflets [of the workers], and finally one was shortened and somewhat altered by the 'city' committee. This provoked a direct clash which threatened to lead to a complete breach between the workers and the intelligentsia."<sup>[106]</sup> In general, the development of the Moscow Workers' League does not differ fundamentally from that of the St Petersburg League of Struggle, which set the pattern for the rest of the country and which we still take as our basic point of reference. The Muscovites had suffered from a series of arrests, especially after 1896 when Zubatov took over the Moscow police department and made use of unreliable and weak-willed elements to obtain information about the league and send in agents provocateurs.

After each wave of arrests, the organisation renewed itself with new workers who learned in practice to trust their own ability and resourcefulness. A few years later, Lenin forcefully reminded the "committee-men" who had no confidence in the ability of workers to run the party that in this period, workers like Babushkin had done precisely that. Despite this, however, the party entered the 20th century in a very precarious condition. By 1900, the Economist trend appeared to have triumphed all along the line. In the western area, the Economists ruled supreme. In the Ukraine, they also had a predominant position. The Kiev committee actually backed the extreme Economist line, the *Credo*. However, there were signs that the mood of the rank-and-file was beginning to react against this situation. Under the influence of the tireless Babushkin, the Yekaterinoslav organisation, which at the turn of the century had about 24 circles with up to 200 workers involved in them, came out against Economism.

In January 1900, on the instigation of the Yekaterinoslav organisation, *Yuzhny Rabochii* (the Southern Worker) was launched. It put out a total of 13 issues until April 1903 when it ceased publication. *Yuzhny Rabochii* opposed Economism, but lacked a sufficiently firm theoretical basis and was inclined to wobble. A typical product of the local circle spirit and amateurism of the times, the editorial board was made up of the representatives of local committees with different shades of opinion, a fact which was reflected in the paper's ambiguous wavering attitude in the struggle between *Iskra* and Economism, though it finally fused with *Iskra*.

A similar tendency was represented by the tiny group around *Bor'ba* (the Struggle), a paper launched by David Ryazanov. Recognising Ryazanov's literary talent, and anxious to secure support for *Iskra* and *Zarya*, Lenin went out of his way to interest him in joint work, though in practice, the *Bor'ba* group represented very little, consisting of a group of intellectuals in Paris. Inside Russia, only the Odessa committee identified with it. It was a typical example of a small intellectual sect, whose activity consisted exclusively of literary work, and whose ideas were a hotch-potch of bits and pieces borrowed from other tendencies, but whose pretension to stand above all factions in reality placed it on an infinitely lower plane than any of them. Similar groups constantly surface in the history of the revolutionary movement, and invariably play a pernicious role, insofar as they play any role at all.

*Bor'ba's* attempt to play the "honest broker" between *Iskra* and *Rabocheye Dyelo* soon brought it into collision with the consistent Marxist trend. Ryazanov tried to put pressure on *Iskra* by refusing to collaborate unless they toned down their criticism of *Rabocheye Dyelo*. When this blackmail had no effect, he dissolved the "*Iskra* promotion group" in Paris and began to complain that *Iskra* had "violated organisational neutrality".<sup>[107]</sup> In the end, Lenin gave them up as a bad job. The *Bor'ba* group, despite their high pretensions, played no further role. At the Second Congress, they were not admitted, and the group soon folded. Ryazanov later re-surfaced as a lecturer at the Capri school of the ultra-left *Vperyod* (Forward) faction in 1909 (not to be confused with the paper of the same name set up by Lenin in 1904). Despite his faults, Ryazanov was undoubtedly a talented intellectual. After the revolution, he became the director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, until he, like so many others, was purged by Stalin.

### **The Birth of *Iskra***

The entry into the struggle of the exiled Russian leaders tipped the balance decisively in favour of Plekhanov. Still in Siberia, Lenin formed the "troika" or triple alliance with Martov and Potresov which, on his insistence, took steps to link up with the Emancipation of Labour Group. His fundamental idea was to re-build the party around a genuine Marxist newspaper. Such a venture was clearly only possible if they joined Plekhanov in European exile. Having served out his term of exile, in early 1900, Lenin travelled illegally to St Petersburg where he met Vera Zasulich, who had been sent to establish contacts with the interior. The following months were taken up by preparations for the publication of the new journal *Iskra*, involving a series of visits to Social Democratic groups in different parts of European Russia, where Lenin and his co-thinkers were agreeably surprised by the favourable reception of their ideas by a significant section of the rank-and-file. By the summer of 1900, everything was ready for direct contact to be established with Plekhanov's group.

With high hopes, Lenin left for Switzerland in July. His high spirits did not last long. After the bitter experience of the split in the Union, Plekhanov's nerves were on edge. He was sullen, resentful and extremely suspicious of the newcomers. The discussions between Plekhanov, Axelrod and Zasulich on the one side and Lenin and Potresov on the other unfolded in an extremely tense atmosphere. Lenin and Potresov were shocked by

Plekhanov's intolerant and abrasive manner. At times, the negotiations appeared to be near to a breakdown. In *How the "Spark" Was Nearly Extinguished*<sup>[108]</sup>—an article written shortly after Lenin's return with the recent events still vivid in his mind—Lenin expresses the painful impression of Plekhanov's behaviour on him: "My 'infatuation' with Plekhanov disappeared as if by magic, and I felt offended and embittered to an unbelievable degree. Never, never in my life had I regarded any other man with such sincere respect and veneration, never had I stood before any man so 'humbly' and never before had I been so brutally 'kicked'."

Plekhanov's behaviour can be understood. He had had a series of bad experiences with younger people coming from the interior, and was still smarting from the coup of the youth in the Union Abroad. There was also a difference of opinion on how to proceed. In their anxiety to recuperate the maximum forces of the movement in Russia, Lenin and the others had made a number of concessions to Struve, including the statement in the original draft declaration that *Iskra* would be open to different political tendencies. This mistake was seized upon by Plekhanov, who vented his accumulated rage on the astonished newcomers. This incident casts a significant light on the state of affairs within the Emancipation of Labour Group. The long period of isolation from the workers' movement in Russia had taken its toll.

Many years later, in 1922, when the October revolution was already five years old, and Plekhanov had been dead for four, Trotsky expressed both the strong and weak sides of the old man in the following words: "Plekhanov spoke as an observer, like a critic, like a publicist but not like a leader. His whole destiny denied him the opportunity of directly addressing the masses, of summoning them to action and of leading them. His weak sides flowed from the same source as did his chief merit: he was a forerunner, the first crusader of Marxism on Russian soil... He was not the leader of the active proletariat, but merely its theoretical harbinger. He defended polemically the methods of Marxism, but he did not have the opportunity of applying them in practice. Though living for several decades in Switzerland, he did remain a Russian exile. Opportunist municipal and cantonal Swiss socialism with its extremely low theoretical level hardly interested him. There was no Russian party. For Plekhanov its place was taken by the 'Emancipation of Labour' group, that is a close circle of sympathisers (Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich and Deutsch, who was serving hard labour). The more Plekhanov strove to strengthen the theoretical and philosophical roots of his position, the more he was short of these political roots. As an observer of the European Labour movement, he passed utterly without attention over the most colossal political manifestations of petty-mindedness, cowardice and compromise by the socialist parties; yet he was always on his guard against theoretical heresies in socialist literature. This violation of the unity of theory and practice which had grown out of the whole destiny of Plekhanov proved fatal to him. He proved unprepared for the great political events in spite of his great theoretical preparation."<sup>[109]</sup>

The meeting with Lenin and Potresov revealed just how much the members of the Emancipation of Labour Group were lagging behind the demands of the present stage of the movement. The informal methods, the organisational looseness, the mixing up of personal questions with political issues which are the hallmarks of the life of a small

propaganda circle, become intolerable obstacles once the organisation of a mass party and serious intervention in the mass movement are on the order of the day. Thanks mainly to Lenin's great patience—and also to the fact that the consequences of a split were clear to everyone—a break was avoided. But although reasonably good working relations were quickly restored, the deeper causes of the conflict remained unresolved and were destined to re-emerge with redoubled force in the future. The compromise which was eventually reached between the two sides meant that *Iskra* would have an editorial board of six, consisting of the troika—Lenin, Martov and Potresov—and the Emancipation of Labour Group—Plekhanov, Axelrod and Zasluch, with Plekhanov having two votes. Control of the theoretical journal, *Zarya* (The Dawn) would be effectively in Plekhanov's hands. But relations between the old members of the Emancipation of Labour Group and the new editors had been seriously damaged. “Outwardly,” wrote Lenin, “it was as if nothing had happened: the apparatus continued to work as it had worked until then, but within a cord had broken, and instead of splendid personal relations, dry, business-like relations prevailed, with a constant reckoning according to the principle: *si vis pacem, para bellum* [if you desire peace, prepare for war].”[\[110\]](#)

The *Declaration of the Editorial Board of Iskra*[\[111\]](#) was published in September. It reads like a declaration of war on all other tendencies in the Russian workers' movement. Unlike the original draft drawn up by the troika, it denounces by name not only Bernstein and *Rabochaya Mysl'* but also *Rabocheye Dyelo* and Struve (Plekhanov was particularly insistent on this). Lenin's initial draft was written in a generally more conciliatory vein. The corrected version has a more implacable tone:

“Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation. Otherwise, our unity will be purely fictitious, it will conceal the prevailing confusion, and hinder its radical elimination. It is understandable, therefore, that we do not intend to make our publication a mere storehouse of various views. On the contrary, we shall conduct it in the spirit of a strictly defined tendency. This tendency can be expressed by the word Marxism, and there is hardly need to add that we stand for the consistent development of the ideas of Marx and Engels and emphatically reject the equivocating, vague and opportunist ‘corrections’ for which Edward Bernstein, P. Struve and many others have set the fashion.”[\[112\]](#)

The explicit denunciation of Legal Marxism, mentioning its most prominent representative by name was a turning point. Even so, Struve did not immediately effect an open break with Marxism, and even contributed one or two articles to the first issues of the paper. However, the first encounter of Struve with Lenin in exile, towards the end of 1900, led to an open confrontation. Struve's arrogant demands for an increased say in the editorial line of the paper gave the game away. The relationship between the Marxists and the left liberal trend which went by the name of Legal Marxism, as Lenin later explained, was the first example of an episodic agreement between the Russian Marxists and another political trend. Without making any principled concessions, and maintaining an implacable criticism of the political deviations of the Legal Marxists, Lenin was prepared to enter into practical agreements with them for the sake of advancing the work

in Russia, outwitting the police and censor and reaching a broader audience than would have been possible with the narrow limitations of illegal work. But there was an underlying contradiction from the beginning. The two trends were fundamentally incompatible, and, ultimately, the contradiction would have to be overcome by the triumph of one over the other.

At one stage it almost looked as if the supporters of Economism and revisionism had won. The Russian workers' movement would thus have found itself tied hand and foot to the chariot of liberalism. And the agency through which this political subordination would have been effected was none other than Legal Marxism. The launching of *Iskra*, with its uncompromising stance on Economism and revisionism, its implacable defence of class independence and criticism of the liberals completely transformed the situation. Now Struve and his allies found themselves on the defensive. Yet Struve still attempted to use his name and influence to dominate the new journal, to push and prod it into a rotten compromise with the old, discredited ideas. Struve's complaint that Lenin was trying to "use" him could hardly cut any ice when in the previous period Struve himself had cynically used his considerable influence with the weak and immature forces of Russian Social Democracy to water down and distort its fundamental ideas and turn it into a mere appendage of liberalism.

Contrary to the impression created by bourgeois historians, there was nothing base or disloyal about Lenin's attitude to political opponents like Struve. Such practical agreements as were reached were freely entered into by both sides, and both sides had their eyes open. As we have seen, Lenin had come under severe criticism by Plekhanov who considered that he had made too many concessions to Struve. This was entirely in Lenin's character. Ever implacable on questions of political principle, he was always extremely flexible on organisational questions and in his dealings with people. Lenin knew how to value people with talent. Whatever their shortcomings, he endeavoured with admirable patience to make use of their abilities to build the movement. But there was also another side. Once Lenin had made his mind up that someone was an irreconcilable enemy of the ideas of Marxism, he did not hesitate to draw all the necessary conclusions and wage a relentless political struggle against them. In this, Lenin's approach was in stark contrast to the members of the Emancipation of Labour Group.

The members of the old group, especially Zasluch and Axelrod, could not bring themselves to burn the bridges that still connected them to the layer of semi-liberal intellectual fellow travellers like Struve, even when, after 1902, their transition to the camp of bourgeois liberalism was clear to all. Yet it was Plekhanov who demanded that Lenin insert a public attack on Struve in the editorial statement! This incident, too, shows the differences in the whole style and personality of the two men. Zasluch once expressed it graphically in the following terms: "George (Plekhanov) is a greyhound: he shakes his victim by the scruff of the neck and in the end lets him go; you (Lenin) are a bulldog: you don't let go."<sup>[113]</sup> As early as 1895, Axelrod had chided Lenin for his vehement attacks on Struve in the article *The Economic Content of Narodism and the Criticism of it in Mr Struve's Book*:<sup>[114]</sup> "You have a tendency," Axelrod complained, "which is the exact opposite of the tendency of the article I was writing for the miscellany

[the article, typically, was not finished and never appeared]. You identify our attitudes to the liberals with the socialists' attitudes to the liberals in the West. And I was just preparing for the miscellany an article entitled *The Requirement of Russian Life*, in which I was out to show that at this historical moment, the immediate interest of the proletariat in Russia coincided with the main interests of the other progressive element of the public..."

"Ulyanov smilingly replied: 'You know, Plekhanov said exactly the same thing about my article. He gave a picturesque term to his thought:— "You turn your back to the liberals," he said, "and we turn our face to them..."'." [115]

All along, Lenin's implacable opposition to the liberals was a bone of contention with the old editors. Zasluch was particularly offended by it:

"Zasluch began to complain, in the peculiar, timidly insistent tone which she always assumed for such occasions, that we were attacking the liberals too much. That was a sore point with her.

"'See how eager they are about it,' she would say, looking past Lenin, though it was really Lenin whom she was aiming at. 'Struve demands that the Russian liberals should not renounce Socialism, because if they do, they will be threatened with the fate of the German liberals; he says they should follow the example of the French Radical Socialists.'

"'We should strike them all the more,' said Lenin with a gay smile, as if he were teasing Vera Ivanovna.

"'That's nice!' she exclaimed in utter despair. 'They come to meet us and we strike them down'." [116]

*Iskra* was so successful because it fulfilled a number of needs. As a workers' newspaper it was a model. Here, simply expressed in a language which, without any trace of condescension, could be understood by any intelligent worker, was the theoretical answer to the ideas of the Economists and their allies. After the years of ideological confusion, the reaction of the socialist workers inside Russia to the new journal must have been like that of Aristotle when he likened the philosopher Anaxagoras to "a sober man among drunkards". The paper's masthead displayed a quotation from the reply of the Decembrists, writing to the poet Pushkin from Siberian exile: "The Spark will kindle a Flame!" Nearly a century after they were written, these lines were destined to come true.

Alongside the systematic exposure of the crimes of tsarism at home came detailed explanation of foreign policy, laying bare the intricacies and manoeuvres of bourgeois diplomacy. The life of the international workers' movement was closely followed. But above all *Iskra* was a paper which accurately reflected the life, the struggles and the aspirations of the working class. In every issue a large amount of space was taken up by quite short reports from the factories and workers' districts, painstakingly collected by

*Iskra* agents inside Russia and smuggled out by clandestine means. In this way, often with a delay of months, the workers of different parts of Russia learned about the struggles of their brothers and sisters in other parts of the country and abroad. Small wonder that the paper was an instant success in the interior. The number of local party committees adhering to the new journal rapidly increased, opening up daily new possibilities but also imposing severe burdens on the still inadequate apparatus at the disposal of the exile centre.

In *Iskra* issue 7 (August 1901), a letter from a weaver vividly expressed the enthusiasm with which each issue was received by the advanced workers in Russia:

“I showed *Iskra* to many fellow workers and the copy was read to tatters: how we treasure it—much more than *Mysl'*, although there is nothing of ours printed in it. *Iskra* writes about our cause, about the all-Russian cause which cannot be evaluated in kopecks or measured in hours: when you read the paper, you understand why the gendarmes and the police are afraid of us workers and of the intellectuals whom we follow. It is a fact that they are a threat, not only to the bosses' pockets, but to the tsar, the employers, and all the rest... It will not take much now to set the working people aflame. All that is wanted is a spark, and the fire will break out. How true are the words ‘The Spark will kindle a Flame!’ In the past, every strike was an important event, but today, everyone sees that strikes alone are not enough and that we must now fight for freedom, gain it through struggle. Today everyone, old and young, is eager to read but the sad thing is that there are no books. Last Sunday, I gathered 11 people and read to them *Where to Begin*. We discussed it until late in the evening. How well it expressed everything, how it gets to the very heart of things... And we would like to write a letter to your *Iskra* and ask you how to teach us, not only how to begin, but how to live and how to die.”[\[117\]](#)

Plekhanov and Axelrod wanted the paper to be published in Switzerland, where they could keep an eye on it. Lenin, Martov and Potresov were determined to publish elsewhere, and moved to Munich. In point of fact, the members of the Emancipation of Labour Group did not fully grasp the significance of *Iskra* as a means of organising the party. They centred their attention on *Zarya*, which was published legally in Stuttgart between April 1901 and August 1902, when a total of four numbers, published in three issues, came out. The only member of the Emancipation of Labour Group who was keen to participate in *Iskra* was Vera Zasulich, who travelled to Munich on a false Bulgarian passport. The bulk of the work of organising the journal fell to Lenin. His wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya played an invaluable role handling the extensive correspondence with Russia which reached them indirectly, via the addresses of German comrades, who forwarded them to Krupskaya.

The task of organising an illegal transportation network was full of difficulties. According to Osip Piatnitsky (Party name, Freitag), who was later made responsible for this work, the transportation of *Iskra* from Berlin to Riga, Vilna and Petersburg took several months. Nor was the work free from blunders of all sorts. In his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Bolshevik (Zapiski Bol'shevika)*, Piatnitsky relates how they would utilise the services of Russian students to carry literature in false-bottomed cases. These cases

were manufactured by a small factory in Berlin. A large order was placed for the product. But the frontier guards soon got wind of the trick. They learnt to pick out the tell-tale cases, which happened to be all the same style! After that, they began to use ordinary suitcases, with 100-150 copies of the paper hidden under a false bottom of strong cardboard. But the demand for *Iskra* continually outstripped supplies. New methods had to be found. Between 200 and 300 copies could be carried in specially stitched waistcoats and skirts. Even so, these methods had to be supplemented by the establishment of underground print-shops inside Russia, which printed *Iskra* from the layout sheets smuggled in from abroad. Print-shops of this sort were eventually set up in Moscow, Odessa and Baku. The endless details involved in such work absorbed a colossal amount of time and energy. It also took a lot of money, which was raised from sympathisers by *Iskra* agents in Berlin, Paris, Switzerland and Belgium who constantly sought funds and travellers prepared to carry literature, contacts, safe addresses and so on.

### ***What Is To Be Done?***

At the time of launching *Iskra*, the party in Russia hardly existed as an organised force. In the midst of ideological confusion, factional divisions gave rise to a series of splits and the setting up of small groups. In Petersburg alone, at the turn of the century, there was the “Group for the Self-Emancipation of the Working Class”, the “Group of Workers for the Struggle with Capital”, “Workers’ Banner”, “The Socialist”, “Social Democrat”, “Workers’ Library”, “The Workers Organisation” and others, all claiming to speak in the name of the RSDLP. Many of these groups were influenced by the ideas of the Economists. One common feature was the desire for a “pure proletarian” image. The first-named group advanced the idea that the interests of the intellectuals were at variance with those of the workers. This explains why the Petersburg League of Struggle itself, having been taken over by the *Rabochaya Mysl’* faction of extreme Economism, actually split into two groups—one for workers and the other for intellectuals! Of course, all this posturing revealed, not a proletarian tendency, but precisely the opposite: the snobbishness of intellectuals who imagine that the way to win the workers is by pandering to the prejudices of the most backward layers of the working class. In the same way as the old Narodniks tried, with calamitous results, to “go to the people”, the would-be middle class revolutionist tries to curry favour by “abasing” himself before the workers, in reality demonstrating at one and the same time a pathetic lack of understanding of, and a deep-seated contempt for, working people.

Lenin’s writings on organisation produced at this time are masterpieces in their own right. The idea of the paper as a collective organiser is brilliantly set forth in such works as *Where to Begin*, *Letter to a Comrade* and *What Is To Be Done?*<sup>[118]</sup> In the first named of these works, the kernel of Lenin’s ideas is already clear: “The role of a newspaper, however, is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser... With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organisation will naturally take shape that will engage, not only in local activities, but in regular general work, and will train its members to follow political works carefully, appraise their significance and their effects on the various strata

of the population and develop effective means for the revolutionary party to influence those events. The mere technical task of regularly supplying the newspaper with copy and of promoting regular distribution will necessitate a network of local agents of the united party, who will maintain constant contact with one another, know the general state of affairs, get accustomed to performing regularly their detailed functions in the All-Russian work, and test their strength in the organisation of various revolutionary actions.”[\[119\]](#)

There is possibly no other work in the history of Marxist ideas which has been so ill-served as Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* Written between late 1901 and early 1902, this work was intended as a final settling of accounts with the Economists, and therefore has an extremely polemical slant throughout. Undoubtedly, there is a rich seam of ideas present in this work, which is, however, seriously flawed by a most unfortunate theoretical lapse. Whilst correctly polemicising against the Economists’ slavish worship of “spontaneity”, Lenin allowed himself to fall into the error of exaggerating a correct idea and turning it into its opposite. In particular, he asserts that socialist consciousness “would have to be brought to them [the workers] from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc”.

This one-sided and erroneous presentation of the relationship of the working class and socialist consciousness was not an original invention of Lenin, but was borrowed directly from Kautsky, whom he regarded at that time as the main defender of orthodox Marxism against Bernstein. Indeed, Lenin quotes approvingly the words of Kautsky that “The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the *bourgeois intelligentsia* [K.K.’s italics]: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians, who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. *Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without [von Aussen Hineingetragenes] and not something that arose within it spontaneously [urwüchsig].*”[\[120\]](#)

Here the one-sidedness of Kautsky’s formulation stands out in all its crudity. It is true that Marxist theory, the highest expression of socialist consciousness, was not thrown up by the working class, but is the product of the best that has been achieved by bourgeois thought, in the form of German philosophy, English classical political economy and French socialism. However, it is not true that the proletariat, if left to itself, is only capable of rising to the level of trade union consciousness (i.e. the struggle for economic betterment within the confines of capitalism). Over a decade before the *Communist Manifesto* saw the light of day, the British working class, through the medium of Chartism—which Lenin himself described as the first mass revolutionary workers’ party in the world—had already gone far beyond the bounds of a mere trade union consciousness, passing from the idea of partial reforms and petitions to the idea of a general strike (“the grand national holiday”) and even armed insurrection (the “physical force” men, the Newport uprising). Likewise, the working men and women of Paris

actually succeeded—without the presence of a conscious Marxist party at their head—in taking power, if only for a few months, in 1871. Let us recall that Marx himself learned from the experience of the Paris Commune, from which he extracted his idea of a workers' democracy ("dictatorship of the proletariat"). In the same way, the idea of soviets (councils) was not the invention of Lenin or Trotsky, but the spontaneous creation of the Russian proletariat during the 1905 revolution.

Does this mean that Marxists deny the importance of the subjective factor—that is, the revolutionary party and leadership? On the contrary. The whole history of the world working class movement shows that the proletariat needs a revolutionary party and leadership in order to take power. But the subjective factor cannot be created by "spontaneous combustion". It cannot be thrown up by events or improvised when the need arises. It has to be prepared painstakingly in advance over a period of years, perhaps decades. The question of the building of the revolutionary party and the movement of the class, however, are not the same thing. The two processes can be represented by two parallel lines that for a long time do not intersect. The working class learns from experience and draws revolutionary conclusions slowly and with great difficulty. Engels explained that there are periods in history in which twenty years are as a single day. Under the dead weight of habit, routine and tradition, the masses continue in the same old rut, until they are forcibly shaken out of it by great events. By contrast, Engels adds, there are other periods in which the history of twenty years is concentrated in the space of 24 hours.

Time and time again the working class has proven in action that it tends to move towards power. The Spanish proletariat, as Trotsky explained, was capable of making ten revolutions in the period 1931-37. In the summer of 1936, the workers of Catalonia, once again without the benefit of a Marxist leadership, smashed the fascist army and, effectively, had power in their hands. If they did not succeed in organising a workers' state and consolidating their hold on power, spreading the revolution to the rest of Spain, that was not their fault but the responsibility of the anarchist and syndicalist leaders of the CNT-FAI and the POUM. The workers' leaders, by refusing to finish off the remnants of the bourgeois state and organise a new workers' state power on the basis of democratically elected soviets of factory and militia deputies, signed the death knell of the Spanish revolution. In any event, what happened in Catalonia and other parts of Spain in 1936 was far beyond "trade union consciousness". The same can be said of France 1968 and any case where the working class attempts to begin to take its destiny into its own hands.

Ideas do not drop from the clouds, but are formed on the basis of experience. In the course of its experience, the proletariat inevitably draws certain general conclusions about its role in society. Under certain conditions, in the turmoil of great events, the learning process can be enormously speeded up. But even in normal periods of capitalist development, the old mole of history continues to burrow deep in the consciousness of the proletariat. At decisive moments, events can burst over the head of the working class before the latter has had time to draw all the necessary conclusions. The role of the advanced guard is not at all to "teach the workers to suck eggs", *but to make conscious*

*the unconscious will of the working class to transform society.* In this idea there is no hint of mysticism. Life itself teaches, as Lenin was fond of repeating. From a lifetime's experience of exploitation and oppression, the working class, beginning with the active layers which lead the class, acquires a socialist consciousness. That is precisely the basis of the historical process which led to the birth of the trade unions and the mighty parties of the Second and Third Internationals. *The elements of a socialist consciousness and the idea of a radical transformation of the social order are present in the rule books and constitutions of countless unions, bearing mute testimony to the underlying desire for change. The class struggle itself inevitably creates not only a class consciousness, but a socialist consciousness.* It is the duty of Marxists to bring out what is already there, to give a conscious expression to what is present in an unconscious or semiconscious form.

Those who mechanically repeat the error of *What Is To Be Done?* nearly a century later do so without realising that Lenin himself later admitted that this incorrect formulation was merely a polemical exaggeration. When, at the Second Congress of the RSDLP, an attempt was made to use this against him, Lenin replied: "*We all now know that the 'Economists' have gone to one extreme. To straighten matters out somebody had to pull in the other direction—and that is what I have done.*"[\[121\]](#) In his biography of Stalin, Trotsky comments in these words: "The author of *What To Do?* himself subsequently acknowledged the biased nature, and therewith the erroneousness, of his theory, which he had parenthetically interjected as a battery in the battle against 'Economism' and its deference to the elemental nature of the labour movement."[\[122\]](#)

In spite of this defect, *What Is To Be Done?* was a major landmark in the history of Russian Marxism. In it, Lenin conclusively demonstrated the need for organisation, the need for professional revolutionaries whose main concern would be the building of the party and the need for a genuine mass All-Russian workers' party. In order for the proletariat to take power, it must be organised. Failure to achieve this task would mean, as Trotsky explained, that the potential force of the working class would be uselessly dissipated, like steam which is dispersed in the air, instead of being concentrated by a piston-box.

The essential idea which runs through *What Is To Be Done?* is *the need to train worker cadres*, not just class conscious trade union militants, but workers with a clear grasp of the ideas of Marxism: "*Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of political activity.*" What Lenin was driving at here was not at all a belittling of the capacity of the workers to understand but quite the opposite. His main concern was to combat the petty bourgeois prejudice that "workers cannot understand theory" and that the party literature must confine itself to economic slogans and immediate demands. On the contrary, Lenin insisted that "it is necessary that the workers do not confine themselves to the artificially restricted limits of 'literature for workers' but that they learn to an increasing degree to master general literature. It would be even truer to say 'are not confined', instead of 'do not confine themselves' because the workers themselves wish to read and do read all that is written for the intelligentsia, and only a few (bad) intellectuals

believe that it is enough ‘for workers’ to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over again what has long been known”.[\[123\]](#)

Starting from the immediate problems of the working class, fighting for all kinds of partial demands, it is necessary to go beyond the particular and establish the link with the general, from the struggle of groups of workers against individual employers, to the struggle of the working class as a whole against the bourgeoisie and its state. In a brilliant line of argument, Lenin established the dialectical interrelation between agitation, propaganda and theory and explained the way in which the small forces of Marxism, by winning over the most advanced layers of the class, can subsequently win over the mass of the proletariat, and through the latter, all other oppressed layers of society—the peasantry, the oppressed nationalities, the women. The Economists were initially successful because they merely adapted to the prejudices of the most backward layers of the workers. But as Lenin argued: the workers are not children to be fed on such thin gruel. They do not want to be told what they already know. The workers have a thirst for knowledge, which it is the duty of the Marxists to satisfy. Taking as the starting point the immediate problems of the working people, it is necessary to raise the level of consciousness to a full understanding of its role in society, pointing the way forward out of the impasse.

## NOTES

[91] Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 51.

[92] Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 223.

[93] *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh*, vol. 1, p. 16.

[94] O. Piatnitsky, *Zapiski Bol'shevika*, pp. 25 and 26.

[95] Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*, p. 215.

[96] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 260.

[97] Quoted in *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh*, vol. 1, p. 17.

[98] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 265.

[99] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 117.

[100] LCW, *What Is To Be Done?* vol. 5, p. 349.

[101] Quoted in Akimov, *On the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903*.

[102] See LCW, vol. 4, pp. 215-221 and 255-296.

[103] Ibid., pp. 167-182.

[104] The full text of the *Credo* is reproduced in Lenin's *Collected Works, A protest by Russian Social Democrats*, vol. 4, pp. 171-4 (my emphasis).

[105] Ibid., pp. 176-7 and 181.

[106] Quoted in Wildman, op. cit., pp. 93 and 106.

[107] LCW, *To P.B. Axelrod, April 25, 1901*, vol. 34, p. 60.

[108] Ibid., pp. 333-349.

[109] Trotsky, *Political Profiles*, pp. 85-7.

[110] LCW, *How the 'Spark' was nearly Extinguished*, vol. 4, p. 348.

[111] LCW, vol. 4, pp. 351-6.

[112] See Lenin's initial draft in LCW, *Draft of a Declaration of the Editorial Board of Iskra and Zarya*, vol. 4, pp. 320-330. Quoted here is LCW, vol. 4, pp. 354-5.

[113] Quoted in Trotsky, *Lenin*.

[114] LCW, vol. 1, pp. 333-507.

[115] *Perepiska GV Plekhanova i PB Aksel'roda*, p. 270.

[116] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 171.

[117] *Iskra*, No 7.

[118] *Where to Begin* (LCW, vol. 5, pp. 17-24), *Letter to a Comrade* (LCW, vol. 6, pp. 235-252) and *What Is To Be Done?* (LCW, vol. 5, pp. 349-529).

[119] LCW, *Where to Begin*, vol. 5, pp. 22-3.

[120] LCW, vol. 5, pp. 375 and 383-4 (my emphasis).

[121] LCW, *Second Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 6, p. 491 (my emphasis).

[122] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 58.

[123] LCW, vol. 5, p. 369 (my emphasis) and p. 384, note.

# Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 6 of 7]

## The Second Congress

The winter of 1902-03 saw “a desperate struggle of tendencies”[\[144\]](#) but gradually the political and organisational superiority of *Iskra* won the day. Committee after committee declared for the congress. Only a few expressed reservations. *Yuzhny Rabochii* criticised *Iskra* for its harsh treatment of the liberals. In desperation, the followers of *Rabocheye Dyelo* attempted to split a series of local committees, inciting the workers against “intellectuals”. Unfortunately, errors and clumsiness by *Iskra* supporters played into the hands of the opposition in some areas. In St Petersburg, they allowed the *rabochedeltsy* to reverse the decision to support the congress. This, however, proved to be only a hiccup. By the time the congress was convened, only one committee, Voronezh, decided to stay away.

The congress finally convened on the 17 July 1903 in Brussels, where its first 13 sessions were held. The attentions of the police forced the Congress to move to London where it re-convened as an Anglers’ club, periodically changing the venue to different workers’ meeting places to avoid detection. At the First Congress, the movement in the interior had been represented by only five local committees. The present gathering could now claim to represent several thousand members, with influence over hundreds of thousands of workers. The majority of delegates were young, mostly under 30 years old. Lenin, at 33, was already a veteran. The rapid pace of revolutionary events in Russia was a forcing house for the development of the young cadres of Marxism. Only the former members of Plekhanov’s Emancipation of Labour Group stood out as the representatives of an older revolutionary generation, belonging to a different epoch, almost a different world.

The conditions for acceptance as a delegation was a minimum of 12 months’ existence as an active organisation. Several local committees (Voronezh, Samara, Poltava, Kishinev) were not invited because they did not fulfil this condition. There were 43 delegates with 51 full votes. Partly because in many areas there was more than one local committee, every delegation was given two full votes, whether or not there were more than one delegate present. The Central Committee of the Bund was given three votes (one for the Bund’s foreign organisation), and the two Petersburg organisations, one vote each. In addition, there were 14 people present with a consultative vote, including two representatives of the Polish and Lithuanian Social Democracy who arrived during the tenth session.

A great deal of time was taken up with the question of the place of the Bund in the party. This debate was of crucial importance in clarifying the Marxist attitude towards the national question. The historic significance of this can be gauged by the fact that without a clear position on the national question, the Russian revolution could never have been successful. In *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky gives a succinct definition of the Bolshevik position on the national question: “Lenin early learned the inevitability

of this development of centrifugal national movements in Russia, and for many years stubbornly fought—most particularly against Rosa Luxemburg—for that most famous paragraph of the old party programme which formulated the right of self-determination—that is, to complete separation as states. In this the Bolshevik Party did not by any means undertake an evangel of separation. It merely assumed an obligation to struggle implacably against every form of national oppression, including the forcible retention of this or that nationality within the boundaries of the general state. Only in this way could the Russian proletariat gradually win the confidence of the oppressed nationalities.

“But that was only one side of the matter. The policy of Bolshevism in the national sphere had also another side, apparently contradictory to the first, but in reality supplementing it. Within the framework of the party, and the workers’ organisations in general, Bolshevism insisted upon a rigid centralism, implacably warring against every taint of nationalism which might set the workers one against the other or disunite them. While flatly refusing to the bourgeois state the right to impose compulsory citizenship, or even a state language, upon a national minority, Bolshevism at the same time made it a verily sacred task to unite, as closely as possible, by means of voluntary class discipline, the workers of different nationalities. Thus it flatly rejected the national federation principle in building the party. A revolutionary organisation is not the prototype of the future state, but merely the instrument for its creation. An instrument ought to be adapted to fashioning the product; it ought not to include the product. Thus a centralised organisation can guarantee the success of a revolutionary struggle—even where the task is to destroy the centralised oppression of nationalities.”[\[145\]](#)

The Bund had played an important role in the early days of the movement, which earned it considerable prestige and enabled it to exercise a decisive influence on the First Congress, where it entered the RSDLP on the basis of autonomy. The weakness of the Russian Social Democracy meant that the Bund, in practice, led an independent existence up to the Second Congress, developing strong nationalist tendencies. At the Second Congress, the Bundists in effect spoke as an independent party, which was only prepared to enter the RSDLP on a loose, federal basis, which would have meant the legalisation of *separate organisations of the Jewish workers*. Lieber, the Bundist spokesman, justified this on the grounds of the special position of the Jewish workers, suffering not only from class oppression but also racial oppression, which Russian workers would not have the same degree of interest in combating. Answering Lieber, Martov said: “Underlying this draft is the presumption that the Jewish proletariat needs an independent political organisation to represent its national interests among the Social Democrats of Russia. Independently of the question of organising the party on the principle of federation or that of autonomy, we cannot allow that any section of the party can represent the group, trade or national interests of any sections of the proletariat. National differences play a subordinate role in relation to common class interests. What sort of organisation would we have if, for instance, in one and the same workshop, workers of different nationalities thought first and foremost of the representation of their national interest?”[\[146\]](#)

Of course, on purely practical grounds, it would be possible to give a certain degree of autonomy to national groups within the party. This would, however, be of a purely

technical character, arising from the need, for example, to publish material in the different languages of the groups concerned. There would have been no objections to the Bund enjoying the necessary autonomy to produce Party literature in Yiddish and conducting agitation among the Jewish workers and artisans with special material, etc. But what the Bund demanded was the exclusive right to speak in the name of the Jewish proletariat and, in effect, to have a monopoly of Jewish affairs within the Party. When the Bund's pretensions were decisively rejected, its delegates abandoned the Congress. They were soon followed by the other representatives of the right wing, the Economists Martynov and Akimov, who were present as representatives of the émigré Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad, who walked out when the Congress recognised the rival League of Revolutionary Social Democrats as sole representatives of the party abroad. These walk-outs decisively changed the balance of forces at the Congress.

Over the years, the events of this Congress have been heavily overlaid with a crust of myths, inventions and downright falsehoods. Here, it is alleged, Bolshevism emerged, fully clad and armed, like Pallas Athene from the head of Zeus. Yet closer examination reveals that the split between "Bolsheviks" ("majority-ites") and "Mensheviks" ("minority-ites"), or more accurately between "hards" and "softs" in 1903 was by no means final but only an anticipation of future differences.

The *Iskra* group, in theory, had a clear majority with 33 votes. The open opponents of *Iskra* held eight votes—three Economists and five Bundists. The remaining votes were held by indecisive, wavering elements, whom Lenin later characterised as the "centre" or "the marsh". At first, everything seemed to be going smoothly for the *Iskra*ites. There was complete unanimity in the *Iskra* camp on all political questions. Then suddenly everything started to change. During the 22nd session, when the Congress had been going on for two weeks, differences between Lenin and Martov began to surface. The crystallisation of two trends within the *Iskra* camp was quite unforeseen. There had been tensions, of course, but nothing that would seem to justify a split. On a number of secondary issues (role of the Organising Committee, the *Bor'ba* group, *Yuzhny Rabochii*),<sup>[147]</sup> it became clear that some of *Iskra*'s supporters had voted with the right wing and the "marsh". But these things seemed to be mere anecdotes. On all the important questions, the *Iskra* camp remained united. But suddenly, the unity was broken by an open clash between Lenin and Martov on an organisational issue.

The first clause of the party rules dealt with the question: "Who is a member?" Lenin's draft reads as follows: "A member of the RSDLP is one who accepts its programme and *supports the Party both financially and by personal participation in one of the party organisations.*" Martov opposed this clause and moved as an alternative that a member was somebody who accepted the programme, and supported the Party financially and "*gives the party his regular personal co-operation under the direction of one of the party organisations*". On the face of it, there is only a slight difference between the two formulas. In fact, the real significance of the difference only became clear later. "The differences were still intangible," Trotsky recalled, "everybody was merely groping about and working with impalpable things."<sup>[148]</sup> But behind Martov's proposal was a certain "softness", a conciliatory attitude which amounted to the blurring of differences between

members and sympathisers, between revolutionary activists and fellow travellers. At the moment when all the energies of *Iskra* should have been concentrated on combating the old anarchistic formlessness and circle mentality, Martov's position represented a big step back. Small wonder that it led to a sharp struggle in the *Iskra* camp on and off the floor of the Congress. In the months and years after the Congress, a whole mythology has been constructed about this incident. It is alleged that Lenin stood for dictatorial centralism and a small conspiratorial party, whereas Martov's aim was a broad-based, democratic party which would allow the workers to participate. Both ideas are completely false.

To begin with, all the *Iskra* supporters were agreed upon the need for a strong, centralised party. That was one of the main arguments against the Bund's national-federalism, in which Martov and Trotsky played the main role. Immediately prior to the discussion on Clause One, Martov is quoted in the Minutes as saying: "*I would recall to Comrade Lieber that our organisational principle is not broad autonomy but strict centralisation.*" Incidentally, the Bund itself was a highly centralised organisation. Its alleged opposition to centralism only applied to the party as a whole, and reflected nothing more than an unscrupulous defence of its own sectional interests. As to the demagogic argument that Martov's formula was intended to "open the party to the workers", that, too, is a misrepresentation. At the outset of the debate Axelrod let the cat out of the bag with the following example, which really revealed what was behind the proposal:

"And, indeed, let us take for example a professor who regards himself as a Social Democrat and declares himself as such. If we adopt Lenin's formula we shall be throwing overboard a section of those who, *even if they cannot be directly admitted to an organisation are nevertheless members...* We must take care not to leave outside the party ranks *people who consciously, though perhaps not very actively, associate themselves with that Party.*"[\[149\]](#)

The working class and its organisations do not exist in a vacuum, but are surrounded by other social classes and groups. The pressure of alien classes, of bourgeois public opinion, and especially the pressure of the intermediate layers, the middle class, the intellectuals who surround the workers' organisations, is ever-present. The demands of these layers that the workers should adapt their programme, methods and organisational structure to suit the prejudices and interests of the petty bourgeoisie are a constant pressure. A long period of very close co-existence with the radicalised middle class in the person of the Legal Marxists had left its stamp on the consciousness of the older members of the Emancipation of Labour Group. They moved among social strata divorced from the working class, formed personal friendships with the radicalised quasi-Marxist university professors, lawyers and doctors who helped them with financial donations and words of encouragement, but were not prepared to dirty their hands with practical revolutionary work. "I support your aims, but to come out openly as a socialist would be inconvenient and risky. Think of my job, my position, my career prospects," and so on. Unconsciously, or perhaps semi-consciously, Axelrod, Zaslulich and Martov were acting as the spokesmen for this social stratum, the transmission belt for the pressures of alien classes upon the workers' party.

Plekhanov was placed in a difficult position by this split, in which his friends and life-long colleagues were ranged against him. For the first time in her life, Vera Zasulich openly stood up to her mentor. It must have been a shock, but to Plekhanov's credit, he stood up against the pressure at the Congress. All his revolutionary instinct told him that Lenin was in the right. In the course of debate he pitilessly demolished the arguments of Axelrod and Martov: "According to Lenin's draft, only someone who joins a particular organisation can be regarded as a Party member. Those who oppose his draft say that this will cause unnecessary difficulties. But what do these difficulties consist of? They talk of persons who do not want to join, or who can't join, one of our organisations. But why can't they? As someone who has himself taken part in Russian revolutionary organisations, I say that I do not admit the existence of objective conditions constituting an insuperable obstacle to anyone's joining. As to those gentlemen who do not want to join, we have no need of them.

"It has been said here that some professors who sympathise with our views may find it humiliating to join a local organisation. In this connection, I remember Engels saying that where it becomes your lot to deal with professors, you have to be prepared for the worst (laughter).

"The example, is, in fact, an extremely bad one. If some Professor of Egyptology considers, because he has by heart the names of all the Pharaohs, and knows all the prayers that the Egyptians submitted to the bull Apis, that it is beneath his dignity to join our organisation, we have no need of that professor.

*"To talk of control by the Party over persons who are outside the organisation means playing with words. In practice such control is impossible."*

After a heated discussion, Martov's variant was approved by 28 votes to 23, but only because the wavering elements in *Iskra* combined with the Economists of the Union, the Bund and the "Centre", represented by the trend around the journal *Yuzhny Rabochii*. Nevertheless, the split had not yet acquired a definite character. Lenin, in the course of the debate, showed that he was still anxious to reach agreement: "First, as regards Axelrod's kind proposal (I am not speaking ironically) to 'strike a bargain', I would willingly respond to this appeal *for I do not at all consider our difference so vital as to be a matter of life and death for the party. We shall certainly not perish because of a bad point in the rules!*" [\[150\]](#)

From a Marxist point of view, organisational questions can never be decisive. There are no eternal, fixed laws governing the mode of organisation of a revolutionary party. The rules and organisational structures must change with changing circumstances and in line with the development of the party. The same Lenin who argued fervently for restricting the party membership in 1903, under different historical circumstances, in 1912, when the party was becoming transformed into a mass force representing the decisive majority of the active working class in Russia, in effect argued that *the party should be open to any worker who considered himself a Bolshevik*—a formula which apparently echoes Martov's celebrated phrase that "every striker should be able to proclaim himself a Party

member”. Does this mean that Lenin was wrong and Martov right in 1903? Such a conclusion would be to completely misunderstand the dialectical relationship between the mode of operation of the revolutionary party and the concrete stage through which both the party and the working class movement is passing. A house must be built upon solid foundations. In 1903, the Party was only taking its first hesitating steps towards the conquest of influence among the masses. It was necessary to lay heavy stress on basic political and organisational principles, above all the need for working-class cadres with a clear understanding of the ideas and methods of Marxism. This was all the more necessary in view of the chaotic period which had gone before. To have thrown the doors open *at this concrete stage* would have been absolutely disastrous, although at a different moment it would be necessary to do just that.

### **The Real Meaning of the 1903 Split**

However significant the consequences of the 1903 split were for the future, the differences which emerged at the Congress still bore an undeveloped character. The assertion that at the Second Congress, Bolshevism and Menshevism already existed *as political tendencies* is entirely without foundation. On all the political questions there was virtual unanimity within the *Iskra* tendency. Yet there have always been powerful vested interests in trying to read into these divisions far more than they contained in fact. This is not accidental. Both Stalinist and bourgeois historians have a vested interest in identifying Leninism with Stalinism, and the Stalinists needed to prove that Trotsky was a Menshevik from 1903 on.

The political tendency represented by Menshevism was only to take shape in the period following the Congress. The lines of demarcation were still confused. Plekhanov, the future social-patriot, initially stood with Lenin. Trotsky, the future leader of the October revolution and founder of the Red Army, found himself temporarily in the camp of the minority. Contrary to the Stalinist slander that Trotsky was a Menshevik from 1903 onwards, he broke with Martov’s group in September 1904 and thereafter formally remained outside both factions until 1917. Politically, Trotsky always stood far closer to the Bolsheviks, but, organisationally, he had the illusion that it was possible to unite both wings of the Party. History finally showed this to be impossible. But Trotsky was not alone in this error, as we shall show.

Despite this evident fact, the Stalinists for decades have persisted in citing the hot-headed reaction of the 23-year old Trotsky at the Second Congress as proof of his alleged Menshevism. Thus we read statements like the following: “Congress speeches by Lenin (?) and other Bolsheviks show that on the fundamental question of the party programme (!) and rules, Trotsky was at one with the other Mensheviks and bitterly fought the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary line (!).”[\[151\]](#) This base slander originates in the campaign against Trotskyism launched in 1923-24, when Lenin lay on his death-bed, paralysed and helpless. Zinoviev, who had formed a secret bloc with Kamenev and Stalin, with a view to forming the leadership after Lenin’s death, went to the lengths of writing an alleged “History of Bolshevism” the main aim of which was to discredit Trotsky by means of a

false and tendentious account of Party history. In regard to 1903, Zinoviev refers to “Comrade Trotsky who was at that time a Menshevik”.[\[152\]](#)

For their part, bourgeois historians such as Leonard Shapiro attempt to caricature Lenin’s arguments in favour of centralism to paint a picture of a ruthless dictator, riding roughshod over democracy. In fact, the 1903 split had a largely accidental character. Nobody had anticipated that this split would take place. The participants themselves were shocked and stunned by the unexpected turn of events. The fact that Lenin did not see it as a final parting of the ways was indicated by his ceaseless attempts to achieve unity with the minority in the months after the Congress. Krupskaya recalled that on one occasion when she mentioned the possibility of a permanent split, Lenin retorted: “That would be too crazy for words.”[\[153\]](#)

What lay behind the 1903 split was the difficulty of passing out of the initial phase of small circle life. Every period of transition from one stage of the development of the Party to another inevitably entails a certain amount of internal friction. We have already commented on the stresses and strains involved in the earlier transition from propaganda to agitation. Now the same problems recurred, but with far more serious results. The main objective of the Marxist tendency represented by *Iskra* was to bring the Party out of the embryonic period of circle life (*kustarnichestvo*) and lay the firm foundation for a strong and united Marxist workers’ party in Russia. Even before the Congress, however, Martov began to express doubts and vacillations as to whether it was desirable to convene a Party Congress at all. Would it not be better to hold a Congress of the *Iskra* tendency? The hesitations reflected the conservatism and routinism and the fear of the veterans of striking out in a new direction.

The ingrained habits of a small exile group instinctively rebelled against so violent a disruption of the old ways. The idea of formal elections, submission of the minority to the will of the majority, disciplined work, while acceptable in theory, proved hard to swallow in practice. The members of Plekhanov’s old group, accustomed to the life of a small, informal circle of friends, had long enjoyed immense political authority as veterans and members of the prestigious *Iskra* Editorial Board which was not strictly warranted by the role they now played. Axelrod and Zasluchich felt an involuntary fear of losing their personal authority and having their individuality swallowed up in the new environment, dominated by the new generation of up-and-coming young cadres from inside Russia. The Congress minutes show how insignificant was the role played by the old-timers, with the natural exception of Plekhanov. They must have felt completely lost.

The element of personal prestige can play a very destructive role in organisations in general, and not only in politics. Petty struggles for positions, personal rivalries and ambitions can cause problems in football clubs, Buddhist temples and knitting circles, where no ideological or principled problems are involved. Under certain conditions they can cause splits and quite poisonous disputes in revolutionary organisations, including anarchist ones, which in theory at least do not subscribe to centralism—though in practice such groups are frequently dominated by cliques and dictatorial individuals. The problem is particularly acute in small organisations isolated from the masses, especially where the

petty bourgeois element predominates. The veterans of the Emancipation of Labour Group never seriously imagined that the decisions of the Congress would change their status in the movement. Things would surely carry on much as before. It was unthinkable that they should occupy anything but the foremost positions, as they had always done. When Lenin moved the election of an Editorial Board of three, it caused an uproar, which took him completely by surprise—all the more so since this proposal had already been accepted by the editors before the Congress. But this agreement was only superficial. The proposal had deeply shocked and wounded the old editors who would be dropped. In the corridors of the Congress, they went around complaining about Lenin's alleged tactlessness and insensitivity.

In the interests of Party unity, both the *Iskra* organisation and the Emancipation of Labour Group were formally dissolved at the Congress. But when the question was posed of the winding up of *Yuzhny Rabochii*, its adherents waged a last-ditch struggle in favour of its being kept going as a “popular” paper—a concept which was firmly rejected by the majority. The proposals agreed on by the *Iskra* leadership prior to the Congress was for a Central Committee of three (from the interior), an Editorial Board of three and a Party Council made up of both bodies plus one other (Plekhanov). However, tensions immediately surfaced over the composition of the CC. The hard *Iskra-ites* favoured a CC composed entirely of *Iskra* supporters. The softs, led by Martov, wanted to give representation to the centre (*Yuzhny Rabochii*), and produced their own list of candidates. This was an indication that the soft *Iskra* current, represented by Martov, was trying to arrive at a compromise with the wavering, centrist trend around *Yuzhny Rabochii*. His attempt to postpone a decision on this issue provoked a commotion in the hall. But the row over *Yuzhny Rabochii* was nothing compared to the stormy scenes which accompanied the next session.

Lenin's proposal for a three-man editorial board was not the reflection of dictatorial centralism but a simple expression of reality. There can be no doubt that logic was entirely on Lenin's side, as Plekhanov was compelled to agree. The old Editorial Board of six had not even managed to meet once. In the 45 issues of *Iskra* under six editors, there were 39 articles written by Martov, 32 by Lenin, 24 by Plekhanov, eight by Potresov, six by Zasluch and only four by Axelrod. This over a period of three years! All the technical work was done by Lenin and Martov. “*Actually,*” wrote Lenin after the Congress, “I would add, this trio [Lenin, Martov and Plekhanov], *throughout these three years in 99 cases out of a hundred had always been the decisive, politically decisive (and not literary) central body.*”<sup>[154]</sup> The notion that a member of the Editorial Board of the Party's official journal could be someone who did not personally participate in the work and whose only contribution was to provide the occasional article for publication did not square with the conception of a fighting proletarian organisation.

Initially, the younger editorial board members, Martov and Potresov, were also in agreement with the change, but, under the frantic pressure of Zasluch and Axelrod, they changed their minds. Trotsky moved the re-election of the old editorial board of six. But the withdrawal of the Bundists and the supporters of *Rabocheye Dyelo* meant that the *Iskra* hards were now in a majority. Trotsky's proposal was voted down, and a new

Editorial Board consisting of Lenin, Plekhanov and Martov was elected, whereupon Martov announced his refusal to participate on it. The split between the hard majority (*Bol'shinstvo*) and soft minority (*Menshinstvo*) was a fact. When the split fully surfaced, it assumed a violent character. In the session when the composition of the Editorial Board was discussed the atmosphere was stormy and at times “hysterical”, as the Bolsheviks later reported to the Amsterdam Congress of the Socialist International (1904).

The indignation aroused by this issue among young and impressionable revolutionaries is conveyed by Trotsky's memoirs of the occasion: “In 1903 the whole point at issue was nothing more than Lenin's desire to get Axelrod and Zasulich off the editorial board. My attitude towards them was full of respect, and there was an element of personal affection as well. Lenin also thought highly of them for what they had done in the past. But he believed that they were becoming an impediment for the future. This led him to conclude that they must be removed from their position in the leadership. I could not agree. My whole being seemed to protest against this merciless cutting off of the older ones when we were at last on the threshold of an organised party. It was my indignation at his attitude that really led to my parting with him at the Second Congress. His behaviour seemed unpardonable to me, both horrible and outrageous. And yet, politically it was right and necessary, from the point of view of organisation. The break with the older ones who remained in the preparatory stages, was inevitable in any case. Lenin understood this before any one else did. He made an attempt to keep Plekhanov by separating him from Zasulich and Axelrod. But this, too, was quite futile, as subsequent events soon proved.”[\[155\]](#)

In the months after the Congress, the supporters of the minority raised a hue and cry about Lenin's alleged “dictatorial tendencies” and “ruthless centralism”. These outbursts, which had not the slightest basis in fact, served as a smokescreen to cover the anarchistic behaviour of Martov's group, who, despite the pledges given by them at the Congress, refused to submit to the decision of the majority and waged a disloyal campaign against the leadership democratically elected at the Congress. Breaking the most elementary norms of conduct which apply in any party, they demanded that the minority should decide, and effectively tried to sabotage the work of the Party, by refusing to collaborate with its elected organs. A revolutionary party is not a discussion club, but a fighting organisation. Nevertheless, the idea of the Bolshevik Party as a monolithic structure, where the leaders ordered and the rank-and-file obeyed, is a malicious falsehood. *On the contrary, the Bolshevik Party was the most democratic party in history.* Even in the most difficult periods of underground work, in the heart of the revolution and in the most dangerous days of the civil war, the internal regime, and especially its highest expression, the Congress, was the arena of open and honest discussion, with the clash of different ideas. But there is a limit for all things. At the end of the day, a party which seeks, not only to talk, but also to act, must reach decisions and carry them into practice.

At bottom, the attitude to party organisation and discipline is a class question. The worker learns discipline in the everyday experience of factory life. The experience of strikes teaches a very hard lesson—the imperative need for united disciplined action as the pre-condition for success. On the other hand, the notion of organisation and discipline is

difficult for the intellectual to grasp. He or she tends to see the party precisely as a gigantic discussion group, in which to expound one's views on each and every topic. The anarchistic individualism of the minority reflected, at bottom, the petty bourgeois standpoint with its organic incapacity for discipline and its tendency to mix up personal questions with political principle. However erudite, however well read, the intellectuals who has not placed themselves personally on the standpoint of the working class, come to a full stop precisely where the real task of the movement begins, that is, in the realm of action. "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways," as Marx explained, "the point is, however, to change it."

### **Confusion in the Ranks**

The caricature of Lenin as a "ruthless dictator" and cynical manoeuvrer, ruthlessly trampling on his former colleagues in order to concentrate power in his hands, does not correspond to the facts. In her *Memoirs of Lenin*, Krupskaya gives a vivid picture of Lenin agonising over the split with Martov:

"At times he saw clearly that a rupture was unavoidable. He started a letter to Clair [Krzhizhanovsky] once, saying that the latter simply could not imagine the present situation, that one had to realise that the old relations had radically changed, that the old friendship with Martov was at an end; old friendships were to be forgotten, and that the fight was starting. Vladimir Ilyich did not finish that letter or post it. It was very hard for him to break with Martov. Their work together in St Petersburg and on the old *Iskra* had drawn them close together... Afterwards Vladimir Ilyich had fiercely fought the Mensheviks, but whenever Martov's line showed a tendency to right itself, his old attitude to him revived. Such was the case, for example, in Paris 1910 when Vladimir Ilyich and Martov worked together on the editorial board of *Sotsial Demokrat* (Social Democrat). Coming home from the office, Vladimir Ilyich often used to tell me in a pleased tone that Martov was taking a correct line and even coming out against Dan. Afterwards in Russia, Vladimir Ilyich was very pleased with Martov's stand during the July Days [in 1917] not because it was any good to the Bolsheviks, but because Martov bore himself as behoves a revolutionary. Vladimir Ilyich was already seriously ill when he said to me once sadly: 'They say Martov is dying too'."

This was typical of a side of Lenin's character which is too often overlooked. Completely devoid of sentimentality, Lenin never allowed himself to confuse personal likes and dislikes with questions of political principle. But Lenin knew how to recognise talent in other people and did not easily give them up as a lost cause. Personal spitefulness was completely foreign to this man who all his life showed the greatest loyalty to other comrades. In the months following the Congress, Lenin himself made repeated attempts to re-establish unity, and even offered to make a series of concessions which, in effect, represented the abandonment of the positions won by the majority at the Congress. Krupskaya recalls that:

"After the Congress, Vladimir Ilyich did not object when Glebov suggested co-opting the old editorial board—better to rough it the old way than to have a split. But the

Mensheviks refused. In Geneva, Vladimir Ilyich tried to make it up with Martov, and wrote to Potresov, reassuring him that they had nothing to quarrel about. He also wrote to Kalmykova (Auntie) about the split, and told her how matters stood. He could not believe that there was no way out.”[\[156\]](#)

No sooner had the Congress ended than Lenin approached Martov to try to arrive at an agreement. Martov wrote to Axelrod in a letter dated 31 August: “I saw Lenin once [since the Congress]. He asked me to give my suggestions about collaboration. I said that I would give a formal answer when we had considered this formal proposal together, but in the meantime, refused. He talked a lot about the fact that by refusing to collaborate, we were ‘punishing the Party’, that nobody expected that we would boycott the paper. He even stated in public that he was prepared to resign if that were to be decided by the old Editorial Board, and that he intended to work twice as hard as a collaborator.”[\[157\]](#)

If it had been up to Lenin, the split could have been quickly resolved. But the almost hysterical reaction of the minority made an agreement impossible. Defeated at the Congress, they launched a series of violent attacks against Lenin and the majority. Martov published a pamphlet accusing Lenin of causing a “State of Siege” in the party. A heated atmosphere was engendered, out of all proportion to the importance of the issues apparently at stake. Osip Piatnitsky, who was in charge of the distribution of *Iskra* in Berlin, recalls the surprise and consternation in the ranks at the report-back from the Congress:

“We listened to the reports of both sides about the Congress, and then immediately began the agitation in favour of one or the other trend. I felt torn in two. On the one hand I was sorry that offence had been caused to Zasluch, Potresov and Axelrod, removing them from the Editorial Board of *Iskra*... On the other hand, I was wholly in favour with the organisational structure of the Party proposed by Lenin. My logic was with the Majority, but my feelings, so to speak, were with the minority.”[\[158\]](#)

Pyatnitsky was not alone in his attitude to the split: “The news of the split hit us like a bolt from the blue. We knew that the Second Congress was to witness the concluding moves in the struggle with *Workers’ Cause* [the Economists], but that the schism should take a course which was to put Martov and Lenin in opposing camps and that Plekhanov was to ‘split off’ midway between the two—none of this so much as entered our heads. The first clause of the Party statutes... was this really something that justified a split? A reshuffle of jobs on the editorial board—what’s the matter with those people abroad, have they gone mad?”[\[159\]](#)

The quotation is by Lunacharsky, who was to become one of Lenin’s principal lieutenants in the next couple of years, was a faithful reflection of the reaction of the majority of Party members to the split at the Second Congress. The prevailing mood was against the split, the real significance of which was not even clear to the principal protagonists.

The confusion of the rank-and-file was understandable. At this stage there were no obvious political differences between the majority and minority. However deplorable the behaviour of the Martovites, whose spiteful attacks and boycotting of the work of the party reflected the hurt pride of individualist intellectuals, unwilling to submit their personal inclinations to the will of the majority, the real differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism were far from being clearly defined at this stage. It is true that the germs of these differences were already present in 1903, but for the moment they had not yet acquired a definite political content. Rather, it was a difference in attitudes—as reflected in Lenin’s characterisation of the two trends as the “hards” and the “softs”. However, the clash of these two trends undoubtedly foreshadowed the future split between Bolshevism and Menshevism, which only finally took place in 1912, after nearly a decade of ceaseless attempts on the part of Lenin to unite the party on a principled basis. Lenin himself explained the reason for the split in the following passage:

“Examining the behaviour of the Martovites since the Congress, their refusal to collaborate on the Central Organ (*although officially invited by the editorial board to do so*), their *refusal* to work on the Central Committee, and their propaganda of a boycott—all I can say is that this is an insensate attempt, unworthy of Party members, to disrupt the Party—and why? *Only* because they are dissatisfied with the composition of the central bodies; for speaking *objectively*, it was *only* over this that our ways parted, while their subjective verdicts (insults, affronts, slurs, oustings, shutting out, etc.) *are nothing but the fruits of offended vanity and a morbid imagination.*”[\[160\]](#)

Refusing all Lenin’s attempts at reconciliation, the Martovites pressed on with their campaign of agitation. They were particularly strong abroad. They had money and close contacts with the leaders of the European Social Democracy. In September 1903, Martov’s group took the first step in the direction of a split by setting up a “Bureau of the Minority”, with the aim of capturing the Party’s leading bodies by all available means. They began to publish their own factional literature for distribution in Russia. Despite all this, Lenin still pinned his hopes on reconciliation. On 4 October 1903 a meeting was held between Lenin, Plekhanov and Lengnik for the majority, and Martov, Axelrod, Zaslulich and Potresov for the minority. The majority were willing to make concessions, but when the minority reacted by demanding a total overturn of the Congress decisions, it became clear that agreement was impossible. To accept such a demand would mean putting the clock back to the situation which prevailed before the Second Congress.

Factional struggle has a logic of its own. By repudiating the Second Congress, and defending organisational formlessness under the guise of an alleged “struggle against centralism”, the minority’s position on organisational questions was gradually becoming indistinguishable from the views of the Economists with whom, only yesterday, they had been at loggerheads. The accidental “bloc” of the softs with the Economist right wing at the Congress, which Lenin had already pointed out, by degrees turned into a fusion. The extreme Economist Akimov, with malicious irony, noted the approximation of the minority to the old opportunist views of Economism: “The move of the ‘soft’ *Iskra*-ites towards the so-called Economists on organisational and tactical questions is recognised

by everyone except the ‘softs’ themselves. Yet even they are ready to admit that ‘we can learn a great deal from the Economists’.

“Even at the [Second] Congress, the Union’s delegates [i.e. Economists] supported the Mensheviks and voted for Martov’s formulation. Today all the members of the former Union [i.e. the Economist-controlled Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad] regard the tactics of the ‘softs’ as more correct, and as a concession to their own viewpoint. When it disbanded, the Petersburg Workers’ Organisation [Economist] declared itself at one with the Mensheviks.”[\[161\]](#)

The differences came to a head at the Second Congress of the League of Russian Revolutionary Social Democracy Abroad held in Geneva in October 1903. After the RSDLP Congress, the minority had tried to find a point of support for its position. The League of Russian Revolutionary Social Democracy Abroad was little more than a paper organisation—a couple of pamphlets had come out in its name, but its activity was next to nothing, a logical state of affairs since the centre of gravity was now in Russia. Immediately after the split, the Martovites decided to call a conference of the League in Geneva. This was done in a factional way; known supporters of the majority were not informed of the meeting, whereas supporters of the minority were brought from as far away as Britain. Lenin delivered the report-back of the Party Congress in measured terms, but was answered by a slashing attack by Martov, which poisoned the atmosphere from the outset.

At the Second Congress of the Party, it had been decided that the League would be the official overseas organisation of the Party, with the same status as a local Party committee in Russia. This clearly meant that it would be under the control of the CC. But the minority, which controlled the League, would not accept this, and approved new rules giving the League independence from the CC with a view to turning it into a base for factional work against the majority. Lengnik moved that this be referred to the CC and when this was turned down, the representatives of the majority, incensed, walked out of the congress.

Piatnitsky, then a young technical worker in *Iskra*, described his bewilderment at the embittered factional atmosphere at the conference, where the forces of minority and majority were evenly divided: “The Congress opened. The Mensheviks sat on one side, the Bolsheviks on the other. I was the only one who had not yet definitely joined one side or the other. I took my seat with the Bolsheviks and voted with them. The Bolsheviks were led by Plekhanov. On the same day, I think, the Bolsheviks, with Plekhanov at their head, left the Congress. I, however, remained there. It was clear to me that the departure of the Bolsheviks, the majority, from the Central Organisation and the Party Council would force the minority either to bow to the decisions of the Second Congress or break with it. But what could I do? Nothing. Both sides could boast of great leaders, responsible Party members who certainly ought to know what they were doing. While attending the sessions of the League Congress, after the departure of the Bolsheviks, I finally decided to adhere to the side of the latter, and also left the Congress.”[\[162\]](#)

At a hastily improvised meeting in a nearby cafe, Plekhanov indignantly denounced the behaviour of the minority and proposed a plan of action for a struggle against them. Nevertheless, in private, Plekhanov was filled with misgivings. Initially firm in defence of Lenin's position, which he knew to be correct, Plekhanov's nerve began to falter, as soon as it became clear that an unbridgeable gap was opening up between the majority and his old friends and colleagues. Had he done the right thing in siding with Lenin? Was it worth tearing the party apart for the sake of a few rules? Lenin and he had made every possible concession to the minority, but the latter demanded total surrender. What of that? What was so terrible about co-opting all the old editors back on for the sake of peace? After all, the old system, for all its faults, was better than this.

Lenin, too, was in favour of concessions, and even contemplated co-opting the former editors. But experience showed that every offer of concessions merely increased the intransigence of the minority. Reluctantly, Lenin picked up the gauntlet the other side had thrown down, because further retreats would do harm to the cause of the Party. The break with Martov had been extremely painful, even traumatic, for Lenin, who confessed to Krupskaya that this was the most difficult decision of his life. But for Lenin the interests of the Party, the working class and socialism were more important than any personal considerations.

Plekhanov was a different type altogether. The victim of "the dead sea of émigré life that drags one to the bottom"[\[163\]](#), Plekhanov proved unable to make the transition to the new historical period, a period of revolution which made new demands on the party and its leadership. What was truly amazing was not so much that he capitulated, but that he had sided with Lenin in the first place. It is a tribute to the man that he at least attempted to make the transition, and not only on this occasion. Later, in 1909, he again turned to the left and entered a bloc with the Bolsheviks. But that was his last attempt before finally veering to the right, to end up tragically in the camp of patriotic reaction in the last few years of his life. Trotsky once remarked that, in order to be a revolutionary, it is not enough to have a theoretical understanding. It is also necessary to have the necessary will-power. Without this, a revolutionary is like "a watch with a broken spring". That phrase accurately describes Plekhanov's weak side, which, despite his tremendous contribution, finally undermined and destroyed him.

The evening of 18 October saw the break with Plekhanov. At a meeting of the majority, only days after he had proposed an all out struggle against the Martovites, Plekhanov did 180° turn and argued for peace at any price: "I cannot fire against my own comrades. Better a bullet in the brain than a split," he exclaimed. "There are times when even the autocracy has to give in."[\[164\]](#) He presented his demands in the form of an ultimatum: either they were accepted, or he would resign from the Editorial Board. Plekhanov's defection was a heavy blow to the majority. With serious misgivings, but still hoping to facilitate unity, Lenin resigned from the Editorial Board shortly afterwards. However, far from uniting the Party, Plekhanov's move had the opposite effect. The Martovites merely used their success to pass new demands: the co-option of minority supporters onto the Central Committee and the Party Council and the recognition of the discussion taken at the Second Congress of the League of Social Democrats Abroad. Having capitulated

once, Plekhanov now gave in to all these demands, which, in effect, would overturn all the decisions of the Party congress.

The position of the majority looked extremely bleak. The minority now controlled the central organ, *Iskra*, the League Abroad and the Party Council. Only the Central Committee remained, theoretically, with the majority. But the majority was deprived of a voice. Gradually, *Iskra* ceased to publish the articles and letters sent in by the supporters of the majority. Meanwhile, the Mensheviks exploited to the full their contact and personal friendships with the leaders of the Socialist International. The Bolsheviks had a poor time of it in the international socialist press.

In his memoirs, Lyadov recalls a conversation he had with Kautsky in which the latter gave his voice to exasperation: “What do you want? We don’t know your Lenin. He’s a new man to us. Plekhanov and Axelrod we all know very well. We are accustomed to finding out about the state of affairs in Russia only through their explanations. It goes without saying that we cannot believe your assertion that suddenly Plekhanov and Axelrod have become opportunists. That’s absurd!”

## NOTES

[144] Krupskaya, *O Vladimirye Ilyiche*, 1924 edition, vol. 1, p. 81.

[145] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 890-1.

[146] *1903, Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP*, p. 81.

[147] For a detailed explanation, see *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, LCW, vol. 7, pp. 203-425.

[148] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 160.

[149] *1903, Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP*, pp. 308 and 311 (my emphasis).

[150] *1903, Minutes of the Second Congress of the RSDLP*, pp. 321 and 326 (my emphasis).

[151] V. Grigenko and others, *The Bolshevik Party’s Struggle against Trotskyism (1903-February 1917)*, p. 30.

[152] Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 85.

[153] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, p. 486.

[154] LCW, *To Alexandra Kalmykova, September 7, 1903*, vol. 34, p. 162.

[155] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 162.

[156] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 98-9 and p. 98.

[157] *Pis'ma PB Aksel'roda i YO Martova*, p. 87.

[158] Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 54.

[159] Lunacharsky, op. cit., p. 36.

[160] LCW, *Account of the Second Congress of the RSDLP, September 1903*, vol. 7, p. 34.

[161] Akimov, *A Short History of the RSDLP*, p. 332.

[162] Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 63.

[163] Krupskaya, *O Vladimirye Ilyiche*, vol. 1, p. 54.

[164] Quoted in Baron, *Plekhanov*, p. 327.

## Part One: The Birth of Russian Marxism

[section 7 of 7]

### Rosa Luxemburg

When Lyadov approached the editor of the German Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* with a request to publish correspondence on the situation in the Russian Party, he was told that *Vorwärts* “could not spare much space for the movement abroad, especially the Russian, which is still so young and can give so little to the German movement”. In the haughty, condescending tone of this apparatchik, tinged with national narrow-mindedness, the outline of future developments can already be discerned. These German Party practicos had no interest in theory. While paying lip-service to Marxism, they were immersed in the daily routine of party and trade union tasks. What could the German Party with its powerful trade unions and parliamentary fraction learn from the internal disputes of a small foreign party? Already to a significant section of the German leaders, internationalism was a book sealed with seven seals.

Particularly damaging to the Bolshevik cause was the attitude of the left wing of the German Party. Right up to 1914, Lenin regarded himself as a supporter of Karl Kautsky, the leader of the orthodox left of the Social Democratic Party. Yet Kautsky refused to allow Lenin space in his journal *Die Neue Zeit* to put the case of the Bolsheviks. In a letter, Kautsky wrote: “While there remains even the shadow of hope that the Russian

Social Democrats will themselves overcome their disagreements, I cannot be in favour of the German comrades finding out about these differences. If they find out about them from another source, then, of course, we will have to take a definite position.”[\[165\]](#) Under the pressure of the Mensheviks, Kautsky came out against Lenin. But he did so cautiously. So long as the split in Russia did not disturb the internal life of the German Party, there was no need to make much of it, hoping that things would sort themselves out. After all, if the German Party could accommodate everybody from Bernstein on the right to Rosa Luxemburg and Parvus on the left, the Russian comrades ought to manage to get along without splitting over trivial questions.

In this way, only the arguments of the Mensheviks were heard in Western European Socialist Parties. Misled by the Mensheviks’ false and tendentious accounts of the differences, Rosa Luxemburg had written an article which Kautsky published in *Die Neue Zeit* under the neutral title: *Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*. This article has been republished in English under the misleading title never used during Rosa Luxemburg’s lifetime—*Leninism or Marxism?* In this article, Rosa Luxemburg repeats the nonsense of the Mensheviks about Lenin’s alleged “ultra-centralism” and “dictatorial methods”. It was precisely Lenin’s reply to this article which Kautsky refused to print. In his reply, Lenin explodes, one after the other, the myths created by the Mensheviks about his ideas on organisation—myths which have been assiduously cultivated ever since by the enemies of Bolshevism. These arguments were answered in advance by Lenin:

“Comrade Luxemburg says, for example, that my book [*One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*] is a clear and detailed expression of the point of view of ‘intransigent centralism’. Comrade Luxemburg thus supposes that I defend one system of organisation against another. But actually that is not so. From the first to the last page of my book, I defend the elementary principles of any conceivable system of party organisation. My book is not concerned with the difference between one system of organisation and another, but with how any system is to be maintained, criticised and rectified in a manner consistent with the party idea.”[\[166\]](#)

Rosa Luxemburg’s stand was no accident. For many years, she had been conducting a stubborn struggle against the bureaucratic and reformist tendency in the German Social Democratic Party. She watched with alarm the consolidation of a vast army of trade union and party functionaries into a solidly conservative bloc. She knew this phenomenon better than anyone else, even Lenin who had first hand experience of the German Party. Rosa Luxemburg understood that this enormous bureaucratic apparatus could become transformed, at a decisive moment in the class struggle, into a gigantic brake on the masses. And so it proved to be in August 1914, when all of Rosa Luxemburg’s worst fears were confirmed.

Even a cursory glance at Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet suffices to show that what she was really polemicising against was not the ideas of Lenin (with which she was only acquainted in the caricature form presented by the Mensheviks), but *the kind of bureaucratic-reformist degeneration with which she was only too well acquainted in her*

*own party, the German SPD.* How relevant to the present situation in the British Labour Party and to European equivalents are the words of this great revolutionary! “*With the growth of the labour movement,*” she wrote, “*parliamentarianism becomes a springboard for political careerists. That is why so many ambitious failures from the bourgeoisie flock to the banner of the socialist parties. Another source of contemporary opportunism is the considerable material means and influence of the large Social Democratic organisations.*”

“The party acts as a bulwark protecting the class movement against digression in the direction of more bourgeois parliamentarianism. To triumph these tendencies must destroy the bulwark. *They must dissolve the active, class conscious sector of the proletariat in the amorphous mass of an ‘electorate’.*”[\[167\]](#)

Of course, the struggle for the socialist transformation of society does not rule out participation in elections or in parliament. On the contrary, the working class of all countries has been to the forefront of the fight for democratic rights and will use every legal and constitutional right in order to improve its position and place itself in a commanding position to change society. The building of powerful trade union organisations, too, is a vital part of the preparation of the working class for the carrying out of its historic tasks. But this process has two sides. The working class and its organisations do not exist in a vacuum. Under the pressure of alien classes, organisations which have been created by the workers for the purpose of transforming society have become deformed and degenerated. The pressure of bourgeois public opinion bears down upon the leading layers.

The ruling class has developed a thousand and one ways of corrupting and absorbing the most honest and militant shop steward if he or she lacks a firm base in Marxist theory and perspectives. The separating out of a layer of full-time trade union officials, increasingly divorced from the shop floor and with all kinds of little perks and privileges, tends to create a distinct and alien mentality, particularly when the workers are not involved in mass struggles which act as a check on the leadership. But in a long period of decades of relative prosperity, full employment and class peace, the predominant trend is for the rank-and-file not to participate actively in their organisations, to trust their leaders and officials to get on with the job. This was the situation in Germany for almost two decades prior to the catastrophe of the First World War, when a conservative bureaucracy, Marxist in words, but reformist in practice, consolidated its hold on the labour movement by degrees—a process repeated in France and every other country in Western Europe. What was true of the unions was a hundred times more true of the parliamentary fraction in the Reichstag. Dominated by intellectuals and professional people, with a standard of living different to the millions of workers they represented, the Social Democratic leaders in parliament moved to the right, escaped the control of the working class and eventually became transformed into a privileged and conservative caste.

As a reaction against this, Rosa Luxemburg laid heavy stress on the *spontaneous movement of the working class*, elevating the idea of a revolutionary general strike almost to the level of a principle. This over reaction undoubtedly led her into a series of errors. One can say that in all of her disagreements with Lenin, including this one, Rosa

Luxemburg was in the wrong. Yet it is equally undeniable that all these mistakes can be traced back to a genuine revolutionary instinct, a boundless faith in the creative power of the working class and an implacable hostility to the careerists and bureaucrats who represent in the words of Trotsky, “the most conservative force in the whole of society”. Rosa Luxemburg’s misgivings about Lenin’s alleged “pitiless centralism” were shared, for the same reason, by other German lefts, such as Alexander L. Helfand, generally known by his pen-name Parvus, whose works were greatly admired by Lenin, and also, at the time, by Trotsky who, after breaking from the Mensheviks, for a while worked closely with him.

In later years, Trotsky admitted that he had been wrong and Lenin correct on the organisational questions. His booklet *Our Political Tasks*, published in the heat of the factional struggle, contains many criticisms of Lenin which the author was later to describe as “immature and erroneous”.<sup>[168]</sup> Yet there are elements even in this work which contained more than a grain of truth in relation to a certain side of Bolshevism, namely the psychology and mode of conduct of the committee-men, that layer of party “practicos” and “organisation men and women” with whom Lenin himself was to enter into bitter conflict only a few months after the appearance of Trotsky’s controversial pamphlet.

Lenin had tried to avoid a fight, refusing to answer the continuous attacks made against him. But the outcome of Plekhanov’s action convinced him that no other situation was possible. This was made abundantly clear by an article, signed by Plekhanov in issue 52 of *Iskra*, entitled *Where Not to Begin*, a shameful attempt to provide a theoretical cover-up for the author’s capitulation. Under its new editors, *Iskra* was now transformed into a factional organ of the minority. The majority still controlled the CC. But having co-opted the old editors onto the Editorial Board, the minority now had a majority on the Party Council, the highest authority in the Party. By the end of the year, Lenin had come round to the view that the only way to resolve the crisis was to call a new Party Congress.

As was to be expected, the supporters of the minority who now controlled the Party Council turned down Lenin’s proposal. However, when Lenin took his request to the CC, theoretically controlled by the majority, he came up against unexpected resistance from his own supporters. In Lenin’s *Works*, we find letter after letter striving to convince the CC members of the correctness of this proposal. But the Bolsheviks on the CC shied away from what they saw as a final break with the Mensheviks. Lenin bitterly remarked: “I believe that we really do have in the CC bureaucrats and formalists instead of revolutionaries. The Martovites spit in their faces and they wipe it off and lecture me: ‘it is useless to fight’!”<sup>[169]</sup>

## **War with Japan**

Lenin’s decision to break with the Mensheviks at this point was not an accident. Up to this time, the central argument had centred on organisational questions. But now things began to take on an entirely new character, reflecting a sudden and sharp turn in the political situation. Student demonstrations, followed by the political strikes and

demonstrations of the workers in 1902, were symptoms of a rapidly developing pre-revolutionary situation. A political general strike in July and August of 1903 was followed by a brief lull, only to be succeeded by a new strike wave in the summer of 1904. A rash of strikes occurred in Petersburg, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Nizhny Novgorod, and the Caucasus, where a major strike shook the oil centre of Baku in December. Under the pressure of the working class, the liberal bourgeois began to press their demands for a constitution. Feeling the ground shake under its feet, the regime was seized with panic. Plehve, Minister of the Interior, wrote cynically to General Kuropatkin, the Minister of Defence: "In order to stave off revolution, what we require is a victorious little war."

Despite its backward, semi-feudal character, and its dependence upon Western capital, tsarist Russia was one of the main imperialist nations at the turn of the century. Together with the other imperialist powers, Britain, France and Germany, tsarist Russia participated in the carve-up of the world into colonies and spheres of influence. Poland and the Baltic states, Finland, and the Caucasus, the Far Eastern territories and Central Asia, were, in effect tsarist colonies. But the territorial ambitions of tsarism were insatiable. The avaricious gaze of St Petersburg was fixed upon Turkey, Persia and above all China, where the decaying Manchu dynasty was incapable of preventing the dividing up of the living body of China by the imperialist brigands, especially after the defeat of the so-called Boxer uprising in 1900, when Russia occupied the whole of Manchuria. This predatory expansion in the Far East brought Russia up against the rising young power of Japan. The Japanese imperialists interpreted Russia's action as an attempt to block them on the mainland of Asia. In the summer of 1903, the War Party won the day in Tokyo. In the dead of the night in February 1904, the Japanese fell upon the Russian fleet in Port Arthur, using the very same tactics employed at Pearl Harbour in 1941. Japanese command of the seas was thus guaranteed and a bloody struggle began which was to lead to the fall of Port Arthur 11 months later with the loss of 28,200 Russian soldiers, half the garrison. Three weeks later, the first Russian revolution had begun.

The new *Iskra*, under Menshevik control had initially taken an ambiguous position on the war, confining themselves to appeals for peace. Lenin poured scorn on the idea, explaining that the victory of tsarism in the war would strengthen the regime for a period, whereas the military defeat of Russia would inevitably mean the outbreak of revolution. He subjected the Russian military campaign to a searing criticism, using it as a means of exposing the degenerate and corrupt essence of the regime. Lenin's revolutionary internationalism had nothing in common with pacifism but set out from a class analysis of war as the continuation of politics by other means:

"The cause of Russian freedom and of the struggle of the Russian (and the world) proletariat for socialism depends to a very large extent on the military defeats of the autocracy," he wrote in *The Fall of Port Arthur*. "This cause has been greatly advanced by the military debacle which has struck terror in the hearts of all European guardians of the existing order. The revolutionary proletariat must carry on a ceaseless agitation against war, always keeping in mind, however, that wars are inevitable as long as class rule exists. Trite phrases about peace à la Jaurés [Jean Jaurés, 1859-1914, prominent leader of the reformist wing of the French Socialist Party] are of no use to the oppressed

class which is not responsible for a bourgeois war between the bourgeois nations, which is doing all it can to overthrow every bourgeoisie, which knows the enormity of the people's sufferings even in time of 'peaceful' capitalist exploitation.”[\[170\]](#)

The calculations of the autocracy were based on cutting across the class struggle and forging a bloc based on national unity. The liberals at once revealed their reactionary essence. Their dislike of the autocratic regime which denied them a slice of the state pie struggled with greed at the prospect of big profits now to be made out of the war and the acquisition of new colonies in the East. The ex-Marxist Struve urged the students to support patriotic manifestos. However, after initially weakening the revolutionary movement, the war soon gave it a powerful impetus. The sight of the allegedly mighty Russian army collapsing like a house of cards at the first serious test, exposed the inner rottenness of the tsarist regime. Cracks began to open up in the very tops of the regime.

The discontent of student youth found its expression in the spread of terrorist moods. On 15 July the repressive Interior Minister Viktor Plehve was blown up by the Social Revolutionary Yegor Setonov. Forty years later P.N. Milyukov, the liberal leader, reflected the mood of society at the time: “Everybody rejoiced at his assassination.”[\[171\]](#) Alarmed at the growing tide of revolution the regime decided to make concessions. Plehve was replaced by Prince Svyatopolsk Mirsky, as the regime decided to opt for liberal reform to head off revolution. The humiliating military defeats made the war deeply unpopular not only with the masses, but also with the bourgeois liberals, who deftly switched from patriotism to defeatism. Terrified of the threat of revolution from below, the regime began to make concessions to the bourgeois liberals. Svyatopolsk-Mirsky began to make noises about a “new era”.

In November, the Zemstvos were given permission to hold a congress in St Petersburg. The liberal trend of *Osvobozhdenie* now had considerable influence in the Zemstvos and was the main force behind the banqueting campaign. The Menshevik *Iskra* proposed participation in the Zemstvo campaign and support for the liberals insofar as they were prepared to fight against the autocracy: the Social Democrats must therefore tone down their demands so as not to frighten off their political ally, they must compromise their programme in the interest of achieving unity against reaction. No sooner had the Mensheviks publicly come out in favour of the liberals, than Lenin issued a blistering attack on the banqueting campaign. In his article *The Zemstvo Campaign and Iskra's Plan*, Lenin mercilessly flayed the advocates of class collaborationism and defended an independent revolutionary class policy:

“Afraid of leaflets, afraid of anything that goes beyond a qualified-franchise constitution,” thundered Lenin, “the liberal gentry will always stand in fear of the slogan ‘a democratic republic’ and of the call for an armed uprising of the people. But the class-conscious proletariat will indignantly reject the very idea that we could renounce this slogan and this call, or could in general be guided in our activity by the panic and fears of the bourgeoisie.”[\[172\]](#)

The question of the attitude to the liberals immediately became the fundamental question by which all the trends of Social Democracy defined themselves. Zinoviev correctly states, that “the question of the attitude of the working class to the bourgeoisie again arose with particular acuteness—the same basic question with which we collided at every stage of the history of the party and to which in the end all our disagreements with the Mensheviks could be reduced”.[\[173\]](#)

In the autumn, the liberal *Soyuz Osvobozhdeniya* (Liberty League) issued a call for a campaign of banquets to put pressure on the government for reforms. Lawyers, doctors, professors and journalists organised semi-legal meetings in the form of dinner parties where they would make speeches and toasts in favour of moderate constitutional reform. However the cowardice of the bourgeois liberals is shown by the fact that they did not even raise the demand for a Constituent Assembly based on universal suffrage, but only vague demands for the representation of the people on a broad democratic basis.

Under the pressure of the bourgeois liberals, the leaders of the minority were, in fact, moving away from the positions of revolutionary Marxism. Their cloudy, semi-pacifist characterisation of the war was perhaps the first public expression of this fact. The Mensheviks were clearly passing over from merely organisational differences to political ones. Right wing Mensheviks like Fyodr Dan began to get the upper hand within the minority. The Mensheviks were reducing the role of the proletariat to that of mere cheerleaders of the liberals. In this way, the Mensheviks hoped to establish a “broad front” for democracy, including all “progressive forces”. The entire psychology of the Mensheviks was impregnated with a lack of confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class. The workers were enjoined not to demand too much, or express too extreme views which might frighten the liberals. *Iskra* published statements like the following:

“If we take a look at the arena of struggle in Russia then what do we see? Only two forces: the tsarist autocracy and the liberal bourgeoisie, which is now organised and possesses a huge specific weight. The working mass, however, is atomised and can do nothing; as an independent force we do not exist; and thus our task consists in supporting the second force, the liberal bourgeoisie, and encouraging it and in no case intimidating it by presenting our own independent proletarian demands.”[\[174\]](#)

The Menshevik *Iskra* in November 1904 proposed to participate in the Zemstvo campaign of banquets. In effect *Iskra* was proposing support for the so-called left liberal wing of *Osvobozhdenie*: “In dealing with liberal Zemstvos and Dumas we are dealing with the enemies of our enemy, though they do not wish to or cannot go so far in their struggle with him as the interests of the proletariat requires; still, in officially speaking up against absolutism and confronting it with demands aimed at its annihilation (!) they are in fact our allies [in a very relative sense to be sure] even if [they are] insufficiently resolute in their aspirations...”

“But within the limits of fighting absolutism especially in the present phase, our attitude to the liberal bourgeoisie is defined by the task of infusing it with a bit more courage and moving it to join with the demands that the proletariat, led by the Social Democracy, will

put forward. We should make a fatal mistake if we set ourselves the goal of forcing the Zemstvos or other organs of the bourgeois opposition through energetic measures of intimidation; under the influence of panic to give to us now a formal promise to present our demands to the government. Such a tactic would compromise Social Democracy because it would turn our political campaign into a lever for reaction.”<sup>[175]</sup> What is the meaning of this quotation? In essence it means a) support for the liberal bourgeois (‘in so far as’) b) the working class must play second fiddle to the liberals c) we must not frighten the bourgeois (in other words tone down, abandon and capitulate) and d) all this is allegedly not to support reaction and in the name of ‘fighting reaction’.

Lenin immediately answered *Iskra* in a pamphlet on November 20 (new style). He had no paper since *Vperyod* only started to come out in January 1905. Denouncing the Mensheviks’ proposal for a block with the liberals, Lenin proposed to utilise the Zemstvo campaign to organise militant workers’ demonstrations against both tsarism and the treacherous and cowardly liberals. The real difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism was the difference between *class independence* and *class collaborationism*, *Marxism and revisionism*, *reformism and revolution*. But it took several years, and the experience of war, revolution and counter-revolution, for the real nature of these differences to become absolutely clear.

The class instincts of the workers rebelled against the idea of an alliance with the bourgeoisie. There were impassioned debates in the ranks of the Mensheviks. In Geneva and Russia, many Menshevik workers instinctively adopted a line in open contradiction to that of the editors of *Iskra*, and much closer to the position of the Bolsheviks. Of course, under the extremely difficult conditions of tsarist dictatorship, one could not rule out temporary, episodic agreements even with the bourgeois liberals. But the first condition for such agreements was always for Lenin the *complete independence of the working class and its party: no mixing up of banners, no political blocs, no compromise on programme or principles*. Of course, the workers could not afford to ignore any opportunity to press their demands. Lenin advocated that the workers should go along to these legal gatherings and try to transform them into militant demonstrations.

Somov, a former supporter of *Rabocheye Dyelo*, who went over to the Mensheviks, explains that “all the speeches prepared for the banquets were sharply critical of both the principles and the tactics of the liberal opportunists and ridiculed the feeble banquet resolutions and petition projects”. The following incident in Yekaterinoslav shows how the social democratic workers chose to intervene in the banquets of the liberals: “At a suitable moment, a group of workers appeared before the table of the town council members, and one of the group began to speak. The mayor tried to stop him, but lost his head when the workers resisted: the speech was concluded amid the hushed attention of the audience with the words: “You and we represent opposite social classes, but we can be united by hatred of the same enemy, the autocratic order. We can be allies in our political struggle. For this, however, you must abandon the former road of meekness: you must boldly, openly, join in our demand: Down with the autocracy! Hail to a Constituent Assembly elected by the entire people! Hail a universal, direct, equal and secret suffrage!”

“After the speech, proclamations of the Kuban committee of the RSDLP were scattered in the hall. The next day, the Committee issued a leaflet (in a thousand copies) describing the meeting and giving the Social Democratic speech in full.”[\[176\]](#)

Elsewhere, similar interventions by these uninvited guests led to fights with the police and Cossacks. The intervention of these “crazy little kids” upset the plans of the liberals, who tried to keep the workers out. At a gathering of 400 doctors in St Petersburg, some 50 workers were refused admission, but lobbied the delegates, who secured the reversal of the platform’s decision. The workers’ intervention, demanding the right to strike, created such a polarisation among the doctors that the meeting broke up in disorder. There were many such cases. In the article *Good Demonstrations of Proletarians and Poor Arguments of Certain Intellectuals*, which appeared in the first number of the Bolshevik paper *Vperyod*,[\[177\]](#) Lenin praised these tactics as a manifestation of the fighting spirit and inventiveness of the working class. The Mensheviks, by contrast, were prepared to water down their demands so as not to intimidate the liberals, to sacrifice the party’s independence for the sake of unity, in a word to subordinate the working class to the so-called progressive wing of the capitalists. This policy was later taken over by Stalin under the title of the “Popular Front”. Lenin poured scorn on the very idea: “Can it in general be acknowledged correct *in principle* to set the workers’ party the task of presenting to the liberal democrats or the Zemstvo-ists political demands ‘which they must support if they are to have any right to speak in the name of the people’? No, such an approach is wrong in principle and can only obscure the class consciousness of the proletariat and lead to the most futile casuistry.”[\[178\]](#)

That the real basis of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split only emerged well after the Second Congress is attested to by many writers, beginning with Lenin who wrote that “Bolshevism as a tendency took definite shape in the Spring and Summer of 1905”.[\[179\]](#) The political differences only began to emerge during the course of 1904. Solomon Schwarz writes: “Behind the mutual accusations, deep political differences lay hidden. Their not being fully conscious may have lent all the more passion to the dispute, which looked like intra party squabbles to outsiders and the less sophisticated members of the two movements. *The political differences came into the open only in late 1904.*”[\[180\]](#)

Fyodr Dan, one of the main leaders of the Mensheviks states: “Today, with historical hindsight, it is scarcely necessary any longer to demonstrate that the organisational disagreements that, at the Second Congress divided the Iskra people into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were merely the cover for incipient intellectual and political divergences that were far more profound, and above all more persistent than the disagreements between the Economists and Iskra that had receded with the past and been completely liquidated by the Congress. It was not an organisational but a political divergence that very quickly split the Russian Social Democracy into two fractions which sometimes drew close and then clashed with each other, but basically remained independent parties that kept on fighting with each other even at a time when they were nominally within the framework of a unitary party... But at that time, at the beginning of the century, the political character of the split was far from immediately apparent, not only to the spectators on the side lines but to the participants in the fractional struggle themselves.”[\[181\]](#)

## Trotsky's Break with the Mensheviks

In his last work, *Stalin*, Trotsky pointed out that the real differences had nothing to do with centralism versus democracy, or even, as of “hards” versus “softs”, but went far deeper. “True firmness and resoluteness predetermine a person to the acceptance of Bolshevism,” he wrote. “Yet these characterisations in themselves are not decisive, there were any number of persons of firm character among the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. On the other hand, weak people were not so rare among the Bolsheviks. Psychology and character are not all there is to the nature of Bolshevism which, above all, is a philosophy of history and a political conception.”[\[182\]](#)

In his autobiography, Trotsky recalls how a section of the old leaders leaned towards the liberals: “The press was becoming more daring, the terrorist acts more frequent: the liberals began to wake up and launched a campaign of political banquets. *The fundamental questions of revolution came swiftly to the front. Abstractions were beginning in my eyes to acquire actual social flesh. The Mensheviks, Zasluch especially, were placing greater hopes in the liberals.*”[\[183\]](#)

Trotsky's characterisation of the liberals was clear from an article which appeared in *Iskra* in mid-March 1904, where he described them as “half-hearted, vague, lacking in decision and inclined to treachery”. It was precisely this article which provoked Plekhanov to present the editors of *Iskra* with an ultimatum demanding Trotsky's removal from the editorial board. Thereafter, Trotsky's name disappeared from *Iskra* and his active collaboration with the Mensheviks to all intents and purposes came to an end. The “crime” of Trotsky in these years was that of “conciliationism”, or, to use an unkind expression, “unity-mongering”. This conciliationism, however, was an attempt to reunite the Party, a view shared by many within the Bolshevik camp and the Party in general. It had nothing to do with a conciliatory attitude to the enemies of the working class—the liberals and the so-called progressive bourgeoisie. It is an idea which Lenin spent his entire active life fighting against.

On this question, there was never any difference between Lenin and Trotsky, who wrote that “I was with Lenin unreservedly in this discussion, which became more crucial the deeper it went. In 1904, during the liberal banquet campaign, which quickly reached an *impasse*, I put forward the question, ‘What next?’ and answered it in this way: *the way out can be opened only by means of a general strike, followed by an uprising of the proletariat which will march at the head of the masses against liberalism. This aggravated my disagreements with the Mensheviks.*” It was the Mensheviks' support for the liberals and in particular their backing of the Zemstvo banqueting campaign that caused Trotsky to break with the Mensheviks in September 1904. Answering the lies of the Stalinists that he had been a Menshevik since 1903, Trotsky explains:

“This connection with the minority in the Second Congress was brief. Before many months had passed, two tendencies had become conspicuous within the minority. I advocated taking steps to bring about a union with the majority as soon as possible, because I thought of the split as an outstanding episode but nothing more. For others, the

split at the Second Congress was the beginning of the evolution towards opportunism. I spent the whole year of 1904 arguing with the leading groups of Mensheviks on questions of policy and organisation. The arguments were concentrated on two issues: the attitude towards liberalism and that towards the Bolsheviks. I was for uncompromising resistance to the attempts of the liberals to lean on the masses, and at the same time, because of it, I demanded with increasing determination the union of the two Social Democratic factions.”[\[184\]](#)

Despite the fact that the political differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism were now coming to the fore, many leading Bolsheviks did not understand Lenin’s position and tended to play the differences down. The predominant trend among the Bolshevik tendency inside Russia was precisely conciliationism. The great majority of the party activists did not grasp the reasons for the split, and rejected it. Even Lenin’s closest collaborators were, in effect, working against him. In February 1904, after a long period of vacillation, the CC inside Russia rejected Lenin’s call for a congress by five votes against one. This amounted to a public rebuff for Lenin. Yet those who voted against — Krzhizhanovsky, Krassin, Galperin, Gusarov and Noskov (Zemlyachka voted for)—had worked closely with Lenin since the founding of *Iskra*, or even earlier. They had played a prominent role in organising the revolutionary Marxist tendency in Russia. How could they behave in this way?

These were, in many ways, true Bolshevik types—tireless, dedicated party workers, good organisers, disciplined and self-sacrificing. But they were what might be called “practicos”, whose work consisted in a hundred and one detailed organisational tasks. Without such people, no revolutionary party can succeed. But there was also a negative aspect to the mentality of the Bolshevik “committee-men”, as they were known: a certain organisational limitedness, a narrowness of outlook and restricted theoretical horizons. Such types as these inevitably tended to look with a certain disdain upon the finer points of history and regard such controversies as those that took place at the Second Congress as mere émigré squabbles, of no practical importance. If the majority of them had initially sided with Lenin and Plekhanov, this was not out of any deep ideological commitment, but because the organisational stand of the majority struck them as being more in accord with the “Party spirit” which was the moving force of their lives.

But after Plekhanov’s defection, things began to appear more complicated. The former majority now looked very much like a minority, at least on the leading bodies. Lenin’s complete isolation seemed to underline his weakness. And, to the practicos, Plekhanov’s arguments carried more weight. What was all this fuss really about? Lenin attempted in his book *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* to point out the issues of principle involved. But many of the committee-men were unimpressed. In January 1904, Lenin had finally organised a Bureau of Majority Committees to agitate for a Congress. Two CC members, Lengnik and Essen, were sent to Russia for this purpose, but were arrested. Meanwhile, the majority of Bolshevik conciliators on the CC actually ousted Lenin’s only supporter, Zemlyachka. The Bolshevik leadership was falling apart. Demoralised, Gusarov dropped out of activity, and Krzhizhanovsky resigned from the CC. The remaining CC members,

Krassin, Noskov and Galperin—all Bolshevnik conciliators—proceeded to pull off an unprincipled coup.

In the summer, when Lenin was convalescing in the Swiss Alps, the triumvirate held a secret meeting of the CC and passed what became known as the “July declaration”, calling for reconciliation between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and, in effect, surrendering on the minority’s terms. They accepted the “unquestionable legality” of the new Editorial Board of *Iskra* and the “equally unquestionable superiority of the central organ in everything which concerns the defence and clarification of the basic principles of the international Social Democracy’s programme and tactics”.

These actions represented an explicit repudiation of Lenin, whom they relieved of the right to represent the CC abroad. They even insisted on the right to censor Lenin’s writings (“the printing of his writings... will be carried out on each occasion with the agreements of the members of the CC”)[185] and prohibited agitation in favour of a Third Congress. Furthermore, Noskov was charged with re-organising the party’s technical work abroad, which meant eliminating such supporters of Lenin as Bonch-Bruyevich, who had been involved in publishing Bolshevik material abroad, and Lyadov, who was in charge of finances. In addition, three more Bolshevik-conciliators, and then three Mensheviks, were co-opted onto the CC. When Lenin finally found out what was going on, he wrote an angry letter to the CC challenging the legality of its actions. A further letter was sent to the members of the Bolshevik committees, exposing the activities of the CC. He even sent a letter to *Iskra* asking it not to publish the illegal declaration. But the editors, ignoring Lenin’s request, published it in issue 72 under the title *Declaration of the Central Committee*. There was nothing left to Lenin but to break off all relations with the conciliators.

The situation was now grim indeed. Everything which had been achieved by the Second Congress was in ruins. One after the other, the leading bodies had been captured by the minority. The Martovites appeared to have triumphed all along the line. Lenin seemed to be utterly isolated. In reality, however, the Mensheviks’ victory had been achieved by manoeuvring at the top. At grass roots level, things were different. An increasing number of committees were coming out in favour of a new Congress as the only way of resolving the crisis. The party committees in Petersburg, Moscow, Yekaterinoslav, Riga, the Northern Union, Voronezh, Nizhegorod, and, perhaps more surprisingly Baku, Batum and the Caucasian Union, declared their support. Even abroad, Social Democratic groups in Paris, Genoa and Berlin came out against the Mensheviks. According to a letter written by Lyubimov to Noskov in the autumn of 1904: “On the question of the declaration [of the CC], there has been such a row you can hardly make head or tail of it. Only one thing is clear: all the committees—except Kharkov, Crimea, Gornozavdsk and Don—are committees of the majority... The CC has received a full vote of confidence from a very insignificant number of committees.”[186]

Encouraged by the response inside Russia, Lenin convened a conference of 22 Bolsheviks in Switzerland in August 1904, which adopted his appeal *To the Party*, which became a rallying call for the convening of a Third Party Congress. With his customary

honesty, Lenin described the serious crisis through which the Party was passing, adding that: “Nonetheless, we regard the Party’s sickness as a matter of growing pains. We consider that the underlying cause of the crisis is the transition from the circle form to party forms of the life of Social Democracy; the essence of its internal struggle is a conflict between the circle spirit and the party spirit. And, consequently, only by shaking off this sickness can our Party become a real party.” Only now did Lenin point out the class forces which lay behind the split: “Lastly, the opposition cadres have in general been drawn chiefly from those elements in our Party which consist primarily of intellectuals. The intelligentsia is always more individualistic than the proletariat, owing to its very conditions of life and work, which do not directly educate it through organised collective labour. The intellectual elements therefore find it harder to adapt themselves to the discipline of Party life and those of them who are not equal to it naturally raise the standard of revolt against the necessary organisational limitations, and elevate their instinctive anarchism to a principle of struggle, misnaming it a desire for ‘autonomy’, a demand for ‘tolerance’, etc.

“The section of the Party abroad, where the circles are comparatively long-lived, where theoreticians of various shades are gathered, and where the intelligentsia decidedly predominates, was bound to be most inclined to the views of the ‘minority’, which then as a result proved to be the actual majority. Russia, on the other hand, where the voice of the organised proletariat is louder, where the Party intelligentsia too, being in closer and more direct contact with them, is trained in a more proletarian spirit, and where the exigencies of the immediate struggle make the need for organised unity more strongly felt, came out in vigorous opposition to the circle spirit and the disruptive anarchistic tendencies.”[\[187\]](#)

By the autumn, the prospects for the Bolsheviks were looking brighter. A new leading team was gradually being put together with new arrivals from Russia—people like Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, Olminsky. After his month in the Alps, Lenin’s health was much improved. “It was as if he had bathed in a mountain stream and washed off all the cobwebs of sordid intrigue,” wrote Krupskaya.[\[188\]](#) Encouraging reports were being received from Russia, where *To the Party* had been clandestinely distributed to the Party committees. According to Krupskaya, by mid-September, 12 out of 20 committees with full voting rights had come out in favour of a Congress, and the number was still growing. From this point on, the Bolsheviks were a serious organised force within Russia. By the end of the year a Bolshevik Organising Centre was established in the interior, with the backing of 13 Party committees. Still, the situation remained extremely fragile.

Unlike their opponents, the Bolsheviks were desperately short of funds. The question of a newspaper was initially out of the question. As a temporary substitute, Lenin and Bonch-Bruyevich launched a “Publishing House for Social Democratic Party Literature” which from early September began to publish individual titles by Lenin and his collaborators. This was, at least, a start. But the Mensheviks held all the cards when it came to publications. Not only did they control the prestigious *Iskra*, but they also had a good supply of money from wealthy sympathisers. They did not hesitate to use this

unscrupulously as a weapon in the factional struggle. Krupskaya recalls with a note of bitterness how the Mensheviks put pressure on sympathisers to stop giving assistance to the majority: “Ilyich and I had some strong things to say about those ‘sympathisers’ who belonged to no organisation and imagined that their accommodation and paltry donations could influence the course of events in our proletarian Party!”<sup>[189]</sup> The question of funds from abroad was undoubtedly a factor in the capitulation of the Bolshevik-conciliators on the CC to the émigré centre.

Despite their lack of resources, the Bolsheviks decided to launch a new paper called *Vperyod* (Forward). At a meeting in Geneva on 3 December, an editorial board was elected, composed of Lenin, V.V. Vorovsky, M.S. Olminsky and A.V. Lunacharsky, with Krupskaya as secretary. As usual, the lack of funds was made up for by personal sacrifice. Everyone scratched around for spare cash. Vorovsky handed over some author’s fees he had just received. Olminsky parted with a gold watch. Somehow or other, 1,000 francs were scraped together—barely enough for one and a half issues. But nobody was deterred by this. The first issue of the first truly Bolshevik newspaper duly rolled off the press on 22 December 1904. Just over a fortnight later, the Russian émigrés were amazed to hear the raucous shouts of the newspaper boys on the streets of Geneva: “Revolution in Russia! Revolution in Russia!”

## NOTES

[165] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 1, pp. 518, 523 and 524.

[166] LCW, vol. 7, p. 474.

[167] Rosa Luxemburg, *Leninism or Marxism?* p. 98 (my emphasis).

[168] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 62.

[169] LCW, *To the Central Committee of the RSDLP, February 1904*, vol. 34, p. 233.

[170] LCW, vol. 8, p. 53.

[171] S.S. Schwarz, *The Russian Revolution of 1905, the Workers’ Movement and the Formation of Bolshevism and Menshevism*, p. 32.

[172] LCW, *Zemstvo Campaign and Iskra’s Plan*, vol. 7, p. 503.

[173] Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 108 (my emphasis).

[174] Quoted in Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, pp. 107-8.

[175] Quoted in S.S. Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p.38.

[176] *Ibid.*, pp. 41 and 48.

[177] LCW, vol. 8, pp. 29-34.

[178] Ibid., p. 508.

[179] LCW, vol. 16, p. 380.

[180] Schwarz, op. cit., p. 32.

[181] F. Dan, op. cit., p. 250.

[182] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 50.

[183] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 166 (my emphasis).

[184] Quoted in Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, pp. 86, 166 (my emphasis) and 165.

[185] *Istoriya KPSS*, p. 509 in both quotes.

[186] Ibid., p. 509.

[187] LCW, *To the Party*, vol. 7, pp. 455-6.

[188] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 106.

[189] Ibid., p. 98.

## **Part Two: The First Russian Revolution**

[section 1 of 5]

### **The 9th January 1905**

“Sire! We workers, our children and wives, the helpless old people who are our parents, we have come to you, Sire, to seek justice and protection. We are in great poverty, we are oppressed and weighed down with labours beyond our strength; we are insulted, we are not recognised as human beings, we are treated like slaves who must bear their lot in silence. And we have suffered it, but we are being driven ever deeper into beggary, lawlessness and ignorance. Despotism and arbitrary rule are strangling us, and we are suffocating. Sire, our strength is at an end! The limit of our patience has been reached: the terrible moment has come for us when it is better to die than to continue suffering intolerable torment.”

With these words, the working class of Russia made its first decisive entrance upon the stage of history, appealing to the clemency of the tsar, the “Little Father”, with a petition

in its hands and a priest at its head. Eleven months later, the same working class rose against the autocracy, arms in hand, under the leadership of a Marxist party. In the intervening months, the first Russian revolution unfolded on an epic scale, involving every layer of the proletariat and all other oppressed layers of society, passing through every imaginable phase of struggle and utilising every conceivable fighting method, from economic strikes and petitions to the authorities through the political general strike and mass demonstrations, to an armed insurrection. The 1905 revolution already revealed, albeit in an embryonic fashion, all the basic processes which were to be repeated on a higher scale 12 years later. It was a dress rehearsal, without which the final victory of the proletariat in October 1917 would have been impossible. In the course of 1905, all ideas, programmes, parties and leaders were put to the test. The experience of the first revolution was decisive for the future evolution of all the tendencies in Russian Social Democracy.

Yet the truth is that the beginning of the revolution found the Party in a lamentable state. On the eve of 1905 the Party was seriously weakened by splits and arrests. The internal faction fight had paralysed its activities for many months. The activists inside Russia were confused and disorientated. Having lost control of the Party centre abroad, the Bolsheviks were deprived of an organ, until the first issue of *Vperyod* came out in December 1904. An acute shortage of funds meant that even *Vperyod* led a precarious existence. The Mensheviks had more resources, but were thinner on the ground in the interior, with the exception of certain areas such as the South and the Caucasus, but there, too, they were in a relatively weak position. Given the nature of underground work, it is very difficult to estimate the exact strength of the Bolsheviks at this time. The St Petersburg Party organisation did not formally split until December 1904, when the Mensheviks broke away. Up to that time, Lenin's supporters had been in the ascendant. But the internal struggle had had a damaging effect on the Party's work, turning it inwards. This is reflected in the number of Bolshevik leaflets issued in Petersburg in 1904: only 11 for the whole year, as against 55 in 1903 and 117 in 1905.[\[1\]](#)

In general, the Bolshevik organisation in Russia in the second half of 1904 was in a poor condition. Many of the full timers, as we have seen, did not really understand the split and were badly shaken by the defection of the conciliationist Central Committee. Despite encouragement and insistence from Lenin, they tended to lag behind the Mensheviks, who were now on the offensive, sending large numbers of agents and money into Russia. In St Petersburg, they soon gained the upper hand over the Bolshevik-dominated committee. The mistakes and general inertia of the committee caused increasing discontent among the St Petersburg workers, who were gradually turning to the Mensheviks. The Narva committee passed a resolution expressing its "disinclination to continue working under the leadership of the St Petersburg committee". The Vasiliev Ostrov committee passed a vote of "complete lack of confidence" in the Bolshevik-led committee. The Narva, Neva, Vasiliev Ostrov and "Petersburg Side" sections, representing the bulk of the workers, broke away and declared for the Mensheviks. By December, they had set up a separate committee. Two rival committees continued to exist in St Petersburg right up to the Stockholm Congress of 1906.

The loss of a number of key areas of St Petersburg was a body blow to Lenin. It deprived the Bolsheviks of key points of influence and allowed the Mensheviks to get a head start in the stormy events of the following months. To make matters worse, it was clear that the losses were mainly the result of the deficiencies of the local Bolshevik leadership, the quality of which was shown by the stream of complaining letters sent to Lenin. He must have torn his hair out when he read the tearful reports of his principal agent in St Petersburg, Rosalia Zemlyachka:

“No end of Mensheviks have flocked into Russia,” she wrote. “The Central Committee has managed to turn many people against us. There are not enough forces to carry on the fight and consolidate positions. Demands for people are coming in from all over. It is imperative to make a tour of the committees immediately. There is no-one who can go. I am neglecting the Bureau and am absorbed in local work. Things couldn’t be worse. We need people. Everybody is asking. There is no-one to work with...”

And the catalogue of complaints continues: “We are running the risk of losing one city after another for the lack of people. Every day, I get heaps of letters from various places, imploring [us] to send people. Just now I got a confused letter from Yekaterinoslav. They write that unless we send people and money at once, we shall lose Yekaterinoslav. But there are no people: one after another are retiring and no new ones arrive. Meanwhile the Mensheviks have consolidated their positions everywhere. They would be easy as can be to drive out if only we had people. The Bureau is a fiction since we’re all busy with local affairs.”

And these lines were written on 7 January, 1905, two days before Bloody Sunday. The constant complaints about a “lack of people” showed up the ingrained lack of confidence of the committee-men and women in the workers. Instead of bringing new blood onto the committees, co-opting the best elements of the workers and the youth, they sought easy solutions, demanding more full-timers from abroad. In every line of these letters, one sees a complete inability to relate the work of the leading circle with the living forces of the working class movement. Commenting on the situation, Litvinov wrote to Lenin: “The trouble is that she [Zemlyachka] does not in the least realise in what a critical and sorry state we are. The periphery, if not everywhere against us, is hardly anywhere for us. The bulk of the party workers still think that we are a bunch of disorganisers without any kind of backing, that since the reconciliation [of the Central Committee and the Mensheviks] the attitude of the committee has changed, that all our efforts are but the death-throes of the Bolsheviks. No conferences (least of all secret ones), no agitation will change this widespread view. I repeat, our situation is utterly shaky and precarious. We can get out of it only by 1) immediately calling a congress (not later than February) and 2) immediately starting a paper. Without the speediest fulfilment of these two conditions, we are going to certain ruin, and with giant steps, too ... Petersburg we shall probably have to lose. Swarms of Mensheviks have arrived there... We ought to mobilise our forces for Petersburg, but who do we get there?”

The Bolsheviks were in a mess, but in fact the position of the Mensheviks was not much better. Neither of the two factions had the support of the workers. “The SocialDemocratic

organisation in St Petersburg prior to January 1905, by almost any criteria, was weak,&” writes Solomon Schwarz. “In December 1903, the joint Social Democratic organisation had about 18 circles in the factories, and membership of circles was from seven to ten, which would give a total worker membership of not more than 180. If the students and intelligentsia had about the same, as seems likely, total membership would have been 360. During the winter of 1904 the Committee’s membership and activities declined, and the links with abroad were weak or non-existent... The same correspondent says that the Mensheviks too were losing support: in one region where they had 15 to 20 circles, by December 1904 they had only four or five.”

In his memoirs, the leading Menshevik P.A. Garvi describes the position in Kiev on the eve of 1905: “A strange dearth of people in the organisation. A remoteness from the working masses and their daily interests. A meagre organisational life in comparison with the recent past—that is what struck me in Kiev, suggesting melancholy comparisons with the past, with the ebullient life of the Odessa organisation of the 1901 and 1902 period. There was the Kiev committee; there were sector committees; in the sections there were propagandists conducting propaganda circles, usually leaflets were distributed through the circles, that was about all.

“Getting ahead of myself I will say that during all of 1905 in Kiev, in Rostov and in Moscow daily we came up against one and the same phenomenon: in the party organisations were gathered mostly callow youths, hotheaded and resolute but weakly linked to the working masses and uninfluential in the factories. The old social democrats among the workers—the real vanguard of the advanced workers formed in the period of propaganda and of the so-called Economism—these old workers, for the most part, stood aside. In Kiev, Rostov and Moscow and right up to the October strike I—and not only I—had to resort to more or less artificial methods to draw the ‘oldsters’ into active party work. We arranged special meetings and evening parties with them, we reasoned with them, but they went into party work reluctantly and looked upon our organisation and our working methods with mistrust.”[\[2\]](#)

### **‘Zubatovism’**

The weakness of the Party coincided with a new upswing in the workers’ movement, which was therefore obliged to express itself through other channels. In 1900-02, the head of the Moscow Okhrana (secret police) S.V. Zubatov hit on the idea of setting up legal unions, under the control of the police, which were allowed to function, and even elect committees, subject to police vetting, and carry out activities, provided they were of a strictly economic, non-political character. Zubatov not only established legal trade unions, under the control of the police (a tactic ironically christened “police socialism” by the revolutionaries) but also went to great lengths to recruit revolutionaries as agents. He would visit them in prison, showing a fatherly interest in their welfare, brought them tea and biscuits and even Marxist literature to read. Interrogations were organised, not in prison but in the study of his home, where he tried to persuade them that the best way to defend the workers’ interest was to participate in his “movement”. By combining harshness with such methods, some of the weaker or more naïve elements were

eventually ensnared and became informants upon their release. Once entangled, it became virtually impossible to escape. Known provocateurs were not treated very gently by the revolutionaries.

Zubatov was far more intelligent than the average tsarist police chief and his methods were quite successful for a time—too successful, in fact! In a climate of general labour unrest and in the absence of genuine mass legal organisations the workers entered the police unions in large numbers. In order to keep in the workers' good books, over-zealous police-officers even organised strikes. These unions contained thousands of workers—far more than the relatively small numbers active in the Social Democratic committees. With their customary resourcefulness, the workers turned the table on the police, and used the opportunity to press home their demands and organise legally in the workplaces. Zubatov's unions gave the workers a chance to organise and express their grievances. The question arose of what attitude the Social Democrats should take towards these reactionary police unions. Many years later, when the Russian workers had already taken power, Lenin gave the answer in his masterpiece on revolutionary strategy and tactics, *Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*:

“Under tsarism we had no ‘legal opportunities’ whatsoever until 1905. However, when Zubatov, agent of the secret police, organised Black Hundred [the Black Hundreds were a reactionary, anti-Semitic organisation used by tsarism as an auxiliary arm against the revolutionary movement] workers’ assemblies and working men’s societies for the purpose of trapping revolutionaries and combating them, we sent members of our party to these assemblies and into these societies... They established contacts with the masses, were able to carry on their agitation, and succeeded in wresting workers from the influence of Zubatov’s agents.”

Lenin did not confine his remarks to the particular conditions of tsarist Russia, but laid down a general rule which governs the approach of Marxists to the mass organisations of the proletariat. In order to build a real revolutionary party, it is not sufficient to proclaim it from the street corner. It is necessary to find a road to the masses, regardless of all obstacles. It is necessary to go to the masses wherever they are: “To refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats, or ‘workers who have become completely bourgeois’...”

“This ridiculous ‘theory’ that Communists should not work in reactionary trade unions reveals with the utmost clarity the frivolous attitude of the ‘Left’ Communists toward the question of influencing the ‘masses’ and their misuse of clamour about the ‘masses’. If you want to help the ‘masses’ and win the sympathy and support of the ‘masses’, you should not fear the difficulties, or pinpricks, chicanery, insults and persecution from the ‘leaders’ (who, being opportunists and social-chauvinists, are in most cases directly or indirectly connected with the bourgeoisie and the police), but must absolutely work wherever the masses are to be found. You must be capable of any sacrifice, of overcoming the greatest obstacles, in order to carry on agitation and propaganda, systematically, perseveringly, persistently and patiently in those institutions, societies

and associations—even the most reactionary—in which proletarian or semi-proletarian masses are to be found.”[\[3\]](#)

This was always the hallmark of Lenin’s method: absolute implacability on questions of theory and principle combined with extreme flexibility on tactical and organisational issues. The authorities attempted to construct a wall between the Marxists and the masses. The Social Democratic workers, by patient and careful work and flexible tactics, succeeded in breaking down the barriers, penetrating the unions, and fertilising them with the ideas of Marxism. Under the irresistible pressure of the shop-floor, the Zubatov unions became partially transformed into organs of struggle. After the strike wave of 1903, the unfortunate Zubatov was unceremoniously sacked. Even then this movement continued to play a role. Typical of these Zubatov unions was the St Petersburg “Assembly of Russian Factory and Workshop Workers”, set up by Father Grigory Gapon with police permission.

Many Social Democrats failed to grasp the necessity of participating in Gapon’s organisation in order to reach the masses. They were repelled by its reactionary features. Not for the first or last time, revolutionaries failed to understand the way in which the real movement of the working class unfolds. Setting out from an abstractly correct idea (“The workers need a revolutionary party”) they failed to take into account the real organisation of the workers that had evolved out of concrete circumstances and which bore no resemblance to their pre-conceived ideas of what a workers’ organisation *ought* to look like. Was this union not organised by the police in order to control the working class? How could Marxists participate in such an abomination? Yet the attempts of the tiny Social Democratic circles to win the masses directly by means of propaganda and agitation alone proved futile. The organised workers were mainly skilled and experienced proletarians, mostly members of Gapon’s union, who looked askance at the beardless youngsters who were trying to teach them lessons. Their propaganda seemed to rebound like water off a duck’s back. The Menshevik S. Somov (I.A. Pushkin) described the situation in their St Petersburg organisation at the start of the year:

“A very sad picture emerged. Well-functioning organisations were to be found only in the Narva sector, with its 30,000 workers for example, the whole social democratic organisation consisted of six or seven circles of workers of the Putilov and the Railway Car Construction plants (five to six workers in each circle) and the work was conducted according to old-fashioned methods, with long courses in political economy and primitive culture. True, there was also a sector organisation of representatives of the circles, but what it did is hard to determine. Factory life found no echo at all in the circles. The diffuse unrest... that was finding an expression in the powerfully developing Gapon movement in which the yearning of the working masses for broad organisation and class unity was so clearly displayed was ignored as Zubatovism. Moreover, most of the workers belonging to our circle were very young men, just out of apprenticeship and with no influence whatsoever in their factory milieu.”[\[4\]](#)

Those active in the circles were generally the more skilled and literate among the workers, good at their work and with a strong sense of pride in it, not just in politics but

in the workplace as well. It was a hard milieu to penetrate. “In those days,” wrote the Putilov worker A.M. Buiko, “it was felt that if a worker did not master his trade, did not become a good craftsman, then he was not a proper fellow. This point of view had its roots in the days of kustashchina, the propaganda circles, when old craftsmen regarded unskilled workers as a casual element in their midst... if a young man began a conversation with an older skilled fitter or turner he would be told: ‘Learn first how to hold a hammer and use chisel and a knife, and then you can begin to argue like a man who has something to teach others’.”<sup>[5]</sup>

## **Father Gapon**

Gapon’s “union”, set up in April 1904, was in reality a friendly society which organised insurance schemes, libraries and social activities, such as musical evenings which the workers attended with their families. It was intended as a safety-valve where workers, to some extent, could give voice to their grievances, but where all mention of politics was rigorously prohibited. Its declared aims, among other things, were to affirm “national consciousness” among the workers, encourage “sensible views” about their rights, and foster “activity facilitating the legal improvements of the workers conditions of work and living”. Since the Assembly’s leaders did everything in their power to exclude revolutionaries, it is not surprising that the revolutionary workers and intellectuals looked upon the new organisation with extreme suspicion and hostility.

However, the efforts of the police and their union stooges to clamp the workers’ movement into a straitjacket of legal constraints was doomed to failure. The rising tide of discontent which affected all layers of society in the course of the Russo-Japanese War, began to affect even the most backward strata of the working class. Up to this moment, the opposition to tsarism had mainly come from the liberal intelligentsia and the students. The big battalions of the working class seemed to have stood aside from the struggle. But, despite the appearance of calm, the factories and workers’ districts were seething with discontent. All that was required was some focal point which would enable this subterranean process to find a voice and a conscious, organised expression. After the assassination of Plehve, the hated interior minister, in July 1904, the regime, hopelessly compromised by military defeats and feeling the ground tremble beneath its feet, tried to forestall revolution from below by making concessions from the top. The relative softening of the regime in the autumn 1904 gave the workers more room to breathe. From September 1904 a series of mass meetings were held in the Petersburg factories, under the auspices of Gapon’s Assembly, which became increasingly popular with the workers. Fresh layers of workers, with no experience of struggle, were becoming organised. Gapon’s organisation now had up to 8,000 members and branches in at least 11 districts of the city. This was a far larger number of workers than had ever participated in the Social Democratic organisations, which numbered at most 500 or 600 members.

The workers who joined Gapon’s union were not like the old, conscious Social Democratic workers, but completely raw, politically untutored masses, who brought with them all the prejudices imbibed for a thousand years from a backward peasant milieu. Insofar as injustice existed, the Russian peasant reasoned, this was the fault of the “tsar’s

servants”, not the monarch who was the “people’s protector”. It was no accident that the union was headed by a priest. The Marxists had no real influence inside the Assembly, although there was a significant layer of workers who had passed through the Social Democratic organisations in the previous decade, had dropped out, and now re-surfaced in this new milieu. It is important to bear this in mind when one reads the usual allegation that the 1905 revolution was a “spontaneous movement”. Of course, the element of spontaneity was present. But equally, the events leading up to 9 January were, in fact, planned in advance by the leading group of Gapon’s organisation, acting under the pressure of the workers, many of whom had been touched by the propaganda of Marxism in the big strikes of the 1890s.

The figure of Gapon himself is shrouded in an enigma. The prevailing opinion in Marxist circles at the time was that he was a simple police agent, who in all probability had deliberately planned the massacre of 9 January 1905 with the authorities. The notorious Stalinist Short Course states baldly that “in 1904, prior to the Putilov strike, the police had used the services of an agent provocateur, a priest by the name of Gapon... Gapon undertook to assist the tsarist Okhrana [secret police] by providing a pretext for firing on the workers and drowning the working class movement in blood”.<sup>[6]</sup> Gapon was undoubtedly mixed up with the police when the union was set up, and even had contacts with leading members of the government. But his was a very contradictory character. On 9 January, when he narrowly escaped death at the hands of the tsarist troops, he marched side by side with the Social Revolutionary Pinchas Rutenberg. Later he was sheltered by Maxim Gorky, held discussions with Lenin in Geneva and came close to the Bolsheviks. Lenin was convinced of his child-like sincerity. But Gapon’s understanding of the revolution remained on a primitive level. Exile destroyed him, as it destroyed many others. He became demoralised, took to gambling and finally returned to Russia where, it seems, he attempted to resume his contacts with the police, writing a letter to the Minister of the Interior Durnovo. Finally, in March 1906, he was assassinated. Ironically, the bullet that killed him was fired by the same SR who had marched at his side on that fateful Sunday in January.

The idea that Gapon consciously led the workers to be slaughtered is clearly false. Gapon’s contradictory character reflected the mentality of the new generation of workers newly arrived from the villages and only half assimilated into the proletariat, bringing with them many prejudices and even reactionary ideas. An able organiser, a fine orator and a natural leader, he spoke a language which the workers could understand. With its curious mixture of militancy and religion, class struggle and monarchism, it corresponded to the first, confused gropings towards consciousness of millions of the most downtrodden layers of society. The son of a peasant himself, who was touched in his youth by revolutionary ideas, Gapon faithfully expressed the confused strivings of this layer in which the desire to fight for a better life in this world is still entangled with hopes in the afterlife and belief in the Little Father. No-one expressed the feelings of the masses better than Gapon. For that reason, the masses worshipped him. “In the tense days of early January 1905,” writes Lionel Kochan, “he had the aura of a leader and a prophet: ‘...for each of his words men were willing to give their lives; his priest’s cassock and

crucifix were the magnet that drew these hundreds of thousands of tormented people,' wrote one observer."<sup>[7]</sup>

Whatever Gapon's motivations, he was stirring up forces neither he nor anyone else could control. While the revolutionaries branded him an agent provocateur, the authorities cursed him as a dangerous agent of the revolution. Irrespective of his subjective intentions, the latter description was far nearer the truth. But Gapon was ill-equipped to deal with the forces he had helped to conjure up. All along he gives the impression of being carried along by events beyond his control or understanding. On the eve of the massacre, this "leader of men" gave voice to his perplexity: "What would come of it? Good heavens, I don't know. Something big, but what exactly, I can't say. Who can make head or tail of all this?"<sup>[8]</sup>

The accumulated rage and bitterness of the factory workers finally exploded in a strike at the Putilov arms works—a strategic centre of the St Petersburg proletariat—in December. Starting in September 1904, there had been mass workers' meetings in the factories under the auspices of the union, which gave the workers a chance to express their grievances and begin to acquire an idea of their own strength. The employers became alarmed and decided to crack down. The spark which ignited the powder-keg was the dismissal of four activists of Gapon's union. On December 28, a mass meeting of workers from 11 factories was convened by Gapon's organisation. The increasingly radicalised mood of the workers was slowly pushing even the Gaponite leaders to more militant positions. An indication of the sea-change was the fact that representatives of the Social Democrats and Social Revolutionaries were invited to attend. At this meeting it was decided to send a delegation with a petition to the management, the factory inspectors and the authorities in St Petersburg, setting forth the workers' grievances. By January 3, all 13,000 workers were on strike. The only people still inside the plant were two police agents. The strikers demanded an eight-hour day, a ban on overtime working, improved working conditions, free medical aid, higher wages for women workers, permission to organise a representative committee and payment of wages for the period of the strike.

### **The Putilov Strike**

The idea of a petition was probably conceived by Gapon as a way of diverting the movement into safe channels. Possibly Gapon really believed he could act as a mediator between the Little Father and his "children". But once put forward, in a situation of ferment among the masses, even this apparently innocuous idea had a logic of its own. The idea of an appeal to the tsar and a petition of demands immediately caught the imagination of the masses. Mass meetings were held all over the capital. Gapon dashed from one meeting to another, delivering increasingly radical speeches under the impact of the mood of the masses, who revered him. An eye-witness account gives a vivid impression of the electric atmosphere at these meetings, with their quasi-evangelical character, Gapon calling upon the Almighty to lead the workers in struggle, urging the workers to stand together and, if necessary, die together: "All those present were in a state of rapture—many were weeping, stamping their feet, banging chairs, beating with

their fists against the walls and raising their hands on high, they swore to remain firm to the end.”

The movement was rapidly turning into a general strike. By 5 January, 26,000 workers were out; by 7 January, 105,000; and the next day, 111,000. It was also acquiring a political character. A mass meeting on January 5 voted for the immediate convening of a Constituent Assembly, political liberty, an end to the war and the freeing of political prisoners. In all probability, the initiative for these resolutions came from workers who had been influenced by the Social Democrats. Over a long period of Social Democratic agitation, propaganda and organisation, a considerable number of advanced workers had been in contact, to a greater or lesser extent, with the Social Democratic propaganda circles. A far larger number had been affected by the mass agitation carried out systematically by the Social Democrats for at least ten years prior to January 9. That the basic slogans of the Marxists had left their mark on the consciousness of the working class was demonstrated by the fact that a number of key Social Democratic demands found their way into Gapon’s famous petition—from the eight-hour day to the demand for a Constituent Assembly.

But although Social Democratic slogans were getting an echo, the Party itself was still completely isolated and without influence. Martov, in his history of the Russian Social Democracy, written only a few years later, confirms that “...the Social Democracy of both factions could not but notice that the stormy events in Petersburg in January 1905 took place not only outside the immediate leadership of the Social Democracy, but even without a significant participation by it as an organised whole”.<sup>[9]</sup> This is confirmed from the Bolshevik side by the minutes of the Third Congress which state that “the January events found the Petersburg committee in an extremely deplorable state. Its links with the working masses had been utterly disorganised by the Mensheviks. Only with great difficulty did they manage to maintain themselves in the city, Vasily Island and the Vyborg district”.<sup>[10]</sup>

As always, the watchword of the movement of the masses is “unity”. They saw the Social Democrats as alien elements coming from without, and not part of their movement. At one mass meeting, Gapon chided a Social Democratic speaker with the words: “Do not introduce discord: let us march towards our sacred goal under a single peaceful banner, common to one and all.” Gapon’s authority appeared to be unassailable. By contrast, the revolutionary Social Democrats were regarded with suspicion by the workers. The report of the St Petersburg Bolsheviks to the Third Congress in April admits that they had been very slow to intervene in what they saw as a reactionary police union, only beginning to pay it serious attention when the strike was well underway. In some parts of the city, notably the Vyborg district, they got a sympathetic hearing. But elsewhere in the city, they were given a rough ride. Often the chairman would not even allow them to speak.

“Up to the 9 January,” the Petersburg delegate reported, “the attitude of the workers towards the [Bolshevik] committee was extremely hostile. Our agitators were beaten up, leaflets were destroyed, and the first 500 roubles sent to the Putilov workers by the students were accepted grudgingly.”<sup>[11]</sup> A Menshevik writer bears this out: “In the

Narva district, where the movement had originated, as late as the 8 of January, the workers enthusiastically welcomed the political content of Gapon's petition. When a lone Social Democrat attempted to deliver a political speech, a howl went up from the assembled workers: 'Down with him!' 'Throw him out!'.<sup>[12]</sup>

The numerical weakness and isolation of the Social Democracy at the beginning of the revolution was revealed in the words of Livshits, giving voice to the frustration of the Party activists in Petersburg at their inability to exercise a decisive influence before 9 January: "We Party workers", he wrote, "knew very well that the forthcoming peaceful procession would not lead to anything worthwhile and would involve the masses in terrible bloodshed. But where was the force that could have forestalled this terrible misdeed, for which tsarism and clericalism was responsible? Such a force did not exist."<sup>[13]</sup> Yet in 24 hours the whole situation was transformed.

### **Bloody Sunday**

The petition aroused tremendous enthusiasm when it was read out in mass workers' assemblies where it was everywhere approved with acclamation. With breathtaking naivety, Gapon wrote to the Minister of the Interior on the eve of Bloody Sunday, requesting legal permission for a peaceful demonstration in front of the Winter Palace: "The tsar has nothing to fear," he wrote, "I, as the representative of the Assembly of Russian Workers, my colleagues, and the worker comrades—and even the so-called revolutionary groups of different trends—guarantee the inviolability of his person. Let him come forth like a true tsar, with courage in his heart, to meet his People and take unto his hands our petition." Signed: "The Priest Gapon and Eleven Workers' Deputies, St Petersburg, 8 January."<sup>[14]</sup>

In an attempt to underline their peaceful intentions, the organisers banned the display of red flags. The Social Democrats, despite their grave misgivings about the demonstration, decided, correctly, to participate alongside the rest of their class. This the organisers agreed to only on condition that they marched at the rear of the demonstration, a measure which, in the event, saved the lives of many of them.

While the leaders of the union were straining every nerve to convince the government of their peaceful intentions, the latter, in a state of near panic, was preparing to teach the masses a bloody lesson. At two o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday January 9, the workers began to assemble before the Winter Palace. The square was soon packed with a huge multitude not only of workers but students, socialist groups, women, children and old people—in all about 140,000 people. "As agreed, the march to the palace was a peaceful one, without songs, banners or speeches. People wore their Sunday clothes. In some parts of the city they carried icons and church banners. Everywhere the petitioners encountered troops. They begged to be allowed to pass. They wept, they tried to go around the barrier, they tried to break through it. The soldiers fired all day long, the dead were counted in by the hundreds, the wounded in the thousands. An exact count was impossible since the police carted away and secretly buried the bodies of the dead at night."<sup>[15]</sup> At least 4,600 people were killed and wounded that day.

The massacre of 9 January reveals “Nicholas the Bloody”, as he justly became known, not only as a cruel and contemptible man, but also as an exceedingly stupid monarch. “The shots fired on the 22 January 1905,” recalls Eva Broido, “woke echoes all over Russia. Everywhere the masses were stirred out of their complacency: the old belief in the goodness of the ‘little father’ the tsar was dead. Even the most backward workers understood that much.”[\[16\]](#)

After the massacre, Gapon recoiled in horror, denouncing the tsar and appealing for an armed uprising. At an emotional meeting held on the night of Bloody Sunday, Gapon announced to the assembled workers: “We no longer have a tsar”. Crowds of workers roamed the streets, angry and desperate but without leadership. And suddenly, the same revolutionaries who had been rejected, shouted down and even beaten up became the focal point of intense interest. The Petersburg delegate at the Third Congress related how on the evening of the 9th the Bolshevik agitators took to the streets looking for groups of workers to address, but found that things had already gone beyond that stage. The workers had learnt in a matter of hours more than decades of agitation and propaganda could ever teach them. “We were passed by carriages carrying away the dead, behind which ran crowds of people shouting ‘Down with the tsar!’ You only had to throw arms at a crowd like this and they would have gone anywhere you wanted. On Vasily Island a scrap iron shop was broken into and the crowd armed themselves with old swords. This created a pathetic impression. Everywhere you could hear the cry: ‘Arms! Arms!’ By evening the attitude towards the organisation underwent a radical transformation. Our agitators were listened to with enthusiasm. The organisers could go wherever they pleased. On each of the successive days the same mood could be observed.”[\[17\]](#)

Marx once wrote that the revolution at times needs the whip of counter-revolution to drive it forward. Despite the hypnotic effect exercised by Gapon on the workers at the time, he was merely an accidental figure thrown up by the movement of the masses, like a fleck of foam on the crest of a mighty wave, which flashes brightly for a moment before vanishing forever. His very success consisted in the fact that he was the personification of the first inchoate, spontaneous, instinctive movement of the working class, the first stirrings of consciousness of the masses. Inevitably, such a movement tends to seek out the line of least resistance, the well-worn paths, familiar sounding phrases and famous leaders. It took the massacre of Bloody Sunday to knock out of the heads of the masses the century-old illusions in the tsar. In a revolutionary situation, the workers’ consciousness grows by leaps and bounds. Indeed, sudden and sharp shifts in the mood of the masses constitutes the essential element of a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary period. By the end of the year, the revolutionary Social Democracy had definitely established itself as the hegemonic force within the working class, striving to place itself at the head of the revolutionary nation.

From exile in Switzerland, Lenin immediately hailed the January events as the beginning of the revolution in Russia: “The working class,” he wrote, “has received a momentous lesson in civil war: the revolutionary education of the proletariat made more progress in one day than it could have made in months and years of drab, humdrum, wretched

existence. The slogan of the heroic St Petersburg proletariat, 'Death or Freedom!' is reverberating throughout Russia."[\[18\]](#)

As we have seen, prior to 9 January the workers were not willing to read Social Democratic leaflets, and often tore them up and even beat the leafletters. But now the consciousness of the masses was transformed. One Social Democrat described the situation: "Now tens of thousands of revolutionary pamphlets were swallowed up without remainder; nine-tenths were not only read but read until they fell apart. The newspaper which was recently considered by the broad masses, and particularly by the peasantry, as a landlord's affair, and when it came accidentally into their hands was used in the best of cases to roll cigarettes in, was now carefully, even lovingly, straightened and smoothed out, given to the literate, and the crowd, holding its breath, listened to 'what they are writing about the war' ... Not only did the soldiers moving along all the lines of the railway network almost fight for a newspaper or other printed sheet thrown from the window of a passing train, but the peasants of the villages near the railways from then on, and also for some years after the war, continued to ask passengers for 'a little newspaper'."[\[19\]](#)

## NOTES

[1] See David Lane, *The roots of Russian Communism*, p. 71.

[2] Quoted in Schwarz, op. cit., pp. 54, 54-55, 55, 72 and 57.

[3] LCW, vol. 31, pp. 55 and 53.

[4] Quoted in Schwarz, op. cit., p. 56.

[5] Quoted in Surh, *St Petersburg in 1905*, p. 73.

[6] Stalin, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [Bolsheviks]*, p. 94.

[7] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 87.

[8] Quoted in Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 2, p. 43.

[9] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 45 in both quotes.

[10] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 544.

[11] Ibid., pp. 158 and 44.

[12] Quoted in J.L.H. Keep, *The Rise of the Social Democracy in Russia*, p. 157.

[13] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, p. 540.

[14] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 45.

[15] Trotsky, *1905*, p. 92.

[16] E. Broido, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 116.

[17] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 545.

[18] LCW, *The Beginning of the Revolution in Russia*, vol. 8, p. 97.

[19] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 36-7.

## Part Two: The First Russian Revolution

[section 2 of 5]

### Revolution Begins

Only two days before Bloody Sunday, the ex-Marxist liberal, Struve, wrote in his journal *Osvobozhdenie*: “There is not yet such a thing as a revolutionary people in Russia,” to which Trotsky replied scathingly, speaking of the liberals, “They did not believe in the revolutionary role of the proletariat; instead, they believed in the force of the zemtsy’s petition [a reference to the campaign of banquets and petitions launched the previous autumn by the liberals organised around the Zemstvos], in Witte, in Svyatopolk Mirsky, in jars of dynamite. There was no political prejudice in which they did not believe. Our belief in the proletariat was the only thing they regarded as prejudice.”<sup>[20]</sup> The magnificent movement of the proletariat was the final answer to all the sceptics.

On January 10, barricades appeared in St Petersburg. By January 17, 160,000 workers were on strike in 650 factories in the capital. The spontaneous mass movement in solidarity with the Petersburg workers swept across the whole country. The events of Bloody Sunday caused an immediate reaction on the part of the working class. In January alone more than 400,000 workers participated in strikes throughout Russia. From 14 to 20 January the Polish capital was in the grip of a revolutionary general strike involving factories, trams, coach drivers and even doctors. The city, occupied by Russian troops, resembled an armed camp. On January 16 socialist groups called a demonstration in which 100,000 workers took part. Troops called in to disperse the crowd fired up to 60,000 rounds. In three days, according to official figures, there were 64 dead and 69 wounded of whom 29 died later. A state of siege was declared.

The Baltic area was also swept by the revolutionary current. Riga, Revel, and all the other cities were involved in mass revolutionary movements. The centre was Riga where on January 13, 60,000 workers staged a political general strike and 15,000 workers staged a protest march. The Russian governor general, A.N. Neller-Zakomelsky, ordered the troops to fire on the crowd killing 70 and injuring 200. In the teeth of ferocious repression, the strike movement continued to sweep like wildfire through Poland and the Baltic states. A similar situation existed in the Caucasus where a political general strike broke out. The movement cut across all national lines: Polish, Armenian, Georgian, Lithuanian and Jewish workers expressed their solidarity with their Russian class brothers in the most practical way—by fighting against the hated Russian autocracy. Most seriously of all, from the government's point of view, a railway strike began in Saratov, in Central Russia, on January 12, which quickly spread to the other railway lines, extending the revolutionary wave outwards to the most backward provinces.

The movement of the workers had an electrifying effect on all classes in society. The public retreat of the regime encouraged not only the workers, but also the middle class, the bourgeois liberals and the students. "The worker's action strengthened the position of the radical elements within the intelligentsia just as the Zemtsy's conference had earlier put a trump card in the hands of the opportunist elements."<sup>[21]</sup> This movement provoked panic in government circles. After Bloody Sunday, the ruling clique intended to move quickly towards reaction, as indicated by the dismissal of the liberal Svyatopolk Mirsky in favour of the conservative bureaucrat Bulygin, and the granting of almost unlimited dictatorial powers to General Trepov. Now all its calculations were thrown into disarray. Under the pressure of the growing strike movement, on 18 February, the tsar issued his first Manifesto in which he hinted at a constitution and popular representation. By its united action, the working class had achieved more in one week than all the years of speechifying and petitions and banquets by the liberal bourgeois.

The shock-waves that flowed from 9 January pushed the whole movement to the left. The tide began to flow strongly in favour of revolutionary action, and the revolutionary Social Democracy, Bolshevik and Menshevik workers, yesterday shunned and mistrusted by their workmates, now came to the fore in every factory. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the role of these conscious worker agitators in the unfolding strike wave, despite its apparently spontaneous character. The activities of the revolutionaries were greatly assisted by General Trepov who obligingly exiled large numbers of "trouble makers" from St Petersburg to the provinces where they acted as a necessary leaven to the revolutionary movement.

After Bloody Sunday, this situation experienced a complete turn-about. The possibilities which now unfolded before the Russian Marxists were now immense. But the Party, still reeling from the effects of the split, was in very poor shape to take advantage of the opportunities. A cursory glance at Lenin's correspondence at this time reveals the deficient state of the organisation, particularly with regard to contact between the Bolshevik activists inside Russia and the leading centre abroad: "A nice business: we talk of organisation, of centralism, while actually there is such disunity, such amateurism among even the closest comrades in the centre, that one feels like chucking it all in in

disgust. Just look at the Bundists: they do not prate about centralism, but *every one* of them writes to the centre weekly and contacts are thus *actually* maintained... Really, I sometimes think that nine-tenths of the Bolsheviks are actually formalists. Either we shall rally all who are out to fight into a really iron strong organisation and with this small but strong party quash that sprawling monster, the new Iskra [i.e. Mensheviks] motley elements, or we shall prove by our conduct that we deserve to go under for being contemptible formalists...

“The Mensheviks have more money, more literature, more transportation facilities, more agents and more ‘names’, and a larger staff of contributors. It would be unpardonable childishness not to see that.”[\[22\]](#)

While some element of exaggeration may be put down to Lenin’s natural feelings of frustration and impatience, the accusation of formalism directed against a layer of the Bolshevik professionals inside Russia was not at all accidental. Starting out from a position of clear superiority among the Party activists in Russia, the Bolshevik committee-men, when unexpectedly confronted with the explosive movement of the masses failed to react with the necessary flexibility, and consequently made mistakes and frequently lost the initiative. In a situation where hundreds of thousands of workers and youth were entering the arena of politics, seeking the revolutionary road, the most pressing need was to open up the Party, and let in at least the best elements among the masses. But the committee-men, steeped in the habit of clandestine, small circle work, proved reluctant to move over and make way for the new, fresh layers. They found a hundred and one excuses for not opening up—the workers were not ready to join, the need to safeguard security, and so on and so forth. After all, they reasoned, wasn’t the basic difference between Lenin and Martov at the Second Congress the need to safeguard the purity of the revolutionary vanguard by not swamping it with too many raw and untutored elements? We must not dilute the membership!

Yet that very Lenin who argued in favour of restricting Party membership in 1903, now argued even more vehemently in favour of opening the doors and windows and letting in the largest possible number of workers and youth: “We need young forces,” he thundered, “I am for shooting on the spot anyone who presumes to say that there are no people to be had. The people in Russia are legion: all we have to do is to recruit young people more widely and boldly, more boldly and widely, and again more boldly *without fearing them*. This is a time of war. The youth—the students and still more the young workers—will decide the issue of the whole struggle. Get rid of all the old habits of immobility, of respect for rank and so on. Form *hundreds* of circles of Vperyodists [i.e. Bolsheviks] from among the youth and encourage them to work at full blast. Enlarge the Committee *threefold* by accepting young people onto it, set up half a dozen subcommittees, ‘co-opt’ any and every honest and energetic person. Allow every subcommittee to write and publish leaflets and without any red tape (there is no harm if they do make a mistake: we on *Vperyod* will ‘gently’ correct them). We must, with desperate speed, unite all people with revolutionary initiative and set them to work. Do not fear their lack of training, do not tremble at their inexperience and lack of

development... [because] events themselves will teach them *in our spirit*. Events are already teaching everyone precisely in the *Vperyod* spirit.

“Only 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 for revolutionary Social Democratic work of all varieties among all strata, or you will go under, wearing the aureole of ‘committee’ bureaucrats.”[\[23\]](#)

Reminding his colleagues that “the strength of a revolutionary organisation lies in the number of its connections”, Lenin wrote to Gusev on 15 February: “A professional revolutionary must build up dozens of new connections in each locality, put all the work into their hands while he is with them, teach them and bring them up to the mark not by lecturing them but by work. Then he should go to another place and after a month or two return to check up on the young people who have replaced him. I assure you that there is a sort of idiotic, Philistine, Oblomov-like fear of the youth among us. I implore you: fight this fear with all your might.”[\[24\]](#)

These lines strikingly reveal the whole essence of Lenin’s method, particularly on organisational questions. While stressing the need for a strong, centralised revolutionary organisation, Lenin’s attitude to organisational questions was always extremely flexible. After the Second Congress, the Mensheviks attempted to caricature Lenin as a hide-bound bureaucrat, striving to create a party composed of an elite of intellectual professional revolutionaries which would exclude ordinary workers who would have to submit to the commands of an “all-powerful centre”. This caricature, which has been maliciously repeated and exaggerated by bourgeois historians, is the opposite of the truth, as the above passage—very typical of the period with which we are dealing—irrefutably demonstrates.

### **The Shidlovsky Commission**

Conscious of the danger facing it from all sides, the regime acted with a mixture of ruthlessness and cunning. While attempting to crush the movement by new arrests, deportations, martial law and pogroms, the government simultaneously attempted to woo the liberal bourgeoisie with the Manifesto of 18 February and set in motion a manoeuvre designed to split and disorient the working class. Utilising the time-honoured trick of the ruling class in all countries when it feels its back to the wall, the tsarist government set up a commission headed by Senator Shidlovsky “to enquire into the causes of the discontent among the workers”. The aim of this stratagem was clearly an attempt to defuse the situation, diverting the workers away from revolutionary action and preventing them from moving in the direction of Marxism. In an unprecedented move, the government announced that the workers would be represented on the commission by means of elected delegates.

This manoeuvre presented the Marxists with a tactical problem. On the one hand, the reactionary aims of the government were quite clear. On the other hand, to refuse to participate would be to renounce a splendid opportunity to carry the ideas of revolutionary socialism to the mass of workers. For the Menshevik leaders, with their opportunistic leanings, there was no particular problem. They immediately advocated using the commission as a “tribune” from which to address the workers of all Russia. Among the Bolsheviks in Petersburg, however, the prevailing mood was initially in favour of a boycott. Similar moods existed also among the Menshevik workers who were far to the left of the leaders in exile. At the Third Congress, Rumyantsev (“Filipov” in the minutes) stated that “there were no differences over the need to boycott the [Shidlovsky] commission”.<sup>[25]</sup> However, the general mood of the workers was overwhelmingly in favour of participation, and the Bolsheviks soon modified their position in favour of participating, at least in the election of delegates, taking full advantage of the legal opportunities for agitation among a wider layer of workers than would normally be possible.

The strike movement continued and intensified. The demands put forward by the workers ranged from the demand for hot water for tea and wash-up facilities, to the demand for the eight-hour day and a constituent assembly. The last-named demands showed the influence of Social Democratic ideas. Still more significant was the demand for the right to elect deputies and that the workers’ elected representatives should enjoy immunity. This already anticipated the formation of the soviets in the coming months. If the authorities thought that the setting up of a commission would halt the mass movement, they were in for a rude awakening. “The rank-and-file workers,” writes Surh, “were more intransigent and less willing to postpone strikes and entrust demands to the deliberations of the commission than were their deputies.”

Through the collective struggle the workers began to realise their strength as a class and their worth and dignity as human beings. A common demand, which reflected the awakening consciousness of the workers, was the demand for politer treatment of workers by managers and foremen: “Unconditionally polite treatment by the plant management,” went the Putilov demands, “of all workers without exception, and the abolition of the use of ‘ty’ with workers [‘ty’ is the familiar form of ‘you’ and was reserved in public discourse for children and social inferiors like serfs and domestics].” Workers at the Baltic Shipyards stated that “foremen, sub-foremen, and the whole management in general must without fail treat workers like people and not like an object... and not use unpleasant and unnecessary words, as is now done”.<sup>[26]</sup>

Demands for the removal of unpopular foremen were frequently backed up by direct action. Workers would seize the offender, put him in a sack, and cast him out of the factory. By 18 March, the Factory Inspectorate had recorded more than 20 cases of such “sackings” in St Petersburg. After two sackings at the Putilov Works, the foremen apparently learned good manners and became extremely polite to the workers. The newly-found mood of confidence of an awakened working class was fertile ground for revolutionary agitation. Taking advantage of the legal opportunities presented by Shidlovsky, Bolshevik and Menshevik agitators flooded the workplaces with their

leaflets, and spoke at many mass meetings. The tactic of both factions was to participate in the elections, to use them as a platform to reach a large number of workers, but to refuse to participate in the commission itself until certain demands were met.

The correctness of the decision to participate in the campaign around the Shidlovsky commission was shown by subsequent events. On February 17, 400 candidates stood in the elections, of whom 20 per cent were Social Democrats, 40 per cent “radicalised workers” and the remainder “Economist” workers and others. But despite being in a minority, the Bolshevik delegates managed to set the tone of the meeting. The arrest of a number of delegates created a mood of angry militancy in which the Bolsheviks succeeded in delivering what amounted to an ultimatum to Senator Shidlovsky, demanding freedom of speech and assembly, the right of delegates to conduct their activities without let or hindrance, the right to meet and discuss freely with their electorate and the freeing of their arrested comrades. But when, on the following day, the votes were due to be taken, the government decided that things were getting out of hand and refused to accept the workers’ demands, whereupon the boycott campaign now went ahead in earnest. Having been through the experience of the commission, shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the class, it was now relatively easy to expose the fraudulent nature of the entire manoeuvre, while simultaneously agitating for the eight-hour working day, a state insurance policy, democratic elections and an end to the war. Three days later the authorities hastened to put an end to the one and only attempt to solve the labour problem by legal means. The workers, meanwhile, had learned a great deal from the experience which set an important precedent for the election of workers’ deputies which played a role in the establishment of the Petersburg Soviet later on.

Lenin understood clearly that all the manifestos, commissions and promises of reform were only a smoke-screen to deceive the masses, behind which the reaction was playing for time and preparing its revenge. Time was therefore of the essence. In an uninterrupted stream of articles, he poured scorn on the liberals with their illusions in peaceful constitutional reform, and flayed the Mensheviks for their illusions in the liberals. One of the facets of Lenin’s political genius was his ability to separate the essential from the inessential and grasp the essence of a problem. He quickly realised that it was now a question of “either... or”. The time for playing games was past. Either the working class, under a conscious revolutionary leadership, would succeed in gathering together all the oppressed masses under its leadership, above all the poor peasants and the oppressed nationalities, and smash the power of tsarism by an armed uprising, or, inevitably, the forces of black reaction would destroy the revolution, exacting a bloody revenge on the working class. There was no middle way. Everything, therefore, hinged on the Marxists’ ability to win over a decisive majority of the working class and as quickly as possible make the necessary political, organisational and material preparation for a national armed uprising. This idea was at the kernel of all Lenin’s pronouncements throughout 1905 and partly explains the urgent and at times uncharacteristically sharp tone of his correspondence with the interior. There was no time to lose.

People can change. In a revolution they can change very swiftly. Early in February, Gapon himself, having been pushed temporarily to the left by his experiences, issued an

*Open Letter to the Socialist Parties of All Russia*, which included an appeal for an armed uprising: “I call upon all the socialist parties of Russia to enter immediately into an agreement among themselves and to proceed to the armed uprising against tsarism. All the forces of every party should be mobilised. All should have a single plan of action... The immediate aim is the overthrow of the autocracy, a provisional revolutionary government which will at once amnesty all fighters for political and religious liberties, at once arm the people, and at once convoke a Constituent Assembly on the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot.”[\[27\]](#)

Gapon’s appeal was given a warm welcome by Lenin, who, in his article *A Militant Agreement for the Uprising*, stressed the need for a united front of all revolutionary forces to prepare the uprising, on the basis of the old slogan “march separately and strike together”. However, here, and in all his other articles, Lenin is emphatic on the absolute necessity of maintaining the complete political independence of the working class and its party: “We see in the independent, uncompromisingly Marxist party of the revolutionary proletariat the sole pledge of socialism’s victory and the sole road to victory that is most free from vacillation. We shall never, therefore, not even at the most revolutionary moments, forego the complete independence of the Social Democratic Party or the complete intransigence of our ideology.”

Under the pressure of the mass movement, the Mensheviks, particularly the ones on the ground in Russia, began to move left. Not only the Bolshevik *Vperyod*, but also the Menshevik *Iskra* published articles and diagrams on street fighting. However, the opportunist tendencies which were already apparent before 9 January were revealed in the exaggerated role attributed by the Mensheviks to the liberal bourgeoisie and in Martov’s insistence upon political, rather than technical preparation of the masses for armed uprising, of which Lenin tersely commented: “The separation of the ‘technical’ side of the revolution from the political side of the revolution is the greatest twaddle.”[\[28\]](#)

The question of arming the workers, which Lenin persistently raised, flowed from the needs of the moment. While making conciliatory noises, the government was systematically preparing the forces of reaction. Shaken by the show of solidarity between the workers of different nationalities, the authorities set about trying to break this unity by organising bloody pogroms. As early as February, the agents of the regime incited the Tartars in Baku to launch a murderous assault on the Armenians in that city. Throughout the year 1905, all over Russia, mobs were bribed with money and vodka by the police to beat up and murder Jews, socialists and students. In organising workers’ defence, the different party organisations co-operated in action. For practical purposes, agreements were arrived at involving Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Bundists, the socialists from other nationalities, and even petty bourgeois organisations like the nationalist Polish Socialist Party, and the SRs.

In theory, there would have been nothing wrong, under these conditions, with arriving at practical, episodic agreements even with the bourgeois liberals, for example, for joint defence against the pogromists, whilst maintaining complete organisational and political

independence. But in reality, such agreements with the liberals were virtually non-existent. The latter were striving, not for an armed insurrection, but for a deal with tsarism, leaning for a time on the mass movement in order to frighten the regime into granting a constitution. Lenin's articles in this period were full of the sharpest attacks on the liberals, warning against their treachery and combating the Mensheviks' attempts to blur the dividing line between the working class and the bourgeois liberals and foment illusions in the latter.

### **Lenin and the 'Committee-Men'**

Some people have attempted to find the "original sin" of Stalinism in Lenin's method of democratic centralism. Actually, the organisational methods of Bolshevism, impregnated through and through with the spirit of democracy, have nothing in common with that monstrous bureaucratic caricature. A measure of centralism is necessary in any serious organisation, whether a railway or a revolutionary party. Every political party, every stable organisation, necessarily has a conservative side. The need to provide the material means to pass from the realms of theory to that of practice demands the creation of an apparatus. The living principle of an apparatus is routine: the thousand and one organisational tasks of collecting money, organising distribution and sales of literature and so on, require a meticulous attention to detail. Without this, the construction of the party would be unthinkable. From the outset, a number of people must be dedicated to these tasks. As the party grows, their numbers increase. Unless special measures are undertaken to constantly raise the theoretical level of these comrades and enlarge their horizons, a certain organisational narrowness tends to creep in, which can play a harmful role under certain circumstances. Unconsciously or semi-consciously, the impression can be created on the primacy of organisation, whereas ideas, principles and theory are regarded as of secondary importance. The opinions, initiative and criticism of the workers, the rank-and-file, are regarded as an unnecessary encumbrance, at variance with the principle of centralism, or control from above.

That there were elements of this in the Bolshevik Party (as in any other party) is undeniable. But the attempts by unscrupulous bourgeois historians to link this with the abominations of Stalinism and to blame Lenin's "pitiless centralism" is a monstrous distortion. Unfortunately, a layer of Bolshevik organisers inside Russia, the so-called committee-men, on occasion acted like the very caricature invented by the Mensheviks. They interpreted Lenin's organisational ideas as fixed and immutable formulas, to be applied mechanically, irrespective of the needs of the moment. Even the most correct idea, when carried beyond a certain limit, becomes transformed into its opposite. By making a fetish of organisational forms, and overlooking the dialectical method of applying these ideas in a rapidly changing situation, despite their undoubted capacity for self-sacrifice and hard work, the committee-men frequently played a negative role in the development of the Party, until corrected by the intervention of Lenin. Looking back on this period at the end of his life, Trotsky summed up Lenin's position in the following way:

“Lenin understood better than anyone else the need for a centralised organisation: but he saw in it, above all, a lever for enhancing the activity of the advanced working men. The idea of making a fetish of the political machine was not only alien but repugnant to his nature. ...The habits peculiar to a political machine, were already forming in the underground. The young revolutionary bureaucrat was already emerging as a type. The conditions of conspiracy, true enough, offered rather meagre scope for such of the formalities of democracy as electiveness, accountability and control. Yes, undoubtedly the committee-men narrowed these limitations considerably more than necessity demanded and were far more intransigent and severe with the revolutionary working-men than with themselves, preferring to domineer even on occasions that called imperatively for lending an authentic ear to the voice of the masses.”[\[29\]](#)

A tendency towards routinism and conservatism can be seen in any apparatus, as any trade unionist knows from bitter experience. These elements, as we have said, were also present in the Bolshevik Party, but were far less important in the Bolshevik Party than in any other political party in history—and certainly less than in those Social Democratic parties and reformist trade unions which are entirely dominated by the worst sort of bureaucratic machines and parliamentary cliques, who have long ago sold their soul to the possessing classes. Politicians like Tony Blair or Felipe Gonzalez, who throw up their hands in feigned horror at the “Leninist” theory of democratic centralism, run their parties on the basis of the purest bureaucratic, centralist and dictatorial lines. This centralism reflects, on the one hand, the interests, salaries and privileges of the apparatus, on the other the pressure of big business which wishes to make the labour movement subject to its discipline. That these people should point an accusing finger at Lenin is hypocrisy of a highly advanced type.

Trotsky answers the cynical attacks on Lenin and Bolshevism: “In this connection,” he adds, “it is rather tempting to draw the inference that future Stalinism was already rooted in Bolshevik centralism or, more sweepingly, in the underground hierarchy of professional revolutionists. But upon analysis that inference crumbles to dust, disclosing an astounding paucity of historical content. Of course, there are dangers of one kind or another in the very process of stringently picking and choosing persons of advanced views and welding them into a tightly centralised organisation. But the roots of such dangers will never be found in the so-called ‘principle’ of centralism: rather they should be sought in the lack of homogeneity and the backwardness of the workers—that is, in the general social conditions which make imperative that centripetal leadership of the class by its vanguard. The key to the dynamic of leadership is in the actual inter-relationship between the political machine and its party, between the vanguard and its class, between centralism and democracy. Those inter-relationships cannot, of their very nature, be established a priori and remain immutable. They are dependent on concrete historical conditions, their mobile balance is regulated by the vital struggle of tendencies, which, as represented by their extreme wings, oscillate between despotism of the political machine and the impotence of phrasemongering.”[\[30\]](#)

In common with many other bourgeois authors, Solomon Schwarz distorts Lenin’s ideas on organisation beyond recognition. He tries to paint Lenin as a defender of the

bureaucratic intelligentsia against the workers, by quoting from the minutes of the Third Congress, when he quotes he uses *prove precisely the opposite*. The same author is compelled to admit that similar problems existed in the Menshevik organisation. This is clear from the discussions on reorganisation that took place at their All Russian Conference of Party Workers in Geneva in April/May 1905, and in the letters of prominent Mensheviks. In a well known pamphlet entitled *Workers and Intelligentsia in our Organisations*, signed “A Worker” and published in 1904 with a foreword by Axelrod, the author says: “It is better not to harbour undue illusions about the Martovite intelligentsia either.”

In March 1905, Gusev, secretary of the Petersburg committee and of the Bureau of Majority Committees wrote to the centre abroad the following: “A circular on organisational questions is needed, particularly on the issue of drawing workers into the committees. It is necessary to stress the importance of the conditions in which this can be done. *The criteria for bringing in workers should not be how well read they are, but how revolutionary, how devoted, energetic and influential.* Nowadays there are many such [people], and mainly among unorganised workers, most of them very young and lacking the qualities of political leaders, although they are well read in social democratic literature. Further, I have already written to you about moving the base of our organisation, the secret work, to workers’ homes. Concretely, this means that a part of our best illegal forces must become outwardly proletarianised.”[\[31\]](#)

The essence of the problem facing the Party was: how to establish firm links between the relatively small forces of the revolutionary vanguard and the mass of the workers and youth who were moving into struggle? The revolution does not unfold in an orderly and pre-determined fashion, like an orchestra responding to the flourishes of a conductor’s baton. It is a living play of forces, an equation even more complex than war between nations. The events of Bloody Sunday and afterwards, to pursue the military analogy, represented a general mobilisation of the working class. But that class, only just recovering from its naïve illusions and striving to find the road to a complete overhaul of society, continually stumbling over the innumerable obstacles placed in its path, as yet lacked a general staff able to point the way forward to victory. Even the most courageous army never won a war without good generals. But the best of generals without an army do not count for much.

At this time, none of the main leaders of either the Bolsheviks or Mensheviks had yet returned to Russia. Martov only returned to Russia after October 17; Lenin slightly later, on November 4. The sole exception was Trotsky who arrived in Kiev in February. There he established close contact with the key Bolshevik figure in Russia at that time, Leonid Krassin. Krassin was in charge of a large and well-equipped secret printing press somewhere in the Caucasus. But his role went far beyond that. A highly capable young engineer, Krassin was in many ways the prototype of a Bolshevik organiser. He proved to be an outstanding organiser and technician.

“The party, like the revolution, was still young at that time,” Trotsky recalls in his autobiography, “and one was struck by the inexperience and lack of finish revealed both

by the members and their actions in general. Krassin likewise was not wholly free from this fault. But there was something firm, resolute and 'administrative' about him. He was an engineer of some experience, he held a paying job and filled it well; he was valued by his employers, and had a circle of acquaintances that was much larger and more varied than that of any of the young revolutionaries of the day. In workers' rooms, in engineers' apartments, in the mansions of the liberal Moscow industrialists, in literary circles—everywhere, Krassin had connections. He managed them all with great skill and, consequently, practical possibilities that were quite closed to the others were opened to him. In 1905, in addition to participating in the general work of the party, Krassin had charge of the most dangerous fields of the work, such as armed units, the purchase of arms, the preparing of stocks of explosives, and the like. In spite of his broad outlook, he was primarily a man of immediate achievement, in politics as well as in life. That was his strength but it was also his heel of Achilles."[\[32\]](#)

Lenin greatly appreciated people like Krassin who got on with the work quietly, efficiently and without fuss. Krassin's work went on in secret, but he played an invaluable role in building the Party in this stormy period. Politically, Krassin was a conciliator. But conciliationist moods were common among Party activists in Russia, and still more among the workers, as was clearly reflected in the report of the Petersburg delegation to the party congress: "In the recent period the demand for an end to the split is becoming widespread. Worker Bolsheviks and Mensheviks are holding joint meetings, either with or without the intellectuals, and everywhere the demand for unification is pushed to the fore."[\[33\]](#) One way or the other, the split in the party had to be resolved.

The obvious solution was the convening of a party congress. The Bolsheviks had been agitating for the convening of the Third Congress for months, but the Mensheviks, fearing they would be in a minority, continually stonewalled. Early in February, a police raid on the Moscow apartment of the writer Leonid Andreyev led to the arrest of all the members of the Central Committee (mainly Mensheviks and conciliators). Those still at liberty contacted the Bolshevik "Bureau of Majority Committees" with the intention of reaching agreement to convene a congress.

Though formally this was the responsibility of the Party Council, a majority of the Party organisations inside Russia were clearly in favour. If two-thirds of the committees requested a congress, the Council was obliged by the rules to call one. By the beginning of April the Bolsheviks were able to prove conclusively that a total of 21 organisations inside Russia, including the CC, were in favour of a congress.[\[A\]](#) This represented 52 votes out of a total of 75 that would represent the whole party at a congress—many more than what would be required by the rules. An Open Letter to Plekhanov, as chairman of the Party Council, written by Lenin in the name of the CC was published early in April. Yet the Council, openly flouting the rules and in contempt of democratic procedure, refused to call the congress. Given the irresponsible and illegal behaviour of the Council, the Bolsheviks had no alternative but to convene a congress themselves, in the name of the Central Committee and the majority of Party organisations in Russia. The Mensheviks, although invited to attend, stayed away and organised their own conference

in Geneva. On April 12 1905, delegates assembled in London for over two weeks of intense discussions on the fundamental problems of the revolution.

### **The Third Congress**

On 12 April 1905, the first genuinely Bolshevik Party Congress opened its doors in London. On the agenda were the following questions: 1) the armed uprising; 2) the attitude to the government's policy, including the slogan of the provisional revolutionary government; 3) the attitude to the peasant movement; 4) relations between workers and intellectuals within the party; 5) party rules; 6) the attitude to other parties (including the Mensheviks); 7) the attitude to the non-Russian Social Democratic organisations; 8) the attitude to the liberals; 9) practical agreements with the Social Revolutionaries, and organisational questions. Present at the Congress were 24 delegates with full voting rights representing 21 committees, as well as a number of other party groups, including the *Vperyod* editorial board and the Bolshevik Organisation Abroad, which had a consultative vote. Lenin was present, nominally as a delegate from Odessa.

The Congress took place in the white heat of revolutionary upswing. The Party was faced with a whole series of pressing political and tactical questions: the attitude to the government's concessions (the Shidlovsky Commission), the slogan of a parliament (Zemsky Sobor), the constituent assembly, armed uprising and the provisional revolutionary government, legal and semi-legal work, the national and agrarian questions, and so on. But the question which dominated all others was the armed insurrection. Lenin was particularly emphatic about this: "The entire history of the past year," he argued, "proved that we underestimated the significance and inevitability of the uprising. Attention must be paid to the practical aspect of the matter."<sup>[34]</sup>

Lunacharsky (Voinov) opened the debate. The revolution in Russia had already begun in the sense that the masses had decisively entered the arena of struggle. What was now needed, he argued, was to give an organised form to this semi-spontaneous movement. Otherwise, all the heroism and energies of the workers could be dissipated in disorganised and aimless local uprisings. In the previous period, when the objective conditions for revolution were absent, the Russian Marxists, Plekhanov in the first instance, had laid heavy stress on attacking the voluntarist theories of the Narodniks, those "romantic revolutionaries" who imagined that all that was needed was a decisive push by small terrorist groups to detonate the masses into action. For this subjective idealism, the problem of armed insurrection was something independent of time and space. For the Marxists, for whom the revolution must be the work of the workers themselves, it arises inevitably at a certain point in the development of the class struggle. Where the necessary objective conditions were absent, to put forward constantly the idea of insurrection and armed struggle is mere Blanquism.

This term, which was commonly used by the Russian Marxists to denote revolutionary adventurism, takes its name from the famous French revolutionary and utopian communist, Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-81), who based himself on an ultra-left, conspiratorial conception of the revolution, as the work, not of the masses, but as a *coup*

*de main* of a small revolutionary minority. Despite his undoubted sincerity and personal courage, Blanqui's lack of theoretical understanding doomed him to play a negative role. "Blanqui," wrote Engels, "is essentially a political revolutionary, a socialist only by sentiment, because of his sympathy for the sufferings of the people, but he has neither socialist theory nor definite practical proposals for social reforms. In his political activities he was essentially a 'man of action'." [35] The modern ultra-lefts have faithfully preserved all of Blanqui's faults without possessing any of his virtues.

When the conditions were absent, the Russian Marxists concentrated on the slow work of developing Marxist cadres, emphasising theory and organisation, carefully husbanding resources and building links with the masses. But now, the entire situation had been transformed by the social earthquakes of war and revolution. After 9 January, Martov's argument that you cannot "organise" the revolution and his accusation of "Blanquism" directed at the Bolsheviks smacked of sophistry. In reality, the Mensheviks' attitude flowed from their entire conception of the revolution as a bourgeois-democratic revolution in which the working class must subordinate itself to the liberal bourgeoisie. The question of organising the workers for an armed uprising did not enter into their scheme of things, because they saw the workers' role as merely backing up the liberals, and forcing the autocracy to retreat under the pressure of strikes and demonstrations directed towards placing the liberals in power. The Bolshevik position was radically different.

After the shock of Bloody Sunday, the consciousness of the masses was transformed. There was a wave of local strikes and demonstrations, often of a stormy character. One of the delegates recalled the electric mood in the factories: "After the January revolutionary week in Petersburg there was such a spate of anarchistic strikes that in many factories it was enough for only one of the workers to shout: 'Down tools, lads!' for a strike to break out, and anyone who spoke out against it, received from the others the tag of 'provocateur'." The danger was that the energies of the workers would be dissipated in this way. What was required was to try to unify the movement so as to be able to concentrate "full strength at the point of attack". The same delegate stressed the need to combat ultra-left adventurism and individual terrorism: "On the one hand, needless acts of petty terrorism, on the other, acts of senseless provocation, or clashes with the police and soldiers, when individual armed persons, by bringing their weapons into play, give the enemy reason and opportunity to fire upon and slaughter unarmed crowds." [36]

The delegates discussed in a businesslike manner all the technical details: the drawing up of strategic maps of towns, the training of competent officers, the raising of funds, but above all the need for every branch to possess detailed knowledge of local conditions and the mood of the workers. Side by side with the technical and organisational preparation, there was to be a stepping up of the ideological, agitational and propaganda work, as an integral part of preparing for the overthrow of tsarism. Agitation was to be carried on, not only among the workers, but also among the intellectuals, students, youth, women, the non-Russian nationalities, and, as much as possible, among the peasants, beginning with the village poor. Special attention was devoted to work in the army, with the aim of winning over the soldiers to the side of the workers. The troops were to be leafleted, and

a commission of experienced specialists was set up, under the control of the Central Committee, to work out a programme of transitional demands for soldiers.

Nevertheless, even at a time when the question of armed insurrection had been pushed to the fore by events, the fundamental task of the Party was still that of winning over the masses. Without that, all the talk about overthrowing tsarism would have been so much empty chatter. The congress, however, confirmed many of Lenin's fears that the Bolshevik activists inside Russia had been slow to react to changing conditions. Accustomed to functioning over a long period in small, closed circles in the underground, the committee-men were ill at ease in the mass movement and used every excuse to avoid getting too closely involved with it. A formalistic conception of organisation, discipline and centralism, together with certain ultra-left tendencies, served to cover up for an innate conservatism and cliquishness, inherited from the past. Lenin used the Congress as an arena to wage an implacable struggle against these tendencies.

On the question of participating in legal organisations such as trade unions, co-ops, insurance and benefit schemes, where the prevailing mood of the committee-men was for a boycott, Lenin warned that "the congress cannot lay down a hard and fast rule on this point. All methods should be used for agitation. The experience of the Shidlovsky Commission gives no ground whatever for a downright negative attitude", and went on to shock the advocates of boycott by asserting that it would be correct, under certain circumstances, to participate even in a rigged tsarist parliament: "It is impossible to reply categorically whether it is advisable to participate in the Zemsky Sobor. Everything will depend on the political situation, on the electoral system, and on other specific factors which cannot be estimated in advance. Some say that the Zemsky Sobor is a fraud. That is true. But there are times when we must take part in elections to expose a fraud." Lenin moved an addendum to the resolution on this question which stated: "As regards the actual and sham concessions which the weakened autocracy is now making to the democrats in general and to the working class in particular, the Social Democratic party of the working class should take advantage of them in order, on the one hand, to consolidate for the people every improvement in the economic conditions and every extension of liberties with a view to intensifying the struggle, and, on the other, steadily to expose before the proletariat the reactionary aims of the government, which is trying to disunite and corrupt the working class and draw its attention away from its urgent class needs at the moment of the revolution."[\[37\]](#)

Lenin's flexible and dialectical understanding of revolutionary tactics and strategy clashed with the unyielding dogmatism of the committee-men, whose universe revolved around the axis of their narrow local circle, which they jealously guarded, on the one hand against the leadership in exile, on the other hand against the demands of the workers for a greater say in the running of inner-Party affairs. The class composition of the congress itself left a lot to be desired, as one of the delegates, Leshchinsky (Zharkov) commented: "Looking around me, at the composition of the present congress, I am astonished that in it there are so few workers, and yet, that workers suitable to be sent to the congress, without any doubt, could have been found."[\[38\]](#) This is borne out by Krupskaya, who says in her memoirs: "There were no workers at the Third Congress—at

least none of any mark... There was no scarcity of committee-men though. Unless this make-up of the congress is borne in mind a great deal of what the congress records contain will not be properly understood.”

In fact, the atmosphere at the congress became frequently heated, as Lenin tackled the prejudices of the practicos head-on, while the latter did not conceal their resentment at the “interference” of the exiles. “The committee-man,” wrote Krupskaya, “was usually a rather self-assured person. He saw what a tremendous influence the work of the committee had on the masses, and as a rule he recognised no inner-Party democracy. ‘Inner-Party democracy only leads to trouble with the police. We are connected with the movement as it is’, the committee-men would say. Inwardly they rather despised the Party workers abroad who, in their opinion, had nothing better to do than squabble among themselves—‘they ought to be made to work under Russian conditions.’ The committee-men objected to the overruling influence of the Centre abroad. At the same time they did not want innovations. They were neither desirous nor capable of adjusting themselves to the quickly changing conditions.”[\[39\]](#)

Bogdanov moved a resolution, drawn up by Lenin, *On the Relations Between Workers and Intellectuals Within the Social Democratic Organisation*, which, while recognising the difficulties under conditions of illegality, argued in favour of applying the principle of elections more broadly, to open up the Party to the workers, to make room for the new, fresh layers on the Party’s leading committees.

This resolution called forth a storm of protest on the part of the committee-men. Kamenev (Gradov) was first on his feet: “I must decisively speak against approving this resolution. This question of the relation between the intellectuals and workers in Party organisations does not exist. (Lenin: It does exist!) No, it does not: it exists as an issue for demagogy—and that’s all.” Others argued that there was no time or forces to train workers, basing themselves on the famous quote from *What Is To Be Done?* which incorrectly asserts that socialist consciousness must be brought to the workers from without. Thus, Romanov (Leskov) complained: “It seems to me that here we are overestimating the psychology of the workers (sic!), as if the workers by themselves could become conscious Social Democrats.”[\[40\]](#) Yet now the very author of *What Is To Be Done?* answered his critics by appealing to the class instinct of the workers, and deliberately shocked his audience by referring approvingly of the participation of the workers in the Party organisation during the period of “Economism”. In the English *Collected Works*, this speech of Lenin’s has, for reasons best known to the Stalinist editors, been left out. I quote here from the Congress minutes in Russian:

*“It has been said here that the bearers of Social Democratic ideas are predominantly the intellectuals. That is not true. In the epoch of Economism, the bearers of revolutionary ideas were workers, not intellectuals... It is further asserted that at the head of the splitters are usually situated intellectuals. That observation is very important but does not settle the matter. I long ago advised in my written works that workers should be brought onto the committees in the greatest possible number. The period following the Second Congress was characterised by the insufficient implementation of this obligation—that is*

the impression I have got from my conversations with the ‘practical workers’ ... *It is necessary to overcome the inertia of the committee-men (applause and booing)... the workers have a class instinct, and with just a little bit of political experience they very quickly become staunch social democrats. I would be very pleased if, in the make-up of our committees, out of every two intellectuals there were eight workers.*”[\[41\]](#)

This is the final answer to those who still persist in repeating Lenin’s mistake in *What Is To Be Done?*, where he erroneously asserts that the proletariat, left to itself, can only develop a “trade union consciousness”. Lenin never repeated that statement, and, in fact, repudiated it on more than one occasion. It was not Lenin, but the committee-men with their formalistic caricature of Bolshevism, who held this view, and who booed Lenin when he tried to correct them. So indignant was he at the contemptuous attitude of the intellectuals towards the workers that he deliberately provoked them by referring positively to the worker-Economists. As a matter of fact, many of the old worker-Economists of the *Rabochaya Dyelo* tendency subsequently joined the Bolsheviks whereas the Economist intellectuals, such as Martynov and Akimov, almost to a man, joined the Mensheviks. This is an interesting point which is never mentioned, but nonetheless true. Burning with indignation, Lenin again intervened: “I could hardly keep my seat when it was said that there are no workers fit to sit on the committees. The question is being dragged out: obviously there is something the matter with the Party. Workers must be given places on the committees. Oddly enough, there are only three publicists at the Congress, the others being committee-men: it appears however that the publicists are for placing the workers, whereas the committee-men for some reason are quite wrought up over it.”[\[42\]](#)

All the passionate arguments put forward by Lenin and his supporters fell on deaf ears. The majority remained obdurate and Lenin’s resolution was rejected, on the grounds that there was “no need” for a special resolution on this subject. Subsequent events were to show just how right Lenin was. Despite this setback, the Third Congress marked an historic landmark. The basic ideas of Lenin on the leading role of the proletariat in the revolution, the need for absolute class independence and mistrust of the liberals, was adopted without dissent. The Party’s policy on the agrarian question (Lenin led off in this debate) was radically changed to include the confiscation of all the big landlords’ estates and the setting up of peasant committees. From this point onwards, the revolutionary solution of the agrarian problem lay at the heart of the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary strategy. The Party Rules approved at the Second Congress were basically re-affirmed, although Lenin made it abundantly clear that they were not to be interpreted in a narrow sense, but that the party organisation should be quickly opened up to include the best of the workers and the youth. With the bitter experience of the split still fresh in everyone’s memory, he also insisted on including in the Rules clear and specific guarantees for the rights of minorities within the Party. Minorities were to have the right to express their point of view freely at all levels of the Party, subject only to the condition that the raising of differences should not be done in such a way as to disorganise and undermine the practical intervention of the Party in the struggle against tsarism and capitalism.

### **How the Party Financed Itself**

Lenin's demand for the opening up of the ranks to let the workers in was entirely in tune with the real situation in Russia. Great events had shaken and transformed the consciousness of the mass of the workers. Decades of slow and painful work were now rewarded by a sudden upsurge in interest in the ideas of revolutionary socialism. The congress launched a new weekly paper, *Proletary*, to replace the *Vperyod*, and elected a new central committee to replace the old conciliationist one. The congress thus resolved the old unsatisfactory division between the Party's central organ, Central Committee and Party Council, reducing these to a single centre, the CC, which was later divided into two parts, the exterior and the interior. Lenin, for the time being, remained outside Russia, whilst the Russian Bureau of the CC, based in St Petersburg, was made up of Bogdanov, Krassin and Postolovsky, with Rumyantsev later being co-opted on. Lenin was, in effect, in charge of the Foreign Bureau of the CC which maintained close links with the Russian Bureau, but also had direct links with the local Party committees, with whom it carried on a regular correspondence.

The scope for the work inside Russia was now considerably easier. Although arrests were still made, sentences tended to be more lenient. Sometimes the local police were overruled by liberal provincial governors. The police themselves were losing their nerve. Under these circumstances, the local committees were able to meet almost daily. A typical local committee would consist of not more than a dozen people. Every member of a committee had a direct responsibility for some aspect of the work, either press, finance or agitation, or responsibility for a particular district or factory. They were linked to the workers through party circles. There were also Social Democratic student organisations, and beyond these a wider periphery of sympathisers. As soon as even one worker joined in a factory, he or she was expected to begin working under the direction of the local committee. We have already seen some of the negative features of the committee-men. But it would be wrong to lose sight of their positive side. They were professional revolutionaries, dedicated to the party, hard-working and self-sacrificing. Working under difficult conditions, they were almost always on the move. They lived a hand-to-mouth existence, on very low wages, around 25-35 roubles a month, funds permitting, which was not always the case! Some had a private income. Others were sometimes forced to do part-time jobs. Some, like Krassin, as we have seen, worked as a "cover", which sometimes gave rise to amusing circumstances: "In St Petersburg there was an insurance company, not inaptly named *Nadezhda* (Hope) whose directors made it their policy to employ as clerks men known to be active revolutionaries: they found that, although they seldom remained with the firm for long owing to the high incidence of arrests, they were exceptionally honest."[\[43\]](#)

After 9 January, Buzinov recalled the dramatic transformation undergone by his fellow workers. Work became a matter of secondary importance, as they eagerly gathered in the workshops to read the latest political leaflet or newspaper.[\[44\]](#) The Party publications, with their limited print-run and infrequent publication, were now hopelessly inadequate to keep pace with the demand. The old *Iskra* had a print-run of around 10-15,000 (fortnightly, although for a brief period it appeared weekly). Now the audience for a revolutionary socialist newspaper was at least ten or 20 times that figure. The underground print-shops could not keep up with the needs of the moment. But the

possibility of launching a legal paper did not arise until later in the year when Trotsky and Parvus took over the old liberal *Ruskaya Gazeta* and transformed it into a legal organ of the Marxists. With its low price of one kopeck, and its popular style, circulation shot up from 30,000 to 100,000, reaching a staggering 500,000 by December. By comparison, the Bolshevik legal paper *Novaya Zhizn'* (New Life), had a circulation of 50,000—which was still five times more than the total print run of the old *Iskra*. But that was not until the autumn. In the meantime, the local Party groups had to make do with whatever leaflets and other material they could duplicate on their humble hand-operated mimeograph machines.

The congress had given a much needed boost to the morale of the Bolsheviks, who began to grow at a considerable pace. New branches and district committees were set up. Factory cells were established, as well as Bolshevik trade union factions, designed to take advantage of the new opportunities for legal trade union work in which, however, the Mensheviks had gained a head start. Bolshevik agitation and propaganda was carried out by small specialised groups of 10 to 12 people. Each agitator-organiser was responsible for a single district. The opportunities for carrying socialist ideas to the workers were now immense. Millions of leaflets were published by both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in the course of the year. “The old forms of propaganda,” writes Krupskaya, “were dead and propaganda had turned into agitation. With the colossal growth of the working class movement, verbal propaganda and even agitation as a whole could not meet the needs of the movement. What was needed was popular literature, a popular newspaper, literature for the peasants and for the non-Russian nationalities.”[\[45\]](#)

These, and other pressing needs, immediately raised the question of finance. The question of arms, too, required large sums of money. The income of both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did increase. Martov states that: “The budget of the revolutionary organisations, consisting in the period 1901-02 of a few hundred roubles, by mid-1905 had grown to tens of thousands of roubles a year.”[\[46\]](#) But the demands were constantly outstripping the available resources. David Lane, on the basis of a study of the Bolshevik and Menshevik press, concludes that, in February, the St Petersburg Bolshevik Committee raised a total of 2,400 roubles, of which 265r was spent on the press and 375r on organisation. There was a separate arms fund of 1,295r, of which 850r had already been spent. If we include a further 981r represented by a separate strike fund, this means that the total income of the St Petersburg Bolsheviks in February 1905 was about 4,680 roubles. However, in just the first two weeks of July, the expenditure of the Bolsheviks had risen to 800r on arms, 540r on organisation and 156r on literature. “The Mensheviks’ income from 15 February to 15 March,” according to Lane, “was larger than the Bolsheviks, being 4,039r (2,000r of which came from one contributor): of this sum, 1,250r were spent on arms, ‘organisation’ in various regions came to 1,126r and 630r were spent on the printing presses.”[\[47\]](#)

In his history of the Social Democracy, Martov gives a whole series of figures for the financial state of both Menshevik and Bolshevik groups in 1905, which show how far the demands of the situation outstripped the income raised from the members in subscriptions. Thus, the Baku committee, in February, raised a total of 1,382 roubles, of

which only 38 (3 per cent) came “from workers”. Only 14 per cent of the income of the Sevastopol committee came from subscriptions. The situation in Riga was better, but still only amounted to 22 per cent. However, in the Bolshevik stronghold, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, the corresponding figure was 53 per cent.<sup>[48]</sup> Both factions received large donations from wealthy sympathisers. But the Mensheviks, with their far looser organisation, were always far more dependent upon this source than the Bolsheviks, who strove for, and finally achieved, an organisation built upon the kopecks of the workers—the only real foundation for a workers’ party. By contrast, we have already seen how, in early 1905, almost half of the income of the Mensheviks came from a single contributor. On the 15 February, according to the same source, the Petersburg Mensheviks’ income totalled 247 roubles “of which 200 roubles were from a sympathiser”.<sup>[49]</sup> The situation with the Jewish Bund was completely different. Despite their opportunistic policy, the Bund had a well-established, centralised working class organisation, about which Lenin spoke enviously more than once. Fifty per cent of their needs were met from the workers’ donations.

Throughout 1905, neither the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks could keep up with the demand for socialist literature. Everywhere there was a thirst for the written word. The workers wanted to know. Workers who had been hostile or indifferent, or simply too afraid to accept a socialist leaflet, now eagerly sought out those of their comrades whom they knew to be somehow involved in revolutionary politics: “If earlier no-one (even) saw them,” recalls the smith Alexei Buzinov, who worked in the Nevsky Ship and Machine Works, “or perhaps did not want to notice them in order to keep out of trouble, now everyone suddenly knew that these were smart, well-informed people. Many dug around in their past, memories began to come to light, and it turned out that someone here and there, somehow or other, had been in contact with socialists... From their side, I do not recall a single reproach, personal or otherwise, for earlier threats or insults. In the workers’ attitude towards them, it began to be recognised that the socialists were the leaders of the labour movement. They were paid heed to, they were looked after in a special way, with a kind of crude but touching good-heartedness.”<sup>[50]</sup>

Like the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks also had some wealthy sympathisers who were systematically tapped for cash. Well-heeled civil servants, Zemstvo liberals, doctors and other professional people provided money through donations, put up full-timers and even hid fugitives. The radicalisation of the professional layers was shown by the number of resolutions of sympathy and solidarity with the workers’ movement passed by professional unions. The engineers’ union actually elected the Bolshevik Krzhizhanovsky to its Executive Committee. Many intellectual unions collected money and gave assistance to the labour movement in the course of the year. The engineers voted at their congress not to participate in the compilation of black lists of worker activists. In Odessa, the director of a big printing works always helped the Bolsheviks out in a financial crisis. The industrialist Saava Morozov donated 2,000 roubles a month to Krassin from late 1903 onwards. Krassin’s biography states that he raised the necessary funds for *Novaya Zhizn* “mainly through the generosity of his employer, the manufacturer Saava Morozov.”<sup>[51]</sup>

Maxim Gorky, whose fame as a writer was already established, played a key role in raising this kind of money, enlisting the aid of many other writers and prominent intellectuals, whose enthusiasm had been aroused by the revolution. Students and other middle class people were approached for donations. Even the odd landowner, like A. Tsurupa, gave regular contributions. The collaboration of some of these wealthy sympathisers went well beyond the passive role of supplying sums of money, and some of them showed a real commitment and even took big risks for the workers' cause. Such a case was that of a nephew of Morozov, Nikolai Schmidt, himself the owner of a furniture factory in the Presnaya district of Moscow. Although only 23 years old, Nikolai went over to the side of the workers in 1905. He provided funds not only for the Bolshevik paper *Novaya Zhizn'*, but also to purchase weapons. His factory, which played an important part in the Moscow uprising, was known to the police as a "devils' nest". Schmidt paid a terrible price for his devotion to the workers' cause.

These donations became very important because the amount of money raised from subscriptions, paper and literature sales was nowhere near enough to meet the demands of the new situation. Immediately after the Third Congress of the Party Krassin was put in charge of secret military work. He organised the establishment of underground bomb factories and arms dumps. Arms were smuggled in from abroad. Local Party committees began to set up military groups (*boyeviye komitety*). The military committees were charged with obtaining arms and setting up fighting units. This work was stepped up in the autumn when it became clear that a decisive showdown was inevitable. Some of the money was raised from wealthy sympathisers. Yet another source of finance were the 'appropriations', bank robberies carried out by Bolshevik armed units. Lenin wrote many times on this question in his writings of 1905 on the revolutionary army and militia. In these writings Lenin insisted that the work of the armed units was necessarily bound up with the revolutionary movement of the masses and only permissible in such a situation. This was not a terrorist conspiracy but part of a broad movement and a united front including fighting agreements with all forces prepared to conduct a fight against the dictatorial regime. Such activities, it must be stressed, have nothing whatsoever in common with the kind of terrorism, guerrillaism and the like which has unfortunately become a feature of the modern period when, in the absence of an authoritative Marxist leadership all kinds of primitive methods of struggle have re-emerged from the dust-bin of history.

## NOTES

[A] These figures were accepted as correct by Martov. See Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, p. 557.

[20] Trotsky, *1905*, p. 95.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[22] LCW, *A Letter to A. A. Bogdanov and S. I. Gusev, February 11, 1905*, vol. 8, pp. 143-5.

- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- [24] LCW, *To S.I. Gusev, February 15, 1905*, vol. 34, pp. 296-7.
- [25] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 179.
- [26] G.D. Surh, *1905 in St Petersburg*, pp. 209 and 181.
- [27] Quoted in F. Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*, p. 305.
- [28] LCW, *A Militant Agreement for the Uprising*, vol. 8, pp. 159 and 163.
- [29] Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 62 and 61.
- [30] *Ibid.*, pp. 61-2.
- [31] Quoted in Schwarz, *op. cit.*, pp. 214 and 216 (my emphasis).
- [32] Trotsky, *My Life*, pp. 169-70.
- [33] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 549.
- [34] LCW, *The Third Congress of the RSDLP, April 12 (25)-April 27 (May 10)*, vol. 8, p. 370.
- [35] Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, p. 381.
- [36] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 10 in both quotes.
- [37] LCW, *The Third Congress of the RSDLP, April 12 (25)-April 27 (May 10), 1905*, vol. 8, p. 375 and 376.
- [38] *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, p. 124.
- [39] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 125 and pp. 124-5.
- [40] Quoted in *Tretiy s'yezd RSDRP (Protokoly)*, pp. 255 and 265.
- [41] *Ibid.*, p. 262 (my emphasis).
- [42] LCW, *The Third Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 8, p. 411.
- [43] J.L.H. Keep, *The Rise of the Social Democracy in Russia*, p. 181.
- [44] See Surh, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

[45] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 127.

[46] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 2, p. 63.

[47] Lane, op. cit., p. 78.

[48] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, p. 569.

[49] Lane, op. cit., p. 78.

[50] Surh, op. cit., p. 238.

[51] Lubov Krassin, *Leonid Krassin his Life and Work*, 1929, p. 36.

## Part Two: The First Russian Revolution

[section 3 of 5]

### Revolutionary Flood Tide

After the massacre of 9 January, the movement in St Petersburg temporarily ebbed, as the workers of the capital cautiously took stock of the position. The May Day demonstration in St Petersburg was not a success, with only a few hundred turning out. Nevertheless, throughout the spring and summer of 1905, the pendulum swung continually to the left. While the workers of the capital temporarily stepped back to take stock of the situation, the more backward provinces were now being roused to struggle. On the 1st of May, 200,000 workers struck in nearly 200 towns throughout Russia. The events in Petersburg stirred the provinces into action everywhere. The textile workers were well to the fore. On 12 May, a general strike broke out in the Bolshevik stronghold of Ivanovo-Voznesensk, a textile town with 70,000 workers, lasting 72 days. By this time the Ivanovo-Voznesensk Bolsheviks numbered more than 400. Negotiations were conducted by elected factory delegates who met in a “meeting of Representative Delegates”, a soviet in all but name. Out of 128 delegates (of whom 23 were women) about 30 were Bolsheviks.

The Ivanovo-Voznesensk Soviet kept order in the town, issued proclamations, set up a militia and controlled the press, thus in practice imposing freedom of the press, speech and assembly. Daily mass meetings enabled the mass of workers to learn and exchange experiences. The peasants in the surrounding districts looked hopefully towards the Soviet to which they directed petitions. The militant unity of the proletariat and peasantry was being forged, not in words but in deeds, by the movement of the workers themselves. From 23 May the local Party got out a regular bulletin on the course of the dispute. By

the end of June, the Ivanovo-Voznesensk Bolshevik organisation had grown to 600 members, with 15-20 factory organisations. In the textile town of Lodz in Poland, the funeral of a worker killed by Cossacks turned into a mass political demonstration on May 15 with slogans such as “Down with tsarism!” and “Long live the revolution!” A wave of strikes and demonstrations swept through Poland and Lithuania, culminating in the 23 June general strike and uprising in Lodz, and solidarity demonstrations in Warsaw and Odessa.

The strike wave which gripped almost all the industrial areas throughout the spring and summer assumed an increasingly political character. Whereas in March, less than 30 per cent of strikes were political, between April and August the figure had risen to 50-70 per cent. Everywhere, the workers’ elected representatives to the factory committees and strike committees led the way. And all that a soviet is—at its inception—is an enlarged strike committee, an organ of struggle in the fight of the workers against the employers. The soviets in Russia, those marvellously effective, flexible and representative organisations of the workers, were not the invention of Lenin or Trotsky. Nowhere do they feature in the writings of Marx and Engels. They were the product of the inventive genius and initiative of ordinary working men and women. The soviets were destined to play a central role in the whole development of the revolution, particularly during and after the great October strike.

Not only the urban workers but the peasantry was also gradually being drawn into the orbit of the revolution. Throughout the summer there were peasant disturbances and strikes of agricultural labourers in the Baltic area, the Ukraine, Don, Kuban and the Caucasus. In some areas, the peasants virtually took over whole areas and ran their own affairs. The Mensheviks tried to use this as backing for their theory of “revolutionary self-government”. But the truth was that, unless the working class took power, such local outbreaks could only have an episodic character. While the Mensheviks looked towards the Zemstvo liberals, Lenin became increasingly convinced that the only possible ally for the workers in their struggle to overthrow the autocracy consisted in the peasantry, particularly the poor peasants. His vision of the revolution was that of the broadest possible movement of the workers and peasants, to overthrow tsarism, establish a provisional revolutionary government (democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry) which, without going beyond the limits of capitalism, would carry through the most radical and far-reaching democratic programme, first and foremost the confiscation of the big estates and the handing over of land to the peasants.

Up till 1905, the Party’s agrarian programme consisted of a series of limited demands which would alleviate the burdens on the peasantry, particularly the recovery of the *otrezki*, or “cut-off lands”, that is, the land which had been withheld from the peasants under the terms of the Emancipation of the Serfs Act of 1861. But now, the revolution in the urban centres was rapidly spreading to the villages. The general sentiment among the peasants was in favour of seizing the landlords’ estates. The old Party programme was hopelessly antiquated. Taking cognisance of the new situation in the villages where the Party had re-drafted its agrarian programme to include the confiscation of all landowners’, government, church, monastic and crown lands. The changed atmosphere in

the villages opened up for the first time the possibility of social democratic work among the peasants.

Although the Party was still weak here, some circles were established in areas like Nizhegorod, Samara, Saratov, Kazan and Tver. Lenin insisted on the establishment of purely Social Democratic groups in the villages, composed of farm labourers and rural proletarians. Only then would they seek agreements for joint work with other revolutionary-democratic groups. But the prior condition was not to blur over the distinction between workers and peasant small proprietors. An interesting pen portrait of the work of Bolshevik agitators in the villages is to be found in Sholokhov's famous novel *And Quiet Flows the Don*, which describes how the Bolshevik Stockman organised a group of Cossacks around a poetry and literacy circle: "After long sifting and testing, a little group of the Cossacks began to meet regularly in Stockman's workshop. Stockman was the heart and soul of the group and he worked straight towards a goal that only he fully understood. He ate into the simple understanding and conceptions like a worm into wood, instilling repugnance and hatred towards the existing system. At first he found himself confronted with the cold steel of distrust, but he was not to be repulsed. Even that could be worn away."[\[52\]](#)

This ferment in the villages had important repercussions in the armed forces, which were overwhelmingly of peasant composition. However, as so often happened in the history of revolutions, the revolt flared up first in the fleet, with its more proletarian class make-up. The Party's work among soldiers and sailors was even more difficult than work among the peasants. On the eve of the 1905 revolution, there were only three organised Party groups in the armed forces. However, in the course of the revolution, this number increased to a total of 27 groups.[\[53\]](#) Military defeats created an explosive mood of discontent in the ranks, making them ever more receptive to Social Democratic agitation. News of the annihilation of the Russian fleet at Tsushima, (14-15 May 1905) had an especially electrifying effect on the sailors. As so often happens in naval mutinies, the leading role was played by the petty officers, normally drawn from the most able and intelligent of the sailors, whose close proximity to the officers gave rise to a deep-seated contempt for the latter. The tensions and conflicts aroused by the arrogance and incompetence of the naval officers became increasingly unbearable when they were related to matters of life and death, in time of war. Precisely such a clash between the petty officers and officers led to the outbreak of the famous mutiny on the battleship Prince Potemkin Tavrishesky on June 14 1905, immortalised in Eisenstein's classic film *The Battleship Potemkin*.

The immediate issue was the bad food. But the underlying cause was the general discontent with the conduct of the war, and the piling up of unbearable contradictions over decades and generations. The Black Sea fleet had set out for the southern port of Odessa precisely when that city was in the grip of a general strike. No amount of military discipline and police surveillance could prevent the bacilli of revolution from reaching the ships anchored only a few miles away. The mutinying crew arrested all the officers, except the commander and six others who were killed. The sailors elected a committee from their midst which took the bold initiative of sailing into Odessa to appeal for

support from the workers. A great crowd assembled around the corpse of the able seaman Grigory Valulinchuk, killed by an officer. A massive demonstration took place, and mass meetings were held in which Social Democratic agitators participated. This showed both the strong and the weak side of the spontaneous, elemental movement of the masses. All the elements were present for a decisive linking-up of the army with the revolutionary people. But in the absence of a conscious leadership, the “floating republic” could only have the character of an episodic development, which nevertheless was an anticipation of the going over of the soldiers and sailors to the side of the soviets in 1917.

These events left the Odessa authorities thunderstruck. For a time they did not know what to do. In practice, power was in the hands of the workers. But they acted with no clear perspective, no overall policy or plan. This allowed the authorities time to concentrate their forces against Odessa. A naval force was sent against the Potemkin, but the mutineers succeeded in escaping to Rumania. The revolution in Odessa was brutally suppressed. The mutiny on the Potemkin therefore failed to lead to an insurrection, which was implicit in the situation. But it did not pass off without leaving its imprint. Terrified at the scale of the mass movement and the signs of inner decomposition in the armed forces, the government announced the holding of elections to the State Duma (parliament). Ten days later peace was concluded with Japan under humiliating terms. From a strictly military point of view, despite her earlier reverses, Russia had everything to gain from continuing the war. Japan’s reserves of men and money were nearly exhausted. Not the military strength of Japan but the threat of revolution at home led to the conclusion of peace. The rapid termination of the war was essential for the preservation of the autocracy.

### **The Bulygin Duma**

The weakness of the autocracy was shown by the August 6 Manifesto promising a parliament or Duma (the Bulygin Duma). The ending of the war and the announcement of elections was greeted with elation by the bourgeois liberals. “The Japanese,” proclaimed one of them, “will not enter the Kremlin, but the Russians will!”<sup>[54]</sup> However, closer acquaintance with the details of Bulygin’s proposals soon poured cold water over this precipitate and naive optimism. Bulygin, the creature of the autocracy, had worked out what Lenin described as “the most reactionary constitution in Europe”. It gave the vote to the landowners, bourgeois, property-owning peasants and the urban middle class, while the workers, the village poor, women and servicemen—that is to say, the overwhelming majority of the population—were excluded. To add insult to injury, the Duma would only have consultative powers! The whole elaborate construction was a lie and a deceit behind which everything would continue as before.

From this moment on, the Duma occupied a central position in the tactical discussions of all Social Democratic tendencies. The Bolsheviks immediately came out in favour of a policy of “active boycott”. The position of the Mensheviks was ambiguous. In the Caucasus, focal point for the most backward and opportunist wing of Menshevism, they openly called for participation. However, in general, the mood of the Menshevik rank-and-file was against this. The Bolsheviks proposed a united front to the Mensheviks and

the Social Democratic organisations of the nationalities for a boycott campaign. At local level, the Bolsheviks and Menshevik workers acted in unison. The petty bourgeois Social Revolutionaries also supported the boycott. Even the liberals of the “Union of Unions” were compelled to come out in opposition, at least in words.

The government’s granting of autonomy to the universities, in itself an apparently secondary measure, represented a major turning-point. The doors of the establishments of higher education were suddenly thrown open and through them poured the masses, thirsting for ideas, and eager to participate in the arena of public debate. Up to this point, the students had been involved in a passive student strike, refusing to turn up to classes. This was on the point of being broken when the whole movement took an entirely different direction. Throughout the autumn, the campuses and lecture theatres were the focal points of heated discussions. Beginning with the students, these debates became known to the workers who soon understood that here, at last, was a place they could meet and discuss unmolested by the police. “Alongside the students’ uniforms in the lecture theatres,” wrote an eyewitness, “ordinary clothes and, above all, workers’ overalls were to be seen with ever increasing frequency.”[\[55\]](#)

The explosion on the campuses showed that the pendulum was still swinging rapidly to the left, with new layers being drawn into the struggle. This was the fundamental consideration which determined the Bolsheviks’ attitude to the question of a boycott at this stage, although at the Third Congress Lenin was very careful to insist that the party should keep its options open on this question. More than anyone else, Lenin understood the need for extreme flexibility on all tactical and organisational questions and not to get carried away by ultra-left moods which would only serve to separate the advanced elements from the majority of the class.

In the given situation, the boycott of the Bulygin Duma project was absolutely correct. The revolutionary wave was still gathering in strength. The terms of the new constitution fell so far short of the expectations aroused that even a section of the liberals were opposed. The democratic aspirations of the masses collided against the solid wall of the bureaucratic-police regime. Only by the revolutionary overthrow of tsarism and a clean break with the past could the ground be cleared for the introduction of a genuine democracy. The exact nature of the transformation and the role of the different classes in the revolution were the subject of heated debate within the ranks of the workers’ movement, which will be dealt with later. But to all but the blindest reformist, it was evident that on the order of the day stood, not parliamentarianism but a revolutionary general strike and armed insurrection to overthrow the autocracy. This perspective was amply corroborated by the high tide of the revolution which was ushered in by the October strike in St Petersburg and culminated in the December uprising in Moscow.

### **The October Strike and the Soviet**

By late summer the strike wave appeared to have subsided. The conclusion of peace with Japan, the Bulygin Duma and a series of other concessions seemed to have brought it to a close. But this appearance was deceptive. The movement was far from exhausted. The

September-October strike movement was sparked off not by the most experienced and advanced sections of the class, but by the more backward layers. The summer months saw a decline in strikes in the big factories, but an increase in strikes of the most downtrodden and oppressed layers of the class—sawmill and brickyard workers, slaughterhouse workers, spinning assistants, pharmacists, postmen, waiters, bakers, even domestic servants. The proletarian army was calling up its reserves. Wave after wave joined in the struggle. A new impulse came from the Moscow printers' strike which led to a general strike in Moscow on September 27. Beginning with a small dispute at the Sytin print-works in Moscow, the printers' strike spread to 50 print-shops within a few days and then rapidly became general throughout the city.

Just when the movement in Moscow appeared to be dying down, there was a new upsurge in St Petersburg. On October 2, a sympathy strike of the printers was followed by a railway strike in Moscow on October 6. The railway workers struck and elected delegates. By October 10 there was an all-out railway strike. By mid-October, three quarters of a million railwaymen were on strike. The strikes became general, involving Moscow, Kharkov, Revel, Smolensk, Lodz, Minsk, Petersburg, Vilna, Odessa, Kazan, Tiflis and other major centres. On October 16 Finland joined in. The rail strike became 100 per cent, and the movement then spread swiftly to the post offices, telephones, telegrams, service employees and professional workers. The strike rapidly took on a political character. This is what compelled the tsar on October 17 to issue a manifesto prompted by Count Witte. Two days later the general strike came to an end.

The role of the strike in general is to make the working class aware of itself as a living social force. The general strike is the highest expression of this. Lenin was fond of quoting the words of a German song: "All the wheels stand still if your mighty arms so will!" By participating in the strike movement, especially where this achieves an active form with mass participation, the workers acquire a feeling of their own strength through unity. The strike is a levelling phenomenon, serving to bind together the most advanced, politically conscious workers with the broadest layers of the class, who are aroused in action from the inertia of "normal" times. In the autumn of 1905, the revolution acquired an unprecedented sweep. At the head of the movement stood the proletariat, wielding its classical weapon of struggle—the general strike. "In its extent and acuteness," as Lenin later recalled, "the strike struggle had no parallel anywhere in the world. The economic strike developed into a political strike, and the latter into insurrection."<sup>[56]</sup>

The working class, by making its power felt, drew behind it big sections of the middle class. The intelligentsia joined in the strike. "In many places juries refused to sit, lawyers to plead, doctors to attend patients. Justices of the peace closed down their courts."<sup>[57]</sup> The strike was accompanied by mass meetings where the workers thrashed out tactics and discussed strategy and politics. Increasingly, soldiers began to participate in these meetings, expressing solidarity with the people. The workers were beginning to organise militias for self-defence, to combat pogroms and keep order. In some places, the workers' fighting squads went onto the offensive. There were clashes with Cossacks in Yekaterinoslav and barricades in Odessa.

Under certain conditions a general strike can lead to the wresting of serious concessions from the ruling class. But in the given context of Russia in 1905 a general strike must necessarily lead to the seizure of power or else lead to defeat. The general strike posed the question of power, but, in and of itself, could not resolve it. For that, it was necessary that the movement should be guided by a revolutionary party prepared to set before itself the most advanced tasks. The rapid development of the forces of Marxism in Russia, and the ease with which they placed themselves at the head of the mass workers' movement in 1905, can only be understood in the context of a politically virgin proletariat with no long history of reformist trade unions and parties. Very swiftly, the Russian Marxists were able to win over the best class fighters in the factories who in turn enabled them to play a dominant role in the mass movement. That revolutionary Marxism should have proven so successful in a backward country such as Russia seems to be a paradox. But the contradiction is more apparent than real. The very backwardness of Russia—that is to say, the belatedness of its economic and social development—meant not only that the social contradictions were sharper and more glaring, but also that the working class was entirely fresh and unincumbered by prejudices, routine and the kind of deadening conservative traditions that flow from the bureaucracy of the mass trade unions and reformist parties in the “advanced” capitalist countries.

This fact largely explains the speed with which the Social Democrats passed from tiny propaganda circles to a mass force embracing hundreds of thousands in the space of just a few months. *The Russian working class was politically virgin with no history of bourgeois or reformist organisations.* Just as Russian industry did not have to pass through the long and painful process of organic development through manufacturing and handicrafts to large scale industry, so the Russian working class did not have to reproduce the slow and painful development of the British, French and German workers, through a phase of trade unionism and reformism, but were able to move straight to the position of revolutionary Marxism. Dialectically, it transformed itself from the most backward to the most advanced class in Europe. Nevertheless, the winning over of the masses was not an automatic process. It demanded not only correct ideas and perspectives, but flexible tactics and the ability to connect with the living movement of the working class as it was in reality, and not in the imagination of sectarians.

To many of the Bolshevik activists, the question of insurrection was seen in exclusively technical terms, as an organisational question, a viewpoint which was connected to an exaggerated appraisal of the independent significance of the “apparat” and an underestimation of the political side, the need to win the masses through patient propaganda and agitation. This, however, is precisely the main point. Each party had its own armed fighting detachments or militias, not only the Social Democrats, but also the Social Revolutionaries. The need to form fighting detachments was, in the given conditions, self-evident. But it had to be linked to the mass movement via the soviets. In fact, without fighting detachments soviets would be toothless “paper tigers”, but without the mass movement expressed in the medium of the elected soviets, the armed detachments could have had no significance. It was necessary to win the masses over in action, by means of timely slogans and correct tactics, to demonstrate in practice the superiority of Marxism on the basis of the concrete struggle and experience of the

masses. In other words, the problem before the Party was to win over the mass movement and not to counterpose itself to it.

The whole question of the relationship of the Party and the mass movement can be reduced in the last analysis to the difference between the finished scientific programme of Marxism and the necessarily unfinished, incomplete and contradictory movement of the masses. Whoever is incapable of finding a bridge between these two aspects will forever be incapable of building a mass movement. Naturally, Lenin explained, the Social Democrats will fight for influence within the soviets, and attempt to win them over. But the broad base of the soviets, representing the big majority of workers, not only the advanced layers, but even the most backward layers in the factories, Social Democratic and non-party, atheists and religious, literate and illiterate, skilled and unskilled, was a big plus in the revolutionary struggle against tsarism. Lenin was confident that, out of the experience of the struggle itself, the masses would, in time, draw the necessary conclusions and come to understand the validity of the Marxist programme. The duty of the revolutionary vanguard was to “patiently explain”, and not to present ultimatums to the masses. The method of Lenin recalls the revolutionary realism of Marx who pointed out that “one real step forward of the movement is worth a hundred correct programmes”.

In Russia, under the prevailing conditions, there was no opportunity for the creation of a mass reformist labour movement with a privileged labour aristocracy and an ossified bureaucracy at its head. The attempt to establish tame, government controlled “Zubatov” unions came to nothing. After 9 January, many of these unions became swiftly transformed by the masses into genuine organs of struggle. In all these events a key role was played by the soviets. These embryonic organs of workers’ power began life as extended strike committees. The soviets themselves first arose in the heat of the all-Russian October general strike. In the absence of well-established mass trade unions, the striking workers moved to elect delegates who began to come together in improvised strike committees, which were generalised to include all sections of the class. The creation of the soviets in 1905 is a marvellous example of the creative genius of ordinary working people, once they enter the arena of struggle. Nowhere does the idea of soviets feature in the writings of the great Marxist thinkers prior to 1905. They were not foreseen in the pages of the *Communist Manifesto*, and they were not the creation of any political party, but the spontaneous creations of the workers in struggle, the product of the initiative and creative genius of the working class. In the first place they represented committees of struggle, assemblies of delegates drawn from the factories.[\[A\]](#)

There are many other examples.

The idea of elected plant delegates was already raised by the Shidlovsky commission. This gave the workers an initial experience. Thus on October 11 when the strike reached St Petersburg they spontaneously elected delegates, including some from the Putilov and Obukhov plants. The system for the election to the soviets was as follows: there was one delegate elected for every 500 workers (this was the same formula as for the Shidlovsky commission). Small workshops combined to send a delegate. On October 13 the first meeting of the Soviet took place at the Technical Institute with 40 people present, some

of these were ex-Shidlovsky delegates. A Menshevik (Zborodsky) chaired the first meeting. Thereafter the number of delegates increased continuously, there were 80 to 90 at the second meeting from 40 big plants. At the third meeting 226 were present from 96 factories and five trade unions. Also present at the meetings were three representatives each of the Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and Social Revolutionaries. In other words the Soviet comprised of delegates from the shop floor, unions and socialist parties. The Soviet proceeded to elect an executive committee of 22 members—two each from the seven city districts and two each from the four biggest trade unions.

The Petersburg Soviet was the most authoritative and influential in Russia. Very soon, the Soviet embraced practically the whole of the Petersburg proletariat, and set the tone for the rest of the country. At its peak the Petersburg Soviet gathered together 562 deputies from a total of 147 factories, 34 artisan associations, and 16 trade unions. 351 of its delegates were metal workers, the praetorian guard of the Russian proletariat. The Bolsheviks were represented on the executive committee by Khostolovksy and Bogdanov. But the leading political figure in the Soviet was undoubtedly Leon Trotsky. Throughout the October general strike and November lockout all eyes were on the St Petersburg Soviet. Here was an extremely broad, democratic and flexible organ of struggle. In the course of the struggle, the soviets gradually increased their functions and representative scope. Through the Soviet, the workers made use of the newly found, newly conquered freedom of the press by the simple expedient of taking over the printing presses. They compelled the introduction of the eight-hour day and even instituted workers' control of production in some factories. They formed a workers' militia and even arrested unpopular police officers. In addition to numerous other tasks the Soviet published *Izvestiya Sovieta Rabochikh Deputatov* as its public organ.

Following the example of St Petersburg, workers took the initiative of forming soviets in other parts of Russia. By the autumn the soviets had been set up in more than 50 other towns and cities including Tver, Kostroma, Kharkov, Kiev, Yekaterinoslav, Odessa, Rostov on Don, Novorossiysk and Baku. The Moscow Soviet was only formed on 21 November. At its first meeting there were 180 delegates representing about 80,000 workers. It originally existed side by side with a so-called strike committee mainly composed of petty bourgeois elements dominated by SRs and assorted middle class "democrats". However, by November this committee fused with the Soviet. In the great majority of cases the Social Democrats predominated, but the petty bourgeois democrats were also represented by the Social Revolutionary Party who, as we have seen, were present in the executive committee of the Petersburg Soviet.

In general, the consciousness of the masses develops slowly and unevenly. Although in a revolution it is enormously accelerated, the process of the awakening of the masses remains contradictory. Different layers draw different conclusions at different times. Thus, as late as November the tsar was still receiving petitions from striking workers from the provinces begging him to intervene on their behalf. This shows not only the uneven development of consciousness, but also the colossal difference between Moscow and Petersburg and the provinces. The contradiction is still more glaring between the consciousness of the town worker and the peasants. The movement that began in the

towns was beginning to spread to the villages. By the end of 1905 peasant disturbances had broken out in 37 per cent of European Russia, especially in the central Black Earth zone, Latvia, Southern Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine. An attempt was made to organise a Peasants' Union in the summer. The peasants expressed their greetings for "our brother factory workers". But in their consciousness the peasants lagged far behind the workers. The villages were still considerably influenced by liberal illusions, reflecting the half-awakened state of mind of the rural masses. Under such conditions the leadership of the Peasants' Union fell into the hands of the Social Revolutionaries and liberals, a phenomenon which was repeated later in February 1917.

In Moscow a soviet of soldiers' deputies was set up and in Tver province a peasants' soviet was formed. In Sevastopol, there were also sailors and soldiers present in the local workers' soviet. But these were rare exceptions. The place where the revolution was beginning to penetrate the minds of the peasants was the army. Under the hammer blows of military defeats and the influence of the general revolutionary movement, the armed forces were in a state of ferment. Social Democratic influence was strong among sections of the sailors, traditionally the most working class section of the armed forces. A mutiny in Sevastopol in November led by Lieutenant P. Schmidt was brutally suppressed by the tsarist authorities. However, a whole series of mutinies in the army posed the question of the military in an especially sharp form. This had a very great symptomatic importance, because the army was overwhelmingly peasant in composition. One of the principal weaknesses of the 1905 revolution was the lack of a firm base amongst the peasants. The rural masses were lagging behind the towns and this fact proved a fatal weakness in the December uprising. Elements of a peasant-soldier revolt were present, but not on a sufficient scale to make a fundamental difference to the outcome. By the time the conflagration has spread to the villages the movement in the towns was already on a downswing.

From distant exile, Lenin greeted the formation of the soviets which, in a brilliant anticipation, he characterised as embryonic organs of workers' power. "I may be wrong," he wrote, "but I believe (on the strength of the incomplete and only 'paper' information at my disposal) that politically the Soviet of Workers' Deputies should be regarded as the embryo of a provisional revolutionary government. I think the Soviet should proclaim itself the provisional revolutionary government of the whole of Russia as early as possible, or should set up a provisional revolutionary government (which would amount to the same thing, only in another form)." [\[58\]](#) This, in essence, was what actually occurred in October 1917.

### **The Bolsheviks and the Soviet**

Under conditions where the movement was acquiring a colossal sweep the need to penetrate new layers, to adopt new methods of agitation presented a big challenge to the party. A shake-up was required to take full advantage of the situation. Every day mass meetings in the cities were taking place all over Russia. Big opportunities opened up for the Social Democracy who virtually had the field to themselves. Their only real rivals were the Social Revolutionaries, who had a certain presence, and the petty bourgeois

nationalist organisations such as the PSP in Poland and the Jewish Bund. The anarchists in Petersburg were too insignificant to be represented in the Soviet executive. The same was true throughout the country, with the sole exception of Byelostok, where they had the majority. The bourgeois liberals had no base among the masses and made virtually no attempts to gain one. Their whole strategy was based on wheeling and dealing in order to extract a compromise from the regime.

The party was rapidly gaining ground among the most advanced elements. But in order to carry through the revolution, this is insufficient. It is necessary to win the masses. For this task, flexible tactics are necessary, in order that the relatively small forces of the proletarian vanguard can find a road to the majority of workers who have not yet drawn all the necessary conclusions. An absolutely key question for the linking up of the small number of organised Marxists to the broad mass of workers in struggle was the attitude towards the Petersburg Soviet. As we have seen, Lenin, despite being separated from the field of action by thousands of miles, was able immediately to grasp the significance of this striking new phenomenon. The same was not true of his followers in Petersburg. Displaying a complete lack of “feel” for the real movement of the working class, the Bolshevik central committee members in Petersburg were uneasy at the thought of a “non-party” mass organisation existing side by side with the party. Instead of seeing the Soviet as an important field of action, they regarded it with hostility, as a rival.

Because of the supposedly non-party nature of the Soviet, and its chairman Khrustalyov, the St Petersburg Bolsheviks went so far as to organise a campaign against the Soviet. They persuaded the federated council, consisting of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to put an ultimatum to the Soviet that it must place itself under the leadership of the RSDLP. However, this proposal was rejected by the rank-and-file of a joint conference of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on 26 October. The Mensheviks opposed it, the Bolsheviks then went ahead on their own. On 24 October they had moved a resolution along the same lines in meetings at the Semyanikov and other metal factories, demanding that the Soviet accept the Social Democratic programme and tactics and demanding that it must define its political stance. In the first issue of the legal Bolshevik paper, *Novaya Zhizn'* an article appeared under the title *On the question of the Soviet of Deputies* which complained of the “extremely strange situation when the ‘Soviet’ does not stand in any dependent relationship to the party”.[\[59\]](#)

The Bolshevik CC published a resolution which was made binding upon all Bolsheviks throughout Russia, insisting that the soviets must accept the party programme. They adopted the kind of formalistic line of reasoning characteristic of sectarians at all periods: if the Soviet wanted to be a political organisation then the Social Democrats must demand that it adopts the Social Democratic programme, but if that was accepted then there would be no point in having a second Social Democratic organisation parallel to the party itself. Therefore the Soviet should be wound up. This was tantamount to demanding that all members of the Soviet join the social democratic party. To be sure the editors of *Novaya Zhizn'* stated that they were not 100 per cent in agreement with the article, but the agitation against the soviet continued just the same. On 29 October, the Nevsky district committee declared inadmissible for Social Democrats to participate in any kind

of “workers’ parliament” like the Soviet. A meeting of the Semyonov works adopted the same line. This position completely ignored the need to establish a firm link between the advanced workers who stood on the ideas of Marxism and the mass of the politically untutored workers. It was tantamount to demanding that the working class as a whole should enter into the Marxist party, a completely unrealistic conception which, if pressed, could only lead to the isolation of the minority of advanced workers from the rest of the class.

The crass formalism of this line of argument was conveyed in a number of articles in *Novaya Zhizn*, notably one which appeared in issue 6 over the signature of P. Mendeleyev, where we read the following: “The Soviet of Workers’ Deputies must not exist as a political organisation and the social democrats must withdraw from it, since its existence acts negatively upon the development of the social democratic movement. The Soviet of Delegates can remain as a trade union organisation, or it cannot remain at all.” The same author goes on to propose that the Bolsheviks should present the Soviet with an ultimatum: either accept the programme of the RSDLP or else disband! The Bolshevik leaders justified their hostility to the Soviet on the grounds that it represented “the subordination of consciousness to spontaneity”.<sup>[60]</sup> They went so far as to move a resolution on these lines in the Soviet. When it was turned down, the Bolshevik delegates, led by CC members Bogdanov and Knuyants, walked out. The other delegates merely shrugged their shoulders and proceeded to the next point on the agenda.

The mistakes of the committee-men and women played into the hands of the Mensheviks. Their more flexible attitude permitted them to take initiatives in setting up soviets, where they immediately won a head-start over the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks regarded the soviets not as a provisional revolutionary government, to use Lenin’s expression, but as a “revolutionary self-government”. This was an analogy with the French revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune. However, the analogy was not with the strong side of these historical precedents, but precisely the mistakes of the Commune. The other Menshevik idea of a ‘labour congress’ was also a non-revolutionary conception, which saw the soviet, not as an organ of struggle through which the workers could take power, but as the starting point for a mass labour party, something like the British Labour Party. The slogan of a “labour congress” which was later taken up by Axelrod in particular, reflected the same idea. Thus, despite their success in participating in the soviet, the Mensheviks’ entire approach was of a reformist, not revolutionary character.

From afar, Lenin followed the activities of his followers with a mixture of frustration and dismay. His unerring instinct and insight into the workers’ movement enabled him to grasp quickly the significance of the soviets. But his colleagues did not share his understanding of the way in which the masses move. It took Lenin’s decisive intervention to straighten things out. In the meantime the Bolsheviks lost a lot of ground to the Mensheviks in the soviets and precious time and opportunities were lost. He must have torn his hair out when he learnt of the behaviour of his co-thinkers in St Petersburg. Burning with impatience, from Stockholm in early November, when he was en route to Russia Lenin attempted, gently but firmly, to correct the mistakes of the Petersburg Bolsheviks. In the fifth issue of *Novaya Zhizn*, an article signed by a prominent member

of the Central Committee, B.M. Knuyants (Radin), posed the alternative of “Soviet or Party”. Answering Knuyants’ question Lenin retorted: “I think 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.” Significantly, the editors did not publish the letter, which only saw the light of day in 1940.

“The only question—and a highly important one,” Lenin continues, “is how to divide, and how to combine, the tasks of the Soviet and those of the RSDLP.” Then, in a phrase which must have caused consternation among the committee-men, he adds: “I think it would be inadvisable for the Soviet to adhere wholly to any one party.” Lenin goes on to explain the elementary fact that the trade unions and the Soviets should strive to embrace all sections of the working class, irrespective of nationality, race, creed or political affiliation. Only the quasi-fascist Black Hundreds should be excluded, and that within these organisations of the masses, the Marxists should fight to win a majority for their ideas, programme and tactics. “We do not shut ourselves off from the revolutionary people,” wrote Lenin, but “submit to their judgement every step and every decision we take. We rely fully and solely on the free initiative of the working masses themselves.”<sup>[61]</sup> This is Lenin speaking. A very long way from the malicious caricature of a sectarian or a “Blanquist conspirator”, manipulating the masses from behind the scenes!

The October strike gave a mighty impetus to the revolt of the oppressed nationalities. Finland, the Baltic region and large areas of the Caucasus became virtual no-go areas, especially after the announcement of reforms in the tsar’s October Manifesto. The “liberal” prime minister, Witte, wrote in worried terms to the tsar about the situation in Finland: “During the second half of last October events took place in Finland which have no precedent in almost a hundred years since the province has been under Russian rule. A political general strike was organised. A well-armed and organised ‘national guard’ [militia] made its appearance, which in many areas took over the role of the lawful police, ordering it to lay down its arms. Certain governors have been forced, under threats by the representatives of the local political parties, to resign their posts.” Count Witte’s daily correspondence with the tsar revealed increasing alarm at the revolutionary situation. Under pressure from Witte the tsar had released the October Manifesto. Now it was becoming clear that, far from halting the revolution, the concessions had merely given it a fresh impetus. If Witte expected a sympathetic hearing from the tsar, he was doomed to be disappointed. Nicholas wrote back: “Is it possible for these 162 anarchists to subvert the Army? They should all be hanged.” This was the tsar’s only comment in relation to Witte’s letter.

Witte’s comments on Finland were confirmed by other reports submitted to the tsar. One of these, written by the Governor General of Warsaw contains the following assessment of the situation in Poland: “The fantastic mood of Polish society and the hostility toward Russians has acquired a hitherto unprecedented dimension. ... The October Manifesto did not call for specific activities, but on the contrary, provoked such serious happenings that the town of Warsaw and the surrounding regions took on the aspect of a single rebellious camp. Mass meetings in the streets and squares with orators calling for uprising. Catholic

priests organising 'patriotic demonstrations' in the villages singing revolutionary songs and carrying red and black flags with the Polish eagle and revolutionary slogans."<sup>[62]</sup> The Ukraine was also in a state of turbulence with mass protest meetings in Kiev and Odessa in October. All the factors were maturing for the passing of power into the hands of the working class. The revolutionary movement in the villages was on the increase. In the last three months of 1905, 1,590 cases of peasant disturbances were reported. Splits were beginning to open up in the ranks of the autocracy. While Witte pleaded with the tsar to grant reform from above to head off revolution from below, General Trepov, the virtual dictator of Petersburg, issued the famous command to his troops: "Spare no cartridges!"

The weakness of the regime, faced with an explosion of popular anger, is revealed in the panicky tone of Witte's letters to the tsar, and the continual complaints about the lack of troops. Finally, even the thick-headed Nicholas was compelled to come to terms with reality and grudgingly concede the need to hold elections to a State Duma. The tsar's Manifesto of the 17 October was hailed by Lenin as "the first victory of the revolution". It was greeted by scenes of wild rejoicing on the streets. Crowds of excited people gathered in the city centres to discuss the situation. On 18, 19 and 20 October, with no pre-ordained plan, the workers marched to the gaols with red flags to demand the release of political prisoners. In Moscow, the gaols were forcibly opened up and the prisoners carried shoulder-high through the streets. The position of the Bolsheviks was not to place any trust in paper promises and to carry on for a Constituent Assembly. Despite the mood of euphoria, Lenin hammered home the idea that the Manifesto was only a tactical retreat and warned against constitutional illusions and playing at parliamentarianism: "There is talk of liberty, of popular representation: some hold forth on a Constituent Assembly. But what is being constantly, hourly and minutely lost sight of is that, without serious guarantees, all these fine things are but hollow phrases. A serious guarantee can be provided only by a victorious rising of the people, only by the complete domination of the armed proletariat and the peasantry over all representatives of tsarist power who, under pressure by the people, have retreated a pace but are far from having yielded to the people, and far from having been overthrown by the people. Until that aim is achieved there can be no real liberty, no genuine popular representation, or a really Constituent Assembly with the power to set up a new order in Russia."

The regime was playing for time, offering concessions in order to defuse the situation, while behind the scenes preparing a counter-stroke. A similar situation arises at a certain point in every revolution. It can be characterised as the phase of *democratic illusions*. People imagine that the problem has been resolved, that the revolution is over, when in reality it is only just beginning. The decisive battle lies in the future. The October Manifesto solved nothing fundamental, but it provided the excuse for the liberals to detach themselves from the revolution. As Lenin and Trotsky had foreseen, the bourgeoisie, which had all along been striving to get a deal with tsarism at the expense of the workers and peasants, now treacherously deserted the revolutionary camp. The big capitalists and landowners united in a reactionary bloc—the so-called Union of 17 October, the "Octobrists", which threw all its weight behind tsarist reaction. At the same time, the "liberal" section of the bourgeoisie founded the Constitutional Democrat

Party, the “Cadets”, which came out in favour of a “constitutional monarchy”, in effect acting as a left flank for the autocracy, covering up the bloody reality of tsarist rule with pseudo-democratic constitutional phrase-mongering. Lenin was particularly scathing in his attacks on this “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie, sparing no opportunity to denounce them for their cowardice and treachery.

“What is a constitution?” wrote Lenin. “A sheet of paper with the peoples’ rights recorded on it. What is the guarantee of these rights being really recognised? It lies in the strength of those classes of the people that have become aware of these rights and have been able to win them.”<sup>[63]</sup> Lenin coolly analysed the balance of forces at the given moment and concluded: “The autocracy is *no longer* strong enough to come out against the revolution openly. The revolution is *not yet* strong enough to deal the enemy a decisive blow. This fluctuation of almost evenly balanced forces inevitably engenders confusion among the authorities, makes for transitions from repression to concession, to laws providing for freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.”<sup>[64]</sup> As Lenin had foreseen, what the autocracy gave with the left hand, it now prepared to take back with the right. The conquests achieved by the general strike heightened the confidence of the working class. Prisoners were released from jails, but the freedom conquered from below had a fundamentally unstable and fragile character. Only by decisively overthrowing the regime could genuine political and social emancipation be assured.

The going over of the liberals effectively cleared the deck for action. It was now a question of “either... or” for the revolution. Only an armed uprising, led by the proletariat, drawing behind it the peasant masses, the nationalities and all oppressed layers of society could show the way out. The illusion of a constitutional reform was now exploded. The October Manifesto was a clear attempt on the part of the old regime to draw a line in the sand of revolution: “Thus far and no further!” Such reforms as had been achieved had been conquered not by the liberal wheeler-dealers, but exclusively by the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Far from drawing in its horns after the October Manifesto, Lenin urged the working class to summon up all its forces for a decisive showdown. Behind the facade of a proffered constitution, the autocracy was prepared for a bloody settling of accounts. The task of the revolutionaries in this situation was, while clearly understanding that the really decisive battles lay in the future, to grasp the opportunity with both hands, and make full use of the newly-won freedoms to build the party rapidly, extend its influence within all spheres of social life, and prepare for the decisive battle. Lenin based himself on the idea of an uprising as the only guarantee. The arming of the people was linked to the fight for basic demands such as the reduction of the working day to eight hours and the freeing of all political prisoners. Lenin’s revolutionary realism was born out by subsequent events.

## NOTES

[A] Nor is this observation limited to the question of the soviets. Marx derived his idea of what a workers’ state would be like from the Paris Commune of 1871, when the workers of Paris took power. The programme of the Commune was summed up by Marx in *The Civil War in France*, and later provided the basis for Lenin’s *State and Revolution*.

[52] Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, p. 259.

[53] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 90.

[54] Pares, op. cit., p. 485.

[55] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 1, p. 73.

[56] LCW, 'Left-Wing' Communism—an Infantile disorder, vol. 31, p. 27.

[57] Trotsky, *1905*, p. 111.

[58] LCW, *Our Tasks and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies*, vol. 10, p. 21.

[59] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 104.

[60] Quoted by O. Anweiler, *Los Soviets*, pp. 84 and 85.

[61] LCW, *Our Tasks in the Soviet of Workers' Deputies—Letter to the Editors*, vol. 10, pp. 19 and 27.

[62] Quoted in V.P. Semenikov and A.M. Pankratova, *Revolyutsiya 1905 Goda—a Collection of Government Documents*, pp. 22-3 and 224-5.

[63] LCW, *Between Two Battles*, vol. 9, p. 460.

[64] LCW, *The All-Russian Political Strike*, vol. 9, pp. 394-5.

## **Part Two: The First Russian Revolution**

[section 4 of 5]

### **'Nicholas the Bloody'**

At the present moment, when it has become fashionable to present the image of tsar Nicholas in the most attractive and humane colours, it is perhaps as well that we remind ourselves of the real character and role of the man known to his contemporaries as "Nicholas the Bloody". We refer specifically to the attitude of the Little Father to the activities of the pogromists. From the beginning of his reign, Nicholas showed his willingness to resort to violence at the slightest pretext. In 1895, the year following his accession, the tsar telegraphed to a grenadier regiment that had distinguished itself in suppressing workers' disorders: "Highly satisfied with the calm and bold conduct of the troops during the factory riots." In 1905 he reacted in the same spirit: "Terror must be

met with terror,” he wrote to his mother in December 1905, in commending the brutal repression of the Baltic peasants. “Orlov, Richter and the others are doing very good work. Many seditious bands have been dispersed, their homes and property burnt.” A little while later, on hearing that Riga had been captured, and that Captain Richter had hanged the chief agitators, the tsar commented: “Fine fellow!” In 1907 Bernard Pares, author of one of the best-known English histories of Russia asked a Russian peasant what he thought of what had occurred during the previous five years. After a moment’s thought the peasant replied: “Five years ago there was a belief [in the tsar] as well as fear. Now the belief is all gone and only the fear remains.”[\[65\]](#)

As an answer to the revolutionary movement of the workers, the regime organised bloody pogroms against Jews, socialists and “intellectuals”. In one month following 17 October, anything up to 4,000 people were murdered, and a further 10,000 injured in bloody pogroms. Many Social Democrats perished in these attacks, notably the Bolshevik leader, Nikolai Bauman who was murdered in Moscow shortly after being released from prison. Bauman’s funeral turned into a mass workers’ demonstration. The coffin was carried through the streets accompanied by a band playing revolutionary songs. “The party leaders followed with wreaths, red flags and heavy velvet banners, bearing the slogans of their struggle in ornate gold. They were flanked by an armed militia of students and workers. And behind them row upon row of mourners, some 100,000 in all, marched ten abreast in military formation. This religious-like procession continued all day, stopping at various points in the city to pick up reinforcements. As it passed the Conservatory it was joined by a student orchestra, which played, over and over again, the funeral dirge of the revolution: *You Fell Victim to a Fateful Struggle*. The measured heaviness of the marchers, their melancholy music and their military organisation filled the streets with dark menace. As night fell, thousands of torches were lit, making the red flags glow. The graveside orations were emotional, defiant and uplifting. Bauman’s widow called on the crowds to avenge her husband’s death and, as they made their way to the city centre, sporadic fighting broke out with Black Hundred gangs.”

There were many other cases of people brutally tortured and murdered by the Black Hundred gangs financed and armed by the authorities as auxiliaries of the state. It is not difficult to prove the link between the pogroms and the authorities, from the local police chief right up to the tsar. Nicholas took a personal interest in the work of the Union of the Russian People which was behind the Black Hundreds. The direct connection between Nicholas and the Black Hundreds is not in doubt, as a recent history points out: “The tsar and his supporters at the court ... patronised the Union, as did several leading Churchmen, including Father John of Kronstadt, a close friend of the royal family, Bishop Hermogen and the monk Iliodor. Nicholas himself wore the Union’s badge and wished its leaders ‘total success’ in their efforts to unify the ‘loyal Russians’ behind the autocracy. Acting on the tsar’s instructions, the Ministry of the Interior financed its newspapers and secretly channelled arms to it.”[\[66\]](#)

The tsar’s anti-Semitism is well documented: “He had a particular animus for the Jews. When Stolypin, the chairman of the Council of Ministers 1906-11, proposed to relax certain restrictions imposed on the Jews in the Pale of Settlement, the tsar replied: ‘In

spite of the most convincing arguments in favour of an affirmative decision in this matter, an inner voice ever more insistently confirms that I should not take this decision upon myself. So far my conscience has *never* deceived me. Therefore in this case also, I intend to follow its dictates.’ Not for nothing did the tsar become a member of the anti-Semitic Union of the Russian People, subscribe to the Union’s funds and receive its president, Dr Dubrovin, on friendly terms. He had no sympathy for the victims of the pogroms that followed the publication of the Manifesto of October 1905. On the contrary, he saw in them a revolt against ‘the impertinence’ of the socialists and revolutionaries.”[\[67\]](#)

The Jews suffered terrible atrocities at the hands of the Black Hundred gangs, liberally plied with vodka and egged on by the police. And these horrors were organised at the top. At the police headquarters in Petersburg, thousands of leaflets were produced, inciting violence against the Jews for ruining Russia, calling upon the populace to “tear them to pieces and kill them all”. General Trepov personally edited the leaflet which was subsidised by the Minister of the Interior to the tune of 70,000 roubles. The most brutal pogrom took place in Odessa where 800 Jews were murdered, 5,000 wounded and more than 100,000 rendered homeless. The lumpenproletariat, the scum of society, protected by the forces of the state, was incited to commit the most unspeakable atrocities against defenceless people. “The doss-house tramp is king,” wrote Trotsky. “A trembling slave an hour ago, hounded by police and starvation, he is now himself an unlimited despot. Everything is permitted to him, he is capable of anything, he is master of property and honour, of life and death. If he wants to, he can throw an old woman out of a third-floor window together with a grand piano, he can smash a chair against a baby’s head, rape a little girl while the entire crowd looks on, hammer a nail into a living human body... He exterminates whole families, he pours petrol over a house, transforms it into a mass of flames, and if anyone attempts to escape, he finishes him off with a cudgel. A savage horde comes into an Armenian almshouse, knifing old people, sick people, women, children... There exist no tortures, figments of a feverish brain maddened with alcohol and fury, at which he need ever stop. He is capable of everything. God save the tsar!”[\[68\]](#)

The Bolshevik Piatnitsky who was in Odessa at the time recalls what happened: “There I saw the following scene: a gang of young men, between 25 and 20 years old, among whom there were plain-clothes policemen and members of the Okhrana, were rounding up anyone who looked like a Jew—men, women and children—stripping them naked and beating them mercilessly... We immediately organised a group of revolutionaries armed with revolvers... we ran up to them and fired at them. They ran away. But suddenly between us and the pogromists there appeared a solid wall of soldiers, armed to the teeth and facing us. We retreated. The soldiers went away, and the pogromists came out again. This happened a few times. It became clear to us that the pogromists were acting together with the military.”[\[69\]](#) The official report ordered by Witte clearly exposed the role of the police in this butchery, not only organising the lumpenproletarian mobs and supplying them with vodka, but directing them to places where Jews were hiding and even participating directly in the massacre of men, women and children. The governor of Odessa, Neidgart, admitted that “the crowds of hooligans engaged in wrecking and robbing, greeted him enthusiastically”. Baron Kaulbars, commander of the local troops,

addressed the police with a speech beginning with the words: “Let’s call a spade a spade. Let’s admit that all of us, in our hearts, sympathise with this pogrom!”[\[70\]](#)

It cannot be argued that the tsar knew nothing of the pogroms, although, naturally, his links with the Black Hundreds were kept on a suitably discrete level. But Nicholas was well aware of what was going on, and approved of it, as his private correspondence reveals. On October 27 he wrote to his mother:

“My Dearest Mama...

“I’ll begin by saying that the whole situation is better than it was a week ago... In the first days after the Manifesto the subversive elements raised their heads, but a strong reaction set in quickly and a whole mass of loyal people suddenly made their power felt. The result was obvious, and what one would expect in our country. The impertinence of the socialists and revolutionaries had angered the people once more; and because nine-tenths of the trouble-makers are Jews, the people’s anger turned against them. That’s how the pogroms happened. It is amazing how they took place simultaneously in all the towns of Russia and Siberia... Cases as far apart as Tomsk, Simeropol, Tver and Odessa show clearly what an infuriated mob can do; they surrounded the houses where the revolutionaries had taken refuge, set fire to them and killed everybody trying to escape.”[\[71\]](#)

Kerensky confirms the blatant complicity between the pogrom-mongers and the authorities, including the tsar: “Shcheglovitov was encouraged in his attitude by the tsar, who was irreconcilable in political matters. His policy in the pogrom trials involving members of the Union of the Russian People [that is, the Black Hundreds, the forerunners of the fascists] was revealing. Among the documents of the Extraordinary Commission of Inquiry into the Activities of Former Ministers and Dignitaries set up by the Provisional Government is a statement made by Lyadov, department head at the Ministry of Justice. Lyadov asserted that among the appeals for pardon that were considered in his department, the tsar invariably approved those submitted by members of the Union of the Russian People and rejected those submitted by revolutionaries.”[\[72\]](#)

How to fight the pogromists? Certainly not by appealing to the police and judiciary who, as we have seen, were behind the Black Hundreds. The wave of pogroms posed a question of self-defence in a most concrete and urgent fashion. Not futile appeals to the law, but workers’ self-defence! Defence, first of all, against the Black Hundreds, defence of Jews, Armenians and of intellectuals. Wherever possible, the workers organisations came together and attempted to combat the racist gangs. On such issues, it is necessary to draw in the representatives of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie and the oppressed minorities, but always under the leadership of the workers’ organisations. Trust only in your own forces! The working class must fight fascism with its own methods! That was the position of Lenin, who, in an article on a pogrom in Bielostok, explains the Bolshevik policy. “Here are a few excerpts from a telegram received from a Bielostok elector, Tsirin: *‘a deliberately organised anti-Jewish pogrom has started’*. *‘In spite of the rumours that have been circulated, not a single order has been received from the ministry all day*

today!’ ‘Vigorous agitation for the pogrom has been carried on for the past two weeks. In the streets, particularly at night, leaflets were distributed calling for the massacre, not only of Jews, but also of intellectuals. *The police simply turned a blind eye to all this.*’

“The old familiar picture! The police organises the pogrom beforehand. The police instigates it; leaflets are printed in government printing offices calling for a massacre of the Jews. When the pogrom begins the police is inactive. The troops quietly look on at the exploits of the Black Hundreds. But later this very police goes through the farce of prosecution and trial of the pogroms.” Lenin denounces the farce of government investigations and enquiries and poses the alternative in revolutionary terms: “Indict the culprits in unequivocal terms—it is your direct *duty* to the people. *Don’t ask the government whether measures are being taken to protect the Jews and to prevent pogroms, but ask how long the government intends to shield the real culprits, who are members of the government. Ask the government whether it thinks that the people who have long been in error as to who it is really responsible for the pogroms. Indict the government openly and publicly; call upon the people to organise a militia and self-defence as the only means of protection against pogroms.*”[\[73\]](#)

The bloody wave of pogroms posed the need for workers’ self-defence in a very concrete fashion. The question of armed struggle was a matter of life and death for the working class and the revolution. These activities, however, had nothing in common with the tactic of individual terrorism or “urban guerrillaism”. This was no secret conspiracy carried out by small groups of terrorists behind the backs of the workers, but a conscious revolutionary strategy linked to the masses. The fighting squads were closely linked to the soviets and other workers’ organisations. Legal workers’ clubs set up rifle ranges where workers learned to handle arms under the noses of the police. For their part, the Bolsheviks pressed for the formation of a united front involving the unity in action of all workers’ organisations and also petty bourgeois democratic and nationalist groups—an agreement of all those forces who were prepared to fight in defence of the gains of the revolution and against the Black Hundreds.

Here and there the workers’ fighting squads inflicted defeats against the pogromists. In his memoirs, Piatnitsky describes the horrific pogrom against the Jews in Odessa, and the formation of a united front of Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Bundists, Dashnaks (Armenian nationalists) and supporters of Paol-Zion—a group set up in 1905 which attempted to combine Zionism with Marxism, a section of which joined the Bolshevik Party after the October revolution. Armed detachments were sent to try to defend the Jews. Initially they succeeded in driving off the racist mobs, before coming up against the army and police whose superior forces compelled them to retreat, with some loss of life. Armed struggle was posed initially in terms of defence. However, in warfare the difference between defence and offence is of a relative character. A successful defensive struggle can be transformed into an offensive action. In Kharkov the fighting squads erected barricades and the demoralised troops surrendered without a fight. In Yekaterinoslav the workers fought back against the Cossacks with home made bombs killing several. In Chita they succeeded in freeing political prisoners including sailors from the Black Sea Fleet. These

partial skirmishes were preparing the way for the decisive showdown between the working class and the autocracy which Lenin knew to be inevitable.

### **Opening up the Party**

At the start of the year, both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were really sects with next to no influence in the masses. But after the 9 January, they began to grow rapidly. When V. Frunze, the organiser of the Party committee in the important textile centre of Ivanovo-Voznesensk, arrived in the town in May, he found “not less than between 400 and 500 activists”, mainly local workers. Martov says that there were 600 Bolsheviks there in mid-1905, the biggest committee in the central industrial region. The same author claims that the Party up to October could count the membership of its underground organisation in “a few tens of thousands of workers, and a few thousand soldiers and peasants”. By September the Social Democratic agitation was already getting an echo not only amongst strikers but at mass meetings, in the universities and the most radical slogans began to obtain support. However its sphere of influence including workers participating in organisations directly linked to the Party was made up of “hundreds of thousands of the urban and rural populace”.[\[74\]](#)

The rapid growth of the party’s influence in the masses made it necessary to adapt its methods and structures to allow for rapid growth. The struggle to build the Party and to extend its influence over the broadest possible layers of the class now assumed the character of a race against the clock. In a series of internal conferences held in the autumn, Lenin insisted on the opening up of the Party, and the introduction of the elective principle from top to bottom, in order to change the composition of the committees, with an influx of fresh new workers and youth. Pressure had to be applied on the committee-men through the free airing of fresh views and criticisms from below and, where necessary, by the replacement of some of the older and conservative elements by new people who were capable of reflecting the real mood of the class. Throughout 1905, Lenin was impatient at the slowness with which the committee-men inside Russia had turned to the masses and made use of the enormous opportunities that opened up. After the October Manifesto, the conditions for Party work radically changed. Freedom of assembly and the press had been won, as well as the right to organise in unions. Everywhere there was a ferment of ideas and discussion. On all sides, the workers and the youth were seeking a vehicle with which to express their instinctive aspirations to change society.

Old methods and habits of thought die hard. Throughout the whole course of 1905 there was a sharp struggle over the need to open up the party and democratise the internal structures. It should be borne in mind that up until the autumn of 1905 the Party was still underground. But with the changed political climate the Party had to adapt its work to legal and semi-legal conditions and to spend all its energies towards the penetration of the masses. In such a situation the old narrow circle mentality with its corresponding structures had to give way to broader based Party branches.

Lenin insisted repeatedly on the need to throw the Party open to workers and youth. This, however, often met with resistance from the committee-men, who interpreted organisational principles from a narrow and mechanical point of view. The fact is that there is no cook-book to determine the structures and rules of a revolutionary party. The party structures and rules must change with changing circumstances. The elective principle and internal democracy cannot be viewed in the same light for an underground organisation and a party that seeks to gain a mass base in conditions of legality. Underground work necessarily imposes certain limitations on internal democracy, but only such that can be justified by the demands of security. In the autumn of 1905 Lenin demanded the opening up of the party. This was mainly because of the change in the objective conditions, but not entirely. The experience of the previous period had given him serious concern at the narrowness of the Bolshevik committee-men. The experience of the mistake over the soviet had now convinced him of the urgent need for a shake up of the party and an increase of its working class composition. The party activists must find common ground and a common language with the masses, not cut themselves off from them.

The party's structures had to be radically altered to take account of the new conditions. Many factory branches were set up to underline the new turn. The newly-founded factory branches held open meetings. The Lessner factory branch recorded an attendance of 70 workers at one such meeting. The district committees in big industrial areas were split into smaller units, sub-districts. Further, a number of areas established workers' clubs, either on a district or factory basis. In a series of internal conferences held in the autumn of 1905 the elective principle was introduced from top to bottom. This was a way of securing greater participation by the workers in the running of the party, but it was also a means of exerting pressure on the committee-men, of allowing fresh views and criticism to come from below and, if necessary, change the composition of the committees through an influx of fresh, new workers, so that the voice of the workers and their class instincts and experience in struggle could be heard and set its stamp on the party's activities. A further development was the holding of city-wide aggregates, where the entire membership could get together and discuss the work. The district committees in big industrial areas were split into smaller units covering sub-districts. In some areas, the city committee even drew up their own rules in line with the special conditions prevailing in their areas. This was the case, for example, in Petersburg and Ivanovo-Voznesensk.

From all this we can see how extremely flexible Lenin's conception of organisation always was. Democratic centralism embraces two apparently contradictory ideas—centralism and democracy. But in any strike, we see how both ideas can be combined in practice: the fullest freedom of discussion until a decision is taken, but after that, the fullest degree of unity in action. At certain moments in its history, the Bolshevik Party laid heavy stress on centralism, for example, during the long periods when it was forced to work in underground conditions. But in periods when they were permitted to work in "normal" legal conditions, the Bolsheviks, as we see here, favoured the most open and democratic forms of organisation. The revolutionary party is a living organism, not a lifeless fossil. At some stages in its history the Bolshevik Party has laid emphasis on its centralist aspect but at other times the democratic element took precedence. Legal work

opened up far broader vistas for agitational work and propaganda. Whereas previously the party press has reached a relatively small number of workers, it could now reach the masses with legal journals, meetings and other means. Meetings were held under the watchful eye of the party defence squads in workers' clubs, libraries and other public premises.

In the course of 1905, and especially after the October Manifesto, big opportunities opened up for work in the mass organisations in a series of legal and semi-legal organisations—trade unions, embryonic factory committees, insurance societies, etc. In relation to the workers' clubs, set up in the "days of freedom," Schwarz writes: "The workers and social democratic workers' clubs were mostly non-partisan organisations, often not even aspiring to formal party membership, concentrating on political and general education."<sup>[75]</sup> The Mensheviks originated this work. Their club at the Baltic Works in Petersburg had a membership of 120. Following their example, the mainly Bolshevik Vyborg district set up a club with 300 members. Normal membership for clubs of this type seems to have been around 200-300, at least in Moscow and Petersburg.

One indication of the growing revolutionary movement was the rapid mushrooming of trade union organisations. The task of penetrating the trade unions, a basic unit of working class organisation, was an absolute priority for the Social Democrats. Even the most backward layers were seized by the instinct to get organised. However, it was precisely the weakness of trade unionism in Russia that gave the soviets its colossal authority and strength as the main proletarian organisation. The soviets became the main centre of activity and to some extent displaced the trade unions in 1905. Nevertheless, trade unions still remained an important field of work, especially for the more skilled workers. This was particularly true in the big industrial centres, notably in Moscow and Petersburg. However, the Bolsheviks were often slow to take advantage of the possibilities, preferring to concentrate on the well-worn and familiar areas of narrow circle life. Lenin repeatedly protested against this organisational routinism. In this field also the Mensheviks had a head start over the Bolsheviks, much to Lenin's dismay. The Mensheviks took initiatives setting up trade union organisations in Petersburg, Moscow, Saratov, Baku, Odessa etc. The trade unions very quickly moved on to Social Democratic traditions. In general, the Social Revolutionaries were not in the running. However, naturally within the trade unions there were many non-party workers. That is after all the essential role of the trade unions. To unite the broadest layers of the class for struggle in defence of its own interests. The task for socialists is to fight for influence within them, gain a majority and to exert influence over the broadest layers of the class.

There were many non-party trade unions, particularly in the south and Volga region. In the west the Bund and the Mensheviks predominated. Moscow was a Bolshevik stronghold. The only reason why the Mensheviks could seize the initiative in Moscow was because the local Bolsheviks initially had a wrong position on the trade unions. They tried to set up separate trade unions with a definite party political identity and justified this with the aim of fighting against "non-partyism". For example, they set up a Bolshevik trade union among the bakers, technicians and fitters and turners. This was a radically false position which was subsequently criticised by Lenin in his celebrated work

*Left Wing Communism an Infantile Disorder* where he explicitly states that it is wrong for Marxists to try to split the trade unions and establish “revolutionary” unions separated from the mass organisations. On this question also the Bolshevik committee-men revealed their lack of understanding of Lenin’s position. Of course the party must fight against “non-party” trends, but the trade unions must embrace all sections of the working class irrespective of party affiliations. The only political trend that should be excluded from the trade unions are the fascists. Lenin wrote an article along these lines in *Novaya Zhizn’* on 2 December 1905.

## **The Party Press**

It is impossible to say exactly what the numerical strength of the party was in 1905. If we take the figures for St Petersburg, Martov calculates that, in the first half of 1905, the Mensheviks had 1,200-1,300 workers, and the Bolsheviks several hundred. By October, the two organisations had about the same number (which he does not give, but was clearly a lot more). In other words, the Bolsheviks gained proportionately more. Other writers differ. V.I. Nevsky calculates the worker membership of both factions in St Petersburg as only between 890 and 1,000 at the end of the spring.<sup>[76]</sup> However, in the following months, the membership experienced a rapid increase. By the end of the summer, the Moscow Bolsheviks numbered 1,035. The Riga Bolsheviks had, by the spring, 250 members and a presence in 25 factories, although the Mensheviks still had a majority there. The Ivanovo-Voznesensk committee doubled in the first half of the year, from 200 to 400; Voronezh went from 40 to 127; Nizhny Novgorod from 100 to 250, and Minsk from 150 to 300. Thereafter, the growth was explosive. Despite the incomplete and probably inexact nature of these figures, the overall picture of extremely rapid growth, doubling and trebling the membership in a few months, comes across clearly. By the end of the year, the Nizhny Novgorod organisation tripled in size from 500 to 1,500. In Saratov and Minsk the Party Bolsheviks had 1,000 members by December.<sup>[77]</sup>

The Bolsheviks were strongest in the North, North-East, the Central Industrial Region, the Volga and the Urals. The Mensheviks also grew, but their influence was greatest in the South—Tiflis, Kutais, Batum, Guri in the Caucasus, which was now a Menshevik stronghold—and the West. According to one recent estimate, there were about 8,400 “organised Bolsheviks” in 1905. Probably, the Mensheviks had about the same.<sup>[78]</sup> But in the context of general pre-revolutionary ferment, the party’s sphere of influence was far wider. The scope for action was vastly increased after the issuing of the October Manifesto. Martov recalls that: “All in all, throughout this period, on the eve of the October days, the Social Democracy in the ranks of the illegal organisations could assemble several thousands of workers, students, soldiers and peasants; but the sphere of its immediate organisational influence took in hundreds of thousands of people in town and countryside.”<sup>[79]</sup>

The growth of the Bolsheviks was especially rapid in the capital. By the year’s end the St Petersburg organisation reached a figure of 3,000, a ten-fold increase in the course of one year. This numerical growth was accompanied by an internal transformation by a rapid influx of fresh, young workers onto the leading bodies at local and provincial level. These

were the “natural leaders” of the working class thrown up by the revolution itself. Lenin could justifiably claim “in the spring of 1905 our party was a union of underground circles; by the autumn it has become the party of *millions* of the proletariat”. This was no exaggeration. The workers actually organised in the party could be numbered in tens of thousands. But there was a vast periphery of hundreds of thousands crying out for socialist ideas and who considered themselves as Social Democrats.

The advent of legal conditions also created vast scope for the party press. The old illegal press was hopelessly inadequate in this situation. Ten days after the tsar’s Manifesto was published, the first issue of the Bolshevik paper *Novaya Zhizn’* came out. The paper was published legally in the name of Gorky’s wife Maria Fedorovna Andreyeva. The editor was a poet, Minsky. This, however, was a front for the real editorial board with Krassin and Gorky in charge until Lenin himself assumed control after his return in November. Such precautions were very necessary. While theoretically a “legal” journal, *Novaya Zhizn’* was published under the eagle eye of the censor. When the first issue carried the RSDLP programme it was swiftly confiscated. *Novaya Zhizn’* became the de facto official mouthpiece of Bolshevism up to its closure in early December. Its circulation was between 50,000 and 80,000, a major achievement for a party which only a month or so earlier had been underground.

On Gorky’s advice, the Bolsheviks entered into contact with liberal publishers who helped launch the venture. As usual, Gorky played an indispensable role in obtaining financial backing for the journal from well-to-do writers and intellectuals. Under the impact of revolution, many writers and poets, who would hitherto never have dreamed of participating in revolutionary politics, became actively involved with the Bolsheviks through the party press. Well-known poets and writers, like Balmont, Leonid Andreyev and of course Gorky himself, contributed articles and money. The degree to which they were actually absorbed by the party is questionable. However, these “fellow travellers”, as they became known, undoubtedly played a useful role in popularising and spreading the influence of Bolshevik ideas. Although the paper appeared under the name of bourgeois journalists, it was in fact the official organ of the party at this period. There were also other legal Bolshevik papers in the provinces: *Borba* and *Vperyod* in Moscow, *Kavkazky Rabotchy Listok* in Tbilisi, etc. The Bolsheviks also collaborated in other legal publications run by bourgeois liberals and Mensheviks and in general made use of any platform that gave their ideas a broader audience.

The Mensheviks still had a more powerful apparatus, more money and resources, better facilities for transport and literature and more big names than the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, their membership was looser and less disciplined than that of the Bolsheviks, who attracted the most militant and class conscious workers and youth. But there was still much to be done and time was running out. Lenin continuously hammered home the need to win the masses. In his first article in *Novaya Zhizn’* written shortly after his return to Russia in early November, Lenin yet again laid heavy stress on the need to open up the party. In answer to the committee-men who opposed this on the grounds that it would lead to a dilution of the party, Lenin wrote:

“Danger may be said to lie in a sudden influx of large numbers of non-Social Democrats into the Party. If that occurred the Party would be dissolved among the masses, it would cease to be the conscious vanguard of its class, its role would be reduced to that of a tail. That would mean a very deplorable period indeed. And this danger could undoubtedly become a very serious one if we showed any inclination towards demagogy, if we lacked party principles (programme, tactical rules, organisational experience) entirely, or if these principles were feeble and shaky. But the fact is that no such ‘ifs’ exist. We Bolsheviks have never shown any inclination towards demagogy... we have demanded class-consciousness from those joining the Party, we have insisted on the tremendous importance of continuity in the Party’s development, we have preached discipline and demanded that every Party member be trained in one or another of the Party organisations.” But having given due weight to the need to build on strong foundations, Lenin goes on to stress the other side of the equation in terms designed to put the narrow-minded committee-men in their place:

*“The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness. Don’t invent bugaboos, comrades! Don’t forget that 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.”*

Once again, Lenin sharply repudiates the pernicious idea that socialist consciousness must be introduced into the working class “from without”. The workers, he insists, are “*instinctively, spontaneously*” socialist. The task of the revolutionaries is to give a conscious and organised expression to the unconscious, or semi-conscious, aspirations of the workers to change society. Time and again in this period Lenin hammers home the need to open up the party, to recruit rapidly the new layers of workers and youth who are entering the struggle, to learn to speak the same language as the workers, to link up the activity of the small group of cadres with the activity of the newly-awakened masses. That same Lenin who argued in favour of restricting the membership in 1903, now wrote the following: “At the Third Congress of the Party I suggested that there be about eight workers to every two intellectuals in the Party committees. How obsolete that suggestion seems today! Now we must wish for new Party organisations to have one social democratic intellectual to several hundred social democratic workers.”<sup>[80]</sup> It is true that some who called themselves Bolsheviks never understood what Lenin was driving at—and that remains true to this day. But that is hardly Lenin’s fault. Even the most beautiful aria can be ruined by a singer who is tone-deaf.

### **Trotsky in 1905**

Of all the leaders of the Social Democracy, it was Trotsky who played the most prominent role in 1905. Lunacharsky, who was one of Lenin’s closest collaborators at the time, recalls that:

“His [Trotsky’s] popularity among the Petersburg proletariat at the time of his arrest [in December] was tremendous and increased still more as a result of his picturesque and heroic behaviour in court. I must say that of all the social democratic leaders of 1905-06 Trotsky undoubtedly showed himself, despite his youth, to be the best prepared. Less than any of them did he bear the stamp of a certain kind of émigré narrowness of outlook which, as I have said, even affected Lenin at that time. Trotsky understood better than all the others what it means to conduct the political struggle on a broad, national scale. He emerged from the revolution having acquired an enormous degree of popularity, whereas neither Lenin nor Martov had effectively gained any at all. Plekhanov had lost a great deal, thanks to his display of quasi-Cadet tendencies. Trotsky stood then in the very front rank.”

Trotsky was only 26 when he first became president of the St Petersburg Soviet. The first chairman of the Petersburg Soviet, the lawyer and Menshevik sympathiser G.S. Khrustalyov-Nosar, was like Father Gapon an accidental figure who played no independent role. In reality, the leading role in the Soviet was played by Trotsky, who became chairman after Khrustalyov’s arrest in November. Trotsky wrote most of the proclamations and manifestos of the Soviet and gained enormous popularity with the workers. Lunacharsky recalls that Trotsky “held himself apart not only from us but from the Mensheviks too. His work was largely carried out in the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies and together with Parvus he organised some sort of separate group which published a very militant and very well-edited small and cheap newspaper *Nachalo*”. And he adds: “I remember someone saying in Lenin’s presence: ‘Khrustalyov’s star is waning and now the strong man in the Soviet is Trotsky’. Lenin’s face darkened for a moment, then he said: ‘Well, Trotsky has earned it by his brilliant and unflinching work’.”<sup>[81]</sup>

The full significance of Lenin’s reaction can only be gauged if we realise that precisely on this decisive question—the attitude to the Soviet—the Petersburg Bolsheviks made a fundamental error, which lost them the opportunity of winning the majority of active workers in the capital. The mistakes of the Petersburg Bolsheviks allowed the Mensheviks to gain a majority in the Soviet. Since the break with the Mensheviks one year earlier, Trotsky had attempted to maintain an independent position between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. This earned him a number of justified rebukes from Lenin. However, despite the sharp differences over the question of unity—differences which, in any case, became increasingly irrelevant in the course of the year—there can be no doubt that on all political questions, Trotsky’s position was very close to that of Lenin. This is well attested to by writers from both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Despite these well-known facts, the Stalinist historians attempted to describe Trotsky in 1905 as a “Menshevik”, as we read in the following, fairly typical, extract: “Trotsky’s denial of a revolutionary democracy (?) was in effect defence of the Menshevik idea of the bourgeoisie’s hegemony (!) in the forthcoming revolution.”<sup>[82]</sup> This is entirely false. The differences which separated Trotsky from the Mensheviks as early as February 1904 are attested to unambiguously by the Menshevik leaders themselves. From late 1904 onwards, Trotsky and the German Left Social Democrat Parvus, worked out a body of ideas which were later to provide the basis for Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution.

We will deal with the nature of this theory and the position of Lenin and the Mensheviks later. But first, let us put the record straight.

“Trotsky, too, had a basic divergence of views with *Iskra* [the Menshevik organ] on the political conclusions to be drawn from the situation created by 9 January. Trotsky wrote that after 9 January the working class movement ‘slipped into an uprising’. Hence the Constituent Assembly in and for itself could no longer be the fundamental and generalising slogan of the party. After 9 January it was necessary to prepare for an armed uprising and the replacement of the tsarist government by a Revolutionary Provisional Government that alone could convoke a Constituent Assembly.”[\[83\]](#) These are the words of the Menshevik leader Fyodr Dan, written at a time when he and Trotsky were bitter political enemies. The basic ideas contained here, based on Trotsky’s pamphlet, *Till the Ninth of January*, are in complete agreement with the general position defended by Lenin. In his history of the Russian Social Democracy, Martov polemicises not only against Lenin’s position, but also against the theories of Trotsky and Parvus.[\[84\]](#)

Perhaps the most impressive achievement made by Trotsky was the publication of a mass revolutionary daily paper. With the assistance of Parvus, he took over the former liberal paper *Ruskaya Gazeta*, changed the name to *Nachalo* (The Beginning) and transformed it into a popular and militant workers’ paper with a low price (one kopeck). Its circulation shot up from 30,000 to 100,000, reaching a staggering 500,000 by December. *Nachalo*, theoretically the organ of the Mensheviks replacing the defunct *Iskra*, in practice was controlled by Trotsky. It had a much bigger circulation than *Novaya Zhizn*. Kamenev, who was one of the editors of *Novaya Zhizn* described to Trotsky the scene at the railway stations as his train passed: “The demand was only for revolutionary papers. ‘*Nachalo, Nachalo, Nachalo,*’ came the cry of the waiting crowds. ‘*Novaya Zhizn*’ and then ‘*Nachalo, Nachalo, Nachalo.*’ “Then I said to myself, with a feeling of resentment,’ Kamenev confessed, ‘they do write better in *Nachalo* than we do.’”[\[85\]](#)

The political line of *Nachalo* had nothing in common with Menshevism and on all the basic questions was identical with Lenin’s positions, a fact that was warmly acknowledged by Lenin many years later. Up to October it was still possible to argue for at least episodic agreement with the bourgeois liberals, thus in the first issue of *Novaya Zhizn* the editors still harked back to Plekhanov’s old slogan “March separately, strike together!” However, from abroad Lenin constantly hammered home his essential mistrust towards the liberals and warned that they would inevitably sell out. In the sixth issue of *Novaya Zhizn* Kamenev was already writing along different lines, arguing that any attempt to nominate a government of liberals behind the backs of the workers would be rejected and that the workers would have to overthrow such a provisional government. This was exactly what happened in 1917. In the following issue, number seven, an article by N. Minsky stated “between the bourgeois and Social Democratic policy there is not, nor can there be, even external, formal points of coincidence”. On this central question *Nachalo*’s position was identical to that of Lenin. Thus, when the first issue of Trotsky’s *Nachalo* appeared, it was warmly welcomed by the Bolshevik *Novaya Zhizn* which wrote: “The first number of *Nachalo* has come out. We welcome a comrade in the

struggle. The first issue is notable for the brilliant description of the October strike written by Comrade Trotsky.”[\[86\]](#)

Martov, who was supposed to be the paper’s co-editor together with Trotsky frequently objected to its line, but was unable to get Trotsky to change it. In his history of the period, he lists a whole series of differences. For example, when Struve tried to enter into negotiations with the liberal bureaucrat Witte, *Nachalo* savagely attacked him as “an agent of Witte”. The leading article of *Nachalo* issue 8 stated that “the revolution has outrun its first phase, the Zemstvo opposition has recoiled and become a counter-revolutionary force”. Referring to this, a disgruntled Martov remarked that this formula was totally “at variance with the traditional conception of Menshevism”. And he complained that the line of *Nachalo* was identical to that of the Bolsheviks, citing a long list of offending articles.[\[87\]](#) The Menshevik leader Dan wrote a grumbling letter to Kautsky: “In St Petersburg they founded a newspaper, *Nachalo*, which succeeded *Iskra*, and throughout November and December 1905 it carried the most radical pronouncements, hardly distinguishable from those in the Bolshevik paper, *Novaya Zhizn*’.”[\[88\]](#) Martov’s biographer, Israel Getzler, makes the same point: “Thus Martov found himself in a minority on *Nachalo* which had become a propagator of Trotskyism rather than of Menshevism.”[\[89\]](#)

One of the more senseless slanders directed against Trotsky by the Stalinists is the accusation that he supported the demand for a labour congress. This deliberately distorts Trotsky’s position. In July 1906 writing from prison Trotsky produced a pamphlet advocating a National Congress of Soviets. This idea was later caricatured by the Stalinists to announce that Trotsky supported the Menshevik idea of a “Labour Congress”. In his pamphlet entitled *Our Tasks in the Struggle for a Constituent Assembly*, Trotsky sets forth three basic demands. 1) local soviets of workers’ deputies; 2) an all Russian Congress and 3) an all Russian Workers’ Soviet as a permanent organisation created by the Workers’ Congress.[\[90\]](#) This idea brilliantly anticipates what actually happened in 1917. Solomon Schwarz, certainly no sympathiser of Trotsky, shows clearly that Trotsky’s idea has nothing in common with the Menshevik idea of a “Labour Congress” i.e. the setting up of a reformist Labour Party: “From his argumentation it is clear, however, that Trotsky meant the all Russian Soviet to be ‘permanent’ only for the duration of the revolution. Axelrod’s version of the Workers’ Congress was broader, more complex and closely related to the idea of either creating a vast new Labour Party or transforming the SDP into such a party.”[\[91\]](#) And he adds in a footnote to page 234: “In all of its short existence (November 13-December 3) *Nachalo* did not carry a single article that even incidentally discussed the problem of a Workers’ Congress.”

Despite the sharpness of the polemical struggle in the previous period, Lenin had a high opinion of Trotsky’s achievements which contrasted favourably with the mistaken policies adopted by the Bolshevik committee-men inside Russia prior to Lenin’s return. Thus Krupskaya, in the second Russian edition of her memoirs, in a passage which, along with much else, has been deleted from all subsequent editions, quotes from a letter written by Lenin in September, which has also not seen the light of day: “In the September letter written to ‘Augustus’, Ilyich wrote: ‘To wait until you get complete

agreement with the CC or among the agents is sheer Utopia. We don't want a coterie but a Party, dear friend!' In the same letter, replying to an indignant complaint that our people had been printing Trotsky's leaflets, Ilyich wrote: '...They are printing Trotsky's leaflets... dear me... there's nothing wrong with that provided the leaflets are tolerable and have been corrected!'"[92]

Finally, at the trial of the 52 members of the St Petersburg Soviet that took place in September 1906, Trotsky turned his defence speech into a brilliant attack on the autocracy and a defence of the right to revolution. "The historical power in whose name the prosecutor speaks in this court," he thundered, "is the organised violence of a minority over the majority! The new power, whose precursor was the Soviet, represents the organised will of the majority calling the minority to order. Because of this distinction the revolutionary right of the Soviet to existence stands above all juridical and moral speculations..."[93] In effect, Trotsky was issuing a call for armed uprising from the dock. Having utilised the trial for the purpose of agitation, the main objective had been achieved. When the court refused the prisoners' demand to interrogate a senator who had set up a printing-press to disseminate pogromist literature, they staged a protest that forced the judges to expel them from the courtroom and sentence them in their absence.

While recognising Trotsky's role, Lenin was irritated by Trotsky's stubborn refusal to join the Bolsheviks, although there was no principled disagreement—a fact that Lenin attributed to personal vanity. This was not the case. The main thing that prevented Trotsky from joining the Bolsheviks was the conduct of the Bolshevik committee-men in St Petersburg which scandalised and repelled him. This explains his reluctance to join Lenin's faction and his insistence on reunification of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, who had turned sharply left and had shown a more flexible attitude to the Soviet than the local Bolsheviks. In later years, the question of "conciliationism" was the issue that sharply divided Lenin and Trotsky, but in 1905 even that difference was soon swept to one side.

The general upswing of the movement inevitably gave rise to a powerful desire for unity among the mass of the workers. The trend towards the unification of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks became irresistible after October. In mid-November the Odessa Social Democrats voted in a general assembly of 1,500 to unify both factions. The same thing happened in Saratov and Tver. In Moscow and St Petersburg the local committees and groups were already working together in a kind of a federal structure even before October. All over the country, branches of both factions passed resolutions demanding unity. Piatnitsky describes how when the Odessa Social Democrats received the proposal for re-unification from the CC it was "met with a warm response from among the party members, the Mensheviks as well as the Bolsheviks. That was easy to understand: that our few available forces were weak and scattered had become evident to every Party member during the pogrom... It was obvious to the committee that the proposal of union would be passed by a great majority at the Party meetings of both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, for wherever the advocates of immediate unity spoke they were supported almost unanimously."[94]

Lenin, who had returned to Russia on November 4, was now convinced of the need for the immediate re-unification of the two wings of the RSDLP. His change of heart was no accident. Apart from the fact that the whole situation demanded it, he was now struggling to correct the sectarian errors of the Bolsheviks on the Soviet, the internal regime and other questions. Probably Lenin believed that unification would help him overcome these sectarian deviations. But the main reason was the pressure from the ranks and the fact that the continuation of the split was holding up the Party's growth. "It is no secret to anyone that the vast majority of Social Democratic workers are exceedingly dissatisfied with the split in the Party and are demanding unity," he wrote. "It is no secret to anyone that the split has caused a certain cooling-off among Social Democratic workers (or workers ready to become Social Democrats) towards the Social Democratic Party... Hence it is now possible not only to *urge* unity, not only to obtain *promises* to unite, but actually *to unite*—by a simple decision of the majority of organised workers in both factions."[\[95\]](#)

Of course, there could be no question of unity if there were differences of principle. Trotsky's paper *Nachalo*, played a big role in ensuring the possibility of unity on a principled basis. Under the impact of the revolution, even the Menshevik leaders began to move to the left, at least in words. Thus Fyodr Dan wrote to Kautsky in November 1905: "We live here as though in a state of intoxication. The revolutionary air affects people like wine."[\[96\]](#) It should be noted that the Petersburg Mensheviks were far to the left of the Menshevik leadership in exile, and moved further to the left under the influence of Trotsky and Parvus. In the course of the revolution, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in the capital had drawn closer together. By the autumn they had already established a joint committee. Both *Nachalo* and *Novaya Zhizn'* defended the restoration of unity. The Bolshevik central committee, with Lenin present, passed an unanimous resolution to the effect that the split was merely the result of the conditions of exile life, and that the development of the revolution itself had removed the basis for the split in the RSDLP.

Both sides made concessions. The Mensheviks now accepted Lenin's formula for paragraph one of the party rules. This was rather ironic, since the Bolsheviks had already opened up and loosened their internal regime in accordance with the new conditions. The old arguments about conspiracy and ultra-centralism were irrelevant. The Bolshevik Central Committee and the Menshevik Organisational Committee had also established a federative structure and were negotiating for unification. Both fractions were to call their own conference preparing the way for a unity Congress as soon as possible. In preparation for unification, the Bolsheviks called for a joint conference, but the Mensheviks preferred to call their own conference in November, whereupon the Bolsheviks, too, organised a conference at Tammerfors, Finland, on 12 to 17 December, while the workers of Moscow were locked in a desperate struggle with the forces of reaction. In view of the highly charged situation, there was a need for a greater emphasis on tightening up security and strengthening the underground apparatus. On 11 December a new electoral law was announced. The Tammerfors conference came out for the active boycott of the Duma, based on the perspective of the imminence of an armed uprising. The logic of this position is clear. Generally speaking it is only permissible to boycott a parliament when you are in a position to overthrow it and offer something superior in its

stead. On all sides the symptoms of revolutionary upheaval were in evidence. Between late October and early December the country was affected by strikes, peasant uprisings, mutinies in the Army and Navy, uprisings in Georgia and the Baltic.

## NOTES

[65] Quoted in O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy. The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, p. 203.

[66] O. Figes, op. cit., pp. 198-9 and 196.

[67] Lionel Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, pp. 62-3.

[68] Trotsky, *1905*, pp. 150-1.

[69] O. Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 82.

[70] Trotsky, *1905*, p. 150, note.

[71] O. Figes, op. cit. pp. 197-8.

[72] Kerensky, *The Kerensky Memoirs. Russia and History's Turning Point*, p. 79.

[73] LCW, *The Reaction is Taking to Arms*, vol. 10. pp. 509 and 510-1 (my emphasis).

[74] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, p. 575 in both quotes.

[75] Schwarz, op. cit., p. 242.

[76] Surh, op. cit., p. 261, note.

[77] See *Istoriya of KPSS*, vol. 2, pp. 35, 36 and 116.

[78] See Lane, op. cit., p. 12.

[79] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, p. 575.

[80] LCW, *The Reorganisation of the Party*, vol. 10, p. 31, p. 32 (my emphasis), and p. 36, footnote.

[81] A. Lunacharsky, *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, pp. 60-1 and 60.

[82] V.A. Grinko and others, *The Bolshevik Party's Struggle against Trotskyism (1903-February 1917)*, p. 58.

[83] F. Dan, op. cit., p. 305.

[84] Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, pp. 553-4.

[85] See Trotsky, *My Life*, pp. 171-8.

[86] Quoted in Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 182.

[87] See Martov and others, *Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie v Rossii v Nachale 20 Veka*, vol. 3, pp. 592-6.

[88] See A. Ascher, *Paul Axelrod and the Development of Menshevism*, pp. 241-2.

[89] I. Getzler, *Martov*, p. 110 (my emphasis).

[90] The quote can be found in Trotsky's Works in Russian, *Sochinyeniye*, vol. 2, p. 435.

[91] Schwarz, op. cit., p. 231.

[92] Krupskaya, *O Vladimirye Ilyiche*, vol. 1, p. 144.

[93] *The Age of the Permanent Revolution*, p. 59.

[94] Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 87.

[95] LCW, *The Reorganisation of the Party*, vol. 10, pp. 37-8.

[96] Quoted in Ascher, op. cit., p. 241.

## **Part Two: The First Russian Revolution**

[section 5 of 5]

### **The Moscow Uprising**

By the end of October the ferment in the villages had reached new levels, with 37 per cent of European Russia affected, especially the central "Black Earth" zone, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia and the Ukraine. The wave of peasant discontent in turn spread to the armed forces. There was a series of mutinies in the army and navy, which underlined the importance of work among the soldiers and sailors. Alongside the legal mass work, the Bolsheviks also stepped up the material preparations for armed insurrection. Krassin was in charge of the military side of the work, penetrating the army and organising fighting groups. The local committees established specialised units to obtain arms. This work was

stepped up in the autumn with the creation of underground bomb factories and arms dumps. Once again, Gorky played a key role in raising money for this work, which was partly funded by what was known as “expropriations”, or raids on banks conducted by armed groups under Bolshevik control. The objective conditions for armed insurrection were rapidly maturing.

Throughout the autumn, all eyes were fixed on St Petersburg, the storm-centre of the movement. But the workers in the capital, who bore the brunt of the conflict from January until November were at the end of their tether. After the issuing of the October Manifesto, the liberal employers, who had previously appeared sympathetic to the revolutionary movement, and even paid the wages of striking workers, finally came out in their true colours. On October 31 the St Petersburg Soviet called a general strike around the struggle for the eight-hour day. But the bosses put up stiff resistance and the strike ended in failure. On November 12 the Soviet called off the strike. This was the turning-point. The October general strike really represented the last gasp of the movement in St Petersburg. The November strike in Petersburg involved even bigger numbers of workers than in October. But this was really the last desperate effort of a working class gravely weakened by months of struggle. Sensing that the movement was beginning to run out of steam, the employers organised a lockout, while the police and troops moved to break up workers’ meetings by force. The November lock-out revealed that the bosses were aware of the real situation. There were widespread repression, sackings and arrests. Fearing that the movement would disintegrate into a series of guerrilla disputes which could be crushed one by one, the St Petersburg Soviet decided to beat a tactical retreat and, on 12 November, after a tense debate, called off the strike, in order to withdraw in a united and organised fashion.

The defection of the bourgeois liberals tipped the balance in favour of the reactionary camp. General Trepov was now virtual dictator of Russia. Fearing “anarchy”, the liberals clung to his coat-tails. By 26 November, the regime felt strong enough to arrest Khrustalyov-Nosar on the premises of the Soviet Executive. The Soviet responded with a Financial Manifesto, written by Parvus, calling for the non-payment of taxes and withdrawal of bank deposits to hasten the financial crisis of the regime. Even at this point, fresh new layers were entering the struggle every day: janitors, doormen, cooks, domestic servants, floor-polishers, waiters, laundresses, public bath attendants, policemen, Cossacks—even the odd detective. Society had been stirred to the depths. But the increasing radicalisation of the formerly politically inert mass disguised the fact that the “heavy battalions” of labour were now almost exhausted. The December strike in Petersburg was far less unanimous than in November, involving at most two-thirds of the workers of the capital. This fact indicated that the high-point of the movement in Petersburg had been reached, and the revolutionary tide was beginning to ebb. On December 2 there was a mutiny of the Rostov regiment in Moscow. The following day, the St Petersburg Soviet was arrested, including its chairman, Leon Trotsky.

The initiative now passed to the workers of Moscow. The mutiny of the Rostov regiment gave rise to hope that the garrison might come over. But the local Bolsheviks hesitated and, seeing that the movement did not spread, the troops quickly lost heart. In a couple of

days the mutiny was crushed. This defeat depressed the soldiers and considerably reduced the prospect of them going over to the side of the workers. On the other hand the mood in the factories of Moscow was reaching fever pitch. The workers were impatient for action. On 4 December, the Moscow Soviet passed a motion congratulating the soldiers on their uprising and expressing the hope that they would come over to the side of the people. But by the time the ink was dry, the soldiers' revolt had been crushed. Lenin had repeatedly expressed his anxiety about a premature uprising. He recognised that the party's forces were still weak, the fighting squads too unprepared, to take on the full might of the state. Above all, the massive reserves of the peasantry had only begun to enter the field of battle. More than once he expressed the hope that the final showdown between the workers and the regime should be put off till the spring. But Lenin understood very well that the revolution cannot be directed like an orchestra under a conductor's baton. Krupskaya vividly conveys Lenin's attitude: "In answer to a question about the timing of the uprising he said: 'I would put the uprising off till the spring, but we shan't be asked anyway'."<sup>[97]</sup>

About the Moscow uprising there has been a great deal of mythology, particularly created by the Stalinists. It is said that the initiative for the uprising belonged to the Bolsheviks. In reality, the Moscow uprising did not take place according to a definite plan. There was no direct order from the Central Committee. The initiative came from below—from the workers themselves. At the first Conference of fighting organisations of the RSDLP held in November 1906, a year after the uprising, the Central Committee's representative I. A. Sammer dismissed the idea that the Central Committee had organised the whole thing, complaining that some comrades "have too mechanical a conception of the circumstances which gave rise to the December uprising in Moscow and are painting too bold a picture of the role of the Central Committee in the calling of this uprising. The Central Committee it seems pressed a button and the insurrection burst forth. If the CC hadn't done it, the uprising would not have taken place!" The leadership was, in fact, overwhelmed by events. Radov, the Bolshevik leader later confessed in a moment of truth that the forces at the disposal of the Party were woefully unprepared: "We must now frankly acknowledge that in that respect our entire organisation and in part we, members of the Central Committee, were completely unprepared."

That there was widespread support among the Moscow workers for the proposed action is not open to serious doubt. The Moscow workers, in contrast to the workers of Petersburg, were newly entering into the fray and impatient for action. A steady series of factory meetings pronounced for an insurrection. The mood of the factories affected the Moscow Soviet. The workers were pressing for action. The factories were in a tense mood of expectation, aware of the approach of the decisive moment. Zemlyatchka recalls that when the Bolshevik local leaders got up to speak in the Soviet, the question was no longer in doubt "it was written on the workers' faces".<sup>[98]</sup> Only the factory delegates, wielding a red card, had a decisive vote. The parties, as elsewhere, had a consultative vote. When the vote was taken, a forest of calloused hands was raised, in favour of a general political strike on the 7 December. The workers' decision was unanimous. Under the circumstances, everyone knew that this was a vote for an uprising. The Menshevik right wing had reservations about the uprising, because of its effect on the liberals, but

swallowed hard and decided to support it. The pressure from below proved irresistible. In fact, although the initiative came from the Bolshevik workers, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries also participated in the uprising. On 5 December, the Mensheviks proposed a general strike of the railway workers of Moscow. The vote in the Soviet was seconded by the railway workers, the postal workers and the Polish workers in Moscow.

An attempt was made to organise solidarity action in Petersburg. The newly re-constituted St Petersburg soviet called on the workers and peasants to second the Moscow general strike. Summoning up their last ounce of strength, the workers of St Petersburg attempted to support their brothers and sisters in Moscow. On 8 December more than 83,000 in St Petersburg came out. The railway workers also called a general strike. However, the attempt to organise such action in Petersburg did not achieve the desired result. The exhaustion produced by many months of uninterrupted struggle was too great. The workers had come out three times in nine weeks and were now tired of strikes. Against them was arraigned the might of the state and they had lost confidence in their own strength. After the failure of the strike, support from Petersburg was limited to the sending of arms. But it was already too late.

The initial spark for the uprising appears to have been a government provocation—troops were sent to disperse a couple of workers' meetings. There were demonstrations and clashes between soldiers and militiamen. The first barricades were thrown up, and hostilities began in earnest. On 7 December the general strike began involving more than 100,000 workers, increasing to 150,000 on the following day. On 7 and 8 December there were mass meetings and street demonstrations in Moscow with isolated clashes with the police and a general strike. The Moscow soviet published a daily paper the *Moscow Izvestiya* which attempted to draw the widest layers of the population into struggle. The leadership of the movement, however, showed itself to be unprepared for a decisive combat. There was vacillation at the decisive point when the general strike could have been converted into an armed insurrection. Meanwhile the regime was already preparing a counter-stroke. On 8 December a mass meeting was broken up by the police and 37 people were arrested. Even then the soviet did not react. In such circumstances, as Marx explained, indecision is fatal. In the words of the great French revolutionary, Danton, the first rule of insurrection is audacity, audacity and yet more audacity. In place of this there were vague calls in *Izvestiya* on 9 December "to continually preserve our forces in a state of extreme tension". The soviet was waiting for the troops to go over. There was in fact wavering among the troops but decisive action was needed for this to be translated into action. The workers instinctively tried to approach the troops, but fraternisation was not enough. Mere propaganda was a poor substitute for physical struggle, as Lenin put it. At this point, "propaganda of the deed" was on the order of the day. Taking advantage of this hesitation the counter-revolution struck back on the 9 December. In the course of the clashes there were many injured, killed and arrested.

Only now did the masses realise the need for decisive action. There were not enough arms to go round, but the rebels counted on the support of the population and hoped that a sufficient number of the troops would go over to tip the balance in their favour. The workers' militias immediately set about energetically disarming not only policemen but

also soldiers to obtain weapons. The strike turned into an armed uprising, the masses participated in barricade building and clashes with police and troops. That the Bolshevik leaders were unsure of the capability of the Moscow leadership is shown by the decision of the Central Committee to send A. I. Rykov and M. F. Vladimirov to Moscow to take charge of the situation. The fact that there were mistakes made is revealed by Lenin's later comments. Answering Plekhanov's famous remarks that "They should not have taken to arms!" Lenin said: "On the contrary, we should have taken to arms more resolutely, energetically and aggressively: we should have explained to the masses that it was impossible to confine ourselves to a peaceful strike, that a fearless and relentless armed fight was indispensable."<sup>[99]</sup> Only when the fighting had actually begun did *Izvestiya* give clear instructions to the fighting squads: "Don't act in a mass, act as small units of 3 to 4 men, not more!" It also recommended against setting up barricades. "Don't occupy fortified positions! Troops will always be able to take them or simply smash them with artillery! Let our fortresses be the alleyways and courtyards and all those places from which it is easy to shoot and easy to get away from!"<sup>[100]</sup> Workers were also advised to keep away from mass meetings. "We now need to fight and only to fight."

Under the new conditions of street fighting, partisan detachments, linked to the mass movement and the general strike, clearly played a key role. The police and troops found themselves confronted with an invisible and omnipresent enemy. The great advantage was that the fighting squads, though small, enjoyed the support of the masses. On December 9 and 10 the first barricades were erected. Following the advice of the Soviet, the insurgents did not attempt to defend the barricades, but they served a useful purpose in slowing down the troops and hindering the deployment of cavalry. The soldiers were enveloped in a hostile environment where every block of flats was an enemy fortress; every doorway and street corner, a potential ambush. The soldiers and police would dismantle the barricades at night only to find them rebuilt by morning. Despite their overwhelming superiority in numbers and fire-power, the troops frequently found themselves in difficulties. More than once, the authorities must have held their breath at the sight of a city of one million inhabitants, the great majority composed of "the enemy", locked in combat with an army of partially demoralised and unreliable troops. The Moscow proletarians fought like tigers. The fighting was particularly ferocious in the Presnya district, the centre of the textile industry. The peak of the armed insurrection was on 11 December. At one point the Moscow authorities were sufficiently alarmed to appeal for reinforcements. The government, still fearing an uprising in St Petersburg, at first sent none.

Despite all this, the final outcome was never in doubt. Unless the troops came over, the workers were hopelessly outnumbered and out-gunned. The technical military side was woefully inadequate. In early December there were only 2,000 armed men and a further 4,000 militia men, but without arms. Of these, between 250 and 300 were in the Bolshevik militia, between 200 and 250 were Mensheviks, and about 150 SRs. In addition the students, telegraph workers and other non-party groups also had their own militias. There were not enough arms to go round but they counted on the support of the population, and, hopefully, also of the troops. The militias had been set up with the main aim of preventing pogroms, a concrete question involving defensive struggle, and they

were ill prepared for the task of going over to the offensive. To add to the problems, on 7 December the entire leadership was arrested. From the beginning it was clear the movement was poorly prepared and largely improvised. The fighting squads tended to concentrate on defending their own areas, instead of going onto the offensive. Despite the heroism of the Moscow workers, lack of arms, poor co-ordination and absence of military skill began to tell at last. Once the barricades had been built, the unarmed populace could only play the role of onlookers. Their passive support boosted the morale of the fighting units and enabled them to hold out for longer than anyone had the right to expect.

On 13 December the Moscow Mensheviks proposed calling a halt to the insurrection, but the Bolsheviks, under pressure from the workers, decided to continue. It is a debatable question to what extent the leaders were actually deciding events. The militias of not only the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, but also the SRs, were in no mood to give up the fight. As a result, the Bolshevik and Menshevik centres issued a joint declaration, *Support the Moscow uprising!* appealing to the working class of Russia not to allow the government to put down the insurrection. But the situation had already decisively turned against the insurrection. The failure of the movement in Petersburg enabled the tsarist government to concentrate its forces on Moscow. The arrival of the Semyonovsky regiment on December 15 tipped the scales decisively against the insurrection. The irregular fighting forces of the insurgents were in no position to take on a frontal assault by the regular army. By 16 December, only one district, Presnya, still remained in rebel hands. That day the Soviet executive committee voted to end the strike. As an act of defiance, the Presnya Social Democratic district committee voted to end the strike only on the evening of 18 December. The gesture was to no avail. In the Presnya district there were about 350 to 400 armed militia men and 700 to 800 in the reserve—without arms—at the high point of the struggle. Red Presnya was bombarded into submission.

For two days and nights the Prokhorov cotton mill and the Schmidt furniture factories, which the workers had turned into fortresses with the support of the left-wing owners, were pulverised by artillery fire. The whole area was engulfed by flames. By nightfall of 17 December, Presnya fell to the government forces. Overwhelmed by superior forces, the Moscow leadership was compelled to call off the fighting on the 18th. On the following day the general strike was also called off in order to prevent the further destruction of the cadres and to preserve all that was possible of the movement. The Moscow rising was at an end. The death toll according to the Moscow Medical Union was 1,059, of whom 137 were women and 86 children. The big majority were ordinary citizens. Casualties among fighting men on both sides were amazingly few. Only 35 soldiers were killed, including five officers. Then began the bloody chapter of mass arrests, shootings and deportations. Prisoners were shot down in cold blood. Workers' children were taken to the police stations and beaten without mercy. Anyone who had sympathised with the workers' cause was in danger. Nikolai Schmidt, the young manufacturer who had allowed the workers to use his factory as a base, suffered a tragic fate. Arrested after the uprising, he was barbarously treated by the police. They took him to the factory to show him their handiwork, pointing triumphantly to the bodies of the slaughtered workers. He was later murdered in prison.

## Defeat

*“The heroic proletariat of Moscow has shown that an active struggle is possible, and has drawn into this struggle a large body of people from strata of the urban population hitherto considered politically indifferent, if not reactionary. And yet the Moscow events were merely one of the most striking expressions of a ‘trend’ that has broken through all over Russia. The new form of action was confronted with gigantic problems which, of course, could not be solved all at once...”* (Lenin)[\[101\]](#)

Armed uprisings were not confined to Moscow. There were, in fact, a whole series of armed uprisings—in Kharkov, Donbas, Yekaterinoslav, Rostov-on-Don, the Northern Caucasus, and Nizhni-Novgorod and other centres. The national question also flared up with uprisings in Georgia and the Baltic states in particular. Even before the Moscow rising, there was a general strike and insurrection in Latvia. In Georgia, too, the December general strike gave rise to an armed uprising in the workers’ district of Tiflis (Tbilisi), led by the legendary “Kamo” (Ter-Petrosyan). This uprising was smashed by reactionary peasants. There were also uprisings in Siberia (railway workers) and in many other areas local “republics” were declared. There were serious uprisings along the railway lines in the Donetsk region where battles occurred in several stations, attracting the support of peasants in the surrounding districts. In Yekaterinoslav news of the Moscow rising brought together Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Bundists and SRs in united action for a political strike. There were strikes in mines and factories in the Donbass region organised by soviets or strike committees. In many areas there were clashes and battles with the army and police. The radicalisation of the Mensheviks is shown by the fact that they organised and led the uprising in Rostov on Don, which was smashed by Cossacks using artillery. But the Moscow rising did not succeed in arousing the proletariat of St Petersburg. This proved a fatal weakness. The absence of an uprising in the capital meant that the government could concentrate its forces on crushing the workers of Moscow, and then put down the local movements one by one. In the end, the defeat in Moscow took the heart out of the movement.

Bitterly disappointed at the failure of the Petersburg working class to come to the aid of the rising, some sections of the Social Democrats initially blamed the workers of the capital for the defeat. Such reactions in a moment of despair, are perhaps understandable. However, in later years, an entirely false interpretation of these events was unscrupulously put in circulation by the Stalinists, beginning with that notorious compendium of lies, Stalin’s *Short Course* which claimed that “the St Petersburg Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, being the Soviet of the most important industrial and revolutionary centre of Russia, the capital of the tsarist empire, ought to have played a decisive role in the revolution of 1905. However, it did not perform its task (!), owing to its bad, Menshevik leadership. As we know, Lenin had not yet arrived in St Petersburg, he was still abroad. The Mensheviks took advantage of Lenin’s absence to make their way into the St Petersburg Soviet (?) and to seize hold (?) of its leadership. It was not surprising under these circumstances that the Mensheviks Khrustalyov-Nosar, Trotsky (!), Parvus and others managed to turn the St Petersburg Soviet against the policy of an uprising.”[\[102\]](#) This is a particularly crass way of expressing a theme which has since

been repeated in a variety of keys. However, this ignorant slander was answered in advance by Lenin, who on innumerable occasions expressed his complete solidarity with the general tactical line adopted by the St Petersburg Soviet.

In her memoirs of Lenin, Krupskaya recalls the prevailing mood among the St Petersburg working class at the time: “The Central Committee,” she wrote, “called upon the proletariat of St Petersburg to support the uprising of the Moscow workers, but no co-ordinating action was achieved. A comparatively raw district like the Moskovsky responded to the appeal, but an advanced district like the Nevsky did not. I remember how furious Stanislaw Wolski was—he had been agitating in that very district. He lost heart at once and all but doubted whether the proletariat was as revolutionary as he had thought it to be. He failed to take into account that the St Petersburg workers were worn out by previous strikes, and most important of all they realised how badly organised and poorly armed they were for a decisive struggle with tsarism. And it would be a struggle to the death, they had the example of Moscow to tell them.”

Even in a revolutionary situation, different layers of the working class move at different speeds and at different times. To use a military analogy, the Achilles’ heel of the 1905 revolution consisted of the fact that the bulk of the reserves were moving into action at a time when the advanced guard was worn out and incapable of continuing the struggle. This explains the apparently contradictory fact that the more backward working class districts were prepared to come out while the more advanced sections did not respond. The same observation holds good for the peasantry, without which the revolution in the towns was doomed to failure. Only in the course of 1906 did the movement in the villages assume massive proportions. By that time, however, the backbone of the working class movement had already been broken, although this was far from clear at the time.

The December defeat was a heavy blow. In her biography of Lenin, Krupskaya recalls that: “The Moscow defeat was a very bitter experience for Ilyich. It was obvious that the workers had been badly armed, that the organisation had been weak, that even the links between Petersburg and Moscow had been poor.”<sup>[103]</sup> Yet even after the December defeat, Lenin did not believe that the revolution had exhausted itself. Throughout the year 1906, there was a whole series of strikes and movements of the proletariat, which led Lenin to believe that revolution was still on the agenda. Far from criticising the Petersburg workers for not rushing to arms in December, Lenin gave the following evaluation of the situation: “Civil war is raging. The political strike, as such, is beginning to exhaust itself, and is becoming a thing of the past, an obsolete form of the movement. In St Petersburg, for instance, the famished and exhausted workers were not able to carry out the December strike. On the other hand, the movement as a whole, though held down for the moment by the reaction, has undoubtedly risen to a much higher plane.”

The peasant movement was growing and might yet have given a fresh impetus to the towns, particularly in the spring. The regime itself was in crisis, faced with the possibility of financial collapse. The inner cohesiveness of the armed forces was still in the balance. It was essential that the workers should husband their strength as far as possible for the decisive all-Russian struggle that lay ahead. And Lenin specifically warned the

Petersburg workers against the danger of provocation: “It would be very much to the advantage of the government to suppress the still isolated actions of the proletariat. The government would like to challenge the workers of St Petersburg immediately, to go into battle under circumstances that would be most unfavourable for them. But the workers will not allow themselves to be provoked, and will know how to continue on their path of independent preparation for the next all-Russian action.”[\[104\]](#)

With the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to see that the period from the October strike to the December uprising marked the high tide of the 1905 revolution. With the defeat of the Moscow proletariat, the movement in the towns, despite the still powerful strike movement in 1906, had effectively been broken. The mighty upsurge of the peasantry came too late. The Party, which was weak and divided at the outset of the revolution, had grown impressively in the space of a few months, but the task of uniting and leading a movement of millions proved to be beyond the capabilities of a few thousand cadres, despite heroic endeavours and sacrifice. The incredible thing was not that the Russian Marxists had failed to lead the proletariat to victory in 1905, but the way in which a tiny handful of revolutionaries, with scarcely two decades of work behind them, had grown from insignificant propaganda circles to a powerful party, with tens of thousands of activists leading hundreds of thousands of workers, in the space of just a few months.

Although it was defeated, the revolution had not been in vain. In the same way, in science, even an unsuccessful experiment is not necessarily wasted. There are some similarities with the history of revolutions—though the human cost is, of course, incomparably greater. Without the experience of the Paris Commune and without the experience of 1905, the successful revolution of 1917 would have been impossible, as Lenin pointed out many years later: “All classes came out into the open. All programmatic and tactical views were tested by the action of the masses. In its extent and acuteness, the strike struggle had no parallel anywhere in the world. The economic strike developed into a political strike, and the latter into insurrection. The relations between the proletariat, as the leader, and the vacillating and unstable peasantry, as the led, were tested in practice. The Soviet form of organisation came into being in the spontaneous development of the struggle. The controversies of that period over the significance of the Soviets anticipated the great struggle of 1917-20. The alternation of parliamentary and non-parliamentary forms of struggle, of the tactics of boycotting parliament and that of participating in parliament, of legal and illegal forms of struggle, and likewise their interrelations and connections—all this was marked by an extraordinary wealth of content. As for teaching the fundamentals of political science to masses and leaders, to classes and parties alike, each month of this period was equivalent to an entire year of ‘peaceful’ and ‘constitutional’ development. *Without the ‘dress rehearsal’ of 1905, the victory of the October revolution in 1917 would have been impossible.*”[\[105\]](#)

The 1905 revolution also had profound international effects. Overnight the idea of the general strike became a central issue in the discussions of the international workers’ movement. The revolution acted as an inspiration and a stimulus to the workers of the rest of Europe. In Germany there was a strike wave in 1905—508,000 workers were on strike—approximately four times more than in 1904. April 1906 saw the first political

general strike in German history. Nor were the effects of the Russian revolution confined to Europe. It had an effect on the developing revolutionary movements of the colonial peoples. In December 1905 Persia experienced its bourgeois revolution, which reached its peak in 1911. China in 1905 was also in the throes of a mass revolutionary movement associated with the bourgeois democrat Sun Yat Sen. This in turn prepared the Chinese bourgeois revolution of 1911-13. Turkey also saw the rise of a revolutionary movement. Like a heavy rock thrown into a still pond, the Russian revolution made big waves capable of reaching very distant shores.

1905 was a decisive turning-point. For the first time, revolutionary Social Democracy became a decisive force within the working class of the whole of Russia. Within a space of nine months, the movement underwent a complete transformation. The consciousness of the workers advanced by leaps and bounds on the basis of great events, which shook the foundations of all the old beliefs, habits and traditions, compelling the working class to come to terms with the realities of its own existence. By a process of successive approximations, the working people tested one political option after another, from worker-priests and humble petitions, passing through economic strikes for better wages and conditions, constitutional reforms and imperial manifestos, bloody pogroms, street demonstrations and workers' self defence squads, to the highest expression of the class struggle—the political general strike and armed insurrection. At each stage, the breaking free of the masses from their old illusions was marked by the rise and fall of political trends and accidental figures of all kinds. The Gapon and the Khrustalyov-Nosars for a brief instant loomed large upon the stage of history before vanishing forever leaving no trace behind them. But the genuine revolutionary tendency represented by Bolshevism, despite all mistakes and inevitable ups and downs, advanced resolutely to its natural place at the head of the revolutionary proletariat. The theoretical, political and organisational weapons which enabled the Bolshevik Party to lead the workers to victory in October 1917 were forged in the white heat of the revolution of 1905, and tempered in the long dark night of reaction which followed.

## NOTES

[97] Krupskaya, *O Vladimirye Ilyiche*, vol. 1, p. 132.

[98] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, pp.136, 141-2 and 137.

[99] Lenin, *Selected Works*, English edition, Moscow 1947, vol. 1. p. 446.

[100] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 142.

[101] LCW, *The Workers' Party and its Tasks in the Present Situation*, vol. 10, p. 94.

[102] Stalin, *History of the CPSU (B)*, p. 128.

[103] Krupskaya, *O Vladimirye Ilyiche*, vol. 1, pp. 142 and 159.

[104] LCW, *The Workers' Party and its Tasks in the Present Situation*, vol. 10, pp. 93 and 94.

[105] LCW, '*Left-wing' Communism-An Infantile disorder*, vol. 31, p. 27 (my emphasis).

## Part Three: The Period of Reaction

[section 1 of 6]

### 'Woe to the Vanquished'

The ancient Romans had a chilling way of describing the fate of conquered peoples: "Vae victis!"—"Woe to the vanquished!" The fate of the working people in every defeated revolution in history completely confirms this grim observation. The Russian revolution of 1905 was no exception. The regime sensed that the immediate danger was past and stepped up repression. The democratic promises of October were rapidly consigned to the rubbish-bin. A bloody regime of terror was everywhere unleashed—in the Baltic states, Poland, the Caucasus. Punitive expeditions spread terror through the villages, killing, raping and burning houses. "Liberally plied with vodka," writes Orlando Figes, "the Cossacks committed terrible atrocities against the peasant population. Women and girls were raped in front of their menfolk. Hundreds of peasants were hanged from the trees without any pretence of a trial. In all it has been estimated that the tsarist regime executed 15,000 people, shot or wounded at least 20,000 and deported or exiled 45,000, between mid-October and the opening of the first State Duma in April 1906."[\[1\]](#)

For months on end, the orgy of reaction raged on unabated. By April 1906, apart from the 15,000 who had been shot or hanged, a further 75,000 were languishing in tsarist prisons. Special trains manned by tsarist execution squads advanced slowly along the Moscow-Kazan railway line into the frozen depths of Siberia, extracting a frightful revenge on the workers. The Bolsheviks suffered proportionately more than other trends from this repression, as they had the greater number of militant revolutionary workers. Their organisation among the Siberian railway workers was virtually wiped out. Among those murdered was A.I. Popov, central committee member and leader of the revolutionary movement in Siberia. The following lines, written to his mother from the death cell, movingly convey the spirit of these fighters: "I leave this world of darkness and repression with complete peace of mind, giving way to other, younger forces. If we have achieved little, they will finish off what we started. I die fully convinced that our bodies will provide a firm foundation upon which will arise a better future for my long-suffering native land."[\[2\]](#)

Under the hammer-blows of reaction, the Social Democratic organisations were gradually being pulverised. Many activists were arrested or killed. Others had to go underground, change town or flee abroad. In order to hasten the strangling of the revolution, the government utilised the services of special auxiliaries recruited from the ranks of the

lumpenproletariat, that “passively rotting scum” as Marx called them, which on more than one occasion has furnished material for the purposes of counter-revolution. The Black Hundred gangs spread terror in the villages, usually in the form of anti-Semitic pogroms.

Kerensky, who at that time was practising as a lawyer and occasionally acted for the defence of accused revolutionaries, recalls that: “Reprisals in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution went on from late 1906 to the early part of 1909. After peasant and other uprisings had been crushed by punitive expeditions, it was a question of hunting out the remnants of revolutionary organisations—gangs, as they were called. The victims were handed over to military tribunals. It was a campaign of systematic judicial terror.” Many political cases were judged by district military tribunals. The chief military prosecutor at that time, General Pavlov, was a merciless man who expected the judges to fulfil their “duty” without paying any attention to the arguments of the defence. Pavlov did not last long. Expecting attempts on his life, he took every precaution. He never left the Main Military Court building, where he had an apartment with a garden surrounded by a tall fence. That did not save him. He fell victim to a terrorist’s bullet in his own garden. But individual terrorism is impotent against the state. One reactionary official is replaced by another. The repression is further intensified.

A particularly savage revenge was inflicted on the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia, where the rising of the workers and peasants against the German landlords had a ferocious character. Starting in December, in the course of a six month campaign, punitive expeditions killed 1,200 people, destroyed tens of thousands of homes, and flogged thousands of workers and peasants. At the end of 1906 and the beginning of 1907 the so-called Tukum Republic trial was held in Riga. Fifteen dragoons had been killed during an uprising in Tukum in 1905. Kerensky, who was one of the defence counsels, recalls what happened. A certain General Koshelev, one of the special military judges in the Baltic provinces, presided over the trial. He was a sadist who had a habit of studying pornographic photographs in court during the hearing of cases in which the accused could be sentenced to death. At the trial it soon became obvious that Koshelev was not interested in trying to establish the truth, but only in selecting 15 of the defendants to be killed as a retaliation for the dead dragoons. All 15 were hanged. The tsar was delighted at the results of his Baltic expedition and commended his officers for “acting splendidly”.[\[3\]](#)

Despite everything, it took fully 18 months to liquidate the revolutionary movement. It proved extremely difficult to extinguish the flame of revolt. No sooner had order been restored in one area, than the movement flared up elsewhere. New layers were constantly entering into struggle while others were abandoning the arena, exhausted and defeated. The general picture that was emerging was still unclear, and remained so throughout the course of 1906. At the start of 1906, the strike movement, though less than the last quarter of 1905, was still considerable. January-March saw 260,000 workers on strike. Significantly, two-thirds of these conflicts were political strikes. In the spring of 1906, there were symptoms of a new revolutionary upturn. The second quarter saw a further upswing of the strike movement—479,000 workers out—more than even the summer of

1905. Again, there were both economic and political strikes. And not all of them ended in defeat. Out of 222,000 involved in economic strikes, 86,000 ended in victory, 58,000 ended in compromise, and only 78,000 were defeated. As late as the summer of 1906, it appeared that the strike wave, far from slackening, was gaining in intensity. In 1906 as a whole there were more than one million workers involved in strike action.

Did the December defeat in Moscow signify the decisive turning-point in the destiny of the revolution? Was the general line of the movement ascending or descending? With the wisdom of hindsight, the answer seems obvious, but this was by no means the case at the time. The movement of the masses was far from uniform. The villages lagged behind the towns, and only began to move on a big scale in the course of 1906. The bloody repression in the villages did not prevent the emergence of new peasant movements—Saratov, Chernigorsk, Kharkov, Mogilev, one after the other entered the fray. One factor was precisely the return of sacked workers to the villages. The proletarianised ex-peasant, educated in the hard school of factory life and steeled by the experience of strikes and insurrection, served as a spur to the movement in the villages, providing the necessary leaven to his rural brothers and sisters. With the wisdom of hindsight (the cheapest of all forms of wisdom), these were only the after-echo of a movement which had already passed its peak. But this was by no means evident to those who were actively participating in the struggle at the time. Above all the most consistently revolutionary wing of the movement represented by the Bolsheviks were in no hurry to sign the death certificate of the revolution.

The working class also had other reserves. The national question, as foreseen by Lenin, rapidly came to the fore and acquired an extreme intensity. The burning sense of national injustice that had long smouldered beneath the surface, burst into flame in Poland, Finland, the Caucasus and the Baltic states. All this led Lenin to believe that the revolution had not yet exhausted its potential. To determine the precise nature of the situation, its inner dynamics and perspective, was of decisive importance for determining the correct tactics and slogans needed to preserve and strengthen the links between the masses and the proletarian vanguard. But this task, never straightforward, is rendered a thousand times more difficult in the heat of a revolution, when the moods of the masses can change with lightning speed. It was precisely this question—“through what stage are we passing?”—which provoked the sharpest conflicts in the ranks of the revolutionaries in this period. Among the working class there were contradictory moods. Could the revolutionary wave in the countryside ignite again the movement in the towns? To this question no clear answer could be given. Lenin certainly regarded it as a possibility and worked out his tactics accordingly.

### **The Struggle Against Unemployment**

Throughout 1906, the working class found itself in an increasingly difficult position, faced not only with physical repression but also with economic terrorism. Having recovered their nerve, the employers went on to the offensive, extracting revenge for the fright they had suffered. Lockouts and sackings were on the order of the day as the bosses took back the gains of the previous period. In the prevailing conditions, it was necessary

to look for any opening, no matter how limited, and to exploit each and every legal loophole. The Party had to pay serious attention to any legal organisations which would provide a platform for agitation and propaganda: workers' insurance, educational and cultural societies, and so on. An absolutely crucial question was work in the trade unions. Driven on to the defensive, the workers rallied to the legal trade unions. There was a big increase in union membership. By early 1907, there were more than 600 trade unions in Russia, with 245,000 members. On the other hand, the spread of unemployment as a result of the economic crisis placed on the order of the day the question of work among the unemployed.

The employers resorted to savage reprisals in order to destroy the gains won by the workers in the revolution. In the mass dismissals that affected all sectors in 1907 to 1909, 36 per cent of employees in the engineering industry had been sacked by January 1908. St Petersburg Metals closed its shell shop; the Neva shipyards sacked 300 workers in 1908 and a further 700 in 1909. The heaviest blows fell upon the more advanced skilled sections of the class, mainly those under Social Democratic influence. This key group had already been singled out for the employers' attention during the October 1905 lockout, and it continued until April 1906. The lockout, which was organised by the St Petersburg employers in cahoots with the tsarist authorities, was aimed at teaching the workers of St Petersburg, and particularly their natural leaders, a harsh lesson.

Under the conditions of mass sackings, which followed the December defeat, the struggle against unemployment assumed a great importance. The Social Democrats succeeded in organising a successful movement against unemployment, particularly in St Petersburg but also to some extent in other industrial centres, such as Moscow and Odessa. Whereas most of the other centres were suppressed by the end of 1906, the movement in St Petersburg was only finally broken up by the secret police and gendarmes in 1908. In Petersburg an "unemployed workers council" (*Soviet bezrabortnykh*) was formed by the local Social Democrats, but from the beginning it was always linked to the employed workers. The workers in the big factories sent delegates to this Soviet. Other unemployed workers' councils were formed in Tiflis, Moscow, Tver, Kostroma, Kharkov, Baku, Taganrog. But the one that set the pace for the others was the St Petersburg Unemployed Council.

The work of the Petersburg Unemployed Council was documented in *The Unemployed Councils in St Petersburg 1906*, a pamphlet written by the Bolshevik worker Sergei Malishev, who played an active role in the movement of the unemployed and was elected chairman of the Kostroma Soviet of Workers' Deputies in 1905. The origins of this are to be found in the stormy events of 1905 when the employers used the weapon of the lock-out to combat the strike movement. Realising that the only way to fight for the cause of the unemployed was by closely linking them with the workers in the factories a commission of unemployed was organised by the St Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies with open departments in all the working class districts of St Petersburg. Later the commission adopted the resolution of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies to deduct 1 per cent from the wages of all the workers at the factories, mills and other institutions for the unemployed. They also organised a voluntary collection at all meetings and gatherings.

Thus, the struggle of the unemployed was closely linked to the struggle of the brothers and sisters who remained at work. This position, which constitutes the cornerstone of Marxist tactics in the struggle against unemployment, was suggested by Lenin: it is interesting to note Lenin's attitude towards the unemployed campaign. When he heard about the initiative taken on this question Lenin initially had some doubts as to whether the Unemployed Council alone could fulfil its programme by its own efforts:

“‘Through this organisation alone,’ said Lenin, ‘you cannot influence the bourgeoisie; you will not be strong enough, and the unemployed workers themselves may not be able to develop this work on a broad proletarian class basis. Therefore, you must immediately extend the Unemployed Council to include representatives of those employed in all the factories and mills of St Petersburg. You must now begin to agitate in the factories and mills for this purpose, and immediately arrange for the election of these representatives. The Unemployed Council must consist not only of 30 representatives of the unemployed, but of 100 or 150 representatives from all districts, from all the factories and mills. This will provide the unemployed with a genuine proletarian leading body which will really be able to exert pressure successfully on the City Duma and on the bourgeoisie generally.’” Lenin's proposal to link the unemployed struggle to the workers who remained at work was accepted by the Council and formed the basis of its tactics.

The St Petersburg Unemployed Council took charge of the movement of the unemployed, beginning with a register of all the locked out workers. In the words of Malishev: “This registration revealed an interesting fact—that 54 per cent of the workers who have been locked out were highly skilled workers, metal workers; 18 per cent were joiners, carpenters, stonemasons and other skilled occupations; and that only 21 per cent were common labourers. Those figures showed that the capitalists vented their wrath on those who fought in the front ranks of the working class.”<sup>[4]</sup> The fact that the most skilled sections were singled out for attack is well-documented. A survey by the Union of Metalworkers reveals that in 1908 the employers used the excuse of the economic crisis to get rid of the most skilled, highly paid, longest-serving metalworkers, who were regarded with much justice as the most militant section. Basing himself on this and other material, Robert McKean concludes:

“They threw onto the streets the old, the sick and ‘the disturbers of internal order’ as well. During 1908 lay-offs and filtering of operatives spread to printing and textiles. Reductions in rates of pay of 30 per cent or higher assumed wide dimensions throughout heavy and light industry in the years 1907 to 1911. In the pressure-gauge shop of the Langenzippen metalworking and casting plant wages were cut by half; in the boiler shop of the Baltic shipyards by 40 per cent. Workers' factory commissions or committees were disbanded (as at Neva shipyards); shop delegates arrested or sacked (the Pipe works); meetings banned (St Petersburg Metals). Fines and searches, which were thoroughly detested by workers, were swiftly reintroduced at many plants as early as 1907 and 1908—among others at the Franco-Russian Society, Odner, Neva Shipyards, Pipeworks, Obukhov, San Galli and St Petersburg Metal. Less frequent was a direct and immediate assault on the 8 or 9 hour day, operatives' most prized conquest of the revolution.”<sup>[5]</sup>

During the course of 1906, the position of the unemployed became increasingly desperate. The outlook of the unemployed workers of St Petersburg was graphically conveyed by Malishev: "Strolling along the Nevsky, we watched the well fed, contented bourgeoisie. Some—of higher rank—rode in magnificent carriages, with coats of arms and with one or two splendid horses; others, a lower estate—a bourgeois crowd—moved on foot along the Nevsky, filling the centre of the city, along Sadovaya, along the Gostin Road. They went into the stores, filled with goods, came out with armfuls of purchases, and youngsters, laden with these purchases, dragged after them to their homes. All that there was in these stores, stands, and warehouses, produced by the proletariat, was quite accessible to the bourgeoisie. We also went several blocks up along the Nevsky but we could only look into the Soloviev store. We could not go in and buy even a quarter of a pound of sausage because the merchant Soloviev's well-fed salesmen would not want to sell such small portions, and, further, the price of sausage did not fit the size of our pocket. To relieve our feelings we swore roundly, linked arms and turned away from this smug Nevsky. We went along narrow alleys and finally, at Bassein Street, found a cheap restaurant where the two of us filled up on some kind of tripe for two kopecks."

The main problem of course was that most of the sacked workers had been blacklisted. Individuals and entire groups of "undesirables" were turned out of the factories and mills. All that the unemployed had in the way of clothes and other valuables were sold or pawned. The position of the unemployed and their families was desperate. The collections raised by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies raised some money, but the sums were so small that they changed nothing fundamental. Dining rooms were opened by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies and by some liberal groups in some workers' districts to provide some tens of thousands of dinners. However, after the October Manifesto the well-heeled liberals began to turn their backs on this and other working class activities. The workers were left to their own devices. To combat the problem of unemployment the Bolshevik group began to organise a campaign in favour of a programme of useful public works and unemployment benefit.

The approach of the Bolsheviks was expressed by a speaker at one congress, quoted by Malishev: "'The Bolshevik group, in whose name I speak now,' said the comrade, 'supports the unemployed movement and helps us organise ourselves into a strong organisation. It is essential to organise all the unemployed and set up a leading body—an Unemployed Council. This council, with the help of the unemployed, must start a struggle for bettering the condition of the unemployed, not only through the distribution of dinners and 30 kopecks a day, but chiefly by getting the City Duma to organise large scale public work for the unemployed. The unemployed are not paupers, they do not want charity. They demand bread and work. The question must be so presented that our demands to the City Duma win the support of all the workers in the factories and mills. The City must organise public work. There is quite enough work of that kind to be had in the city and it is now being given to various contractors who give the city administrators large bribes. The most highly skilled workers of all trades are to be found among the unemployed. They can do all types of work. The City has a number of contracts essential for public welfare; for instance, construction of tramways. The City has decided to replace horse power by electric cars, and it will not be able to do this unless the streets

are paved. That opens up the possibility of providing public work for the unemployed. We must take steps to see that the City provides this public work, therefore I move that all the proposals which I have suggested be taken up by the meeting, adopted, and immediately carried out, because hunger and poverty will not wait'.”[\[6\]](#)

In order to organise the unemployed campaign it was decided to organise an Unemployed Council by holding elections at the dining rooms where the unemployed were getting their dinners and a group of worker Bolsheviks were assigned to carry out the agitation for it and get the elections carried through. The Council drew up an appeal to the City Duma. It was decided to include 30 delegates from the large factories and mills in the Unemployed Council and elections were held among the employed in all the factories, mills and workshops. Delegates were elected by the unemployed at general meetings on the basis of one for every 250 workers, and from factories and mill districts. These made up the District Councils. The latter managed the dining rooms, collected money in the factories and mills, registered the unemployed, gave material help and generally conducted the campaign on unemployment, on the basis of the slogan “For bread and work!” A petition to the St Petersburg City Council was drafted by the Unemployed Council and worded in the most forceful language. The petition was then discussed by the Unemployed Council, voted on and sent to all the factories and mills of St Petersburg and its vicinities to be discussed by the workers who were then asked to sign it.

The text of the petition read as follows: “Owing to unemployment, numberless workers’ families are now without bread. The workers do not want charities, or dole. We demand work. The masters refuse to give us work. They say they have no contracts. But the City has contracts and can provide work for the unemployed. We think that the way the City disposes of the public funds is scandalous. Public funds should be used for public needs and our need today is—work. Therefore, we demand that the City Duma immediately organise public work for all the needy. We demand not charity, but our rights and we will not be satisfied with charity. The public work that we demand must be started immediately. All the unemployed of St Petersburg must be allowed to do this work; every unemployed worker must receive an adequate wage. We have been delegated to insist on the fulfilment of our demands. The masses who have sent this will not be content with less. If you do not accede to our demands we will report your refusal to the unemployed and then you will not have us to deal with, but those who sent us, the masses of unemployed.”[\[7\]](#)

Speakers were despatched to all the main factories to defend the petition, speaking at lunch hour breaks, during the change of shifts and also holding factory gate meetings on the question of unemployment. Despite the fact that, after the mass sackings, only the less class conscious workers remained at work, the petition received widespread support and sympathy. The whole thrust of the anti-unemployment struggle was designed to link the unemployed workers to their brothers and sisters who remained in work and who alone had the power to help them to solve their problem. In addition to this, the Council attempted to enlist the support of sympathetic sections of the middle class.

## **Revolutionary Tactics**

Whereas the Bolsheviks approached the unemployed struggle from a revolutionary and class point of view, the Mensheviks, typically, attempted to water down the demands of the unemployed movement in order not to alienate their liberal friends. They demanded the deletion of the rather threatening final paragraph of the petition, and also demanded that the unemployed delegation be restrained from entering into the City Duma. They also strongly opposed the election of representatives from the factories and mills to the Unemployed Council. However, divisions opened up in the ranks of the Mensheviks leading to a split which gave the supporters of the petition a majority. On April 12, 1906 the unemployed workers' delegation made up of 30 people (15 from the unemployed and 15 from the factories) presented themselves at the St Petersburg City Duma. At this stage, the revolutionary wave had still not sufficiently subsided to give the Duma the necessary self-confidence to refuse to meet the delegation. Fearing the reaction of the masses, the City Duma decided to admit the delegation and acceded to its demands as far as possible. However, this decision was not known to the delegation as it entered the Council chamber. Realising the worst fears of the Mensheviks, the unemployed representatives in the Council chamber did not mince words: "We ask nothing of you; we demand!" said one of the speakers. 'We think that all the money at your disposal rightfully belongs to us. If you do not give work to the unemployed nothing remains for us but to rob you,' said another speaker. 'You have not seen the unemployed,' cried one of the representatives of the delegation, a young worker. 'I live with them, I can tell you how they live, I can tell you what they, who sent me here, said: 'Go, talk to the town councillors and the City Duma, and if they will not listen to you, we ourselves will go and grab them by the throat'."[\[8\]](#)

Frightened at the prospect of disorder, the town councillors were compelled to listen in silence to such incendiary speeches as this. When their "guests" had finished they suggested that the delegates leave the hall. But the latter declared that they would not leave until they had received an answer to their demands. Then the town councillors announced an intermission, cleared out the general public and then resumed the session with the unemployed delegation present. Finally, under the direct pressure of mass action the gentlemen of the City Duma decided to retreat and conceded all the main demands of the unemployed. A large number of the unemployed had been thrown on the streets and found shelter in lodging homes, but their children had been sent away to stay with comrades who remained at work. Families were thus broken up. It was decided that some action would have to be taken to help the unemployed to pay their rent. The question of helping the unemployed to redeem their belongings from the pawn shops, particularly sewing machines and underwear, was also discussed by the Duma and decided in the affirmative.

The generosity of the City Duma was not entirely disinterested. Even at this moment a new strike movement was developing in St Petersburg. The strikes were mainly of a political, rather than economic character. The solidarity of the workers with the unemployed bore important fruit, the latter participated actively in the struggle of the striking workers. In return for the solidarity shown by the workers in the previous months the unemployed, together with the strikers in the Vyborg district, organised financial assistance for the strikers. However, with the ebb of the strike movement, the Black

Hundreds and the liberals recovered their nerve and systematically set about sabotaging the reforms which they had previously granted. The programme of public works was obstructed as far as possible and the funds were gradually cut off. The Unemployed Council thereupon presented a new list of demands to the City Duma:

1) The eight-hour day. 2) Prohibition of overtime. 3) The establishment of a daily wage. 4) The observance of all necessary sanitary and hygienic conditions at work. 5) Employment to be given to the registered unemployed at the indication of the Unemployed Council. 6) The right to control all the internal affairs in the workshops by workers' representatives.

Agitation around these demands was carried out by the Bolsheviks through their paper *Volna* (The Wave) which systematically set out to expose the conduct of the Cadets and liberals. However, the Duma refused to make any new grants. There were rumours that the Ministry of the Interior had sent instructions to the City Duma not to make many concessions to the unemployed. The impatience and anger of the unemployed grew. On June 10, 1906 the Unemployed Council drew up a leaflet which denounced this state of affairs:

“The Unemployed Council does not hide from the masses the Duma is only procrastinating, playing with the unemployed and has no intention whatever of keeping its promises. But the Council has not broken its contract with the Duma because to do that would mean to play into the hands of those who want to provoke the workers into premature action. This is exactly what the enemies of the working class, thirsting for proletarian blood, are waiting for.

“At present, the provocation of the unemployed has increased to the highest degree. The Minister for the Interior has given special orders to the Duma and to the town councillors not to make concessions to the unemployed. His aim is quite clear—to provoke the unemployed to premature action at a time when their employed comrades are not ready to help them, and the Duma, of course, does readily what the Ministry wants it to do. However, we shall not allow ourselves to be provoked by the Duma.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The aim of this resolution was to combat the influence of ultra-left elements (anarchists and Social Revolutionaries) who were taking advantage of the frustration felt by the unemployed in order to advocate provocative actions with potentially disastrous results. By once more putting pressure on the Duma through mass action, the Council succeeded in gaining further concessions. The public work achieved helped to hold the class together and prevent further disintegration at a time when reaction reached its blackest point. At the same time the correct tactics pursued by the Bolsheviks developed the revolutionary consciousness of the class. However, of necessity, such victories were short lived. In the second half of 1907, reaction gained the upper hand. The majority of the Bolsheviks were arrested. Others were forced to flee abroad. The majority of the organisers and leaders of the Unemployed Council were also arrested or were forced to go underground. From his prison cell in the first half of 1908 Sergei Malishev learned that the tsarist government had finally put an end to the public works schemes in St

Petersburg. When the government proceeded to close the public workshops on Kagarinsky Wharf, before the gendarmes set about their work, they called out a battery of light artillery, in case of any emergency.

## **Reunification**

Despite the remorseless advance of reaction, the RSDLP still maintained its structures and its basic cadres intact throughout 1906 and even maintained an open organisation. In his memoirs, Osip Piatnitsky describes the Moscow organisation where he worked in 1906, from which it is clear that the elective principle was still in place at that time: “Some of the districts were divided into sub-districts. The districts and sub-districts were connected with the factory meetings (now cells) and with the factory committees and commissions (now cell bureaux). The representatives of the district factory committees heard the reports of the district and Moscow Committees, elected a district committee and sent representatives to the city conferences at which the Moscow Committee was elected from 1906 to nearly the end of 1907.”[\[10\]](#)

Under the prevailing conditions the importance of work in legal and semi-legal organisations of all kinds is self-evident. The party participated in all manner of work, not just the trade unions, but co-ops, workers’ insurance societies and also cultural activities which served to maintain its links with the masses. Both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks made great use of clubs, which acted as fronts for the work of the revolutionaries. “The most important centres of party work were our clubs,” recalls Eva Broido. “In them we concentrated all our propaganda activities: our propaganda was distributed from them, and then the workers came to hear lectures on current affairs. There, too, our members in the Duma came to report to us on their work. Virtually all the organisational work was centred on these clubs—general and special party meetings were held there, party publications were distributed from there, these were the ‘addresses’ of the local district and sub-district branches, there all local news was collected, from there speakers were sent to factory meetings. And these were also the places where enlightened workers—men and women—could meet for friendly exchange of ideas and to read books and newspapers. All clubs aimed above all at having good libraries. And eventually they also encouraged art, there were music and song groups and the like.”

The revolution aroused in the minds of the workers a thirst for ideas of all sorts, not just political in the narrow sense, but science, literature, art and culture in general. Broido explains: “At first clubs were exclusively political, but soon their character changed. Propaganda meetings gave place to lectures and discussions of a more general nature, the clubs became ‘colleges’ of Marxism. Representatives of all club committees combined to work out systematic courses of lectures, to provide and distribute the necessary books and to supply book catalogues. Soon, groups of workers asked for courses on scientific subjects. And already in the winter of 1906-07 the programmes included physics, mathematics and technology alongside economics, historical materialism and the history of socialism and the labour movement. “In addition to the clubs there were many ‘evening schools’; they grew in number as the clubs attracted the attention of the police and were often closed down. These evening schools included some courses for the

illiterate and were often attended by working-class men and women who were already playing influential roles in the movement.”<sup>[11]</sup> The clubs carried on a precarious, semi-legal existence right up to the outbreak of the First World War.

The revolution pushed the workers of both factions of the RSDLP together. Throughout the latter half of 1905 there had been a continuous and spontaneous process of unity from below. Without waiting for a lead from the top, Bolshevik and Menshevik Party organisations simply merged. This fact partly expressed the workers’ natural instinct for unity, but also the fact, as we have already seen, that the Menshevik leaders had been pushed to the left by pressure from their own rank-and-file. By December 1905 the two leaderships had effectively re-united. There was now one united Central Committee. A unification Congress was announced and the first issue of a joint organ published, called *Partiniye Izvestiya* (Party News). On the editorial board there were three Bolsheviks (Lenin, Lunacharsky and B.A. Bazarov), and three Mensheviks (Dan, Martov and Martynov). But the December events had knocked the fighting spirit out of the Menshevik leaders who were already moving back to the right, placing a large question mark over prospects for unity.

Lenin was in favour of organisational unity, but did not for a moment abandon the ideological struggle, maintaining a firm position on all the basic questions of tactics and perspectives. This was entirely characteristic of Lenin’s whole approach—extreme flexibility on all organisational and tactical questions combined with an absolutely implacable attitude on all questions of principle and theory. However, we must be careful not to read into the history of Bolshevism intentions and ideas derived from our knowledge of subsequent events. For many years, the official Soviet histories presented the the role of Lenin as that of an all-seeing, all-knowing Leader who foresaw everything in advance and guided the party with a sure hand towards the goal of ultimate victory. From this kind of hagiography, no understanding of the real Lenin can be gained. The whole history of Bolshevism remains shrouded in mystery, like a fairy story or a religious myth. It was neither. In fact, far from having an absolutely clear idea of where he was going at this time, Lenin was still very unsure as to how things were going to turn out. Of course, he was very clear on the need to stand firm on the basic ideas and revolutionary principles of Marxism, and also on the need to maintain the Bolsheviks as the consistently revolutionary wing of the RSDLP. But his support for re-unification was neither a sham nor a manoeuvre. On the basis of the revolution, the Mensheviks had moved far to the left, and it was not at all clear how this would end up. Lenin was not yet clear in his own mind that it would be necessary to make a complete break, and did not finally come to this conclusion until 1912. It is entirely false to present the picture in any other way.

In fact, while the Party was formally united, from the outset it was divided into two opposing tendencies—the revolutionary and the opportunist wings. Reformism or revolution, class collaboration or an independent proletarian policy: these were the basic questions which separated Bolshevism from Menshevism. The basic differences immediately emerged over the attitude to the Duma and to the bourgeois parties. The Mensheviks stood for capitulation to the liberal bourgeoisie which in practice had gone

over to constitutional Monarchism and surrendered to the autocracy. For two months a heated discussion raged over different resolutions. The main working class centres supported the Bolshevik platform. But this was a very different Party to that of the past. Even the debates of the Third Congress one year earlier now seemed like ancient history. It was as if a whole epoch had been compressed into 12 months. There could be no question of maintaining the old narrow circle structures and mentality. The committee-men were increasingly elbowed aside by fresh workers and youth. The revolution had mobilised millions around the banner of Social Democracy. It was impossible and undesirable to maintain the old set-up where delegates had been elected from narrow groups of professional revolutionaries (the “committees”). Now the Party had to be organised on a much wider basis, and on strictly democratic principles. The size of the Party is revealed by the ratio of members to delegates at the Fourth Party Congress—one to every 300 members.

The Fourth “Unity” Congress was held from 10 to 25 April 1906 in Stockholm, whence they had been invited by the Swedish Social Democrats. The general conditions of reaction undoubtedly gave rise to a distortion in the representation of the rival factions. Some Bolshevik branches were unable to send delegates through financial difficulties. Repression created other difficulties. As a general rule, the areas dominated by the Mensheviks, that is, small-scale industry and small towns, were less hard hit by reaction, which had a disproportionate effect on the Bolsheviks. Arrests, imprisonment and general disruption of party branches meant that the Bolsheviks were underrepresented at the Fourth Congress, which was dominated by the Mensheviks. There were a total of 112 delegates with full voting rights and 22 consultative, representing 62 organisations. Also present were the representatives of national Social Democratic organisations (Poland and Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Ukraine and the Bund and also the Bulgarian SDRP). The Bolsheviks had 46, the Mensheviks 62. In addition there was a small number of conciliators. Trotsky was in prison. Among the Bolshevik delegation—Lenin, Krassin, Gusev, Lunacharsky, Shaumyan, Bubnov, Krupskaya, Lyadov, A.I. Rykov, A.P. Smirnov, Frunze, Dzerzhinsky, and an obscure young Georgian with the alias Koba, later known to history by the name of Stalin.

The main issues debated at the Stockholm congress were the agrarian programme, the current situation and the tasks of the proletariat, attitude to the Duma, armed uprising, the partisan movement, the trade unions, the nature of the Social Democratic organisations, and the Party rules. The Mensheviks lost no time in seizing the advantage afforded by their majority. In a report of the congress written in May 1906, Lenin recalls that: “The elections at the Congress took only a few minutes. Virtually, everything had been arranged before the general sessions. The Mensheviks took all five seats on the editorial board of the Central Organ. As for the Central Committee, we agreed to elect three persons to it, the other seven being Mensheviks. What the position of these three will be, as a kind of supervisors and guardians of the rights of the opposition, is something that only the future can tell.”[\[12\]](#)

### **The Debate on the Land Question**

Central to the whole discussion was the agrarian question—an issue upon which the whole fate of the Russian revolution hinged. The experience of the revolution showed the inadequacy of the old agrarian programme based on the *otrezki* (the cut-off lands). Lenin was in favour of adopting a much more radical agrarian programme based on the slogan of confiscation of land from the feudal landowners. This slogan was absolutely central to Lenin's perspectives for the Russian revolution. It was the slogan of a "people's revolution"—a thoroughgoing revolutionary transformation, led by the working class in alliance with the poor peasants. The basic task would be a radical solution of the landlords' estates land problem by means of a complete agrarian revolution leading to confiscation to be carried out by peasant committees to smash the power of the landlords and, depending on circumstances—i.e. triumph of the armed uprising—a democratic republic and the nationalisation of the land.

Lenin advocated a revolution to clear out all the accumulated rubbish of feudalism. It was based on the perspective of a revolutionary struggle against the autocracy and armed insurrection, not class collaboration with liberals and parliamentary cretinism. The Mensheviks opposed calling on peasants to seize the land in favour of pettifogging reformism of the worst kind. In place of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, they favoured parliamentary manoeuvres and deals with the liberals behind the backs of the masses. Their policy on the land question flowed from their general reformist line. In contrast, Lenin pointed out that the land question would be solved by revolutionary means or not at all. In opposition to the reformist demand for the municipalisation of land (presumably under the rule of the autocracy!), he put forward the demand for the nationalisation of the land. However, Lenin was careful to point out—contrary to the prejudice of the Narodniks who mistakenly saw in this the overthrow of capitalism—that land nationalisation is a *bourgeois* demand, which does not in itself signify the abolition of bourgeois property, but only of landlord-feudal property. As to the class forces of the revolution, Lenin spelled this out a thousand times: the bourgeois liberals were a counter-revolutionary force. The bourgeois-democratic revolution could only be carried out by an alliance of workers and poor peasants (semi-proletarian masses of town and countryside). Actually, the nationalisation of the land in the context of the bourgeois-democratic revolution means the most radical "clearing of the decks" for the free development of capitalism. Together with the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracy, and its replacement by a democratically elected Constituent Assembly, it would mean the establishment of a bourgeois democratic regime under the most favourable conditions for the working class. The possibility of carrying out the socialist revolution in backward Russia before Western Europe never occurred to Lenin—or anyone else at this time, except for Trotsky.

Plekhanov also adamantly rejected the demand for nationalisation. Resorting to demagogic arguments, Plekhanov accused Lenin of putting forward the same arguments of the Social Revolutionaries, and argued that the demand for the division of the landlords' estates was reactionary: "I say that the peasant idea of a general distribution of the land is a reactionary feature. And precisely in view of this reactionary feature, which has been refuted throughout our whole political history, I pronounce myself against the nationalisation of the land. So how can this feature be cited in evidence against me?"

Lenin is looking at nationalisation through the eyes of a Social Revolutionary. He has even begun to take over their terminology—for example, he is holding forth about the notorious people’s creativity.”

With his customary irony, he went on: “It is pleasant to recall old friends, but it is unpleasant to see Social Democrats defending Narodnik positions. The agrarian history of Russia is more similar to the history of India, Egypt, China and other Eastern despotisms, than to the history of Western Europe... In order to smash despotism, it is necessary to eliminate its economic basis. Therefore I am against nationalisation now; when we argued this against the Social Revolutionaries, Lenin found that my arguments were correct. Lenin says ‘we will render nationalisation harmless’, but, in order to render nationalisation harmless, it is necessary to find a guarantee against restoration; but such a guarantee does not exist and cannot exist. Remember the history of France; remember the history of Britain; in each of these countries after a broad revolutionary swing, restoration followed. The same thing can happen to us; and our programme must be such that in carrying it out, it must cause the least harm in the case of restoration.”

And Plekhanov concludes: “And that is why I reject nationalisation. Lenin’s draft is closely linked to the utopia of the seizure of power by the revolutionaries, and that is why those of us who have no taste for such a utopia must speak out against it. Municipalisation is another matter.”[\[13\]](#)

Plekhanov’s comments at least had the merit of clarity. When he accuses Lenin of linking his radical agrarian programme to the seizure of power by the revolutionaries, he is not far from the truth, although he presents it in the form of a caricature. The essence of Lenin’s solution to the agrarian problem was precisely a revolution in which the proletariat would base itself on a thoroughgoing peasant revolution to overthrow tsarism and institute a democratic republic. This demanded that the party should stand for the most radical programme of revolutionary democratic demands, and above all a revolutionary solution to the land problem. By contrast, Plekhanov and the Mensheviks attempted to frighten the Party with the philistine idea that revolution inevitably produces counter-revolution. Here we have in an extreme form the notion that the working class must do nothing to “provoke” the counter-revolution, and, by extension, must cling to the shirt-tails of the liberals. Lenin answered that the only full guarantee against the danger of restoration, was *the complete victory of the revolution*. In this little episode is encapsulated two entirely different perspectives, two entirely different psychologies even.

In his reply to the discussion on the agrarian question, Plekhanov summed up in a nutshell the Menshevik position. He accused Lenin of Blanquism: “This is how matters stand—between Lenin and me there are extremely serious differences of opinion. These differences must not be glossed over. They must be clarified in all their importance and extent. Our party is living through a serious moment. The decisions that you will take today or tomorrow on the disputed questions will determine to a significant extent the fate of our entire party and therefore of our entire country. And for that very reason comrade Lenin’s draft, expresses not only his private opinion on the agrarian question, but the whole character of his revolutionary thinking.

“Blanquism or Marxism—that is the question which we will decide today. Comrade Lenin himself admitted that his agrarian draft was closely link to his idea of seizure of power. And I am very grateful for his sincerity.”

Now comes the crunch. Plekhanov revealed the attitude of the Mensheviks towards the seizure of power by the workers and peasants with these words: “After the 17 October the seizure of power ceased being a utopia, comrade Lenin? But you spoke of this even before the 17 October, and just as before the 17 October I answered you. The 17 October changes nothing in our evaluation of the idea of the seizure of power. Our standpoint consists in this, that the seizure of power is compulsory for us when we are making a *proletarian* revolution. But since the revolution now impending can only be petty bourgeois, we are duty bound to refuse to seize power.”<sup>[14]</sup> Such was the argument of the Mensheviks in 1906-07. The revolution was a *bourgeois* revolution: the tasks before it were *bourgeois-democratic*; the conditions for socialism were absent in Russia. Therefore, any attempt by the workers to seize power was adventurism; the task of the workers was to seek alliance with the bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties, to assist them to carry through the bourgeois revolution.

What was Lenin’s reply to Plekhanov? He made no attempt to deny that the revolution was bourgeois-democratic, certainly not that it was possible to build socialism in Russia alone. All the Russian Marxists, the Mensheviks, Lenin and Trotsky were *agreed* on these questions. It was ABC that the conditions for a socialist transformation were absent in Russia, but had matured in the West. Replying to Plekhanov’s dark warnings of “the danger of restoration”, Lenin explained: “If we mean a real, fully effective, economic guarantee against restoration, that is a guarantee that would create the economic conditions precluding restoration, then we shall have to say: *the only guarantee against restoration is a socialist revolution in the West*. There can be no other guarantee in the full sense of the term. Without this condition, whichever other way the problem is solved (municipalisation, division of the land, etc.) *restoration will not only* be possible but positively inevitable.”

Thus, right from the start, Lenin conceived of the Russian revolution as the prelude to the socialist revolution in the West. He tied the fate of the Russian revolution in an indissoluble link with that of the international socialist revolution, without which it would inevitably succumb to internal reaction: “I would formulate this proposition as follows: the Russian revolution can achieve victory by its own efforts, *but it cannot possibly hold and consolidate its gains by its own strength. It cannot do this unless there is a socialist revolution in the West*. Without this condition restoration is inevitable, whether we have municipalisation, or nationalisation, or division of the land; for under each and every form of possession and property the small proprietor will always be a bulwark of restoration. *After the complete victory of the democratic revolution the small proprietor will inevitably turn against the proletariat*: and the sooner the common enemies of the proletariat and of the small proprietors, such as the capitalists, the landlords, the financial bourgeoisie, and so forth are overthrown, the sooner will this happen. *Our democratic republic has no other reserve than the socialist proletariat of the West.*”<sup>[15]</sup>

In his report of the Congress, Lenin commented: “The right wing of our Party does not believe in the complete victory of the present, i.e., bourgeois democratic, revolution in Russia; it dreads such a victory, before the people. It is constantly being misled by the essentially erroneous idea, which is really a vulgarisation of Marxism, that only the bourgeoisie can independently ‘make’ the bourgeois revolution, or that only the bourgeoisie should lead the bourgeois revolution. The role of the proletariat as the vanguard in the struggle for the complete and decisive victory of the bourgeois revolution is not clear to the right Social Democrats.”<sup>[16]</sup> The differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism here stand out with complete clarity. And yet, there were differences and doubts among the Bolsheviks themselves on this issue. Among others, Suvorov, Bazarov and also Stalin opposed nationalisation in favour of “sharing out” the land among the peasants. This demand reflected a petty bourgeois tendency, a thousand miles removed from Lenin’s position.

“Since we are concluding a temporary revolutionary union with the struggling peasantry,” Stalin said, “since we cannot on that account ignore the demands of that peasantry, we must support those demands, if, as a whole and in general, they do not conflict with the tendencies of economic development and with the progress of the revolution. The peasants demand division; division is not inconsistent with the above-mentioned phenomena; therefore, we must support complete confiscation and division. From that point of view, both nationalisation and municipalisation are equally unacceptable.”<sup>[17]</sup> In order to defeat “municipalisation” Lenin was forced to withdraw his own resolution and vote with the supporters of “division”. Under certain conditions, the division of the landlords’ estates would, of course, be a step forward, but Lenin’s demand for nationalisation was the only consistent revolutionary demand. In the end, the final resolution was an unsatisfactory compromise.

## NOTES

[1] O. Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, p. 202.

[2] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 164.

[3] A. Kerensky, *Memoirs. Russia and History’s Turning Point*, p. 76.

[4] Quoted in S. Malishev, *The Unemployed Councils in St Petersburg 1906*, pp. 16 and 8.

[5] R.B. McKean, *St Petersburg between the revolutions*, pp. 8-9.

[6] S. Malishev, *The Unemployed Councils in St. Petersburg 1906*, pp. 11-2 and 14.

[7] Quoted in Malishev, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[9] Ibid., p. 40.

[10] O. Piatnitsky, op. cit., pp. 101-2.

[11] Eva Broido, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 133 in both quotes.

[12] LCW, *Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 10, p. 375.

[13] Congress Minutes, *Chertyvortiy S'yezd RSDRP, Protokoly*, pp. 59-60 and 60-1.

[14] Ibid., pp. 139 and 142.

[15] LCW, *Unity Congress of RSDLP*, vol. 10, p. 280 in both quotes (my emphasis).

[16] LCW, *Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 10, pp. 377-8.

[17] Congress Minutes, *Chertyvortiy S'yezd RSDRP, Protokoly*, p. 79.

## Part Three: The Period of Reaction

[section 2 of 6]

### Bolshevism and Menshevism

The other debates served to underline the rightward drift of the Mensheviks. For example, they now opposed the slogan of arming the masses, and got their view adopted by Congress. Irrespective of the question of the appropriateness of armed struggle at the given moment, the Menshevik position clearly represented the abandonment of the revolutionary struggle in favour of reformist parliamentarism and class collaborationist politics, as shown by their position on the agrarian question and attitude to the Cadets. Trotsky later described the change in the attitude of the Mensheviks: “The Mensheviks, who a mere few weeks back had stood for a semi-boycott of the Duma, now transferred their hopes from the revolutionary struggle to constitutional conquests. At the time of the Stockholm Congress, the support of the liberals seemed to them the most important task of the Social Democracy.”[\[18\]](#)

In his report on the Duma, Axelrod admitted that most Menshevik activists in Russia had initially supported boycott, but complained that this was leaving the field open to other parties. It was time to change the line. He undoubtedly had a point. But in politics it is possible to be right for the wrong reasons. At bottom, the Menshevik position amounted to a permanent striving for a deal with the Cadets. By contrast, the Bolsheviks proposed to take advantage of conflict between the Duma and the regime to deepen revolutionary crisis, while at the same time striving to expose the Cadets by implacable criticism and winning over the peasant representatives—the Trudoviks—to “firm them up” and drive a

wedge between them and the Cadets. While Lenin, in every article and every speech at this time, waged a relentless war against parliamentary cretinism, the Mensheviks placed all their hopes on the Duma. However, when Lenin spoke, while ridiculing Axelrod for his exaggerated expectations in the Duma, *he made no mention of the boycott tactic itself*. This is significant. Evidently, he maintained his earlier reservations, but felt constrained by factional ties, from expressing his views openly. It was left to Krassin to put the case for boycott to the delegates. But the Mensheviks used their majority to good use. Finally, the Congress voted to agree to allowing the party to participate in the elections to the Duma.

However, the Bolsheviks had their own problems. They took an incorrect position on the Duma, opposing the setting up of a Social Democratic parliamentary fraction. In this detail we already perceive the ultra-left trend in Bolshevism—*anti-parliamentary cretinism*—which was really the mirror-image of parliamentary and legalistic illusions of the Mensheviks. Contrary to the accusations usually levelled at Lenin for his alleged “sectarianism” and propensity for splitting, he consistently defended the unity of the party. When in the course of the Congress Lenin was accused of stating that it was impossible for Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to work together in one party, he indignantly rejected the accusation: “It is not true that I ‘supported’ comrade Vorobyov’s statement that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks cannot work together in one party. I did not in any way ‘support’ such an assertion, and *do not share that opinion at all.*”[\[19\]](#)

In general, it must be said that the Bolsheviks behaved far better as a minority than the Martovites had done at the Second Congress. In contrast to the Martovites in 1903, Lenin loyally accepted the position of minority on the CC, which was completely dominated by Mensheviks. A novel aspect of the new CC was the presence of the representatives of the national Social Democratic organisations for the first time: the Poles, represented by Warski and Dzerzhinsky; the Letts, by Danishevsky; and the Bundists, by Abramovich and Kremer. Thus, albeit temporarily, the Mensheviks scored a victory at this Congress held in conditions of gathering reaction. There were some small victories. On the Party statutes, Lenin’s draft of the first paragraph of the Rules was accepted, and essentially the principles of democratic centralism adopted. This was really not a controversial question, but regarded as self-evident, not only by the Bolsheviks but also by the Mensheviks (who were in the majority!). There were some differences on organisational issues, but they did not lead to any serious problems. The Bolsheviks insisted that the two-centre system (the parallel existence of a central committee and central organ) had outlived its usefulness. But the Mensheviks succeeded in maintaining it, and made sure they had complete control of the editorial board, which was made up exclusively of Mensheviks (Martov, Martynov, Maslov, Dan and Potresov), while graciously allowing the Bolshevik minority three places on the Central Committee.

In some respects, the Fourth Congress did represent a step forward, notably in strengthening the Party with the inclusion of workers’ organisations from other nationalities. In his report back to the Congress, previously mentioned, Lenin states the following: “Summing up the work of the Congress and the effect it has had upon our party, you must draw the following main conclusions. An important practical result of the

Congress is the proposed (partly already achieved) amalgamation with the national social democratic parties. This amalgamation will strengthen the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. It will help to efface the last traces of the old circle habits. It will infuse a new spirit into the work of the party. It will greatly strengthen the proletariat among all the peoples of Russia.” And he added: “An important practical result was the amalgamation of the minority and majority groups. The split has been stopped. The Social Democratic proletariat and its Party must be united. Disagreements on organisation have been almost entirely eliminated.”[\[20\]](#)

The Polish and Lithuanian Social Democrats joined the RSDLP and conditions were drawn up for unity with the Latvian (Lettish) Social Democrats. The conditions for the Bund’s joining the Party were also established, but the congress firmly rejected any idea of organising the working class on national lines. Later in the year (in August) the Bund also voted to join the RSDLP. Lenin commented that “the RSDLP has become, at last, really all-Russian and united. The number of members of our party is now more than 100,000. 31,000 were represented at the Unity Congress, then in addition about 26,000 Polish Social Democrats, about 14,000 Lettish and 33,000 Jewish”. Lenin’s figures were confirmed by the left Cadet newspaper *Tovarishch* which estimated the total number of members enrolled in the RSDLP at about 70,000 in October 1906. This figure includes both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. To this must be added a further 33,000 for the Bund, plus 28,000 for the Polish Social Democrats and 13,000 for the Letts.[\[21\]](#)

However, the impressive membership figures cited above do not reveal the whole story. *The growth in membership tells us something about the advanced layers of the workers and youth, but not the masses. The December defeat was a turning-point for the working class. In reality, although the RSDLP continued to grow, its influence in the masses was beginning to decline.* Exhaustion bred moods of apathy and pessimism. Although for a time the movement continued, borne along by its own momentum, Lenin’s hopes for an early recovery of the revolutionary movement did not correspond to the real situation. Trotsky explains: “It [the RSDLP] continued to grow in membership. But its influence on the masses declined. A hundred Social Democrats were no longer able to lead as many workers into the streets as ten Social Democrats had led the year before.”[\[22\]](#)

### **The Peasants’ Revolt**

The centre of revolutionary activity passed from the town to the village. In April, 47 cases of peasant disturbances were registered; in May, 160, but by June the figure increased to 739. This was close to the highest figure for autumn 1905. Half of European Russia, especially the Volga area, where the tradition of Stenka Razin and Pugachov still burned in the memory of the muzhik, the central Black Earth zone, the Ukraine, Poland, Tambov, and other regions, all were engulfed by the flame of revolt. Landlords fled their estates as strike committees were formed in villages by rebellious agricultural labourers. An inevitable consequence of peasant revolution was the upsurge in guerrilla actions—the classical mode of struggle of the peasantry. Such activities were particularly common in Latvia (the “forest brotherhood”) and Georgia (the “Red Hundreds”). This situation posed a mortal danger for the tsarist regime, which found its principal point of support in

the class of feudal landowners, the main target of the concentrated rage and hatred of the dispossessed masses. There was yet another reason to fear the revolt in the villages. Immediately, the peasant revolution had an echo in the army, where the truculent mood of the troops, demoralised by defeat and aroused by the example of the workers in the towns, expressed itself in a new wave of mutinies and uprisings.

Under these conditions, the military policy of the Party still had a key role to play, and still more so its agrarian policy, as Lenin clearly understood. About 50 RSDLP committees had special military organisations and groups. On the party's military organisation in Moscow, Piatnitsky writes: "A military technical bureau was attached to the Moscow Committee; this bureau was responsible for the invention, testing and production in great quantities, whenever necessary, of simple arms, including bombs; and with this the bureau was occupied all the time. The military technical bureau was completely isolated from the Moscow organisation, and was connected with the Moscow Committee only through the secretary of the committee."[\[23\]](#)

The strongest of the military organisations, however, was in Petersburg. According to Leonard Schapiro, the Party still "maintained a wide network of organisations among the soldiers, and published some 20 illegal soldiers' periodicals and newspapers".[\[24\]](#) Some agitation was carried out in the army and navy with special publications like *Kazarma* (Barracks) and *Soldatskaya Zhizn'* (Soldiers' Life). The party conducted an energetic campaign among the army recruits, asking them not to fire on their brothers, but to come over to the side of the workers, bringing their arms with them. March 1906 saw the first Conference of Military and Fighting Organisations. But on the first day all the delegates were arrested. The first real conference took place on 16 November 1906 in the relative safety of Tammerfors in Finland. Although Lenin certainly hoped that the movement in the villages might provide the spark that would re-ignite the revolution, he nevertheless argued continually for caution, against undue haste, against adventurism seeing the dangers involved in premature and ill-prepared action. Lenin's revolutionary optimism was always tempered with a healthy dose of realism, based upon a sober-minded appraisal of the situation. It would never have crossed his mind to launch the slogan of guerrilla war by a minority, as later became the fashion and led to defeat after defeat, especially in Latin America.

Like any other tactic, guerrilla war was always strictly subordinated to the needs of the mass movement of the working class. This did not mean that the Bolsheviks neglected work among other layers, such as the students and the peasants. On the contrary. The RSDLP attempted to conduct work among the peasants. Piatnitsky reports that in only eight months in 1906 the party's illegal printing-press in Moscow published four leaflets directed at the peasants with a total run of 140,000 copies, in addition to a further 20,000 copies of the party's agrarian programme. The goal was still armed insurrection: "In 1906 and the first half of 1907," writes Piatnitsky, "the entire work of the Moscow organisation was carried on with the approaching mass proletarian and peasant movement which would culminate in an armed struggle against tsarism."[\[25\]](#)

Nevertheless, the Party's influence among the peasants remained weak. Social Democratic propaganda found only a feeble echo among the peasants right up to 1917. The great majority of peasants, insofar as they possessed any political allegiance, looked to one or other of the "Narodnik" parties—either the SRs, or, to an even greater extent, the Trudoviks. It was this layer that the autocracy was attempting to ensnare with promises of an agrarian reform. The First Congress of the Social Revolutionaries was held from 29 December 1905 to 4 January 1906. The political line was the usual eclectic mixture of utopian socialism (the idealisation of the peasant commune, the *obshchina* which would allegedly allow Russia to by-pass capitalism and establish "socialism in one country" in defiance of the laws of social and economic development) and ultra-leftism. The SRs had the illusion that the peasant commune could serve as the basis for socialism in Russia, not realising that it was the basis of tsarist autocracy, as the Trudovik Kerensky points out:

"In demanding the 'nationalisation' or 'socialisation' of the land, the Narodniks had been certain that the peasants would easily shift from the communal to the co-operative system of land tenure. In actual fact, however, the peasant commune of that time had very little in common with the ideal commune as imagined by the Slavophiles and Narodniks. From the administrative standpoint, the commune was very convenient for police control—as Witte put it, for keeping the peasants under surveillance like little children—and also for collecting taxes, since defaulters were paid for by the rest of the commune on a pro rata basis. The authorities turned the commune into a bulwark of economic backwardness and gradually drained it of its vitality. Furthermore, compulsory membership in the commune was always a sore point among the peasants themselves."[\[26\]](#)

The tactical questions that concentrated the attention of Lenin and his collaborators at the time—boycott of elections, guerrilla warfare, etc.—were closely linked to the perspective for a revival of the revolution, and the possibility that the peasant movement might give an impulse to the movement of the workers in the cities. The apparently theoretical discussions at the Fourth Congress on the agrarian question were but a pale reflection of a stark reality. The peasants' rebellion was on the upswing. Month by month the violent outbursts in the villages increased in number and intensity. For all these reasons, the agrarian question inevitably occupied a central importance in the activities of the State Duma.

In order to bring about the complete liquidation of the revolutionary movement, tsarism combined murderous repression with deceit, by offering a new electoral law which slightly increased the franchise, while still excluding more than 50 per cent of the adult population—women, all under 25 years, those in military service, workers in small factories, landless peasants, etc. On 23 April, the new electoral norms were published. The franchise was blatantly rigged in favour of the landlords. In the curiae, there was one landlord elector for every 2,000 population, while the ratio for the peasants was 1:7,000, and for the workers 1:90,000. In Perm province for example one landlord vote was equivalent to that of 28 peasants and 56 workers. The voting system was also indirect, with a complicated system of voting commissions (curiae) set up to "represent" the different social estates—workers, peasants, landlords—voting for "electors", who would

then elect the members of the State Duma. In his memoirs, Kerensky says this about the electoral laws:

“The new electoral law was complex, and it violated every canon of democratic procedure. Deputies were elected by provincial colleges consisting of delegates chosen separately by four groups (*curias*): landowners, the urban population, peasants, and, in a few districts, factory workers. One mandatory delegate to the Duma was elected by each curia, and the rest of the deputies were elected by the provincial college as a whole.”[\[27\]](#)

While the feudal landlords ruled the roost, the peasants were given a relatively privileged position vis-a-vis the workers. In typical Bonapartist-fashion, the regime tried to lean on the peasantry (especially the rich, or “strong” peasant) against the working class. The peasant representation in the Duma was therefore relatively high: around 45 per cent of the seats. This reflected the autocracy’s awareness of its own social isolation, and its overwhelming desire to gain a solid base of mass support in the more conservative layers of the rural population. For as long as anyone could remember, the tsar had posed as the “Little Father”—the *Batyushka*—of the People, an illusion which was traditionally shared by the Russian muzhik, who, in his hour of need, would sigh; “Bog vysoko; tsar’ daleko” (“God is in heaven, and the tsar is far away”). The diaries of Nicholas II show that he himself was convinced that the “People” (i.e. the peasants) adored him—right up to the moment when they overthrew him and his dynasty. January 9 1905 drew a line of blood between the autocracy and the urban working class. The dream of erecting an impregnable bulwark around the monarchy in the shape of a loyal class of small peasant proprietors persisted and formed the very soul and substance of the Stolypin reaction. But by giving a voice—however distorted and tremulous—to the peasantry in the Duma, the autocracy unwittingly created a stick for its own back and provided a lever for the revolutionary socialist wing to exploit.

In addition to a rigged franchise, the rights of the Duma were severely restricted. Parts of the budget could not be discussed. Loans and currency were exclusively the competence of the Minister of Finance. The army and navy, of course, were under the personal control of the tsar. The Council of Ministers, hitherto nominated by the monarch, was broadened to include an equal number of elected ministers, and, under the title of senate, was turned into an upper chamber with equal rights to the Duma! This gigantic swindle was the handiwork of Count Witte, who further displayed his usefulness to the tsar by negotiating a sizeable loan from France.

### **To Boycott, or Not to Boycott?**

At the Tammerfors Conference of the Bolsheviks, which took place while the Moscow uprising was reaching its bloody dénouement, the Bolshevik leaders had debated their attitude to the forthcoming elections to the Duma. The general mood was overwhelmingly in favour of a boycott. Yet Lenin struck a note of caution. When it came to the vote, two votes were cast against the boycott proposal—Lenin and Gorev. This provoked an outburst of indignation by the other delegates, which compelled Lenin to abandon his opposition. Not for the first or last time, he was forced to take into account

the mood of the leading layer against his better judgement. His new stance was greeted by stormy applause, although, as he ruefully quipped, he was “retreating in full military order”.[\[28\]](#)

The boycottists were strongest among that layer of committee-men, including Stalin who was attending his first party meeting abroad, who considered that their practical knowledge of the situation in Russia was sufficient to place them on a superior plane to the party theoreticians, even to Lenin himself. In another session, the Tammerfors Conference voted for the re-unification of the RSDLP. A fourth Party Congress should be convened, and preliminary measures should begin forthwith to unite the two factions on the basis of parity. Local committees should combine their activities, and committees should everywhere be elected from below and should be accountable to the lower echelons. However, democratic centralism should be applied and, once elected, the committees should be accorded “the entire fullness of power in the matter of ideological and practical leadership”.[\[29\]](#)

Immediately after, meetings were held between the representatives of both tendencies, attended by both Lenin and Martov, to hammer out the obstacles to unity and convene the Fourth Party Congress. On the issue of boycotting the Duma, the Mensheviks gave way to the case for boycott, insistently put by the Bolsheviks. They were still under the impact of the recent events, and, anyway, were themselves suspicious of the Duma. However, by the time the Congress came round, they were already cooling off. After the December defeat, it was undoubtedly necessary to revise the party’s tactics to take account of the new situation. Having failed to take the enemies’ positions by direct assault, it was necessary to resort to siege tactics, making use of all legal possibilities to rally the workers around the revolutionary programme. To boycott parliament in such circumstances was a serious mistake. Trotsky points out that “It is permissible to boycott representative assemblies only in the event that the mass movement is sufficiently strong either to overthrow them or to ignore them. But when the masses are in retreat the tactic of boycott loses its revolutionary meaning.”[\[30\]](#)

There were heated internal discussions on tactics in relation to the boycott question. This debate throws into sharp focus the gulf separating Bolshevism and Menshevism. The Mensheviks with their customary inclination towards opportunism rapidly drew the conclusion that the revolution was over and that it was time to turn to the parliamentary arena. However, they faced considerable difficulty in persuading the party rank-and-file. They also originally refused to participate in elections, but then changed their position to one of a “semi-boycott”, linked to the confused and essentially meaningless slogan of “revolutionary self-government”. Lenin scornfully denounced their vacillations. “They do not believe in the revolution and they do not believe in the Duma,” he commented. Plekhanov, now on the right wing of the Mensheviks, advocated participation without more ado.

In spite of the increasingly ferocious repression, the Party was still able to function. Meetings still took place, in which tactical questions were hotly debated. The general mood of the Party members was still strongly against participating in elections to the

Duma at this stage. On the 11 February at a Petersburg united Party conference, including both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Lenin led off on the party's attitude to the Duma. Dan and Martov, representing the Mensheviks, spoke against. A second Conference approved Lenin's position of "active boycott". In later years Lenin honestly admitted that this position was a mistake, but at the time it undoubtedly reflected the prevailing mood of the activists. The reactionary nature of the Duma was evident, not only to the Bolsheviks, but to the majority of Social Democrats. The mood of the majority of Social Democrats throughout the country seems to have been strongly inclined to boycott. The lava of revolution had not yet cooled, so that not only the Bolsheviks, but also the Polish and Latvian Social Democrats, the Lithuanian and even the normally conservative Bund favoured the boycott tactic. Even many Mensheviks were ambivalent. But this mood of the party activists was out of step with the mood of the masses.

On the dispute over participation in the Duma elections in 1906, Eva Broido recalls how the RSDLP, in effect, stumbled into the Duma, almost unexpectedly: "The Bolsheviks were against, the Mensheviks for participation. In the end they agreed that the party should participate only in the first stage of the elections—that of the electoral colleges (there was no direct vote). In this way the party hoped to exploit the elections for the purposes of propaganda and agitation, particularly among the workers. In the event things turned out differently. Where the Mensheviks had a big majority, as in the Caucasus, the party went right through with the elections and returned several members to the Duma. In addition, several members who had been elected as independents now joined the Social Democrats. The party was thus represented in the Duma and had to define its attitude to current political events." And she adds: "Moreover—and this was contrary to Bolshevik predictions—the Duma at once became a focus of public interest and concern, even amongst the working class. It was no longer possible simply to ignore the Duma—and we Mensheviks were convinced that we ought to make the fullest possible use of this opportunity of publicly proclaiming our socialist message to the whole country."[\[31\]](#)

In the spring of 1906, elections were held for the first Duma. Given the relatively wide franchise offered by the October Manifesto, there was the potential for a successful campaign by the Social Democrats. Under this system, as we have seen, the workers voted separately through the system of electoral commissions known as "curiae", which elected representatives in the following way. The elections were held in three stages: first, the workers elected representatives at a factory level; the latter then elected the "electors", and finally the "electors" elected the Duma deputies. Factories employing from 50 to 1,000 workers elected one representative. Bigger factories elected one for every 1,000 workers, and factories with fewer than 50 workers were excluded from voting. Paradoxically, the fact that the elections were indirect, which in itself was an undemocratic feature, also gave the Social Democrats an opening which they would not have had under a more normal system of voting, since they could concentrate their energies in a campaign in the workers' curiae, their "natural constituency".

The Bolshevik position was based on the expectation of an imminent new revolutionary upturn. But that was a misreading of the situation. The more advanced workers felt the need for a revolutionary party, but the masses were increasingly falling into apathy and

passivity. It is a well-established fact that the mood of the most active and militant layer of workers can often be at variance with that of the rest of the class. The advanced guard can move too far ahead of the class. This is as bad a mistake in the class struggle as would be the analogous mistake in military tactics. If the advanced guard moves too far ahead and loses contact with the rear, it becomes seriously exposed and runs the risk of being chopped to pieces. This is equally true when the most militant layer, out of impatience, misjudges the mood of the workers, or confuses its own level of understanding with that of the majority. So it was in this case.

The Bolsheviks had misread the situation, and failed to appreciate that the revolution was in retreat. As in war, so in a revolution or even a strike, it is necessary to be able to retreat in good order when the situation demands it. To sound the advance when objective conditions demand a retreat is a recipe for disaster. In the event, the tactic of the active boycott failed to have any effect. The real nature of the Duma was by no means evident to the *masses*. Constitutional illusions were especially strong among the peasants who believed they could get land. But the victory of the counter-revolution and the ebbing of the mass movement meant that, for broad layers of urban petty bourgeois masses, and the peasantry, and even a layer of the working class, the Duma remained the only hope, however tenuous, for some prospect of amelioration. The fact that such hopes were devoid of any rational basis did not make them any less persistent.

So long as Lenin continued to believe in the imminence of a new revolutionary upturn, he placed all his emphasis on the goal of armed insurrection: “The revolutionary Social Democracy,” he wrote in October 1906, “must be the first to take its place in the most resolute and the most direct struggle and the last to resort to the most roundabout methods of struggle.” In other words, his attitude to participation in even the most reactionary of parliaments was dictated, not by abstract principles or dogmatism, but by the demands of the revolution. For the whole period from 1906 to the outbreak of the First World War, the question of whether the Social Democrats should participate in the elections to the tsarist Duma, elected on the basis of what Lenin described as the most reactionary electoral law in Europe, was at the heart of the controversies on tactics and strategy that agitated the Party. Years later, in his classic *Left Wing Communism*, Lenin explained his position at that time:

“When, in August 1905, the tsar proclaimed the convocation of a consultative ‘parliament’, the Bolsheviks called for its boycott, in the teeth of all the opposition parties and the Mensheviks, and the ‘parliament’ was in fact swept away by the revolution of October 1905. The boycott proved correct at the time, not because non-participation in reactionary parliaments is correct in general, but because we accurately appraised the objective situation, which was leading to the rapid development of the mass strikes first into a political strike, then into a revolutionary strike, and finally into an uprising. Moreover, the struggle centred at that time on the question of whether the convocation of the first representative assembly should be left to the tsar, or an attempt should be made to wrest its convocation from the old regime. When there was not, and could not be, any certainty that the objective situation was of a similar kind, and when there was no

certainty of a similar trend and the same rate of development, the boycott was no longer correct.

“The Bolsheviks’ boycott of ‘parliament’ in 1905 enriched the revolutionary proletariat with highly valuable political experience and showed that, when legal and illegal, parliamentary and non-parliamentary forms of struggle are combined, it is sometimes useful and even essential to reject parliamentary forms. It would, however, be highly erroneous to apply this experience blindly, imitatively and uncritically to *other* conditions and *other* situations. The Bolsheviks’ boycott of the Duma in 1906 was a mistake, although a minor and easily remediable one. The boycott of the Duma in 1907, 1908 and subsequent years was a most serious error and difficult to remedy, because, on the one hand, a very rapid rise of the revolutionary tide and its conversion into an uprising was not to be expected, and, on the other hand, the entire historical situation attendant upon the renovation of the bourgeois monarchy called for legal and illegal activities being combined.”[\[32\]](#)

The same point was made by Trotsky: “The boycott is a declaration of outright war against the old government, a direct attack against it. Barring a widespread revolutionary revival ... there can be no talk of the boycott’s success.” Much later, in 1920, he wrote: “It was an error ... for the Bolsheviks to have boycotted the Duma in 1906.” And Trotsky adds: “It was an error, because after the December defeat it was impossible to expect a revolutionary attack in the near future; it was therefore senseless to spurn the Duma’s tribune for mobilising the revolutionary ranks.”[\[33\]](#)

Hanging over all this discussion on the Duma was the far more fundamental question of the attitude of the workers’ party to the liberals. In the aftermath of the December events, there were clear indications of a shift in the mood of the contending classes. The workers were thrown onto the defensive everywhere. The December events also marked a decisive shift in the attitude of the liberals. The Cadets had already turned their backs on the revolution in October 1905. The Moscow uprising finally eradicated any last lingering sympathies they might have entertained for the revolutionary proletariat. Now they emerged in their true colours. The bourgeoisie to a man (and woman) united in opposition to December “madness”. It was, of course, not the first time in history that we have seen such a phenomenon. Exactly the same thing occurred in the 1848 revolution, as Marx and Engels explained.

The typical style of the liberals in the period of reaction was to *appeal for reform to prevent revolution*, calling on the state to “save itself”. Needless to say, such well-meaning advice was met by contemptuous guffaws from the Octobrist benches. The hypocritical whining of the liberals about the “excesses” of the counter-revolution were merely intended as friendly advice to the autocracy on *the best method* of strangling the revolution. Quite clearly, it is far better to strangle a person in such a way that he or she makes the least possible noise and fuss. But on the need for the strangling to be carried out, there could be no two opinions! This, in essence, was the difference between the two counter-revolutionary bourgeois blocs. The Cadets began to call themselves the “party of the people’s freedom”. The better to deceive the people and put an end to the revolution

which had terrified them. The attitude to the Cadets constituted the fundamental dividing-line between the Social Democrats, the Mensheviks advocating blocs and agreements with the Cadets in the Duma, while Lenin reserved his most bitter invective for these *counter-revolutionary liberals*.

The counter-revolutionary conduct of the liberals was no accident. The weak Russian bourgeoisie was tied by a thousand threads to the feudal aristocracy, by marriage, social origin, or direct ownership of land. According to a contemporary study by N. A. Borodin, *The State Duma in Figures*, out of the 153 Cadets in the First Duma, 92 were of the nobility. Of these, three owned landed estates between 5,000 and 10,000 dessyatines; eight owned estates from 1,000 to 2,000 dessyatines and 30 owned estates from 500 to 1,000 dessyatines. Thus, about one-third of the Cadet deputies were actually big landowners.<sup>[34]</sup> How could such people offer a solution to the most pressing problem facing Russia—the agrarian question? Despite their “progressive” protestations, on all the basic issues, the liberals in the Duma were far closer to the tsarist regime than to the workers and peasants.

The bourgeois liberals effectively split into two camps in the Duma, represented by the Right “*Octobrists*” and the “*Left*” (Constitutional Democrats or Cadets as they became popularly known). But although they were formally opposed as “*reactionaries*” and “*liberals*”, the differences between them were more apparent than real. In relation to the revolutionary proletariat and peasantry, they stood firmly united in a single counter-revolutionary bloc representing the interests of Order and Property. While enthusiastically supporting the smashing of the revolution, the latter were not averse to leaning on the mass movement to put pressure on the regime to grant concessions. But not when the masses looked like challenging them for power. The bourgeois liberals who had already sold their soul to the autocracy (alleging that it had been miraculously transformed into a “*Constitutional Monarchy*”) immediately took their rightful place in the camp of “*parliamentary*” reaction, where they remained as His Majesty’s loyal opposition, a mere fig-leaf for the counter-revolution. The question of the attitude of the Social Democracy to the bourgeois parties from this point on became the central question for the revolutionaries.

### **Parliamentary Illusions**

On 27 April (10 May) 1906, a hot summer’s day, the first State Duma opened its doors in the magnificent Tauride palace, the former palace of Catherine the Great’s favourite, Potemkin. In a stately hall, flanked by dukes and courtiers in full regalia, the elected representatives of the people listened respectfully to the opening speech of tsar Nicholas. A colourful and somewhat incongruous spectacle greeted the eyes of one English observer who captured it for posterity: “Peasants in their long black coats, some of them wearing military medals and crosses; popes (i.e. priests), Tartars, Poles, men in every kind of dress except uniform... You see dignified old men in frock coats, aggressively democratic-looking ‘*intelligents*’, with long hair and pince-nez; a Polish bishop dressed in purple, who looks like the Pope; men without collars; members of the proletariat, men in loose Russian shirts with belts; men dressed by Davies or Poole, and men dressed in

the costume of two centuries ago... There is a Polish member who is dressed in light-blue tights, a short Eton jacket and Hessian boots. He has curly hair, and looks exactly like the hero of the *Cavalleria Rusticana*. There is another Polish member who is dressed in a long white flannel coat reaching to his knees... There are some socialists who wear no collars and there is, of course, every kind of headdress you can conceive.”[\[35\]](#)

The extremely heterogeneous composition of the Duma is here vividly conveyed. Here at last was a genuine cross section of Russian society all together under one roof, ready to solve the problems of society through democratic discussion and good will! But beneath the glitter and ceremony there was an invisible fault-line. The tsar’s mother suffered such a shock at the sight of the great unwashed that for several days she was unable to compose herself. “They looked on us as so many enemies,” she later confided to the Minister of Finance, “and I could not stop myself from looking at certain faces, so much did they seem to reflect a strange hatred for us all.”[\[36\]](#) The right wing parties did not do well in the elections, and only 12 Octobrists (right wing liberals) were returned. The Cadets benefitted from the boycott of the Social Democrats. Posing as the only left alternative, they won 184 seats. Confusion on the attitude to the Duma elections cost the Social Democrats dear. The RSDLP had attempted to boycott the elections, and then, when it became clear that the masses were participating, did a hasty about-face, but too late to recover lost ground. In effect, they had helped the Cadets. If the Social Democrats and SRs had put up candidates, the Cadet result would have been nothing like this, as was later shown in the following elections.

The mistaken tactic of the Social Democrats handed the Cadets effective control of the Duma on a plate. Puffed up with their own importance, they immediately put forward the proposal that a government should be formed that would be answerable to the Duma, as opposed to the accepted system whereby the tsar appointed the government which was answerable to him alone. This was, in effect, a demand that power should pass to the Cadets. True to their parliamentary illusions, the Mensheviks supported the Liberals’ demand, while the Bolsheviks opposed it as playing with parliament. Even from a purely democratic point of view, this was not a demand that could be supported by a revolutionary party worthy of the name. So long as there was no equal, direct and universal suffrage in Russia, the Duma was not representative of the people. To support the parliamentary manoeuvres of the Cadets would be to create illusions in the minds of the people that such a government would be better than the undemocratic tsarist governments that had gone before. But this was not the case. The bourgeoisie wanted only to strike a bargain with the monarchy, while the revolutionary party of the working class wanted to sweep it away and replace it with a genuinely democratic government. The two aims were incompatible and that expressed itself in antagonistic tactics. The conflict over Duma tactics immediately split the RSDLP into two wings. “For or against the government of the Constitutional Democrats?” That was the question which was put to a party referendum.

In the course of the campaign around the referendum, the Menshevik Eva Broido describes a meeting at the Baltic Shipbuilding Wharf in Petersburg, a Menshevik stronghold, where Lenin spoke: “Declaring the meeting open I gave Lenin the floor. He

spoke very well and with great elation. His speech was often interrupted by applause. And to my surprise he did not once attack the Mensheviks.”[\[37\]](#) Lenin lost the vote by a big majority, 50 to 13, but this shows his style in party polemics, especially when dealing with workers. Broido confessed her astonishment. Was this the same Lenin that had so sharply broken with Martov and Plekhanov? Yet in a debate before the workers who are under Menshevik influence, “*he did not once attack the Mensheviks*”. This tells us a lot about Lenin’s method of argument.

Although the text of Lenin’s speech at the shipyards has not been preserved, it is not hard to imagine its content. He would have attacked, not the Menshevik leaders, but the main enemy—the landlords and capitalists and the tsarist regime; he would have explained that the so-called liberals in the Duma, the Cadets, had turned their backs on the revolution and were striving for a deal with tsarism; he would have called upon the workers to rely only on their own strength, not to get entangled with alliances and deals with the treacherous liberals; and he would have demanded that the RSDLP—the workers’ party—stick firmly to a policy of class independence. Lenin always relied upon the strength of his case—facts, figures and arguments—in order to convince his audience. Only by such means did he eventually win over the majority, first of the active layers, then of the working class as a whole. The same methods were used in 1917, when Lenin directed the Bolshevik Party to win the masses with the famous slogan “Patiently explain!”

Although the Duma was dominated by the Cadets, they were not the largest parliamentary group. There was, for reasons explained already, a sizeable bloc of peasant deputies—200 in all. Some thought that this would be a factor for stability. The illusion of the god-fearing, pro-tsarist muzhik was still strong in upper-class circles: “Thank heaven!” exclaimed Count Witte, “the Duma will be predominantly peasant.” But this optimism was premature. The muzhik was becoming conscious of his interests. A big section of the peasant deputies organised themselves as the “Labour Group” (the “Trudovaya Gruppya” or “Trudoviks” as they became known). Lenin immediately grasped the significance of this. The peasants had sent their representatives to the Duma, not to make speeches but to get the land. They would soon discover in practice that the Duma was powerless to solve their most pressing needs. In the meantime, the Social Democrats must try by all means to establish a firm link with the peasant deputies, whose contradictory psychology was described by Lenin thus: “[The typical Trudovik is a peasant who] is not averse to a compromise with the monarchy, to settling down quietly on his *own* plot of land under the bourgeois system; but at the present time his main efforts are concentrated on the fight against the feudal state for democracy.”[\[38\]](#)

The Bolsheviks’ tactic consisted in trying to win away the Trudoviks from the influence of the Cadets. But such a tactic necessarily entailed the skilful utilisation of parliament. The boycott tactic had failed. It was necessary to adapt the Party’s tactics to the prevailing conditions if it was not to be reduced to an impotent sect cut off from the masses. By skilfully combining legal and illegal work, it would be possible to get the best of both worlds. Revolutionaries could make use of such legal openings that were still available, and supplement this work with illegal activities. What could not be said in the

pages of the legal press and from the tribune of the Duma, could be printed in the underground papers. The work of the Social Democratic deputies in the Duma could be publicised in legal papers such as *Volna*, *Vperyod*, and *Ekho*, which exposed the fraudulent character of this pseudo-parliament and the sell-outs of the liberals.

For the Mensheviks the Duma became the centre of all attention. This reformist deviation was immediately noticeable in the declaration of the Social Democratic Duma Fraction of 16 July which asserted that the Duma “can become the centre of the movement of the entire people against the autocratic police state”.<sup>[39]</sup> There began an uninterrupted series of clashes between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks over the issue of the attitude to the Duma. The Menshevik-dominated Central Committee sent out a circular to all RSDLP branches asking them to support all steps taken by the Duma (that is, the Cadets) to change Goremykin, the chairman of the Council of Ministers, for a Cadet. The Bolsheviks immediately protested against this tail-ending of the liberals in the Duma. To this the Mensheviks replied that it was necessary to support the progressive bourgeoisie (i.e., the Cadets) against the Ministry. Lenin answered that the Party’s parliamentary representatives must maintain complete independence from all other parties, especially the bourgeois liberals. “Rely on your own strength,” he said to them. “Only in this way can we win over lower, oppressed strata of revolutionary petty bourgeoisie (Trudoviks), and split them away from the Liberals (Cadets).”

The Cadets’ ministerial ambitions, and their burning desire to save the autocracy from itself soon brought them into collision with the ruling Ministry. In effect, they were saying to the tsar: “See, your ministers cannot be relied on to defend the old order. You need new men, people who enjoy the trust of the masses. Only we can keep the masses in check. But you must move over and share power with us.” But by now the powers-that-be had recovered from their initial alarm. They were getting the situation under control with the aid of the bullet and the noose. The services of the liberals were no longer required. Determined to eradicate the last vestiges of the gains of the revolution, the court clique went onto the offensive. Even the timid resistance of the Duma was too much for Nicholas to tolerate.

On May 13, 1906, the government rejected the demands of the Cadet Duma stated in its Address. In reply the Duma passed a resolution expressing “no confidence” in the Ministry and insisting on its resignation. The Menshevik CC of the RSDLP circulated to the Party organisations a resolution proposing to support the Cadet Duma’s demand for a Duma—that is a Cadet—ministry. The opportunism of the Mensheviks in the Duma was too much for the Party members to stomach. The Bolsheviks succeeded in getting the Party to condemn Milyukov’s Duma tactics. In Petersburg the Party organisation voted 1760 for the Bolsheviks, 952 for the Mensheviks on this issue. At its July Conference, the Petersburg party organisations confirmed this position. After a debate in which Lenin spoke for the Bolsheviks and Dan for the Mensheviks the Petersburg Social Democrats specifically rejected the call for a Duma Ministry. Despite this, the Social Democratic parliamentary fraction continued its conciliationist stance by supporting a Cadet resolution on the agrarian question.

Lenin poured scorn on the liberals' Duma antics: "The Duma is powerless," he wrote. "It is powerless not only because it lacks the bayonets and machine-guns that the government has at its command, but also because, as a whole, it is not revolutionary, and is incapable of waging a resolute struggle."<sup>[40]</sup> Lenin was soon shown to be correct. The Duma foundered precisely on the land question. Far from being a solid basis for reaction, the Trudovik peasants used their position in the Duma to agitate for peasants' rights. The question of taking over the landlords' estates was raised in the Duma, to the horror of the tsar. "What belongs to the landlord belongs to him," was his angry comment. It spelled the end for the first Duma. Irritated by the radical-sounding speeches emanating from the halls of the Tauride palace, the tsar had already decided to put an end to this circus.

## NOTES

[18] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 72.

[19] LCW, *Unity Congress of RSDLP, Written Statement at the Twenty-sixth Session of the Congress*, vol. 10, p. 309.

[20] LCW, *Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 10, p. 376.

[21] See L. Schapiro, *History of the CPSU*, p. 72, footnote.

[22] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 88.

[23] O. Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 104.

[24] Schapiro, op. cit., p. 99.

[25] O. Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 106.

[26] Kerensky, op. cit., p. 96.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[28] Quoted in Robert Service, *Lenin, a Political Life*, p. 149.

[29] *KPSS v rezoluitsiakh*, vol. 1, p. 136.

[30] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 98.

[31] E. Broido, op. cit., pp. 130-1.

[32] LCW, *'Left-wing' Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, vol. 31, pp. 35-6.

[33] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 93.

[34] See LCW, vol. 12, p. 532, note.

[35] M. Baring, *A Year in Russia*, London, pp. 191-2, 202. Quoted by L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 121.

[36] Quoted in Figes, op. cit., p. 214.

[37] Eva Broido, op. cit., p. 132.

[38] LCW, *An Attempt at a Classification of the Political Parties of Russia*, vol. 11, p. 229.

[39] Quoted in the *Istoria KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 202.

[40] LCW, *Resolution (II) of the St Petersburg Committee of the RSDLP on the Attitude Towards the State Duma*, vol. 10, p. 481.

## Part Three: The Period of Reaction

[section 3 of 6]

### The Duma Dissolved

Into this turbulent scenario stepped the flamboyant Pyotr Arkadevich Stolypin, then Minister of Interior, and from this point on one of the key players of the period. A wealthy landlord with big political ambitions, Stolypin owned two estates, one in Penza province with 2,850 acres, and another in Kovno, with a further 2,500 acres. In addition, his wife, the daughter of a high official of the imperial household, owned another 14,000 acres in Kazan. He therefore had plenty of reasons for interesting himself in the land question. Although he is generally described as a progressive reformer, Stolypin had earned the tsar's confidence by his application of the most brutal measures of repression during the period of "pacification" following the 1905 revolution. "His draconian measures in suppressing one of the most turbulent of the Volga provinces in 1905-06 made him notorious," writes Lionel Kochan. "His own words are suggestive: of one action against the peasants he reported to the Ministry of the Interior, 'the whole village, almost, went to prison on my instructions... I billeted Cossacks in the houses of the worst offenders, left there a squadron of Orenburgers and imposed a special regime on the village'." [41] Stolypin's reputation with the people is shown by the fact that a hangman's noose was referred to as a "Stolypin necktie", and as late as the 1930s, railway trucks used to carry political prisoners to Siberia were still referred to as "Stolypin carriages". However, he was undoubtedly one of the few really competent men among the tsar's advisers in the period before 1914, until he was removed by an assassin's bullet. Kerensky characterises this consummate and skilful reactionary as follows:

“Just before the first Duma was due to meet, a new Minister of the Interior was appointed in St Petersburg. This was the governor of Saratov, Peter A. Stolypin, who was hardly known to anyone at the time of the appointment. In less than three months, just after the dissolution of the Duma on July 8, 1906, he was appointed chairman of the Council of Ministers... Of provincial upper-class origin, he was not a member of the St Petersburg court set and had never been employed in any of the higher government establishments of the capital. The whole of his career had been spent in the provinces, where he had no lack of connections among prominent public and Zemstvo figures...

“He did not share the view of his predecessor Goremykin that the Duma was merely an idle ‘talking-shop’. On the contrary, unlike the hidebound and soulless bureaucrat, Goremykin, he was strongly attracted by the role of a constitutional minister. The idea of making speeches in parliament, openly debating vital issues with the opposition, and governing the country on the basis of his government majority appealed to him greatly.

“The fighting spirit lacked by the St Petersburg officials was more than compensated for by Stolypin. The tsar liked Stolypin for his youth, self-confidence, devotion to the throne, and readiness to carry out the tsar’s plan for illegal changes in the electoral law. The heads of the Council of United Gentry saw in him one of their own kind who would save the system of upper-class land proprietorship from destruction. The Octobrists and various other moderate constitutionalists, frightened by the excesses of the revolution, clutched at him as a drowning man clutches at a straw. They welcomed his programme, which was intended to unify the government with the moderately liberal and conservative public, thus strengthening the constitutional monarchy and eliminating for good the revolutionary movement. They thought of him as a Russian Thiers (the man who consolidated the bourgeois Third Republic in France after the defeat of the Commune in 1871).”[\[42\]](#)

Shortly before the dissolution of the Duma, Nicholas had appointed this “strong man” as chairman of the Council of Ministers in place of the “hidebound and soulless” Goremykin. At first, Stolypin, in a show of uncharacteristic modesty, refused to accept the honour, whereupon the tsar instructed him to kneel before his favourite icon. “Let us make the sign of the cross over ourselves and let us ask the lord to help us both in this difficult, perhaps historic, moment.” After this brief consultation with the Almighty, Nicholas then got down to serious business: “On what day would it be best to dissolve the Duma and what instructions do you propose to give to ensure order, chiefly in St Petersburg and Moscow?” With the help of the Almighty, the date of the coup was fixed for Sunday 9 (21) July.

The tsar need not have worried. The first Duma disappeared from history, not with a bang but a whimper. The liberals had not the slightest intention of stirring up the masses. Faced with the fait accompli of dissolution, some 200 deputies travelled to Vyborg, which, being under Finnish control, was relatively safe. There they issued the *Vyborg Manifesto* which called on the people to engage in acts of civil disobedience such as non-payment of taxes and refusal to accept military service, as a sign of protest at the dissolution. This document was drawn up by a joint parliamentary commission made up

mainly of the Cadets and Trudoviks. True to form, the Cadets were unenthusiastic even about these demands and later backed out of it. This farcical experience exposed the counter-revolutionary character of the Cadets and the hopelessness of such methods. Horrified at this quite predictable turn of events, the Menshevik Central Committee called on the workers to strike and demonstrate in support of the Duma. But this call went unheeded.

Lenin opposed the call for demonstrations in support of the Duma. Lenin was never afraid to tell the truth to the workers. His position was always dictated by an unerring revolutionary instinct and realism. What should the working class fight for? Not *for* bourgeois parliamentarism, *but against the main enemy—tsarist reaction*. The working class must not accept *any* responsibility for bourgeois pseudo-democracy or spread illusions in the counter-revolutionary liberals, but come out openly for an armed uprising against the autocracy, *not for the defence of the Cadet Duma, but for the Constituent Assembly, which will give land to the peasants, an eight-hour day to the workers and full democratic rights for all*. Here we have in a nutshell the difference between revolutionary Marxism and reformism.

While the Mensheviks participated in yet another pantomime with the Cadets, Lenin pressed home his call for a revolutionary united front with the Trudoviks. Under pressure from the mood of the working class and peasants, the Trudoviks actually agreed to a joint appeal with the Social Democrats for an armed uprising. Here, in outline, was the possibility of a “left bloc” with the Trudoviks, a united front of the organisations of the working class and peasant masses for the purpose of struggle against the autocracy *and* the liberals. While Lenin ruled out any deals with the bourgeois liberals, he accepted the possibility of temporary agreements with the Trudoviks, as the parliamentary representatives of the peasantry, and even occasionally voting together with the Trudoviks against the Cadets to win over the former. Such partial and temporary parliamentary agreements with the representatives of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie—without for a moment renouncing the right to criticise the Trudoviks for their inconsistency and vacillations—had nothing whatsoever in common with the political bloc with the liberals advocated by the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks’ position was to use the Duma as *a platform to expose the tsarist regime and the liberals, and at the same time for organising outside parliament in preparation for revolution*.

### **The Question of Guerrilla War**

In the period 1905-06, the revolutionary movement included an element of “guerrilla warfare”, with partisan detachments, armed expropriation, and other forms of armed struggle. But the fighting squads were always closely linked to the workers’ organisations. Thus, the Moscow military committee included not just RSDLP members, but also SRs, trade unionists (printers) and students. As we have seen, partisan groups were used for the purpose of defence against pogromists and the Black Hundred gangs. They also helped to protect meetings against police raids, where the presence of armed workers’ detachments was frequently an important factor in preventing violence. Occasionally, such groups could pass over to the offensive, though the target was not the

armed forces of the state (against which they could not hope to win in a straight fight), but strike-breakers and fascists. One armed workers' group staged an attack on a Black Hundred group in the Tver inn in Petersburg in January 1906. Where conflicts with the police took place, it was usually in connection with the release of political prisoners, as in the daring raid on the Riga police department in order to secure the release of arrested Latvian revolutionaries. Precisely in Latvia the guerrilla movement reached its highest intensity when, in December 1905, a number of towns were actually captured by armed detachments of insurgent workers, agricultural labourers and peasants before the uprising in Latvia was brutally suppressed by punitive expeditions under tsarist generals.

Other tasks included the capture of arms, the assassination of spies and police agents and also bank raids for funds. The initiative for the setting up of such guerrilla groups was frequently taken by the workers themselves. The Bolsheviks strove to gain the leadership of these groups, to give them an organised and disciplined form and provide them with a clear plan of action. There were, of course, serious risks entailed here. All kinds of adventurist, declassed and shady elements could get mixed up in these groups, which, once isolated from the movement of the masses, tended to degenerate along criminal lines to the point where they would become indistinguishable from mere groups of bandits. In addition to this, they were also wide open to penetration by provocateurs. As a rule it is far easier for the agents of the state to infiltrate militaristic and terrorist organisations than genuine revolutionary parties, especially where they are composed of educated cadres bound together by strong ideological ties, although even the latter are not immune to penetration, as we shall see later. However, Lenin was well aware of the dangers of degeneration posed by the existence of the armed groups. Strict discipline and firm control by party organisations and experienced revolutionary cadres partially guarded against such tendencies. But the only real control was that of the revolutionary mass movement.

As long as the guerrilla units acted as *auxiliaries to the mass movement* (that is, in the course of the revolutionary upswing) they played a useful and progressive role. But, wherever the guerrilla groups were separated from the mass revolutionary movement, they inevitably tended to degenerate. For this reason, Lenin considered it completely inadmissible to prolong their existence, once it was clearly established that the revolutionary movement was in irreversible decline. Once this stage was reached, he immediately called for the dissolution of all the guerrilla groups. In the initial stages, however, they played a positive role. There were many heroic and self-sacrificing people involved, working under the strict control of the Party. Such a man was the famous Armenian revolutionary Semeno Arshakovich Ter-Petrosan (Kamo).

One of the main reasons for continuing the tactic after the defeat of the December uprising was simply that the party was short of funds. Up to that time, the party had relied to a great extent on big donations from wealthy sympathisers. In the period of constitutional agitation before 1905, and during the initial period of the revolution, a large part of the "progressive" bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia looked upon the Social Democracy with approval and even admiration. They tended to see it as merely as a more radical expression of the bourgeois-democratic movement. The activities of the

revolutionary students and workers were regarded with indulgence, and even the kind of sneaking admiration which comes from the nostalgia for a lost youth. And as is natural in the outlook of hard-headed men of money, an element of calculation was involved. The bourgeoisie hoped to use the revolutionary movement as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with the autocracy for a share in government. But after October 1905, the attitude of the liberal bourgeoisie began to change. The tsar's manifesto having satisfied their basic demands, their enthusiasm rapidly began to cool. The Moscow rising finally convinced them that the workers meant business. This was getting to be a dangerous game! The reaction bared its teeth, and like Pontius Pilate, the liberals washed their hands of the whole affair. "We told you not to go too far! Don't provoke the reaction! Why not accept what's on offer? After all, half a loaf is better than a prison sentence."

The sudden drying up of funds placed the party in a difficult position. Under attack from all sides, the Party was desperately short of resources, especially as the bourgeois liberals had turned against the revolution. Many former wealthy businessmen and intellectual fellow travellers, who had earlier been prepared to give money to the revolutionaries for a variety of motives, now hastily moved away, suddenly recalling that they had careers and families to worry about. For the working class, however, there was no-where to retreat. This was now a life or death struggle. It was at this point that the question of expropriations assumed a burning importance. Kamo already had a long record of revolutionary activity, including imprisonment and escape from Baku prison, before he became famous for his part in the armed struggle. Cool-headed, brave and efficient, Kamo was the personification of the best type of Bolshevik activist. After the mutinies at Sveaborg and Kronstadt, the peasant movement grew in intensity. There seemed to be every possibility that the revolution was entering into a new stage. The question of accumulating arms acquired a fresh urgency. Kamo was in charge of obtaining weapons, but there was a severe problem of cash. At the Stockholm Congress the Mensheviks had got control of the Central Committee, and they were not keen on the idea of arming. "Letters and telegrams to the Central Committee went unanswered. Requests for money remained like a voice crying in the wilderness."[\[43\]](#)

Kamo did not flinch from taking the necessary action to arm the party. In a series of spectacular bank raids which drove the police frantic, large sums of money were "expropriated". Yet Kamo himself lived very modestly on 50 kopeks a day. Like other Bolshevik partisans, he was totally dedicated to the party and the cause of the working class. His legendary bravery and audacity were shown by the Tiflis bank raid in the summer of 1907. Travelling on a forged passport as a well-known Georgian nobleman, Kamo went to Tiflis to organise a major expropriation. On the morning of 23 June, dressed as an army officer, although he was suffering from wounds caused by an accidental explosion, Kamo led a spectacular attack which netted 250,000 roubles—a huge amount—from the State Bank. His later experiences read like an adventure novel. Having escaped to Germany, Kamo was arrested in Berlin with a suitcase full of dynamite. He had been betrayed by the *agent provocateur* Zhitomirsky.

Accused and indicted as a "terrorist-anarchist", for four years he pretended to be mad. As a punishment for his conduct, he was placed naked in a basement cell at sub-zero

temperatures for nine days. Sent to a prison for the criminally insane, he kept up the act. For four months he never lay down but stood with his face to a corner, standing first on one leg then another. The brutal treatment to which he was subjected included force-feeding, during which several of his teeth were broken. On two occasions he attempted suicide by hanging and opening his veins with a sharp bone. At first, the authorities believed he was feigning madness, but after six months of torture, they began to believe that his madness was the genuine article. Finally, in March 1909, the doctors decided that the state of the mentally deficient “anarcho-terrorist” Ter-Petrosan was quite satisfactory, that he was quiet and rational, and even able to perform handicraft and gardening. Being returned to prison, Kamo again feigned madness and was subjected to more torture. “Civilised” German doctors inserted needles under his fingernails, his body was burnt with red-hot irons, but to no avail. Kamo’s body was permanently scarred, but he kept up the pretence of insanity until finally the authorities decided that the upkeep of this foreign lunatic should not be paid by the German people, and ordered his extradition to Russia. Finally, he effected yet another daring escape from a mental hospital in Tiflis.

In her biography of Lenin, Krupskaya recalls how Kamo visited them in Paris: “He was very distressed to hear that a rupture had occurred between Ilyich and Bogdanov and Krassin. He was greatly attached to all three. Besides, he was unable to grasp the situation that had developed during the years he had spent in prison. Ilyich told him how things stood.

“Kamo asked me to buy him some almonds. He sat in our Paris kitchen eating almonds, as if in his native Georgia, and telling us about his arrest in Berlin, about the way he had simulated insanity, about the sparrow he had tamed in prison, etc. Listening to his stories, Ilyich felt extremely sorry for that brave, devoted, childishly naive man with the warm heart, who was so eager to perform deeds of valour, but who now did not know what to turn his hand to. His schemes were fantastic. Ilyich did not argue with him, but tried delicately to bring him back to earth with suggestions about organising the transportation of literature and so forth. In the end it was decided that Kamo was to go to Belgium, have an operation on his eyes there (he was cross-eyed, and this always gave him away to the police spies), and then make his way south to Russia and the Caucasus. Ilyich examined Kamo’s coat and said: ‘Haven’t you got a warm coat? You’ll be cold in this, walking about on deck.’ Ilyich himself always promenaded the deck incessantly when travelling by boat. Hearing that Kamo had no other coat, Ilyich got out the soft grey cloak which his mother had given him as a present in Stockholm and of which he was very fond, and gave it to Kamo. His talk with Ilyich, and the latter’s kindness, somewhat soothed Kamo.[\[44\]](#)

Like many others who had played an active part in the revolution, Kamo was now like a fish out of water in the period of reaction. The inactivity, the isolation, the pressures of émigré existence, all depressed and frustrated him. He soon returned to underground activity in his native Caucasus, where the revolutionary movement was on the eve of a new awakening. Re-arrested, he was given four death sentences, later commuted to 20 years’ penal servitude as a sign of the tsar’s magnanimity on the three hundredth anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. Kamo was sent to the penal prison at Kharkov where he sat out the war sewing dresses, underclothes and boots in the company of

common criminals who learned to respect the man they called Big Ivan. Even in this hellish place, the spirit of revolt did not die. In order not to have to take his hat off in the presence of the warders, he went bare-headed even in the coldest weather. Kamo was only released from this place by the February revolution, after which he immediately rejoined the ranks of the Bolshevik Party and played a heroic role in the Civil War. Having survived all these trials and tribulations, ironically, he died in a motor-cycle accident in 1922.

### **Lenin's Attitude to Guerrillaism**

The question of guerrilla war was closely linked to the perspective for a revival of the revolution, and the possibility that the peasant movement might give an impulse to the movement of the workers in the cities. The apparently theoretical discussions at the Fourth Congress on the agrarian question were but a pale reflection of a stark reality. The peasants' rebellion was on the upswing. Month by month the violent outbursts in the villages increased in number and intensity. But the consolidation of the Stolypin reaction forced Lenin to reconsider the position. A turning-point was the defeat of the mutinies at Sveaborg and Kronstadt. Whereas the Mensheviks had already given the movement up as lost, Lenin's tactics were directed towards winning over the left petty bourgeois, the poor peasants to the idea of an armed uprising, a movement in the villages which in turn could link up with the movement in the towns to bring about the overthrow of the autocracy. Nor was this perspective as utopian as might appear. While the working class of Petersburg and Moscow had suffered defeat, the movement in the villages was just beginning to get seriously underway. This in turn had an effect on the mass of peasants in uniform who made up the overwhelming majority of the tsarist army. Shaken by military defeat and months of revolution, the mood of the men in grey overcoats was becoming ever more unsettled. The critical point was reached on the night of the 17 July. A mutiny of soldiers and sailors erupted in the Sveaborg fortress near Helsingfors. When the St Petersburg RSDLP committee got news of the uprising it sent representatives to the sailors in an attempt to persuade them to postpone the action. But it was already too late.

Although the RSDLP's military organisation participated in the revolt—two Lieutenants, A.P. Yemelyanov and Y.L. Kokhansky, were Social Democrats—the rising was mainly under the influence of the Social Revolutionaries. Out of ten artillery companies, seven participated actively in the rising, which advanced revolutionary-democratic slogans: down with the autocracy, for freedom for the people, land to the peasants. The Finnish workers took action in support of the mutineers. A general strike was begun in Helsingfors on July 18, spreading to other towns. The movement lasted for three days, but, badly prepared and with no clearly thought-out plan of action, subjected to a heavy bombardment from pro-government ships, the Sveaborg rising was crushed. The mutineers were handed over to the tender mercies of the tsarist courts-martial. Forty-three men were executed and hundreds others sent to penal servitude or imprisoned. This was no isolated case. Other mutinies occurred elsewhere. The news of the Sveaborg events caused a ferment in the naval garrison in Kronstadt and an actual mutiny on the cruiser *Pamyat' Azova* near Revel. It seems that in this case, the RSDLP had been planning an action, but was disrupted by the arrest of the local military and workers' organisation on

July 9. The government was aware of the plans for an uprising from its network of spies and quickly acted to smother the revolt. More than 2,500 Kronstadt mutineers were arrested. As in Sveaborg, the courts-martial were pitiless: 36 men were sentenced to death; 130 were sentenced to penal servitude; a further 316 were imprisoned, and 935 sent to corrective battalions.

The impact of the peasant movement was clearly discernible in the mutinies, which also contained the negative side of all peasant *jacqueries* in history—lack of perspective and formlessness—which enables a small force of determined disciplined officers used to command to subordinate to their will a far larger number of troops who lack discipline, organisation and a clear plan of action, and who have been conditioned all their lives to obey. These were indeed the last throes of the revolution. After Sveaborg, the general outcome was no longer seriously in doubt. Reaction was triumphant, and celebrated its victory in the customary fashion—with a new wave of arrests, summary court martials, shootings, lock-outs. Unemployment soared. And as Trotsky explained at the time, this onset of mass unemployment, coming in the wake of a severe political defeat, could not have the effect of reviving the fighting spirits of the workers, but precisely the opposite. The workers were stunned and disoriented. It would take time for them to recover. Trotsky predicted—and he was shown to be correct—that there would be no revival of the revolutionary movement in Russia until there was some kind of upturn in the economy.

Marxists have always conceived the peasant war as an *auxiliary* of the workers in the struggle for power. That position was first developed by Marx during the German revolution of 1848, when he argued that the German revolution could only triumph as a second edition of the Peasants' War. That is to say, the movement of the workers in the towns would have to draw behind it the peasant masses. The Bolsheviks also explained that it was the workers in the cities who had to lead the peasants behind them. It is important to note that during the Russian revolution the industrial working class represented no more than 10 per cent of the population. Yet the proletariat played the leading role in the Russian revolution, drawing behind itself the multi-millioned mass of poor peasants—the natural ally of the proletariat. No reference or hint at the possibility that the peasantry can bring about a socialist revolution can be found in the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. The reason for that is the extreme heterogeneity of the peasantry as a class. It is divided into many layers, from the landless labourers (who are really rural proletarians) to the rich peasants who employ other peasants as wage labourers. They do not have a common interest and therefore cannot play an independent role in society. Historically they have supported different classes or groups in the cities. The only class able to lead a successful socialist revolution is the working class. This is not for sentimental reasons but because of the place it occupies in society and the collective character of its role in production.

By its very nature, *guerrilla warfare is the classical weapon of the peasantry, and not the working class*. It is suited for conditions of armed struggle in inaccessible rural areas—mountains, jungle, etc.—where the difficulty of the terrain makes it complicated to deploy regular troops and where the support of the rural masses provides the necessary

logistic support and cover for the guerrillas to operate. In the course of a revolution in a backward country with a sizeable peasant population, guerrilla warfare can act as a useful auxiliary for the revolutionary struggle of the workers in the towns. But it would never have occurred to Lenin to put forward the idea of guerrillism as a substitute for the conscious movement of the working class. Guerrilla tactics, from a Marxist standpoint, are only permissible as a subordinate and auxiliary part of the socialist revolution. This was precisely Lenin's position in 1905. It had nothing in common with the kind of individual terrorist tactics pursued by the Narodnaya Volya and their heirs, the Social Revolutionary Party, still less the insane tactics of the modern terrorists and "urban guerrilla" organisations which are the very antithesis of a genuine Leninist policy. [\[A\]](#)

In his article on guerrilla war, Lenin gives a graphic picture of the situation: "The phenomenon in which we are interested is the *armed* struggle. It is conducted by individuals and by small groups. Some belong to revolutionary organisations, while others (the *majority* in certain parts of Russia) do not belong to any organisation. Armed struggle pursues two *different* aims, which must be *strictly* distinguished: in the first place, this struggle aims at assassinating individuals, chiefs and subordinates in the army and police; in the second place, it aims at the confiscation of monetary funds both from the government and from private persons. The confiscated funds go partly into the treasury of the Party, partly for the special purpose of arming and preparing for an uprising, and partly for the maintenance of persons engaged in the struggle we are describing. The big expropriations (such as the Caucasian, involving over 200,000 roubles, and Moscow, involving 875,000 roubles) went in fact first and foremost to revolutionary parties—small expropriations go mostly, and sometimes entirely, to the maintenance of the 'expropriators'. This form of struggle undoubtedly became widely developed and extensive only in 1906, i.e., after the December uprising. The intensification of the political crisis to the point of an armed struggle and, in particular, the intensification of poverty, hunger and unemployment in town and country, was one of the important causes of the struggle by the vagabond elements of the population, the lumpenproletariat and anarchist groups."

Lenin insisted that armed struggle must be part of the revolutionary mass movement, and specified the conditions in which it was permissible: "1) the sentiments of the masses be taken into account; 2) the conditions of the working class movement in the given locality be reckoned with, and 3) care be taken that the forces of the proletariat should not be frittered away." And he also made it clear that, far from being a panacea, guerrilla war was only one possible method of struggle permissible only "at a time when the mass movement has actually reached the point of an uprising".

The danger of degeneration inherent in such activity becomes an absolute certainty the moment the guerrilla groups are isolated from the mass movement. In the period following 1906, when the workers' movement was in decline and the revolutionaries were reeling from a series of body-blows, the guerrilla organisations increasingly displayed signs that they were ceasing to be useful auxiliary organs of the revolutionary party, and becoming transformed into groups of adventurers, or even worse. Even while defending the possibility of guerrilla tactics as a kind of rearguard action against reaction

at a moment when he still expected the revolutionary movement to revive, Lenin warned against “anarchism, Blanquism, the old terrorism, the acts of individuals isolated from the masses, which demoralise the workers, repel wide strata of the population, disorganise the movement and injure the revolution,” and added that “examples in support of this appraisal can easily be found in the events reported every day in the newspapers”.[\[45\]](#)

As time passed, Lenin came to understand that the tactic of expropriation had outlived its usefulness. He was already coming round to this point of view before the Tiflis raid. But, given the acute shortage of funds, accepted the windfall by way of exception. However, the money from the raid did the party no good. The entire sum was in 500 rouble banknotes, impossible to exchange in Russia. The money was sent abroad, but to no result. The provocateur Zhitomirsky, who occupied a key position in the Bolsheviks’ foreign organisation, alerted the police to the scheme. Litvinov, the future Soviet ambassador to London, was arrested while attempting to exchange the notes in Paris. The same fate awaited Olga Ravich, who later became Zinoviev’s wife, in Stockholm. But although the booty from Tiflis proved useless to the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks seized upon it to make a scandal that dragged on for years. The question of expropriations was also the occasion for heated discussions within the Bolshevik faction, where it soured relations. Finally, at the insistence of the Mensheviks, the question of expropriations was placed on the agenda of the Party control commission in January 1910. A resolution was passed condemning expropriations as an inadmissible violation of party discipline, while recognising that the participants in these actions had not meant to damage the labour movement, but had merely been guided by “a faulty understanding of Party interests”.[\[46\]](#)

Not everyone who participated in the guerrilla movement was a Kamo. As the reaction dragged on and the workers’ movement remained in a depressed state, the dangers of the movement falling into the hands of declassed elements and actual criminals multiplied. Prominent among those who, in contradiction with Lenin’s position, persisted in the tactic of guerrillaism and expropriations long after the conditions for them had ceased to exist was Koba-Stalin. Such tactics seriously undermined the movement. Olminsky, who was close to Lenin at this time, wrote: “Not a few of the fine youth perished on the gibbet; others degenerated; still others were disappointed in the revolution. At the time people at large began to confound revolutionists with ordinary bandits. Later, when the revival of the labour movement began, that movement was slowest in those cities where the ‘exes’ (expropriations) had been most numerous. (As an example, I might name Baku and Saratov.)”[\[47\]](#)

### **The Stolypin Reaction**

The Stolypin reaction began with draconian measures. On 19 August he set up field courts martial which meted out savage sentences against anyone who had been involved in revolutionary activity. Thousands of people were tortured, executed and exiled. Thousands of peasants were tried in military field courts. “Justice” was summary. Most of these trials were over in four days. The usual sentence was death, and 600 persons were executed in the first period. The “reformist” premier orchestrated a campaign of

terror unprecedented even in the bloody annals of Russian tsarism. In the period 1907-09 more than 26,000 were brought before the tsarist tribunals. Of these, 5,086 were sentenced to death. By 1909 the gaols were filled to overflowing with 170,000 people. But Stolypin was astute enough to realise that the revolutionary movement could not be extinguished by violence alone. There could be no question of a lasting solution unless the land question were addressed. With characteristic decision, Stolypin moved to tackle the problem through a land reform from the top. In order to consolidate itself, the reaction needed a broader social base. The bourgeois and landlord oligarchy, fused together in one reactionary bloc, looked around for allies in the village.

Land relations in pre-revolutionary Russia were characterised by extreme backwardness. The peasants lived in 120,000 village communes, eking out an existence on the basis of subsistence economy with an extremely low productivity of labour. Peasant rights were non-existent. Remnants of decaying feudalism still remained, despite the fact that serfdom had been abolished in 1861. The old feudal labour service persisted, along with the old serf mentality. Land hunger and a sense of deep resentment against the landlord simmered beneath the surface, but, finding no organised expression, remained latent like an inactive volcano. At the beginnings of the new century, the peasant had heard the echoes of revolt from the towns and something stirred deep within him: “No rumours came to me about any little books (revolutionary propaganda),’ a peasant said after the peasant outbreaks of 1902. ‘I think if we lived better, the little books would not be important, no matter what was written in them. What’s terrible is not the little books, but this; there isn’t anything to eat’.”

Whereas Lenin advocated a revolutionary settling of accounts with the landlords, Stolypin’s reform represented a reactionary bourgeois solution to the agrarian problem. A new law was drafted which forcibly broke up the commune to the advantage of the “bourgeois” minority of the peasantry, the so-called strong peasant or *kulak*: It was, to quote its author, “a wager, not on the needy and the drunken, but on the sturdy and the strong”. The prior condition for the introduction of capitalist agriculture into Russia was the breaking up of the communes and the creation of a class of rich peasants. “The natural counterweight to the communal principle,” affirmed Stolypin, “is individual ownership. It is also a guarantee of order, since the small owner is the cell on which rests all stable order in the state.”<sup>[48]</sup> The *ukaz* was issued in late 1906 and finally became law on 14 June 1910. The basic thrust of the law was to give peasants the right to leave the village commune—the *obshchina*—though in practice only wealthy peasants had the means to be independent. “The reform was put into effect with tremendous energy,” Kerensky writes, “but also with gross disregard for the most elementary tenets of law and justice. The government, which was ‘backing the strongest,’ expropriated the land belonging to the commune and gave it to those well-to-do peasants who opted to withdraw from it. They were given the best plots of land, in complete violation of the commune’s right to tenure. And the new owners of this land were given loans, amounting to 90 per cent of cost, with which to set up their farms.”

Stolypin’s reform meant a violent shaking-up of relations on the land. By the end, perhaps as much as two-thirds of the land was in peasant hands. Yet in spite of all the

benefits offered them, by the first day of January, 1915, only 2,719,000 peasant households could say that their holdings had become their private property (about 22 or 24 per cent of the total amount of available peasant land). How did the majority of peasants view Stolypin's land reform? "For the most part," Kerensky affirms, "the peasants took an unfavourable or even hostile view of the Stolypin land reform for two reasons. First, and most important, the peasant did not want to go against the commune, and Stolypin's idea of 'backing the strongest' ran counter to the peasant's outlook on life. He had no wish to become a semi-landowner at the expense of his neighbours." Such a policy provided no solution to the pressing problems of the Russian peasant. But, in truth, the burning desire of the peasants for land was expressed in a whole series of uprisings in the villages which served notice on the autocracy that these "dark masses" were no longer content to support the unbearable burden of landlord oppression in silence. The proverbial patience of the Russian muzhik had reached breaking point. Here lay a mortal danger for the autocracy and an inexhaustible reserve of strength for the revolution. Thus, more than ever, the fate of the proletariat was inextricably bound up with the question of a revolutionary solution of the land problem. Kerensky concluded gloomily: "By his land reform Stolypin has thrown the brand of civil war into the Russian countryside."<sup>[49]</sup>

Looking back on the years of reaction (1907-10), Lenin wrote in 1920: "Tsarism was victorious. All the revolutionary and opposition parties were smashed. Depression, demoralisation, splits, discord, defection, and pornography took the place of politics. There was an ever greater drift towards philosophical idealism; mysticism became the garb of counter-revolutionary sentiments. At the same time, however, it was this great defeat that taught the revolutionary parties and the revolutionary class a real and very useful lesson, a lesson in historical dialectics, a lesson in an understanding of the political struggle, and in the art and science of waging that struggle. It is at moments of need that one learns who one's friends are. Defeated armies learn their lesson."<sup>[50]</sup>

The workers' movement was badly hit, and not only by arrests. Between 1906-10, 500 trade union organisations were shut down. Union membership plunged as unemployment rose inexorably. Membership of legal trade unions fell from 246,000, to 50,000, then to 13,000. The working day was lengthened to 12 hours, 15 in some cases. The rapid rise in unemployment, partly reflecting a world economic crisis, made the position of the workers still worse. In the Moscow area about a quarter of the metalworkers were out of work in 1907. A similar situation existed elsewhere. Coming on the heels of a serious political defeat, the onset of mass unemployment took the fighting spirit out of the working class. The employers drew up black lists of activists, who were systematically expelled from the workplaces. Wages were driven down.

The downturn in the fortunes of the revolution inevitably provoked a series of internal crises and splits in all of the left parties. This is true not only of the Social Democrats, but also of the Social Revolutionaries. To numerical decline and financial difficulties were added scandals and splits. None other than the SRs' leading terrorist and chief of its Battle Organisation, Evno Azef, was unmasked as a provocateur. There was a right-left split in the SRs between the popular socialists (the right wing) and the Maximalists on the left who demanded immediate socialisation of the land and factories. This was, in itself,

quite a significant development, anticipating the split away of the Left SRs in 1917. At the SRs Fifth Party Congress in May 1909, the delegate from Petersburg, Andreyev pointed out that, in an organisational sense, the party had ceased to exist in the capital; only isolated individuals were left.<sup>[51]</sup> There was even a split in the tiny anarchist movement between the advocates of terrorism and the anarcho-syndicalists.

Meanwhile, the re-unification of the RSDLP did not signify an end to the inner-party struggle, but quite the opposite. Not only did relations between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks steadily worsen, but a whole series of splits opened up within the two main factions. The Menshevik right wing (Axelrod, Cherevanin) not only advocated a deal with the Cadets, but also put forward the idea of a “labour congress” of a non-party character—a kind of reformist Labour Party in place of the old revolutionary Social Democracy. Here, at a very early date, we already have the germs of liquidationism. The disease of class collaborationism was widespread among all shades of Menshevik opinion. Plekhanov wrote an *Open Letter to Conscious Workers* in the left Cadet organ *Tovarishch*, calling on them to support the liberal bourgeoisie. The Menshevik Basilev went so far as to call for a fusion of Social Democrats with the SRs, and Cadets in one constitutional party, a proposal which Lenin called the “Mont Blanc of opportunism”. The only way out of the impasse was the immediate convening of a new party congress. Lenin waged a tireless campaign for this, basing himself on the Petersburg committee.

The reaction had won the battle but was not yet confident in itself. The regime combined the carrot with the stick. The tsar convened the second Duma, while stepping up repression. Once again, the issue was posed: should Social Democrats participate in elections to the Duma—yes or no? By this time, Lenin had come round to the view that boycott would be wrong. He had already come to the conclusion that it had been a mistake to boycott the first (Witte) Duma, although he was in a minority of one in this opinion among the leaders of the Bolshevik faction. In September 1906 he wrote that the boycott tactic must be reconsidered. By their very nature tactics cannot be regarded as something static and fixed for all time. They must reflect the existing situation in society, the psychology of the masses, and the stage the movement is at. If the revolution was in retreat, the party could not renounce any legal arena of struggle. It had a duty to utilise each and every opening, each and every platform which would serve to maintain the party’s links with the masses. To behave in any other way would be to make the party into a sect. A sectarian lives in his own little world, remote from the masses, and for this very reason, the concrete questions of tactics are a matter of indifference to him. Since he has invented his own (imaginary) proletariat in an ideal (equally imaginary) world, he has no need to strive to establish contacts with the real working class and its existing organisations. In his article, *Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International* (1935), Trotsky characterises sectarianism as follows:

“The sectarian looks upon the life of society as a great school, with himself as a teacher there. In his opinion, the working class should put aside its less important matters, and assemble in solid rank around his rostrum. Then the task would be solved.

“Though he swears by Marxism in every sentence, the sectarian is the direct negation of dialectical materialism, which takes experience as its point of departure and always returns to it. A sectarian does not understand the dialectical action and reaction between a finished programme and a living—that is to say, imperfect and unfinished—mass struggle... Sectarianism is hostile to dialectics (not in words but in action) in the sense that it turns its back upon the actual development of the working class.”[\[52\]](#)

The matter is completely different for a genuine Marxist tendency which must find an answer to the question: how is it possible to link the finished scientific programme of Marxism with the necessarily unfinished, contradictory and inchoate movement of the masses? Such a question cannot be answered by repeating abstract formulae. The link must be established at every stage by taking into account the real conditions in which the movement is unfolding. For the advanced Social Democratic workers, it was clear that the Duma could not resolve a single one of the problems facing the proletariat and poor peasants. But for the masses, especially in the countryside, this was far from evident. Considerable illusions had been aroused in the possibility of achieving reforms through parliament, especially that most essential reform of all—agrarian reform. The village sent its representatives to the Duma, represented by the Trudovik (Labour) bloc, and waited impatiently for results. Even among the workers, while there were fewer illusions in the Duma, the defeat of the revolution meant that the latter began to occupy greater attention.

As a general rule, you only boycott a parliament when there is a realistic prospect of replacing it with something better, as was the case in November 1917. But where this is not the case, to boycott elections *means only that the workers' party is boycotting itself*. Such a position has nothing in common with Leninism. Lenin was in favour of flexible tactics, reflecting the changed situation. As opposed to the Mensheviks who favoured electoral deal with Cadets —the bourgeois liberals—Lenin supported electoral deals with the Trudoviks and SRs against the right parties *and* against the liberals. The idea of a Left Bloc of the parties of the proletariat and the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie against the bourgeois liberals was really an extension of the policy of the united front to the electoral plane. In the Duma it was permissible to vote together with these parties on specific points where principled agreement existed, while the Social Democrats kept their hands free at all times to criticise the inconsistent, ambiguous and contradictory policies of the petty bourgeois parties.

The golden rule was: the absolute independence of the workers' party at all times from all other tendencies (including the radical petty bourgeoisie); no programmatic blocs: no mixing up of banners; complete freedom of criticism. Above all, it was necessary to wage an implacable struggle against the bourgeois liberals. The essential aim was in fact to drive a wedge between the political representatives of the petty bourgeoisie and the Cadets. The outspoken rejection of reformist and parliamentary illusions and all forms of class collaboration—these were the essential features of Lenin's policy in this period, reflected in a hundred speeches, articles and resolutions. This policy in turn was the reflection of a longer-term strategy—to fight for the hegemony of the proletariat over the petty bourgeois masses, especially the peasantry. The results of this strategy were fully revealed in the October revolution.

This issue was settled at the November 1906 Conference, which, because of the prevailing situation of reaction, was held at Tammerfors in Finland. This was really a defining moment in the history of the party. The Mensheviks and Bund openly supported a bloc with the Cadets. Lenin regarded this as the decisive step which marked the definitive passing over of the Mensheviks to opportunism.[\[53\]](#) But there was now a change of mood in the party, reflected in a growing support for Lenin's position which got the backing of 14 delegates, (65 per cent of the conference) expressed in a "minority report" stressing the need for class independence and that the only agreements permissible were episodic blocs with the revolutionary petty bourgeois democrats. The Tammerfors Conference revealed the existence of sharp internal conflicts, but it did not lead to a split. Lenin confined himself to arguing for his ideas and fighting for the majority, confident that experience would prove him to be correct. To have split the party at such a time would have been irresponsible. More time was needed for the disputed questions on tactics to be clarified by events. However, the internal situation in the RSDLP was complicated. A de facto split on election tactics took place in the St Petersburg organisation which was finally settled at a local Conference held in early January 1907 which rejected blocs with the Cadets. Having lost the argument and the vote, the Menshevik delegates walked out to pursue their separate policy. This was a harbinger of future events. While formally united, the tensions between the different factions constantly increased.

Article four of the resolution on election tactics passed by the Conference states that "local agreements with revolutionary and oppositionist-democratic parties" were permitted "if, during the election campaign, they saw that there was a danger of the parties of the Right getting in". In practice, this was used by the Mensheviks to support Cadet candidates in many areas. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks argued that "in the first stage of the electoral campaign, i.e. before the masses, they must, as a general rule, come forward as an independent party, and present Party candidates only for election". Exceptions were allowed "in urgent cases, and then only with parties which wholly subscribed to the principal slogans of our immediate political struggle, i.e., which recognised the necessity of an armed insurrection, and fought for a democratic republic. In addition, such coalitions may be formed only with regard to the drawing up of a common list of candidates, and can in no way interfere with the political agitation of the Social Democrats".[\[54\]](#)

The elections to the second Duma took place on 20 February 1907. Despite everything its composition was more left than that of the first Duma. The left was represented by 222 deputies out of a total of 518. The breakdown was as follows: 65 Social Democrats, 104 Trudoviks, 37 SRs, 16 "popular socialists". This compared with just 54 right wingers (monarchists and Octobrists). The real losers were the Cadets who had lost support to both the right and the left and now had only 98, as against 184 in the first Duma.[\[B\]](#) There were more peasants in the second Duma than the first. However, the leftish composition of the Duma was paradoxically a symptom of the revolution's decline, not of its rise. Although the masses—not just the workers but also the petty bourgeoisie—attempted to take their revenge on the autocracy by voting for the left in the Duma elections, they were no longer capable of a new insurrection.

The tactic of participating in elections was amply justified by the results. By dropping the boycott, they secured 65 deputies, mainly at the expense of the Cadets. The workers returned Social Democratic candidates on the first ballot. In Petersburg, oddly enough, the SR Party got many of its candidates elected. In the villages, many Left Bloc candidates were returned. The situation within the party was extremely fluid, and opinions were changing and veering in all kinds of directions. Differences began to emerge within the Menshevik faction, part of which joined the Left Bloc. In practice the differences between the right (monarchist/landlords) and Cadets were minimal: the “liberal” bourgeois defended the interests of their landlord cousins, while reading them lectures on the best methods of keeping the masses in subjugation. In fact, many of the Cadets were themselves big landlords. The central question in all the Duma’s deliberations was *the agrarian question*. The Social Democratic parliamentary fraction provided a real rallying point for the left. But the fraction was still dominated by the Mensheviks, who had 33 deputies plus a number of sympathisers.<sup>[C]</sup> The Bolsheviks numbered 15 and three sympathisers.

Differences between the two factions surfaced immediately. Consistent with their policy of striving for deals with the Cadets, the Mensheviks proposed a Cadet for Speaker, while the Bolsheviks advocated either a Trudovik or a non-party peasant. The Social Democratic deputies in the Duma fought consistently to support the peasants’ demands. But life itself was revealing the glaring inadequacy of the old RSDLP agrarian programme. The Fourth Party Congress limited its demands to the municipalisation of land. But the situation had progressed far beyond such half-measures. The peasants demanded nationalisation, and they did not limit themselves to speeches. There were 131 “incidents” in March, 193 in April, 211 in May and 216 in June. The debates in the Tauride palace were lit up by the bonfires of revolt that blazed in the villages.

## NOTES

[A] Such tactics led to defeat after defeat where they was put into practice in modern times, most notoriously in the 1970s in Latin America. It is a striking proof of how far the movement has been thrown back since the Second World War that ideas belonging to the prehistory of the movement, which should long ago have been consigned to the dust-bin of history, have re-emerged, parading as something new and original.

[B] The figures for the representation of the parties in the Duma have been calculated differently by different authors. Sometimes the discrepancies are just one or two, but sometimes they are quite important. For instance, the *Istoriya* puts the number of Trudovik deputies at 104, Kochan at 98, and Pares at 201! This may be the result of the somewhat unstable lines of division between the formations on the “right” and “left”. In the given example, Pares probably confused the total number of peasant deputies with those specifically organised in the “labour” (Trudovik) group. Such discrepancies are common in this field. The figures reproduced here are from the *Istoriya KPSS*.

[C] Here is another discrepancy. The *Istoriya* puts the number of sympathisers at three; Kochan at 11.

- [41] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 123.
- [42] Kerensky, *Memoirs*, pp. 94-5.
- [43] S.F. Medvedeva, *Kamo, The life of a great revolutionist*, p. 18.
- [44] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 212-3.
- [45] LCW, *Guerrilla Warfare*, vol. 11, p. 216, p. 222 (footnote), p. 219 and pp. 216-7.
- [46] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 110.
- [47] Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 98-9.
- [48] Quoted in B.H. Sumner, *A Survey of Russian History*, pp. 115 and 116.
- [49] Kerensky, *Memoirs*, p. 97 and 98.
- [50] LCW, 'Left-wing' Communism—An Infantile Disorder, vol. 31, pp. 27-8.
- [51] See McKean, op. cit., p. 62.
- [52] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, p. 153.
- [53] See Lenin, *Collected Works* in Russian, vol. 14, p. 125.
- [54] Quoted in Piatnitsky, op. cit., pp. 146-7.

## **Part Three: The Period of Reaction**

[section 4 of 6]

### **The Fifth (London) Congress**

The conduct of the Duma fraction gave rise to considerable discontent at rank-and-file level. This was one of the reasons for calling the Fifth (London) Congress. Throughout the months of February and March 1907 the Party's attention was concentrated on preparations for the Congress. As could be expected, the agenda was polarised between conflicting resolutions presented by the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. The Congress was originally going to be held in Denmark, but the tsarist authorities leaned on the government in Copenhagen and persuaded it to refuse permission. They then attempted to hold it across the water in Malmö, but the Swedish government made it clear they were not welcome, so they had to pack their bags yet again. The Congress eventually ended up in London, where it took up residence in the Brotherhood non-denominational Church in

Southgate Road, Whitechapel which, by an irony of history, belonged to those arch-enemies of revolutionism, the right wing reformist Fabian Society.<sup>[A]</sup> “I can still see vividly before me,” recalled Gorky many years later, “those bare wooden walls unadorned to the point of absurdity, the lancet windows looking down on a small, narrow hall which might have been a classroom in a poor school.”<sup>[55]</sup> In such inauspicious surroundings, the revolutionaries gathered to hammer out the fate of the Russian revolution.

At seven o’clock in the evening of 30 April the Fifth Congress opened. It lasted almost three weeks, until 19 May 1907. It was a critical meeting. Despite the difficult conditions, this was the most representative gathering of Russian Social Democracy yet. There were no fewer than 303 delegates, as well as a further 39 with consultative vote. There was one delegate for every 500 party members (a total of 150,000 members in 145 party organisations) of which, 100 were from the RSDLP, eight organisations of the Polish and Lithuanian Social Democrats, plus seven Latvian and 30 Bundist groups. These were the battle-hardened troops of the revolution. Although most were still in their twenties, there was scarcely anyone who had not served their apprenticeship in prison and exile. Since the previous congress, 12 months earlier, the Russian section of the Party had increased from 31,000 to 77,000 members, i.e. two and a half times. However, these figures must be treated with caution. The sharpness of the factional struggle led both sides to inflate the figures of membership. Even bearing this in mind, it is clear that the Party had continued to grow, even in the period of reaction, reflecting, not the mood of the masses, but the radicalisation of a layer of the most conscious workers and students. For the same reason, the party’s left wing grew at a faster rate than the right wing.

The factional line-up was balanced on a knife’s edge. At the beginning of 1906, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in St Petersburg were almost equal. But in the interval between the first and second Dumas, the Bolsheviks began to pull ahead. By the time of the second Duma, Trotsky recalls, they had “already won complete dominance among the advanced workers”.<sup>[56]</sup> This shift was reflected in the composition of the London Congress. The Stockholm Congress had been Menshevik; the London Congress was Bolshevik. At the previous congress, the breakdown had been 13,000 Bolsheviks and 18,000 Mensheviks (one delegate for every 300 party members). Now the situation was different. Of the full delegates, 89 were Bolsheviks, 88 Mensheviks.

This was the most remarkable galaxy of talent ever assembled at a Social Democratic congress. Plekhanov, Martov, Axelrod, Deutsch and Dan were brilliant exponents of the Menshevik cause. The Bolshevik delegates included, among others, Lenin, Bogdanov, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bubnov, Nogin, Shaumyan, Lyadov, Pokrovsky, Tomsky. Gorky, the well-known writer, who was close to the Bolsheviks was also present. Trotsky, recently escaped from exile, attended as a non-factional Social Democrat. There was also a young Georgian known as Ivanov who had no voice in the proceedings as he had no credentials from any recognised party organisation in the Caucasus, which was represented by Shaumyan—later murdered by the British intervention forces in Baku—and Mikha Tskhakaya, who travelled with Lenin in the famous “sealed train” in 1917. This silent visitor called Ivanov later gained notoriety under the name of Stalin. But at

this stage he was unknown in Party circles outside his local area and his presence at the congress passed completely unnoticed.

A major factor was the participation of the non-Russian parties which generally stood on the left, thus giving the Bolsheviks an overall majority. Among the delegates from Poland and Lithuania, were Rosa Luxemburg, Markhlevsky and Tyszka (Jogiches), who formed part of a closely-knit group of 44 which swung the congress sharply to the left. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the future head of the Cheka, was to have been part of the Polish delegation but had been arrested en route. The equally radical Latvian Social Democrats were headed by another future leader of the Cheka and Red Army, Hermann Danishevsky. The changed composition of the congress was duly noted by the Police Department which reported that “the Menshevik groups in their present state of mind do not present as serious a danger as the Bolsheviks”. They also included the following appraisal: “‘Among the orators who in the course of discussion spoke in defence of the extreme revolutionary point of view were Stanislav (Bolshevik), Trotsky, Pokrovsky (Bolshevik), Tyszka (Polish Social Democrat); in defence of the opportunist point of view—Martov and Plekhanov,’ (leaders of the Mensheviks). ‘There is clear intimation,’ the *Okhrana* agent continued, ‘that the Social Democrats are turning toward revolutionary methods of struggle ... Menshevism, which blossomed thanks to the Duma, declined in due time, when the Duma demonstrated its impotence, giving ample scope to Bolshevik, or rather, to extreme revolutionary tendencies.’”[\[57\]](#)

The verbatim account of this Congress makes fascinating reading. Here we have the first real debate between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on tactics and strategy. Compared to this, the differences at the Second Congress appear to be a mere anticipation—as, indeed, they were. Even the debates on the nationalisation versus municipalisation of the land at the Stockholm Congress did not really get to the heart of the problem, which emerged with absolute clarity at the Fifth Congress. On the agenda were reports from the Central Committee and the Duma fraction; the Party’s attitude to the bourgeois parties; the question of a Labour Congress; the Duma; the trade unions; the partisan movement; unemployment; the economic crisis; the lockout; organisational questions; the International Congress and work in the army.

Martov opened the Congress with the Central Committee report. Since the outgoing CC was overwhelmingly dominated by the Mensheviks, Bogdanov gave a counter-report stating the Bolshevik point of view. The Congress thus opened with a heated discussion. But in contrast to the previous Congress, the Mensheviks were now on the defensive. When Plekhanov in his opening address assured the delegates that there were no revisionists in the Party, Lenin bent down, convulsed with silent laughter. Nearly everyone present at this Congress belonged to one faction or another, and this fact was reflected in the election of the presidium. This was composed of five delegates, one from each organised group. The Mensheviks chose Dan, the Bundists Medem, the Latvians Azis-Rozin, the Poles Tyszka and the Bolsheviks Lenin. The Mensheviks showed their spiteful attitude from the outset by calling Lenin’s credentials into question. At this, the congress exploded, with delegates shouting and waving their fists at each other. Order

was restored when the Mensheviks withdrew their objections, but the opening set the stage for the rest of the congress.

### **The Debate on the Bourgeois Parties**

The key question which conditioned everything else was the attitude to the bourgeois parties. This question was thoroughly debated at the Congress. Four people led off on this subject—Lenin, Martynov, Rosa Luxemburg, and Abramovich. Lenin, who spoke first, highlighted the central importance of this issue: “The question of our attitude to the bourgeois parties is the nub of the differences in matters of principle that have long divided Russian Social Democracy into two camps. Even before the first major successes of the revolution, or even before the revolution—if it is permissible to express oneself in this way about the first half of 1905—two distinct points of view on this question already existed. The disputes were over the appraisal of the bourgeois revolution in Russia. The two trends in the Social Democracy agreed that this revolution was a bourgeois revolution. But they parted company in their understanding of this category, and in their appraisal of the practical and political conclusions to be drawn from it. One wing of the Social Democracy—the Mensheviks—interpreted this concept to mean that the bourgeoisie was the motive force in the bourgeois revolution, and that the proletariat could occupy only the position of the ‘extreme opposition’. The proletariat could not undertake the task of conducting the revolution independently or of leading it.”

Lenin accepted that “the aims of the revolution that is now taking place in Russia do not exceed the bounds of bourgeois society... But from this it does not at all follow that the bourgeoisie is the motive force or leader in the revolution. Such a conclusion would be a vulgarisation of Marxism, would be a failure to understand the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie”. And he concludes “that the bourgeoisie can be neither the motive force nor the leader in the revolution. Only the proletariat is capable of consummating the revolution, that is, of achieving a complete victory. But this victory can be achieved only provided the proletariat succeeds in getting a large section of the peasantry to follow its lead”. The Mensheviks complained of the “one-sided hostility” of the proletariat towards liberalism. Lenin replied that the bourgeois liberals did not represent a revolutionary, but a *counter-revolutionary* force: “The Mensheviks say that our bourgeoisie are ‘unprepared to fight’. Actually, however, the bourgeoisie were *prepared* to fight, prepared to fight *against* the proletariat, to fight against the ‘excessive’ victories of the revolution... To maintain silence at the present time about the counter-revolutionary nature of our bourgeoisie means departing entirely from the Marxist point of view, means completely forgetting the viewpoint of the class struggle.”[\[58\]](#)

In this debate, Rosa Luxemburg was naturally close to Lenin. She poured scorn on the Menshevik argument: “It turns out that this revolutionary liberalism striving for power, to which we are urged to adapt the tactics of the proletariat, and to please which they are ready to restrict the proletariat’s demands, this revolutionary Russian liberalism exists not in reality, but in the imagination, it is an invention, it is a phantom. (Applause.) And this policy, erected on a lifeless schema and on invented relations and not taking into account

the special tasks of the proletariat in this revolution, calls itself 'revolutionary realism'." [59]

Trotsky moved an amendment which Lenin commented on favourably. Here for the first time, Trotsky had the opportunity of expounding his views on the revolution before the Party. His speech in the debate on the attitude to the bourgeois parties, for which he was given only 15 minutes, was twice commented on by Lenin, who emphatically agreed with the views expressed by Trotsky, especially his call for a Left Bloc against the liberal bourgeoisie: "These facts," commented Lenin, "are sufficient for me to acknowledge that Trotsky has come close to our views. Quite apart from the question of 'uninterrupted revolution', *we have solidarity on fundamental points in the attitude towards the bourgeois parties*." On Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution, Lenin was not prepared to commit himself. But on the fundamental question of the tasks of the revolutionary movement, there was complete agreement. The differences between the positions of Lenin and Trotsky will be dealt with later. That these differences were regarded by Lenin as secondary was again revealed at the Congress when Trotsky moved an amendment to the resolution on the attitude towards the bourgeois parties. Lenin spoke against the amendment on the grounds, not that it was wrong, but that it added nothing fundamental to the original: "It must be agreed," he said, "that Trotsky's amendment is *not Menshevik*, that it expresses the 'very same', that is, Bolshevik, idea." [60] [B] Lenin's resolution on the attitude towards the bourgeois parties was passed by Congress.

Despite the identity of views on the analysis of the tasks of the revolution, Trotsky still attempted to steer a course in between the rival factions in a vain attempt to prevent a fresh split. "If you think," he said at the Congress, "that a schism is unavoidable, wait at least until events, and not merely resolutions separate you. Do not run ahead of events." Trotsky made the mistake of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable, attempting to mediate between the two factions. On the basis of the experience of 1905, Trotsky believed that a fresh revolutionary upheaval would have the effect of pushing the best elements among the Mensheviks, in particular, Martov, to the left. His main concern was to hold the forces of Marxism together in a difficult period, to prevent a split which would have a demoralising effect on the movement. This was the essence of Trotsky's "conciliationism", which prevented him from joining the Bolsheviks in this period. In later years Trotsky was honest in admitting his mistake. Commenting on this, Lenin wrote: "A number of Social Democrats in that period sank into conciliationism, proceeding from the most varied motives. Most consistently of all was conciliationism expressed by Trotsky, about the only one who tried to provide a theoretical foundation for that policy."

The extreme differences that now separated the right and left wings were brought out into the open at the Fifth Congress, which did not resolve them. The factional centres continued to exist and increasingly went their own way. The Bolsheviks had their own centre including Lenin and the Central Committee members, plus, among others, Krassin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Rykov. As so often happened, political differences found their expression in organisational questions. Even before the congress Axelrod, Larin, and others had been canvassing the idea of a so-called Labour Congress. Faced with the swift

advance of reaction, the right wing Mensheviks advocated the closing-down of the Party's illegal organisations and the setting-up of a broad Labour organisation including the SRs, anarchists, non-party people, "and Uncle Tom Cobbley and all". But they overlooked one little detail. The establishment of a "legal" organisation in Russia in 1907 was not at all the same as the establishment of a mass Labour Party in Britain under conditions of bourgeois democracy. Under the given conditions, this proposal represented an opportunist adaptation to the norms established by the triumphant reaction. It would have meant in essence dissolving the activists into the mass of non-party, unorganised workers, an aim, incidentally, which has since been pursued by the right-wing Labour leaders in Britain and other countries.

This proposal was also rejected by the Congress. This by no means signified the abandonment of the aim of creating a real mass workers' party. But the way to do this is not to water down the party to the lowest common denominator, but to conduct a stubborn struggle to win the mass of the workers in action to the revolutionary programme. Having first won and educated the advanced layer of the class, it was necessary to find a road to the masses. The way to link up with the masses was by conducting patient work in the mass organisations, starting with the trade unions. The Party must not dissolve itself into the mass, but fight to win leadership of the unions.

A further point of difference concerned the relations between the Party and its parliamentary representatives. The Mensheviks defended the independence of the Duma fraction from the Central Committee. This was also rejected by Congress, which insisted that its public representatives must be under the control of the Party. The conduct of the Social Democratic deputies in the Duma—all Mensheviks at this time—came in for some bitter criticism, and the Congress carried a Bolshevik resolution criticising the Duma fraction. Finally the old dual leadership was abolished. Henceforth, only the Central Committee was to lead the Party. A 12-man CC was elected: five Bolsheviks (Goldenberg, Rozhkov, Dubrovinsky, Teodorovich and Nogin), four Mensheviks (Martynov, Zhordania, Isuva and Nikorov), two Poles (Warski and Dzerzhinski) and one Lett (Danishevsky). The other three, consisting of the representatives of the Bund and the Latvian Social Democrats, were elected after the congress.

### **The Permanent Revolution**

At this point, it is necessary to outline the main tendencies that crystallised in the Russian Social Democracy before 1914 on the central question of the nature and tasks of the Russian revolution. The most important theory that emerged on this question was the theory of the permanent revolution. This theory was first developed by Trotsky, in collaboration with the German-Russian left Social Democrat, Alexander Helfand (alias Parvus), as early as 1904. The permanent revolution, while accepting that the objective tasks facing the Russian workers were those of the bourgeois democratic revolution, nevertheless explained how in a backward country in the epoch of imperialism, the "national bourgeoisie" was inseparably linked to the remains of feudalism on the one hand and to imperialist capital on the other and was therefore completely unable to carry through any of its historical tasks.

The rottenness of the bourgeois liberals, and their counter-revolutionary role in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, was already observed by Marx and Engels. In his article *The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution* (1848), Marx writes: “The German bourgeoisie has developed so slothfully, cravenly and slowly that at the moment when it menacingly faced feudalism and absolutism it saw itself menacingly faced by the proletariat and all factions of the burgers whose interests and ideas were akin to those of the proletariat. And it saw inimically arrayed not only a class *behind* it but all Europe *before* it. The Prussian bourgeoisie was not, as the French of 1789 had been, the class which represented the *whole* of modern society *vis-a-vis* the representatives of the old society, the monarchy and the nobility. It had sunk to the level of a kind of social estate, as distinctly opposed to the crown as to the people, eager to be in the opposition to both, irresolute against each of its opponents, taken severally, because it always saw both of them before or behind it; inclined to betray the people and compromise with the crowned representative of the old society because it itself already belonged to the old society.”

The bourgeoisie, Marx explains, did not come to power as a result of its own revolutionary exertions, but as a result of the movement of the masses in which it played no role: “The Prussian bourgeoisie was hurled to the height of state power, however not in the manner it had desired, by a peaceful bargain with the crown, but by a revolution.”[\[61\]](#)

Even in the epoch of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Europe, Marx and Engels mercilessly unmasked the cowardly, counter-revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, and emphasised the need for the workers to maintain a policy of complete class independence, not only from the bourgeois liberals, but also from the vacillating petty bourgeois democrats:

“The proletarian, or really revolutionary party,” wrote Engels, “succeeded only very gradually in withdrawing the mass of the working people from the influence of the democrats whose tail they formed in the beginning of the revolution. But in due time the indecision, weakness and cowardice of the democratic leaders did the rest, and it may now be said to be one of the principal results of the last years’ convulsions, that wherever the working class is concentrated in anything like considerable masses, they are entirely freed from that democratic influence which led them into an endless series of blunders and misfortunes during 1848 and 1849.”[\[62\]](#)

Strictly speaking, Marx was not correct in attributing a revolutionary role to the bourgeoisie even in 1789. The bourgeois revolution in France was not carried out by the bourgeoisie, which wanted to reach a compromise with the monarchy, but by the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, whose political representatives were the Jacobins, and the semi-proletarian masses of Paris and the other big cities. The role of the masses in the French revolution was brilliantly described by the anarchist Kropotkin in his history of the revolution. It has been amply documented in our own times by historians like George Rudé. The Great French Revolution of 1789-93 only succeeded to the degree that it pushed aside the representatives of the conservative big bourgeoisie in the National Assembly and, basing itself on the masses, carried out the most radical measures which,

at the flood-tide of the revolution, even began to go beyond the limits of the bourgeois-democratic task and threaten private property. At this point, the revolution halted and was thrust back by the Thermidorian reaction and then Bonapartism. The plebeian masses were defeated and driven from positions which they were unable to defend precisely because the objective conditions for socialism were absent. Only a capitalist development was possible. Under the revolutionary banner of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, by which the masses were induced to fight their battles for them, the wealthy merchants and men of property climbed to power and then delivered the *coup de grace* to the revolutionary aspirations of those who had shed their blood for the revolution.

A similar tale can be told of the bourgeois revolution that took place in 17th century England. The bourgeoisie, represented in Parliament by the Presbyterians, did everything in its power to arrive at a deal with Charles I. The royalist counter-revolution was defeated, not by the big merchants of the City of London, but by Cromwell's New Model Army which based itself on the Yeomen farmers of East Anglia and the nascent proletarian elements in London, Bristol and the other towns and cities that fought for the parliamentary cause. Here too, the bourgeoisie showed itself to be incapable of carrying out its own revolution. In order to succeed, Cromwell had to sweep them aside and rouse the petty bourgeois and plebeian masses into action. True, once the monarchist reaction had been smashed, Cromwell turned on the radical wing (the "Levellers" and "Diggers") who, even at this stage, were drawing communist conclusions and calling private property into question. In so doing, Cromwell was merely recognising the indisputable bourgeois character of the revolution. Indeed it could have no other character at this time in history. But that does not alter the equally indisputable fact that the victory of the bourgeois revolution in England even at this early period, was not accomplished by the bourgeoisie, but *against* it.

The arguments of Marx and Engels in relation to Germany in 1848 were still more applicable to Russia at the turn of the century. The stormy development of industry had transformed the face of Russian society forever. But, in the first place, this development was confined to a small number of areas, namely the area around Moscow and St Petersburg, western Russia (including Poland) and the Urals, and oil-rich Baku. The proletariat grew rapidly and became the decisive force from the 1890s onwards. But this did not alter the generally backward character of Russia, which had many of the features of a semi-feudal, and, to some extent, semi-colonial country. The development of industry was not a natural, organic outgrowth of Russian society, but the result of massive foreign investment from France, Britain, Germany, Belgium and America. The Russian bourgeoisie, like the German bourgeoisie which Marx and Engels had castigated in 1848, had come on the stage of history too late, its social base was too weak, and above all its fear of the proletariat too strong for it to be able to play a progressive role. The fusion of industrial with landed capital, and the dependence of both upon the banks; the dependence on foreign capital was precisely what ruled out the possibility of a successful bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia.

In all of Lenin's speeches and writings, the counter-revolutionary role of the bourgeois-democratic liberals is stressed time and time again. However, up until 1917, he did not

believe that the Russian workers would come to power before the socialist revolution in the West—a perspective that only Trotsky defended before 1917, in his remarkable theory of permanent revolution. This was the most complete answer to the reformist and class collaborationist position of the right wing of the Russian workers' movement, the Mensheviks. The two-stage theory was developed by the Mensheviks as their perspective for the Russian revolution. It basically states that, since the tasks of the revolution are those of the national democratic bourgeois revolution, the leadership of the revolution must be taken by the national democratic bourgeoisie.

Trotsky, however, pointed out that by setting itself at the head of the nation, leading the oppressed layers of society (urban and rural petty bourgeoisie), the proletariat could take power and then carry through the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (mainly the land reform and the unification and liberation of the country from foreign domination). However, once having come to power, the proletariat would not stop there but would start to implement socialist measures of expropriation of the capitalists. And as these tasks cannot be solved in one country alone, especially not in a backward country, this would be the beginning of the world revolution. Thus the revolution is “permanent” in two senses: because it starts with the bourgeois tasks and continues with the socialist ones, and because it starts in one country and continues at an international level.

Lenin agreed with Trotsky that the Russian liberals could not carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and that this task could only be carried out by the proletariat in alliance with the poor peasantry. From 1905 until 1917, on the fundamental question of the attitude to the bourgeoisie, Lenin's position was close to that of Trotsky, and, in fact, identical. This was publicly acknowledged by Lenin at the Fifth (London) Congress, as we have seen. Following in the footsteps of Marx, who had described the bourgeois “democratic party” as “far more dangerous to the workers than the previous liberals”, Lenin explained that the Russian bourgeoisie, far from being an ally of the workers, would *inevitably* side with the counter-revolution. “The bourgeoisie in the mass,” he wrote in 1905, “will inevitably turn towards the counter-revolution, and against the people as soon as its narrow, selfish interests are met, as soon as it ‘recoils’ from consistent democracy (*and it is already recoiling from it!*).”

What class, in Lenin's view, could lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution? “There remains ‘the people’, that is, the proletariat and the peasantry. The proletariat alone can be relied on to march on to the end, for it goes far beyond the democratic revolution. That is why the proletariat fights in the forefront for a republic and contemptuously rejects stupid and unworthy advice to take into account the possibility of the bourgeoisie recoiling.”[\[63\]](#)

Where Lenin differed from Trotsky was on the issue of the possibility of the Russian workers coming to power before the workers of Western Europe. Up to 1917, only Trotsky thought that this would happen. Even Lenin ruled this out, insisting that the Russian revolution would have a bourgeois character. The working class, in alliance with the poor peasants, would overthrow the autocracy and then carry out the most sweeping programme of bourgeois-democratic measures. At the heart of Lenin's programme was a

radical solution of the land problem, based on the confiscation of the landlords' estates and land nationalisation. However, as Lenin explained many times, the nationalisation of the land is not a socialist, but a bourgeois demand, aimed at the landed aristocracy. He repeated on dozens of occasions that the Russian revolution would stop short of carrying out the socialist tasks, since, as everyone agreed, the objective conditions for building socialism were absent in Russia. But Lenin's case did not rest there. Lenin was always an uncompromising internationalist. His whole perspective was based on the international revolution, of which the Russian revolution was only a small part.

The Russian workers and peasants would overthrow tsarism and carry out the most radical version of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. This would then provide a powerful impetus to the workers of Western Europe, who would carry out the socialist revolution. Then, by uniting their efforts with those of the French, German and British workers, the Russian workers could transform their bourgeois-democratic revolution into a socialist one: "But of course it will be a democratic, not a socialist dictatorship. It will be unable (without a series of intermediary stages of revolutionary development) to affect the foundations of capitalism. *At best*, it may bring about a radical redistribution of landed property in favour of the peasantry, establish consistent and full democracy, including the formation of a republic, eradicate all the oppressive features of Asiatic bondage, ... lay the foundations for a thorough improvement in the conditions of the workers and for a rise in their standard of living, and—last but not least—carry the revolutionary conflagration into Europe."

Lenin's position is absolutely clear and unambiguous: the coming revolution will be a *bourgeois* revolution, led by the proletariat in alliance with the peasant masses. *The best* that can be expected of it is the fulfilment of basic bourgeois-democratic tasks: distribution of land to the peasants, a democratic republic, etc. This, of necessity, since any attempt to "affect the foundations of capitalism" would bring the proletariat into conflict with the mass of peasant small proprietors. Lenin hammers the point home: "The democratic revolution is bourgeois in nature. The slogan of a general distribution, or 'land and freedom' ... is a bourgeois slogan."[\[64\]](#) And for Lenin, *no other outcome was possible on the basis of a backward, semi-feudal country like Russia*. To talk about the "growing over" of the democratic dictatorship to the socialist revolution is to make nonsense of Lenin's whole analysis of the class correlation of forces in the revolution. Lenin explained his attitude towards the role of the proletariat in the bourgeois democratic revolution in hundreds of articles. "We are incomparably more remote than our Western comrades from the socialist revolution; but we are faced with a bourgeois democratic peasant revolution *in which the proletariat will play the leading role.*"[\[65\]](#) In what sense did Lenin refer to the possibility of socialist revolution in Russia? In the above quotation from *Two Tactics*, Lenin asserts that the Russian revolution will not be able to affect the foundations of capitalism "without a series of intermediary stages of revolutionary developments".

From all this, it is clear that Lenin ruled out the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia before the workers had taken power in Western Europe. He maintained this view right up until February 1917 when he abandoned it and adopted a position which was

essentially the same as Trotsky's. However, even when Lenin had the perspective of a bourgeois revolution in Russia (in which the proletariat would play the leading role) he explained the dialectical relation between the Russian revolution and the international revolution. The bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia will, he wrote, "last but not least carry the revolutionary conflagration into Europe. Such a victory will not yet by any means transform our bourgeois revolution into a socialist revolution; the democratic revolution will not immediately overstep the bounds of bourgeois social and economic relationships; nevertheless, the significance of such a victory for the future development of Russia and for the whole world will be immense. Nothing will raise the revolutionary energy of the world proletariat so much, nothing will shorten the path leading to its complete victory to such an extent, as this decisive victory of the revolution that has now started in Russia."[\[66\]](#)

Lenin's internationalism here stands out boldly in every line. For Lenin, the Russian revolution was not a self-sufficient act, a "Russian Road to Socialism!" *It was the beginning of the world proletarian revolution.* Precisely in this fact lay the future possibility of the transformation of the bourgeois-democratic revolution into the socialist revolution in Russia. Neither Lenin, nor any other Marxist, seriously entertained the idea that it was possible to build "socialism in a single country", much less in a backward, Asiatic, peasant country like Russia. Elsewhere Lenin explains what would be ABC for any Marxist, that the conditions for a socialist transformation of society were absent in Russia, although they were fully matured in Western Europe. Polemicising against the Mensheviks in *Two Tactics*, Lenin re-iterates the classical position of Marxism on the international significance of the Russian revolution:

"The basic idea here is one repeatedly formulated by *Vperyod* [i.e. Lenin's paper] which has stated that we must not be afraid ... of Social Democracy's complete victory in a democratic revolution, i.e. of a revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, for *such a victory will enable us to rouse Europe; after throwing off the yoke of the bourgeoisie, the socialist proletariat in Europe will in its turn help us to accomplish the socialist revolution.*"[\[67\]](#) This is the crux of Lenin's prognosis of the coming revolution in Russia: the revolution can only be bourgeois-democratic (not socialist) but, at the same time, because the bourgeoisie is unfit to play a revolutionary role, the revolution can only be carried out by the working class, led by the Social Democracy, which will rouse the peasant masses in its support. The overthrow of tsarism, the uprooting of all traces of feudalism, and the creation of a republic will have a tremendously revolutionising effect on the proletariat of the advanced countries of Western Europe. But the revolution in the West can only be a *socialist* revolution, because of the tremendous development of the productive forces built up under capitalism itself, and the enormous strength of the working class and the labour movement in these countries. Finally, the socialist revolution in the West will provoke further upheavals in Russia, and, with the assistance of the socialist proletariat of Europe, the Russian workers will transform the democratic revolution, in the teeth of opposition from the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary peasantry, into a socialist revolution.

“Thus, at this stage, [i.e. after the final victory of the ‘democratic dictatorship’] the liberal bourgeoisie and the well-to-do peasantry plus partly the middle peasantry organise counter-revolution. The Russian proletariat *plus* the European proletariat organise revolution.

“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*.

“The European workers will then show us ‘how to do it’, and then together with them we shall bring about the socialist revolution.”[\[68\]](#)

Here and on dozens of other occasions Lenin expressed himself with the utmost clarity that the victory of “our great bourgeois revolution ... will usher in the era of *socialist* revolution in the West”.[\[69\]](#) No matter how the matter is presented, nothing can alter the fact that, in 1905, Lenin not only rejected the idea of the “building of socialism in Russia alone” (the very idea would not have entered his head), *but even the possibility of the Russian workers establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat before the socialist revolution in the West*.

Trotsky always considered Lenin’s position to be progressive in relation to that of the two stages theory of the Mensheviks, but also pointed out its shortcomings. In 1909 he wrote: “It is true that the difference between them in this matter is very considerable: while the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism have already become fully apparent, those of Bolshevism are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory.” These prophetic lines have often been taken out of context by Trotsky’s Stalinist critics, but in fact they accurately express what occurred in 1917, when Lenin came into conflict with the other Bolshevik leaders precisely over the slogan of the “Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry”, which Lenin abandoned in favour of a policy that was identical with that of the permanent revolution. When this book was published after the revolution, Trotsky wrote in a footnote: “This threat, as we know, never materialised because, under the leadership of Comrade Lenin, the Bolsheviks changed their policy line on this most important matter (not without inner struggle) in the spring of 1917, that is, before the seizure of power.”[\[70\]](#)

From a materialist point of view, the final test of all theories is found in practice. All the theories, programmes and perspectives that were advanced and passionately defended by the different tendencies in the Russian labour movement concerning the nature and motor-force of the revolution were subjected to the acid test in the events of 1917. At this point, the line separating Trotsky from Lenin dissolves completely. The line of Lenin’s *Letters From Afar* and his *April Theses* is absolutely indistinguishable from that which we read in Trotsky’s articles published in *Novy Mir*, written at the same time, but thousands of miles away in America. And, as Trotsky had warned in 1909, the counter-revolutionary side of the theory of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry only became evident in the course of the revolution itself, when Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin used it against Lenin to justify their support for the bourgeois

Provisional Government. An open split developed between Lenin and the other leaders of the Party who, in effect, accused him of—Trotskyism.

In point of fact, the correctness of the theory of the permanent revolution was triumphantly demonstrated by the October revolution itself. The Russian working class—as Trotsky had predicted in 1904—came to power before the workers of Western Europe. They carried out all the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and immediately set about nationalising industry and passing over to the tasks of the socialist revolution. The bourgeoisie played an openly counter-revolutionary role, but was defeated by the workers in alliance with the poor peasants. The Bolsheviks then made a revolutionary appeal to the workers of the world to follow their example. Lenin knew very well that without the victory of the revolution in the advanced capitalist countries, especially Germany, the revolution could not survive isolated, especially in a backward country like Russia. What happened subsequently showed that this was absolutely correct. The setting up of the Third (Communist) International, the world party of socialist revolution, was the concrete manifestation of this perspective.

The situation is clearer still today. The national bourgeoisie in the colonial countries entered into the scene of history too late, when the world had already been divided up between a few imperialist powers. It was not able to play any progressive role and was born completely subordinated to its former colonial masters. The weak and degenerate bourgeoisie in Asia, Latin America and Africa is too dependent on foreign capital and imperialism, to carry society forward. It is tied with a thousand threads, not only to foreign capital, but with the class of landowners, with which it forms a reactionary bloc that represents a bulwark against progress. Whatever differences may exist between these elements are insignificant in comparison with the fear that unites them against the masses. Only the proletariat, allied with the poor peasants and urban poor, can solve the problems of society by taking power into its own hands, expropriating the imperialists and the bourgeoisie, and beginning the task of transforming society on socialist lines.

Had the Communist International remained firm on the positions of Lenin and Trotsky, the victory of the world revolution would have been assured. Unfortunately, the Comintern's formative years coincided with the Stalinist counter-revolution in Russia, which had a disastrous effect on the Communist Parties of the entire world. The Stalinist bureaucracy, having acquired control in the Soviet Union developed a very conservative outlook. The theory that socialism can be built in one country—an abomination from the standpoint of Marx and Lenin—really reflected the mentality of the bureaucracy which had had enough of the storm and stress of revolution and sought to get on with the task of “building socialism in Russia”. That is to say, they wanted to protect and expand their privileges and not “waste” the resources of the country in pursuing world revolution. On the other hand they feared that revolution in other countries could develop on healthy lines and pose a threat to their own domination in Russia, and therefore, at a certain stage, sought actively to prevent revolution elsewhere. Instead of pursuing a revolutionary policy based on class independence, as Lenin had always advocated, they proposed an alliance of the Communist Parties with the “national progressive bourgeoisie” (and if there was not one easily at hand, they were quite prepared to invent it) to carry through

the democratic revolution, and afterwards, later on, in the far distant future, when the country had developed a fully fledged capitalist economy, fight for socialism. This policy represented a complete break with Leninism and a return to the old discredited position of Menshevism—the theory of the two stages.

### **The 3rd June Coup**

The 1905 revolution in reality had lasted for two and half years. But by the summer of 1907, the last flickering embers of revolt were extinguished. Deprived of a leadership in the towns, the peasant revolt inevitably resolved itself into a series of unco-ordinated and aimless uprisings which could be put down one by one. With every reverse of the mass movement, the self-confidence of the regime was reinforced. Finally, on 3 June, convinced of the impotence of the Cadets and the waning of the peasant movement, Stolypin decided to dismiss the second Duma and arrest the Social Democratic fraction. Immediately after the Fifth Congress finished, Stolypin challenged the Duma by demanding the expulsion of the 55 Social Democratic deputies, and the arrest of 16 of them. On the night of 2 June, without waiting for the Duma's response, he proceeded to carry out the arrests. The next day the Duma itself was suspended. A new electoral law was drafted that was even worse than the previous one. When it finally convened, the third Duma was the parliament of open reaction. Even Count Witte admitted in his memoirs that: "The new electoral law excluded from the Duma the voice of the people, i.e., the voice of the masses and their representatives, and gave a voice only to the powerful and the obedient."

Kerensky who was a Trudovik deputy in the third Duma comments: "The electoral law of June, 1907, practically eliminated the participation of peasants and workers from the towns and villages. In the provinces the elections were virtually handed over to the moribund gentry, and in the larger towns the right of quasi-universal suffrage was also suppressed; the number of deputies was cut down, and half the seats were assigned under a curial system to an insignificant minority of the property-owning bourgeoisie. Representation of the non-Russian nationalities was reduced. Poland, for example, was allowed to send only 18 deputies to the third Duma (and the fourth), as opposed to the 53 representatives sent to the first and second Dumas, and the Muslim population of Turkestan was excluded entirely.

"The people's representatives elected under Stolypin's law were rightly called Russia's 'distorting mirror.' The left-wing parties making up the majority in the first and second Dumas practically vanished in the third Duma of 1907-12, which, moreover, contained only 13 members of the Labour Group (Trudoviks) and 20 Social Democrats. The Social Revolutionaries boycotted the elections. The Cadets, the party of the liberal intellectuals, had dropped from their dominant position to the role of 'His Majesty's loyal opposition,' with 54 seats."

Out of 442 members of parliament, the reactionary parties (the Black Hundreds, Octobrists and Cadets) had 409. The working class had only 19 deputies (Social Democrats) and the Trudoviks, only 14. A vastly different situation to that of the second

Duma. Yet, as Lenin pointed out, this reactionary Duma at least had the merit of expressing the real situation in the country. Here was the real face of the Black Hundred autocracy, without its liberal mask. "Fifty seats," Kerensky comments, "were taken by the reactionary Union of the Russian People, which was subsidised from special funds available to the secret police and was patronised by the tsar and Grand Duke Nicholas. These deputies, under the guidance of three very able men—Markov, Purishkevich, and Zamyslovsky—tried to sabotage the Duma from within by incessantly causing trouble. Along with these, 89 seats were given to a completely new party called the Nationalists. They were returned by and large from the western and south-western provinces, which had been torn by feuding between the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Jewish sections of the population as far back as could be remembered. The gap between the Cadets and the right wing was filled by the 153 Octobrist deputies, of whom there had hardly been any at all in the first two Dumas. They thus comprised slightly more than a third of the total membership of the Duma."

The leading figure in this Duma was the Octobrist Guchkov, a big Moscow industrialist whose party represented the reactionary big bourgeoisie and landowners, but deemed it expedient to distance themselves from the ruling clique: "Guchkov, Khomyakov, Shidlovsky, and the other leaders of the Octobrist Party knew full well the danger to the country of the morbid atmosphere surrounding the tsar. Well aware that they could not rely on the weak-willed tsar, they firmly rejected all of Stolypin's tempting invitations to join the government. They preferred to keep watch on the activity of the official government by applying the statutory rights of the Duma Budget Commission, to support it in the struggle against the irresponsible and powerful influence of the Rasputin clique in court circles, and to try to improve the country's military and economic position through regular legislation."[\[71\]](#)

The Cadets effectively played the role of second fiddle to the Octobrists in the third Duma. In turn, Guchkov leaned over backwards to support Stolypin against the court reactionaries, as the lesser evil. For their part, the Mensheviks looked towards the Cadets, also as the lesser evil. However, Stolypin was really the firmest supporter of the autocracy. His reforms were intended to preserve the rule of the Romanovs, while crushing the revolution underfoot. In this way, the "lesser evil" becomes imperceptibly transformed into the *greatest evil* for the revolutionary cause. Guchkov, the representative of Russian big business, expressed his fervent loyalty to the autocracy by wholeheartedly embracing the cause of imperialism and militarism at a time when the international scene was already darkened by the clouds of impending war. The Duma vied with the government to show who was more patriotic. On 9 June 1908, speaking in a debate on the army estimates, Guchkov spoke of "our buried military glory". As a result of this cringing and fawning, the third Duma was permitted to live out its full term of five years, until the election of the fourth Duma in 1912.

Paradoxically, Stolypin's position in the new Duma was no better than before. Playing the role of Bonapartist, manoeuvring between the different classes and parties, he had no firm point of support. Not a single party in the Duma backed him consistently. The strengthening of the right wing weakened him because the conservatives and the court

clique hated him as a dangerous radical. The tsar, not noted either for political acumen or personal gratitude, became increasingly distant from his faithful minister. Although he had concentrated great power in his hands, Stolypin's life was constantly in danger, and he knew it. He wore a bullet-proof vest and was always surrounded by body-guards, but that did not save him. On the night of 1 September 1911, Stolypin turned up for a special gala performance of Rimski Korsakov's opera *tsar Saltan*, in Kiev, which the tsar also attended. During an interval, a young man in evening dress walked up to him and shot him twice. Theatrical to the end, Stolypin made the sign of the cross over Nicholas before collapsing. He died four days later. His last public utterance was "I am happy to die for the tsar", which was ironical since, by this time, Nicholas could not stand the sight of him. The student who did the deed was a Social Revolutionary turned police informer called Bogrov. He was executed without delay, and kept incommunicado beforehand, so no questions could be asked. Many people suspected that the assassination was the work of the secret police in cahoots with the court clique who hated Stolypin. This is most probable. The deepening crisis of society reflected itself in splits and clique struggles at the top. In a set-up like the tsarist-Rasputin regime, political intrigue and assassination were inseparable travelling companions.

During this period, the fortunes of the revolutionary movement seemed to reach their nadir. Once again, the Party was reduced to difficult and dangerous underground work. Waves of arrests decimated the Party organisations. In the summer of 1907, all the Social Democratic Duma deputies were arrested. The workers were indignant but by this time had not the strength to react. The reaction flexed its muscles and felt its own strength. For three long years, in 1908-10, it rained blows on the defeated labour movement. "The incessant mass arrests led to the destruction of one Party branch after another, until the Party practically ceased to exist," writes the Menshevik Eva Broido. "The trade unions too suffered havoc; hundreds of their branches were dissolved and the formation of new ones was made extremely difficult."[\[72\]](#)

As the most militant wing of the RSDLP, the Bolsheviks suffered proportionately greater losses. Their organisations in Petersburg suffered no fewer than 15 mass arrests of leaders in this period. Its leading committee was arrested six times. In Moscow, the area committee was arrested 11 times. The same situation prevailed everywhere. Each time the committees were reorganised, but in ever smaller numbers, and with less experienced people. However, there was at least one advantage. Most of those who stepped into the breach were workers. For the first time the Party committees were genuinely proletarian in composition. These worker cadres kept the illegal Party alive in conditions of extreme adversity. By contrast, many of the intellectuals became demoralised and fell away.

In 1908 Lenin noted in a letter to Gorky: "The significance of the intellectuals in our Party is declining; news comes from all sides that the intelligentsia is *fleeing* the Party. And a good riddance to these scoundrels. The Party is purging itself from petty bourgeois dross. The workers are having a bigger say in things. The role of the worker-professionals is increasing. All this is wonderful."[\[73\]](#) It would appear that Gorky was upset by Lenin's comments, since in a subsequent letter he hastened to reassure him: "I think that some of the questions you raise about our differences are a sheer misunderstanding. Never, of

course, have I thought of 'chasing away the intelligentsia', as the silly syndicalists do, or of denying its necessity for the workers' movement. There can be no divergence between us on *these* questions." [74]

Under these conditions, a process of selection was inevitable: unstable intellectuals left in droves, succumbing to the prevailing mood of reaction. By late 1907, the Petersburg Party had only about 3,000 members, not all active. Many of the best leaders were in gaol or exile, their place taken by second line leaders like Stalin, who began to make a name for himself at this time as an organiser. Stalin's rapid advance to a leading position can easily be explained by the fact that, with the extreme shortage of capable people from Russia, Lenin eagerly pounced on any newcomer who seemed promising. Stalin had a certain flare for organisation, but no more than many other Bolshevik committee-men. Indeed, Stalin was a typical committee-man: tough, practical and capable of displaying energy under certain conditions, but narrow in outlook. Stalin's whole political career showed that, without Lenin's guiding hand, he was devoid of any real political understanding, let alone theoretical depth. This is shown by the fact that Stalin continued to organise expropriations when the revolutionary wave had long ebbed and the counter-revolution was in full swing. Such tactics could have done serious damage to the Party if Lenin had not put a stop to them in time.

The new conditions demonstrated the necessity for combining illegal work with all manner of legal and semi-legal work. Only in this way was the Party able to maintain links with the masses. The forces at its disposal had been seriously depleted. By late 1908, about 900 Party members were abroad. But these numbers do not tell the whole story. Revolution, as Trotsky pointed out, is a mighty devourer of human energy. Many of the most experienced cadres were languishing in tsarist prisons or Siberian exile. Many of those that remained were traumatised, disoriented, mentally and physically exhausted. Cases of suicide were not uncommon, especially among the youth who believed that the defeat signified the final liquidation of the revolution. Under such circumstances moods of pessimism and despair can quickly find an expression in all manner of ways, from open apostasy and desertion to various forms of political deviation—to the left as well as to the right. Frustration leads to moods of impatience and the search for panaceas and short cuts. This can express itself either in opportunist adaptation to the existing conditions or ultra-left adventures. Such phenomena, apparently extreme opposites, are in fact head and tail of the same coin.

At this time, Lenin found himself in a particularly difficult position. While the Party remained formally united, in practice, the two factions functioned independently, a fact that was sharply revealed by the opposing policies pursued by the different factions on the Central Committee. The Menshevik members (Zhordania and Ramishvili) did not conduct underground work, since their entire strategy was to liquidate the underground Party and confine their activities to what was permitted by the tsarist authorities. The work of maintaining the illegal Party organisation inside Russia thus depended on the Bolsheviks on the CC (Dubrovinsky, Goldenberg, Nogin). But the latter were conciliators who by no means agreed with Lenin's demand for an implacable struggle against the Menshevik CC members.

Under the circumstances, the formation of an organised tendency within the united Party was inevitable. The Bolshevik factional centre was established in 1907. There was nothing in the party rules to stop the publication of factional newspapers, so Lenin decided to go ahead. Despite all difficulties, the Bolshevik “centre” managed to produce its own paper *Proletarii* (1906-09). Lenin edited the paper, which, among other collaborators included Maxim Gorky, who also played an important role in raising funds. In the traditions of old *Iskra*, *Proletarii* maintained correspondence with party organisations in the interior. Because of the problems of illegality, many other titles appeared in order to confuse the censor. There was the *Sotsial-Demokrat*, and a number of local party papers. At first, Lenin tried to set up an underground headquarters in Finland where the movement for national independence made it more difficult for the Russian authorities to re-establish complete control, but the arm of the Okhrana was long and the Bolshevik leader only narrowly escaped arrest. Once again Lenin had to make plans for exile.

## NOTES

[A] The venue was only one of several ironies associated with this Congress. An even more amusing incident relates to the way the Congress was financed. The Party being, to all intents and purposes, bankrupt, the revolutionaries were compelled to seek a loan. This was finally arranged by Gorky through the mediation of the English socialist, George Lansbury, with an English soap manufacturer. The loan was due to be repaid by 1 January 1908. Probably the lender was not unduly surprised when not a penny arrived. However, the debt was not forgotten. After the October revolution, the Soviet government, through the services of Krassin, its ambassador in London, returned the money to the lender’s heirs, who, no doubt utterly astonished, returned the letter acknowledging the debt, signed by all the participants in the congress!

[B] The notes of the Russian edition of the minutes of this Congress, published in 1959, with astonishing cynicism, state that: “In fact, Trotsky supported the Mensheviks on every basic question.” (Congress Minutes, *Pyatyy S’yezd RSDRP Protokoly*, p. 812.)

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[56] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 89.

[57] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 89 in both quotes.

[58] LCW, *The Fifth Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 12, pp. 456, 457, 458 and 462-3.

[59] Congress Minutes, *Pyatyy S’yezd RSDRP Protokoly*, p. 386.

[60] LCW, *The Fifth Congress of the RSDLP*, vol. 12, pp. 470 and 479 (my emphasis).

[61] K. Marx, *The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-revolution*, in MESW, vol. 1, pp. 140-1 and 138.

- [62] F. Engels, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany*, MESW, vol. 1, p. 332.
- [63] LCW, *Two Tactics of SD in the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 9, p. 98 in both quotes.
- [64] *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7 and 112.
- [65] LCW, *The Social Democratic Election Victory in Tiflis*, vol. 10, p. 424 (my emphasis).
- [66] LCW, *Two Tactics of SD in the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 9, p. 57
- [67] *Ibid.*, p. 82 (my emphasis).
- [68] LCW, *The Stages, the Trend, and the Prospects of the Revolution*, vol. 10, p. 92.
- [69] LCW, *Victory of Cadets and Tasks of Workers' Party*, vol. 10, p. 276 (my emphasis).
- [70] Trotsky, *Our Differences*, in 1905, p. 332 and footnote of same page.
- [71] Kerensky, *Memoirs*, pp. 101-2 and 104.
- [72] E. Broido, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- [73] LCW, *Letter to Maxim Gorky, February 7, 1908*, vol. 34, p. 379.
- [74] LCW, *To Maxim Gorky, February 13, 1908*, p. 385.

## Part Three: The Period of Reaction

[section 5 of 6]

### Liquidationism and Otzovism

The demoralisation of the Mensheviks was expressed in the phenomenon which became known as liquidationism. Under conditions of reaction, the majority of the petty bourgeois fellow-travellers of the RSDLP swung to the right. This was not so much a worked-out political trend but a definite mood that permeated this social stratum, a mood of scepticism in the future of the socialist revolution, and above all a mood of doubt—doubts about the revolutionary potential of the working class, doubts about the validity of Marxist philosophy, doubts about themselves—*doubts about everything*. The clearest manifestation of this state of mind among the intelligentsia on the right wing of the movement was “liquidationism” among the Mensheviks, but it had its mirror-image on the left in the “otzovism” that emerged in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. The feebleness of

the Social Democratic Duma fraction, dominated by the Mensheviks, its organic tendency towards compromise with the liberals and its rejection of control by the Party, provoked the opposite trend of recallism and ultimatism. As Lenin often observed, ultra-leftism is the price the movement has to pay for opportunism. But, under conditions of growing reaction, refusal to make use of the third Duma for the purpose of rallying the scattered forces of the Party, would have been clearly harmful.

Liquidationist moods found their most developed expression in a layer of Menshevik intellectuals and writers. People like Potresov, Larin, Dan, Martynov, Axelrod, Cherevanin constantly accused the Bolsheviks of extremism, of going too far and of fighting the bourgeois liberals. Some advocated giving up the idea of armed uprising altogether and making the Duma the focal point of all Social Democratic activity—that is, they stood for *the abandonment of the perspective of revolution*. Other Mensheviks like Zhordania did not go so far, but argued that, since the objective character of the revolution was bourgeois-democratic, the bourgeoisie (that is, the liberals) must lead it. This meant the abandonment of the hegemony of the working class—a “theoretical” justification for the organic lack of trust in the working class on the part of the middle class intellectual, who disguises his servile acceptance of the rule of the big bourgeoisie behind a string of sophistries which “prove” that the proletariat is unfit to stand at the head of society. This prejudice may be expressed directly and “sincerely” (the workers are too ignorant, “don’t understand”, etc.) or in more subtle forms— “the revolution is bourgeois-democratic”, “the time is not right” and so on and so forth. After all, for the intellectuals, accustomed to playing with ideas as with pieces on a chessboard, it is not difficult to make out a clever-sounding argument for any proposition whatever, in line with their current mood or self-interest (the two things are usually closely related). For these people, if one is to tell the truth, the time for the working class to take control of society will *never* be right. The Mensheviks tried to base themselves on all kinds of “erudite” arguments and quotes from Marx to “prove” that the Russian workers must subordinate themselves to the bourgeois liberals, help them to take power, introduce democracy and then usher in a long period of capitalist development, after which, in about a hundred years or so, the objective conditions would be ready for socialism. In reality, such a position had nothing to do with Marxism, but was only a scholastic caricature. It was answered many times by Lenin and Trotsky. As a matter of fact, it was already answered in advance by Marx and Engels.

At bottom, all this was an expression of a collapse of morale. As early as October 1907, Potresov wrote to Axelrod: “We are undergoing complete disintegration and utter demoralisation... There is not only no organisation, but not even the elements for it. And this non-existence is even extolled as a principle.”<sup>[75]</sup> On 20 February 1908, Axelrod wrote a letter to Plekhanov expressing his deep pessimism about the future: “Without leaving it [the Party] for the time being, and without pronouncing the inevitability of its demise, we should nevertheless consider it from this perspective and not identify our future movement with what happens to it.”<sup>[76]</sup> In the spring of 1908, the Mensheviks began to disband the underground Party organisations in Moscow and replace them with so-called initiative groups, which mainly limited themselves to those cultural activities and work in co-operatives and clubs that was permitted by the existing legislation. In

July, Alexander Martynov and Boris Goldman issued an open call for the dissolution of the Party's Central Committee and its replacement by an "information bureau". This, in effect, meant the liquidation of the Party as a revolutionary force and the adaptation to the laws established by the Stolypin reaction.

The struggle against liquidationism was thus the struggle to preserve the Party as a revolutionary organisation—the struggle against the attempt of the right wing to water down and abandon its revolutionary aims and policy and to subordinate it to the liberals. Lenin spoke with scorn of the liquidationist tendencies which he immediately saw as a reflection of the demoralised state of the intellectuals who were turning their backs on the revolution with the excuse of rejecting "old" methods of struggle and organisation. "The connection between liquidationism and the general philistine mood of 'weariness' is obvious," he wrote. "The 'weary' (particularly those weary as a result of doing nothing) are making no effort to work out for themselves an exact answer to the question of the economic and political appraisal of the current moment... 'Weary' persons of this kind, who ascend the rostrum of the publicist and from it justify their 'weariness' of the old, their unwillingness to work on the old, belong to the category of people who are not just 'weary', but are treacherous as well."<sup>[77]</sup> "The more this banner is 'unfurled'," Lenin wrote elsewhere, "the clearer does it become that what we have before us is a dirty liberal rag worn to shreds." This was the essential nature of the struggle between Bolshevism and Menshevism that was to culminate in the split of 1912.

All this was, as Lenin understood, an expression of the counter-revolutionary moods among the intellectuals—their despair, their loss of faith in the working class and the perspective of a new revolution. It was the most obvious manifestation, but not the only one. Lenin often said that ultra-leftism is the price which the workers' movement pays for opportunism. Liquidationism found its reflection in ultraleftism. But whereas the former trend affected the Mensheviks, the latter found an echo in the ranks of Bolshevism, where it caused a great deal of damage. Already in March and April of 1908, some Social Democratic groups in Moscow put forward the idea of re-calling the Party's deputies and of boycotting the Duma. The Russian word for "recall" is "otzvat", from which we get the name of this tendency—*otzovism* (recallism). Lenin had come down firmly in favour of participation in the elections to the third Duma. This was approved by the rank-and-file in the third Conference of the RSDLP ("Second All-Russian" Conference) which was held on 21-23 July 1907 in Kotka in Finland. Present were 26 full delegates—nine Bolsheviks, five Mensheviks, five Poles, two Letts and five Bundists. This position was not quite as clear-cut as it appears, since by this time serious cracks had opened up inside the Bolshevik faction. Some of the Bolshevik delegation were "boycottists". However, the Poles and Letts supported Lenin's position. The Party participated in the election. Four Bolsheviks were elected out of a total Social Democratic fraction numbering 19.

The inner Party dispute raised its head at every meeting. On 5-12 November 1907 the fourth—or third "All-Russian"—Conference, held in Helsingfors, once again discussed Duma tactics. Of the 27 delegates present, ten were Bolsheviks, four Mensheviks, five Poles, five Bundists and three Letts. Lenin argued in favour of using the Duma, not as a vehicle for obtaining reforms—as argued by the liquidators—but as a platform for

revolutionary agitation, and always on the basis of class independence not blocs with Cadets, as advocated by the Bundists and Mensheviks. It was agreed to accept temporary agreements with working class and peasant groups to the left of the Cadets, with a view to winning away the peasantry from the influence of bourgeois liberals. This was an important boost for Lenin's position. Things appeared to be going in the right direction. Then there was a new setback.

In the spring of 1908, all the Bolshevik members of the Bureau in Russia were suddenly arrested. This completely disorganised the work of the Bolshevik faction in Russia. It was at this point that the Mensheviks took advantage of the situation by trying to turn the CC into a mere information centre. This proposal was defeated at the August Plenum which took place in 1908 in Geneva. As usual the Bolsheviks were backed by the Poles and Letts. It was decided to call a party conference to discuss the issue of liquidationism. The Mensheviks opposed this idea, as did the otzovists who called for a "purely Bolshevik congress", at a time when Lenin was trying to hold things together. In addition to the recall of the Duma fraction, the otzovist tendency demanded that the Party boycott work in the legal organisations. Under the prevailing conditions of counter-revolution it was essential that the Marxists made use of all legal openings, no matter how limited: trade unions, workers' clubs, insurance societies and, above all, the Duma. To turn one's back on these legal possibilities would have been a disastrous error. It would have signified abandoning any attempt to reach the masses, thus reducing the party to a mere sect. Lenin waged an implacable struggle against this ultra-left trend which he correctly characterised as "liquidationism turned inside-out".

Ultra-left moods were prevalent among the leading layer of the Bolshevik faction at this time. The main proponents of this trend included such key figures as, Alexander Bogdanov (Maximovich), Grigory Alexinsky, A. Sokolov (Volsky), Martin Lyadov (Mandelshtamm) and also Gorky, whose limited grasp of the theoretical basis of Marxism was shown by his support for a semi-mystical philosophical trend called "god-building". The urge to criticise and revise the fundamental theoretical postulates of Marxism was equally a reflection of the prevailing moods of pessimism and despair among the intelligentsia which can be observed repeatedly in the history of counter-revolutionary periods. Bogdanov's support for an ultra-left policy was organically connected to his philosophical revisionism and rejection of dialectical materialism which antedated the 1905 revolution. Anxious as ever to make use of the services of talented people, Lenin was prepared to put up with Bogdanov's eccentric ideas about philosophy, while making clear that he disagreed with them. But in the context of rampant counter-revolution, with desertion, despair and apostasy on all sides, Lenin realised that it was impermissible to tolerate any further backsliding. To allow the Party to be permeated with the rotten mysticism emanating from its periphery of middle-class intellectuals would have been suicidal. It would have led inevitably to the liquidation of the Marxist party, beginning with its cadres.

It was necessary to make a stand in defence of Marxist theory, and Lenin did not hesitate to take up the cudgels, even though it might lead to a break with most of the leading comrades. Lenin's fervent defence of Marxist philosophy has earned him many an ironic

comment from non-Marxist historians. Naturally. If one does not accept Marxism anyway, how can one understand the need for a struggle for Marxist theoretical principles? Yet Marxism is a scientific doctrine which has an inner logic. It is not possible to separate out the three component parts of Marxism, as Lenin described them, accepting some and rejecting others, as one would select a tie or a pair of socks. Dialectical materialism stands at the heart of Marxism because it is the method of Marxism. Without dialectical materialism, the whole of Marxism falls to the ground, or else is transformed into a formalistic and lifeless dogma. Precisely for this reason, the bourgeoisie and its hangers-on in the universities have directed a constant tirade against Marxist dialectics which it tries to present as some kind of mystical idea or else as a meaningless sophistry. As a matter of fact, dialectical materialism represents the only consistent form of materialism, and therefore the only really consistent way of struggling against all forms of mysticism and religion. And the history of science is sufficient proof that science and religion are mutually incompatible schools of thought. Lenin's struggle to defend Marxist philosophy was not understood by many party activists at the time. The average theoretical level of the membership had declined as a result of the rapid growth and the loss of experienced cadres through imprisonment and exile. Many of those who remained lacked a thorough grounding in Marxism, and, in the difficult conditions of underground work, looked askance at the apparently obscure and remote discussions taking place among the exiles. There were frequent appeals for unity and complaints about the factional struggle. But nothing could deflect Lenin from his course.

### **Mood of intelligentsia**

The period of reaction expressed itself not only in physical acts of repression, but in far more insidious ways. The trauma of defeat affected people psychologically in a thousand different ways, in an epidemic of depression, pessimism and despair. The working class does not live in isolation from other social layers. It is surrounded in all countries and in every period by other classes, in particular the petty bourgeoisie in all its innumerable sub-divisions, which acts as a huge conveyer belt transmitting the moods, prejudices and ideas of the ruling class into every corner of society. The proletariat is not immune to the pressure of alien classes transmitted via the petty bourgeoisie. Such influences play a particularly malevolent role in periods of reaction. Disappointed in the revolution and the working class, sections of the intellectuals withdrew from the struggle to retreat within themselves where they felt safe against the storm blowing outside. The reactionary mood of the intelligentsia expressed itself in a variety of ways—subjectivism, hedonism, mysticism, metaphysics, pornography. It found its reflection in literature, in the prevailing school of Symbolism, in philosophy where revolutionary dialectics were rejected in favour of Kantianism, with its strong subjective element. All this was merely an expression of the demoralisation of the intellectuals, a turning aside from the world and an attempt to seek refuge in an “interior life”, which under all manner of pretentious and essentially meaningless labels (“Art for Art's sake”, and so on) provided a comforting excuse for contemplating their navels. A contemporary source recalls how: “The radical sons of petty merchants submitted to their fate and took up positions behind the counters of their father's business. One or other of the socialist students buried himself in knowledge as in a monastery.”

This phenomenon is not new. It is something common to every period of reaction, when the hopes of the intelligentsia in revolution are dashed. After the fall of Robespierre, we saw the rise of the “gilded youth”, and a tendency towards hedonism and egotism. A similar phenomenon may be observed in England after the restoration of Charles II. The defeat of the 1848 revolution in France saw a movement of the artists and poets who had earlier displayed revolutionary tendencies towards introversion and mysticism, the literary manifestation of which was the Symbolism of Baudelaire. It is no accident that the predominant school of Russian poetry during the years of Stolypin reaction was precisely Symbolism. A schoolboy of the time explains: “Now it was no longer Marx and Engels, but Nietzsche and Baudelaire and Wagner and Leonardo da Vinci whom we passionately discussed, we did not sing revolutionary songs but recited to one another poems of contemporary symbolist poets and our own imitations of them. A new period had begun.”<sup>[78]</sup> The principal trait of this poetry is its inward-looking character. The isolated individual turns his back on the world and seeks refuge in the darkness of the soul. As one Russian Symbolist expressed it:

“We are all alone,  
Always alone.  
I was born alone.  
Alone I shall die.”

The whole movement was impregnated with religious and mystical notions. The author Fyodor Sollogub wrote: “I am the god of a mysterious world, all the world is in my dreams alone.” And V.V. Rozanov: “All religions will pass, but this alone will remain, simply sitting in a chair and looking in the distance.”<sup>[79]</sup> And so on and so forth. This phenomenon was by no means confined to literature. Intellectual fellow travellers of the Cadets produced a journal called *Vekhi* (Landmarks) which attempted to give a philosophical basis to the mood of despair and pessimism among the petty bourgeoisie. “The intelligentsia should stop dreaming of the liberation of the people—we should fear the people more than all the executions carried out by the government, and hail this government which alone, with its bayonets and its prisons, still protects us from the fury of the masses,” wrote M.O. Gershenzon in the pages of *Vekhi*.<sup>[80]</sup>

A kind of de facto reactionary division of labour was established. While right wing journals like *Vekhi* and *Russkaya Mysl'* openly lauded and excused the reaction, in the salons of Moscow and St Petersburg, intellectual ex-lefts, anxious to find some profound justification for their abandonment of the revolutionary cause, opened up a more subtle and more insidious assault on the ideology of Marxism which had so badly let them down. These unconscious or half-conscious anti-revolutionary moods among the intelligentsia were given a finished form by those renegades who had earlier formed the basis of the trend which became known as Legal Marxism, such as Struve, the philosopher Bardyayev, A.S. Izgoev and D.S. Merezhkovsky. These former exponents of an anaemic and half-digested university “Marxism”, which is to be found in every period in academic circles, by some misconception, imagine themselves to be Marxists without any real relation to the real world of the class struggle. At the first signs of difficulties, these “fellow travellers” jump ship and become apologists of reaction.

Of the two enemies, it is difficult to say which was the more harmful. This theoretical backsliding threatened the future of the revolutionary movement, gnawing away at its very foundations. It was imperative to engage in an implacable ideological struggle on all fronts to save the Party from a complete debacle. Not by accident, dialectics was singled out for attack by the intellectual critics of Marxism. Despite appearances, dialectics is not at all an abstract philosophical doctrine with no practical implications, but the theoretical basis of Marxism, its method and its revolutionary essence. Rejection of dialectical materialism implies rejection not only of the scientific philosophical basis of Marxism, but above all of its revolutionary essence.

These alien ideas soon began to penetrate the workers' party itself. Kantianism was smuggled in via the fashionable theories of Ernst Mach, the Austrian physicist and philosopher whose theories were impregnated with the spirit of subjective idealism. In this guise, anti-Marxist philosophical views were echoed by the ultraleft trend in Bolshevism, including such leading members of Lenin's faction as Bogdanov, Lunacharsky and V.S. Bazarov. As usual, the lapse into revisionism was carried out under the banner of the search for new ideas. The appeal to novelty and originality always prefaces a reversion to old ideas fished out from the prehistory of the workers' movement—anarchism, Proudhonism, Kantianism. As the French saying goes: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!" ("The more things change, the more they stay the same!"). This trend tried to marry Marxism with... religion! Its supporters gave themselves some fancy names—"God Builders" and "God Seekers"—which reveal their real nature far more accurately than intended. Lunacharsky's book *Religion and Socialism* argued that the "cold and impersonal" theories of Marxism could not be grasped by the masses and proposed the creation of a "new religion", which would be a "godless religion", a "religion of labour", and so on and so forth. Socialism was referred to as a "new, powerful religious force".<sup>[81]</sup> This mystical claptrap masquerading under the name of philosophy filled Lenin with indignation.

After a stormy united Party Conference held in Paris in December 1909, a new editorial board for *Sotsial Demokrat* was elected, consisting of Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Martov and Marchiewski. Nine issues were put out in the course of the year, during which, as Krupskaya recalls, "Martov was in a minority of one on the new editorial board, and he often forgot about his Menshevism". And she adds: "I remember Ilyich once remarked with satisfaction that it was good to work with Martov, as he was an exceedingly gifted journalist. But that was only until Dan arrived."<sup>[82]</sup>

Many people get the idea that Lenin was a very hard man who took a perverse delight in "hammering" his opponents in polemics. This impression—very far from the truth—is derived from a one-sided acquaintance with Lenin's writings. If one merely reads the public articles, many of which were naturally of a polemical character, then it does seem that Lenin treats his opponents none too gently. But this gives only one side of the picture. If one reads Lenin's correspondence, an entirely different picture emerges. Lenin was always extraordinarily patient and loyal in his dealings with comrades. He would go to great lengths to convince and carry his colleagues with him. Only in the last analysis, when the disputed issues passed over into the public domain, especially where issues of

principle were at stake, Lenin would come out fighting. At this juncture, diplomacy took a back seat and no feelings were spared. For Lenin, all other considerations were secondary when it came to the defence of the fundamental principles of Marxism. This method can be seen clearly in this case.

That Bogdanov had reservations about dialectical materialism was not new. But in the storm and stress of the revolution, such things appeared of little importance. In any case, there was no time to devote to philosophy. But under conditions of reaction, the question appeared in an altogether different light. The dangers were all too clear. But to split over such questions, and in such a difficult situation—this thought was too awful to contemplate. Initially, Lenin attempted to play down the differences, so as to avoid a damaging conflict inside the Bolshevik leadership: “At the end of March,” recalls Krupskaya, “Ilyich had been of the opinion that philosophical disputes could and should be detached from political groupings within the Bolshevik section. He believed that such disputes in the section would show better than anything else that Bogdanov’s philosophy could not be put on the same level as Bolshevism.” But then she adds: “It grew clearer every day, however, that the Bolshevik group would soon fall apart.”[\[83\]](#)

In his shallow and pretentious memoirs, N.V. Volsky (Valentinov) gives a picture of the sharp conflicts over philosophy that shook the Bolshevik organisation at this time.[\[84\]](#) Reading this, one realises that Lenin must have had the patience of Job. But everything has its limits. Despite all Lenin’s attempts at peacemaking, the differences were too serious to paper over. To make matters worse, a defiant Bogdanov wrote an article in Kautsky’s journal *Die Neue Zeit* praising Machism. For Lenin, this was like a red rag to a bull. The German Party was the leading party of the International. To go public in the German party press was an open provocation. Worse still, the SPD had an ambiguous position on the question of philosophy, while the Austrian Social Democratic theoretician Friedrich Adler hailed Machism as a great scientific discovery. By giving the polemic in the Russian Party such a high profile internationally, Bogdanov upped the ante and deepened the split. From this moment there was no turning back.

It was very hard for Lenin to break with people with whom he had worked closely, as Krupskaya points out: “For about three years prior to this we had been working with Bogdanov and the Bogdanovites hand in hand, and not just working, but fighting side by side. Fighting for a common cause draws people together more than anything. Ilyich, on the other hand, was wonderful at being able to fire people with his ideas, infect them with his enthusiasm, while at the same time bringing out the best in them, taking from them what others had failed to take. Every comrade working with him seemed, as it were, to have a part of Ilyich in him, and that perhaps is why he was so close to them.

“The conflict within the group was a nerve-wracking business. I remember Ilyich once coming home after having had words with the otzovists. He looked awful, and even his tongue seemed to have turned grey. We decided that he was to go to Nice for a week to get away from the hurly-burly and take it easy in the sunshine. He did, and returned fit again.”[\[85\]](#)

Lenin now felt he had no alternative but to wage a war to the death against the supporters of Bogdanov. But as it happened, it was not Lenin, but Plekhanov who fired the first shot. His article *Materialismus Militans* (Militant Materialism), was written partly as an open letter to Bogdanov. But the main theoretical response was Lenin's philosophical masterpiece *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* one of the seminal works of modern Marxism. This book played a key role in the ideological rearmament of the Russian working class and the re-orientation of the movement, combating retrograde tendencies and reactionary ideas. Lenin cuts across the fog of mysticism as a hot knife cuts through butter. It was now a question of war to the finish. The hardening of Lenin's attitude can be seen from his letters to his sister Anna who was handling relations with the publisher of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The latter tried to tone down the language used against the other side. But Lenin was now adamant that no concessions at all be made. In his text he used the word *popovshchina* (an untranslatable word, meaning approximately "priestliness") to describe the outlook of the supporters of Empirio-monism. This was incorrectly translated as "fideism", which, apart from being linguistically inaccurate, clearly marked an attempt to water down the tone of Lenin's polemic. This called forth a sharp rebuke from the author, expressed not in one letter but in several, for example, one dated 9 March 1909:

"Please do not tone down the places against Bogdanov and against Lunacharsky's *popovshchina*. We have *completely broken off* relations with them. There is no reason for toning them down. It is not worth the trouble."<sup>[86]</sup> And again, only three days later: "*Please* do not tone down *anything* in the places against Bogdanov, *Lunacharsky* and Co. They must not be toned down. You have deleted the passage about Chernov being a 'more honest' opponent than they, which is a great pity. The shade of meaning you have given it is not the one I want. There is now no overall consistency in my accusations. The crux of the issue is that our Machists are *dishonest*, mean-spirited, cowardly enemies of Marxism in philosophy."<sup>[87]</sup>

### **The Bolsheviks Split**

The leadership of the Bolshevik faction was now openly split. Their journal *Proletary* had a "narrow" editorial board, composed of Lenin, Zinoviev and Kamenev whose collaboration began in these years, together with Bogdanov and CC members Goldenberg and Dubrovinsky. The above-named editors met together with others in a mini-Conference in Paris in 8-17 (21-30) June 1909. Among those present were Rykov and Tomsky, the future trade union leader from Petersburg. The aim of the conference was to discuss "otzovism" and "ultimatism". In open debate, Bogdanov defended his position, but was practically isolated. With the exception of Shantser, who took a conciliationist position, and two abstentions (Tomsky and Goldenberg), all the other delegates voted for Lenin's position. The conference also discussed the philosophical views of Bogdanov's group which were condemned. However, it should be noted that all Lenin's positions were accepted with votes against and abstentions. Of course, there is nothing unusual about decisions being taken by majority votes. The idea that every vote must be unanimous belongs to the tradition of Stalinism with its cult of the infallible Leader, something completely alien to the democratic traditions of Bolshevism. But in this case,

the abstentions were significant in that many Party activists in Russia regarded the dispute on philosophy as an incomprehensible luxury in the difficult conditions in which the Party was now operating. For such people, to tell the truth, disputes about theory are always “inopportune”.

A typical example of this cast of mind was Stalin, who completely failed to grasp what Lenin was driving at. In a letter to M.G. Tskhkaya he stated that *Empirio-criticism* had the good sides also and that the task of Bolsheviks was to develop the philosophy of Marx and Engels “in the spirit of J. Deitzgen, *mastering on the way the good sides of Machism*”. This winged phrase, like others of the same kind that reveal Stalin’s narrow, ignorant and crude vision of Marxism were naturally omitted from his *Collected Works*, but survived in some forgotten corner of the Party Archives, from whence they were extracted by the authors of the official Party History published under Khrushchov.<sup>[88]</sup> In all probability Stalin had never read a single line of Mach, and, as the personification of the Party “practico”, was indifferent to such theoretical questions which were regarded as an annoying irrelevance and a distraction to everyday Party tasks. The above quote represents a clumsy attempt to achieve unity by the simple device of ignoring principled questions altogether.

However, Stalin was not the only one to fail to recognise the importance of the struggle for theoretical principles. On the contrary. Such attitudes were widespread in the ranks of the Bolsheviks, including Lenin’s closest collaborators. The future leader of the Soviet trade unions, Mikhail Tomsky was against all philosophy and declared: “I have never felt nostalgic about philosophy. Those who are going into philosophy want to escape the realities.”<sup>[89]</sup>

On 26 May 1908, Kamenev wrote in the first version of a letter to Bogdanov: “If ... I am confronted with the ultimatum of working together politically, you must approve all the steps taken by us against our philosophical opponents ... of course, in the struggle of these groups *I have no other way out but to withdraw from this struggle*.”<sup>[90]</sup> Following the line of least resistance, he advocated that the Party’s central organ, *Sotsial Demokrat*, should publish not only articles by those who defended dialectical materialism, but also by those who opposed it. This at a time when Lenin had come to the conclusion that a complete break with the Bogdanovites was necessary. In the summer of 1908, Lenin wrote to Vorovsky, who had worked with him in *Vperyod* and in 1905, in terms which make it clear that an open break with the Bogdanov group was only a matter of time. Lenin even envisaged that he might be in a minority, in which case, *he* would make the break:

“Dear friend,

“Thanks for the letter. Both your ‘suspicions’ are wrong. I was not suffering from nerves, but our position is difficult. A split with Bogdanov is imminent. The true cause is offence at the sharp criticism of his philosophical views at lectures (not at all in the newspaper). Now Bogdanov is hunting out every kind of difference of opinion. Together with

Alexinsky, who is kicking up a terrible row and with whom I have been compelled to break off all relations, he has dragged the boycott out into the light of day.

“They are trying to bring about a split on empirio-monistic and boycott grounds. The storm will burst very soon. A fight at the coming conference is inevitable. A split is highly probable. I shall leave the faction as soon as the policy of the ‘Left’ and of true ‘boycottism’ gets the upper hand.”[\[91\]](#)

During this period, Lenin’s fortunes fell to their nadir. Although the support of the Polish and Latvian Social Democrats gave a majority to the Bolshevik positions at Party meetings, within the Bolshevik faction Lenin now found himself in a minority. Most of his closest former collaborators—Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, Lyadov—were otzovists. The new generation of leaders were strongly inclined to conciliationism. Lenin, Krupskaya, and the men who were to become their closest companions in the next few years, Zinoviev and Kamenev, were compelled to emigrate to Switzerland. An inveterate optimist by nature, Lenin was not given to bouts of depression. But when he arrived back in Geneva in January 1908, the signs of strain were showing. The atmosphere of gloom and depression permeates every line of the following passage of Krupskaya’s memoirs: “Geneva looked bleak. There was not a speck of snow about, and a cold cutting wind was blowing—the bise. Post cards with a view of the freezing water near the railings of the Geneva Lake embankment were being sold. The town looked dead and empty. Among the comrades living there at the time were Mikha Tskhakaya, V. Karpinsky and Olga Ravich. Mikha Tskhakaya lived in a small room and got out of bed with difficulty when we arrived. The conversation flagged. The Karpinskys were then living in the Russian library (formerly Kuklin’s) where Karpinsky was manager. He had a very bad headache when we arrived and kept wincing all the time. All the shutters were closed, since the light hurt him. As we were going back from the Karpinskys through the desolate streets of Geneva, which had turned so unfriendly, Ilyich let fall: ‘I have a feeling as if I’ve come here to be buried’.”[\[92\]](#)

Lenin’s misgivings were understandable. The situation of the Russian exiles was far worse than ever before. Funds had dried up, creating appalling hardship for people already traumatised by mental and physical suffering. The Bolsheviks had suffered most from arrests in the period of reaction, because the liquidators confined themselves mainly to legal activities. Their organisation had less money than the Mensheviks, who could always rely on wealthy backers from the intelligentsia. Mainly for this reason, Lenin had tolerated the continuation of the “expropriations” for longer than was really justified from a strictly political point of view. In January 1908, Lenin wrote a letter to the English socialist, Theodore Rothstein, underlining the dire financial position: “The Finnish smash-up, the arrests of many comrades, the seizure of papers, the need to remove printing presses and to send many comrades abroad—all this has entailed *heavy* and unforeseen expenditure. The Party’s financial plight is all the more unfortunate because during two years everyone has grown out of the habit of working illegally and has been ‘spoilt’ by legal or semi-legal activities. Secret organisations have had to be organised almost afresh. This is costing a mint of money. And all the intellectual, philistine elements are abandoning the Party; the exodus of the intelligentsia is enormous. Those

remaining are pure proletarians who have no opportunity of making open collections.”[\[93\]](#)

The acute shortage of funds meant that there was no longer any money to pay for the large number of exiles who flocked abroad. In mid-December 1908, Lenin moved to Paris with his mother-in-law and Krupskaya. The life of the exiles was even worse there than in Geneva because there were so many of them. A hardship fund was set up, but it was pathetically small and could only be used in cases of extreme necessity. Lenin eked out a living from writing articles and the small amounts that his mother could send him from time to time. Poverty, depression and sickness were the common lot of the exiles. Some went mad and ended their lives in insane asylums, others in lonely hospital beds, or at the bottom of the river Seine. It was a frustrating and lonely time. Krupskaya recalls the case of a man who had fought in the Moscow uprising and was now living in a working class suburb in Paris, keeping himself to himself. One day he went mad and started to babble incoherently. Recognising that the delirium was brought on by starvation, Krupskaya’s mother gave the man some food: “Ilyich was white with misery as he sat beside the man,” she remembered. “I ran off to find a psychiatrist, who was a friend of ours, and the psychiatrist came and talked to the patient and gave it as his opinion that this was a serious case of insanity brought about by starvation, which had not yet reached a terminal stage; it would develop into persecution mania, and then the patient would be likely to commit suicide.”[\[94\]](#) Such was the fate of the Russian exiles in the dark years of the Stolypin reaction.

While the Fifth Congress marked an important step forward for the Bolsheviks, it did not alter the fact that the movement inside Russia was facing very difficult times. The Bolsheviks were gaining the ear of the most radicalised sections of the workers and youth, but the general picture was one of unrelieved gloom. The June 3 Coup ushered in a period of profound reaction. In 1907, the Party’s total membership was nominally 100,000. But this figure was to suffer a swift collapse. Only in the Caucasus was the decline somewhat less steep, but that was a stronghold of Menshevism. Nominal membership of the Bolshevik organisation in Petersburg stood at 6,778 early in 1907. One year later the figure was halved to 3,000, but by the start of 1909, only 1,000 people admitted to membership. By the spring of 1910, the Okhrana put the total membership at a mere 506.[\[95\]](#) Police raids continued to wreak havoc on the Party’s severely depleted underground organisations. In the first three months of 1908 the police struck again, this time concentrating on Party organisers in certain areas of Moscow and Petersburg. A member of the Bolshevik committee in Petersburg was forced to admit in private that, after the spring arrests, “work in the districts almost ceased...”[\[96\]](#)

Nor does this tell the whole story. Internal conflicts and splits meant that Lenin was almost totally isolated within his own faction. After the expulsion of Bogdanov’s group, the dominant trend in the leadership was the so-called Conciliationist faction, which was increasingly disinclined to follow Lenin’s lead. Many years later, Trotsky described the situation of those bleak years in an interview with C.L.R. James (“Johnson”):

“James: How many were there in the Bolshevik Party?

“Trotsky: In 1910 in the whole country there were a few dozen people. Some were in Siberia. But they were not organised. The people whom Lenin could reach by correspondence or by agent numbered about 30 or 40 at most. However, the tradition and the ideas among the more advanced workers was a tremendous capital which was used later during the revolution, but practically, at this time we were absolutely isolated.”[\[97\]](#)

The accuracy of this estimate is attested to by Zinoviev, who writes: “The years of Stolypin’s counter-revolution were the most critical and most dangerous in the Party’s existence. In retrospect we can say quite unhesitatingly that in those hard times the Party as such did not exist: it had disintegrated into tiny individual circles which differed from the circles of the 1880s and early 1890s in that, following the cruel defeat that had been inflicted upon the revolution, their general atmosphere was extremely depressed.[\[98\]](#) The difficulties facing the underground Party were unprecedented. “In the course of one year after the Fifth Congress,” writes Schapiro, “in many organisations where membership had been estimated in hundreds it was now reckoned in tens.” And the same author estimates that “in the summer of 1909 only five or six Bolshevik committees in all were functioning”.[\[99\]](#) The same story is told by many different authors. “No more than five or six Bolshevik committees were still operating in Russia, and the Moscow organisation could boast only 150 members at the end of 1909,” writes Stephen Cohen.[\[100\]](#)

Krupskaya recalls the position: “They were difficult times. In Russia the organisations were going to pieces. The police, with the aid of *agent provocateurs*, had arrested the leading Party workers. Big meetings and conferences became impossible. It was not so easy for people, who had only recently been in the eye of the public, to go underground. In the spring (April-May) Kamenev and Warski (a Polish Social Democrat and intimate friend of Dzerzhinsky, Tyszka and Rosa Luxemburg) were arrested in the street. A few days later Zinoviev, and then N.A. Rozhkov (a Bolshevik, member of our CC) were arrested, too, in the street. The masses withdrew into themselves. They wanted to think things over, try to understand what had happened; agitation of a general kind had palled and no longer satisfied anyone. People readily joined the study-circles, but there was no one to take charge of them. These moods provided a favourable soil for otzovism.”[\[101\]](#)

With the greatest difficulty, the Bolshevik centre maintained contacts with local groups in Russia, using conspiratorial methods. Osip Piatnitsky once again found himself in charge of sending illegal literature into Russia, especially the Bolshevik journals *Proletarii* and *Sotsial Demokrat*—just as in the bad old days before 1905. The external centre for this activity was Leipzig, the internal centre in Minsk. And, just as in the old times, his work was closely observed by the tsarist Okhrana, whose agent Zhitomirsky had infiltrated a key position in the Bolsheviks’ foreign organisation. The Fifth Congress had approved a new way of electing the Party leadership at all levels. Given the acute problems of security, this had to include co-option. As leading people fell victim to police raids (efficiently directed by the likes of Zhitomirsky), so new people had to be co-opted to fill the gaps.

A letter from the Urals described the situation: “Our ideological forces are melting away like snow. The elements who avoid illegal organisations in general...and who joined the

Party only at the time of the upsurge and of the de facto liberty that then existed in many places, have left our Party organisations.”<sup>[102]</sup> An article in the central organ summed up the position with the words: “The intellectuals, as is known, have been deserting in masses in recent months.” Commenting on this, Lenin writes: “But the liberation of the Party from the half-proletarian, half-petty-bourgeois intellectuals is beginning to awaken to a *new life* the new *purely proletarian* forces accumulated during the period of the heroic struggle of the proletarian masses. That same Kulebaki organisation which was, as the quotation from the report shows, in a desperate condition—and was even quite ‘dead’—has been resurrected, it turns out. ‘Party nests among the workers [we read] scattered in large numbers throughout the area, in most cases without any intellectual forces, without literature, even without any connection with the Party Centres, don’t want to die... The number of organised members is not decreasing but increasing... There are no intellectuals, and the workers themselves, the most class-conscious among them, have to carry on propaganda work.’ And the general conclusion reached is that ‘in a number of places responsible work, owing to the flight of the intellectuals, is passing into the hands of the advanced workers’. (*Sotsial-Demokrat*, no. 1, p. 28).”<sup>[103]</sup>

This had its disadvantages, however. The Party had lost many of its most experienced people, one way or another. The new influx were mainly raw and inexperienced in underground work, which made them easier targets for the police. On the other hand, it was far easier for the police to infiltrate their agents into the underground committees, which were soon full of spies and provocateurs. In order to tighten up on security, methods of election were changed to fit the new conditions. Local organisations seem to have had different ways of electing their committees, reflecting the demands of illegality. In Moscow, instead of electing committees at an all-city aggregate, they were now elected by smaller local meetings. In the beginning there were party cells, committees and groups in all the big factories, but as time went on and the police intensified their hunt for activists, the party committees were increasingly disrupted and the active membership reduced to a minimum expression. As a rule district committees were supposed to meet once a month, while the executive of the DC was to meet weekly. But it is doubtful if this was really maintained in most areas. In general only small numbers were involved and those groups that remained active tended to function autonomously.

These changes, however, did little to protect the Party from the attentions of the ever-increasing network of spies and provocateurs that, in the prevailing climate of demoralisation, managed to infiltrate even the most responsible posts and committees: “The gendarmes made visible the invisible text of the letter and—increased the population of the prisons. The scantiness of revolutionary ranks led unavoidably to the lowering of the Committee’s standards. Insufficiency of choice made it possible for secret agents to mount the steps of the underground hierarchy. With a snap of his finger the provocateur doomed to arrest any revolutionist who blocked his progress. Attempts to purge the organisation of dubious elements immediately led to mass arrests. An atmosphere of suspicion and mutual distrust stymied all initiative. After a number of well-calculated arrests, the provocateur Kukushkin, at the beginning of 1910 became head of the Moscow district organisation. ‘The ideal of the Okhrana is being realised,’ wrote an active participant of the movement. ‘Secret agents are at the head of all the

Moscow organisations'. The situation in Petersburg was not much better. 'The leadership seemed to have been routed, there was no way of restoring it, provocation gnawed away at our vitals, organisations fell apart...' In 1909 Russia still had five or six active organisations; but even they soon sank into desuetude. Membership in the Moscow district organisation, which was as high as 500 toward the end of 1908, dropped to 250 in the middle of the following year and half a year later to 150; in 1910 the organisation ceased to exist." In early 1909 Krupskaya wrote despairingly: "We have no people at all. All are scattered in prison and places of exile."<sup>[104]</sup> At the end of March 1910, Lenin complained: "There are few forces in Russia. Ah, if only we could send from here a good Party worker to the CC or for convening a conference! But here everyone is a 'has-been'."<sup>[105]</sup>

### **The Pro-Party Mensheviks**

Meanwhile, the Mensheviks had their own problems. The danger of liquidationism was becoming clear, not only to the Bolsheviks, but to a growing number of rank-and-file Mensheviks. The opportunism of the Duma fraction provoked the indignation of the Menshevik workers. By the end of 1908, a process of inner differentiation was taking place in their ranks. Many Menshevik workers were breaking with the liquidators who increasingly found themselves politically isolated. The "Pro-Party Mensheviks", headed by Plekhanov, defended the maintenance of the underground party organisation, and naturally gravitated towards the Bolsheviks. Soon after the Fifth Congress Plekhanov left the editorial board of *Golos Sotsial Demokrata* (Social Democrat's Voice) and launched his own journal, *Dnevnik* (The Diary), from which he launched a blistering attack on the "legalistic renegades". Independent local groups broadly sympathetic to Plekhanov's positions sprang up, especially among the exiles—in Paris, Geneva, Nice and San Remo.

This unexpected development provided welcome relief for Lenin. Not only did it appear to hold out the hope of re-uniting the revolutionary wing of the Party on a principled basis, but it might have fundamentally altered the balance of forces within the rival factions. Despite all the conflicts and hard words of the past, he showed great enthusiasm for the return of his old mentor to the revolutionary camp. Lenin probably hoped that unification with Plekhanov would help him to overcome the ultra-left tendencies in his own faction. In the delicate negotiations with the Pro-Party Mensheviks, Lenin showed both skill and sensitivity. Although the Bolsheviks were numerically far superior to the Plekhanovites, Lenin was careful not to present the relationship between the two trends in triumphalistic terms, but as a growing together of two equal groups of co-thinkers. He had to take into account the personal sensitivities of the eternally prickly Plekhanov, who wrote: "I mean a *mutual drawing closer together*, and not the Mensheviks switching to the Bolsheviks standpoint."<sup>[106]</sup> Lenin showed himself to be very tactful in this respect: "I am speaking of a mutual *rapprochement*, and not of the Mensheviks going over to the standpoint of the Bolsheviks," he wrote.<sup>[107]</sup>

This was the real Lenin—a thousand light-years removed from the caricature of the rigid and unforgiving sectarian and fanatic which malicious and dishonest critics have systematically tried to peddle. On the other hand, considerations of tact and diplomacy

for Lenin never outweighed the need for political clarity. What was needed was “an agreement on the basis of the struggle for the Party and the Party principle against liquidationism, without any ideological compromises, without any glossing over of tactical and other differences of opinion *within the limits* of the Party line”.<sup>[108]</sup>

By forming a bloc with Lenin to combat both opportunism and ultra-leftism, the founder of Russian Marxism paid his last service to the cause of the revolutionary working class and its party. Plekhanov came close to making the break with Menshevism at this time. He supported Lenin against both liquidators and otzovists. But ultimately he proved unable to go the whole way. He balked at unity with the Bolsheviks, and this proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, preventing Pro-Party Mensheviks from going over to the camp of consistent revolutionism. This scenario has been played out many times in the history of the international Labour Movement. Under certain conditions, honest left reformist or centrist leaders can make the transition to the camp of revolutionary Marxism. But history shows that this is rather the exception than the rule. More often than not, the mental habits and inertia of long periods of stagnation, and the vacillations and ambiguity which flow from confusion and unwillingness to call things by their right name, act as a powerful brake to prevent the process from coming to fruition. Such individuals—even the best of them, like Plekhanov and Martov—tend to recoil at the moment of truth and sink back into the morass of opportunist politics.

For a time, however, the united front with Plekhanov’s group gave new heart to Lenin’s supporters. Ordzhonikidze wrote to Lenin: “I welcome Plekhanov’s about-turn with all my heart... If he now really takes up a firm position, that will undoubtedly be a plus for the Party.”<sup>[109]</sup> Alas, it was not to be. Plekhanov’s rapprochement with Bolshevism was almost entirely confined to the organisational question. Politically, he remained in the orbit of Menshevism, reluctant to completely break the umbilical cord that tied him to his old friends. Inevitably, he veered to the right once more—this time for good. In the First World War, he found himself in the camp of reactionary patriotism. From the standpoint of the revolution, the great man was dead. But for the time being, the collaboration of Leninists and “Plekhanovites” had a positive effect. Many “Pro-Party Menshevik” workers later became Bolsheviks.

### **Tensions in *Proletary***

The first and most pressing necessity was to resolve the simmering conflict with the ultra-left otzovists. In June 1909, the enlarged editorial board of *Proletary* met in Paris. Lenin hoped to make use of this meeting to firm up the leadership of the Bolshevik faction. In reality, it was a meeting of the Bolshevik factional centre. At the meeting, there was a clash on an important question, which fully reveals the difference between Leninism and ultra-leftism. Bogdanov called for a “purely Bolshevik congress”, that is to say, he wanted the Bolsheviks to split from the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and constitute themselves as a separate party. The demand for a “purely Bolshevik congress” was supported by the other ultra-left Bolsheviks: Shantser, Lyadov and Sokolov (Volsky). This doctrinaire appeal for the “independence” of the revolutionary party, whether it is a party of two, or two million, is the constant refrain of ultra-lefts throughout

history. It has nothing in common with Lenin's skilful and flexible tactics, which were always guided by the need to connect with the masses. The first task was to win over the advanced layers of the working class, which in Russia were organised in the RSDLP. The rise of the right wing liquidationist tendency in the RSDLP was not an argument for splitting away the revolutionary wing but, on the contrary, for redoubling the fight to defeat the right wing inside the party and tear the workers away from their influence. Upon the results of this struggle depended the future of the revolution in Russia.

Bogdanov's argument about splitting from the RSDLP in order to establish the "independence" of the revolutionary party was false to the core. In fact, the Bolsheviks were always independent, in the sense that they never compromised in the defence of their revolutionary programme, policy and theory. But that is insufficient. It is necessary to find a way of carrying these revolutionary ideas to the working class, starting with the most advanced, organised layers. To the extent that a significant part of the organised workers in Russia were still under the influence of the Mensheviks, it was essential to continue the struggle inside the RSDLP—to fight to win the majority. That was Lenin's line. But in order to do this, it was necessary to organise the revolutionary wing separately, as a faction inside the RSDLP. The Bolsheviks had their own centre, their own publications defending their revolutionary positions and carrying on a constant struggle against the party's right wing. What more "independence" than this was required? The formal declaration of a separate party? That would be merely an empty gesture, or worse, an adventure. To have accepted this ultra-left line would have doomed the Bolsheviks to sectarian impotence and handed the party over to the reformists on a plate. Bogdanov's position on this issue was a further manifestation of ultra-left moods born out of impatience and frustration.

To the disgust of the Bogdanovites, the meeting not only threw out the demand for the "purely Bolshevik congress", but also underlined the need for a rapprochement with the Pro-Party Mensheviks. According to Soviet historians, this meeting "expelled" Bogdanov, but this is untrue. Despite the highly provocative behaviour of Bogdanov and his followers, they were not expelled from the Bolsheviks at the Paris meeting, which limited itself to a declaration that the Bolshevik faction "could accept no responsibility" for their activities. This public disassociation of Bolshevism from ultra-leftism was the prior condition for a rapprochement with the Pro-Party Mensheviks. But in any case, the break was clearly inevitable. The meeting also voted a resolution that instructed the *Proletary* representative on the central organ (CO) to "take a definite stand for the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels on philosophical questions, if such should arise, in the CO". This position was by no means unanimous. Tomskey voted against and Kamenev, true to form, abstained.

After the meeting of the enlarged editorial board of *Proletary* in Paris, the position did not improve, but rapidly deteriorated into an open conflict. Bogdanov's group had no intention of accepting the decision of the majority, but went onto the offensive, publishing a factional leaflet, defending the minority's position in defiance of the decisions of the meeting. As a result of his defiance, Bogdanov was expelled from the Bolshevik faction. "The Bolshevik group was breaking up," writes Krupskaya.[\[110\]](#)

Lunacharsky moaned about Lenin's "impatience" while Bogdanov published a tendentious account of the discussions. The Vperyodists replied by entering into an open and public conflict with the Bolshevik majority faction. They moved a motion at the Petersburg committee against participation in the Duma elections campaign. Lenin's supporters replied by calling a better attended district aggregate, where they managed to get this reversed. Sverdlov, released from jail in autumn 1909, played an important role in the Moscow organisation. This was a big help. But Lenin's position was generally very insecure.

After the conference, the otzovists regrouped and established a factional centre of their own. Realising that they could not easily defeat Lenin in open debate, the Bogdanov group took advantage of the personal wealth and connections of Gorky, who sympathised with their philosophical views, to organise what was effectively a factional school in the unlikely surroundings of the Italian island of Capri. Bogdanov and Lunacharsky also launched their own faction organ, *Vperyod* (Forward). Lenin tried to take the struggle into the camp of the Bogdanovites, sending people to the Capri school. But the only result was to deepen the split. The workers in Russia were furious with the behaviour of the Vperyodists, but in general they were losing patience with all the émigrés and their philosophical disputes which seemed remote from the problems on the ground in Russia. Despite everything, Lenin tried his best to save at least some of the boycotters from themselves. Contrary to the widespread picture of Lenin as a virulent factionalist, Krupskaya recalls that:

"Ilyich hit back hard when he was attacked, and defended his point of view, but when new problems had to be tackled and it was found possible to co-operate with his opponent, Ilyich was able to approach his opponent of yesterday as a comrade. He did not have to make any special effort to do this. Herein lay Ilyich's tremendous advantage. Very guarded though he always was on matters where principles were involved, he was a great optimist as far as people were concerned. Despite an occasional error of judgement, this optimism of his was, on the whole, very useful to the cause. But where there was no agreement on matters of principle, there was no reconciliation."[\[111\]](#)

In June 1909 he wrote in *Proletary* of his conviction that "comrade Lyadov, who has worked for many years in the ranks of the revolutionary Social Democracy will not remain for long in the new God-building-'otzovist' faction but will return to the Party". This detail once again shows a side of Lenin which the professional detractors of Bolshevism have carefully concealed—his tolerance, loyalty and patience with people, qualities that are absolutely necessary for any true leader. Gorky recalled how Lenin would say to him: "Lunacharsky will come back to the party. He is less individualistic than the other two [Bogdanov and Bazarov]. He has an exceptionally gifted nature. I have a soft spot for him, know you. I love him as an excellent comrade!"[\[112\]](#) [\[A\]](#) Lenin spared no effort to help people where they showed a clear tendency to evolve in a revolutionary direction, to hold out his hand and to invite them to return, setting aside past differences and polemics, no matter how bitter. But he never allowed the search for unity to cloud the central question of the need to defend the purity of the revolutionary message. If that meant a split then so be it. As old Engels once expressed it, "the party

becomes strong by purging itself". Once he saw the inevitability of a break, Lenin could also be implacable.

## NOTES

[A] In fact not only Lunacharsky and Lyadov, but most of the Vperyodists later did rejoin the Bolshevik Party. Even Bogdanov returned in the end. He surfaced in 1918 as a Party activist and theoretician. One of his books (on Marxist economics) was used in the 1920s as a Party text-book. Later he was one of the leading lights of the so-called Proletkult tendency, a sure sign that he had lost none of his iconoclastic tendencies and formalistic leanings. But in the years of bureaucratic counter-revolution he dropped out of politics. Not all the Vperyodists returned to the Party, however. V.A. Bazarov gave up politics altogether and was hostile to the October revolution.

[75] See Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 110.

[76] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, pp. 251-2.

[77] LCW, *Those who would liquidate us*, vol. 17, pp. 71-2.

[78] Quoted in L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 155 in both quotes.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[80] Quoted in O. Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

[81] Lunacharsky, *op. cit.* p. 35.

[82] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 193.

[83] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[84] See Valentinov, *Encounters with Lenin*, 1968.

[85] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 193-4.

[86] LCW, *To his sister Anna, March 9, 1909*, vol. 37, p. 414.

[87] LCW, *To his sister Anna, March 12, 1909*, p. 416.

[88] See *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 272 (my emphasis).

[89] *Protokoly soveshchaniya rasshirennoy redaktsii Proletariya*, p. 12.

[90] *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, No. 9-10, 1932, p. 203 (my emphasis).

- [91] LCW, *Letter to V.V. Vorovsky, July 1, 1908*, vol. 34, p. 395.
- [92] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 162.
- [93] LCW, *Letter to Theodore Rothstein, January 29, 1908*, vol. 34, p. 375.
- [94] Quoted in Stanley Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin*, p. 240.
- [95] See McKean, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- [96] P. Kudelli, in *Krasnaya letopis'*, No. 14, quoted in McKean, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- [97] Trotsky, *Fighting Against the Stream*, in *Writings, 1938-39*, p. 257.
- [98] Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 165.
- [99] Schapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- [100] Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 12.
- [101] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 183.
- [102] See LCW, *On to the Straight Road*, vol. 15, p. 18.
- [103] *Ibid.*, p. 18 in both quotes
- [104] Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 95 in both quotes.
- [105] LCW, *Letter to N.Y. Vilonov, March 27, 1910*, vol. 34, p. 415.
- [106] G.V. Plekhanov, *Works*, in Russian, vol. 19, p. 37.
- [107] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Russian edition, vol., XIX, p. 23.
- [108] LCW, *Methods of the Liquidators and Party Tasks of the Bolsheviks*, vol. 16, p. 101.
- [109] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 269.
- [110] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 198.
- [111] *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- [112] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 296.

## Part Three: The Period of Reaction

[section 6 of 6]

### Trotsky and Conciliationism

Trotsky thought it was possible to unite the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, or, to be more accurate, the left wing tendency in Menshevism represented especially by Martov. He was not the only one. Lenin himself was attracted more than once to the idea of unity with Martov, whose personal and political qualities he always recognised. Lunacharsky recalls that as late as 1917, Lenin dreamed of a bloc with Martov. At this time certainly Lenin held out hopes that Martov would come over: “The next spell of emigration struck Martov a very hard blow; never, perhaps, had his tendency to vacillate been so marked nor probably so agonising. The right wing of Menshevism soon began to go rotten, deviating into so-called ‘liquidationism’. Martov had no wish to be drawn into this petty bourgeois disintegration of the revolutionary spirit. But the ‘liquidators’ had a hold on Dan and Dan on Martov and as usual the heavy ‘tail’ of Menshevism dragged Martov to the bottom. There was a moment when he would literally have made a pact with Lenin, urged to do so by Trotsky and Innokenty, who were dreaming of forming a powerful centre to counter the extreme left and the extreme right.

“This line, as we know, was also strongly supported by Plekhanov, but the idyll did not last long, rightism gained the upper hand with Martov and the same discord between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks broke out again.

“Martov was then living in Paris. I was told that he had even begun to go slightly to seed, always a lurking danger for émigrés. Politics was degenerating into an affair of petty squabbles and a passion for bohemian café life was beginning to threaten him with a diminution of his intellectual powers. However, when the war came Martov not only pulled himself together but from the start took up an extremely resolute position.”[\[113\]](#)

Trotsky hoped that all the left wing elements might come together, on the basis of a break with the extreme right-wing liquidators and the ultra-left Bolsheviks. Although politically close to Bolshevism, Trotsky was critical of what he saw as Lenin’s “factionalism”. He nursed the hope that the left wing of Menshevism would, in time, break with the right, and Lenin’s seeming intransigence infuriated him. From October 1908, he succeeded in publishing a paper called *Pravda* (The Truth) intended for illegal circulation in Russia, which was a big success. *Pravda* was published in Vienna and financed by two wealthy sympathisers, Adolf Joffe, the future outstanding Soviet diplomat who was later to commit suicide in protest against the Stalinist bureaucracy, and M.I. Skobelev, the son of a Baku oil magnate, who later re-emerged as a minister in the Provisional Government. Part of the new paper’s success was that it wrote in a lively and popular style and avoided the strident factional tone that characterised other underground Social Democratic publications. Instead of attacking other publications and groups, it concentrated on denouncing the problems of the working class and attempted to find common ground between the Bolsheviks and left Mensheviks. This was very popular with the workers in

Russia, but profoundly irritated Lenin who was involved in a struggle on two fronts and suspicious of unity-mongering. But Lenin now found himself in a minority in the leadership of his own faction, where conciliationist tendencies were strong.

Trotsky's wrong position on organisation was the source of endless disputes with Lenin. The period under consideration witnessed the sharpest of clashes between Lenin and Trotsky in which Lenin heatedly denounced "Trotskyism". But it is clear that for Lenin "Trotskyism" was synonymous with Trotsky's position on organisation (i.e. conciliation) and not at all his political views which were close to Bolshevism. Moreover, the sharpness of the polemics between the two men had another explanation, which is not immediately obvious to the modern reader. The harshness of Lenin's language in these polemics was dictated by the fact that, under the guise of "Trotskyism", he was really attacking conciliatory tendencies in the leadership of his own faction. But the real story was for a long time suppressed beneath a thick layer of lies and distortions aimed at justifying the Stalinist bureaucracy and blackening the names of the Old Bolsheviks who fought against it.

In fact, for a time, Trotsky actually appeared to be on the point of succeeding. Many Bolshevik leaders were in agreement with him on the question of unity—that is, they supported precisely the weakest side of Trotsky's position, not the strongest. On the Central Committee, the Bolsheviks N.A. Rozhkov and V.P. Nogin were conciliators. Krupskaya commented ironically that "Nogin was a conciliator who was out to unite all and everyone".<sup>[114]</sup> So were Kamenev and Zinoviev. Given the popularity of Trotsky's paper with workers in Russia, a number of Bolshevik leaders were in favour of using *Pravda* for the purpose of bringing about a fusion of Bolsheviks and Pro-Party Mensheviks. At the Paris meeting of the *Proletary* editorial board, Kamenev and Zinoviev, now Lenin's closest collaborators proposed the closing down of *Proletary* and moved that *Pravda* should be accepted as the official organ of the Central Committee of the RSDLP. This position was also supported by others like Tomsy and Rykov. The proposal was passed against the opposition of Lenin, who counter-proposed the setting up of a popular Bolshevik paper and monthly theoretical journal. In the end, a compromise was reached whereby *Proletary* would still come out, but not more than once a month. Meanwhile it was agreed to enter into negotiations with Trotsky with a view to making the Vienna *Pravda* the official organ of the RSDLP CC. This fact shows the strength of the conciliationist tendencies in the ranks of the Bolsheviks, and also tells us quite a lot about the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards Trotsky in this period. The minutes of the meeting of *Proletary* referred to were published in 1934, in order to discredit Zinoviev and Kamenev before their murder by Stalin. But were later consigned to the Archives and hardly ever referred to.<sup>[115]</sup>

Lenin was increasingly isolated within his own faction, and compelled to make concessions against his better judgement just to hold things together. The psychology of the Bolshevik conciliators was conditioned by the kind of "practical politics" which prides itself on its haughty contempt for theory and principle, and is always looking for short cuts that, in the end, always turn out to be the opposite. This philistine mentality always regards a struggle for principles as "sectarianism", an accusation that was

frequently levelled against Lenin by his opponents. Kamenev and his fellow conciliators regarded themselves as infinitely wiser and more practical than Lenin, perhaps not on theory, but in the practical search for solutions to the party's ills. In November 1908, Kamenev wrote to Bogdanov: "In the 'squabble' that has started here I stand in the 'middle of the road' line and hope to stay there ... I feel that just as the struggle against conciliation was binding on me in 1904, so conciliation is equally binding on me now."[\[116\]](#)

As late as 1912, when Lenin had already firmly set out on the course of a final split with the opportunists, a significant part of the leadership dragged their feet, as Krupskaya points out: "Obviously, there could be no room in the Party for people who had made up their minds beforehand that they would not abide by the Party decisions. With some comrades, however, the struggle for the Party assumed the form of conciliation; they lost sight of the aim of unity and relapsed into a man-of-the-street striving to unite all and everyone, no matter what they stood for. Even Innokenty, who fully subscribed to Ilyich's opinion that the main thing was to unite with the Pro-Party-Mensheviks, the Plekhanovites, was so keen to preserve the Party that he began himself to incline towards a conciliatory attitude. Ilyich set him right, however."[\[117\]](#)

In retrospect, it seems inexplicable that Trotsky should have wasted so much time in attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable. But he was not the only one who failed to understand what Lenin was driving at. It is sufficient to mention the name of Rosa Luxemburg to make the point. Like Rosa, Trotsky was mistaken, but his mistake was that of a sincere revolutionary with the interests of the working class and socialism at heart. Most probably the source of his error was also similar to hers. Rosa Luxemburg was early repelled by the centralised bureaucratic machine of the German SPD and, over-reacting to it, tended to reject centralism *per se*. Not fully understanding Lenin's position, and taking as gospel the caricature of the Mensheviks, she subjected his organisational ideas to a harsh and unjust criticism that partially clouded their relations, although politically they usually stood on the same side. Trotsky was repelled by the narrowness of the Bolshevik committee-men, who sought to reduce the most complex political questions to simple organisational problems, and presented the dialectical relation between the class and the party in a mechanical way that at times resembled a caricature, as when the Bolshevik committee-men in St Petersburg demanded that the St Petersburg Soviet dissolve itself when it refused to accept the leadership of the party. Trotsky was inclined to base his opinion of Bolshevism, not on Lenin, but on a mechanical caricature of Lenin's ideas which passed for Bolshevism in certain circles. This kept him at a distance, despite the closeness of his political views with those of Lenin, right up to 1917, when the actual experience of the revolution caused all the old disagreements to dissolve.

In later years Trotsky admitted that on this question Lenin had always been in the right. In his autobiography Trotsky explains the basis of his error: "In its view of the future of Menshevism, and of the problems of organisation within the party, the *Pravda* never arrived at the preciseness of Lenin's attitude. I was still hoping that the new revolution would force the Mensheviks—as had that of 1905—to follow a revolutionary path. But I underestimated the importance of preparatory ideological selection and of political case-

hardening. In questions of the inner development of the party I was guilty of a sort of *social-revolutionary* fatalism. This was a mistaken stand, but it was vastly superior to that *bureaucratic* fatalism, devoid of ideas, which distinguishes the majority of my present-day critics in the camp of the Communist International.”[\[118\]](#)

After Lenin’s death, as part of an unscrupulous campaign to blacken Trotsky’s name, the Stalinists deliberately exaggerated the significance of the differences between Lenin and Trotsky. But these old polemics ceased to have any interest for Lenin after 1917 when Trotsky joined the Bolshevik Party and took a firm stand against conciliationism. In November 1917, that is, *after* the October revolution, the “Old Bolsheviks” Kamenev and Zinoviev advocated the formation of a coalition government with the Mensheviks. At that time, Lenin said: “As for coalition, I cannot speak about that seriously. Trotsky long ago said that a union was impossible. Trotsky understood this, *and from that time there has been no better Bolshevik.*”[\[119\]](#)

### **The January Plenum**

“1910,” writes Trotsky, “was the period of the most complete degeneration of the movement and of the most widespread flood of conciliatory tendencies. In January, a plenum of the Central Committee was held in Paris, at which the Conciliators gained a very unstable victory. It was decided to restore the Central Committee in Russia with the participation of the Liquidators. Nogin and Germanov were Bolshevik Conciliators. The revival of the ‘Russian’ collegium—that is, of the one acting illegally in Russia—was Nogin’s task.”[\[120\]](#)

The prevailing conditions of reaction, and the appalling difficulties faced by all Social Democrats, understandably encouraged those elements who favoured unity at any price. Out of these moves towards unity came the idea of a special Plenum to kick out the liquidators and otzovists and establish unity between the Bolsheviks and non-liquidator Mensheviks. But Lenin was unimpressed by all these attempts at unity. He wrote sarcastically that Trotsky was in a bloc with people “with whom he agrees *on nothing* theoretically but *in everything* practically”.[\[121\]](#) What Lenin meant was that, while Trotsky was politically at odds with the liquidators and otzovists, he nevertheless continued to argue in favour of conciliation and unity, and thus found himself in an unprincipled bloc. Lenin saw no point in participating in a Plenum of elements who stood for mutually exclusive political positions. But he no longer carried a majority in the Bolshevik camp on this question. The violence of the discussions among the Bolshevik leaders was later hinted at by Lenin in a letter to Gorky: “Three weeks of agony, all nerves were on edge, the devil to pay...”[\[122\]](#) But Lenin’s protests were in vain. Outvoted within the Bolshevik faction, he was compelled reluctantly to go along with the Plenum.

In January 1910, for the last time, the leading representatives of the different tendencies of the RSDLP met together in an attempt to patch up their differences. The Plenum took place in Paris on 2 to 23 January 1910. The leaders of all the factions were present, except Plekhanov who declined to attend, pleading illness. The absence of the Pro-Party

Mensheviks was a further blow to Lenin, since his preference was for unity with Plekhanov's group. Given the extremely heterogeneous nature of such a gathering, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. In order to secure genuine unity, it is not enough to proclaim it. Unless there is principled agreement on the fundamental questions, such an attempt usually only succeeds in uniting three groups into ten! The differences separating the different groups were too great to be overcome by resolutions piously proclaiming the need for unity. That is why Lenin opposed the convening of such a gathering. Far from "resolving" the issues, this explosive mixture of inflammable elements inevitably led to an immediate blow-up. At Lenin's insistence, the Plenum passed a resolution condemning both liquidationism and otzovism as bourgeois influences within the Party. Subsequently, however, the supporters of these trends insisted on watering this down. The question arose of calling a Party Conference to try to resolve the problems. Lenin insisted that the largest number of workers from illegal party organisations be invited to this. On this basis, the Bolsheviks agreed to support the idea. The Plenum also agreed to grant Trotsky's *Pravda* a monthly subsidy and to place Kamenev on its editorial board as the representative of the central committee.

There was a row over money. The Mensheviks caused a scandal over funds belonging to the Bolsheviks, which had been obtained by the controversial method of "expropriations". Still more controversial was a large sum of money left to the Party by millionaire industrialist Saava Morozov. At the time of the Plenum, for once, the Bolsheviks had plenty of money thanks to a nephew of Morozov, Nikolai Schmidt, who was murdered in a tsarist prison after the December defeat. Before he died, Nikolai got word to his friends outside that he was leaving all his property to the Bolsheviks. In addition, his younger sister Elizaveta Schmidt decided to donate her share of the inheritance to the Bolsheviks. But as she was not yet of age, a fictitious marriage had to be organised with a member of one of the party's fighting squads who had somehow managed to keep on a legal footing. By this means the Bolsheviks managed to obtain the money immediately. That is why Lenin could write confidently that *Proletary* was now able to pay for delegates to the Plenum. The Mensheviks were incensed when they discovered the situation, and raised hell. This was the cause of the kind of hysterical and acrimonious dispute which so often poisoned the atmosphere of émigré circles.

A heavy price was, in fact, paid by the Bolsheviks for the sake of unity. Against Lenin's protest, they agreed to cease publication of their central organ, *Proletary*. More painful still, the Bolshevik group's funds were handed over to a committee of trustees established by the Socialist International. The matter of the Schmidt inheritance was "resolved" when the disputed funds were handed over for temporary safekeeping to this commission, which was composed of Mehring, Klara Zetkin and Kautsky. Lenin was, to put it mildly, unhappy about this and insisted on the right to get this back if the Mensheviks did not likewise wind up *Golos Sotsial Demokrata* and disband their factional centre. Future developments would prove him right. Finally, the remaining 500 rouble notes left over from the Tiflis expropriation were burnt.

It is not correct, as is frequently done, to attribute the failure of the attempt at unity to Lenin's intransigence. As a matter of fact, at this stage, the main obstacle to unity were

the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks had already expelled the otzovists, so they had no trouble in voting for that. A very different situation existed in the camp of Menshevism, where liquidationism reigned supreme. How could they expel the liquidators? It would have supposed an act of self-immolation, which not one of them was prepared to contemplate. Thus, when both factions agreed to disband their factional apparatus and merge, the Bolsheviks actually loyally carried out the decision, but the Mensheviks did not. Martov later admitted that they only agreed because the Mensheviks were too weak to risk an immediate split.[\[123\]](#)

At the end of the meeting, in a hollow gesture, Lenin and Plekhanov were unanimously elected as delegates to the forthcoming Congress of the Socialist International. The Bolshevik conciliators had achieved their objective. Kamenev was sent by the Bolsheviks to Vienna to represent them on Trotsky's *Pravda*, which was granted a regular subsidy of 150 roubles from the Central Committee. But Lenin remained unconvinced. His judgement on the January Plenum was that it marked a partial retreat by the Bolsheviks for the sake of unity. But its decisions were contradictory and could not be carried out. The Mensheviks did not dissolve their centre and continued to publish the *Golos*. The agreement to repay the Bolshevik funds in such a case turned out to be a dead letter. The money placed in the care of Kautsky's committee remained in Germany, where, after the outbreak of War it was eventually impounded by the Treasury and used to pay for the Kaiser's war effort.

### **'Unity' Breaks Down**

After the Paris meeting, Lenin wrote to his sister Anna Ilyichna: "We have been having 'stormy' times lately, but they have ended with an attempt at peace with the Mensheviks—yes, strange as it may seem; we have closed down the factional newspaper and are trying harder to promote *unity*. We shall see whether it can be done."[\[124\]](#) The tone of this letter shows that Lenin was sceptical from the beginning about the prospects for unity, and it is also clear from the reference to things being "stormy" that there were sharp words on the subject between Lenin and his conciliator colleagues. But in the end he had to give way, and, while sceptical, was prepared to give it one last try ("we shall see whether it can be done"). In order to convince his colleagues, it was necessary to pass through the experience. "Ilyich believed that the utmost concession should be made on organisational issues without yielding an inch on fundamental issues," writes Krupskaya.[\[125\]](#)

Immediately after the Plenum Lenin summoned a meeting of the Bolshevik faction. This very fact shows that the two factions continued to operate exactly as before. *In other words, the Plenum had solved precisely nothing.* Any agreement with the Menshevik-liquidators could only be temporary and would inevitably break down. It was as impossible to mix revolutionism and reformism as to mix oil and water. The growing divergence between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks made a nonsense of the January Plenum, leaving Trotsky in an unnatural bloc with the Mensheviks, with whom, politically, he had nothing in common. *Pravda* continued to appeal for unity, but the whole position had been rendered obsolete by life itself. Trotsky tried to call a Party conference for

November 1910. Lenin called Trotsky's position "unprincipled adventurism". Having gone through the experience of attempting to unify the Party ever since 1906, Lenin must have already made up his mind that a split was, sooner or later, inevitable. The behaviour of the Menshevik-liquidators was now an obstacle in the path of the working class. Lenin was never afraid to draw bold conclusions when the interests of the movement demanded it. But he had to carry his followers with him. It was a path they were not eager to tread.

This growth of the revolutionary movement led to a further sharpening of the contradictions within the Party. As the masses were moving left, so the Menshevik-liquidators were veering to the right. Matters were clearly leading in the direction of a split. This showed the futility of conciliationism and the "January Plenum". Lenin's appraisal of the Plenum was confirmed by events. The liquidators, as we have seen, naturally, broke all the agreements. The factions maintained their separate factional centres and apparatuses, while loudly proclaiming the virtues of unity. The very day after swearing their unshakeable allegiance to unity, the liquidators began to organise a public faction around the legal journals *Nasha Zarya* and *Dyelo Zhizni*. These people (Potresov, Levitsky, etc.) represented the extreme right wing tendency in Menshevism. The other Menshevik faction around *Golos Sotsial Demokrata* Martov, Dan and Axelrod, were only "shamefaced liquidators", standing far closer to the former than to the genuine revolutionary wing of the Party. On the "left", the Vperyodists (Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, Alexinsky) continued their factional activities, having virtually split off from the Bolsheviks, organising their own factional "schools". Ironically, the ultra-left Vperyodists frequently found themselves in an unprincipled bloc with the Mensheviks against the Bolsheviks.

Behind the facade, the factional struggle not only continued, but was intensified, moving inexorably in the direction of a split. The Menshevik *Golos* continued to appear with attacks on the underground party groups and Pro-Party Mensheviks, Martov, Dan, Axelrod and Martynov published a kind of "manifesto" calling for the establishment of a "legal-open party" and so on. In other words, the agreements reached by the January Plenum were not worth the paper they were written on. By the end of 1910, Lenin was already demanding the return of the Bolshevik funds, not surprisingly without success. Lenin was not in the least surprised at this outcome. He had predicted it. He had only gone through the experience of the Plenum, which he personally regarded as "idiotic" and "fatal",<sup>[126]</sup> to convince his conciliationist colleagues of the impossibility of agreement. Lenin warned Kamenev: "I do not see any possibility of carrying on fruitful work with the liquidators, on the Right and on the Left, especially with Trotsky, but I do not object to your going to Vienna to give you a chance to see for yourself that I am right."<sup>[127]</sup> Lenin was soon shown to be right. Kamenev, who had quarrelled with Trotsky, handed in his resignation from the *Pravda* editorial board on August 13, 1910.

Even after it became clear that the Mensheviks were not going to respect the decisions of the plenum, the Bolshevik conciliators still kept up their futile attempts to get "unity". The Bolshevik members of the Central Committee carried on endless negotiations with the liquidators with the aim of organising the CC, but never got anywhere. In his memoirs, Piatnitsky describes the euphoria of the conciliator Nogin after the January

Plenum: “While Nogin was telling me about the decisions of the Plenum he was almost speechless with joy at the fact that it had at last been possible to unite the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks for practical work in Russia (the Plenum had vigorously denounced the liquidators and recallism-ultimatism) and that henceforth the ‘Nationals’ were to participate in the work. Only one thing worried him: Comrade Lenin firmly opposed all the resolutions of the Plenum which made concessions to the Mensheviks and those decisions which hampered the work of the Bolsheviks by making them dependent on chance representatives of the ‘Nationals,’ although he submitted to the majority of the Bolshevik CC membership. Nogin told me with bitterness that Lenin did not understand the vital importance of Party unity for work in Russia.”[\[128\]](#)

These illusions were completely unfounded. The ink was not dry on the paper, when the decisions of the January Plenum began to unravel rapidly. The Bolsheviks were in a weaker position than before. They were now dependent on the representative of the Social Democrats of Poland and Lithuania to get decent policies through the editorial board of *Sotsial Demokrat*. Financially they were much worse off, and depended on the Foreign Bureau of the CC for cash. It was an intolerable position. To make matters worse, the Bolsheviks were the only ones to carry out the decisions of the Plenum. The balance-sheet of conciliationism was entirely negative. In 1911, Lenin commented, with some justice, that the Plenum had drained the Party of its strength for over a year. However, the setback for the Bolsheviks was more apparent than real. What was decisive was not the artificial combinations at the top, but what was taking place in the Party’s grass-roots in Russia. After the failure of the January adventure, the process of rapprochement of Bolsheviks and Pro-Party Mensheviks was resumed all over Russia: Ukraine, Saratov, Urals, Nizhny Novgorod, Latvia, and other centres, the real forces of the Party were involved in a process of regroupment. Inside Russia the big majority of worker Mensheviks supported Plekhanov, and these now moved closer to the Bolsheviks in joint action.

One important side-effect of these events was that they played a role also in Lenin’s growing awareness of opportunism as an international phenomenon because of the role of the International leaders in the Russian inner-Party dispute. Up until this moment, Lenin had regarded himself as an orthodox “Kautskyite”, in the period when Karl Kautsky stood—or at least seemed to stand—on the left of the Second International. But Kautsky’s temporising role in relation to the struggle between the right and left wings of the RSDLP raised serious doubts in his mind. Lenin was taken by surprise by the conduct of the leaders of the Socialist International. He was deeply shocked and offended by the unprincipled behaviour of Kautsky and the other representatives of the International who in practice backed the conciliators, publishing their articles in the international Social Democratic press. These doubts were substantiated after August 1914 when Kautsky, along with all the other leaders of the German SPD, with the honourable exception of Karl Liebknecht, shamefully betrayed the cause of international socialism.

Lenin’s extremely sharp tone is explained by the fact that he was completely isolated, even within his own faction. He could see further ahead than the others, but was powerless to act on his own instincts. Lenin himself, reached the conclusion that a split

was inevitable only after much hesitation. The dividing line for Lenin was probably 1910. But even so, the formal split did not occur until two years later. This was not accidental. Lenin was consistently out-voted in the leadership of the Bolshevik faction. In a way, this was not surprising. It should not be forgotten that the idea of a split between revolutionary and reformist Social Democrats was an entirely new one (except for France, which had earlier experienced the split between the supporters of Guesde and Jaurés, and Bulgaria, with the split of the “broad” and “narrow” socialists which did not exactly fit this pattern, but these were exceptions to the rule). On an international scale the split did not happen until 1914-15. The trauma of August 1914 still lay in the future.

### **On the Eve**

It is said that the darkest hour comes just before the dawn. On the eve of a new revolutionary upsurge, Lenin’s position appeared hopeless. Out of three leading centres of the RSDLP, two (the foreign bureau of the CC and CC inside Russia) were dominated by the conciliators (and also the liquidators in the latter case). The Bolshevik members of the Russian CC (interior) were conciliators (first Dubrovinsky and Goldenberg, then, after their arrest, Nogin and Leiteisen), always running after agreements with the liquidators (Isv, Bronstein, Yermolaev). Lenin was indignant at the compromising tactics of his supporters, and insistently demanded rapprochement with Pro-Party Mensheviks and implacable struggle against the “unprincipled bloc” of the January Plenum. Lenin’s opponents shook their heads and muttered about “sectarianism”.

Things were not much better in Russia. Just before the new upswing, the Bolshevik organisations were in an extremely enfeebled state. In the spring of 1911, Lenin described the position of the Party as follows: “At present the *real* position of the Party is such that almost everywhere in the localities there are informal, extremely small and tiny Party workers’ groups and nuclei that meet irregularly. Everywhere they are combating liquidator-legalists in the unions, clubs, etc. They are not connected with each other. Very rarely do they see any literature. They enjoy prestige among workers. In these groups *Bolsheviks* and *Plekhanov’s supporters* unite, and to some extent those *Vperyod* ‘supporters’ who have read *Vperyod* literature or have heard *Vperyod* speakers, but have not yet been dragged into the isolated *Vperyod* faction set up abroad.”[\[129\]](#)

In his study of the St Petersburg labour movement at this time, Robert McKean writes: “As all revolutionary coteries deliberately refrained from keeping proper lists of members and financial accounts for obvious reasons of conspiracy, it is quite impossible to paint an accurate picture of the size of the underground, its social composition or the state of its finances at the beginning of 1912. The total number of adherents was undoubtedly extremely minute and constantly changing due to frequent waves of arrests. The estimates claimed in the party press must be treated with the greatest caution, although even these testify to the paucity of supporters. Lenin’s factional organ claimed some 300 in the summer of 1911, as did the ‘Central Group of Social Democratic Workers’ at the end of the year. At the Bolshevik’s Prague Conference in January 1912 the St Petersburg delegate P.A. Zalutsky furnished the probably more accurate estimate of 109 supporters of Lenin. The evidence adduced here suggests that within the Bolshevik faction the

‘Central Group’s’ claim was the more accurate of the two. At the most, there must have been a mere 500 or so Social Democratic party members. In all districts and factories there can have existed only little groups of 10, 20 or 30 or so card-carrying members. These doleful figures must be set against the total labour force in St Petersburg of 783,000, of whom 240,000 were factory workers, at the time of the December 1910 city census.”[\[130\]](#)

The fortunes of the RSDLP, and first and foremost its revolutionary wing, seemed to have hit rock-bottom. Yet beneath the surface invisible forces were working to transform the whole situation. The key to the change must be sought in the economic base upon which the superstructure of politics, and all social life in general, rests. The economic depression that struck immediately after the December defeat, had knocked the wind out of an already exhausted working class. Trotsky, in a brilliant prediction, warned that the Russian workers would not move back into action until the economy began to pick up again. This prognosis was confirmed by events. By early 1910, the economic situation began to improve, and the labour movement also began to revive, although slowly at first. There was an increase in strikes, some of them at least partially successful, to improve wages and conditions. This placed on the agenda the urgent need to rebuild the party. But how? And with what methods and policies? There was no consensus. On the contrary, the controversies were fiercer than ever, especially in exile, where they were characterised by a particularly venomous character. <

Once the workers began to move in a revolutionary direction, the entire position began to change. That is what Lenin was counting on, and events proved him to be correct. The upsurge in the workers’ movement breathed new life into the underground party circles. Looking for a vehicle to express their aspirations, the workers quite naturally gravitated towards that banner and name that was familiar to them from the earlier period—the RSDLP. The new layers had no knowledge of the inner-party splits and squabbles. Most of them had never read the party programme or statutes. But when they moved to change society, they rallied to their traditional mass organisation. Here too, Lenin’s tactics had been vindicated. If the Bolsheviks had succumbed to the ultra-left impatience of Bogdanov and split from the party, they would have been isolated. True, they would have grown. But for every worker that joined them, 100 would have joined the RSDLP. The party was transformed by an influx of fresh workers and youth. Overnight, groups sprang up in new areas. By 1912, the Tiflis (Tbilisi) RSDLP organisation had 100 members. The party in the Urals could count groups of 40-50 members. The main beneficiaries of this growth were the underground revolutionary groups of Bolsheviks and Pro-Party Mensheviks. These new layers brought with them a breath of fresh air and almost automatically gravitated to the left wing—that is, the Leninists, who were more active, militant and better organised than all the rest. Active participation in the party increased as the masses moved into struggle again. New members were recruited, and once they joined, were rapidly won over by the Bolshevik cadres. The prestige and support for the Bolsheviks as the left wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, grew by leaps and bounds as the demands of the new revolutionary situation made themselves felt.

## NOTES

- [113] A.V. Lunacharsky, *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, p. 136.
- [114] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 207.
- [115] *Protokoly soveshchaniya rashirennoy redaktsy Proletarii*, Moscow, 1934, quoted in the *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 293.
- [116] *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, No. 9-10, p. 202.
- [117] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 206.
- [118] Trotsky, *My Life*, p. 224.
- [119] Quoted in Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification*, p. 105 (my emphasis).
- [120] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 123.
- [121] LCW, *An Open Letter to All Pro-Party Social Democrats*, vol. 16, p. 339.
- [122] LCW, *Letter to Maxim Gorky, April 11, 1910*, vol. 34, p. 420.
- [123] See Martov, *Spasiteli ili Uprazdniteli?* p. 16.
- [124] LCW, *Letter to his sister Anna, February 1, 1910*, vol. 37, p. 451.
- [125] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 206.
- [126] See LCW, *Letter to A. Rykov, February 25, 1911*, vol. 34, p. 443.
- [127] *O Vladimire Ilyiche Lenine. Vospminaniya, 1900-1922*.
- [128] O. Piatnitsky, op. cit., p. 153.
- [129] LCW, *Material for the Meeting of CC Members of RSDLP*, vol. 17, p. 202.
- [130] R.B. McKean, *St Petersburg Between the Revolutions*, pp. 82-3.

## Part Four: The Revival

[section 1 of 4]

### A Brief Interregnum

In the spring Lenin finally succeeded in setting up a party school in two small rooms rented from a leatherworker in the village of Longjumeau near Paris. The aim was to emphasise the vital importance of theory for cadre building. Lenin was particularly anxious that workers and people in contact with the masses should be designated by local committees to attend the school. There were, of course, other Party schools at Capri and Bologna, but these were dominated by the supporters of Bogdanov, and it is clear that Lenin intended the school at Longjumeau as a counterweight to the latter. Lenin threw himself wholeheartedly into the enterprise, preparing his lectures with characteristic meticulousness. He gave a total of 45 lectures on political economy, the agrarian question and the theory and practice of socialism. Zinoviev and Kamenev lectured on the history of the party. Other lectures were given by Charles Rappaport and Inessa Armand. Among the students at the school was a young worker from Kiev whom nobody knew called Andrei Malinovsky, who was an agent of the tsarist police, who reported on every aspect of the school to the Paris Bureau of the Okhrana. Curiously, this Malinovsky was no relation to the notorious Roman Malinovsky.

Although it was clearly a Bolshevik affair, among lecturers there were Bolsheviks, Vperyodists, Mensheviks, Bundists, and conciliators, but no Liquidators. This was Lenin's idea. If possible, he would have liked to isolate the Liquidators, separate out the better Menshevik elements (especially the Pro-Party Mensheviks), and save what could be saved of the "centrists" and left reformists. But history shows that most left reformists find it easier to cling to the right reformists than to go over to the openly revolutionary trend. This is true of the leaders, but not of the rank-and-file, as shown by the experience of 1905-06 and 1910-14 as well as 1917. Here again we have another example of the flexibility of Lenin's tactics. His main aim, however, was to establish the Bolsheviks as a clearly-defined, independent tendency. It was necessary to conduct a persistent struggle to win over the best elements in the Party. But the first condition was to organise *separately as a tendency*.

For this reason, Lenin was delighted when they managed to launch a new publication in Petersburg, *Zvezda* (the Star), with an editorial board which included the Bolshevik V. Bonch-Bruyevich, but also N. Yordansky from the Plekhanov group and I. Pokrovsky, a Duma deputy sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. But he was even more pleased with the appearance of *Mysl'* (Thought) in Moscow because it was a purely Bolshevik paper. He wrote to Maxim Gorky: "Congratulate us on *our own* little journal in Moscow, a Marxist one. This has been a happy day for us."<sup>[1]</sup>

But in general there were not many happy days at this time. The unhealthy atmosphere of émigré life with its eternal squabbles hung like a leaden ball around their necks, as Lenin complained:

“Living in the midst of this ‘anecdotic’ situation, amidst these squabbles and scandals, this hell and ugly scum is sickening. To watch it all is sickening too. But one must not be influenced by one’s moods. Emigrant life now is a hundred times worse than it was before the revolution. Emigrant life and squabbling are inseparable. But the squabbling can be dismissed—nine-tenths of it takes place abroad; squabbling is a minor detail. The thing is that the Party, the Social Democratic movement are developing and going forward in face of all the hellish difficulties of the present situation. The purging of the Social Democratic Party of *its* dangerous ‘deviations’, liquidationism and otzovism *is going ahead* unswervingly, and within the framework of unity it *has moved ahead far more* than before.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, in another letter to his sister Anna, he confided: “I do not know if I shall live to see the next rise of the tide.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The problem with conciliationism is that politics cannot be reduced to simple arithmetic. It is not always the case that two plus two equals four. Two men in a boat, each one pulling in a different direction is not better than a single rower who knows exactly where he is heading. The different tendencies inside the RSDLP were indeed pulling in opposite directions with completely contradictory tactics flowing from completely different perspectives and goals. The attempt to combine mutually contradictory tendencies created an impossible situation, which was soon visible to all. Heightened tensions within the party were everywhere in evidence. By May 1911, the Bolsheviks had withdrawn their representative (N.A. Semashko) from the foreign bureau of the CC. The Russian bureau of the CC, paralysed by inner party strife, had practically ceased to exist. This was inevitable. “The unity of all the groups, achieved with such difficulty in January 1910, swiftly began to break up,” writes Krupskaya. “As the practical problems of the work in Russia began to crop up it became ever more clear that co-operation was impossible.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The January Plenum had solved nothing. Lenin urgently demanded the calling of a new Conference. But his closest collaborators were stubbornly opposed to a break with the opportunist wing of the party. Rykov, Kamenev, Zinoviev and the other Bolshevik conciliators, clung to the illusion of compromise. Lenin scornfully referred to “...good intentions, sweet words, kind thoughts, and impotence to carry them into practice.”<sup>[5]</sup> Finally, on Lenin’s insistence, a special meeting of CC members was held in Paris, on 28 May-4 June 1911. All of the CC members based abroad turned up (except for the Bundist Yanov). Lenin, Rykov and Zinoviev attended for the Bolsheviks; Tyszka and Dzerzhinski for the Polish and Lithuanian Social Democrats; Lieber for the Bund; B.I. Gorer for the *Golos* people, and M.V. Dzolin for the Letts (Latvians). Another mixed bag! The meeting predictably got off to a heated start.

The Liquidator and Bundist representatives immediately called the legality of the meeting into question. After a sharp debate, the meeting finally accepted Lenin’s resolution that this gathering be considered as a central committee meeting.<sup>[6]</sup> It was moved that a conference be convened and a committee was set up for the purpose of arranging this.

This was too much for the Mensheviks. Martov and Dan walked out of the editorial board of *Sotsial Demokrat* in protest. After this there was not one representative organ of the RSDLP where Bolsheviks were together with Mensheviks. The split was a fact, in all but name. The Mensheviks refused to acknowledge the validity of the June meeting in Paris—a “private meeting”, they called it. They were implacably opposed to a conference where they feared, rightly, that they would not have a majority. Lenin, on the contrary, placed all his hopes on the working class rank-and-file. By this time, any further compromise was ruled out. Although even now the conciliators dragged their feet, terrified of being “isolated”. However, Lenin, as always, was ready to draw all the conclusions from the situation. Once he decided that “enough was enough”, he would not be swayed. Lenin directed a withering and unremitting fire on the “conciliators”.

By now, Lenin had decided to push things to the limit. With the revolution entering into a new and decisive phase, any further temporising with the Mensheviks would have been clearly irresponsible. The Bolsheviks were gaining ground inside Russia, the united front with the Pro-Party Mensheviks had borne fruit with the passing over of a large number of the best worker Mensheviks to the Bolsheviks. The tide was beginning to flow in favour of Lenin once again. Those who remained behind and resisted the necessary steps, had to be abandoned. A decisive split with these incorrigible elements was now inevitable. Lenin had only gone through the experience of the January Plenum, which soon turned out to be a farce, in order to convince his co-thinkers in practice of the impossibility of union with the Liquidators. This “experiment” had now to be brought quickly to a close, if irreparable damage was not to be done to the Party and the cause of the revolution. The most pressing need now was to unite the revolutionary wing of the party on a principled basis in order to take advantage of the rising revolutionary wave.

Lenin’s implacable attitude was based upon political considerations. The political evolution of Menshevism was clearly to the right. It represented a Russian variant of opportunism. Although the objective conditions in Russia, and the pressure of the revolutionary wing, compelled the Mensheviks to adopt a somewhat more “left” coloration, the main content of their theory and practice was clearly anti-revolutionary: the stress on parliamentarism, the constant hankering after a bloc with the liberals, the opposition to anything that might frighten the Cadets, the demand for the winding up of all underground activity and to subordinate the party’s activities to the existing tsarist legality—how could such a policy be reconciled with Marxism? Yet, despite the obvious truth of Lenin’s argument, it fell upon deaf ears. Many of the Bolshevik Party workers saw the question in purely practical and organisational terms. One such Party “practico” wrote the following about Lenin’s position at this time: “About the ‘tempest in the teapot’ abroad we have heard, of course: the blocs of Lenin-Plekhanov on the one hand and of Trotsky-Martov-Bogdanov on the other. The attitude of the workers to the first bloc, as far as I know, is favourable. But in general the workers are beginning to look disdainfully at the emigration: ‘let them crawl on the wall as much as their hearts desire; but as for us, whoever values the interests of the movement—work, the rest will take care of itself’. That I think is for the best.”[\[7\]](#)

These lines were written by Stalin. They accurately convey the disdain for theory and the vulgar empiricism that unfortunately characterised many Party activists in Russia. In general, they tended towards Lenin's position because it was more in tune with their conception of a disciplined centralised party. But whereas for Lenin, the party organisation was merely a tool in the service of revolutionary ideas and theory, the committee-men, or at least a good part of them, tended to regard it from an exclusively organisational standpoint. Even after the final split in 1912, Lenin still had many problems with committee-men (and women) who, like Stalin, regarded the split as merely an émigré squabble, and an irritating distraction from practical work. In April 1912, Lenin sent a heated letter to Ordzhonikidze, Spandaryan and Stasova, reprimanding them for their dismissive attitude to the fight against the Liquidators:

“Don't be light-hearted about the campaign of the Liquidators abroad. It is a great mistake when people simply dismiss what goes on abroad with a wave of the hand and 'send it to hell'.”[\[8\]](#)

### **Mass Work Under Conditions of Reaction**

In the years of reaction the Bolsheviks had to learn how to use each and every opportunity for legal mass work. A key area was that of the trade unions. The Mensheviks, with their opportunistic tendency to adapt to the most backward layers of the class, were always stronger in the unions than the Bolsheviks. Echoing the positions of the Economists, they held that the unions should be politically “neutral”, something that completely flies in the face of elementary Marxist principles. As the basic units of working class organisation, it is true that the unions must strive to embrace the broadest layers of the proletariat. Only the fascists must be excluded, as the direct enemies of the working class who seek to destroy not only the unions but all other democratic rights conquered by the workers, and thereby liquidate the germs of a new society which are maturing within the old.

However, while the unions should strive to organise all layers of the class, even politically backward layers, that does not at all mean that Marxists must not fight to win over a majority in the unions, and still less that the unions must be politically “neutral”. The struggle for workers' rights cannot be limited to a purely economic struggle, but inevitably passes over into politics. To demand that the unions abstain from political activity (a demand which, ironically, unites the reactionaries and the anarcho-syndicalists) is to play into the hands of the bourgeois parties. Non-political trade unionism, as Lenin explained many times, is *yellow* trade unionism, *bourgeois* trade unionism. This was so obvious that even the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International stated that the Social Democrats should strive for leadership of the trade unions. Yet Martov opposed this, on the grounds that it was not appropriate for Russian conditions.

The combination of legal and illegal work meant that for the Bolsheviks participation in the mass labour organisations was obligatory under all circumstances. The socialist revolution would be unthinkable without a lengthy period of patient work to establish a

firm base of support in the unions, making use of skilful and flexible tactics in order to combat, not only the police and the state, but the bureaucratic “policemen” who strive to make the unions safe for the ruling class by purging them of revolutionary elements. *Proletary* no. 21, which came out in February 1908, published the resolution of the CC of the RSDLP on trade unions. Party members were instructed to set up Party groups within trade union organisations and to work in them under the direction of the local Party centres. Where police persecution made it impossible to organise trade unions or to recreate those that had been broken up, the CC proposed that trade union nuclei and trade unions should be organised illegally. As regards such legal organisation as benefit societies, temperance societies, and others, the resolution of the CC instructed the local Party organisations to form within them “well-knit groups of Social Democrats to conduct Party work among the broadest possible masses of the proletariat”. To thwart any attempt on the part of the Mensheviks to interpret this part of the resolution in an opportunist manner, the resolution pointed out the need for making it clear that “the organised activity of the proletariat cannot be limited to such societies alone” and that the legal existence of trade unions “should not belittle the militant tasks of organising the proletariat in trade unions”.[\[9\]](#)

Although the Mensheviks maintained their advantageous position in the majority of unions right up to 1917, the Bolsheviks made steady progress. In November 1907, in Petersburg there were 12 clubs and trade union societies for workers, but by 1909 the number had increased to 19. These friendly societies often had to function under different names which camouflaged their real nature, for example, the Bolsheviks in St Petersburg ran one called “The Source of Enlightenment and Knowledge”, another was called “Enlightenment”, yet another, in Vyborg, “Education” and so on. Often these societies and clubs played the role of union organisations in the absence of real trade unions.

The systematic penetration of even the most bureaucratic and right wing unions is a duty of every serious revolutionary current which is fighting for influence over the masses. The Bolsheviks conducted such work in the most difficult conditions of reaction. So successful were they in capturing positions in the legal unions that the authorities were increasingly concerned, as reflected in police reports, such as the following dated May 1907 which emerged from the archives of the Okhrana after the Revolution: “The trade unions have already taken on the definite appearance of completely Social Democratic organisations, and are therefore extremely dangerous for the ruling stratum.” Alarmed police chiefs demanded stern measures against the unions before these “nests of revolutionary conspiracy” could once again give rise to armed uprisings.[\[10\]](#)

Work in legal organisations was not confined to the unions. The Bolsheviks made use of every legal conference called by the government or the liberals, like the All Russian Conference of popular universities in Petersburg in January 1908, where the Bolsheviks proposed a motion based on class demands, such as the right of workers’ organisations to representation on the boards of universities with the right to take part in the arranging of the curricula, choosing suitable lecturers on social sciences, and recognition of every nationality to education in its own language. The resolution was, not unsurprisingly, rejected, whereupon the workers’ representatives walked out. Not all such events ended

so well. Another field of activity were the co-operatives. This had an important practical side, since, under the harsh conditions of reaction, workers resorted to the co-ops for all kinds of purposes (insurance, etc.). At the First All-Russian Congress of Representatives of Co-operative Societies, held in Moscow in April 1908, the Bolsheviks formed a group—against the wishes of the Mensheviks—to lead the fight of the trade union and workers' co-operatives against the bourgeois co-operators who were in the majority. After a number of Bolsheviks had spoken the police imposed a ban on all speeches that referred to the class struggle, the trade unions, aid to workers during strikes and lock-outs and any other potentially subversive matters (including the election of a congress bureau) on pain of arrest. As a protest against this, the congress was closed.

Another important field was work among women. Legal women's organisations existed and held conferences where the Bolsheviks also intervened systematically. At the First All-Russian Women's Congress, held in December in Petersburg, there were many women workers among the delegates. On the agenda was the fight against alcoholism, labour protection for women and children, equal rights for Jews, and the political and legal status of women. The women workers moved a resolution demanding universal, direct and equal suffrage by secret ballot, without distinction of sex, race and religion. The presiding commission refused to read out the resolution, and replaced it with another drafted on bourgeois-liberal lines, upon which the women workers walked out. A similar fate lay in store for the First All-Russian Congress of Factory Medical Officers and Representatives of Manufacturing Industry, which met in Moscow in April 1909 under the grandiose slogan of a "festival of reconciliation". But when the workers present began to take the floor to denounce the appalling safety and hygiene conditions in their workplaces, the light of reconciliation soon dimmed. After the police demanded that no questions "liable to excite class struggle" be touched on in the debates, all the workers and some of the doctors walked out, in view of which regrettable setback, the presidium decided to close the congress.[\[11\]](#)

These legal organisations often included backward and non-political layers, yet even here, in the most apparently unpromising territory, the Bolsheviks conducted political work, and used them to build and strengthen their links with the masses. Like a mountain climber doggedly searching out every nook and cranny to grasp and haul himself up, they looked for each and every legal opening and exploited it to the full. They even intervened in an Anti-Alcoholic Conference convened by the Temperance Society in December 1909. Slowly, painfully, the Bolsheviks regrouped and rebuilt the links with the masses, which had been brutally severed by the victorious counter-revolution. Nevertheless, it was still an uphill struggle. The revolutionaries were still swimming against the stream. The general situation of the class remained depressed. The Bolsheviks discouraged adventurist actions which would lay the workers open to repression. The basic need was to conserve what forces remained, advance slowly, inch by inch, and await a change in the situation. Only in 1911, with the Lena massacre, did the tide begin to turn. The recovery, as predicted by Trotsky, was linked to an economic revival. Up to that time, the graph of the strike movement, which provides a rough and ready index of the state of the movement, registered a steady and persistent decline:

**Year**

**Workers on strike**

1907

740,000

1908

176,000

1909

64,000

1910

46,000

*(Istoriya KPSS, vol. 2, page 322)*

Then in 1910-13 a boom announced the end of the long depression that dominated the early years of the 20th century. The production of cast iron—not unrelated to the war preparations of the tsarist regime—increased in the period 1909-13 from 175m to 283m poods. In the same period coal production went up from 1,591 million to 2,214 million

tons. The economic upswing gave a powerful impetus to a revival of the class struggle. The workers flexed their muscles and felt their new-found economic power. In the second half of 1910 there was already a rise in the number of strikes, coinciding with the economic recovery. Increased production and full order-books transformed the climate on the shop floor, increasing the confidence of the working class. By mid-1910, the working class once more passed onto the offensive. 10,000 Moscow textile workers struck in the summer. Later the strike wave spread to Riga, Vladimir, Kazan, Saratov, Warsaw, Odessa, Kostroma, and other industrial centres. The immediate causes of the strikes were low wages, bad conditions and the old problem of factory fines. But these were only the immediate expression of a far more deep-seated and widespread feeling of disaffection. Now, feeling a new sense of power, they moved to take their revenge. The workers were smarting from the results of the defeat of the 1905 revolution, from the years of oppression, sackings, wage cuts and a thousand and one humiliations and injustices and even strikes in protest against the use of the familiar form of address (“ty”, which is the equivalent of the French “tu”, used by adults when talking to little children) by management when talking to workers.

Increased production went hand in hand with the concentration of capital, with mergers creating bigger and bigger factories. By 1914 factories of more than 500 workers represented 56.5 per cent of the total. Tsarist Russia was now one of the major world powers in terms of concentration of capital. Russia remained an extremely backward, semi-feudal economy but with an enormous concentration of industry and banking capital—more, in fact, than most other advanced capitalist countries. This was a graphic manifestation of the Marxist law of combined and uneven development. The process of monopolisation is shown by the fact that by 1913 nine big companies accounted for 53.1 per cent of the production of cast iron: seven watch factories produced 90 per cent of watches, six Baku firms produced 65 per cent of oil and so on. The total number of monopolies in Russia was not less than 150-200 monopolies. The predominance of gigantic factories, concentrating large numbers of workers in appalling conditions, especially in the metal industry, was a powerful factor giving an impressive sweep to the strike movement that preceded the First World War and investing it with a clearly revolutionary character.[\[12\]](#)

Significantly, many of these strikes were successful. Out of 265, 140 (52.8 per cent) were won. Even more significant was the number of political strikes. In 1909, according to official figures, 7.7 per cent of strikes were political; in 1910, the figure was 8.1 per cent, but by 1912, the figure was an astonishing 75.8 per cent. These figures provide an unerring barometer of the mood of the masses. Nor did the movement limit itself to strikes. The wave of radicalisation also affected the intelligentsia, especially the youth. The student movement was revived, and soon fell under the influence of the revolutionary Social Democracy. In January-March 1911, the Bolsheviks were already in a position to call student strikes in St Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Tomsk and Warsaw. There were also mass demonstrations, some of them of an overtly political character, like the extraordinary mass demonstrations which took place at Tolstoy’s funeral in November 1910. The great Russian novelist had earned the hatred of the reactionaries by his progressive views, and had even been excommunicated by the Holy

Synod of the Orthodox Church. But despite official disapproval, it was impossible to prevent the masses from taking advantage of his funeral, not just to say a last farewell to the great man, but above all to express their hatred of the system and the autocratic regime.

### **The Prague Conference**

The failure of the attempt to secure unity convinced Lenin of the need for a clean break. He began to press for a new conference of all genuine revolutionary elements in Russia. In February 1910, Lenin wrote that the conference should be called “first of all, immediately and at all costs”.<sup>[13]</sup> The Bolsheviks and the Pro-Party Mensheviks collaborated in the setting up of the Russian Organising Commission. It is a characteristic fact that Plekhanov no longer took part in the work. The burden of his Menshevik mistakes had prevented him, at the crucial moment, from making a final organisational break with the Liquidators. In a letter to Maxim Gorky, Lenin wrote: “Plekhanov is hedging, he always acts that way—it’s like a disease—before things break.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The Prague Conference (the minutes of which have not been published) was a decisive turning-point. It was held under extremely difficult underground conditions. The position inside Russia was still too dangerous to allow the holding of a Conference there. Preparations for the Conference were hindered by arrests, although local conferences were held in November 1911. Finally, the conference was held in Prague. The preparations were made by Piatnitsky and Dzerzhinsky with the help of the Czech Social Democrats. Lenin wrote to the latter stressing the need for absolute clandestinity. On 19 October 1911 he wrote to Anton Nemec: “No-one, no organisation must know about this.” Despite all these precautions some of the delegates were arrested on the way to the conference, every detail of which was known to the Okhrana.

The conference opened on the 5 January 1912 and lasted 12 days. The truth of the matter was that the attendance at the Prague Conference seemed to be an unpromising beginning. There were a mere 14 voting delegates, all but two of them Bolsheviks. The Letts, the Bund, the Polish and Lithuanian and the Caucasian Social Democrats, the *Vperyod* group, Plekhanov and also Trotsky’s *Pravda* were all sent letters of invitation but did not attend. Plekhanov also stayed away, alleging ill-health. These tendencies either opposed the convening of the conference, or at least entertained grave doubts about such a decisive break. Even now, conciliatory tendencies were still strong in the camp of Bolshevism. Differences and doubts surfaced at the conference, particularly, but by no means exclusively, on the part of the Pro-Party Mensheviks. Y.D. Zevin (who later joined the Bolsheviks and was one of the 26 Baku commissars murdered by the British) caused some controversy, by defending the line given to him by Plekhanov. Plekhanov, as Lenin had feared, was already getting cold feet. At the opening session, Zevin read a prepared statement to the effect that he was taking part in this conference “only to the degree that it is not an all-Party conference but the conference of *only part of the party*”.

A number of Russian delegates, including Lenin’s trusted agent Ordzhonikidze, insisted on issuing invitations to the conference to the national Social Democratic parties and the

editors of the party organs of the Vperyodists, Trotsky, and the Party Mensheviks. But all of them refused to attend. “I was *against* the invitation,” Lenin wrote later, “but the delegates *invited* the *Vperyod* group and Trotsky and Plekhanov.”<sup>[15]</sup> That was not all. At least four even wanted to invite the editors (Martov, Dan) of *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata*, the Mensheviks’ main newspaper, in open opposition to Lenin’s resolve to exclude the “Liquidators” formally from the party. There were other expressions of disconformity. Several delegates criticised *Sotsial-Demokrat* for publishing articles unintelligible to ordinary workers. The underlying suspicion on the part of those delegates working inside Russia towards the émigré leaders surfaced in the demand, presented by Goloshchekin, Ordzhonikidze and Spandarian, that the Bolsheviks’ émigré organisations should be dissolved. Ordzhonikidze stated that the exile organisations were “null and void”, and even called into question the unity with Plekhanov’s group. Spandaryan went further, calling for the dissolving of all exile groups: “Let those who wish to work ... join us in Russia”. Here again we see a manifestation of the narrowness of the Party “practicos”. Once again, Lenin had to correct the views of these people. “Some say: we must wage war on the émigrés. But we must understand what it is we are fighting against. While the Stolypin regime remains in Russia, there will always be people in exile. But these exiles are linked by a thousand threads to Russia and you are not going to sever these threads, try how you may.”<sup>[16]</sup>

However, despite this foot-dragging by part of the Bolshevik committee-men, the main goal was realised. The Prague Conference marked the final parting of the ways between Bolshevism and Menshevism. As the Mensheviks boycotted the Conference, the preparations went ahead for a purely Bolshevik Conference—in other words, a formal split had occurred. Lenin, in any case, had made his mind up; the moment for temporising had past. It was necessary to carry out a radical separation of the revolutionary wing from opportunism, and he was not to be swayed by pressure from the conciliators now. The final resolution stated that the Liquidator group around the St Petersburg periodicals *Nasha Zarya* and *Dyelo Zhizni* “has once and for all placed itself outside the party”. *Nasha Zarya* and *Dyelo Zhizni* were the organs of the extreme right wing of Menshevism (Potresov and co.). It also stated that the foreign exile groups could not use the name of the RSDLP.

Plekhanov now felt uncomfortable at being left alone with the Bolsheviks, but the Rubicon had now been crossed and the reservations of the Pro-Party Mensheviks were to no avail. There was no going back now. Although they were the best of all the left Mensheviks, and undoubtedly sincere and devoted to the cause of the working class, they proved to be vacillating and uncertain allies, who would draw back at the decisive moment. This was a centrist current—that is to say, a tendency standing half-way between left reformism and genuine Marxism. Their conduct was absolutely typical of all centrist currents at all times, everywhere. But Lenin was by now in no mood for compromise and their proposals were rejected. Despite the uncompromising tone of the proceedings, however, he understood that the Prague conference was not the end of the story, but the beginning of a fight to win over the majority of the working class, and also all other elements of the Party who could be won.

On the question of organisation, Lenin once again stressed the need to open up the Party, to form broad organisations capable of taking in the mass of workers newly aroused to political life in the new situation. A commission was set up to work out an organisational resolution. The forms of the party must adapt to changing circumstances. There was a pressing need to involve more people in the work, to give them responsibilities. Until now, the small number of activists in the underground cells had become accustomed to doing everything themselves. Now there needed to be a greater delegation of responsibilities, greater participation and greater initiative on the part of Social Democratic workers in the factories, the trade unions and all other organisations where the Party was present. These broader organisations should assume a greater role in the work of the Party. The composition of branch committees should be rotated to reduce the risk of repression. It was also necessary to wrest control of legal organisations from the liberals. This was the essential characteristic of Leninism, which is the polar opposite of all kinds of sectarianism. The proclamation of an independent party was not intended as an empty gesture or formality, but the first step to organising the work of the revolutionaries in the mass organisations, where they were obliged to engage in a struggle to tear the masses away from bourgeois liberal and opportunist leaderships. The conference stressed the role of *the party press as an organiser*, designating *Rabochaya Gazeta* (The Workers' Gazette) as the official party organ.

An important part of the Prague conference was to work out a concrete programme of action to build the Party. Lenin attached great importance to the area reports which put flesh and blood on the bare bones of his perspectives. A key element in winning the majority of the workers to Bolshevism was the work of the Duma fraction. Bolshevik electoral tactics were outlined by Lenin at the Conference. They were based, on the one hand, on opposition to the tsarist monarchy and the bourgeois-landlord parties which stood behind it. On the other hand, it was necessary to expose the liberals and remain completely independent from them. The Duma fraction must strive for a fighting agreement only with the representatives of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie (the peasantry)—the Trudoviks and SRs. The Party was to put up its own candidates in all areas, but, under certain conditions, it was permissible to reach partial agreements with “other groups”, including the Liquidators. The conference resolution explained that:

“The party must wage a merciless war against the tsarist autocracy and the parties of landlords and capitalists that support it, persistently exposing at the same time the counter-revolutionary views and false democracy of the bourgeois liberals (with the Cadet party at their head). Special attention should be paid in the election campaign to maintaining the independence of the party of the proletariat from *all* the non-proletarian parties, to revealing the petty bourgeois nature of the pseudo-socialism of the democratic groups (mainly the Trudoviks, the Narodniks, and the Socialist-Revolutionaries), and to exposing the harm done to the cause of democracy by their vacillations on questions of mass revolutionary struggle.”[\[17\]](#)

### **The Provocateur Malinovsky**

In addition to the groups already mentioned, there was another tendency present at the Prague Conference, albeit in an “unofficial” capacity. The tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, had succeeded in placing its agents provocateurs at the highest levels of the Party and some of these unbeknown to the rest of the delegates, two of which were present at the Bolsheviks’ founding congress. The delegate from Moscow was none other than the notorious agent-provocateur Roman Malinovsky, the member of the Bolshevik Duma fraction, accompanied on this occasion by yet another agent, A.S. Romanov, the delegate from the central industrial region. Every speech and resolution was known to the police thanks to their conscientious reports. In an attempt to protect the members of the new Central Committee from the danger of arrest, special conspiratorial methods were used to guard against the police. Each delegate wrote the surname of the candidates and then handed it in to Lenin. The result was not even announced at the Conference. But Roman Malinovsky, a highly skilled provocateur had already done a very effective job of gaining Lenin’s confidence. Malinovsky had succeeded in getting not only onto the CC but also into the Duma fraction. There were agents-provocateurs in all opposition parties in Russia. The Party was hit by a series of police raids in Petersburg in February and March 1912. In a letter dated 28 March, Lenin wrote anxiously that “our affairs are bad there”.

The presence of a spy at such a high level in the Party bears witness to the extraordinary efficiency and tenacity of the tsar’s secret service. This was no isolated instance. The tactic of provocation and spying had been developed to a fine art by the tsarist regime over a long period. The Bolshevik Party was constantly plagued by police infiltrators, some of whom succeeded in penetrating key positions. Such a man was Zhitomirsky, who even before 1905 occupied an important post in the underground organisation in Berlin, where he collaborated with Piatnitsky in the transportation of Bolshevik literature to Russia. “By all appearances he was one of us,” recalls Bobrovskaya, “a sincere, 100 per cent Bolshevik.”<sup>[18]</sup> After the December defeat, and the Bolshevik centre was once more transferred abroad, Zhitomirsky offered his services to restore the old connections in Europe and organise the transportation of clandestine Bolshevik literature into Russia. The offer was accepted. After a time, he became a member of the all-important technical commission of the Central Committee, in charge of all underground work. As a result, the tsarist authorities were always one step ahead. One after another, Bolshevik groups were discovered and raided by the police. Not until 1911 was he caught red-handed in an act of provocation. Zhitomirsky was spirited away by his masters before he could be called to account, and there were plenty of others to take his place.

There were a number of reasons why the Okhrana was so successful in penetrating the revolutionary movement (not only the Bolsheviks) at this time. As we have already seen, the defeat of the 1905 revolution had caused widespread demoralisation, especially, but not exclusively, among the intellectuals. Many people lost their bearings. Ideological backsliding, scepticism, cynicism, apostasy, all are the natural by-products of such periods, which are all too common in the history of the movement. A revolutionary without the necessary theoretical understanding or the necessary backbone, isolated in prison, under relentless interrogation by skilled agents, can crack under the pressure. After that, things have their own logic. The apparent ease with which some of these

agents rose to the top at that time is also not difficult to understand. In a period of rampant reaction, with the party organisations smashed and the most experienced people in prison or exile, it was inevitable that their place would be taken by new, untested elements. Among these, it was relatively easy for the police to insert its agents. Given the extreme shortage of capable personnel, anyone showing ability would stand a good chance of obtaining a leading position. And the way to their advancement could be eased by the simple expedient of arresting anyone who represented an obstacle.

In this context, it is not hard to explain the rise of Roman Malinovsky. Polish by birth, Malinovsky was personally capable, intelligent and energetic, although with the traits of an adventurer. Before moving to Moscow, he had been President of the St Petersburg Metal Workers' Union. Malinovsky had been arrested and exiled for party work. His credentials were therefore impeccable, and there was nothing remotely to suggest a darker side to the man, although, in fact, he had become an agent of the tsarist police in 1910. As a matter of fact, the police helped him to get selected as the Bolshevik parliamentary candidate by the usual method of arresting the alternative candidates! The police records show that he was paid a quantity of money for each arrest—500 roubles, 700 roubles, and so on. But it is likely that a man like Malinovsky did not work just for the money. There is a kind of person with the psychology of an adventurer, a person without any fixed principles who enjoys excitement and even takes a certain pride in acting a part, deceiving people and so on. In the criminal world, such people can make a good living as confidence tricksters—until they are caught. Malinovsky was the type of demoralised ex-revolutionary in whom cynicism had completely smothered all class instinct and obliterated all conscience. The dare-devil element, the excitement of play-acting, of living two lives, the danger which also appeals to real spies, in his case probably served to blunt the sense of betrayal and shut off to his mind the enormity of what he was doing. Either way, he seems to have taken a perverse pride in his “work” which was highly successful for some time.

During his period in the Duma, Malinovsky did such good work and was so popular that no-one suspected him of being an agent. When the Mensheviks had accused him of being an agent, Lenin indignantly rejected the charge. This was also understandable. The virulence of the factional struggle was such that it spawned all sorts of irresponsible rumours about individuals. Lenin naturally attributed this to the usual factional malice and gossip about a leading member of the Bolshevik Duma fraction spread by its enemies. Bobrovskaya recalls the atmosphere in party circles in Moscow shortly after the Prague Conference. Her brother had been arrested and their apartment searched by the police shortly after he had handed over addresses and secret meeting places on the frontier to Malinovsky, prior to his departure as a delegate. “When I was allowed my first visit to my brother, he managed to whisper to me: ‘Someone is spying in Moscow; I was sure of it after my first interrogation by the police. They know absolutely everything’. However, there was no-one further from our thoughts in this connection than Malinovsky; anyone but he, our rising star, whose speeches from the Duma tribune later attracted general attention.”[\[19\]](#)

Yet all their successes in infiltrating revolutionary organisations even at a very high level, all the provocations, the spying, the arrests, in the last resort, availed them nothing. There is a general tendency on the part of historically bankrupt regimes to attach excessive importance to the supposed strength of the state, especially the technical side of the apparatus of repression. This is a prejudice that can sometimes rub off on some “Marxists” who can develop a strangely superstitious respect for the power of the state—a peculiar mirror-image of the delusions of the ruling class. In fact, all the power of the state can crumble to dust, the moment it is confronted by the organised power of the masses, determined to put an end to their slavery and change society. A more powerful state (apparently) than Russian tsarism it would be difficult to imagine, with its mighty army, numerous police force, Cossack auxiliaries and vast bureaucracy. One arm of that state—as of any other—was the secret police. Here the art of provocation was developed to heights hitherto unimagined. But in the moment of truth, what did it all matter? The working class, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, just swept it all aside with a brush of its hand.

A revolutionary organisation will, of course, take all possible measures to combat and hinder the attempts of the capitalist state to spy and infiltrate its ranks (this is a fact of life, even in the most “democratic” states), but, in the final analysis, such activities cannot be decisive, and can even be counterproductive. Paradoxically, agents like Malinovsky, precisely in order to escape suspicion, are themselves compelled to do the work of the revolution. Years later, after the Bolsheviks had assumed power, Lenin was philosophical when he looked back on the Malinovsky case. Certainly, Malinovsky had betrayed dozens of comrades to arrest, hard labour and death. Yet while he was there he was obliged to help the party set up a legal daily, *Pravda*. With one hand he sent comrades to prison, with the other, in order to escape detection, he helped the building of the revolutionary party. Such are the ironies of life! And ironies accompanied Malinovsky to his death. When, shortly before the First World War, he suddenly disappeared, and the Mensheviks redoubled their attacks, Lenin still refused to believe it, although the incident served as an unpleasant distraction. When Malinovsky was finally expelled, it was on a charge of a breach of discipline, for abandoning his post without permission!

Only after the October revolution, when the Bolsheviks finally opened the police files, did they learn the stupifying truth about Malinovsky’s real role. What happened next constitutes a mystery suitable for a fictional spy story. At the time when the archives of the Okhrana were giving up their secrets, Malinovsky was working in Germany as a Soviet diplomat. When he received the fateful summons to Moscow, he must have realised immediately that he had been discovered. Although it would have been easy for him to slip away, he returned to Russia. Why did he go back? Was he so demoralised that he no longer cared what happened to him? Or, as seems more likely, did he entertain the idea of throwing himself on the mercy of the Party, professing loyalty to the revolution. If so, it turned out badly for him. Malinovsky paid for his crimes with his life.

## NOTES

[1] LCW, *To Maxim Gorky, January 3, 1911*, vol. 34, p. 437.

- [2] Quoted in Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 208.
- [3] Quoted in S. Payne, *Lenin*, p. 247.
- [4] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 224.
- [5] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 48, p. 16.
- [6] See *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh*, vol. 1, p. 247.
- [7] Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 131.
- [8] LCW, *Letter to G.K. Ordzhonikidze, S.S. Spandaryan and Yelena Stasova, April 1912*, vol. 35, p. 33.
- [9] LCW, vol. 13, pp. 532-3, note.
- [10] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 319.
- [11] See LCW, vol. 15, pp. 510-11, note.
- [12] See Rashin, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
- [13] LCW, *Towards Unity, February 13 (26), 1910*, vol. 16, p. 155.
- [14] LCW, *Letter to Maxim Gorky, September 15, 1911*, vol. 36, p. 185.
- [15] LCW, *Letter to G.L. Shklovsky, March 12, 1912*, vol. 35, p. 25.
- [16] From the Party Archives, quoted in the *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2.
- [17] Quoted in A.Ye. Badayev, *Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma*, p. 20.
- [18] C. Bobrovskaya, *Provocateurs I Have Known*, p. 13.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

## **Part Four: The Revival**

[section 2 of 4]

### **After the Conference**

Shortly after the Prague conference, on 28 February 1912, the Mensheviks and all the other groups organised a separate Conference in Paris. The split was now a fact, recognised by all. Present at the Paris meeting were the foreign committee of Bund, Plekhanov's group, the *Vperyod* group, the *Golos* group, Trotsky's group, and the conciliators. They raged about the Bolsheviks "splitting" activities and "coup d'état". As on earlier occasions, they made a fuss abroad, writing in the SDP press and sending a protest to the International Socialist Bureau. But all to no avail. The split between revolutionary Marxism and opportunism in Russia was an anticipation of the split in the international workers' movement that occurred in 1914. Although neither he nor anyone else could foresee the terrible betrayal perpetrated by the leaders of the Second International in the First World War, Lenin was already drawing conclusions about the clash between Marxism and opportunism from the experience in Russia and the position of the leaders of the International in relation to it. Referring to the situation in the German SDP he said it was "on the outside, unity, on the inside two sharply defined tendencies", and he predicted the inevitability of conflict between them.

Lenin regarded the Prague Conference as the rebirth of the party. After the Conference Lenin wrote to Maxim Gorky: "We have finally succeeded—in spite of the liquidationist scoundrels—in reviving the Party and its Central Committee."<sup>[20]</sup> He hoped that, having extricated themselves from entanglement with the Mensheviks, the genuine revolutionary current could get down to the task of winning the working class. However, the process of separating out the revolutionary wing did not occur easily or without internal conflict. The response of the other tendencies to the Prague Conference was predictably hysterical, and many of the Bolsheviks were still wavering even after the Prague Conference. In a letter to his sister Anna, Lenin describes the atmosphere among the exiles: "Among our people here, by the way, there is more bickering and abuse of each other than there has been for a long time—there probably never has been so much before. All the groups and sub-groups have joined forces against the last conference and those who organised it, so that matters even went as far as fisticuffs at meetings here. In short, there is so little here that is interesting or even pleasant that it's not worth writing."<sup>[21]</sup>

Worse still, many of the activists in Russia, including the Bolsheviks, were conciliators. Lenin later conceded in private to Gorky that the "young workers in Russia" were "furiously irritated with those abroad."<sup>[22]</sup> Lenin's correspondence in the months following the Prague conference reveals his worried frame of mind. On March 28 he wrote to his supporters in Russia: "I am terribly upset and disturbed by the complete disorganisation of our (and your) relations and contacts. Truly it is enough to make one despair!" He admits that "things are bad" in St Petersburg. And not only there: "No resolutions from anywhere, not a single one, demanding the money! [i.e., the Bolshevik funds held by the Socialist International] Simply a disgrace. Neither from Tiflis nor from Baku (terribly important centres) is there any word of sense about reports having been delivered. Where are the resolutions? Shame and disgrace!" Later he wrote: "You are wrong not to reply to the Liquidators. This is a great mistake."<sup>[23]</sup> There were many such letters.

Meanwhile, the opponents of the Conference were not inactive. Trotsky tried to organise another meeting in August 1912 in Berne, but only the Liquidators turned up, as if to underline the hopeless position he had got himself into. Describing his attitude at that time, Trotsky writes: “In 1912, when the political curve in Russia took an unmistakable upward turn, I made an attempt to call a union conference of representatives of all the Social Democratic factions. To show that I was not alone in the hope of restoring the unity of the Russian Social Democracy, I can cite Rosa Luxemburg. In the summer of 1911, she wrote: ‘Despite everything, the unity of the party could still be saved if both sides could be *forced* to call a conference together.’ In August, 1911, she reiterated: ‘The only way to save the unity is to bring about a general conference of people sent from Russia, for the people in Russia all want peace and unity, and they represent the only force that can bring the fighting-cocks abroad to their senses.’”

“Among the Bolsheviks themselves, conciliatory tendencies were then still very strong, and I had hoped that this would induce Lenin also to take part in a general conference. Lenin, however, came out with all his force against union. The entire course of the events that followed proved conclusively that Lenin was right. The conference met in Vienna in August 1912, without the Bolsheviks, and I found myself formally in a ‘bloc’ with the Mensheviks and a few disparate groups of Bolshevik dissenters. This ‘bloc’ had no common political basis, because in all important matters I disagreed with the Mensheviks. My struggle against them was resumed immediately after the conference. Every day, bitter conflicts grew out of the deep-rooted opposition of the two tendencies, the social-revolutionary and the democratic-reformist.

“‘From Trotsky’s letter,’ writes Axelrod on May 4, shortly before the conference, ‘I got the very painful impression that he had not the slightest desire to come to a real and friendly understanding with us and our friends in Russia ... for a joint fight against the common enemy.’ Nor had I, in fact nor could I possibly have had, an intention of allying myself with the Mensheviks to fight against the Bolsheviks. After the conference, Martov complained in a letter to Axelrod that Trotsky was reviving the ‘worst habits of the Lenin-Plekhanov literary individualism.’ The correspondence between Axelrod and Martov, published a few years ago, testifies to this perfectly unfeigned hatred of me. Despite the great gulf which separated me from them, I never had any such feeling toward them. Even today, I gratefully remember that in earlier years I was indebted to them for many things.

“The episode of the August bloc has been included in all the ‘anti-Trotsky’ text-books of the epigone period. For the benefit of the novices and the ignorant, the past is there presented in such a way as to suggest that Bolshevism came out of the laboratory of history fully armed—whereas the history of the struggle of the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks is also a history of ceaseless efforts toward unity. After his return to Russia in 1917, Lenin made the last effort to come to terms with the Mensheviks-Internationalists. When I arrived from America in May of the same year, the majority of the Social Democratic organisations in the provinces consisted of united Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. At the party conference in March, 1917, a few days before Lenin’s arrival, Stalin was preaching union with the party of Tsereteli. Even after the October revolution,

Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Lunacharsky and dozens of others were fighting madly for a coalition with the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. And these are the men who are now trying to sustain their ideological existence by hair-raising stories about the Vienna unity conference of 1912!”[\[24\]](#)

The August Bloc was an unprincipled amalgam because it was made up of different tendencies with nothing in common except their hostility to Lenin. All talk about “unity” was completely irrelevant now. When the *Vperyod* representative walked out, Trotsky was left with the Liquidators, with whom he had absolutely nothing in common—a completely unnatural bloc, as Trotsky later honestly admitted. Trotsky was undoubtedly mistaken in his attempt to get unity at this time, but his mistake was that of a genuine revolutionary with the interests of the working class and the victory of socialism at heart. Many years later Trotsky gave his final verdict on the August Bloc and his role in it: “I have in mind the so-called August bloc of 1912. I participated actively in this bloc. In a certain sense I created it. Politically I differed with the Mensheviks on all fundamental questions. I also differed with the ultra-left Bolsheviks, the *Vperyodists*. In the general tendency of politics I stood far more closely to the Bolsheviks. But I was against the Leninist ‘regime’ because I had not yet learned to understand that in order to realise the revolutionary goal a firmly welded centralised party is indispensable. And so I formed this episodic bloc consisting of heterogeneous elements which was directed against the proletarian wing of the party.

“In the August bloc the Liquidators had their own faction, the *Vperyodists* also had something resembling a faction. I stood isolated, having co-thinkers but no faction. Most of the documents were written by me and through avoiding principled differences had as their aim the creation of a semblance of unanimity upon ‘concrete political questions’. Not a word about the past! Lenin subjected the August bloc to merciless criticism and the harshest blows fell to my lot. Lenin proved that inasmuch as I did not agree politically with either the Mensheviks or the *Vperiodists* my policy was adventurism. This was severe but it was true.

“As ‘mitigating circumstances’ let me mention the fact that I had set as my task not to support the right or ultra-left factions against the Bolsheviks but to unite the whole party as a whole. The Bolsheviks too were invited to the August conference. But since Lenin flatly refused to unite with the Mensheviks (in which he was completely correct) I was left in an unnatural bloc with the Mensheviks and the *Vperyodists*. The second mitigating circumstance is this, that the very phenomenon of Bolshevism as the genuine revolutionary party was then developing for the first time—in the practice of the Second International there were no precedents. But I do not thereby seek in the least to absolve myself from guilt. Notwithstanding the conception of permanent revolution which undoubtedly disclosed the correct perspective, I had not freed myself at that period especially in the organisational sphere from the traits of a petty bourgeois revolutionist. I was sick with the disease of conciliationism toward Menshevism and with a distrustful attitude toward Leninist centralism. Immediately after the August conference the bloc began to disintegrate into its component parts. Within a few months I was not only in principle but organisationally outside the bloc.”[\[25\]](#)

The incident of the so-called August Bloc was later blown out of all proportion by the Stalinist falsifiers of the history of Bolshevism, with their barefaced invention of “Trotsky’s Bloc” with the Liquidators. The August Bloc undoubtedly represented the shipwreck of conciliationism, showing the impossibility of unity between Bolshevism and Menshevism. Trotsky was particularly upset at this move towards a split which upset all his plans. He railed against Lenin, who replied in kind. Some harsh words were said in both sides in the heat of the moment, which would later be fished out of the archives and used by the Stalinists for unprincipled factional purposes in the struggle to discredit Trotsky after Lenin’s death, despite the explicit instructions in his Testament that “Trotsky’s non-Bolshevik past should not be used against him”.

### **A New Awakening**

The year 1912 had begun quietly enough. The Factory Inspectorate only registered 21 strikes in January and the same number in February. Then, without warning, a bombshell burst in a clear blue sky. The Lena goldfield in Siberia was one of the biggest goldmines in the world. Among the shareholders was the tsar’s mother, Count Witte and government ministers. At the end of February a strike broke out in Lena over the atrocious wages and conditions. Significantly, the chairman of the strike committees was a Bolshevik, P.N. Batashev. The government sent in the troops, who, on 4 April, opened fire on a crowd of 3,000 miners killing 270 and wounding a further 250. It was Bloody Sunday all over again. The shots that echoed over the frozen tundra broke the ice of five years of reaction.

The news of the massacre of miners had an electrifying effect. On 7 and 8 April, mass protest meetings were held in the factories of St Petersburg. A few days later with incredible stupidity Makorov, the Minister of the Interior, answering questions in the Duma, said “so it was, and so it will be in the future”. The indignation of the masses finally boiled over. Between the 14 and 22 April there were 140,000 on strike in St Petersburg and from 12 to the 30, 70,000 in Moscow. The protest strikes spread to the Ukraine, the Baltic states, the Middle Volga, Byelorussia, Lithuania, Poland and the North and Central industrial regions. This was followed by a new wave of strikes on 1 May, when 400,000 workers came out. These strikes were increasingly of a political character. There were 700 political strikes in April. On 1 May, there were more than 1,000 strikes in the St Petersburg area—a higher number than in 1905. The knot of history was re-tied: the workers continued where they had left off in 1907, but on a higher level. The workers had learnt from their experience. In January 1905 they began with appeals to the Little Father. Now they began with the slogan Down with the tsarist government!

After Lena, everything changed in a matter of days. M.F. Van Koten, the St Petersburg Okhrana Chief wrote to the Police Department: “The events at Lena have heightened the mood of the local revolutionary groups and of factory workers.”<sup>[26]</sup> Suddenly, the fortunes of the Bolsheviks were transformed. In 1905 the Social Democrats had been in a weak position with a very scant presence in the working class. And the Bolsheviks had been in a still weaker position within the Social Democracy. Now the opposite was the

case. The Bolsheviks quickly became the decisive force within the Social Democracy, and the Social Democracy was the decisive political force in the working class. Responding quickly to events, they called on the workers to take revolutionary action. Using *Zvezda* as a legal front, they were able to give leadership to the mass movement issuing fighting slogans and directives. The swift reaction of the Bolsheviks and their militant stance facilitated the rapid growth of Bolshevik numbers and influence. It also completely justified the split, which had, in fact, come just in time. To have remained entangled with the Mensheviks at such a moment would have meant paralysis.

The workers quickly took up the Bolshevik slogans on May Day: “Long live the democratic republic!” “Long live socialism!” The movement was not restricted to the workers. The student movement was given a new impetus by the Lena events which sparked off a ferment in the universities. This presented new possibilities for the spread of revolutionary ideas. But a lot of work was still needed to win complete hegemony of the mass movement. In particular, the re-awakening of democratic aspirations and the undoubted presence of constitutional illusions could have strengthened the influence of the bourgeois-liberals who appeared to be “in opposition”. They were well-known public figures, not averse to making demagogic speeches “for democracy”, and speaking in the name of “the people”. For this reason, Lenin’s main fire was directed against the bourgeois liberals.

Revitalised and elated by the change in the situation, which he had awaited for so long, Lenin immediately set about galvanising his comrades and spurring them into action. In the latter part of June, he and Krupskaya moved from Paris to Cracow, in the Austrian-held part of Poland, in order to be nearer the revolution. Krupskaya recalls this period as only “half-emigration” when they had ever closer ties with the interior. From here, he bombarded the Party with letters, calls to action, complaints and words of encouragement. It was also a relief to get away from the enervating atmosphere of intrigue, backstabbing and gossip which characterised émigré life in Paris. He wrote to Gorky that summer: “You ask me why I am in Austria. The Central Committee has set up a bureau here (entre nous); we are nearer to St Petersburg, and it is much easier to write articles for the papers in Russia, and collaboration is being arranged. There is less wrangling, and that too is an advantage. There is no good library, and that is a disadvantage. It is hard to live without good books.”<sup>[27]</sup>

### **Lenin and *Pravda***

Throughout the year, the revolutionary movement was on the ascendant. The mood of revolt spread to the troops. There were mutinies in the Baltic Fleet, where the sailors, mostly of proletarian origins, were affected by the mood of the workers of nearby St Petersburg. 500 Baltic Fleet sailors were arrested and sent for court martial. On 26 October, the Petersburg Bolsheviks called a strike in protest at the repression of the sailors. The protest spread to Moscow, Riga, Reval, Nikolaev, Nizhny Novgorod, Berdyansk and other working class centres, anticipating the future unity of workers and soldiers in 1917.

After the long frustrating years in the wilderness, the Party now began to experience rapid growth. By early 1913 the Bolsheviks had 22 workers' cells in Moscow. The new upswing had a positive effect on morale and growth everywhere. Freed from the restrictive and debilitating influence of the Liquidators and the interminable internal conflicts, the Bolsheviks advanced with giant strides, under their own colours. This time the Mensheviks had missed the boat. However, rapidly changing conditions posed the need for a swift transformation of the Party's methods and an urgent strengthening of the apparatus. The bourgeois liberals had the means to publish "popular" papers like *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) which, for lack of an alternative was widely read by workers. The struggle against bourgeois influence in the masses demanded a Bolshevik daily paper. The Bolshevik *Zvezda* reached the minority of active workers, but it was quite insufficient for the changed situation. The Prague Conference agreed to launch a daily paper with the name *Rabochaya Gazeta*. In the spring of 1912 preparations were begun for the new publication. A team was formed consisting of N.N. Baturin, M.S. Olimsky, N.G. Poletaev, and CC members Ordzhonikidze and Stalin.

At the same time the Liquidators were talking about a daily and began an appeal for funds, although without success. By late March in Petersburg, *Zvezda* had the support of 108 groups of workers, the Mensheviks seven! By April, after the Lena events, the figures were 227 to eight. By late April, the Bolsheviks had collected enough money to issue the paper, which they called by the well-known name of *Pravda*. This meant, in effect, appropriating the name of Trotsky's paper, a move which considerably embittered relations between the Bolsheviks and Trotsky, who, in a moment of anger, wrote a stinging attack on Lenin in a private letter not meant for publication which was later fished out and used unscrupulously by the Stalinists to blacken Trotsky's name.

The new *Pravda* was an instant success. The first issue had a print run of 60,000. This was an invaluable weapon in the middle of a massive strike wave. *Pravda* was a real workers' paper with links to every factory. Worker correspondents wrote in every issue commenting on every aspect of working class life. About 5,000 letters from workers were received in the first year. Regular columns included "Strikes in Petersburg" and "Strikes in the Provinces". *Pravda* was much more than a paper. It was a real organiser. In its pages there was not only a lot of information about the workers' movement, but also directives and slogans, and many letters about the life and conditions of the workers written by workers themselves. This was not just a paper "for workers" but a real workers' paper, something they could identify with as their own. However, *Pravda* did not limit itself to describing what is. It also included theory as a necessary means of raising the consciousness of its readers to the level of the tasks demanded by history. It regularly featured Lenin's articles, which provided the necessary theoretical generalisations and explanations, as well as polemics against other trends, with particular emphasis on exposing the Liquidators.

Lenin paid careful attention to *Pravda*, and wrote a large number of articles for it—out of 75 issues that came out between March and May of 1913, 41 contain at least one of Lenin's articles. He also tried to involve Plekhanov, Gorky and other intellectuals in *Pravda*, although Plekhanov was already moving away. Nor was Lenin's participation

limited to writing articles. He was also actively involved in reading and correcting articles, studying the reports and correspondence in order to gain a more accurate idea of what was going on in the factories, following the circulation figures and analysing the results of financial campaigns. Such close attention was not at all accidental. Lenin well understood the key role of the paper as an organiser. To the degree that there is a serious organisation, capable of penetrating every factory, setting up a network of worker correspondents, raising money from the workers, sending regular reports and the hundred and one other tasks involved in the workers' press, the basis and framework is already established for far bigger tasks.

The new paper did not escape the attention of the authorities. *Pravda* had to contend with censorship, fines and police raids. About 17 per cent of all the issues were confiscated in 1912. In May-June 1913 it was up to 40 per cent. By July-September the figure was 80 per cent! In an effort to fool the authorities, they changed its name repeatedly. The paper came out as *Rabochaya Pravda* (Workers' Truth), *Pravda Truda* (Labour Truth), *Severnaya Pravda* (Northern Truth) and so on. Each time, the authorities imposed a new ban, and each time a new title appeared. And so the cat and mouse game went on. Apart from the legal problems, there was a permanent struggle to keep the paper going financially. There were continuous efforts to raise cash. Unlike the Mensheviks, who raised most of their finance from wealthy sympathisers, the Bolsheviks were proud of the fact that they raised most of their funds from small sums collected by the workers themselves. In the long run, this is the only really firm base for financing a revolutionary party. In 1912 there were 620 groups of workers organising collections for the paper, and by 1913, it was up to 2,181. *Pravda* was maintained mainly by the "kopecks of the workers".

Neither persecution nor the lack of funds could halt the advance of the workers' daily. *Pravda's* influence increased by leaps and bounds. Tens of thousands of workers read the paper, often in groups, passing copies from one workshop to another. *Pravda* galvanised a wide layer of non-party workers around the Party, considerably expanding its influence and periphery. The local party organisations were given targets of money to raise to support *Pravda*. By such means the paper began to occupy a central place in the building of the Party—a collective organiser. By early 1913, the paper had not only increased its size, but its run was up too. Starting the year with a circulation of 23,000, by mid-March, it rose to 30-32,000, and 40-42,000 on Sundays. By the summer the number of individual and collective subscribers was an impressive 5,501. This automatically meant a growth in party membership, which had increased to 30-50,000 by September 1913. Groups of supporters were set up all over the country, even in far-off Tashkent in Central Asia. Eventually *Pravda* even began to penetrate the villages.

Despite the phenomenal success of *Pravda*, relations between Lenin and the paper's editorial board were far from smooth. A section of the editorial board did not approve of Lenin's attacks on the Liquidators: Stalin, S.S. Danilov, N.N. Lebedev, V.M. Molotov, S.M. Nakhimson, M.S. Olminsky—all opposed using the paper for factional disagreements. This detail reveals a total lack of understanding on the part of Lenin's collaborators, even at this late stage. Lenin tried to "patiently explain" the facts of life to

his collaborators. “It is harmful, destructive, ridiculous to conceal differences from the workers (as *Pravda* is doing) ... If you remain silent, you have abstained. And a paper which abstains, has perished.”[\[28\]](#)

Lenin’s strained relations with other Bolshevik leaders were directly related to the question of tactics in the Duma. Early in 1912, the editors of *Zvezda* had published an article by the Bolshevik conciliator M.I. Frumkin, who demanded a single Social Democratic electoral programme and openly came out in favour of the Mensheviks’ electoral slogans.[\[29\]](#) So sharp did the conflict become that the editorial board of *Pravda*, where Stalin was in charge at the time, pointedly refused to publish a single article by Lenin or Zinoviev on questions of electoral strategy. This produced a furious row. Even a superficial reading of Lenin’s correspondence with *Pravda* at this time shows that there was a running battle between him and the editors. Krupskaya notes that “Sometimes—but not often—Ilyich’s articles got lost. At other times they were held up and inserted only after some delay. Ilyich used to worry; he wrote angry letters to *Pravda*, but that did not help much.”[\[30\]](#)

During the election campaign for the fourth Duma in 1912, Lenin wrote to the *Pravda* editorial board: “*Pravda* is carrying on now, at election time, like a sleepy old maid. *Pravda* doesn’t know how to fight. It does not attack, it does not persecute either the Cadet or the Liquidator.” Some time in October, he wrote to the editorial board in language which shows Lenin’s burning indignation at *Pravda*’s failure to expose the Liquidators: “The undersigned, now in the capacity of a permanent political contributor to *Pravda* and *Nevskaya Zvezda*, considers it his duty to express his protest against the behaviour of the colleagues in charge of these newspapers at a critical time.

“The elections in St Petersburg, both in the workers’ curia and in the 2nd urban curia, are a critical moment, a moment for realising the results of five years of work, a moment for determining, in many respects, the direction of work for the next five years.

“At such a moment, the leading organ of working class democrats must follow a clear, firm, and precisely defined policy. But *Pravda*, which is in many respects effectively the leading organ, is *not* conducting such a policy.”

And he continues: “*Pravda* itself has admitted that there are two clearly formalised lines, platforms, collective wills (the August, or Liquidators’, line and the January line). Yet *Pravda* creates the opinion that it is carrying on some third line ‘of its own’, invented only yesterday by someone and amounting (as we have learned from St Petersburg through other channels, since *Pravda*’s editorial board has stubbornly refused to favour us with a reply) either to letting the Liquidators have one of the three candidates, or handing over to them the whole of the 2nd curia ‘in exchange for the workers’ curia’. If these rumours are untrue, *Pravda* bears the entire *responsibility* for them, because you cannot sow such uncertainty among Marxists that unquestionable *friends*, Marxists, believe these rumours, and pass them on.

“At this hot time, *Nevskaya Zvezda* is closed down, without a single letter or explanation, collective exchange of opinion is *completely* interrupted, and political contributors are left *in the dark*, not knowing *whom* they are helping after all to get elected; may it not be a Liquidator? I am obliged hotly to protest against this, and to decline any responsibility for this abnormal situation, which is pregnant with drawn-out conflicts.”[\[31\]](#)

Finally, Lenin’s patience was exhausted: “We received a stupid and impudent letter from the editorial board (of *Pravda*). We will not reply. *They must be got rid of* ... We are exceedingly disturbed by the absence of news about the plan for reorganising the editorial board ... Reorganisation, but better still, *the complete expulsion of all the old timers, is extremely necessary.*” (My emphasis.)

Lenin protested against the systematic censorship of his articles: “Why then does *Pravda* stubbornly and systematically cut out any mention of the Liquidators, both in my articles and in the articles of other colleagues?”[\[32\]](#) In other letters he demands the return of unpublished articles, many of which vanished without trace. At times, it seems, Lenin did not even receive the paper, and there are also complaints that he was not paid: “Why don’t you pay me the money you owe? This delay is causing us great difficulties.”[\[33\]](#) Finally, Lenin’s patience ran out. In a furious letter to Sverdlov, he wrote: “It is essential to put in our own editorial board of *Dyen* and throw out the present one. Work is thoroughly bad at present, the boosting of the Bundist Liquidators (*Zeit*) and the non-Social Democrat Jagiello is an absolute disgrace. The absence of a campaign for unity from below is stupid and base ... are such people editors? They are not people, but wretched wet-rags and wreckers of the cause.”[\[34\]](#)

Despite the reference to *Dyen*, this letter in fact deals with the state of affairs in the editorial board of *Pravda* at the end of 1912 and the beginning of 1913.[\[35\]](#) It shows how far relations with Lenin had deteriorated at this time. Only after Lenin exerted heavy pressure at the Cracow conference, did *Pravda* modify its stance. As late as February 1913, Lenin, while noting with relief the changes in the *Pravda* editorial board, commented: “You cannot imagine to what extent we have been exhausted by working with a sullenly hostile editorial board.”[\[36\]](#) But gradually, Lenin succeeded in straightening things out. By the autumn of 1913, Lenin was able to write to *Pravda* congratulating it on its campaign in support of the Bolshevik deputies in the Duma.[\[37\]](#)

## **Elections to the Fourth Duma**

The elections to the fourth Duma were held in the summer of 1912. To begin with the Mensheviks enjoyed many advantages. Apart from their many well-heeled sympathisers, they had obtained a subsidy from the German SPD and put out a daily legal paper, *Luch* (Sunbeam), demagogically appealing for “unity”, for “non-factional” candidates, etc. This got a certain echo among non-party elements. For their part, the bourgeois-liberal Cadets, fearing with some reason defeat at the polls, resorted to deceit in order to get more votes. Their organ *Rech’* (Speech) proclaimed on the 3rd of February: “One should not give one’s vote to a party, or to individual candidates, but either for the strengthening of the constitutional layer in Russian society, or against it.” That was an appeal to the

electorate to vote for the “progressive forces” against “reaction”, the well-known siren-song of opportunists in every period which tries to blackmail the masses with the threat of reaction to vote for “the lesser evil”. Lenin fought against this deceit and for class independence and revolutionary policies. Conditions in Russia were still tough. The police made a series of arrests before the elections. The RSDLP’s electoral platform was illegally distributed in all the factories. From exile in Crakow Lenin impatiently followed the party’s election campaign. Watching for the slightest signs of opportunism on the part of the Bolshevik leadership, he remained implacably opposed to the idea of a non-party “progressive bloc”.

“The Bolshevik headquarters for the campaign were the editorial offices of *Pravda*, which became the scene of hard and continuous work,” writes Badayev, who was a Bolshevik candidate in these elections. “On these premises, meetings were held with the representatives of the districts and of the individual factories and mills. Simultaneously illegal election meetings were organised in the city districts.

“Owing to the fact that incessant watch was kept by the police on every ‘suspicious’ worker, we had to resort to all sorts of subterfuges in order to gather together even in small groups. Usually, in order to avoid the attentions of the police, small meetings of not more than ten to 20 people were called. Summer helped us. Under the guise of picnic-parties, groups of workers went to the suburbs, mostly into the forest beyond the Okhta. The forest was the best refuge from police spies, who would not venture beyond the outskirts, for it was easy to escape from them there, and they were afraid of being attacked in some out-of-the-way spot.

“At the meetings vehement arguments arose with the Liquidators. Our party called on the workers to enter the elections on the basic unabridged demands and to elect Bolsheviks only as delegates. The Liquidators talked continually about ‘unity’, the necessity of a united front, the necessity of abandoning factional disputes and, of course, of electing their candidates.”[\[38\]](#)

And Badayev explains what the attitude of the Bolsheviks was towards the demand for “the unity of all progressive forces”: “The Bolsheviks thought it necessary to put up candidates in all workers’ *curiae* and would not tolerate any agreements with other parties and groups, including the Menshevik-Liquidators.”

“They also considered it necessary to put up candidates in the so-called ‘second *curiae* of city electors’ (the first *curiae* consisted of large property owners and democratic candidates had no chance there at all) and in the elections in the villages, because of the great agitational value of the campaign. But in order to safeguard against the possible victory of reactionary candidates, the Bolsheviks permitted agreements respectively with the bourgeois democrats (Trudoviks, etc.) against the Liberals, and with the Liberals against the government parties during the second ballot for the election of electors in the city *curiae*. The five big towns (St Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Odessa and Kiev) had a direct system of elections with second ballot. In these towns the Social Democrats put up independent lists of candidates, and as there was no danger of Black Hundred candidates

being elected no agreements were entered into with the Liberal bourgeoisie. The resolutions of the Prague party conference, which established these tactics, emphasised that ‘election agreements must not involve the adoption of a platform, nor must the agreements bind the Social Democratic candidates by any political obligations whatsoever, or prevent the Social Democracy from resolutely criticising the counter-revolutionary nature of the Liberals and the half-heartedness and inconsistency of the bourgeois democrats’. Hence, the agreements entered into by the Bolsheviks in the second ballots were not in the nature of a *bloc* of political parties.”[\[39\]](#)

On the face of it, there would have been a case for uniting with other forces for the sake of getting a bigger parliamentary representation. The electoral law was, of course, heavily weighted against the working class. Under the rigged tsarist electoral system, the voting was indirect. The workers voted for representatives who, in turn, elected 160 “electors” (*vyborshechiki*) of which, the Social Democrats made up 60 per cent. Together with “conciliators” and diverse sympathisers, this figure would have been something like 83 per cent. The majority of the “electors” from working class areas were Bolsheviks. But in the other curiae, the middle class, bourgeois and landlords predominated. Badayev explains: “The electoral law, passed by the government prior to the elections to the first Duma, was so drafted as to secure a majority for the bourgeoisie and the landlords. The voting was not direct but by a system of stages. Various classes of the population (the landlords, the big property-owners in the towns, the peasants, working men, etc.) had first to elect electors, who in turn elected the deputies from amongst themselves. For the peasants and working men the system was still more complicated; the workers, for example, first elected delegates, who in their turn elected electors, and only the latter took part in the Gubernia electoral colleges, which elected the deputies. In addition there were a number of property qualifications—for instance in the towns only householders (tenants of apartments) were entitled to vote.”[\[40\]](#)

Despite all the difficulties, the workers elected 3,500 representatives in all Russia. Of these, the Social Democrats had 54 per cent but if we include sympathisers, their total share was as much as 80 per cent. This was an outstanding triumph for the Bolsheviks, in difficult conditions, which, more than elections, resembled an obstacle race. Under election laws small workshops of less than 50 workers, which were usually more backward and under the thumb of the bosses, had one representative. But the big factories, which tended to be more militant and pro-Bolshevik, had only one representative for every 1,000 workers. In St Petersburg, out of a total of 82 representatives, there were 26 Bolsheviks, 15 Mensheviks, and 41 non party RSDLP sympathisers. The police replied with a series of arrests of workers’ representatives. In some factories where Bolsheviks were elected, the employers demanded re-runs.

On October 20, the Petersburg regional congress of electors elected a Bolshevik M.P., A.Ye. Badayev, whose book *Bolsheviks in the tsarist Duma*, quoted above, is still the best work on this subject. F.N. Samoïlov was elected in Vladimir, N.R. Shagov in Kostroma, M.N. Muranov in Kharkov, G.I. Petrovsky in Yehaterinoslav, and R.V. Malinovsky, the *agent provocateur*, in Moscow. Overall, the Social Democrats presented candidates in 53 towns and won in 32. The Mensheviks got seven of their candidates

elected: three in the Caucasus, their traditional stronghold, and one each from the Don, Irkutsk, Tavrichesk and Ufimsk. Only three were workers. This result marked an amazing triumph for the Bolsheviks, particularly if we bear in mind the fact that their party had only just been established as such and there had been very little time to prepare for the elections. It was a big boost for the organisation.

### **Bolsheviks in the Duma**

The first big success for the Leninist tactic of combining legal and illegal work came in the autumn of 1912 with the election to the workers' electoral colleges (*curiae*) in the elections to the fourth Duma. Up to this time, the Duma fraction had been a Menshevik affair. Now the Bolsheviks for the first time began to develop work in the parliamentary arena. In the third Duma the Social Democratic fraction consisted of nineteen deputies, divided along the following lines: four Bolsheviks and five sympathisers against ten Menshevik-Liquidators. But in practice, it was the Mensheviks who called the tune. The lines between the two factions were as yet insufficiently clear. Lenin had not yet decided that a split was inevitable. Consequently, up to the period 1912-14, the Social Democratic parliamentary fraction acted as one.

The situation in the fourth Duma was completely different. The factional struggle had reached a decisive turning point. This was inevitably reflected in the parliamentary group. In the elections to the fourth Duma the Bolsheviks won an overwhelming majority in the workers' *curiae*. The Social Democratic fraction in the fourth Duma consisted of six Bolsheviks and seven Mensheviks. In addition, one Polish deputy, Jagello, supported the Mensheviks, making a total of 14 deputies. The Bolsheviks had won the majority in all six of the workers' colleges of the largest industrial areas. The Menshevik deputies, on the contrary, were elected from non-working-class centres, chiefly the border provinces, where the majority of the population was petty bourgeois. The distribution of workers in the areas concerned shows for whom the working class voted. Badayev gives the figures for the six provinces with workers' *curiae*. There were 1,008,000 workers (in factories and mines), whereas in the eight provinces which returned Mensheviks there were 214,000 workers. If Baku province (where the workers were disenfranchised), is included the figure would be 246,000 workers. The Bolshevik deputies represented 88.2 per cent of the workers' electors, against only 11.8 per cent for the Mensheviks. The distorted correlation of forces within the Social Democratic Duma fraction is only the result of a rigged electoral system specially designed to reduce the representation of the working class.

The six Bolsheviks were all workers; there were four metal workers (Petrovsky, Muranov, Malinovsky, and Badayev) and two textile workers (Shagov and Samoïlov). The Bolshevik deputies were elected in the biggest industrial areas of Russia: G.I. Petrovsky was deputy for the Yekaterinoslav Gubernia, M.K. Muranov for Kharkov Gubernia, N.R. Shagov for the Kostroma Gubernia, F.N. Samoïlov for the Vladimir Gubernia, R.V. Malinovsky for the Moscow Gubernia, and A.Ye. Badayev for St Petersburg. By contrast, the Menshevik seven were almost all intellectuals and professional people. The only worker among them, Burianov, was a follower of

Plekhanov. The leading lights were all from the upper middle class: Skobelev (who had earlier collaborated with Trotsky on the Vienna *Pravda*, was the son of a Baku oil magnate; Chkheidze was a journalist; Chkhenkeli, a lawyer; Mankov, an accountant. The Mensheviks had a majority of only one, yet they insisted that they had the support of the majority of the working class. This was entirely false. However, their greater experience and knowledge of the parliamentary “tricks of the trade” at first allowed them to dominate the Bolsheviks who felt ill at ease in this strange and alien environment. In addition, the Bolshevik Duma fraction, in common with many other leading members of Lenin’s faction, was strongly influenced by conciliationism and, much to Lenin’s annoyance, resisted a break with the Mensheviks.

The laws governing parliamentary activity can be observed in the parliamentary fractions of reformist workers’ parties at all times. The pressures of the ruling class, its ideology and institutions is nowhere so intense as in the parliamentary hothouse. The bourgeoisie has perfected over a long period the necessary mechanisms for bribing, pressurising and corrupting the parliamentary representatives of the proletariat. Unless the latter are thoroughly imbued with class consciousness and the necessary theoretical understanding to enable them to see through the tricks and manoeuvres of the enemy, they will inevitably tend to succumb to pressure and get sucked into the parliamentary morass of committees, procedure, points of order and worse. It is not necessarily a question of direct personal corruption, careerism, bribes, etc., although all these weapons are actively employed to buy off the workers’ leaders. In the case of right wing reformists, many are themselves middle class lawyers, doctors and economists standing far closer in their lifestyle and psychology to the bourgeoisie than to the workers they profess to represent. Even the most honest left reformists, even devoted workers from the factory floor steeled in years of struggle, can rapidly fall under the spell of the rarefied atmosphere of this artificial world, far removed from the reality of the class struggle.

For a reformist party, which in any case subordinates everything to the question of electing members of parliament, the independence of the parliamentary fraction from the party, the sacred right of each individual deputy to “follow his or her conscience” is accepted as normal. This is just another way of expressing the independence of the reformist leaders from the working class, and their absolute and total dependence on the bourgeoisie. But for a revolutionary party, for which the parliamentary struggle is only one element in the general struggle of the working class to change society, this is unthinkable. The party, as the organised expression of the most conscious elements of the proletariat can and must exercise control over its elected representatives at all levels, above all its members of parliament.

It is obvious that parliament is not an ideal platform for worker revolutionaries. The rarefied atmosphere of parliament had overawed the Bolshevik deputies, who at first lamely followed the line of least resistance. Thus, in the very first session, they failed to vote against the Cadet and Octobrist candidate for speaker. The fraction refused to read out the statement prepared by the Bolshevik CC on the grounds that they had their own—which, however, contained no revolutionary appeal to the masses outside parliament. There were other instances, such as when voting for the release of funds for public

education during the debate on the budget, they failed to expose the class bias of the government's education policy. Lenin was immediately alarmed by the way in which the six Bolshevik deputies yet again allowed themselves to be led by the nose: "If all our six are from the workers' curiae, they must not submit in silence to a lot of Siberians [i.e. intellectual former exiles]. The six must come out with a very clear-cut protest, if they are being lorded over."

The Mensheviks tried to form a counterweight to the CC in the form of a "political commission" of leading lights of the Duma Fraction to consider all questions and issue "recommendations". In other words, the parliamentary big wigs were to decide on all questions pertaining to the activity of the Duma fraction without reference to the Party. The behaviour of the fraction gave rise to much criticism and discontent in the rank-and-file who felt control of the fraction slipping from their hands. Robert McKean comments:

"The conciliatory attitude of the six Bolshevik parliamentarians assumed concrete form in several ways. They joined the Mensheviks in condemning the attempt of certain activists to launch a strike on the opening day of the State Duma. Four of them (excluding Malinovsky and Muranov) agreed with their Menshevik colleagues on 15 December 1912 to merge the two factional newspapers and to the reciprocal inclusion of deputies' names as collaborators of the respective editorial boards. In the composition of the fraction's declaration, read out by Malinovsky on 7 December 1912, the deputies reached a compromise on drafts sent by Lenin and Dan from abroad. Contrary to the claim of Soviet historians that the Bolsheviks forced the inclusion of their slogans, a close reading of the text reveals that the document omitted them, partly because the Mensheviks feared their incorporation would lead to criminal charges. Instead the document referred to a 'sovereign popular representation' and universal suffrage, but it did bow to Bolshevik demands by the exclusion of the Menshevik concerns for freedom of coalition and cultural-national autonomy."[\[41\]](#)

Hiding behind the phraseology of bourgeois parliamentarism, the Menshevik deputies strove to free themselves from the control of the party and acquire "independent" status, but in so doing merely revealed their slavish dependence on the norms of bourgeois parliamentarism and the Cadets and Octobrists. In a meeting of the fraction held on the 22 November 1907, the Mensheviks got through the following resolution: "The Duma Social Democratic fraction is an autonomous group which, while attentive to the voice of the party, in each concrete case of Duma work, shall resolve the issues independently."[\[42\]](#) A steady stream of protest letters from Social Democratic workers was received by the Bolshevik organ *Proletary*. The need to bring public representatives under firm control of the party became a pressing question. Lenin advocated that members of the Duma Fraction should be as much under control as a member of any other of the leading bodies (EC, CC, etc.). Parliamentary work should be conducted in such a way that every party worker should participate in the general Duma work of the party.

Parallel to his struggle against the conciliationism of *Pravda*, Lenin waged war against the no less harmful conciliationism of the Bolshevik Duma group. As early as January

1912, he wrote: “See to it unconditionally that the letter of the Baku workers which we are sending you is published” (the letter demanded that the Bolshevik Duma group break with the Liquidators). Through the pages of their paper *Luch*, the Liquidators were waging a demagogic campaign for “unity”. Four of the Bolshevik Duma deputies’ names appeared in the list of collaborators of *Luch*. Lenin was furious. “When will the four (deputies) resign from Luch?” “Must we wait much longer?...Even from distant Baku 20 workers are protesting.”[\[43\]](#)

In September, he wrote: “The essence of the problem *today* is that under cover of shouts about unity, the Liquidators are *flouting* the will of the majority of class-conscious workers in St Petersburg, and are foisting on the majority of the workers the *splinter* candidates of the *minority* intelligentsia, namely, the liquidationist intelligentsia.

“All elections in a bourgeois country are accompanied by rampant phrase-mongering and licentious promises. The main principle of Social Democrats is not to trust words but go to the heart of the matter.

“The Liquidators’ phrases about unity in their newspaper *Luch* are a pack of lies. *In reality*, unity has already been brought about in St Petersburg by the majority of class-conscious workers *against the Liquidators*; it was established by the May Day demonstration, and by the support given to *Pravda* by 550 groups of workers against the 16 groups of Liquidators.”[\[44\]](#)

Under pressure of the remorseless criticism of Lenin, the Bolshevik deputies began to play a more active role in Duma affairs and distance themselves from the Menshevik “Siberians”. Given the general lack of freedom to carry out agitation and propaganda on behalf of the workers and peasants, the work in the Duma acquired an enormous significance. Of course, there were severe limitations. Theoretically the deputies had “parliamentary privilege” but in practice could be arrested at any moment. Even within the Duma, the Social Democrats were confronted with all sorts of obstacles.

Nevertheless, all kinds of important issues were raised, which demanded a concrete response from the workers’ parliamentary representatives: the state budget, the rights of soldiers, Church subsidies, the conditions of workers, and, above all, the land question. This provided a wide scope for developing mass agitation and propaganda. What could not be said inside the Duma was supplemented by the illegal Party publications outside. Legal work was combined with illegal. This was the only way of preserving the revolutionary principles of the Party, while maintaining close links with the masses. Particularly good agitational speeches made by Social Democratic deputies were printed and distributed among the workers. Such a case was Surkov’s speech against Church subsidies, which was singled out for praise by Lenin, and ended with the words: “Civil servants in vestments are just as much enemies of the people as civil servants in uniforms... Not one penny of the people’s money for these bloody enemies of the people, these obscurers of the popular consciousness.”

Lenin was particularly pleased because this speech completely exploded the god-builders' myth that "religion is a personal affair". In the 1909 budget debate the Social Democratic fraction exposed the fraud whereby an exorbitant amount of the workers' money went to pay off the tsar's debts. On all such questions, the revolutionaries in the Duma mercilessly exposed the landlords and capitalists and the autocracy, setting out from concrete problems which directly affected the lives of the masses. At the same time, they exposed the limitation of the Duma itself: "The proletariat, of course, does not expect a solution for the worker question from the third Duma," said Polovsky in summing up in a debate on wages of workers.<sup>[45]</sup>

The work in the Duma enabled the Party to address itself to the peasantry in a way that normal propaganda and agitation would not have permitted. By participating in the parliamentary debates on the land question, proposing agreements with the representatives of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie, the Trudoviks, and demanding the most radical solution to the land question, the Social Democrats struck a blow at the heart of the autocracy.

In all, the Social Democratic fraction put down about 50 questions on all kinds of issues. They also moved their own bills, expressing in a concrete, concise form, various demands taken from the party programme. All this represented a valuable addition to the work of the Party. But much more important than their speeches in the chamber was the activity of the deputies outside the Duma. Here there was an open conflict with the Liquidators, who used their majority to oppose such activity. In December 1907 they passed a motion stating that no Social Democratic deputy was "obliged" to participate in extraparliamentary activity, but left it to each individual whether to accept or not. The Bolshevik deputies regularly visited the factories in their electoral districts, acquainting themselves with the workers' problems first-hand, writing in the party press, and even attending illegal workers' meetings. They gave report-backs of their activities to meetings of voters. Thus, the activity in the Duma was a two-way process, an active dialogue with the masses in which legal and illegal methods were combined to maintain a firm link between the members of parliament and the working class.

The socialist deputies also maintained an extensive correspondence with 54 regions of Russia, mainly answering letters from workers and peasants, but also from political prisoners, exiles and intellectuals. By such means, the voice of the oppressed and exploited could at last find an echo in the parliamentary "holy of holies". The Bolshevik deputies took a keen interest in the living and working conditions of the masses, which had suffered a brutal deterioration in the period of reaction. Badayev cites one example of this: "The Baltic naval dockyards were under the control of the Minister for the Navy. Working conditions there were as intolerable as in the other War Office factories. The ordinary workers earned 12 to 18 kopecks an hour, overtime was customary and normally meant that working-hours were doubled. The workshops were extremely unhealthy, damp, draughty, smoky, and in winter very cold. Men had to work in awkward, cramped positions. Seven or eight years there were often enough to make a man a complete wreck."<sup>[46]</sup> The deputies received a large number of letters from workers. Often these letters expressed the desperation of the masses, like the one from a group of workers in

the Urals, published in *Novy Den'* on the 7 September 1909 the essential message of which was: "We can't go on living like this any more." Such messages revealed the deep undercurrent of discontent which was building up in the depths of society and which found a voice in the fraction. The revolutionary Social Democrats in this reactionary Duma aspired to becoming the "tribunes of the people", and, notwithstanding all the problems and failings, actually succeeded to a considerable extent.

### **Tactics in the Duma**

The tactics of the Bolsheviks in the Duma consisted mainly in using it as a tribune from which to denounce and expose the crimes of the landlords and capitalists and their regime. But it was also necessary to master the Byzantine intricacies of parliamentary procedure in order to be able to intervene in the most effective manner. In general, the Bolsheviks would not support any proposal put forward by the liberals, considering it their main duty to unmask these hypocritical "friends of the people". However, sometimes they were confronted with complicated tactical decisions as to whether it was permissible or not to vote for a bill which contained measures which might benefit working people. In such cases, it was usually deemed permissible to vote only for those parts of a bill which meant genuine improvements for the workers. Otherwise, they would vote against. In cases where the so-called progressive measures were of doubtful value, they should abstain. Here is another example of flexible tactics. Not to take such things into consideration, simply to vote against every liberal proposal on principle would have turned the Party into a sect.

The preponderant influence which the Bolsheviks enjoyed among the masses can be proved by comparing the numbers of deputies elected by the workers' electoral colleges to the previous State Dumas. In the second Duma, 12 Mensheviks and 11 Bolsheviks were elected by the workers' colleges; in the third there was an equal number of each; while in the fourth Duma, only six deputies were elected, but they were all Bolsheviks. "At the time of the second Duma, which coincided with the London Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, the majority of the party was definitely Bolshevik; and in the fourth Duma there could be no doubt that the Bolsheviks had the support of at least three-fourths of the revolutionary workers."[\[47\]](#)

There were a hundred and one procedural obstacles designed to prevent the Social Democrats from making use of the Duma for revolutionary purposes. The chief difficulty was that an interpellation could only be introduced if it was signed by at least 33 Duma members. The signatures of the Social Democratic fraction amounted to only 14. Even if taken together with those of the ten Trudoviks, this did not give the required number. Here is a concrete case of an episodic agreement with other parties that is both necessary and permissible. In order to introduce an interpellation, the Social Democrats had to "borrow" signatures from the Cadets or the Progressives. "The conditions under which the various parliamentary parties associated," recalls Badayev, "were such that individual members of the Cadets and Progressives sometimes added their signatures to our interpellations. But this only occurred rarely and very often they flatly refused to help us."[\[48\]](#)

In order to get round these onerous restrictions, they had to resort to subterfuge and tricks to “bend the rules” of parliamentary procedure. They would make a long speech denouncing some injustice or other, and then end with the words “Is the minister aware of this and what steps does he propose to take?” This concluding sentence of every interpellation did not have much sense, since the workers’ deputies were perfectly aware that every instance of oppression and police outrage was well known to the tsarist ministers with whose blessing and by whose orders it occurred, and they likewise knew in advance that the ministers would do nothing to prevent such infractions of the law. Neither did they attach any importance to the replies given by the ministers. The sole significance and purpose of these interpellations was that they exposed the autocratic regime and its fake parliament before the entire working class and invited the masses to draw the necessary conclusions. In this way, the Duma fraction could play the role of genuine revolutionary tribune of the people, partially cutting through the barriers of censorship and carrying the message of the party to millions who would otherwise have no access to socialist ideas.

Even if they succeeded in making an interpellation, the authorities resorted to other methods to restrict the activities of the Social Democrats in the chamber. “The chairman carefully followed our speeches, trying to anticipate and prevent all digressions from the formal topic of urgency; while we, ignoring his calls to order, went ahead and said what we regarded as necessary. Most of these encounters ended in Rodzyanko or his vice-chairman losing patience and stopping the workers’ deputies in the middle of their speeches,” states Badayev.<sup>[49]</sup> And finally, even if the interpellation went ahead, the authorities would ensure that nothing was done about it: “Although this interpellation was accepted by the Duma it fared no better than the other interpellations introduced by our fraction. On receiving the interpellations, the ministries concerned set in motion the entire bureaucratic machine of red tape, ‘making enquiries’, ‘waiting for reports’, etc. While the interpellation was thus being thickly covered with office dust, the acuteness of its subject-matter passed and it was only then that the minister fulfilled his formal duty and presented his ‘explanations’.”<sup>[50]</sup> Such are the time-honoured methods of bourgeois parliamentarism, which have not changed much up to the present day, even in the most “democratic” of parliaments.

Despite all difficulties, the Bolsheviks succeeded in mastering this unfamiliar arena of struggle and used it effectively to further the workers’ cause. The key to the revolutionary utilisation of parliament was at every moment to link the work of the parliamentary fraction with the movement outside parliament. The Bolshevik Duma deputies maintained the closest contacts with the workers outside the Duma, travelling to workers’ areas all over Russia, speaking at factory meetings, editing leaflets and proclamations, and paying close attention to the workers’ grievances. Badayev recalls how he kept up a voluminous correspondence with workers:

“Every day I received a voluminous correspondence not only from St Petersburg, but also from other cities, and many workers called to see me. In order that these consultations with the masses should continue, I published in Pravda the hours of my ‘reception’ at

home. Some of these numerous visitors called on behalf of various organisations, while others came on personal matters.

“The conversations and letters touched upon absolutely every aspect of the workers’ lives. I was kept informed of the work accomplished and of the persecutions incurred by the trade unions, of strikes, lock-outs, unemployment, and new cases of police oppression. I was asked to intercede on behalf of those arrested, and received many letters from exiles, who requested me to organise financial and other material relief for them. Among those who came on personal matters, some even asked if I could help to find work for them. Very often visitors called in order to talk about the Duma and its work, to express their wishes and to give advice.

“It was necessary to answer all the letters promptly and to deal with the requests. In a number of cases I had to initiate petitions and conduct negotiations with various government institutions. All this took a lot of time and my day was fully occupied even before the Duma opened.”[\[51\]](#)

From the very beginning it was clear that this Duma was taking place in a very different atmosphere to that of the preceding ones. On the day it opened a massive strike wave was sweeping Russia. Badayev recalls the scene in Petersburg: “At about 3.30 p.m. a crowd formed of these workers and students appeared in Kirochnaya Street. Singing revolutionary songs, and carrying a red flag, about the size of a handkerchief, bearing the legend ‘Down with Autocracy’, they came out to Liteyny Prospect and went towards Nevsky Prospect. At the corner of Liteyny Prospect and Basseynaya and Simeonovskaya Streets, the ordinary police dispersed the demonstrators, picked up the flag from the sidewalk where the crowd had gathered and arrested the flag-bearer.”[\[52\]](#)

## NOTES

[20] LCW, *Letter to Maxim Gorky, February 1912*, vol. 35, p. 23.

[21] LCW, *Letter to his Sister Anna, March 24, 1912*, vol. 37, p. 474.

[22] See LCW, *Letter to Maxim Gorky, August 25, 1912*, vol. 35, p. 54.

[23] LCW, vol. 35, pp. 28, 29 and 36.

[24] Trotsky, *My Life*, pp. 224-6.

[25] Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*, pp. 177-8.

[26] Quoted in R. McKean, *St Petersburg Between the Revolutions*, p. 88.

[27] Quoted in S. Payne, *The Life and Death of Lenin*, p. 248.

[28] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 48, p. 71.

- [29] See McKean, op. cit., p. 132.
- [30] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 261.
- [31] LCW, *To the Editorial Board of Pravda, First half of October, 1912*, vol. 36, pp. 198, 194 and 195-6.
- [32] LCW, *To the Editors of Pravda, 1/8/1912*, vol. 35, p. 47.
- [33] LCW, *To the Editors of Pravda 24/11/1912*, vol. 35, p. 66.
- [34] LCW, *Letter to Sverdlov, 9/2/1913*, vol. 35, p. 79.
- [35] See LCW, vol. 35, p. 577, note.
- [36] LCW, *To the Editorial Board of Pravda*, vol. 35, p. 82.
- [37] LCW, *To the Editorial Board of Za Pravdu, 2-11/11/1913*, vol. 35, p. 115.
- [38] A.Ye. Badayev, *Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma*, p. 207.
- [39] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.
- [40] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- [41] R. McKean, op. cit., pp. 140-1.
- [42] Original in the Party Archives, quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 312.
- [43] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 148.
- [44] LCW, *Workers' Unity and the Elections*, vol. 36, pp. 191-2.
- [45] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 314 in both quotes.
- [46] A.Ye. Badayev, op. cit., p. 101.
- [47] *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.
- [48] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- [49] *Ibid.*, p. 61.[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1.
- [51] *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.
- [52] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.

## Part Four: The Revival

[section 3 of 4]

### Revolutionary Upswing

The elections to the fourth Duma unfolded in the midst of a tremendous revolutionary upswing. That was the real reason for the success of the Bolsheviks. Throughout the whole of 1912 there were more than 3,000 strikes, with the participation of 1,463,000 workers, out of which 1,100,000 were involved in political strikes. In 1913, about two million workers struck, of whom, 1,272,000 were involved in political strikes, in which Bolsheviks often played a leading role. There were new mutinies among the sailors and soldiers. The tactics of the Bolsheviks were firmly rooted in the perspective of a new revolutionary upswing. We get a glimpse of the tactics of the Social Democrats, who intervened in every strike and lock-out, in the following extract:

“It was decided that all workers locked out should keep in touch, that an appeal for help should be made to all St Petersburg workers, a determined struggle waged against the use of alcohol during the lock-out, and that workers’ educational societies should be requested to organise free lectures, etc. No man or woman was to approach the gates of the factory, and to plead for him or herself, or on behalf of groups of workers. When the factory was reopened, no worker was to return unless all were reinstated.”[\[53\]](#)

It is impossible to understand the organisational side of Lenin’s position in isolation to the political questions. The irresistible movement in the direction of a split was dictated by the whole logic of the situation. The time for diplomacy and futile attempts to unite tendencies that had been shown to be completely incompatible was long past. Hence Lenin’s intransigent opposition to all talk of unity with the Mensheviks at this time. It was absolutely imperative that the revolutionary party should be “well shod on all fours” before the critical point was reached. There was not a moment to lose. In the course of the election campaign to the Duma, before mass meetings of workers the Bolsheviks had the opportunity to put forward their political line and test the response. It was overwhelmingly favourable. The instructions to the Social Democratic Duma group, signed by thousands of workers, were on clearly Bolshevik lines:

“The demands of the Russian people advanced by the movement of 1905 remain unrealised.

“The growth of reaction and the ‘renovation of the regime’ have not only not satisfied these demands, but, on the contrary, have made them still more pressing.

“Not only are the workers deprived of the right to strike—there is no guarantee that they will not be discharged for doing so; not only have they no right to organise unions and meetings—there is no guarantee that they will not be arrested for doing so; they have not

even the right to elect to the Duma, for they will be ‘disqualified’ or exiled if they do, as the workers from the Putilov works and the Nevsky shipyards were ‘disqualified’ a few days ago.

“All this is quite apart from the starving tens of millions of peasants, who are left at the mercy of the landlords and the rural police chiefs.

“All this points to the necessity of realising the demands of 1905. The state of economic life in Russia, the signs already appearing of the approaching industrial crisis and the growing pauperisation of broad strata of the peasantry make the necessity of realising the objects of 1905 more urgent than ever.

“We think, therefore, that Russia is on the eve of mass movements, perhaps more profound than those of 1905. This is testified by the Lena events, by the strikes in protest against the ‘disqualifications’, etc.

“As was the case in 1905, the Russian proletariat, the most advanced class of Russian society, will again act as the vanguard of the movement.

“The only allies it can have are the long-suffering peasantry, who are vitally interested in the emancipation of Russia from feudalism.

“A fight on two fronts—against the feudal order and the Liberal bourgeoisie which is seeking a union with the old powers—such is the form the next actions of the people must assume.

“But in order that the working class may honourably discharge its role as the leader of the movement of the people, it must be armed with the consciousness of its interests and with a greater degree of organisation.

“The Duma tribune is, under the present conditions, one of the best means for enlightening and organising the broad masses of the proletariat.”[\[54\]](#)

Needless to say, Lenin was in constant contact with Russia. Party leaders and activists came out to Cracow to discuss with Lenin who maintained an energetic correspondence with the interior, with the aid of the ever efficient and indefatigable Krupskaya. Occasionally formal meetings were held, where the tactics and programme of the party were reviewed. Such a meeting was the Cracow conference which met from 28 December 1912 to 1 January 1913. For purposes of camouflage it was called the February conference and figured as such in the press and in party literature. Lenin was in the chair and in addition to the deputies the following were present: Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, G. Zinoviev, A. Troyanovsky, Valentina Nikolayevna Lobova, E. Rozmirovich and a few other comrades, delegates from big working-class centres. Of the deputies, Petrovsky, Malinovsky, Shagov and Badayev were present.

The year which had passed since the Prague conference had witnessed a powerful development of the revolutionary movement, of political and economic strikes, mass demonstrations, and the creation and consolidation of the workers' press. The split between the revolutionary and reformist wings of the Social Democracy was now total. The domination of the liquidationist tendency among the Mensheviks rendered this inevitable. The division between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was spreading throughout the whole labour movement and everywhere the revolutionary tendency was gaining ground—a fact that was underlined by the decisive victory of the Bolsheviks in the workers' electoral colleges during the elections to the State Duma. These advances were duly noted:

“1. The conference notes that, in spite of unparalleled persecutions and governmental interference in the elections, in spite of the Black-Hundred-Liberal *bloc* against the Social Democrats, which was definitely formed in many districts, the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party achieved great victories in the elections to the fourth Duma, nearly everywhere there was an increase in the number of votes received by the Social Democrats in the second city electoral colleges, which are being wrested from the hands of the Liberals. In the workers' electoral colleges, which are the most important for our party, the RSDLP enjoys undivided rule. By electing only Bolsheviks as deputies from the workers' electoral colleges, the working class has unanimously declared its unswerving loyalty to the old Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and its revolutionary traditions.

“2. The conference welcomes the energetic work of the Social Democratic deputies in the fourth Duma as expressed in the introduction of interpellations and in the declaration which, in the main, defined correctly the basic principles of Social Democracy.

“3. Recognising, in accordance with party tradition, that the only correct policy is for the Duma Social Democratic fraction to be subordinated to the party as a whole as represented by its central organisations, the conference considers that, in the interests of the political education of the working class and to ensure the maintenance of a correct party policy, it is necessary to follow every step of the fraction and thus establish party control over its work.”[\[55\]](#)

In his book, for fairly obvious reasons, Badayev skates over the real significance of this resolution, which is contained in the final sentence. The main purpose of the meeting at Cracow was, in effect, to call the Bolshevik Duma deputies to order, and to put an end to their conciliationism and vacillations. The Duma deputies' activities were placed firmly under the control of the party's leading bodies. They were instructed to terminate their collaboration with the editorial board of the Liquidators' newspaper, *Luch*, by the end of January 1913. In an attempt to get the Bolshevik deputies to distance themselves from the Mensheviks, the conference passed a resolution stating that: “The only true type of organisation in the present period is an illegal party composed of nuclei each surrounded by a network of legal and semi-legal societies. The illegal nuclei must be organisationally adapted to the local everyday conditions.” The chief task was stated to be the setting up at

factories and works of illegal party committees with one leading organisation at each centre. Badayev writes:

“The conference recognised that the best type of organisation was that which prevailed at St Petersburg. The St Petersburg committee was composed of delegates elected by the districts and of co-opted members, which resulted in a very flexible organisation, in close touch with the nuclei, and at the same time well concealed from the secret police. It was also recommended that regional centres should be organised and contact maintained with the local groups on the one hand and the central committee on the other by a system of delegates. The resolution on organisation established a harmonious system firmly welded from the bottom to the top.”[\[56\]](#)

But despite all Lenin’s urgings, the majority of the Bolshevik faction stubbornly refused to break with the Menshevik parliamentary group, with whom they continued to maintain friendly relations, much to Lenin’s chagrin, throughout the first half of 1913. As a means of ensuring that the Duma deputies did not become divorced from the workers, Lenin insisted that they participate personally in the work of *Pravda*. “On the recommendation of comrade Lenin himself,” recalls Badayev, “I was charged with the duty of publishing *Pravda*. Lenin told me that being the deputy for St Petersburg, the representative of the St Petersburg workers, I must take on that task. *Pravda* pursued not only educational and propagandist aims, but it was also the most important centre for organisation. He emphasised the point that my duty was to work there.”[\[57\]](#)

It is also clear that some sharp exchanges occurred between Lenin and Stalin in relation to the behaviour of the editorial board of *Pravda*. Krupskaya, whose book about Lenin was published in the USSR under Stalin, was compelled to express herself cautiously about this, but nevertheless reveals that relations between the two men were very strained. At this meeting Sverdlov was appointed editor of *Pravda* and co-opted onto the CC. This step represented a demotion for Stalin. However, the arrest of Sverdlov on 10 February 1913, removed him from the picture. Stalin was once again placed in charge of *Pravda*, but was also arrested. But not before showing his defiance of Lenin and the other exiled leaders. Despite all that had been said at the Cracow meeting, *Pravda* continued to oppose a break with the Mensheviks in the Duma. In November 1912, it bluntly declared that “the fraction must be united”. In February, shortly before his arrest, Stalin wrote an article in the pages of *Pravda*, exhorting workers to speak out against attempts to split the fraction “from wherever they come”—a phrase, despite its oblique character, that is clearly directed against Lenin.[\[58\]](#)

### **‘The Masses Have Now Grown Up’**

Meanwhile, events were moving rapidly. The class struggle was proceeding at an ever accelerating pace. In the whole of Russia during 1913 about one million workers had participated in strikes: of these over half a million were involved in political strikes. By the summer of 1913 Russia was in the throes of a political crisis. At a Party meeting in Polish Galicia (then under Austrian rule), the perspective of a new revolution was placed on the order of the day. “The question of a new revolution is uppermost in the political

life of the country.”[59] In the context of general radicalisation, the Menshevik influence was in steep decline. The Bolsheviks were rapidly becoming the dominant force in the organised working class in Russia. Badayev reports that: “Party work had been strengthened, extended and consolidated, new groups had been formed and the old ones had grown larger and more effective.”[60] Given the way in which Party membership was now calculated, it is difficult to say exactly how many members the Bolsheviks had at this time. Even Lenin didn’t know, as the following extract, written in September 1913, shows:

“The party was 150,000 in 1907 (according to the estimate approved by the London Congress). Right now, you can’t say how many... Probably a lot fewer, but 30 or 50,000. It’s impossible to be exact... The Party is the conscious and advanced layer of the class, its advance guard. The strength of this vanguard is ten or a hundred times greater than its numerical strength. Can the strength of hundreds be greater than that of thousands? Yes, it can be greater, when that hundred is organised. Organisation increases your strength tenfold.”[61] It was now urgent that all the disputed questions be resolved as quickly as possible. A new conference was held, this time at Poronino, a village not far from Cracow, where Lenin and a few members of the central committee were staying. In order to mislead the police, the Poronino conference was always referred to as the August conference, although it actually took place at the end of September 1913. Twenty-five to thirty representatives from the larger party organisations were present. In addition to Lenin, Zinoviev and Krupskaya, who were living in Galicia, Kamenev, Shotman, Inessa Armand, Troyanovsky, Rozmirovich, Hanyecki and other party workers also attended, as well as all the Duma Bolsheviks except Samoilov, who was ill. At the Poronino conference, a resolution was passed on the party press which marked a new departure:

“1. The conference recognises the enormous importance of a legal press for the cause of Social Democratic agitation and organisation and therefore calls on all party organisations and class-conscious workers to lend their whole-hearted support by distributing papers as widely as possible, by organising mass collective subscriptions and by the payment of regular dues. *The conference once more emphasises that the said dues are membership dues to the party.*

“2. Special attention should be paid to the strengthening of the legal workers’ paper in Moscow and to the speedy establishment of a paper in the south.

“3. The conference desires to bring about the closest co-operation between the existing legal papers by means of mutual exchange of information, the holding of conferences, etc.

“4. Recognising the importance and the necessity of a theoretical Marxist organ, the conference desires party and trade union papers to call the attention of the workers to the journal *Prosvestchenye* (Enlightenment), and to appeal to them to subscribe regularly and support it in a systematic fashion.

“5. The conference calls the attention of party publishing organisations to the necessity for a wider circulation of popular pamphlets for agitation and propaganda.

“6. In view of the recent development of the revolutionary movement and of the importance of analysing it thoroughly, in the complete manner which is impossible in the legal press, the conference draws special attention to the necessity of extending our illegal publishing work and recommends that, in addition to illegal pamphlets and leaflets, a central illegal party paper should be issued regularly at short intervals.”[\[62\]](#)

The influence of the Bolsheviks was growing far faster than the Party’s actual membership. Krupskaya says in a letter that: “At the conference the reports from the locals were very interesting. Everybody was saying that the masses have now grown up ... During the elections it had become apparent that there were self-made workers’ organisations everywhere ... For the most part they are not connected with the Party, but they are of the Party in spirit.”[\[63\]](#) In the new conditions, with large numbers of fresh workers coming into the Party’s orbit it was necessary to introduce drastic changes in the approach to recruitment, to open the doors to the workers. Here once more we see how flexible Lenin was on organisational questions. The Party is, after all, a living organism which will change and adapt itself to changing conditions. Thus, the very same Lenin who in 1903 argued against Martov’s attempt to dilute the Party by blurring the distinction between a member and a sympathiser, now advocated an entirely different approach, whereby any regular reader of *Pravda* should be regarded as a member (money paid regularly to *Pravda* should be considered as equivalent to “membership dues to the party”). There is, in reality, no contradiction between the two positions. They merely reflect a change in the objective situation, from a relatively small, embryonic party, which, of necessity must have the character of a *cadre* party, and a mass workers’ party.

### **Split in the Duma Group**

The whole situation exposed the crying contradiction of the Duma fraction, where the Mensheviks were using their formal majority of one to dominate its activities and hamper the intervention of the Bolshevik deputies, a situation which the latter were prepared to accept in the name of unity. Lenin was highly critical of the Bolshevik Duma fraction for dragging its feet on the question of a break from the Menshevik seven: “The campaign against the seven began excellently,” he wrote, “but is now being carried on with insufficient determination.”[\[64\]](#) As the Cracow meeting had failed to produce a definitive solution, this time the need for a split in the Duma fraction was spelled out in no uncertain terms. At a meeting of the Central Committee held in July, the “six” were, in effect, censured, although only Malinovsky was present from the Duma fraction. This time, no excuses would be accepted. However, the way that this question was handled was important. It was absolutely necessary that the workers should understand the reasons for the split, and that the full responsibility be placed at the door of the Mensheviks. Badayev tries to present the conduct of the Bolshevik deputies in the best possible light, but it is clear that they only took the decision to break with the Mensheviks very reluctantly and under pressure:

“Of course, it was obvious to all of us already at that period, that the time was drawing near for a complete rupture with the Mensheviks. *But the desire to preserve unity within the Social Democratic Party by some means or other was still strong among the broad masses of the workers.* Naturally the wide public did not know what was taking place inside the party organisation, in our underground committees or nuclei, owing to the police regime then prevailing in Russia. But the Duma fraction operated in the sight of all; every worker, not only in St Petersburg, but even in the most remote corners of Russia, knew of its existence and activities. When the broad masses referred to party unity, they mainly had our fraction in mind.”[\[65\]](#)

The Bolsheviks organised a campaign of collecting signatures to mobilise the maximum amount of support behind their Duma deputies. The result was an outstanding success.

By November 1, in just two weeks, *Pravda* and the Bolshevik fraction received over eight resolutions of support bearing over 5,000 signatures. During the same period, the Mensheviks could only muster 3,500 signatures. And even this proportion was not maintained, since the Mensheviks had exhausted all their efforts in the first weeks, and every day saw a falling off in the number of Menshevik resolutions while the number of resolutions in favour of the “six” continued to increase. In the course of the next month the Bolsheviks’ lead was still more pronounced; the flow of pro-Menshevik resolutions from the provinces virtually dried up, whereas that of the Bolsheviks was only just beginning. By December 1, it was clear that the Bolsheviks could count at least two and a half times as many supporters among the Russian workers as the Mensheviks. The same conclusion was evident from the amount of money collected by each group among the workers. The Mensheviks were able to raise only about 150 roubles for every 1,000 obtained by the Bolsheviks.

Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks by this time had united behind them the decisive sections of the working class, conciliationist moods still persisted, as Badayev himself admits: “Some Social Democratic circles abroad too did not grasp the nature and meaning of the split in the fraction, but hovered between the two camps, passing from Bolshevism to Menshevism and vice versa. One of the largest of these two groups, *Vperyod* (Forward), thought that the split was the result of the ‘absence of a single leading party centre, enjoying the confidence of the majority of party members’. The *Vperiodists* recognised that the demands of the ‘six’ were just, but they thought that the whole question only amounted to minor organisational clashes within the fraction. Thus they entirely missed the significance of the split and the fundamental differences which had led to it.”

The Mensheviks naturally seized upon the split in the Duma group to make a fuss abroad, taking advantage of the ignorance of Russian affairs among foreign Social Democratic parties and their natural reluctance to countenance a split. In this, they were helped by the fact that it was their nominee who represented the fraction on the International Socialist Bureau (of the Second International). The Mensheviks decided to raise the question at the next meeting of the Bureau on December 1, and Chkheidze and Skobelev duly set out for London. Hoping to enlist the considerable authority of Plekhanov for the Menshevik

cause, Chkheidze telegraphed him in Italy asking him to come to London to state his views on the split at the Bureau meeting.

Plekhanov, however, not only declined to come to London, but sent a letter to the International Socialist Bureau stating that he supported the “six” and considered that the Mensheviks were to blame for the split. At the same time, since he believed that this matter finally clinched the question of a split in the Social Democratic Party, Plekhanov decided to resign from the Bureau, on which he was the representative of the whole party. The following extract from his letter is quoted from Badayev’s book: “The differences of opinion which have existed within the Russian Social Democratic Party during the last few years have now led to the division of our Duma fraction into two competing groups. This split occurred as the result of certain regrettable decisions taken by our liquidationist comrades, who chanced to be in a majority (seven against six). Since a decisive blow has been dealt at the unity of our party, I, who represent among you the whole party, have no other choice but to resign. This I am doing by the present letter.”[\[66\]](#)

The approach of a new revolution by no means signified that the party could abandon the struggle for partial demands. On the contrary, it invested this struggle with a new urgency. There was a need to fight for every partial demand, no matter how small, which tended to improve the working class’s living standards, conditions and rights, in order to fuse the Party ever closer to the masses. The reality of the Bolshevik Party bears not the slightest resemblance to the caricature of Bolshevism advanced by Martov who spitefully defined it as “maximalism, the striving for immediate maximum results, indeed the realisation of social improvements, without taking into account objective conditions”.[\[67\]](#) Had this really been the case, the Bolsheviks could never have succeeded in winning a majority of the working class, as it did, both in 1912-14, and once again in September-November 1917.

Writing as an exile after the October revolution had already furnished the ultimate proof of the correctness of Lenin’s perspectives, policy and methods. Martov’s spite is clearly the product of embittered envy and not just a defective memory. As we have already had occasion to observe, the difference between revolutionary Marxism and so-called reformism is not at all that the former accepts the need to fight for reforms while the latter denies it. In any event, the revolutionaries are distinguished from the reformists by being the most consistent and determined fighters for reforms, while the latter, especially in periods of capitalist crisis, always pass from reforms to counter-reforms and “austerity” under the pressure of big business, while all serious reforms have historically been the by-product of the revolutionary struggle to change society. Unfortunately for the Liquidators, under Russia’s conditions even the fight for the most partial demands, if conducted seriously, led inexorably to the demand for the overthrow of tsarism.

### **The National Question**

The attitude of the Bolsheviks to democratic demands is shown by their stance on the national question. Without a clear and principled stand on the national question, they could never have led the working class to the conquest of power. The national question

was of decisive importance for Russia, where 57 per cent of the population consisted of non-Russian national minorities who suffered oppression and discrimination at the hands of the 43 per cent who were Great Russians. The onset of reaction in the period 1907-10 intensified the national antagonisms to an unbearable degree. Rampant reaction immediately trampled underfoot all the gains made by the oppressed nationalities in the previous period. Finnish autonomy was abolished. Millions of people were deprived of voting rights on grounds of their "citizenship".

Anti-Semitism revealed its ugly face again in the notorious Beylis case in Kiev, when Black Hundred elements blamed the Jews for the alleged ritual murder of a Christian boy. The vilest racist prejudices were deliberately used by the regime to divide and enslave the people. The right-wing press published sensationalist articles claiming that the ritual murder of Christian boys by Jews was part of the Jewish faith. The case was so scandalous that a wave of indignation swept through Russian society. Liberal public opinion expressed its moral outrage. But the fact was that the origin of this racist poison was the regime itself and the social system upon which it rested. It is no coincidence that anti-Semitism was rife at the court of Nicholas and was shared by the tsar and his entourage who deliberately encouraged it.

The only way to fight racism is by uniting the workers in struggle against all forms of oppression and discrimination, as part of the general revolutionary struggle to change society. This does not preclude, but presupposes that action is taken by the labour movement to deal with fascists and racists who attack members of oppressed minorities. But it is imperative that the defence of the oppressed minority be undertaken by the working class united as a whole, without distinction of race, language or colour. At the time of the Beylis trial, the Social Democrats organised a protest campaign against the anti-Semites. In September and October the Bolsheviks put out a series of leaflets. One of them said: "Comrades: We workers, do not need the enslavement of one nation by another. Finn, Pole, Jew, German, Armenian are all brothers to us. We must not fight against them, but against the autocracy and capitalism."<sup>[68]</sup> The leaflets called for protest strikes, which actually took place in Petersburg, Kiev, Revel, Gomel, Bielostok, Brest-Litovsk, and other areas. In other words the Party responded to racist poison with a class appeal.

The workers of Russia and the Ukraine responded with strikes in defence of the oppressed Jewish people. Finally, under pressure from the mass protest movement, Beylis was declared innocent. The way to combat racism is precisely by strengthening the unity of all working people in struggle, cutting across all differences of nationality, race, religion, colour or language. By contrast, the kind of petty bourgeois nationalism that emphasises national differences merely acts as grist to the mill of the racists. Thus, in the context of tsarist Russia, the separatist line of the Bund was extremely harmful. They pursued a policy which amounted to splitting the workers on national lines, demanding the right to act as the sole representative of the Jewish workers, demanding Saturday rest for Jews, rights for the Jewish language, and other demands in line with "cultural-national autonomy".

Members of the oppressed nationalities (Estonian workers, Ukrainian peasants, etc.) frequently wrote asking for support to the Social Democratic Duma fraction. The Bolshevik Party itself was a model of how to unite workers from different nationalities in common class organisations, even where there was a history of racial conflict between them, as was the case in tsarist Russia, where the regime not only incited the Russians and Ukrainians against the Jews, but also turned Azeris and Georgians against Armenians. The pogroms against Armenians in Baku are now less well remembered than those against the Jews, but they were every bit as horrific. And yet in Bolshevik organisations Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Latvian, Armenian workers worked together. Lenin was always radically opposed to separate national organisations of the working class: “In our party in the Caucasian Social Democracy, Georgians, Armenians, Tartars, Russians have been working together in united social democratic organisations for more than ten years. This is not a phrase, but a proletarian solution of the national question. The only solution. The same thing in Riga: there are Russians, Latvians and Lithuanians; the only ones to organise apart are the separatists—the Bund. This is also the case in Vilna.”<sup>[69]</sup> This is a crushing answer to all attempts to split the workers organisations on national lines.

Great-Russian chauvinism was always one of the most powerful weapons of reaction. On the issue of the national question, too, Lenin, denounced not only the open Black Hundred reaction, but also the liberal bourgeoisie: “The liberal bourgeoisie of all nations—and the Great Russian above all—fights for the privileges of ‘its’ nation... for national particularity, for national exclusiveness and through this, assists the policy of our ministry of internal affairs.”<sup>[70]</sup> And again: “Bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism are two implacably opposed slogans, corresponding to two great class camps throughout the entire capitalist world and expressing two policies (rather, two world outlooks) on the national question.”<sup>[71]</sup>

Confusion over the national question would have been a catastrophe for the Russian revolution. That is why it occupied a central place in all the debates from 1903 onwards. There were serious problems not only with the Jewish nationalists of the Bund, but also with the Polish and Lithuanian Social Democrats who were influenced by Rosa Luxemburg who denied the rights of nations to self-determination. Rosa Luxemburg was undoubtedly a resolute defender of internationalism. In her stubborn resistance to the prejudices of the petty bourgeois Polish nationalists of the Polish Socialist Party (PSP), she had right on her side. But her understanding of internationalism was rather abstract and one-sided. In effect, she denied the right of the Polish people to self-determination. For the RSDLP to have accepted this position, as she demanded, would have been an unmitigated disaster and a gift to the Polish nationalists. So serious were the differences that it led to a split in the Polish Social Democracy in which an opposition group, which sympathised with Lenin’s position, and led by J.S. Hanyecky and A.M. Malecki broke away. Lenin’s position was far more profound and dialectical. In the years immediately before and during the First World War, he wrote a large number of articles and documents on the national question which to this day retain all their vitality and relevance. As was his wont, Lenin discussed his ideas on this with younger cadres and encouraged them to go into print: The result was, among others, Shaumyan’s pamphlet

*On National-Cultural Autonomy* and Stalin's article in *Prosveshcheniye*, *The National Question and the Social Democracy*, which was, in effect, dictated by Lenin.

## **Lenin on the National Question**

What was Lenin's attitude to the national question?

Marxists will fight against even the smallest manifestation of inequality and discrimination. For example, we are against any privileged status for a particular language. There is no particular reason why there should be an "official" language with a monopoly over other languages. That was Lenin's position. But it did not mean that he allied himself with the reactionary exclusiveness of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationalities with their demand for "national-cultural autonomy", the glorification of their "own" language and culture, which conceals their striving to oppress other peoples. "The slogan of workers' democracy is not 'national culture' but the international culture of democracy and the working-class movement."

Behind the appeals to "national culture" lie the class interest of the exploiters of every nation—the landlords and capitalists. The ruling ideas of every nation are the ideas of the ruling class. That is an elementary proposition for Marxists. Here too, Lenin maintained a class position: "The *elements* of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in *every* national culture, since in *every* nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But *every* nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of 'elements', but of the *dominant* culture. Therefore, the general 'national culture' *is* the culture of the landlords, the clergy and the bourgeoisie. This fundamental and, for a Marxist, elementary truth, was kept in the background by the Bundist, who 'drowned' it in his jumble of words, i.e., *instead* of revealing and clarifying the class gulf to the reader, he in fact obscured it. *In fact*, the Bundist acted like a bourgeois, whose every interest requires the spreading of a belief in a non-class national culture." He explains that: "The national culture of the bourgeoisie is a fact (and, I repeat, the bourgeoisie everywhere enters into deals with the landed proprietors and the clergy). Bellicose bourgeois nationalism which stultifies, fools and disunites the workers in order that the bourgeoisie may lead them by the halter—such is the fundamental fact of the present day. "Those *who seek to serve the proletariat must unite the workers of all nations, and unswervingly fight bourgeois nationalism, domestic and foreign.*" [\[72\]](#)

Lenin was opposed to the setting up of separate schools on national lines which have the effect of dividing the population and reinforcing racial and national prejudices. Lenin exposed the reactionary nature of this and other demands flowing from the so-called policy of "Cultural Autonomy" advocated by the Austrian Social Democracy: "'Cultural-national autonomy' implies precisely the most refined and, therefore, the most harmful nationalism, it implies the corruption of the workers by means of the slogan of national culture and the propaganda of the profoundly harmful and even anti-democratic segregating of schools according to nationality. In short, this programme undoubtedly

contradicts the internationalism of the proletariat and is in accordance only with the ideals of the nationalist petty bourgeoisie.”

Instead of the demand for “national cultural autonomy”, Lenin advanced the demand for the *right* to self-determination. This is a democratic demand which sets out from the assumption that no nation should be obliged to remain within the frontiers of another nation, contrary to its will. The right of every people to determine its own affairs, free from the coercion of a more powerful people is an elementary right which must be defended. But this does not mean that Marxists are under an obligation to defend separatism. As a matter of fact, Lenin pointed out that “For a Marxist, of course, *all other conditions being equal*, big states are always preferable to small ones.”<sup>[73]</sup> The nation state, like private property, is an obsolete and reactionary institution that hampers the free development of the productive forces. The domination of the world market, long ago predicted by Marx and Engels, is now a fact. No country, no matter how big and powerful, can escape from the irresistible pull of the world market. That is why the so-called independence of those countries which succeeded in throwing off the yoke of direct foreign oppression since 1945 has turned into a mere fiction. They are more exploited and oppressed than before—except that the exploitation takes place indirectly, through the mechanism of world trade.

“The proletariat,” Lenin wrote in October-December 1913, “far from undertaking to uphold the national development of every nation, on the contrary, warns the masses against such illusions, stands for the fullest freedom of capitalist intercourse and welcomes every kind of assimilation of nations, except that which is founded on force or privilege.”<sup>[74]</sup>

Marxists do not stand for the erection of new frontiers, but for the elimination of *all* frontiers, in the socialist united states of the world. But this statement does not exhaust the question. Yes, we are in favour of large units, *all other things being equal*. But all other things are *not* equal. Marx once said that there was no greater calamity for a people than to oppress another people. Where this occurs, it is the duty of Marxists to defend the oppressed minority. We are opposed to all forms of discrimination, oppression and the denial of national rights, and will fight against it. But that is insufficient. The working class must have its own, independent position on the national question, as on any other question. And as on any other question, this must serve the general cause of the struggle for the socialist transformation of society. There is no question of setting aside the struggle for socialism or the fight between wage labour and capital in the interests of some kind of “national unity”. In the fight against national oppression too, the revolutionary class struggle must be put to the fore.

Lenin explained a thousand times, that the Russian Marxists, as members of an oppressor nation (the Great Russians) had to fight against the oppressive policies and conduct of its own bourgeoisie, and defend the rights of those nations oppressed by the Great Russians. This was necessary to show to the workers and peasants of the other, non-Russian nations that the Russian workers had no interest in oppressing them, but were the most consistent defenders of their rights. As final proof of this, Lenin insisted that the Russian party

inscribe on its banner the right of nations to self-determination. In effect, the Russian workers were saying to the Poles, the Finns, the Georgians, Ukrainians, and the rest: “We have no interest in keeping you in chains. Let us combine to overthrow the exploiters, and then we will give you the freedom to decide what your relations will be with us. We hope to show you that you will be treated with absolute equality, and that you will choose to remain with us. But if you decide something else, that is your own affair, and we will fight to defend your right, even if it means setting up your own state.”

Lenin never made the slightest concession to nationalism, including to the nationalism of the oppressed. His whole line of argument on the national question was motivated by a burning belief in internationalism and the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. “If a Ukrainian Marxist allows himself to be swayed by his *quite legitimate and natural* hatred of the Great-Russian oppressors to *such a degree* that he transfers even a particle of this hatred, even if it be only estrangement, to the proletarian culture and proletarian cause of the Great-Russian workers, then such a Marxist will get bogged down in bourgeois nationalism. Similarly, the Great-Russian Marxist will be bogged down, not only in bourgeois, but also in Black-Hundred nationalism, if he loses sight, even for a moment, of the demand for complete equality for the Ukrainians, or of their *right* to form an independent state.”[\[75\]](#)

The main purpose of the slogan of the right to self-determination was precisely to *guarantee the unity of the working class*. The other side of the coin was that the Marxists of the oppressed nationalities should concentrate on fighting their own bourgeoisie, on combating the nationalist poison of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationality, of waging a remorseless struggle to combat the influence of nationalism in the working class. Moreover, Lenin was always implacably opposed to setting up separate organisations for the workers of oppressed nationalities. The Russian Marxists stood for the unity of the working class and its organisations, not just the party, but the trade unions also:

“Working-class democracy contraposes to the nationalist wrangling of the various bourgeois parties over questions of language, etc., the demand for the unconditional unity and complete amalgamation of the workers of *all* nationalities in *all* working class organisations—trade-union, co-operative, consumers’, educational and all others—in contradistinction to any kind of bourgeois nationalism. Only this type of unity and amalgamation can uphold democracy and defend the interests of the workers against capital—which is already international and is becoming more so—and promote the development of mankind towards a new way of life that is alien to all privileges and all exploitation.”[\[76\]](#) Self-determination was thus only one part of a programme aimed at securing the unity of the workers of both oppressed and oppressor nations. It did not at all signify support for nationalism and separatism, as Lenin explains, when he says that “the recognition of the *right* [to self-determination] does not exclude either propaganda and agitation *against* separation or the exposure of bourgeois nationalism.”[\[77\]](#)

## NOTES

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[54] Quoted in A.Y. Badayev, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-7.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[56] A.Ye. Badayev, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[58] *Pravda*, No. 167, February 26, 1913, quoted in McKean, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[59] See *KPSS v. rezolyutsiakh*, vol. 1, p. 302.

[60] A.Ye. Badayev, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[61] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 24, p. 34.

[62] Quoted in A.Y. Badayev, *op. cit.* p. 120 (my emphasis).

[63] Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 149.

[64] LCW, *To the Editorial Board of Za Pravdu*, vol. 34, p. 118.

[65] A.Ye. Badayev, *op. cit.*, p. 112 (my emphasis).

[66] See A.Ye. Badayev, *op. cit.*, p. 131, 132 and 133.

[67] Martov, *Mirovoy Bol'shevism*.

[68] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 431.

[69] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 48, p.162.

[70] *Ibid.*, vol. 25, p. 71.

[71] *Ibid.*, vol. 24, p. 123.

[72] LCW, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, vol. 20, pp. 22, 24 and 25 (my emphasis).

[73] LCW, *The National Programme of the RSDLP*, vol. 19, pp. 541 and 545.

[74] LCW, *Critical Remarks on the National Question*, vol. 20, p. 35.

[75] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[77] LCW, *The National Programme of the RSDLP*, vol. 19, p. 544.

## Part Four: The Revival

[section 4 of 4]

### The Balkan Wars

The national question has always been a treacherous minefield, because the demand for national liberation and “self determination” is not simple. Behind what appears at first sight to be a progressive demand can lurk the most reactionary forces and interests. That is why Lenin insisted that the demand for self-determination did not possess an absolute validity, but had to be subordinate to the interests of the proletariat and world revolution. Marxists are not at all obliged to support it in every case, as is frequently supposed. Marx had long ago pointed out the reactionary role played by “small nations” which become the catspaws of imperialist “big brothers”. He was particularly scathing about Pan Slavism, the doctrine whereby Russian tsarism put itself forward as the “Liberator” of the Slavs, and used this position to gain a foothold in the Balkans. Following in Marx’s footsteps, Lenin’s position on the national question was characterised by his constant insistence on the class question. He consistently warned against the danger of nationalist intoxication and wrote ironically about the slogans of “freedom”, behind which the bourgeoisie sought to conceal its reactionary intrigues and deceive the people.

In his writings on the national question before 1914, Lenin frequently uses the example of the way in which Norway separated from Sweden in 1905. This was a very simple example, and probably for that reason Lenin chose it. Unfortunately, the national question is not always so simple. Whether or not Marxists will defend the right of self-determination depends on the concrete circumstances of each case. “The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within *definite* historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (e.g., the national programme for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch.” And again: “There can be no question of the Marxists of any country drawing up their national programme without taking into account all these general historical and concrete state conditions.”[\[78\]](#)

One would have thought that this was sufficiently clear. But unfortunately, “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing”. Having glanced at Lenin’s writings and caught sight of the phrase “right to self-determination”, some people who evidently consider themselves to be followers of Lenin conclude that, come rain, hail or shine, it is always necessary to support each and every demand for independence. What Lenin carefully explained and

qualified becomes transmuted into a kind of nervous tic, compelling those who suffer from it to jump to attention every time some nationalist group sounds the trumpet. One really wonders why Lenin bothered to write all those volumes, when it seems that those who speak and act in his name have clearly not understood a single line!

In the light of the most recent history of the Balkans after the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, it is instructive to recall the position that Lenin took on the Balkan Wars. Did he immediately fall into line behind one or other of the belligerent countries? Far from it. He denounced the Balkan Wars as reactionary on all sides. There is no way that the working class could have supported any of the belligerents, although each one of them (of course!) loudly protested that they were the victims of aggression and that their “right to self-determination” was being violated. “Never and in no place,” wrote Lenin of the Balkan conflict, “has ‘freedom’ been won by the oppressed peoples by means of war of one people against another... Real freedom of the Slav peasants on the Balkans, and also of the Turkish peasant can be won only by complete freedom within each country...”<sup>[79]</sup> This is the real Lenin. This is the voice of his uncompromising revolutionary class internationalism. What a contrast with the disgraceful chauvinist demagoguery of the leaders of the former Communist parties like Zyuganov today, who have thrown Lenin overboard and are echoing the old Slavophile rubbish which Marx and Lenin so despised.

In the period following the first Russian revolution, storm clouds were gathering over Europe, which was soon to receive a harsh lesson in the importance of the national question. Even while events in Russia were moving towards a final split between the forces of revolutionary Marxism and reformism, on an international scale, other forces were being unleashed. The contradictions between the rival groups of imperialist powers—Germany, Austro-Hungary, Britain, France and Russia—were raising the spectre of war on an incomparably vaster and more terrifying scale than in the past. At the Copenhagen Congress of the Second International, which took place on the 15-25 August 1910, the Russian party was represented by Lenin and Plekhanov. A central place in the debates at the International Congress was occupied by the struggle against militarism and the war question. Already at the Stuttgart Congress (August 1907) Lenin had included a number of amendments on the resolution on war, i.e. in the event of war, to take advantage of economic and political crisis to overthrow capitalism.

The explosive contradictions between the great powers reached the critical point in the Balkans in August 1914. But even before that, the fault-lines were exposed by the Balkan Wars. The slow, ignominious decline of the Ottoman empire was brought to a head by the successive wars of the Balkan peoples to free themselves from Turkish rule. In a series of wars, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria won their freedom, but instantly became transformed into the puppets of different European powers (Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia) and the small change of imperialist diplomacy. France was pressurising Russia to take a tougher line in the Balkans against Austro-Hungary which in the autumn of 1908 suddenly added to its colonial possessions in the Balkans by annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina, a clear provocation to the government of St Petersburg. But in this vicious game of power politics, tsarist Russia was playing an equally predatory role. Its main aim had not varied for decades—to give cynical support to Bulgaria and Serbia against

Turkey under the hypocritical banner of pan-Slavism in order to dominate not only the Balkans, but Turkey itself. The seizure of Constantinople, and thus the gaining of access to a warm water port with an outlet to the Mediterranean, remained the central goal. This was the real purpose behind the setting up of the “Union of four monarchies” against Turkey.

The uproar that ensued after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia also exposed the imperialist ambitions of the Russian bourgeois liberals, who demanded that Russia act on the Balkans. The right-wing Cadet leader Guchkov condemned the government’s decision not to go to war over Bosnia as a betrayal of the Slavs. The Russian government, he said, was displaying a “flabby indolence”, while the Russian people was prepared for the “inevitable war with the German races”. Behind this belligerence was the cold, calculating policy of the Russian bourgeoisie which looked forward to rich commercial profits from the seizure of Constantinople and control of the Black Sea and the shipping routes through the straits. Struve denounced the Bosnian affair as “a national disgrace”, and asserted that Russia’s destiny was to extend its civilisation “to the whole of the Black Sea basin”. “The straits must become ours,” Mikhail Rodzianko, President of the Duma, told the tsar in March 1913. “A war will be joyfully welcomed and it will raise the government’s prestige.”<sup>[80]</sup> There was also still unfinished business on the Balkans, since a significant part of Balkan territory (Macedonia) had remained under Turkish rule. On the 26 of September 1912 the first Balkan War broke out. Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece (the Union of four monarchies) lined up against Turkey. Formally, this was a war of national liberation of Balkan peoples against the Turkish oppressors, but behind the slogans which demagogically proclaimed freedom and self-determination lurked the predatory ambitions of the different national bourgeoisies, behind each of which stood one or another of the great powers, intent on waging war by proxy against its rivals. France, Germany, Britain and Austro-Hungary were all watching the position in the Balkans with a mixture of greed, fear and suspicion.

The decrepit Ottoman empire was defeated in the first Balkan war. The Turkish yoke was removed, but immediately replaced by the yoke of the “national” Serb, Greek and Bulgarian landlords and capitalists. Moreover, the latter immediately began to vie with each other over the spoils of victory, like rabid dogs fighting over a bone. The London Conference in the spring of 1913 finally established “Peace” in the Balkans after the first Balkans War, but did so in such a way as to guarantee the outbreak of a new and even more nightmarish war—one that would eventually sweep up not only the Balkans but the whole world in its train. The London Conference set the seal on the involvement of the Great Powers in the Balkans. This was a self-evident fact anyway. Behind the ruling clique of each of the “independent” Balkan regimes stood one or other of the European powers. And each of the latter was grouped in one of the two great blocs—the Triple Entente led by Germany, and the “Entente” led by Britain. Like Russia, Austro-Hungary and Germany also had ambitions in the Balkans which may be summed up in the question: Who was destined to inherit the Ottoman Empire? Then as now, the different national regimes on the Balkans were really just the agents of the main imperialist states.

The reactionary role of the national bourgeoisies in the Balkans was immediately revealed by their vicious expansionism, as expressed in the policy of “Greater Bulgaria”, “Greater Serbia”, “Greater Greece” and reflecting nothing more than the greed of ruling landlord-capitalist circles, conspiring with great powers for the ruination of all the peoples of the Balkans. The new war broke out on 6 of June, 1913 when Bulgaria attacked Greece and Serbia. Sensing the possibility of easy spoils, Rumania joined in. Turkey also weighed in against Bulgaria, which suffered a shattering defeat and the loss of a considerable amount of territory. This shows how empty the concept of “colonial” oppression is when seen from a formal and anti-dialectical position. Nations which were previously oppressed colonies can be transformed into their opposite. The war against Turkey might be said to have had a relatively progressive aspect, in that (theoretically at least) it was fought to free the Macedonians from the Turkish yoke, although, in practice, the different Balkan states were already seeking aggrandisement at the expense of their neighbours. But the Second Balkan War had an openly reactionary and imperialist character, as the Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and Rumanian ruling cliques fought among each other for the division of the spoils.

There was not an atom of progressive content in any of this. Nor could the rights of self-determination be invoked in any meaningful way to solve the bloody impasse that afflicted the Balkans then and has continued to do so ever since. The only way out of the bloody impasse on the Balkans consisted in a revolution led by the working class with the aim of a democratic Balkan federation. That was Lenin’s position and also that of all genuine Balkan socialists and democrats, especially the greatest of them, Christian Rakovsky. These “national” wars, led by the national bourgeoisie, as Lenin explained, were infinitely more costly in human lives than a revolution would have been. Without a revolution led by the working class in alliance with the poor peasantry, no solution was possible for the Balkans. The real programme defended by the Marxists as the only solution to the Balkan problem was explained by Trotsky in his article *The Balkan Question and Social Democracy*, which appeared in *Pravda* on 1 August 1910:

“The only way out of the national and state chaos and the bloody confusion of Balkan life is a union of all the peoples of the peninsula in a single economic and political entity, on the basis of national autonomy of the constituent parts. Only within the framework of a single Balkan state can the Serbs of Macedonia, the sanjak, Serbia, and Montenegro be united in a single national-cultural community, enjoying at the same time the advantages of a Balkan common market. Only the united Balkan peoples can give a real rebuff to the shameless pretensions of tsarism and European imperialism.”[\[81\]](#)

Lenin himself made the same point in his article *The Balkan War and Bourgeois Chauvinism*: “The Balkan peoples,” he wrote, “could have carried out this task ten times more easily than they are doing now and with a hundred times fewer sacrifices by forming a Federated Balkan Republic. National oppression, national bickering and incitement on the ground of religious differences would have been impossible under complete and consistent democracy. The Balkan peoples would have been assured of truly rapid, extensive and free development.”[\[82\]](#)

Like Lenin, Trotsky saw the solution to the Balkan problem not in national but in *class* terms: “The historical guarantee of the independence of the Balkans and of the freedom of Russia lies in revolutionary collaboration between the workers of Petersburg and Warsaw and the workers of Belgrade and Sofia.”[\[83\]](#)

These lines remain equally true today, except that the slogan of a Democratic Federation must now be replaced by that of a Democratic Socialist Federation of Balkan Peoples, as the only way to overcome the ghastly legacy of Balkanisation to which neither capitalism nor Stalinism has the answer.

### **The Gathering Storm**

The real significance of the Balkan Wars is that they clearly revealed a tendency towards a world war. The tensions between the big imperialist powers had been steadily accumulating to the critical point where any accident could ignite a general conflict. The only hope of avoiding war was not pacifist declarations but the revolutionary movement of the working class. This was the position taken by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg at the congresses of the International that immediately preceded First World War. On the face of it, the forces at the disposal of the international socialist movement were more than enough to stop a war. In 1914, the Second International was a mass organisation with 41 parties in 27 countries with a total membership of about 12 million workers. Resolutions passed by big majorities in the Stuttgart and Basle congresses pledged the International to oppose war by all means at its disposal.

Lenin’s position on war was neither “warmongering” nor tearful pacifism but revolutionary through and through. Among the many slanders levelled against Lenin, one of the most absurd is that he “wanted war”. This assertion is frequently linked to a misinterpretation of his idea of “revolutionary defeatism” which has been almost universally misunderstood. When a Polish journalist Majkosen asked Lenin before the First World War whether, if war would hasten revolution, he wanted a war, he answered “No, I don’t want that ... I am doing all I can, and will continue to do so till the end, to hinder the war mobilisation. I don’t want millions of proletarians to be forced to slaughter one another impelled by the lunacy of capitalism. There can be no misunderstanding on this point. To objectively predict war, and to strive, in the event of such a misfortune to develop, to take advantage of it as best we can—that is one thing. To desire a war and work for it, that is something entirely different.”[\[84\]](#)

In November 1912 the Basle Emergency Conference of the International was held. The impressive number of delegates proclaimed the colossal power of the labour organisations of the world—a total of 555 delegates representing 23 countries listened as the greatest issue of the day was earnestly debated. At the conference the predominant trend was pacifism. The great French socialist Jean Jaurès read out an anti-war resolution: “The proletariat demands peace in the most energetic terms,” he proclaimed. But such general declarations “for peace” are not worth the paper they are written on in the event of war breaking out. In order to transform such general sentiments into a fighting programme against war, something else is required. That is why Lenin had moved an

amendment at the Stuttgart congress in 1907 stating that in the event of war, the working class would take advantage of the situation to overthrow capitalism. In fact, that would be the only way in which war could be stopped. Amazingly, Lenin's amendment was unanimously approved. But, as it later became clear, the leaders of the international Social Democracy only voted for such resolutions because they had not the slightest intention of ever carrying them out.

Such was the general rule in almost all the parties of the Second International. The revolutionary programme was safely kept locked in a drawer, tucked away in the Party's constitution, to be taken out and dusted off to be read out at May Day meetings, and then put back again for the rest of the year. Between the theory and practice of the Social Democracy, there was an unbridgeable abyss. The masses believed in the socialist aims of the party, but for most of the leaders, sucked into the rarefied world of parliamentary politics, the latter were at best irrelevant and at worst an embarrassing encumbrance. Their outlook was well summed up in the winged phrase of the father of revisionism Eduard Bernstein: "The movement is everything, the final goal is nothing."

But just as the leaders of the Second International were lulling the workers with the vision of peaceful, gradual change and reform, the capitalist system was preparing a rude awakening for all classes in society. The Balkan wars had solved nothing, but raised the temperature of international relations to fever pitch. Macedonia was divided between Greece and Serbia. Romania seized a chunk of Bulgarian territory (southern Dobrudja). In the western Balkans, the powers set up a new independent Albania. But Serbia, although victorious, was blocked from getting secure access to the Adriatic sea, an aim in which she was backed by Russia. Defeated and humiliated in the Second Balkan War, Bulgaria waited for an opportunity to take her revenge and joined the camp of Germany and Austria. From fear of Russia, Turkey, the other defeated power, also moved closer to Germany with whom it concluded an alliance in August 1914. On the other hand, Serbia and Montenegro grew even closer to Russia in self-defence against Austro-Hungary. In the words of Russia's foreign minister Sazonov: "Our fundamental task is to guarantee the political and economic emancipation of Serbia."<sup>[85]</sup> The world was sliding uncontrollably towards war.

In Russia, the Bolshevik legal press waged a consistent anti-war agitation, concentrating on exposing the real war aims of tsarism in the Balkans. Lenin's slogans were "Against interference of other powers in the Balkan war ... War against war! Against any interference! For Peace: such are the workers' slogans." As opposed to the sentimental whimperings of the pacifists, Lenin always approached the question of war from a class standpoint, exposing the interests that lay behind the patriotic slogans. Lenin's articles constantly denounced the capitalists and arms manufacturers and unmasked the real war aims of Russian tsarism, showing their material basis and class content. He always asked, with a lawyer's turn of phrase, "cui prodest?"—*who benefits* from the arms race? There was no question of taking sides in this Balkan conflict. The interests of the Balkan people could not be served by a war. And the very idea that the right of self-determination of this or that Balkan statelet could serve as a justification for dragging the whole of Europe into war was simply monstrous. Later, in 1915, Lenin explained that if the war had been a

question of a military conflict between Serbia and Austria alone, it would be necessary to support Serbia, from the point of view of the rights of nations to self-determination. However, this right was never considered by Lenin to be absolute for all times and circumstances. In no way could the struggle for self-determination of the Serbs or any other people justify plunging the whole world into a war. In this case, as always, the right of self-determination was subordinate to the interests of the working class and the world revolution.

### **The Bolsheviks' Influence Grows**

The Bolshevik deputies in the Duma also did their duty on the question of the Balkan war. On 12 June 1913, Badayev announced the Bolsheviks' refusal to vote for the war budget in the Duma, with the defiant slogan: "Not a penny for the arms budget." Mass agitation was organised against war, with factory resolutions denouncing the Balkan War and the even greater threat of world war. At the same time there were anti-war demonstrations in Germany, France and Britain. As the fatal year 1914 dawned, there were big strikes and demonstration commemorating the anniversary of Bloody Sunday on 9 January in St Petersburg, Riga, Moscow, Nikolaev, Warsaw, Tver, Kiev, Kherson, Drinsk, and other workers' centres, 260,000 people participated in demonstrations. And this was only the beginning. From 17 to 20 March in St Petersburg there were 156,000 workers on strike, in Riga 60,000, in Moscow 10,000. The atmosphere was white hot. Russia was rapidly moving towards a new revolutionary situation. On 22 April, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Trudovik deputies were excluded from the Duma for "obstructionism". More than 100,000 workers participated in political protest strikes in Moscow and St Petersburg.

One strike wave followed another. On 1 May more than half a million workers struck and demonstrated, in St Petersburg there were 250,000, in Riga 44,000, in Moscow 32,000, in the Caucasus about 20,000. In its size and sweep, the movement surpassed even that of 1905. Lenin, in his article *May Days of Revolution*, pointed out that there are two basic conditions for a pre-revolutionary situation: that the masses cannot live as before and that the ruling class cannot rule as before. This was clearly the case in Russia. On the eve of the World War, Russia was again rapidly heading for a new revolution. The workers' movement was in a state of continuous ebullition. The growth in the party's influence was recorded by Badayev who deals with the structure of the St Petersburg organisation and the work of the St Petersburg committee:

"All activity in the St Petersburg district is now controlled by the St Petersburg committee, which has been functioning since autumn last year. The committee has contacts at all works and factories and is informed of all developments there. The organisation of the district is as follows: At the factory, party members form nuclei in the various workshops and delegates from the nuclei form a factory committee (at small factories, the members themselves constitute the committee). Every factory committee, or workshop nucleus in large factories, appoints a collector who on each pay-day collects the dues and other funds, books, subscriptions for the newspapers, etc. A controller is also appointed to visit the institutions for which the funds were raised, to see that the

correct amounts have been received there and collect the money. By this system, abuses in the handling of money are avoided.

“Each district committee elects by secret voting an executive commission of three, care being taken that the committee as a whole should not know of whom the executive commission actually consists.

“The district executive commissions send delegates to the St Petersburg committee, again trying to ensure that the names should not be known by the whole district committee. The St Petersburg committee also elects an executive commission of three. Sometimes, for reasons of secrecy, it was found inadvisable to elect the representatives from the district commission and they were co-opted at the discretion of the St Petersburg committee.

“Owing to this system, it was difficult for the secret police to find out who are members of the St Petersburg committee, which was thus enabled to carry on its work, to guide the activities of the organisations, declare political strikes, etc.

“The committee is held in high esteem by the workers, who, on all important points, await its guidance and follow its instructions. Special attention is paid to the leaflets which the committee issues from time to time.

“St Petersburg trade union organisations have decided not to call political strikes on their own initiative but to act only on instructions from the St Petersburg committee. It was the committee which issued the call for strikes on 9 January, 4 April and 1 May. The workers strongly resented the suppression of Pravda and wanted to strike, but the committee decided that it was necessary first to prepare the action properly and to issue an explanatory leaflet which should reach the masses. Within a few days another paper appeared and as it followed the same policy the workers were somewhat reassured. Although no appeal to strike action was issued, some 30,000 workers left their work.

“Leaflets are of great importance and the committee devoted much effort to perfecting its machinery for their printing and distribution. The committee consists entirely of workers, and we write the leaflets ourselves and have difficulty in finding intellectuals to help in correcting them.

“The St Petersburg political strikes, far from ruining the organisation, strengthened it. It may be asserted that the St Petersburg organisation was revived, strengthened, and is developing, owing to the political strike movement. The shouts of the Liquidators about a ‘strike fever’ show that they are completely detached from the workers’ organisations and from the life of the masses; they altogether fail to grasp what is now taking place among the workers. From my position in the centre of the St Petersburg working-class movement, I notice everywhere how the strength of the workers is increasing, how it shows itself and how it will overwhelm everything.

“The resolutions of the Cracow conference were read and studied by the workers in the factories and the entire work of our organisation was conducted in their spirit. Their

correctness was fully proved in practice; taking active part in the work, I felt all the time that the line of policy was correct. I rarely met a Liquidator or heard of one; this surprised me at first, but later, at a meeting of metal-workers, I learnt that they were almost non-existent in St Petersburg.”[\[86\]](#)

Bolshevik influence was continually spreading to new layers of the class—to the youth and women. *Pravda* was the main weapon for this work. Its circulation grew to an impressive 40,000 a day, whereas the Mensheviks’ *Luch* (The Ray) sold a maximum of 16,000 copies. The Bolsheviks always took the question of revolutionary work among women workers very seriously. Lenin, in particular, attached an enormous importance to this question, especially in the period of the revolutionary upsurge from 1912-14, and during the First World War. It was at this time that International Women’s Day 23 February (8 March) began to be celebrated with mass workers’ demonstrations. It is not an accident that the February (March, according to the new calendar) revolution arose from disturbances around Women’s Day, when women demonstrated against the War and the high cost of living.

Social Democrats had begun consistent work among women workers during the 1912-14 upsurge. The Bolsheviks organised the first International Women’s Day meeting in Russia in 1913. The same year, *Pravda* began regularly publishing a page devoted to questions facing women. The Bolsheviks launched a women’s newspaper, *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker), in 1914, with the first issue appearing on International Women’s Day, when the party again organised demonstrations. The paper was suppressed in July along with the rest of the workers’ press. The Bolshevik paper was supported financially by women factory workers and distributed by them in the workplaces. It reported on the conditions and struggles of women workers in Russia and abroad, and encouraged women to join in struggle with their male co-workers. It urged them to reject the women’s movement initiated by bourgeois women following the 1905 revolution.

A key question was the fight for leadership in the unions, where the Mensheviks were traditionally strong. Prior to the First World War in most countries the unions represented a minority of the class and were heavily dominated by the skilled trades who enjoyed higher wages and better conditions than the rest. This layer, which Marx characterised as the “aristocracy of Labour” were frequently under the influence of the liberals and it was no accident that the trade unions, especially their leading layer, were organically inclined towards conservatism and opportunism. Russia was no exception to the rule, which explains why the Mensheviks were traditionally stronger than the Bolsheviks in this milieu.

The St Petersburg trade unions, among the strongest and best organised had at most 30,000 members in 1914, and in the whole of Russia, there were no more than 100,000, a small percentage of the total work force. Nevertheless, as the basic units of the class, the unions were of fundamental importance to any tendency which aspired to the leadership of the masses. Despite all the difficulties, the Bolsheviks conducted patient revolutionary work in even the most bureaucratic and reactionary unions to win the majority. And eventually this painstaking and patient labour was crowned with success.

By 1913-14, the Bolsheviks were in a position to organise an intervention in all the trade union congresses and mount a successful challenge to the right wing. By the summer of 1914, the Bolsheviks had won the majority in the unions of both Moscow and St Petersburg. In St Petersburg, out of 19 trade unions, 16 supported the Bolsheviks, while only three (the draughtsmen, clerks and chemists) were for the Mensheviks. In Moscow, all 13 trade unions were with the Bolsheviks. Given the traditional influence of the Mensheviks in the unions, this advance was particularly spectacular, and symptomatic of a complete change in the mood of the class.

Under the impulse of the mass revolutionary movement the right wing were losing their traditional base of support among the skilled layers of the working class and the unions. The statements of the Menshevik leaders of this period provide a frank admission of their growing isolation from the working class. A.I. Chkhenkeli, member of the Duma for Kars and Batum lamented at a meeting of the Menshevik Duma fraction in January 1914 that “we have lost all our ties with the working class”. This evaluation received official confirmation at the OC’s meeting in February which admitted that “the Duma fraction stands at a remote distance from the popular masses”. The reason for the Mensheviks’ loss of support is not hard to find. Their entire policy consisted of cultivating their connections with the liberal bourgeoisie. They looked up, not down, for a solution. Consequently, the upsurge of the mass movement in the form of a stormy strike wave took them aback. In fact, they really regarded it as a nuisance, fearing anything that might frighten away their Cadet friends. This attitude of distrust towards the mass movement was intimately linked to their whole conception of the Russian revolution as a bourgeois affair. The masses were supposed to behave responsibly, accept the role of second fiddle to the bourgeoisie, and not go “too far”.

“Mensheviks also remained extremely ambivalent in their attitude towards strikes,” writes Robert McKean. “In part their reservations derived from their different interpretation of the shape of a bourgeois revolution in Russian conditions and of the nature of the contemporary crisis... [However] the unspoken fear of `Menshevik intellectuals was that the apparently ceaseless and uncontrollable surge of labour unrest would frighten off potential ‘bourgeois allies’.” In an article in *Nasha Zarya*, Dan warned that “in the political struggle, the strike is not always the sole expedient means.”<sup>[87]</sup> For reformist labour leaders, the strike, or any mass initiative from below is, of course, *never* “expedient”. But the masses see things differently, and soon learn how to distinguish between leaders and organisations that support them in struggle and those that act as permanent fire-hoses for the bosses.

The Bolsheviks showed no such restraint, and consequently were rapidly extending their influence in the unions, especially the key industrial unions, like the metal workers. Even traditionally Menshevik unions, like the printworkers, moved away from the Liquidators who were increasingly isolated and discredited. In the summer of 1913, they were defeated in the election of the Moscow printers’ union. The same thing happened in the Baltic region in the autumn. In April 1914 the Bolsheviks won half of the seats on the leading bodies of the Petersburg printers’ union. This energetic and successful drive into the trade unions proved to be a dress-rehearsal for what occurred in 1917. The skilful

combination of work in the illegal underground party organisations and the penetration of all kinds of legal workers' organisations—the unions, the co-ops, the insurance societies (*kassy*), the legal press and the Duma, was shown in practice to be the only correct road.

The figures for the unions—embracing only a small minority of the workers, albeit an important one—by no means gives us a complete picture of the strength of the Party at this time. In most towns, the Bolsheviks had won a predominant influence in almost all workers' clubs and associations which, under the influence of the Party, were given a political character. In many areas (especially the provinces) these clubs became centres of revolutionary activity. The same was true of the co-operative societies in the Ukraine and elsewhere, and in the workers' mutual and insurance societies (*kassy*). By participating in such work, paying attention to the day-to-day problems of the workers and their families, the Bolsheviks were able also to establish contacts with other layers: traders, shopkeepers, accountants, railway employees, civil servants, artisans and other non-proletarian sections. In St Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Baku, etc. Legal work was conducted by the Bolsheviks even in sports clubs and musical and drama societies. The slow, patient work in these seemingly unpromising environments paid off handsomely in the end. After all, real revolutionary work is not at all glamorous, but consists in a proportion of about nine-tenths of precisely such humdrum and unspectacular work to sink roots in the masses wherever they are.

In order to build links with the peasants and rural proletarians—a vital task for a mass party in Russia—the Bolsheviks launched the slogan: “Carry the revolutionary word to the village.” *Pravda* published letters from peasants alongside those of the workers. Nor did the Bolsheviks neglect work among students and intellectuals. The Petersburg higher education group (which included all Social Democratic factions) under Bolshevik leadership had about 100 members, which was still relatively weak, reflecting the falling-off of revolutionary influence in the intelligentsia in the previous period, but was expanding again. Thus, the newly-formed Bolshevik Party carried into practice the old slogan of the Narodniks “Go among the People!” But it did so on a higher basis, armed with a scientific programme and a proletarian revolutionary policy. The whole thrust of the policy can be simply summed up: the proletariat must fight to place itself at the head of each and every oppressed section of society, and the Party must fight to win the leadership of the proletariat.

### **The Bolsheviks on the Eve of the War**

Feeling the earth quake under their feet, the bourgeois liberals began to distance themselves from the government, demanding reforms. They were both frightened themselves and attempting to frighten the regime into granting concessions. “Reform before it is too late!” That was their battle cry. They took heart from the growing conflict between “reformers” and “reactionaries” within the regime itself which proceeded in tandem with the conflict between the Cadets and the autocracy. There was even a “strike of Ministers” in 1913. As always, splits at the top are the first warning of an impending revolutionary crisis. The Interior Minister, Maklakov, wrote in worried terms to the tsar: “The mood among the factory workers is uneasy”, and advocated a crackdown. Naturally

this proposal was approved by the tsar but turned down by the Prime Minister Kokovtsov—further indications of vacillations and splits at the top as the government lost its nerve and arguments broke out over whether to use the mailed fist or the velvet glove to deal with the problem.

By now the government was monopolised by the most reactionary elements. As war approaches, everything become clearer, sharper. All elements of confusion and ambiguity are removed. The “middle-ground” liberals, the compromisers, and all accidental figures and groupings are mercilessly squeezed out of the picture. And finally there remains only two trends which present society with a stark and imperious alternative—revolution or reaction. The liberals, in desperation, tried to lean on the working class and to this end patched up a deal. In March 1914, the Cadets set up a kind of “opposition committee” and even included a Bolshevik on it (I.I. Skovrtsov-Stepanov). Despite the well-known spinelessness of the liberals, Dan and the Mensheviks placed all their hopes on this.

Informed of this development, Lenin considered it important as a symptom. Lenin advised Skovrtsov-Stepanov to go along in order to obtain precise information on how far the liberals were prepared to go in practice, that is, to what extent the moneybags were prepared to make donations to help to develop the illegal press, and so on. The reply was, predictably, unclear! The Cadets (and still less their allies the Octobrists) had no serious intention of challenging the regime or aiding the revolution. Their pleas to the bureaucracy to “reform itself” were aimed at preserving the system, not overthrowing it. The Mensheviks committed the “small” mistake of confusing revolution with counter-revolution in a democratic guise. Faced with the working class the liberals and reactionaries inevitably closed ranks in one reactionary bloc. The real difference between the liberals and the government were on how best to defeat the working class. Nevertheless, as Lenin said, it was necessary to use these splits in a skilful way, but not to sow illusions in them as the Mensheviks did.

Objectively the situation was ripe for revolution, but the decisive factor was the subjective factor—the capability of the working class and its leadership to take advantage of the situation to overthrow the autocracy and take power. The party was now stronger than ever, after parting company with the opportunists. But the war intervened to cut across the whole process. By the spring of 1914 *Pravda* had a daily circulation of almost 40,000 but many more were actually circulated and read in the factories. *Pravda* in April 1914 had 8,858 subscribers in 740 areas of Russia, by June the figure had risen to 11,534 in 944 areas. This sharp increase shows the rapid spread of Bolshevik ideas and the increased penetration of the masses. The Liquidators raised an anguished plea for “unity” only when the Bolsheviks already had, in practice, obtained an overwhelming majority in the class. In the spring of 1914—*Pravda*’s second anniversary (22 April)—there was a campaign for fund-raising (“Press day”). All party groups, trade union cells, factory groups, cultural societies, etc. were involved. The campaign obtained greetings and donations from 1,107 different workers’ groups. In addition to *Pravda*, there was also a theoretical journal *Prosveshcheniye* (Enlightenment) as well as a host of regional and local papers.

Despite this remarkable progress, on the eve of a new revolutionary upturn, Lenin was uneasy. While recognising that magnificent work had been done on the ground, he saw that the central committee tended to lag behind: “Whilst in the field of agitation and propaganda of the party over the past two to three years of the new upswing an enormous amount of work has been done, in the field of organisational consolidation, up to the present time, proportionately very little has been done.”<sup>[88]</sup> Lenin was critical not only of the CC but also of the *Pravda* editorial board. He saw the need for new blood, for the renovation of the leading bodies with fresh layers of workers. This entailed, to some extent, a gamble, but anything was better than stagnation and excessive reliance on “old glories”, some of whom had fallen into routinism and conservatism. It was necessary to strike a balance. Lenin, with his habitual patience, tact and loyalty was always ready to preserve older comrades, but also always on the lookout for new talent—a most important part of the art of leadership. Lenin insistently demanded the inclusion of fresh workers in the leading bodies. Preparation was now underway for a new party congress. Once again the Liquidators opposed it, describing it as a “private meeting of Lenin’s clique”. But their protests no longer cut any ice.

The Liquidators were desperately thrashing about, announcing all kinds of plans—for the setting up of a federal committee to call a joint congress and the like, all of which were rejected. The Bolsheviks now had the upper hand. They had the troops on the ground. The Liquidators did not. The situation was so clear that the basis for conciliationism had completely evaporated. The Bolsheviks now turned down the proposals for unity but made it clear that any bona fide workers’ group in Russia would be invited to send delegates to the congress, irrespective of tendency. The question of “unity” had been settled in action. The “August Bloc”, riven with internal contradictions from its inception, finally broke up in early 1914. The Latvian Social Democrats—the only mass organisation represented there—broke away, and the whole thing fell to bits. Trotsky had already resigned from the journals of the Liquidators and in February 1914 attempted to establish a new “non-factional” journal, *Bor’ba*. But the time for such attempts was long past. With his usual wry humour, Lenin commented that the unifiers couldn’t even unite among themselves. In desperation the Mensheviks turned to the Second International. But after the conduct of the Second International in the previous dispute, Lenin was on his guard. He considered this attempt to look for an honest broker as a joke. But because of the authority of the International, to turn down the offer of mediation, would not have been understood, the Bolsheviks decided, after all, to participate in the “unification meeting” called by the International Bureau, with the intention of “exposing the fiction of the August Bloc”.<sup>[89]</sup>

At the meeting which took place in Brussels in July 1914, the Bolsheviks were represented by second-line leaders. Also present were the Menshevik Liquidators, Trotsky’s *Bor’ba*, Plekhanov’s *Yedinstvo* (Unity) group, the Menshevik Duma deputies, *Vperyod*, the Bund, the Letts, the Lithuanian Social Democrats and three Polish groups. The International had wheeled out some of its big guns in an attempt to bring about a shotgun marriage between two politically irreconcilable trends by bureaucratic means. This was quite logical for people who had long ago turned their back on principled politics in favour of *Realpolitik*. The chairman of the meeting was the Belgian Social

Democratic leader Vandervelde, along with Huysmans and Kautsky. In the course of the meeting, Kautsky uttered prophetic words that, “In Germany there is no split, despite the differences between Rosa Luxemburg and Bernstein,” a phrase which would soon be shown up for the hollow sham it was. The meeting accepted Kautsky’s motion that there were no differences in the Russian Social Democracy which should impede unity. But the Bolsheviks stood firm, despite pressures from all sides. At the meeting, which lasted three days, the Bolshevik representatives rejected the International’s pretensions to act as an arbitration court. They saw no reason to make concessions this time. Vandervelde threatened the Bolsheviks with condemnation at the next International Congress. In fact, the next Congress would never be held. Events on a vast scale would blow the old International sky high, cruelly exposing all the lies, half-truths and shams upon which it had rested.

The weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie, and its dependence on foreign capital in turn determined the foreign policy of tsarism, which found itself entangled as a junior partner in an alliance with Anglo-French imperialism. By 1912, everything was, in practice, subordinated to the perspective of war. The foreign policy of tsarism was dictated by the war aims of the ruling autocracy and the landlords, which was identical to those of the Russian bankers and capitalists. It amounted to the conquest of foreign territories, markets and sources of raw materials—the classical policy of imperialism and expansionism. The Russian bourgeoisie, including its “liberal” wing, was content to play second fiddle to the autocracy in the hope of obtaining profitable markets as a result of war. But on the eve of the war, the autocracy was once more staring revolution in the face.

On the eve of the First World War, the revolutionary movement was even stronger and more widespread than in 1905. More important still, the consciousness of the working class was on a qualitatively higher level, a fact that was reflected in the Bolshevik majority. Trotsky later commented: “In order to understand the two chief tendencies in the Russian working class, it is important to have in mind that Menshevism finally took shape in the years of ebb and reaction. It relied chiefly upon a thin layer of workers who had broken with the revolution. Whereas Bolshevism, cruelly shattered in the period of the reaction, began to rise swiftly on the crest of a new revolutionary tide in the years before the war. ‘The most energetic and audacious element, ready for tireless struggle, for resistance and continual organisation, is that element, those organisations and those people who are concentrated around Lenin.’ In these words the Police Department estimated the work of the Bolsheviks during the years preceding the war.”[\[90\]](#)

The Bolsheviks’ superiority was shown by a whole series of facts. In the elections to the fourth Duma, the Bolsheviks won six out of nine of the workers’ places. In the political campaign around the establishment of an independent Duma fraction, the Bolshevik deputies got more than 69 per cent of all workers’ signatures. After the establishment of an independent Duma Bolshevik fraction in October 1913, the Liquidators got the support of only 215 workers’ groups, while the Bolshevik deputies got 1,295 (85.7 per cent!). Other statistics indicate the crushing superiority of the Bolshevik influence. In 1913, the Liquidators’ newspaper got the support of 661 workers’ groups while *Pravda*

had 2,181 (77 per cent). By 1914, (up to the 13 of May), the corresponding figures were 671 to 2,873 (i.e. 81 per cent). Thus, despite the difficulty of arriving at precise figures under the prevailing conditions of illegal and semi-legal work, it can be calculated with a large degree of certainty that the Bolsheviks had the support of at least three quarters of the organised working class.

The workers' movement was going from strength to strength. New areas were constantly being drawn into the struggle. A strike of 50,000 oil workers in Baku began in May 1914. Strikes in solidarity with Baku took place in St Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, Rostov and Nikolaev. On July 1, the St Petersburg committee of the Party called out the workers with the slogan: "Comrades of Baku, we are with you! A victory of the Baku workers is our victory!" The temperature was rising fast. On that day, a mass meeting of 12,000 workers in the big Putilov works was broken up by the police, with 50 injured and two dead. The news from Petersburg shook the whole country. By July 4, there were 90,000 on strike. The Bolshevik central committee called a three-day general strike as a test of strength. By July 7, the strike was almost total with 130,000 workers out.

Even while the workers struck, French President Poincaré was in Petersburg to discuss certain delicate matters pertaining to the international situation with the tsar. While the two men calmly discussed the coming war, another kind of war had broken out on the streets of St Petersburg. The centre of the capital was occupied by police and troops who clashed with the workers. Although the strike had only been called for three days, the strike wave, in fact, was uninterrupted. The following figures of the numbers out on strike reveal the real position in the months leading up to the War:

8 July  
150,000

9 July  
117,000

10 July  
111,000

11 and 12 July  
more than 130,000

(*Istoriya KPSS*, vol.2, page 463)

The government struck back. *Pravda* was closed on 8 July and Bolsheviks were arrested everywhere. Union headquarters and workers' clubs were closed down. This was tantamount to officially recognising that in July 1914 Russia was once more in the throes of a revolutionary situation. This fact could not be altered by a few arrests. By the Summer, the strike movement had already exceeded that of 1905. One and a half million workers were participating in strikes, most of them political. But there were also

weaknesses: the movement was mainly concentrated in St Petersburg, Moscow and the other major industrial centres. In 1905, the movement, at its high point, had been more widespread. In 1905, Petersburg accounted for 20 per cent of the total strike statistics. In 1912-13, it was 40 per cent, and in 1914, more than 50 per cent.

These statistics show that there was quite a wide gap between the proletarian vanguard, concentrated in St Petersburg and the other centres of industry, and the more backward masses, especially in the provinces, and the peasantry. A certain amount of time and experience was necessary in order to allow the provinces to catch up. It was still too early to enter into a decisive battle, although there was a great deal of impatience and ultraleft tendencies among the young Bolsheviks. Sections of the youth in Petersburg were impatient to go over onto the offensive. An ultra-left group led by the section of the bakers' union set up a "left Bolshevik committee" and argued in favour of extending the barricade fighting. These young hotheads were responsible for a serious setback. They called together 123 delegates from factory committees who were all arrested by the police. On 14 July, the strike came to an end. Things were clearly coming to a head, although Lenin was in favour of postponing the decisive clash for a little longer. He understood that the attitude of the peasantry was decisive for determining that of the army. Those who were pushing for the continuation of strike action and barricade fighting were pressing for an insurrection before the time was ripe. The July events could have been transformed, in normal circumstances, into a revolutionary situation. But dramatic events on the international scale cut across these developments.

As the whole of Europe stood trembling on the brink of the abyss, Russian tsarism was more afraid of social revolution than of war. On 28 June (NS), the Austrian Crown prince Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. Immediately a general mobilisation was declared in Russia. When on July 10 (NS) the Austrian government presented Serbia with a humiliating ultimatum, St Petersburg hastened to put pressure on its Serbian "brothers" to accede to all demands other than those that violated its rights as a sovereign state. This is just what the Serbs did in their reply to the note of July 10. It made no difference. The Vienna government considered the Serbian reply to be "insufficient". At this juncture, any answer from Serbia would have been insufficient. On July 15, the Austrians began shelling Belgrade. Late on the evening of July 18, Count Pourtalès called on the Russian foreign minister Sazonov and informed him "with tears in his eyes" that from midnight, Germany was at war with Russia. The great slaughter was about to commence.

## NOTES

[78] LCW, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, vol. 20, pp. 400-1.

[79] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 22, pp. 151-2.

[80] O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 247 and 248.

[81] Trotsky, *The Balkan Wars 1912-13*, pp. 39-40.

[82] LCW, *The Balkan War and Bourgeois Chauvinism*, vol. 19, p. 39.

[83] Trotsky, *The Balkan Wars 1912-13*, pp. 41-2.

[84] *V.I. Lenin. Biography*, Moscow. 1963, p. 213.

[85] B.H. Sumner, *A Survey of Russian History*, p. 380.

[86] Quoted in A.Ye. Badayev, op. cit. pp. 117-8.

[87] R. McKean, op. cit. p. 120 and 122.

[88] *Voprosy Istorii KPSS*, 1957, no. 4, p. 117.

[89] See Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 24, p. 289.

[90] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 58.

## Part Five: The War Years

[section 1 of 6]

### The Collapse of the Second International

The outbreak of the First World War immediately provoked a crisis in the Socialist International. Violating every decision of the International, the leaders of the German, French, British and Austrian parties of the Second International had lined up behind their own bourgeoisie and became the most rabid chauvinists. The German Social Democratic press began to call on the working class to “defend the fatherland”. At a meeting of the Reichstag fraction on 3 August, the SPD leaders decided to vote for the war credits. The very next day, they voted with the bourgeois and Junker parties five billion marks for war purposes. The “Lefts” who had spoken against in the fraction meeting, now voted “for” on formal grounds of group discipline! This perfectly exposes the perfidious role of left reformism and centrism, which, despite their radical phrases, at decisive moments are inextricably bound up with the right wing. Their essential function is always to act as a left cover for the right reformists.

In all the belligerent countries, the Social Democratic leaders entered coalition governments with the representatives of the bourgeoisie. They preached the doctrine of “national unity”—that emptiest of all slogans—opposing strikes “for the duration of the war”, accepting all the impositions placed on the shoulders of the workers and peasants in the name of the struggle for victory. In Germany, Vorwärts published an editorial statement promising not to publish articles reflecting “class discord and class hatred” for the duration of the war. The SPD was the most important and prestigious party of the

Second International with about a million members. Their betrayal was decisive. But the others were no better.

On 31 July, 1914, the anti-war French Socialist leader Jean Jaurès was murdered by reactionaries. Four days later, the French Socialist leaders voted for war credits, as did the Belgians, and entered the bourgeois coalition government (the “union sacrée” or sacred union). In Britain Labour’s Arthur Henderson did the same. In France, the sell-out was actively backed by the “Syndicalist” trade union leaders who before the War had demagogically called for a general strike against war. This slogan was opposed by the Marxists even before 1914. The idea of the pacifists and anarcho-syndicalists that it is possible to call a general strike to prevent war overlooks the obvious fact that a general strike can only be called when the necessary conditions exist. The situation on the eve of a war is normally the least appropriate for such a development. Unless we are talking about a general strike as part of a revolutionary situation, the prelude to the taking of power by the proletariat, it is ruled out as a means of preventing war. At best it is a utopian illusion, at worst it is a way of throwing dust in the eyes of the advanced workers by giving the impression of a radical policy, where nothing of the sort exists. Trotsky characterised it as “the most ill-considered and unfortunate of all types [of general strike] possible”. And he explains why:

“Hence it follows that a general strike can be put on the agenda as a method of struggle against mobilisation and war only in the event that the entire preceding developments in the country have placed revolution and armed insurrection on the agenda. Taken, however, as a ‘special’ method of struggle against mobilisation, a general strike would be a sheer adventure. Excluding a possible but nevertheless exceptional case of a government plunging into war in order to escape from a revolution that directly threatens it, it must remain as a general rule that precisely prior to, during, and after mobilisation the government feels itself strongest, and consequently is least inclined to allow itself to be scared by a general strike. The patriotic moods that accompany mobilisation, together with the war terror, make hopeless the very execution of a general strike, as a rule. The most intrepid elements who, without taking the circumstances into account, plunge into the struggle would be crushed. The defeat and the partial annihilation of the vanguard would make revolutionary work difficult for a long time in the atmosphere of dissatisfaction that war breeds. A strike called artificially must turn inevitably into a putsch, and into an obstacle in the path of the revolution.”<sup>[1]</sup> The truth of this assertion was demonstrated in 1914 when the anarcho-syndicalist leaders, the day after war was declared, immediately dropped the slogan of a general strike against war and meekly took up their ministerial portfolios in the government of the “sacred union”.

The official leaders of the Social Democracy of all the belligerent powers were easily ensnared, since they needed no encouragement to rally to the support of “their” bourgeoisie. In the celebrated phrase of Clausewitz, “war is the continuation of politics by other means”. The right wing of the Labour movement conduct a pro-bourgeois policy in peace time. Their collaboration with the most reactionary imperialist circles in time of war is only the continuation of this. The only difference is that war necessarily strips off the veneer of hypocrisy and mercilessly reveals every political trend in its true colours.

The left reformists, as a petty bourgeois tendency, wriggle uncomfortably between a bourgeois and a proletarian policy, and expresses their confusion and impotence in pacifism. But the serious representatives of the ruling class in the Labour movement, the Labour lieutenants of Capital, as they used to be called in the USA, make no bones about their support for war. The only difference between them is which particular imperialist gang they support. The British Labour leaders backed King and country in a coalition with Lloyd George and Churchill, the German Social Democrats backed the Kaiser and the reactionary Junkers. The Social Democrats of the smaller capitalist powers backed either one or the other, reflecting the dependence of their bourgeoisie on German or Anglo-French imperialism. Thus, the Belgian Social Democrats lined up with the Allies, while the Dutch and Scandinavian Social Democratic leaders were more inclined to Germany.

The wave of social-patriotism swept all before it. The ruling class of the belligerent countries disposed of ample means to confuse and intoxicate the masses with a thousand arguments. With the enthusiastic collaboration of the workers' leaders they succeeded in disorienting even a large layer of organised workers at the beginning of the war. Many German Social Democrats—not only the right wing leaders, but honest workers—were prepared to justify the war, at least at first. They argued as follows: victory for the tsar means that his Cossacks would destroy our party and our unions, papers, and halls. In the same way the average French worker likewise listened trustingly to the appeals of Renaudel, Cachin and co. to keep the Republic and democracy out of the hands of the Kaiser and his Junkers. But the worries of the average German or French worker are one thing, the cowardice, hypocrisy and cynicism of the leaders of the Socialist parties another thing altogether.

Unlike the masses, they could not plead ignorance. The imperialist character of the war was evident from the war aims of the contending powers. This was not a war for defence on the part of any of the contending powers, but solely a war for the re-division of the globe, for the possession of markets, raw materials, colonies and spheres of influence between Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Russia and Austro-Hungary. Russia had her eyes on Turkey, leading directly to a conflict between Germany and Russia over Constantinople and the Straits. Russia and Turkey were also in conflict over Armenia, with Austria over the Balkans and with Austria and Italy over Albania. Nor could it be argued that the outbreak of war had taken the Socialist International by surprise. For at least a decade before 1914, the great powers had been systematically preparing for war. Thus, the question of who struck the first blow was therefore of no significance.

The danger of war had been widely discussed. In two congresses of the International—at Stuttgart (1907) and Basle (1912)—all the socialist parties in the world solemnly pledged themselves to oppose any attempt to unleash an imperialist war. At the Stuttgart congress, they approved an amendment moved by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg that: “In case a war should break out anyway, it is their duty to intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilise the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.” The Basle congress, called as an emergency response to the Balkan war, unanimously ratified the

earlier decision. As Zinoviev later commented: “The Basel resolution was not worse, but better than that of Stuttgart. Every word in it is a slap in the face to the present tactics of the ‘leading’ parties of the Second International.”<sup>[2]</sup> Because in the moment of truth, every one of the socialist parties betrayed the cause of socialism and the working class. Only the Russian and Serbian parties stood against the war. The Italian party took a halfway position of “neither collaboration nor sabotage”.

### **The Social Roots of Chauvinism**

Everywhere socialists struggled to find some understanding of what had happened. An event of such earth-shattering significance could not be explained in terms of individual failings alone—although personal qualities undoubtedly played a role, as we see in the courageous stand taken by Karl Liebknecht in Germany. Lenin and Trotsky found the explanation in the long period of capitalist upswing that preceded the First World War. The mass parties of the Second International had taken shape under conditions of full employment and rising living standards which formed the basis of the politics of “class peace”. A similar situation existed in the developed capitalist countries between 1948 and 1974. In both cases the results were similar. Marx long ago explained that “social being determines consciousness”. In such conditions, the Labour leaders tended to separate themselves from the working class. In the hot-house atmosphere of parliament or shut away in trade union offices, and enjoying a privileged standard of living, they gradually succumbed to the pressure of alien classes.

The theoretical expression of this pressure was the rise of revisionism—the assertion that the ideas of Marx and Engels were out of date and had to be revised. In place of revolutionary politics, they advocated peaceful parliamentary reform and gradualism. “Today better than yesterday; tomorrow better than today” was their watchword. Slowly, peacefully, gradually, they would reform the capitalist system until it would imperceptibly grow over into socialism. What a beautiful idea! How practical! How economical! No sane person would prefer the road of hard struggle and revolution to such an alluring vision of the future. But unfortunately, all theories sooner or later must face the test of practice. The dreams of the reformists were weighed in the balance of the events of August 1914 and found wanting. All the beautiful illusions of peaceful parliamentarism and gradual change ended up in the muck and blood and poison gas of the trenches.

Cutting through the fog of chauvinist demagogy and sentimental pacifism, Lenin explained the socio-economic roots of social chauvinism, its class basis in the labour aristocracy. The mass parties and trade unions of the Second International had taken shape in a long period of capitalist upswing and full employment in which reforms and concessions could be made to the working class and particularly its upper layers. Under such conditions, a thick crust of bureaucracy formed at the top of the Labour organisations, composed of a large number of Members of Parliament, trade union officials, journalists and the like, among whom were a host of careerists and jacks-in-office, separated from the class by their incomes, life styles and psychology and imbued with bourgeois ideas derived both from their living standards and the social milieu in

which they moved. Decades of slow, peaceful development in boom conditions, the absence of class struggle for long periods (Russia was the exception here) meant that the mass organisations, and especially their leading layer, came increasingly under the pressure of alien classes. While they still professed loyalty to the class struggle and socialism before the Party faithful, in practice their conduct was entirely circumscribed by the limits of what was permitted by bourgeois legality and “public opinion”. They had fallen victim to that fatal disease which Marx called “parliamentary cretinism”. In his article *The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx*, Lenin characterises this period thus:

“The second period (1872-1904) was distinguished from the first by its ‘peaceful’ character, by the absence of revolutions. The West had finished with bourgeois revolutions. The East had not yet risen to them. The West entered a phase of ‘peaceful’ preparations for the changes to come. Socialist parties, basically proletarian, were formed everywhere, and learned to use bourgeois parliamentarism and to found their own daily press, their educational institutions, their trade unions and their co-operative societies. Marx’s doctrine gained a complete victory and *began to spread*. The selection and mustering of the forces of the proletariat and its preparation for the coming battles made slow but steady progress.

“The dialectics of history were such that the theoretical victory of Marxism compelled its enemies to *disguise themselves* as Marxists. Liberalism, rotten within, tried to revive itself in the form of socialist *opportunism*. They interpreted the period of preparing the forces for great battles as renunciation of these battles. Improvement of the conditions of the slaves to fight against wage slavery they took to mean the sale by the slaves of their right to liberty for a few pence. They cravenly preached ‘social peace’ (i.e., peace with the slave-owners), renunciation of the class struggle, etc. They had very many adherents among socialist members of parliament, various officials of the working-class movement, and the ‘sympathising’ intelligentsia.”[\[3\]](#)

The right wing leaders were not the only trend in the international Social Democracy. There were also centrist tendencies—Karl Kautsky, Rudolph Hilferding and Hugo Haase in Germany, Jean Longuet and Alphonse Merrheim in France, Ramsey MacDonald in Britain, Viktor Adler in Austria and others. The usual line of these people was to hide behind pacifism, but to avoid a real struggle against the right wing social chauvinists. Lenin directed his most severe attacks against this trend as the main obstacle, preventing the workers from taking the revolutionary road. They were, he said, “left in words, right in deeds”, a comment that is applicable to left reformists at every period.

Only slowly did the revolutionary wing begin to recover from the deadly blow inflicted in August 1914. But gradually, a regroupment took place everywhere. The forces of revolutionary internationalism in almost every case emerged from an inner differentiation and splits in the old mass organisations—the Social Democracy and the unions. The international left included Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and Klara Zetkin in Germany, Dimitr Blagoev and Vasil Kolarov in Bulgaria, John MacLean in Scotland, and James Connolly in Ireland, as well as the Serbian Social Democrats whose two MPs

voted against the war credits. The Bulgarian “tesnyaki” (“Narrow socialists”) issued an anti-war manifesto and voted against the militarisation of the country. That was the plus side. But on the other hand, some ex-lefts like Parvus in Germany and Plekhanov in Russia went right over to the camp of social-chauvinism. In the German SPD the left international tendency had the strongest base after Russia, Serbia and Bulgaria.

On 2 December 1914, Karl Liebknecht voted against war credits in the Reichstag. This courageous act was a turning point which gave heart to the left wing workers not only in the German SPD, but in all the belligerent countries. On December 4, a meeting of party activists in Halle voted to support Liebknecht’s stand. The Bolsheviks tried to contact the German Lefts, but found this materially impossible either through Switzerland or Scandinavia. Because of the traditional role of the German party in the International, this was particularly important. Revolutionary internationalists like Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring took a courageous stand against the war. In Austria likewise the left began to organise. In Britain, especially in Scotland, there were anti-war meetings and later strikes (the Glasgow rent strike, the shop stewards movement.) By posing fundamental questions in a very sharp way, the War provoked a series of crises and splits in the “left” parties in Britain—the Socialist Party and Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and also in the Independent Labour Party (ILP), out of which the forces of the future Communist Party were formed.

There was also a growing left opposition within the French Socialist Party and trade unions. The revolutionary syndicalist current led by Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte led the opposition to the ex-Syndicalist right reformist leaders. As the War dragged on, the support for the chauvinists began to melt away. The circulation of the right-chauvinist paper *L’Humanité* went down by about a third. In Italy, the revolutionary socialist trend was represented by *Avanti* edited by Giacinto Serrati, while the leader of the right wing of the Socialist Party was the future fascist dictator Mussolini. The Rumanian Social Democrats also adopted a revolutionary anti-war position. The Dutch “Lefts” organised around the paper *Tribune*, but their leader Anton Pannekoek, like several others, suffered from the kind of extreme ultra left tendencies that were prevalent at the time, as a reaction against the policies of the leadership. In general, the left was composed of rather weak, mainly young forces whose lack of experience expressed itself in a swing towards ultra-left, semi-anarcho-syndicalist positions.

### **Tendencies in Russian Social Democracy**

Despite all its horrors and cruelty, war at least has the merit of exposing all that lies hidden in society and politics. All tendencies are put to the test, all pretences are rudely stripped away, as diplomatic evasions become impossible and history presents its final bill. Wars and revolutions pitilessly seek out any weakness in parties, programmes or individuals and destroy them. The patriotic wave that swept through society appeared to carry all before it. More than one former revolutionary celebrity rallied round the flag, including, of all people, the famous theoretician of anarchism, Prince Kropotkin. The advocate of mutual aid, as Lionel Kochan observes, now became the advocate of mutual destruction.<sup>[4]</sup> All the tendencies which manifested themselves in international Social

Democracy were present in Russia, but with an important difference. The influence of the revolutionary wing of Social Democracy—Bolshevism—was immeasurably stronger as a result of Lenin’s stubborn struggle against opportunism throughout the whole of the previous period. By contrast, reformism, both in its right and left variants, was a weak and sickly plant. While the Bolsheviks did not entirely escape from the prevailing disorientation and suffered from vacillations, especially in the first period, they soon recovered their bearings, thanks to the implacable stand adopted from the very first moment by Lenin.

By contrast, the war cruelly laid bare the chronic ideological weakness and instability of the Mensheviks, who immediately splintered into conflicting trends. The outbreak of war caught the Mensheviks off-guard. Theoretically disarmed, they split into a myriad of factions and sub-factions on the all-important war question, ranging from the ultra-nationalist Plekhanov to the left-centrism of Martov. In between there were a host of intermediate views. More than anything else, the war cruelly exposed the political and organisational helplessness of Menshevism. The intellectuals grouped around the literary journal *Nasha Zarya*, A.N. Potresov, E. Maevskii, F.A. Cherevanin and P.P. Maslov, defended one variant or another of defencism.

The saddest case was that of Plekhanov, who went over to the extreme right wing from the outset, adopting such a rabid chauvinist stance that he remained isolated even among the Mensheviks. Just like all the other social-chauvinists, Plekhanov tried to cover up his sell-out with “clever” sophisms, an art at which he excelled: “The struggle between exploiters and exploited,” he wrote, “does not cease to be a class struggle because the exploiters live on the other side of the frontier and speak another language. The proletarians of the countries attacked by Germany and Austria, are conducting an international class struggle by the very fact that they are opposing, arms in hand, the realisation of the exploiting plans of the Austro-German imperialists.”[\[5\]](#)

Lenin found it hard to believe what had happened to his old mentor, particularly as he had come so close to Bolshevism in the period of reaction. “Early in October,” recalls Krupskaya, “we found out that Plekhanov, who had returned from Paris, had already addressed a meeting in Geneva and was going to read a paper in Lausanne. Plekhanov’s position worried Ilyich very much. He could not believe that Plekhanov had become a ‘defencist’. ‘I just can’t believe it,’ he said, adding thoughtfully, ‘it must be the effect of his military past’.”

Once Lenin saw that Plekhanov had indeed crossed the line, he immediately decided to confront him in open debate. At first, as Krupskaya recalls, he was worried that he would not be admitted to Plekhanov’s lecture and say what he had to say—the Mensheviks might not let in so many Bolsheviks. “I can imagine,” she writes, “how reluctant he was to see people and carry on small talk with them, and I can understand the naive ruses he devised to shake them off. I can clearly see him amid the dinner-table bustle at the Movshovichs’, so withdrawn, absorbed and agitated that he could not swallow a bite. One can understand the rather forced humour of the remark uttered in an undertone to those sitting next to him about Plekhanov’s opening speech, in which the latter had declared hat

he had not been prepared to address such a large audience. ‘The slyboots,’ Ilyich muttered, and gave himself up entirely to hearing what Plekhanov had to say. The first part of the lecture in which Plekhanov attacked the Germans had his approval, and he applauded it. In the second part, however, Plekhanov set forth his ‘defence-of-the-country’ views. There was no room for doubt any more. Ilyich asked for the floor—he was the only one to do so. He went up to the speaker’s table with a pot of beer in his hand. He spoke calmly, and only the pallor of his face betrayed his agitation. He said in effect that the war was not an accidental occurrence, that the way for it had been paved by the whole nature of the development of bourgeois society.”[\[6\]](#)

Lenin had had only ten minutes to speak, during which he reminded the audience of the resolutions of the International congresses at Stuttgart, Copenhagen and Basle, and called on the Social Democrats to combat the chauvinist intoxication and strive to convert the war into a decisive fight against the ruling classes on the part of the proletariat. Plekhanov retorted with his usual irony and was wildly applauded by the Mensheviks, who were an overwhelming majority. Lenin must have felt completely isolated.

The war fever claimed other notable casualties. Potresov, like Plekhanov, capitulated to chauvinism. Another prominent Menshevik, G.A. Alexinsky, moved so far to the right that he became a White Guard after the October revolution. His was not the only such case. However, Plekhanov’s blatant defence of social-chauvinism found no echo in the ranks of Social Democracy and throughout the war he remained virtually isolated. Of Plekhanov’s group, McKean writes: “A paltry number of Menshevik intellectuals in Petrograd replicated Plekhanov’s outright capitulation to nationalism. His few adherents included A.Iu. Finn-Enotaevskii and N. Yordansky, Party Menshevik and editor of the monthly periodical *Sovremennyi mir* (which reprinted many of Plekhanov’s articles). An Okhrana survey of socialist attitudes to the war in January 1916 noted that the Russian supporters of Plekhanov ‘exerted minimal influence upon the public mood’.”[\[7\]](#) Far more dangerous, as Lenin immediately realised, were the disguised chauvinists, those ex-lefts like Kautsky, who enjoyed huge personal prestige and who concealed their betrayal behind a screen of hypocritical “Marxist” sophistry.

On October 17, 1914, Lenin wrote to Shlyapnikov: “Plekhanov, as I think you have already been told, has become a French chauvinist. Among the Liquidators there is evidently confusion. Alexinsky, *they say*, is a Francophile. ... It seems as though the middle course of the whole ‘Brussels bloc’ of the Liquidator gentry with Alexinsky and Plekhanov will be adapting themselves to Kautsky, who now is *more harmful than anyone else*. How dangerous and scoundrelly his sophistry is, covering up the dirty tricks of the opportunists with the most smooth and facile phrases (in *Neue Zeit*). The opportunists are an obvious evil. The German ‘Centre’ headed by Kautsky is a concealed evil, diplomatically coloured over, contaminating the eyes, the mind and the conscience of the workers, and more dangerous than anything else. Our task now is the unconditional and open struggle against international opportunism and those who screen it (Kautsky).”[\[8\]](#)

The Russian Mensheviks actually stood to the left of most other groups in the International because of the pressure of the Bolsheviks. They adopted what amounts to a centrist position but soon split into two groups. The majority of Mensheviks were closer to Kautsky's "centre" than to Plekhanov. Throughout the war, in sharp contrast to Plekhanov, they advised the Menshevik fraction in parliament to vote against military credits and maintained an ambivalent attitude to the question of defence. The "Organising Committee" led by P.B. Axelrod, elected by the August 1912 meeting, had an ambiguous (Kautskyite) position on the war and, as ever, calling for the "unity" of all Social Democrats—including Plekhanov and Alexinsky! They supported the Menshevik Duma Fraction which at first failed to oppose the war, but then opposed the war credits.

Three days after his clash with Plekhanov and in the same hall—the Maison du Peuple—Lenin delivered his own lecture. Krupskaya writes: "The hall was packed. The lecture was a great success. Ilyich was in a buoyant fighting mood. He elaborated his views on the war, which he branded as an imperialist war. He pointed out in his speech that a leaflet against the war had already been issued in Russia by the Central Committee and that similar leaflets had been issued by the Caucasian organisation and other groups. He pointed out that the best socialist newspaper in Europe at the moment was *Golos* (Voice), in which Martov was writing. 'The more often and seriously I have disagreed with Martov,' he said, 'the more definitely must I now say that this writer is doing just what a Social Democrat should do. He is criticising his government, denouncing the bourgeoisie of his own country, railing against its ministers'." [\[9\]](#)

Martov stood on the left of the Mensheviks throughout the war. The left wing of Menshevism was represented in Petrograd by the Central Initiative Group, which from August 1914 defended a radical internationalist stance against the war. At first, it seemed as if Martov was moving in the direction of Bolshevism, not only in his internationalist stand, but also in his opposition to blocs with the liberals. "In sharp contrast to most Mensheviks," writes Robert McKean, "they [the Menshevik Internationalists] adamantly refused to accept the 'reactionary' and 'anti-popular' bourgeoisie as the ally of the working class." [\[10\]](#) This gave Lenin reason to hope for an alliance with his old colleague Martov, for whom he always maintained a deep personal affection to the end of his days. But, as usual, Martov halted half-way and did not go to the length of conducting a struggle against Kautsky. Nevertheless Martov and his group, the Menshevik-Internationalists, despite certain inconsistencies, held an internationalist position during the War.

Some Menshevik leaders like the Duma deputies Chkheidze, Tulyakov and Skobelev were inclined to the position of Martov's "Internationalist Mensheviks". They advocated a campaign for a non-annexationist, democratic peace and later subscribed to the resolutions of the Zimmerwald Conference. They also supported the reconstitution of the old International. Later, with the emergence of the Progressive Bloc and the clash between the State Duma and Goremykin's cabinet in the summer of 1915 these three parliamentary representatives had illusions (apparently shared by Martov), of the possibility of replacing the 3 June regime by a democratic republic, which would then act as a stimulus to the European peace movement. The reactionary implications of this kind

of left-reformist pacifism were only revealed after February 1917 when it led the Mensheviks to support not only the bourgeois Provisional Government, but the war as well.

Trotsky, who while still not formally in any faction immediately took up a consistent internationalist revolutionary stand and tirelessly engaged in agitation and propaganda against the war and social chauvinism. From his place in exile in Paris, Trotsky succeeded in doing something which no other member of the Russian internationalist tendency achieved. With the active collaboration of his friends Monatte and Rosmer, the most outstanding leaders of the left wing in France, he published a daily paper, *Nashe Slovo* (Our Word). Together with Martov and other internationalists especially in France, Trotsky's paper played an important role in campaigning for an International Conference, which eventually bore fruit in Zimmerwald. It used to be the fashion in the old Stalinist histories to classify Trotsky at this time as "centrist". That is nonsense. Trotsky's position on the war differed in no fundamental sense from that of Lenin. The fact that he was not yet formally a member of Lenin's organisation reflected, not political differences but was an inheritance of the polemics of the previous period. In fact, despite some tactical disagreements and mutual suspicion inherited from the past, there was frequent collaboration between the Bolsheviks and *Nashe Slovo* which kept up its anti-imperialist struggle until it was finally banned by the French government when a mutiny broke out on the Russian cruiser Askold, based in Toulon and copies of the paper were found on some of the mutineers.

As ever, what separated Lenin and Trotsky was not the political line but the question of party unity. Given the immense difficulties faced by the revolutionary internationalist wing, Trotsky considered it more vital than ever to strive to unite all those elements who maintained an internationalist position. That included not only the Bolsheviks but those Menshevik-Internationalists like Martov who had come out firmly against social-chauvinism from the beginning of the War. There were, in fact, many such people, a good part of whom later joined the Bolshevik Party and played an outstanding role. A clear example was the Inter-District Group in Petrograd (*Mezhrayontsi*). Lunacharsky, the future People's Commissar for Culture and education, was another case. He also collaborated with *Nashe Slovo*, and recalls not only Trotsky's efforts to achieve unity of all the genuinely internationalist elements, but also the vacillations of people like Martov who adopted an internationalist position, but was unwilling to draw all the necessary conclusions:

"We sincerely wanted to bring about, on a new basis of internationalism, the complete unification of our Party front all the way from Lenin to Martov. I spoke up for this course in the most energetic fashion and was to some degree the originator of the slogan 'Down with the "defeatists", long live the unity of all Internationalists!' Trotsky fully associated himself with this. It had long been his dream and it seemed to justify his whole past attitude.

"We had no disagreements with the Bolsheviks, but with the Mensheviks things were going badly. Trotsky tried by every means to persuade Martov to break his links with the

Defencists. The meetings of the editorial board turned into lengthy discussions, during which Martov, with astounding mental agility, almost with a kind of cunning sophistry, avoided a direct answer to the question whether he would break with the Defencists, and at times Trotsky attacked him extremely angrily. Matters reached the point of an almost total break between Trotsky and Martov—whom, by the way, Trotsky always respected as a political intellect—and at the same time a break between all of us left Internationalists and the Martov group.”[\[11\]](#)

The so-called Inter-District Committee (the *Mezhrayonka*) played an important role throughout the War, which has not received the attention it deserves from historians. The *Mezhrayontsi*, as its members were known, dated back to 1913, when it was set up on the initiative of a 23-year old Bolshevik, K.K. Yurenev; an ex-deputy of the third Duma from Perm, N.M. Yegorov; and the metalworker, A.M. Novoselov, a Bolshevik since 1906, who was prominent in the Metalworkers’ union in Vasil’evsky Island. Its declared aim was to achieve the “re-unification from below of all revolutionary Social Democrats”, (that is, Bolsheviks, Pro-Party Mensheviks) and to conduct party agitation in the armed forces. From the beginning it took a principled position in relation to the War. Independently from the Bolsheviks, the *Mezhrayontsi*, at a meeting on 20 July, also adopted the slogan “war upon war”.

Robert McKean writes: “In the first six months after the outbreak of hostilities the most ‘successful’ of the revolutionary factions was the *Mezhrayonka*. In Vasil’evsky Island an inter-party strike committee survived after the July 1914 disturbances. Some time in the autumn it set up an illegal Social Democratic district committee which adhered to the *Mezhrayonka* platform. Cells functioned in 11 enterprises, including the Pipes works and Siemens-Schukkert. In October in the town district a group emerged, as did circles in several plants on Petersburg Side, among which were Petrograd Engineering and Langenzippen. In Narva, where the *Mezhrayonka* had put down no roots before the war, Bolsheviks and Party Mensheviks created a committee which won some 130 adherents, mostly in Putilov workshops. In November this autonomous organisation voted to join the *Mezhrayonka*. The latter also possessed a press which printed five leaflets and one edition of the illegal newspaper *Vperyod*. As in the past, however, the *Mezhrayonka* signally failed to penetrate the Neva or Vyborg quarters. In view of the crucial importance the *Mezhrayonka* ascribed to the army as the key to a successful revolution, it set up a military propaganda group which managed to issue a leaflet to the soldiers. But it possessed no cells in individual Petrograd military units. By the close of the year the *Mezhrayonka* had attracted over 300 followers. Judging from the membership of the *Mezhrayonka* committee itself, the leadership derived from three groups at this time—students, skilled metal workers and, in particular, printers. The organisation’s expansion soon attracted retribution from the security forces. Early in February 1915, widespread arrests almost completely wiped it out, paralysing its activity for months thereafter.”[\[12\]](#)

In 1917, the *Mezhrayontsi* joined the Bolshevik Party, together with Trotsky, and played an important role, as we shall see later.

## **Lenin’s Position**

Perhaps no part of Lenin's work has been more misunderstood as his writings on war. Lenin stood on the far left of the internationalist current throughout the war. To many, even in the ranks of Bolshevism, Lenin's position appeared tinged with ultra-leftism at this time. The sharpness of some of his formulations provoked controversy, and some of them were later toned down or abandoned altogether. The resulting disagreements made it impossible to unite with many genuinely internationalist elements. But there were reasons for this. The collapse of the International had taken him completely by surprise. Once he understood the nature of the problem, he arrived at the conclusion that a radical break was needed, not only with the extreme right wing chauvinists, but also with the so-called lefts (Kautsky, Haase, Lebedour). The revolutionary wing, isolated and partially disoriented in the first instance, was faced with a difficult task. It was not enough simply to "break with social chauvinism" in words. It was necessary to win over the masses to the programme of genuine internationalism. But the masses could not be reached. The work of the revolutionary internationalists in most cases was, for the time being, reduced to re-educating the cadres in small circles, and waiting for a break in the situation.

It is difficult to imagine now what a shattering demoralising effect the betrayal of the Second International had. This was an entirely new and unprecedented situation. Everywhere the workers' vanguard were caught off-guard. For a time confusion reigned, until gradually the Internationalists began to regroup and fight back. Lenin had to re-educate the cadres in an uncompromising spirit against the poison of social-chauvinism. The betrayal of the leaders of the Socialist International in August 1914 fell like a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky. So unexpected was the conduct of the SPD's Reichstag faction in voting for the war credits that when Lenin read the report in the Party's official organ *Vorwärts*, he initially refused to believe it, attributing the article to a provocation invented by the German general staff. Nor was he alone in this. At the Zimmerwald conference Trotsky recalled: "We thought that the August 4 issue of *Vorwärts* had been produced by the German general staff."<sup>[13]</sup> Zinoviev summed up what was the general position: "Many socialists shared the foreboding that something was rotten in the state of Denmark. But we shall not be wise in hindsight. We honestly admit: the possibility of anything remotely resembling what we witnessed on August 4, 1914, occurred to none of us."<sup>[14]</sup> Axelrod described the reaction of the Mensheviks: "The German party has always been our teacher. When we got word of the German [parliamentary] faction's vote we couldn't believe it."<sup>[15]</sup>

But it was true. Particularly shocking was the behaviour of the left Social Democratic leaders. Not for nothing did Lenin reserve his sharpest barbs for the so-called Lefts, and Kautsky in particular, during the War. Before the War, Kautsky was widely seen as the leader of the left. Lenin had considered himself an "orthodox Kautskyite". Rosa Luxemburg, who knew Kautsky better than Lenin, was always more critical of him, sensing that behind all his erudite "Marxism" lay a cowardly conciliator and a bureaucrat. Lenin had occasion to ponder Rosa's prophetic warnings now: "Rosa Luxemburg was right when she wrote, long ago, that Kautsky has the 'subservience of a theoretician'—servility, in plainer language, servility to the majority of the Party, to opportunism," he wrote.<sup>[16]</sup>

Kautsky and his followers wanted to convince the workers that the International could not function under war conditions, but that it would be revived again after peace had been restored. Such a view resembles an umbrella full of holes—useless precisely when it rains! Lenin spared no efforts to expose the role of the “Lefts” and hammer home the impossibility of any reconciliation with those responsible for the greatest act of treachery in working-class history. The time for shamefaced evasions and diplomatic formulas was over. It was necessary to call things by their right name!

Keenly feeling his isolation, Lenin anxiously looked around for co-thinkers. As occurred more than once in the course of his political life, his thoughts turned to his old comrade Martov. “In private conversation,” writes Krupskaya, “Ilyich often remarked what a good thing it would be if Martov came over to our side altogether. But he doubted whether Martov would stick to his present position for long. He knew how prone Martov was to yield to outside influences. ‘He writes like that while he is alone,’ Ilyich added.”<sup>[17]</sup> But long and bitter experience of Martov’s vacillations had taught Lenin to be wary. In a letter to Shlyapnikov he welcomed Martov’s early stand against social-chauvinism, but immediately gave voice to his doubts about the man he knew so well: “Martov is behaving most decently of all in *Golos*. But will Martov hold out? *I don’t believe it.*” Time would confirm his worse fears on this score.

Lenin had a clear vision of what had to be done. The Second International was dead. All efforts to re-constitute it were in vain. It was necessary to build a new International. The message was as bold as it was simple. But to carry such a project into practice was not so simple. The millions of workers in the belligerent states still remained in the old organisations. To reach them, especially under wartime conditions, seemed an impossible task. And when we consider that Lenin’s group had by now been reduced to a tiny handful of people, with no apparatus, no money and little influence over events in Russia or anywhere else, it might appear to be sheer madness. No wonder even people who stood very close to Lenin politically were reluctant to accept all the implications of his position. No wonder he had serious difficulties in convincing even the leaders of his own party. Yet Lenin did not hesitate even for an instant. In him we see not just theoretical brilliance, not just an astonishing breadth of vision, but colossal personal courage—not the kind that explodes momentarily and then vanishes, but a dogged, stubborn determination to draw all the necessary conclusions and see things through to the end. These qualities were much in evidence during this testing time. They are shown in the following, absolutely typical lines:

“This is an international task. It devolves on us, there is no one else. We must not retreat from it. It is wrong to put forward the watchword of the ‘simple’ restoration of the International (for the danger of a rotten conciliatory resolution on the Kautsky-Vandervelde line is very, very great!). The watchword of ‘peace’ is wrong: the watchword should be transformation of the national war into a civil war. (This transformation may be a long job, it may require and will require a number of preliminary conditions, but all the work should be carried on *in the direction* of precisely *such* a transformation, in that spirit and on that line.) Not sabotage of the war, not separate, individual actions in that spirit, but mass propaganda (not only among ‘civilians’) leading

to the transformation of the war into a civil war.”<sup>[18]</sup> The contrast with Martov’s Hamlet-like hesitations and doubts could not be greater. “*It devolves on us. There is no-one else. We must not retreat from it.*” In these few lines is the essence of Lenin the man, the fighter who, once he is convinced of the correctness of a given line of action, does not look back.

But there were problems here too. Most of the young and immature forces that made up the Zimmerwald Left did not really understand what Lenin was driving at. The first task was therefore to insist on basic principles. Lenin’s method always involved an element of polemical exaggeration. He would always hammer home a particular point, and even exaggerate (as he did in 1902, when he stated, wrongly, that the working class, if left to itself, could only attain a “trade union” consciousness) in order to shock people into grasping his point of view. War always mercilessly tears away all subterfuges and falsehoods and compels men and woman to face the truth. Lenin’s implacable onslaught on the old leaders, on opportunism and chauvinism took on an extreme form because he was determined to leave not the smallest chink through which they could crawl back after the war. In order to carve this message on the consciousness of the cadres, Lenin did not hesitate to employ the sharpest language and the most extreme language. True, this created some difficulties, but he considered it absolutely necessary in order to re-educate the proletarian vanguard and prepare it for the titanic tasks that lay ahead. Lenin’s Manifesto *War and the Russian Social Democracy* was intended to stiffen up his own ranks where there was some wobbling, as might be expected under these circumstances. Lenin’s theses on the war only reached Petersburg in September. They did not arouse much enthusiasm. Shlyapnikov states that Lenin’s revolutionary defeatism was greeted by “perplexity”. According to the Moscow Okhrana: “The war caught the ‘Leninists’ unprepared and for a long time...they could not agree on their attitude towards the war...”<sup>[19]</sup>

These vacillations among even the leading strata of the Bolsheviks on the vital question of the war, again explains why Lenin adopted slogans that lay themselves open to the accusation of ultra-leftism such as “turn the imperialist war into a civil war”, and “the defeat of Russia is a lesser evil”. Trotsky criticised Lenin’s slogan: “Turn the imperialist war into a civil war”, understanding that it could not provide a basis for conducting a broad campaign against the War that could get an echo in the masses, and was working on the possibility of a platform which could unite all the genuinely international socialists. There is no doubt that Trotsky had a point. Such slogans could never have appealed to the masses, at least not in that form and at that stage. Lenin described Trotsky’s position as “centrism” and even “Kautskyism”. This was entirely incorrect. Throughout the war, like Lenin, Trotsky maintained a consistently internationalist position. On all the fundamental positions, his position on the war and the International was the same as Lenin’s. But through the pages of his daily paper, *Nashe Slovo* (Our Word), which he edited in Paris, Trotsky could command a far broader audience than Lenin. Partly for this reason, he placed his emphasis differently, and posed the need for a revolutionary struggle against the war in different terms that could get an echo with at least the most conscious workers who were beginning to look for a left wing alternative.

During the First World War, Lenin was completely isolated from the masses. The slogans he advanced at that time were not intended for the masses. *Lenin was writing for the cadres*. If we do not understand this, the most grotesque errors can result. Moreover, the way in which Lenin formulated the question of defeatism left a lot to be desired. Not for the first time, as we have seen, Lenin tended to exaggerate a formulation, in order to hammer home a point that had not been grasped. Endless confusion has arisen from the fact that this has not been grasped by people who have read a few lines of Lenin without grasping Lenin's method. It is necessary to understand the concrete conditions in which these works were written and who they were aimed at. Lenin was taken aback by the overwhelming tide of chauvinism which seemed to sweep all before it. Cut off from Russia, he was also worried by the possibility of vacillations among his own supporters on the question of war and the International. It was necessary to re-establish basic principles. The stakes were very high. What was involved was the fate not just of the Russian but of the world revolution. For this reason, diplomacy and ambiguity was out of place. Krupskaya explains:

“Ilych deliberately put the case very strongly in order to make it quite clear what line people were taking. The fight with the defencists was in full swing. The struggle was not an internal Party affair that concerned Russian matters alone. It was an international affair.”[\[20\]](#)

Part of the problem is that Lenin's slogan, intended to educate the cadres in an uncompromising spirit of revolutionary struggle against all brands of chauvinism, was frequently presented in a caricature form by his supporters. In an article published in *Sotsial Demokrat* (No. 38) Zinoviev typically, presented it in a crude and simplistic manner: “Yes, we are for the defeat of ‘Russia’, for that will facilitate the victory of *Russia*, emancipating it, liberating it from the fetters of tsarism.”[\[21\]](#) As usual, Lenin's views were wrongly expressed by his supporters, who seized upon his words (which were actually only a polemical exaggeration) and turned them inside out. The idea that a military defeat of tsarism would accelerate the process of revolution in Russia was obviously correct and was confirmed by events. But to go before the masses in Russia with the bald assertion that the revolutionaries were for the victory of the Kaiser would have been suicidal. As a matter of fact, it would have been defencism turned inside out, and would have laid them open to the accusation (used later by the Provisional government) that the Bolsheviks were German agents.

## NOTES

[1] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, pp. 140-1.

[2] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, pp. 35 and 103.

[3] Reproduced in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 101.

[4] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 177.

- [5] Plekhanov, *Voprosy Voyny i Sotsialisma*, p. 69.
- [6] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 286 and 287-8.
- [7] Robert B. McKean, op cit., p. 362.
- [8] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 17/10/1914*, vol. 35, pp. 161-2.
- [9] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 288.
- [10] Robert B. McKean, op. cit. p. 364.
- [11] Lunacharsky, *Revolutionary Silhouettes*, pp. 63-4.
- [12] Robert B. McKean, op. cit. pp. 373-4.
- [13] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 293.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
- [16] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 27/10/1914*, vol. 35, pp. 167-8.
- [17] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 288-9.
- [18] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 17/10/1914*, vol. 35, p. 161 (footnote) and p. 162.
- [19] Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, p.168.
- [20] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 290.
- [21] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 273.

## **Part Five: The War Years**

[section 2 of 6]

### **The Mood of the Working Class**

The real content of Lenin's slogan was not this at all, but merely an emphatic way of expressing the need to fight against chauvinism and oppose the "Burgfrieden". The essence of the position was that socialists cannot take upon themselves any responsibility for an imperialist war. Even the defeat of Russia was a "lesser evil" than support for the

Russian bourgeoisie and its predatory war. It was necessary to instil this idea into the minds of the cadres, to inoculate them against the disease of chauvinism. On the other hand, Lenin was too much of a realist not to understand that it is a fatal error to confuse the way revolutionaries see things with the consciousness of the masses. The whole art of building the revolutionary party and cementing it with the masses consists precisely on knowing how to connect the finished scientific programme of Marxism with the necessarily unfinished, confused and contradictory consciousness of the masses. That is precisely why, when Lenin returned to Petrograd in the spring, he modified his position, stating that he had seen that there were two kinds of defencism—that of the social-chauvinist betrayers and an “honest defencism” of the masses. In making such an assertion, Lenin in no way turned his back on his earlier position of revolutionary defeatism, but merely acknowledged that the way that these ideas were conveyed to the masses in the given situation had to take into account the actual level of consciousness. Not to have done this would have been to reduce the party to the level of a sect.

Lenin’s speeches at that time bear little or no relation to the position he put forward during the war. It is sufficient to read his speech at the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets to see the difference. When speaking to honest working class “defencists”—Menshevik and Social Revolutionary workers who believed that they were fighting to defend a democratic republic and the revolution—Lenin took their views into account. We are prepared to fight against the German imperialists, he explained. We are not pacifists. But we have no confidence in the bourgeois Provisional Government. We demand that the Menshevik and SR leaders break with the bourgeoisie and take the power. Then we can wage a revolutionary war against German imperialism, calling on the German workers to follow our example. This, and not the caricature of “revolutionary defeatism” that is so often presented by empty-headed ultra-lefts, was the real essence of Lenin’s revolutionary military policy.

In the beginning the organised workers, under the influence of the Bolsheviks, tried to oppose the war but were swiftly swept aside by the mass of patriotic petty bourgeois peasants and backwards workers. Is it true that the Russian workers were infected with patriotism? Many non-Marxist historians cite evidence to the contrary. Robert McKean, who cannot be suspected of partiality for the Bolsheviks, commenting on the class composition of the patriotic demonstrations writes: “The reports in the capital’s middle-class press described crowds as being formed for the most part of officers, students, society ladies and members of the professions, with a sprinkling of artisans, shopkeepers and shop assistants. One may conclude that at the very least there was no large-scale, overt opposition to the war among the mass of factory and artisanal hands.”<sup>[22]</sup> This entirely coincides with the version of a prominent Bolshevik who was an eye-witness of these events, Alexander Shlyapnikov. The declaration of war initially took the workers by surprise. The stunned mood was described by Shlyapnikov: “Knots of people crowded around the leaflets, talking over the events in an anxious, despondent mood. Hundreds of workers’ families thronged the police stations, which had been converted into recruiting offices. Women wept, wailed, and cursed the war. In the workshops, factories, and mills the mobilisation created great havoc since as many as 40 per cent of the workers were taken from their machines and benches. Helplessness and despair arose everywhere.”<sup>[23]</sup>

But once the initial shock wore off, it was soon replaced by a wave of anger. From the beginning, in fact, there were attempts to organise anti-war protests. McKean says that “On the day war was declared, the secret police noted that militant revolutionary youths were arranging factory meetings, at which they exhorted all socialist tendencies to oppose the war and the soldiers to turn their weapons against the internal enemy, the autocracy.”<sup>[24]</sup> The workers came out onto the streets to demonstrate their opposition. On July 31, an estimated 27,000 people demonstrated against the war on the streets of the capital. In all the great industrial centres, there were strikes and demonstrations—in Byelorussia, the Ukraine, the Caucasus and the Urals. There were initial attempts to resist mobilisation leading to clashes with police and Cossacks in which many were killed and wounded. According to official government figures, there were disturbances and anti-war protests in 17 provinces and 31 districts. 505 draftees and 106 officials were killed in 27 provinces in the two weeks following the declaration of war. That the War was deeply unpopular with the working class was even recognised by the tsarist police whose reports continually emphasised that internationalist positions secured the widest acceptance.<sup>[25]</sup> In no other country except Ireland was there such resistance to the war.

This was a mainly spontaneous, unorganised mass protest. But it was condemned from the start by the unfavourable class balance of forces and the wave of patriotic fervour that swept all before it. Badayev recalls how the backward layers of the population were used against the workers: “In Petersburg the first days of the war were marked by strikes and even by some scattered demonstrations. On the day that army reservists were mobilised, workers at more than 20 Petersburg enterprises went on strike to protest against the war. In some places the workers met the reservists with shouts of ‘Down with the war’ and revolutionary songs.

“But the demonstrations now took place under conditions different from those two or three weeks earlier. The crowds of onlookers, especially in the centre of the city, were stirred up by patriotic shouts. Now they not only did not maintain a ‘friendly’ neutrality, but fell upon the demonstrators, and helped the police arrest and beat them. One incident typical of this time was the ‘patriotic’ outburst that took place the same day as the mobilisation in the city centre, at the City Duma building on the Nevsky Prospect.

“Just as a batch of reservists were passing by here, a crowd of demonstrating workers appeared. With shouts of ‘Down with the war’ the demonstrators closed in on the reservists. The public on the Nevsky Prospect, mainly philistines and all sorts of idle loafers, usually scurried away and hid in the side streets during workers’ demonstrations. Sometimes, as a last resort, they huddled timidly in porches and gateways and observed the demonstrators from afar. But this time the public displayed ‘activism,’ and took on the role of tsarist police. Crying ‘Traitors, traitors’ they rushed from the sidewalk onto the avenue and began to beat up the demonstrating workers. The police then arrested the demonstrators and dispatched them to nearby police stations.

“Under these conditions any broad development of a protest movement against the war was impossible. The individual heroic actions of the workers were drowned in the broad sea of militant patriotism.”<sup>[26]</sup> The regime easily rode out the storm. Mobilisation meant

that the relatively thin layer of advanced Bolshevik workers were drowned in a sea of politically untutored masses. The army was overwhelmingly peasant in composition. Until events changed the outlook of the muzhiks in uniform, the worker Bolsheviks in the trenches were impotent.

### **The Party Decimated**

“At the first sound of the drum the revolutionary movement died down. The more active layers of the workers were mobilised. The revolutionary elements were thrown from the factories to the front. Severe penalties were imposed for striking. The workers’ press was swept away. Trade unions were strangled. Hundreds of thousands of women, boys, peasants, poured into the workshops. The war—combined with the wreck of the International—greatly disoriented the workers politically, and made it possible for the factory administration, then just lifting its head, to speak patriotically in the name of the factories, carrying with it a considerable part of the workers, and compelling the more bold and resolute to keep still and wait. The revolutionary ideas were barely kept glowing in small and hushed circles. In the factories in those days nobody dared to call himself a ‘Bolshevik’ for fear not only of arrest, but of a beating from the backward workers.”[\[27\]](#)

As soon as war was declared, the regime clamped down hard. In the first months of war, the Party was decimated by arrests. The Bolsheviks once again bore the brunt of the repression. Almost overnight the fortunes of the Party suffered the most abrupt and brutal transformation. Thousands of Bolsheviks were rounded up and dispatched to prison and exile. Many areas were smashed. Party structures disappeared. Links with the leading centres were severed. In St Petersburg alone over a thousand party and union members had just been arrested for participation in the July general strike. The first wave of mobilisations eliminated many more party activists, especially the youth. The closure of *Pravda* was the green light for a general witch-hunt against the left and progressive press. Most of the central committee members were sent to Siberia. Many of the leaders were in foreign exile. Lenin was caught in Austrian Poland at the outbreak of war and, to avoid being interned by the Austrian authorities, moved to Berne in Switzerland where he remained until the outbreak of the February revolution. But in the dark days of 1915 such things seemed relegated to a distant and uncertain future. Here he began the painful task of regrouping the Party’s shattered forces, mostly in emigration, and above all concentrating on the ideological re-armament of the cadres on the basic position of war, revolution and internationalism.

The blow was made much worse by the unexpected collapse of the International. The sell-out of the leaders of the International Social Democracy badly affected morale. Moreover, the isolation of the exiled leaders was far more terrible than anything hitherto experienced. Under wartime conditions, the closure of the borders meant that for months on end no word was received from Russia. This worked two ways. The party centre abroad was completely cut off from the interior until September. Even then communication was all but impossible to maintain. Censorship and other wartime measures deprived the tiny forces of the Party that still functioned inside Russia of any information. Badayev says that conditions were far worse than in the worst period of

reaction. The defeat was apparently total for reasons that were not hard to find. At the outset of war, there is almost always a wave of patriotic intoxication that sweeps through the population, dragging behind it not just the petty bourgeoisie but also backward sections of the working class. The advanced guard finds itself temporarily isolated.

After moving to Berne, where they were joined by Zinoviev, Lenin and Krupskaya began the difficult task of reorganising the work. The main problem, apart from the eternal lack of funds, was isolation. Lenin's manifesto *War and the Russian Social Democracy* appeared in *Sotsial Demokrat* no. 33 which had a total print run of 1,500. This figure, however, gives one no real idea of the actual numbers Lenin could hope to reach with his ideas at this time. Only a handful of journals ever reached Russia. Contacts with the interior had been reduced virtually to nil. After July 1914 all communications between Russia and the West had to be conducted across the difficult far northern Swedish-Finnish frontier. In September the Bolshevik Duma deputy, F.N. Samoilov, who had been recuperating in a Swiss sanatorium at the start of the war, brought to Russia a copy of Lenin's *Seven Theses*. The hope of renewed contact with Lenin gave a welcome boost to the morale of the party activists, who were only gradually recovering from the body-blows inflicted on them since July.

### **The Duma Fraction**

“In the Duma session of 26 July 1914 the deputies unanimously adopted a resolution declaring their readiness ‘at the summons of their sovereign, to stand up in defence of their country, its honour and its possessions’. The only dissentients were the six Mensheviks, five Bolsheviks, and the Trudovik deputies. They left the session and refused to vote war-credits (though Kerensky came out in favour of a defensive war). Those were ‘wonderful early August days’ and Russia seemed ‘completely transformed’, wrote the British ambassador.”[\[28\]](#)

The Duma fraction remained as an important focal point of the work for a time. The provocateur Malinovsky, shortly before the war, had suddenly resigned and gone abroad. Now only five Bolshevik deputies remained—Badayev, Petrovsky, Muranov, Samoilov and Shagov—and their position was increasingly precarious. The pressure of the petty bourgeois masses led to an immediate breakdown of the agreement with the Trudoviks. Kerensky announced that the latter would actively back the war, hence his attempts to attribute a “defencist” position to the working class. Actually the workers were mostly against the war, unlike the peasants who backed the Trudoviks. Feeling themselves isolated, the Bolshevik Duma deputies drew closer to the Mensheviks, much to Lenin's dismay. Chkheidze, the leader of the Menshevik fraction in the Duma, adopted a semi-left stance, which facilitated a temporary rapprochement with the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks in the Duma fraction wobbled under the intense pressure of jingoism and war fever. The position of the Bolshevik deputies was not at all firm and they were inclined to gloss over the differences with the Mensheviks who, in turn, wavered in the direction of defencism. Under the influence of Kamenev, they soft peddled on the issue of revolutionary defeatism and tried to tone down Lenin's formulations. The Bolshevik and Menshevik Duma fractions initially took the same position on the war. The joint

resolution presented by both factions was read out to the Duma. In Krupskaya's words it "was very cautiously worded and left many things unsaid",<sup>[29]</sup> but it was enough to provoke howls of protest from the rest of the chamber.

The behaviour of the Russian Social Democrats in the Duma attracted the attention of the leaders of the Socialist International, who were already acting as the open agents of their respective governments. Some time in August the Duma fraction received a telegram from the Belgian socialist Emile Vandervelde, president of the International Socialist Bureau, who had entered the cabinet as Minister of State, in effect inviting his Russian comrades to follow his example. The hypocrisy of the man was all the more revolting, since only a few months earlier, in the spring of 1914, he had visited Russia on a fact-finding mission, and therefore was well acquainted with the monstrously oppressive character of Russian tsarism. Now, hiding behind the excuse of the need to "defeat Prussian militarism", he proposed that the Russian Social Democrats suspend their opposition to tsarism until after the war:

"For Socialists of Western Europe, the defeat of Prussian militarism—I do not say of Germany, which we love and esteem—is a matter of life and death... But in this terrible war which is inflicted on Europe owing to the contradictions of bourgeois society, the free democratic nations are forced to rely on the military support of the Russian government.

"It depends largely on the Russian revolutionary proletariat whether this support will be effective or not. Of course, I cannot dictate to you what you should do, or what your interests demand; that is for you to decide. But I ask you—and if our poor Jaurès were alive he would endorse my request—to share the common standpoint of socialist democracy in Europe... We believe that we should all unite to ward off this danger and we shall be happy to learn your opinion on this matter—happier still if it coincides with ours."<sup>[30]</sup> These weasel words, which carried the signature "Emile Vandervelde, delegate of the Belgian workers to the International Socialist Bureau and Belgian minister since the declaration of war", must surely rank as one of the finest examples of sly diplomacy in history. However, it had the effect of causing the Menshevik Duma deputies to waver in their initial position of outright opposition to the war. There was a violent discussion inside the faction on how to respond to the message. Finally, they issued a statement which represented a clear abandonment of the earlier anti-war position. After enumerating the sufferings of the Russian people under tsarism, they concluded:

"But in spite of these circumstances, bearing in mind the international significance of the European conflict and the fact that socialists of the advanced countries are participating in it (!), which enables us to hope (!) that it may be solved in the interests of international socialism (!!), we declare that by our work in Russia we are not opposing the war."<sup>[31]</sup>

Lenin followed the conduct of the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd with growing anxiety. He was especially disappointed at the Duma deputies' feeble response to Vandervelde's telegram. "From fragmentary evidence," writes Robert McKean, "it can be inferred that

Lenin was far from satisfied with his followers' attitude to the war. Publicly and privately he kept silent about the Duma declaration and, in as yet unpublished correspondence, criticised the Bolsheviks' reply to Vandervelde."[\[32\]](#)

Given the intensity of the war fever, it is perhaps not surprising that the Duma deputies were also affected. In the end, what was decisive was not these vacillations, but the fact that they could be rapidly corrected. After its initial hesitations, the Duma fraction, recovered its nerve and began to take a principled stand against the war. The Social Democratic deputies refused to vote for the war credits and spoke against them in the Duma, and demonstratively walked out of the chamber. Thereafter, the members of the Duma fraction behaved courageously visiting the factories and delivering anti-war speeches to workers' meetings. For the first few months of the war, their activity was at the centre of the party's work.

Trotsky, commenting on the conduct of the Duma fraction, writes: "The Bolshevik faction in the Duma, weak in its personnel, had not risen at the outbreak of the war to the height of its task. Along with the Menshevik deputies, it introduced a declaration in which it promised 'to defend the cultural weal of the people against all attacks wheresoever originating.' The Duma underlined with applause this yielding of a position. Not one of the Russian organisations or groups of the party took the openly defeatist position which Lenin came out for abroad." But the same author adds: "The percentage of patriots among the Bolsheviks was, however, insignificant. In contrast to the Narodniks and Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks began in 1914 to develop among the masses a printed and oral agitation against the war. The Duma deputies soon recovered their poise and renewed their revolutionary work—about which the authorities were very closely informed, thanks to a highly developed system of provocation. It is sufficient to remark that out of seven members of the Petersburg committee of the party, three, on the eve of the war, were in the employ of the secret service."[\[33\]](#)

The work was constantly plagued by the activity of the police who had infiltrated it to the highest levels. Attempts to organise meetings—even small meetings—in the interior merely led to new arrests. The party had virtually ceased to function, except to a limited extent at local level. Not until November 1914 did a national meeting take place in a small country home outside Petersburg. The meeting was chaired by Kamenev, who had come from Finland. The conference met in conditions of the utmost secrecy in the house of a factory clerk in an isolated suburb of Petersburg. The meeting was only attended by the Duma fraction members plus a handful of delegates from local organisations—from Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been renamed, to avoid using a German-sounding name), Kharkov and Ivanovo-Voznesensk, plus one representative from the Latvian Social Democrats. No minutes are available as the person who had them was arrested. When the delegates finally assembled, after many hours of dodging the police, the picture of the organisation that emerged from their reports could not have been more desolate. Badayev, who was present, along with the other Bolshevik Duma members recalls: "Party cells suffered heavily as well as the legal organisations; our party, the leader and guide of the proletariat, had been half destroyed. Yet the skeleton still existed, some party work was still being done and the question of its extension was bound up with the

question of preserving the Duma fraction which acted as the centre and core of the whole organisation.”[\[34\]](#)

Lenin’s position on war was discussed. According to the “official” version, it was endorsed with only “small amendments”. In point of fact, the Duma deputies were by no means convinced of Lenin’s defeatist position. Later, at their trial, all but one of them (Muranov) repudiated it. The hardest blow was about to fall. Despite all the precautions taken, the conference was known to the police. On the third day [4 November, OS], when the delegates were still discussing Lenin’s theses on war the door burst open and the police arrested everyone present and “turned the place over”. The Duma deputies were shortly released but did not remain at liberty for long. They managed to destroy compromising documents, but in the evening the whole Bolshevik fraction was arrested. This was the final blow. With the removal of the one point that had served to rally the party’s scattered forces, the situation was desperate. After the arrest of the five Duma deputies, Lenin wrote to A.G. Shlyapnikov: “This is terrible. The government has evidently decided to have its revenge on the Russian Social Democratic Labour group, and will stick at nothing. We must be ready for the very worst: falsification of documents, forgeries, planting of ‘evidence’, false witness, trial behind closed doors, etc., etc.”[\[35\]](#)

In the general atmosphere of depression and fear, the arrest of the Duma deputies did not arouse mass protests. The chief of the Petrograd Okhrana reported complacently to his superiors that “workers reacted inertly, even coldly” to the arrests.[\[36\]](#) Attempts by the Bolsheviks to organise protests got no response, with the exception of a half-day walk-out at the Psycho-Neurological Institute. The fortunes of the party seemed to be at their lowest ebb. With the liquidation of the Duma fraction, work in Russia was rendered even more arduous than before. It was increasingly difficult to get experienced collaborators in Russia. By January 1915, most of the activists had been swept away by arrests. The charge was always the same: “anti-war agitation”. The routes through which letters and propaganda could be delivered were long and dangerous, and the police controls tightened as the war dragged on. The focus then shifted abroad. But here too the problems were multiplying.

### **Vacillations Among the Bolsheviks**

All through the War, Lenin had plenty of trouble in his own camp. Not for the first or last time, Lenin found himself isolated increasingly within the leadership of his own Party. Some Bolsheviks, admittedly only a few, even lost their bearings to the extent of going over to chauvinism, like the members of the Parisian émigré group who actually volunteered to serve in the French army. Not even the Bolsheviks were immune to the pressures of defencism. These were, after all, not rank-and-filers but members of the Bolshevik “Foreign Committee”. But the Party was hard up and didn’t even have the means to call a congress of the exiles. In any case, who would have attended? And would Lenin have had a political majority? That was far from clear. There were a lot of problems with different local groups of exiles, who were clearly showing signs of

demoralisation, of which the case of the intellectuals in the Paris group was only one expression.

In a way, this was not all that surprising. After all, the war had caused a crisis in every section of the labour movement. It would be surprising if the prevailing atmosphere of war fever had had no echo in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. Krupskaya remembered the general mood of confusion that reigned in the first months of the War: “People were not clear on the question, and spoke mostly about which side was the attacking side,” writes Krupskaya. “In Paris, in the long run, the majority of the group expressed themselves against the war and volunteering, but some comrades—Sapozhkov (Kuznetsov), Kazakov (Britman, Sviagin), Misha Edisherov (Davydov), Moiseyev (Ilya, Zefir) and others—joined the French army as volunteers. The Menshevik, Bolshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary volunteers (about 80 men in all) adopted a declaration in the name of the ‘Russian Republicans’, which was printed in the French press. Plekhanov made a farewell speech in honour of the volunteers before they left Paris.

“The majority of our Paris group condemned volunteering. But in the other groups, too, there was no definite clarity on the question. Vladimir Ilyich realised how important it was at such a serious moment for every Bolshevik to have a clear understanding of the significance of events. A comradesly exchange of opinions was necessary: it was inadvisable to fix all shades of opinion right away until the matter had been thrashed out. That is why, in his answer to Karpinsky’s letter framing the views of the Geneva section, Ilyich wrote: ‘Would not this “criticism” and my “anti-criticism” make a better subject for discussion?’

“Ilyich knew that an understanding could more easily be reached in a comradesly discussion than by correspondence. Of course, this was no time to keep such an issue long confined to comradesly talks within a narrow circle of Bolsheviks.”[\[37\]](#)

What happened in Paris was an extreme case, and an isolated one. Few Bolsheviks were drawn to an open chauvinist position. But some veered towards pacifism. Sections of the Party in France (Montpellier) advanced the slogan: “Down with war!” and “Long live peace!” which Lenin subjected to withering criticism. In all his writings of this period, Lenin pours scorn on pacifism, which he regarded as a debilitating influence on the working class. Not the slogan of “peace”, but class war, was what was needed. This idea is repeated time and again in dozens of letters and articles: “The watchword of peace, in my opinion, is incorrect at the present moment,” he wrote. “It is a philistine, parson’s watchword. The proletarian watchword must be civil war.”[\[38\]](#) In July 1915, Lenin wrote to the Dutch Marxist, David Wijnkoop expressing his delight that the Dutch comrades had taken up the slogan of a people’s militia: “I welcome with the greatest joy the position taken up by you, Gorter and Ravesteyn on the question of a people’s militia (we have that in our programme too). An exploited class which did not *strive* to possess arms, to know how to use them and to master the military art would be a class of lackeys.”[\[39\]](#)

The essence of Lenin’s position on war is this: that the only way to end the war was to overthrow capitalism. Any other proposal was essentially a lie and a diversion. The

slogan of “peace” could only play a progressive role to the degree that it was closely linked to this perspective. “The struggle against war is the preparation for revolution,” wrote Trotsky years later, “that is to say, the task of working class parties and of the International. Marxists pose this great task before the proletarian vanguard, without any frills. To the enervating slogan of ‘disarmament’ they counterpose the slogan of *winning the army and arming the workers.*”[\[40\]](#)

The truth of these assertions was established by the Russian revolution in 1917. But initially Lenin’s position was greeted with doubts and even incredulity. Even among experienced Bolshevik leaders, there were doubts and hesitations. Lenin’s implacable stand against chauvinism, which concentrated its fire against the “Centre” was only grudgingly accepted by his colleagues, many of whom had been conciliators before the war. Although he occupied a leading position in the party and was entrusted with overseeing the work in Russia, Kamenev clearly did not agree with Lenin’s policy of defeatism. His conduct at the trial of the Duma deputies, with whom he had been arrested, left a lot to be desired and was sharply criticised by Lenin.

“It is indeed evident from several sources,” comments McKean, “that Kamenev entertained the severest doubts about Lenin’s *Theses*, especially the propagation of defeatism. Most spectacularly at his trial in February 1915 he publicly repudiated all Lenin’s theories on the war and called in his defence the ‘social chauvinist’ Yordansky. That this was not merely a device to secure a lighter sentence is confirmed by the fact that when the police raided another conference of the Bolshevik deputies with party workers on 4 November they discovered in Petrovsky’s possession notes dictated to him by Kamenev amending the *Seven Theses* and above all sidestepping the call for defeatism. Kamenev’s objection to the slogan of Russia’s defeat was apparently widely shared amongst Bolsheviks.”[\[41\]](#)

On the basis of a textual analysis of 47 leaflets and appeals published illegally by Bolshevik militants between January 1915 and 22 February 1917, McKean finds that not a single leaflet mentioned the slogan of the defeat of Russia being the lesser evil. Ten leaflets made reference in the form of short phrases to the necessity of turning the imperialist war into a civil war and nine to the formation of a Third International. But in general the party’s illegal literature avoided themes likely to evoke a hostile response from the masses and concentrated, as before the war, on attacking the government’s policies towards the working class and advocating a revolutionary struggle against the autocracy as the only way of ending the war, based on the old Bolshevik slogans of a democratic republic, the eight-hour day and confiscation of the estates of the gentry (the “three whales”).

### **The ‘Left’ Bolsheviks**

If Kamenev represented a deviation in the direction of opportunism, there were also ultra-left and sectarian deviations, especially among a section of the exiles. Bukharin, Piatnitsky, and other leading elements had an ultra-left position on the national question. Some supporters of Bukharin’s group (N.V. Krylenko and E.F. Rozmirovich) in

Switzerland insisted on publishing their own local journal, in defiance of the central committee which, given the lack of resources, had forbidden other local groups (Paris, Geneva) to do so. There was a bitter row over this issue. Lenin, who always had a soft spot for Bukharin, and recognised both his personal sincerity and his ability as a theoretician, nevertheless was well acquainted with his weaknesses. The question of self-determination always occupied a central place in the armoury of the Bolsheviks. But now, in the midst of an imperialist war, its importance was multiplied tenfold. No concessions were possible on this issue because it involved the whole question of annexations—a central issue in the war.

Lenin's opposition to the imperialist war did not at all imply opposition to all war in general. He distinguished very carefully between different types of war. In all his writings, Lenin poured scorn on pacifism and the slogans of peace and disarmament. He always pointed out that Marxists have a duty to defend just wars—wars for the liberation of oppressed peoples and classes. Writing to Kollontai in late July 1915, Lenin answered the arguments of Bukharin: "How can an oppressed class in general be against the armament of the people?" he thundered. "To reject this means to fall into a semi-anarchist attitude to imperialism—in my belief, this can be seen in certain Left-wingers even among ourselves. Once there is imperialism, they say, then we don't need either self-determination of nations or the armament of the people! That is a crying error. It is precisely for the socialist revolution against imperialism that we need both one and the other. "Is it 'realisable'? Such a criterion is incorrect. Without revolution almost the entire minimum programme is unrealisable. Put in that way, realisability declines into philistinism."[\[42\]](#)

In view of the deterioration of the internal situation, Lenin finally decided to call a Conference of foreign party groups which opened in Berne on 15 February, 1915. It was attended by the representatives of the CC, the editorial board of the central organ *Sotsial Demokrat*, the Bolshevik women's organisation and foreign branches—Paris, Zurich, Berne, Lausanne, Geneva, Baugy-en-Clarence and London. Among those present were Lenin, Krupskaya, I. Armand, Zinoviev and Bukharin. Apart from the conflict with the Baugy group, the conference was called to discuss disagreements over the party's approach to the war. In fact, the organisational dispute over the publication of a local paper was really the indirect expression of these differences. Bukharin submitted theses reflecting his view that the advent of imperialism meant that democratic demands were no longer important in the advanced capitalist countries. His remarks were directed specifically against the rights of nations to self-determination, echoing the arguments of Rosa Luxemburg and the Polish lefts.

There was only a hint of it in the resolution moved by the Baugy group on party tasks, which expressed strong reservations about Lenin's slogan of "civil war" and in particular the so-called defeat of Russia slogan. While agreeing in general with the idea that the war, at a certain stage, would provoke a revolutionary movement and a civil war, and while accepting the revolutionary significance of the slogan in combating the "Burgfrieden" ("civil peace", suspension of the class struggle for the duration of the war), the resolution goes on: "However, our group categorically rejects advancing for Russia

the so-called defeat of Russia slogan, particularly the way it was expressed in (*Sotsial Demokrat*, No. 38).”[\[43\]](#) The article here referred to was the one written by Zinoviev which put the position of revolutionary defeatism in a very crude fashion.

At the Berne conference, Lenin led off on the war, basing his remarks on the Manifesto. Lenin tried to get agreement on a comradely basis with the Baugy group. But right at the end of the Conference E.B. Bosch and G.L. Pyatakov (the inseparable duo known as the “Japanese” because they had escaped from exile via Japan) turned up and insisted on re-opening the discussion on the war issue. Bukharin immediately identified himself with their position, which flowed from an abstract, undialectical, mechanical way of thinking. They argued that, since the period of democratic demands (including the rights of nations to self-determination) was over, the only demand that could now be put forward was the seizure of power by the proletariat. No-one supported Bukharin’s theses at the Conference and the commission on the war resolution accepted Lenin’s resolution unanimously. Since the commission was made up of Lenin, Zinoviev and Bukharin, it can only be presumed that Bukharin voted against his own position!

The “United States of Europe” slogan was also discussed at Berne. This had appeared in the Manifesto *War and the Russian Social Democracy*, written by Lenin in the early days of the war and published in *Sotsial Demokrat* No. 40. The slogan was part of the fight to overthrow the three reactionary monarchist regimes: Russian tsarism, Germany and Austro-Hungary. Later, however, Lenin revised his opinion on the basis of the debate in Berne. After the conference, Lenin wrote his article *On the Slogan for a United States of Europe*, in which he explains that the slogan of the united states of Europe *under capitalism* is “either impossible or reactionary”, a position which, despite the illusions of the European capitalists today, remains correct at the present time. “Capitalism,” explains Lenin, “is private ownership of the means of production, and anarchy of production. To advocate a ‘just’ division of income on such a basis is sheer Proudhonism, stupid philistinism.” Temporary agreements can be reached between the different ruling classes of Europe, for the purpose of sharing out the spoils and for the joint exploitation of the colonies, such as the agreement between the French, German and other capitalists after the Second World War. But they will inevitably break down again in periods of crisis. All this was explained in advance by Lenin.

Lenin is referring here specifically to the unification of Europe on a *capitalist basis*, of course. The unification of Europe remains an absolute necessity, but can only be achieved by the working class taking power and establishing the Socialist United States of Europe. The entire thrust of this article, and all Lenin’s writings of this period, was precisely the need to fight for a socialist revolution, not only in Russia, but throughout Europe. The issue was not resolved and was postponed for further consideration.

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## NOTES

[22] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 358.

- [23] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 128.
- [24] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 356.
- [25] See Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 365.
- [26] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, pp. 129-30.
- [27] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 58-9.
- [28] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, pp. 176-7.
- [29] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 285.
- [30] Quoted in Badayev, op. cit., p. 208.
- [31] Ibid., pp. 208-9.
- [32] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 366.
- [33] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 59.
- [34] Badayev, op. cit., p. 212.
- [35] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 28/11/1914*, vol. 35, p. 175.
- [36] Quoted in Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 370.
- [37] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 285-6.
- [38] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 17/10/1914*, vol. 35, p. 164.
- [39] LCW, *To David Wijnkoop*, vol. 35, p. 195.
- [40] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, p. 26.
- [41] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 360.
- [42] LCW, *To Alexandra Kollontai*, vol. 35, p. 198.
- [43] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 272.

## Part Five: The War Years

[section 3 of 6]

### Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism

Lenin now embarked on a major theoretical study of Imperialism which culminated in his great work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. It was written partly in answer to Hilferding's *Finance Capital*, published in 1910, a work in which the latter, ignoring the contradictions inherent in capitalism and the inevitability of inter-imperialist conflict, raised the possibility of a universal cartel, a world planned economy under monopoly capitalism and the resolution of the conflict between wage labour and capital, or "organised capitalism"—an early example of the idea of "managed capitalism", so beloved of reformist leaders in the 1950s and 60s. Kautsky later seized upon Hilferding's idea of organised capitalism for his theory of ultra-imperialism. Bukharin was struck by this idea which he answered in his book *Imperialism and World Economy*. Lenin, always on the look-out for young talent, was favourably impressed by Bukharin's book on imperialism.

These were not the only attempts to revise Marx's economic theories. Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*, written shortly before the war posed the idea of the automatic collapse of capitalism, an idea that has since been utilised by revisionists to belittle the role of the subjective factor in carrying out the socialist transformation of society. As always, Lenin's main task was the education of the cadres. He waged an implacable ideological struggle on two fronts—against opportunism and anarcho-syndicalism. Later on the Stalinists indulged in an unscrupulous attempt to link Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution to the Mensheviks and the "Left" Bolsheviks, Bukharin, Pyatakov and Bosch! There is absolutely no link between "permanent revolution" and the infantile rejection of democratic demands advocated by the "Lefts". But it is quite possible that Lenin's attacks on "permanent revolution" in this period were aimed at this group.

Conscription had a big effect on the working class. Seventeen per cent of working class cadres in Petrograd were called up, including almost all the youth. To take their place, a mass of politically untutored layers flooded into the factories, further diluting the class content of the workforce with raw, semi-proletarian elements. The younger, more energetic layers both from town and village were sent to the front. A large number of women and adolescents were drafted into the factories. These new elements—shop assistants, waiters, domestics, innkeepers, porters—brought their class prejudices with them. The factory proletariat was thrown back. The Bolshevik workers had to keep their heads down for a period. Conditions and wages were worsening and "military discipline" imposed in factories. The general political level was reduced in the short term, but the merciless pressure on the workers and the proletarianisation of new layers in turn were preparing the way for a new explosion. The Party itself was temporarily disorganised, and only gradually recovered some semblance of order. But the ideas and traditions of Bolshevism were still alive in the factories and trenches.

The fall-off of the movement is reflected in strike statistics:

**Month**

**No. of strikes**

**No. of strikers**

August

24

(40 x less than June)

24,688

(13 x less than June)

September

10

October

9

November

16

December

9

(Source: *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 538.)

In the whole period August-December 1914, according to official figures, there were 70 strikes and 37,200 participants in all Russia. In Ivanovo-Voznesensk, one of the main centres of the workers' struggles, strikes practically ceased. In all these months only one small stoppage was registered. Things were not much better in Petrograd.

**The Trial of Bolshevik Duma Deputies**

The arrest of the Duma deputies caused new problems for the Party. The local branches managed to get a few underground protest leaflets out. But no general movement was possible except small strikes. The Duma trial was preceded by a wave of arrests. There was a massive police presence on the streets of the main cities in order to "soften the working class up" for it. In February, political protest strikes involved 4,630—not a bad

result given the extremely difficult conditions, but really a very small number, reflecting a generally depressed mood in a majority of workers.

The deputies' performance at the trial was uneven. M.K. Muralov confined himself to admitting to being a member of the RSDLP and a deputy, elected by the workers. But G.I. Petrovsky's speech, in Lenin's words, "did him honour". However, Lenin was critical of some aspects of the defence. For example, the defendants denied all personal participation in the illegal party. Kamenev, who as a central committee member arrested about the same time as the Duma deputies and put on trial with them, made a declaration which did not display the courage one might have expected from someone in his position. Lenin was dismayed by Kamenev's conduct. Referring to the trial of the Duma deputies, Trotsky writes:

"At the trial, which took place on the 10th of February, the defendants maintained the same line. Kamenev's declaration that the documents with which he was confronted 'decidedly contradict his own views on the current war' was not dictated only by concern for his own safety; essentially, it expressed the negative attitude of the entire Party upper layer toward defeatism. To Lenin's great indignation, the purely defencist tactics of the defendants extremely weakened the agitational effectiveness of the trial. The legal defence could have proceeded hand in hand with a political offensive. But Kamenev, who was a clever and well-educated politician, was not born to meet extraordinary situations. The attorneys, for their part, did whatever they could. Repudiating the charge of treason, one of them, Pereverzev, prophesied at the trial that the loyalty of the labour deputies to their class will be forever preserved in the memory of future generations; whereas their weaknesses—lack of preparation, dependence on their intellectual advisers, and the like—'all of that will fall away, like an empty shell, together with the libellous charge of treason'."<sup>[44]</sup>

Lenin had expected something more. At a moment when all the leaders of the Second International were reneging, he saw the trial as an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to stand out, to give a clear public display of firmness and courage. The trial should have been a rallying-point to raise the fighting spirits of the workers in Russia and internationally. But the opportunity was thrown away. Nor did their diplomatic defence tactics help to give them lighter sentences. The accused were sentenced to perpetual exile in Siberia. Despite Lenin's misgivings, the fate of the Bolshevik deputies helped to raise the authority of the Bolsheviks in the eyes of the masses, who could not understand the finer points of the defence, but saw that their parliamentary leaders were prepared to go to prison for their principles. After the trial, Lenin asserted that the Bolsheviks had four fifths of the conscious workers in Russia behind them. This was certainly true in 1914, as we have seen. About 40,000 workers used to buy *Pravda* before the war. Many more would have read it. Despite arrests, imprisonment and exile, this tradition—a Bolshevik tradition—remained in existence. Even if the organisation had been reduced to a minimum expression, it still survived in the hearts and minds of the workers. This was the soil upon which the revolutionary tendency would eventually flourish once again.

But for the present, the situation of the party was grim. The party membership slumped with the outbreak of war. In the underground, the basic Bolshevik unit was the factory cell. The number of workers active in the cells at the time was very small. Because of arrests and mobilisation, a relatively high proportion of party members were new, inexperienced people. The Bolshevik central committee included Lenin, Zinoviev, Shlyapnikov, who was responsible for work in Russia and the indispensable Krupskaya as secretary. That was about all! Only in the autumn of 1915 was a Russian bureau of the CC established. By the autumn of the following year the bureau was reorganised. The leadership fell to P.A. Zalutsky, V.M. Molotov and Shlyapnikov and remained so until February 1917. Gradually, painfully the Party was being reorganised in the interior. The most important group was, of course, in Petrograd. It is claimed (in the *Istoriya KPSS*) that ten District Committees (*rayonnye komitety*) functioned here, though “not uninterruptedly” (i.e. their existence was tenuous).

But by 1915 the mood was changing, the masses were slowly beginning to lose their fear. By the second half of 1915 there were already sporadic strikes in Moscow against the high cost of food. This changing mood was reflected in a gradual recovery of the party’s fortunes. Membership began to pick up slowly. In November 1914, the Petrograd Party organisation had only between 100 and 120 members. But by the spring of 1915, this went up to 500 and to 1,200 by the autumn. By mid-1916 and early 1917, there were 2,000 members in the capital. Also in the outlying areas the Party organisations were beginning to fill out. Apart from workers, there were groups of students, and even soldiers and sailors of the Baltic Fleet. It was the same elsewhere. In Kharkov in the spring of 1915 there were only 15 members. By the autumn, it had risen to 85, and one year later to 120. In Yekaterinoslav, at the end of 1915 there were 200, by November 1916, 300, and by the beginning of 1917, 400. The maintenance of underground party meetings, even when they were reduced to a few people, was the key to future success.

Slowly, the work was beginning to revive. Work was conducted in legal organisations, such as insurance and friendly societies. Even so, these were difficult and dangerous conditions of work. The *Istoriya* claims that the Party had groups in 29 towns and cities and names them as: Petrograd, Moscow, Kharkov, Yekaterinoslav, Kiev, Makeyevka, Samara, Saratov, Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Odessa, Yekaterinodar, Baku, Tiflis, Ivanovo- Voznesensk, Tula, Orekhovo-Zuyevo, Tver, Gomel, Vyazma, Revel, Narva, Yuryeva, Irkutsk, Zlatoust, Yekaterinburg and Orenburg. However, these claims should be treated with caution. Many of these groups will have been mere shells, and their existence problematical. The work was continuously hampered by agents provocateurs and arrests. Many of these organisations were probably not stable or long-lasting like the Petrograd committee, which was smashed at least 30 times, although every time it was reconstituted. But, if this estimate is correct, then we must conclude that, at one time or another, party organisation existed in this period in at least 200 different towns and cities in Russia.

Underground work in wartime demanded the strictest centralisation and conspiratorial methods. The election principle was virtually impossible to retain. Elections were the exception not the rule. Committees were formed by means of co-option: the regional

committee (*rayonny komitet*), formed by members of local factory cells, nominated the members of the local committee (*gorodsky' komitet*) which also had the right to co-opt experienced local workers. Some abuses were bound to creep in. But as far as possible the rank-and-file was kept informed by a combination of meetings and the underground press. The latter, in spite of all the difficulties, played a vital role in keeping the Party's forces together. Three months after the outbreak of war, a new Bolshevik journal the *Sotsial Demokrat* was launched. In all, between October 1914 to January 1917, 26 issues (numbers 33-58) were produced—an average of one per month—a remarkable achievement in the given conditions.

## **Closed Frontiers**

Lenin's work in exile was proceeding frustratingly at a snail's pace, fraught with difficulties at each step. With meagre resources, Lenin struggled to keep the work going with his tiny group of collaborators in exile. Apart from Zinoviev and Krupskaya, there was Inessa Armand, G.L. Shklovsky, and V.M. Kasparov. These made up the "foreign bureau of the Central Committee". They tried to get the Bolshevik journal *Sotsial Demokrat* to act as an organiser. 300 issues were distributed in Paris, 100 in London, Stockholm and New York, 75 in Geneva and Berne, 50 in Zurich and Lausanne. A few copies were sold in Milan and Genoa. But only a small number ever reached Russia. The collection of money occupied a central place in the preoccupations of the exiles. But despite excruciating difficulties, the paper not only continued to appear, but actually managed to reflect the life of the workers' movement inside Russia. Its columns carried news, reports, resolutions and leaflets from the underground party. In order to solve the ever-pressing financial difficulties, a fighting fund to aid *Sotsial Demokrat* was organised. The party was very hard up and the life of the exiles, bitter enough in itself, was made still more unbearable by the lack of contact with the movement in Russia.

If it was difficult to produce regular publications, it was even harder to deliver them to the intended readership. Closed frontiers and associated wartime conditions rendered the maintenance of regular contact with the interior almost impossible. Police vigilance, spies and provocation bore down on the revolutionaries on all sides, breaking up all the old channels of underground transportation. The centre for this activity now moved to Stockholm, and also Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. The Scandinavian Social Democrats helped, although because of the pro-German stance of the leadership, such assistance came mainly from the Lefts, especially the Young Socialists who took an anti-war position, though tinged with pacifism, as in all the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties ("Lay down the weapons!"). The man in charge of the transportation was the veteran worker Bolshevik Alexander Shlyapnikov, whose memoirs provide an important source for the Party's activities in this period. Krupskaya, as always, played an invaluable role in organising with meticulous detail all this work and helping younger comrades understand underground methods of work. Her small team of collaborators, apart from Shlyapnikov, included Kollontai, who had recently broken with the Mensheviks and now embraced the Bolshevik cause with the enthusiasm of a neophyte, Lenin's two sisters, M.I. Ulyanova, A.I. Ulyanova-Elizarova, L.N. Stahl, and V.M. Kasparov. There were not

many others. The fact that two of Lenin's sisters had to be involved indicates the extreme difficulty in obtaining trustworthy people for this activity.

Lenin continued to have trouble with his close collaborators abroad. In August 1915 another Bolshevik journal appeared, *Kommunist* edited by Bukharin. But very soon, Bukharin's ultra-leftism soon had Lenin tearing his hair out. In an angry letter to Shlyapnikov, he complained that: "*Kommunist* has become *harmful*. It has to be *stopped* and replaced by a *different* title: *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata* (edited by the editorial board of *Sotsial-Demokrat*). *Only* in this way will we avoid squabbling, avoid wavering." Having made numerous concessions to "the trio"—Bukharin, Pyatakov and Eugenie Bosch—Lenin's patience had finally run out. "Nik[olai] Iv[anovich] is an economist who studies seriously, and, *in this* we have always supported him. But he is (1) credulous where gossip is concerned and (2) devilishly *unstable* in politics. The war pushed him to semi-anarchist ideas. At the conference which adopted the Berne resolutions (the spring of 1915) he produced *theses* (I have them!) which were the height of stupidity, a disgrace, semi-anarchism. I attacked severely, Yuri and Eug. Bosch listened and remained satisfied that I did not allow any falling away to the left (they declared at the time their complete disagreement with N. Iv. [Bukharin]). Six months passed. Nik. Iv. studies economics. He *doesn't* occupy himself with politics. And lo and behold, on the question of self-determination, *he* serves up *the same* nonsense. Eug. Bosch and Yuri sign it!"<sup>[45]</sup>

The worst problem was isolation, the sense of being cut off from the movement in Russia. The work with the interior was plagued with difficulties and dangers. Only on rare occasions could someone reliable be sent into Russia to gather first-hand information on the state of affairs in the interior. The ever-resourceful Shlyapnikov, champing at the bit in Stockholm, was dogged by problems of all sorts, not just police surveillance and frontier guards, but lack of funds and the demoralisation produced by the collapse of the International. At first it was possible to maintain reasonable contacts with Russia by means of businessmen and emigrants returning to answer the call-up. But when this possibility dried up and controls became tighter, with regular searches of travellers at the frontier, things took a serious turn for the worse. Many Russian émigrés, who had previously been prepared to carry illegal material into Russia were no longer willing to do so, preferring to dedicate themselves to more lucrative smuggling activities. The mood of disorientation and despair in the ranks was expressed in the following comments: "The news of our Paris Bolsheviks going off in the army, the 'cosy chats' of the old man of Geneva, Plekhanov, and the situation as a whole also casts a gloomy cloud across our heads."

The disorganisation of work in the interior, especially after the arrest of the Duma fraction, expressed itself in a financial crisis. Shlyapnikov found some seafarers who were willing to smuggle in illegal propaganda—for a price. But the money was simply not to be had: "I reported this to the Petersburg Committee and the Duma fraction, but received the sad news that they were not in a position to give the necessary sum of some 300 to 500 roubles a month. It was hard enough for them to send out money for my keep, and, having once sent me 100 roubles, the comrades recommended that I arrange all my own expenses. I could not even begin to think of finding work, as those first months of

war had caused great unemployment in Sweden and the plants were operating only a few days per week. No opportunity presented itself of finding resources in the local emigrant community, although there were a lot of speculative racketeers there. Our party's foreign-based Central Committee was too poor to allocate such a sum for this operation. In order to keep the work going I resorted to loans and sent back news only occasionally." [46]

## **German Intrigues**

As always in time of war, the activities of the secret services were stepped up. The efforts of the secret service to gain potentially useful recruits for their particular cause was not limited to the official leaders of Labour in the main countries. Every attempt was made to gain points of support through intrigues, bribes and blackmail. Working on the well-known axiom that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", the great powers attempted to encourage rebellions in the enemy's rear, appealing demagogically to the "rights of nations to self-determination". Thus, London sent its agent, the adventurer T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"), to rouse the Arabs against the Turks, and cynically promised Palestine both to the Jews and the Arabs (with no intention of giving it to either), while Berlin tried to get the Finns to rise against the Russians. In this shady game of intrigue and counter-intrigue, the agents of the imperialists were not averse even to putting out feelers to revolutionaries with a view to entangling them in acts of subversion which would weaken the enemy. For example, the ex-left winger Parvus, a capable man but an adventurer who had gone over to social chauvinism, opened a so-called Institute for the Study of the Social Consequences of the War, in Copenhagen, as a means of luring Russian revolutionaries into collaborating with the Germans. Out of poverty and demoralisation, many fell into the trap.

Throughout the War, the Bolsheviks took great care to maintain themselves aloof from all the attempts of the German imperialists to involve them in intrigues which would have completely compromised the party in the eyes of the world working class. In relation to both the Allied and the German brigands, the position of Lenin was made clear in hundreds of articles and speeches: "A plague on both your houses!" This is a matter of public record. And although the Party, as we have seen, was in desperate need of money at this time, there was never any question of accepting German funds, although they were in fact offered. The position of Lenin on this was clear and unambiguous. While making use of the contradictions between the imperialists, the revolutionaries must not get ensnared with their intrigues or become dependent on them in any way. However, lately, as part of a general campaign to smear and discredit Lenin by all possible means, the enemies of Bolshevism have fished out of the dustbin the slanderous accusation that Lenin was a "German agent". This monstrous lie was invented by the tsarist secret service to discredit the Bolsheviks, and later repeated and amplified by the Provisional Government to harry and persecute the Bolsheviks in the period of reaction that followed the July Days of 1917. In the recent period it has been revived by unscrupulous "historians" like Volkogonov, who make no attempt to conceal their vitriolic hatred of Lenin, Trotsky and revolutionaries in general.

In his book on Lenin, Volkogonov dredges up all the old lies about Lenin as a “German agent” that were answered long ago. In addition to the old calumniators, he quotes some new ones, who, on closer inspection, appear to be mere replicators of the old stuff. A “Russian historian”, a certain S.P. Melgunov is the first authority quoted by Volkogonov. He assures the reader that one must seek “the key to the German gold in the pocket of Parvus (Helhand), who was simultaneously in touch with the socialist world and the German general staff”, and that “this would explain the extraordinarily rapid success of Lenin’s propaganda.” When was this startlingly new and original material written? In 1940, when it appeared in a book called *The Bolsheviks’ German Golden Key*, published in Paris and part of a rather voluminous literature published by Russian exiles, all of them fanatical opponents of Bolshevism, motivated by spite, hatred and the spirit of revenge. From such sources one can hardly expect a scientific appraisal of this subject or any other.

But at last Volkogonov arouses our interest when he adds: “Now that I have examined a great number of hitherto unobtainable documents...” Yes, at last we catch a glimpse of these new and exciting sources! And what do they show? Believe it or not, they show that the famous “secret of the revolution”, which has so long been kept hidden... “*is still far from being cleared up*”. (My emphasis.) Either the “secrets” were passed on by word of mouth among a small circle of Bolshevik leaders, or the evidence has been destroyed, and “Lenin knew well how to guard secrets”.[\[47\]](#)

The mountain has laboured, and borne, not even a mouse, but a squeak! But even the squeak of such a diminutive mouse is capable of being magnified a thousand-fold and broadcast to the ends of the earth. As has happened in this case, with a little help from Volkogonov’s friends in the mass media who did not waste any time in assuring everyone that this book contained conclusive proof, based on entirely new sources (hitherto unobtainable!) that Lenin was no more than an agent of the Kaiser (just as Trotsky was later said to be an agent of Hitler).

We are treated to a potted (and not very illuminating) life history of Parvus, who, by 1914 was very rich and in tow to the German general staff. Lenin seems to have met Parvus in Switzerland in 1915. Nothing new here, either, since Shub’s material has been around for a very long time, as has Zeman’s biography of Parvus, from which Volkogonov has taken most of this “new and original” section. In fact, this accusation (made by the Provisional Government during its notorious slander campaign against Lenin and the Bolsheviks in July 1917) was already answered by Lenin himself: “They implicate Parvus, trying hard to establish some sort of connection between him and the Bolsheviks. In reality it was the Bolsheviks who in the Geneva *Sotsial-Demokrat* called Parvus a renegade, denounced him ruthlessly as a German Plekhanov, and once and for all eliminated all possibility of close relations with social-chauvinists like him. It was the Bolsheviks who at a meeting held in Stockholm jointly with the Swedish Left Socialists categorically refused to admit Parvus in any capacity, even as a guest, let alone speak to him.

“Hanyecky was engaged in business as an employee of the firm in which Parvus was a partner. Commercial and financial correspondence was censored, of course, and is quite

open to examination. An effort is being made to mix these commercial affairs with politics, although no proof whatsoever is being furnished!!”[\[48\]](#)

When Bukharin raised the question of working with Parvus, Lenin dissuaded him from doing so, although some Mensheviks were working there—a fact which Lenin never utilised, and which is now never mentioned, since the slanderers are only interested in discrediting revolutionaries. In fact, Lenin reserved his sharpest attacks for the likes of Parvus, whom he castigated as a renegade and a traitor in the pages of *Sotsial Demokrat*, although none of these facts find the least echo in Volkogonov’s book. In 1915, Lenin wrote the following about Parvus in an article significantly entitled *At the Uttermost Limit*:

“He fawns upon Hindenburg, assuring his readers that ‘the German General Staff has taken a stand for a revolution in Russia’, and publishing servile paeans to this ‘embodiment of the German people’s soul’, its ‘mighty revolutionary sentiment’. He promises Germany a painless transition to socialism through an alliance between the conservatives and part of the socialists, and through ‘bread ration cards’. Like the petty coward he is, he condescendingly semi-approves of the Zimmerwald Conference, pretending not to have noticed in its manifesto the expressions directed against all shades of social-chauvinism, from the Parvus and Plekhanov variety, to that of Kolb and Kautsky.

“In all six issues of his little journal there is not a single honest thought or earnest argument or sincere article. It is nothing but a cesspool of German chauvinism covered over with a coarsely painted signboard, which alleges it represents the interests of the Russian revolution! It is perfectly natural for this cesspool to come in for praise from such opportunists as Kolb and the editors of the Chemnitz Volksstimme.

“Mr. Parvus has the effrontery to publicly declare it his ‘mission’ ‘to serve as an ideological link between the armed German proletariat and the revolutionary Russian proletariat’. It is enough to expose this clownish phrase to the ridicule of the Russian workers.”[\[49\]](#)

Volkogonov refers us triumphantly to a whole series of letters *written in code* by Lenin and received by him. Since these letters cannot be deciphered, regrettably, we can know nothing of their content. However, on the word of Volkogonov (who also could not know what is in them), we may safely *assume* them to refer to “German gold”, (whatever else would they refer to?) Unfortunately, though, there was a lot more business that Lenin conducted that had to be kept secret—like all the work of the underground, that is, 90 per cent of the party’s work at that time! During its campaign of slander against the Bolsheviks, the provisional government referred to a whole series of letters, allegedly from the Bolsheviks, that were either fabricated or deliberately distorted by the German press for propaganda purposes. Undoubtedly, the letters referred to by Volkogonov fall into this category. In dealing with these slanders, and specifically with the “letters in code”, Trotsky remarks: “The testimony of the merchant, Burstein, concerned the trade operations of Hanecky and Kozlovsky between Petrograd and Stockholm. This wartime

commerce, which evidently had recourse at times to a code correspondence, had no relation to politics. The Bolshevik Party had no relation to this commerce. Lenin and Trotsky had publicly denounced Parvus, who combined good commerce with bad politics, and in printed words had appealed to the Russian revolutionists to break off all relations with him.”[\[50\]](#)

Getting more and more desperate, Volkogonov finally appeals to... Kerensky! At which point the wheel has turned full circle, and we are left with the original campaign of lies directed against the Bolsheviks in “the month of the great slander” as Trotsky called it. A certain Yevgeviya Mavrikevna Sumenson is quoted as yet another “new and original” source. She is said to have confirmed the existence of a special account at the bank of Siberia of “around a million roubles”, of which the quantity of 800,000 is said to have been withdrawn on the eve of the revolution. Who is this Miss Sumenson? A witness at the trials of the Bolsheviks during the witch-hunt of July 1917. Where did Volkogonov get the quote? Not from “hitherto unobtainable sources”, but from Melgunov’s book published in Paris in 1940. And so on and so forth...

Is it not possible that some of the money distributed by the German general staff through its agents abroad found its way, one way or another, into the accounts of the Bolsheviks? Throughout the war, not only the Germans but the Allies also used their stooges in the labour movement to buy support among left groups in other countries. But to allege that the Germans had bought the Bolsheviks with gold and that there existed an actual bloc between the Bolsheviks and German imperialism is not only monstrous but extremely stupid. It flies in the face of all the known facts about the political conduct of the Bolsheviks both during and after the war. For example, Volkogonov tries to show that German money was channelled to the Bolsheviks via Sweden. The representative of the Bolshevik Party in Sweden was Alexander Shlyapnikov. In his memoirs, he recalls that the German secret service was indeed very active in Sweden, had penetrated the Swedish Social Democracy, and attempted to bribe the Russian revolutionaries into its service. What attitude did he take?

The answer is given in Shlyapnikov’s memoirs. In October 1914, the Dutch Social Democratic leader Troelstra, who was pro-German, arrived in Stockholm on a mission on behalf of the SPD, that is to say, on behalf of the German general staff. He wanted to stiffen up the pro-German sympathies of Branting and the other Swedish Social democratic leaders, while pushing the idea that the International bureau be moved to Amsterdam. The Dutch leader took the opportunity to sound out the Bolsheviks on their attitude to the war. Shlyapnikov gave him his answer in a speech to the congress of the Swedish Social Democrats which he attended.

After denouncing the Allies and exposing the reactionary war aims of Russia, he then turned to Troelstra:

“The German socialists’ surprise that we are not rejoicing over their recently announced alliance with their government for a ‘holy war on Russian tsarism’ is nothing but a

hypocritical cover for their own betrayal of the International and socialism from the eyes of the masses.

“We have always been glad to accept a helping hand from comrades in toil and ideas in our arduous struggle against tsarism but we have never demanded nor expected assistance to the Russian revolution from the part of German feudalism and Wilhelm II, the Russian tsar’s reactionary counsellor and friend.

“We do not renounce our struggle against Russian tsarism but in that struggle we are counting only upon our own forces.

“We would ask the German social democrats not to send Wilhelm II with his 420-millimetre gun to our aid but to try to put this war material to use against their own feudal lords just as we hope to use ours against Russian tsarism.

“The Finns, our brothers in toil, have also given a negative reply to all the ploys of Germany’s bellicose capitalism and take the same standpoint.

“The revolutionary proletariat of Russia, along with all the oppressed nationalities, hope to emerge victorious without doing deals with any government whatsoever.”[\[51\]](#)

The attack on the German Social Democracy launched by Shlyapnikov (whose name figured in the minutes as A. Belenin for reasons of security) provoked the indignation of the Swedish leader Branting, and sparked a conflict between the right and left wings of the party:

“*Branting* takes the floor on a question over which he considers it essential to take a decision. He had just familiarised himself with the text of a greeting, originating from one of the Russian parties, where it speaks of a betrayal by the German party. The speaker points out that it does not befit the congress to express condemnation directed at other parties and considers it necessary that a motion of regret be formally moved with regard to the paragraph inserted in the greetings.

“*Höglund* (Stockholm) considers it improper for the congress to adopt such a resolution because within our own party there are also comrades who regard the Germans’ behaviour as a betrayal. He moves that congress does not pass judgment but contents itself with entering Branting’s statement in the minutes.

“*S. Vinberg* (Stockholm) considers that we should state merely that the judgement expressed remains the responsibility of the Russians.

“*Branting* repeats his demand and asserts that otherwise the misunderstanding will arise that delegates to congress are in sympathy with the aforementioned judgement.”

In the end the congress defeated Vinberg’s motion and passed Branting’s but only by a narrow margin—54 votes to 50. This situation was eventually to be duplicated in all the

parties of the Second International, paving the way for massive splits and the formation of a new International. But that still lay five years in the future, after the most terrible tribulations.

Far from enjoying access to unlimited funds in the form of “German gold”, the Bolsheviks were afflicted by constant financial difficulties. The lack of funds is a constant theme in Shlyapnikov’s memoirs: “I set about reinforcing the working group of Bolsheviks in Stockholm and training several proletarians in the conspiratorial work of smuggling literature, etc. The Petersburgers had displayed no initiative in organising communications. *My activity in this direction ran into obstacles for lack of funds.* Smuggling could be managed at great expense, but I had no money and not a hope of obtaining any. We had to improvise. This was far from satisfactory, especially when with some 500 roubles a month I could have showered our working-class organisations in Russia with literature and maintained a regular monthly contact with every corner of the country. But such a trifling sum could not be managed, so there matters rested.”

Had the Bolsheviks been prepared to accept money from the Germans, they would not have been in such desperate financial straits during the war. But to have accepted aid from such a source would have been the kiss of death. Shlyapnikov recalls the difficulties they faced:

“There were no permanent properly established links with Russia. We had to use the good offices of passing emigrants, and also Finnish comrades, for transporting the precious funds. Various commercial and manufacturing firms were running contraband traffic in both goods and personnel. Heading some of these establishments were Russian engineers glorying in their former Social Democracy, but these gentlemen were afraid of losing their cosy niches and did not wish to lift so much as a finger in the business of aid for revolutionary work in Russia.”[\[52\]](#)

## NOTES

[44] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 169.

[45] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 11/3/1916*, vol. 35. pp. 214-5.

[46] A. Shlyapnikov, *On the Eve of 1917*, pp. 35 and 37-38.

[47] Dimitri Volkogonov, *Le Vrai Lénine*, p. 130.

[48] LCW, *Dreyfusiad*, vol. 25, p. 167.

[49] LCW, *At the Uttermost Limit*, vol. 21, pp. 421-2.

[50] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 599-600.

[51] A. Shlyapnikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-1.

[52] Ibid., pp. 44, 51 and 47.

## Part Five: The War Years

[section 4 of 6]

### How Did the Party Survive?

In recent years there have been many attempts to downgrade and belittle the role of the Bolsheviks in the workers' movement in Russia. One of the more serious studies is Robert McKean's book, which is very well documented, and is intended to correct the excessively rosy and simplistic picture of the old Stalinist histories which present the history of Bolshevism as a kind of triumphal march. The party made no mistakes, was always on the ascent, always in the leadership of every strike and demonstration, and so on. From such fairy tales, one can learn nothing about the way in which the Bolshevik Party was really built. Thus, the road is blocked, not only to the past, but to the future. It is necessary to understand the truth about the past in order to learn from it. While McKean's case is probably over-stated, there is no reason to doubt that the party was in very poor shape at the beginning of the War. This is hardly surprising. The objective conditions were extremely difficult at this time, McKean admits:

“At the advanced Petrograd Metals plant, one memoirist recalled, the workers exhibited indifference in the first year of the war to the Bolsheviks' anti-war case. At other cardinal defence enterprises such as Erikson and Putilov operatives voluntarily surrendered as much as a fifth of their weekly wage in order to provide support to the families whose breadwinners had been summoned to military duty. Work stoppages remained extremely rare occurrences until the summer of 1915. Bolshevik leaders themselves privately, if indirectly, admitted the existence of this impediment. In the spring of 1915, for example, they acknowledged their 'inability to attract the masses to the socialist camp by demonstrations against the war'.”

He quotes one unnamed worker from the red Vyborg district of Petrograd as recalling that “in the factories ... in the first year of the war the mood was not particularly revolutionary.” And concludes that: “At most the party's membership [in Petrograd] did not exceed 500. In the almost complete absence of all city or even district networks, consistent planned activity or the formulation of an agreed strategy proved a chimera. Agitational work could take place only on the most restricted scale. In all the constraining circumstances the outreach of the 25 or so anti-war leaflets published to the summer of 1915 and the unknown copies of *Sotsial-Demokrat* reaching the city was likely to have been inconsiderable.”

Arguing against Soviet historians who claimed that at the outset of the war the five Bolshevik deputies reconstituted along with Kamenev the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee, McKean states that he has found no corroboration of this assertion in the

relevant Okhrana files. There is no reason to doubt this, since the arrest Kamenev along with the Duma deputies, and the general disorganisation of the party committees, would have cut short its activities, if it ever had any. The absence of leadership, either from the leading bodies in Russia or from abroad, meant that everything depended on the initiative of the worker-Bolsheviks in the factories. The difficulty in getting precise information about the work of these unnamed heroes and heroines is self-evident, above all in conditions of strict clandestinity. But this lack of information does not mean that these people did not exist. The point is made by McKean who writes: "In the absence of effective leadership from abroad or from the PK [Petersburg Committee], revolutionary strategy and tactics were at the discretion of rank-and-file socialist militants throughout the first year of the war."

In preparation for 9 January 1915 the Petersburg committee succeeded in putting out a leaflet calling for a strike on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. McKean compares the poor response to the situation after the Lena shootings in 1912. But that was the beginning of an upturn in the class struggle, when the workers were recovering from the effects of the defeat of the 1905 revolution. In the given context of the War and patriotic reaction, the very fact of producing a leaflet at all may be considered a success. 2,000 workers responded to the call and downed tools—a small result when compared to the pre-War figures, but still a significant one in the given situation. All that it shows is that the masses still had their heads down. The orgy of reaction had still not exhausted itself: "Sweeping police raids and detentions towards the end of April put paid effectively to revolutionaries' plans for 1 May. 'The work of local Leninists,' the police reported at the time, 'is at present completely disorganised'. Although the remnants of the PK succeeded in publishing a leaflet on the very eve of the workers' 'holiday', the small number of copies remained undistributed for the most part. A mere 600 workers refused to report for work on that day."[\[53\]](#)

However, the Okhrana's agents spoke too soon. Leninism was by no means destroyed. The creation of a strong and disciplined centralised organisation composed of revolutionary cadres was what permitted the Bolsheviks to survive the test of fire. They alone were in a position to sustain revolutionary work in the harsh conditions of the underground. By contrast, the war utterly disorganised the Mensheviks at grass-roots level. By January 1916, Martov could write in a plaintive tone: "In Russia things are going badly for us... F.I. (Dan) fears that everything that is alive is going over to the Leninists."[\[54\]](#) This was no accident. The organisational and political flabbiness of Menshevism (which were head and tail of the same coin) rendered them ill-equipped to cope with the arduous conditions of underground work in wartime. In any case, they had made a principle out of disbanding the illegal party organisation in favour of purely legal activities. How could such a position be justified now?

In fact, the Menshevik organisation barely existed in Russia at this time. This is acknowledged by non-Marxist writers like Robert McKean: "The Organisational Committee and the Central Initiative Group betrayed no sign of existence in this period." And again: "Both the Mensheviks' dearth of organisations and the 'liquidationist'

intellectuals' aversion to strikes as a form of labour protest resulted in their complete indifference to the possibility of utilising the political anniversaries.”[\[55\]](#)

The lack of an organised expression of Bolshevism does not tell us everything. If Bolshevism had been completely liquidated during the War, how was it possible for the party to recover so quickly after February? How did it succeed in moving to take power in only nine months? If one accepts McKean's case at face value, there is no answer to this riddle. But there is, in fact, a very simple answer. In the period before the War, four-fifths of the organised workers supported the Bolsheviks. Many of them were not active in party committees, but readers of *Pravda* who collaborated with the Bolsheviks in one way or another. Many hundreds of thousands more would have been touched by the agitation and slogans of the Bolsheviks. The idea of the party lived on in their minds even though they had their heads down. This was the real capital of the party, that re-emerged as conditions changed and played a key role in the events of February 1917. In the same letter to Shlyapnikov, where he underlines the difficult position the party found itself in after the arrest of the Duma deputies, Lenin points out the real strength of Bolshevism—in that layer of revolutionary workers educated by the party in the period 1912-14: “At all events, the work of our Party has now become 100 times more difficult. And still we shall carry it on! *Pravda has trained up thousands of class-conscious workers out of whom, in spite of all difficulties, a new collective of leaders—the Russian CC of the Party—will be formed.*”[\[56\]](#)

Subsequent events proved Lenin to be correct, despite Robert McKean's attempts to show the opposite. In August 1915, when the tide was already beginning to turn in Russia, Lenin wrote to Shlyapnikov, calling for the rebuilding of the organisation: “It would be extremely important for leading groups to come together in two or three centres (*most conspiratively*), establish contact with us, restore a Bureau of the Central Committee (one exists, I think, in Petersburg already) and the CC itself in Russia. They should establish firm ties with us (*if necessary*, one or two persons should be brought to Sweden for this purpose). We would send news-sheets, leaflets, etc. The most important thing is firm and constant relations.”[\[57\]](#)

The party still faced an uphill struggle. The party's organisations inside Russia were badly disorganised and contacts with the exterior extremely difficult. Yet the most important thing, as Lenin pointed out in this letter was that the party had survived, despite everything: “It is clear that the advanced sections of Pravdist workers, that bulwark of our Party, has survived, in spite of terrible devastations in its ranks.”

Lenin's comments go right to the heart of the matter. No matter what persecution, no matter how many arrests, no matter how many police agents succeeded in infiltrating the party, Bolshevism could not be eradicated. As long as there remained a hard core of cadres, trained and educated in the ideas, methods and traditions of the party, it was invincible. Trotsky writes: “The war produced a dreadful desolation in the underground movement. After the arrest of the Duma fraction the Bolsheviks had no centralised party organisation at all. The local committees had a scattered existence, and often had no connection with the workers' districts. Only scattered groups, circles and solitary

individuals did anything. However, the reviving strike movement gave them some spirit and some strength in the factories. They gradually began to find each other and build up the district connections. The underground work revived. 'Ever since the beginning of the war, the Leninists, who have behind them in Russia an overwhelming majority of the underground social democratic organisations, have in their larger centres (such as Petrograd, Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, Tula, Kostroma, Vladimir Province, Samara) been issuing in considerable numbers revolutionary appeals with a demand to stop the war, overthrow the existing government, and found a republic. And this work has its palpable result in workers' strikes and disorders'." [58]

### **Catastrophe at the Front**

At the commencement of hostilities, the Russian army appeared as a formidable military machine—a numberless mass of fighting men, ready to lay down their lives for the tsar like the hero of Glinka's opera. The German officers were impressed, then appalled, by the sight of vast numbers of grey overcoats advancing remorselessly over open fields, only to be mowed down by German machine-guns. Surely, here was the famous old Russian army described by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, made up of mindless peasants willing to follow the orders of their superiors with blind obedience, and submit, patient and unquestioning, to the harshest impositions. This myth about the Russian people, which even surfaces today as a supposed "explanation" of the present situation, despite its patently unscientific and quasi-racist character, was blown sky-high by the real historical experience of 1914-17. The Russian army did not benefit from the vast number of troops at its disposal. It was gravely under-equipped in everything. Even such elementary items as boots and rifles were in short supply, to say nothing of tanks, airplanes, shells and artillery. In 1914 there were no more than 679 motor cars (and two motorised ambulances!) for the whole of the army.

Throughout the war, the Russian army was expected to play the role of cannon-fodder for the Allies. Thus, the original plan of the Russian high command had been to launch an offensive on the South-Western Front against the weaker Austrian forces, whilst defending the North-Western Front against a stronger German force. But under pressure from France this plan was changed to an all-out offensive on both Fronts to force the Germans to transfer troops from the theatre in the west and thus relieve pressure on the French. The offensive, which seemed to start well, ended in the bloody disaster of Tannenberg, where at the end of August Samsonov's army was surrounded and cut to bits in four days of the most appalling butchery. 70,000 Russians were killed or wounded and another 100,000 taken prisoner. By contrast, the Germans losses amounted to a mere 15,000 men. In answer to the condolences offered by the French representative, the Grand Duke Nikolai, the Russian Commander-in-Chief, replied nonchalantly: "Nous sommes heureux de faire de tels sacrifices pour nos alliés" ("We are happy to make such sacrifices for our allies"). By the end of 1914, Russian casualties were already in the region of 1.8 million.

All this slowly worked on the psychology and morale of the soldiers, as slow dripping wears away the hardest rock. Just as the Russian working class was in the main not

patriotic in outlook, so the mass of peasants in uniform were unenthusiastic about a war which they did not understand and could not identify with. The proverbial obedience of the Russian muzhik was soon strained to the limit by the months and years of hardship, suffering and death. Orlando Figes affirms that: "The soldier of the Russian army was, for the most part, a stranger to the sentiment of patriotism."

And to underline this point, he quotes several instructive examples: "A farm agent from Smolensk, who served in the rear garrisons, heard such comments from the peasant soldiers during the first weeks of the war:

"'What devil has brought this war on us? We are butting into other people's business.'

"'We have talked it over among ourselves; if the Germans want payment, it would be better to pay ten roubles a head than to kill people.'

"'Is it not all the same what tsar we live under? It cannot be worse under the German one.'

"'Let them go on and fight themselves. Wait a while, we will settle accounts with you.'

"These sorts of attitudes became more common in the ranks as the war went on, as Brussilov had cause to complain:

"The drafts arriving from the interior of Russia had not the slightest notion of what the war had to do with them. Time after time I asked my men in the trenches why we were at war; the inevitable senseless answer was that a certain Archduke and his wife had been murdered and that consequently the Austrians had tried to humiliate the Serbians. Practically no one knew who these Serbians were; they were equally doubtful as to what a Slav was. Why Germany should want to make war on us because of these Serbians, no one could say ... They had never heard of the ambitions of Germany; they did not even know that such a country existed."

An army always reflects the society from which it is formed. The class divisions in the tsarist army, the brutal discipline, the corruption and inefficiency, the callous indifference of the officers to the suffering and slaughter around them, did not pass unnoticed by even the most politically uneducated peasant soldier. The Allied commanders themselves were shocked by the rottenness of the Russian general staff, which was but the mirror-image of the rottenness of the tsarist-Rasputin regime. The Supreme Commander himself, the Grand Duke Nikolai, had never taken part in any serious fighting and was little more than a figurehead, writes Figes. "General Yanushkevich, his Chief of Staff, had nothing to recommend him but the personal favour of the tsar, who had discovered him as a young Guardsman at the palace. He had never even commanded a battalion. Colonel Knox, the British military attaché at Stavka, gained 'the impression of a courtier rather than a soldier'." The rot seeped from the top down. "The aristocratic generals committed endless blunders (one even had the distinction of ordering his artillery to fire on his own infantry's trenches)."

The growing mood of revolt is mirrored in the declarations of the troops: “‘Look at the way our high-up officers live, the landowners whom we have always served,’ wrote one peasant soldier to his local newspaper at home. ‘They get good food, their families are given everything they need, and although they may live at the Front, they do not live in the trenches where we are but four or five versts away’.”

Any study of army mutinies will show that the leaders are usually the NCOs. These “natural leaders of men” are usually selected from the most energetic and intelligent layers of the soldiers. In charge with most of the day to day running of the army, they are frequently hostile and contemptuous of the upper echelons. Sixty per cent of the NCOs in the tsarist army were peasants, mostly in their early twenties and with very little education. But, as Figes points out: “The war was... a great democratizer, opening channels of advancement for millions of peasant sons. Their sympathies lay firmly with the ordinary soldiers, and any hopes that they might form a bridge between the high-born officers and their low-born troops were badly misplaced. This was the radical military cohort—literate, upwardly mobile, socially disoriented and brutalised by war—who would lead the mutiny of February, the revolutionary soldiers’ committees, and eventually the drive to Soviet power during 1917. Many of the Red Army’s best commanders (e.g. Chapaev, Zhukov and Rokossovsky) had been NCOs in the tsarist army, much as the marshals of Napoleon’s wars had begun as subalterns in the king’s army.”

One such sergeant in the tsarist army, the peasant Dmitry Os’kin, who later became a Social Revolutionary, wrote in his diary, April 1915: “What are we doing in this war? Several hundred men have already passed through my platoon alone and at least half of them have ended up on the fields of battle either killed or wounded. What will they get at the end of the war? ... My year and a half of military service, with almost a year at the Front, has stopped me from thinking about this, for the task of the platoon commander demands strict discipline and that means, above all, not letting the soldier think freely for himself. But these are the things we must think about’.”[\[59\]](#)

Out of such stuff are revolutions made.

From May to September 1915 the Germans inflicted a series of shattering blows against the tsarist forces. The Russians were pushed back 300 miles, surrendering a territory bigger than France. Three quarters of a million Russian soldiers were in prisoner of war camps, and ten million people became refugees. The losses of the army in killed, wounded and missing amounted to between 7.2 and 8.5 million men, i.e. between 45 per cent and 53 per cent of all the men mobilised. A million men surrendered to the German and Austrian forces during the Great Retreat. “The army was no longer retreating but simply fleeing”, Polivanov, Minister for War, stated. “Confidence in its strength is completely destroyed. ... Headquarters has completely lost its head. Contradictory orders, wavering hither and thither, feverish changes of commanding officers, and general confusion unnerve even the most courageous men. ... The confusion at headquarters is no longer a secret and still further demoralises the army.”

At the end of July, Krivoshein, Minister of Agriculture, told the Council of Ministers: “Hungry and destitute people are bringing panic everywhere, and extinguished all the vestiges of the enthusiasm of the first months of the war. [Refugees] move in a solid mass, they tread down the fields, destroy the meadows and woods. ... The railway lines are congested; even movements of military trains and shipments of food will soon become impossible. I do not know what is going on in the areas that fall into the hands of the enemy, but I do know that not only the immediate rear of our army but the remote rear as well are devastated, ruined ... it is in my competence to declare, as a member of the council of ministers, that the second great migration of peoples, staged by general headquarters, will bring Russia to the abyss, to revolution and to ruin.”[\[60\]](#)

### **Bolsheviks in the Armed Forces**

The possibilities of conducting revolutionary work in the armed forces were clearly even more limited than elsewhere, although the situation began to change after 1915. It was never the Party’s policy to refuse to join the army or fight in a war, but to go with the rest of the class and conduct revolutionary work in the barracks and trenches. However, the class composition of the Russian army, overwhelmingly made up of peasant troops, initially created unfavourable conditions for revolutionary activity. The Bolsheviks did conduct work in the armed forces, especially among sailors—the navy being traditionally working class in composition. In the latter stages of the War, there was a growing radicalisation and ferment in the fleet. Bad food and conditions and excessive work caused outbreaks of mutiny which was viciously put down in October 1915. Warships are like floating factories and the crews that manned them had to contain a fair number of skilled workers—engineers, stokers, electricians and the like—drawn from the factories themselves. Many of these sailors had participated in the revolutionary movements before the war and had been Bolsheviks or at least had been touched by Bolshevik propaganda. In the Baltic Fleet almost every big ship had its group of Social Democrats. It was no accident that the sailors played a key role in 1917, or that the majority of them backed the Bolsheviks.

Among those active in the Baltic Fleet was F.F.I. Iyin—known to history as Raskolnikov—who played an important role in the revolution. His political biography is fairly typical. Born into a poor family, he discovered the ideas of Marx and Engels as a teenager and joined the RSDLP in 1910 while studying at the St Petersburg Polytechnical Institute where Vyacheslav Molotov was one of his comrades in the Bolshevik students’ organisations. When *Pravda* was launched in 1912, Raskolnikov (he was now given his Party name) was one of the original editorial team, working as a secretary. He was then arrested and sentenced to three years exile in the far northern province of Archangelsk. As a result of pleas from his widowed mother, the sentence was reduced to banishment from Russia. Raskolnikov travelled to Paris where he hoped to continue his revolutionary work with the Bolsheviks, but was arrested in Germany as a spy and sent back to Russia. In 1913 he was amnestied and returned to Petersburg where he continued to work on *Pravda* until the outbreak of War, when he joined the navy as a cadet. It was in this situation that Raskolnikov found himself when the February revolution broke out. There were many Raskolnikovs in the tsarist fleet.

It is impossible to know exactly how many Bolsheviks were active in the army, for obvious reasons. Such work would have been extremely clandestine. The Khrushchovite *Istoriya* claims the existence of more than 80 party cells in the Baltic Fleet and 30 or more on the Western Front. This is almost certainly an exaggeration. But that there were Bolsheviks active in the army and especially in the fleet is undeniable. The importance of these soldier-sailor Bolshevik agitators cannot be underestimated, but the figures given in the *Istoriya* are described as “approximate”, and no source given, so we must treat them with caution. The real position was undoubtedly far more complex than this. Alexander Shlyapnikov, who played a leading role in the Bolshevik Party in Russia during the war explains that, while there were many Bolsheviks and actual party organisations in the fleet, their connections with the party leadership were, at best, tenuous. Under the harsh conditions of wartime, the RSDLP sailors’ committees functioned independently, although their activities alarmed the authorities which strove to root them out through arrests and repression.

The growing strength of the revolutionary current among the sailors, particularly in the Baltic Sea Fleet, is shown obliquely by the wave of arrests of sailors that took place in Petersburg, Kronstadt and Helsinki, coinciding with a strike wave in Petersburg in early 1916. A major trial of the “Military Organisation of the Petersburg Committee of the RSDLP” was held. The voluminous Bill of Indictment drawn up by the Okhrana and filling 50 typed pages, describes the work of the Social Democrats in the navy in great detail. The tsarist secret police, whose agents closely monitored all subversive activity in the armed forces, states that:

“From the autumn of 1915 reports started coming into the Kronstadt gendarmerie headquarters that there was a marked increase in the activity of revolutionary organisations of social democratic tendencies among the crews of vessels of the Baltic Fleet. These are endeavouring to place as many of their supporters in the fleet who would train the ships’ crews for actions in pursuit of a variety of demands when the war comes to an end. The aforementioned activity, although not succeeding in organising systematic propaganda, has, as events have proved, nevertheless exerted a powerful influence on the crews’ excited mood and this in the end overflowed into major disorders on the battleship *Hangut* on 19 October 1915 the participants in which, namely 26 ratings, were sentenced by the Naval Court-Martial of 17 December of the same year and duly punished.

“At the same time there arose similar disorders on the cruiser *Riurik*.

“The existence of propaganda was confirmed by the participants and by disorders on other vessels that arose from the crews’ dissatisfaction with their food and officers bearing German surnames.

“The Petersburg Security Department has received reports parallel to this material about the emergence of a military organisation of the Russian Social Democratic Party among ship and shore-based crews of the Baltic Fleet.

“According to these reports social democratic circles have been formed on each warship whose leading personnel sat on a general directing committee. The latter, by arranging gatherings ashore in teashops and restaurants, directed its energies chiefly towards explaining current events to the sailors in a desirable light with the purpose of creating a climate of discontent among them.”

With the unconscious humour that is characteristic of police statements about political questions, the report continues in its poker-faced bureaucratic tone: “This approach apparently succeeded in winning some influence on the sailors, creating among them *a highly restive mood for which no other reason could be observed.*” What a priceless pearl of bureaucratic-police wisdom! The sailors of the Baltic Fleet faced atrocious conditions, bad food, autocratic officers and a bloody and reactionary war, yet the police blockheads can see no reason for their “restive mood” than the malicious activity of agitators. The same malignant cause lies behind every strike and manifestation of social discontent, since the working people must be delighted to work long hours in bad conditions for low pay, for the greater glory of God and the capitalist system!

Having made this profound discovery of the law that explains everything in terms comprehensible to a policeman’s level of intelligence (i.e. demonology) the report then proceeds to contradict it: “*Although the circles arose on the ships independently and outside of the influence of the group functioning in Petersburg that styles itself the Petersburg Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party*, the leading committee of the naval organisation has none the less from the time of appearance sought opportunities to join forces with the ‘Petrograd Committee’ which it in fact achieved through one of the active leaders of the workers’ movement who was the representative of the Vyborg party district on the Petrograd Committee, the peasant Ivan Fedorovich Orlov.”[\[61\]](#)

Here, unintentionally, the real relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the developing movement of revolt is fairly accurately described. The “highly restive mood” of the sailors was due to objective conditions that were not created by the revolutionaries, but by the tsarist regime and the imperialist war, itself the product of the unbearable contradictions of world capitalism. This inchoate but increasingly intense feeling of discontent in the mass finds a conscious expression at a certain stage through the minority who have had some experience of political life before the war, and who are able to put into words the unconscious aspirations of the majority below decks. Inevitably, this mood strives for an organised expression, and eventually finds it in the necessarily secret organisations established by the sailor-revolutionaries, who, in turn, attempt to establish contacts with the party, which remains their only point of reference. Only at this point does the Okhrana obtain the information that convinces them of the existence of a gigantic and sinister plot of some all-powerful revolutionary centre which, by magical means, turns honest, god-fearing sailors into subversives “for which no other reason could be observed”.

The upsurge of the workers’ movement in St Petersburg found an echo in the Baltic Sea Fleet. By the autumn of 1915, it seems that a fairly strong Social Democratic organisation

existed there, with committees on all the big warships and shore companies in Kronstadt, Helsingfors, Petersburg and other points on the Baltic coast, all of which were linked to the “Chief Committee of the Kronstadt Military Organisation”. On October 19, the anger over bad food and the harsh regime on board exploded in a protest on the battleship *Hangut*. The sailors seized some of the officers and contacted other vessels requesting aid. This was precisely the kind of unorganised outburst which the Bolsheviks had been striving to prevent. The movement was quickly isolated and put down with savage reprisals. 26 men stood trial and the whole group was transferred to shore duty and disbanded. At the trial in December 1915, two men were sentenced to death and 14 others to hard labour. But such sentences could not extinguish the flame of revolt. Other protests followed, provoking increasing concern in the authorities. One police report states that “functioning on board every vessel are social democratic cells that elect their own committees, each vessel’s committee having its representative on the leading committee. The aforementioned cells have arisen quite independently, owing to the existence of favourable soil in the sense of the high degree of development of the ratings and the presence among them of individuals who prior to entry into military service had already become skilled in underground work.”

The report shows how the Social Democrats conducted agitation and propaganda in the canteens and cafés, explaining current events to the sailors and drawing revolutionary conclusions, while adding that “the ideological leaders of the underground work on the warships have tried in every way to restrain the sailors from sporadic unrest, in order to bring about a situation where a general action could take account of the possibility of an active movement on the part of the working class which might bring crucial influence to bear upon changing the political system.”<sup>[62]</sup> Allowing for an element of exaggeration for the sake of effect, this report of the trusted agents of the regime has obviously the ring of authenticity in at least some aspects.

Despite the impossibility of establishing the exact nature and extent of revolutionary activity in the armed forces in time of war, there can be no doubt that as time wore on and conditions worsened, the mood of the soldiers began to change and become more open to revolutionary ideas, and they looked towards the Social Democrats, especially their most radical wing, the Bolsheviks. The process is well portrayed by Trotsky in his *History*:

“The revolutionary elements, scattered at first, were drowned in the army almost without a trace, but with the growth of the general discontent they rose to the surface. The sending of striking workers to the front as a punishment increased the audience. ‘The army in the rear, and especially at the front’, reports a secret agent, ‘is full of elements of which some are capable of becoming active forces of insurrection, and others may merely refuse to engage in punitive activities.’ The Gendarme Administration of the Petrograd province declares in October 1916, on the basis of a report made by a representative of the Land Union, that ‘the mood in the army is alarming, the relations between officers and soldiers is extremely tense, even bloody encounters are taking place. Deserters are to be met everywhere by the thousands. Everyone who comes near the army must carry away a complete and convincing impression of the utter moral disintegration of the troops’.”<sup>[63]</sup>

## The Liberals Begin to Stir

The military catastrophe stirred the liberals out of their state of inertia. Under growing pressure, the tsar finally agreed to recall the Duma on 19 July 1915. Here was an opportunity to seize the reins of power from the shaky grasp of the ruling clique without a revolution! The regime was riven with splits. The Progressive Bloc was formed in the late summer, when Russia was already in the throes of a deep crisis. It ranged all the way from the moderate Nationalists and Octobrists to the Cadets and had a clear majority in the Duma—241 votes of a total of 407. “Since 1915 we patriots had almost become Cadets because the Cadets had almost become patriots,” this was how Sulgin, a Nationalist deputy, put it. In the more conservative-minded upper house, the state council, it only had 89 votes out of a total of 196. “Only a strong, firm and active authority can lead the fatherland to victory,” declared the bloc’s first manifesto.

The Mensheviks and Trudoviks—though formally outside the bloc—supported the bourgeois liberals. Once again, Chkheidze tried to frighten the bourgeoisie into taking power with the threat of the masses. For its part, the autocracy, which had originally given some concessions to the bourgeois (reshuffling certain ministers and changing a few generals) then moved away again. But all this “palace politics” with its constant game of parliamentary musical chairs was by now quite irrelevant. It is interesting to note that, while all this was going on, against the will of the bourgeoisie, the tsar had secretly entered into contact with Berlin with the aim of concluding a separate peace with Germany. This was no accident. The situation was getting serious: crisis and splits at the top; military defeats at the front; strikes and demonstrations and bourgeois opposition at home. Even the thick-headed Nicholas could now feel the ground shake under his feet. The tsar had no intention of “sharing power” with the bourgeois liberals, who were by this time toying with the idea of a palace coup to put Nicholas’ brother Mikhail on the throne. But this plan, like all the other schemes of the liberals, came to nothing.

The bourgeoisie, while striving for a place in the sun and bristling at the rule of a corrupt and incompetent autocracy, nevertheless lived in fear of revolution and constantly looked over its shoulder at the “dark masses”. Lionel Kochan quotes the comments of the director of the Police Department that the strike outbreak had acted “in a chilling manner” on the tactics of the Cadets. Fully aware of the impotence of the liberals, the government treated them with undisguised and well-merited contempt. Sazonov (Minister of Foreign Affairs) contemptuously told his fellow-ministers that if the Cadets were offered some crumbs they would be the first to come to an agreement with the government.

“Milyukov is the greatest bourgeois of all and fears a social revolution more than anything else,” he continued. ‘Yes, and the majority of the Cadets are trembling for their investments.’ If only Sazonov had trembled for *his* investments...

“Shulgin defined the bloc’s aim in purely static terms—as an attempt ‘to calm the masses’.”

The Cadets' dilemma—to see the need for action, yet to fear to act—was graphically illuminated in V.A. Maklakov's famous article *A Tragic Situation*. He compared Russia to an automobile entrusted to a chauffeur, so incapable that he is taking the vehicle to inevitable disaster. Those in the vehicle who are able to drive dare not interfere—not for one second must the car be left without a driver or else it will fly into the abyss. The chauffeur knows this and that is why he can make merry over the alarm and impotence of his passengers.

“The bloc, therefore, petrified by fear lest it inadvertently admit the masses to its private quarrel with the tsar, spent its time in discussion that did not lead to action. Like so many Oblomovs, it discussed, negatively and positively, the growing despair in the country, the fear of revolution, the need for another 11 March, the railway crisis, the fuel crisis... In retrospect, Milyukov identified the autumn of 1915 as ‘the precise moment’ when the revolution became inevitable.”[\[64\]](#)

The proposal of a parliamentary government responsible to the Duma was put forward by the left-wing Cadets and Kerensky. This was supported by the Mensheviks, but Miliukov, the Cadet leader and principal architect of the Bloc, would not hear of it. The Cadets bent over backwards to make their proposals acceptable to the tsar. But all this moderation was in vain. The tsarina and the Rasputin clique had far more influence over Nicholas than the “moderates” could ever aspire to. “‘Show your fist,’ the tsarina had urged her weak-willed husband. ‘You are the *Autocrat* and they dare not forget it’.”[\[65\]](#) Nicholas responded accordingly. On 3 September the tsar ordered the dissolution of the Duma until November and began dismissing ministers he thought insufficiently trustworthy. At the beginning of October, the acting Minister of the Interior Shcherbatov was replaced by the reactionary Alexei N. Khvostov. Kerensky wrote bitterly: “The tsar's co-ruler, the tsarina, was thus giving notice to the entire nation that there was to be no more vacillation in the defence of the time-honoured principles of Russian autocracy. All hopes of an agreement with the Crown were crushed—that much the leaders of the Progressive Bloc now realised. What were they to do?”[\[66\]](#)

What could they do? The only way to remove the regime was by mobilising the masses for a direct onslaught. But the very thought filled these gentlemen with terror. The workers responded to the dissolution of the Duma with a protest general strike. But the slogan was not “Convene the Duma”, but “Down with the government!” The strike was to have continued for three days, but when General Frolov issued an order for the strikers to be brought before field court-martials, and so on, the Petersburg Committee resolved to strike for one more day to demonstrate that the workers were not ending the strike on the general's orders. The Liquidators were against this and their supporters returned to work; the Bolshevik workers returned to work one day later, as had been decided. Altogether, 150,000 went on strike in Petersburg, 25,000 in Nizhni Novgorod (where they struck for only one day); there were big strikes in Moscow, Kharkov, and Yekaterinoslav. “After these strikes,” reported *Sotsial Demokrat*, “the liberals went on a concerted ‘pacification’ drive, but the workers were not about to be pacified at all. The repression carried out against them, the incredible rise of inflation, and so on, heightened the revolutionary mood.”[\[67\]](#)

This strike served notice that the proletariat had recovered from the earlier set-backs and was on the move again. Such a prospect filled the liberals with dread. Far better to knuckle under to the autocracy than have another 1905! The fear of the masses ensured that the liberals' response to the arbitrary action of the tsar would be non-existent. Prince Lvov was elected to lead a delegation to plead with the tsar to "place the heavy burden of power upon the shoulders of men made strong by the nation's confidence". But Nicholas refused to receive them. They were summoned instead to the Ministry of the Interior where they were told that their "intrusion into state politics" had been presumptuous.

The dissolution of the Duma cruelly exposed the liberals' impotence. Power lay firmly in the hands of the Romanov-Rasputin regime. The liberals were becoming desperate. "I am afraid", one Cadet leader told his colleagues in the autumn of 1916, 'that the policy of the government will lead to a situation in which the Duma will be powerless to do anything for the pacification of the masses'."

On 1 November, when the Duma reassembled, even the moderate Miliukov finally understood that time was running out for the policy of co-operation with the government. In his opening speech to the Duma, he launched an attack on the government's abuses of power, one after another, and asking the question: "Is this folly or treason?" Of course, Milyukov had no intention of stirring up revolution—merely to frighten the autocracy into making concessions in order to save itself. But in the charged atmosphere of the times, his words had an altogether different effect—much to its author's discomfort. Since the law prohibited its publication, the speech was copied and distributed by illegal means. The workers made use of its contents to denounce the autocracy, its ministers and all its works.

"My speech acquired the reputation of a storm-signal for the revolution,' a bemused Miliukov later recalled. 'Such was not my intention. But the prevailing mood in the country served as a megaphone for my words'." [\[68\]](#)

## NOTES

[53] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., pp. 368, 369, 367 and 370.

[54] *Pis'ima P.B. Aksel'rod Yu. O. Martova 1901-1916*, p. 355.

[55] Robert B. McKean, op. cit., p. 371.

[56] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov*, 28/11/1914, vol. 35, p. 175 (my emphasis).

[57] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov*, 23/8/1915, vol. 35, p. 205.

[58] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 62.

[59] O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, pp. 257, 258, 259, 260, 264 and 265.

[60] Quoted in L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, pp. 181-2.

[61] A. Shlyapnikov, op. cit., pp. 138-9 and 138-9 (my emphasis).

[62] See Shlyapnikov, op. cit., pp. 191 and 192.

[63] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 44.

[64] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, pp. 184, 185 and 186.

[65] O. Figes, op. cit., p. 276.

[66] Kerensky, *Memoirs*, p. 142.

[67] Quoted in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*.

[68] O. Figes, op. cit., p. 285 and 287.

## Part Five: The War Years

[section 5 of 6]

### The Turn of the Tide

Trotsky once remarked that theory is the superiority of foresight over astonishment. As Lenin had predicted, the revolution was given a powerful impetus by Russia's military defeats. At the beginning of the war, Lenin was completely isolated. His views on the war were not even shared by many of his closest comrades. But now things were different. Finally, events were proving him right. The turning point was probably in April-June 1915. His letters begin to reflect a new confidence and optimism:

“Events in Russia have completely endorsed our position, which the social-patriot donkeys (from Alexinsky to Chkheidze) have christened defeatism. The facts have proved that we are right!! The military reverses are helping to shake the foundations of tsarism, and facilitating an alliance of the revolutionary workers of Russia and other countries. People say: what will ‘you’ do, if ‘you’, the revolutionaries, defeat tsarism? I reply: (1) our victory will fan the flames of the ‘Left’ movement in Germany a hundredfold; (2) if ‘we’ defeated tsarism completely, we would propose peace to all the belligerent powers on democratic terms and, if this were rejected, we would conduct a *revolutionary war*.”[\[69\]](#)

The corruption of the regime was palpable at all levels, at the court, in the army and in industry. There was a cosy relation between the government and the big arms manufactures. “The huge Putilov plant, for example, received 113 million roubles worth

of orders for shells—far more than it could deliver on time—at a price six times higher than the average market price. Putilov used the cash to subsidise the loss-making parts of his business, including his own fabulous lifestyle, so that his company eventually went bankrupt and had to be sequestered by the state in 1916.”[\[70\]](#) No wonder Lenin wrote sarcastically in response to the tearful complaints of the pacifists: “War is a ‘terrible’ thing? Yes. But it is a terribly *profitable* thing.”[\[71\]](#)

The war brought rising prices, bread shortage, speculation and blackmarketeering. Fabulous profits were made by the arms manufacturers. The unbearable conditions of the masses called forth a wave of strikes. In 1915 there were 1,063 strikes, 15 times more than in the second half of 1914 (i.e. the first six months of the war). The number of strikers reached 569,999—more than 15 times more. The strikes affected especially the big factories. The upswing in the strike movement began in April-June 1915. In these three months alone there were 440 strikes and 181,600 strikers, double the figures for the eight previous months of the war. The rising graph of the strike movement served notice on the regime that the patience of the working class was reaching its limits. A key role in this was played by the textile workers of Ivanovo-Voznesensk and Kostroma. They were the first to move.

In spite of everything, some victories were won. In July, the Bolsheviks managed to hold a conference of the Petrograd Party in Oranienbaum, with 50 delegates representing 500 members. This was a considerable achievement under the conditions. There was also a conference in Kiev. Gradually, contacts between the towns were improving. The shooting in Ivanovo-Voznesensk provided the basis for the call for a general political strike of textile workers. This began on 8 August, and initially began with economic demands. On the night of August 10, 19 workers’ leaders were arrested. On the next day, more than 25,000 workers from 32 factories took part in a street demonstration. When the workers turned up at the gaol to demand the release of their arrested comrades, the troops opened fire, killing 100 people and wounding another 40. Among the dead were members of the Bolshevik Party. But no amount of shooting could stop the movement. Like a Hydra-headed monster, no sooner had the regime lopped off one head than two more grew in its place. Strikes broke out in other areas: in Petersburg, Tver’, Tula, Kharkov, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinoslav, and other areas. The stormy outbreak of strikes announced the reawakening of the proletariat.

The strike curve continued its upwards course. From August to October 1915 there were officially 340 strikes, and 246,000 strikers. A key role in the movement was played by Bolshevik worker-activists, trained in the school of struggle in the period 1912-14. Thus, history does not pass in vain. Despite the War, despite the arrest and exile of the leadership, despite the disruption of the Party’s structures and the reduction of its organisation to a minimum, despite everything, *something* remained. That “something” was the revolutionary consciousness imbibed by the proletariat from its earlier experiences and retained through its most active and developed layer, which had been biding its time patiently in the hope of better days. Now, sensing a change in the mood of the workers, these activists—a big majority of them Bolsheviks—once more came to the fore. The strikebreaking role of the defencists provoked a growing rejection on the

factory floor. Workers at many factories carried resolutions demanding the recall of their representatives from the War Industry Committees.

The September strike in Petrograd involved 150,000 workers, protesting at the arrest of 30 Bolshevik workers from the Putilov works. There were also strikes in Moscow and elsewhere. The masses stirred and dimly remembered the old slogans which had not been heard in the factories, except in whispers, since that fateful summer of 1914. Now they were on everyone's lips again —those slogans which became popularly known as Lenin's "Three whales": For a Democratic Republic! For the confiscation of all landed estates! For the eight-hour working day! And above all, in this bloody dance of death of the nations, For the international solidarity of the working class! Down with the War! And a curse on all those responsible for it!

In May 1915, the bourgeoisie moved to set up "War Industry Committees" (VPK), in part to try to get some control over the lucrative war industries, while simultaneously establishing their patriotic credentials as the would-be saviours of Russia, in the hope of winning concessions from the tsar. As part of this tactic, they attempted to involve the workers in the war effort and boost production. "In May 1915," reports Kerensky, "on the initiative of leading Moscow industrialists and businessmen, an All-Russian Trade and Industry Convention was held, without prior notification to the government. The main business of this meeting was the establishment of a Central War Industry Committee with a number of subsections. All industry was now being mobilised for the immediate dispatch of munitions, clothing, and equipment to the front. Everyone of importance in Russia became active in the cause."[\[72\]](#)

In June 1915 a congress of these committees decided to set up "workers' groups" in them. Here again we see the difference between Bolshevism and Menshevism. The Mensheviks again revived the idea of a "Labour Congress", trying to work in "legal" conditions in wartime. More than anything else, this shows how far removed these "realistic" Labour leaders were from reality. Under wartime conditions, the tsarist regime was even less likely to permit genuine organisations of the working class.

The Mensheviks and SRs supported participation in these committees, demagogically arguing that they represented "workers' control" and could be used to defend the workers' interests against capital. They played with the idea of soviets, conveniently overlooking the fact that real soviets are organs of struggle, not talking-shops that aim to bring about conciliation between the classes. As Lenin explained: "Soviets of Workers' Deputies and similar institutions must be regarded as organs of insurrection, of revolutionary rule. It is only in connection with the development of a mass political strike and with an insurrection, and in the measure of the latter's preparedness, development and success that such institutions can be of lasting value."

The Bolsheviks were radically opposed to participation in these committees, which were organisations of the bourgeoisie set up to help the imperialist war effort. Nevertheless, complicated tactical questions were involved here, which could not be reduced to a simply negative attitude. Under conditions where it was necessary to take advantage of

each and every legal opening, it would be correct, Lenin explained, to participate in the first round of elections to these committees exclusively for the purpose of agitation and propaganda and to build the organisation: “We are opposed to participation in the war industries committees, which help persecute the imperialist and reactionary war,” he wrote. “We are in favour of utilising the election campaign; for instance, we are for participation in the first stage of the elections for the *sole* purpose of agitation and organisation.”[\[73\]](#)

The Petrograd committee called on the workers to participate massively in the first round of elections, holding factory meetings where they should clearly and publicly explain the Party’s position and try to get elected in order to go to a city-wide meeting. There they should read out a speech denouncing the war and call for a boycott of the War Industry Committees. In order to hold elections to the War Industry Committees, the regime was indeed compelled to call open mass meetings in the factories. Only factories of more than 500 were allowed to participate. The Bolsheviks, who had their main strength in the big factories, actively participated in them and the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks struggled for influence in these election campaigns, carrying their different message to the masses. Some Mensheviks were elected, but the main beneficiaries were the Bolsheviks. Lenin was delighted at the victory which he considered very important. After the success of the Bolsheviks in the election campaign, the bourgeois Gvozdev angrily demanded the holding of new elections. The Liquidators were only too pleased to go along with this.

The second round of elections was marked by a reign of police terror. The government was determined not to permit a repeat and took the precaution of arresting leading Bolsheviks. Under these conditions, the Bolsheviks—who were in a “left bloc” with the left SRs—went to the factory meetings to denounce the traitors and demonstratively walk out. There were protest meetings in a number of factories. After the experience in Petrograd, the government took no chances with the election in Moscow: there were massive police raids. Even so, the defencists’ campaign was not a success. Out of a total of 244 War Industry Committees, “workers’ groups” were only set up in 58—mostly in small, backward factories. In the main working class centres, the tactic of active boycott triumphed. The chief of the Moscow Okhrana wrote in a report: “Literally, nearly all (sic) the beginnings of this group suffer shipwreck because of the hostile attitude of the overwhelming majority of the workers, influenced by the Bolsheviks.”[\[74\]](#)

Throughout the war, the Bolsheviks inside Russia were faced with extremely difficult conditions. By contrast, the right wing Mensheviks (the “defencists”) enjoyed a privileged position because of their innate opportunism and their willingness to subordinate the workers’ interests to the bourgeoisie. Although the Bolsheviks had more support among the most active and conscious workers, the defencists had the advantage of their legal status. In addition to their representatives on the workers’ sections of the War Industry Committees, they had ample funds from their liberal friends, and possessed legal journals like *Delo* (The Cause) and *Ekonomicheskoe Obozrenie* (Economic Review). Their “Labour Group” even had premises on one of the main streets in Petersburg (the Liteiny) where they could meet freely and receive reports from the Duma from Chkheidze and Kerensky. These legal meetings were well attended, and the

Bolsheviks used to attend them in order to expose the policies of the defencists—which, on at least one occasion, ended in the arrest of the unwelcome “guest”. Nevertheless, the tsarist authorities were suspicious of them, and eventually, patriotism notwithstanding, began to crack down on the Labour Group also.

These objective difficulties made it both necessary and correct to try to arrive at working agreements with other tendencies in the workers’ movement. They attempted to form a united front with those Social Democratic groups that defended an internationalist position. The Bolshevik bureau had on several occasions participated in negotiations with other tendencies in the Petrograd working class movement during the war, notably the Inter-District Committee (Mezhrayontsi) who, as Shlyapnikov states, were politically indistinguishable from the Bolsheviks, but who stubbornly clung to a “non-factional” position which kept them from uniting with the Bolsheviks.<sup>[75]</sup> By December 1916, very close contacts already existed between the Bolsheviks and the Mezhrayontsi, who were finally persuaded by Trotsky to join the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1917. As a matter of fact, there was always a large number of Social Democratic workers—both individuals and groups—who were not formally aligned with Bolsheviks or Mensheviks. The immense difficulties of the war years, the weakness of the party’s central organisation, led to a situation where many local groups existed in isolation. “Similar groups of social democrats,” writes Shlyapnikov, “which had no permanent link with the overall city organisation existed in large numbers in Petersburg. Several of these circles kept apart and isolated through fear of provocateurs.”<sup>[76]</sup>

The attempt to form a united front was not confined to the Mezhrayontsi. There were also proposals from the Bolsheviks for a united front with left Mensheviks (the “initiative group”) and they also offered practical agreements to the non-defencist left, represented by Chkheidze, the leftward-leaning chairman of the Menshevik Duma fraction, and even Kerensky of the Duma Trudovik group. The latter at the time even called himself an internationalist and a supporter of Zimmerwald (!). However, they refused to break with the defencist right reformists. They were besotted with the idea of parliamentary action and, above all, they feared a break with the liberal bourgeoisie. At bottom, all these elements feared the mass movement like the plague.

The attempt to secure practical agreements or episodic blocs for specific aims does not at all imply the shelving of differences. On the contrary. The prior condition for the united front tactic is complete freedom of criticism. Lenin treated with justified contempt the notion that unity means the mixing up of programmes and banners. In his article *The Defeat of Russia and the Revolutionary Crisis*, written in November 1915, Lenin writes: “There is nothing more puerile, contemptible and harmful, than the idea current among revolutionary philistines, namely, that differences should be ‘forgotten’ ‘in view’ of the immediate common aim in the approaching revolution. People whom the experience of the 1905-14 decade has not taught the folly of this idea are hopeless from the revolutionary standpoint.”<sup>[77]</sup> Not playing at unity, but an open struggle for the leadership of the working class was the banner of Lenin.

## **Crisis of Tsarism**

“A revolution breaks out when all the antagonisms of a society have reached their highest tension. But this makes the situation unbearable even for the classes of the old society—that is, those who are doomed to break up.”[\[78\]](#)

The weakness of tsarist Russia, the corruption that gnawed at the entrails of the regime was cruelly exposed. The military catastrophes, the rising cost of living, the profiteering and speculation, the rottenness of the court clique expressed themselves in a crisis of the regime. In May 1916 there were scattered disturbances among recruits in the provinces. Food riots began in the south and spread to the naval fortress of Kronstadt. By late autumn Petrograd was once more the scene of stormy social agitation and a massive strike wave. The military defeats, the bungling of the government, the whiff of corruption from the Rasputin regime, the rising prices and constant repression provoked a burning sense of anger and injustice in the very depths of society. By 1916, the strike wave reached new and unprecedented heights. A staggering 1,542 strikes involving up to 1,172,000 workers were recorded—much more than in 1905. No other country experienced such an explosion of strikes during the First World War. The workers advanced mainly economic demands, at first. But the number of political strikes steadily increased: in 1915, 216; in 1916, 273. And the number of participants increased likewise: in 1915, 156,900; in 1916, 310,300. By the autumn of 1916, the mood of discontent had reached threatening proportions.

The regime’s anxiety grew as the anniversary of Bloody Sunday approached. Repression and arrests were stepped up, especially in December 1915-January 1916. Despite a pre-emptive strike of the police, there were mass protest meetings on 9 January 1916 with 55 factories out in Petrograd alone, according to official figures. There were strikes in Moscow, Kharkov, Revel, Tver and Yekaterinoslav. The metal workers—the heavy battalions of the proletariat—took over from the textile workers as the main force in the strike movement. More ominous for the regime was the commencement of fraternisation at the front. News of mutinies in the army were now reaching the authorities—from Kharkov, Greece and France. There were the beginnings of a peasant movement, giving notice of the explosive mood in the villages, especially among the poorest layers who bore the brunt of the war. Uprisings took place in Kazakhstan and Central Asia which lasted several months in the summer of 1916.

This was a decisive turning-point. By 17 October, 45 factories were on strike, protesting against the high cost of living, the war and the autocracy. In an ominous development, the troops turned against the police and supported the workers. The Cossacks, sent to restore order, refused to fire on the soldiers. Only with great difficulty did the authorities manage to get the soldiers to return to barracks that evening. For those with eyes to see, here were the unmistakable symptoms of a revolution in the advanced stages of gestation. Further strikes occurred later in October, culminating in a lock-out, which was defeated by a general strike. In the whole of October, up to 250,000 Petrograd workers participated in political strikes.

The crisis of the regime was revealed by the assassination of Rasputin. The hideous reality of a drunken and debauched “Holy man” intriguing with a degenerate court clique

and dictating to a superstitious tsarina, handing out favours and even deciding military policy, brought to a head the unbearable contradictions between different wings of the state. A section of the aristocracy resolved to eliminate Rasputin as a means of regenerating the regime and staving off imminent disaster. Since all attempts to remove him (including the offer of a bribe of 200,000 roubles in cash to return to Siberia) foundered on the opposition of the tsarina, the only solution was murder. The reactionary politician and bitter enemy of Rasputin V.M. Purishkevich hatched a plot, together with a clique of noblemen to assassinate Rasputin and place the tsarina in a mental institution, a simple expedient, whereby the tsar, freed from the pernicious influence of the court camarilla, would be miraculously transformed into a model constitutional monarch!

Similar dreams have accompanied every absolute monarchy to the grave. The basic flaw in all of them is the same: that monarchy, especially of the absolute type, is organically inseparable from court camarillas. The Rasputin regime was merely a particularly poisonous example of this phenomenon. The details of the assassination of Rasputin, which combined the macabre with comic opera, are too well-known to need much elaboration here. Topped up with a large dose of his favourite brand of sweet Madeira liberally laced with cyanide, shot several times, and finally knocked on the head, the Holy man was finally despatched, his body weighed down with iron chains and dumped in the river Neva. His death was celebrated in champagne by Dukes and field marshalls. The principal assassin, the Grand Duke Dimitri was given a standing ovation at the Bolshoi Theatre. But the tsar was not amused. Dimitri was exiled to Persia, and, contrary to all expectations, Nicholas was still more under the thumb of his grief-stricken wife than before. Thus, the attempt to reform the monarchy by means of a surgical operation had the opposite effect to what was intended.

The idea of a palace revolution offered no solution for Russia. Things were too far gone. The intrigues and manoeuvres at the top resembled the antics of a man dancing on the edge of a volcano. Meanwhile, society was in a state of constant and uncontrollable ferment. The intrigues at the top bore no relation to the sufferings of the masses which constantly worsened. While rich speculators and arms manufactureres got richer, the masses suffered from constantly rising prices. To pay its huge debts, the government resorted to printing roubles. The money supply increased eightfold between 1914 and 1917. Prices soared. Food became scarce and dear. In Moscow the price of rye—the basis of Russian black bread—rose 47 per cent in the first two years of the war. In the same period, a pair of boots went up by 334 per cent, and a box of matches by 500 per cent. By November 1916, the food supply to the army and to the cities had reached a critical level. On the eve of the February revolution, the average working woman in Petrograd had to spend around 40 hours a week queuing to get the basic necessities of life. In such circumstances, the antics at court could only provide a passing interest for the mass of workers and peasants, struggling for survival. But the whiff of corruption and decay that emanated from the regime served to deepen the sense of outrage, hatred and contempt that was ripening in the depths of society. The regime was bankrupt in every respect, not just economically, but politically and morally as well.

### **Change of Mood**

As the war dragged on and the mood of the masses began to grow restive, the situation of the Party began to change, slowly at first, and then with increasing rapidity. For the first time opportunities began to open up for the revolutionaries. The beginning of the war saw the revolutionary movement in the wilderness. For the first two years the possibilities were negligible. The arrest and trial of the Duma fraction removed one of the few remaining possibilities for legal activity. Those trade unions that were not banned were placed under strict police surveillance. Most workers' cultural and educational centres were shut down. Those who went on strike were handed over to the police who usually made sure they were sent to the front with a letter that usually ensured they did not return. Most worker activists were in gaol or in hiding. The Party's forces were reduced to a minimum expression. The masses had their heads down. A few illegal papers were produced inside Russia, like the Petrograd *Proletarsky Golos* of which four issues appeared at long intervals.

According to the *Istoriya*,<sup>[79]</sup> the Bolsheviks at this time had organisations in 29 towns and cities: Peterburg, Moscow, Kharkov, Yekaterinoslav, Kiev, Makayevsk, Samara, Saratov, Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Odessa, Yekaterinodar, Baku, Tiflis, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Tula, Orekhovo, Zuyevo, Tver, Gomel, Vyazma, Revel, Narva, Yureva, Irkutsk, Zlataust, Yekaterinburg and Orenburg. But it gives no details. It is possible that, at one time or another, small groups could have existed in all of these places and more. The *Istoriya* calculates that the Bolsheviks at different times would have had a presence in over 200 different places. This may well be an exaggeration. But, in any case, under the prevailing conditions, their existence would, in most instances, have been precarious and fleeting. Only the Latvian Social Democrats, with their tradition of tight organisation, seem to have been able to produce a regular paper in the underground. The other papers had, at best, a fleeting existence. In the war years, 11 different illegal papers saw the light of day, but their sum total amounted to only 17 issues. The Letts, on the other hand, produced 26 issues, no less, in the Latvian language with an impressive run of 80,000 and, in addition, produced journals in Lithuanian and Estonian. But this was quite exceptional.

A report from the city of Tver gives us a glimpse of the kind of situation that must have been prevalent in most of the provincial party organisations: "A city committee was elected as early as the autumn meeting of local party workers in 1915, but it was only able to resume active work in March 1916 when a group of new party workers arrived to assist the ailing committee. Discussion-group activity was promptly set in motion but there was no co-ordination in the work for the lack of a centre. The committee did not disband but did nothing. The strikes which broke out in the second half of April ended in a victory for the workers at two undertakings. The strike movement ended at the end of May with the rout of the organisation. Over that period the organisation had managed to issue three leaflets on the war, the War Industries Committees and May Day. Work was resumed at the beginning of June. A new centre was formed and a plan of work was drawn up (the main point lay in stepping up agitation). Work was made harder by the fact that no people remained at the centre who were rich in knowledge and experience. Discussion-group work had not ceased even by September."

From these lines it is clear that the party organisation in Tver only really began to function towards the end of 1915. Even then, it must have been very small (no figures for membership are given) and more of a discussion circle than anything else. Most of the members lacked the experience and political level to make much of an impact, and the very existence of the leading committee was tenuous. A similar picture emerges in a report from the Nizhni- Novgorod area. Here figures are given for membership (between 150 and 200). There were four circles active on the outskirts and a further 14 in the factory districts, with two committees in charge of the different areas. Here the work seems to have been on a sounder basis than in Tver. Even so, there was a “dreadful shortage of literature”. “As yet we have not had many issues of the central organ. The pamphlets *On the War* and *On the High Cost of Living* come out only in single copies and those are hard to get hold of. We haven’t even seen *Kommunist*. All the work in the organisation, including purely propaganda work (there exists a college of propagandists of six members) is, at present being undertaken exclusively by workers. The main shortcoming of the organisation is the almost total lack of theoretically knowledgeable and experienced people. The local intellectual forces do not take close part in the work for a variety of reasons.”[\[80\]](#)

The Kazan committee reports a demonstration of students against the war, but says nothing about its participation. On the other hand, the Kharkov organisation claimed “some 120 members” paying dues regularly. But this was in Latvia where the degree of organisation was much higher than elsewhere, as we have seen. The Kharkov organisation even succeeded in producing its own hectographed weekly paper—*Golos Sotsial Demokrata*. The position of the central organisation was weak in the extreme. The “apparatus” at the disposal of the CC Bureau in Petrograd consisted of the flat of a couple where the wife acted as the “custodian of the press” and the Bureau’s tiny archives. There were various rendezvous points in the city where comrades could pick up the party press—a hazardous occupation when the place was crawling with police agents and spies. Vadim (Tikhomirov) was in charge of the illegal shipment of literature from Finland to the provinces, and also its storage and distribution in Petrograd. For this, he organised a group of young women who travelled to Finland and delivered the hot material to designated addresses.

True, the mood of apathy and pessimism was gradually being dissipated. An increasing number of workers who had been party members before the war were re-joining. But the problems remained immense. The strongest organisation was in St Petersburg. The Moscow organisation suffered from the lack of a serious leading centre throughout the war and only picked up during the course of 1917 on the basis of the influx of fresh young comrades. Moscow also suffered a great deal from the activities of police provocation. A serious problem was the lack of finance which prevented the Bolshevik centre in Petersburg from supporting the organisations in the provinces. Only occasional visits were possible. Shlyapnikov recalls with some bitterness how former comrades with well-paid jobs were reluctant to donate to the underground party, though many of them later re-joined it. The bitter tone was understandable, considering the risks and hardships the underground activists were obliged to experience every day:

“But we had to work under extremely tough conditions,” he writes. “We proved able to group many active comrades around us. But owing to lack of resources we did not succeed in expanding the work very widely. We were very poor. From 2 December 1916 to 1 February 1917 only 1,117 roubles 50 kopeks flowed into the funds of the Central Committee Bureau. We had to carry out all work within these means. If we sent an organiser out to the provinces we could not guarantee him even one month’s support; consequently we had to rely upon the initiative of chance visits by comrades from different areas or strokes of luck for our contacts. The Bureau spent very little on maintaining its staff. The majority had their earnings but underground workers even in February 1917 could not receive more than 100 roubles a month. The supply of literature required a great deal of funds, but we were unable to assign very much to it.

“No less difficult were conditions of personal existence. From the very first days of my arrival, when I at once became the object of intensive trailing by spies, it was plain to me that settling down with my own flat, a valid passport and other such luxuries was in such a situation to court real disaster. To have any possibility of countering the stratagems of the agents I had to have as many lodgings as possible. Comrades helped me to find places, and I had a particular spot for each night. These were dispersed in various parts of Petersburg, including its extremities; for example, on the one hand, on the Grazhdanka and on the other, at the Galley Harbour and also in between them in the city centre. My life was turning into a perpetual wandering. It was hard to write, read and at times even to think as often when tired hospitable comrades engaged me with their political programmes and enjoyable conversation deep into the night. You could survive like that for two or three months but my physical energy did not allow more.”[\[81\]](#)

The upswing in the workers’ movement, however, acted as a spur to the recovery of the Bolsheviks. The first signs of recovery were to be observed also in the provinces. In February and March 1916, in the Donets Basin, a major coal-producing area, the first leaflets appeared, calling on workers to organise, and repeating the slogans of the Bolsheviks. In early April, the first wartime strike broke out in the Donets coalfield, involving 20 neighbourhoods with a total participation of some 50,000 miners. The signal for strike action came from the pit where the Bolshevik leaflets had appeared. In at least one pit, a strike committee was elected. Two companies of soldiers were dispatched to the coalfield, but the soldiers refused to take action against the strikers. Even the police showed reluctance to act. The attempt of management to divert the strike into anti-Semitic channels was roundly rebuffed by the workers. Finally, the authorities managed to “restore order” but only after four workers had been killed and 20 wounded. The strike was lost, but the mood of the workers was transformed. This fact was reflected in the growth of the revolutionary organisation:

“Simultaneously with the strike wave, strong political groups began to be formed, the cells rapidly gaining strength rather as if workers wanted to recover the precious time lost. They started to seek links between each other. This was now quite easy. During the strikes all these grouplets and cells had become acquainted with each other. At this juncture they all united to form the social democratic organisations of the Donets Basin, whose statutes and programme were those of the RSDLP majority.”

Thus, little by little, the Bolsheviks were re-organising and growing: “In spite of ever mounting repression, mass arrests and the loss of party workers, our illegal organisation developed and strengthened. The most powerful illegal organisation in Petersburg was our party’s Petersburg Committee which brought together some 3,000 members, but the majority of Petersburg workers could be regarded as sympathizing with its anti-war policy. Out of our party’s legal organisations there remained in existence only the Workers’ Group of the Insurance Council, which was also the all-Russian centre of the hospital funds and its journal, *Voprosy Strakhovaniya*. The activity of these institutions was inhibited in the extreme and many members of the Insurance Group were in jail or exile.”[\[82\]](#)

Despite the chronic shortcomings of the apparatus, from the end of July 1916 to 1 March 1917, local Bolshevik organisations produced more than 600 different leaflets with a total run of about two million printed in about 80 different towns and cities, familiarising the mass of workers and soldiers with Bolshevik slogans. Despite the irregular and unstable nature of these illegal publications, they played a significant role in a situation where legal possibilities for getting Social Democratic ideas into print were practically non-existent. Every legal opening had to be used, though these were limited in the extreme. The trade unions in Petrograd had been closed “for the duration” although certain “professional associations” were permitted. In Moscow, unions were theoretically allowed. But the workers who participated in them could be prosecuted by the law. Under these circumstances, such openings as health insurance and friendly societies were important. The revolutionaries used them as best they could to maintain contacts with the masses, including the new layers of women and youth.

### **Work Among Women**

Revolutionary social democratic work in Russia during the First World War faced enormous difficulties. The Party and the unions were illegal. But by 1915 the movement was recovering from the blows it received in the first months of the war. One area where it began to make important gains was among women, who were being drawn into the industrial work force in large numbers. By the outbreak of the war, women made up roughly one-third of industrial workers, and a still larger portion of those in the textile industry. This increased even further during the war as men were mobilised for military service. The situation of women worsened during the war as many became the sole support of their families and necessities became scarcer and more expensive. Women workers took part in many strikes and demonstrations against the economic hardships created by Russia’s involvement in the war.

“Pitiful as the lot of the worker is, the status of the woman is far worse. In the factory, in the workshop, she works for a capitalist boss, at home for the family.

“Thousands of women sell their labour to capital; thousands drudge away at hired labour; thousands and hundreds of thousands suffer under the yoke of family and social oppression. And for the enormous majority of working women it seems this is the way it must be. But is it really true that the working woman cannot hope for a better future, and

that fate has consigned her to an entire life of work and only work, without rest night and day?"[\[83\]](#)

The preceding lines are from a leaflet entitled *To the Working Women of Kiev*, distributed by the Bolsheviks in Kiev (Ukraine), on March 8 (International Women's Day), 1915. The leaflet gives us an idea of how the Bolsheviks posed the question in their public agitation. Their appeal linked the oppression of women to the suffering of male workers, and to a programme for the liberation of all working people.

The war was a disaster for the people of Russia. From the outset, the Germans dealt the Russian forces one devastating blow after another. In the Summer Campaign of 1915 the Russians were kicked out of Galicia[\[A\]](#) and the German army was poised to take all Poland, the Baltic and Byelorussia. Ill-prepared for war, the tsarist armies suffered one humiliating defeat after another. As early as the summer of 1914, 150,000 Russians were prisoners of war. By the end of the war, the number of Russians killed at the front rose to a staggering 1.8 million. Slowly but surely, the seemingly mighty armies of the tsar were being ground to a bloody pulp. To replace such horrendous losses, millions of workers and peasants were called up—nearly 16 million by the end. And to make up for the lost numbers in industry, new layers were drawn into the factories—women, youth and peasants—all without any previous experience of factory life and the class struggle. This caused further difficulties for the revolutionaries who still remained. But the harsh conditions of wartime soon educated the new layers.

The main victims of the war were women. The suffering and death at the front were only one face of the war. The other, less well-known but no less appalling, was the fate of those numberless women from working-class and peasant homes who saw their world collapse into ruins as if by the command of some pitiless and all-powerful god. Drafted into the factories to replace their menfolk sent to the front, the proletarian women had to bear the brunt of the social problems of the war. Formerly backward and unorganised, they soon learned a harsh lesson in the school of factory life, and became transformed. Exploited and oppressed in the factory and in the home, working long hours under bad conditions only to find at the end of the month that their wages had been eroded by the remorseless rise in prices, the women saw that the rich owners were literally taking the bread from the mouths of their children. Sweeping aside all the traditional prejudices about a woman's role, they occupied the front line of battle.

“An investigation carried out into 700,000 war workers by the Special Council for Defence in 1917 found that 17 per cent of them were women and 12.5 per cent adolescents. In manufacturing industry generally the proportion of women rose from 27.4 per cent in 1914 to 34.2 per cent in January 1917; the corresponding figure for adolescents and juveniles (of both sexes) were 10.9 per cent and 14.0 per cent. In the engineering industry female labour accounted for a mere 1.1 per cent of the total number of employees in 1913 but for 14.3 per cent in January 1917; the percentage of adolescents and juveniles rose slightly from 9.4 per cent to 11.7 per cent. In the textile industry, where women had always played a very important part, their proportion now doubled, reaching 43.4 per cent. Women were even recruited for underground work in the mines,

although at least not as face-workers. On the records of the factory inspectorate there were virtually as many women and young people as there were men.”[\[84\]](#)

Lenin constantly emphasised the revolutionary potential of these women proletarians and insisted that the party take special measures to win them to the revolutionary cause. To this end, they launched, in 1914, a woman’s newspaper, *Rabotnitsa* (Woman Worker). Already in the revolutionary upsurge of 1912-14, the party had begun consistent work among women, and had organised the first International Women’s Day meeting in Russia in 1913. Simultaneously, *Pravda* began to publish a regular page devoted to questions affecting women. The first issue of *Rabotnitsa* came out on International Women’s Day, to coincide with a demonstration organised by the party. *Rabotnitsa* was financed by collections organised by women in the factories, on the same lines as *Pravda*. It carried material on the conditions of women workers and reported on their struggles. It also reported on the position of women in other countries. The same year that *Rabotnitsa* appeared the Mensheviks also began to publish a woman’s newspaper. However, these publications shared the same fate as the rest of the workers’ press in Russia after July 1914.

The work of the Bolshevik Party among women had nothing whatsoever in common with bourgeois or petty bourgeois feminism, but was impregnated with an implacable revolutionary and class spirit. From the beginning, the Bolsheviks encouraged women to get organised and join in the struggle of the male workers, and urged them to turn their backs on the movements set up by bourgeois women after the defeat of the 1905 revolution. In the leaflet already quoted we read the following:

“Comrades! Working women! The men comrades toil along with us. Their fate and ours are one. But they have long since found the only road to a better life—the road of organised labour’s struggle with capital, the road of struggle against all oppression, evil, and violence. Women workers, there is no other road for us. The interests of the working men and women are equal, are one. Only in a united struggle together with the men workers, in joint workers’ organisations—in the Social Democratic Party, the trade unions, workers’ clubs, and co-operatives—shall we obtain our rights and win a better life.”

Of course, the party took up those demands of special interest to women —benefits for pregnancy and maternity; full equality of civil and family rights for men and women and so on. But all these demands were seen as part of the general struggles of the working class as a whole and inseparably linked to the perspective of socialist revolution:

“Comrades! Working women, let’s go to work! Wake all those who are still sound asleep; unite in struggle for the demands of the whole working class.”[\[85\]](#)

As the conditions worsened, so women began to participate more and more in strikes and demonstrations against the appalling conditions brought on by the war. Nor did they stop at merely economic demands. The women textile workers of Kostroma distributed a leaflet to the troops with the title *To the Russian soldier from the Russian Woman*. The regime, in a panic, lashed out. Troops and Cossacks were sent into Kostroma and on the 5

July, there were bloody clashes in which 12 people were killed and 45 wounded. In the whole of 1915, 20 per cent of all strikes were political. In the war months of 1914 the figure was only 11 per cent. The work of the Bolshevik Party among women bore important fruits. During the dark days of the war, the women Bolsheviks played a key role in agitating against the war and fighting against chauvinism. It is no accident that the Russian revolution of February 1917 commenced on Woman's Day, and that the first initiative came from the women workers who had received their baptism of fire during the war.

### **Pacifist Gestures**

Discontent with the war was naturally most deeply felt by women, who in many ways were the main victims everywhere. The Bolshevik women's journal *Rabotnitsa* took the initiative to campaign for an international conference of left socialist women and wrote to Klara Zetkin as secretary of the International Women's Bureau, who immediately agreed to it. In March 1915 in Oslo, there were mass demonstrations of women against the war. In the same month the Berne socialist women's conference of German and Austro-Hungarian Social Democrats was convened by socialist leaders of the German bloc, anxious not to be outdone by their counterparts in the Entente. Lenin was quick to see this as an opportunity to put forward the ideas of revolutionary internationalism. This was a chance to put the work among women to good use. At the conference there were 25 delegates from eight countries. The Bolsheviks were represented by four delegates, including Inessa Armand and Krupskaya. The Polish delegate, Kamenskaya also stood for a hard-line Leninist position. The majority, however, were muddled centrists, pacifists and reformists. Had Rosa Luxemburg been present, it might at least have made a difference to the flavour of the proceedings, if not the final outcome. But Rosa was in a German prison, and her place was taken by Klara Zetkin, who, much to Lenin's annoyance, made all sorts of concessions to the pacifist majority and watered down Lenin's position to remove its revolutionary essence.

A courageous stand on the war at this conference would have been a rallying call for the left internationally. Lenin wrote a declaration for this meeting which was not passed. Instead, the majority took the line of "We can't criticise the parties", and must confine ourselves to "supporting peace". When the Bolshevik delegates opposed this and stuck out for their resolution, they were subject to a barrage of criticism, and portrayed as sectarians and splitters for standing in the way of unity. Lenin already anticipated such accusations which he had heard so many times. The left reformists and centrists have always denounced the real revolutionaries as "sectarians" because they refuse to compromise on principled questions. On this, Lenin wrote to Alexandra Kollontai: "You underline that 'what we must put forward is a slogan that would *unite* us all.' Frankly, what I fear most of all at the present time is just this kind of indiscriminate unity, which in my opinion is most dangerous and harmful to the proletariat."

Lenin was indignant and spared no feelings in his denunciation of these so-called peace initiatives, even though Klara Zetkin was friendly to him. Indeed he was particularly scathing about her role. "She would have to see, she could not help seeing, he said, that

sliding down into pacifism at such a time was impossible. All the issues at stake had to be emphasised very strongly.” The accusations of “splitting” cut no ice with Lenin. “‘No matter that we are so few,’ he said once, ‘We shall have millions with us’.”<sup>[86]</sup> In another letter to Alexandra Kollontai written in July 1915, Lenin underlined the impermissibility of unprincipled agreements with Kautsky and the “lefts” on the grounds of preserving unity: “In international affairs we shall *not* be for rapprochement with Haase-Bernstein-Kautsky (for *in practice* they want unity with the Südekums and to shield them, they want to get away with left phrases and to change nothing in the old rotten party). We cannot stand for the *watchword* of peace, because we consider it supremely muddled, pacifist, petty bourgeois, helping the governments (they now want to be with one hand ‘for peace’, in order to climb out of their difficulties) and obstructing the revolutionary struggle.

“In our opinion, the Left should make a common declaration *of principle* (1) unquestionably condemning the social-chauvinists and opportunists, (2) giving a programme of revolutionary action (whether to say civil war or revolutionary mass action, is not so important), (3) against the watchword of ‘defence of the fatherland’, etc. A declaration of principle by the ‘Left’, in the name of several countries, would have a *gigantic* significance (of course, not in the spirit of the Zetkin philistinism which she got adopted at the Women’s Conference at Berne; Zetkin *evaded* the question of condemning social-chauvinism!! out of a desire for ‘peace’ with the Südekums+Kautsky??).”<sup>[87]</sup>

A few days later, the International Socialist Youth Conference was also held in Berne, summoned by the secretary of the Swiss Young Socialists, Willy Münzenberg. The German and French YS refused to participate, arguing that the war question was outside their competence. The Austrian YS took the same position. Despite this, delegates came from Germany and the RSDLP was represented by Inessa Armand and G.I. Safarov. The majority even here were “centrists”. The Bolshevik resolution was lost 13-3 and a pacifist resolution was carried, as with the women. But they did decide to hold an “International (anti-militarist) Youth Day” annually and publish a journal *Youth International*, which carried articles by Lenin and Liebknecht.

Lenin’s comments on the conference of the youth was that it was full of good intentions but basically “marking time”, that is to say: the decisive break with the social-chauvinists was avoided. These early efforts did not lead very far. The time was not yet ripe. The ground not sufficiently prepared for a big shift to the left. On the other hand, it can be argued that Lenin’s position was out of step with the majority—he went a bit too far, too fast. But as the war dragged on with no end in sight, the situation changed. The current was flowing to the left in many countries, and this was eventually reflected inside the mass organisations, beginning with the unions, which began to reflect the mood of opposition developing in the masses against the intolerable impositions, exploitation, profiteering and inflation, which was expressed in a wave of strikes. In Britain, the birth of the shop stewards’ movement was a direct result of the radicalisation of the workers and the class collaboration and remoteness of the trade union bureaucracy.

The first expression of these stirrings of revolution was the strengthening of left reformist and centrist currents in the leadership of the Socialist Parties. The pacifist declarations of the leaders reflected in a distorted, emasculated way the desperate yearning for peace, the hatred of the imperialist war of the mass of workers, peasants, soldiers and women. In June 1915, Kautsky, Haase and Bernstein published a declaration, *The Demands of the Moment*, which appeared in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* protesting against the “war of annexation” and calling for a speedy conclusion of peace. This belated action of the opportunist leaders was a feeble reflection of the mood of the masses. At every opportunity Lenin subjected the pacifism of the centrists to withering criticism.

## NOTES

[A] Galicia was the part of Poland that was under Austrian rule before the First World war.

[69] LCW, *To A.G. Shlyapnikov, 23/8/1915*, vol. 35, pp. 204-5.

[70] O. Figes, op. cit., p. 273.

[71] LCW, *May Day and the War, 1915*, vol. 36, p. 325.

[72] Kerensky, op. cit., p. 136.

[73] LCW, *Several Theses*, vol. 21, pp. 401 and 402.

[74] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 581.

[75] See Shlyapnikov, op. cit., p. 164.

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[77] LCW, *The Defeat of Russia and the Revolutionary Crisis*, vol. 21, p. 379.

[78] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 97.

[79] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 547.

[80] A. Shlyapnikov, op. cit., pp. 181-2.

[81] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[82] *Ibid.*, pp. 163 and 164.

[83] *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, p. 268.

[84] Keep, op. cit., p. 49.

[85] Reprinted in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, pp. 268 and 269.

[86] Quoted in Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 301 and 303.

[87] LCW, *To Alexandra Kollontai, 11/7/1915*, vol. 35. pp. 193-4.

## **Part Five: The War Years**

[section 6 of 6]

### **The Zimmerwald Conference**

Even though the Bolsheviks, formally speaking, had no international organisation, they never ceased to consider themselves as part of an international. Never did Lenin abandon the idea of recreating a genuine revolutionary international. The Bolsheviks followed the internal life of all the Socialist Parties very closely. Every day, Lenin scoured the foreign socialist press eagerly, enthusiastically welcoming every attack on social chauvinism. While advocating a decisive political break from the right, he did not suggest leaving the mass organisations of the working class—quite the reverse. The bureau instructed by letter all Bolsheviks living abroad to set up local “internationalist clubs”. Those who had a knowledge of the language of the country were instructed to participate in the labour movement of that country, especially the Socialist Parties. This was particularly stressed, not only as a means of getting new contacts with internationalists from other countries, but in order to prevent the demoralisation that would inevitably arise from the kind of isolation from the workers’ movement which so frequently characterises exile organisations. However, there was another dimension to this.

Already the idea of a new international was forming in Lenin’s mind. But he was well aware that this could not simply be proclaimed. It had to be built through a struggle against the social chauvinists and the crystallisation of a revolutionary-internationalist tendency. The split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had taken ten years to complete, and was only really achieved when the Bolsheviks had won over four-fifths of the organised working class. But for a long time up till 1912, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had co-existed as two antagonistic tendencies in one party. The Bolsheviks participated actively with the left wing of the different Socialist Parties abroad. Inessa Armand, Gopner and Stahl worked in the French Socialist Party, Abramovich and others in the Swiss party, where Lenin also helped out with lectures. Shlyapnikov maintained close contact with the Swedish and Norwegian Social Democrats, and so on. This work laid the basis for the Zimmerwald Left, and therefore for the Communist International. But it was not enough to conduct revolutionary work in each separate country. It was necessary to call an international conference of the left.

The first attempts at an international meeting took place in the autumn of 1914 in Lugano (Switzerland). The Italian and Swiss Social Democrats passed anti-war resolutions, but

ruined it by appealing to the IS Bureau to hold a meeting as soon as possible to discuss international affairs. The Bolsheviks, who turned up with Lenin's theses on war, naturally could not support this. Typically, the proceedings at Lugano were generally tinged with pacifism. Finally, the Lugano affair ended in failure. Nevertheless, it could be considered half a step forward, better than none at any rate. The Bolsheviks used it as a stepping stone to call for a real international conference of the revolutionary wing.

In November 1914, the congress of Swedish Social Democrats in Stockholm was attended by Shlyapnikov, who defended the Bolshevik position causing a storm. Larin was present for the Mensheviks. Typically, the Swedish leader, Karl Branting, took an abstentionist line ("We can't interfere in affairs of other parties"). But Shlyapnikov was backed by the left leader Karl Höglund. The Social Democracy of the small neutral countries was mainly inclined to the kind of impotent, hand-wringing "pacifism" which Lenin cordially detested. The Bolsheviks did not even bother to attend the Conference called by the Socialists of the "neutral" states (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Holland) in Copenhagen in January 1915: "We won't learn anything. You won't achieve anything there. We'll just send our manifesto. That's all we have to do," he commented dismissively.[\[88\]](#)

Worse still were the manoeuvres of the "socialist" leaders of the belligerent states, who acted as conscious agents of the ruling class. In February 1915 in London there was a conference of socialists of the Entente countries (Britain, France and Belgium). From Russia the Mensheviks and SRs were invited. The Bolsheviks in London protested that only socialists from the Entente were invited and also at the invitation of the Mensheviks. *Nashe Slovo* invited the Bolsheviks to organise a demonstration against "official socialist patriotism" at the conference and counterpose to the London conference the real international standpoint. Lenin, after initial hesitation, sent the editorial board of *Nashe Slovo* a draft declaration to be read out at the London conference.[\[89\]](#) But there were differences on how the line should be expressed. In the end Litvinov, for the Bolsheviks, tried to read an anti-war resolution at the London meeting, but was interrupted by the chair. After distributing copies of the statement, he walked out.

The conditions were now ripening for an international conference of the lefts. The Italian and Swiss parties, in whose ranks there was a strong anti-war mood, were best placed to organise this. The leaders of this initiative (Grimm and Balabanova) were centrists. They called a conference at Berne in July 1915. They did not invite a single one of the real left groups, but did invite the "centrist" leaders: Hugo Haase, Karl Branting and Peter Troelstra, against the Bolsheviks' protests. The overriding concern of Grimm was to prove that this was not the occasion for the setting up a new International. Lenin was in regular touch with the lefts of many Socialist Parties: Sweden, Norway, Holland, Germany, Bulgaria, Switzerland. Trotsky also played an important role in convening the Zimmerwald conference, which was finally held in September 1915. Lenin arrived early at the sleepy little Swiss village to hold long discussions with other delegates. There was enthusiasm about the Conference, which was logical after the long period in which the anti-war socialists had been isolated under difficult conditions. But Lenin was anxious that the conference should settle the fundamental issues, and that there should be no

papering over the cracks. He amended the original manifesto which was too academic and not sufficiently militant for his liking.

Upon arrival, when he looked around the room and saw the small number in attendance, Lenin made a joke. He said: “You can put all the internationalists in the world into two stage-coaches.” Even so, the majority of the delegates were far from consistent, and tended towards centrism. At Zimmerwald, Lenin organised the “Zimmerwald Left”. This was a minority within a minority (eight out of 38), made up of Lenin, Zinoviev and J.A. Berzin (Latvia), Karl Radek (Poland), Julian Borkhat (Germany), Fritz Platten (Switzerland), Karl Höglund (Sweden), Ture Nerman (Norway). The Bund sent observers. The bureau of the conference was made up of Robert Grimm, Constantino Lazzari and the celebrated Balkans Socialist Christian Rakovsky.

Karl Liebknecht sent a letter from his prison cell which was read out at the conference—an emotional moment in the proceedings: “I am a prisoner of militarism. I am in chains. Therefore I cannot address you, but my heart and my thoughts, all my being is with you,” and Liebknecht ended his letter with a fierce denunciation of the betrayers of the International in Germany, France and Britain, and a call for “Civil war, not civil peace!” which unconsciously echoed Lenin’s slogan. The idea of a “Third International” filled the centrists with horror. George Lebedour heatedly defended the “unity” of the International!—this is the classical role of centrism, to preserve unity with the right wing. These people represented the right wing Zimmerwaldists. Grimm commented, not without some grounds, that Lenin’s draft resolution “to the workers of Europe” was directed more to party members than the masses.

Many years later, looking back on this period, Trotsky wrote: “I remember the period between 1908 and 1913 in Russia. There was also a reaction. In 1905 we had the workers with us—in 1908 and even in 1907 began the great reaction.

“Everybody invented slogans and methods to win the masses and nobody won them—they were desperate. In this time the only thing we could do was educate the cadres and they were melting away. There was a series of splits to the right or to the left or to syndicalism and so on. Lenin remained with a small group, a sect, in Paris, but with confidence that there would be new possibilities arising. It came in 1913. We had a new tide, but then came the war to interrupt this development. During the war there was a silence as of death amongst the workers. The Zimmerwald conference was a conference of very confused elements in its majority. In the deep recesses of the masses, in the trenches and so on there was a new mood, but it was so deep and terrorised that we could not reach it and give it an expression. That is why the movement seemed to itself to be very poor and even this element that met in Zimmerwald, in its majority, moved to the right in the next year, in the next month. I will not liberate them from their personal responsibility, but still the general explanation is that the movement had to swim against the current.”[\[90\]](#)

Zimmerwald set up an International Socialist Commission which served to co-ordinate the left, but was mainly composed of centrists like Grimm and Balabanova. In general

most of those present at Zimmerwald were confused, vacillating centrist types. Lenin had no illusions in them, but saw the Conference as a step forward. Despite reservations, Lenin signed the Zimmerwald Manifesto, written by Trotsky. Lenin's attitude to Zimmerwald was summed up by the title of his article *The First Step*, where he writes: "In practice, the manifesto signifies a step towards an ideological and practical break with opportunism and social-chauvinism. At the same time, the manifesto, as any analysis will show, contains inconsistencies, and does not say everything that should be said."<sup>[91]</sup> In other words, he criticises the manifesto, not for what it says, but for what it does not say. The main thing was to develop the Zimmerwald Left as an independent current. Even so, many of the "Lefts" also immediately began to vacillate. Lenin in particular had trouble with Roland-Holst and Radek over the line of the official journal of the left, *Vorbote* (Herald), published in Holland with Pannekoek's assistance.

Thanks to his participation in Zimmerwald Lenin's writings on war and the International became more widely known in different languages. The Zimmerwald Left gained important points of support for the future Third International. Zimmerwald's message, despite its shortcomings, was beginning to get across. Workers in the main are not accustomed to read the "small print" of political documents, but seize upon what they perceive to be the central message and fill it with their own content. In his memoirs, Shlyapnikov explains how the news of the Zimmerwald Conference gradually reached the workers in Russia and had a very positive effect in encouraging particularly those groups that were not directly affiliated to the Bolsheviks. "As it later turned out," he writes, "all these cells were to become adherents of the Zimmerwald resolutions. We should note that these grouplets were not interlinked and did not even know of the existence of the others similar to themselves."<sup>[92]</sup>

This reaction was not confined to Russia. There was now the beginnings of a ferment in the mass parties of the Second International. Germany itself was now moving towards a pre-revolutionary situation. Early in 1916, Otto Rühle, a Reichstag deputy, called publicly for a break with the social chauvinists. Independently, the German Lefts were coming to see the need for a new International. A series of public "Letters" originating from the German Left signed "Spartacus", was closely followed by Lenin. The Socialist Youth founded by Karl Liebknecht was the main base of the left. Things were moving in Austria too. In the autumn of 1916 there was the formation of a left wing in the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) based on the youth. Anti-war agitation was conducted from the "Karl Marx Club" in Vienna. In France, a left group of MPs was formed and received letters of support from the trenches. In Britain, Hyndman's chauvinist group was forced out of the BSP at the Salford Conference in April. In Italy, Serrati "the most left" of the leaders was still linked to the centrists, while Gramsci, still a youth, supported Lenin's ideas. The Swiss SP rejected the Zimmerwald position as "too radical" but a big sector of the rank-and-file supported it. In Bulgaria, the *tesnyaki* ("narrow" socialists) already had a revolutionary anti-war position. A revolutionary, or quasi-revolutionary current was beginning to crystallise within the existing mass organisations everywhere.

## **The Kienthal Conference**

The symptoms of a growing revolutionary crisis were unmistakable. There was anecdotal evidence: a crowd in Germany booed the right-wing Socialist leader Scheidemann; a rent strike in Glasgow; demonstrations against the high cost of living in several countries. Above all, the increasing social ferment in all the belligerent powers was expressed in a notable increase in strikes:

	Year	Strikes	Strikers
Germany	1915	137	14,000
	1916	240	129,000
France			

1915

98

9,000

1916

314

41,000

Russia

1915

928

539,000

1916

1410

1,086,000

(Source: *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, p. 624)

Lenin watched carefully for any sign of a shift in the mood of the European proletariat. This question was absolutely fundamental to his perspectives for the revolution in Russia. “The task confronting the proletariat in Russia,” he wrote in October 1915, “is the consummation of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia *in order* to kindle the socialist revolution in Europe. The latter task now stands very close to the former...”[\[93\]](#)

The growing social crisis found a belated echo within the mass organisations of the old International, where the ferment of discontent expressed itself in increased support for the left wing. In order to head off the Lefts, the old leaders of the Second International tried a new manoeuvre. The International Socialist Bureau had been totally inactive since the War began. Now, suddenly, Camille Huysmans, the Bureau’s secretary, announced at a congress of the Dutch party in January 1916 that the “International was not dead”. In February 1916 at Berne there was the meeting of the “Broad Commission: representatives from Austria, Germany, Italy, Russia, Rumania, Switzerland and other countries, met together to fight back from the left and expose Huysmans’ manoeuvre, as a “conspiracy against socialism”. Here it was agreed to call another international conference of the left. In early May at Kienthal a Second Conference was held, with the participation of 43 delegates from Russia, Poland, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Austria, Serbia and Portugal. Willi Münzenberg attended as representative of the International Youth Section. For the Bolsheviks there were Lenin, Zinoviev, and Inessa Armand. For the Poles, Radek, (another Polish group was represented by V. Dombrovski and Mieczyslaw Bronski), three Swiss socialists: Ernst Nobs, Fritz Platten and Agnes Tobman, the Serb Trisha Kantslevovich, the representative of a left group in Bremen, Paul Fröhlich plus Münzenberg, Thalheimer, and others. The left was stronger here than at Zimmerwald. But even so, their resolution on peace was not accepted. The mood of the majority was still centrist. The end result was a compromise but still an advance over Zimmerwald.

But the tensions were growing between the right and left of the Zimmerwald movement—a heterogeneous creature at best. Lenin was prepared for a temporary coexistence with the centrists, starting from a weak initial base. But it could not last. A *de facto* international split, which only Lenin really understood, already existed. Under conditions of war and revolution all half way currents are doomed to disappear. Lenin simply helped them on their way, insisting on clarification. Ambiguity is intolerable in critical moments of history when there is a pressing need to choose. The objective situation was pushing the masses to the left, to the road of revolution. The centrist Zimmerwald current was dragging its feet. There were only two ways to go: either go the whole way, breaking decisively with reformism and passing over to an open revolutionary position, or to go back to the swamp of reformism. Lenin, by word and deed, made this abundantly clear. For that the centrists hated him, as at every moment in history a muddlehead always hates a man with clear ideas.

Robert Grimm was the first to move to the right. By the summer of 1916, he had gone over. Lenin was merciless in his criticism of the centrists who were revolutionary in phrases, but bourgeois-reformists in deeds. This was exactly what Lenin detested. Turati,

Merrheim, Bourderon and the other centrists sooner or later went the same way. In the end nothing was left of Zimmerwald, except the memory—and the Left! The Zimmerwald Left itself could not have an independent significance except as a stepping stone to the new International. But this had to be built on the basis of great events which were only a few months away. By going through the experience of Zimmerwald, Lenin had gained invaluable experience and a wide range of contacts: the German Lefts (the Spartakists and the Bremen *Arbeiterpolitik* group), Ferdinand Loriot's group in France, John MacLean in Britain, Eugene Debs in the USA, Pannekoek and Gorter in Holland, Serrati and Gramsci in Italy, Fritz Platten (Switzerland), Hanyeck and Radek (Poland). There were also problems within the Zimmerwald Left. The political positions of all the above were by no means unanimous. Prominent people in Lenin's own circle—Radek, Bukharin, Pyatakov and others—did not have a clear Bolshevik-Leninist position. Even the left was somewhat heterogeneous. This, too, was a necessary stage on the journey towards October. But such a perspective seemed very far off at the time.

Trapped in his Swiss exile, Lenin paced his room like a caged tiger. Would the nightmare of reaction never end? The isolation and frustration of émigré life acted like a slow poison that corroded even the strongest from within. Lenin was not immune from this. At times he was tormented by the thought that he might not live to see the revolution. In a letter to Inessa Armand written on Christmas day 1916, Lenin gave voice to his innermost misgivings: "The revolutionary movement grows extremely slowly and with difficulty." And adds in a tone of resignation: "This must be put up with." In one of the most ironic comments of history, in a speech to the Swiss young socialists delivered in January 1917, Lenin said: "We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution."<sup>[94]</sup> One month later, the tsar was overthrown. In less than a year, the Bolsheviks had come to power.

## NOTES

[88] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 49, p. 51.

[89] Lenin, *Collected Works*, in Russian, vol. 26, p. 128.

[90] Trotsky, *Fighting Against the Stream*, in *Writings, 1938-39*, pp. 252-3.

[91] LCW, *The First Step*, vol. 21, p. 384.

[92] A. Shlyapnikov, op. cit., p. 160.

[93] LCW, *Several Theses*, vol. 21, p. 402.

[94] Quoted in Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 335.

## Part Six: The Year of Revolution

[section 1 of 7]

### The February Revolution

The year 1917 was ushered in by a strike wave in Petrograd, after a short lull in November-December 1916. In January alone, 270,000 were on strike, 177,000 in Petrograd, according to the figures of the Factory Inspectorate. The war created an ever more unbearable situation for the masses. Upon the nightmare of war superimposed the horrors of a deep economic crisis. By December 1916, 39 Petrograd factories were at a standstill for lack of fuel and 11 more because of power cuts. The railways were on the point of collapse. There was no meat, and a shortage of flour. Hunger stalked the land and bread queues became a normal condition of life. To all this must be added the constant news of military defeats and the whiff of scandal emanating from the court, the Rasputin clique and the Black Hundred monarchist-landlord government. A regime dominated by aristocratic crooks, speculators and assorted riff-raff openly paraded its rotteness before an increasingly disaffected people. The bourgeois liberals of the “Progressive Bloc” pleaded with tsar Nicholas for reform trying to frighten him with revolution.

Beneath the surface, the mood of the masses had been slowly changing. Trotsky described this process as the “molecular process of revolution”. It is a process that proceeds so gradually that it is frequently imperceptible, even to revolutionaries, who sometimes draw the wrong conclusions from the appearance of apathy and the absence of surface manifestations of the accumulated frustration, rage and bitterness. It is very similar to the gradual building up of pressure beneath the earth’s surface prior to an earthquake. This process is also invisible to the superficial observer who looks no further than the surface, without taking into account the seething processes that are unfolding in the bowels of the earth. When the eruption takes place, it produces general astonishment. All kinds of “learned” people proffer explanations, which usually go no further than the immediate cause, which really explains nothing at all. Thus, the February revolution is said to be caused by the scarcity of bread. This explanation overlooks the fact that, in the years following the October revolution, the shortage of bread was far worse than before as a consequence of the civil war provoked by the counter-revolution and the invasion of 21 foreign armies of intervention. Why did this not produce a new revolution? This question is never asked, and cannot be answered if we persist in confusing the immediate incident that sparked off the movement with its deeper underlying causes, that is, to confuse accident with necessity, like the old school text-books that asserted that the First World War was caused by the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and not by the accumulation of contradictions between the main imperialist powers before 1914.

The strike of 9 January was the biggest strike Petrograd had seen for the whole of the war. The strike was general in the Vyborg and Nevsky districts. It hit the war industries especially hard. About 145,000 workers were involved, in a kind of “dry run” for

revolution. The strike was accompanied with mass meetings and demonstrations. Petrograd resembled an armed camp, occupied by troops and police, but police measures were no longer sufficient to hold back the revolution. The bourgeois liberals, from their point of view, tried to stave off revolution by pleading with the tsar for reforms. Rodzianko begged the tsar to prolong the life of the Duma and organise a government reshuffle. The Menshevik-dominated Labour Group of the War Industry Committees called on the Petrograd workers on 14 February—the opening day of the Duma—to go to the Tauride palace to show their “solidarity” with the Duma and back the liberal opposition. The Bolshevik Bureau denounced this policy of class collaboration and called for a one-day strike on the anniversary of the trial of the Bolshevik deputies. 90,000 workers in 58 factories responded to the strike call. The Putilov workers demonstrated with the slogans: “Down with the War!” “Down with the government!” “Long live the Republic!” No-one bothered to go to the Tauride Palace. Rodzianko confessed that the Duma was reduced “to the role almost of a passive onlooker” as the demonstrators filed past almost under their noses along the Nevsky Prospekt.

These successive “dry runs”—“progressive approximation” would be an even more accurate expression—showed that the mood of the masses had reached boiling point. Delegates from Putilov visited all the other factories in the Narva and Vyborg districts. This sparked off a general movement. There were bread riots with a notable participation of women.

The strike at the giant Putilov factory, initially started on February 18 by a few hundred workers in one of the shops over a claim for higher wages and the rehiring of some sacked fellow-workers, took the organised workers and revolutionaries by surprise. 30,000 workers of this giant firm set up a strike committee, came out onto the streets and appealed to the other workers for support. On February 22, the Putilov management responded by a lock-out. This turned out to be a big mistake, as thousands of angry workers were massing on the streets, at a time when many working-class women were queuing in the freezing streets for a meagre ration of bread. The combination proved more explosive than the shells produced by the Putilov plant. By coincidence, the next day, February 23, was International Women’s Day. This gave added impetus to the mass movement. The lightning speed with which the women and young people, formerly backward and unorganised layers, moved again caught the activists by surprise. As the Soviet historian E.N. Burdzhlov put it, working class youths “marched in the front rank of the demonstrators, were present at meetings, took part in clashes with the police, [and] ... acted as scouts of the revolution, being the first to tell [adult] workers when troops and police were gathering, etc.”[\[1\]](#)

On 24 February, 200,000 workers—more than half of the Petrograd working class—were on strike. There were massive factory meetings and demonstrations, as the workers cast off the old fear and stood up to face their tormentors. The revolution had begun. Once it had started, the movement developed a momentum all of its own, carrying all before it. Massive demonstrations accompanied the strikes that spread like wildfire from the Vyborg district to the other industrial areas. Crowds of people swept past the police and

troops to reach the city centre, even crossing the frozen river Neva, shouting “Bread!” “Peace!” and “Down with the Autocracy!”

On Thursday 23 February meetings were held to protest against the war, the high cost of living, the bad conditions of women workers. This in turn developed into a new strike wave. The women played a key role. They marched on the factories, calling the workers out. Mass street demonstrations ensued. Flags and placards appeared with revolutionary slogans: “Down with the war!” “Down with hunger!” “Long live the revolution!” Street orators and agitators appeared as if from nowhere. Many were Bolsheviks, but others were ordinary workers, both men and women, who, after years of enforced silence had suddenly discovered that they had a tongue in their head and a mind that thinks.

That morning, a 25-year old sailor, Fyodr Fyodorovich Ilyin (Raskolnikov) looked out of the window and thought “Today is Woman’s Day. Will something happen in the streets today?” Something did happen. 128,000 workers were on strike. The whole city was seething with life.

“As things turned out, ‘Women’s Day’ was fated to be the first day of the revolution. Working women, driven to despair by their hard conditions, a prey to the torments of hunger, were the first to come out on to the streets demanding ‘bread, freedom and peace’.

“On that day, when we were shut up in our quarters, we were able to look out from the window upon a most unusual scene. The trams were not running, which meant the streets were uncharacteristically empty and quiet. But at the corner of Bolshoi Prospekt and Gavanskaya Street groups of working women kept assembling. Mounted policemen tried to disperse them, roughly pushing them apart with the muzzles of their horses and hitting them with the flats of their drawn swords. When the tsarist *oprichniki*<sup>[A]</sup> rode on to the pavement the crowd would, without losing its composure, break up for the moment, heaping curses and threats upon them; but as soon as the mounted policemen had returned to the roadway, the crowd would close up again into a solid mass. In some of the groups we could see men, but the overwhelming majority consisted of working women and workers’ wives.”<sup>[2]</sup>

On February 25, some 30 to 35 workers’ leaders met in the office of the Petrograd Union of Workers’ Co-operatives to set up a soviet. Although half were arrested the same evening, two days later, when the tide had already turned, a number of them proclaimed themselves the Provisional Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. The Menshevik Duma deputy N.S. Chkheidze was elected chairman, although he obviously represented no factory. But then, the majority of the 150 or so present at the inaugural meeting of the Soviet had equally dubious credentials. It defined its aims as “to organise the people’s forces and to struggle to consolidate political liberty and popular government”. On the evening of the same day, Nicholas issued a peremptory order to Khabalov instructing him to “end the disorders in the capital by tomorrow”. The following afternoon the troops opened fire. A police report stated that “only when loaded cartridges were fired into the heart of the crowd was it possible to disperse the mob, who however for the most part hid

in the courtyards of nearby houses and then re-emerged into the streets when the firing had ceased". When the masses lose their fear of death, then the game is up. Yet even now, the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd did not grasp the real nature of the situation. V. Kayurov, a member of the Bolshevik committee in the Vyborg district, concluded that "one thing seems evident: the insurrection is dissolving".<sup>[3]</sup> In reality, it was only just beginning.

Within a few days, from February 25 to 27, Petrograd was in the grip of a general strike. A general strike poses the question of power point blank, but in and of itself cannot solve it. The question arises from the situation itself: Who rules? Who is the master of the house? Inevitably, the final issue is decided by force. Recovering from its initial paralysis, the regime began to react. The tsar personally issued the order: "I order you to put an end to the disorder in the capital tomorrow without fail." The soldiers and police were ordered directly by Nicholas the Bloody to fire on demonstrators. On 26 of February, the shooting began. Most of the soldiers fired in the air, but the police, always more backward and reactionary than the soldiers, fired into the crowds. Many were killed and injured. This was a decisive turning point in the consciousness of the soldiers. That very day, the Pavlovsk regiment, ordered to fire on workers, instead opened fire on the police. On paper, the regime had ample forces at its disposal. But in the moment of truth, these forces just melted away. The desperate calls for reinforcements went unanswered. Trotsky reproduces a questionnaire sent by general Ivanov to general Khabalov:

*"Ivanov's question:* How many troops are in order and how many are misbehaving?

*"Khabalov's reply:* I have at my disposal in the Admiralty building four companies of the Guard, five squadrons of cavalry and Cossacks, and two batteries; the rest of the troops have gone over to the revolutionists, or by agreement with them are remaining neutral. Soldiers are wandering through the towns singly or in bands disarming officers.

"Q: Which railroad stations are guarded?

"R: All the stations are in the hands of the revolutionists and strictly guarded by them.

"Q: In what parts of the city is order preserved?

"R: The whole city is in the hands of the revolutionists. The telephone is not working, there is no communication between different parts of the city.

"Q: What authorities are governing the different parts of the city?

"R: I cannot answer this question.

"Q: Are all the ministries functioning properly?

"R: The ministers have been arrested by the revolutionists.

“Q: What police forces are at your disposal at the present moment?

“R: None whatever.

“Q: What technical and supply institutions of the War Department are now in your control?

“R: I have none.

“Q: What quantity of provisions is at your disposal?

“R: There are no provisions at my disposal. In the city on February 5 there were 5,600,000 pounds of flour in store.

“Q: Have many weapons, artillery and military stores fallen into the hands of the mutineers?

“R: All the artillery establishments are in the hands of the revolutionists.

“Q: What military forces and staffs are in your control?

“R: The chief of the Staff of the District is in my personal control. With the other district administrations I have no connections.”[\[4\]](#)

There was widespread fraternisation between troops and strikers. Workers went to the barracks to appeal to their brothers in uniform. At Bolshevik headquarters there were continuous and often heated discussions on tactics, in a situation which was changing, not by the day but by the hour. Shlyapnikov argued against the setting up of armed detachments, placing all emphasis on winning over the troops. Chugurin and others argued that both tasks were necessary, and so on. In the event, the situation was moving far faster than the debates of the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd. The workers were, in effect, taking over the city, making up for the lack of arms and military training with sheer heroism and weight of numbers.

After 27 February most of the capital was in the hands of the workers and soldiers, including bridges, arsenals, railway stations, the telegraph and the post office. In the moment of truth, the mighty forces which the regime possessed on paper evaporated into thin air. By the night of the 28th, Khabalov was left entirely without troops—a general without an army. The ministers of the tsar’s last government were led away to the Peter Paul fortress, prisoners of the revolution! Basing themselves on the experience of 1905, the workers set up Soviets to take over the running of society. Power was in the hands of the working class and soldiers.

One thing is absolutely clear. The overthrow of tsarism was accomplished by the working class, which drew behind it the peasantry in the shape of the army. In fact, the revolution was accomplished in a single city—Petrograd— which accounted for just one-seventy-

fifth of the population of Russia. Here, in a most striking way, we see the decisive weight of the proletariat over the peasantry, of the town over the countryside. The February revolution was relatively peaceful because no serious force was prepared to defend the old regime. Once the proletariat began to move, there was nothing to stop it. In relation to the February revolution Trotsky wrote:

“It would be no exaggeration to say that Petrograd achieved the February Revolution. The rest of the country adhered to it. There was no struggle anywhere except in Petrograd. There were not to be found anywhere in the country any groups of the population, any parties, institutions, or military units which were ready to fight for the old regime. This shows how ill-founded was the belated talk of the reactionaries to the effect that if there had been cavalry of the Guard in the Petersburg garrison, or if Ivanov had brought a reliable brigade from the front, the fate of the monarchy would have been different. Neither at the front nor at the rear was there a brigade or regiment to be found which was prepared to do battle for Nicholas II.”[\[5\]](#)

The workers now had power in their hands, but, as Lenin later explained, were not sufficiently organised and conscious to carry the revolution through to the end. This was the central paradox of the February revolution. The class which carried through the revolution was none other than the workers, pulling behind them the peasantry dressed in a grey soldiers’ greatcoat. Then how was this a bourgeois revolution? True, in its immediate programme and demands, the objective content of the February revolution was bourgeois-democratic. But what role did the bourgeoisie play in it? A counter-revolutionary role, which was only thwarted because the liberal politicians, like the autocracy itself, lacked the material means to put it into effect. Grasping the impossibility of drowning the revolution in blood, they hastily improvised a “Provisional Government” in order to attempt to gain control of the movement and derail it. The Provisional Government emerged out of the provisional committee of the Duma which gave itself a title that says it all: “Committee for the Re-establishment of Order and relations with Public Institutions and Personages.” The committee was headed by Mikhail Rodzianko, the former Speaker of the Duma, who admitted that he viewed the tsar’s abdication with “unspeakable sadness”. Another prominent member of the Progressive Bloc was Shulgin, who wished machine-guns had been made available to him to deal with the mob. Shulgin accidentally let slip the real reasons for the formation of the Provisional Government, when he remarked: “if we do not take power, others will take it for us, those rotters who have already elected all sorts of scoundrels in the factories.”[\[6\]](#)

The “scoundrels in the factories” were the members of the workers’ councils (“soviets”), those broadly-based committees of struggle, democratically elected in the workplaces, which immediately made their appearance. The workers took up where they had left off in 1906. In the course of the revolution they rediscovered all the old traditions and set up elected councils in every factory. In fact, power was already in their hands in February. The problem was the lack of a party and a leadership that stood for revolution. The reformist leaders who found themselves thrust into the foreground in the beginning of the revolution, and who made up the bulk of the Soviet Executive Committee, had no perspective of taking power, but fell over themselves in their haste to hand over power to

the bourgeoisie, although the latter had played no role in the revolution and were terrified by it.

The liberals had no real mass base of support in society. The only reason the Provisional Government could survive was that it was propped up by leaders of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. The representatives of big business knew that they could only hold the line by leaning on the support of the Soviet leaders. This would, after all, be only a temporary arrangement. The masses would soon tire of this madness. The movement would die down, and then they could simply give the “socialists” a kick in the teeth. But for the time being, they were a necessary evil to be put up with, for fear of worse. They therefore swallowed their indignation and made the necessary overtures. The reformist leaders held a hastily convened meeting at the Tauride Palace with the members of the Labour Group of the Central War Industry Committees, the Menshevik Duma deputies and assorted journalists and intellectuals of the Menshevik camp. The Mensheviks immediately come out with a class collaborationist stance. That was only to be expected, since it was the logical outcome of their whole previous evolution. Their OC published a declaration on 1 March calling for a provisional government “which will provide the conditions for the organisation of the new free Russia”. The workers had shed their blood to conquer power, while the bourgeoisie watched, terrified, from the sidelines. Yet the Mensheviks—the elected representatives of the “scoundrels in the factories”—wished to hand over power to the bourgeoisie!

The workers and soldiers distrusted the bourgeoisie but trusted their leaders, especially those with the most radical and “left” image, like Kerensky. This middle class careerist with a lawyer’s rhetoric and a flare for theatrical demagoguery was perfectly cut out to embody the first shapeless, confused and naïve stages of the awakening of the masses. Kerensky was allowed by the Soviet to participate as a member of the Provisional Government. Here we have the central paradox of the February revolution: that it brought to power those who played absolutely no role in its success and who feared it as the devil fears holy water—the Cadets and their Octobrist allies in the Duma. On 2 March, the Provisional Government was constituted. It was made up mainly of big landlords and industrialists. Prince Lvov was designated as chairman of the council of ministers. The Foreign Minister was the chief of the Cadet party, Milyukov. The Finance Minister was the wealthy sugar manufacturer and landowner Tereshchenko. Trade and Industry was in the hands of the textile manufacturer Konovalov. War and Navy went to the Octobrist Guchkov. Agriculture was given to the Cadet Shingarev. To this reactionary gang of rogues, the Soviet handed the government of Russia!

The petty bourgeois leaders of the soviets had no confidence in the ability of the masses to carry through the revolution. Profoundly convinced that the bourgeoisie was the only class qualified to rule, they were anxious to hand over the power conquered by the workers and soldiers to the “enlightened” section of Capital at the earliest opportunity. The Mensheviks and SRs strove to convince the masses that to rule without the capitalists was to “destroy the people’s revolution” (!). (*Izvestiya* 2/3/17) They constantly harped on the theme that the working class was too weak to carry through the revolution and must not “isolate” itself. Potresov put the Menshevik position bluntly when he said that “at the

moment of the bourgeois revolution, the (class) best prepared, socially and psychologically, to solve national problems, is (the) bourgeoisie”. On March 7, the Petrograd Menshevik organ *Rabochaya Gazeta* wrote: “Members of the Provisional Government! The proletariat and the army await your orders to consolidate the revolution and make Russia a democracy.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Such a thought, however, was very far from the minds of the bourgeois leaders of the Provisional Government. Their first instinct, as we have seen, was to resort to repression, but that was now impossible. Therefore, they were compelled to manoeuvre and play for time. So they “gave” to the masses only what the workers and soldiers had already conquered in struggle. The sole aim of the liberals was to halt the revolution by making cosmetic changes from the top which would preserve as much of the old regime as possible. That old regime, severely undermined, bruised and shaken, was still in existence in the shape of the economic power of the landlords, bankers and capitalists, the huge bureaucracy, the officer caste, the Duma and—the monarchy. The liberal bourgeoisie was so terrified of the revolution that it clung like grim death to the monarchy as the firmest bulwark of property and Order. In order to preserve the monarchy the Provisional Government was manoeuvring to replace Nicholas II with his son under the regency of his brother Prince Mikhail, hoping to substitute one Romanov for another. In this grotesque comedy of errors, the workers, who had shed their blood to overthrow the Romanovs, handed power to their leaders, who, in turn, handed it to the bourgeois liberals, who, in turn, offered it back to the Romanovs!

All this was not lost on the workers and soldiers, especially the activists, whose attitude to the bourgeois politicians in the Provisional Government was characterised by a gnawing feeling of distrust. But they trusted their leaders, the Mensheviks and SRs, the “moderate socialists” who made up the majority of the Soviet Executive Committee and who were constantly telling them that they must be patient, that the first task was to consolidate democracy, prepare to convene the Constituent Assembly and so on. The masses listened and considered. Perhaps we should wait and see. Our leaders know best. Yet the gnawing feeling of distrust was to grow more intense with every passing day.

### **The Bolsheviks in February**

The Bolsheviks had lost a lot of ground since 1914, and had also lately been badly hit by repression. According to the *Istoriya*, the strength of the Party in February was approximately as follows:

Petrograd  
about 2,000

Moscow  
about 600

Urals  
500

Yekaterinoslav  
400

Nizhy-novgorod  
300

Rostov area  
170

Tver  
between 120-150

Ivanovo-Voznesensk  
between 150-200

Kharkov  
200

Samara  
150

Kiev  
200

Makeyevsk  
between 180-200

When we bear in mind that we are talking about a huge country with a population in the region of 150 million, we see that, in the beginning of the revolution, the Party represented a very small number. But against this we must take other factors into account. The quality of the Bolshevik cadres was undoubtedly superior to those of the other tendencies. Mostly working class in composition, they would have had a better training, and a higher level of discipline than the Mensheviks and SRs. A high proportion of them would have been what we might call the “natural leaders” in their workshops, the most conscious and militant elements who enjoyed the trust of their fellow workers. Each one would be in touch with a much larger number. Above all, they could base themselves on the Bolshevik tradition left over from 1912-14, especially in big industrial centres. Organisationally, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries were in a far worse state. In principle, the Bolsheviks had the edge over other tendencies. Sukhanov, who after all was a Menshevik, refers to them as the main workers’ tendency in Petrograd in February. But against this must be weighed the quality of the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd. In February the leading cadres were Shlyapnikov, Zalutsky and the young student, Molotov.

In the first volume of his informative and closely-observed history of the revolution, the left Menshevik Sukhanov who also attended the meetings, says of the Petrograd Bolshevik leaders that “their flatfootedness or, more properly, their incapacity to think their way into the political problem and formulate it, had a depressing effect on us”.

Sukhanov gives the following appraisal of Shlyapnikov, who was one of the leading elements: “A party patriot, and, one might say, a fanatic, ready to appraise the entire revolution from the standpoint of the success of the Bolshevik Party, an experienced conspirator, an excellent technical organiser and a good practical member of the professional movement, but definitely not a politician, capable of grasping and generalising the essence of the given circumstances. If there was any political thought present here, then it was the pattern of the old-time party resolutions of a general character, but this responsible leader of the most influential workers’ organisation possessed neither independent thought, nor the ability or desire to work out the essence of the moment in all its concreteness.”<sup>[8]</sup>

The Menshevik Sukhanov no doubt underestimates the qualities of Shlyapnikov, which are presented in a one-sided manner. Nevertheless, there is at least a grain of truth in this pen-portrait which sums up many of the mental traits of a typical Bolshevik “committee-man”. As in 1905, the latter quickly lost their bearings when confronted with a new situation and lagged behind the movement until Lenin re-armed the party with the perspective of a new revolution. This fact has long been concealed by the writings of Soviet histories. For example, they claim that the Party issued a leaflet on February 26. But more recent investigations have shown that the Petrograd Committee published its first leaflet on February 27. But by this time Petrograd was already in the grip of a general strike and the spread of mutinies in the army and navy had sealed the fate of the regime. In other words, the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd was following the movement, not leading it.

How did the party react to the February events? According to the voluminous history of the CPSU produced under Khrushchov, on the morning of February 25, the Bolshevik Bureau met and decided to take energetic steps to spread the movement throughout the country. But other accounts present a somewhat different picture. The February revolution caught not only Lenin, but the whole party by surprise. At the beginning of the revolution, the party was still in a weak position. So weak that, as Marcel Liebman points out in his perceptive study, the Petrograd Committee was not even capable of issuing a leaflet on the occasion of the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in January 1917. Yet in the space of a few months the Bolshevik Party’s membership had grown by more than ten times, transforming it into the decisive force in the working class. The growth of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 must represent the most spectacular transformation in the entire history of political parties. Yet in the initial phase of the revolution, the party showed itself to be woefully unprepared. The upsurge of the masses caught it off guard. “Lacking a vigorous and clear-sighted leadership,” writes Marcel Liebman, “the Bolsheviks of the capital had reacted to the first workers’ demonstrations with much reserve, and even with a suspiciousness that recalls their attitude in January 1905. They were somewhat isolated in the factories where they worked.”

At the beginning of the revolution, they did not give a good account of themselves. So far out of step were the Bolsheviks in Petrograd that at first they tried to restrain the movement on Women's Day. V.N. Kayurov, a member of the key Vyborg District Committee recalls how he intervened in a meeting of militant women workers on February 22: "I explained the meaning of 'Women's Day' and of the women's movement in general, and when I had to talk about the present moment I endeavoured first and foremost to urge the women to refrain from any partial demonstrations and to act only on the instructions of the Party Committee." But the women workers were in no mood to wait. Kayurov learned with "astonishment" and "indignation" that the party's slogans had been ignored. "I was angered by the behaviour of the strikers," he wrote. "In the first place they had obviously ignored the decisions taken by the Party's district committee, and then by me. The previous evening I had called on the working women to show restraint and discipline—and now, out of the blue, there was this strike."<sup>[9]</sup>

In his *History*, Trotsky asserts that "for Bolshevism, the first months of the revolution had been a period of bewilderment and vacillation"<sup>[10]</sup> There is plenty of evidence to back this assertion. The most experienced and politically mature leaders were in prison, in Siberia or abroad. The Petrograd leadership, as we have seen, was ill-prepared for the tasks that loomed before it. The Russian Bureau was made up of Shlyapnikov, Molotov and Zalutsky, who maintained contact with Lenin by letter. A member of the Vyborg district committee, V.N. Kayurov, recalled that they "received absolutely no guidance from the leading organs of the Party. The Petrograd committee had been arrested, and Comrade Shlyapnikov representing the Central Committee was unable to give [them] directions for future activity."<sup>[11]</sup>

Having been caught off guard at first, once the scope of the workers' action became clear, the Bolsheviks began to react, supporting the strike and working to extend it. More and more workers were becoming incorporated into the strike movement. By 25 February there were 300,000 on strike in Petrograd. The strike wave had turned imperceptibly into a general political strike: trams, small workshops, printers, shops, all were swept up into action begun by the women workers. Leaflets were issued with slogans: "Everyone in struggle! Onto the streets!" "Down with the tsarist monarchy!" "Down with the war!"

Gradually, the Bolsheviks in Petrograd recovered from their initial disorientation and got down to work. On the day the shooting started, three Bolshevik CC members were arrested. The Vyborg local committee assumed the function of leadership in Petrograd. From the morning of 27 February onwards, all the forces of the Petrograd organisation were sent out to the factories and barracks. Arsenal were raided. The Bolshevik V. Alexeyev organised the young workers of the Putilov plant into an assault group to attack the police, to seize their weapons. On the evening of the 27, the Bolshevik leadership, consisting mainly of the Vyborg committee, met to discuss what action was needed to transform the general strike into an armed insurrection. The order was given to fraternise with the troops and disarm the police, to raid the arms stores and arsenals and arm workers. The workers needed no urging!

Once they had recovered from their initial unpreparedness, the Petrograd Bolsheviks took a more offensive stance. They denounced pacts with the bourgeois liberals, flayed the defencists and called on the workers to take immediate action. The workers went to the barracks, fraternised with the troops and were everywhere received with enthusiastic solidarity. The mood of the troops, some of whom were ex-Putilov workers, was revolutionary. The troops came over, one regiment after another. The same story was unfolding in Moscow. Together with the workers, the insurgent troops occupied the central arsenal in Petrograd. 40,000 rifles and 30,000 revolvers were instantly at the disposal of the workers. The going-over of the army was not an accident, but the result of years of harsh experience of the trenches, and beyond that the accumulated discontent of the long-suffering Russian peasant, brought to a head by the war. But the role of countless individual and nameless heroes cannot be under-estimated.

The line usually put by bourgeois historians is that, whereas the October revolution was a mere “coup”, the February Revolution was an elemental, spontaneous movement of the masses. The implied conclusion is that the first was a bad thing, the conspiracy of a small minority, leading inexorably to dictatorship, while the second...well, of course as a revolution, one should not really approve, but then the tsarist regime was not entirely OK, and it did, after all, represent a democratic movement—a movement of the majority. Both these versions are false. The October revolution was neither a coup nor a conspiracy, but the organised expression of the will of the overwhelming majority which had striven for nine months to find a solution to its problems through Soviet power. On the other hand, the description of the February revolution as a merely “spontaneous” affair is equally one-sided and superficial. One can say this only in the sense that no party had organised it. But this is insufficient. It conveys the impression of a kind of blind upsurge, like a stampede of cattle which occurs without rhyme or reason. The use of the word “spontaneous” in this context explains nothing, and is merely a cover for the lack of explanation, or, worse still, a contempt for the “ignorant masses” whose actions are attributed to mere herd instinct.

The Bolshevik Party as such could in no sense be said to have led the February revolution. Yet somebody led it. Somebody took the initiative, called the strikes, organised the demonstrations. Every worker knows that even a strike of a couple of hours has a leadership. Someone always takes the initiative. Someone has to walk through the door of the manager’s office to present the workers’ demands. That person is chosen by the workers. And the choice is not “spontaneous” (that is, accidental). The workers will inevitably choose the most conscious, the most fearless, the most committed man or woman on the shop floor to represent them. That person has a history which did not commence yesterday. He or she is known to the workers as someone who knows what they are talking about. These are the natural leaders of the working class. As a rule, though not always, most of them will be organised in the unions and left wing political parties. In the case of Russia, they were mainly Bolsheviks.

Although they were still numerically small, the Bolsheviks by this time had some hundreds of members in the key factories: about 75-80 in the Old Lessner factory, around 30 in the “Russo-Baltic” and “Izhorsky” shipyards and smaller groups in other factories.

In the Putilov works, with its 26,000 employees, there were 150 Bolsheviks. These were still very small numbers, but with their revolutionary, uncompromising class policies, individual Bolsheviks undoubtedly played a role out of all proportion to their numerical strength in the February events. Without waiting for a lead from the party, the worker-Bolsheviks in the factories and barracks moved into action, providing decisive leadership to the strikers and demonstrators. Their past political activity provided them with a political capital that placed them head and shoulders above the raw masses that surrounded them.

There can be no doubt that individual Bolshevik workers, as the most organised and militant elements in the factories, played a key role, giving a revolutionary class content to the slogans of the movement and an organised form without waiting for orders from the Bolshevik leadership. They had not read much theory, and in most cases simply remembered the basic party slogans on the war, the land, the republic and the eight-hour day. But this limited stock of ideas, linked to a basic class instinct and revolutionary spirit was enough to give them a colossal superiority and make them into giants in their workplaces and on the streets. The party agitator now came into his own.

These local leaders were sufficiently able to lead the workers to the overthrow of tsarism, but no more than that. In order to have gone further, they would have required a firm and clear guidance from the party leadership. But the Bolshevik leadership in Petersburg, still clinging to the inadequate and out-moded slogan of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, had no perspective of the assumption of power by the working class. Even the most radical of them did not look further than the establishment of a bourgeois republic. The overthrow of tsarism therefore left them confused and disoriented. Thus, while the leading role in the February uprising was played in large measure by Bolshevik workers, the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd lost the initiative as a result of their initial hesitations. As Lenin so often repeated, the workers and the rank-and-file proved far more revolutionary than the most revolutionary party.

As in the factories, so in the barracks, many of the “natural leaders” of the soldiers were Bolsheviks, who now came into their own, like the ex-Putilov men who joined the army during the war. The decisive sections of the advance guard were under the influence of the Bolsheviks. The years had not passed in vain. Most of these would have been Bolsheviks, trained in the revolutionary school of 1905 and 1912-14. But the masses were a different matter altogether. The war had transformed the composition of the factories by drawing in a large number of formerly backward, unorganised and inexperienced layers. In order for the heavy, multi-millioned masses to draw all the necessary conclusions, a further experience was necessary. It is natural for people to take the line of least resistance, even in a revolution. For this very reason the masses always cling obstinately to their traditional mass organisations. The thinking of the masses is very economical: why discard an old tool before trying to make it work? The only difference in Russia in 1917 was that the broad masses had neither a clearly recognised party nor a mass trade union, but only a vague idea of the “Social Democrats”. True, the most advanced workers were Bolsheviks and in the period immediately before the war had been in the majority—of the organised workers at least. But the masses newly awakened

to political life could not immediately distinguish between the left and right wing. They were not immediately concerned with the niceties of programmatic details but were moved by a general desire for change. They were capable of carrying out a revolution but not of preventing power from slipping out of their hands. Their actions were far in advance of their consciousness. It required the experience of great events and the patient work of the Bolsheviks for the consciousness of the masses to be brought up to the level demanded by the real situation.

This also explains why the lines of demarcation separating Bolshevik and Menshevik workers were not so clear. Suddenly, the differences between them seemed less important. Did they not both defend a bourgeois democratic republic? In any case, there was a strong urge for unity as a result of the revolution itself. The Menshevik workers, swept along by the revolutionary wave, fought side by side with the Bolsheviks. The idea of unity in action of all revolutionary groups was widespread at this time. At rank-and-file level, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and even SR workers collaborated in action without any difficulty. In many areas, not for the first time, Social Democratic groups fused spontaneously. This fact is highly significant. It shows just how tenacious the idea of unity is in the working class and also just how complex the task of building a revolutionary party is.

Even though in 1912-14, the Bolsheviks had succeeded in winning over four-fifths of the organised workers in Russia, even though during the war the Mensheviks had played hardly any role, *yet in the heady days of February-April, the two factions were again merged into a single organisation in every province except Moscow and Petrograd. Indeed, in many areas, they remained united right up to the October revolution.* Such was the power of the banner of the old, traditional party, the RSDLP, despite all that had gone before. Even in Russia in 1917, Lenin's struggle to separate out the genuine revolutionary tendency was not accomplished either easily or at one blow. In Russia, as in every other country, the mass forces of Bolshevism and the future Communist International did not drop from the sky, but were formed out of a struggle of contradictory trends within the existing traditional organisations of the working class (the Social Democracy) which only after a long period of struggle with many vicissitudes, resulted in a split and the formation of a new party. This process, the stages of which we have attempted to outline in the present work, only really ended in October 1917, when the revolutionary wing finally won over a decisive majority in the soviets and led the working class to the seizure of power.

## NOTES

[A] The *oprichniki* were the private bodyguards of Ivan the Terrible, the bloody ruler of 16th century Muscovy. They were notorious for their bloodthirsty activities.

[1] Quoted in Keep, op. cit., p. 59.

[2] Raskolnikov, *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917*, p. 1.

[3] Keep, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

[4] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 105-6.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

[6] Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, pp. 119-20.

[7] Quoted in Liebman, *op. cit.*, pp. 121 and 120.

[8] N. Sukhanov, *Zapiski o revoliutsii*, vol. 1, pp. 50 and 94.

[9] See Liebman, *op. cit.*, p. 117 and 118.

[10] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 300.

[11] Quoted in M. Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, p. 117.

## **Part Six: The Year of Revolution**

[section 2 of 7]

### **The Mensheviks and the February Revolution**

By its very nature, a revolution stirs society to the depths, arousing the millions of politically backward and inert masses to political life. Above all in a backward, predominantly peasant country like Russia, this meant the awakening of the peasantry and other layers of the petty bourgeoisie of town and countryside. The pressure of the petty bourgeois masses played a disproportionate role in the early stages. This was expressed in the system of elections in the soviets. Initially, the workers were entitled to one representative for every 1,000 voters, one soldier elected for every company (*rota* in Russian) in Petrograd. This voting system gave an overwhelming preponderance to the soldiers, that is to say, the peasants, over the workers' representatives in the soviets. There were 2,000 soldiers deputies as against 800 workers. At the beginning of the revolution the Bolsheviks were submerged in this sea of politically untutored and often illiterate peasants. Motivated by the petty bourgeois spirit, they tended to elect as their representatives "intellectuals" and "the gentlemen who know how to speak". These were overwhelmingly made up of the democratic middle class (many of them junior officers in the army) who gravitated massively to the moderate socialist and reformist parties—the Mensheviks and SRs.

The most prominent Menshevik leaders—Dan, Chkheidze, Tsereteli—were defencists, but there was a small group of Menshevik Internationalists—Martov, Martynov, and others—who opposed the war. These left reformist or "centrist" elements (centrist, in the

sense of standing between Marxism and reformism) had initially moved to the left, but, typically, did not want to break completely with the defencists, and therefore subsequently moved back to the right. The line of the Mensheviks in 1917, in contrast to 1905, was dictated by its right wing. The “lefts” played no independent role. Nor could they. The only consistently revolutionary tendency was the Bolshevik Party, which attracted to itself, as Lenin later observed, all the best elements in the Russian labour movement. The best of the left reformists, one way or another, found their way into the ranks of the Bolshevik Party. The rest sunk without trace.

The Menshevik and SR leaders who dominated the Soviet in the beginning were, in practice, self-appointed. But they initially had a number of advantages over the Bolsheviks. They had the “big names” from the Duma group, people known to the masses through the legal press during the war years. They also offered what appeared to be an “easy way out” to the mass of politically untutored workers and peasants who now flooded onto the scene, intoxicated with democratic illusions. These petty bourgeois leaders were inwardly terrified of the revolution and from the first were anxious to hand power over to the “natural” leaders of society—the bourgeoisie.[\[A\]](#)

There were other reasons why the Mensheviks and SRs came to the fore after February. The Petrograd proletariat, which was solidly Bolshevik in 1912-16, had been seriously diluted by the war. The raw layers who entered the factories did not have the same level of consciousness or tradition as the veterans of 1905 whom they replaced. Trotsky explains: “The hegemony of the lower middle-class intellectuals was at bottom the expression of the fact that the peasantry, suddenly called to take part in organised political life through the machinery of the army, had by sheer weight of numbers pushed aside and overwhelmed the proletariat for the time being. Even more, in so far as the middle-class leaders had been raised to a dizzy height by the powerful mass of the army, the working class itself, with the exception of its advanced sections, could not but become imbued with a certain political respect for them and try to maintain political contact with them for fear of finding themselves divorced from the peasantry. And this was a very serious matter, for the older generation still remembered the lesson of 1905, when the proletariat was crushed, just because the massive peasant reserves had not come up in time for the decisive battles. That is why in the first phase of the new Revolution also the proletarian masses showed themselves highly accessible to the political ideology of the SRs and the Mensheviks—especially as the Revolution had aroused the hitherto slumbering backward masses of workers, and thus made the hazy radicalism of the intellectuals a sort of preparatory school for them.”[\[12\]](#)

The leading figures in the Petrograd Soviet—Chkheidze, Kerensky, the Soviet’s chairman, and Skobelev—were all Mensheviks and defencists. On the Soviet’s executive committee there were 12 others, but only two Bolsheviks: Shlyapnikov and Zalutsky. On a Bolshevik proposal, the EC was broadened to include three representatives from each party: Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and SRs. In this way, Molotov and K.I. Shutko were added for the Bolsheviks and P.I. Stuchka from the Latvian Social Democrats. The total number of Bolsheviks in the Soviet on March 9, was 40. The army was also represented on the soviet. Soldier delegates were sent to the Tauride Palace, including men from the

front. This meant, in effect, that for the first time the representatives of the peasantry sat alongside their proletarian brethren. This was indeed the practical realisation of the revolutionary unity of the proletariat and peasantry.

The Soviet launched its own publication, *Izvestiya* (The News), the first issue of which came out on 28 February under the editorship of Y.M. Steklov. Here at last was the parliament of the revolutionary people in arms! No power on earth could prevent it from taking over the land and factories and instituting a genuinely democratic republic of the toilers. It was sufficient that it should will it. There was only one obstacle—that the workers and peasants should be conscious of their power. But such a consciousness was as yet lacking. In this way was born the abortion of “dual power”.

The reasons for the dual power regime were explained by Trotsky: “The ‘united front’ of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries dominated the soviets and actually had power in its hands. The bourgeoisie was completely paralysed politically since ten million soldiers, exhausted by the war, stood fully armed on the side of the workers and peasants. But what the leaders of the ‘united front’ dreaded most of all was to ‘scare off’ the bourgeoisie, to ‘push’ it to the camp of reaction. The united front dared not touch either the imperialist war, or the banks, or feudal land ownership, or the shops and plants. It marked time and spouted general phrases while the masses lost patience. More than that: the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries directly transferred the power to the Cadet party, rejected by the toilers and despised by them.”[\[13\]](#)

The Mensheviks and SRs clung to the bourgeois liberals. The latter clung to what remained of the old order. The workers and peasants, only recently awakened to political life, were striving to find their way and as yet lacked the experience and self-confidence to rely on their own strength. Lenin grasped immediately the significance of the Soviet as a “real popular government”. But this conception was a book sealed by seven seals to the leaders of all the parties, including, at first, the Bolsheviks themselves. The first concern of the bourgeois liberals was to restore “order” and “get things back to normal”. Yet the workers and soldiers, instinctively reluctant to disarm or take a step back having come so far, looked for guidance and leadership to the Soviet. Increasingly distrustful, a delegation of soldiers and sailors deputies came to the Tauride palace to present their demands to the soviet. Two members of this delegation (A.M. Paderin and A.D. Sadovsky) were Bolsheviks.

The vacillations of the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd did not reflect the outlook of the rank and file Bolshevik workers who were more in touch with the mood in the factories and barracks. The Bolsheviks in the Vyborg district demanded that power be taken over by the Soviet. Naturally, the Soviet leaders refused on the grounds that the revolution was “bourgeois” and the working class was “not ready” to take power. The bourgeois politicians manoeuvred to head off the revolution. The open defencists favoured the entry of the Soviet leaders into a coalition with the bourgeoisie. The shamefaced defencists (Chkheidze, Sukhanov, Steklov) favoured staying out of the coalition, but not the assumption of power. Instead, the Soviet should “control” the bourgeois government from outside. This attempt to combine fire and water anticipated the position later taken

by the German centrists who advocated a mixed constitution in which the workers' councils (soviets) should exist side by side with the bourgeois government. A similar line was taken by Stalin and Kamenev.

The Menshevik policy went against the grain of the masses, but the latter were politically inexperienced, naive and trusting in their leaders. The Menshevik orators and "big names" overawed them and silenced their doubts. In the name of "unity" and "defence of democracy", unity of all "progressive forces", etc. They used the argument that the working class could not transform society "on its own", and all the dismal litany traditionally rattled off by the reformist leaders to convince the workers that it is powerless to change society, and must forever put up with the rule of Capital. They argued the Soviet would "put pressure on the bourgeois liberals" to act in the workers' interests.

### **The Bolsheviks and the Provisional Government**

Faced with an entirely new and unexpected turn of events, the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd felt out of their depth. They anxiously awaited the arrival of the exiled leaders to provide them with direction. Shlyapnikov admits that the Bolsheviks, who concentrated all their efforts in winning the immediate battle for power, gave little thought to the question of what power meant and how, concretely, the "provisional revolutionary government" would be formed. At bottom, this was the result of a mistaken theory, summed up in the formula "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" which utterly disarmed and disoriented the Bolshevik leaders after the overthrow of tsarism. Even the most radical of them had no other perspective than the consolidation of a bourgeois regime. "The coming revolution must only be a bourgeois revolution," wrote Olmsky, adding that "this was an obligatory premise for every member of the party, the official opinion of the party, its continual, and unchanging slogan right up to the February revolution of 1917, and even some time after." The same idea was expressed even more crudely in *Pravda* on March 7, 1917, even before Stalin and Kamenev had given it an even more right wing slant: "Of course, there is no question among us of the downfall of the rule of capital, but only the downfall of the rule of the autocracy and feudalism."[\[14\]](#)

The rank and file Bolshevik workers in the factories, in contrast to the leaders, displayed a healthy scepticism and distrust of the Provisional Government from the outset. Their outlook was shaped, not by old slogans, but by their class and revolutionary instinct. At every stage they stood to the left of the Central Committee which, without the steadying hand of Lenin, frequently vacillated. Paradoxically, the absence of the leaders from Petrograd in the beginning permitted the voice of the rank-and-file to be heard more clearly. Once they got over the initial disorientation, they adopted a more or less correct position. Thus early on, the Petrograd Bolsheviks issued a manifesto, which Lenin heartily welcomed, <*To All the Citizens of Russia* demanding a democratic republic, the eight-hour day, seizure of the landlords' estates and an immediate end to the war of plunder.

This position would have placed the Bolsheviks on collision course with all the other tendencies of the “progressive camp” which were attempting to put the brakes on the revolution for the sake of reaching an accommodation with the bourgeois liberals. Although it did not refer to the soviets it said that: “The factory workers and also the revolutionary soldiers must immediately elect their representatives for a provisional revolutionary government, which must be set up under the protection of the insurrectionary, revolutionary people and army.” The Manifesto also appealed for the setting up of soviets. “Proceed immediately to the election in the factories of factory strike committees. Their elected representative will make up a Soviet of workers’ deputies, which will take upon itself the organising role in the movement, which will set up a provisional revolutionary government.”

The instinctively revolutionary position of the Bolshevik rank-and-file, and its opposition to class collaborationism was reflected in the radical stance taken by *Pravda* in the early days of the revolution, before the arrival of Stalin and Kamenev. *Pravda* (9/3/1917) wrote: “The Soviet of Workers and Soldiers deputies must immediately get rid of this provisional government of the liberal bourgeoisie and declare itself to be the provisional revolutionary government.”<sup>[15]</sup> However, the arrival of the exiles immediately changed things for the worse. Since Lenin was stranded in Switzerland, blocked by the refusal of the Allies to allow him to travel to Russia through their territory, the first to return were those who had been sent to Siberia, Kamenev and Stalin among them. They immediately steered the Party on a rightward course, which signified drawing close to the Mensheviks.

The leaders of the Bolsheviks in Russia joined the Mensheviks and SRs in supporting the Provisional Government headed by Prince Lvov, despite all Lenin’s warnings against blocs with the liberal bourgeoisie. Even before the return of Stalin and Kamenev, there were sharp differences. When Molotov, in the name of the Bureau of the Central Committee, put before the Petrograd Committee a resolution criticising the Provisional Government, denouncing its counter-revolutionary policy and calling for its replacement by a “democratic government”, he was rebuffed. Instead, the Petrograd Committee passed a resolution in which it agreed to refrain from attacks on the Provisional Government “so long as its actions correspond to the interests of the proletariat and of the broad democratic masses of the people”.<sup>[16]</sup> Instead of appearing as an independent revolutionary force, the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd acted as the fifth wheel in the cart of the “progressive democrats”. This reflected the pressure of petty bourgeois public opinion. The general mood in the aftermath of the February overthrow was one of euphoria and universal rejoicing. Intense pressure grew for the unity of all “progressive forces”, and weighed heavily on the leading stratum of the most radical wing which was constantly urged to modify its stance and fall into line with the majority. This threw the Bolshevik leaders off balance, and they moved towards accommodation with the Mensheviks. In many areas, local committees of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks spontaneously merged. As Trotsky recalls:

“The barriers between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, between the Internationalists and the Patriots, fell down. The whole country was flooded with buoyant but nearsighted and verbose conciliationism. People floundered in the welter of heroic phrases, the

principal element of the February Revolution, especially during its first weeks. Groups of exiles started from all the ends of Siberia, merged into one stream and flowed westward in an atmosphere of exultant intoxication.”[\[17\]](#)

The arrival of the exiles from Siberia instantly imparted a sharp rightward slant to the political positions taken by the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd. Up until this time, the local leadership made up of Shlyapnikov, Zalutsky and Molotov, had steered a more radical course. These three leaders stood on the left wing of the party. But the newly arrived Kamenev and Stalin used their seniority to push the party’s line sharply to the right. This was immediately reflected in the pages of the central organ. In an editorial in *Pravda* on March 14, two days after his return, Kamenev wrote an editorial in which he asked: “What purpose would it serve to speed things up, when things were already taking place at such a rapid pace?”[\[18\]](#) The next day, he wrote another piece commenting on Kerensky’s statement that Russia would “proudly defend its freedoms” and would not “retreat before the bayonets of the aggressors”. Kamenev enthusiastically concurred, in language which completely renounced Lenin’s policy of opposition to the war: “When army faces army, it would be the most insane policy to suggest to one of those armies to lay down its arms and go home. This would not be a policy of peace, but a policy of slavery, which would be rejected with disgust by a free people.”[\[19\]](#)

Stalin held the same position as Kamenev, only more cautiously. He published an article approving the stance of the Soviet in its Manifesto (which Lenin blasted) and said that what was needed was “to bring pressure to bear on the Provisional Government to make it declare its consent to start peace negotiations immediately”. According to Stalin it was “unquestionable” that “the stark slogan ‘Down with the war!’ was absolutely unsuitable as a practical means”.[\[20\]](#)

The first All-Russian Conference of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies was convened at the end of March 1917. Simultaneously with this, the Bureau of the Bolshevik Central Committee issued a call for the All-Russian Conference of party workers, which opened on March 28. This was the first really representative conference of the party to be held since the overthrow of tsarism. Lenin was still struggling to return from his Swiss exile, and was therefore absent. The political proceedings therefore constitute an accurate reflection of how the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd viewed the revolution. Among the central issues discussed were the attitude to the war and the Provisional Government, as well as relations to other parties. The report on the attitude to the Provisional Government was delivered by Stalin. The whole thrust of this report, permeated through and through with opportunistic adaptation and conciliationism, is radically opposed to the line advocated insistently by Lenin.

The central idea of Stalin’s speech is that the Bolsheviks should give critical support to the bourgeois Provisional Government, to act as a kind of loyal opposition, which, while remaining outside the government, and with certain reservations, nevertheless supports it: “In so far as the Provisional Government fortifies the steps of the revolution,” he says, “to that extent we must support it; but in so far as it is counter-revolutionary, support to the provisional Government is not permissible.”

This position did not command unanimous support at the Conference. In fact, the resolution adopted by the Bureau of the Central Committee while unsatisfactory, at least made some correct points: "The Provisional Government," it reads, "brought forward by the moderate bourgeois classes of our society and linked through all its interests with Anglo-French capitalism, is incapable of solving the tasks posed by the revolution."

It continues: "Therefore the task of the day is: consolidation of all forces around the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' deputies as the embryo of revolutionary power, alone capable both of repelling the attempts on the part of the tsarist and bourgeois counter-revolution as well as realising the demands of revolutionary democracy and of explaining the true class nature of the present government.

"The most urgent and important task of the Soviets, the fulfilment of which will alone guarantee the victory over all the forces of counter-revolution and the further development and deepening of the revolution, is, in the opinion of the party, the universal arming of the people, and, in particular, the immediate creation of Workers' Red Guards throughout the entire land."

The minutes state that Stalin publicly distanced himself from the resolution of the Bureau: "Comrade Stalin reads the resolution on the Provisional Government adopted by the Bureau of the Central Committee, but states that he is not in complete agreement with it, but is rather in accord with the resolution of the Krasnoyarsk Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies." The Krasnoyarsk resolution, which reflects the thinking of the more backward provinces, had a completely opportunist character, based on the idea that the Soviets can co-exist with the bourgeois Provisional Government and, by means of pressure, make it submit to its will:

"2) to make entirely clear that the only source of the power and the authority of the Provisional Government is the will of the people who have accomplished this revolution and to whom the Provisional Government is obliged wholly to submit;

"3) to make likewise clear that the submission of the Provisional Government to the basic demands of the revolution can be secured only by the unrelaxing pressure of the proletariat, the peasantry and the revolutionary Army, who must with unremitting energy maintain their organisation around the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies born out of the revolution, in order to transform the latter into the terrible force of the revolutionary people;

"4) to support the Provisional Government in its activities only in so far as it follows a course of satisfying the demands of the working class and the revolutionary peasantry in the revolution that is taking place."

In an incredible intervention in the course of the debate, Stalin made a bad situation still worse:

“In such a situation, can one speak of supporting such a government? *One can rather speak of the Government supporting us.* It is not logical to speak of support of the Provisional Government, on the contrary, *it is more proper to speak of the Government not hindering us from putting our programme into effect.*”

How could the Bolsheviks “put their programme into effect” while allowing a bourgeois government to remain in power? How was it possible to get peace from a government tied hand and foot to British and French capital? How could land be transferred to the peasantry by a government dominated by the “men of property?” The idea that the workers’ and soldiers’ soviets could co-exist for any length of time with a government of capitalists, let alone oblige it to act against its own vital interests, was in flagrant contradiction to the ABCs, not only of Marxism, but of common sense. This same formula was later used by the German Social Democratic leaders to de-rail and destroy the German revolution of November 1918. Had the line of Stalin and Kamenev prevailed, the Russian revolution would have undoubtedly ended up in a similar defeat.

The confused nature of these speeches and resolutions, and the disorientation of the Bolsheviks at this time, has its roots in the confused and contradictory nature of the old Bolshevik slogan “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, which Trotsky had pointed out long before. Starting out from the definition of the class nature of the revolution as bourgeois-democratic, the Bolsheviks were now faced with the dilemma of what to do, if the working class was not supposed to take power. Stalin and Kamenev concluded that the working class must support the “progressive” bourgeoisie, although hedging it round with “ifs” and “buts”.

The line of capitulation to middle class “democracy” advocated by Stalin and Kamenev effectively blurred the lines of demarcation between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. So much so, that the March Conference actually considered the question of fusion. Indeed, if the Stalin-Kamenev line were accepted, there would be no serious reason to maintain the existence of two separate parties. In the session of March 30, Kamenev reported on his contacts with the Mensheviks, as the minutes show:

“Kamenev: Reports that he has entered into negotiations with the internationalist SRs and Mensheviks. Inasmuch as it is clear that an absolutely unacceptable resolution of the Executive committee [of the Soviets] will be passed, it is necessary to counterpose to it a joint resolution of the internationalists. The SRs (22) are a national minority. They will not vote against the resolution of the Bolsheviks and will withdraw their resolution. The Mensheviks are seeking to introduce a single resolution and are for uniting on a joint resolution. Should factional discipline be imposed to compel the minority to submit to the majority, the internationalists will come out in favour of our resolution.”

Those speakers on the left of the party who opposed these moves towards unity and who dared to raise the question of the workers taking power were given short shrift. Thus, when Krassikov intervened on these lines, he was stopped in his tracks by the chairman:

“Krassikov: The gist of the matter is not in the amendments and not in a demonstrative presentation of social democratic slogans, but in the current moment. If we recognise the Soviets of Deputies as the organs that express the will of the people, then the question before us is not the consideration of what concrete measures must be taken on this or that issue. If we think that the time has now come to realise the dictatorship of the proletariat, then we ought to pose the question that way. We unquestionably have the physical force for a seizure of power. I believe that we will have sufficient physical force both in Petrograd as well as in other cities. [*Commotion in the hall. Shouts: ‘Not true’.*] I was present...

“The Chairman (*interrupting*): The question under discussion involves the practical steps for today. The question of the dictatorship of the proletariat is not under discussion.

“Krassikov (*continues*): If we do not pose the question that way then ought we to take steps in relation to the Provisional Government which...

“The Chairman deprives him of the floor.”

Although formally Kamenev’s proposal was to link up with the left (internationalist) wing of Menshevism, the real intention was to unite in a single party. Prominent Menshevik leaders like Lieber were present in the Conference, and participated in it. On the session of April 1, a resolution on unity written by the Georgian Menshevik leader Tsereteli was put to the congress. Although representatives of the Bolshevik left wing, including at that time the student Molotov, opposed it, Stalin expressed himself in favourable terms:

“*Order of the day*: Tsereteli’s proposal for unification.

“Stalin: We ought to go. It is necessary to define our proposals as to the terms of unification. Unification is possible along the lines of Zimmerwald- Kienthal.

“Luganovsky: The Kharkov Committee is carrying on negotiations precisely along these lines.

“Molotov: Tsereteli wants to unite heterogeneous elements. Tsereteli calls himself a Zimmerwaldist and a Kienthalist, and for this reason unification along these lines is incorrect both politically and organisationally. It would be more correct to advance a definite internationalist socialist platform. We will unite a compact minority.

“Luganovsky (in refuting comrade Molotov) says: At the present time we are unaware of any disagreements. The Mensheviks abstained in the Soviet and spoke more strongly than did ... the Bolsheviks who came out against. Many disagreements have been outlived. It is out of place to underscore tactical differences. We can have a joint Congress with the Mensheviks, the Zimmerwaldists and Kienthalists.”

In view of the controversy sparked off by this proposal, Stalin once again intervened in the debate to defend unification in unmistakable terms which, despite his habitual caution, faithfully echo his earlier comments, describing the differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism as “a storm in a tea-cup”:

“Stalin: There is no use running ahead and anticipating disagreements. There is no party life without disagreements. We will live down trivial disagreements within the party. But there is one question—it is impossible to unite what cannot be united. We will have a single party with those who agree on Zimmerwald and Kienthal...”[\[21\]](#)

After all this time, to describe the differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism as “trivial disagreements” shows that Stalin, the party “practico” had no real understanding of the the fundamental ideas of Bolshevism. These “trivial disagreements” were nothing other than the differences between reformism and revolutionism, between a class policy and a policy of class collaboration. In the end, the Conference voted to allow negotiations with the Mensheviks to proceed, and elected a negotiating committee composed of Stalin, Kamenev, Nogin and Teodorovich.

### **Lenin and Trotsky in 1917**

From his far-off exile in Switzerland Lenin, watched with growing anxiety the evolution of the line pursued by the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd. Immediately on hearing the news of the tsar’s overthrow he telegraphed Petrograd on March 6: “Our tactic: no trust in and no support of the new government; Kerensky is particularly suspect; arming of the proletariat is the only guarantee; immediate elections to the Petrograd City Council; no rapprochement with other parties.”

As soon as *Pravda* recommenced publication, Lenin started to send his famous *Letters from Afar*. Reading these articles, and comparing them to the speeches at the March conference, we seem to be in two different worlds. No wonder they fell like a bombshell on the astonished Central Committee members! Lenin bombarded *Pravda* with letters and articles demanding that the workers break with the bourgeois liberals and take power into their own hands. In *Letters from Afar* we see Lenin’s revolutionary genius in its authentic stature. His ability to sum up the essence of a situation at a glance, his imaginative sweep, his way of grasping precisely which concrete slogans apply and how to get from A to B. The February revolution, he stressed in the first letter, had put the Guchkovs and Milyukovs in power “*for the time being*”. But a capitalist government cannot solve the problems of the Russian people. “The tsarist monarchy has been smashed, but not finally destroyed.” “Side by side with this government...there has arisen the chief, unofficial, as yet underdeveloped and comparatively weak *workers’ government*, which expresses the interests of the proletariat and of the entire poor section of the urban and rural population. This is the *Soviet of Workers’ Deputies* in Petrograd which is seeking connections with the soldiers and peasants, and also with the agricultural workers, with the latter particularly and primarily, of course, more than with the peasants.”

Upon the solution of this contradiction, this regime of “dual power”, hung the fate of the revolution. What attitude should the Bolsheviks have towards the Provisional Government?

“He who says that the workers must *support* the new government in the interests of the struggle against tsarist reaction (and apparently this is being said by the Potresovs, Gvozdyovs, Chkhenkelis and also, all *evasiveness* notwithstanding, by *Chkheidze*) is a traitor to the workers, a traitor to the cause of the proletariat, to the cause of peace and freedom.”

And here Lenin comes over to a position that is identical to that first defended by Trotsky over a decade earlier: “Ours is a bourgeois revolution, *therefore* the workers must open the eyes of the people to the deception practised by the bourgeois politicians, teach them to put no faith in words, to depend entirely on their *own* strength, their *own* organisation, their *own* unity, and their *own weapons*.”

In the second letter, Lenin makes a withering criticism of the Manifesto issued by the leaders of the Soviet which hides behind pacifist phraseology and declares that all democrats must support the Provisional Government, and authorises Kerensky to enter it. Lenin retorts that “The task is not to ‘coax’ the liberals, but to *explain* to the workers why the liberals find themselves in a blind alley, why *they* are bound hand and foot, why they *conceal* both the treaties tsarism concluded with England and other countries and the deals between Russian and Anglo-French capital, and so forth.”[\[22\]](#)

When Lenin’s letters reached the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd, they were aghast. They thought that their leader must be completely insane! Or at least, he must be so far out of touch as to fail to understand the practicalities of the situation in Russia. A bitter conflict now opened up between Lenin and his closest comrades. In *Pravda* No. 27, Kamenev wrote: “As for Comrade Lenin’s general scheme, it appears to us to be unacceptable, inasmuch as it proceeds from the assumption that the bourgeois-democratic revolution is completed, and builds on the immediate transformation of this revolution into a socialist revolution.”[\[23\]](#) This accurately conveys the opinions of Kamenev, Stalin and most of the other “Old Bolsheviks” in the spring of 1917.

Out of all the leaders of the Social Democracy at that time, only one completely coincided with the position defended by Lenin. That man was Leon Trotsky, with whom Lenin had clashed so frequently in the past. When Trotsky first heard of the February revolution, he was still in exile in the United States. Immediately he wrote a series of articles in the paper *Novy Mir* (New World), which were published in its issues of March 13, 17, 19 and 20, 1917. What is most striking is the fact that, although there was no communication between Trotsky and Lenin, who was thousands of miles away in Switzerland, the content of these articles is identical to that of Lenin’s *Letters From Afar*, written at the same time. Let us recall that these letters of Lenin proved to be so shocking to the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd that Kamenev and Stalin had them suppressed or published in a mutilated form. At a time when the “Old Bolsheviks”, against Lenin’s explicit advice, were moving closer to the Mensheviks, Lenin’s ideas seemed to them to

be pure “Trotskyism”, and they were not wrong. The logic of events had pushed Lenin and Trotsky together. Independently, and starting from different directions, they came to the same conclusion: the bourgeoisie cannot solve the problems of Russia. The workers must take power.

In his article *Two Faces—Internal Forces of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky wrote: “*Formally*, in words, the bourgeoisie has agreed to leave the question of a form of government to the discretion of the Constituent Assembly. Practically, however, the Octobrist-Cadet Provisional Government will turn all the preparatory work for the Constituent Assembly into a campaign in favour of a monarchy against a republic. The Character of the Constituent Assembly will largely depend upon the character of those who convoke it. It is evident, therefore, that right now the revolutionary proletariat will have to set up its own organs, the Councils of Workingmen’s, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies, against the executive organs of the Provisional Government. In this struggle the proletariat ought to unite about itself the rising masses of the people, with one aim in view—to seize governmental power. Only a revolutionary labour government will have the desire and ability to give the country a thorough democratic cleansing during the work preparatory to the Constituent Assembly, to reconstruct the army from top to bottom, to turn it into a revolutionary militia, and to show the poorer peasants in practice that their only salvation is in support of a revolutionary labour regime. A Constituent Assembly convoked after such preparatory work will truly reflect the revolutionary, creative forces of the country and become a powerful factor in the further development of the revolution.”[\[24\]](#)

These lines, which are typical of the position taken by Trotsky at the time, exactly reproduce that of Lenin. But Lenin was not aware of this. He was misled by the false reports of Trotsky’s position sent from America by Alexandra Kollontai, who, having only recently broken with Menshevism, was anxious to present herself to Lenin as an ultra-radical, and falsely presented Trotsky as a “centrist”. Lenin accepted this nonsense as good coin and wrote some very harsh things about Trotsky in his replies to Kollontai, which were later used unscrupulously by the Stalinists. Only later, when Trotsky had returned to Russia and immediately began to play an outstanding role in the revolutionary wing, did Lenin change his opinion of Trotsky, saying of him that there was “no better Bolshevik”. As for Kollontai, she carried her ultra-leftism to its logical conclusion, entering into conflict with both Lenin and Trotsky, before she finally became a submissive servant of the totalitarian regime of Stalin.

The complete convergence of views between Lenin and Trotsky in the moment of truth was no accident. As long ago as 1909, Leon Trotsky—the only one to predict that the revolution would triumph as a workers’ revolution or not at all— had warned that the counter-revolutionary nature of the slogan of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” would only become clear in the moment when the question of power was posed. Now he was proved to have been correct. The weak side of Lenin’s theory, and its effect in practice, was the cause of very serious mistakes made by the Bolshevik leaders at the time of the February revolution, which were only corrected by Lenin after his return on the basis of a sharp internal struggle. Even Zinoviev admits this

in his tendentious *History of the Bolshevik Party* published in 1923 as part of the campaign against “Trotskyism”, although in a typically round-about and dishonest way:

“This evolution in our views over the years from 1905 to 1917 cannot be denied, any more than the fact that it proceeded with definite inconsistencies which were to produce amongst us very dangerous differences on the eve of October 1917. Some of us (including myself) for too long upheld the idea that in our peasant country we could not pass straight on to the socialist revolution, but merely hope that if our revolution coincided with the start of the international proletarian one it could become its overture.”[\[25\]](#)

These lines, despite their evasive character, hold the clue to all that happened in the Bolshevik Party in the first few months after February 1917. What happened to his letters sheds a lot of light on Lenin’s relations with the “Old Bolsheviks”. It was a carbon-copy of what had happened in 1912-13. Even the actors were the same. Stalin and Kamenev were once again the editors. Once again they opted for the line of least resistance called conciliationism. And once again they reacted to Lenin’s criticism and protests by blatant censorship. The Bolshevik leaders were so embarrassed by Lenin’s letters that, when Kollontai brought the first two letters to Petrograd late in March, they hesitated for several days before publishing. Even then, they printed only one of the two, which was censored to cut out all those passages where Lenin opposed any agreement with the Mensheviks. The same fate awaited the remainder of Lenin’s articles. They were just not published or issued in a mutilated form. Krupskaya comments: “Only the first letter was published on the day Lenin arrived in St Petersburg, three others were lying in the editors’ office and the fifth had not even been sent to *Pravda*, as Lenin had started writing it just before leaving for Russia.”[\[26\]](#)

In his autobiography, Trotsky recalls: “In New York, at the beginning of March, 1917, I wrote a series of articles dealing with the class forces and perspectives of the Russian revolution. At that very time, Lenin, in Geneva, was sending to Petrograd his *Letters From Afar*. And both of us, though we were writing in different parts of the world and were separated by an ocean, gave the same analysis and the same forecast. On every one of the principal questions, such as the attitude toward the peasantry, toward the bourgeoisie, the Provisional government, the war, and the world revolution, our views were completely identical. Here a test of the relations between ‘Trotskyism’ and Leninism was made on the very touchstone of history. And it was carried out under the conditions of a chemically pure experiment. At that time I knew nothing of Lenin’s stand; I argued on the basis of my own premises and my own revolutionary experience, and I drew the same perspective and suggested the same line of strategy as Lenin.

“But perhaps the question was quite clear to every one at that time, and the solution universally accepted? On the contrary; Lenin’s stand at that period, that is, before April 4, 1917, when he first appeared on the Petrograd stage, was his own personal one, shared by no one else. Not one of those leaders of the party who were in Russia had any intention of making the dictatorship of the proletariat—the social revolution—the immediate object of his policy. A party conference which met on the eve of Lenin’s arrival and counted

among its numbers about 30 Bolsheviks showed that none of them even imagined anything beyond democracy. No wonder the minutes of that conference are still kept a secret! Stalin was in favour of supporting the Provisional government of Guchkov and Miliukov, and of merging the Bolsheviks with the Mensheviks.”[\[27\]](#)

## NOTES

[A] The *Istoriya*, which describes the February rising, without the slightest foundation, as a purely Bolshevik affair, is at a loss to explain how the Mensheviks and SRs could be the principal beneficiaries!

[12] Trotsky, *The Russian Revolution*, in *The Essential Trotsky*, pp. 27-8.

[13] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, pp. 167-8.

[14] Quoted in Liebman, op. cit., p. 127.

[15] Quoted in *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, pp. 674 and 688.

[16] M. Liebman, op. cit., p. 122.

[17] Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 181.

[18] Liebman, op. cit., p. 123.

[19] E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 75.

[20] Stalin, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 8.

[21] Quoted in Trotsky, *The Stalin School of Falsification*, pp. 239, 240, 241, 242, 255, 256, 258, 274 and 275, which reproduces the official transcript of the Conference (my emphasis).

[22] LCW, *Telegram to the Bolsheviks Leaving for Russia, March 6 (19) 1917*, vol. 23, p. 292, 298 (emphasis in original), 304, 305, 306 and 317.

[23] LCW, *Letters on Tactics*, vol. 24, p. 50.

[24] Trotsky, *Leon Trotsky Speaks*, pp. 46-7.

[25] Zinoviev, *History of the Bolshevik Party*, pp. 177-8.

[26] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 338.

[27] Trotsky, *My Life*, pp. 329-30.

## Part Six: The Year of Revolution

[section 3 of 7]

### Lenin Rearms the Party

On 3 April, after weeks of frustrating negotiations to arrange his return through Germany, Lenin arrived at the Finland Station in revolutionary Petrograd. From the moment of his arrival, he adopted a belligerent stance in relation to the bourgeois provisional government and the defencist-reformist politicians who were propping it up.

Immediately on his return to Russia, Lenin opened up a struggle against those Bolshevik leaders who had capitulated to the pressures of petty bourgeois “public opinion”, and had come out in support of the bourgeois Provisional Government. Only after an extremely sharp internal fight did he succeed in re-arming and re-orienting the Bolsheviks. In this struggle Lenin counted on the support of the Party rank-and-file, and the working class which, as he never tired of pointing out, is a hundred times more revolutionary than the most revolutionary party. In fact, the line of Kamenev was not well received by the Party in Petrograd, which called for his expulsion. The working-class Bolshevik stronghold of Vyborg demanded the expulsion of Stalin also.[\[28\]](#)

At the very moment of his arrival in the Finland station, Lenin served notice of his intentions. Demonstratively turning his back on the assembled dignitaries who had turned up to greet him, he faced the workers with the words: “Long live the socialist world revolution!” This opening shot immediately confirmed the worst suspicions of the party leaders: that Lenin had gone over to— “Trotskyism”. A fierce faction fight ensued culminating in the April Conference in which Lenin triumphed all along the line. Krupskaya writes: “The comrades were somewhat taken aback for the moment. Many of them thought that Ilyich was presenting the case in much too blunt a manner, and that it was too early yet to speak of a socialist revolution.”[\[29\]](#) It is obvious that Krupskaya is expressing herself in a diplomatic manner. The differences were of the most serious kind, and the struggle, though not long, was bitterly fought. When Lenin first defended his position in public, the audience was left speechless.

In his memoirs, Raskolnikov, who was present, recalls what happened when Kamenev walked into Lenin’s compartment: “Hardly had he entered the compartment and sat down than Vladimir Ilyich turned on Comrade Kamenev. ‘What’s this you’re writing in Pravda? We’ve seen several issues, and really swore at you...’ we heard Ilyich say in his tone of fatherly reproof, in which there was never anything offensive.”

Immediately after his arrival at the Finland Station, he was taken to a fashionable residence, the property of a famous ballerina, where in a big room complete with grand piano Lenin was regaled with welcoming speeches—the kind of thing he hated: “A

celebration in honour of Ilyich was held here. One after another speakers voiced their feeling of profoundest joy at the return to Russia of the Party's battle-hardened leader.

"Ilyich sat and listened with a smile to all the speeches, waiting impatiently for them to finish.

"When the list of speakers was exhausted, Ilyich at once came to life, got to his feet and set to work. He resolutely assailed the tactics which the leading Party groups and individual comrades had been pursuing before his return. He caustically ridiculed the notorious formula of support for the Provisional Government 'in so far as ... to that extent', and gave out the slogan, 'No support whatsoever to the government of capitalists', at the same time calling on the Party to fight for power to be taken over by the Soviets, for a socialist revolution.

"Using a few striking examples, Comrade Lenin brilliantly demonstrated the whole falsity of the policy of the Provisional Government, the glaring contradiction between its promises and its actions, between words and deeds, emphasising that it was our duty to expose ruthlessly its counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic pretensions and conduct. Comrade Lenin's speech lasted nearly an hour. The audience remained fixed in intense, unweakening attention. The most responsible Party workers were represented here, but even for them what Ilych said constituted a veritable revelation. It laid down a 'Rubicon' between the tactics of yesterday and those of today.

"Comrade Lenin posed the question clearly and distinctly: 'What is to be done?' and summoned us away from half-recognition, half-support of the Government to non-recognition and irreconcilable struggle.

"The ultimate triumph of Soviet power, which many saw as something in the hazy distance of a more or less indefinite future, was brought down by Comrade Lenin to the plane of an urgently-necessary conquest of the revolution, to be attained within a very short time. This speech of his was in the fullest sense historic. Comrade Lenin here first set forth his political programme, which he formulated next day in the famous theses of April 4. This speech produced a complete revolution in the thinking of the Party's leaders, and underlay all the subsequent work of the Bolsheviki. It was not without cause that our Party's tactics did not follow a straight line, but after Lenin's return took a sharp turn to the left."[\[30\]](#)

Taken aback by the conduct of the Bolshevik leader, so completely at variance with that of his lieutenants in Petrograd, the Mensheviks accused him of trying to stir up violence and civil war. In the pages of his journal *Yedinstvo*, Plekhanov called Lenin's theses "ravings". But the attitude of the Bolshevik leaders was not much different. When Lenin's *April Theses* were published in the pages of *Pravda*, on April 7, they appeared over a single signature—Lenin's own. Not one of the other leaders was prepared to associate their name with Lenin's position. The very next day, *Pravda* published an article by Kamenev entitled *Our Disagreements*, which disassociated the Bolshevik leadership from Lenin's position, stating that it represented his own private views which

were shared neither by the editorial board of *Pravda* nor by the Bureau of the Central Committee.

Notwithstanding the reaction of the Mensheviks and the Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd, Lenin was not insane and was, in fact, more “in touch” with the real situation than his comrades in Russia. For him the essence of the question was very simple: it was necessary to prepare the working class for the seizure of power, not, of course, immediately. Lenin was no adventurist and the idea of a minority taking power was very far from his mind. No. The task of the hour was to arm the vanguard of the class—the most advanced sections of the workers and youth—with the perspective of winning over the masses to the programme of socialist revolution as the only way out. This correctly summed up the essence of the situation. But it clashed head-on with the slogan of the “dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” which everyone knew was not the slogan of a socialist revolution.

The matter was finally settled at a city-wide conference which lasted eight days, from April 2-10, and is known to history as the April Conference. The conference was attended by 149 delegates representing 79,000 members—15,000 of them in Petrograd. This was already an impressive result for a party that had been underground and now stood in opposition to the mainstream labour leaders. Rarely has so much depended on the outcome of a single meeting as this. Lenin confronted in open struggle his old colleagues of many years standing who, in the decisive moment, turned out to be his bitterest opponents. Ironically, these “Old Bolsheviks” rallied under the banner of—Leninism! They presented themselves as the defenders of Leninist orthodoxy as summed up in the slogan of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”, which Lenin himself had advanced in 1905. But this formula had outlived its usefulness. The very development of the revolution had rendered it redundant.

Both Lenin and Trotsky, as we have seen, had come to the same conclusion. They understood that the Kerensky government could not seriously tackle the problems facing the workers and peasants; but that was precisely because it was a government of the bourgeoisie, not of the workers and peasants. Only the dictatorship of the proletariat, in alliance with the poor peasants, could begin to solve the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia. As Trotsky put it: “The ‘Old Bolsheviks’—who pretentiously emphasised this appellation in April 1917—were condemned to defeat precisely because they were defending exactly that element of the party tradition which had not passed the historic test.”

The inner-party struggle was brief but sharp. But the great strength that Lenin had was the backing of the Bolshevik workers, who stood well to the left of the leadership. They felt from the beginning that there was something wrong with a policy that, against all their instincts and traditions, stood for reconciliation with the Mensheviks and a temporising attitude to the bourgeois Provisional Government. But the workers were unable to answer the “clever” arguments of the leaders like Kamenev and Stalin who used their authority to silence the doubts of the rank-and-file. On the contrary, Lenin based himself on the support of the party’s working class rank-and-file who instinctively

accepted his revolutionary theses: “These worker-revolutionists,” Trotsky points out, “only lacked the theoretical resources to defend their position. But they were ready to respond to the first clear call. It was on this stratum of workers, decisively risen to their feet during the upward years of 1912-14, that Lenin was now banking.”<sup>[31]</sup> By the time the April Conference assembled, the battle had, to all intents and purposes, been won by Lenin and the party’s rank-and-file. Zalezky, who was a member of the Petrograd Committee states that “District after district adhered to them [Lenin’s theses]”.

Lenin’s opening speech emphasised the international dimension of the revolution: “The great honour of *beginning* the revolution has fallen to the Russian proletariat. But the Russian proletariat must not forget that its movement and revolution are only part of a world revolutionary proletarian movement, which in Germany, for example, is gaining momentum with every passing day. *Only from this angle can we define our tasks.*”

This was the opening shot in the debate and Lenin weighs every word. What does it mean? Lenin answers the argument of the Mensheviks, Kamenev and Stalin that the Russian workers cannot take power because the objective conditions in backward, feudal Russia do not permit it. And the answer is as follows: it is true that the objective conditions for socialism do not exist in Russia, but they do exist on a world scale. Our revolution is not an independent act, but part of the world revolution. If we have the possibility of assuming power before the German, French and British workers, then we should do so. We can begin the revolution, take power, start to transform society on socialist lines, and this will give a powerful impulse to the revolution that is already maturing in Europe. We can begin, and with the help of the workers of Germany, France and Britain, we shall finish the job. Of course, if we do not have the perspective of international revolution, our task would indeed be hopeless. But that is not the position. “Only from this angle can we define our tasks.” The same theme was hammered home repeatedly by Lenin during the course of the conference.

“Yes, we are in the minority. Well, what of it? To be a socialist while chauvinism is the craze means to be in the minority. To be in the majority means to be a chauvinist.”

Lenin’s resolution on the *Current Situation* stated: “Operating as it does in one of the most backward countries of Europe amidst a vast population of small peasants, the proletariat of Russia cannot aim at immediately putting into effect socialist changes.

“But it would be a grave error, and in effect even a complete desertion to the bourgeoisie, to infer from this that the working class must support the bourgeoisie, or that it must keep its activities within limits acceptable to the petty bourgeoisie, or that the proletariat must renounce its leading role in the matter of explaining to the people the urgency of taking a number of practical steps towards socialism for which the time is now ripe.’

“From the first premise it is customary to make the conclusion that ‘Russia is a backward country, a peasant, petty bourgeois country, therefore there can be no question of a social revolution’. People forget, however, that the war has placed us in extraordinary

circumstances, and that side by side with the petty bourgeoisie we have Big Capital. But what are the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies to do when they assume power? Should they go over to the bourgeoisie? Our answer is—the working class will continue its class struggle.”[32]

“But at this point we hear a clamour of protest from people who readily call themselves ‘old Bolsheviks’. Didn’t we always maintain, they say, that the bourgeois-democratic revolution is completed only by the ‘revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’? Is the agrarian revolution, which is also a bourgeois-democratic revolution, completed? Is it not a fact, on the contrary, that it has *not even* started?

“My answer is: The Bolshevik slogans and ideas *on the whole* have been confirmed by history; but *concretely* things have worked out *differently*; they are more original, more peculiar, more variegated than anyone could have expected.

“To ignore or overlook this fact would mean taking after those ‘old Bolsheviks’ who more than once already have played so regrettable a role in the history of our Party by reiterating formulas senselessly *learned by rote* instead of *studying* the specific features of the new and living reality.”[33]

In answer to those elements who asserted that the proletariat had to obey the “iron law of historical stages”, could not “skip February”, had to “pass through the stage of the bourgeois revolution”, and who thereby tried to cover up their own cowardice, confusion and impotence by appealing to “objective factors”, Lenin replied scornfully:

“Why didn’t they take power? Steklov says: for this reason and that. This is nonsense. The fact is that the proletariat is not organised and class-conscious enough. This must be admitted; material strength is in the hands of the proletariat, but the bourgeoisie turned out to be prepared and class-conscious. This is a monstrous fact, but it should be frankly and openly admitted, and the people should be told that they didn’t take power because they were unorganised and not conscious enough.”[34]

There was no *objective* reason why the workers—who held power in their hands—could not have elbowed the bourgeoisie to one side in February 1917, no reason other than unpreparedness, lack of organisation and lack of consciousness. But this, as Lenin explained, was merely the obverse side of the colossal betrayal of the revolution by *all* the so-called workers’ and peasants’ parties. Without the complicity of the Mensheviks and SRs in the Soviets, the Provisional Government could not have lasted even for an hour. That is why Lenin reserved his most stinging barbs for those elements among the Bolshevik leadership who had got the Bolshevik Party itself into tow with the Menshevik-SR bandwagon, which had confused and disorientated the masses, and deflected them from the road to power.

“The person who *now* speaks only of a ‘revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’ is behind the times, consequently, he has in effect *gone*

over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle; that person should be consigned to the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archive of 'old Bolsheviks')."

Referring to the power of the working class, and the impotence of the Provisional Government, Lenin pointed out: "This fact does not fit into the old schemas. One must know how to adapt schemas to facts, instead of reiterating the now meaningless words about a 'dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' *in general*."

Again: "Is this reality [of dual power] covered by Comrade Kamenev's old-Bolshevik formula, which says that the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution is not completed'?"

"It is not. *The formula is obsolete. It is no good at all. It is dead. And it is no use trying to revive it.*"[\[35\]](#)

One point Lenin was particularly emphatic about. It was essential that the Bolsheviks maintain absolute independence from all other tendencies. Lenin was all too aware that in the general atmosphere of euphoria, there would be a strong pull in the direction of unification of "all progressive trends". The history of conciliationism on the part of the Old Bolsheviks, particularly Kamenev, filled him with apprehension. That is why he wrote in his first telegram: "No rapprochement with other parties". On the other hand, at the March congress, Stalin was already contemplating the overcoming of "trivial differences" within the framework of a united party of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Stalin's narrow committee-man's mentality saw everything from the standpoint of organisation. A bigger party meant more members, more money, a bigger apparatus, and consequently a broader arena in which to develop his activities. Compared to this, what were a few theoretical differences but—"trivialities"? Here, in a particularly crude form, we see the difference between the psychology of a revolutionary and a bureaucrat.

The Old Bolsheviks thought they could bring about unity with the Mensheviks on the basis of the "Zimmerwald-Kienthal principles" precisely when the Zimmerwald movement had exhausted its historic mission and was in the process of breaking up. In any case, it had always been a compromise, a transitional step in the direction of a new and genuinely revolutionary International. Lenin had already made his mind up. Not "back to Zimmerwald" but "forward to the Third International!" was his slogan. In a letter to Radek dated May 29 he wrote: "I fully agree with you that Zimmerwald has become a hindrance and that the sooner we break with it the better (you know that I disagree with the conference on this point). We must speed up a meeting of the Lefts, an international meeting and *only* of the Lefts."

One week later he wrote: "If it's true that that muddled wretched Grimm (no wonder we never trusted that ministeriable scoundrel!) has handed over all Zimmerwald affairs to the Left Swedes and that the latter are convening a Zimmerwald conference within the next few days, then I—personally (I am writing this only in my own name)—*would strongly warn* against having anything to do with Zimmerwald.

“‘What a good chance this is to seize the Zimmerwald International now,’ Grigory said today.

“In my opinion, this is super-opportunist and harmful tactics.”[\[36\]](#)

### **The First Coalition**

The most burning issue facing the revolution was the war and the ever deepening mood of discontent of the soldiers. After the collapse of the old regime, the soldiers spontaneously moved to purge the officers who had opposed the revolution. The men in grey coats demanded their right to be treated like human beings, not animals. Out of this was born the celebrated Order Number One, which Trotsky describes as “the single worthy document of the February revolution”.[\[37\]](#) The initiative for this remarkable document came from the ranks themselves. In it one can hear the real voice of the front, the anguished but hopeful voice of men who, staring death in the face, had not lost the spark of human dignity and the desire to be treated like human beings. Here, in turn was the real face of the February revolution: not the studied and artificial speeches of the politicians, but the masses newly awakened to political life seeking democratic rights and freedom in place of the old ranks and servility. Order Number One expresses better than anything else the democratic and revolutionary aspirations of the masses.

The demands put forward represented a real soldiers’ charter:

Elected committees at all level of the army and the navy.

Election of representatives to the Soviet where these have not been held.

The soldiers will obey only the Soviet and its committees.

The orders of the Provisional Government will be obeyed only where they are not in contradiction to those of the Soviet.

All weapons to be under the control of elected soldiers’ committees, and in no case to be given to officers.

While on duty, strict maintenance of discipline: when off duty and out of barracks, full freedom and civil rights.

Elimination of officers’ titles, no “bull”; officers are forbidden to behave rudely to soldiers, and especially to use the familiar form (“ty”) when addressing them.

The demands were called “Order Number One”. It fell like a bombshell among the reactionary officers and their political friends in the Provisional Government. Here was a challenge to the autocratic “divine right” of the officer caste to rule the roost, and, by extension, a challenge to the pillars of the existing bourgeois order. The “Provisional Committee of the Duma” immediately clashed with the soldiers’ deputies who drew up

the “Order Number One” for the Petrograd garrison. The reactionary officers, now sporting republican insignia in their buttonholes tried to prevent it being carried out at the front, alleging it to be a “purely Petrograd affair”. In this they had the backing of the SRs and Mensheviks, who were as anxious as they to put an end to the revolutionary “madness” and restore (bourgeois) order. In vain. The demand for democratic rights contained in the “soldiers charter” spread through the army like wildfire. The clash over Order Number One showed the shape of things to come.

What the army wanted was the immediate conclusion of a peace without annexations or indemnities. The Soviet leaders made speeches about a “just peace”, but as long as the power remained in the hands of bankers and industrialists tied hand and foot to the interests of Anglo-French capital, this was just a dream. Throughout the spring, the discontent of the soldiers grew, as the government dragged its feet over the question of peace. The bourgeoisie, through its chief representative in the government, Milyukov, made no secret of its intention to pursue the war to a “victorious conclusion”. This enraged the soldiers and created an explosive situation in Petrograd.

The processes that unfolded after February can be observed in every revolution. The fall of the old regime is greeted with enthusiasm by the masses. There is universal rejoicing, as men and women enjoy the new-found freedoms. This is the stage of democratic illusions, a carnival in which people become drunk with the sensation of liberation and hopes that know no bounds. Alas, this beautiful love-feast is not destined to last. The enormity of the illusion rapidly finds its counterpart in the depth of disappointment as expectation cracks its head against reality. “We have scotched the serpent, not killed him,” exclaims Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Gradually, the idea begins to dawn upon the masses that, beneath the tinsel and the speeches, nothing has really changed. The old order has merely swapped its garb and its mode of address, but the same old masters still remain, and the same old problems too.

This rapid spread of disillusionment does not affect all layers at once. It finds its first expression in the ranks of the most advanced section of the masses. Vaguely realising that the power won with so much effort and sacrifice is slipping out of their hands, the advanced guard instinctively lashes out. This is a moment of utmost danger for the revolution. The advanced guard understands more than the mass, and impatiently pushes ahead with demands for precipitate action. But it is necessary to win over the rest of society, which lags behind and has not yet drawn the necessary conclusions. If the advanced guard breaks away from the mass, it can become isolated and cut down by the reaction. Under such conditions it is the duty of the party to attempt to restrain the advanced elements, to avoid battle until such time as the reserve battalions are in place.

The process of successive approximation by which the masses search out the political party that best expresses their aspirations commenced as soon as the revolution began. There were a whole succession of what we can liken to sorties in a battle, in which the masses tested out the defences of the enemy and their own strength. These sorties took the form of mass demonstrations, beginning in April, when thousands of workers, soldiers and sailors poured onto the streets of Petrograd, carrying banners displaying the

slogans: “Down with Milyukov!” “Down with Annexation Politics!” and even the odd ultra-left “Down with the Provisional Government!” These were undoubtedly Bolshevik slogans, but the demonstrations themselves had not been called by the party. As Alexander Rabinovitch explains:

“Rank-and-file party members from garrison regiments and factories undoubtedly helped provoke the street demonstrations in the first place, although the Central Committee did not become involved until after the movement was well underway; subsequently, the top party leadership endorsed the demonstrations. Impulsive elements in the Petrograd party organisation and in the Bolshevik Military Organisation, responsive to their militant constituents and fearful of losing ground to the anarchists, took a significantly more radical tack; some officials of the Petersburg Committee prepared and widely circulated a leaflet appealing, in the party’s name, for the immediate overthrow of the Provisional Government and the arrest of cabinet ministers.”[\[38\]](#)

The immediate aim of the demonstration was to protest against plans to continue the war. But this question raised the question of power. The April mobilisations were the first in a whole series of mass demonstrations whereby the masses attempted to force the government and the Soviet leaders to do their bidding. In essence, they played a similar role to reconnaissance missions in war, probing the weaknesses of the enemy and allowing the workers and soldiers to test their strength on the streets. Significantly, the demonstrators only agreed to disperse when asked to do so by the Petrograd Soviet, having openly defied the government’s orders to disperse. This detail says it all. The real power was in the hands, not of the provisional government, which the masses hated and distrusted, but in the hands of the reformist leaders, the “moderate socialists” in the Soviet Executive, who feared it as the Devil fears Holy water. The masses were compelled to take the reformists by the scruff of the neck and push them into the government. That was the real meaning of the April demonstrations. The sudden eruption of the masses onto the street had an immediate result. The government entered into crisis, in which the bourgeoisie was forced to pass the hot potato to the reformist leaders.

The April demonstration was the first serious test of strength between the workers and the Provisional Government and its right wing socialist backers. And it was successful. Two of the bourgeois ministers most hated for their pro-war policies, Guchkov and Milyukov, were forced to resign, and several leaders of the Soviet entered the government. The Georgian Menshevik Iraklii Tsereteli became minister of post and telegraphs. The veteran SR Victor Chernov became minister of agriculture. Alexei Peshekonov, head of the Popular Socialist Party, became minister of food supply. Pavel Pereverzev occupied the post of Minister of Justice, and Kerensky became the Minister of War and the navy. In this way the Soviet leaders accepted direct responsibility for the Provisional Government, instead of supporting it from the outside. The first coalition had been formed.

The masses mostly welcomed this as a sign that “their” ministers would somehow bring about a change of course in the government. But Lenin immediately denounced the participation of the Mensheviks and SRs in the government, pointing out that, by joining the bourgeois Provisional Government, the SRs and Mensheviks “saved it from collapse

and allowed themselves to be made its servants and defenders”.[\[39\]](#) The Soviet leaders were, in effect, hostages of the bourgeois ministers who called all the shots. They accepted ministerial portfolios, while the real power was left in the hands of the landlords and capitalists, except that here there was another, alternative power which was waiting with anxious expectation for its most pressing problems to be resolved. Vain hope! Terrified of offending the bourgeoisie, who, according to the dogma of the “two stages” ought to rule, the reformist leaders merely acted as a left cover for the Provisional Government, which, in turn, was merely a façade behind which the forces of reaction were re-grouping and preparing for a counter-attack, once the masses had been sufficiently demoralised and disappointed by the school of coalition politics.

This coalition of the Labour leaders with the bourgeoisie was shot through with insoluble contradictions which paralysed it from the start. It was essentially similar to all such coalitions, from Millerandism in France, passing through the Lib-Lab politics of the British Labour leaders to the so-called People’s Front governments in France and Spain in the 1930s. All were justified in the name of the “unity of progressive forces” and “national unity”—the emptiest of all slogans, signifying the “unity” of the horse and its rider. In reality, through such coalitions, the bourgeoisie use and discredit the Labour leaders in order to demoralise the masses, while behind the scenes they prepare reaction. The Provisional Government after April was entirely typical of this kind of coalition. The Soviet leaders were placed in those ministries that would bring them in conflict with the aspirations of the workers and peasants—labour, agriculture, and so on. Kerensky, who enjoyed a measure of popularity to begin with, was entrusted with whipping the soldiers into line and getting them to accept the need for a new offensive in the name of “peace, progress and democracy”, of course.

The entry of the “socialist” ministers into the Provisional Government was a turning-point. From now on the workers and peasants could compare words and deeds. The ground was being prepared for the reformist Labour leaders to be exposed in practice. That was one side of the question. But the most decisive element was the fact that, under Lenin’s guidance, the Bolsheviks had stayed out of the coalition and maintained an implacable opposition towards it. What had seemed to some a utopian and sectarian stance was now revealed as the only realistic position for a revolutionary party. This was the key to the success of the Bolsheviks and the reason why they grew so rapidly at the expense of the Mensheviks and SRs in the following months. As Rabinovitch observes: “Once they had joined the first coalition, the moderate socialists became identified in the popular mind with the shortcomings of the Provisional Government. Only the Bolsheviks, among the major Russian political groups, remained untainted by association with the government and were therefore completely free to organise opposition to it, a situation of which the party took full advantage.”[\[40\]](#)

But the revolutionary wing faced an uphill struggle that must have seemed all but impossible at first. Their slogans seemed too far advanced for the masses. The Menshevik and SR leaders, on the other hand, offered them what seemed to be the easy option. The revolution had triumphed. Russia was now the freest country in the world. With a little patience, all would be resolved. What was needed was for everyone to unite and sink

their differences and everything would be fine. The intense pressure for unity was one of the reasons why Kamenev and Stalin had capitulated to the Mensheviks before Lenin's return. Their mistake had been to see only the situation before them, and not to see the underlying process that would soon stand all this on its head. The philosophical basis of all kinds of reformism is vulgar empiricism that masquerades as "realism", or, as Trotsky once expressed it, the slavish worship of the established fact. But what is a "fact" at one moment can become a fiction the next. In order that the masses should draw the necessary conclusions, two things are necessary: firstly, that the working people, through their own experience, come to understand their true situation, and secondly, that there exists a revolutionary party with a far-sighted leadership capable of going through the experience together with them and explaining its significance at each stage.

But the masses do not all draw the same conclusions simultaneously. By June-July, a layer of the advanced workers and sailors in Petrograd had drawn a balance sheet of the Provisional Government and the soviet leaders and found them wanting. Likewise a section of the Bolshevik Party, under the influence of impatience, wanted to move too far ahead too soon echoing the ultra-lefts and anarchists, they raised the revolutionary slogan "Down with the Provisional government". This was the slogan of insurrection. What attitude did Lenin take? He completely rejected it. Why? Because such a slogan did not at all correspond to *the real stage the movement was at*. Lenin, who was a revolutionary to the fingertips, nevertheless implacably opposed this slogan, and instead oriented the Party towards the conquest of the masses insisting on the need to "patiently explain". The problem was that the mass of the working class in the more backward provinces had not yet had time to understand the role of the reformist leaders in the soviets, and the peasants still less so. The Bolsheviks had succeeded in winning the most advanced sections of the class. But it would have been a fatal error to bring these into collision with the less conscious majority who still had illusions in the Mensheviks and SRs. Basing themselves on the advanced workers, the Bolsheviks now had to find the way to winning over the majority.

The explosive growth of Bolshevism in the nine months from February to October is a phenomenon for which it would be difficult to find a parallel in the history of political parties. The year 1917 perfectly sums up the whole essence and meaning of the history of Bolshevism. All programmes, policies, tactics and strategies are finally subjected to the acid test of practice. Nowhere is this assertion truer than in the course of a revolution. Looking back on the experience of the Russian revolution, Trotsky commented:

"We must remember, however, that at the beginning of 1917 the Bolshevik Party led only an insignificant number of the toilers. Not only in the soldiers' soviets but also in the workers' soviets, the Bolshevik fraction generally constituted 1 to 2 per cent, at best 5 per cent. The leading parties of petty bourgeois democracy (Mensheviks and the so-called Social Revolutionaries) had the following of at least 95 per cent of the workers, soldiers, and peasants participating in the struggle. The leaders of these parties called the Bolsheviks first sectarians and then ... agents of the German Kaiser. But no, the Bolsheviks were not sectarians! *All their attention was directed to the masses*, and moreover not to their top layer, but to the deepest, most oppressed millions and tens of

millions, whom the parliamentary babblers usually forgot. Precisely in order to lead the proletarians and the semiproletarians of city and countryside, the Bolsheviks considered it necessary to distinguish themselves sharply from all factions and groupings of the bourgeoisie, beginning with those false 'Socialists' who are in reality agents of the bourgeoisie."[\[41\]](#)

As we have seen, the Bolshevik Party before the war had succeeded in winning over the decisive majority of the organised workers. In a sense it was the traditional party of the working class in Russia. But during the war, the class balance of forces was drastically modified. The youth—the natural “constituency” of Bolshevism—was in the army. A large part of the experienced worker-cadres, too, were at the front, where they were submerged in a sea of backward and politically illiterate peasants. The workers' organisations were decimated by arrests. The workers had their heads down. The influx of a large number of inexperienced elements into the factories—peasants, women, raw youths—made things worse at first. Under such circumstances, no serious advance was possible. It was sufficient to keep what was left of the cadres together and prepare for a break in the situation.

It is difficult to calculate with any precision the membership of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, and different authors give different estimates. The “official” estimate given by the *Bol'shoya Sovietskaya Encyclopaedia* was 23,600 for January 1917, before the start of the revolution, but this piece of guesswork is certainly an exaggeration. The figure of 8,000 members in the whole of Russia is probably not far from the true figure. Rabinovitch claims that there were 2,000 members in Petrograd in February and that the national membership of the party *doubled to 16,000 by April*: “In February there had been about 2,000 Bolsheviks in Petrograd. At the opening of the April Conference party membership had risen to 16,000. By late June it had reached 32,000, while 2,000 garrison soldiers had joined the Bolshevik Military Organisation and 4,000 soldiers had become associated with the ‘Club *Pravda*’.”

The overwhelming majority of the new recruits were very raw, as the same author points out: “The party's rapid growth since February had flooded the ranks with militants who knew next to nothing about Marxism and who were united by little more than an overwhelming impatience for immediate revolutionary action.”[\[42\]](#) The rapid influx of new, fresh recruits, many of them youngsters (the Mensheviks contemptuously referred to the Bolsheviks as “a party of kids”) was part of the reason why Lenin could succeed in overcoming the resistance of the conservative “Old Bolsheviks”. This transformed the party. Marcel Liebman points out that “beginning in April 1917, the Bolshevik Party was reinforced by a steady influx of new members. This influx had the effect of crushing the nucleus of ‘old Bolsheviks’ who claimed to be the guardians of Leninist orthodoxy, submerging them under the weight of new members who had been radicalised by the revolutionary events and were not paralysed by the principles of that orthodoxy.”[\[43\]](#)

The most significant feature of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 was its youthfulness. With one exception, all the members of the Moscow party Bureau were under 30 years old. There was a conflict between the Bureau and the Moscow Party Committee, which was

made up of older, more conservative Party members. In his biography of Bukharin, Stephen F. Cohen describes the situation of the Bolsheviks in Moscow: “While a majority of the Moscow Committee eventually supported insurrection, its response to the radical course set by Lenin and the Left was sluggish and half-hearted throughout. Most of its senior members believed, as one insisted, that ‘There do not exist the forces, the objective conditions for this’. Bureau leaders, constantly prodding their elders, remained worried as late as October that the ‘peaceloving’ mood and ‘significant wavering’ in the Moscow Committee would prove fatal ‘at the decisive moment’. Consequently, despite the radical support of some older Moscow Bolsheviks, the young Muscovites tended to regard the final victory in Moscow as their personal achievement, a *tour de force* of their generation. As Osinsky later put it, they had led the struggle for power ‘against significant resistance by a large part of the older generation of Moscow officials’.”[\[44\]](#)

## NOTES

[28] See Liebman, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[29] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, pp. 347 and 348.

[30] F.F. Raskolnikov, *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917*, pp. 71 and 76-7.

[31] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 338 and 339.

[32] LCW, *The Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP(B)*, vol. 24, pp. 227 (my emphasis), 245 and 306.

[33] LCW, *Letters on Tactics*, vol. 24, p. 44.

[34] LCW, *Report at a Meeting of Bolshevik Delegates*, vol. 36, p. 437.

[35] LCW, *Letters on Tactics*, vol. 24, pp. 45,46 and 50 ( my emphasis).

[36] LCW, *To Karl Radek, May 29 (June 11), 1917*, vol. 43, p. 632 and 634-5.

[37] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 291.

[38] A. Rabinovitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, p. xxxii.

[39] LCW, vol. 25, p. 237.

[40] A. Rabinovitch, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii.

[41] Trotsky, *Writings, 1935-36*, pp. 166-7.

[42] Rabinovitch, *op. cit.* pp. xxi and xxxi.

[43] Liebman, op. cit., p. 134.

[44] S.F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, p. 50.

## Part Six: The Year of Revolution

[section 4 of 7]

### ‘All Power to the Soviets’

Having won over the Party to the aim of a new revolution led by the working class, Lenin indicated the next step which was to win the masses. Nothing could be further from the truth than the oft-repeated slander that Lenin was a conspirator, bent on the seizure of power by a minority of revolutionaries, as advocated by the great French revolutionary of the 19th century Blanqui. Without for a moment doubting the personal sincerity and heroism of Blanqui, who developed important insights on the *technique* of insurrection, Lenin never had the view that the socialist revolution could be brought about by a determined minority. All his life, Lenin maintained a burning faith in the revolutionary potential and creative capacity of the working class. Socialism must be based on the self-movement of the proletariat, its active participation and control of society from the very first moment. Even before his return to Russia there were a number of Bolsheviks who, motivated by impatience, advanced the slogan “Down with the Provisional Government”. This was an ultra-left slogan, because the mass of the workers were still under the influence of the reformist leaders of the soviets, who were supporting the Provisional Government. The task facing the Bolshevik Party at that stage was not the conquest of power, but *the conquest of the masses*. This idea was summed up in Lenin’s celebrated watchword: Patiently explain!

The Bolshevik Party had succeeded in winning over a significant number of the most conscious and advanced layers of the class. Their influence, especially in Petrograd, was growing by the hour. But that was insufficient. In order to change society, it is not enough to have the support of the vanguard, or to be a party of tens of thousands. It is necessary to win over the millions of politically backward workers, and, in the case of Russia, at least a large section of the peasants, beginning with the poor peasants and rural proletariat and semi-proletariat. In the spring of 1917, this gigantic task was still at its early beginnings. It was essential that the Bolshevik workers open a road to the rest of the class, especially in the provinces, who had illusions in the reformist leaders. It was necessary to speak to them in a language they could understand, and to avoid ultra-left gestures that would repel them.

Lenin understood that the working class learns from experience, especially the experience of great events. The only way in which a revolutionary tendency which is as yet in the minority can gain the ear of the masses is by following the course of events shoulder to shoulder with the masses, participating in the day to day struggle as it unfolds, advancing

slogans which correspond to the real stage of the movement, and patiently explaining the need for a complete transformation of society as the only way out. Shri11 calls to insurrection and civil war will not win over the masses, or even the advanced layer, but only repel them. As we see from the above, this is true even in the middle of a revolution. On the contrary, it is necessary to put the onus for violence and civil war on the shoulders of the reformist leaders who have it in their hands to take power peacefully and, by their refusal to do so, make bloodshed inevitable.

Realising that the ruling class wanted to provoke the workers into premature acts of violence, Lenin denounced those who claimed that he stood for civil war. He repeatedly denied that the Bolsheviks stood for violence, and placed full responsibility for violence on the shoulders of the ruling class. This did not at all suit the ultra-lefts who failed to understand that nine tenths of the task of the socialist revolution is the work of winning over the masses by propaganda, agitation, explanation and organisation. Without this, all talk of civil war and insurrection is irresponsible adventurism, or, as it is called in the scientific terminology of Marxism, Blanquism.

Here is what Lenin has to say on the subject: “*To speak of civil war before people have come to realise the need for it is undoubtedly to lapse into Blanquism.*”[\[45\]](#)

It was not the Bolsheviks, but the bourgeoisie and their reformist allies who constantly raised the spectre of violence and civil war. Lenin repeatedly denied any suggestion that the Bolsheviks advocated violence. On April 25, he protested in *Pravda* against “dark insinuations” of “Minister Nekrasov” about “the preaching of violence” by the Bolsheviks: “You are lying, Mr Minister, worthy member of the ‘people’s freedom’ party. It is Mr Guchkov who is preaching violence when he threatens to punish the soldiers for dismissing the authorities. It is *Russkaya Volya*, the riot-mongering newspaper of the riot-mongering ‘republicans’, a paper that is friendly to you, that preaches violence.

“*Pravda* and its followers do not preach violence. On the contrary, they declare most clearly, precisely, and definitely that our main efforts should now be concentrated on *explaining* to the proletarian masses their proletarian problems, as distinguished from the petty bourgeoisie which has succumbed to chauvinist intoxication.”[\[46\]](#)

On April 21 (May 4, NS) the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks passed a resolution written by Lenin. The aim of the resolution was to restrain the Petrograd local leadership which was running ahead of events. It aimed to put the responsibility for any violence on the Provisional Government and its supporters, and to accuse the “capitalist minority of reluctance to submit to the will of the majority”. Here are two paragraphs from the resolution:

“1. Party propagandists and speakers must refute the despicable lies of the capitalist papers and of the papers supporting the capitalists to the effect that we are holding out the threat of *civil war*. This is a despicable lie, for only at the present moment, as long as the capitalists and their government cannot and dare not use force against the masses, as long

as the mass of soldiers and workers freely expressing their will and freely electing and displacing *all* authorities—at *such a moment* any thought of civil war would be naive, senseless, preposterous; at such a moment *there must be compliance with the will of the majority of the population* and free criticism of this will by the discontented minority; should violence be resorted to, the responsibility will fall on the Provisional Government and its supporters.

“2. By their outcries against civil war the government of the capitalists and its newspapers are only trying to conceal the reluctance of the capitalists, who admittedly constitute an insignificant minority of the people, to submit to the will of the majority.”[\[47\]](#)

In all his speeches and articles of the first half of 1917, Lenin emphasises the possibility and desirability of a peaceful transfer of power to the soviets. He even stated that compensation could be paid to the capitalists whose industries were taken over, on condition that they handed the factories over without any sabotage, and collaborated in the process of re-organising production: “Don’t try to frighten us, Mr. Shulgin. Even when we are in power we shall not take your ‘last shirt’ from you. but shall see that you are provided with good clothes and good food, on condition that you do the job you are fit for and used to!”[\[48\]](#)

Everyone knows that this was the central slogan of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917. But very few people have understood the real content of this slogan. What, concretely, was the meaning of the slogan “All power to the soviets?” Civil war? Insurrection? The seizure of power by the Bolsheviks? Far from it. The Bolsheviks were in a minority in the soviets, which were dominated by the reformist parties, the SRs and Mensheviks. The central task was not the seizure of power, but winning over the majority who had illusions in the reformists. The Bolsheviks based their “patient explanation” on the idea, constantly reiterated in the writings and speeches of Lenin from March right up to the eve of the October insurrection that the reformist leaders should take power into their own hands, that this would guarantee a peaceful transformation of society, that the Bolsheviks were wholeheartedly in favour of this, and that, if *the reformist leaders were to take power, the Bolsheviks would limit themselves to the peaceful struggle for a majority inside the soviets.*

Here are a couple of examples of how Lenin put the question (there are many more): “Apparently, not all the supporters of the slogan ‘All Power Must Be Transferred to the Soviets’ have given adequate thought to the fact that it was a slogan for peaceful progress of the revolution—peaceful not only in the sense that nobody, no class, no force of any importance, would then (between February 27 and July 4) have been able to resist and prevent the transfer of power to the Soviets. That is not all. Peaceful development would then have been possible, even in the sense that the struggle of classes and parties within the Soviets could have assumed a most peaceful and painless form, provided full state power had passed to the Soviets in good time.”[\[49\]](#)

After the failure of the Kornilov uprising, in an article called *On Compromises*, Lenin once again adopted the slogan “All power to the Soviets” and advocated a compromise proposal to the reformist leaders, whereby the Bolsheviks would not press the idea of an insurrection, on condition that the Soviet leaders break with the bourgeoisie and take power into their own hands. This would have easily been possible after the collapse of the counter-revolutionary offensive. The reactionaries were demoralised and disoriented. The workers were confident and a massive majority supported the transfer of power to the Soviets. Under such conditions, the revolution could have been carried out peacefully, without violence and civil war. Nothing could have prevented it. One word from the Soviet leadership would have been enough. After that, the question of which party would rule could have been settled through peaceful debate inside the soviets:

“I think the Bolsheviks would advance no other conditions, trusting that the revolution would proceed peacefully and party strife in the Soviets would be *peacefully overcome* thanks to really complete freedom of propaganda and the immediate establishment of a new democracy in the composition of the Soviets (new elections) and in their functioning.

“Perhaps this is *already* impossible? Perhaps. But if there is even one chance in a hundred, the attempt at realising such a possibility would still be worth while.”[\[50\]](#)

Lenin was firmly convinced that a peaceful revolution was not only possible but probable, on one condition—that the reformist leaders in the Soviets took power instead of dedicating all their energies to propping up the rule of the landlords and capitalists. But their refusal to take power, particularly after the defeat of Kornilov, threatened Russia with catastrophe. This is the eternal contradiction of reformism—that, by clinging to the notion of a slow, gradual, peaceful transformation of society, they always create the most convulsive, catastrophic and violent conditions, preparing the way for the victory of reaction. Lenin was scathing about the hesitations and vacillations of the Mensheviks and SRs who refused to break with the bourgeoisie and take power. As always, the reformists tried to frighten the masses with the alleged danger of civil war, an assertion which Lenin treated with well-merited contempt and ridicule. In his article *The Russian Revolution and Civil War*, Lenin answers these arguments, point by point:

“If there is an absolutely undisputed lesson of the revolution, one fully proved by facts, it is that only an alliance of the Bolsheviks with the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, only an immediate transfer of all power to the Soviets would make civil war in Russia impossible, for a civil war begun by the bourgeoisie against such an alliance, against the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, is inconceivable; such a ‘war’ would not last even until the first battle; the bourgeoisie, *for the second time* since the Kornilov revolt, would not be able to move even the Savage Division, or the former number of Cossack units against the Soviet Government!”[\[51\]](#)

He argues that a government that bases itself on the mass of workers and peasants, that puts an end to the war, that gives land to the peasants and acts in the interests of the working people, could brush aside the resistance of the propertied classes, and that, on

that basis “a peaceful development of the revolution is *possible* and *probable* if all power is transferred to the Soviets. The struggle of parties for power within the Soviets may proceed peacefully, if the Soviets are made fully democratic, and ‘petty thefts’ and violations of democratic principles, such as giving the soldiers one representative to every 500, while the workers have one representative to every 1,000 voters, are eliminated. In a democratic republic such petty thefts will have to disappear.

“When confronted with Soviets that have given all the land to the peasants without compensation and offer a just peace to all the peoples—when confronted with such Soviets the alliance of the British, French and Russian bourgeoisie, the Kornilovs, Buchanans, Ryabushinskys, Milyukovs, Plekhanovs, and Potresovs is quite impotent and is not to be feared.

“The bourgeoisie’s resistance to the transfer of the land to the peasants without compensation, to similar reforms in other realms of life, to a just peace and a break with imperialism, is, of course, inevitable. But for such resistance to reach the stage of civil war, *masses* of some kind are necessary, masses capable of *fighting* and vanquishing the Soviets. The bourgeoisie does *not* have these masses, and has nowhere to get them.”

It is astonishing that even now, Lenin’s approach to the question of power is not understood. Not only do the bourgeois enemies of Bolshevism persistently strive to pin firmly upon Lenin the label of a violent fanatic, hell-bent on blood and mayhem (Orlando Figes is the latest to peddle this disgusting distortion), but, incredibly, many of the sectarian grouplets who, for some reason, imagine themselves to be great Leninists, repeat the same childish nonsense about the inevitability of violence and civil war, without even realising that Lenin’s position was *just the opposite*. In dozens of articles and speeches in the course of 1917, Lenin explained that the notion that revolution necessarily meant bloodshed was a reactionary lie, deliberately put in circulation by the bourgeois and reformists in order to frighten the masses:

“Some speak about ‘rivers of blood’ in a civil war. This is mentioned in the resolution of the Kornilovite Cadets quoted above. This phrase is repeated in a thousand ways by all the bourgeois and opportunists. Since the Kornilov revolt all the class-conscious workers laugh, will continue to laugh and cannot help laughing at it.”[\[52\]](#)

If we examine world history over the last hundred years, we see that, on countless occasions and in many countries, the working class could have taken power peacefully, as in 1917, if the leaders of the trade unions and mass Socialist and Communist parties had willed it. But, like the Russian Mensheviks and SRs, they had no intention of taking power. They found a thousand and one “clever” arguments to show that the “time was not ripe”, the “correlation of forces was unfavourable”, and of course there was a danger of civil war, violence, the streets running with blood and so on. This was, after all, the argument of the German Labour leaders in 1933, when Hitler boasted that he had come to power “without breaking a window pane”, although the German workers’ organisations were the most powerful in the world. It is always the same story with these ladies and gentlemen. Their reformist “gradualism” always prepares a catastrophe. If there is

bloodshed, it is always the result of these policies of class collaboration, of parliamentary cretinism, of popular frontism, which considered itself to be “realistic” and “practical” but always turns out to be the worst kind of utopianism in the end.

“Our business is to help do everything possible to secure the ‘last’ chance for a peaceful development of the revolution, to help this by presenting our programme, by making clear its general, national character, its absolute harmony with the interests and demands of an enormous majority of the population.”

“Having seized power, the Soviet could still at present—and that is probably their last chance—secure a peaceful development of the revolution, peaceful elections of the deputies by the people, a peaceful struggle of the parties inside the Soviets, a testing of the programmes of various parties in practice, a peaceful passing of power from one party to another.”[\[53\]](#)

And here is how Trotsky sums up the position in *The History of the Russian Revolution*: “The transfer of power to the Soviets meant, in its immediate sense, a transfer of power to the Compromisers. *That might have been accomplished peacefully, by way of a simple dismissal of the bourgeois government, which had survived only on the good will of the Compromisers and the relics of the confidence in them of the masses.* The dictatorship of the workers and soldiers had been a fact since the 27 of February. But the workers and soldiers were not [at that point necessarily] aware of that fact. They had confided the power to the Compromisers, who in their turn had passed it over to the bourgeois. The calculations of the Bolsheviks on a peaceful development of the revolution rested, not on the hope that the bourgeois would voluntarily turn over the power to the workers and soldiers, but that the workers and soldiers would in good season prevent the Compromisers from surrendering the power to the bourgeois.

“The concentration of the power in the soviets under a regime of soviet democracy, would have opened before the Bolsheviks a complete opportunity to become a majority in the soviet, and consequently to create a government on the basis of their programme. *For this end an armed insurrection would have been unnecessary. The interchange of power between the parties could have been accomplished peacefully. All the efforts of the party from April to July had been directed towards making possible a peaceful development of the revolution through the soviet. ‘Patiently explain’—that had been the key to the Bolshevik policy.*”[\[54\]](#)

But maybe Lenin and Trotsky were only bluffing? Maybe they only put forward the idea of a peaceful transition in order to gain popularity with the workers, making allowance for their reformist pacifist illusions? To imagine such a thing would be not to understand anything of the method of Lenin and Trotsky, based on fearless revolutionary honesty. In his testimony before the Dewey Commission, Trotsky puts this very clearly: “I believe that the Marxist, the revolutionary, policy in general is a very simple policy: ‘Speak out what is! Don’t lie! Tell the truth!’ It is a very simple policy.”[\[55\]](#)

The Bolshevik Party did not have two different programmes, one for the educated few and one for the “ignorant” workers. Lenin and Trotsky always told the truth to the working class, even when this was bitter and unpalatable. If in 1917, that is in the midst of a revolution, when the question of power was poised point blank, they insisted in the idea that a peaceful transformation was possible (not “theoretically” but *actually possible*), *on condition only that the reformist leaders took decisive action*, it could only be because this was actually the case. And so it was. Had the soviet leadership acted decisively, the revolution would have taken place peacefully, without civil war, because they had the support of the overwhelming majority of society. In pointing this simple fact out to the workers and peasants, Lenin and Trotsky were not telling lies, or abandoning the Marxist theory of the state, but merely saying what was *obviously true* to the mass of workers and peasants.

By bringing out the contradiction between the words and deeds of the reformist leaders, the Bolsheviks prepared the way to winning over the decisive majority in the soviets, and also in the army (which was also represented in the soviets). *This was the real way in which the Bolshevik Party prepared for insurrection in 1917, not by talking about it, but by actually penetrating the masses and their organisations with flexible tactics and slogans which really corresponded to the demands of the situation, and connected with the consciousness of the masses, not lifeless abstractions learned by rote from a revolutionary cookbook.* The *only* reason why a peaceful revolution was not immediately achieved in Russia was because of the cowardice and treachery of the reformist leaders in the soviets, as Lenin and Trotsky explained a hundred times.

Unless and until the revolutionary party wins the masses, it is pointless and counterproductive to place the emphasis on the alleged inevitability of violence and civil war. Such an approach, far from “educating” the cadres or preparing them for serious revolutionary work (which at this stage consists almost entirely of the patient preparatory work of gaining points of support among the workers and youth and the labour movement) is more likely to confuse and disorient the cadres and alienate the workers we are trying to win. This was never the method of the great Marxist thinkers in the past, but was always a characteristic of the ultra left sects on the fringes of the labour movement, who live in a “revolutionary” dream world all of their own, which bears no relation to the real world. In this hothouse, shut away from reality, small groups can while away the time endlessly debating the “insurrection” and mentally “preparing” themselves for the “inevitability of civil war” while the real task of building the revolutionary organisation entirely escapes them.

In what way does a Marxist tendency concretely prepare for power? By winning over the masses. In what way can this task be achieved? By working out a programme of transitional demands which, setting out from the real situation of society and the objective needs of the working class and the youth, links the immediate demands to the central idea of expropriating the capitalists and transforming society. As Lenin and Trotsky explained many times nine-tenths of the task of revolution consists precisely in this. Unless this fact is grasped, all talk about armed struggle, “military preparations” and civil war is reduced to irresponsible demagogy.

As we have pointed out, when the Bolsheviks were a small minority in the soviets, which were entirely dominated by the reformist parties, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who were striving for an alliance with the bourgeoisie, they did not play with insurrection, but stressed the need to win a majority in the soviets (“patiently explain”). The masses tended to look for what appeared to be the easiest, most economical solutions to their problems. That is why the Russian workers and peasants trusted the reformist leaders then as now. The Bolsheviks had to take this fact as their starting point. Lenin had a deep understanding of the psychology of the masses. On July 8, he wrote:

“The masses are still looking for the ‘easiest’ way out—through the bloc of the Cadets with the bloc of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks.

“But there is no way out.”[\[56\]](#)

### **The June Days**

Beginning in 1905, Lenin had advanced the slogan of a workers’ militia as a central demand for the revolution. It was no accident that the arming of the workers was one of the first demands he put forward in his telegram to the Bolsheviks from Switzerland. In fact, the Russian workers were already carrying this demand into practice without waiting to be told.

In the armed clashes of February, the workers, beginning with the activists, seized a large quantity of arms. 40,000 rifles and 30,000 revolvers were seized from the arsenal alone. A further 24,000 rifles and 400,000 cartridges were reluctantly handed over by the Provisional Government’s Military Commission between 2 and 3 of March. On this basis, the workers’ militia was formed, firstly to patrol the workers districts, keeping order, preventing pogroms and disarming criminal and hooligan elements. Before long, however, they began to go onto the offensive against counter-revolutionary elements, including oppressive and unpopular members of management. The workers militia had nothing in common with terrorism and guerrillaism, but emerged from the mass movement and was subordinated to it, being closely linked to the Soviets and factory committees that everywhere began to spring up after the February Revolution. If we agree that state power is “armed bodies of men”, then power in Petrograd was in the hands of the armed people. By 19 March, there were 85 militia centres functioning in the city, of which 20 were under the control of factory committees or similar bodies. They numbered around 10,000 or 12,000 as opposed to the 8,000 of the regular militia. “In essence,” commented the Populist A.V. Peshekonov, “all power rested completely in the hands of the crowd.”

On April 28, a conference was organised on the initiative of the Left Menshevik N. Rostov, of elected representatives from 156 enterprises to set up the Red Guard. The statutes of the new force, drafted by Shlyapnikov and adopted by the Vyborg district Soviet, controlled by the Bolsheviks, stated its aims as “to struggle against the counter-revolutionary intrigues of the ruling class [and] defend with arms in hand all conquests of

the working class”, but at the same time “to safeguard the lives, security and property of all citizens without distinction of sex, age or nationality”. Membership was open to any man or woman who could prove membership of a socialist party or union, and was elected or recommended by a general meeting of their workmates. The basic unit was the squad of ten (*desyatok*); these were to combine to make up a “*sotnya*”, or unit of one hundred, and ten such companies were to constitute a battalion. The whole force was under the control of the district soviet (most of which were controlled by the Bolsheviks). All officers were elected by the rank-and-file.

Thus, in the beginnings, the workers’ militias saw their role in purely defensive terms. But in the course of experience, their role became transformed, passing almost imperceptibly from defence to offence, until, by November, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, they could place on the order of the day the seizure of state power. One recent analyst has estimated that, on the eve of the October revolution, the militias counted in their ranks between 70,000 and 100,000. Of these, roughly 15-20,000 were in Petrograd and the surrounding area, and about 10-15,000 in Moscow and the Central Industrial Region.[\[57\]](#)

With every day that passed, the role of the reformist leaders of the Soviets was becoming exposed. The first All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which was held in Petrograd from June 3 to June 24, passed a resolution pledging full support for the government. The Bolsheviks were in a small minority at the Congress: 105 delegates, as against 533 for the Mensheviks and SRs. But the mood in the factories and garrisons in the capital was growing increasingly restless. The large numbers of new recruits made this mood felt within the Bolshevik Party. In early June, under the influence of these moods, the Bolsheviks’ Military Organisation had projected an armed demonstration in Petrograd to coincide with the congress. The purpose of the demonstration was to put pressure on the Congress. But it was also a response to the increasing pressure of the advanced workers of Petrograd who were straining at the leash to take power. Had the Bolsheviks not placed themselves at the head of the workers, all kinds of ultra-left and anarchist elements could have exploited the situation to provoke premature armed clashes with calamitous results.

The workers of Petrograd had a clear message for the Soviet leaders: “Take over power in the state! Break with the bourgeoisie! Break the coalition and take power into your own hands!” But the last thing the petty bourgeois Soviet leaders wanted was power, and the movement of the Petrograd workers terrified them. They were convinced that the Bolsheviks were using the armed demonstration as a front to take power. Such an idea was very far from Lenin’s mind at this stage. On the contrary, the Bolsheviks were attempting to restrain the workers of Petrograd, understanding that the time for a decisive showdown was not ripe. True, the workers could have taken power in Petrograd in June. But the provinces had not yet had time to catch up with the capital. The mass of the workers and peasants would have interpreted this as an attack on “their” government, and rallied to the Soviet leaders who would not have hesitated to drown the movement in blood. The Russian revolution would have ended up as a heroic failure, like the Paris Commune. Lenin had no intention of going down that road.

In a panic reaction, the Soviet leaders opened up a savage campaign against the projected demonstration. Understanding what this meant, the Bolsheviks decided to retreat and the demonstration was called off. They were still in a small minority at the Congress, and acted accordingly. The main task was still that of winning over a majority in the Soviet by patient work, propaganda and agitation. The question of taking power while the party remained a small minority simply did not arise. The Bolsheviks' decision to stage a tactical retreat was shown to be correct by what happened next.

To compensate for the calling-off of the Bolsheviks' demonstration, the reformist leaders called their own "official" demonstration—and had the shock of their lives. On July 1, the masses poured onto the streets of Petrograd in answer to the call of the Soviet leaders. But in their hands they carried banners with Bolshevik slogans: "Down with the secret treaties! Down with the policy of strategic offensives! Long live an honourable peace! Down with the ten capitalist ministers! and All power to the soviet!" In the entire demonstration there were only three placards that expressed confidence in the Provisional government—one from a Cossack regiment, one from Plekhanov's tiny group, and one from the Bund. This demonstration showed not only the reformist leaders but also the Bolsheviks themselves that they were far stronger in Petrograd than what they had imagined.

So long as they were in a minority, Lenin and Trotsky did their utmost to restrain the workers and soldiers, to avoid a premature confrontation with the state. All their emphasis was on peaceful agitation and propaganda. This was not an easy thing to do. For their pains, Lenin and Trotsky frequently incurred the anger of sections of the workers who had moved a bit too far ahead of the class. They were accused of opportunism for not pushing the question of armed insurrection into the foreground. To such criticism, they merely shrugged their shoulders. They understood that the most pressing task was to win over the majority of the workers and soldiers who remained under the influence of the Mensheviks and SRs. That was the real significance of the slogan "all power to the soviets". Lenin maintained this position up until July, when he advocated dropping it in favour of "all power to the factory committees".

At the Congress of Soviets, Lenin made a speech which sums up his whole approach to the question of winning over the workers in the Soviets. No trace of shrill, strident denunciations, but instead a patient, positive-sounding appeal to the workers which takes into account their illusions in the reformist leaders, but at the same time states clearly what is. He warned that only two alternatives were possible: "One or the other: either the usual bourgeois government, in which case the peasants', workers', soldiers' and other Soviets are useless and will either be broken up by the generals, the counter-revolutionary generals, who keep a hold on the armed forces and pay no heed to Minister Kerensky's fancy speeches, or they can neither retreat nor stand still. They can exist only by advancing."[\[58\]](#)

Then he turned his attention to the burning issue of the war. His analysis of the situation is so clear, the message so direct, that it could not fail to strike a chord with the delegates, even though they were overwhelmingly in favour of the Mensheviks and SRs at this

stage. With no trace of rhetoric or demagogy, by the force of an iron logic, Lenin ruthlessly strips away all the diplomatic verbiage to lay bare the class interests that lie beneath:

“The capitalists continue to plunder the people’s property. The imperialist war continues. And yet we are promised reforms, reforms and more reforms, which cannot be accomplished at all under these circumstances, because the war crushes and determines everything. Why do you disagree with those who say the war is *not* being waged over capitalist profits? It is, first of all, which class is in power, which class continues to be the master, which class continues to make hundreds of thousands of millions from banking and financial operations. It is the same capitalist class and the war therefore continues to be imperialist. Neither the first Provisional Government nor the government with the near-socialist Ministers has changed anything. The secret treaties remain secret. Russia is fighting for the Straits, fighting to continue Lyakhov’s policy in Persia, and so on.

“I know you don’t want this, that most of you don’t want it, and that the Ministers don’t want it, because no one can want it, for it means the slaughter of hundreds of millions of people. But take the offensive which the Milyukovs and Maklakovs are now talking about so much. They know full well what that means. They know it is linked with the question of power, with the question of revolution. We are told we must distinguish between political and strategic issues. It is ridiculous to raise this question at all. The Cadets perfectly understand that the point at issue is a political one.

“It is slander to say the revolutionary struggle for peace that has begun from below might lead to a separate peace treaty. The first step we should take if we had power would be to arrest the biggest capitalists and cut all the threads of their intrigues. Without this, all talk about peace without annexations and indemnities is utterly meaningless. Our second step would be to declare to all people over the head of their governments that we regard all capitalists as robbers—Tereshchenko, who is not a bit better than Milyukov, just a little less stupid, the French capitalists, the British capitalists, and all the rest.

“Your own *Izvestiya* has got into a muddle and proposes to keep the status quo instead of peace without annexations and indemnities. Our idea of peace ‘without annexations’ is different. Even the Peasant Congress comes nearer the truth when it speaks of a ‘federal’ republic, thereby expressing the idea that the Russian republic does not want to oppress any nation, either in the new or in the old way, and does not want to force any nation, either Finland or the Ukraine, with both of whom impermissible and intolerable conflicts are being created. We want a single and undivided republic of Russia with a firm government. But a firm government can be secured only by the voluntary agreement of all people concerned. ‘Revolutionary democracy’ are big words, but they are being applied to a government that by its petty fault-finding is complicating the problem of the Ukraine and Finland, which do not even want to secede. They only say, ‘Don’t postpone the application of the elementary principles of democracy until the Constituent Assembly!’

“A peace treaty without annexations and indemnities cannot be concluded until you have renounced your own annexations. It is ridiculous, a comedy, every worker in Europe is laughing at us, saying: You talk very eloquently and call on the people to overthrow the bankers, but you send your own bankers into the Ministry. Arrest them, expose their tricks, get to know the hidden springs! But that you don’t do although you have powerful organisations which cannot be resisted. You have gone through 1905 and 1917. You know that revolution is not made to order, that revolutions in other countries were made by the hard and bloody method of insurrection, and in Russia there is no group, no class, that would resist the power of the Soviets. In Russia, this revolution can, by way of exception, be a peaceful one. Were this revolution to propose peace to all peoples today or tomorrow, by breaking with all the capitalist classes, both France and Germany, their people, that is, would accept very soon, because these countries are perishing, because Germany’s position is hopeless, because she cannot save herself and because France—*(Chairman: ‘Your time is up.’)*”

“I shall finish in half a minute. *(Commotion; requests from the audience that the speaker continue; protests and applause.)*”

Clearly impressed, almost in spite of themselves, the majority decided to give the speaker extra time, and Lenin continued his speech, exposing the imperialist nature of the war, but, again taking into account the “honest defencist” inclinations of his audience, explains revolutionary defeatism in a language which could get an echo from the workers and soldiers. We are not pacifists, he says. We are prepared to fight against the Kaiser, who is also our enemy. But we do not trust the capitalists. Get rid of the ten capitalist ministers! Let the Soviet leaders take the power, and we will wage a revolutionary war against German imperialism, while fighting to extend the revolution to Germany and all the other belligerent powers. That is the only way to get peace:

“When we take power into our own hands,” he said, “we shall curb the capitalists, and then the war will *not be the kind* of war that is being waged now, because the nature of a war is determined by what class wages it, not by what is written on paper. You can write on paper anything you like. But as long as the capitalist class has a majority in the government the war will remain an imperialist war no matter what you write, no matter how eloquent you are, no matter how many near-socialist ministers you have...

“The war remains an imperialist war, and however much you may desire peace, however sincere your sympathy for the working people and your desire for peace—I am fully convinced that by and large it must be sincere—you are powerless, because the war can only be ended by taking the revolution further. When the revolution began in Russia, a revolutionary struggle for peace from below also began. If you were to take power into your hands, if power were to pass to the revolutionary organisations to be used for combating the Russian capitalists, then the working people of some countries would believe you and you could propose peace. Then our peace would be ensured at least from two sides, by the two nations who are being bled white and whose cause is hopeless—Germany and France. And if circumstances then obliged us to wage a revolutionary war—no one knows, and we do not rule out the possibility—we should say: ‘We are not

pacifists, we do not renounce war when the revolutionary class is in power and has actually deprived the capitalists of the opportunity to influence things in any way, to exacerbate the economic dislocation which enables them to make hundreds of millions.’ The revolutionary government would explain to absolutely every nation that every nation must be free, and that just as the German nation must not fight to retain Alsace and Lorraine, so the French nation must not fight for its colonies. For, while France is fighting for her colonies, Russia has Khiva and Bokhara, which are also something like colonies. Then the division of colonies will begin. And how are they to be divided? On what basis? According to strength. But strength has changed. The capitalists are in a situation where their only way out is war. When you take over revolutionary power, you will have a revolutionary way of securing peace, namely, by addressing a revolutionary appeal to all nations and explaining your tactics by your own example.”[\[59\]](#)

What is most striking here is the complete absence of Lenin’s earlier formulations on “revolutionary defeatism”. No reference to civil war. No call to the soldiers to turn their bayonets against their officers, and certainly no hint that the defeat of Russia would be the “lesser evil!” This change reflects an important shift in Lenin’s thinking on tactics since February. The question of defencism versus revolutionary defeatism, which he frequently presented in very black-and-white terms in the previous period, turned out to be not so simple. Of course, fundamentally Lenin’s position on the war had not changed. The change of regime from tsarist autocracy to a bourgeois democratic republic did not mean that the war on Russia’s side was any less imperialist than before. But when he returned to Russia, Lenin said that he had found, as well as the usual social-chauvinist crowd, a wide layer of honest working class defencists in the Soviets who had to learn by experience and argument the reactionary nature of the war. To have merely repeated the old slogans would have been to cut off the Bolsheviks utterly from the working class. A new approach was needed, which reflected the difference between writing and speaking for small groups of party activists and addressing the broad mass of workers recently awakened to political life.

## NOTES

[45] LCW, *The 7th (April) All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP(B)*, vol. 24, p. 236 (my emphasis).

[46] LCW, *A Shameless Lie of the Capitalists*, vol. 24, pp. 110-1.

[47] LCW, *Resolution of the CC of the RSDLP(B) Adopted April 21 (May 4), 1917*, vol. 24, p. 201.

[48] LCW, *Titbits for the ‘Newborn’ Government*, vol. 24, p. 363.

[49] LCW, *On Slogans*, vol. 25, p. 184.

[50] LCW, *On Compromises*, vol. 25, p. 307.

[51] LCW, *The Russian Revolution and Civil War*, vol. 26, p. 36.

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 37 and 38.

[53] LCW, vol. XXI, book I, pp. 257 and 263-4.

[54] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 816 (my emphasis).

[55] *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, p. 384.

[56] LCW, *A Disorderly Revolution*, vol. 25, p. 129.

[57] Quoted in Keep, *op. cit.*, pp. 91 and 95.

[58] LCW, *First All-Russia Congress of Soviets*, vol. 25, p. 18.

[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-3 and 26-7.

## **Part Six: The Year of Revolution**

[section 5 of 7]

### **The July Days**

The reformist leaders of the Soviets remained deaf to all these appeals. The cowardice of the Mensheviks and SRs in refusing to take power, meant that the initiative inevitably passed to the forces of reaction. Despite the February overturn, the tsarist regime had not been decisively defeated. Behind the shirt-tails of the Russian popular front (the Provisional Government), the ruling class was regrouping and preparing its revenge. The result was the reaction of the “July Days”. The immediate issue was the offensive of July 1. On the very day that the workers and soldiers were demonstrating on the streets of Petrograd demanding peace and the publication of the secret treaties, Kerensky launched a new offensive. “Spontaneous” patriotic demonstrations were organised on the Nevsky Prospekt, where smartly dressed bourgeois ladies and gentlemen vied with officers and journalists in their invective against the Bolsheviks. The reactionaries were once again crawling out of the woodwork, encouraged by news of the offensive.

At the Congress of Soviets, the Bolshevik minority energetically protested against the offensive, pointing out that it would lead to a strengthening of the reactionary elements in the armed forces, who would take advantage of the situation to attempt to re-establish discipline and regain control. The revolution would be placed in the gravest danger: “An offensive, whatever its outcome may be from the military point of view,” wrote Lenin, “means politically strengthening imperialist morale, imperialist sentiments, and infatuation with imperialism. It means strengthening the old, unchanged army officers

(‘waging the war *as we have been waging it so far*’), and strengthening *the main position of the counter-revolution.*”[\[60\]](#)

These warnings were subsequently made flesh in the person of general Kornilov. If the offensive succeeded, it would encourage the reactionary forces and push a layer of the petty bourgeois and peasants towards the bourgeoisie, isolating the revolutionary proletariat. If it failed, it could lead to the complete collapse of the army, producing a demoralising effect on the masses. In the event, the latter variant was what occurred.

On July 2 a ministerial crisis broke out over the Ukrainian question, which revealed the utter inability of the Provisional Government to solve the national question. The case for breaking the coalition and ejecting the bourgeois ministers was never clearer. But the more the crisis deepened, the more the “socialist” ministers clung to the bourgeois liberals. Kerensky was moving rapidly to the right and becoming indistinguishable from the Cadet ministers. The reformist leaders were terrified of the masses. The June demonstration had given them a fright, and the more they saw the increase in the influence of the Bolsheviks, the more they saw the danger to their position from the left, and clung still more fervently to the right. The Bolsheviks, for their part, intensified their campaign demanding that the Mensheviks and SRs break with the capitalists and take the power into their own hands. This apparent paradox in reality represented the only way in which the Bolsheviks could gain the ear of the masses. Lenin even put to the Soviet leaders that, if they took the power, the Bolsheviks would guarantee that the struggle for power would be confined to the peaceful struggle to win a majority in the Soviets.

Trotsky explains:

“After all the experiences of the Coalition, it might have seemed that there could be only one way out, viz. to break with the Cadets and to form a purely Soviet Government. The correlation of forces inside the Soviets at the time was such that a Soviet Government would have meant, from a party point of view, the concentration of power in the hands of the SRs and Mensheviks. We were deliberately aiming at such a result, since the constant re-elections to the Soviets provided the necessary machinery for securing a sufficiently faithful reflection of the growing radicalisation of the masses of the workers and soldiers. We foresaw that after the break of the Coalition with the bourgeoisie the radical tendencies would necessarily gain the upper hand on the Soviets. In such conditions the struggle of the proletariat for power would naturally shift to the floor of the Soviet organisations, and would proceed in a painless fashion.”

The pressure for decisive action was building up among the workers and soldiers of Petrograd. Again the Bolsheviks called an armed demonstration to put pressure on the Soviet leaders. Trotsky explains the motives of the Bolsheviks: “There was still some hope that a demonstration of revolutionary masses might break down the obstinate doctrinarism of the Coalitionists and compel them to realise at last that they could only maintain themselves in power if they completely broke with the bourgeois. Contrary to what was said and written at the time in the bourgeois press, there was no intention whatever in our party of seizing the reins of power by means of an armed rising. It was

only a revolutionary demonstration which broke out spontaneously, though guided by us politically.”[\[61\]](#)

The mood of the soldiers was particularly explosive. The First Machine-Gun Regiment, stationed in the working-class Vyborg district, was agitated by the news that they would have to send 500 machine-gun crews to the front. The regiment, where the influence of the Bolsheviks was strong, drew their own conclusion: it was necessary to overthrow the provisional Government. Sections of the Bolsheviks—especially the Military Organisation—sympathised with this aim. There is a tendency among military men to over-estimate the independent power of the gun. But the Bolshevik Central Committee firmly opposed any attempt to seize power in Petrograd at this stage. The provinces were not yet ready and, under such circumstances, the seizure of the capital would be a putsch. “One wrong move on our part can wreck everything,” said Lenin, “If we were now able to seize power, it is naive to think that we would be able to hold it. ... Even in the Soviets of both capitals, not to speak now of the others, we are an insignificant minority. ... This is a basic fact, and it determines the behaviour of our Party. ... Events should not be anticipated. Time is on our side.”[\[62\]](#)

But the Bolsheviks could not prevent the explosion that was being prepared. On July 3, the soldiers, sailors and workers, incensed at the moves of the government to send them as cannon-fodder to the front, poured out onto the streets of the capital. It was a spontaneous uprising involving a large number of people moving around the streets with no clear aim or strategy. The reformist leaders looked on aghast as an immense crowd of workers and sailors surrounded the Tauride Palace where the Central Executive was meeting. The initiative for the demonstration came from below, from the workers and soldiers of Petrograd, exasperated by the shilly-shallying of the Soviet leaders, whose indignation had been raised to boiling point by the announcement of the July offensive. Far from aiming to seize power, the Bolsheviks did their best to restrain the masses, fearing quite rightly that Petrograd would be isolated from the rest of Russia.

Lunacharsky wrote to his wife the next day: “The movement developed spontaneously. Black Hundreds, hooligans, provocateurs, anarchists and desperate people introduced a large amount of chaos and absurdity into the demonstration.”[\[63\]](#) Anarchist and Black Hundred elements attempted to incite the demonstrators to attacking the building and arresting the Soviet leaders, and an actual attempt was made to arrest the SR leader Chernov. This enabled the reactionary press later to describe the July demonstration as a pogrom and simultaneously an attempted *putsch* organised by the Bolsheviks against the revolution and the Soviet majority. None of this bears the slightest relation to the truth. The Central Committee met at 4 p.m. on July 3 and decided to do everything possible to restrain the movement, which threatened to turn into a full-blown uprising. Delegates were hastily dispatched to the factories and barracks to prevent the masses from coming out onto the streets, but it was already too late. The movement had started and nothing could stop it.

Late that night the Central Committee, together with the Petrograd Committee and the Military Organisation, taking into account the mood of the masses, decided to take part in

the demonstration in order to give it an organised and peaceful character. Lenin was away on holiday, in an attempt to recover his strength after the exhaustion of the last few months. But being informed of the sudden turn of events, hurried back to the capital, where he found a chaotic and potentially dangerous state of affairs. On July 4, a vast number of people were involved in the demonstrations. More than half a million thronged the streets of Petrograd with no order, aim or leadership. The small number of anarchists in Petrograd were delighted: "The streets will organise us!" was the typical comment. But things were not so simple, as events showed.

By July 4, the demonstration had assumed a huge and threatening character. By now, the Bolsheviks were straining might and main to keep things within limits.

"We Bolsheviks," recalls Trotsky, "met every new detachment of demonstrators, either in the street or in the Palace, with harangues, calling on them to be calm, and assuring them that with the masses in their present mood the compromisemongers would be unable to form a new coalition ministry. The men of Kronstadt were particularly determined, and it was only with difficulty that we could keep them within the bounds of a bare demonstration."

Trotsky was sent to rescue the SR leader Chernov who had been "arrested" by the Kronstadt sailors. In the course of his "arrest", one of the workers angrily shook his fist in Chernov's face and shouted at him: "Take the power, you son of a bitch, when it's handed to you!" In a famous incident, Trotsky recalls the mood of sullen suspicion that emanated from all sides as he made his way through the ranks of the rebellious sailors. They were waiting for Trotsky to give them the order to take power, but instead he asked them to release their prisoner. The sailors shouted angrily at Trotsky, who felt that the slightest wrong word or action would have ended in his being set on and killed. At seven o'clock in the evening, a crowd of armed and angry workers from the Putilov plant burst in on a meeting of the terrified Soviet leaders. A worker in blue overalls jumped onto the platform and, waving his rifle in the air, shouted at the deputies:

"Comrades! How long must we workers put up with treachery? You're all here debating and making deals with the bourgeoisie and the landlords... You're busy betraying the working class. Well, just understand that the working class won't put up with it! There are 30,000 of us all told here from Putilov. We're going to have our way. All power to the Soviets! We have a firm grip on our rifles! Your Kerenskys and Tseretelis are not going to fool us!"[\[64\]](#)

The Soviet leaders were compelled to negotiate to gain time while Kerensky brought in "reliable" troops from the front. But the arrival of troops from the front was the signal for a counter-revolutionary offensive. The bourgeois took revenge for the fright it had suffered. The counter-attack was led by the Soviet leaders, who recovered their nerve the moment the Volhynian regiment arrived. They no longer had any reason to negotiate with the alleged perpetrators of an "armed rebellion". The Bolsheviks were declared a "counter-revolutionary party". Cossacks and police fired on the demonstrators from the roof-tops, causing panic. Later, when the loyal troops had arrived and disarmed the rebel

units, the middle class gave vent to their fury. Workers were beaten up by respectable ladies and gentlemen on the Nevsky Prospekt. There was a wave of raids, arrests, beatings and even murders. On the night of July 4-5, the Justice minister P.N. Pereverzev gave the press papers that purported to show that Lenin was a German agent. On the night of July 5, the offices of *Pravda* were wrecked by government forces. The Bolshevik papers were suppressed. Rebel units were sent to the front to be massacred. Suddenly, the pendulum was swinging violently to the right.

### **After the July Events**

The demonstration of July 2 and 3 revealed many things. It showed that the reformist leaders had decisively lost their base in Petrograd. But it also showed, as the Bolsheviks had warned, that Petrograd was not Russia, that the Mensheviks and SRs still had huge reserves of support in the workers and peasants of the provinces. Even in Petrograd, the mood in the barracks was not uniform. Although a majority of the soldiers and still more the sailors were with the Bolsheviks at this time, some units remained passive or were undecided. However, not a single unit of the Petrograd garrison was prepared to fight to defend the Provisional Government or even the Soviet leaders.

The workers and soldiers did not get off scot-free. Mistakes are always paid for. Some hundreds were killed. But if the Bolsheviks had not placed themselves at the head of the demonstration in order to give it an organised and peaceful character, there would undoubtedly have been a blood-bath. Moreover, the party's influence over the most advanced workers would have been destroyed. At times it is necessary to go with the workers even when they are mistaken, in order that they should learn by experience and draw the conclusions. The experience of the July days was a painful one, but the workers learned to trust the judgement of the Bolsheviks who had warned them in advance of what would happen, but then participated shoulder to shoulder with them.

On July 2, as a result of the split on the Ukrainian question, three Cadet ministers had resigned from the government, followed later by Pervzev and, on the 7th, by the Prime Minister, Prince Lvov. The remaining cabinet ministers appointed Kerensky and entrusted him with forming a new government—the Second Coalition. The attack on the left greatly strengthened the counter-revolutionaries who now felt that they had the initiative. After the suppression of the movement in Petrograd, the bourgeois felt that the time had come to “restore order”. The Cadets demanded that the Socialist ministers break their links with the Soviets. The left wing, in the person of the Bolsheviks, was to be crushed. Orlando Figes gives a flavour of the mood of anti-Bolshevik hysteria that existed at this time:

“By the morning of the 5th, the capital was seized with anti-Bolshevik hysteria. The right-wing tabloids bayed for Bolshevik blood, instantly blaming the ‘German agents’ for the reverses at the Front. It seemed self-evident that the Bolsheviks had planned their uprising to coincide with the German advance. General Polovtsov, who was responsible for the repressions as the head of the Petrograd Military District, later acknowledged that the Bolshevik-baiting contained ‘a strong anti-Semitic tendency’; but in the usual way

that Russians of his class justified pogroms he put it down ‘to the Jews themselves because among the Bolshevik leaders their percentage was not far from a hundred. It was beginning to annoy the soldiers to see that Jews ruled everything, and the remarks I heard in the barracks plainly showed what the soldiers thought about it’.”[\[65\]](#)

The day after the demonstrations, the press waged a hysterical campaign about Lenin and the “German agents”, while the SRs and Mensheviks, who knew that this was a pack of lies, maintained a cowardly silence. But their complicity with the counter-revolution did not end there. The Mensheviks and SRs called on Lenin and the other leaders to “hand themselves over to justice”. That was an open invitation to place their necks in the hangman’s noose. The reactionaries were now baying for blood.

On July 6, the government issued an order for the arrest of Lenin, Kamenev and Zinoviev. Some writers (among the most recent, Orlando Figes) try to accuse Lenin of personal cowardice. That is nonsense. The record shows that Lenin had decided to give himself up, and had to be talked out of it by other party leaders. The day after the order of arrest was issued, following a raid on his sister’s apartment, Lenin wrote a note, addressed to the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet, asking it to open an investigation and offering to give himself up to the authorities, on condition that the Soviet Executive sanctioned his arrest:

“Only just now, at 3.15 p.m., July 7, I learned that a search was made at my flat last night, despite the protests of my wife, by armed men who produced no warrant. I register my protest against this and ask the Bureau of the CEC to investigate this flagrant breach of the law.

“At the same time I consider it my duty to confirm officially and in writing what, I am sure, not a single member of the CEC can doubt, namely that, in the event of the government ordering my arrest and this order being endorsed by the CEC, I shall present myself for arrest at the place indicated to me by the CEC.

“Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (N. Lenin), Member of the CEC.”[\[66\]](#)

In her memoirs of Lenin, Krupskaya recalls that “he [Lenin] argued the necessity of making his appearance in court. Maria Ilyichna [Lenin’s sister] warmly protested against it. ‘Grigory [Zinoviev] and I have decided to appear—go and tell Kamenev,’ Ilyich said to me. Kamenev was staying in another flat not far away. I got up hastily. ‘Let’s say good-bye,’ Ilyich checked me. ‘We may not see each other again’.”[\[67\]](#)

Members of the CC tried to persuade Lenin that this course of action was out of the question. What finally made up Lenin’s mind was the decision of the Soviet Executive to cancel its promised inquiry into the July events. When Ordzhonikidze and Nogin were sent to the Tauride palace carrying Lenin’s message and instructions to negotiate the terms of his imprisonment, the Soviet’s representative refused to give any assurances, but promised to “do what they could”. According to Ordzhonikidze, even the moderate Nogin was “uneasy about Lenin’s fate were he to turn himself in”. It was now quite clear

that the Soviet was excluded from all influence over the government and that the judiciary, still dominated by tsarist elements, would act as the obedient servant of the counter-revolution. In a letter written for publication, Lenin explained:

“We have changed our plan to submit to the government because ... it is clear that the case regarding the espionage of Lenin and others has been intentionally constructed by the forces of counter-revolution. ... At this time there can be no guarantee of a fair trial. The Central Executive Committee ... formed a commission to look into the espionage charges and under pressure from the counter-revolution this commission has been dissolved. ... To turn ourselves in to the authorities now would be to put ourselves into the hands of the Miliukovs, Aleksinskys, Pereverevs—that is, into the hands of dyed-in-the-wool counter-revolutionaries for whom the charges against us are nothing more than an episode in the civil war.”[\[68\]](#)

The party leaders finally persuaded Lenin to go into hiding. That was undoubtedly the correct line of action. Lenin was more use to the revolution alive than dead or locked up. It is true that a section of the party was in favour of Lenin going on trial, with the idea of defending himself from the accused’s bench, as Trotsky had done in 1906. But such an idea would have been madness. Later, the majority of the Sixth Party Congress, which met in Petrograd at the end of July, considered the question correctly and concluded that Lenin would never have reached the courtroom, but would have fallen to some assassin’s bullet, “shot whilst trying to escape”. Even if that were only a possibility, the party had no right to risk the life of Lenin on a gambler’s throw.

There can be no doubt that Lenin’s life was in danger at this moment in time. The counter-revolution was rampant. In the Petrograd Soviet, a Menshevik deputy declared: “Citizens who look like workers or who are suspected of being Bolsheviks are in constant danger of being beaten.” Another added that “quite intelligent people are conducting ultra-anti-Semitic agitation”.[\[69\]](#) Several Bolshevik Party offices were raided and smashed. This happened to the print-shop of *Trud*, which printed a lot of material for the unions, as well as Bolshevik literature. Ivan Voinov, a 23-year old Bolshevik who helped out in the circulation department of Pravda, was arrested while distributing *Listok Pravdy* (Pravda Pamphlet), one of the many names under which the party paper appeared to get round the ban. While being “interrogated”, the prisoner was struck on the head with a sabre, killing him instantly. Given the general atmosphere of hysteria and the accusations directed personally against Lenin as a German agent, it would have been the height of irresponsibility to entrust him to the tender mercies of the “Law” in a period of counter-revolution.

Two years later, during the Spartakist uprising in Berlin—a movement which was strikingly similar to the July Days—Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht failed to take the necessary precautions and were arrested by counter-revolutionary officers. They did not believe that they would be murdered in cold blood, but that is just what happened. The murder of the two most outstanding leaders of the German working class had a disastrous effect on the whole course of the German revolution and the history of the world. Yes, they showed personal bravery. But what a terrible price was paid for that

mistaken action! If they had gone underground, as Lenin did, the future of the German revolution would have been in safe hands. Instead, it suffered an abortion. Not just the German working class, but the whole world paid for this catastrophe, with the rise of Hitler and all the subsequent horrors of fascism and war. Such considerations should make one pause for thought before making inane comments about “personal bravery”, and all the rest of it.

The Menshevik and SR leaders, to whom Lenin had looked for guarantees concerning his arrest, played a contemptible role. Dan proposed a crudely worded resolution which was supported by the majority of the reformist parties in the Soviet, accusing the Bolsheviks of crimes against the people and the revolution, and branding Lenin’s evasion of arrest as “intolerable”. In the same way, the German right-wing Social Democratic leaders Noske and Scheidemann in 1919 acted as accomplices to the general staff and the Freikorps in the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg. They demanded that the Bolsheviks open a discussion on Lenin’s conduct, and provided for the suspension of membership of the Soviet Executive of all persons under investigation. Nogin protested: “You are being asked to adopt a resolution regarding the Bolsheviks before they have been tried. You are asked to place outside the law the leaders of the fraction that prepared the revolution with you.”<sup>[70]</sup> But the Soviet right wing was not interested in Nogin’s complaints. Dan’s resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority. From the floor the attacks on the Bolsheviks were even more hysterical.

Now that the appetite of the counter-revolutionaries had been whetted, they vented their fury against the workers’ movement in general, not caring to distinguish between left and right. At a meeting of the Provisional Committee of the Duma held on July 5, right wing Duma deputies like A.M. Maslenikov and Vladimir Purishkevich (best known for his part in the assassination of Rasputin) raged against the moderate Soviet leaders, who were described as “dreamers”, “lunatics passing themselves off as pacifists”, “petty careerists”, and “a group of fanatics, transients [that is, Jews] and traitors”. Maslenikov demanded that power be restored to the Duma and that the government be made responsible to it alone. This was a demand for the liquidation of dual power. The Soviets should play no role. Purishkevich went further, blurting out the real intentions of the counter-revolutionaries: “If a thousand, two thousand, perhaps five thousand scoundrels at the front and several dozen in the rear had been done away with, we would not have suffered such an unprecedented disgrace.”<sup>[71]</sup>

And he demanded the re-introduction of the death penalty, not only at the front, but in the rear also. This demand grew like a deafening crescendo in the weeks following the July defeat. Its meaning was clear. The bourgeoisie was striving to re-establish “order”—that is, its control over the society and the state, which, as Lenin explained, in the last analysis, is armed bodies of men. The re-establishment of discipline in the army by the most brutal means, including the death penalty, was the prior condition for liquidating the dual power and re-constituting the old state. That could only mean dictatorship, as subsequent events proved.

The July defeat altered the class correlation of forces. With every step backwards taken by the revolution, the counter-revolution grew bolder. On the other hand, the mood of the workers and soldiers in the capital was depressed. They had learned a harsh lesson. The provinces were against them. A sense of isolation and impotence gripped the capital. The workers lowered their heads and waited for the next blow. In the midst of this carnival of reaction, when the Bolsheviks were being hounded and persecuted on all sides, one voice rang out bold and clear—the voice of Leon Trotsky who, in an open letter to the Provisional Government, dated 10 (23) July 1917, wrote:

“Citizen Ministers:

“I have learned that in connection with the events of July 16-17, a warrant has been issued for the arrest of Lenin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, but not for me. I should like, therefore, to call your attention to the following:

“1. I agree with the main thesis of Lenin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and have advocated it in the journal *Vperyod* and in my public speeches.

“2. My attitude toward the events of July 16-17 was the same as theirs.

“(a) Kamenev, Zinoviev, and I first learned of the proposed plans of the Machine-Gun and other regiments at the joint meeting of the Bureaus (Executive Committees) on July 16. We took immediate steps to stop the soldiers from coming out. Zinoviev and Kamenev put themselves in touch with the Bolsheviks, and I with the ‘interward’ organisation (i.e. *Mezhrayontsi*) to which I belong.

“(b) When however, notwithstanding our efforts, the demonstration did take place, my comrade Bolsheviks and I made numerous speeches in front of the Tauride Palace, in which we came out in favour of the main slogan of the crowd: ‘All power to the Soviets’, but we, at the same time, called on those demonstrating, both the soldiers and civilians to return to their homes and barracks in a peaceful and orderly manner.

“(c) At a conference which took place at the Tauride Palace late in the night of July 16-17 between some Bolsheviks and ward organisations, I supported the motion of Kamenev that everything should be done to prevent a recurrence of the demonstration on July 17. When, however, it was learned from the agitators, who arrived from the different wards, that the regiments and factory workers had already decided to come out, and that it was impossible to hold back the crowd until the government crisis was over, all those present agreed that the best thing to do was to direct the demonstration along peaceful lines and to ask the masses to leave their guns at home.

“(d) In the course of the day of July 17, which I spent in the Tauride Palace, I and the Bolshevik comrades more than once urged this course on the crowd.

“3. *The fact that I am not connected with Pravda and am not a member of the Bolshevik Party is not due to political differences, but to certain circumstances in our party history which have now lost all significance.*

“4. The attempt of the newspapers to convey the impression that I have ‘nothing to do’ with the Bolsheviks has about as much truth in it as the report that I have asked the authorities to protect me from the ‘violence of the mob’, of the hundreds of *other false rumours of that same press.*

“5. From all that I have said, it is clear that you cannot logically exclude me from the warrant of arrest which you have made out for Lenin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev. There can also be no doubt in your minds that I am just as uncompromising a political opponent as the above-named comrades. Leaving me out merely emphasises the counter-revolutionary high-handedness that lies behind the attack on Lenin, Zinoviev and Kamenev.”[\[72\]](#)

The authorities obliged, and Trotsky was imprisoned in the Kresty fortress.

### **Lenin Changes His Mind**

Pondering the significance of these events from his hiding-place in the little village of Razliv on the Gulf of Finland, some 20 miles to the north-west of the capital, Lenin was in a sombre frame of mind. The events of July and its aftermath made a strong impression on him. To those who imagine that the Russian revolution of 1917 followed an automatic course to victory under the all-seeing leadership of a man who never once doubted its success, it would be a profitable exercise to examine the evolution of his thought at this time. It is not generally realised, but initially Lenin was inclined to over-estimate the advance of the counter-revolution and draw pessimistic conclusions. Basing himself on the memoirs of Shotman and Zinoviev, Alexander Rabinovitch, in his interesting book on the Bolshevik revolution, writes: “Shotman remembered that for a time Lenin exaggerated the scope and impact of the reaction and was pessimistic about the short-term prospects for revolution in Russia. There was no use talking further about a Constituent Assembly, Lenin felt, because the ‘victor’ would not convene it; the party ought therefore to marshal what strength it had left and go underground ‘seriously and for a long time’. The dismal reports that Shotman initially passed to Lenin in Razliv reinforced these convictions; it was several weeks before the news began to improve.

“Lenin’s pessimism in the wake of the July days is confirmed by Zinoviev. Writing in the late twenties, he recalled that at the time Lenin assumed that a longer and deeper period of reaction lay ahead than actually turned out to be the case.”[\[73\]](#)

Maria Sulimova, a Bolshevik staff worker with whom Lenin stayed on July 6, remarks that when she related the latest news to Lenin, the latter responded gloomily: “You, comrade Sulimova, they might arrest. But me, they will hang.” That this was playing on his mind was shown by a note he sent to Kamenev: “*Entre nous* [between you and me]: if they do me in, I ask you to publish my notebook, ‘Marxism and the State’.”[\[74\]](#)

The notebook referred to here is Lenin's celebrated *State and Revolution*, one of the most important and influential works of Marxist theory, which he wrote at this time. Lenin kept in close contact with the capital by letter, wrote many articles and proclamations and scoured the papers for news. But in a situation that was changing rapidly, by the day, sometimes by the hour, this was not sufficient to keep his hand on the pulse of the movement. The deep impression made by the July events induced him to advocate a change of tactics which led to yet another fierce controversy in the party.

On the basis of the July days, Lenin had drawn the conclusion that a peaceful outcome was now impossible, that civil war was inevitable, and that it was necessary for the party to place insurrection on the order of the day immediately. "All hopes for a peaceful development of the Russian revolution have vanished for good," he wrote. Lenin concluded that the July defeat had liquidated the regime of dual power. The soviets, under the leadership of the right wing, had, in effect, gone over to the side of the counter-revolution. It was therefore ruled out that they could be transformed and used to take power. That meant that the earlier perspective of a peaceful transformation was no longer possible. Therefore, he advocated abandoning the slogan "All power to the Soviets". Instead, the party should concentrate all its efforts on preparing an insurrection, basing itself on the factory committees:

"The slogan 'All Power to the Soviets!' was a slogan for peaceful development of the revolution which was possible in April, May, June, and up to July 5-9, i.e., up to the time when actual power passed into the hands of the military dictatorship. This slogan is no longer correct, for it does not take into account that power has changed hands and that the revolution has in fact been completely betrayed by the SRs and Mensheviks. Reckless actions, revolts, partial resistance, or hopeless hit-and-run attempts to oppose reaction will not help."[\[75\]](#)

That appraisal turned out to have been premature, and Lenin subsequently revised it. But it was understandable at the time. What was characteristic of Lenin was to be thinking of the next stage, and predicting the inevitability of an insurrection precisely at a time when the counter-revolution appeared to have triumphed all along the line. Lenin saw that the tide of counter-revolution would eventually ebb, and that the Bolsheviks must set themselves the goal of taking power. That was shown to be correct. But in another sense, Lenin was too pessimistic. The victory of the right wing in the soviets was not as decisive as he had thought. On the contrary, the growing polarisation and radicalisation of society would inevitably express itself in the soviets, as the main mass organisations of the working class. Of course, there is nothing magical about the soviets as such. True, they are particularly suited to expressing the aspirations and moods of the masses because of their extremely democratic and flexible form. But in a revolution, where the moods of the masses change with lightning speed, even such organisations as these lag behind, reflecting the situation of yesterday, not today. As early as April, Lenin warned against a fetishism of soviets. At the April Conference, he said: "The Soviets are important to us not as a form; to us it is important what classes they represent." It was not a question of participating in "soviet parliamentarism", of manoeuvring with the tops, but of finding a way to the workers that were looking to the soviets.

After July, the class balance of forces had been dramatically modified. The reformist leaders understood nothing. They resembled a man sawing off the branch upon which he was sitting. With every blow struck against the Bolsheviks, the confidence and aggressivity of the right increased. Inevitably, this was directed not only against the Bolsheviks but against the soviets themselves. Not only did the Mensheviks and SRs refuse to take power, but by their actions, the Soviet leaders were encouraging the counter-revolution, and, in Lenin's opinion, making future violence and civil war inevitable. In that sense, these were *counter-revolutionary* soviets, inasmuch as the right wing reformist leadership, leaning on the soviets, was actively assisting the bourgeoisie to re-establish its control of the state.

Later, Lenin wrote: "All the experience of both revolutions, that of 1905 and that of 1917, and all the decisions of the Bolshevik Party, all its political declarations for many years, may be reduced to the concept that the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies is a reality only as an organ of insurrection, as an organ of revolutionary power. Apart from this, the Soviets are a meaningless plaything that can only produce apathy, indifference and disillusion among the masses, who are legitimately disgusted at the endless repetition of resolutions and protests." [\[76\]](#)

Despite everything, the Bolsheviks recovered fairly quickly from the defeat of July. The victory of the counter-revolution proved to be far shallower and more ephemeral than Lenin had assumed. Surprisingly few left the party after July, despite the fact that the Bolsheviks had a rough time even in some of the factories where backward workers were influenced by the barrage of anti-Bolshevik propaganda. Within a few weeks, the party was beginning to recover its influence and grow. The reasons were rooted in the objective situation. Despite its temporary success, the provisional Government's policies were as unpopular as ever. The news from the front went from bad to worse. Kerensky's "patriotic" demagoguery cut no ice with the troops who wanted only to demobilise and go home. The attempts to restore discipline under such circumstances only made things worse. The soldiers also observed with growing alarm the re-emergence of counter-revolutionary elements in the officer corps. The tsarist officers had kept their heads down since February, but now started to re-group and assert themselves with ever greater confidence.

Against Lenin's prognosis, the soviets began to be more receptive to Bolshevik propaganda. This despite the fact that, up to August, the only two soviets in Petrograd where the Bolsheviks enjoyed strong influence were Kolpinsky and the workers' stronghold of the Vyborg district. All the other local Soviets in the capital supported the Mensheviks and SRs. Some of these took a belligerently anti-Bolshevik attitude after the July Days, passing resolutions condemning the organisers of the demonstration. But now the mood was beginning to change. The rank-and-file Menshevik and SR workers were becoming ever more critical of their leaders.

A contradictory process was unfolding: the reformist leaders in the All-Russian Executive Committee were pledging their unconditional support for Kerensky, while in the district soviets, suspicion towards the government was growing by the hour. This was

shown by the steady rise of the left current represented by the Menshevik Internationalists (Martov), the Inter-District Committee (the Mezhrayontsi) and the Bolsheviks. By mid-summer, in addition to Vyborg and Kolpinsky, Bolshevik resolutions were being passed in the Vasilevsky Island, Kolomensky and the First City District. Although formally they were still Mensheviks and SRs, the workers were more and more inclined to listen to the ideas of the only people who were prepared to speak what was on their minds—the Bolsheviks. “Nonetheless,” Alexander Rabinovitch points out, “with the possible exception of the Vyborg District Soviet, it appears that none of these soviets were controlled by the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks and SRs, more accurately their Menshevik Internationalist and Left SR offshoots, remained influential in most district soviets until the late fall of 1917.”[\[77\]](#)

### **Trotsky and the Bolshevik Party**

The events of 1917 were a defining moment for the revolutionary movement in Russia. Here, at last, all theories, programmes and individuals were put to the decisive test—the test of practice. Many did not survive the test. Even Lenin’s closest collaborators succumbed to the pressures of the moment and failed to live up to their historic responsibilities. This was not entirely due to their personal characteristics, although these play a role, and not an unimportant one. The idea that history can be reduced to the blind play of economic forces in which men and women are mere puppets of a pre-determined fate, like the characters in a Greek tragedy, has nothing in common with Marxism. Marx and Engels never denied the role of the individual in history, but merely explained that human beings are not entirely free agents, but are conditioned by the existing social reality, the constellation of class forces, the existing consciousness of the masses, the political trends, the prejudices, the illusions—all play a determining role, but, in the last analysis (and *only* in the last analysis) are themselves determined by the patterns of development of the means of production. Ultimately, the economic base is decisive, but the relationship between “base” (productive forces) and “superstructure” (state, politics, religion, philosophy, morality, etc.) is not direct and mechanical, but indirect and dialectical. There is plenty of scope for the actions of individuals to make a difference—even a decisive difference to the course of history, as the Russian revolution undoubtedly proves.

Marx once observed that theory becomes a material force when it grips the minds of the masses. A correct theory is one that anticipates more or less accurately the main course of events. Armed with such a theory, it should be possible to work out a perspective which makes clear in advance the general line of development even before the facts to support it are available to us. This should enable a revolutionary tendency to orient its forces correctly, and to anticipate the real tendencies before they come into existence. Anyone who studies the polemics in the Russian Social Democracy in the decade or so before 1917 cannot fail to be struck by the superiority of one theory which, with astonishing accuracy, predicted what really occurred in 1917—Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. By contrast, the theory of the “bourgeois-democratic stage” advanced by the Mensheviks immediately revealed its counter-revolutionary nature after February, when it was used to justify the Mensheviks’ and SRs’ support for the bourgeois Provisional

Government, while Lenin's formulation of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" served as an excuse for Kamenev and Stalin to capitulate to the Mensheviks and abandon the socialist revolution for bourgeois democracy.

In the course of 1917, the differences that had separated Lenin from Trotsky vanished, as if they had never existed. There grew up between the two men a real sense of solidarity and a closeness that was to last until Lenin's death. At the beginning of October, in a document addressed to a Conference of Bolsheviks of Petrograd which was considering the list of candidates for the Constituent Assembly, Lenin supported Trotsky's inclusion in the list, writing that "no one would contest the candidature of, say, Trotsky, for, first, upon his arrival, Trotsky at once took up an internationalist stand; second, he worked among the *mezhrayontsi* for a merger [with the Bolsheviks]; third, in the difficult July days he proved himself equal to the task and a loyal supporter of the party of the revolutionary proletariat."[\[78\]](#)

In his memoirs, Raskolnikov wrote: "Trotsky's attitude to Vladimir Ilyich (Lenin) was one of enormous esteem. He placed him higher than any contemporary he had met with, either in Russia or abroad. In the tone in which Trotsky spoke of Lenin you felt the devotion of a disciple. In those times Lenin had behind him 30 years' service to the proletariat, and Trotsky 20. The echoes of their disagreements during the pre-war period were completely gone. No difference existed between the tactical line of Lenin and Trotsky. Their rapprochement, already noticeable during the war, was completely and unquestionably determined, from the moment of the return of Lyeve Davidovich (Trotsky) to Russia. After his very first speeches all of us old Leninists felt that he was ours."[\[79\]](#)

As soon as he had officially joined the party, at the Sixth Congress, Trotsky was elected to the Central Committee. Trotsky's enormous popularity with the Bolshevik workers, and his rapid advance, was resented by the "Old Bolsheviks" who showed their irritation by opposing Lenin's proposal to include him on the editorial board of *Pravda*, a decision which was reversed in September when he was elected to the editorial board. As Lenin states in the document quoted above (which, incidentally, was not published in the USSR until 1962), Trotsky did not enter the Bolshevik Party alone, but with an important group, the *Mezhrayntsy*, or Inter-District Group. In point of fact, in agreement with Lenin, he delayed joining the Bolshevik Party in order to win over this group, which finally joined the Bolsheviks after the July days. At the Sixth Congress, where the *Mezhrayontsi* joined the Bolshevik Party, and Trotsky was elected to the Central Committee, his was one of the four names (with Lenin, Kamenev and Zinoviev) which was announced as having polled the highest number of votes (131 out of 134).

The only reason why Trotsky delayed joining formally the Bolsheviks after his return was that, with Lenin's full agreement, he was working to win over the *Mezhrayontsi* group. The "*Mezhdurayonny komitet*", or "*Mezhrayonka*" as it was popularly known means the "Inter-District Committee". This was not a new organisation, as we have already seen. It was formed in 1913, and kept up its revolutionary activity throughout the war. Its membership was made up mainly of revolutionaries who, for different reasons, did not feel inclined to join Lenin's party. There were left Menshevik Internationalists,

Vperyodists, Bolshevik Conciliators, supporters of Trotsky and individual leftists, many of them very talented people who later played an important part in the revolution and occupied leading positions in the Soviet government. Such men were Lunacharsky, the first People's Commissar for Education and Culture, Adolf Joffe, the Soviet diplomat who later committed suicide in protest at Stalin's usurpation of power, Volodarsky and Uritsky, two important Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd, who are not better known because they were assassinated early on by Left SR terrorists, Ryazanov, the well-known writer, Pokrovsky, the historian, Manuilsky, Yurenev and many others. In February 1917 they were a significant force with 4,000 members in Petrograd.<sup>[A]</sup> Their addition to the party was an important development, as Lenin later acknowledged.

From the moment of Trotsky's return in May, as soon as he saw the fundamental identity of views, Lenin saw the possibility of a partnership that would bear important fruit. The two men held discussions, in which it was decided that Trotsky should delay joining the Bolsheviks until he had first won over the Mezhrayontsi. This was no easy task, in view of all the past frictions and suspicions. Later, in his evidence before the Dewey Commission, Trotsky explained the circumstances:

“Trotsky: I was working together with the Bolshevik Party. There was a group in Petrograd which was the same, programmatically, as the Bolshevik Party, but organisationally independent. I consulted Lenin about whether it would be good that I enter the Bolshevik Party immediately, or whether it would be better that I enter with this good workers' organisation which had three or four revolutionary workers.

“Goldman: Three or four?

“Trotsky: Three or four thousand revolutionary workers. We agreed that it would be better to prepare for a merger of the two organisations at the Communist Party Congress. Formally, I remained in that organisation and not in the Bolshevik Party, until August, 1917. But the activity was absolutely identical. This was done only to prepare for a merger on a larger scale.”<sup>[80]</sup>

On May 10, as if to underline the importance he attached to this question, Lenin himself attended a meeting of the Mezhrayontsi and took the extraordinary step of offering them a seat on the editorial board of *Pravda* and on the organisation committee of the forthcoming party congress.<sup>[81]</sup> In connection with this, he wrote: “In compliance with the decision of the All-Russia Conference, the Central Committee of our Party, recognising the extreme desirability of union with the Inter-District Organisation, advanced the following proposals (they were first made to the Inter-District Organisation only in the name of comrade Lenin and a few other members of the Central Committee, but were subsequently approved by the majority of the members of the Central Committee):

“‘Unity is desirable immediately’.

“‘The Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party will be asked to include a representative of the Inter-District Organisation on the staff of each of the two papers (the present Pravda, which is to be converted into an All-Russia *popular* newspaper, and the Central Organ to be established in the near future)’.

“‘The Central Committee will be asked to set up a special Organising Committee to summon a Party Congress (in six weeks’ time). The Inter-District Conference will be entitled to appoint two delegates to this committee. If the Mensheviks, adherents of Martov, break with the ‘defencists’, it would be desirable and essential to include their delegates on the above-mentioned committee’.

“‘Free discussion of controversial issues shall be ensured by the publication of discussion leaflets by Priboi Publishers and by free discussion in the journal Prosveshcheniye (Kommunist), publication of which is being resumed’.”[\[82\]](#)

Lenin’s anxiety to win over the Mezhrayontsi was not at all accidental. The experience of the past few weeks since the February overturn had convinced him of the need for a radical renewal of the Bolshevik Party from top to bottom. He needed allies on the left who would act as a counterbalance to the conservatism of the “Old Bolsheviks”. His main hope lay in the rank-and-file Bolshevik workers and, especially, the influx of fresh new elements from the youth, the factories and the barracks. But that was insufficient. He needed experienced people, theoreticians, propagandists, writers who would play a role in shaking up the leadership, fighting routine and imprinting a clearly revolutionary line on the party’s activity.

The Mezhrayontsi responded to Lenin’s initial overtures with a certain reserve. Not until the summer was the ground sufficiently prepared for the Mezhrayontsi to join the Bolsheviks, which they finally did at the Sixth Congress. However, even before they formally merged, the two organisations worked closely together. On the All-Russian Congress of Soviets held in the beginning of June, which was solidly dominated by the Mensheviks and SRs, the celebrated English historian of the Russian revolution, E.H. Carr, writes: “Trotsky and Lunacharsky were among the ten delegates of the ‘united social democrats’ who solidly supported the Bolsheviks throughout the three weeks of the congress.”[\[83\]](#)

In order to speed up the accession of the Mezhrayontsi to the Bolshevik Party, which was opposed by some of the Mezhrayontsi leadership, Trotsky wrote in *Pravda* the following statement: “There are in my opinion at the present moment [i.e. July] no differences either in principle or in tactics between the Inter-District and the Bolshevik organisation. Accordingly there are no motives which justify the separate existence of these organisations.”[\[84\]](#)

Following in the time-honoured tradition of Stalinist falsification, the *Istoriya KPSS* dishonestly describes it as a group which “vacillated between Menshevism and Bolshevism” but adds, without explanation, that “in the summer of 1917, it entered the ranks of the Bolshevik Party”.[\[85\]](#) Two years after the revolution, Lenin, wrote that in

1917 “Bolshevism drew to itself all the best elements in the currents of socialist thought that were closest to it”. To whom do these lines refer? The only other possibility would be the Left Menshevik group of Larin, which applied to join the Bolsheviks about the same time as the Mezhrayontsi. But Lenin’s attitude to this group was well known to be highly critical. In the same speech to the October 8 Conference, Lenin indignantly rejected the proposal to elect Larin as a Bolshevik candidate to the Constituent Assembly, describing it as “especially scandalous”.[\[86\]](#)

This reference can only be to Trotsky and the Mezhrayontsi. The fact that no real political differences existed between the Bolsheviks and the Mezhrayontsi was shown by the fact that, when they joined the party, it was decided that the period of their membership of the Inter-District Committee should be regarded for purposes of seniority as equivalent to the same period spent in the Bolshevik Party. This indicated that the political line of the two organisations had been essentially the same, a point that was underlined in a note to the *Collected Works* of Lenin published during his lifetime which stated: “On the war question, the Mezhrayontsi occupied an internationalist position, and in their tactics were close to the Bolsheviks.”

## NOTES

[A] Some authors give a lower estimate, probably basing themselves on Shlyapnikov. However, Shlyapnikov’s estimate is suspect, since he displays a resentful attitude to the Mezhrayontsi, presumably because of their reluctance to join the Bolsheviks before the February revolution. The figure of about 4,000 mentioned by Trotsky in the *History*, is confirmed both by E.H. Carr in *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 102 and in a note to Lenin’s *Collected Works*, vol. 24, p. 601.

[60] LCW, *An Alliance to Stop the Revolution*, vol. 25, p. 53.

[61] Trotsky, *The Russian Revolution*, in *The Essential Trotsky*, pp. 35-6 and 37.

[62] See Rabinovitch, op. cit., pp. 117-8 and 121-2.

[63] Quoted in Figes, op. cit., p. 424.

[64] Ibid., pp. 38-9 and 431.

[65] Ibid., p. 433.

[66] LCW, *To the Bureau of the Central Executive Committee*, vol. 43, p. 636.

[67] Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, p. 366.

[68] A. Rabinovitch, op. cit., p. 34 in both quotes.

[69] Ibid., p. 41.

[70] Ibid., p. 36.

[71] Ibid., p. 45.

[72] Reprinted in *The Age of the Permanent Revolution*, pp. 98-9 (my emphasis).

[73] Rabinovitch, op. cit., p. 37.

[74] LCW, *Note to L.B. Kamenev*, vol. 36, p. 454.

[75] LCW, *The Political Situation*, vol. 25, pp. 177-8.

[76] LCW, *Theses for a Report at the October 8 Conference of the Petrograd Organisation*, vol. 26, p. 143.

[77] Rabinowich, op. cit., p. 77.

[78] LCW, *From the Theses for a Report at the October 8 Conference of the St Petersburg Organisation*, vol. 41, p. 447.

[79] Quoted in Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 814.

[80] *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, p. 21.

[81] See E.H. Carr, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 99.

[82] LCW, *The Question of Uniting the Internationalists, May 31 (18), 1917*, vol. 24, pp. 431-2.

[83] E.H. Carr, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 89.

[84] Quoted in Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 811.

[85] *Istoriya KPSS*, vol. 2, pp. 657-8, note.

[86] See LCW, *From the Thesis for a Report at the October 8 Conference of the St Petersburg Organisation*, vol. 41, p. 447.

## **Part Six: The Year of Revolution**

[section 6 of 7]

### **The Kornilov Rebellion**

Slowly at first, but then with ever greater energy, the Bolsheviks were also regrouping. Under the indefatigable leadership of Yakov Sverdlov, a capable and cool-headed organiser from the Urals, things were quickly pulled together in Petrograd. The repression had not succeeded in destroying the party. This was no accident. The counter-revolution was still feeling its way. It was obliged to camouflage its actions by speaking in the name of the revolution and the Soviets. Even the troops who put down the July demonstration did so in the name of defending the Soviet. A drastic clamp-down would have caused problems, although that is what Kerensky wanted. They were obliged to proceed with caution. Even the trials of the “German agents” had to be postponed, in part for the complete lack of any real evidence. Conditions were still difficult, of course. The loss of offices and records temporarily disorganised the work: “We lost just about everything—our documents, accounts, quarter, literally everything!” a member of the Executive Committee complained. The suppression of *Pravda* was a serious blow, and the party was reduced to turning out leaflets on a dilapidated hand press left over from the tsarist period. Only in early August were the Bolsheviks able to resume publication of a regular organ. However, morale was quickly recovering. Sverdlov was able to telegraph party organisations in the provinces that “the mood in Piter [the colloquial name for Petrograd] is hale and hearty. We are keeping our heads. The organisation is not destroyed”.[\[87\]](#)

The Bolshevik leadership met on July 13-14 to consider the change of tactics proposed by Lenin, which was badly received. Out of 15 party leaders in attendance, ten voted against. The resolution finally adopted by the Central Committee made no reference either to the end of the period of peaceful development of the revolution or to the need to prepare for an armed uprising. When Lenin found this out the next day, he was thoroughly alarmed. What did this foot-dragging mean? In his article *On Slogans*, he tackled head-on the tendency of his comrades to postpone revolutionary action and make concessions to the reformists. The situation had experienced a sharp turn after the July Days. The reaction was now in the saddle: “Primarily, and above all, the people must know the *truth*—they must know who actually wields state power. The people must be told the whole truth, namely, that power is in the hands of a military clique of Cavaignacs[\[A\]](#) (Kerensky, certain generals, officers, etc.), who are supported by the bourgeois class headed by the Cadet Party, and by all the monarchists, acting through the Black Hundred papers, *Novoye Vremya*, *Zhivoye Slovo*, etc., etc.”

These words proved to be prophetic. The Cavaignacs of the officer caste were indeed preparing a counter-stroke. It was necessary to prepare the party and warn the masses of the impending conflict. And the Soviets? Lenin wrote: “Soviets may appear in this new revolution, and indeed are bound to, but *not* the present Soviets, not organs collaborating with the bourgeoisie, but organs of revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is true that even then we shall be in favour of building the whole state on the model of the Soviets. It is not a question of Soviets in general, but of combating the *present* counter-revolution and the treachery of the *present* Soviets.”[\[88\]](#)

At the Second City Conference, Volodarsky, who had come over with the Mezhrayontsi and played a prominent role in the Bolshevik organisation in Petrograd until his

assassination by a Left SR terrorist in 1918, expressed the views of many of those present when he said: "People who claim the counter-revolution is victorious are making judgements about the masses on the basis of their leaders. While the [top Menshevik and SR] leaders are shifting rightwards, the masses are moving leftwards. Kerensky, Tsereteli and Avksentiev are caliphs for one hour. ...The petty bourgeoisie will swing to our side. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' is not obsolete." Another delegate, Veinberg, added: "The present government won't be able to do a thing about the economic crisis; the soviets and political parties will swing leftward. The majority of the democracy is grouped around the soviets and so rejecting the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' can have very harmful consequences."[\[89\]](#)

As a matter of fact, Lenin was mistaken. Lenin, who was in hiding, later admitted that he was out of touch with the situation. Subsequent developments showed that the Bolsheviks could still win a majority in the soviets and defeat the right wing reformist leaders, and it was precisely this that guaranteed the success of the October revolution. Now this seems so obvious that further comment is superfluous. Yet there was nothing automatic about it. Throughout the summer, it was touch and go, and Lenin's worries were by no means without foundation.

The decisive turning-point was precisely the moment when it seemed that the Bolsheviks had suffered a decisive defeat and initiative had passed to the counter-revolution. Throughout the summer of 1917, the pendulum continued to swing towards the right. On July 18, general Brussilov was replaced by general Lavr Kornilov, an adventurer who, unlike most other members of the officer caste, was not an aristocrat but the son of a Cossack smallholder. Personally brave, Kornilov was also a maverick with a habit of disobeying orders. Narrow in outlook and politically illiterate, he had the soldier's solution to all problems. There was nothing wrong with Russia that could not be solved by a whiff of grapeshot and the crack of an officer's whip. Of him it was remarked that he had "the heart of a lion, and the brain of a sheep".

Echoing the central demand of the counter-revolution, Kornilov insisted on the re-introduction of the death penalty at the front, where, in practice, he had already introduced it by ordering deserters to be shot. As a condition for accepting the Supreme Command, Kornilov dictated terms to Kerensky. In addition to the death penalty, he demanded the prohibition of meetings at the front, the disbanding of revolutionary regiments and an end to the powers of soldiers' committees. Later, these demands were broadened to include the restoration of the death penalty for civilians, the imposition of martial law and the banning of strikes in defence industries and the railways, on pain of capital punishment. This was a finished programme for a counter-revolutionary dictatorship.

For his part, Kerensky did not disagree with any of this, except maybe the timing. His main disagreement with Kornilov was that there could only be one Bonaparte, and Kerensky was determined to reserve that role for himself. However, personal rivalries did not prevent Kerensky from entering into contact with Kornilov and participating in the plot. This has led historians like Orlando Figes to assume that Kornilov never intended to

overthrow Kerensky and install himself as dictator, but only to save the Provisional Government from the Bolsheviks. But Figes' own researches contradict this argument. He writes: "None of which is to deny that many of Kornilov's supporters were urging him to do away with the Provisional Government altogether. The Union of Officers, for example, laid plans for a military coup d'état, while a 'conference of public men' in mid-August, made up mostly of Cadets and right-wing businessmen, clearly encouraged Kornilov in that direction. At the centre of these rightist circles was Vasilii Zavoiko, a rather shady figure—property speculator, industrial financier, journalist and political intriguer—who, according to General Martynov, acted as Kornilov's 'personal guide, one might even say his mentor, on all state matters'. Zavoiko's plans for a coup d'état were so well known that even Whitehall had heard of them: as early as 8 August the Foreign Ministry in London told Buchanan, its Ambassador in Petrograd, that according to its military sources, Zavoiko was plotting the overthrow of the Provisional Government. Nor is it to deny that Kornilov himself had his own ambitions in the political field—the cult of Kornilov, which he helped to generate, was a clear manifestation of this—and he must have been tempted by the constant urgings of his supporters, like Zavoiko, to exploit his enormous popularity in order to install himself as dictator."[\[90\]](#)

Figes bases himself on the fact that Kornilov, while his army was advancing on Petrograd, loudly proclaimed that he was doing so in order to "save" the government from a "Bolshevik coup" which was rumoured to be planned for the end of August. This "coup" was an invention, and had obviously been cooked up as a justification for Kornilov's action in ordering general Krymov to advance on Petrograd. That is a pathetic line of argument. One does not have to be a genius to see that Kornilov was only using the well-known tactic of disguising an offensive action as a defensive one. Pretending to "save" the existing government, he would place the latter at his mercy and then brush it to one side and install himself as dictator. This scenario is not even original. It is the well-worn path trodden by every would-be Bonapartist, from Napoleon onwards.

Kerensky, the other aspiring Bonaparte, attempted to do a deal with Kornilov through his emissary, the Octobrist Duma deputy V.N. Lvov. But Kornilov told Lvov that he was demanding dictatorial powers for himself. There was no room for a second Bonaparte! Only at this point did Kerensky denounce Kornilov's "counter-revolutionary conspiracy" to the cabinet. Kornilov was ordered to withdraw his troops. If indeed he was only acting to save the Provisional Government, then it is not clear why he did not take orders from it and retire to barracks. Instead, he announced his intention to "save Russia" from a government which was now under the control of the Bolsheviks!

On 25 August General Kornilov began his advance on Petrograd. This was a sudden and sharp turn in events, which is one of the main characteristics of a revolutionary period. And here we see the importance of tactics, which by their very nature must be flexible, such that a revolutionary party can change course within a question of days or even hours, if necessary. The question was posed point-blank: what attitude should the Bolsheviks take in the conflict between Kerensky and Kornilov? Despite the counter-revolutionary and repressive policy of the Provisional Government, it was necessary to join in the struggle against the open forces of reaction represented by Kornilov. This was

understood instinctively by the workers, including the Bolshevik workers of the Vyborg district who were the first to rush to the defence of Petrograd.

Alarmed by this turn in events, the reformist leaders in the Soviet Executive were compelled to issue a call to the workers to defend the revolution. The Bolsheviks were invited to participate in the Committee for Struggle Against the Counter-Revolution. Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky, were released from prison, where they had languished after the July days. Immediately, the Bolsheviks accepted the offer of a united front, and energetically set about combating the counter-revolution. However, the Bolshevik policy in no sense signified support for the provisional government. As Lenin explained:

“*Even now* we must not support Kerensky’s government. This is unprincipled. We may be asked: aren’t we going to fight against Kornilov? Of course we must! But this is not the same thing; there is a dividing line here, which is being stepped over by some Bolsheviks who fall into compromise and allow themselves to be *carried away* by the course of events.

“We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, *just as* Kerensky’s *troops do*, but we do not support Kerensky. *On the contrary*, we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten.”[\[91\]](#)

Lenin stated that the Bolsheviks would use Kerensky as a “gun-rest” to fight against Kornilov, and then, when they were strong enough, they would deal with Kerensky: “We are changing the *form* of our struggle against Kerensky. Without in the least relaxing our hostility towards him, without taking back a single word said against him, without renouncing the task of overthrowing him, we say that we must *take into account* the present situation. We shall not overthrow Kerensky right now. We shall approach the task of fighting against him *in a different way*, namely, we shall point out to the people (who are fighting against Kornilov) Kerensky’s *weakness* and *vacillation*. That has been done in the past *as well*. Now, however, it has become the *all-important* thing and this constitutes the change.”[\[92\]](#)

This is the essence of Lenin’s tactic throughout 1917: not to attack the reformist leaders directly, but to outflank them, to attack the main enemy, the landlords and capitalists and the reaction, and *to show in practice that the reformists were incapable of fighting reaction, incapable of acting decisively in the interests of the workers and peasants*.

Here was a classic example of the Leninist policy of the united front in action. The Bolsheviks threw themselves energetically into struggle alongside the Menshevik and SR rank-and-file workers and soldiers who had earlier believed the slanders about “German agents”. They proved in action that they were the best fighters against the counter-revolution, and thereby laid the basis for winning over the mass of workers and soldiers who had hitherto backed the reformist leaders.

There can be no doubt that the participation of the Bolsheviks was decisive in defeating Kornilov. Even the anti-Bolshevik Figs admits that: “The Committee of Struggle represented a united front of the whole Soviet movement. But it was effectively dependent on the military organisation of the Bolsheviks, without which, in the words of Sukhanov, it ‘could only have passed the time with appeals and idle speeches by orators who had lost their authority’. Only the Bolsheviks had the ability to mobilise and arm the mass of the workers and soldiers, and they now worked in close collaboration with their rivals in the Soviets.”[\[93\]](#)

Utilising revolutionary methods, the Bolsheviks mobilised the workers against the Kornilovites. On paper, the latter represented a formidable force. Their shock troops were the so-called Savage Division, recruited from warlike mountain tribes in the North Caucasus. But the movement of the reactionary troops under general Krymov’s soon ground to a halt. The railway workers sabotaged the trains, which were driven off course and into sidings, as the points were switched by an invisible hand. Once the advance was halted, the rebel troops were engaged by Bolshevik agitators, who even persuaded the Cossacks not to fight. The Savage Division was addressed in their own language by a delegation of Caucasian Muslims who happened to be at a Soviet congress in Petrograd at the time of the mutiny. Soon the rebel officers had been arrested by their own men. Krymov shot himself. The Kornilov revolt collapsed, like a wave breaking over a rock.

Marx once wrote that the revolution needs the whip of the counter-revolution, and that was shown to be true. What was intended to be the decisive move of the counter-revolution was turned into its opposite. The defeat of Kornilov gave a powerful impulse to the revolution. Everywhere the soldiers turned against their officers. Many were arrested by their own men. The most unpopular ones were shot. The soldiers’ assemblies voted for the immediate signing of peace, and the transfer of power to the Soviets. They also voted with their feet. Whole units disbanded, as the peasant soldiers returned to their villages. The arrival of so many radicalised elements from the front in turn acted as a stimulus to the peasant revolt that flared up in September. The revolution had entered its decisive phase.

### **The Struggle for the Masses**

The decisive arena of struggle, without doubt, was the Soviets. From the moment of Lenin’s return, the Bolshevik Party was firmly oriented to the goal of the conquest of power. But the prior condition for this was the winning over of a decisive majority of the working class. This meant winning a majority in those organisations that commanded the allegiance of the mass of workers and soldiers—the soviets. But a serious obstacle was the domination of the soviets by the reformist leaders, the Mensheviks and SRs. From February until the summer, the majority was firmly in the hands of the Mensheviks and SRs who favoured a coalition with the bourgeois liberals, although they were obliged to cover their rear-end by using the old formula of supporting the Provisional Government “insofar as” it did this or that. This was to silence criticisms from the workers in the soviets who were naturally suspicious of the bourgeois government. But they trusted their leaders and would not automatically abandon them, even though they did not agree with

some of their policies. The Bolsheviks were initially at a great disadvantage. Their weakness in the Soviets immediately after February is even greater than the figures suggest. In some Soviets they had a disproportionately large representation because they did deals with the Mensheviks to present joint lists of candidates. Thus, in Saratov, the Bolsheviks got three out of five members of the Soviet presidium, when they only had 28 out of 248 deputies in the plenum.[\[94\]](#)

From the spring onwards, the Bolsheviks waged an energetic campaign for new elections to the Soviets. In the course of a revolution the masses learn rapidly from their own experience. The soviets, it is true, are a much more faithful reflection of the changing moods and consciousness of the masses than the cumbersome machinery of even the most democratic parliament. But even the Soviets lagged behind the swiftly changing situation, and more often than not reflected the yesterday rather than the today of the masses' ideas and aspirations. The Bolsheviks were always much stronger in the factory committees because these were much closer to the rank-and-file workers and thus reflected more quickly the real mood at the bottom.

Between August and September, the composition of the soviets experienced a dramatic transformation. Here again the Kornilov affair marks the decisive turning point. The threat of counter-revolution spurred the Soviets to demand decisive action, and the Bolshevik slogans of a break with the bourgeoisie and "all power to the soviets" began to take root. The Soviet Executive Committee was inundated with telegrams demanding that it take the power. Although the process was somewhat uneven, the general tendency was clearly towards the Bolsheviks from this time onwards. The Soviet Executive still clung to its discredited policy of support for the Provisional Government, but only by a wafer-thin majority—there were 86 delegates in favour of soviet power, and only 97 against. But the situation was changing by the day, almost by the hour.

A decisive turning-point occurred in the first week of September when control of the Petrograd Soviet passed into the hands of the Bolsheviks. The balance of forces was revealed when a resolution demanding the formation of a government of workers and peasants proposed by the Bolsheviks received 229 votes, with 115 against and 51 abstentions, which revealed that many of the Menshevik and SR workers had voted for the Bolsheviks. As a result, the stunned reformist leadership announced their resignation. Panicking at the loss of this key position, the reformists immediately commenced a furious campaign in the pages of *Izvestiya*, alleging, as usual in such cases, that the meeting had been unrepresentative and calling on all delegates to turn up to the next meeting to overturn the vote.[\[95\]](#)

The session of September 9 was a heated one. Everyone was aware of the vital importance of the outcome. All the factions ensured that they were represented down to the last delegate. There were about 1,000 delegates present. Fearing that they could not get a majority on their own to oust the presidium, the Bolshevik delegation proposed that the voting be on a proportional basis. Lenin condemned this procedural move, which he feared might blunt the edge of the Bolsheviks' case. The issue was the question of workers' power, and no amount of constitutional wrangling should be allowed to obscure

this. But Lenin need not have worried. The issues were sufficiently clear to all, and the procedural proposal had the advantage that it helped win over the wavering elements, namely Martov's group and even the more right wing Popular Socialists. In any case, the chairman Tsereteli ruled the compromise out of order. But the right wing had miscalculated. By ruling out a compromise and obliging the delegates to vote on a straight resolution, moved by the reformists, that the previous vote on 1 September did not correspond to the line of the Soviet, and reaffirming support for the old presidium, they forced the Bolsheviks to pick up the gauntlet and polarised the whole meeting. It was a question of "either...or".

The leading speaker for the Bolsheviks was Trotsky, in his first public appearance since his release from prison. He was warmly applauded by part of the hall, before launching a blistering attack on the presidium. Was Kerensky still a member of the presidium, yes or no? The question immediately put the presidium on a wrong footing. After a moment's hesitation, the answer was given in the affirmative. This was exploited to the full by Trotsky: "We had firmly believed that Kerensky would not be allowed to sit in the presidium. We were mistaken. The ghost of Kerensky now sits between Dan and Cheidze... When they propose to you to sanction the political line of the presidium, do not forget that you will be sanctioning the policies of Kerensky."<sup>[96]</sup> Even at this stage, the Bolsheviks directed their fire, not so much at the reformists, but always at the bourgeois and Kerensky, who was now completely identified with the bourgeois. By such skilful propaganda, they succeeded in winning over workers who had up till recently stood solidly behind the Mensheviks and SRs. By concentrating their attacks on the class enemy, they systematically exposed the class collaborationist policies of the reformists, their cowardice, their unwillingness to confront the enemies of the workers and peasants, and thereby drove a wedge between the reformists and their supporters.

The result of the vote could not be clearer: for the Coalition, 414 votes; against, 519; abstentions, 67. This victory for the Bolsheviks was even more resounding for the fact that the reformists had spared no efforts to pack the meeting with their supporters and had themselves insisted in turning the vote into a referendum on the issue: The Coalition or Soviet Power? Reformism or Bolshevism? The defeat was a body-blow to the right wing. They had invested so much in winning this meeting that the loss of the vote seemed to deflate them utterly. On the other hand, the left wing was encouraged and pressed home its advantage. On September 11, when Dan defended the Coalition against Trotsky who spoke for a Soviet government in the Petrograd Soviet, the Coalition was rejected with only ten votes cast for, and seven abstentions. The battle in Petrograd had been decisively won.

The tide was now flowing strongly in favour of the Bolsheviks everywhere. On September 5, the Congress of Soviets of Central Siberia solidly backed the Bolsheviks. Moscow soon followed suit, with the Bolsheviks winning the majority not only in the Soviet, but in the soldiers' committee that existed separately from it. In the elections to the Moscow Workers' Soviet Executive Committee held on September 19, the Bolsheviks won 32 seats, the Mensheviks, 16. Nogin was elected President. On October 5, the Bolsheviks presented a resolution on the current situation to a session of the

Workers' and Soldiers' Soviet and the result was 335 votes for and 254 against. But in the Executive of the Soldiers' Soviet the situation was different. Here the Bolsheviks remained in a minority, with 16 seats, as against 26 for the SRs and nine Mensheviks—a situation that lasted right up to the October insurrection. For this reason in the general meetings of both executives, the rival factions were evenly balanced, and the Bolsheviks were sometimes in a minority, although they usually managed to get their resolutions passed. On the other hand, in the Moscow region as a whole, the Bolsheviks had won the majority as far back as May.[\[97\]](#)

The Bolsheviks also had a strong position in the northern territories around Petrograd. In the Kronstadt Soviet, the Bolsheviks had 100 delegates, the Left SRs 75, the Menshevik Internationalists 12, the anarchists seven. The rest (90) were independents. The Bolsheviks got the majority in Finland—especially in Helsingfors and Vyborg, where the power of the provisional Government was already eliminated in September. In Estonia too the left won outright. The big majority in September in Reval, Dorpat and Wenden were Bolsheviks and Left SRs. In the regional committee elected in October there were six Bolsheviks, four Left SRs, one Menshevik Internationalist, and one right Menshevik. The organisation of the Baltic Fleet—Centrobalt—broke off all relations with the Provisional Government and began to run its own affairs. The Fifth Legion, which was considered to be the finest of the front-line regiments, in mid-October voted in a new committee with a majority of Bolsheviks. Thus, not only Petrograd but all the surrounding regions were firmly with the Bolsheviks.

Historically, the struggle to win influence in the trade unions, the basic unit of working-class organisation, always occupied a central place in the strategy and tactics of Bolshevism. However, in the Russian revolution, while the fight for control of the unions continued unabated, it was pushed into second place by the parallel struggle in the soviets and factory committees. There were a number of reasons for this. In tsarist Russia, the trade unions eked out a precarious existence under an autocratic regime that frequently subjected them to arrests and all kinds of prohibitions that severely restricted their freedom to act. Thus, in 1917, the unions were in a relatively weak state, embracing only a small minority of workers, mostly in the more skilled and better paid layers of the class. The mass of unorganised workers who poured onto the stage after February organised themselves spontaneously in the soviets and factory committees that were more flexible and more representative than the unions, which more often than not were dominated by conservative elements who naturally gravitated to the Mensheviks, rather than the revolutionary wing.

“Amongst the first institutions to rally to the Bolsheviks,” writes Lionel Kochan, “were the factory committees. By June-July the Petrograd committees were already under Bolshevik control; and at the third All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees (17-22 October) more than half the 167 voting delegates were Bolsheviks who also enjoyed the support of the 24 Socialist-Revolutionary delegates. The opposition consisted only of seven Mensheviks and 13 Anarcho-Syndicalists. This was indeed, as Trotsky proudly claimed, ‘the most direct and indubitable representation of the proletariat in the whole country’.”[\[98\]](#)

The work in the soviets and factory committees, of course, did not mean that the Bolsheviks neglected the unions. On the contrary. Throughout 1917, the trade unions were a field of constant struggle between the revolutionary tendency and the reformist leaders. The advance of the Bolsheviks was more rapid in the metal workers of Petrograd, where they soon won a predominant influence. Workers were recruited en masse at factory meetings where all the main decisions were taken by an open show of hands. Here too, the fresh new layers immediately gravitated to the revolutionary wing. It was this very layer that transformed the internal situation of the Bolshevik Party itself. Already in April, all but four executives of the metal workers' union in Petrograd were in the hands of the Bolsheviks. By June, the Petrograd organisation had a "fully formed apparatus" of over a hundred strong, paid for out of union funds. From Petrograd, the party's influence in the unions spread out to other areas. By May the metal workers' union had 54,000 members, and by August, 138,000.<sup>[99]</sup> Given that the total workforce employed in the metal industry stood at 546,100 in January 1917, this represented a sizeable proportion of a key section of the proletariat. By the end of the year, the unions claimed a membership of 544,527 members in 236 organisations.

The picture in the textile union, the second most important group, was more mixed. In June, the union claimed a total membership of 240,000 members, and may have reached 400,000 by October. This was half the total employed in the industry. A large part of the workforce were women, and the textile industry was badly affected by unemployment, so there was at first a tendency to look to the union for solutions to pressing socio-economic problems rather than revolutionary politics. This might explain why the Mensheviks and SRs dominated the union (except in Petrograd, where the Bolsheviks had had a small group before the February revolution, and rapidly became the dominant force) in the period after February. But the Bolsheviks, once again using their base in Petrograd as a launching-pad, set out to conquer one area after another, beginning with the important Central Industrial Area. In June they called a regional conference where a number of Bolshevik-inspired resolutions were passed, demanding, among other things, workers' control of industry. The Menshevik leaders, in a manner common to all trade union bureaucracies when they are on the losing end, claimed that the conference was "irregular". But in fact, it merely reflected a general swing to the left among the workers who were beginning to break free of the influence of the reformist leaders. The changing mood was reflected by the fact that the conference elected a new executive committee in which the Bolsheviks held positions of influence. Thus, step by step, the persistent and systematic work of the revolutionary tendency was wresting one position after another from the Mensheviks and SRs. By August, the Bolsheviks had managed to gain a strong position in the main industrial unions. Anweiler expresses the growth of the Bolsheviks in the unions thus:

"While the Bolsheviks at the All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions (June 1917) only had the support of 36.4 per cent of the delegates, out of a total of 117 delegates in the Democratic Conference in September, 58 per cent were Bolsheviks, as against 38.4 per cent Mensheviks and right SRs."

Even in the traditionally conservative white-collar and craft unions, there had been a change in outlook and the Bolsheviks, though still in a minority, had won a sizeable following. However, in the upper reaches of the unions, things were different. The slow-moving machinery of the union structure meant that the changes at the lower level took a long time before communicating themselves to the leadership. In many of the unions, the Bolsheviks only gained control some time after the October revolution. Some of them played an openly counter-revolutionary role, notably the bank clerks and the All-Russian Union of Railwaymen, which attempted to sabotage the Soviet government after the revolution.

Up until August, the Bolsheviks still remained a small minority of the working class. In the soviets, they were the smallest group. The same was true of the local councils and the trade unions. In April, the party membership stood at around 80,000. By August, this had increased to 240,000.<sup>[100]</sup> But the party's influence in the working class was growing, especially since the Kornilov episode. In some areas, like Ivanovo-Voznesensk, the Bolsheviks were in the majority as early as the spring. But such cases were exceptional. In the provinces, and still more in the rural areas, the gulf separating the Bolsheviks from the reformist parties was enormous.

The July days seemed to mark the final demise of the Bolsheviks. Yet in a few weeks the party had all but recovered the lost ground. The tactics of the Bolsheviks in opposing the Kornilov rising was the fundamental turning-point, winning colossal prestige for the Bolsheviks as the most determined and energetic fighters against the counter-revolution, and once and for all laying to rest the slanders about "counter-revolutionaries" and "German agents". The tide began to flow strongly in favour of the Bolsheviks to the degree that it became clear that the Provisional Government was not solving any one of the pressing problems facing the Russian people, and that the reformist leaders were mere appendages of the capitalists. The Bolshevik slogan of "peace, bread and land" gained an ever wider audience.

By late August and early September, the Bolsheviks became the decisive mass force, not only in Petrograd and Moscow, but also in the provinces. Although the party remained relatively small in membership, for every member there were 20, 30 or 50 workers and soldiers who considered themselves to be Bolsheviks. Under such circumstances, when the current was flowing strongly in favour of the revolutionary tendency, even persecution acted as a spur to growth. Workers who were striking for higher wages, and were met with a chorus of disapproval from the bourgeois press which attacked them as Bolsheviks, became firmly convinced of the justness of the Bolsheviks' cause, even though they had never read a single line of Lenin. Bolshevism was growing for the simple reason that its policies and slogans closely corresponded to the needs and aspirations of the workers and peasants.

"At the Seventh All-Russian Conference, in the first week of May<sup>[B]</sup>," writes Schapiro, "79,204 party members were represented by 149 delegates. The largest concentrations were in the Petrograd province and in the Urals (over 14,000 each), with Moscow province (7,000) and the Donets Basin (5,000) next in importance. The strength of the

party increased rapidly in the next few months. Sverdlov told the Sixth Congress in August that the number of organisations had grown from 78 to 162, and he estimated the total strength of the party at 200,000. No information is available on party membership by November, but it may be presumed that a further increase took place, since the very incomplete data on the membership of individual organisations available to the Central Committee Secretariat show an increase after August in the case of a number of organisations.”[\[101\]](#)

The party’s growth was reflected in a whole number of statistics. The first victory was chalked up in the factory committees. This was important because the factory committees were the organisations that most closely reflected the mood of the workers on the shop-floor. The factory committees had sprung up immediately after the February revolution, as the continuation of the strike committees. They were the cutting edge of the struggle for the eight-hour day, which they frequently introduced by their own initiative. The demand for workers’ control advanced by the Bolsheviks met with a ready response from the factory committees, which in many enterprises introduced control over hiring and firing, formed workers’ militias and combated the attempts of the bosses to sabotage production.

On May 30-June 3 the first congress of factory committees was held in Petrograd. This was the scene of a bitter clash between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks over the role and tasks of the committees. The Mensheviks naturally opposed workers’ control, which clashed with their whole conception of the bourgeois nature of the revolution and the right of the bourgeois to rule. The conference, however, passed the Bolshevik resolution. Lenin took part in this conference, and drafted the resolution *On Measures to Cope with Economic Dislocation*, which was carried by a big majority. From the summer of 1917, the factory committees in Petrograd, Moscow and the Urals were solidly Bolshevik.

There was plenty of other evidence that the Bolsheviks were gaining ground. Even in the elections to town councils, the Bolsheviks were obtaining spectacular results. In the local elections in Petrograd, held in August, they increased their number of seats from 37 to 67, and went into second place behind the SRs who numbered 75. The Cadets had 42, but the Mensheviks saw their numbers reduced from 40 to only eight. This clearly shows the swing to the left. Still more surprising were the results of the local elections in Moscow. If we compare the results with those of the elections in June, we get the following:

### **Votes**

### **Percentages**

### **Party**

**June**

**September**

**June**

**September**

Social Revolutionaries

374,885

54,374

58

14

Mensheviks

76,407

15,887

12

4

Cadets

168,781

101,106

17

26

Bolsheviks

75,409

198,230

12

51

(Source: Anweiler, *Los Soviets en Rusia, 1905-1921*, p. 188)

This is significant because for the first time the Bolsheviks got an absolute majority of votes. The June figures refer to the Moscow City Duma elections, whereas the September figures refer to the ward elections. In the latter the participation was not particularly high (50 per cent). However, that does not diminish the importance of the result. It must not be forgotten that elections to parliament and local councils are not the most favourable field for a revolutionary party. It is generally far easier to obtain results in elections to unions or factory committees. This was especially the case in Russia in 1917, when the attention of the masses was concentrated on the soviets. But still the Bolsheviks, with the aim of

reaching the widest layers of society, did not ignore even local elections. The Moscow election result was highly significant because for the first time the Bolsheviks won an absolute majority in an important urban centre.

In Petersburg the same trend was visible, although not quite to the same degree as in Moscow. Between August and November the Bolshevik vote went up from 184,000 to 424,000; the SRs went down from 206,000 to 152,000 and the Cadet vote went up from 114,000 to 274,000. Surprisingly, the Mensheviks also increased their vote from 24,000 to 29,000, but this relative rally cannot disguise the fact that they were now a small minority and had practically been almost wiped out as a real force in the working class in the capital.

### **Tactics of the Insurrection**

From his hut in Razliv, Lenin followed the process of the revolution with keen attention, devouring all the reports, statistics, anecdotes, anything that could serve to determine the all-important question: when should the party strike? With his customary meticulousness, he studied the results of every election, every vote in the soviets, unions and town councils, trying to see what light they cast on the class balance of forces. Lenin did not for a moment forget that election statistics present the correlation of forces in a very partial and distorted manner. But everything pointed to a swift advance of the revolutionary party. The memory of Kornilov's revolt was still vivid in the minds of the workers and soldiers and the threat of counter-revolution provoked a rapid polarisation and radicalisation in the Soviets. New elections were taking place everywhere in the Soviets and soldiers organisations at the front. And in almost all of them, the vote for the Bolsheviks registered an astonishing advance. Power was slipping from the hands of the right wing leaders who had displayed their complete impotence during the emergency. One by one, the Soviets in the main industrial centres changed their allegiance from the Mensheviks and SRs to the Bolsheviks: Petrograd, Finland, the fleet, the northern armies, Moscow and the central industrial area, the Urals.

True, the picture was not uniform. The SRs still held sway in the peasant soviets and in the front-line regiments. But here also a process of internal differentiation was taking place. A left-wing tendency was rapidly gaining ground inside the Social Revolutionary Party, and in the process of splitting and lining up with the Bolsheviks. The right wing SRs were strongest in the Black Earth region and in the Central Volga. In the Ukraine they shared control with the left nationalists. But the Mensheviks were losing ground everywhere. Only in their traditional stronghold, the Caucasus, did they manage to keep control of the soviets which they had dominated all over Russia at the start of the revolution. Such was the balance of forces that determined Lenin's next step. The Bolsheviks were now the decisive force inside the Soviets. The reformist leaders were isolated and besieged in their final refuge, the Soviet Executive. Was it not time to bring matters to a head, to strike the decisive blow?

Lenin was convinced that the time was ripe, and that any delay could prove fatal. But not all the other party leaders were thinking on the same lines. The party's top leadership was

still profoundly affected by the July defeat, and inclined towards excessive caution. Zinoviev, who had hitherto always followed Lenin's line, had been badly shaken and now clung to Kamenev, who, as usual, took the road of "moderation". From the beginning of September Lenin bombarded the Central Committee with letters, insistently demanding that it begin to organise the insurrection. In a letter to the Central Committee dated September 12-14 (25-27), he opens with the words: "The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals can and *must* take state power into their own hands."[\[102\]](#)

Lenin's letter fell like a bombshell. The Central Committee was so aghast at its content and tone that they actually decided to destroy it, as Bukharin later recalled: "When I entered, Milyutin came suddenly to meet me and said: 'You know, Comrade Bukharin, we've received a little letter here'. The letter was read. We all gasped. No one had yet put the question so sharply. No one knew what to do. Everyone was at a loss for a while. Then we deliberated and came to a decision. Perhaps this was the only time in the history of our party when the Central Committee decided to burn a letter of Comrade Lenin's."

Other letters followed, each one more emphatic than the last: "What are we doing? We are only passing resolutions. We are losing time. We set 'dates' (October 20, the Congress of Soviets—is it not ridiculous to put it off so long? Is it not ridiculous to rely on that?)"

"To 'wait' for the Congress of Soviets and so forth under such circumstances would be a *betrayal of internationalism*, a betrayal of the cause of the world socialist revolution."

"We must...admit the truth that there is a tendency, in our opinion, in our Central Committee and among the leaders of our Party which favours *waiting* for the Congress of Soviets, and is *opposed* to taking power immediately, is *opposed* to an immediate insurrection. That tendency, or opinion, must be *overcome*. Otherwise, the Bolsheviks will cover themselves with eternal *shame* and *destroy themselves* as a party. To miss such a moment and to 'wait' for the Congress of Soviets would be utter idiocy, or sheer treachery."[\[103\]](#)

Finally, exasperated by the delaying tactics of the CC, Lenin threatened to resign from it and carry the struggle into the ranks of the party: "In view of the fact that the Central Committee has *even left unanswered* the persistent demands I have been making for such a policy ever since the beginning of the Democratic Conference, in view of the fact that the Central Organ is *deleting* from my articles all references to such glaring errors on the part of the Bolsheviks as the shameful decision to participate in the Pre-Parliament, the admission of Mensheviks to the presidium of the Soviet, etc., etc.—I am compelled to regard this as a 'subtle' hint at the unwillingness of the Central Committee even to consider this question, a subtle hint that I should keep my mouth shut, and as a proposal for me to retire.

“I am compelled to *tender my resignation from the Central Committee*, which I hereby do, reserving for myself freedom to campaign among the *rank-and-file* of the Party and at the Party Congress.

“For it is my profound conviction that if we ‘wait’ for the Congress of Soviets and let the present moment pass, we shall *ruin* the revolution.”[\[104\]](#)

### **Crisis of Leadership**

The real reason for Lenin’s insistence on immediate action was his fear that the party leaders would vacillate, would not proceed to prepare to take power and thus miss the opportunity. Once the moment is lost, it may take many years to return. Precisely for this reason a party and a leadership is necessary. Lenin was probably doubtful about the new members of the CC, Joffe and Uritsky, who had come over with the Mezhrayontsi and whom he did not know. Would they not be conciliators? And would Trotsky fall into line with Kamenev and Zinoviev? In his mistrust of the new members of the CC he was mistaken. They stood, like Trotsky, firmly on the left. But the ferocious resistance put up by his old comrades Kamenev, Zinoviev, and, though more guardedly, Stalin was a bitter blow.

At every decisive turning point there were fierce controversies and polemics in the leadership. Such a controversy broke out over the question of participating in the Democratic Conference. This was a manoeuvre of the Mensheviks and SRs on the Central Executive of the Soviets who felt that power was slipping from their hands. In theory the conference was called by the Executive in order to decide the question of power, but in practice it was to throw dust in the eyes of the masses, to divert attention away from the rising tide of revolution and into harmless speechifying and paper projects. The reformist leaders did their best to reduce the representation of the workers and peasants, and heavily weight the conference in favour of petty bourgeois elements. They were trying to set up an alternative to the Soviets where their influence was declining by the hour. To Lenin’s disgust, the Bolshevik Central Committee voted to participate in this charade and circulated party organisations to “do their utmost to build up the largest possible well-knit group of delegates from among our Party members”.[\[105\]](#)

Lenin was more than doubtful about this decision, but grudgingly went along with it, on condition that the Bolsheviks demonstratively separate themselves from all other tendencies and read out a statement to expose the Soviet leaders. The declaration stated that “In struggling for the power in order to realise its programme, our party has never desired and does not desire to seize the power against the organised will of the majority of the toiling masses of the country.” Of this statement, Trotsky writes: “That meant: We will take the power as the party of the soviet majority. Those words about ‘the organised will of the toiling masses’ referred to the coming Congress of Soviets. ‘Only such decisions and proposals of the present Conference ... can find their way to realisation’ said the Declaration, ‘as are recognised by the All-Russian Congress of Soviets...’.”[\[106\]](#)

The decision to participate in the Democratic Conference was actually a mistake, as Lenin later stated, but a relatively minor one, and easily rectified. Far more serious was the decision of the Bolshevik delegation at the Conference to agree to participate in the so-called pre-parliament that had been agreed there. This was a blunder of the first order. The move to set up a kind of “caretaker government” was a transparent attempt by the reformist leaders to create the impression that Russia now had a parliamentary system, when the pre-parliament was merely an appendage of the bourgeois Provisional Government with only consultative rights. This was clearly a reactionary manoeuvre. Yet the Bolshevik delegates voted by 77 to 50 to take part in it. This move split the Central Committee, with Trotsky leading the fight to boycott the pre-parliament. Lenin, already worried that the Bolshevik leaders were wasting time, was beside himself with rage and frustration. He flatly demanded that the Bolsheviks withdraw from the pre-parliament and dedicate all their energies to preparing the insurrection.

In a footnote to the article in which he declared the participation in the Democratic Conference to have been a mistake and demanded the withdrawal of the Bolsheviks from the pre-parliament, Lenin writes: “Trotsky was for the boycott. Bravo, Comrade Trotsky! Boycottism was defeated in the Bolshevik group at the Democratic Conference. Long live the boycott!”

“We cannot and must not under any circumstances reconcile ourselves to participation. A group at one of the conferences is not the highest organ of the party and even the decisions of the highest organs are subject to revision on the basis of experience.

“We must at all costs strive to have the boycott question solved both at a plenary meeting of the Executive Committee and at an extraordinary Party congress. The boycott question must now be made the platform for elections to the Congress and for *all* elections inside the Party. We must draw the *masses* into the discussion of this question. Class-conscious workers must take the matter into their own hands, organise the discussion, and exert pressure on ‘those at the *top*’.

“There is not the slightest doubt that at the ‘top’ of our Party there are noticeable vacillations that may become *ruinous*, because the struggle is developing; under certain conditions, at a certain moment, vacillations may *ruin* the cause. We must put all our forces into the struggle, we must uphold the correct line of the party of the revolutionary proletariat before it is too late.

“Not all is well with the ‘parliamentary’ leaders of our Party; greater attention must be paid to them, there must be greater workers’ supervision over them; the competency of parliamentary groups must be more clearly defined.

“Our Party’s mistake is obvious. The fighting party of the advanced class need not fear mistakes. What it should fear is persistence in a mistake, refusal to admit and correct a mistake out of a false sense of shame.”[\[107\]](#)

Finally, not without a sharp struggle on the CC in which Kamenev opposed withdrawing from the pre-parliament, Lenin's advice was accepted and the Bolsheviks walked out on the first day, having first read out a declaration which ended in the cry: "Long live the direct and open struggle for revolutionary power in the country!"

On the day before Trotsky led the Bolsheviks out of the pre-parliament, the Central Committee met, at Lenin's insistence, to discuss once more the question of insurrection. Given the urgency of the situation, Lenin came from Finland in disguise, complete with actor's wig. But there was nothing either comic or theatrical about this discussion, upon which hinged the destiny of the revolution. Lenin tore into the compromisers on the CC. The minutes read: "Comrade Lenin maintains that a sort of indifference to the question of insurrection has been noticeable since the beginning of September. But this is impermissible if we are issuing the slogan of the seizure of power by the Soviets in all seriousness. It is therefore high time to pay attention to the technical aspect of the question. Apparently a lot of time has already been lost."[\[108\]](#) And he goes on to enumerate the reasons why the Bolsheviks should take power without delay. Significantly, he refers first to the international situation. The news of mutinies in the German fleet, of strikes of the Czech workers and demonstrations and barricades in Italy indicated that the conditions for revolution were ripening on a world scale: "Take a glance at the international situation. The growth of a world revolution is beyond dispute," Lenin wrote in his *Letter to the Bolshevik Comrades*.[\[109\]](#)

Delay was impermissible because the fate of the revolution was in the balance. Either the Bolsheviks took power, or Kerensky would go onto the offensive against the Soviets. Red Petrograd could be surrendered to the Germans, and the Constituent Assembly put off indefinitely: "What is being done to surrender territory as far as Narva, and to surrender Petrograd makes it still more imperative for us to take decisive action." And again, the same warning: the masses are tired of words and resolutions. They will begin to see the Bolsheviks as the same as all the other parties if they do not act to take power: "Absenteeism and indifference on the part of the masses is due to their being tired of words and resolutions. We now have the majority behind us. Politically, the situation is fully ripe for taking power."[\[110\]](#)

How do we explain the crises and vacillations in the Bolshevik leadership during the course of 1917? If we set out from an idealised conception of the Bolshevik Party, this question cannot be answered. "How could it happen," asked Trotsky, "that Lenin, whom we have seen at the beginning of April isolated among the leaders of his own party, found himself again solitary in the same group in September and early October? This cannot be understood if you believe the unintelligent legend which portrays the history of Bolshevism as an emanation of the pure revolutionary idea. In reality Bolshevism developed in a definite social milieu undergoing its heterogeneous influences and among them the influence of a petty bourgeois environment and of cultural backwardness. To each new situation the party adapted itself only by way of an inner crisis."[\[111\]](#)

It is a law that, as the date of the insurrection approaches, the leadership of the revolutionary party comes under extreme pressure from alien classes, and a section

begins to vacillate. The reason for this is not hard to find. The exact appraisal of the mood of the masses is never easy to determine. Given the colossal responsibility that weighs on the shoulders of the leadership in such a moment, the serious risks entailed in every decision, the pressure of bourgeois “public opinion”, nerves are stretched to breaking point and all weaknesses stand cruelly exposed. Yet on the eve of insurrection, weakness and vacillation can be afforded least of all.

## NOTES

[A] Louis Cavaignac was the French general who, as War Minister in the Provisional Government established by the French Revolution of February 1848, led the suppression of the Paris workers’ uprising in June of that year.

[B] May in the new calendar. Schapiro is referring to the April Conference.

[87] Rabinovitch, op. cit., pp. 62 and 59.

[88] LCW, *On Slogans*, vol. 25, pp. 188 and 189.

[89] Quoted in Rabinovitch, op. cit., p. 68.

[90] O. Figes, op. cit., pp. 445-6.

[91] LCW, *To the CC of the RSDLP*, vol. 25, pp. 285-6.

[92] LCW, *To the CC of the RSDLP*, vol. 25, p. 286.

[93] O. Figes, op. cit., p. 452.

[94] See Keep, op. cit., p. 142.

[95] See Anweiler, *Los Soviets en Rusia, 1905-1921*, p. 189.

[96] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 805.

[97] See Anweiler, op. cit., pp. 190-1.

[98] L. Kochan, *Russia in Revolution*, p. 269.

[99] See Keep, op. cit., p. 101.

[100] Anweiler, op. cit., pp. 187 and 186.

[101] L. Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, p. 171.

[102] LCW, *The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power*, vol. 26, p. 19.

[103] Quoted in M. Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin*, pp. 137, 69, 81 and 82.

[104] LCW, *The Crisis has Matured*, vol. 26, p. 84.

[105] LCW, vol. 26, p. 530, note 4.

[106] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 836.

[107] LCW, *From a Publicist's Diary*, vol. 26, pp. 57-8.

[108] LCW, *Meeting of the Central Committee of the RSDLP(B) October 10 (23), 1917*, vol. 26, p. 188.

[109] LCW, *Letter to the Bolshevik Comrades Attending the Congress of Soviets of the Northern Region*, vol. 26, p. 182.

[110] LCW, *Meeting of the Central Committee of the RSDLP(B) October 10 (23), 1917*, vol. 26, p. 188.

[111] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 989.

## Part Six: The Year of Revolution

[section 7 of 7]

### The Question of the Soviet Congress

From the point of view of formal logic, defence and offence are immutable opposites. However, in practice, they frequently pass into each other. A defensive struggle, under certain conditions, can be transformed into an offensive struggle, and vice versa. There are many points of comparison between the wars between nations and wars between the classes. But there are also differences. A bourgeois standing army is prepared, financed and armed for decades in preparation for war. The general staff can choose when and where hostilities begin. Of course, even here, it is not a purely military question. Clausewitz explained that war is the continuation of politics by other means. The military acts of bourgeois governments are determined by the class interests of the bourgeoisie. For this reason, Marxists have always pointed out that the question of who fires the first shot is an entirely secondary consideration which does not have any bearing on the concrete character of a war.

Every government in *every* war *always* tries to put the blame for starting it on the shoulders of the enemy. This is neither an accident nor a whim. War is not just a military question, but involves politics. The mobilisation of public opinion, at home and abroad, in support of the war is a fundamental question, which can only be resolved on the

political plane. Napoleon explained that in warfare morale is to the physical as three to one. Hence, the fundamental task of diplomacy is to convince public opinion that its particular army acted only in self-defence, in response to intolerable provocation, enemy aggression and so on. A government which did not act in this way would commit an intolerable blunder, and do enormous damage to its war effort.

All this is a thousand times more true in the socialist revolution. The proletariat, unlike the ruling class, does not possess an army, and will never possess an armed force capable of taking on the forces of the bourgeois state, provided that the latter remains intact. Whereas conventional war is mainly a military question, in which diplomacy plays a significant but subordinate role, the task of the socialist revolution is therefore mainly the political task of winning over the masses and the armed forces. The roles are reversed.

In point of fact, the overwhelming majority of the struggles of the working class begin as defensive struggles: struggles to defend living standards, jobs, democratic rights, etc. Under certain circumstances, particularly with correct leadership, these defensive struggles can prepare the way for an offensive, including a general strike, which poses the question of power. However, even in the course of a revolution, it is necessary to place all the responsibility for violence on the shoulders of the ruling class, in order to win over the masses, not only of the working class, but also of the petty bourgeoisie. It is therefore not only correct, but absolutely essential that the movement should be presented in a defensive light. Already in June Lenin wrote:

“The socialist proletariat and our party must be as cool and collected as possible, must show the greatest staunchness and vigilance. Let the future Cavaignacs begin first. Our Party conference has already given warning of their arrival. The workers of Petrograd will give them no opportunity to disclaim responsibility. They will bide their time, gathering their forces and preparing for resistance *when* those gentlemen decide to turn from words to action.”[\[112\]](#)

The history of the Russian revolution, before, during, and after October, suffices to demonstrate this. On the eve of the October revolution, there was a difference of opinion between Lenin and Trotsky concerning the date of the insurrection. Lenin wanted to move straight to the seizure of power in September, whereas Trotsky was in favour of postponing the insurrection until the Congress of Soviets. Why did Trotsky take this position? Did he suffer from a lack of audacity? Not at all. Trotsky understood that, even in a revolution, *the question of legality is extremely important for the masses*. Trotsky was sure that the Bolsheviks would get the majority at the Congress, and could therefore appear before the masses as the legitimate power in society. This was not a secondary question, but was a vital factor in achieving a peaceful transfer of power. Once again, the essential element was not military, but political. Incidentally, the Bolsheviks presented the October insurrection as a defensive action to prevent Russia from sliding into chaos and civil war. And this is no accident. Even when you are in a position to go onto the offensive (which is by no means always the case, rather the contrary), it is always necessary to act and speak as if you were fighting a defensive struggle, placing all the responsibility on the enemy.

Kamenev and Zinoviev opposed the taking of power because they were affected by the pressure of bourgeois public opinion and lost their nerve. Exaggeration of the strength of the enemy and a pessimistic appraisal of the fighting potential of the working class is highly characteristic of this state of mind. For them, postponement meant forever. Kamenev's attitude was shown by a conversation he had with Raskolnikov only a few weeks before the insurrection:

“When I met my old friend L.B. Kamenev I immediately launched into a discussion with him about ‘our differences’. The starting point of Lev Borisovich’s argument was that our Party was not yet ready for insurrection. True, we had large masses of various kinds behind us, and they readily passed our resolutions, but there was still a long way to go from ‘paper’ voting to active participation in an armed uprising. It was not certain that the Petrograd garrison would show itself resolute in battle, ready to conquer or die. When the first critical circumstances arose the soldiers would desert us and run away.

“‘The Government, on the other hand,’ said comrade Kamenev, ‘has splendidly organised troops at its disposal, devoted to its cause—Cossacks and cadets who have been well worked up against us and will fight desperately to the end’.

“Drawing from all this depressing conclusions about our chances of victory, comrade Kamenev had arrived at the view that an unsuccessful attempt at insurrection would result in defeat and downfall for our Party, which would throw us back and delay for a long time the development of the revolution.”[\[113\]](#)

Lenin was so insistent about the need to take power immediately, because he feared, not without reason, that the Bolshevik Conciliators would let the opportunity slip altogether. But his objection to the postponement of the insurrection until the Soviet congress was not so well founded. Trotsky supported this postponement not only to win over the wavering elements on the CC, but for sound tactical reasons. The majority of workers and soldiers still looked to the authority of the soviets. They would support the seizure of power on the basis that it was done in the name of the Soviets, but not necessarily in the name of the Bolsheviks alone. Therefore, the insurrection should coincide with the Congress of Soviets where the Bolsheviks and their allies were sure of winning the majority. Lenin was doubtful about this stratagem. Was this not yet another example of prevarication and legalistic-parliamentary cretinism?

However, Trotsky's position was undoubtedly correct. He understood the need to continue the work of winning over the soviets right up to the moment of the insurrection, in order to mobilise the maximum forces for the rising, and minimise resistance. That is why he supported, against Lenin's opposition, the postponement of the insurrection to coincide with the congress of soviets where the Bolsheviks would win the majority. Thus, even in the course of an insurrection itself, the question of legality, far from being relegated to an unimportant position, assumes a crucial role in winning over the more inert layers of the masses. The insurrection took place, as Trotsky had proposed, coinciding with the Congress. That, of course, did not prevent the Stalinists from maintaining that Trotsky's proposal “in practice meant bungling the insurrection and

allowing the Provisional Government to pull up its forces to crush the uprising on the day the congress opened.”[\[114\]](#)

The decision to organise the insurrection was taken by the Central Committee, at Lenin’s insistence, on 10 October. It seems clear that Lenin intended to utilise the Northern Region Congress of Soviets, which took place in Petrograd from October 11 to 13, to start the insurrection. According to the Latvian Bolshevik Latsis, the plan was that the Northern Congress would declare itself the government, and this would be the start. This was one of many regional Soviet congresses which were being held in preparation for the coming All-Russian Congress. The congress was dominated by the left: 51 Bolsheviks, 24 Left SRs, four Maximalists (a small terrorist split-off from the SRs), one Menshevik Internationalist, and only ten SRs and four Mensheviks, who immediately walked out. Originally planned to be held in Helsingfors in Finland, it had been moved to the capital as a more appropriate place from which to start the insurrection.

In a message to the Bolshevik delegates to the Northern Region Congress, Lenin wrote that they would be “traitors to the International” if they limited themselves to “mere resolutions”. But the congress did not vote for immediate insurrection. Instead, it passed a resolution which declared for a Soviet government, but linked it to the forthcoming All-Russian Congress. This was the general mood at the time. Reports from many areas showed the same picture: that workers would be prepared to fight for the establishment of a Soviet government if it were proclaimed by the Soviet Congress, but not necessarily if it were proclaimed by a single party, the Bolsheviks, without the stamp of authority of the Soviets. Moreover, internal reports, especially from the Bolshevik Military Organisation, revealed a disappointing state of unreadiness and “flagrant deficiencies”. Probably these were exaggerated. The Military Organisation always tended to attach excessive importance to the purely military-technical side, whereas in practice, the political questions were decisive. Nevertheless, these reports did reveal something. After the bitter experience of the July days, the Bolshevik activists feared isolation and were inclined to be cautious—perhaps too cautious. Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that the party was not yet prepared either psychologically or organisationally for the decisive leap. A couple more weeks were needed. And that already meant that the uprising would coincide with the Second All-Russian Congress.

## **The Final Chapter**

By skilful and flexible tactics, the Bolsheviks succeeded in drastically increasing their influence in the soviets in the months before October, to the point where, together with their allies, they could command a majority at the Soviet Congress. That, and that alone, explains the relatively peaceful character of the October insurrection. The reason was not primarily military, but the fact that nine-tenths of the work had already been accomplished beforehand. The most vital arena of struggle was in the soviets themselves. Anweiler gives the following break-down of the relations between the parties in the Soviets on the eve of the insurrection:

“1) In the workers soviets in almost all the big industrial cities the Bolsheviks had the majority, and the same was true of the majority of soldiers’ soviets in the regiments. The essential points of their influence were:

“a) Finland, Estland [Estonia], Petersburg and the surrounding region, part of the Northern Front and the navy; b) The central industrial zone around Moscow; c) The Urals; d) Siberia where they were equally balanced with the SRs.

“2) In the peasants’ soviets and in the front-line soviets the SRs were still the dominant force. A strong left wing, which finally split away from the SR party in the weeks leading up to October, was on the side of the Bolsheviks and frequently helped them to obtain a majority in most of the soviets. The moderate SRs were strongest in:

“a) The Black Sea area and the Central Volga; b) The Ukraine (together with the nationalist Socialist parties); c) The Eastern, South-Eastern and Rumanian fronts.

“3) The Mensheviks had lost their dominant position in the workers’ soviets almost everywhere after the first months of the revolution. Only in the Caucasus, especially in Georgia, where they could also base themselves on the peasant population, were they much stronger than the Bolsheviks in October 1917.

“4) For the first time groups of Maximalists and anarchists played an important role in some soviets. They supported the Bolsheviks in October and significantly contributed to the radicalisation of the masses.”[\[115\]](#)

Anweiler exaggerates the role of the anarchists and maximalists, who were a tiny minority, representing the ultra-left tendencies that always exist, but cannot play any real role. A certain growth of such tendencies in a revolution is to be expected. Lenin himself explained that the masses were already getting tired of waiting. Individual workers or sometimes small groups of workers who have moved a bit too far ahead of the class can be attracted to the radical-sounding slogans of the ultra-lefts. But for every one of these there are 50, 100 or 1,000 who will go to the traditional mass organisations, even where these are under the leadership of the reformists. The reason why the anarchists played no significant role in the Russian revolution was because of the existence of the Bolshevik Party. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin wrote in sympathetic terms about the anarchist workers, while criticising their half-baked notions about the state, pointing out that anarchism (and ultra-leftism in general) is the price the movement has to pay for the opportunism of the reformist labour leaders.

Under Russian conditions reformism always was a feeble and sickly plant. There was no tradition of powerful reformist trade unions and Labour Parties as in Western Europe. Nevertheless, for the reasons already outlined, the Russian workers in February, even as they established the soviets, took the line of least resistance and backed the reformist parties in the soviets. Only through the experience of great events did the masses reject these leaders and move in the direction of Bolshevism. But this process was neither easy nor automatic. It was only made possible by the generally correct policies and tactics of

the Bolsheviks, above all, their clear orientation to those mass organisations that had been created by the workers and which, to the end, had tremendous attractive power, despite the policies of the leaders—the Soviets and the trade unions.

The way in which the workers cling to the established mass organisations was strikingly revealed on the eve of October by the controversy around the date of the insurrection and the Soviet Congress. Lenin was quite rightly worried about the constitutional and parliamentary cretinism of Bolshevik leaders like Kamenev and Zinoviev. He feared delay, since every day that passed gave the time and opportunity to the counter-revolutionaries to re-group and launch a new offensive. There were persistent rumours (subsequently shown to be true) that Kerensky was planning to move the centre of government to Moscow. There was every possibility that the Provisional Government would let Petrograd fall into the hands of the Germans, rather than see it fall to the Bolsheviks. There is ample evidence that the bourgeoisie in the capital was waiting to receive the Kaiser's armies as saviours. At the time of Kornilov's uprising, the Germans had taken Riga. Later they occupied two strategic islands in the Baltic, placing them in striking distance of Petrograd. The danger was real enough.

Mikhail Rodzianko, the former head of the Duma, confessed in so many words that it would be better for the Germans to take Petrograd: &“Petrograd appears threatened (by the Germans)...I say to hell with Petrograd...People fear our central institutions in Petrograd will be destroyed. To this, let me say that I should be glad if these institutions are destroyed because they have brought Russia nothing but grief.”[\[116\]](#) At the very least, Kerensky was preparing to get rid of the mutinous Petrograd garrison, using the excuse of the German threat. But, as the gulf between the classes opened ever wider, the threat that the Soviets would be dissolved by the forces of reaction loomed larger.

The main argument employed against Lenin was “we must wait for the Soviet Congress”. But Lenin feared that the congress would be postponed. The Soviet leaders had already postponed it once, fearing that they would lose control. Why should they not do this again? Then the opponents of insurrection had another argument. Why not wait for the convening of the promised Constituent Assembly? They were always looking for some pretext or other to postpone the insurrection. Here again Lenin thought it highly likely that the provisional Government would postpone or cancel the convening of elections to the Constituent Assembly. Hence, his implacable opposition to waiting for the Congress of Soviets, or anything else.

Lenin's impatience, and his constant fear that the Bolshevik leaders were dragging their feet, were partly dictated by the waverings of Kamenev and Zinoviev, who were far from being alone in the Bolshevik leadership. But they were also partly the result of Lenin's isolation. Trotsky, who was more in touch with the situation on the ground, was in favour of preparing the insurrection, but making it coincide with the Congress of Soviets, which would give it the necessary legitimacy in the eyes of the masses. This showed a sharp insight into the psychology of the workers. The Bolsheviks had certainly made extraordinary progress since the summer. The growth of the membership was now so rapid that it swamped the meagre capacity of the party's apparatus, which was unable to

keep pace with it. In August, at the time of the Sixth congress, the membership stood at around 240,000.<sup>[A]</sup> At the Central Committee meeting of October 16, Sverdlov reported that “the growth of the party has reached gigantic proportions: at the present time it must be estimated at 400,000 at least.”<sup>[117]</sup>

In fact, it is impossible to arrive at an exact figure for party membership at this time. The Bolshevik Party’s apparatus was still relatively weak and constantly overwhelmed with work. In a revolution, the demands of the hour must take precedence over such mundane tasks as keeping up-to-date membership figures. Any estimate must therefore necessarily have a conditional character. Lenin himself admitted that it was all but impossible to get an accurate idea of the membership in September, but pointed to the increased donations from workers as proof of the party’s rapid growth: “In the absence of any statistics concerning the fluctuation of the party membership, attendance at meetings, etc., the conscious support of the party by the *masses* may be judged only from published data concerning cash collections for the party. These data show a tremendous mass-scale heroism on the part of worker Bolsheviks in collecting money for *Pravda*, for the papers that have been suppressed, etc. The reports of such collections have always been published.”<sup>[118]</sup>

What is not in question is the fact that the Bolsheviks, who had started the year as a tiny organisation had grown rapidly to the point where they became the dominant force in the working class. But even with a membership of 400,000, the Bolsheviks would never have been able to lead millions of workers and soldiers to the seizure of power without flexible tactics and methods and a correct orientation towards the mass organisations. The party’s progress in the soviets has already been alluded to. But this does not tell the whole story. While the Bolshevik slogans were finding a ready echo among the workers, the latter still looked to the soviets to carry these slogans into practice. The relationship was a dialectical one. Without the policies of the Bolshevik Party, the soviets were useless. As a matter of fact, under the leadership of the right wing reformists, they could be characterised as counter-revolutionary soviets. But from another point of view, the policies of the Bolsheviks, without the soviets, would not necessarily have won the ear of the masses who still had profound illusions in those organisations which they had built themselves, and to which they had become accustomed to look for a solution to their problems. The ideas of Bolshevism only acquired an irresistible force when they were linked in the minds of the masses with the organisations to which they had given their allegiance—the soviets.

### **The Seizure of Power**

The hour of decisive action had arrived. By this time, the rank-and-file Bolshevik workers were themselves growing impatient at the lack of decisive action from the top. On October 19 (16), at a secret meeting of the amplified CC, Lenin again read out a written statement on the need for an immediate insurrection. With only two votes against—Kamenev and Zinoviev—it was decided that the only way to save the revolution from destruction was an armed uprising. Convinced that an insurrection would be disastrous for the party and the revolution, Lenin’s two old comrades-in-arms opened up

a frantic campaign to stop it. On 18 October, they went to the extreme of publishing an article in a non-party paper, Gorky's *Novaya Zhizn'* which publicly opposed the organising of an insurrection as "an act of desperation" which would bring "the most ruinous consequences for the party, for the proletariat, for the fate of the revolution". Significantly, the letter, which appeared under Kamenev's signature, claimed to speak not only in the name of two members of the CC, but of a large number of (unnamed) "party practical workers":

"Not only myself and Comrade Zinoviev, but a number of practical party comrades think that to take upon ourselves the initiative to mount an armed uprising at the present time, under the present correlation of social forces, independently of the Soviet congress, and a few days before it, would be an inadmissible step, disastrous for the proletariat."[\[119\]](#)

This was, to put it mildly, a most serious breach of discipline. In presenting their arguments against the armed uprising, Kamenev and Zinoviev had given away to the enemy key party decisions on the insurrection, which were clearly meant to be top secret. Furious at this action, Lenin, in an uncharacteristic action, wrote an angry letter to the CC denouncing Kamenev and Zinoviev as strike-breakers and demanding their expulsion from the party.[\[120\]](#) In fact, the Central Committee did not carry out Lenin's proposal. Kamenev (but not Zinoviev) resigned from the CC, and both men were forbidden to make any further statements contrary to CC decisions. But they were neither expelled nor asked to recant their actions. The day of Stalinist confessions and forced recantations had not yet arrived. Despite the serious nature of their misdemeanour, it was not held against them. The day after the insurrection, Kamenev and Zinoviev presented themselves at the Bolshevik HQ and were given responsible positions in the party and the Soviet state.

The Kamenev-Zinoviev affair did not do lasting damage. The tide was already flowing strongly in the direction of an insurrection. In such conditions, the mistakes of the revolutionaries can normally be rectified by an intelligent leadership that keeps its head. But the converse is true in the camp of reaction. Beset with problems on all sides, trapped in a welter of contradictions, the politicians who yesterday could do no wrong, suddenly find they can do nothing right. That is the explanation of the oft-repeated comments about the "incapacity", "obstinacy" and "stupidity" of Kerensky, tsar Nicholas, King Louis, Marie Antoinette and Charles I and a long list of other, similar figures. The ancient Greeks used to say: "Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad." But, on closer observation, this madness is rooted in the objective situation. A doomed social system results in a regime of crisis. In such regimes, the options are limited and the scope for error is multiplied a thousandfold. Given a favourable historical conjuncture, even fools and mediocrities can rule successfully (and frequently do). But when a regime and a social system is sick unto death, the talents of even the most able minister will not necessarily be enough to save it. Such regimes are inevitably riven with internal crises and splits at the top. One section of the ruling class tries to stave off disaster through concessions, while another tries to halt the rising tide of revolt by repression. The result is the appearance (and reality) of vacillation and incompetence. All of which does not mean that the quality of the revolutionary leadership is not important. Even the most favourable circumstances can be thrown away in wars and revolutions. Had Zinoviev, Kamenev and

Stalin stood at the head of the Bolshevik Party instead of Lenin and Trotsky, the opportunity would undoubtedly have been thrown away. Then all those clever historians who now pontificate on the stupidity of Kerensky and Nicholas for not doing this or that would be writing their doctoral theses on how intelligent and far-sighted they were, and how utopian were Lenin and Trotsky for imagining that the workers could have assumed power.

Accidents can certainly play a role in history, including mistakes, and a regime that is poised on the brink of an abyss is highly prone to making mistakes. The Provisional Government committed a first-class error in demanding the dispatch of two-thirds of the Petrograd garrison to the front. This was a clumsy attempt to weaken the revolutionary garrison in the capital, but instead it was a godsend to the Bolsheviks, for two reasons. Firstly, it caused a wave of indignation in the barracks, pushing even the most backward layers towards the Bolsheviks. Even those regiments that had participated in suppressing the July demonstrations passed resolutions condemning the Provisional Government and calling on the soviets to take power. Secondly, it showed that the government was preparing to go onto the offensive against Red Petrograd. The revolution was entitled to take action in its own self-defence. This was something that every worker and soldier could understand. And it silenced the waverers in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. Even the reformist leaders, in spite of themselves, were being forced into semi-opposition to the government.

The Soviet Executive itself was forced to refuse to give its signature to this demand. The Bolsheviks led the agitation against it, and demanded the setting up of the Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee, an official Soviet body which soon acquired enormous power and became practically the cutting edge of the October revolution. The MRC appointed commissars to every store and arms depot without opposition. From then on, no arms could be moved without the permission of the Committee. Trotsky's order to the Sestoretsky Small Arms factory for the issue of 5,000 rifles to the Red Guard provoked something like panic in bourgeois circles which raised a hue and cry about the Bolsheviks massacring the bourgeois, but the rifles were issued anyway. Thus, the preparations for the insurrection were taking place under the very noses of the authorities who were powerless to prevent them.

Yet the number of Red Guards in Petrograd was very small. Estimates vary from 23,000 to as few as 12,000. Such a small force could never have defeated the full might of the old state apparatus. But the essence of the matter was the fact that the political work of the Bolsheviks in the nine months prior to October had succeeded in winning over the masses, and thereby also the decisive sections of the army. As the leading figure of the Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee, Trotsky was personally responsible for winning over the Petrograd garrison, as Marcel Liebman points out: "On October 23 the leaders of the insurrection learned that the garrison of the fortress refused to recognise the authority of the Military Revolutionary Committee. Antonov-Ovseyenko proposed to send in a revolutionary battalion to disarm the garrison and take its place. Trotsky, however, urged that, instead of this risky operation, a more typically Bolshevik and *socialist* method be employed, that of political agitation. He went in person to the

fortress, called a general meeting of the soldiers, addressed them, won them over, and persuaded them to pass a resolution announcing their readiness to overthrow the Provisional Government.

“While the military preparation of the rising left much to be desired, its political preparation, during the last few days and hours before it began, was intense and exemplary. The regiments stationed in the capital rallied to the insurrection after listening to fiery speeches by Bolshevik delegates; the great meeting-halls of Petrograd, such as the Modern Circus, were never empty, and Bolshevik speakers (Trotsky outstandingly) used them to maintain or revive the revolutionary ardour of the workers, sailors and soldiers. The whole of October was, in Petrograd and in the provinces alike, a period of ceaseless political activity: the soviets of the various regions assembled in conferences and congresses; the Bolshevik Party, which had been obliged to postpone an extraordinary congress fixed for the end of the month, did the same. In October 1917 the permanent revolution took concrete form in a permanent debate. And if the masses took no direct part in the insurrection, this was, in the last analysis, because there was no need for them to do so. Their rallying to the Bolsheviks’ policy had been able to find other means of expression, appropriate to the proletarian and democratic character of the enterprise, and to socialist tradition.”[\[121\]](#)

It seems a paradox that, compared to all the preparatory work that went on before, the actual seizure of power seems almost like an afterthought. In his monumental work, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky describes in detail the ease in which Petrograd was taken. The peaceful nature of the revolution was ensured by the fact that the Bolsheviks, under Trotsky’s leadership, had already won over the Petrograd garrison. In the chapter *The Conquest of the Capital*, he explains the manner in which the workers took control of the key Peter and Paul fortress:

“All the troops of the fortress garrison accepted the arrest of the commandant with complete satisfaction, but the bicycle men bore themselves evasively. What lay concealed behind their sulky silence: a hidden hostility or the last waverings? ‘We decided to hold a special meeting for the bicycle men,’ writes Blagonravov, ‘and invite our best agitational forces, and above all Trotsky, who had enormous authority and influence over the soldier masses.’ At four o’clock in the afternoon the whole battalion met in the neighbouring building of the Cirque Moderne. As governmental opponent, Quartermaster-General Poradelov, considered to be a Social-Revolutionary, took the floor. His objections were so cautious as to seem equivocal; and so much the more destructive was the attack of the Committee’s representatives. This supplementary oratorical battle for the Peter and Paul fortress ended as might have been foreseen: by all voices except 30 the battalion supported the resolution of Trotsky. *One more of the potential bloody conflicts was settled before the fighting and without bloodshed. That was the October insurrection. Such was its style.*”[\[122\]](#)

From the beginning Lenin insisted that the insurrection must take place on the basis of the mass movement. Shortly before the October revolution he wrote that the “insurrection

must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class... Insurrection must rely upon *a revolutionary upsurge of the people*".[\[123\]](#)

### **Was October a Coup?**

Bourgeois critics of Bolshevism frequently describe the October revolution as a coup. That argument is false to the core. The revolution took place over nine months, during which the Bolshevik Party, using the most democratic means, won over the decisive majority of the workers and poor peasants. The fact that they succeeded so easily in overcoming the resistance of the Kerensky forces can only be explained by this fact. Moreover, as we shall see, there is no way that the Bolsheviks could have held onto power, without the support of the overwhelming majority of society. At every stage, the decisive role was played by the active intervention of the masses. This is what set its stamp on the whole process. The ruling class and its political and military representatives could only grind their teeth, but were powerless to prevent power from slipping from their hands. True, they were involved in constant conspiracies against the Revolution, including the armed uprising of General Kornilov, which aimed at overthrowing Kerensky and instituting a military dictatorship, but all of this foundered on the movement of the masses.

The fact that the masses supported the Bolsheviks was accepted by everyone at the time, including the staunchest enemies of the Revolution. Naturally, they put this down to all kinds of malign influences, "demagogy", the immaturity of the workers and peasants, their supposed ignorance, and all the rest of the arguments which are essentially directed against democracy itself. How it came about that the masses only became ignorant and immature when they ceased to support the Provisional Government must be one of the greatest mysteries since Saint Paul saw the light on the road to Damascus. But if we leave aside the obvious motivation of spitefulness, malice and impotent rage, we can see that the following passage from a right-wing paper constitutes a valuable admission that the Bolsheviks indeed enjoyed the support of the masses. On 28 October, *Russkaya Volya* wrote the following: "What are the chances of Bolshevik success? It is difficult to answer that question, for *their principal support is the ... ignorance of the popular masses*. They speculate on it, they work upon it by a demagogy which nothing can stop."[\[124\]](#)

It is impossible to understand what happened in 1917 without seeing the fundamental role of the masses. The same is true of the French Revolution of 1789-94, a fact which historians frequently fail to grasp (there are exceptions, notably the anarchist Kropotkin, and, in our own times, George Rudé). But here for the first time in history, if we exclude the brief but glorious episode of the Paris Commune, the working class actually succeeded in taking power and at least beginning the socialist transformation of society. That is precisely why the enemies of socialism are compelled to lie about the October revolution and slander it. They cannot forgive Lenin and the Bolsheviks for having succeeded in leading the first successful socialist revolution, for proving that such a thing is possible, and therefore pointing the way for future generations. Such a precedent is dangerous! It is therefore necessary to "prove" (with the assistance of the usual crew of "objective" academics) that this was all a very bad business, and must not be repeated.

The claim that the October revolution was only a coup is often justified by pointing to the relatively small numbers actually involved in the insurrection itself. This apparently profound argument does not resist the slightest scrutiny. In the first place, it confuses the armed insurrection with the revolution, that is to say, it confuses the part with the whole. In reality, the insurrection is only a part of the revolution—a very important part, it is true. Trotsky likens it to the crest of a wave. As a matter of fact, the amount of fighting that took place in Petrograd was very small. One can say that it was bloodless. The reason for this was that nine-tenths of the tasks were already accomplished beforehand, by winning over the decisive majority of the workers and soldiers. It was still necessary to use armed force to overcome the resistance of the old order. No ruling class has ever surrendered power without a fight. But resistance was minimal. The government collapsed like a house of cards, *because nobody was prepared to defend it*.

In Moscow, mainly because of the mistakes of the local Bolsheviks, who did not act with sufficient energy, the counter-revolutionary Junkers initially went onto the offensive and carried out a massacre. Despite this, incredibly, they were allowed to go free on giving their word that they would not participate in any further violent acts against the Soviet power. This kind of thing was quite typical of the early days of the Revolution, characterised by a certain naivety on the part of the masses who had yet to understand what terrible violence the defenders of the old order were capable. Far from being a bloodthirsty regime of terror, the Revolution was an extraordinarily benign affair—until the counter-revolution showed its real nature. The White General P. Krasnov was one of the first to lead an uprising against the Bolsheviks at the head of the Cossacks. He was defeated by the Red Guards and handed over by his own Cossacks, but again was released on parole. Of this Victor Serge writes correctly:

“The revolution made the mistake of showing magnanimity to the leader of the Cossack attack. He should have been shot on the spot. At the end of a few days he recovered his liberty, after giving his word of honour never to take up arms again against the revolution. But what value can promises of honour have towards enemies of fatherland and property? He was to go off to put the Don region to fire and the sword.”[\[125\]](#)

Do the relatively small numbers involved in the actual fighting mean that the October overturn was a coup? There are many similarities between the class war and war between nations. In the latter too, only a very small proportion of the population are in the armed forces. And only a small minority of the army is at the front. Of the latter, even in the course of a major battle, only a minority of the soldiers are normally engaged in fighting at any given time. Experienced soldiers know that a lot of time is spent waiting in idleness, even during a battle. Very often the reserves are never called into action. But without the reserves, no responsible general would order an advance. Moreover, it is not possible to wage war successfully without the wholehearted support of the population at home, even though they do not directly participate in the fighting. This lesson was carved on the nose of the Pentagon in the latter stages of the Vietnam war.

The awakening of the masses, their active participation, their initiative and creative power, lies at the heart of every great revolution. It was displayed in a truly spectacular

fashion in the nine months that separated the February from the October revolution. Time and time again, in February, in May, in June, in July, in September, the masses moved to transform society. If they did not immediately succeed, that was not for lack of trying, but because every time they were thrown back by their leaders, who stubbornly refused to take the power when it was presented to them on a plate. How many times since then have we seen the same thing? In Germany in 1918, 1920 and 1923; in Britain in 1926 and 1945; in Spain in 1936; in France in 1936 and again in 1968; in Portugal in 1974-75; in Italy in 1919-20, in 1943 and in 1969 and throughout the 1970s; in Pakistan in 1968-69; in Chile in 1970-73, and in many other countries throughout the world. In every case, after the leadership has thrown away the possibility of changing society even by peaceful means and prepared the victory of reaction, the same cynics wheel out the same tired old arguments: that the objective situation was not ripe; that the balance of forces was unfavourable; that the masses were not ready; that the state was too strong, and so on and so forth. The blame for defeat is always placed at the feet of the soldiers who fought, but never on the generals who refused to lead. And if, instead of Lenin and Trotsky, the leadership of the Bolshevik Party had been in the hands of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, these same ladies and gentlemen would now be writing, with an impressive battery of facts, how the Russian revolution was doomed to defeat from the beginning, on account of the hopelessness of the objective situation, the unfavourable class balance of forces, and the “immaturity” of the masses.

Actually, the masses displayed the greatest maturity and initiative, as they do in every revolution. The awakening of the masses, their high level of consciousness, their newly found pride in themselves as thinking human beings is manifested in a thousand ways. It is best revealed, not by dry statistics, but precisely by anecdotes which bring the statistics to life, like the one cited by that most perceptive observer of the Russian revolution, John Reed:

“All around them great Russia was in travail, bearing a new world. The servants one used to treat like animals and pay next to nothing, were getting independent. A pair of shoes cost more than 100 roubles, and as wages averaged about 35 roubles a month the servants refused to stand in *queue* and wear out their shoes. But more than that. In the new Russia every man and woman could vote; there were working-class newspapers, saying new and startling things; there were the Soviets; and there were the Unions. The *izvoshchiki* (cab-drivers) had a Union; they were also represented in the Petrograd Soviet. The waiters and hotel-servants were organised, and refused tips. On the walls of restaurants they put up signs which read ‘No tips taken here’ or, ‘Just because a man has to make his living waiting on table is no reason to insult him by offering him a tip’.”[\[126\]](#)

The argument that the Bolsheviks were able to take power without the masses (a coup) is usually linked to the idea that power was seized, not by the working class, but by a party. Again, this argument is entirely false. Without organisation—the trade unions and the party—the working class is only raw material for exploitation. This was already pointed out by Marx long ago. True, the proletariat possesses enormous power. Not a wheel turns, not a light bulb shines, without its permission. But without organisation, this power remains as just potential. In the same way, steam is a colossal force, but without a piston

box, it will be harmlessly dissipated into the air. In order that the strength of the working class should cease to be a mere potential and become a reality, it must be organised and concentrated in a single point. This can only be done through a political party with a courageous and far-sighted leadership and a correct programme. The Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, was such a party. Basing themselves on the magnificent movement of the masses, they gave it form, purpose and a voice. That is its cardinal sin from the standpoint of the ruling class and its echoes in the labour movement. That is what lies behind their hatred and loathing of Bolshevism, their vitriol and spiteful attitude towards it, which completely conditions their attitude even three generations later.

Far from moving behind the backs of the masses, the Bolsheviks were the party that gave a conscious expression to the strivings of the working class to change society. As a matter of fact, throughout the course of 1917, if anything, the party often lagged behind the revolutionary mood of the masses, a fact that was quickly grasped by Lenin, and which is clear from countless sources, like the following extract from the memoirs of a prominent Bolshevik activist, the sailor Raskolnikov, who recalls a mass meeting of soldiers which he addressed shortly before the insurrection: “I was amazed at the militant mood of revolutionary impatience I found at this meeting. I felt that every one of these thousands of soldiers and workers was ready at any moment to take to the streets, arms in hand. Their ebullient feelings, their seething hatred of the Provisional Government was not at all disposed towards passivity. Only at Kronstadt, on the eve of the July affair, had I observed a similar ferment of revolutionary passion yearning for action. This still further strengthened my profound conviction that the cause of the proletarian revolution was on the right road.”[\[127\]](#)

It is necessary to add that at every stage the Bolsheviks always had before them the perspective of the international revolution. They never believed that they could hold power in Russia alone. This burning spirit of internationalism runs like a red thread through all the writings and speeches of Lenin. As late as 24 October, Lenin wrote to the party leaders an impassioned call to action: “With all my might, I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by peoples, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed people.”[\[128\]](#)

### **The Triumph of Bolshevism**

The actual seizure of power passed off so smoothly that many did not realise it had taken place. For this reason, the enemies of the October revolution present it as a coup. In fact, there are two reasons why it went so smoothly—one technical, the other political. The technical preparations for the final offensive were meticulously carried out by the Military Revolutionary Committee under the leadership of Trotsky. The basic rule, as always in warfare, was to concentrate, at the decisive moment and at the decisive point, an overwhelming superiority of force, and then strike hard. But this did not exhaust the question of tactics in the insurrection. The element of surprise and of manoeuvring to deceive the enemy as to the real intentions of the revolutionaries played a role here, as in

any other kind of military operation. Every step was presented as a defensive move, but in practice, the character of the insurrection was necessarily offensive, moving swiftly to take one position after another, taking the enemy unawares and off-guard.

But the real reason why the insurrection was carried off so quickly and almost painlessly was neither military nor technical, but political. Nine tenths of the work of the insurrection had already been accomplished beforehand—by winning a clear majority in the workers' and soldiers' soviets. In the moment of truth, the Provisional Government, like the tsarist regime in February, had no-one to defend it. The real position at the moment of the insurrection is shown by the statements of one of the main players—Kerensky. In an extract pregnant with unconscious irony, he writes:

“The night of October 24-25 was a time of tense expectation. We were waiting for troops to arrive from the front. They had been summoned by me in good time and were due in Petrograd on the morning of October 25. But instead of the troops, all we got were telegrams and telephone messages saying that the railways were being sabotaged.

“By morning (October 25) the troops had not yet arrived. The central telephone exchange, post office, and most of the government offices were occupied by detachments of Red Guards. The building that housed the Council of the Republic, which only the day before had been the scene of an endless and stupid discussion, had also been occupied by Red sentries.”[\[129\]](#)

The same Kerensky who had earlier boasted to the British ambassador that he was just waiting for the Bolsheviks to make a move, in order to put them down, now found himself with no troops to do the job and was obliged to flee Petrograd in a car graciously lent by the American embassy.

This is not the place to repeat the history of the insurrection, which is sufficiently well known from the writings of John Reed and Leon Trotsky. What is astonishing about the October revolution is the degree to which it was played out in the full glare of public attention. If people were not aware that the Bolsheviks intended to take power, then the public declarations of Kamenev and Zinoviev would soon have alerted them to the fact. The French paper *Entente* published in Petrograd on November 15, one week after the revolution, commented: “The Government of Kerensky discusses and hesitates. The Government of Lenin and Trotsky attacks and acts.

“This last is called a Government of Conspirators, but that is wrong. Government of usurpers, yes, like all revolutionary Governments which triumph over their adversaries. Conspirators—no!

“No! They did not conspire. On the contrary, openly, audaciously, without mincing words, without dissimulating their intentions, they multiplied their agitation, intensified their propaganda in the factories, the barracks, at the Front, in the country, everywhere, even fixing in advance the date of their taking up arms, the date of their seizure of the power...

“They—conspirators? Never...”[\[130\]](#)

Towards the evening of October 24, groups of Red Guards began to occupy the print shops of the bourgeois press, where they printed large numbers of revolutionary proclamations as well as Bolshevik papers like *Rabochy Put'* and *Soldat*. Soldiers ordered to attack the printshops refused to obey orders. This was the general picture in Petrograd. Resistance was practically non-existent. As sleepy delegates to the Congress watched from doorways—some with alarm, others with expectation, detachments of soldiers and sailors departed from the Smolny palace to key points of the city. By one o'clock in the morning, they had occupied the telegraph agency. Half an hour later, the post office was taken. At five o'clock, the telephone exchange followed. By ten o'clock in the morning, a cordon was thrown around the Winter Palace, where some resistance was anticipated. In point of fact, it fell, not with a bang, but a whimper.

The October insurrection merely legitimised what was a self-evident reality. Everyone knew that the Bolsheviks and their allies would have a decisive majority at the Congress of Soviets. The decision was therefore made that the insurrection should *coincide* with the opening of the Congress. The formal aspect here quite clearly had to take second place to the exigencies of a military operation. The notion that the question of an armed uprising should be determined by the result of a public debate in the Congress is as ludicrous as would be the demand that the plans for battle should be publicly debated in parliament in time of war. Anyone who demanded such a thing would undoubtedly be branded a traitor and probably locked up in an asylum for the criminally insane. Yet such considerations do not prevent the critics of October from complaining that Lenin and Trotsky did not wait for the formal approval of the Congress of Soviets before launching the offensive. Such arguments are without a shred of validity. The opinion of the overwhelming majority of the workers and soldiers was already well known: that the Soviets should take power. That question had been settled in advance, and the Congress simply put a stamp on it. Once this central question was resolved, the issue of when and how the rising should be carried out—a purely technical and military decision—had to be determined by the appropriate bodies, in this case the Military Revolutionary Committee, according to the rules, not of formal democracy, but of war.

At 2.35 p.m., Trotsky opened an emergency session of the Petrograd Soviet. Stepping up to the tribune, he shouted the words everyone had been waiting for: “On behalf of the Military Revolutionary Committee, I declare that the Provisional Government no longer exists! Long live the Military Revolutionary Committee!” One after another, he listed the conquests of the insurrection, pausing only to explain the situation of the Winter Palace:

“The Winter Palace has not been taken, but its fate will be decided momentarily...In the history of the revolutionary movement I know of no other examples in which such huge masses were involved and which developed so bloodlessly. The power of the Provisional Government headed by Kerensky, was dead and awaited the blow of the broom of history which had to sweep it away... The population slept peacefully and did not know that at this time one power was replaced by another.”[\[131\]](#)

At that point, Lenin entered the hall, still disguised as a workman. In the middle of his speech, Trotsky paused and turned to the man to whom he was now completely united as a comrade-in-arms. All the differences of the past forgotten in the heat of struggle. “Long live Comrade Lenin, back with us again,” were Trotsky’s words as he ceded the speakers’ platform to Lenin, who now addressed the delegates for the first time. In his historic speech to the Congress of Soviets on October 25 1917, he said:

“Comrades, the workers’ and peasants’ revolution, about the necessity of which the Bolsheviks have always spoken, has been accomplished.

“What is the significance of this workers’ and peasants’ revolution? Its significance is, first of all, that we shall have a Soviet government, our own organ of power, in which the bourgeoisie will have no share whatsoever. The oppressed masses will themselves create a power. The old state apparatus will be shattered to its foundations and a new administrative apparatus set up in the form of the Soviet organisations.

“From now on, a new phase in the history of Russia begins, and this, the third Russian revolution, should in the end lead to the victory of socialism.

“One of our urgent tasks is to put an immediate end to the war. It is clear to everybody that in order to end this war, which is closely bound up with the present capitalist system, capital itself must be fought.

“We shall be helped in this by the world working-class movement, which is already beginning to develop in Italy, Britain and Germany.

“The proposal we make to international democracy for a just and immediate peace will everywhere awaken an ardent response among the international proletarian masses. All the secret treaties must be immediately published in order to strengthen the confidence of the proletariat.

“Within Russia a huge section of the peasantry have said that they have played long enough with the capitalists, and will now march with the workers. A single decree putting an end to landed proprietorship will win us the confidence of the peasants. The peasants will understand that the salvation of the peasantry lies only in an alliance with the workers. We shall institute genuine workers’ control over production.

“We have now learned to make a concerted effort. The revolution that has just been accomplished is evidence of this. We possess the strength of mass organisation, which will overcome everything and lead the proletariat to the world revolution.

“We must now set about building a proletarian socialist state in Russia.

“Long live the world socialist revolution! (*stormy applause.*)”[\[132\]](#)

## **The Struggle at the Congress**

To all intents and purposes, the insurrection had triumphed. The only goal that had not yet been achieved was the taking of the Winter Palace which remained in the hands of forces loyal to the government. Lenin, who had hoped that the uprising would all be over before the opening of the Congress of Soviets, displayed his impatience at the delay, which was caused by the inexperience of the insurrectionists. The political preparations for the uprising had been carried out with far greater professionalism than the technical side, which was far from perfect. There were many organisational defects. Troops arrived late because a locomotive had burst its pipes, the shells for the assault cannon proved to be the wrong size, they could not find a red lantern to signal the start of the attack, and so on. But in the end, none of this was decisive. Such anecdotes belong to the category of historical accidents. What was decisive was the winning over of the masses which left the Provisional Government isolated and defenceless in the moment of truth. Thus, although there were originally 3,000 defenders inside the Winter Palace, they just melted away in the course of the night. The real situation was understood by the commanding officers inside. A council of war was convened, at which Admiral Verderevsky made the most pertinent observation: "I don't know why this session was called," he said. "We have no tangible military force and consequently are incapable of taking any action whatever."

The taking of the Winter Palace was a bloodless affair, more akin to a police operation. When warning shots were fired from the cruiser Aurora, the garrison simply melted away into the night. The right SR Minister of Agriculture Semyon Maslov rang the Duma in a state of despair: "The democracy sent us into the Provisional Government; we didn't want the appointments but we went. Yet now, when tragedy has struck, when we are being shot, *we are not supported by anyone.*"<sup>[133]</sup> When the assault was finally launched, there was no resistance. At about 2 a.m., while the tired and demoralised members of the Provisional Government waited around the table, the door burst open and, in the words of one of those present: "A little man flew into the room, like a chip tossed by a wave, under the pressure of the mob which poured in and spread at once, like water filling all corners of the room." The little man was Antonov-Ovseyenko of the Military Revolutionary Committee. "The Provisional Government is here—what do you want?" asked the Minister Konovalov. "You are all under arrest," came the peremptory reply.

The start of the Congress of Soviets had been scheduled for 2 p.m., but was delayed, finally opening its doors at 10.40 p.m., while the siege of the Winter Palace was still in progress. The debates were occasionally punctuated by the sound of gun-fire. Inside the Congress, a dramatic scene was being played out. "It had been a momentous session," wrote John Reed. "In the name of the Military Revolutionary Committee Trotsky had declared that the Provisional Government no longer existed.

"The characteristic of bourgeois governments,' he said, 'is to deceive the people. We, the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, are going to try an experiment unique in history; we are going to found a power which will have no other aim but to satisfy the needs of the soldiers, workers, and peasants'."

The voting strength at the Congress gave the Bolsheviks and their Left SR allies a clear majority. Out of a total of 670 delegates, there were 300 Bolsheviks, 193 SRs—of whom more than half were Lefts—and 82 Mensheviks—of whom 14 were Internationalists. As we have seen, the Bolsheviks had a crushing domination in the key industrial centres in the north and west. And their support was still growing. The congress opened with the election of the Soviet presidium. The Bolsheviks presented a joint slate with the Left SRs and Menshevik Internationalists. The result was: 14 Bolsheviks, seven SRs, and four Mensheviks. However, the latter refused to take the seats allocated to them. The overwhelming majority of the Congress voted for the formation of a Soviet government.

The indignation of the Mensheviks and SRs knew no bounds. When Trotsky announced that the insurrection had triumphed, that troops loyal to the Provisional Government were advancing against Petrograd, and that a delegation must be sent to them to tell them the truth, there were howls of “You are anticipating the will of the Congress of Soviets!” But the time for formal niceties was long past. Trotsky answered coldly: “The will of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets has been anticipated by the rising of the Petrograd workers and soldiers.”

The Mensheviks and SRs were not alone in their opposition to the uprising. Even at this late hour, the Bolshevik Conciliators were still against taking power. John Reed reports a momentary encounter with Ryazanov, the vice-chairman of the trade unions, “looking black and biting his grey beard. ‘It’s insane! Insane!’ he shouted. ‘The European working class won’t move! All Russia—He waved his hand distractedly and ran off.’” Martov, now a very sick man, maintained his vacillations right to the end. Lenin’s hopes that he would at last find his way to the revolutionary camp proved futile. Martov insisted on the formation of a coalition government with the right-wing socialist leaders “in order to prevent civil war”. This proposal would, in effect, have nullified the insurrection and put the clock back to where it had been before. Such an outcome was unthinkable. Lenin and Trotsky were both against it, but the conciliators were in favour. On behalf of the Bolshevik contingent, Lunacharsky announced that he had nothing against the proposal, which was actually passed. But the Mensheviks immediately revealed the complete hollowness of the proposal by denouncing the overthrow of the Provisional Government, and walking out of the Congress. As they walked out, in the midst of jeers and whistles from the delegates, Trotsky’s voice thundered after them: “All these so-called Socialist compromisers, these frightened Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, *Bund*—let them go! They are just so much refuse which will be swept into the garbage-heap of history!”[\[134\]](#)

The victory of the insurrection was not the final episode of the Bolshevik revolution. The forces of reaction rallied and attempted a counter-attack which was defeated. Then a bloody civil war was unleashed against the Bolsheviks that lasted another four years. In this conflict the Soviet power was confronted with the might of world imperialism in the shape of 21 foreign armies of intervention. At one point, all the territory that remained in the hands of the Bolsheviks was the area around Moscow and Petrograd—approximately equivalent to the old Muscovy. Yet one by one the enemies of the revolution were thrown back. From the shattered remnants of the old tsarist army Trotsky fashioned a new

proletarian force, the Red Army, which astonished the world with its victories. The heroism, organisation and discipline of the Red Army were the key to victory, but it could never have succeeded without the internationalist appeal of the Bolshevik revolution. Through the medium of the Communist International, Lenin and Trotsky issued an appeal to the workers of the world, which was taken up with enthusiasm. The British dockers refused to load arms ships bound to counter-revolutionary Poland. There were mutinies in every one of the armies dispatched against the Bolsheviks. Against all expectations, the Soviet power survived to show the world for the first time that it is possible to run society without private capitalists, bankers and landowners. It is true that, under conditions of terrible economic and cultural backwardness, the Russian revolution suffered a process of bureaucratic degeneration. But not before it had provided a spectacular proof of the tremendous potential of a nationalised planned economy.

“The historic ascent of humanity taken as a whole, may be summarised as a succession of victories of consciousness over blind forces—in nature, in society, in man himself. Critical and creative thought can boast of its greatest victories up to now in the struggle with nature. The physico-chemical sciences have already reached a point where man is clearly about to become master of matter. But social relations are still forming in the manner of the coral islands. Parliamentarism illumined only the surface of society, and even that with a rather artificial light. In comparison with monarchy and other heirlooms from the cannibals and cave-dwellers, democracy is of course a great conquest, but it leaves the blind play of forces in the social relations of men untouched. It was against this deeper sphere of the unconscious that the October revolution was the first to raise its hand. The Soviet system wishes to bring aim and plan into the very basis of society, where up to now only accumulated consequences have reigned.”[\[135\]](#)

We will leave the final word to a great revolutionary who has too often been falsely portrayed as an implacable opponent of Lenin and Bolshevism. From her prison cell in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg greeted the October revolution with the following words:

“Only a party which knows how to lead, that is, to advance things, wins support in stormy times. The determination with which, at the decisive moment, Lenin and his comrades offered the only solution which could advance things (‘all power in the hands of the proletariat and peasantry’), transformed them almost overnight from a persecuted, slandered, outlawed minority whose leader had to hide like Marat in cellars, into the absolute master of the situation.

“Moreover, the Bolsheviks immediately set as the aim of this seizure of power a complete, far-reaching revolutionary program: not the safeguarding of bourgeois democracy, but a dictatorship of the proletariat for the purpose of realising socialism. Thereby they won for themselves the imperishable historic distinction of having for the first time proclaimed the final aim of socialism as the direct program of practical politics.

“Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary far-sightedness and consistency in an historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky and the other comrades have given in good measure. All the revolutionary honour and capacity which Western Social Democracy lacked was

represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian revolution; it was also the salvation of the honour of international socialism.”

Rosa Luxemburg’s final judgement on the Bolshevik Party can stand as the last word of the history of the greatest revolutionary party in history:

“What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescences in the policies of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: ‘I have dared!’

“This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realisation of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labour in the entire world. In Russia the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved in Russia. And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to ‘Bolshevism’.”[\[136\]](#)

## NOTES

[A] Liebman gives this figure. Schapiro, quoting different sources, puts it at 200,000.

[112] LCW, *The Turning-Point*, vol. 25, p. 83.

[113] Raskolnikov, op. cit., pp. 256-7.

[114] LCW, vol. 26, p. 547, note.

[115] Anweiler, op. cit., p. 194.

[116] Quoted in Rabinovitch, op. cit., p. 226.

[117] Liebman, op. cit., p. 158.

[118] LCW, *The Russian Revolution and Civil War*, vol. 26, p. 32.

[119] *Protokoly Tsentral'nogo Komiteta RSDRP b*, p. 116.

[120] See LCW, *Letter to the CC of the RSDLP(B)*, vol. 26, pp. 223-7.

- [121] M. Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, pp. 179-80.
- [122] *Ibid.*, pp. 211-2 (my emphasis).
- [123] LCW, *Marxism and Insurrection*, vol. 26, p. 22.
- [124] Quoted in J. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, p. 298 (my emphasis).
- [125] Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, p. 87.
- [126] J. Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- [127] Raskolnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
- [128] LCW, *Letter to Central Committee Members*, vol. 26, p. 234.
- [129] Kerensky, *Memoirs*, p. 437.
- [130] Quoted by John Reed in *Ten Days that Shook the World*, p. 107.
- [131] Quoted in A. Rabinovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 278.
- [132] LCW, *Meeting of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, October 25 (November 7), 1917*, vol. 26, pp. 239-40.
- [133] Rabinovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 284 and 290 (my emphasis).
- [134] J. Reed, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-3, 123 and 131.
- [135] Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 1191.
- [136] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 39-40 and 80.

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