

# **Revolutionary Marxism Study Series**

# **The Revolutionary Party and the Working Class**

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# Marxism and the Party

by John Molyneux

## 1. Lenin and the Birth of Bolshevism

Although Marxism in general is, as Gramsci put it, a “philosophy of action” and thus hostile to fatalism, Marx himself, as we have shown, owing to the prevailing conditions and his determination to avoid sectarianism never fully emancipated himself from a fatalist conception of political organization. The political party of the proletariat would emerge gradually, spontaneously, from the broad struggle of the working class. In social democracy this fatalist tendency thoroughly consolidated itself in the sphere of organization and then extended itself to the theory of capitalist development, the proletarian revolution, and the nature of human activity itself. The practice of Bolshevism and the organizational ideas of Lenin marked a break with this fatalism, and thus constituted a tremendous step forward for Marxist theory not only in relation to social democracy but also in relation to Marx. Only with Lenin was the concept of a broad party that *represents*, or *is*, the working class replaced by that of a “minority” party (in the prerevolutionary period) which is the *vanguard* of the class and which, since it is the organizational embodiment of the socialist future of that class, has a duty to defend itself from and struggle against all manifestations of opportunism.

### 1. The background to Bolshevism

Bolshevism was no “Venus” born fully grown from the waves—it developed and grew through a host of struggles, internal and external. Nor can it be seen simply as the product of Lenin’s organizational genius. The idealization of Lenin that is general in Marxist circles combined with the tendency of Stalinist theoreticians to write Russian revolutionary history as though there were only two protagonists, the Russian people and Lenin (most other individuals having become unpersons), has created an image of Bolshevism as invented by Lenin much as Watt invented the steam engine. In fact the break with gradualism in the sphere of organization was itself a gradual and only semi-conscious process, though one marked by many sharp and conscious struggles. Leninism was the product of a sustained and developing revolutionary response to a concrete situation, and to understand that response we must look at the elements in the situation that made it possible.

The first factor which springs to mind as a source of Bolshevism is what Tony Cliff calls “the tradition of substitutionism in the Russian revolutionary movement.” This tradition was indeed very strong. In the 1860s and 1870s sometimes tens, occasionally hundreds, of heroic and idealistic intellectuals pitted themselves against the autocracy, alternatively “going to the people” as their educators and enlighteners and “acting on behalf of the people” with daring acts of terrorism. And in so doing these Narodniks gained the undying respect and admiration of Russian revolutionaries including Lenin especially, who refers repeatedly to their “devoted determination and vigour.” To strengthen the case various pieces of biographical evidence can be thrown in: the formative influence on Lenin of such basically elitist writers as Chernychevsky and Tkachev, and of course the fate of his brother, executed for terrorism.

However, this argument, superficially attractive as it is, will not bear critical examination. It ignores the fact that Lenin cut his theoretical teeth precisely in the struggle against Narodism; that he opposed individual terrorism throughout his life; that he refused to countenance a seizure of power in 1917 until the Bolsheviks had a majority in the soviets; and that he waged a most vigorous struggle against all forms of “putschism,” of attempts at uprisings by minorities, at the third Congress of the Communist International (1921).

It was not terrorism but the situation which produced terrorism that was an important factor in the development of Lenin’s ideas. Lenin could break decisively with the romantic and utopian theories of the terrorists, he could adhere absolutely to the theory of the class struggle as the lever of the social revolution, but he could not break with the reality of the Tsarist police. Under Tsarism political repression remained virtually absolute and so did the ban on all trade-union and strike activity.

In such a situation the social-democratic model of a broad mass party representing the whole of the working class was simply impossible. “Only an incorrigible utopian would have a *broad* organization of workers ... under the autocracy.” In fact as far as combating the Tsarist police was concerned, the *smaller* the organization the better. Inextricably linked to the question of size and secrecy was the need for efficiency and vigorous training. Need for efficiency which is hammered home again and again in *What is to be done?*, and which was almost certainly the main objective factor in determining the success of this work at the time, gives rise to the concept of the professional revolutionary as the basis of the revolutionary organization. Summing up his views on this aspect of the argument Lenin writes:

[I]n an autocratic state, the more we *confine* the membership of such an organization to people who are professionally engaged in revolutionary activity and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to unearth the organization.

The eminent practicality of this emphasis on secrecy, training and professionalism in organization should be clear. But this element of pure practicality or necessity in Lenin’s theory of organization can easily be exaggerated. If immediate expediency were the sole consideration, then it would be true to say with Leonard Schapiro (and many other commentators) that “Lenin’s conceptions had perhaps moved nearer to the conspiratorial ideas of Narodnaya Volya, and away from Marx’s conception of the historic mission of an entire class.” In fact this was not so; the hard core of professional revolutionaries were not seen as an end in themselves but as a means. Lenin stresses that the tighter the core of the party “the *greater will be* the number of people from the working class and from the other social classes who will be able to join the movement and perform active work in it.” Lenin’s perspective was *always* one of a mass class movement against the autocracy but one led by a vanguard party. “We are the party of a class, and therefore *almost the entire class* (and in times of war, in a period of civil war, the entire class) should act under the leadership of our party.” Furthermore, if it were merely practical necessity that determined Lenin’s thought, then his ideas would possess only local, temporary significance. Bolshevism would have proved a specifically Russian phenomenon, an exception to the rule, rather than the basis for a vast international movement and tradition. Indeed the conspiratorial elements in Lenin’s conception *are* historically limited and Lenin recognises

this.

Under conditions of political freedom our party will be built entirely on the elective principle. Under the autocracy this is impracticable for the collective thousands of workers that make up the party.

If it was the level of repression that made a broad Western-type party impossible, it was the particular social and political conjuncture in Russia and trends within the revolutionary movement that stimulated Lenin into new theoretical insights and enabled him to take a step forward from the social-democratic model rather than a step backwards to conspiracy. This situation must therefore be examined.

The primary distinction between the tasks of the revolutionary movement in Western Europe and in Russia was that in the West capitalism had been firmly established, whereas in Russia capitalism was still nascent and the bourgeois revolution had not yet been achieved. Thus whereas in the West Marxism presented itself straightforwardly as the theory of the overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat, in Russia Marxism appeared to many as the theory of the inevitability of the development of capitalism. Since the authorities at first regarded the terrorists as the main danger and the terrorists argued that Russia could side-step capitalism by means of an immediate revolution, Marxist criticism of terrorism and emphasis on the inevitability of capitalism was for a period welcomed or at least regarded as very much a lesser evil. This led to what became known as “legal Marxism,” and Marxism became a veritable fashion:

Marxist journals and newspapers were founded, nearly everyone became a Marxist, Marxists were flattered, Marxists were courted, and the book publishers rejoiced at the extraordinary ready sale of Marxist literature.

Inevitably in such a situation a coalition of “manifestly heterogeneous elements” occurred. In particular calling themselves Marxists were those who regarded capitalism as inevitable and progressive but who also wanted to fight it and overthrow it, and also calling themselves Marxists were those who in reality supported capitalism as such and for whom socialism was cloudy rhetoric for the dim and distant future. (The leading representative of the latter trend was Pyotr Struve, originally a collaborator of Lenin and Plekhanov, who was, in 1905, to found the bourgeois-democratic Cadet Party.) This meant that from very early on Lenin felt himself in the position of having to select very rigorously those who really wanted to fight from a large number of people who mouthed radical phrases. This was a major factor in conditioning Lenin’s doctrinal intransigence and especially his insistence on distinguishing between what people said and what they were actually prepared to do. This latter faculty, which was so acutely developed in Lenin and is one of the most striking features of all his writings, was to play an enormous role in the development of Bolshevism as a separate party.

The revolutionary Marxist answer to the problem of seeing capitalism as progressive and at the same time maintaining the complete independence of the proletariat for the fight against capitalism lay in the theory of the hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution. Originating in Plekhanov (“the Russian revolution will succeed as a workers’ revolution or it will not succeed at all”), though later abandoned by him, and adopted and refined by Lenin, this theory was to become a hallmark of Bolshevism in the pre-1917 period. The essence of this theory was that the Russian bourgeoisie arrived late on the scene, long after the bourgeoisie had ceased to be a revolutionary force on a world scale. Consequently the task of leading a revolution against the autocracy would fall to a proletariat which, although small, was developing rapidly in large scale modern industry and could ally itself to the tremendous elemental force of the peasant revolt. In order to accomplish this task the proletariat would have to adopt the overthrow of Tsarism as its first and most important demand and place itself in the vanguard of every struggle for democracy and political freedom.

## 2. The critique of “economism”

It was this theory which brought Lenin into conflict with the various trends which he grouped under the term “economism.” The main representatives of “economism” at the time were *Rabochaya Mysl* (*The Workers’ Thought*), a journal published in St. Petersburg from 1897 to 1902, and *Rabocheye Dyelo* (*The Workers’ Task*), the organ of the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad from 1899 to 1903—the latter assuming a position which could more strictly be described as semi-“economist.” The basic contention of the “economists” was that social democracy should concentrate its work not on the political struggle against the autocracy, but in serving and developing the economic struggle of the workers, and it was from the disputes with “economism” that many of the fundamental ideas of Bolshevism emerged. In order to understand and assess those ideas it will therefore be necessary to look at the disputes in some detail—but even before that it is necessary to look at the *context* in which the disputes occurred and simply to ask *why* they were so important.

The basic reason was that Lenin saw “economism” as leading inevitably to the abandonment of the hegemony of the proletariat in the coming democratic revolution by instituting a division of labor in which the workers would limit themselves to the trade union struggle, leaving politics to the bourgeoisie. Indeed it was the open advocacy of such a division in the document known as “The Credo,” by Y. D. Kuskova of the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad, that first spurred Lenin to take up the cudgels against “economism” with his “Protest by Russian Social Democrats” in August 1899. In “The Credo” Kuskova had written: “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.”

To Lenin such a course meant betrayal of the revolution, for “liberal opposition activity” (i.e. the bourgeoisie) was completely incapable of consistent revolutionary opposition to the autocracy. He held that any attempt to narrow down the tasks of the proletariat and the social-democratic movement would play into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and regarded *any* tendency towards “economism” as leading in that direction. In this way the debate over “economism” foreshadowed the central issue for the Russian Marxists during the next 17 years—the relative role and tasks of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the revolution—with a fundamental continuity existing between the position of early “economism” and late Menshevism that the leading role should go to the bourgeoisie.

From this it can be seen that Lenin was also correct in linking “economism” to the international trend to reformism or “revisionism” in social democracy, which he does right at the beginning of *What is to be done?* The “economists” shared the de facto split between economics and politics and asserted with Bernstein the importance of “the movement” (immediate demands) as against the “ultimate aim” (socialism or, in this case, the overthrow of Tsarism).

Fierce polemic, for Lenin, meant getting to the very root of the disputed questions and pursuing ruthlessly the logic of his own and his opponents’ arguments; thus these polemics, though rooted in concrete issues, invariably possess a certain universal significance. The product of the struggle against the “economists” was *What is to be done?* which, quite deservedly, has had an immense influence on Marxist theory and practice throughout the world and which, I would argue, has wrongly been regarded as *the* standard Marxist text on the theory of the party. Thus any critical study of the Marxist theory of the party must look very seriously at this work.

*What is to be done?* sums up all Lenin’s arguments against “economism” and his case for a nationwide revolutionary organization based on a cadre of professional revolutionaries and an all-Russia newspaper. Thus many of the points it makes are of a practical nature of the kind referred to earlier in this essay, but its central theme is the relationship of spontaneity and consciousness in the development of the revolutionary movement. The “economists,” holding that “politics

always obediently follows economics” and that therefore political consciousness would grow organically from economic struggles, contended that the main task of Marxists was to assist the economic struggle, and that Lenin and the Iskraits “belittled the spontaneous element” and “overestimated, consciousness.” But for Lenin even this method of presenting the problem was completely unsatisfactory. It was not that the spontaneous upsurge of the workers was unimportant (on the contrary it was profoundly important), but that its importance lay precisely in the demands that it made on consciousness, on organization. The programme of *Rabocheye Dyelo* stated:

We consider that the most important phenomenon of Russian life, the one that will mainly determine the tasks and the character of the publication activity of the Union, is the mass working-class movement which has arisen in recent years.

And Lenin comments:

That the mass movement is a most important phenomenon is not to be disputed. But the crux of the matter is, how is one to understand the statement that the mass working-class movement will “determine the tasks.” It may be interpreted in one of two ways. *Either* it means bowing to the spontaneity of this movement, i.e. reducing the role of social democracy to mere subservience to the working-class movement as such—or it means that the mass movement places before us *new* theoretical, political, and organizational tasks, far more complicated than those that might have satisfied us in the period before the rise of the mass movement.

This dialectical conception of the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness, the mass movement and the party, represents a tremendous step forward for Marxist theory and is an advance on any previous contribution to this problem (including that of Marx himself and especially that of German Social Democracy). Essentially it is the necessary starting point of a truly revolutionary theory of the party because it is a radical break with *fatalism*. “We revolutionary social democrats, on the contrary, are dissatisfied with this worship of spontaneity, i.e. of *that which exists ‘at the present moment.’*” [My emphasis—J. M.]

For Lenin the development of the class struggle itself, even its economic form, is a process of moving from “spontaneity” to “consciousness.”

Strikes occurred in Russia in the seventies and sixties (and even in the first half of the nineteenth century) and they were accompanied by the “spontaneous” destruction of machinery, etc. Compared with these “revolts,” the strikes of the nineties might even be described as “conscious,” to such an extent do they mark the progress which the working-class movement made in that period. This shows that the “spontaneous element” in essence, represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in *embryonic* form.

Lenin therefore sees it as the duty of the revolutionary always to assist the conscious element and work to overcome spontaneity.

But Lenin is not merely arguing for organization against lack of organization, for leadership against the “tail-ending” (tailism) of the “economists.” What is central to his attack on the “economists” and to his view of the nature of tasks of the party is his rejection of the notion that proletarian class-consciousness can develop gradually on the basis of an accumulation of economic struggles.

As Lukacs writes:

The impossibility of the economic evolution of capitalism into socialism was clearly proved by the Bernstein debates. Nevertheless, its ideological counterpart lived on uncontradicted in the minds of many honest European revolutionaries, and was, moreover, not even recognised as either a problem or a danger.

Lenin’s position on this was extreme and uncompromising.

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, op-

pression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what* class is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a social-democratic point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata and groups of the population.

And therefore:

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.

In practical terms this meant that it was necessary for social democrats not merely “to go among the workers,” but to “go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army *in all directions*.” Workers should be mobilised to take action in support of all victims of the autocracy including such groups as religious minorities and students. “The social democrats’ ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*...who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands.” Essential to this strategy was an all-Russia newspaper keeping a vigilant eye on every aspect of political and social life in Russia and able to mount nationwide political exposures. “Without a political organ, a political movement deserving that name is inconceivable in the Europe of today.”

It is perhaps necessary to point out in passing that of course Lenin in no way regarded this diversification of forces as a modification or compromise of the class basis of the party. On the contrary, it was possible only on the basis of a prolonged period of largely economic agitation in the working class. “In the earlier period, indeed, we had astonishingly few forces, and it was perfectly natural and legitimate then to devote ourselves exclusively to activities among the workers and to condemn severely any deviation from this course. The entire task then was to consolidate our position in the working class.” And in any case the whole purpose of the strategy was to ensure the hegemony of the proletariat in the struggle against the autocracy.

What is specifically and characteristically Leninist about this approach, and what distinguishes it from the methods of social democracy and the Second International, is *not* that Marxists fight for democratic rights and for reforms. That much was common ground and indeed second nature to German Social Democracy. But the social democrats fought for reforms because they were “progressive” and part of the development of capitalism into socialism; in other words, they fought for reforms *as reformists*. Whereas, for Lenin, the whole process was part of the battle for the class-consciousness of the proletariat, to enable it to grasp the relationships in action of all social classes and groups, and thus to fit itself for taking power. Thus for social democracy a yawning gap developed between the minimum and the maximum programme (between immediate demands and ultimate aim). While, for Lenin, all-sided political agitation was a means of bridging this gap and securing the predominance of the ultimate *revolutionary* aim.

### 3. Socialism from without?

At this point, we have summed up the main advances made by *What is to be done?* over the theory of the party to be found in Marx and prevailing in more dogmatic form in Russian “economism” and to a certain extent in European social democracy. But there remains an important aspect of Lenin’s argument we have not dealt with—important not because of its centrality to Lenin’s own theory and practice, but because of its influence on many later followers. We are referring to the thesis that “political consciousness” can only be introduced into the working-class movement “from without,” which is



inserted to give theoretical justification to the attack on spontaneism. This thesis appears in *What is to be done?* in two forms. One, which we have cited already, is that:

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.

The other is that:

We have said that *there could not have been* social-democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them 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, labor legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of social democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working-class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.

There is a clear distinction between the two formulations. The first is merely an extreme and slightly clumsy way of saying that workers need to understand the totality of social relations and all forms of oppression, knowledge of which comes from a much wider sphere than (“from without”) the factory. As such, one could quibble with the wording but the content is fairly unexceptionable. In the second formulation, however, “from without” means from outside the working class, specifically from the bourgeois intelligentsia, and moreover it carries with it an attempt at a positive account of the origins and development of the theory of scientific socialism. This raises problems of considerable theoretical significance, especially for the theory of the party, so it is necessary to embark on a fairly detailed critical analysis of Lenin’s conception here.

The first point that must be made is that Lenin was here expressing ideas taken directly from Karl Kautsky, and indeed he uses a quotation from Kautsky to provide himself with theoretical authority.

But socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other; each arises under different conditions. Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. Indeed modern economic science is as much a condition for socialist production as, say, modern technology, and the proletariat can create neither the one nor the other, no matter how much it may desire to do so; both arise out of the modern social process. The vehicle of science is not the proletariat but the bourgeois intelligentsia.

This resort to Kautsky, given the latter’s mechanical version of Marxism and his subsequent political development, is clearly a danger signal to those of us working with the benefit of hindsight, and a number of latter-day Leninists have been critical of this point. Trotsky comments that Lenin himself “subsequently acknowledged the biased nature, and therewith the erroneousness, of his theory.” Lucio Magri in a recent article calls the quotation from Kautsky an “enlightenment schema,” and Nigel Harris refers to it as an “elitist statement.”

The fundamental problem is that if one accepts literally the Lenin-Kautsky formulation that political consciousness derives from the bourgeois intelligentsia and at the same time that the political struggle must predominate over the economic struggle, then precious little is left of Marx’s fundamental dictum that “the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself”: on the contrary the role of the working class would be a strictly subordinate one. The truly revolutionary class would be not the working class but the discontented intellectuals, thus implicitly confirming the typical bourgeois picture of radical movements as made up of a malevolent middle-class leadership and an “innocent” manipulated working-class

rank-and-file. The division of mental and manual labor inherent in class society, far from being overcome, is carried over into the socialist movement and sanctified in the revolutionary party.

In fact the whole presentation of science, theory and socialist consciousness (which are here equated) is completely un-Marxist and has more in common with nineteenth century positivism and idealism. Science is seen as developing in complete isolation from social life, from practice. As far as the natural sciences, philosophy and bourgeois social science are concerned, this appears to be true insofar as the thinker tends to the isolation of the ivory tower, but in reality this is only an illusion, a mystification produced by class society. For this reason Marx refused to recognise philosophy or any other discipline as having its own history independent of the history of men active in society. Where the theory of socialism is concerned, even the relative and illusory autonomy of bourgeois science does not and should not exist if this theory is to be genuinely revolutionary. On the contrary, it must be intimately related to, influenced by and based upon the activity of the working class. Thus Marx writes:

Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeoisie, so the socialists and communists are the theorists of the proletariat. As long as the proletariat is not sufficiently developed to constitute itself as a class, as long therefore as the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie has not acquired a political character, and while the productive forces are not yet sufficiently developed, within bourgeois society itself, to give an indication of the material conditions necessary for the emancipation of the proletariat and the constitution of a new society, these theorists remain Utopians who, in order to remedy the distress of the oppressed classes, improvise systems and pursue a regenerative science. But as history continues, and as the struggle of the proletariat takes shape more clearly, they have no further need to look for a science in their own minds; they have only to observe what is happening before their eyes, and to make themselves its vehicle of expression.

Examination of the history of socialist and Marxist thought also clearly refutes the “Lenin-Kautsky” theory of “separate development.” The idea of socialism and the socialist revolution itself was not something invented or discovered by Marx; rather it emerged from the struggles of the masses as the extreme left wing of the bourgeois revolutions in England and France—witness the Levellers and Babeuf’s Conspiracy of Equals (which Marx referred to as the world’s first communist party). Raya Dunayevskaya in *Marxism and Freedom* records the impact of the American Civil War and the English workers’ struggle over the working day on the structure of *Capital*. She writes:

No one is more blind to the greatness of Marx’s contributions than those who praise him to the skies for his genius as if that genius matured outside of the actual struggles of the period in which he lived. As if he gained the impulses from the sheer development of his own thoughts instead of from the living workers changing living reality by their actions.

Indeed it was from the insurgent workers of Paris that Marx learned that the working class cannot simply take over the existing state machine but must smash it.

History also provides numerous examples of workers spontaneously rising to much greater heights than trade unionism and trade-union politics: the Chartists, the 1848 revolution in France, the Paris Commune, the Russian workers in 1905 and February 1917, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and so on.

But this critique of the way in which Lenin theoretically justified his position at this time does not, as some of Lenin’s hagiographers might maintain, undermine the whole basis of Lenin’s theory of the party. The fact of workers achieving socialist consciousness spontaneously does not entail a return to a social-democratic gradualist view, for this consciousness does not develop gradually, accumulating steadily and inevitably. On the contrary, it takes giant and sudden leaps forward and can suffer equally catastrophic shipwrecks. Nor

does the consciousness spread evenly through the class, so the consciousness of the advanced socialist workers must be organised and centralised to increase to the maximum its influence within the ideologically heterogeneous class as a whole. These ideas will be returned to and developed later in this work, especially when dealing with the contribution of Rosa Luxemburg.

#### 4. The Bolshevik-Menshevik split

Because of its great theoretical, historical and practical significance, *What is to be done?* tends to be regarded as the founding document of Bolshevism. In a certain sense this is correct, which is why we have subjected it to such detailed analysis. But it was not *What is to be done?* which directly occasioned the split of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party into Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. On the contrary, the pamphlet acted as a rallying point in the struggle for the second congress of the RSDLP, bringing together militants on an all-Russian basis, and having the apparently united support of the leading intellectuals of Russian Marxism—Plekhanov, Martov, Axelrod, Trotsky, etc. It was the attempt to put the programme of *What is to be done?* into practice that produced the split. Those who thought themselves in agreement in theory found themselves in violent disagreement when those theories were translated into practical rules and decisions at the Second Congress in London in 1903.

The history of the development of the split is both complicated and obscure. A blow-by-blow account of the disputes at the congress is available in Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* written immediately after the split in 1904. Briefly what happened was this. The formerly united (and dominant) Iskrist tendency within the party divided over the formulation of Paragraph 1 of the Rules. Martov's formulation was as follows: "A member of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party is one who accepts its programme, supports the Party financially, and renders it regular personal assistance under the direction of one of its organizations." Whereas Lenin's draft read: "A member of the Party is one who accepts its programme and who supports the Party both financially and *by personal participation* in one of the Party organizations." [My emphasis—J.M.] On this question the Iskrist split into two definite factions. Plekhanov supported Lenin, but when it came to the vote Martov, with the aid of anti-centralist "economist" elements still within the party, gained a majority. But with the secession of the *Rabocheye Dyelo* economists and the Bund at a later session, the majority passed to Lenin's faction, which enabled him to push through his slate of candidates for the *Iskra* editorial board. This replaced the old board of six (Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich, Lenin, Martov, Potresov) with a board of three (Lenin, Plekhanov, Martov). Martov and his supporters refused to accept this decision and Martov resigned from *Iskra*. The terms Bolshevik and Menshevik (meaning "majority" and "minority") referred to the vote on the editorial board, but, because officially the two factions remained parts of the same party, the names stuck and have passed into history.

For the purpose of this study it is necessary to ask two questions. First, what were these disputes, seemingly a hairsplitting wrangle about words, really about? Secondly, what was the impact of the split on the developing Leninist theory of the party? To grasp the real meaning of any dispute in the Marxist movement it is always necessary to see it in its context. "Truth is concrete" as Lenin was so fond of saying. Writing in this vein we find Paul Frölich who sums up the situation as follows:

In order to understand these debates, it is necessary to keep in mind the state of the social-democratic movement at that time, with its unstable and anarchical network of circles, and the conditions in which an illegal party organization had to operate under absolutism. At the same time, it is necessary to understand that deep political antagonisms were coming to a head in the discussions on the statutes, antagonisms which were still only felt rather than clearly expressed in any single argument. Lenin sensed grave dangers ahead and wanted to ward them

off by organising the party more tightly. He was aware of the tremendous tasks which the party would face in the approaching revolution, and wanted to forge it into a weapon of iron. And, finally, he recognised that he alone out of the whole Iskrist group would be able to lead the party with the necessary confidence and determination. The very impersonal and objective way in which he reached this conclusion explains his obstinacy on this question.

The wording of the two proposals for Paragraph I of the statutes gives hardly an inkling of the antagonism. It is certain that Martov wanted a party with ill-defined boundaries in accordance with the actual state of the movement, and with strong autonomy for the individual groups; a party of agitation which would broadly and loosely embrace everybody who called himself a socialist. Lenin, however, felt it was important to overcome the autonomy and the isolation of the local groups, and thus avoid the dangers inherent in their over-simplified and ossified ideas, not to speak of their backward political development. He wanted a firmly and tightly organised party which, as the vanguard of the class, would be closely connected with it, but at the same time clearly distinct from it.

There was, however, another aspect of the debate which Lenin fastened on. There was a second possible interpretation of Martov's formulation; "that a Party organization [would be] *entitled to regard* as a party member anyone who renders it regular personal assistance under its direction" and "that a committee would assign functions and watch over their fulfilment." Lenin comments:

Such special assignments will never, of course, be made to the *mass* of the workers, to the *thousands* of proletarians (of whom Comrade Axelrod and Comrade Martynov spoke)—they will frequently be given precisely to...professors...high school students...and revolutionary youth...In a word, Comrade Martov's formula will either remain a dead letter, an empty phrase, or it will be of benefit mainly and almost exclusively to "intellectuals who are thoroughly imbued with bourgeois individualism" and do not wish to join an organization. *In words*, Martov's formulation defends the interests of the broad strata of the proletariat, but *in fact* it serves the interests of the *bourgeois intellectuals*, who fight shy of proletarian discipline and organization.

Raya Dunayevskaya also focuses on this point as the central question in the dispute.

The disciplining by the local was so crucial to Lenin's conception that it held primacy over verbal adherence to Marxist theory, propagandising Marxist views, and holding a membership card...Lenin insisted that the Marxist intellectual needed the *ideological* discipline of the proletarians in the local because otherwise he was resisting not only local discipline but also resisting being theoretically disciplined by the *economic content* of the Russian revolution.

It was this softness towards the bourgeois intellectuals which was probably the main cause of Martovite hostility to Lenin (and this would fit very well the pattern of future Bolshevik-Menshevik differences). But to counter this particular deviation Lenin did not have to leave the ground of Kautskyite social-democratic orthodoxy. The organizational views of the Mensheviks could be taken together with those of Bernstein, Jaurès and the general opportunist trend in international social democracy, and there was even a lengthy quotation from Kautsky himself to fit the bill. What was crucial for the *development* of Lenin's thought—i.e. what enabled him to make a breakthrough into a new Marxist approach to organization—was the question of the distinction between the party of the class and the class itself, which Lenin was forced to clarify by the debate on the conditions of membership.

The stronger our party organizations, consisting of real social-democrats, the less wavering and instability there is within the party, the broader, more varied, richer and more fruitful will be the party's influence on the elements of the working-class masses surrounding it and guided by it. *The party, as the vanguard of the working class, must not be confused, after all, with the entire class.* [my emphasis—J.M.]

It is this last sentence which signifies the break with Marx's concept of organization in which the distinction between party and class remains blurred, and, more decisively, with the orthodox social-

democratic conception of the party as *representing* the class. What renders this break permanent rather than temporary, and of universal rather than merely Russian, significance is that Lenin roots it not in practical necessities of secrecy (though these are of course not lost sight of) nor in an erroneous theory of the introduction of consciousness “from the outside” but in the objective situation of the proletariat under capitalism:

Precisely because there are differences in degree of consciousness and degree of activity, a distinction must be made in degree of proximity to the party ... it would be . . . “tailism” to think that the entire class, or almost the entire class, can ever rise, under capitalism, to the level of consciousness and activity of its vanguard, of its social-democratic party.

Of great importance in this passage is the charge of “tailism” directed at his opponents. “Tailism” (from the Russian *khvost*=tail) is Lenin’s figurative and polemical term for the “fatalism” which was to prove the Achilles’ heel of the Second International. Running like a red thread through *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* is the contrast between the Bolshevik activist, revolutionary outlook on the world and the “tailist” fatalist complacency of the Mensheviks. Nothing illustrates this better than one of the disputes with Trotsky.

To the category of arguments, which inevitably crop up when attempts are made to justify Martov’s formulation, belongs in particular, Comrade Trotsky’s statement that “opportunism is produced by more complex (or: is determined by deeper) causes than one or another clause in the Rules: it is brought about by the relative level of development of bourgeois democracy and the proletariat.” The point is not that clauses in the Rules may produce opportunism, but that with their help a more or a less trenchant weapon against opportunism can be forged. The deeper its causes, the more trenchant should this weapon be. Therefore, to justify a formulation which opens the door to opportunism on the grounds that opportunism has “deep causes” is tailism of the first water.

Trotsky analyses and explains a phenomenon and leaves it at that. Lenin accepts the explanation but wants to use it to do something about it.

## 2. Lenin: From Russian Bolshevism to the Communist International

As we have shown, by 1904 Lenin had developed a number of ideas which constituted a definite advance on the generally accepted view of the party. Because of this, and because of the historical continuity of the Bolshevik faction from the 1903 split to the 1917 revolution, it has commonly been assumed that Lenin had had almost from the first his own clearly worked out theory of the party, quite distinct from that of social democracy in the West. But this is to make the mistake of reading back into the past ideas that only became clear much later. In reality Lenin, at this stage, was not aware that he diverged in any fundamental way from social-democratic orthodoxy. He identified the Mensheviks with Bernsteinian “revisionism” and himself with the mainstream Bebel-Kautsky tendency of the SPD.

The citations of Kautsky as *the* Marxist authority are legion in Lenin’s works at this time and remain so throughout the pre-war period. Even Kautsky’s tendency to favour the Mensheviks is not allowed to affect this judgement; it is always attributed to Kautsky’s ignorance of the real situation in Russia. As late as August 1913 Lenin

can refer to Bebel as a “model workers’ leader,” and praise him as the elaborator of “the fundamentals of parliamentary tactics for German (and international) Social Democracy, tactics that never yield an inch to the enemy... (and are) always directed to the accomplishment of the final aim.” As far as perceiving the conservatism of the SPD is concerned, not only Luxemburg, who saw its leaders at first hand, but also Trotsky were far in advance of Lenin. As early as 1906 Trotsky warned that:

The European socialist parties, particularly the largest of them, the German Social-Democratic Party, have developed their conservatism in proportion as the masses have embraced socialism and the more these masses have become organised and disciplined. As a consequence of this social democracy as an organization embodying the political experience of the proletariat may at a certain moment become a direct obstacle to open conflict between the workers and bourgeois reaction.

This point is stressed as a corrective to the widespread tendency to exaggerate the “unity” of Lenin’s thought, to make of his ideas a totally consistent system in which everything from beginning to end fits neatly into place. As Trotsky once commented: “If Lenin in 1903 had understood and formulated everything that was required for the coming times, then the remainder of his life would have consisted only of reiterations. In reality this was not at all the case.” There is a great gap between Lenin’s theory of the party in 1903–04 and that of 1919 at the founding of the Communist International. Lenin developed that theory, not all at once, but through a series of responses to and generalizations from the course of the class struggle. Consequently, as with Marx, an understanding of that theory cannot be extracted from one or two key texts, but must be drawn from an examination of Lenin’s practice as a whole.

### 1. The impact of 1905

After the 1903 split, the next event which had a major impact on Lenin’s theory of the party was the 1905 revolution. The first effect of 1905 was to deepen the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. Originally the division had been only about organization, apparently unrelated to questions of programme or strategy, but now a fundamental divergence emerged in the estimation of the driving forces of the revolution. Lenin, as we have indicated above, accepted the bourgeois nature of the revolution, but, because of the conservative, weak and cowardly nature of the Russian bourgeoisie, held that the bourgeois revolution would have to be made by the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry.

Attempting to concretize this position for the purpose of revolutionary action, Lenin argued that the social democrats should work to break the influence of the bourgeois liberals (Cadets etc.) on the peasantry, and then stage a joint proletarian-peasant insurrection to overthrow the autocracy. Issuing from a successful rising would be a provisional revolutionary government consisting of the revolutionary workers’ party (the Social Democrats) and the party of the revolutionary peasantry (the Socialist Revolutionaries) which would represent the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.” After a brief period of energetic measures to sweep away every vestige of feudalism, the provisional revolutionary government would summon a constituent assembly, which because of the peasant majority of the population would inevitably be anti-socialist, and the social democrats would then become an opposition party leading the struggle for socialism. In this way, maintained Lenin, the Russian revolution would be thoroughgoing (like the great French Revolution, rather than a shabby compromise like Germany in 1848) and would secure the best possible conditions for the future battles of the proletariat.

The Mensheviks however rejected this perspective. More and more they tended towards the view that because the revolution was bourgeois its driving force must be the bourgeoisie, with only a subsidiary role assigned to the proletariat. The job of social democrats was to pressurise the bourgeois liberals so as to “revolutionise” them, but



at the same time not to frighten them. They rejected the formula of “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry,” and participation in a provisional revolutionary government as likely to “cause the bourgeois classes to recoil from the revolution and thus diminish its sweep.” During the rise of the revolution, the Mensheviks were in large part swept along by events, but as soon as the movement began to ebb they more and more came to express regret at the extreme positions and actions into which they had been pushed—a process which culminated in Plekhanov’s notorious remark, “We should not have taken up arms.”

Lenin’s observation of the conduct of the Mensheviks convinced him of the connection between opportunism in organization and opportunism in politics. Thus, although the joint action of Bolshevik and Menshevik workers in the revolutionary struggles produced great pressures for unification to which Lenin formally acceded, he became more determined than ever to strengthen the independent organization of his own tendency. In his article of 1910 on “The historical meaning of the inner-party struggle in Russia,” it is on the issue of the role of the proletariat in the revolution that Lenin focuses, writing that “Bolshevism as a tendency took definite shape in the spring and summer of 1905.”

The second effect of the revolution was to bring about a shift of emphasis in Lenin’s conception of the relationship between party and class. In *What is to be done?* Lenin had justified his view of the party with the argument that socialism had to be introduced into the working class “from without,” and that spontaneously the working class could not rise above the level of trade unionism. In the face of the enormous and spontaneous revolutionary achievements of the Russian working class, the tone of Lenin’s writings changes completely.

There is not the slightest doubt that the revolution will teach social-democratism to the masses of the workers in Russia...At such a time the working class feels an instinctive urge for open revolutionary action.

The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic.

It is now that Lenin notes “how the elementary instinct of the working-class movement is able to correct the conceptions of the greatest minds” and from this point on he becomes circumspect about the formulations of *What is to be done?* “*What is to be done?*” he writes in 1907, “is a controversial correction of ‘economist’ distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light.” This reappraisal did not, however, involve a return to a spontaneist or fatalist attitude to the tasks of the party—on the contrary it was precisely on this score that Lenin most strongly attacked the Mensheviks. “Good marchers, but bad leaders, they belittle the materialist conception of history by ignoring the active, leading and guiding part in history which can and must be played by parties that understand the material prerequisites of a revolution and that have placed themselves at the head of the progressive classes.” The break with economic fatalism that was achieved in *What is to be done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* is maintained and developed, but freed of the elitist foundation that Lenin had at first given it. The formulations in *Two Tactics* are eminently dialectical. “Undoubtedly, the revolution will teach us, and will teach the masses of the people. But the question that now confronts a militant political party is: shall we be able to teach the revolution anything?”

The corollary of this theoretical shift was a struggle by Lenin within the Bolshevik faction against the influence of the “professional revolutionaries” or “committeemen” on whom he had placed so much emphasis a year or two earlier. In the pre-revolutionary period of clandestine activity these “committeemen” provided the stability and the expertise necessary to firmly establish the party in such difficult circumstances, but they also became prey to a certain routinism which revealed its reactionary features with the arrival of the revolution. In particular they were the tangible embodiment of the theory of “bring-

ing socialism to the working class from without,” and as such tended to have a superior attitude towards the workers, with the result that there were practically no workers on the Bolshevik committees. The question of bringing workers onto the committees came up at the Bolsheviks’ third congress in April 1905. Krupskaya has described the debate:

Vladimir Ilyich vigorously defended the idea of including workers. The people abroad, Bogdanov and the writers were also in favour. The Komitetchiks (committeemen) were against. Both sides became very heated...

In his speech in this discussion Vladimir Ilyich said: “I think we should consider the question more broadly. To bring workers on to the committees is not only an educational but a political task. The workers have a class instinct, and even with little political experience they quite quickly become steadfast Social Democrats. I would very much like to see eight workers on our committees for every two intellectuals...”

When Mikhailov (Pestolovsky) said, “so in practical work very small demands are made of intellectuals, but extremely big demands are made of workers,” Vladimir Ilyich cried out: “That is absolutely true!” His exclamation was drowned in a chorus of—“Not true!” from the Komitetchiks. When Rumyantsev said “There is only one worker on the Petersburg committee, although work has been going on there for fifteen years” Vladimir Ilyich shouted: “What a disgrace.”

The debate about worker involvement on the committees, over which, incidentally, Lenin was defeated by the congress, was only one aspect of Lenin’s fight against conservative sectarianism in the Bolshevik ranks. Another issue over which he clashed with his supporters was the attitude of the party to the soviet. Trotsky, the soviet’s chairman, has described the initial response of the Bolsheviks to this historic organization.

The Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks was frightened at first by such an innovation as a non-partisan representation of the embattled masses, and could find nothing better to do than to present the soviet with an ultimatum: immediately adopt a Social-Democratic programme, or disband. The Petersburg soviet as a whole, including the contingent of Bolshevik workingmen as well, ignored this ultimatum without batting an eyelash.

Even from abroad Lenin saw the sterility of this approach and opposed it in a letter to the party’s paper *Novaya Zhizn*, in which he argued that it was not a question of the soviet or the party, but of “both the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies and the party,” and that it would be inadvisable for the soviet “to adhere wholly to any one party.” “To my mind,” wrote Lenin, “the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, as a revolutionary centre providing political leadership, is not too broad an organization but on the contrary, a much too narrow one. The soviet must proclaim itself the provisional revolutionary government, or form such a government.”

The essential difference between the “committeemen” and Lenin was that the former wished to apply in the revolution the concept of the party which had operated in the pre-revolutionary period, whereas Lenin wanted to completely reorganise the party so as to embrace the new forces and confront the new tasks thrown up by the revolution.

If we fail to show bold initiative in setting up new organizations, we shall have to give up as groundless all pretensions to the role of vanguard. If we stop helplessly at the achieved boundaries, forms and confines of the committees, groups, meetings, and circles, we shall merely prove our own incapacity. Thousands of circles are now springing up everywhere without our aid, without any definite programme or aim, simply under the impact of events...Let all such circles, except those that are avowedly non-social-democratic, either directly join the party or align themselves with the party. In the latter event we must not demand that they accept our programme or that they necessarily enter into organizational relations with us. Their mood of protest and their sympathy for the cause of international revolutionary social democracy in themselves suffice, provided the social democrats work effectively among them.

The party machine resisted Lenin’s exhortations but the course



of events was on his side. By November 1905 he could note with satisfaction:

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 the new party organizations to have one social-democratic intellectual to several hundred social-democratic workers.

Just as Lenin's theoretical reappraisal of the spontaneous capacities of the proletariat did not involve a return to economic fatalism, neither did his new views on party organization mean adoption of the Menshevik position of the broad party. The open-ended expansion envisaged by Lenin in the *revolutionary period* was possible *only* on the basis of the solid preparation of the party beforehand.

Is social democracy endangered by the realization of the plan we propose?

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 demagoguery, if we lacked party principles...entirely, or if those principles were feeble and shaky. But the fact is that no such "ifs" exist. We Bolsheviks have never shown any inclination towards demagoguery...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 other of the party organizations ...

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.

Thus the experience of the "great dress rehearsal" of the Russian Revolution raised Lenin's theory of the party to a new level. It deepened his opposition to opportunism and strengthened his determination to build a specifically *revolutionary* party. It also clarified his understanding of the relationship between party and class. The party remains a vanguard, distinct from the class as a whole, but now it is the party of the advanced workers—a part of the class, not the party of the declassed intelligentsia introducing socialism "from without." But it was not only the upsurge of revolution that affected Lenin, the period of reaction which followed also added important elements to his theory of the party.

## 2. Reaction steels

After the defeat of the 1905 revolution terrible reaction engulfed Russia for a number of years. Demoralization set in all round and the Bolshevik organizations were shattered.

It is interesting to compare Lenin's response to this situation with that of Marx after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions. Marx dissolved the Communist League, left the emigres to their squabbles, and retired to the study. Lenin, however, clung desperately both to the remnants of his party organization and to the *party* idea, defending them passionately against all assaults. "Let the Black-Hundred diehards rejoice and howl" he wrote, "let the reaction rage... A party which succeeds in consolidating itself for persistent work in contact with the masses, a party of the advanced class which succeeds in organising its vanguard and which directs its forces in such a way as to influence in a social-democratic spirit every sign of life of the proletariat—such a party will win no matter what happens."

To preserve and build the kind of party he wanted Lenin had to fight many factional battles. The three most important of these were against (a) right wing "liquidationism," (b) ultra-left "otzovism" ("recallism") and (c) centrist "conciliationism." These disputes became very fierce and very tangled, and the theoretical level of the polemics which they produced was not always very high. Consequently there is

no need to go into detail about them here, but nonetheless certain important general principles emerged which are worthy of note, and which stood Lenin in good stead in later years. Firstly, that the party is not only an organization for attack, but also for "retreat in good order." "Of all the defeated opposition and revolutionary parties, the Bolsheviks effected the most orderly retreat, with the least loss to their 'army,' with its core best preserved." Secondly, the principle of "combining illegal work with the utilization of 'legal opportunities.'" And thirdly, the principle of carrying the fight against opportunism through to its organizational conclusions, and effecting a split with all nonrevolutionary elements.

It was this last point which was really the distinct hallmark of Leninism, and which resulted in 1912 in the formal foundation of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks) as a completely separate and independent party. Kautsky had fought Bernstein theoretically, but the revisionists were not expelled from the SPD. Rosa Luxemburg fought Kautsky and the SPD centre, but built no separate organization. Trotsky was opposed to both liquidationism and otzovism and was just as critical as Lenin of the political line of the Mensheviks, and yet he actively worked against a split. It was also an advance on Lenin's own earlier position, in that the 1903 split had in large part been the work of the Mensheviks, and Lenin had frequently been willing to countenance reunification, whereas now he broke with the Mensheviks once and for all.

The result of Lenin's determined struggles during the reaction was that the Bolsheviks started life as a fully independent party just as the working-class movement began to get going again. The slowly reviving movement received a great impetus from the massacre of gold miners in Lena on 4 April 1912, which produced a wave of strikes, protest meetings and demonstrations throughout the country, culminating in a 400,000 strong May Day strike. Lenin intervened in this situation through the production of a legal daily newspaper, *Pravda*, the first issue of which appeared 18 days after the Lena massacre. *Pravda* combined an intransigent revolutionary political line with numerous reports from workers themselves chronicling their everyday conditions and struggles. In one year 11,000 such workers' letters and contributions were published. The daily circulation of *Pravda* reached over 40,000 and the formation of workers' groups to collect money for the paper compensated for the lack of a mass legal party. On the basis of a painstaking analysis of these collections Lenin showed that the Bolsheviks had won clear hegemony over the politically conscious workers. In 1913 *Pravda* received donations from 2,181 groups, while the Menshevik papers got donations from 661 groups. In 1914 up to 13 May the figure for donations to *Pravda* was 2,873, as against 671 for the Mensheviks. From this Lenin concluded, "Pravdism, Pravdist decisions and Pravdist tactics have united four-fifths of Russia's class-conscious workers." Lenin had thus become the first Marxist to have created a party consisting solely of revolutionaries, without any reformist or opportunist wing, which also had a substantial base in the working class.

## 3. The most revolutionary section of the Second International

At this point it is useful to examine what the Bolshevik party, the tangible embodiment of Lenin's ideas on the party, actually looked like in practice and see how it compared with the more "orthodox" social-democratic parties.

Firstly, the Bolsheviks were, of course, an illegal party operating in a country where there were no democratic liberties and no effective trade unions, whereas most Western social democracies had long since obtained their legality. Consequently the Bolsheviks did not and could not develop, as did for example the SPD, a broad layer of functionaries consisting of local officials, trade-union leaders, members of parliament, local councillors etc. This is a stratum which is inevitably subject to enormous "moderating" pressures from its environment.

Raised to a privileged position vis-à-vis the rank-and-file workers, such functionaries find that there is a definite role for them to play, not only within the workers' movement, but also within capitalism, as mediators between the classes, and therefore they have a direct interest in social peace. They thus constitute a major conservative force. Within international social democracy this stratum acted as a permanent base for reformism. The fact that the Bolshevik leadership and its local cadre were closer to the prison cell or Siberian exile than they were to ministerial posts or to trade-union officialdom, and that the party itself had no more than a threadbare administrative apparatus, made the party relatively (though not absolutely) immune to bureaucratic routinism.

Secondly, the Bolshevik party was heavily proletarian in composition. David Lane has produced the following breakdown of Bolshevik membership for 1905: workers, 61.9 percent; peasants, 4.8 percent; white collar, 27.4 percent; others 5.9 percent;<sup>34</sup> and concludes, "if judged by the bottom levels of the party and particularly by its popular support, it may be said that the Bolsheviks were a 'workers' party," whereas, "it seems probable that the Mensheviks had comparatively more 'petty-bourgeois' members, and fewer working-class supporters at the lower levels." During the reaction there was a mass exodus of intellectuals from the movement, whereas the factory cells, albeit isolated, survived better, thus increasing the party's proletarianization. Lenin's above-mentioned analysis of money collections between 1912 and 1914 confirms this picture. Of all the donations to Pravda in the first quarter of 1914, 87 percent came from workers' collections and 13 percent from non-workers, whereas only 44 percent of donations to the Menshevik papers came from workers and 56 percent from non-workers.

The combination of the illegal status of the party and its proletarian composition made for an organizational structure radically different from the normal social-democratic tradition. Despite their revolutionary rhetoric, the essential strategy of most of the parties of the Second International was the achievement of the parliamentary majority. Consequently the base units of these parties were organised on residential or geographical lines, so as to facilitate mobilization of the party membership for electoral campaigns in the respective electoral districts. In Russia the absence of parliamentary elections (such elections as did take place to the Duma were on a factory basis) and the need for secrecy led the Bolsheviks to base their organization on the factories. Osip Piatnitsky, an old Bolshevik organization man, records that "during all periods the lower party organization of the Bolsheviks existed at the place of work rather than at the place of residence." This structure, despite the smallness of the Bolshevik party, made for a more intimate relationship between the party and the proletariat than was achieved by the social-democratic parties, where contact with the factories tended to be maintained only indirectly through control of the trade-unions, and where a certain division of labor operated between the industrial struggle handled by the unions and the political struggle handled by the party. No such de facto separation occurred with the Bolsheviks. Piatnitsky has described the work of Bolshevik factory cells:

In Czarist Russia the cells...utilised all the grievances in the factories; the gruffness of the foremen, deductions from wages, fines, the failure to provide medical aid in accidents, etc, for oral agitation at the bench, through leaflets, meetings at the factory gates or in the factory yards, and separate meetings of the more class-conscious and revolutionary workers. The Bolsheviks always showed the connection between the maltreatment of factories, and the rule of the autocracy...At the same time the autocracy was connected up in the agitation of the party cells with the capitalist system, so that at the very beginning of the development of the labor movement the Bolsheviks established a connection between the economic struggle and the political.

Thus the Bolshevik party, rather than being simply the political representative of the working class, was an interventionist combat party striving to lead and guide the class in all its battles.

Also important was the youth of the party membership. In 1907 approximately 22 percent of the party members were less than, 20 years old; 37 percent were between 20 and 24, and 16 percent between 25 and 29. Trotsky has commented on the significance of this. "Bolshevism when underground was always a party of young workers. The Mensheviks relied upon the more respectable skilled upper stratum, always prided themselves on it, and looked down on the Bolsheviks. Subsequent events harshly showed them their mistake. At the decisive moment the youth carried with them the more mature stratum and even the old folks." And Lane notes that "the Bolsheviks were younger than the Mensheviks at the lowest levels of party organization and more so among the 'activists' than among the ordinary members. This suggests that the Bolshevik organizational structure allowed the young to advance to positions of responsibility more easily than did the Menshevik...Politically, these young men may have provided more dynamic and vigorous leadership for the Bolshevik faction." Certainly the youth of the party was another major factor in freeing it from conservative routinism.

Finally, the Bolshevik party was a disciplined body. The internal regime of the party was characterised as democratic centralism, but this phrase in itself does not have great significance. As an organizational formula it was not at all specifically Leninist, being accepted in theory by both the Mensheviks and many other social-democratic parties." What mattered was the interpretation given to democratic centralism in practice. Lenin defined it as "unity of action, freedom of discussion and criticism," by which he meant freedom of criticism within the bounds of the party programme and until a definite decision was reached, then the implementation of that decision by the party as one. No party which contains both a revolutionary and a reformist wing, i.e. groups with fundamentally divergent aims, can in practice be a disciplined organization. Thus although German Social Democracy attached great importance to administrative centralization and party unity, it had a very lax attitude to breaches of discipline by party dignitaries, trade-union leaders and so on. Discipline exists to achieve unity in action, but if organizational unity is placed above principle, then real discipline inevitably disappears. "Unless the masses are organised," wrote Lenin, "the proletariat is nothing. Organised—it is everything. Organization means unity of action, unity in practical operations. But every action is valuable, of course, only because and insofar as it serves to push things forward and not backward... Organization not based on principle is meaningless, and in practice converts the workers into a miserable appendage of the bourgeoisie in power... Therefore class conscious workers must never forget that serious violations of principle occur which make the severance of all organizational relations imperative."

The Bolshevik party was compelled by its situation to be disciplined, and it was able to achieve the necessary discipline because it was politically united. But it is important to realise that this discipline did not, as was often claimed, rule out independent initiative from the rank-and-file of the party. The same repressive conditions which made unity in action a necessity also compelled the local sections of the party to act for themselves. Piatnitsky writes:

The initiative of the local party organizations, of the cells, was encouraged. Were the Bolsheviks of Odessa, or Moscow, or Baku, or Tiflis, always to have waited for the directives from the Central Committee, the provincial committees, etc. which during the years of the reaction and of the war frequently did not exist at all owing to arrests, what would have been the result? The Bolsheviks would not have captured the working masses and exercised any influence over them.

All these factors combined made Lenin's Bolshevik party, on the eve of the first world war, in the words of Trotsky, "the most revolutionary—indeed, the only revolutionary—section of the Second International."

#### 4. The break with social democracy

Trotsky's characterization of the Bolsheviks as "the only revolu-

tionary section of the Second International,” however, also indicates the limits of Lenin’s achievements up to this point, for it makes clear the fact that the Bolsheviks remained a *section* of social democracy. This in itself shows that although Lenin had developed in practice a party quite at variance with the social-democratic norm, he had not yet consciously generalised this experience into a distinct and new theory of the party. It was only the collapse of the International in the face of the world war that brought about Lenin’s complete theoretical break with the old socialism and the birth of a specifically Leninist *theory* of the party.

Lenin, it is well known, was taken completely by surprise by the support given to the war by all the main European socialist parties, in total defiance of all their past policy. His first reaction to the issue of *Vorwärts* recording the SPD’s vote for war credits was that it must be a forgery. But once he had grasped the scale of the capitulation his thought developed extremely rapidly. Lenin’s very first article after the outbreak of the war, “The Tasks of Revolutionary Social Democracy in the European War,” written not later than 28 August 1914, not only condemned the leaders of international social democracy for their “betrayal of socialism” and recorded the “ideological and political bankruptcy of the International” but also identified in this betrayal and abandonment of past positions a *continuation* of tendencies long at work in the pre-war period. Social-chauvinism is identified as the product and development of opportunism. “This collapse [of the International] has been mainly caused by the actual prevalence in it of pettybourgeois opportunism...The so-called Centre of the German and other social-democratic parties has in actual fact faintheartedly capitulated to the opportunists. From this Lenin immediately drew the conclusion that “it must be the task of the future International resolutely and irrevocably to rid itself of this bourgeois trend in socialism.”

From this point on Lenin would have no truck with schemes to reunite or resurrect the old International. “On the contrary, this collapse must be frankly recognised and understood, so as to make it possible to build up a new and more lasting socialist unity of the workers of all countries.” By 1 November the Bolshevik Central Committee had issued the slogan “Long live a proletarian International freed from opportunism.” In December Lenin was asking “is it not better to give up the name of Social Democrats, which has been besmirched and degraded by them, and return to the old Marxist name of Communists?” and by February 1915 the Bolshevik party conference had committed itself officially to the eventual creation of a “Third International.”

Up till 1914 Lenin had seen himself as an orthodox social democrat applying to the peculiar conditions of Tsarist Russia the tried and tested theory and method of Kautsky and Bebel. But the decision in favour of a Third International signified not a determination to uphold that tradition, abandoned by its leaders, but a thorough-going rejection of it. Lenin levelled two interconnected charges at the Second International: (a) that it was the product of a prolonged period of “peace”—“peace” signifying not only peace between nations but also relative peace between classes—in which it had become so accustomed to legal methods and the growth of its legal mass-organizations that it was unwilling and unable to make the necessary transition to illegal work; and (b) that it was a coalition between revolutionaries and opportunists to the advantage of the latter.

Typical of the socialist parties of the epoch of the Second International was one that tolerated in its midst an opportunism built up in decades of the “peaceful” period...This type has out-lived itself. If the war ends in 1915, will any thinking socialist be found willing to begin, in 1916, restoring the workers’ parties together with the opportunists, knowing from experience that in any new crisis all of them to a man...will be for the bourgeoisie.

Compared with the Second International, which Katitsky aptly described as “an instrument for peace, unsuitable for war,” the Third

International was to be precisely an instrument of war—international civil war against the imperialist bourgeoisie—and therefore could tolerate in its ranks neither a fifth column nor waverers. In mounting this critique of social democracy it is clear that Lenin based his ideas on his experiences with the Bolsheviks and the struggle against Menshevism, but now for the first time these experiences and the numerous theoretical insights that accompanied them were generalised internationally into a new theory of the party to replace everywhere the old forms of organization.

A new theory of the party, however, could not stand on its own; it required the all-round regeneration of Marxism. For a theory of the party is merely the application to organization of an analysis of the class struggle as a whole. The social-democratic parties were both producer and product of a mechanistic and fatalist interpretation of Marxism in which the unification of the proletariat and the growth of its political party were seen as proceeding smoothly and harmoniously in a steadily ascending line as an inevitable consequence of capitalist development. The tasks of Marxists in this scheme were formulated by Kautsky as “building up the organization, winning all positions of power, which we are able to win and hold securely by our own strength, studying the state and society and educating the masses; other aims we cannot consciously and systematically set either to ourselves or to our organizations,” and the object as “the conquest of state power by winning a majority in parliament and by raising parliament to the rank of master of the government.” The latter would inevitably be realised provided only that the party avoided the disruption of its prized “organizations” through being drawn into foolish or premature conflicts. In practice the avoidance of such upsets became the main preoccupation of many of the social-democratic leaders. In the first years of the war Lenin set about systematically dismantling this perspective and establishing a new theoretical foundation for the future Third International. His project led Lenin into three main areas of theoretical investigation: (a) philosophy (b) economics (the analysis of imperialism) (c) politics (the state). Each of these had an important bearing on his theory of the party, and therefore, although it is not possible here to go deeply into any of these questions, it is necessary at least to indicate the main interconnections.

In relation to philosophy we have already argued that the key to Lenin’s attitude in the original split with the Mensheviks was his rejection of the latter’s fatalist (“tailist”) approach to problems of organization. At that time, Lenin’s position was the product more of his keen political instinct and practical judgement than of a philosophical break with mechanical materialism, as is illustrated by his formulations in “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.” At the end of 1914, however, Lenin plunged into the study of Hegel, in particular Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Lenin, like Marx, never wrote his “Dialectics,” but nonetheless his marginal notes on Hegel show clearly the philosophical “revolution” brought about by this reading. For the first time Lenin grasps clearly and assimilates the marxian dialectics. Through the restoration of these dialectics and of practice to their rightful place in the Marxist world view,<sup>60</sup> Lenin established the philosophical basis for a party which aimed not passively to reflect the working class and await the working out of iron historical laws, but actually to intervene in the shaping of history.

In relation to economics, Lenin’s task was to show that the objective situation was ripe for the creation of a new international party which was revolutionary not only in its ultimate aims but also in its immediate advocacy and preparation of revolutionary methods of struggle.

In his booklet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin aimed to show that on a world scale revolution was on the order of the day. Lenin’s argument, in its bare bones, was that imperialism was the product of the transformation, through the law of concentration of capital, of capitalism based on free competition into its opposite, monopoly capitalism. This was accompanied by the dominance of fi-



nance capital over industrial capital, and the accumulation of a surplus of capital which could only find profitable outlets in the backward countries where labor was cheap and capital scarce. Consequently the world had been divided up between the great monopolies and their respective “home” governments. Since such division could take place only on the basis of relative strength, and since the relative strengths of the monopolies and the capitalist powers would not remain stable, so struggle for redivision, again on the basis of strength (i.e. war), would inevitably set in. On this basis any achievement of peace would merely be the prelude to a new war. Above all imperialism aggravated the contradiction between the socialization of production and its private appropriation; and thus imperialism marked the beginning of the decline of capitalism and the opening of the era of “wars and revolutions.”

In addition to establishing the objective basis for a new revolutionary international, Lenin’s analysis of imperialism also provided an economic foundation for his critique of the Second International. Recalling Engels’ comments on the bourgeoisification of a section of the English proletariat due to England’s industrial and colonial monopoly,” Lenin argued that imperialist monopolies gained “superprofits” from their exploitation of the colonies and that this enabled “the bourgeoisie of an imperialist ‘Great’ Power [to] *economically bribe* the upper strata of ‘its’ workers.” In the nineteenth century this had been possible only in England, but it had operated there for decades to corrupt the labor movement. Now on the other hand “*every* imperialist ‘Great’ Power can and does bribe *smaller* strata [than in England in 1848–68] of the ‘labor aristocracy.’” In this way “in all countries the bourgeoisie has already...secured for itself ‘bourgeois labor parties’ of social chauvinists.” Thus Lenin established that opportunism, or reformism, in the working-class movement was not just an alternative school of thought, a sign of immaturity or even simply a product of the pressure of bourgeois ideology; rather it was “substantiated economically.” Opportunism was the sacrifice of the overall interests of the proletariat as a whole for the immediate interests of separate groups of workers. The concept of the “bourgeois labor party” signifies that opportunism is regarded as the agent of the class enemy within the ranks of the proletariat.

This definition of opportunism, which no Marxist had formulated so clearly before, is crucial for Lenin’s theory of the party. It is the basic reason why the party must strictly exclude all reformist trends from its ranks. It is a recognition that the revolutionary party must be organized for struggle not only against the bourgeoisie, but also (in a different way) against bourgeois organizations within the working class. It is an understanding and materialist explanation of the difficulties involved in the transition from the class-in-itself to the class-for-itself. In 1901 Lenin had grasped this problem but had explained it in terms of the inability of the working class to achieve socialist consciousness by its own efforts. Now he explained it in terms of the contradiction between the historical and immediate interests of the proletariat, which for *limited periods* and *limited strata* could predominate over the ultimate need for class unity. The socialist unification of the working class develops dialectically, through internal struggle. As the agent of this struggle, the revolutionary party must confine its membership to those for whom the overall interests of the proletariat stand higher than immediate interests, in a word, to internationalists.

Finally there is the question of the state, which was brought to the fore by the debates on imperialism and the war. The essence of socialist revolution is the transfer of state power from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. Since the organization of the party is necessarily in part determined by the tasks it will have to perform in the revolution, how this transfer of power is envisaged is of great importance to the theory of the party. The theorists of the Second International did not rule out violence, particularly defensive violence, in the struggle for power, but essentially they expected the revolution to leave the state

machine itself intact. The role of the party would be to take over the existing state, no doubt changing its leading personnel, reorganising it and so on, but not fundamentally challenging its structure. With such a view of the tasks of the revolution in regard to the state, the centre of gravity of the class struggle must inevitably be seen as being in parliament and parliamentary elections. Thus Kautsky wrote—“This direct action of the unions can operate effectively only as an auxiliary and reinforcement to, and not as substitute for, parliamentary action” and “[parliament] is the most powerful lever that can be used to raise the proletariat out of its economic, social and moral degradation.” From this it follows that the leadership of the party comes to lie with its parliamentary representatives, since it is through a parliamentary majority that the revolutionary government will be formed. In this conception the role of the rank-and-file of the party, and even more so that of workers outside the party, is essentially passive: for even though they may be called upon to fight, they are not expected either to create new structures of power themselves or to participate in running them. Social democracy’s bureaucratic conception of the revolution entailed a bureaucratic organization of the party.

For the Bolsheviks, as we have shown above, none of this has applied because no modern “democratic” state existed in Russia and they had from the start been illegal. But now, with a new International in mind, Lenin had to confront this problem theoretically. The result was that he rediscovered, clarified and systematised Marx’s generalization from the experience of the French revolutions of 1848–52 and 1871 that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.” Lenin, in his notebooks, summed up the question as follows:

Changes after 1871? They are all such, or their general nature or their sum is such, that bureaucracy has everywhere soared (both in parliamentarism, within it,—in local self-government, in the jointstock companies, in the trust and so on). That is the first thing. And second: the workers’ “socialist” parties have, by 3/4, “grown into” a similar bureaucracy. The split between the social-patriots and the internationalists, between the reformists and the revolutionaries, has, consequently, a still more profound significance: the reformists and the social-patriots “perfect” the bureaucratic-state machine...while the revolutionaries must “smash” it, this “bureaucratic-military state machine,” smash it, replacing it by the “Commune,” a new “semi-state.”

One could, probably, in brief and drastically, express the whole matter thus; replacement of the old (“ready-made”) state machine and-parliaments by Soviets of Workers’ Deputies and their trustees. Therein lies the essence!!

A party aiming to smash the state cannot be organized in the same way as a party intending to take it over. Its centre of gravity must be not in parliament, but in factories, from which the new state will issue. The rank-and-file of the party cannot simply be passive voters or even propagandists. They themselves have to become leaders of their fellow workers, builders of their own new state machine. Moreover, the thesis that the bourgeois state had to be smashed, finally closed the option of a peaceful or constitutional revolution even for the “freest” of democratic republics. Proletarian revolution would by definition involve a mass struggle for power, and therefore every revolutionary party would have to be so organized as to be able to lead such a struggle. This meant the creation of parallel legal and illegal apparatuses, the organization of fighting detachments, the creation of party groups within the armed forces and so on.

Finally, Lenin’s theory of the state radically altered current conceptions of the relationship of the party to the workers’ state during and after the conquest of power. If the revolution means the taking over of the existing state, then the class content of the state as a workers’ state is defined by the party that controls it. The party and the state must merge. In this sense, for social democracy, the party was the embryo of the new state. Lenin’s theory of the replacement of the existing state by soviets (workers’ councils) established a clear distinction between the workers’ state and the revolutionary party. The class con-

tent of the new state is defined by the fact that it is the creation of the working class as a whole, and involves the class as a whole in its operation. "Under socialism...the *mass* of the population will rise to taking an *independent* part, not only in voting and elections, *but also in the everyday administration of the state.*" The role of the party is not to *be* the workers' state, but to be the advanced minority which leads and guides the process of the new state's creation and consolidation. As Chris Harman has put it, "The Soviet state is the highest concrete embodiment of the self-activity of the whole working class; the party is that section of the class that is most conscious of the world historical implications of self-activity. It is because the party and the state are not identical that more than one party can contend for influence and government within the framework of the institutions of workers' state power.

Thus Lenin's theory of the state was an indispensable compliment to his theory of the party. It was this that ensured that the restriction of the party to the advanced minority of the proletariat in no way implied the party substituting itself for the class as a whole or attempting to seize power as a minority. It was the theory of the state that brought the Leninist theory of the party into harmony with the fundamental principle of Marxism that "the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself."

As a result of these few years of intense theoretical labor, the theoretical foundations of the Second International had been completely demolished and Lenin's new theory of the party was now fully formed (which is not to say that further additions or developments were excluded). The new theory represented not an isolated breakthrough but the crowning practical conclusions of a comprehensive renovation of the Marxist world view. Nor did it come a moment too soon, it now faced the crucial test of practice with the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in February 1917. The question we must ask is how did it measure up to this test?

## 5. The party in the revolution

The momentous events of the Russian Revolution confirmed Lenin's theory of the party in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it showed that an originally tiny organization could, in the heat of the struggle, grow extremely rapidly and, even more important, gain the support of the overwhelming majority of the working class. In January 1917 the Bolshevik party membership stood at 23,600. By the end of April it had grown to 79,204, and in August it was estimated to be about 200,000. Presumably by October it was even larger. Measured against the Russian population as a whole, 200,000 remained an almost insignificant figure, but the Bolshevik membership was concentrated in the small, but politically decisive, working class. Leonard Schapiro has recorded that: "A sample of replies from the organizations in twenty-five towns shows that the percentage of organised Bolsheviks among the factory workers in the towns at this date (August 1917) varied from 1 percent to 12 percent—the average for the twenty-five towns being 5.4 percent." For a disciplined activist party this was a very high proportion. It meant that in the key industrial centres, especially Petrograd, the Bolsheviks had complete political leadership of the proletariat. Thus the first representative body to yield a Bolshevik majority was a conference of Petrograd factory delegates at the end of May, and when the Menshevik/SR dominated executive of the soviets called a mass demonstration in Petrograd on 18 June, about 400,000 marched and 90 percent of the banners bore Bolshevik slogans. As for October, Lenin's old opponent Martov wrote "Understand, please, what we have before us after all is a victorious uprising of the proletariat—almost the entire proletariat supports Lenin and expects its social liberation from the uprising." In nine months the Bolsheviks rose from a seemingly irrelevant splinter group to the most powerful political force in Russia.

Secondly, the Revolution demonstrated the indispensability of a centralised revolutionary party for the conquest of state power by the

working class. The February Revolution which overthrew Tsarism and gave birth to the soviets was, of course, not led by the Bolsheviks nor by any political party. As E. H. Carr comments:

The February Revolution...was the spontaneous outbreak of a multitude exasperated by the privations of the war and the manifest inequality in distribution of burdens... The revolutionary parties played no direct part in the making of the revolution. They did not expect it and were at first somewhat nonplussed by it. The creation at the moment of the revolution of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies was a spontaneous act of groups of workers without central direction.

But precisely because of this, the victorious revolution made by workers and soldiers (peasants in uniform), did not place power in the hands of the working class. On the contrary it voluntarily surrendered power to the bourgeoisie in the form of the Provisional Government. The workers and soldiers certainly did not like this development. "As early as 3 March, meetings of soldiers and workers began to demand that the soviet depose forthwith the Provisional Government of the liberal bourgeoisie, and take power in its own hands." But, lacking organization and political leadership, they were unable to impose their will. Only with the growth of the Bolsheviks into a mass party and with the emergence of a Bolshevik majority in the soviets were these, embryos of workers' state power able to fulfil their potentiality. Only through a party could a clear and concise political programme—"Bread, Land, and Peace," "All Power to the Soviets"—be formulated, capable of concretizing the feelings of the masses and uniting the different strands of the revolution, the workers, the peasants and the soldiers.

Also the party was crucial for the mounting and success of the actual insurrection. In the first place, it was able through its capacity to assess the situation in Russia as a whole, its discipline and its moral authority with the workers, to prevent a premature rising in "the July Days" which would have isolated the impetuous workers and soldiers of Petrograd from the rest of the country. Had the Bolsheviks been less disciplined and less well established they might easily have been caught up by events and dragged into a hopeless uprising which would have met the fate of the Paris Commune or the German revolution of 1919. Then when, after the defeat of the Kornilov plot, the mood of the country, not just of Petrograd, had shifted in their favour, and it became clear that the Bolsheviks would have a majority at the second congress of soviets, the party was able to seize the critical moment when power could be gained swiftly and smoothly. Carr writes that, "For the organization of the almost bloodless victory of 25 October–7 November 1917 the Petrograd Soviet and its military-revolutionary committee were responsible." But the soviet had a Bolshevik majority and the military-revolutionary committee contained only one non-Bolshevik (a young left-SR). Moreover the initial decision to launch the insurrection, which they were implementing, was taken not by the soviet but by the central committee of the party in secret session. Nor could it have been otherwise, for timing and secrecy were of the essence. A public debate in the soviet would have alerted the Provisional Government and given it the chance to take pre-emptive action. By their nature the soviets were politically heterogeneous. Only a disciplined and politically united body, the party, could discuss the tactical pros and cons of the insurrection and plan its execution. And immediately after the seizure of power only the Bolshevik party possessed the unity of will and purpose to form a government capable of dealing with the immensely difficult and chaotic situation facing the revolution.

The pre-eminent role of the Bolshevik party in the October insurrection combined with the relatively small number of participants in the fighting, and the brevity of the operation (at least in the capital) have led many commentators to depict the revolution as essentially a coup d'état by a tiny but determined minority, acting quite independently of the class they claimed to represent. This view seems strengthened by Lenin's repeated insistence that it was "necessary to fight

against constitutional illusions and hopes placed in the congress of soviets, to discard the preconceived idea that we absolutely must 'wait' for it." Did not the actual course of the insurrection completely violate the distinction between party and state, which we discussed earlier, and did not this mean that in practice the Leninist conception of the party as a minority vanguard necessarily led to the seizure of power by that minority? In answering these questions it is necessary to look not just at the period when the whole fate of the revolution depended on a few days fighting, but at the evolution of Lenin's policy throughout 1917. Lenin first set the Bolsheviks on course for the conquest of power with his "April Theses," but from the start he guarded himself "against any kind of Blanquist adventurism." "In the theses," wrote Lenin, "I very definitely reduced the question to one of a struggle for influence within the Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Laborers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies. To leave no shadow of doubt on this score, I twice emphasised in the theses the need for patient and persistent "explanatory" work "adapted to the practical needs of the masses." "Patient explanation" remained the line of Lenin and the Bolsheviks through the spring and summer of 1917, and always the struggle for power was linked to winning over the soviets. Even when in July Lenin considered that the soviets had moved decisively into the anti-revolutionary camp and therefore wanted to withdraw the slogan "All Power to the Soviets," he was still careful to warn that "a decisive struggle will be possible only in the event of a new revolutionary upsurge in the very depths of the masses." Nor did he then abandon the soviet idea. "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." Only when the Bolsheviks had achieved a majority in the soviets did Lenin place insurrection on the order of the day.

The fact that it was primarily the party, acting through the Petrograd Soviet, that effected the rising did not contradict this perspective because this was essentially a destructive operation. The new structure of state power was already in existence and recognised as the supreme authority by both the workers and the army. The action on the night of 24/25 October merely eliminated the Provisional Government, leaving the soviets as the sole power. Furthermore, it was on their soviet majority, not the right of armed conquest, that the Bolsheviks based their claim to form the government. On 5 November Lenin wrote:

There must be no other government in Russia but a soviet government. Soviet power has been won in Russia and the government can be transferred out of the hands of one soviet party into the hands of another party without any revolution, simply by a decision of the soviets, simply by new elections of deputies to the soviets. The Bolshevik party was in the majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Only a government formed by that party is, therefore, a soviet government.

Thus, in general, the practical test of the Russian Revolution brilliantly confirmed Lenin's theory of the party. It completely justified his conviction that a principled and disciplined vanguard would play a decisive role in the achievement of the socialist revolution. But here a note of caution must be sounded, for the process by which the Bolshevik party actually came to play this role was not at all automatic.

Before Lenin's return to Russia, the Bolshevik leadership slipped into a position of conditional support for the Provisional Government and also for the war. When Lenin first declared in favour of the overthrow of the Provisional Government and "All Power to the Soviets," he found no support from within the party's leading circles. The latter, basing themselves on the longstanding Bolshevik formula of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry," denounced Lenin's position as "unacceptable" in *Pravda*. Even the most meticulously prepared revolutionary party could not anticipate all the

concrete features of the revolution, and therefore had to learn from reality and from the workers. Within the party leadership Lenin was the agent of this learning process. "Theory my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life," wrote Lenin, condemning "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." That, starting from a position of seeming isolation, Lenin so rapidly won over the party to his position was due partly to his great personal prestige, but also to the fact that he was articulating theoretically the views of the advanced workers who were flooding into the party. Lenin's tirades against the "old Bolsheviks" dovetailed with the pressure coming up from the factory districts. Repeatedly through 1917 Lenin would comment that the party was to the left of its central committee, and the masses were to the left of the party.

Even after Lenin had won the victory in principle at the April Conference, sections of the party continued to vacillate, and this was most marked in relation to the question of insurrection. Kamenev, Zinoviev, Nogin, Miliutin and Rykhov formed a group within the leadership completely opposed to the staging of an insurrection. Kamenev and Zinoviev stood, next to Lenin, as the party's most authoritative leaders, and yet at the decisive moment they wavered. It took a month of battering by Lenin, including threats that he would resign and campaign among the rank-and-file, to overcome this opposition and shake the central committee out of its inertia. When, immediately after the seizure of power, the Zinoviev-Kamenev group demanded that the Bolsheviks enter a coalition with the Mensheviks and SR's, Lenin once again threatened a split ("an honest and open split would now be incomparably better than internal sabotage, the thwarting of our own decisions, disorganization and prostration") and declared that if the opposition had a majority in the party, they should form their coalition government and he would "go to the sailors."

That sections of the Bolshevik party and at times the party as a whole, faltered in this way, does not, of course, invalidate the principles on which it had been built. Neither before nor since has any working-class party acquitted itself better in the conditions of revolutionary upheaval. But it does mean that the organization of the party on Leninist lines is not, in itself, any guarantee of success. It is not an organizational key which opens all the doors of history. The revolutionary party is indispensable, but the most revolutionary of parties is subject to an element of conservative routinism simply because it has to be a permanent stable organization. Equally the very creation of a party as a distinct body involves the risk that the party may separate itself from the class. The advantage of the Leninist party was that though it could not exclude these dangers it reduced them to a minimum. The greatness of Lenin in the Russian Revolution was that he—the party man par excellence—in the last analysis transcended his party. He was able, so to speak, to reach over the head of the party to the mass of the Russian workers and soldiers, not so much to address them as to respond to them, and so was able to force the party to respond as well. Expressing this idea as a theoretical generalization one can say that for Lenin, although the party had often to maintain a high degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the working class, and although the claims of the party and its discipline were strong, in the final analysis the party remained subordinate to, and dependent upon, the class. The Leninist theory of the party in no way implies the fetishization of party loyalty that characterised social democracy and was later to assume the most grotesque forms and dimensions in the official Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and the world.

## 6. The single world party

Lenin's theory of the party was, we have argued, in its essentials fully formed by the beginning of 1917. Now with the theory vindicated by the October Revolution Lenin possessed the political authority and influence to bring into being the logical conclusion of that



theory, namely the Communist International. The first congress of the Communist International opened in Moscow on the 2 March 1919, but in reality this was little more than the planting of a banner and a declaration of intent. Only 35 delegates attended and most of these were from the small nations that formerly were part of the Russian empire. Not until the second congress in July 1920, which 217 delegates attended, did the new International take definite shape as a mass fighting organization. The leadership of the Communist International was, naturally, the work of many hands and Lenin frequently took a back seat. Zinoviev was its president and many of its most important manifestoes were written by Trotsky. Nonetheless it is quite legitimate to consider the work of the Communist International in a study of Lenin's theory of the party, as he was both its initiator and most ardent champion (sometimes even against his own supporters) and certainly either inspired or approved all its most important strategic decisions." The discussion here will be extremely brief and inadequate. There are two reasons for this: firstly, an adequate treatment of all the questions of party strategy, tactics and organization dealt with by the International in its first few years would require at least a book to itself; secondly, we have been concerned primarily with the *development* of Lenin's theory of the party, and the work of the International involved in the main the *application* of ideas we have already discussed. Consequently only the main outlines will be indicated here, with the emphasis on those aspects of the Comintern which were in some way new departures.

The most immediately striking difference between the Second and Third Internationals, as organizations, lay in the fact that the former was a loose federation of independent national parties, whereas the latter was to be strictly centralised. As the Statutes adopted at the second congress put it: "The Communist International must, in fact and in deed, be a single communist party of the entire world. The parties working in the various countries are but its separate sections. Supreme authority was vested in the world congress to meet regularly once a year, but in between congresses the International was to be run by its elected Executive Committee, which was given extensive powers.

The Executive Committee conducts the entire work of the Communist International from one congress to the next...and issues instructions which are binding on all parties and organizations belonging to the Communist International. The Executive Committee of the Communist International shall expel groups or persons who offend against international discipline, and it also has the right to expel from the Communist International those parties which violate decisions of the world congress.

This conception of the International as a centralised world party was a major advance. In part it was designed to prevent any repetition of the nationalist fragmentation that destroyed the Second International in 1914. More positively its aim was to create a unified general staff of what was assumed to be the impending world revolution. Trotsky has neatly summarised the thinking that lay behind this form of organization.

Lenin's internationalism is not a formula for harmonising national and international interests in empty verbiage. It is a guide to revolutionary action embracing all nations. Our planet, inhabited by so-called civilised humanity, is considered as one single battlefield where various nations and social classes contend.

One battlefield required one army and one high command. The Communist International was to be, as Lukacs has put it, "The Bolshevik Party—Lenin's concept of the party—on a world scale."

To realise this aim it was necessary to foster the rapid growth of genuine revolutionary parties in all the main capitalist countries. To do this the Comintern worked to draw together existing Communist groups and trends and unite them into stable parties, and to win over as large a proportion as possible of the rank-and-file of Europe's socialist parties (notably the USPD, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and the

French Socialist Party). In this process the main enemy was "centrism," in that the centrist leaders had to be discredited to capture their supporters, and in that they had to be prevented from entering the International and infecting it. It was precisely the pressure from the rank-and-file in favour of the International that drew reformists in its direction and created this latter danger. At the second congress Lenin warned that "The Communist International is, to a certain extent, becoming the vogue...[and] may be faced with the danger of dilution by the influx of wavering and irresolute groups that have not as yet broken with their Second International ideology." Just as in 1903 Lenin had insisted on Clause 1 of the Party Rules as a weapon against opportunism, he now drew up 21 conditions of admission to the Communist International. These were extremely stringent. Condition 2 demanded that "Any organization that wishes to join the Communist International must consistently and systematically dismiss reformists and 'centrists' from positions of any responsibility in the working-class movement." Condition 4 insisted on "systematic propaganda and agitation...in the armed forces." Condition 14 required that "Communist parties in countries where communists can conduct their work legally must carry out periodic membership purges (re-registrations) with the aim of systematically ridding the party of petty-bourgeois elements that inevitably percolate into them." Summing up the 21 conditions, Zinoviev declared, "Just as it is not easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, so, I hope, it will not be easy for the adherents of the centre to slip through the 21 conditions." Prominent leaders of the centre, Crispin and Dittmann from the USPD and Serrati from the PSI, were present at the congress but their objections were forcefully rebutted by Lenin as "fundamentally Kautskyan...[and] imbued with a bourgeois spirit."

Parallel to the struggle against centrism, there was a debate with various revolutionary but ultra-left or syndicalist tendencies. This was conducted in a much more friendly fashion. The errors of the "Left" were put down primarily to their "youth" and inexperience. Some of the "Left," notably Pestafia from the Spanish syndicalists and Tanner from the British Shop Stewards' Movement, were so disgusted by the opportunism of the social-democratic parties that they rejected altogether the need for a proletarian party. In reply Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev patiently set out the ABC of the Leninist theory of the party, stressing the contrast between a social-democratic and a communist party. It is noticeable that there were no tirades against "economism" and no mention of the "introduction of socialism into the working class from without." The adopted theses stated "The revolutionary syndicalists often speak of the great part that can be played by a determined revolutionary minority. A really determined minority of the working class, a minority that is communist, that wants to act, that has a programme, that is out to organise the struggle of the masses—that is precisely what the communist party is."

More difficult and more instructive was the argument with those who accepted the need for a revolutionary party but who wanted it to pursue a simon-pure policy of no compromise, no manoeuvres and no participation in bourgeois parliaments or reactionary trade unions—this was the line of the KAPD (recently split from the German CP), Bordiga in Italy, Gorter and Pannekoek in Holland, Gallacher and Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain. To Lenin all this was "old and familiar rubbish," but his reply, *Left Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, specially written for the second congress, was one of his most thorough and lucid expositions of the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary party. Recounting some of the lesser-known episodes in the history of Bolshevism, Lenin argued that it was necessary to remain in the trade unions and "carry on communist work within them at all costs," and that "whilst you lack the strength to do away with bourgeois parliaments and every other type of reactionary institution you *must* work within them." "The task devolving on Communists," he wrote, "is to *convince* the backward elements, to work among them, and not to fence themselves off from them with

artificial and childishly 'Left' slogans." Lenin was concerned that communists should not "regard what is obsolete to us as something obsolete to a class, to the masses."

The concept of the party presented by Lenin in *Left Wing Communism* is that not of a band of blinkered dogmatists marching in only one direction—straight forward—but of a highly aware and politically astute body able to manoeuvre, at times to compromise and to retreat, so as never to lose contact with the class it aims to lead, and yet able "through all the intermediate stations and all compromises...[to] clearly perceive and constantly pursue the final aim." Of course it would not always be easy to distinguish between compromises that were necessary and those that were treacherous, but "It would be absurd to formulate a recipe or general rule ('No compromises') to suit all cases." What was required, Lenin argued, was analysis of the concrete situation.

It is, in fact, one of the functions of a party organization and of party leaders worthy of the name, to acquire, through the prolonged, persistent, variegated and comprehensive efforts of all thinking representatives of a given class, the knowledge, experience and—in addition to knowledge and experience—the political flair necessary for the speedy and correct solution of complex political problems.

During 1919 and 1920 the main emphasis within the Comintern was placed on the struggle against opportunism with ultraleftism being regarded as a much less serious deviation, but in 1921 this changed. Throughout Europe the working-class movement had been split and the opportunists and centrists had been expelled from the International—now the emphasis shifted to combating "leftism." The basic reason for this was the change in the objective situation. The immediate post-war period had seen an international wave of direct revolutionary struggles and the bourgeoisie had been thrown into panic. The perspective of the International was one of immediate world revolution. But in country after country the working class had been beaten back and the bourgeoisie had regained confidence. In all cases the new communist parties had conspicuously failed to win the support of the majority of the working class.

The immediate catalyst of the reorientation of Comintern strategy was the disastrous March action of the KPD in 1921. Over-reacting to the deliberately provocative police occupation of the Mansfield coal mines, the German Communist leaders attempted, without preparation and without majority support, to call a general strike and transform it into an uprising. When the workers failed to respond, party members were ordered to force them on to the streets and the unemployed, amongst whom the party had a strong base, were used to occupy factories against the will of the workers. The result was heavy fighting between communist and non-communist workers, the complete rout of the former and the decimation of the party (membership fell by almost two-thirds). Not content with this the KPD's "left" leadership attempted to generalise their ludicrous adventurism into a system going under the name "the theory of the offensive."

Clearly it was time to call a halt. Lenin declared that if the "theorists of the offensive" constituted a definite trend, then "a relentless fight against this trend is essential, for otherwise there is no Communist International." The third congress of the International in June–July 1921 adopted the slogan "To the masses" and stated that "The most important question before the Communist International today is to win predominating influence over the majority of the working class." Particular attention was now to be paid to "partial struggles and partial demands." "The task of the communist parties is to extend, to deepen, and to unify this struggle for concrete demands... These partial demands, anchored in the needs of the broadest masses, must be put forward by the communist parties in a way which not only leads the masses to struggle, but by its very nature organises them." The logical consequence of this new line was the policy of the united front, which was promulgated by the Executive of the International in December 1921 and ratified by the fourth congress in 1922.

The idea of the united front was that public approaches should be made to the leaders of the social-democratic parties proposing united action on a common programme of basic economic and political demands arising from the immediate needs of the working class. If the social democrats agreed, then the communist parties would have the chance to prove in practice their superiority as defenders of the proletariat. If the social democrats rejected the proposals, then the blame for any disunity would fall on them. But as well as being an indirect weapon against the social democrats, the united front was also designed to reconcile the existence of separate communist parties with the need of the working class for unity in the day-to-day struggle against the industrialists and the state.

In order that the parties of the International should be able more effectively to carry out this day-to-day agitation for immediate demands and to lend it a revolutionary character, and to be better prepared for future revolutionary opportunities, it was thought necessary that they should "bolshelize" not only their ideology, strategy and tactics, but also the details of their organization and methods of work. We discussed earlier the differences between the organization of the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik party and that current in the European social-democratic parties. In 1921 many of the Western CPs were still functioning on the social-democratic model. To correct this the third congress adopted theses on "The Organization and Construction of Communist Parties" which were to be implemented by each national section. Apart from general remarks about democratic centralism the theses stressed the obligation of all members to work, the key role of factory and trade-union cells, the importance of report backs on all activity and the necessity of an illegal communications network, and gave instructions on how to prepare for meetings and work in trade-union branches.

Organizing millions of workers in a single world party, the Communist International, during its first few years marks in many respects the highest point that has yet been achieved by the Marxist revolutionary movement. And yet it was also a failure; not just in that it did not produce immediate world revolution, but also in that within a few years it ceased to be a revolutionary force at all and became the submissive instrument of Russian foreign policy. Russian domination was the rock on which the Communist International foundered. It was of course inevitable that the leaders of the world's first successful workers' revolution would be listened to with respect. Moreover this was, at first, a positive factor as the Russian leaders, especially Lenin and Trotsky, were clearly superior in theory and in practical experience to anyone in the new European parties. Lenin frankly acknowledged the fact of Russian leadership, but assumed that it would be only temporary. "Leadership in the revolutionary proletarian International has passed for a time—for a short time, it goes without saying—to the Russians, just as at various periods of the nineteenth century it was in the hands of the British, then of the French, then of the Germans." As long as the Russian Revolution linked its fate to the success of the revolution internationally, the preeminence of the Russian leaders aided the International, but as soon as this orientation was abandoned the International was ruined.

Two factors explain the continued passive submission of the foreign communist parties to Russian direction. The first was the series of defeats inflicted on the international working-class movement. The Russians alone retained the prestige of success, and on the basis of nothing but setbacks no other party developed the confidence or authority to challenge them. The second was a failure of the Bolsheviks to communicate, or, put the other way round, a failure of the foreign parties to learn. The communists of Germany, Italy, France etc. found themselves continually being criticised and corrected, first from the left and then from the right. In the process they seem to have absorbed not the Leninist method as a whole, on which the corrections were based, but only the idea that Moscow was always right. Consequently they never developed the capacity for independent concrete

analysis which Lenin considered to be a function of the party to produce in its leaders. In his last speech to the Communist International in November 1922, Lenin seemed to be beginning to grapple with this problem, though he did not have the chance to develop his ideas.

At the third congress in 1921, we adopted a resolution on the organizational structure of the communist parties and on the methods and content of their activities. The resolution is an excellent one, but is almost entirely Russian, that is to say, every thing in it is based on Russian conditions. This is its good point but it is also its failing. It is its failing because I am sure that no foreigner can read it...and...if by way of exception some foreigner does understand it, he cannot carry it out...we have not learned how to present our Russian experience to foreigners...the most important thing for all of us, Russian and foreign comrades alike, is to sit down and study...We are studying in the general sense. They, however, must study in the special sense, in order that they may really understand the organizational structure, method and content of revolutionary work.

The failure of the International and its transformation into the tool of the emergent Russian state bureaucracy, does not discredit the concept of the centralised world party, for that concept was the reflection of the international nature of the class struggle. But it does show that the creation of an International intensifies not only the advantages, but also the dangers inherent in the creation of a party at all. A healthy International would have been a powerful counterweight to the processes of degeneration at work in Russia. As it was, the International proved a reliable prop and support for the Stalinist bureaucracy. What remained from the early years of the Communist International was, in Trotsky's words, "an invaluable programmatic heritage." To this one can add that its documents, its theses, its debates and in some respects its practice give us the most complete picture of the application of the fully developed Leninist theory of the party.

## 7. The essence of Lenin's theory

From the foregoing account it is clear that Lenin's theory of the party was a highly complex, many-faceted doctrine. We have argued that to understand this theory fully it is necessary to trace its evolution relating each step in its development to the practical and theoretical problems which engendered it. This we have attempted to do and on this basis it is possible to venture a brief summary of the essence of the theory.

There are two basic themes in Lenin's theory of the party: first, the absolutely independent organization of the advanced workers, rigidly upholding the overall interests of the working class and all the exploited and the ultimate aim of international socialist revolution; second, the closest possible relationship with the mass of workers maintained by providing practical leadership in every struggle involving the workers or affecting their interests. The former means fixed adherence to principle, a willingness to accept, for a period, the position of a tiny and apparently isolated minority, and the waging of an unrelenting struggle within the working class against all manifestations of opportunism. The latter means extreme tactical flexibility and the ability to exploit every avenue to maintain contact with the masses.

These two elements are not separate but dialectically interrelated and mutually dependent. Without firm principles and disciplined organization the party will either be unable to execute the necessary abrupt tactical turns or will be derailed by them. Without deep involvement in the struggles of the working class the party will be unable to forge and maintain its discipline and will become subject to the pressure of alien classes. Unless the day-to-day struggle of the working class is linked to the ultimate aim of the overthrow of capitalism, it will fail in its purpose. Unless the party can relate the ultimate aim to immediate struggles, it will degenerate into a useless sect. The more developed the spontaneous activity of the workers, the more it demands conscious revolutionary organization on pain of catastrophic defeat. But revolutionary organization cannot be maintained and re-

newed unless it receives the infusion of fresh blood from the spontaneous revolt of the masses.

All the organizational forms characteristic of Bolshevism—the close watch on the party's boundaries, the commitment to activity of all members, the strict discipline, the full inner-party democracy, the primary role of the workplace cell, the combination of legal and illegal work—derive from the need to combine these two elements. The Leninist party is the concrete expression of the Marxist synthesis of determinism and voluntarism in revolutionary practice.

Throughout Lenin's revolutionary career the two aspects outlined here were continually present, but at different times one aspect preponderated over the other in his concerns. In 1903 and 1914 and at the first two congresses of the Communist International it was the independence of the party that was dominant. In 1905 and at the third and fourth congresses of the International it was the relationship with the masses. In October 1917 the two were inextricably fused precisely because the revolution marked the fusion in the working class of its immediate demands and its historical interests. Part of Lenin's unique genius was his ability to judge which aspect to stress, which way to "bend the stick" at a particular time.

"It is not enough" he wrote, "to be a revolutionary and an advocate of socialism in general. It is necessary to know at every moment how to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength in order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link."

Of all Marxists Lenin unquestionably made the largest and most significant contribution to the development of the theory of the party. His ideas transformed the organization, strategy and tactics of first the Russian and then the world working-class movement. They are the criteria by which, and to a large extent the framework within which, all other contributions to the theory of the party, including that of Marx, must be assessed.