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From Lenin to Leninism

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Resumen

In “From Lenin to Leninism,” Oswaldo Coggiola examines the evolution of Lenin’s influence on the 20th century, as recognized by Eric Hobsbawm. Lenin’s leadership during the October Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet state left an indelible mark on global history. This paper traces the transformation of Lenin’s ideas into “Leninism,” a doctrine formalized posthumously, which became a foundation for the international communist movement. Coggiola highlights the contrast between Lenin’s practical approach to revolutionary strategy and the rigid, bureaucratic interpretation that Stalin later imposed. The analysis delves into Lenin’s theoretical contributions, particularly his views on the agrarian question and the proletarian revolution, while critiquing the subsequent misappropriation and mythologization of his legacy. This historical re-examination underscores Lenin’s complex legacy and its implications for contemporary socialist thought and practice

Palabras clave: Leninism; October Revolution; Soviet Union; Proletarian Revolution; Agrarian Question

De Lênin ao Leninismo

Abstract

Em “De Lênin ao Leninismo”, Oswaldo Coggiola examina a evolução da influência de Lênin no século XX, conforme reconhecida por Eric Hobsbawm. A liderança de Lênine durante a Revolução de Outubro e o subsequente estabelecimento do Estado soviético deixaram uma marca indelével na história global. Este artigo traça a transformação das ideias de Lenin em “Leninismo”, uma doutrina formalizada postumamente que se tornou a base do movimento comunista internacional. Coggiola destaca o contraste entre a abordagem prática de Lenin à estratégia revolucionária e a interpretação rígida e burocrática que Stalin impôs mais tarde. A análise investiga as contribuições teóricas de Lênine, particularmente as suas opiniões sobre a questão agrária e a revolução proletária, ao mesmo tempo que critica a subsequente apropriação indevida e mitologização do seu legado. Este reexame histórico sublinha o complexo legado de Lênine e as suas implicações para o pensamento e a prática socialistas contemporâneos.

Keywords: Leninismo; Revolução de Outubro; União Soviética; Revolução proletária; Questão agrária

Introducción

In “The Age of Extremes,” Eric Hobsbawm defined Lenin as “the man with the greatest individual impact on the history of the 20th century.” As is known, he was the principal (though not sole) leader of the October Revolution, whose shadow loomed and continues to loom over the world. His myth inspired the specter that haunted the century, that of the “world communist revolution,” used to justify wars and unprecedented massacres in history. In Russia, the birthplace of the “communist specter” and a “country of unpredictable past,”

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interpretations of Lenin by various authors have been diametrically opposed. Dimitri Volkogonov, for instance, who for years sustained the Soviet “official” version, presenting Bolshevism as an “absolute good” born from Lenin's mind. Conversely, Trotsky was portrayed as the embodiment of evil, an enemy of Lenin from beginning to end (albeit concealing this for a brief period), and an opponent of socialism due to imperialism. In a trilogy devoted to the most important characters in the history of the USSR, Volkogonov completely changed his stance: Bolshevism was now the “absolute evil,” born from Lenin's (demonic) genius. As for Stalin and Trotsky, they were “enemies brothers”; the former a legitimate son of Lenin. Volkogonov tendentiously interpreted phrases, in which “note by note, letter by letter, Lenin, the semi-deity venerated for 62 years, even by me, appears not as the magnanimous guide of legend, but as a cynical tyrant, willing to do anything to seize and retain power.” “Semi-deity venerated”: that was Lenin's status in the “official history” of the USSR. A Western practitioner of potboiler history, in the wake of post-Soviet anti-communist reaction, titled one of his works “Lenin, the Cause of Evil” (Mourousy, 1992).

“Leninism” was created upon Lenin's death as a supposedly infallible doctrine, capable of ensuring, through its “application,” the victory of the socialist revolution. A century later, on the terrain cleared and also devastated by victorious and defeated revolutions, by wars and bloody counter-revolutions, it is worth considering the conditions that shaped the man, and also those that presided over the doctrine that inspired the so-called “international communist movement.” Bukharin summarized: “Marx mainly provided the algebra of capitalist development and revolutionary action; Lenin added the algebra of new phenomena of destruction and construction, as well as its arithmetic. He deciphered the formulas of algebra from a concrete and practical point of view.” (Bukharin, 1976) This in a country where, in Trotsky's summary, “the fall of the monarchy had long been the indispensable condition for the development of the economy and culture of Russia. But the forces to carry out this task were lacking. The bourgeoisie trembled before the revolution. The intellectuals tried to organize the peasantry around them. Unable to generalize their efforts and objectives, the peasant did not respond to the appeals of the youth. The intelligentsia armed itself with dynamite. An entire generation was consumed in this struggle.” This included Lenin's older brother, Alexander Ulyanov, a populist, executed by the czarist regime for conspiring against the monarch, without any assassination attempt being made against him.

A member of the subsequent revolutionary generation, Lenin began his career in the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) by combating, within old Russian populism (including its dynamite-leaning tendency), its alleged specific, “Eastern,” path to socialism, based on the survival of the Russian agrarian community (the *mir*). It was mistaken to maintain the possibility of realizing a Russian socialism based on the rural community, as the Narodniks did, since capitalist development had created social differentiation within rural communities. The village was in the process of dissolution, giving rise, on the one hand, to capitalist agricultural property and, on the other, to agricultural wage laborers. His diagnosis of the dissolution of the old rural community (confirmed by subsequent historical research) (Atkinson, 1983), outlined in various works, especially in “The Development of Capitalism in Russia,” followed in the footsteps of Plekhanov's political struggle against populism, summarized in “Our Differences.” (Haron, 1963)

Lenin added a differentiated evaluation of the peasant movement, which pointed to the nodal point of the revolutionary strategy, the worker-peasant alliance. In the Agrarian Program of



Social Democracy, he stated: “The mistake of certain Marxists consists in criticizing the theory of the populists, losing sight of its historically real and legitimate content in the struggle against feudalism. They criticize, and rightly so, the 'principle of labor' and 'equalitarianism' as backward, reactionary, petty-bourgeois socialism, and forget that these theories express advanced, revolutionary petty-bourgeois democratic ideals; these theories serve as the banner of the most determined struggles against old Russia, feudal Russia. The idea of equality is the most revolutionary idea in the struggle against the old order of absolutism in general and against the old feudal and latifundist land ownership regime in particular. The idea of equality is legitimate and progressive among the petty-bourgeois peasants because it expresses the aspiration for redistribution.”

For Lenin, “the agrarian question constituted the basis of the bourgeois revolution in Russia and determined the national peculiarity of this revolution.” (Gruppi, 1979) The goals he set for the bourgeois revolution were: democratic republic, constituent assembly, and provisional revolutionary government under the dictatorship of the workers' and peasants' democracy. The means to achieve these objectives would be armed popular insurrection. According to Lenin, the party should promote a revolution of workers and peasants, and this, while carrying out the democratic revolution, even preparing the ground for the socialist revolution, could not escape, at least for some time, the fate of a bourgeois revolution. Trotsky, a member of the subsequent generation, understood that the proletariat would have to seek the support of the peasants, but could not stop there: in completing the bourgeois revolution, the proletariat would inevitably be induced to carry out its own revolution, without interruption. The already controversial issue of the revolution's program was intertwined with that of organization, which gave rise to Bolshevism, identified with Lenin.

Lenin's political role at the turn of the century was to lay the groundwork for the organization of a unified workers' party, after the dispersion of the groups participating in the founding congress of the RSDLP in 1898. A sort of unity existed through reference to exiled socialists, led by Plekhanov. But “up until then, Plekhanov's group had been mainly concerned with the problem of theoretical orientation, due to the fact that there was no political party that identified with Marx's theory and sought to spread this doctrine among the popular masses.” (Hill, 1987) In “Our Immediate Task,” of 1899, Lenin defined that “the party has not ceased to exist; it has only withdrawn into itself, to gather strength and face the task of unifying all Russian Social Democrats on firm ground. Achieving this unification, developing convenient forms, definitively setting aside fragmented localist work: these are the most immediate and essential tasks of Russian Social Democrats.” How did Bolshevism, Lenin's great political creation, emerge in these conditions?

Against the ahistorical interpretation, it has been pointed out that “there are three organizations habitually designated as the 'Bolshevik party': 1) the RSDLP, between 1903 and 1911, in which many factions disputed leadership; 2) the Bolshevik faction within the same party; 3) the RSDLP (Bolshevik) finally founded in 1912, which received important reinforcements, especially that of the 'inter-district organization' of Petrograd with Trotsky, before becoming the victorious Bolshevik party in October.” (Broué, 1971) Bolshevism was a current that emerged from ideological and political disputes, from splits and mergers, but with continuity. It was Lenin who early on undertook to relativize the political and organizational principles of “What Is to Be Done?” (1902), considered (wrongly) the founding document of Bolshevism, as being those of a “new type” of party. The term “Bolshevik”

initially meant majority (of the II Congress of the RSDLP, 1903). Writing in 1907 a preface to the reissue of his works, Lenin criticized the exegetes of “What Is to Be Done?”, who “completely separate this work from its context in a defined historical situation—a period long surpassed by the development of the party,” noting that “no other organization except the one led by Iskra could, in the circumstances of Russia from 1900 to 1905, have created a social democratic workers' party such as the one that was created... What Is to Be Done? is a summary of the tactics and organizational policies of the Iskra group in 1901 and 1902.

That tactic and that policy were not considered original, but rather a version, within the Russian conditions (severe repression, absence of democratic freedoms and political democracy), of the principles of the Second International, especially the German SPD, of which the head of the German police said in 1883, “foreign socialist parties consider it as the example to be imitated in all its aspects.” (Haupt, 1980) Lenin proposed an organization of revolutionaries, conspiratorial and centralized, which would also be a workers' organization, with ample room for internal debate but with full unity of action. If the first aspect was emphasized, it was because it clashed with the supporters of a “loose” party, which the Bolsheviks did not consider adapted to Russian conditions. For Lenin, the revolutionary “should not idealize the union secretary but the popular tribune, who knows how to react against any manifestation of arbitrariness and oppression, wherever it occurs, whatever the class or social layer affected, who knows how to generalize all facts to compose a complete picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation, who knows how to seize the slightest opportunity to expose his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, to explain to everyone the historical significance of the proletariat's emancipatory struggle.”

In summary, a workers' party and also professional. This idea would be maintained in all phases of Bolshevism, including changes in program. From it, combined with specific circumstances, Bolshevism was profiled as a differentiated political current within socialist currents, including international ones, beyond the intentions of its founders. Lenin changed not once, but several times his assessment of the nature of the Russian revolution, but never the idea that its central protagonist would be the industrial proletariat, elaborated in the 1890s in polemics against the Narodniks (populists): “The working class is the consistent and declared enemy of absolutism, and only between the working class and absolutism is no compromise possible. The hostility of all other classes, groups, and strata of the population toward autocracy is not absolute: its democracy is always looking back.”

It is for and with this working class that Bolshevism proposed to build a party. It was because of its effectiveness in this that Bolshevism was constituted and prevailed. At the outset, Lenin's comrades probably did not understand the profound meaning of his proposals. However, his concept of organization and discipline constituted, nevertheless, an effective policy in the task of unifying clandestine socialist committees, whose number was rapidly increasing in Russia, under the direction of Iskra, located abroad. Many committees opposed it. The “party question” (and its fractions) arose from the divergence between Lenin and Martov at the II Congress of the RSDLP regarding the first article of the statutes. Martov proposed: “Anyone who accepts the program of the RSDLP and supports the party, materially or through regular cooperation developed under the direction of one of its bodies is a member of the RSDLP.” To which Lenin replied: “Anyone who accepts the party program and supports the party, materially or through personal participation in the activity of one of its bodies, is a party member.” A seemingly minimal divergence.



At the Social Democratic congress of 1903, the “second,” the Bolshevik majority was actually a minority in the votes immediately before and after the vote on the statutes: “Martov's more elastic formulation, which, in opposition to Lenin, did not consider 'collaboration' to be a requirement in a Party organization, was accepted by 28 votes against 23. After the withdrawal of seven delegates, Lenin formed a majority of 24 against 20, so that he managed to admit his own list of candidates to the Central Committee... The victory was short-lived, as the result was the division of the Party leadership into two factions [Bolsheviks and Mensheviks]. The leading positions of Iskra returned to men who became ideological opponents of Lenin, who soon joined Plekhanov. Lenin prepared the foundation of his own newspaper; *Vperiod* (Forward) was launched at the end of 1904.” (Shapiro, 1975) The Bolsheviks constituted their faction and convened their own congress as the III Congress of the RSDLP (London, 1905). Bolshevism, as seen, emerged from a series of crises and political upheavals, not from a pre-existing finished project.

A well-known political dictionary, however, considered Leninism as “the theoretical-practical interpretation of Marxism, in a revolutionary key, elaborated by Lenin in and for an industrially backward country, such as Russia, where peasants represented the vast majority of the population,” attributing to Lenin's “party theory” “clear populist roots” and simultaneously situating it as a “left-wing” variant of Bernsteinian revisionism. (Settembrini, 1980) The organizational controversy in Russian social democracy obscured a divergence over what type of party (parliamentary or revolutionary) for what type of activity (electoral or revolutionary), for what type of historical period (peaceful or revolutionary). What initially appeared to be a difference over methods to build a workers' party in Russia ultimately revealed itself as a divergence over program and world historical period, which would split the international workers' movement, with Lenin and Bolshevism as the pivot of the split.

Lenin was the main organizer of the II Congress of the RSDLP, considered the true founding congress of the party. It was the result of a series of previous political victories: “When the Congress was held in 1903, three ideological battles had already been fought and resolved, which formed the basis of the party program unanimously adopted by the Congress. Faced with the Narodniks, the RSDLP considered the proletariat and not the peasants as the agent of the future revolution; facing the 'legal Marxists,' it preached revolutionary action and denied any compromise with the bourgeoisie; facing the 'economists,' it emphasized the essentially political nature of the party's program.” (Carr, 1970) The fight against the economists, summarized by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*, was a common heritage of the party, including the future opponents of the supposed ultra-centralism contained in this text.

In *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin stated that “the spontaneous development of the workers' movement precisely marches toward its subordination to bourgeois ideology, because the spontaneous workers' movement is trade-unionist (...) Anything that bows before the spontaneity of the workers' movement, anything that diminishes the role of the 'conscious element,' the role of social democracy, means strengthening the influence of bourgeois ideology on the workers.” But at the same time, he defined that “the spontaneous element is nothing more than the embryonic form of the conscious. And the primitive riots already reflected a certain conscious awakening.” Or else: “The working class spontaneously tends toward socialism, but bourgeois ideology, the most widespread (and constantly resurrected in various forms), is the one that most spontaneously imposes itself on the workers.” The text

and its consequences sparked a controversy that resonates to this day. It proposed a new foundation (only partially anticipated by Kautsky) for the workers' political party.

In 1904, Rosa Luxemburg used her pen against Leninist “ultra-centralism” in *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*: “It is not by starting from the discipline inculcated by the capitalist State, with the mere transfer of the baton from the hand of the bourgeoisie to that of a social-democratic central committee, but by the breaking, by the extirpation of this spirit of servile discipline, that the proletariat can be educated for the new discipline, the voluntary self-discipline of social democracy.” Adding that “the ultra-centralism advocated by Lenin seems to us, in all its essence, to bear, not a positive and creative spirit, but the sterile spirit of the night watchman. His concern consists, above all, in controlling party activity and not in fecundating it, in restricting movement and not in developing it, in annoying it and not in unifying it.” In the Luxemburgist conception, “social democracy is not linked to the organization of the working class: it is the very movement of the working class.” (Luxemburg, 1980) Lenin's response was simple: Rosa's criticisms were politely answered, one by one, affirming that “what Rosa Luxemburg's article, published in *Die Neue Zeit*, makes known to the reader, is not my book, but something else entirely,” and essentially saying that “what I defend throughout the book, from the first page to the last, are the elementary principles of any party organization that one can imagine; (not) a system of organization against any other.” Lenin, therefore, did not proclaim himself the inventor of some system called “democratic centralism.”

In 1904, Trotsky also published a pamphlet (*Our Political Tasks*) in which, alongside a notable series of personal attacks on Lenin (inaugurating a practice unknown to Russian socialists: Trotsky would later justify himself by referring to his “immaturity” - witnesses of the time, like Angelica Balabanova, affirmed that there was no personal affinity between the two men) (Balabanova, 1974), he also accused Bolshevism of intending to establish “the dictatorship of the party over the working class,” of the central committee over the party, and of the leader over the central committee. Alongside polemical tricks, Trotsky also engaged in futurological exercises: “The tasks of the new regime will be so complex that they can only be resolved through competition between various methods of economic and political construction, through prolonged 'disputes,' through a systematic struggle not only between the socialist and capitalist worlds, but also between many tendencies within socialism, which will inevitably arise as soon as proletarian dictatorship brings dozens of new problems. No strong and 'dominant' organization will be able to suppress these controversies. A proletariat capable of exercising its dictatorship over society will not tolerate any dictatorship over itself. The working class will have in its ranks some handfuls of political invalids and much ballast of outdated ideas that it will have to get rid of. In the time of its dictatorship, just as today, it will have to clear its mind of false theories and bourgeois experiences, and purge its ranks of political charlatans and revolutionaries who only know how to look backward. But this intricate task cannot be solved by imposing a handful of chosen people, or a single exercise of power, over the proletariat.

Trotsky had broken with Lenin at the 1903 Congress. Retrospectively, he presented this rupture as “subjective” and “moral,” linked to an issue that did not involve any political principle. Lenin proposed reducing the number of editors of *Iskra* from six to three. These were to be Plekhanov, Martov, and himself. Axelrod, Zaslulich, and Potresov were to be excluded. He wanted the editorial work of *Iskra* to be more effective than it had been recently;



“to Trotsky, this attempt to eliminate Axelrod and Zasluch from Iskra, two of its founders, seemed sacrilege. The harshness of Lenin aroused his repugnance.” (Deutscher, 1976) At the Congress, Trotsky spoke against Lenin regarding two points on the agenda: paragraph 1 of the party statutes and the election of the party's central bodies. Trotsky did not oppose the theses of the party program prepared by Lenin. On the contrary, in this item, he defended Lenin. (Pantsov, 1978) In his autobiography, Trotsky did not refer to his 1904 pamphlet; after the 1903 Congress, he was momentarily linked to the Mensheviks, with whom he later broke. During the subsequent decade, he was a supporter of the “reconciliation” of factions (not without some ephemeral successes), which fueled the legend of an “anti-Bolshevik” Trotsky, although he approached Bolshevism as much as Lenin did, at a time when the formal division of the party had not yet been consummated.

Party, workers' vanguard, working class, did not identify (as Lenin, Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg did) although they mutually and decisively influenced each other. In 1905, Bolshevism was a party of the workers' vanguard; its composition was almost 62% workers (and almost 5% peasants) (Lane, 1977): this was the party of the “professional revolutionaries.” Three lustres later, Lenin ironically remarked about his critics: “To claim that Iskra (from 1901 and 1902!) exaggerated the idea of an organization of professional revolutionaries is like saying, after the Russo-Japanese War, that the Japanese had an exaggerated idea of the Russian military forces, and that they worried too much, before the war, about fighting against these forces.” (Lenin, 1971) Many saw in *Our Political Tasks* a prophecy about the fate of Bolshevism and the revolution. For Isaac Deutscher, who criticized the personal attacks of the work, this was also “astonishing” for containing “great ideas” and “subtle historical insight.” (Deutscher, 1976) For E. H. Carr, “the (future) process was very detailedly predicted by Trotsky, who in a brilliant pamphlet published in 1904 announced a situation in which 'the party is replaced by the party organization, the organization by the central committee and finally the central committee by the dictator.'” (Carr, 1969) Pierre Broué criticized the “pedantry” of *Our Political Tasks*, its invectives against “Maximilien Lenin,” stating that Trotsky considered, later on, the work as “a terribly annoying document about which he observed the greatest discretion,” and wondered why, in the circumstances of its publication (Trotsky's break with Menshevism), he “did not renounce its publication.” (Broué, 1988) The strongest criticism referred to the fact that Lenin maintained that the intelligentsia played a special role in the revolutionary movement, endowing it with the socialist perspective that the workers would not achieve on their own. Trotsky saw in this opinion a denial of the capabilities of the working class and the aspiration of the intelligentsia to keep its movement under its tutelage. The Polish socialist Makhavski held a similar opinion about “Russian socialism” in general. (Makhavski, 1979)

Trotsky stated that, at the Congress, “my whole being protested against the ruthless suppression of the veterans. Out of the indignation I felt came my rupture with Lenin, which took place in a way on moral grounds. But this was only appearance. Ultimately, our divergences had a political character that manifested itself in the question of organization.” (Trotsky, 1973) *Our Political Tasks* was “dedicated to Pavel Axelrod.” It now seems clear that “both Trotsky and Luxemburg were unfair to Lenin when they removed the positions of *What Is to Be Done?* from their concrete historical context and attributed to them a universal character.” (Mandel, 1995) Trotsky spoke, much later, about his “cursed” work, without regrets: “In a pamphlet written in 1904, whose criticisms of Lenin often lacked maturity and fairness, there are, however, pages that provide a very faithful idea of the thinking of the

komitetchiki of that time (...) The battle that Lenin would wage a year later, at the congress [III Congress, April 1905], against the arrogant komitetchiki fully confirms this criticism.” (Trotsky, 2012) This is the aspect explored by historians who affirm that “(in 1903) Lenin was already convinced that it was the professional revolutionary, and not the masses, who held the key to the victory of socialism.” (Ulam, 1976)

Lenin's position, which led to the emergence of factions, was not an impulse: it was the continuity of a political and ideological struggle in which he was the protagonist since the 1890s. The struggle against populism, *What Is to Be Done?*, and the delimitation of Menshevism, were its various phases, not based on a statutory fetish: Lenin accepted, at the Congress of reunification (Bolsheviks + Mensheviks) of 1906, the Menshevik wording of article 1 of the statutes... This and other episodes allow us to question the retrospective view of the Bolshevik Zinoviev: “In 1903, we already had two separate groups, two organizations, and two parties. Bolshevism and Menshevism, as ideological tendencies, were already formed with their characteristic profile, later evident in the revolutionary storm.” (Zinoviev, 1973) At the London Congress of 1905 (Bolshevik), Lenin undertook the battle for the recruitment and promotion of workers who were not “professional revolutionaries,” but merely worker militants: an index of a conflict with the komitetchiki, the “committee men”. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, recounted in her memoirs the battle between Lenin and Rykov, spokesman for the “clandestine”: “The komitetchiki was a man full of assurance... he did not admit any democracy within the party... he did not like innovations.” According to her, Lenin could hardly contain himself “hearing it said that there were no workers capable of being part of the committees.” He proposed to include a majority of workers in the committees by obligation. The party apparatus was against it; Lenin's proposition was defeated, a fact that Pierre Broué related to “the sectarian spirit that kept the Bolsheviks away from the first soviets, in which many of them feared an opposing organization.” The revolution of 1905, already underway, witnessed the formation of workers' councils, elected by workers in their workplaces. The delegates were at all times revocable by their electors. Unionized or not, politically organized or disorganized, the workers of Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Tula, Odessa, and other industrial agglomerations were creating a new form of mass organization, which appeared as the opposite of the parliamentary assemblies with which the Western bourgeoisie exercised its class domination. Its transformation into organs of government, however, was not yet the project of any political current.

The revolutionary tradition of the Russian working class had a decisive weight in the revolution of 1905; the strike of January 1905 was closely linked to the outbreak of another general strike in 1904, in Baku, in the Caucasus. This, in turn, was preceded by other major strikes that occurred between 1903 and 1904, in southern Russia, which had as their predecessor the great strike of 1902, in Batum. We can identify the beginning of this series of strikes in that undertaken by the textile workers of St. Petersburg between 1896 and 1897. Since the end of the 19th century, Russia had become an epicenter of the European revolution: the RSDLP, at its congress in 1903, adopted a program “where, for the first time in the history of socialist parties, the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat appeared, defined as the conquest of political power by the proletariat.” (Broué, 1971) The class struggle in Russia acquired its own, vanguard profile on the international scene; Russian social democracy was not simply the projection of European socialism in “wild lands.”



In the revolution of 1905, the problem of the soviets affected all factions of the RSDLP: “Without paying attention to the cooperation of many Bolshevik workers in the councils, the principled position of the leading Bolshevik bodies varied between a radical rejection and a somewhat reluctant acceptance of these 'foreign bodies' to the revolution. The position of the Bolsheviks regarding the soviets differed according to the locations and was undergoing transformations; Lenin himself did not come to a definitive judgment about their role and importance, although he was the only one who, among the Bolsheviks, strove to thoroughly examine this new revolutionary phenomenon and add it to his revolutionary theory and tactics. During the October strike, the Bolshevik workers participated in the formation of the Council of Workers' Deputies of Petersburg, just like the other workers. In the early days of the existence of the soviet, when it acted as a strike committee and no one really knew what role it would play in the future, the Bolsheviks opposed it benevolently. But that changed when, at the end of the October strike, the soviet remained standing and began to evolve towards a political leadership body of the working class. Most Bolsheviks openly opposed the soviet; they drafted, in the federative committees formed by representatives of both factions of the RSDLP, a resolution recommending the official acceptance of the program of social democracy, since independent organizations in the style of the council could not guide a clear political orientation and would be detrimental.” (Anweiler, 1975) The party that would project itself to the world as the vanguard of the “Soviet power” initially opposed the directing or governmental function of the soviet. There was no “genius Lenin” to prevent this.

For most Marxist historians, there is a connection between What Is to Be Done? and “Bolshevik sectarianism.” Paul Le Blanc asserts that “the potential sectarianism that (Rosa) Luxemburg had noticed in Lenin's conceptions was clearly manifested since 1905.” (Le Blanc, 1990) For Ernest Mandel, “it is evident that Lenin underestimated during the course of the 1902-1903 debate the dangers for the workers' movement that could arise from the formation of a bureaucracy within it.” (Mandel, 1984) The test of the revolution, and its defeat, produced new crises and political realignments. During the reaction after 1905, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split into three fractions each: the “liquidators” (Potressov, Zasulich), the center (Martov, Dan), and the “party Mensheviks” (Plekhanov) among the latter; the “vperiodists” (Bogdanov), the “Leninists,” and the “conciliators” or “party Bolsheviks” (Rykov, Nogin), among the former. If 1903 was not the “magic date” of Bolshevism, 1906 (reunification congress) was not the great hour of the lost conciliation (Lenin declared that “until the social revolution, social democracy will inevitably present an opportunist wing and a revolutionary wing”); the Bolsheviks maintained a “clandestine center” in the unified party; finally, 1912 (when the Bolsheviks definitively separated from the Mensheviks) was not the “final party,” for before 1912 Lenin reconciled with Plekhanov and formed a bloc in the RSDLP with the “party Mensheviks” against the “liquidators,” with the aim of maintaining a clandestine apparatus. It is on this position that the RSDLP (Bolshevik) was constituted, with a revolutionary wing and another “opportunist”...

Between crises and fierce disputes among fractions, the political problems of Russian social democracy were situated at a higher level than those of the other sections of the Second International, impregnated by reformism and electoralism. Its particularity has nothing to do with a supposed theory about the “Party, with a capital P, (which) constitutes the great and ambiguous Russian contribution to contemporary history,” also called “the Party: a meta-political entity totally different from everything that had been seen until then in the varied scene of European socialist movements,” considered as the birth of a new anthropological

variant: the homo bolchevicus! (Betizza, 1984) It is easy to point the finger at the confusion of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks about the role of the soviets; the leaders of these were confused themselves about it: “Even when the second congress (of the soviets) took place, on October 28, no member of this assembly knew very well its function, whether they constituted a central strike committee or a new type of organization, similar to a revolutionary self-administration organism.”

Lenin's evolution was ironically described by Moshe Lewin: “Since his work written in Siberian exile, Lenin tended to see capitalism behind every Russian cart. The revolution of 1905 led him to nuance his ideas: capitalism was still weakly developed, liberal forces were embryonic and timid.” (Lewin, 1996) Nevertheless, for Lenin, the revolution continued to be “bourgeois in the sense of its socio-economic content. What this means: the tasks of the revolution taking place in Russia do not go beyond the scope of bourgeois society. Not even the fullest victory of the current revolution, that is, the conquest of the most democratic republic and the confiscation of all land from the owners by the peasants, will shake the foundations of bourgeois social order.” But, from this thesis, Lenin did not derive the conclusion that the main engine of the revolution would be the bourgeoisie, as the Mensheviks wanted, because the revolution was occurring at the moment when “the proletariat had already begun to become conscious of itself as a particular class and to unite in an autonomous class organization.”

In September 1905, during the “first Russian revolution,” Lenin stated that “from the democratic revolution we will soon begin to pass, to the extent of our forces, the forces of the conscious and organized proletariat, to the socialist revolution. We are for uninterrupted revolution. We will not stop halfway.” Lenin, however, limited the immediate scope of the revolution to the bourgeois-democratic horizon. According to Trotsky, he “wanted to imply that, to maintain unity with the peasantry, the proletariat would be obliged to forgo the immediate placement of socialist tasks during the next revolution. But that meant for the proletariat to renounce its own dictatorship. Consequently, the dictatorship was, in essence, of the peasantry, even if the workers participated in it.” Let us quote Lenin's confirming words, spoken at the Stockholm Congress of the RSDLP (1906) in reply to Plekhanov: “What program are we talking about? An agrarian program. Who is supposed to take power with this program? The revolutionary peasants.” Did Lenin confuse the government of the proletariat with the government of the peasants? “No,” he said, referring to himself, “Lenin clearly differentiated the socialist government of the proletariat from the bourgeois-democratic government of the peasants.”

Trotsky already defended the theory of permanent revolution, whose perspective was that “the complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia is only conceivable in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the peasants. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which would inevitably bring to the table not only democratic tasks but also socialist ones, would at the same time give a vigorous impetus to the international socialist revolution. Only the victory of the proletariat in the West could protect Russia from bourgeois restoration, giving it security to complete the implementation of socialism.” It was a strategic divergence: “Bolshevism was not contaminated by belief in the power and strength of a revolutionary bourgeois democracy in Russia. From the beginning, it recognized the decisive significance of the working class struggle in the upcoming revolution, but its program was limited, in the early days, to the interests of the large peasant masses, without which - and



against which - the revolution could not have been carried out by the proletariat. Hence the provisional recognition of the democratic-bourgeois character of the revolution and its prospects. Therefore, the author [Trotsky] did not belong, during that period, to either of the two main currents of the Russian workers' movement." For him, "the proletariat, once in power, should not confine itself to the framework of bourgeois democracy but should employ the tactic of permanent revolution, that is, to blur the boundaries between the minimum and maximum program of social democracy, moving towards increasingly profound social reforms and seeking direct and immediate support from the revolution in Western Europe."

As positions evolved, a convergence emerged since the Fifth Congress (of London) of the RSDLP: "The most notable fact of the congress was the isolation of the Mensheviks in the face of the convergence of positions of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Trotsky. It was an objective convergence, without any agreement, and not without considerable discrepancies, between Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and Rosa and Trotsky, on the other." Post-Gorbachev Soviet historiography tended to downplay the pre-revolution disagreements between Lenin and Trotsky (just as Stalinism, earlier, had exaggerated them to outright lies): "These disagreements do not have much significance when considered from a historical perspective. This includes the question of permanent revolution, which was always taken to exaggerated proportions after Lenin's death. In fact, after 1916, Lenin never emphasized this issue again." The same author highlights that "Trotsky's articles were published in magazines directed by Lenin."

Strategic divergences continued. They sharpened after the "August Bloc" (a bloc "for the unity of the RSDLP", led by Trotsky, with Menshevik participation) of 1912, when the Bolsheviks engaged in the path of building an independent party. For 15 years, Lenin and Trotsky exchanged various insults in writing ("mediocre," "second-rate lawyer," Trotsky said about Lenin; "cheap slanderer," "balalaika player," "phony," "ambitious," Lenin retorted), which Trotsky, retrospectively, attributed to immaturity and the "heat" of factional struggle. In the midst of the reactionary period, Trotsky clarified the scope of the divergences: "If the Mensheviks, starting from the following conception: 'our revolution is bourgeois,' come to the idea of adapting all the proletarian tactics to the conduct of liberal bourgeoisie until the latter seizes power, the Bolsheviks, starting from a no less abstract conception, 'the democratic, but not socialist dictatorship,' come to the idea of a self-limitation of the proletariat, holding power, to a bourgeois democracy regime. It is true that there is an essential difference between Menshevism and Bolshevism: while the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism manifest themselves from the present moment, in all their breadth, what is anti-revolutionary in Bolshevism does not threaten us - but the threat is no less serious - except in the case of a revolutionary victory." This admits a double interpretation: 1) Trotsky places Bolshevism on a historical and political plane superior to Menshevism; 2) he also didn't refrain from stating that there were anti-revolutionary aspects in Bolshevism, which was not a small matter.

We focus here on the Lenin-Trotsky controversy for the role of both leaders in the October Revolution and subsequent history. Before that, for more than a quarter of a century, Lenin participated in polemics with numerous currents of Russian and international socialism (even the Argentine socialist Juan B. Justo criticized Lenin's theory of imperialism), and was undoubtedly the pivot of political debates in the workers' movement of his country. The programmatic differences between Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and "Trotskyists" became

evident with the revolution. According to Rudi Dutschke, “only the understanding of the bourgeois revolution of 1905 allows us to approach, through Lenin's economic conceptions, the roots of democratic centralism as a type of party.” As initially all factions agreed on the bourgeois nature of the Russian revolution, differences did not appear clearly. Initially, the 1905 revolution and its repression by the tsarist regime brought the Bolsheviks closer to the Mensheviks: both believed in the need for a “bourgeois democratic” stage prior to the socialist revolution. However, it was revealed, between 1907 and 1908, that while the Mensheviks believed that the bourgeoisie could lead and conclude this stage, the Bolsheviks argued that only the proletariat and the peasants could fulfill the task of the bourgeois democratic stage.

The differences were overcome, not entirely, in practice (the October Revolution was identified with the names of Lenin and Trotsky) and by the political assimilation of this practice. Thinking of political differences as abnormality, and homogeneity as an ideal to be achieved, means denying thought itself and its engine (contradiction). Without the revolution, it is likely that some of these controversies would have continued *ad infinitum*. In his autobiography, Trotsky was quite terse about it: “I came to Lenin later than others, but in my own way, having gone through and reflected on the experience of revolution, counter-revolution, and imperialist war. Thanks to this, I came to him more firmly and seriously than his 'disciples' (note the quotation marks).” To which the Stalinist historian Léo Figuères replied, “It is worth asking whether Trotsky could have joined Bolshevism in 1917 if all his disciples (sic, without quotation marks) had followed his path, abandoned and fought Lenin after the II Congress.” If that had happened, Bolshevism would not have existed. Figuères, as a good Stalinist, considered Bolshevism as a current of “disciples” of Lenin, that is, in religious terms.

Internationally, nothing is more contrary to the truth than the legend coined by Stalin in “Foundations of Leninism”: that the Bolsheviks had been working since 1903 in favor of a split with the reformists in the Socialist International. It was with great struggle that Lenin managed to be recognized as the representative of the RSDLP (along with Plekhanov) since 1905, in the International Socialist Bureau (ISB), a position he held until World War I. This framework led to the “Congress of Unity” of Russia in 1906. In 1907, at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, the motion on the attitude and duty of socialists in case of war (“to use the crisis provoked by war to precipitate the fall of the bourgeoisie”) was presented jointly by Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and the Menshevik Martov. When in January 1912 the (Bolshevik) conference in Prague consummated the split with the Mensheviks, Lenin did not present it to the ISB as a rupture between reformists and revolutionaries, but as the defenders of the “true workers' party” against the “liquidators” (advocates of a party only “legal”), and advocating “the only existing party, the illegal party” (Kamenev's report, Lenin's representative, at the ISB in November 1913).

In 1912, the Bolsheviks fought to assert themselves as representatives of the RSDLP at the International Socialist Congress in Basel. Already in 1914 (before the war), due to the international isolation of the Bolsheviks (including in relation to the left-wing of the Socialist International, whose leader Rosa Luxemburg had allied with the Mensheviks and the “August Bloc” led by Trotsky), the Bolsheviks admitted a new and fruitless “unification conference.” Lenin was already aware of the international projection of the “Russian split” and, after the capitulation of the main parties of the Socialist International to the outbreak of war in August 1914, proclaimed from the end of that year the struggle for a new International, the Third.



Three years later, in 1917, in Russia, Bolshevism was the point of confluence of the revolutionaries.

Lenin, in the midst of imperialist war (end of 1915), accused Trotsky, despite both belonging to the so-called “left of Zimmerwald,” the ultra-minoritarian internationalist faction of international socialism: “Trotsky's original theory borrows from the Bolsheviks the appeal for decisive revolutionary struggle and the conquest of political power by the proletariat and, from the Mensheviks, the denial of the role of the peasantry. It seems that the latter is divided, differentiated, and would be increasingly less capable of playing a revolutionary role. In Russia, a 'national' revolution would be impossible, 'we live in the age of imperialism,' and 'imperialism does not oppose the bourgeois nation to the old regime, but the proletariat to the bourgeois nation.' Here is a funny example of the jokes that can be made with the word 'imperialism.' If, in Russia, the proletariat already opposes the 'bourgeois nation,' then it is on the eve of a socialist revolution. In this case, the 'confiscation of the estates' (as put forward by Trotsky in 1915) is false, and it is not a matter of speaking of a 'revolutionary proletariat,' but of a 'socialist workers' government.' The degree of Trotsky's confusion is seen in his statement that the proletariat will lead the non-proletarian masses! Trotsky does not even think that if the proletariat can lead the non-proletarian masses to confiscate the estates and overthrow the monarchy, this will be the realization of the 'bourgeois national revolution,' the democratic-revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.”

And Lenin concluded that “Trotsky actually helps liberal workers' politicians, who, by denying the role of the peasantry, refuse to lead the peasants to the revolution.” In light of Trotsky's work, it can be said that Lenin's accusation was false, although it relied on still weak elements of the formulation of “permanent revolution,” which Trotsky would later clarify in subsequent works (not to mention that, in fact, Russia was “on the eve of a socialist revolution”). The war itself gave rise to other disagreements: on “revolutionary defeatism” (which Trotsky, along with several Bolsheviks, did not accept), on the “United States of Europe”... But the common internationalist work, in the left of Zimmerwald, did not fail to create the elements of future political unity. The convergence that occurred in 1917 was, first and foremost, political, the struggle to build the instrument of revolution, the party. Even at the moment of unification, however, Trotsky drafted a document, which included a “phrase that pointed out, in organizational matters, the 'narrow circle spirit' of the Bolsheviks.... The inter-district workers retained great mistrust towards the Petrograd committee (of Bolshevism). I wrote then that 'the circle spirit still exists, a legacy of the past, but for it to decrease, the inter-district workers must cease to carry out isolated activity'.”

Years later, he wrote that “without belonging to either faction during the emigration, the author underestimated the fundamental fact that in the differences of opinion between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, there were, in fact, a group of uncompromising revolutionaries on one side and, on the other, a grouping of increasingly fragmented elements due to opportunism and lack of principles. When the revolution broke out in 1917, the Bolshevik Party represented a strong centralized organization, which had absorbed the best elements among progressive workers and revolutionary intelligentsia.” On the eve of the Russian revolution, Lenin, in a lecture given in Switzerland, on the anniversary of the “Bloody Sunday” of 1905, stated that perhaps only future generations would witness the revolutionary victory, the same one that brought Bolshevism to power less than a year later... Trotsky reaffirmed that “the most important disagreement between Lenin and me during these years

was my hope that unification with the Mensheviks would drive the majority of them onto the revolutionary path. Lenin was right about this fundamental issue. However, it must be said that in 1917, the tendencies toward 'unification' were very strong among the Bolsheviks."

The October Revolution of 1917 was preceded by the February Revolution, which was not the result of the conspiracy of any political party. 1917 was called by French President Poincaré the "terrible year," the third of the World War, after a harsh European winter. For millions of men, it was the end of the patriotic illusions of 1914, transformed into massacres of fighters in "offensives" that cost hundreds of thousands of lives; supply difficulties, with significant price increases, affecting the working class of all countries; the "civil peace," defended by trade unions and workers' parties in belligerent countries, resulted in the questioning of all workers' achievements (production rates, schedules, working conditions, rights). The wear and tear of materials, machinery, and the economic apparatus had caused a crisis in all countries. Russia was the country that, by far, had suffered the worst consequences of the war, making its historical contradictions more acute and unbearable. The February Revolution caused the fall of Tsarism and opened a period of political crises that concluded with the "coup d'état" of October, which brought the Bolsheviks to power, by then already the majority in the soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants. Lenin, as extensively exposed in all historiography, was at the center of these events, which were the culmination of his political career and altered the fate of the world, justifying the initial assertion by Hobsbawm.

The Bolshevik party that took power in October 1917 was the continuation of the party born in 1912 and the faction after 1903. It was, however, also diverse. In the months of acute political crisis, it recruited widely among the young generations of workers, peasants, and soldiers: the clandestine organization that counted 25,000 members in January had nearly 80,000 by the April conference and 200,000 at the Sixth Bolshevik Congress in August: the old Bolsheviks and komitetchiki were a minority of 10%. The adhesions included worker groups not defined in relation to the previous fractions and quarrels before the war: the Interdistrict Organization, which had no more than 4,000 members, had three of its members elected to the Central Committee. The August 1917 congress noted the convergence of various organizations or groups; its solid foundation was Lenin's RSDLP (Bolshevik), into which the "revolutionary streams" referred to by Radek flowed. Two years after the October Revolution, Lenin wrote: "At the time of the conquest of power, when the Republic of Soviets was established, Bolshevism attracted everything that was best in the trends of socialist thought closest to it."

Lenin converged with Trotsky's theory based on his own theory. In the April Theses, the historical program of the "turn," Lenin started from the "conclusion of the bourgeois phase of the revolution." If what prevented the proletariat from taking power in February 1917 was only its insufficient consciousness and organization, this means that there was no separate "national revolution" by a historical stage from the proletarian revolution. Bolshevism was, thanks to this, the political instrument of the "second stage" of the revolution. It was Trotsky, in "Lessons of October" (1924), who made the critical necrological balance of Lenin's formula of "democratic dictatorship": "Completely revolutionary and profoundly dynamic, Lenin's posing of the problem was radically opposed to the Menshevik system, according to which Russia could only repeat the history of advanced peoples, with the bourgeoisie in power and social democracy in opposition. However, in Lenin's formula, certain circles of our party did not stress the word 'dictatorship' but the word 'democratic,' in opposition to the word



'socialist.' This would mean that in Russia, a backward country, only the democratic revolution was conceivable. The socialist revolution should begin in the West, and we could only join the socialist current by following England, France, and Germany.”

The programmatic shift of Bolshevism became clear in Lenin's own assessment, a few years after the October 1917 victory: “To consolidate for the peoples of Russia the achievements of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, we had to go further, and so we did. We solved the problems of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the course of the process, as a 'by-product' of our fundamental and genuinely proletarian, revolutionary socialist activities. We always said that democratic reforms - we said and demonstrated with facts - are a by-product of the proletarian revolution, that is, socialist. This is the relationship between the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist proletarian revolution: the former turns into the latter. The latter solves the problems of the former along the way. The latter consolidates the work of the former. The struggle, and only the struggle, determines to what extent the latter manages to impose itself on the former” (Lenin, 1968). The “new Bolshevism” dominated the Congress (August 1917), which materialized the fusion and had the honorary presidency of Lenin and Trotsky (absent due to the repression of July), the latter being elected to the CC with 131 out of 134 possible votes.

The entry of Trotsky and his supporters, as well as other groups, was decisive for the realization of the “historical turn” of Bolshevism, which assumed its definitive name of Communist Party. Political convergence occurred at times when, according to the Menshevik memoirist Sukhanov, “the masses lived and breathed with the Bolsheviks, were entirely in the hands of Lenin and Trotsky” (Sukhanov, 1984). Reflecting retrospectively, Trotsky recalled that: “There were violent clashes between Lenin and me because in cases where I disagreed with him on a serious issue, I fought to the end. These cases, naturally, were engraved in everyone's memory, and later epigones wrote and spoke about them a lot. But a hundred times more numerous were the cases in which we understood each other with half-words, and our solidarity ensured the passage of the issue in the Politburo without debate. Lenin greatly appreciated this solidarity”.

Victorious, the revolution, Bolshevism, before precise circumstances (a bloody civil war, sustained by the intervention of 14 foreign powers, and the international isolation of the country), was not the “sole party of the revolution.” During the October Revolution, four anarchists were members of the Revolutionary Military Committee. An anarchist sailor from Kronstadt led the delegation that dissolved the Constituent Assembly. At the same time, however, Bolshevik hegemony was clear. Factory committees sprang up everywhere, quickly becoming strong and dominated by the Bolsheviks. From October 30 to November 4, the first Russian Conference of Factory Committees was held in Petrograd, where 96 out of 167 delegates were Bolsheviks. (Gorodetsky, 1976) Nevertheless, “during the first week of December 1917, there were some demonstrations in favor of the Constituent Assembly, that is, against the power of the soviets. Irresponsible Red Guards then shot at one of the processions and killed some people. The reaction to this stupid violence was immediate: within twelve hours, the constitution of the Petrograd Soviet was modified; more than a dozen Bolshevik deputies were dismissed and replaced by Mensheviks... Despite this, it took three weeks to calm public resentment and allow the calling and reinstatement of the Bolsheviks” (Reed, 2010).

Trotsky was explicit in acknowledging Lenin's superior role in the revolution: "If I had not been in Petersburg in 1917, the October Revolution would have happened in the same way - conditioned by the presence and direction of Lenin. If neither Lenin nor I had been in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik party would have prevented it from happening... If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, there would have been no chance for me to convince the top Bolshevik echelons to resist. The struggle against 'Trotskyism' (that is, against proletarian revolution) would have been open from May 1917, and the outcome of the revolution would have been a question mark. But, I repeat, with Lenin present, the October Revolution would have reached victory in any case. The same can be said, in short, of the civil war" (Trotsky, 1980). Regarding the party, Trotsky referred to old organizational issues in terms that almost point by point echoed the terms Lenin had used to criticize him three decades earlier: "The leadership is not a simple 'reflection' of a class, or the product of its free creation. Leadership is forged in the process of clashes between the different layers of a particular class. Once it has assumed its role, the leadership rises above its class, being exposed to the pressure and influence of other classes... An extremely important factor in the maturity of the Russian proletariat in 1917 was Lenin, who did not fall from the sky. He personified the revolutionary tradition of the working class. In order for his principles to make headway among the masses, there had to be cadres, albeit limited; there had to be the confidence of the cadres in his leadership, a confidence based on all past experience" (Trotsky, 1940).

Bolshevism was not only the product of a set of individuals, their political and ideological struggles, but also of the history of the workers' movement and the revolution, through a gigantic confrontation of ideas, programs, tactics, organizations, and men. In the early years of the revolution, Bolshevism had no problem admitting its turn of 1917, as demonstrated by an article by Molotov (later a Stalinist bureaucrat in the highest state positions) from 1924: "It must be said openly: the party did not have the clarity of vision or the spirit of decision required by the revolutionary moment. It did not have them because it did not possess a clear orientation towards the socialist revolution. In general, the agitation and all the practice of the revolutionary party lacked a solid foundation, since thought had not yet advanced to the bold conclusion of the need for an immediate struggle for socialism and the socialist revolution" (Mandel, 1978).

The victory of the Soviet revolution meant the shipwreck of all the parties that had bet, against absolutism, on bourgeois regimes, from a constitutional monarchy (the constitutional party, KDI) to a parliamentary democracy (almost all socialist parties, except Bolshevism). It was Lenin, above all, who made efforts to preserve, in these conditions, a multi-party political framework. In an unstable framework, an olive branch was extended to the socialist parties excluded from power. The Mensheviks convened a five-day conference in Moscow at the end of October 1918. The outbreak of the civil war and the threat to the Soviet regime led them down the path of compromise. The conference approved a series of theses and resolutions recognizing the October Revolution as "historically necessary" and as "a gigantic ferment that had set the whole world in motion," renouncing "any political cooperation with classes hostile to democracy." Attempts at collaboration with the anarchists (whom Lenin even defined as "our best allies," even having friendly meetings with their famous Ukrainian leader Nestor Makhno) foundered amidst the vicissitudes of the civil war, which witnessed violent clashes between the Red Army and the "Black Army" of Ukraine.



The policy of conciliation did not withstand the test of events, in a context of internal counter-revolution and external intervention, both violent. The civil war transformed the Bolsheviks first into the “sole governing party,” with the SR (Left Socialist Revolutionaries) assassination attempt against Lenin, who were part of the Soviet government, and the murders of Uritsky and Volodarsky, Bolshevik leaders: “The events of the summer of 1918 left the Bolsheviks without rivals or accomplices as the dominant party in the state; and they possessed in the Cheka an organ of absolute power. However, there was still a strong reluctance to use this power without restrictions. The final extinction of the excluded parties had not yet arrived. Terror was, at this point, a capricious instrument and it was normal to find parties, against which the most violent anathemas had been pronounced and the most drastic measures taken, continued to survive and enjoy tolerance. One of the first decrees of the new regime had authorized the Sovnarkom to close all newspapers that preached 'open resistance or disobedience to the Workers' and Peasants' Government' and the bourgeois press ceased to exist. The Menshevik newspaper in Petrograd, *Novyi Luch*, was suppressed, in February 1918, for its opposition campaign to the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Nevertheless, it reappeared, in April, in Moscow, under the name *Vpered*, and continued its career for some time without interference. Anarchist newspapers were published in Moscow long after the Cheka's action against the anarchists, in April 1918” (Carr, 1977). The civil war swept away all compromises between Bolshevism and its political opposition.

Lenin opposed considering this situation as ideal, evolving in his appreciation of the nature of the Soviet power established in Russia. In 1918, he wrote: “The struggle against the bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet organization is guaranteed by the solidity of the links between the soviets and the people, by the flexibility and elasticity of these links. The poor never consider bourgeois parliaments as their institutions, even in the most democratic capitalist republic in the world. The soviets, on the contrary, are their institutions, not alien to the masses of workers and peasants” (Lenin, 1918). Already in 1921, during the controversy over the unions, Lenin referred to the Soviet state as “a workers' state with the peculiarity that in the country the working population does not predominate, but the peasant population does, and, secondly, a workers' state with a bureaucratic deformation” (Lenin, 1983). The transition from deformation to bureaucratic degeneration was a political and social process, summarized by Christian Rakovsky: “The situation of a class struggling for power and that of a class holding power is different [... when a class takes power, part of it becomes an agent of that power. In a socialist state, where capitalist accumulation is prohibited, this difference begins as functional and then becomes social” (Rokovsky, 1928).

Five years after the October Revolution, the isolation of the revolution, economic hardship, the exhaustion of the popular masses, and the emptying of the soviets were inevitably accompanied by the differentiation of a privileged bureaucratic layer of the party, by then the sole party of the State. The struggle against the bureaucratization of the State and the party was also “the last [and failed] battle of Lenin” (Lewin, 1980). In the crisis caused by the Georgian national question (against the chauvinistic Great Russian policy of the nascent bureaucracy, and of Stalin in particular, himself Georgian) and in Lenin's political testament (which proposed Stalin's dismissal from the post of party general secretary) the main lines of this struggle were revealed. Trotsky agreed to form a political bloc with Lenin against bureaucratization, which did not mean that this bloc had its victory guaranteed in advance, by the weight of the prestige of both leaders (Juravlev; Nenakorov, 1990).

Trotsky wrote in his autobiography: “The idea of forming a 'bloc' Lenin-Trotsky against the bureaucracy, only Lenin and I knew it. The other members of the Political Bureau had only vague suspicions. No one knew anything about Lenin's letters on the national question or the Testament. If I had started to act, they could say that I was starting the personal struggle to occupy Lenin's place. I couldn't think about it without shuddering. I thought that, even if I emerged victorious, the final result would be such demoralization for me that it would cost me dearly. In all calculations, there was an element of uncertainty: Lenin himself and his state of health. Will he be able to express his opinion? Will he have time for that? Will the party understand that Lenin and Trotsky are fighting for the future of the revolution, and not that Trotsky is fighting for the post of sick Lenin? The provisional situation continued. But the procrastination favored the usurpers, for Stalin, as general secretary, naturally directed the entire state machine during the interregnum period” (Trotsky, 1959).

Lenin tried to make his rupture with Stalin public in the last days of 1922, shortly before being sidelined from politics by illness. As Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin had imposed a government submissive to Georgia by force, invading it in February 1921 and ousting the Menshevik government headed by Noah Jordania, not only against the will of the majority of the population but also of the Georgian Bolsheviks. Lenin expressed himself in a “Letter to the Congress”: “I think that, in this episode, Stalin's impatience and his taste for administrative coercion, as well as his hatred for the famous 'social chauvinism,' had a fatal influence. The influence of hatred in politics in general is extremely disastrous. Our case, that of our relations with the State of Georgia, is a typical example of the need for us to use the utmost prudence and to show a conciliatory and tolerant spirit if we want to solve the problem in an authentically proletarian way”. And, referring directly to Stalin: “The Georgian who is contemptuous of this aspect of the problem, who blatantly makes accusations of social-nationalism (when he is an authentic social-nationalist and also a vulgar Great Russian executioner), this Georgian, violates the interests of proletarian class solidarity. Stalin and [Felix] Dzerzhinsky [founder and head of the Cheka] must be politically identified as responsible for this campaign”. The Georgian question signaled the transformation of the USSR, created in 1922, from a project of a free federation of socialist republics (with an explicit right to secession) into a “prison of peoples,” which would explode 70 years later.

Lenin died in January 1924, after a year of increasing health complications - partly derived from the assassination attempt against him in 1919 - and almost total withdrawal from active politics. In the last months of his life, his concerns, recorded in his “Testament,” caused embarrassment when read to the Central Committee; the meeting on the eve of the XIII Congress that resolved not to remove Stalin also decided to disclose the document only to some delegates. A series of provocations and insults against Trotsky followed, tending to polarize the political scene: the goal was to propose an incompatibility between “Leninism” and “Trotskyism”. With Lenin's death, Stalin quickly presented himself as the legitimate heir of this “Leninism,” defined as a set of doctrines, vaguely defined but infallible, that would distinguish the party's “official line” from the “heresies” of its critics. The open and changing thought of a revolutionary method was transformed into the closed and immutable system of a conservative and counter-revolutionary interest.

The adjective (“Leninist theory of...”) was replaced by the noun (Leninism) used initially against Trotsky and the Left Opposition (created in late 1923) and then as the official doctrine of the USSR and the Communist International. In a few years, the high priest of the new



unique system of “thought” and, above all, of political coercion, naturally added “Stalinism” to the doctrinal canon of the new Sacred Scriptures. The enemy of all schemes and definitive ideas, Lenin, was distorted and presented as the founding father of the Great Definitive Scheme, while his body was obscenely embalmed, as a religious relic, for public display, a fact that survives to the present. Communist parties were “Bolshevized,” bureaucratically disciplined, to be transformed into an apparatus for integrating the new bureaucracy into the world order, which precipitated the world, again, into a scenario dominated by inter-imperialist contradictions, which led to the greatest catastrophe in human history.

Deified in the “socialist world,” the figure of Lenin was labeled, after the end of that “world,” as the greatest villain in human history by publicists recruited from the ranks of former deifiers, recycled as representatives of hysterical anti-communism by the ideologues of self-assured and wild capitalism. As this self-assurance melts away in the light of the crisis of capital, Lenin's trajectory reemerges, a hundred years later, in its true dimension: not as the creation of an “ism” for the consumption of sects and the justification of bureaucracies (without the name of a profaned “democratic centralism”) and conservative policies, but as an unavoidable moment of critical-dialectical thought, the only basis for revolutionary action, against a world where the ever-increasing unfolding of barbarism, neoliberal, fundamentalist, eco-destructive, and neo-fascist, leaves socialism as the only viable alternative for the survival of humanity. In our historical context, it is necessary to unembalmed Lenin's thought and action as an exemplary moment, hitherto unsurpassed, of the transformation of revolutionary ideas into material force.

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