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Why Leninism and Bolshevism Are Not the Same

MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN

The essay closely investigates and questions the assumptions that Leninist theory is more or less a consistent whole, which must be accepted or rejected in its entirety, and that Bolshevik policy under Tsarism was the direct result of Leninist theory—that Bolshevism and Leninism are synonyms. It tries to determine the position of Lenin's theory in its historical-materialist context, concentrating on his method of analysis and his theories of proletarian consciousness and the revolutionary party. It then deduces some important internal inconsistencies in Lenin's methodology and organisational theory, and attempts to prove that Bolshevik practice was in no way Leninist. What then follows is a brief formulation of some consequences.

Historically, in the debate on Leninism¹ three controversial positions have usually been taken up. Some claim that Leninism proved its usefulness in the Russian October Revolution and that the same model should, therefore, also be applied elsewhere; others propose that Leninism was suited to the Russian circumstances at the beginning of the 20th century, but not to present day conditions in other countries; finally, yet another group thinks that, as early as in the pre-revolutionary situation, Leninism carried within itself the seeds of the later Stalinist degeneration and should, therefore, be rejected in all circumstances.

These three positions appear to differ widely from each other. Even so, they have two assumptions in common: that Leninist theory is more or less a consistent whole, which must be accepted or rejected in its entirety; and that Bolshevik policy under Tsarism was the direct result of Leninist theory—that Bolshevism and Leninism are synonyms. In this article, I want to make a closer investigation of both of these assumptions. To do so, I shall try to determine the position of Lenin's theory in its historical-materialist context, concentrating on his method of analysis and his theories of proletarian consciousness and the revolutionary party. After that I hope to deduce some important internal inconsistencies in Lenin's methodology and organisational theory and finally I shall attempt to prove that Bolshevik practice was in no way Leninist. Having thus criticised the two premises of the contemporary Leninism debate, I shall briefly formulate some consequences.

Leninism's Historical Context

In order to understand the birth and development of Leninism, it is necessary to analyse the historical context in which this theory flourished. Historians do not agree on the extent to which Tsarist social relations can be characterised as feudalism in the (West-)European sense. There is agreement on the proposition that traditional Russian society, with its many different development stages since the Mongolian period, cannot be regarded as just another type of "normal" feudalism.² At the same time it is clear that the state was strongly developed and had a despotic ("Asiatic") tinge.

From the 17th century onwards there was a growing need for the state to be able to compete on the world market. The first symptom of this pressure were the absolutist reform policies of Peter the Great, who on the one hand could only obtain the necessary financial means and goods through the increased exploitation of the peasants, but on the other used these means to build towns, canals, harbours and roads, stimulated mining, set up manufactures and imported labour.

My essay is much inspired by the long-forgotten West German debates on Leninism of the 1970s, in particular, the writings of the late Christel Neusüss, and Bernd Rabehl. I am grateful to Pepijn Brandon and Dilip Simeon for their critical reading of an earlier draft.

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This absolutist policy was continued after Peter the Great, but it became clear that it did not result in any great success on the world market. The industrialisation of England from the 18th century onwards, and of France, Germany and the United States (us) from the 19th century, made the low labour productivity of Russia painfully visible. If the Tsarist state was not to be reduced to colonial status, only one possibility remained: a drastic increase of labour productivity through forced industrialisation.

From the very start it was clear that because of the high rate of capital accumulation in Western Europe and North America, the “English road” (that is, a broad and varied industrialisation with relatively little state intervention and without competition of higher developed countries on the world market) could not be followed by Russia. The “Prussian road” (that is, industrialisation through the slow transformation of feudal to capitalist landownership and a carefully calculated process of expropriation of peasant land, in accordance with the demands of capitalist industry and controlled by the state) was the Tsarist state’s point of orientation when it freed the peasants from 1861 onwards. The two central elements of this model—liberation of the peasants and state intervention—turned out to function differently in Russian society.

Thus, the “Prussian road” turned out not to be a practicable one for Tsarist Russia, either. The contradiction between the industrial and agricultural sectors deepened. Through the inductive industrialisation method—meaning the import of forms of developed capital relations—a technologically advanced industrial complex could be established in Russia, but the proper social and economic conditions were absent. On the contrary, Tsarist industrialisation policy increased the backwardness of the social sector financing the process: agriculture. Because agriculture had the exclusive function of financing the import of industrial installations from which it drew hardly any benefits, its inferiority on the world market was bound to increase. The enforced industrialisation took place at the expense of both workers and peasants. And as the economic process began to show more signs of stagnation, the common destiny of both classes became clearer. This is the essential root of the 1917 revolution.

The Russian revolutionary movement was born against this summarily sketched socio-economic background. The relatively economic and social backwardness of Russia, and its simultaneous integration in the capitalist world market resulted in a colourful mixture of different cultural levels, leading to what Friedrich Engels referred to as the “most bizarre and impossible combinations of ideas.”³ The revolutionary movement was at first based almost exclusively on the intelligentsia, which found itself in an ambiguous position in the period after 1861. Old certainties were disappearing, but the troublesome economic development gave few new guarantees to replace them. Large groups of intellectuals began to grasp the importance of the societal stagnation and radicalised.

The debates amongst the revolutionary intelligentsia about the development possibilities of Russian society were, for a large part, determined by the semi-“European” and semi-“Asiatic”

nature of Tsarism: should Russia follow the West-European road (as the “Westernisers” wanted) or did it have its own historical path to follow, based on the specifically Russian collective agrarian form of society, the *obshchina* (according to the “Slavophiles”)? In 1862, Zemlya i Volya, an organisation of intellectuals, was set up. Its members wanted to mingle with “the people” (so-called Narodniki), but at the same time this organisation was isolated from the lower classes and therefore wanted to act in their place. As a result of increasing state repression in the 1870s, the Narodniki split into factions in 1879: Narodnaya Volya (The People’s Will) and Chernyi Peredel (Black Repartition). The last-mentioned was “one of the seedbeds of Russian social democracy.”⁴

In the 1880s, the terrorist currents collapsed after Narodnaya Volya had been rounded up by the Tsarist police. At the same time the intense, forced pace of industrialisation, which was accompanied by much misery, as well as the increasing combativeness of the workers, blew new life into the debates of the revolutionary intelligentsia. Marxist-tinged theories became popular. In 1872, the first volume of *Capital* had already appeared in Russian. However, the Narodniki read the work in a very special way: as a moral indictment of capitalism and not as an attempt at scientific analysis.⁵ Another interpretation made its appearance only in the 1880s and 1890s, under the influence of the Paris Commune, the Great Dock Strike in London, the destruction of Narodnaya Volya and the electoral success of German social democracy, among others. Part of the intelligentsia now no longer regarded the peasant community (*obshchina*) as the foundation of future society. Some Narodniks began to focus on the working class, and became “*Narodovolchy* Social Democrats,” who propagated a terrorist strategy, while considering the proletariat as the revolutionary subject. Other intellectuals moved closer to the social-democratic programme of the Second International. The new type of Russian Marxism which was created in this way was made up of a mixture of traditions from the Russian intelligentsia and German social democracy.

Under German Marxist Influence

The most typical representative of the new Russian Marxism under German influence was Georgi Plekhanov, who at an earlier stage had belonged to the Narodniki and who had “educated an entire generation of Russian Marxists” (Lenin). Plekhanov regarded Marx’s theory as an “ingenious idea” and not as the historic product of social developments. It was his opinion that people’s ideas exist *next* to history, as it were, and more or less reflect it. “The criterion of truth lies not in me, but in the relations which exist outside me. Those views are *true* which correctly present those relations; those views are *mistaken* which distort them.” From Marx’s point of view, “That ideal is true which corresponds to economic reality,” he wrote.⁶ For Plekhanov, Marxism was the most perfect reflection of reality—a general development model of the forces of production, a Kautskyian Social Darwinism. As Daniela Steila concludes in her thorough analysis of Plekhanov’s epistemology, “praxis remained basically external to the theory.”⁷

Plekhanov did not understand the dialectic of form and content any better than Kautsky did. This was expressed in the fact that he did not recognise the double nature of productive labour in capitalism: abstract, value creating labour and concrete, use-value creating labour. Because he did not understand the difference between concrete and abstract labour, Plekhanov also lost sight of the specific nature of the transition from capitalism to socialism. According to his view, only the property relations would change. For this reason Plekhanov thought that a proletarian class consciousness could not be born at grass-roots level in the factories but only could be brought in from the outside, through “education.” Here too, he saw revolutionary theory as something standing next to history, to class struggle; the revolutionary intelligentsia was the bearer of socialist theory, who must lead the working class and educate it about its situation and the need for political struggle.

Plekhanov’s views determined the thinking of all wings of Russian social democracy. Even those taking up partially different positions (like Bukharin, for example) supported Plekhanov’s undialectical Marxism in its fundamental approach.⁸

Methodological Weaknesses in Lenin’s Theory

Lenin never hesitated to modify his positions whenever he deemed it necessary. Between 1893 and 1924 he changed his theoretical thoughts on the agrarian question, the tactic of the proletarian party, the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat in capitalist underdeveloped countries. Despite these corrections, Lenin maintained his specific interpretation of Marxism, in which Narodnik influences always remained visible. As Nikolai Valentinov (who had worked with Lenin in their Swiss exile) observed: “By the time he came to Marxism, Lenin, under Chernyshevsky’s influence, was already forearmed with certain revolutionary ideas which provided the distinctive features of his specifically ‘Leninist’ political make-up.”⁹ It was therefore no coincidence that Lenin gave his 1902 pamphlet *Chto delat’?* (*What Is To Be Done?*) the same title as Nikolay Chernyshevsky’s novel of 1863. Lenin basically derived his Marxism from Plekhanov. As late as 1921, he thought that “nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world” than Plekhanov’s contributions to philosophy.¹⁰ Lenin, therefore, shared a number of Plekhanov’s methodological weaknesses.¹¹ He too, saw Marxism as a natural science of society. He too, did not understand the dialectic of form and content, nor the difference between abstract and concrete labour. And he also saw scientific socialism as an independent product of revolutionary intellectuals, separate from the “spontaneous” labour struggle.¹²

Because of these methodological faults, Lenin’s thoughts contained a number of important misconceptions.

(i) For Lenin the founding of socialism was a purely political question. Because just like Plekhanov and Kautsky (and like his contemporaries Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding), Lenin did not distinguish between socialisation of capitalist and socialist society. Socialism in his eyes was not the liberation of labour from its capitalist forms. Instead, Lenin considered socialism to be the adjustment of the political superstructure to

the highly developed capitalist basis. “Is it not clear,” he wrote, “that the form of production comes into irreconcilable contradiction with the form of appropriation? Is it not evident that the latter must adapt itself to the former and must become social, that is, socialist?”¹³ The political sphere of developed capitalism has to be adjusted to the basis, which is already socialist—that is the foundation of socialism according to Lenin.¹⁴ (ii) Because the socialist revolution was a purely political question for Lenin he saw no possibility for the working class to gain political insights into society from the sphere of production. This was why a Social-Democratic consciousness could be brought in “only from the outside”:

The history of all countries bears witness that exclusively with its own forces the worker class is in a condition to work out only a *tred-unionist* awareness, that is, a conviction of the need to unite in unions, to carry on a struggle with the owners, to strive for the promulgation by the government of this or that law that is necessary for the workers and so on. The doctrine of socialism grew out of those philosophic, historical, and economic theories that were worked out by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intelligentsia.¹⁵

According to Lenin, the bourgeoisie and radical social democracy were involved in a struggle for the contents of the consciousness of the working class.

Once we realise that there can be no question of an ideology standing by itself and worked out by the worker masses in the very course of their movement, then the question stands *only in this way*: bourgeois or socialist ideology.¹⁶

The special task of the socialist intelligentsia would be to reverse the influence of bourgeois ideology. If the revolutionaries leave the propaganda to the bourgeoisie, then this will lead to a subordination of the working class to bourgeois ideology. In capitalism, therefore, the working class itself has the tendency to be bourgeois.

Isolated from Social-Democracy, the working-class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois. In waging only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tail of other parties and betrays the great principle: “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”¹⁷

Two issues mentioned in these sentences are noteworthy. In the first place, the contradiction in which Lenin entangles himself when he says that the working class can only achieve liberation if it subordinates itself to a radical bourgeois intelligentsia. In the second place, the voluntarism in his reasoning: the success or failure of revolutionary plans is not so much dependent on material developments in society as on the will and dedication of revolutionary intellectuals. The revolution is reduced to a technical matter, based on the moral responsibility of non-workers.

(iii) Lenin’s view of history as a linear process is also expressed in the fact that he regarded Marx’s economic analysis in *Capital* more or less as a chronology of capitalism: the logical levels that Marx was supposed to have distinguished (simple commodity production, extended reproduction, etc) were incorrectly considered by Lenin as historical stages which necessarily followed each other in reality.¹⁸ It did not occur to

Lenin that these stages can exist simultaneously in one and the same country and in fact did.

While Plekhanov had still, following Marx, considered the possibility of “non-linear” developments in world history like the supposedly stagnant Asiatic mode of production, Lenin was a staunch “unilinearist” in this respect too. In his lecture on “The State,” given in 1919, he presented a view of history which would become Stalinist orthodoxy a few years later.

The development of all human societies for thousands of years, in all countries without exception, reveals a general conformity to law, a regularity and consistency; so that at first we had a society without classes [...]; then we had a society based on slavery—a slave-owning society. [...] This form was followed in history by another—feudalism. [...] Further, with the development of trade, the appearance of the world market and the development of money circulation, a new class arose within feudal society—the capitalist class.¹⁹

Lenin’s methodological mistakes naturally had far-reaching consequences for his analyses of society. This is clearly shown by his widely praised study on *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899, second edition 1908). In this book, which is an attack on the Narodniki, Lenin wanted to show that capitalism was already well developed in Russia. In order to prove this, Lenin made a study of the internal Russian market. Because he thought that every country must go through the same stages, and in that sense stands by itself, he emphatically neglected the world market as well as the Tsarist state.²⁰ We have, however, seen that such an abstraction is impossible, precisely because the industrialisation of Russia took place under the influence of the world market as well as the absolutist state. The dynamics of Russian economic development therefore necessarily eluded Lenin. Furthermore, because he considered the logical levels of Marx’s analysis as actual historical stages he could not recognise that Russia was made up of a varied and patchwork combination of all kinds of transitional economic modes between the old pre-capitalist and the new oncoming capitalist economy.

On the basis of his schematic approach Lenin threw together all kinds of temporary and transitional modes with the manifestations of developed capitalism. Thus, he concluded that the capitalist mode of production had been present in Russia since the freeing of the peasants in 1861. He regarded well over half (63.7 million) of the total population (125.6 million) as being proletarian or semi-proletarian. Lenin’s conclusion was, therefore, that “Russia is a capitalist country” well before 1914.²¹ It is clear to anyone with some knowledge of economic history that this was an excessive distortion of real Russian social relations.

It is understandable that for a long time Lenin did not draw any conclusion from his obviously incorrect analysis. For the direct consequence of the capitalist nature of Russian society would have been that the proletarian revolution should have been the order of the day. But, right up to 1917 Lenin stated no such thing. All that time there was a chasm, a contradiction between his class analysis and his strategic opinions. It was only after the beginning of World War I that Lenin could no longer deny the international character of economy and

politics, and started to appreciate the importance of the world market. The result of this learning process is to be found in his well-known little work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. However, because of his continued incorrect interpretation of Marx, Lenin did not regard imperialism as an historically specific phase of the capitalist mode of production, but as a new “stage,” succeeding that of “normal” capitalism as Marx had analyzed it.

A new fourth and highest stage was added to the schematic series of the natural, primitive and capitalist economy: imperialism. At the same time Lenin continued to think that the fusion of industrial trusts, bank capital and state formed the direct economic preparation for socialism. Although imperialism was still functioning in the interest of the monopolies, there was an objective basis for the direct transition to socialism.

When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, and, on the basis of an exact computation of mass data, organises according to plan the supply of primary raw materials [...] for tens of millions of people; when the raw materials are transported in a systematic and organised manner [...]; when a single centre directs all the consecutive stages of processing the material right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when these products are distributed according to a single plan among tens and hundreds of millions of consumers [...]—then it becomes evident that we have socialisation of production [...]; that private economic and private property relations constitute a shell which no longer fits its contents [...].²²

Here too Lenin still does not see the difference between capitalist and socialist socialisation. As far as he is concerned, the hierarchy in the factories, the dull labour processes, etc, would also be maintained under socialism.

The consequences of this apolitical concept of socialisation surface in a curious fashion in Lenin’s book—the *State and Revolution*. In this work, the bourgeois state is split into two parts: political-repressive and economic-administrative. The political-repressive part (army, police, etc) must be destroyed by the working class and its political expression: the councils’ movement. The economic part (state bank, etc), however, is kept for after the revolution and comes under workers’ control. Hence, the entire country ultimately becomes one big company: “The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labour and pay.”²³ The connection between the economic and repressive aspect of the bourgeois state remained unclear for Lenin. This was facilitated by the circumstance that he never clearly understood the hierarchic and bureaucratic structure of the bourgeois state. When Lenin attacked bureaucratism, he was not referring to bureaucratic structures as such, but to the fact that certain bureaucrats were lazy or corrupt.

Contradictions in Lenin’s Theory of Organisation

What consequences did these more generalised opinions have for Lenin’s theory of organisation? He developed the major lines of his position on the tasks and organisation of social democracy through polemics with the “economist” faction, with the Mensheviks and also partially in discussions with Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. Although he did

make some later changes, the most important assumptions of Lenin's theory of organisation had already been stated in a number of works published immediately after the turn of the century, especially in *Where to Begin?*, *What is To be Done?*, and *A letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks*. In all these writings we again see the return of the Kautskyist idea that theory forms an independent whole above the class movement.²⁴

Quite rightly, Lenin states that the economic struggle of the working class must *merge* with revolutionary political theory, but he sees this "melting" as the combination of two mutually independent elements. The connection with the economic struggle is for Lenin simply a means of winning the trust of the working class; it is an attempt to join the dynamics of the economic struggle in order to further organically develop it into a political struggle. The task of the revolutionary party is technical, propagandistic. The central question for Lenin is how to spread social-democratic ideas as effectively as possible. The publication of economic and political disclosures in a much-read all-Russian organ is the best way of increasing the political consciousness of the working class. Lenin therefore characterised the exemplary revolutionary by emphasising:

the ideal of the Social-Democrat should not be a secretary of a *tred-union* but a *people's tribune* who can respond to each and every manifestation of abuse of power and oppression, wherever it occurs, whatever stratum or class it concerns, who can generalise all these manifestations into one big picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation, who is able to use each small affair to set *before everybody* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands and to explain to each and *all* the world-historical significance of the liberation struggle of the proletariat.²⁵

The party *embodies* the interests of the working class and, therefore, may act in its place. In 1917, Lenin expressed this lumping together of the "class" and "party" levels quite clearly, when he stated:

Our party, like any other political party, is striving after political domination *for itself*. Our aim is the dictatorship of the revolutionary proletariat.²⁶

The party's task consists of creating optimum conditions for the people's tribunes. For this a well-oiled and exceedingly efficient apparatus is needed which Lenin, logically enough, often refers to as a machine. The party uses all forms of bourgeois rationality, such as specialisation, division of labour and hierarchy. The central committee at the top holds on to all the strings and makes sure that "all the cogs and wheels of the Party machine"²⁷ fit properly together. For Lenin, the fact that as a result of Tsarist repression the democratic election of the leadership and the complete informing of all the members were impossible, and were not important. To him the "strictest possible *konspiratsiia*, the strictest possible selection of members, preparation on the part of the revolutionaries by trade [professional revolutionaries]" was "something bigger" than "democratism"; it was the "complete comradesly confidence among the revolutionaries." Should the central leadership prove to be incompetent then it would have to be removed through "comradesly influence"—or else overthrown as the most extreme measure.²⁸

Class Struggle as War, Party as Military Leadership

In accordance with these views, Lenin interpreted class struggle as war and the party as military leadership. At numerous occasions he explicitly addressed this analogy. Two citations may suffice here. In 1915, Lenin said:

[The army] is a good example of organisation. This organisation is good only because it is *flexible* and is able at the same time to give millions of people a *single will*. Today these millions are living in their homes in various parts of the country; tomorrow mobilisation is ordered, and they report for duty. Today they lie in the trenches, and this may go on for months; tomorrow they are led to the attack in another order. Today they perform miracles in sheltering from bullets and shrapnel; tomorrow they perform miracles in hand-to-hand combat. Today their advance detachments lay minefields; tomorrow they advance scores of miles guided by airmen flying overhead. When, in the pursuit of a single aim and animated by a single will, millions alter the forms of their communication and their behaviour, change their tools and weapons in accordance with the changing conditions and the requirements of the struggle—all this is genuine organisation. The same holds true for the working-class struggle against the bourgeoisie.²⁹

And in 1920, Lenin wrote:

One will readily agree that any army which does not train to use all the weapons, all the means and methods of warfare that the enemy possesses, or may possess, is behaving in an unwise or even criminal manner. This applies to politics even more than it does to the art of war. [... If] we learn to use all the methods of struggle, victory will be certain, because we represent the interests of the really foremost and really revolutionary class.³⁰

Such opinions confirm our proposition that the Kautskyist and Narodniki traditions were being mingled. The German-Marxist idea of bringing in revolutionary ideas from the outside was combined with the Russian concept of a conspiratorial elite organisation.³¹ The Narodniki's basic attitude is perfectly reflected in Lenin's exclamation: "give us an organisation of revolutionaries—and we will turn Russia around!"³², or when he claims: "we need a military organisation of agents."³³ It need, therefore, not surprise anyone that Lenin considered it the duty of social democrats "of creating as good an organisation of revolutionaries as Zemlya i Volya had, or, indeed, an incomparably better one." According to Lenin, the only big mistake made by the Narodniki was that they relied

on a theory that in essence was not a revolutionary theory at all, and so were unable or not in a position to link their movement inextricably to the class struggle within developing capitalist society.³⁴

Because Lenin did not derive ideas from material relations but saw them as standing by themselves, he saw no problem in rejecting the ideas of the Narodniki while at the same time copying their organisational model. In so doing he ignored the fact that there was a direct link between the military organisation concept of Zemlya i Volya and its conspiratorial terrorist ideas.

After 1902, Lenin modified a few aspects of his party theory. As early as the Second Congress of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) (1903), Lenin changed an element in his reasoning as a result of the voting behaviour of the delegates, which according to him was determined by their class position. In his view the proletarian-revolutionary wing had voted Bolshevik, while the intellectual-opportunist wing had chosen for the Menshevik position. In fact, this was a conflict "between the mentality of the unstable intellectual and that of the

staunch proletarian, between intellectualist individualism and proletarian solidarity.³⁵ Since Lenin maintained his theory about the intelligentsia as the bearer of scientific socialism, he ended up in a new contradiction: the working class could not develop a revolutionary consciousness on its own, but at the same time guaranteed that the party took up revolutionary positions.

A second important change took place when Lenin—on account of the experiences during the failed revolution of 1905 and the sectarian behaviour of many Bolsheviks towards the workers' councils which were rising—began to take these workers' councils into account. Although Lenin regarded the soviets as bourgeois organs,³⁶ certainly in the first years, he nevertheless believed it necessary to make a connection between the party and the council movement. This also had consequences for the internal structure of the party. Lenin now became, among other things, a proponent of democratic centralism with freedom of debate and unity in action.³⁷ In a later period, Lenin also admitted that he had exaggerated certain issues in *What Is to Be Done?*. Even so he maintained the idea that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought in from the outside. To that extent the acceptance of the principle of democratic socialism was not a principled review of his positions on the party, but purely a means of preventing the party from being alienated from the class and thus being unable to fulfil its political leadership role.

Differences between Bolshevik Practice and Leninist Theory

There is a growing consensus among historians that Bolshevism and Leninism were never identical, for “Bolshevism from the start was a collection of personalities, in exile and in Russia, whose views were often in conflict with Lenin’s and the Marxist orthodoxy he claimed to defend.”³⁸

A deep chasm existed between Lenin’s ideas about organisation and the Bolsheviks’ organisational practice. First, to what

Table 1: Membership of the Bolshevik Party

	1905–06	1907	1908	1912	1915–16	1917 March	1917 (6th Congress, 26 July–3 August)
Petrograd		2,105 ¹ (January)				2,000	36,000
Moscow		500? ¹ (Spring 1905)				600	15,000
Ivanovo– Voznesensk		500–700 ¹				10	5,440
Ekaterinoslav	2,000 ²	1,015 ²	100 ²	200 ²	300 ²	400	3,500
Kharkov	300 ²	762 ²	150 ²	40 ²	120 ²	105	na
Kiev	1,500 ²	1,235 ²	80 ²	200 ²	(100) ²	200	4,000
Saratov						60	3,000
Ekaterinburg						40	2,800
Total Ukraine	20,000 ²	10,000 ²	1,000 ²	700 ²	1,000 ²		
Total Tsarist Empire	8,400 ³ 10,000 ⁴	40,000 ¹ 46,100 ³				10,000 ⁴	2,00,000 ⁴

Sources: ¹ David Lane, *The Roots of Russian Communism. A Social and Historical Study of Russian Social Democracy 1898–1907* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969), pp 12–13, 76, 104, 141; ² Ralph Carter Elwood, *Russian Social Democracy in the Underground: A Study of the RSDRP in the Ukraine, 1907–14* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), p 38; ³ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899–1919* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), p 364; ⁴ Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp 180, 301, 457; the remaining figures in V V Anikeev, “Svedeniya o bolshevistskikh organizatsiyakh s marta po dekabr 1917 goda,” *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, 1958, No 2, pp 126–93 and No 3, pp 96–168.

extent was the Bolshevik party a group of “steeled militants”? Historical research has shown that there was a large-scale “circulation” of members in the Bolshevik wing of the social democrats. A study of the period up to 1907 concluded: “In terms of organisation, the Mensheviks had a larger permanent core of personnel. The Bolsheviks had a great turnover.”³⁹ This was, by the way, one reason why Lenin, who himself partly represented the continuity of the organisation from the start, enjoyed such respect in the party. This picture of a rapidly changing membership has also been confirmed for later years.

We do not have solid statistical material for most cities and years, but it is clear that during the Revolution of 1905–06, total membership grew rapidly, while it shrank again considerably after the defeat. During the decade that followed, the party’s size remained at a very low level (Table 1). The idea of a tightly-knit organisation of experienced militants was definitely undermined in practice by the events of 1917. Membership growth was extremely impressive and swift. An extreme example is Ivanovo–Voznesensk, a centre of the textile industry, where membership increased from 10 in early March to 5,871 at the beginning of December! It seems obvious that Leninist structures—which after all require much training and discipline—could not exist under these circumstances.

Second, what was the role of the intelligentsia that, according to Lenin, should play a decisive role in the learning process of the working class? In Lenin’s opinion the party had to be a league of intellectuals which was to attract workers and politically educate them. Historical experience, however, shows that the relation between workers and intellectuals in Russia was far more complicated. Numerous sources show that the nucleus of the party was always made up of skilled workers. Intellectuals joined in periods of increasing struggle and left the movement when a downward stage started. Some quotations from the memoirs of the old Bolshevik Alexander Shlyapnikov (published in 1923) can illustrate this:

A typical feature of the pre-war period of party work was its lack of intellectuals. The exodus of intellectuals that had begun in 1906 and 1907 meant that party workers, full-time staff and so on were workers. There was so little of the intelligentsia left that it barely sufficed to meet the needs of the Duma faction and the daily paper. [The place of the intelligentsia was taken by] the intellectual proletarian with his calloused hands and highly developed head who had not lost contact with the masses.

Instead of the student youth and intellectuals of 1903–5, only workers were in evidence in the war years. Likewise, the secret meeting-places in flats and lodging-houses were all in working-class districts and in workers’ flats. Intellectuals were a rare exception. Of the old party intelligentsia there remained very few who had maintained their ties with the workers.

[From 1916 this changed again:] The turning-point in the mood of the people and the growth of opposition among even the bourgeoisie drove into our ranks no small number of student activists.⁴⁰

The pattern is clear: in 1903–05 and 1916–17, there was an influx of intellectuals because the movement was on the rise. In the intermediate period of reaction and counter-revolution they stayed on the side. The success of the Bolshevik party was

not due to the intellectuals (except for a few, including Lenin himself) but to the politically educated workers.⁴¹

And third, to what extent was the Bolshevik party indeed a party machine, with well-oiled parts working in close harmony under the leadership of the central committee? This question too must be answered negatively. Orders from the top leadership were regularly ignored by lower echelons. When in 1917, the central leadership ordered the setting up of regional organisations, opposition against this measure arose in different regions. In Kiev and the surrounding area, an important group under Georgy Pyatakov refused to join the new regional committee. In the lower Volga region, it was not possible to form a regional committee because of the enormous rivalry between the Saratov and Samara committees. Something similar happened in Moscow when the town committee and the regional bureau refused to combine. The result: in several regions there were two parallel Bolshevik leaderships.

Even the central committee was not very punctual and disciplined. A large number of members did not even come to meetings. The Sixth Congress, for example, had chosen 21 members in the leadership. At various meetings following these appointments between six and 16 members were present, with an average of 10 per session. The historically vital meeting of 10 October 1917, which decided on rebellion, was held by 11 members! The central committee did not carry out its own decisions either. According to the minutes of the meeting of 10 October 1917, the following was discussed:

Comrade Dzerzhinsky proposes that out of the Central Committee a Political Bureau be set up to take up the leadership in the coming days. After an exchange of views the proposal was accepted. A Political Bureau of 7 members was formed: Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov, Bubnov.

However, this political bureau, which was supposed to lead the revolt, never met. The decision seems to have been forgotten.⁴²

The Bolshevik organisation as a whole was never the disciplined, well-oiled party machine which many for a long time supposed it to be. Alexander Rabinowitch attributes the Bolshevik success in Petrograd 1917 in no small measure to the flexible nature of the party, emphasising the party's internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character—in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.⁴³

Conclusions

Centralisation of experience and knowledge is at the heart of any collective revolutionary effort. The point is, however, that Lenin interpreted centralisation as an hierarchical, army-like, process, wherein the officers of the revolutionary party digest the lessons of the struggle and then explain these lessons to the

foot soldiers, that is, the broad layers of the working class. This is, I believe, the central contradiction of Lenin's organisational theory: it seeks to promote the self-activity of the working class by subordinating it to an elevated hierarchical organisation. If the party is the teacher of the proletariat, then the workers are the pupils in need of education. The other internal contradictions in Lenin's thought, which I have pointed out, are related directly to this benevolent-authoritarian pedagogical view.

The Russian experience of 1903–24 showed, however, that this approach worked only partly. Once more history proved that reality is stronger than theory. Paul LeBlanc, a sophisticated Leninist who admits that there did exist a “tension between diversity and discipline, between local or individual initiative and centralism,” has emphasised that this should not lead us to “harmonizing a rather amorphous ‘anything-goes’ organizational practice with a sentimental attachment to the Bolshevik tradition.”⁴⁴ Correct as this warning is, it should not make us forget that Lenin considered “discipline” and “centralism” as much more important than “diversity” and “local or individual initiative.” In that sense the Bolshevik party was not Leninist, but “quasi-Leninist” at most.⁴⁵ Even in 1917 there did not exist, as LeBlanc believes, a “common commitment to the revolutionary program” in all segments of the party—unless we consider a revolutionary *sentiment* already as such a commitment. To give just one example: although Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had already split in 1912, even *after* the October events, not all local party organisations had separated from the Mensheviks.

The conclusion of all this can only be that Leninism not only contained some essential weaknesses and contradictions, but also that it was the mere shell of a revolutionary organisation which in practice functioned differently and, in all probability, owed much of its success in 1917 to this “deviation.”

After Lenin's death a powerful myth has been created. The Stalinists reformulated Lenin's theory into an apparently coherent “world view,” stressing one-sidedly its conservative, hierarchical part. They also rewrote the history of the Bolshevik party in such a way that one does indeed get the impression of a monolithic block, led in infallible fashion by Lenin. It is, therefore, not surprising that the official history of 1938 characterised the Bolshevik party as an indivisible war machine, “intimately united by unity of purpose, unity of action and unity of discipline,” with “one party discipline for all, with at its head a leading organ,” etc.⁴⁶ Anti-Leninists from the Left and the Right were quite happy with these ideological “innovations,” for it enabled them to construct the threatening image of Leninism–Bolshevism as an authoritarian, thoroughly repressive, movement-cum-theory. It is high time to abandon this chimera and to show what really happened.

NOTES

1 In this paper I am using the concept of “Leninism” only in the literal sense, as “Lenin's teachings.” All theories which refer to themselves as Leninist but do not come directly from Lenin are therefore excluded. I am employing this strictly delineated boundary

because I believe it to be extremely doubtful whether the later “Leninist” discourses by Grigory Zinoviev, Joseph Stalin and others do indeed correspond with Lenin's teachings.

2 Perry Anderson regards Tsarism before industrialisation as a pure type of feudalism, although accompanied by an exceptionally well-developed

(atypical) absolutist state (*Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: Verso, 1974, pp 328–60). Hans-Heinrich Nolte sees a special type of feudalism, without a developed class structure (“Zur Stellung Russlands im europäischen Feudalismus,” *Das Argument*, Special Issue 32, 1978). Carsten Goehrke goes even further and proposes

- that the concept of feudalism does nothing but evoke wrong associations (Goehrke et al. *Russland*, Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972, p 120). Compare these with Tamás Krausz's *Lenin Reconstructed* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015, pp 101–09).
- 3 Friedrich Engels: letter to Plekhanov dated 25 February 1895. The entire relevant passage is as follows: "As for the rest, in a country such as yours, where modern large-scale industry is grafted onto the primitive peasant community, and where all the intermediate stages of civilisation are represented simultaneously, in a country which, in addition, is surrounded more or less effectively by an intellectual wall of China, erected by despotism, it is scarcely surprising if the most bizarre and impossible combinations of ideas are produced" (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 50, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004, p 450).
 - 4 Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1960, p 575.
 - 5 See, for example, Masaharu Tanaka, "The Narodniki and Marx on Russian Capitalism in the 1870's–1880's," *Kyoto University Economic Review*, 39: 2, October 1969, pp 1–25; James D White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996, pp 227–44.
 - 6 G Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History*, Moscow: Progress, 1956, pp 196–97.
 - 7 Daniela Steila, *Genesis and Development of Plekhanov's Theory of Knowledge. A Marxist between Anthropological Materialism and Physiology*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991, p 133.
 - 8 This interpretation of Plekhanov is based on Bernd Rabehl, *Marx und Lenin. Widersprüche einer ideologischen Konstruktion des 'Marxismus-Leninismus'*, Berlin: VSA, 1973, pp 197–210.
 - 9 Nikolay Valentinov, *Encounters with Lenin*, Trans Paul Rosta and Brian Pearce, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p 65.
 - 10 "Once Again on the Trade Unions, the Current Situation and the Mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin" (1921), *Lenin Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House/Progress Publishers, 1960–170 [hereafter: *LCW*], Vol 32, pp 70–107, at 94.
 - 11 It will be clear that I do not agree with Neil Harding, whose "points of reference in considering Lenin's degree of orthodoxy are not so much the texts of Marx and Engels as those of his Russian Marxist predecessors and contemporaries considered by the Russian movement to be unimpeachably orthodox." See his *Lenin's Political Thought*, Vol 1, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977, p 30.
 - 12 On this and the following, also see the excellent analysis in Rabehl, *Marx und Lenin*, p 253f; Bernd Rabehl, Wilfried Spohn, and Ulf Wolter, "Halbheiten in der Überwindung des Leninismus," *Probleme des Klassenkampfes*, Nos 11–12, 1974; and Rabehl, Spohn, and Wolter, "Der Einfluss der jacobinistischen und sozialdemokratischen Tradition auf das leninistische Organisationskonzept," *Probleme des Klassenkampfes*, Nos 17–18, 1975.
 - 13 "What the 'Friends of the People' Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats" (1894), *LCW*, Vol 1, pp 129–300, at 177.
 - 14 See also Christel Neustift, *Imperialismus und Weltmarktbewegung des Kapitals*, Erlangen: Politladen, 1972, p 88 ff. This determination clarifies the fact that Lenin's embracing of the Taylorist organisation of labour after 1917 was not a coincidence, but a direct consequence of his theory, which was implicitly based on the political neutrality of labour processes.
 - 15 "What Is to Be Done?" (1902), here quoted from Lars Lih's translation in Lars T Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, pp 673–840, at 702; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 375ff.
 - 16 Ibid: 710; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 384.
 - 17 "The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement" (1900), *LCW*, Vol 4, pp 366–71, at 368.
 - 18 Marx, in fact, did not consider simple commodity production as a separate historical stage. See, for example, Christopher J Arthur, "The Myth of 'Simple Commodity Production,'" at <<http://www.marxmyths.org/chris-arthur/article2.htm>>.
 - 19 "The State" (1919), *LCW*, Vol 29, pp 470–88, at 475–76.
 - 20 Lenin attempted "to examine the whole process of the development of capitalism in Russia," but introduced some limitations: "Firstly [...], we treat the problem of the development of capitalism in Russia exclusively from the standpoint of the home market, leaving aside the problem of the foreign market and data on foreign trade. [...] Fourthly, we limit ourselves exclusively to the economic aspect of the process." "Preface to the First Edition" (1899), in "The Development of Capitalism in Russia" (2nd edition, 1908), *LCW*, Vol 3, pp 25–607, at 25. Although Lenin's book contains an impressive number of facts and some real insights, it remains unclear why some scholars consider it rather uncritically as "the fullest, best-documented and best-argued examination of the crucial period of the evolution of capitalism out of feudalism in the literature of Marxism." Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought*, Vol 1, p 107.
 - 21 "The Development of Capitalism in Russia," p 503. Lenin added however: "Russia is still very backward, as compared with other capitalist countries, in her economic development." In 1905, Lenin assumed that "the entire economic life of the country has already become bourgeois in all its main features, since the overwhelming majority of the population is in fact already living in bourgeois conditions of existence [...]" Lenin, "The Socialist Party and Non-party Revolutionism" (1905), *LCW*, Vol 10, pp 75–82, at 76.
 - 22 "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" (1916), *LCW*, Vol 22, pp 185–304, at 302–03.
 - 23 "The State and Revolution" (1917), *LCW*, Vol 25, pp 381–492, at 474.
 - 24 This is also illustrated by Lenin's polemic against Bogdanov's *Empirionomizm* (1904). As Lenin wrote to Gorky, earlier (in 1904) he had reached "complete agreement" with Bogdanov: they formed a "tacit bloc, which tacitly ruled out philosophy as a neutral field." Lenin, "A letter to A M Gorky" (25 February 1908), *LCW*, Vol 13, pp 448–54, at 449. Only because he had become very angry about Bogdanov's philosophical "deviation" had he later polemicised against Bogdanov's books. See, for a contextualised analysis, Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin*, pp 125–39.
 - 25 "What Is to Be Done?," p 746; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 423.
 - 26 "On Compromises" (1917), *LCW*, Vol 25, pp 305–10, at 306.
 - 27 "A Letter to a Comrade on Our Organisational Tasks" (1902), *LCW*, Vol 6, pp 231–252, at 249.
 - 28 "What Is to Be Done," p 80; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 480; "Letter to a Comrade," p 242.
 - 29 "The Collapse of the Second International" (1915), *LCW*, Vol 21, pp 205–59, at 253.
 - 30 "Left-wing' Communism—An Infantile Disorder" (1920), *LCW*, Vol 31, pp 17–117, at 96. For an early example of the military analogy, see: "The Persecutors of the Zemstvo and the Hannibals of Liberalism" (1901), *LCW*, Vol 5, pp 31–80, at 74.
 - 31 In the scholarly literature, two views can be found. On the one hand, a relatively small group of experts believes that the "historical roots of Lenin's theory of organisation were not Russian at all, but German—or, more precisely, Austro-German." (Ernest Mandel, "Liebman and Leninism," *The Socialist Register*, 1975, pp 95–114, at 100). On the other, the majority of researchers interpret Leninism mainly as a modernised version of *narodnichestvo*. See, for instance, Astrid von Borcke, *Die Ursprünge des Bolschewismus. Die jakobinische Tradition in Rußland und die Theorie der revolutionären Diktatur*, Munich: Berchmans, 1977, especially pp 459–577. In my view both these approaches are one-sided.
 - 32 "What Is to Be Done?," p 789; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 467.
 - 33 Ibid: 835, note; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, p 515, note.
 - 34 Ibid: 796; compare *LCW*, Vol 5, pp 474–75.
 - 35 "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1904), *LCW*, Vol 7, pp 203–425, at 402.
 - 36 "The Socialist Party and Non-party Revolutionism," op cit.
 - 37 See, for example, "Report on the Unity Congress of the RSDLP" (1906), *LCW*, Vol 10, pp 317–82, at 380. In "A Tactical Platform for the Unity Congress of the RSDLP" (1906), Lenin had also stated that the principle of elections from the bottom to the top should be carried through in the party organisation (*LCW*, Vol 10, pp 147–63, at 163). It should be stressed that, contrary to a widely held belief, democratic centralism was not a typically Leninist invention. In fact, some other currents within the Russian socialist movement (like the Mensheviks) were adherents of democratic centralism too.
 - 38 Robert C Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics, 1904–1914*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986, p 31. Some representative studies defending this view are: Dietrich Geyer, *Kautskys Russisches Dossier. Deutsche Sozialdemokraten als Treuhänder des russischen Parteivermögens 1910–15*, Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1981; John Biggart, "Anti-Leninist Bolshevism: The Forward Group of the RSDRP," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 23, No 2, June 1981, pp 134–53; and Zenovia A Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.
 - 39 David Lane, *The Roots of Russian Communism*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969, p 50.
 - 40 Alexander Shlyapnikov, *On the Eve of 1917. Reminiscences from the Revolutionary Underground*, Trans. Richard Chappell, London: Allison & Busby, 1982, pp 6, 94 and 141.
 - 41 See on these manual, usually skilled, workers who read and published: Reginald Zelnik (ed), *Workers and Intelligentsia in Late Imperial Russia: Realities, Representations, Reflections*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999; Mark Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–25*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.
 - 42 These details and others may be found in chapter 8 of Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol II: *All Power to the Soviets* (London: Pluto Press, 1976). Also see Paul LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1990, pp 270–73.
 - 43 Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, New York: Norton, 1976, p 311. According to Rabinowitch, "Probably the clearest example of the importance and value of the party's relatively free and flexible structure, and the responsiveness of its tactics to the prevailing mass mood, came during the second half of September [1917], when party leaders in Petrograd turned a deaf ear to the ill-timed appeals of Lenin, then still in hiding in Finland, for an immediate insurrection" (p 313).
 - 44 LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, pp 273–74.
 - 45 Compare Tony Cliff: "What an incredible gulf between Lenin's concept of a centralised party and the actual situation among the Bolsheviks in 1917!" (*Lenin*, II, p 157).
 - 46 *Istoriya vsesoyuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov). Kratkii kurs*, Moscow: np, 1938, p 45f.