

Lecture on the centenary of the Russian Revolution

Spontaneity and Consciousness in The February Revolution

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We are publishing here the text of a lecture delivered on Saturday, April 22 by Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US). This is the fourth in a series of five international online lectures being presented by the International Committee of the Fourth International to mark the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Background to February: Russia's Combined and Uneven Development and the Theory of Permanent Revolution

The events of February 1917 in Russia marked the beginning of revolutionary convulsions that changed the course of history. On February 22, the eve of the revolution, Nicholas II was still the Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia. A week later, the seemingly invincible Romanov Dynasty, which had ruled Russia for more than 300 years, was overthrown, replaced by the unstable “dual power” of the bourgeois Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. This was the framework of the political conflicts that developed over the next eight months, leading up to the conquest of power by the working class, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

In beginning our examination of the revolution of 1917, we must again review the way in which the “Russian Question” was understood and analyzed by the revolutionary movement, for only in this context is it possible to understand the political and social conflicts that developed during the momentous events of 1917.

The basic principle of Marxism is that social revolution—that is, the process of replacing one ruling class with another—takes place only when the development of the productive forces is no longer possible within the framework of the existing relations of production. Scientific socialism is rooted, not in Utopian fantasies, but in the objective contradictions of capitalism, and, bound up with them, the social interests of the working class. As we consider the world situation today, it is clear that the capitalist nation-state system has become an enormous barrier to the further development of production and the future of humanity itself.

However, Marxism began to take root in Russia under conditions where the level of social and economic development considered necessary for a socialist movement—in particular, the predominance of capitalist property relations and a mass working class—was very low. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the peasantry still comprised 85 percent of the population, for the most part toiling in ignorance and poverty. Despite the formal emancipation of the serfs in 1861, land ownership was dominated by the large landlords. Old feudal relations, which had been abolished in Western Europe in the great bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th

centuries, remained. Politically, the tsarist aristocracy dominated the country, and there were no real mechanisms of the democratic and parliamentary forms of rule that existed in Western Europe and the United States. This meant that the immediate tasks facing the revolutionary movement in Russia were bourgeois-democratic in character.

The “father of Russian Marxism,” Georgi Plekhanov, was the first to recognize that the working class of Russia, despite its relatively small size in comparison to the peasantry, would be the decisive revolutionary force in the democratic revolution. “The revolutionary movement in Russia will triumph only as a workers’ movement or it will never triumph at all,” he proclaimed at the founding congress of the Second International in 1889. His conception was that of a revolution in two stages, in which the working class would play the leading role in the democratic revolution, but power would necessarily be transferred in some manner to the bourgeoisie, allowing for a more or less extended period of capitalist development before the working class was strong enough to take power itself.

Comrades North and Volkov note in their important essay on Plekhanov published late last year, “Plekhanov’s outstanding role as a political thinker lay in the fact that he foresaw the decisive role of the working class long before it emerged as a mass social group occupying a specific place in economic and political life, and under conditions in which capitalism in Russia had taken only its first steps.” [1] Indeed, this basic and far-sighted conception lay at the foundation of the subsequent development of the entire Marxist movement in Russia.

The subsequent steps of Russian capitalism, however, raised critical issues of perspective that exposed the weaknesses and consequences of Plekhanov’s two-stage conception. The 1905 revolution, as we saw in the lecture by Comrade Fred Williams, not only demonstrated the enormous social power of the working class, but also, and bound up with this, the counter-revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie. In 1905, Plekhanov, now associated with the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, wrote that the revolution was bourgeois in character, which meant that it did not “signify the undermining of capitalism,” but rather would “clear the ground, for the first time and in a real way, for a broad and rapid, European, and not Asiatic, development of capitalism” making possible “for the first time the rule of the bourgeoisie as a class.” [2]

But how would it be possible to transfer power to a class that did not want it, was terrified of the class—the working class—that was the main driving force in the revolution itself? For the working class, the logic of this perspective meant that it had to refrain from advancing its own interests for fear of frightening the bourgeoisie and driving it into the camp of reaction. As we will see, this program and perspective would be developed by the Mensheviks, along with the Socialist Revolutionary Party, following the February Revolution.

The perspective of Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, was very different. The Russian Revolution was to be a bourgeois-democratic revolution, but the fundamental tasks of this revolution would and could not be carried out by the bourgeoisie or in alliance with the bourgeoisie. The most important of these tasks was the liquidation of feudal relations in the countryside. In Russia, however, the bourgeoisie was unwilling and unable to carry out this task. In response to Plekhanov's statement in 1905 that it was necessary to be careful not to repel the non-proletarian parties by "tactless actions," Lenin replied that "the liberals and landlords will forgive you millions of 'tactless acts' but will not forgive you a summons to take away the land." [3]

Lenin advanced instead a program of overthrowing the tsarist aristocracy through a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry," with the term "dictatorship" used in the Marxist sense of state power. The working class would take power in alliance with the peasantry and implement the most radical democratic measures. However, this revolution would not and could not transcend the framework of capitalist property relations. "Social Democracy has consistently stressed the bourgeois nature of the impending revolution in Russia," he wrote in 1905, "and insisted on a clear line of demarcation between the democratic minimum program and the socialist maximum program... Objectively," he added, "the historical course of events has now posed before the Russian proletariat precisely the task of carrying through the democratic bourgeois revolution...; this task confronts the people as a whole, the entire mass of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry; without such a revolution the more or less extensive development of an independent class organization for the socialist revolution is unthinkable." [4]

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution rejected the two-stage theory of Plekhanov as well as the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" proposed by Lenin.

Trotsky recognized that the basic tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution had yet to be completed. The "unevenness" of capitalist development was expressed in the relative backwardness of Russian economy and society. However, into this backwardness, class relations of a highly advanced character had been introduced, as a result of the interaction of the Russian economy with the world economy. Rather than an organic growth of capitalism that involved the development of a broad layer of petty bourgeois and small craftsmen, Trotsky wrote in 1906, "Capital intruded from the West with the direct co-operation of absolutism, and in a short period converted a number of old archaic towns into centers of trade and industry, and even created, in a short time, commercial and industrial towns in places that previously had been absolutely uninhabited." [5]

Trotsky later referred to this phenomenon as the "law of combined development"—"a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms." [6]

This "combined and uneven" character of Russian development determined the social physiognomy and political orientation of different classes. The speed and concentration of industrialization imparted to the class struggle a particularly explosive character.

As for the bourgeoisie, it was thoroughly dependent on foreign capital and therefore European imperialism. The severity of the class struggle meant that the Russian liberal bourgeoisie was perpetually terrified that the development of a revolutionary movement against the tsar would spark a working-class movement against private ownership. It was thus constantly fleeing into the arms of the tsar and seeking an alliance with the landed aristocracy.

This phenomenon could already be seen in Europe, in somewhat different form, during the revolutions of 1848. The revolutionary movements in Hungary, Germany and Austria in the middle of the 19th century were characterized by a high level of working class struggle, and

the bourgeoisie, fearing this revolution, allied with reaction. "No struggle can be successful," the German revolutionary Ferdinand Lassalle wrote to Marx in 1849, "if social questions enter into it only as a sort of hazy element, and remain in the background, and if it is carried on under the banner of national regeneration or bourgeois republicanism." [7] It was in their 1850 report to the Central Authority of the Communist League that Marx and Engels first used the phrase "Revolution in Permanence!", to refer to working class opposition to the "hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie" that preaches "general unity and reconciliation ... in which the definite demands of the proletariat must not be brought forward for the sake of beloved peace." [8]

The level of class conflict in Russia a half century later was far greater, and the revolutionary appetite of the bourgeoisie far less, than in 1848 in Europe, let alone in 1789 at the time of the great French Revolution. The overthrow of the tsar and the resolution of the "democratic tasks" fell to the working class of Russia, which, Trotsky emphasized, would play the leading role in the revolution, leading behind it the peasant masses.

In opposition to Lenin, Trotsky insisted that once the working class took power, it could not constrain itself to purely "bourgeois" tasks, but would be compelled to make inroads into capitalist property relations, to begin introducing socialism. Having taken state power, what program would the working class implement? Even if it were to establish a state in alliance with the peasantry, how would the party of the working class respond to unemployment and food shortages, or to strikes by workers or lockouts by employers? Writing in 1909, he criticized Lenin for believing that "the contradiction between the proletariat's class interests and objective conditions [i.e., the backwardness of Russia] will be resolved by the proletariat imposing a political limitation upon itself" by exercising a "class asceticism."

Whereas the Mensheviks, proceeding from the abstract notion that "our revolution is a bourgeois revolution," arrive at the idea that the proletariat must adapt all its tactics to the behavior of the liberal bourgeoisie in order to ensure the transfer of state power to that bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks proceed from an equally abstract notion—"democratic dictatorship, not socialist dictatorship"—and arrive at the idea of a proletariat in possession of state power imposing a bourgeois-democratic limitation upon itself. It is true that the difference between them in this matter is very considerable: while the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism have already become fully apparent, those of Bolshevism are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory. [9]

The revolution in Russia could only be led by the working class, and, having taken power, the working class would be compelled to introduce measures of a socialist character. This was one sense in which the revolution would be "permanent."

But how was this possible in backward Russia? How could the most advanced forms of social relations be introduced in a country that was so economically underdeveloped, comprised of the most part of peasants? The key to resolving this dilemma lay in understanding Russia and the Russian Revolution not as an isolated, national event, but as a component part of an international revolution.

In the midst of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky wrote:

Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism. This immediately gives the events now unfolding an international character, and opens up a

wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia led by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, and will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions... [10]

The passage of twelve years between 1905 and the outbreak of the February Revolution only confirmed Trotsky's analysis. On the bloody battlefields of Europe, the fate of workers of every country was bound together. The Great War, the colossal breakdown of the nation-state system, also marked the end of all national programs. It placed on the order of the day the socialist reorganization of world economy. This was another sense in which the revolution had to be "permanent." Writing in the midst of the mass international slaughter, Trotsky explained:

A national bourgeois revolution in Russia is impossible because of the absence of a genuinely revolutionary bourgeois democracy. The time for national revolutions is past, in Europe anyway, and so is the time for national wars. There is a deep inner connection between the two. We are living in the era of imperialism, which means not only a system of colonial expansion but also a very distinctive type of domestic regime. It is no longer a matter of a bourgeois nation opposing an old regime, but of the proletariat opposing the bourgeois nation. [11]

This perspective provided the essential strategic foundation of the Bolshevik Party between April and October, but not before an internal struggle led by Lenin, to which I will return later in this lecture.

Five Days

It is within this perhaps extended introduction that we examine the events of February 1917 and the Russian Revolution as a whole. Russia's development during the year, and, indeed, the subsequent nationalist and Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, provided powerful confirmation in different forms of the correctness of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

While more information has been uncovered by historians over the past 80 years, and there are a number of valuable works on the February Revolution, the best account of the Russian Revolution as a whole remains Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. If the main consequence of this lecture is to encourage more people to read this book, I would consider it a success.

The most immediate fact about the February Revolution, as with the revolution of 1905, is that its principal motive force was the working class, and particularly the working class of Petrograd.

Even prior to February 23, the class struggle in Russia had been escalating under the impact of the war and desperate economic conditions. While the number of striking workers had fallen from 1.3 million in January-July 1914, just prior to the outbreak of the war, to under 10,000 from August-December of that year, it rose to more than 500,000 in 1915 and nearly 1 million in 1916. In the weeks leading up to the February Revolution, the number of strikes expanded rapidly, including 186,000 workers participating in a strike to mark the anniversary of the 1905 Bloody Sunday massacre, and the lockout of 25,000 workers at the Putilov factory, the largest factory in Petrograd, on February 22. The strikes were

becoming increasingly political in character, demanding an end to the monarchy and an end to war.

The revolution itself began with the eruption of protests and walkouts by workers in the heavily industrialized Vyborg District, where the Bolshevik Party had a principal base of support.

On February 23, International Women's Day (March 8 in the western calendar), women textile workers in the Vyborg District, fed up with long work hours, the unending war, food shortages and bread lines, met in the morning and walked off the job. They appealed to their fellow workers in neighboring factories, which included large metal working plants, to join them. [12]

One worker in the New Lessner Factory, a machine construction plant in the Vyborg District, and one of the largest factories in Petrograd at the time, described what followed: "Women's voices were heard in the alley onto which the windows of our department opened, shouting 'Down with the war! Down with the high cost of living! Down with hunger! Bread for the workers'... Throngs of militant women workers filled the alley. Those who spotted us began waving their arms and yelling 'Come out! Stop work!' Snowballs pelted the windows. We decided to join the demonstration." [13]

Though the policy of the Bolshevik Party central leadership at the time was not to call for strike action, the Vyborg Committee met and decided to support the strike. Similar decisions were taken at other factories, involving workers associated with the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties, as well as the Bolsheviks. More than 100,000 workers, or about a third of the industrial workforce, were on strike by the end of the day.

The next day, February 24, a Friday, the strike expanded to encompass half of all industrial workers, more than 200,000, and began to expand beyond the Vyborg District. The gigantic factories, the centers of industrial production, including war production, became the centers of revolutionary activity and agitation. This day also saw the beginning of confrontations with the police. The military, however, had not yet been ordered to shoot at protesters, and there were initial signs of fraternization between workers and soldiers.

On the third day, Saturday, February 25, the strike expanded and became practically general. Nearly 250,000 workers participated. The police played a leading role in suppressing strikes and demonstrations. A conflict began between the soldiers of the city and the police. In one incident, Cossack soldiers not only refused to assist police in breaking up a demonstration, but attacked the police and killed their commander.

Tsar Nicholas II ordered Khabalov, the commander of the Petrograd military district, to take more drastic action to suppress a rebellion that could endanger the war effort. "I order you to bring all these disorders in the Capital to a halt as of tomorrow. These cannot be permitted in this difficult time of war with Germany and Austria." Khabalov responded with an order forbidding gatherings in the street. Arrests were made in the evening, including of five members of the Petrograd Committee of the Bolsheviks, with direct guidance of the Bolsheviks falling to the Vyborg organization.

The fourth day was Sunday, February 26, and the factories were closed. Yet demonstrations continued, and Khabalov followed Nicholas' orders with bloody violence. Mobilizing more reliable military units, including the training squads composed of non-commissioned officers, he ordered troops to fire into the crowds. Hundreds were killed, thousands wounded.

In the evening of the 26th, a momentous event occurred that would foreshadow what was to happen the next day. The Pavlovsky regiment of the Imperial Guard revolted, angered at the firing on workers by their own training squad.

On the morning of the 27th, the soldiers' revolt began with a mutiny of the Volynsky regiment. They fired on and killed their commander, who had ordered them to shoot workers the previous day. The mutineers went

out to nearby regiments and encouraged revolt. One by one the separate barracks joined the revolution. Attempts by the Tsar's commanders to assemble loyal troops failed. The workers' insurrection expanded. Government buildings were taken over and political prisoners liberated.

Who led the February Revolution? There was no centralized political party directing events. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries neither anticipated nor wanted a working-class revolution. During the February events, leading members of these organizations were in the Duma, pleading with the bourgeois parties to take action lest the situation develop out of control.

The *Mezhraiontsy* (Interdistrict Group)—with which Trotsky, exiled in New York, was associated—issued a leaflet on the second day of the revolution, calling for a democratic republic, socialism, an end to war and the creation of a provisional revolutionary government. However, it did not have the same mass base as the Bolsheviks did, particularly in Vyborg.

Lower-level Bolshevik Party organizations played a significant role, particularly the Vyborg District Committee. However, the party's central leadership was perpetually behind events, and the leadership in the city was under constant pressure by worker-activists within Bolshevik Party to respond more aggressively, to issue leaflets, to call for a general strike and insurrection. During the February events, most of the Bolshevik leadership itself was in exile, including Lenin, who was in Switzerland, from where he did not return until April.

This does not, however, mean that the revolution was purely "spontaneous," a "mystic" theory that Trotsky notes "fell in most opportunely with the minds not only of all those gentlemen who had yesterday been peacefully governing, judging, convicting, defending, trading, or commanding, and today were hastening to make up to the revolution, but also of many professional politicians and former revolutionists, who having slept through the revolution wished to think that in this they were not different from all the rest." [14]

There were workers who led it. They were workers who had been trained and educated through years of socialist propaganda, and through the bitter experiences of 1905. They had gone through the strike wave of 1912-1914, which threatened revolution prior to the outbreak of war. They saw the spinelessness of the liberals. Some may have been influenced or cowed at the time of the outbreak of war by the nationalist upsurge, but they had seen what the war had done.

Many of these workers would have been strongly influenced by the Bolshevik Party, which was growing in prominence before the outbreak of war. The revolution was led, as Trotsky wrote, by "conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin." However, this leadership by itself "proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution." [15]

Dual Power

The working class and soldiers of Petrograd had made the revolution, but they were not able to take political power. Instead, a complex and unstable "dual power" regime emerged, which would exist until the October Revolution.

On the 27th of February, with the tsar still in power, the Duma representatives gathered to discuss how to contain the situation and tame the revolution. They decided to form a Provisional Committee of the Members of the Duma, which issued a statement declaring it "found itself compelled ... to take into its own hands the restoration of the State and

Public order."

Contrary to its own subsequent mythologizing, the liberal bourgeoisie, represented by the main parties in the Duma, played no revolutionary role. It was terrified of the masses, seeking some way to preserve autocratic rule, with or without Tsar Nicholas II. Paul Milyukov, leader of the bourgeois Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) later acknowledged, "We did not want this revolution. We did not wish particularly that it would come at the time of the war. We struggled desperately so that this would not happen." [16]

However, when their efforts to pressure the Tsar to form a new government failed, and as it became clear that the masses would not accept it, the bourgeoisie's representatives turned to the military high command to force his abdication. Discussions had already taken place, before the revolution, between the military and the leaders of the bourgeois parties about the formation of a new government, even the deposing of Nicholas II, to create better conditions for prosecuting the war. The Allied imperialist powers had indicated some support for such efforts as well.

Without the support of the military, the Tsar abdicated on March 2, transferring power to his brother, the Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich. The Provisional Government was formed the same day, headed by Prince L'vov, with the intention that it would serve under the new tsar. But Mikhail himself abdicated, fearing for his head. The Romanov Dynasty was abolished, despite the best intentions of the bourgeois representatives that led the new government.

On the same day that the Duma Committee was formed in the Tauride Palace, February 27, and in the same building, another governing body was established, which enjoyed the support of the masses of workers and soldiers, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, later the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Some 250 workers, soldiers and socialist intellectuals participated in its first meeting. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, a petty bourgeois party with a base in the peasantry, dominated the leadership of the early Soviet.

The phenomenon of "dual power" was not unique to the Russian Revolution. The existence of two governing institutions had occurred in previous revolutions, as one class was replacing another. Such a situation can only resolve itself in civil war. The dual power regime that emerged after the February Revolution was peculiar, however, in that the leaders of the Soviets, which commanded the support of the workers and soldiers—the driving force of the revolution—worked consciously and deliberately to turn power over to the bourgeois Provisional Government. The essential class conflict that was concealed in the relationship between the two bodies was to emerge directly only when the Bolsheviks won control of the Soviet several months later.

Masses of workers and soldiers did not look to the Duma for leadership, but to the Soviet. The parties that headed the Soviet, however, did not want power and were unwilling to take measures that would address the workers' and soldiers' demands. The basic democratic and social aspirations of the workers and soldiers who led the revolution collided with the interests of the bourgeoisie, but their representatives in the Soviet insisted that the bourgeoisie must rule.

This "paradox" found expression in different forms. First, there was the issue of power itself and the recognition of the Provisional Government. Immediately after Tsar Nicholas' abdication, the leaders of the Executive Committee of the Soviet met with the representatives of the Duma to discuss the conditions in which the Soviet would support the new government. Their conditions did not include any of the basic demands of the workers and soldiers—including an end to war, a republic, land, or the eight-hour day. They only had one demand, freedom of agitation. That is, they were willing and, indeed, eager to hand power to the bourgeoisie so long as the bourgeoisie agreed not to arrest them.

Second, and closely related to the issue of power, was that of the

arming—or disarming—of the workers and the workers' militia. During the revolution, the most militant workers, again concentrated in the Vyborg District, had taken the initiative to form militias. The Soviet recognized this established fact by seeking to organize the militias under its own authority, while the Duma Committee set up militias of its own. This created the conditions for a possible armed conflict between the two militias, that is, civil war.

As one historian of the February Revolution notes, "Already on February 28 the Soviet Executive Committee made clear its intention to cooperate with the Duma Committee in solving this conflict by sacrificing the independence of the workers' militias." [17] It worked to unify the two militias, that is, to disarm the workers and subordinate the workers' militias to the governing authority of the bourgeoisie, consecrated in Executive Committee decisions on March 1 and March 7.

Third, was the return of workers to the factories. The Executive Committee initially designated March 5 as the date for resuming work, with no change in the conditions of labor in the plants. They rejected workers' demands for an eight-hour day on the grounds that this would scare off the bourgeoisie.

Workers, however, took matters into their own hands, with many in the major industrial plants leaving work en masse after eight hours. The Manufacturers' Association ended up reluctantly accepting the eight-hour day as a matter of necessity, with one of the bourgeois publicists explaining: "Unfortunately for the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks had already by means of terror compelled the Manufacturers' Association to agree to an immediate introduction of the eight-hour day." [18]

Fourth, relations within the army. The Duma representatives attempted to regain control over the military, ordering soldiers to submit to the discipline of their officers and surrender their arms, which the Soviet leaders supported. The soldiers, however, rejected these efforts, pressuring the Petrograd Soviet to pass on March 1 Order No. 1. It instructed soldiers not to obey any orders from the Duma Committee that contradicted those of the Soviet. It also instructed soldiers to seize control of weapons and to elect committees in each regiment.

Order No. 1 was passed when the top leaders of the Mensheviks and SRs were not present. Later, they attempted to reverse it by passing Order No. 2, limiting its application to Petrograd. This effort at reinforcing relations within the military failed, however, and the revolution encouraged an already developing virtual civil war within the military, between the soldiers and their officers.

Finally, and most importantly, was the overriding matter of the war itself. For the bourgeoisie, the banner was "war to complete victory." After ignoring the issue of the war for two weeks, the Executive Committee passed a resolution on March 14, a manifesto to the peoples of the world, containing many pacifist phrases but pledging that, "We will firmly defend our own liberty from all reactionary attempts from within, as well as from without. The Russian revolution will not retreat before the bayonets of conquerors, and will not allow itself to be crushed by foreign military force."

In other words, the war would continue. The resolution was hailed by British imperialism and the bourgeois parties in Russia.

Sukhanov, a member of the Executive Committee who had participated in the Zimmerwald antiwar conference in 1915, later wrote candidly in his memoirs,

It was evident that the bourgeoisie could have nothing in common with a movement that undermined the idea of 'war to complete victory.' It saw, or at least spoke of, any such movement as simply the result of German provocation.... It was clear then *a priori* that if a bourgeois Government and the adherence of the bourgeoisie to the revolution were to be counted on, it was

temporarily necessary to *shelve the slogans against the war*, to furl for a time the banner of Zimmerwald, which had become the banner of the Russian, and especially of the Petersburg, proletariat. [19]

Lars Lih and the new historical falsification

The events of February and early March marked the first stage in the unfolding revolution. The next stage had to be prepared by sharply clarifying the political tasks posed by the new situation. Both Lenin in Switzerland and Trotsky in New York responded, with incredible precision, in analyzing what had just transpired. Trotsky, in an article published in *Novy Mir* on March 6 (O.S.), wrote that "an open conflict between the forces of the revolution, headed by the urban proletariat, and the anti-revolutionary liberal bourgeoisie, temporarily in power, is absolutely inevitable." [20]

On March 3, Lenin cabled instructions to Russia: "Our tactics—complete distrust. No support for the Provisional Government. Distrust Kerensky above all. Arm the proletariat as the only guarantee." In his first "Letter from Afar," written on March 7, Lenin wrote that "he who says that the workers must *support* the new government in the interests of the struggle against tsarist reaction... is a traitor to the workers, a traitor to the cause of the proletariat, to the cause of peace and freedom. For actually, *precisely* this new government is *already* bound hand and foot by imperialist capital, by the imperial policy of *war* and plunder..." [21]

This perspective was developed in Lenin's further *Letters from Afar*, in which he outlined a program calling for the transfer of power to the Soviets, an immediate end to the war, confiscation of the landed estates by the peasantry, workers' control of production and the beginning of the transition to socialism.

Lenin's positions provoked a major political conflict within the Bolshevik Party in March and April of 1917, in which he fought for a political line that had been associated with Trotsky. In doing so, Lenin had to do battle with sections of the Bolshevik Party, in particular a right-wing faction associated with Kamenev, Stalin and Muranov, who had returned to Petrograd in mid-March and taken over editorial responsibilities for *Pravda*, seeking to orient the party toward support for the Provisional Government and the war.

In this struggle, Lenin had powerful allies within the Bolshevik Party itself, particularly its working-class base. As historian Alexander Rabinowitch notes, as early as March 1, the Vyborg District Committee of the party had "adopted a resolution calling for the immediate seizure of power by the workers and the abolition of the Duma's Provisional Committee."

The Bureau of the Central Committee, headed by Shliapnikov, adopted a resolution declaring that the Provisional Government was a "representative of the grand bourgeoisie and big landowners" and that it was necessary to "initiate a struggle for the creation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government." When this resolution was brought before the Petersburg Committee of the party, however, it was rejected, in favor of a resolution stating that the Bolshevik Party "does not oppose the Provisional Government as long as its policies are consistent with the interests... of the people," a formula that mirrored that of the Mensheviks. [22]

This history has been the subject of relentless falsification by the Stalinists, as part of a general effort to remove Trotsky, and the significance of the theory of permanent revolution, from history and to justify their own nationalist and opportunist politics. For serious historians, however, the basic political dynamic of the Russian Revolution

has been clear—the contradictory character of dual power, the relationship between the Soviets and the Provisional Government, the significance of the divisions within the Bolshevik Party, the impact of Lenin’s return in April.

We are seeing now a renewed campaign of historical falsification, of an essentially neo-Stalinist character. One prominent example is the historian Lars Lih, who has been heavily promoted by the International Socialist Organization and its publication arm, Haymarket. Indeed, this very afternoon Lih participated in a panel with ISO member Todd Chretien at the Historical Materialism conference in New York, on the subject of the divisions within the Bolshevik Party in March.

In a number of recent articles, Lih argues that there were no fundamental differences within the Bolshevik Party in the months that followed the February Revolution, that there was a seamless continuity between the February and October Revolutions, that “dual power” is not a useful category in understanding the period between the two revolutions, and, incredibly, that the Russian Revolution had nothing to do with socialism.

Lih’s essay “Fully Armed: Kamenev and *Pravda* in March 1917,” published in 2014, is devoted to arguing that the line of Stalin and Kamenev in March “fully prepared” the Bolsheviks for the conquest of power in October. [23] In constructing his “narrative,” Lih cites only one of the editorials published in *Pravda* after Kamenev, Muranov and Stalin returned from exile on March 15. That editorial, which was unsigned but attributed to Kamenev, states, “Just as we energetically support [the new Provisional Government] in the complete liquidation of the old regime and the monarchy, in the implementation of freedoms, etc., we will just as energetically criticize each failure of the Provisional Government to act on its declared intentions, each deviation from decisive struggle, each attempt to tie the hands of the people or to put out the raging revolutionary fire.”

The editorial is in direct conflict with Lenin’s Letter from Afar, which characterized anyone who called for support for the new government in its struggle against the old regime “a traitor to the cause of the proletariat.” Indeed, when *Pravda* later published this letter, the only Letter from Afar that was published, the editors removed several passages, including this one. They clearly understood the significance of what Lenin was writing.

Lih dismisses the obvious interpretation of Kamenev’s article as the product of “inattentive readers,” who have simply not read the entire editorial. The editorial later states, according to Lih’s translation, that “the paths of the democratic forces and of the Provisional Government will diverge—that when the bourgeoisie comes to its senses, it will inevitably attempt to halt the revolutionary movement and not permit it to develop to the point of satisfying the essential needs of the proletariat and the peasantry. ... This full satisfaction of their demands is possible only when full and complete power is in their own hands.”

This is in fact a thoroughly Menshevik argument. Currently, the Provisional Government—that is, the bourgeoisie—is carrying out revolutionary actions. They should be supported in doing so. In typically opportunist fashion, the revolutionary tasks are postponed to some indefinite future. It is an argument to justify support for the Provisional Government.

Lih supplements Kamenev’s statement with his own explanation.

The great mass of soldiers and workers, newly awakened to political life, still trusted the new Provisional Government and its seemingly excellent anti-tsarist credentials. This trust was not just based on a deluded burst of revolutionary good feeling, as we usually describe the situation with more than a little condescension. The fact of the matter is that in this slice of time, the Provisional Government was actually carrying out revolutionary measures: dismantling the tsarist police apparatus,

releasing political prisoners, setting up guarantees of basic political freedoms, laying the groundwork for national elections, and so forth.

A clash would come, and only then would it be necessary to oppose the Provisional Government, which happened several months later. Thus Kamenev’s line, according to Lih, “took the Bolsheviks all the way to October.”

This analysis is false from beginning to end. The new government did not have “seemingly excellent anti-tsarist credentials.” It had sought to preserve the autocracy at all costs. The masses of workers and soldiers did not look to the Provisional Government to carry out revolutionary measures, but rather to the Soviet, led by political parties that were trying to encourage support for the Provisional Government. For Lenin and for Trotsky, the task was to sharpen the political differentiation, to encourage absolute distrust in the government and in figures like Kerensky, not to counsel illusions that the government would carry out democratic reforms and end the war.

In making his claims, Lih completely ignores the most fundamental issue involved in the conflict within the Bolshevik Party in March: that of war. He ignores the many editorials and articles that appeared in March, in which Kamenev and Stalin adopted a defencist position on the war, corresponding to their support for the Provisional Government.

A March 15 editorial written by Kamenev, under the headline “Without Secret Diplomacy!” is a thoroughly Menshevik document. “The war continues, the Great Russian Revolution has not stopped it,” it begins. “And no one nourishes hopes that it will end tomorrow or the day after. Russia’s soldiers, peasants, and workers, who went to war at the call of the overthrown tsar and who shed their blood under his banners, have freed themselves, and the tsarist banners have been replaced by the red banners of the revolution.”

That is, the war has become a war of revolutionary liberation, led by the Provisional Government—the same line promoted by the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. Kamenev wrote, “When army faces army, the most absurd policy would be to propose that one of them lay down its arms and return to its homes. This policy would not be a policy of peace, but a policy of enslavement, a policy which a free people would indignantly reject. No, it would firmly stand at its post, answering bullet with bullet and shell with shell. This is imperative.”

Demonstrating abject prostration before the Allied imperialist powers, he continued,

Russia is bound by alliances with England, France and other countries. It cannot act in questions of peace apart from them. But this only means that revolutionary Russia, which has freed itself from the tsarist yoke, must directly and openly turn to its allies with a proposal to review the question of opening peace negotiations...

Our slogan is not the disorganization of the revolutionary army and the army that is becoming more revolutionary; nor is it the empty slogan: ‘Down with war.’ Our slogan is: pressure on the Provisional Government in order to compel it to openly, before the entire worldwide democracy, and immediately attempt to induce all the warring countries to immediately open negotiations about a way to end the world war. Until then, everyone should remain at his post. [24]

It concludes with a “warm greeting” to the appeal of the Soviet, drawn up by Sukhanov, to which I referred earlier.

Kamenev's pro-war position was repeated by Stalin, despite the subsequent falsifications by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In Stalin's article on March 16, "The War," he rejects the slogan "Down with the war!," asserting instead that "The workers, soldiers and peasants must arrange meetings and demonstrations and demand that the Provisional Government shall come out openly and publicly in an effort to induce all the belligerent powers to start peace negotiations immediately, on the basis of recognition of the right of nations to self-determination." [25]

Bring pressure to bear on the Provisional Government, to force this bourgeois government to end the war, this government comprised and led by organizations and individuals who had been the most fervent supporters of the war throughout its bloody course.

One need only compare such statements with the writings of Lenin to see the vast political gulf. "It is absolutely impermissible," Lenin wrote on March 9, "to conceal from ourselves and from the people that this government wants to continue the imperialist war, that it is an agent of British capital, that it wants to restore the monarchy and strengthen the rule of the landlords and capitalists." And later, on March 12, he said: "To urge the Guchkov-Milyukov government to conclude a speedy, honest, democratic and good neighborly peace is like the good village priest urging the landlords and the merchants to 'walk in the way of God', to love their neighbors and to turn the other cheek." [26]

Lih's defense of Kamenev—and by implication Stalin—is supplemented by another position, elaborated in a report he delivered last month at the University of Michigan, that it is impossible to say that the revolution in February was "bourgeois democratic" and the revolution in October "socialist." This is a myth promoted by, among others, Trotsky and his followers, who have used it to suggest that prior to Lenin's return to Russia, Stalin and Kamenev intended to go no further than a bourgeois-democratic revolution, while Lenin called for a socialist revolution in his April Theses.

All of 1917 should instead be understood as an "anti-bourgeois democratic revolution." Lih asserts that the aim of a socialist revolution was not part of the Bolshevik message throughout 1917. [27]

In all of his arguments, Lih relies on the ignorance of his readers. The assertion that the Bolsheviks did not advance a socialist program is disproven by an analysis of party documents, including the April Conference that followed Lenin's return. The editors of *Pravda* were under no illusions about the significance of Lenin's proposals. They wrote on April 8, after the publication of Lenin's April Theses, "As for the general scheme of Comrade Lenin, it seems to us unacceptable in that it starts from the assumption that the bourgeois-democratic revolution is ended, and counts upon an immediate transformation of this revolution into a socialist revolution." [28]

In "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It," written in September 1917, in the section titled: "Can We Go Forward If We Fear To Advance To Socialism?," Lenin argues against the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, who claim that the revolution is purely bourgeois democratic and that it cannot implement socialist policies.

Lenin states:

It is impossible to stand still in history in general, and in war-time in particular. We must either advance or retreat. It is impossible in twentieth-century Russia, which has won a republic and a democracy in a revolutionary way, to go forward without advancing towards socialism, without taking steps toward it (steps conditioned and determined by the level of technology and culture: large-scale machine production cannot be 'introduced' in peasant agriculture nor abolished in the sugar industry) ...

The dialectics of history is such that the war, by extraordinarily expediting the transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-

monopoly capitalism, has thereby extraordinarily advanced mankind toward socialism. [29]

While I cannot address the issue in detail in this lecture, this last quote points to the conditions that brought Lenin and Trotsky together theoretically and programmatically. The imperialist war had exposed the contradictions of capitalism as a world system, and revealed the interconnection of the fate of the working class as an international class. It was not a question of a national bourgeois-democratic revolution, but, to refer back to the quote from the end of Comrade Nick's lecture, of turning "the imperialist war into a civil war of the oppressed against the oppressors for the attainment of socialism."

The falsifications of Lih confirm, once again, that the history of the Russian Revolution is of enormous contemporary significance. So many times in the history of the 20th century, the revolutionary upheavals of the working class have been subordinated, particularly through the treachery of Stalinism, to the bourgeoisie. In China in 1927, in Spain in the 1930s, in India and Indochina in the 1940s, throughout Europe after the war, Indonesia in the 1960s, in Chile and Latin America in the 1970s, in Iran in 1979, through to Egypt in 2011.

Today, as we enter a new period of war and revolution, the parties of the upper middle class are doing everything they can to block the development of an independent movement of the working class for socialism.

What made the Russian Revolution so unique was the existence of a revolutionary leadership, headed by Lenin and Trotsky, that guided the revolutionary uprising of the working class to its necessary conclusion, the conquest of state power. The next stage in this struggle, Lenin's return to Russia and the April Theses, is the subject of the next lecture.

Notes:

[1] "Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856–1918): His Place in the History of Marxism," by David North and Vladimir Volkov, *World Socialist Web Site*, December 5, 2016.

[2] Quoted in "Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution," Leon Trotsky, 1939.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "The Revolutionary-Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry," V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Vol. 8*, Progress Publishers, 1965, pp. 294-98.

[5] *Results and Prospects*, Leon Trotsky, Chapter II: The Towns and Capital, Leon Trotsky, 1906.

[6] *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky, Pluto Press, 1977, p.27.

[7] Quoted in *Results and Prospects*, Leon Trotsky, Chapter III: 1789-1848-1905.

[8] "Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, March 1850.

[9] "Our Differences," in *1905*, Vintage Books, 1971, pp. 315-17.

[10] "Introduction to Ferdinand Lassalle's Speech to the Jury," quoted in *Results and Prospects*, Chapter IX: Europe and Revolution.

[11] "The Struggle for Power," in *1905*, Ibid., p. 322.

[12] All dates in the account of the February Revolution and after are given in the Old Style Julian calendar.

[13] Quoted in *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, Rex. A. Wade, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 29.

[14] *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky, p. 161.

[15] Ibid., p. 171

[16] Quoted in *The February Revolution: Petrograd, 1917*, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, University of Washington Press, 1989, p. 227.

[17] "The Formation of the Militia in the February Revolution: An Aspect of the Origins of Dual Power," Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Slavic*

Review, Vol 32, No 2, June 1973, pp. 303-22.

[18] Quoted in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky, *Ibid.*, p. 258.

[19] *The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record*, N. N. Sukhanov, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 12.

[20] "The Growing Conflict," L. Trotsky (tr. Fred Williams).

[21] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, Progress Publishers, 1964, p. 292 and p. 305.

[22] *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising*, Alexander Rabinowitch, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 34-35.

[23] "Fully Armed: Kamenev and Pravda in March 1917," Lars T. Lih, *The NEP Era: Soviet Russia 1921-1928*, 8 (2014), pp. 55-68.

[24] *Pravda*, Wednesday, 15 [28] March 1917. (Translated by Fred Williams from the Russian).

[25] *Pravda*, Thursday, 16 [29] March 1914, published in *Stalin Works*, Vol. 3, March-October, 1917.

[26] From Lenin's second and fourth "Letters from Afar," *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, *Ibid.*, p. 315 and p. 336.

[27] Lih made these arguments in a report delivered at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor conference, *Revolutionary Longings*, March 2017.

[28] Quoted in Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, *Ibid.*, pp. 326-27.

[29] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, *Ibid.*



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