

## Lecture on the centenary of the Russian Revolution

# Lenin's Return to Russia and the April Theses

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*We are publishing here the text of a lecture delivered on Saturday, May 6 by James Cogan, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia). It was the fifth in a series of international online lectures being presented by the International Committee of the Fourth International to mark the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution.*

When the February Revolution broke out in Petrograd in 1917, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party, was in political exile some 2,400 kilometres away, in Zurich, Switzerland. It was some 10 years since he had been forced to flee Russia following the 1905 Revolution, to escape imprisonment or even a death sentence by the Tsarist regime.

Bolshevik leader and one of Lenin's closest political comrades, his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, recounts that as they were finishing lunch in early March, by the Julian calendar, Polish Marxist Mieczyslaw Bronski rushed into their apartment. He shouted: "Haven't you heard the news? There's a revolution in Russia!"

Krupskaya wrote in her 1933 *Reminiscences of Lenin*:

After Bronski had gone, we went down to the lake, on the shore of which all the newspapers were posted as soon as they came out.

We read the reports several times. A revolution had really taken place in Russia. Ilyich's mind went to work at once. I hardly remember how the rest of the day and the night passed. Next day, the second batch of official reports about the February Revolution found Ilyich writing to Kollontai in Stockholm: "Never again along the lines of the Second International! Never again with Kautsky! By all means a more revolutionary program and tactics." And further on: "... as before, revolutionary propaganda, agitation and struggle with the aim of an *international* proletarian revolution and for the conquest of power by the Soviet of Workers Deputies..." [1]

Geographically, Lenin was certainly isolated from Russia. That did not mean, however, that he had no influence. The Bolshevik leadership-in-exile in Zurich, consisting of not only Lenin and Krupskaya, but also remarkable revolutionists such as Inessa Armand, maintained as much contact as possible with the illegal Bolshevik organisation in Russia—mainly through letters and telegrams that were sent to trusted people such as Alexandra Kollontai in neutral Sweden, which were then smuggled into Finland, then on to St Petersburg and, from there, gradually disseminated more widely.

In March 1917, Lenin was just approaching his 47th birthday. The conditions in which he lived were poor, to put it mildly. Krupskaya recounted that their room was "in a dingy old house, built, I think, way

back in the sixteenth century, and had a smelly courtyard." She noted that, by late 1916, "we had cut down our living expenses to a bare minimum." The Bolshevik exiles were plagued by lack of resources—a factor that, without question, contributed to Lenin's health problems.

Lenin's response to the February Revolution flowed from the internationalist perspective for which he had fought throughout his political life, and especially in the aftermath of the August 1914 betrayal of the Second International, when the majority of its parties and leaders supported their own capitalist class in World War I.

Even among the Marxists who opposed the betrayal, Lenin was in the minority.

The majority of the anti-war tendency, which had come to be known as the Zimmerwald International, after the name of the village in which it had met in 1915, advocated the policy of pressuring the governments of the warring countries into peace talks.

Lenin insisted that only socialist revolution across Europe and around the world could secure lasting peace and the future of civilisation. All the work of Marxists, of genuine internationalists, had to be dedicated to developing the class struggle in their own country and preparing the conditions for the overthrow of their own ruling class—the revolutionary perspective encapsulated in Lenin's slogan: "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war."

The resolution Lenin wrote for the "Left-Wing" at the anti-war Zimmerwald conference in 1915 began:

The present war has been engendered by imperialism. Capitalism has already achieved that highest stage. Society's productive forces have outgrown the narrow limits of the individual national states... The whole world is merging into a single economic organism; it has been carved up among a handful of Great Powers. The objective conditions for socialism have fully matured, and the present war is a war of the capitalists for privileges and monopolies that might delay the downfall of capitalism.

The draft resolution of the Zimmerwald Left concluded:

The imperialist war is ushering in the era of the social revolution. All the objective conditions of recent times have put the proletariat's revolutionary mass struggle on the order of the day. It is the duty of socialists, while making use of every means of the working class's legal struggle, to subordinate each and every one of those means to this immediate and most important task, develop

the workers' revolutionary consciousness, rally them in the international revolutionary struggle, promote and encourage any revolutionary action, and do everything possible to turn the imperialist war between the peoples into a civil war of the oppressed classes against their oppressors, a war for the expropriation of the class of capitalists, for the conquest of political power by the proletariat, and the realisation of socialism. [2]

This perspective demanded, Lenin insisted, the establishment of a new, Third International, comprised only of parties committed to world socialist revolution. On this question, above all, Lenin did not have support in the Zimmerwald International. The majority clung to the possibility that the Second International could be wrested back to Marxism.

Lenin was convinced that the same contradictions that had propelled imperialism into world war would propel the working class into revolutionary struggles, and that the over-riding task of Marxists was to prepare for them. He could not, however, predict when that revolution would break out, or where it would begin.

In fact, in January 1917, in a speech delivered to an audience assembled by Marxist youth in Zurich, Lenin had concluded with the words: "We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution." [3]

Just weeks later, the February Revolution erupted and Lenin did live to both see, and to lead "the decisive battles of this coming revolution."

The central issue that faced Lenin and other revolutionary exiles in Switzerland was how to get back to Russia. Switzerland is a land-locked country. At the time, it bordered Italy to the south, France to the west, the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the east, and the German Empire to the north. Russia was at war with both Austria and Germany, and allied to France. The French ruling class was not going to assist an anti-war figure such as Lenin to return to Russia.

Time was of the essence.

As Lenin and the Bolsheviks had anticipated, and Leon Trotsky even more clearly, in his theory of permanent revolution, the leading role in the revolution was played by the working class. The workers had been joined by hundreds of thousands of soldiers, most of whom, in their class background, came from the lower, poorer sections of Russia's vast agricultural peasantry.

The situation in Russia was one of "dual power." Real power, in the sense of the active support of the masses, rested with the Soviets, whose authority was upheld by the strength of armed soldiers and workers' militias. The Menshevik and Social Revolutionary (SR) Party leaders in the Soviet, however, were consciously working to transfer power to the Provisional Government that had been established by the bourgeois parties, which represented the capitalist class and had no lack of ties to the still largely intact Tsarist state apparatus.

Russia, the bourgeois parties insisted, had to continue to prosecute the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary, and meet its obligations to its British and French imperialist allies. They demanded that discussion on other issues, including even when a Constituent Assembly would be elected to draw up a new constitution, be delayed until "victory" in the war. The soldiers had to be brought back under military discipline and the armed workers would have to hand over their weapons to the state.

The working class, however, was advancing its own demands. It had forced, through its independent actions, the capitalist employers to concede to the eight-hour day. It had established a degree of control over the factories and workplaces. It was calling for price controls and other measures to alleviate its conditions. Above all, workers were demanding an end to the catastrophe of the war, which had claimed the lives of some

1.75 million Russian soldiers and left millions more physically wounded or traumatised.

Like the workers, soldiers were also demanding peace. As Trotsky notes in his *The History of the Russian Revolution*, peasant soldiers rightly concluded that land reform and democratic liberties would not mean a great deal for them if they were dead.

The demands of the working class and soldiers were reflected most clearly in the resolutions of Bolshevik-influenced sections of workers and the military, calling on the Soviets to take power into their hands.

The question of the war had rapidly come to centre stage. Menshevik leaders in the Soviet, who until then had verbally opposed Russian involvement, such as Chkheidze and Tsereteli, along with the Social Revolutionary leader Alexander Kerensky, who had taken a ministry in the Provisional Government, were asserting that the February Revolution, and the gains it had achieved, had "transformed" the character of Russia's participation in World War I. It was no longer a predatory war on Russia's part, they declared, but one for the defence of "democracy" and the revolution against German and Austro-Hungarian militarism—a justification for the war known as "revolutionary defencism."

The position of "revolutionary defencism" was objectively aimed at completing the subordination of the masses and the Soviets to the Provisional Government. And it had an undeniable impact on the multi-millioned peasant soldier masses as well as broader layers, who had only begun to enter political life and had a low level of political understanding and consciousness. That the gains of the revolution needed to be defended from external aggression appeared to make sense. Soldiers would not fight for the predatory aims of the Tsar. If necessary, however, they would fight to defend a government that promised to deliver them land reform, democracy and peace.

On March 14, the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary-controlled Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet adopted a "manifesto to the world," declaring that Russia wanted peace, but would "firmly defend our own freedoms." It called on German and Austrian workers "to refuse to serve as an instrument of conquest and spoliation in the hands of kings, landlords and bankers!"

As Trotsky later observed in his *The History of the Russian Revolution*, no such demands were raised for the repudiation of Russia's imperialist alliances with Britain and France, for British and French workers to refuse to serve as an "instrument of conquest," let alone for action against the landlords and bankers of Russia. The manifesto was nevertheless endorsed unanimously by the Petrograd Soviet.

Among those in the Soviet who endorsed the Executive Committee manifesto on March 14 were dozens of Bolshevik delegates. This followed a series of cases in which Bolshevik committees had adapted to the Menshevik and SR's positions and expressed "critical support" for the new Provisional Government, in the face of furious disagreement among sections of the party in working-class strongholds such as the Vyborg district of Petrograd.

On March 15, the day after the Soviet "manifesto to the world," and reflecting the immense class pressures on the party, Bolshevik leader Lev Kamenev, who along with Joseph Stalin had taken control of the party's newspaper *Pravda*, wrote in an editorial: "While there is no peace, the people must remain steadfastly at their posts, answering bullet for bullet and shell with shell." [4]

Stalin wrote the next day: "Our slogan is not the empty cry 'Down with war!'—which means the disorganisation of the revolutionary army and of the army that is becoming ever more revolutionary. Our slogan is to bring pressure to bear on the Provisional Government so as to compel it to make, without fail, openly and before the eyes of world democracy, an attempt to induce all the warring countries to initiate immediate negotiations to end the world war. Till then let everyone remain at his post." [5]

The line of *Pravda* was opposed by sections of the Bolshevik Party. There is no question that a trend was developing in the party toward acceptance of the Provisional Government, deference to the Menshevik and SR control of the Soviet, and toward limiting and curtailing the independent struggle of the working class.

The political line spelt out by Lenin in his *Letters From Afar*—no support for the bourgeois government, no change in the party's opposition to the war and the fight for the taking of power by the Soviets and the working class—was being ignored by the Bolshevik leadership. Only one of his four letters had even been published in *Pravda*, and it had been substantially edited, including to remove a section in which Lenin denounced anyone giving support to the Provisional Government as a “traitor to the workers, a traitor to the cause of the proletariat, to the cause of peace and freedom.” [6]

The argument of Kamenev and Stalin was that critical support for the Provisional Government was necessary to consolidate the gains of February and create the best conditions for the Bolsheviks to fight for the future establishment of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” which would “complete” the bourgeois revolution in Russia.

As Trotsky wrote: “The Kamenev-Stalin faction was steadily converting itself into a left flank of the so-called revolutionary democracy, and was taking part in the mechanics of parliamentary pressure in the *couloirs* [corridors] upon the bourgeoisie.” [7]

By the end of March, discussions were well underway, at different levels, on a reunification of the long-divided Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies, based on their mutual support, critical or otherwise, for the Provisional Government and “revolutionary defencism.”

In the background, while the parties in the Soviet sought to deliver power to the Provisional Government, elements within the bourgeois parties were conspiring with former Tsarist generals for the day when the revolution had been sufficiently pushed back to carry out the bloody suppression of the working class.

With each compromise by the Soviets, and by the Bolsheviks in particular, the danger of counter-revolution grew.

Lenin had a profound understanding of his responsibilities and the potential impact of his decisions and actions as a political leader. He grasped the urgency of the situation. The Bolshevik Party was being turned into a prop of the capitalist class and the continuation of the war.

Despite his years in exile, Lenin knew the quality of his party and its members. They were educated in Marxism, politically conscious and committed to the cause of socialism. He would have expected that the positions of Kamenev and Stalin would encounter resistance within the Bolshevik movement and its base. In any event, events within Russia were moving at blinding speed, the Bolshevik Party was in crisis, and his own presence in Petrograd was critical.

In a discussion among the Russian exiles in Zurich on March 19, Menshevik leader Julius Martov had suggested the possibility of securing the agreement of the German government to allow them to pass through Germany. They could then cross the Baltic Sea to Sweden, and travel to Russia via Finland. In exchange, Martov proposed, they could give an undertaking to petition in Russia for the release of German prisoners-of-war.

Lenin seized on the idea. He was acutely aware that Russian chauvinists would attempt to smear anyone returning via Germany as having accepted assistance from the so-called “enemy.” He therefore insisted that the terms of his transit were transparent and involved no compromise of revolutionary principle.

The terms were negotiated by Swiss Marxist Fritz Platten with the German embassy in Zurich.

They were, as recounted by Krupskaya:

\* That the Russian exiles be allowed to pass through Germany regardless of their position on the war.

Party\* **But** no-one could enter the train carriages carrying the exiles without Platten's permission.

\* That there was to be no searching of the exiles' luggage or inspection of their passports.

\* That the exiles would undertake to agitate for the release of a corresponding number of German and Austrian internees in Russia. [8]

The so-called “sealed train” left Zurich on March 27, carrying Lenin and 29 others, including Bolshevik leaders such as Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, and Grigory Zinoviev.

On March 31, after crossing the Baltic, they arrived in Sweden. From there, they crossed into Finland and caught a train for Petrograd. Krupskaya recalled that Lenin “asked whether we would be arrested on our arrival.” His comrades, she wrote, “smiled.”

Lenin arrived at Finland Station in Petrograd late in the evening of April 3, 1917.

Far from being arrested, he was met by thousands of Bolshevik-aligned workers and soldiers, and handed a bouquet of roses. He was personally greeted on behalf of the Soviets by Menshevik Alexander Chkheidze, who urged him to support the conciliatory line of the Executive Committee of the Soviet.

Lenin, instead, made a passionate call for socialist revolution. In private, he lambasted Kamenev over the defencist, pro-war political stance being advanced in *Pravda*.

Leon Trotsky characterised what followed as “The Rearming of the Party.”

The next day, April 4, Lenin presented his “April Theses” to a meeting of Bolshevik delegates to the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies; and then again to a combined meeting of delegates of both the Bolsheviks and the rival Menshevik tendency.

Vladimir Lenin was the founder of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution and a towering political and intellectual figure in the 20th century.

What were the April Theses? The document consisted of 10 points. It outlined Lenin's attitude toward the Provisional Government and the war; and his assessment of the historic significance of the Soviets as a new and higher state form. It spelt out the urgent economic measures that were objectively necessary to address the conditions of the working class and rural peasantry within Russia; and it called for the renaming of the party from the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party to the Communist Party.

Lastly, and of perhaps the greatest importance, Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks must take the initiative and create a new revolutionary International, against not only the parties of the Second International that had betrayed socialism by supporting their own bourgeoisie in the war, but against all those “Centrists” who had refused to break from those parties.

I will now review the April Theses. [9]

Point 1: No change in the party's position on the war.

In our attitude towards the war, which under the new government of Lvov and Co. unquestionably remains on Russia's part a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of that government, not the slightest concession to “revolutionary defencism” is permissible....

In view of the undoubted honesty of those broad sections of the mass believers in revolutionary defencism who accept the war only as a necessity, and not as a means of conquest, in view of the fact that they are being deceived by the bourgeoisie, it is necessary with particular thoroughness, persistence and patience to explain their error to them, to explain the inseparable connection existing between capital and the imperialist war, and to prove that without

overthrowing capital it is impossible to end the war by a truly democratic peace, a peace not imposed by violence.

On this point, Lenin's contrast between the predatory ambitions of the bourgeoisie and the "honesty" of the masses who were adhering to a revolutionary defencist position was a critical one. It drew on the entire legacy of Bolshevism, which from the time of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, had based itself on the understanding that socialist consciousness had to be introduced, brought into, the working class, against its spontaneous bourgeois consciousness.

The Marxist party, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had always insisted, had to oppose the bourgeois consciousness of the working class, under all conditions, and "patiently explain," to convince them, to win them over to a socialist standpoint. Among the politically-advanced workers, who had been educated and influenced over decades by the Bolsheviks, the recapitulation of this fundamental understanding, under conditions of intense pressure to adapt to prevailing sentiments, was crucial.

Lenin was telling the Bolshevik cadre, it does not matter if the party is in the minority at present. The task was to tell the truth. The logic of the class struggle would see Kerensky and the Mensheviks expose their counter-revolutionary character. At the critical stage, the intersection of the party's program with objective developments would enable the Bolsheviks to win the mass of the working class to the perspective of socialist revolution.

Point 2: The embrace by Lenin of the theory of "uninterrupted," or "permanent revolution," associated above all with Leon Trotsky.

The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is *passing* from the first stage of the revolution—which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie—to its *second* stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.

Lenin had, against Trotsky, argued that Russia's economic and social backwardness was an objective barrier to the working class establishing a workers' government—the dictatorship of the proletariat. The bulk of the population, the vast rural peasantry, was a petty-bourgeois class and had ambitions only for land reform and democratic rights. It had no essential class interest in socialism.

Lenin had therefore theorised the establishment in Russia of a type of intermediary regime—a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry"—in which the workers' socialist movement would function in an alliance with the most radical of the peasant-based parties to implement, to the greatest possible extent, land reform and the expansion of democracy. This would spur the most rapid economic development of the country, the expansion of the working class, and create the best conditions for the future implementation of socialist measures.

What had been left unanswered by Lenin was which class, and therefore which interests, would dominate in such a "democratic dictatorship," and, therefore how it would respond to the inevitable eruption of conflict between the capitalist class and the working class.

In April 1917, Lenin came out clearly for the establishment of a workers' state, which would win and maintain the allegiance of the majority of the peasantry by implementing, to the fullest extent, land reform and democracy.

Russia, taken in isolation, was certainly characterised by economic and social backwardness. On a world scale, however, as Lenin had assessed, the imperialist war signified that the objective conditions for socialism—an

integrated world economy—had fully matured. The task of the working class in Russia was to seize the possibility of taking power and use it to advance the cause of the world revolution. Russia's development would take place as part of the development of international socialist planning.

In the debates within the Bolshevik Party, Lenin was legitimately accused of "Trotskyism" for this position. In all its fundamentals, the line of the April Theses aligned with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

Point 3: No support for the Provisional Government. In a damning rebuke to both the Soviet leadership and the Kamenev-Stalin faction of the Bolshevik Party, the April Theses declared bluntly:

No support for the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear, particularly those relating to the renunciations of annexation.

Exposure in place of the impermissible, illusion-breeding "demand" that *this* government, a government of capitalists, should *cease* to be an imperialist government.

Point 4: An objective assessment of the balance of forces and the significance of the Soviets.

Recognition of the fact that in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies our Party is in a minority, so far a small minority, as against a *bloc of all* the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements, from the Popular Socialists and the Socialist Revolutionaries down to the Organising Committee (Chkheidze, Tsereteli etc.), Steklov, etc. etc. who have yielded to the influence of the bourgeoisie and spread that influence among the proletariat.

The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our task is, as long as this government yields to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses.

As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.

In an organisation where the position was coming to prevail that the Provisional Government had to be given critical support because the conditions did not exist yet to establish a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry," these statements of Lenin had, as Professor Alexander Rabinowitch has written, "an explosive effect."

Lenin not only advanced that power must pass into the hands of the Soviets, but that the struggle for Soviet power could only be developed by the Bolsheviks, against every other political tendency.

Point 5: The Soviet as a higher state form.

Making clear that Lenin was advocating the overthrow of the capitalist state and the establishment of a new, higher form of state power, the dictatorship of the proletariat, leading the poorer sections of the peasantry, the fifth point of the April Theses declared:

Not a parliamentary republic—to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviet of Workers' Deputies would be a

retrograde step—but a republic of Soviets of Workers, Agricultural Labourers’ and Peasants’ Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom,

Abolition of the police, army and the bureaucracy.

The salaries of all officials, all of whom are elective and displaceable at any time, not to exceed the average wage of a competent worker.

This was followed by further points outlining the most radical implementation of land reform, at the expense of the great landowners, to win the support of the peasantry, and control over finance, production and distribution by the working class, through its Soviets, at the expense of the capitalist class.

Point 6 called for the nationalisation of the land and expropriation of the large estates of the landlords, to meet the aspirations and demands of the peasantry.

Point 7 called for the amalgamation of the banks into a single national bank, controlled by the Soviets.

Point 8 called for workers’ control over production and distribution.

Point 9 advocated a party Congress, to bring its program into line with the struggle for Soviet power, and to change the party name, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, to the Communist Party.

Point 10: A new International.

It stated simply: “We must take the initiative in creating a revolutionary international, an International against the *social-chauvinists* and against the ‘Centre.’”

Lenin defined the “Centre” as the “trend” in the Second International “which vacillates between the chauvinists (=‘defencists’) and internationalists.” He named among its representatives Kautsky and Co. in Germany, Longuet and Co. in France, Turati and Co. in Italy, MacDonald and Co. in Britain, and most explosively, Chkheidze and Co. in Russia—that is, the Mensheviks with whom Bolshevik committees were already engaged in talks, and with whom, just days before, Stalin had advocated re-forming a united organisation.

The Bolsheviks’ shock at hearing the April Theses paled in comparison to the reaction of the Menshevik Soviet deputies who heard it. As the Menshevik Sukhanov recalled in his memoirs, Lenin’s report was labelled “the raving of a madman” and “primitive anarchism.” Menshevik leader Skobelev declared Lenin was a “has-been who stands outside the ranks of the movement.” [10]

Lenin did not receive immediate support within the Bolshevik Party leadership, but he was certainly no “has-been.” His intervention into the political situation had a decisive impact.

On April 6, Lenin was opposed by both Kamenev and Stalin at a meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee.

On April 7, the Theses was published by *Pravda*, albeit with the disclaimer they represented Lenin’s views only.

Raging discussion and realignments, however, were already well underway within the party.

The same day, April 7, in the Soviet Executive Committee, 11 Bolshevik delegates and three others, shifted from the position of “critical support” for the Provisional Government and voted “No” against a Menshevik/SR majority resolution that gave the Soviet’s endorsement to a so-called “Liberty Loan” to finance the continuation of the war.

On April 8, Kamenev, on behalf of the *Pravda* editors, attempted to challenge the April Theses. He wrote:

“As for Comrade Lenin’s general scheme, it appears to us unacceptable as it proceeds from the assumption that the bourgeois-democratic revolution is completed, and builds on the immediate transformation of this revolution into a socialist revolution.” [11]

Between April 8 and 13, Lenin wrote his *Letters on Tactics*, which

answered Kamenev’s position. They circulated in the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd and were published in a pamphlet prior to the party conference, from April 24 to April 29.

In *Letters on Tactics*, Lenin particularly addressed the shift represented by the April Theses from the previous Bolshevik perspective of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry,” which was being defended by Kamenev and others in the party.

The February Revolution, Lenin insisted, had resulted in state power passing to the bourgeoisie, in the form of the Provisional Government. “To this extent,” he wrote against Kamenev, the bourgeois-democratic revolution was “completed.”

Against mechanical counter-arguments that the Bolshevik Party had always insisted that the bourgeois-democratic revolution could only be realised through the “democratic dictatorship,” Lenin replied:

My answer is: The Bolshevik slogans and ideas *on the whole* have been confirmed by history; but *concretely* things have worked out *differently*; they are more original, more peculiar, more varied than anyone could have expected.

To ignore or overlook this fact would mean taking after those “old Bolsheviks” who more than once, already, have played so regrettable a role in the history of our Party by reiterating formulas senselessly *learned by rote* instead of *studying* the specific features of the new and living reality.

The “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” has *already* become a reality (in a certain form and to a certain extent) in the Russian revolution, for this “formula” envisages only a *relation of classes*, and not a *concrete political institution implementing* this relation, this co-operation. “The Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies”—there you have the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” already accomplished.

This formula is already antiquated. Events have moved it from the realm of formulas into the realm of reality, clothed it with flesh and bone, concretised it and *thereby* modified it. [12]

Upholding the Theses’ insistence that the next stage of the revolution was the struggle to “place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants,” Lenin wrote bluntly:

The person who now speaks only of a “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” is behind the times, consequently, he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletariat class struggle; that person should be consigned to the archive of “Bolshevik” pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archive of “old Bolsheviks.”) [13]

Lenin, in this document and others, explained clearly what he meant by the “democratic dictatorship” being realised “in a certain form and to a certain extent” in the Soviets.

The liberal bourgeoisie had played no significant role in the February Revolution. It had been initiated and led by the working class. Its victory, however, had depended on winning to its side the peasant masses, expressed, not in the form of an uprising in the countryside, but in the mutiny against the Tsarist autocracy by hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had been conscripted from the peasantry and flung into the imperialist war. They looked to the Soviets to deliver peace.

The leadership of the Soviet was refusing to exercise the power that had

been placed in its hands by the working class and the peasant soldier masses. Instead, as Lenin wrote, it was “voluntarily ceding power to the bourgeoisie, voluntarily making itself an appendage of the bourgeoisie,” through its support for the Provisional Government.

The Bolsheviks had to patiently explain to the working class that only by taking the revolution to its necessary “second stage,” the assumption of full state power by its Soviets, could its class interests be advanced.

The Soviets, Lenin wrote, “will more effectively, more practically and more correctly decide what *steps* can be taken toward socialism and how these steps should be taken. Control over a bank, the merging of all banks into one, is *not yet* socialism, but it is a *step towards* socialism... “What compels such steps? Famine. Economic disorganisation. Imminent collapse. The horrors of war. The horrors of the wounds inflicted on mankind by the war.” [14]

On April 10, Lenin submitted for publication his Draft Program for the Bolshevik conference, under the title *The Task of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*. It was not publicly published until September, but, like his *Letters*, it circulated in the Bolshevik Party and, as Lenin later noted, an “attentive reader will have noticed that my pamphlet often served as the original draft” of conference resolutions.

Volume 24 of Lenin’s *Collected Works* also records the series of articles and comments he wrote prior to the conference, arguing for the line of the April Theses.

I want to spend the final section of my lecture on arguably the two most critical issues in the April Theses, which were elaborated in some detail by Lenin in both his *Letters on Tactics* and in *The Task of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*.

They were:

Firstly, the significance of the Soviets, and secondly, the necessity to establish a new, Third International, to politically lead the fight for world socialist revolution.

Lenin assessed the Soviets within the heritage of the writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels on the world historical importance of the Paris Commune, through which, for two brief months in 1871, the working-class masses of the city held political power against the French bourgeoisie.

Critiquing both its achievements and the lessons from its mistakes, the founders of scientific socialism assessed the Commune as the first example of the new state form that would defend the rule of the working class against attempts to restore bourgeois relations. The Commune form would preside over the transition to a classless society in which a state was not required—that is, it represented the first “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Marxism, Lenin insisted in *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*, “differs from anarchism in that it recognises the *need* for a state and for state power in the period of the revolution in general and in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism in particular.”

A state of the “Commune type,” he continued, was “the type of state which the Russian Revolution *began* to create in 1905 and 1917.” [15]

The question facing the Bolshevik Party was to make the working class conscious that the Soviets it had formed represented the new, higher, state form it required to achieve socialism. Only the Soviets could ensure the dismantling, or smashing, of the old state bureaucracy, prevent the re-establishment of the police, abolish the military apparatus and reorganise economic life in the interests of the majority, through the establishment of public ownership of the means of production.

In words that will resonate with millions of workers around the world today, who face parliamentary democracies that are toying with a turn to military or fascistic forms of rule, and which are building up their military-police-intelligence apparatuses, Lenin wrote:

It is quite easy (as history proves) to revert from a parliamentary bourgeois republic to a monarchy, for all the machinery of oppression—the army, the police, and the bureaucracy—is left intact. The Commune and the Soviet *smash* that machinery and do away with it.

The parliamentary bourgeois republic hampers and stifles the independent political life of the *masses*, their direct participation in the *democratic* organisation of the life of the state, from the bottom up. The opposite is the case with the Soviets. [16]

Lenin would subsequently devote a great deal of his time over the following months writing his monumental work *The State and Revolution*, reviewing and elaborating on the question of a workers’ state.

Having carried out the first stage of the Revolution and created the Soviets, Lenin insisted that the working class could not allow power to be taken by the bourgeoisie. It had to continue the revolution.

This necessity arose not only from Russian conditions, but above all, from world conditions.

In a concise summation of Lenin’s embrace of permanent revolution, the draft program of the Bolshevik Party declared:

The war is a product of half a century of development of world capitalism and of its billions of threads and connections. It is *impossible* to slip out of the imperialist war and achieve a democratic, non-coercive peace without overthrowing the power of capital and transferring state power to *another* class, the proletariat.

The Russian revolution of February–March 1917 was the beginning of the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war. This revolution took the *first* step towards ending the war; but it requires a *second* step, namely, the transfer of state power to the proletariat, to make the end of the war a *certainty*. This will be the beginning of a “break-through” on a world-wide scale, a break-through in the front of capitalist interests; and only by breaking through *this* front *can* the proletariat save mankind from the horrors of war and endow it with the blessings of peace.

It is directly to such a “break-through” in the front of capitalism that the Russian revolution has *already* brought the Russian proletariat by creating the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies. [17]

The international content of the Russian Revolution, and the “international obligations of the working class in Russia,” as Lenin put it, were at the heart of his insistence that the Bolsheviks, renaming itself as the Communist Party, had to immediately found a Third International.

Lenin, scathingly denounced the Centrist tendency internationally that claimed to oppose the betrayal of the Second International, but promoted the conception that peace could be achieved by pressure on the imperialist bourgeoisie and refused to openly break with those who had supported their own ruling class in the war—the tendency Lenin labelled as the social chauvinists.

The Centre, he wrote in the Draft Program, “is not convinced of the necessity for a revolution against one’s own government; it does not preach revolution; it does not carry on a whole-hearted revolutionary struggle....”

They were “revolutionaries in word and reformists in deed,” and, “internationalists in word and accomplices of the social-chauvinists in deed.”

The only tendency that represented internationalism and the working class, Lenin declared, were those that adhered to the positions advanced

by the Left minority at the 1915 Zimmerwald anti-war conference.

The discussion that followed the April Theses is a clear refutation of the anti-Marxist position that the bureaucratic dictatorship of the Stalinist regime emerged organically out of Bolshevism. Lenin did not convince the Bolshevik Party, let alone millions of workers, by bureaucratic means. He had no apparatus, no means of intimidation. He convinced through his ideas.

The nonsense that the Bolshevik Party was a monolithic, unthinking political machine dominated by Lenin is even more clearly refuted by the outcome of the Bolshevik Conference from April 24 to April 29. Some 150 delegates assembled from across Russia, representing and speaking for, according to the figures cited by Trotsky in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 79,000 party members—workers, soldiers, peasant farmers, as well as intellectuals, professionals and artists. Some were longstanding revolutionists, most had only joined the party in the years or even months before.

The tens of thousands of Bolshevik members collectively represented the vanguard of the working class, an advanced layer who had been imbued with socialist consciousness.

The attitude advanced in the April Theses on the Provisional Government, the attitude to the war, and the perspective of taking of power by the Soviets, won clear majority support at the April Bolshevik Conference. A resolution containing Lenin's call for the immediate founding of the Third International, however, was defeated. It would require months of further discussion before the necessity of breaking, not just with the Mensheviks in Russia, but with their Centrist counterparts internationally, was fully agreed.

From the conference, the delegates returned to their party areas and fought for the line of "All Power to the Soviets."

In 1940, reflecting on the complex relationship between the working class, the revolutionary party, and the leadership of the revolutionary movement, Trotsky wrote the following:

A colossal factor in the maturity of the Russian proletariat in February or March 1917 was Lenin. He did not fall from the skies. He personified the revolutionary tradition of the working class. For Lenin's slogans to find their way to the masses there had to exist cadres, even though numerically small at the beginning; there had to exist the confidence of the cadres in the leadership, a confidence based on the entire experience of the past. To cancel these elements from one's calculations is simply to ignore the living revolution, to substitute for it an abstraction, the "relationship of forces," because the development of the revolution precisely consists of this, that the relationship of forces keeps incessantly and rapidly changing under the impact of the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat, the attraction of backward layers to the advanced, the growing assurance of the class in its own strength. The vital mainspring in this process is the party, just as the vital mainspring in the mechanism of the party is its leadership. The role and the responsibility of the leadership in a revolutionary epoch is colossal. [18]

In the same document, Trotsky also wrote:

The arrival of Lenin in Petrograd on April 3, 1917 turned the Bolshevik party in time and enabled the party to lead the revolution to victory. Our sages might say that had Lenin died abroad at the beginning of 1917, the October revolution would have taken place "just the same." But that is not so. Lenin

represented one of the living elements of the historical process. He personified the experience and the perspicacity of the most active section of the proletariat. His timely appearance on the arena of the revolution was necessary in order to mobilise the vanguard and provide it with an opportunity to rally the working class and the peasant masses. Political leadership in the crucial moments of historical turns can become just as decisive a factor as is the role of the chief command during the critical moments of war. History is not an automatic process. Otherwise, why leaders? why parties? why programs? why theoretical struggles? [19]

Trotsky's questions: why leaders?, why parties?, why programs?, why theoretical struggles?, are underscored by arguably the most critical outcome of the April Theses. It was the document that, after 14 years of political differences, brought Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky together.

Trotsky, in April 1917, was being detained by British imperialism in Canada to prevent his return, from enforced exile in New York, to Russia. In large part because of the incessant demands by the Petrograd working class and the Bolsheviks, the Provisional Government's foreign minister Miliukov made the reluctant request to Britain that Trotsky be released.

Trotsky was freed from British detention and boarded a ship for Europe on April 16, 1917.

Throughout all the events in April that I have reviewed, Trotsky was either in a prison camp, or at sea and lacking all communication. He finally arrived in Russia on May 4, Julian calendar. He had not read the April Theses or any of the subsequent documents.

Later, Trotsky would write in his biography of Lenin:

The second or third day after my arrival in Petersburg [Petrograd] I familiarised myself with Lenin's April Theses. It was exactly what the revolution needed....

The first meeting [between Lenin and Trotsky] must have taken place on the 5th or 6th of May. I told Lenin that nothing separated me from his April Theses and from the whole course that the party had taken since his arrival..." [20]

From Trotsky's account, the discussion that followed centred solely on the tactical issue of when he would openly join the Bolsheviks. Significant revolutionaries and some 3,000 workers belonged to the Inter District Committees. These were elements who opposed the Menshevik majority, but did not support the Bolsheviks, in large part out of agreement with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and his long-standing criticism of the Bolshevik perspective of a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry."

Trotsky believed he was best positioned to convince the majority of the Inter-District Committees to also join the Bolshevik Party. And that is what took place. The Inter-District Committees formally merged with the Bolsheviks in August 1917.

The politically-reinforced Bolshevik Party, led above all by Lenin and Trotsky, won the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the Russian working class, which, supported by a vast mass of soldiers and rural peasants, established the first workers' state on the explicit perspective that the Russian Revolution was the first shot in the world socialist revolution.

The coming together of Lenin and Trotsky must rank among the most important events in modern history. It contained two critical elements that must be understood by all revolutionists today.

It required Lenin's rearming of his party on the perspective of world socialist revolution. If the Bolsheviks had rejected Lenin's April Theses,

and continued with the Kamenev-Stalin line of “critical support” for the Provisional Government and for the war, then Trotsky would not have joined them.

The coming together was no less predicated, however, on Trotsky’s recognition of the far-sighted character of Lenin’s insistence that there could be no compromise with opportunism. This is what today’s generation of revolutionaries must assimilate, above all.

Since the 1915 Zimmerwald Conference, Lenin had singled out Trotsky as one of those “Centrists” who, while profoundly opposing the betrayal of the Second International and fighting for a revolutionary program against the war, had not openly called for a break and the establishment of a new, Third International.

Lenin had insisted since 1903, against Trotsky, that the complete demarcation from all opportunist, that is bourgeois tendencies, was essential to the development of independent, revolutionary, socialist consciousness in the working class. Trotsky was won over to this standpoint by the war, no less than Lenin was won over to the essential precepts of permanent revolution.

The evolution of the Menshevik “Centre” in Russia, and similar groupings in the US and Western Europe, into an openly bourgeois, pro-imperialist, pro-war tendency had clarified Trotsky on the full significance of Lenin’s efforts to carry through a total split with the Mensheviks from 1903 on.

Lenin would state some months later that, after Trotsky rejected any possibility of unification with the Mensheviks upon his return to Russia, and the need for the Third International, there “was no better Bolshevik.” [21]

Lenin and Trotsky had fought a theoretical battle for 14 years. In 1917, they arrived at a common understanding of the political perspective and nature of the party that was necessary to lead the Russian working class in taking political power into its own hands, and to provide the way forward for the working class of the world.

That is the reason why the 1917 Russian Revolution remains the first and only successful socialist revolution.

No other attempt by the working class to take power has been prepared or developed in a comparable fashion, above all, due to the politically criminal role of the Stalinist apparatus that usurped power from the working class during the 1920s and then exterminated vast numbers of the politically-educated Bolshevik intellectuals and workers in the 1930s.

The lesson of the Russian Revolution is this: In every country, the working class requires a section of a world party, which bases itself on the theory of permanent revolution and the perspective of world socialist revolution, and conducts a relentless struggle to demarcate and differentiate itself from all bourgeois and anti-Marxist tendencies.

The International Committee of the Fourth International is that world party, and it alone is preparing the working class for the revolutions of the twenty-first century.

Thank you.

**Notes:**

[1] N. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 1933, in the chapter “Last Months in Emigration”

[2] V.I. Lenin, *The Draft Resolution of the Left Wing at Zimmerwald*, 1915)

[3] V.I. Lenin, *Lecture on the 1905 Revolution*, January 1917

[4] Quotes cited in Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, in the chapter “The Bolsheviks and Lenin”

[5] Ibid

[6] V.I. Lenin, *The First Stage of the First Revolution*, March 7, 1917

[7] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, in the chapter “The Bolsheviks and Lenin”

[8] N. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 1933, in the chapter “Last Months in Emigration”

[9] All quotes ~~Taken~~ ~~from~~ ~~V.I. of~~ ~~Lenin~~ ~~the~~ ~~Present~~ ~~Revolution—The~~ ~~April~~ ~~Theses~~, 1917

[10] Quotes cited in Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, Indiana University Press, pg. 40

[11] Cited in V.I. Lenin, *Letters on Tactics*, April 1917

[12] V.I. Lenin, *Letters on Tactics*, April 1917

[13] *ibid*

[14] *ibid*

[15] V.I. Lenin, *The Task of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*, April 1917

[16] *ibid*

[17] *ibid*

[18] Leon Trotsky, *The Class, the Party and the Leadership*, 1940

[19] *ibid*

[20] Leon Trotsky, *Lenin*, in the chapter “Before the October Revolution,” 1925

[21] From the minutes of the “Session of the Petersburg Committee of DLPR (Bolshevik), November 1, 1917,” published in Leon Trotsky, *Stalin’s School of Falsification*, 1937, in the chapter “The Lost Document ”



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