

From the archives of the Russian Revolution

On Slogans

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Lenin wrote "On Slogans" while in hiding in Finland in late July (mid-July, Old Style). He analyzes the shift in class and party relations in the wake of the counter revolution against the July insurrection, in which the leading Soviet parties, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), backed the military's suppression of the workers and soldiers. Based on this experience, Lenin calls for abandoning the Bolsheviks' central previous slogan "All power to the Soviets." Arguing that a new stage in the revolution had begun, he explains that only a seizure of power by the proletariat, which must be prepared by a direct struggle against the Mensheviks and SRs, can guarantee the success of the revolution.

Much like his "April Theses," the text initially provoked mixed to negative responses among leading Bolsheviks, several of whom were still oriented toward a compromise with the Mensheviks and SRs. The Kronstadt Bolshevik Committee, one of the most militant and pro-Leninist sections of the party, made sure that the text got printed and distributed as a pamphlet. It formed the basis for heated discussions and a reorientation at the Sixth Party Congress of the Bolshevik Party, which was held in Petrograd in the absence of Lenin from August 8 through August 16 (July 26 -August 3, O.S.).

We are publishing here a revised translation from the original Russian text.

It has happened too often that, when history takes sharp turn, even the most advanced parties are for a more or less longer time unable to adapt themselves to the new situation, repeat slogans which were correct yesterday, but have lost any sense today, having lost their sense as suddenly as the sharp turn of history was sudden.

Something of this sort might apparently recur in connection with the slogan calling for the transfer of all state power to the Soviets. This slogan was correct during the period of our revolution—say, from February 27 to July 4—that has now passed irrevocably. It has patently ceased to be correct now. Unless this is understood, it is impossible to understand anything of the urgent questions of the day. Every particular slogan must be deduced from the totality of specific features of a definite political situation. And the political situation in Russia now, after July 4, is fundamentally different from the situation between February 27 and July 4.

During that period of the revolution now past, so-called "dual power" existed in the country, which both in a material and a formal sense expressed the indefinite and transitional condition of state power. Let us not forget that the issue of power is the fundamental issue of every revolution.

At that time state power was unstable. The Provisional Government and the Soviet shared it on the basis of a voluntary agreement between themselves. The Soviets represented delegations from the mass of free—i.e., not subject to external coercion—armed workers and soldiers. The main feature was that arms were in the hands of the people and that there was no coercion of the people from without. This is what opened up and ensured a peaceful path forward for the entire revolution. The slogan "All

Power Must Be Transferred to the Soviets" was a slogan for the next step, the immediately feasible step, on that peaceful path of development. It was a slogan for a peaceful development of the revolution, which between February 27 and July 4 was possible and, of course, most desirable, but which is now absolutely impossible.

Apparently, not all supporters of the slogan "All Power Must Be Transferred to the Soviets" have given adequate thought to the fact that it was a slogan for peaceful progress of the revolution—peaceful not only in the sense that nobody, no class, not a single force of any importance, would then (between February 27 and July 4) have been able to resist and prevent the transfer of power to the Soviets. That is not all. Peaceful development would then have been possible, even in the sense that the struggle of classes and parties *within* the Soviets could have assumed a most peaceful and painless form, provided that all of state power had passed to the Soviets in good time.

This latter aspect of the matter has also not yet received adequate attention. In their class composition, the Soviets were organs of the movement of the workers and peasants, a ready-made form of their dictatorship. Had they possessed full state power, the main shortcoming of the petty-bourgeois layers, their chief sin, that of trusting the capitalists, would have been overcome in practice, would have been criticized by the experience of their own measures. The change of classes and parties in power could have proceeded peacefully within the Soviets, provided the latter wielded exclusive and undivided power. The contact between all the Soviet parties and the people could have remained stable and unimpaired. One must not forget for a single moment that only such a close contact between the Soviet parties and the people, freely growing in extent and depth, could have helped peacefully to get rid of the illusion of petty-bourgeois compromise with the bourgeoisie. The transfer of power to the Soviets would not, and could not, in itself have changed the correlation of classes; it would in no way have changed the petty-bourgeois nature of the peasantry. But it would have taken a big and timely step towards separating the peasants from the bourgeoisie, towards bringing them closer to, and then uniting them with, the workers.

This is what might have happened had power passed to the Soviets at the proper time. That would have been the easiest and the most advantageous course for the people. This course would have been the least painful, and it was, therefore, necessary to fight for it most energetically. Now, however, this struggle, the struggle for the timely transfer of power to the Soviets, has ended. A peaceful course of development has become impossible. A non-peaceful and most painful course has begun.

July 4 was a turning point precisely because afterward the objective situation changed dramatically. The unstable condition of state power has come to an end. At the decisive point, power has passed into the hands of the counterrevolution. The development of the parties on the basis of compromise by the petty-bourgeois parties of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks with the counterrevolutionary Cadets has brought about a situation in which both these petty-bourgeois parties have

de facto become participants in and abettors of the counterrevolutionary butchery. As the struggle between parties developed, the unconscious trust which the petty bourgeoisie put in the capitalists led to their conscious support of the counterrevolutionaries. The development of party relations has completed its cycle. On February 27, all classes found themselves united against the monarchy. After July 4, the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie, working hand in glove with the monarchists and the Black Hundreds, secured the support of the petty-bourgeois Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, partly by intimidating them, and handed over real state power to the Cavaignacs, the military gang, who are shooting insubordinate soldiers at the front and smashing the Bolsheviks in Petrograd.

The slogan calling for the transfer of state power to the Soviets would now sound like Don Quixotism or like ridicule. Objectively, the slogan would signify a deception of the people, it would be fostering in them the illusion that even *now* it is enough for the Soviets to want to take power, or to pass such a decision, for power to be theirs, that there are still parties in the Soviets which have not been tainted by abetting the butchers, that it is possible to undo what has been done.

It would be a profound error to think that the revolutionary proletariat is capable of “refusing” to support the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks against the counterrevolution in order to have “revenge,” so to speak, for the support they gave in smashing the Bolsheviks, in shooting down soldiers at the front and in disarming the workers. To pose the question in this way would, first, be applying philistine conceptions of morality to the proletariat (since, *for the good of the cause*, the proletariat will always support not only the vacillating petty bourgeoisie but even the big bourgeoisie); secondly—and that is main issue—it would be a philistine attempt to obscure the political essence of the situation by “moralizing.”

This essence of the situation is that power can no longer be taken peacefully. It can be obtained only by winning the decisive struggle against those actually holding power at the moment, namely, the military gang, the Cavaignacs, who are relying for support on the reactionary troops brought to Petrograd and on the Cadets and monarchists.

The essence of the situation is that these new holders of state power can be defeated only by the revolutionary masses, who, in order to get moving, must not only be led by the proletariat but must also turn their backs on the parties of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, who have betrayed the cause of the revolution.

Those who introduce philistine morals into politics reason as follows: let us assume that the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks did commit an “error” in supporting the Cavaignacs, who are disarming the proletariat and the revolutionary regiments; still, they must be given a chance to “rectify” their “error”; the rectification of the “error” “should not be made difficult” for them; the swing of the petty bourgeoisie towards the workers should be facilitated. Such reasoning would be childishly naive or simply stupid, if not a new deception of the workers. For the swing of the petty-bourgeois masses towards the workers could only mean that these masses have turned their backs upon the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. The Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties could now rectify their “error” only by denouncing Tsereteli, Chernov, Dan, and Rakitnikov as the butchers’ collaborators. We are wholly and unconditionally in favor of their “error” being “rectified” in this way ...

We said that the fundamental issue of the revolution is the issue of power. We must add that it is revolutions that show us at every step how the question of *where* actual power lies is obscured, and reveal the divergence between formal and real power. Precisely that is one of the chief characteristics of every revolutionary period. In March and April 1917 it was unclear whether real power was in the hands of the government or the Soviet.

Now, however, it is particularly important for class-conscious workers to soberly face the fundamental issue of revolution, namely, who holds

state power at the moment? Consider its material manifestations, do not mistake words for deeds, and you will have no difficulty in finding the answer.

Frederick Engels once wrote that the state is primarily contingents of armed men with material adjuncts such as prisons. [1] Now it is the military cadets and the reactionary Cossacks, who have been specially brought to Petrograd; those who are keeping Kamenev and the others in prison; who closed down *Pravda*; who disarmed the workers and a certain section of the soldiers; who are shooting down an equally definite section of the soldiers; who are shooting down an equally definite section of troops in the army. It is these butchers who are the real power. The Tseretelis and Chernovs are ministers without power, puppet Ministers, leaders of parties that support the butchery. That is a fact. And this fact is no less true because Tsereteli and Chernov themselves probably “do not approve” of the butchery, or because their papers timidly dissociate themselves from it. Such changes of political garb do not change the core of the matter.

The newspaper of 150,000 Petrograd voters has been closed down. The military cadets on July 6 (O.S.) killed the worker Voinov for carrying *Listok “Pravdy”* out of the printers’ shop. Isn’t that butchery? Isn’t that the handiwork of Cavaignacs? But neither the government nor the Soviets are to “blame” for this, we are told.

So much the worse for the government and the Soviets, we reply; for that means that they are mere figureheads, puppets, and that real power is not in their hands.

First and above all, the people must know *the truth*—they must know who actually wields state power. The people must be told the whole truth, namely, that power is in the hands of a military clique of Cavaignacs (Kerensky, certain generals, officers, etc.), who are supported by the bourgeois class headed by the Cadet Party, and by all the monarchists, acting through the Black Hundred papers, *Novoye Vremya*, *Zhivoye Slovo*, etc., etc.

That power must be overthrown. Unless this is done, all talk of fighting the counterrevolution remains empty phrase-mongering, “self-deception and deception of the people.”

That power now has the support both of the Tseretelis and Chernovs in the Cabinet and of their parties. We must explain to the people the butcher’s role they are playing and the fact that such a “finale” for these parties was inevitable after their “errors” of April 21, May 5, June 9 and July 4 and after their approval of the policy of an offensive, a policy which went nine-tenths of the way to predetermining the victory of the Cavaignacs in July.

All agitational work among the people must be reorganized so as to ensure that it takes account of the concrete experience of the present revolution, and especially of the July days, i.e., that it clearly points to the real enemy of the people, the military clique, the Cadets and the Black Hundreds, and that it specifically unmasks the petty-bourgeois parties, the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties, which played and are playing the part of butcher’s accomplices.

All agitational work among the people must be reorganized so as to make clear that it is absolutely hopeless to expect the peasants to obtain land as long as the power of the military clique has not been overthrown, and as long as the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties have not been exposed and deprived of the people’s trust. Under “normal” conditions of capitalist development, this would be a very long and arduous process, but both the war and the economic collapse will tremendously accelerate it. These are “accelerators” which may make a month or even a week equal to a year.

Two objections will probably be advanced against what has been said above: first, that to speak now of a decisive struggle is to encourage sporadic actions, which would only benefit the counterrevolutionaries; second, that their overthrow would still mean transferring power to the

Soviets.

In answer to the first objection, we say: the workers of Russia are already class-conscious enough to not yield to provocation at a moment which is obviously unfavorable to them. It is indisputable that for them to take action and offer resistance right now would mean aiding the counterrevolutionaries. It is also indisputable that a decisive struggle will be possible only in the event of a new revolutionary upsurge in the very depths of the masses. But it is not enough to speak in general terms of a revolutionary upsurge, of the rising tide of revolution, of aid by the Western European workers, and so forth; we must draw a definite conclusion from our own past, we must draw our own lessons. And such a balance sheet brings us precisely to the slogan of a decisive struggle against the counterrevolutionaries, who have seized power.

The second objection also amounts to a substitution of extremely abstract reasoning for concrete realities. Nothing, no force except the revolutionary proletariat, can overthrow the bourgeois counterrevolutionaries. Now, after the experience of July 1917, it is precisely the revolutionary proletariat that must independently take state power into its own hands. Without this a victory of the revolution is *impossible*. The proletariat in power, supported by the poorest layers of the peasantry and semi-proletarians—that is the only solution, and we have already explained which conditions exactly can greatly accelerate this process.

Soviets may, and are even bound to, appear in this new revolution but *not* the present Soviets, not organs of compromise with the bourgeoisie, but rather organs of revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is true that even then we shall be in favor of building the whole state on the model of the Soviets. It is not a question of Soviets in general, but of combating the *present* counterrevolution and the treachery of the *present* Soviets.

The substitution of the abstract for the concrete is one of the greatest and most dangerous sins in a revolution. The present Soviets have collapsed, have suffered complete defeat, because they are dominated by the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. At the moment, these Soviets are like sheep brought to the slaughterhouse and bleating pitifully under the knife. The Soviets *at present* are powerless and helpless against the triumphant and conquering counterrevolution. The slogan calling for the transfer of power to the Soviets might be understood as a “simple” appeal for the transfer of power to no other but the present Soviets, and to say that, to call for it, would now mean deceiving the people. Nothing is more dangerous than deception.

The cycle of development of the struggle of classes and parties in Russia from February 27 to July 4 is complete. A new cycle is beginning, one that involves not the old classes, not the old parties, not the old Soviets, but classes, parties and Soviets rejuvenated in the fire of struggle, tempered, schooled and refashioned by the process of this struggle. We must look forward, not backward. We must operate not with the old, but with the new, post-July, class and party categories. We must, at the beginning of the new cycle, proceed from the triumphant bourgeois counterrevolution, which triumphed because the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks compromised with it, and which can be defeated only by the revolutionary proletariat. Of course, in this new cycle there will be many different stages, both before the complete victory of the counterrevolution and the complete defeat (without a struggle) of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and before a new upsurge of a new revolution. However, of this we can speak only later, when these individual stages are reached ...

Notes:

[1] See Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, in three volumes, vol. 3, Moscow: 1973, p. 327).



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