

From the July Days to the Kornilov coup: Lenin's *The State and Revolution*

Barry Grey
16 October 2017

This lecture was delivered October 14, 2017 by Barry Grey, the US national editor of the World Socialist Web Site.

The focus of this lecture is Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. It was written in the summer of 1917 while Lenin was in hiding, first outside Petrograd and then in Finland. Lenin went underground to escape the bourgeois Provisional Government's repression of the Bolshevik Party in the aftermath of the mass anti-government demonstrations of workers and soldiers in early July.

In late August—with Lenin still underground and Trotsky, Kamenev and other Bolshevik leaders, along with many Bolshevik workers and soldiers, in jail—General Lavr Kornilov attempted a military coup, initially with the connivance of the head of the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky. The counter-mobilization of the armed working class, spearheaded by the Bolsheviks, accelerated a resurgence of support for the Bolsheviks and completely undermined Kerensky and his Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary collaborators.

The question was posed point blank: proletarian socialist revolution or a counterrevolutionary bloodbath that would make the mass murder that followed the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 pale in comparison.

This is what Trotsky says of *The State and Revolution* in his *History of the Russian Revolution*:

During the first months of his underground life Lenin wrote a book, *The State and Revolution*—the principal material for which he had collected abroad during the war. With the same painstaking care that he dedicated to thinking out the practical problems of the day, he here examines the theoretic problems of the state. He cannot do otherwise: for him theory is in actual fact a guide to action. ... His task, he says, is to revive the genuine "teaching of Marxism about the state. ..."

By a mere reestablishment of the class theory of the state on a new and higher historical foundation, Lenin gives to the ideas of Marx a new concreteness and therewith a new significance. But this work on the state derives its immeasurable importance above all from the fact that it constituted the scientific introduction to the greatest revolution in history. This "commentator" of Marx was preparing his party for the revolutionary conquest of a sixth part of the habitable surface of the earth. [1]

Trotsky underscores just how critical Lenin considered his "historical excavation," as Lenin put it, of the writings of Marx and Engels on the proletarian revolution and the state by noting: "In July he writes to Kamenev: 'If they bump me off, I ask you to publish my little notebook *Marxism on the State* [i.e., Lenin's preparatory notes for *The State and Revolution*]." [2]

Lenin was determined to clarify the party and the vanguard of the

working class on the fundamental issues of the socialist revolution. This required an exposition of the teachings of Marx and Engels on the state and a refutation of the falsifications of Marxist theory carried out by the opportunists and centrists, first and foremost their chief theoretician, Karl Kautsky, who glorified bourgeois democracy and sought to turn Marxism into a reformist doctrine. Lenin was acutely aware, moreover, that these petty-bourgeois revisionist tendencies were reflected within the Bolshevik leadership. The defensist and centrist positions that had prevailed under Joseph Stalin and Lev Kamenev prior to Lenin's return to Russia and his battle for his "April Theses" had not disappeared.

The State and Revolution was Lenin's theoretical arming of the party and the working class as a whole for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the transfer of power to the soviets. This is underlined by the subtitle Lenin chose for the work: "The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution."

For Lenin, this was not only a Russian question, as urgent as the tactical and organizational problems confronting the party in Russia were. It was a world question. *The State and Revolution* must be viewed alongside his other great theoretical work composed in the heat of war and revolution: *Imperialism*.

Lenin saw two interrelated events—the eruption of world war and the collapse of the Second International—as the beginning of a new epoch in world history: the epoch of imperialism—the highest stage of capitalism, the epoch of wars and revolutions. His fundamental perspective toward the war from its outset was that it signified a crisis of the capitalist system that would spark a revolutionary struggle of the working class internationally. And the betrayal of the Second International, whose principal leaders supported the war, meant that the struggle against imperialism could be mounted only in implacable struggle against the Second International and, on that basis, the founding of a new, Communist International.

In Russia, the connection between the struggle against petty-bourgeois democracy, led by the Mensheviks, and the struggle against the imperialist war took a very concrete form. On the basis of a glorification of bourgeois democracy and parliamentarism, the Mensheviks demanded that the soviets and the working class support the war as a "revolutionary war for democracy" against German militarism and Prussian autocracy. On the same basis, they handed the power given to the soviets by the working class revolution that overthrew the tsar in February back to the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie, led by the Cadet Party, and the allies of the bourgeoisie in the monarchist state bureaucracy and military.

Now, in the face of open counterrevolution, the Mensheviks directed their fire not against the bourgeoisie and the Black Hundreds, but against the Bolsheviks, i.e., against the working class.

In the most fundamental sense, the struggle embodied in *The State and Revolution* was animated by the need to formulate the basic program of the world socialist revolution, of which the Russian Revolution was an integral part, and of the new International that had to be constructed to

lead it.

In the preface to the first edition of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin begins by stressing the urgent, practical relevance of the issues he will examine in the course of the work. He then immediately places the Russian revolution within its world historic context and draws the connection between imperialism and the question of the state. He stresses that with the advent of imperialism, the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state—the standing army, the police, the state bureaucracy—assumes monstrous proportions. Bourgeois democracy becomes little more than a fig leaf for militarism and state violence. Any notions of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism stemming from the earlier period of capitalist free competition are rendered hopelessly obsolete.

These tendencies are magnified by the imperialist war, which further integrates the great industrial and financial trusts with the state machine, turning monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism.

In his polemic *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, published in October 1916, Lenin described the putrefaction of imperialist bourgeois democracy as follows:

The difference between the democratic-republican and the reactionary-monarchist imperialist bourgeoisie is obliterated precisely because they are both rotting alive. ... Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism. [3]

In the beginning of his Preface to *The State and Revolution*, Lenin writes:

The question of the state is acquiring at the present a particular importance, both as theory, and from the point of view of practical politics. The imperialist war has greatly accelerated and intensified the transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism. The monstrous oppression of the laboring masses by the state—which connects itself more and more intimately with the all-powerful capitalist combines—is becoming ever more monstrous. The foremost countries are being converted—we speak here of their “rear”—into military convict labor prisons for the workers. ...

The struggle for the emancipation of the laboring masses from the influence of the bourgeoisie in general, and the imperialist bourgeoisie in particular, is impossible without a struggle against the opportunist superstitions concerning the “state.”

... The revolution is evidently completing at the present time (beginning of August 1917) the first stage of its development; but, generally speaking, this revolution can be understood in its totality only as a link in the chain of Socialist proletarian revolutions called forth by the imperialist war. The question of the relation of a proletarian Socialist revolution to the state acquires, therefore, not only a practical political importance, but the importance of an urgent problem of the day, the problem of elucidating to the masses what they will have to do for their liberation from the yoke of capitalism in the very near future. [4]

From the April Crisis to the Kornilov Coup

Let us turn now to an examination of the political context in Russia of

The State and Revolution.

The bourgeois Provisional Government, which depended on the support of the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leaders of the soviets, faced its first major political crisis in April, with the publication of Cadet leader and Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov’s letter pledging the government to the imperialist war aims of the deposed tsar and to war until victory. The appearance of the letter sparked a mass armed demonstration of soldiers and workers in Petrograd demanding the resignation of Miliukov. This was the “April Crisis.”

With Miliukov gone and the government hanging by a thread, the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries agreed to enter the government and form a coalition regime. This severely discredited them in the eyes of the increasingly militant workers and soldiers. At the end of April, the Bolsheviks adopted Lenin’s revolutionary line of opposition to the war and to the Provisional Government and for a struggle for workers’ power, centered on the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” Support for the Bolsheviks within the working class and among soldiers began to grow rapidly.

Trotsky writes in his *History* that at the end of April, the Bolshevik’s Petrograd organization had 15,000 members. By the end of June, it had over 82,000. Alexander Rabinowitch in *Prelude to Revolution* presents somewhat lower but nevertheless impressive figures. He writes that the Petrograd party membership went from 2,000 in February to 32,000 by the beginning of July.

Any objective account of the Russian Revolution, from the February overthrow to the October insurrection, refutes the claims, so prominent in the media and academia today on the centenary of these events, that the October Revolution was a putsch carried out by conspirators above the heads and behind the backs of the workers. One of the immense strengths of Trotsky’s *History* is its rich and detailed description of the vast changes in consciousness of the masses and their independent revolutionary initiative in the complex and contradictory course of the revolution, and the relationship between this mass movement and the critical political intervention of the Bolshevik Party and its leadership, above all Lenin.

In his chapter titled “Shifts in the Masses,” Trotsky writes:

The growth of strikes, and of the class struggle in general, almost automatically raised the influence of the Bolsheviks. ... This is explained by the fact that the factory and shop committees, waging a struggle for the life of their factories against the sabotage of the administration and the proprietors, went over to the Bolsheviks much sooner than the Soviet. At a conference of the factory and shop committees of Petrograd and its environs at the beginning of June, the Bolshevik resolution won 335 out of 421 votes. ...

All the by-elections to the soviets showed a victory for the Bolsheviks. By the 1st of June in the Moscow Soviet there were already 206 Bolsheviks against 176 Mensheviks and 110 Socialist Revolutionaries. The same shifts occurred in the provinces, only more slowly. ... [5]

By June, the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leadership of the Petrograd Soviet was completely dominated by fear of a workers’ uprising led by the Bolsheviks. The first All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies met in Petrograd from June 3 to June 24. [Throughout this lecture, the Julian Calendar, i.e., the old-style calendar used in Russia at the time of the Revolution, which is 13 days behind the modern calendar, will be used.] The social-chauvinist Soviet leadership intended the Congress to rubber-stamp its support for the war and the bourgeois Coalition Government, now for all practical purposes headed by Kerensky.

Irakli Tsereteli, the leader of the Mensheviks, and Viktor Chernov, the leader of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, hoped that the announcement of a new military offensive—which was, in fact, launched by Kerensky during the Congress, on June 18—would spark a new wave of patriotism and derail the growth of social unrest and political support for the Bolsheviks.

The Congress voted to back the Coalition Government and tacitly endorsed the new military offensive. But when the leadership got wind of the Bolsheviks' intention to stage a mass demonstration on June 10 of workers and soldiers—unarmed—in opposition to the war and under the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” it secured a vote condemning the action and proscribing all slogans not approved by the Soviet leaders. The Bolsheviks were forced to make a tactical retreat and call off the demonstration.

Tsereteli, a leading member of the Soviet Executive Committee and also a minister in the Coalition Government, gave a speech on June 11 to the Soviet Congress calling for the virtual illegalization of the Bolsheviks. He said:

What occurred was nothing other than a conspiracy, a conspiracy to overthrow the government and to seize power by the Bolsheviks, who know they will never come to power any other way. ... Let the Bolsheviks accuse us—we now move to different methods of warfare. We must take the weapons away from those who do not know how to handle them with dignity. The Bolsheviks must be disarmed. [6]

The Soviet Congress did not back Tsereteli's proposal. It did, however, approve an official demonstration for June 18. The Bolsheviks participated in that demonstration, and to the horror of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, Bolshevik banners and slogans dominated the mass action.

The stage was set for the “July Days.” Lenin and Trotsky were acutely aware of the danger of an isolated uprising in the capital, under conditions where there was not yet mass support in the provinces and among the peasantry for a new revolution. The tragic fate of the Paris Commune, in which Adolphe Thiers and the French bourgeoisie were able to count on the support of the peasantry and isolation of the Paris workers to carry out their bloodbath, a pattern that was to some extent repeated in the defeat of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, was very much on their minds.

Support for the Bolsheviks grew in response to lack of food, high prices, the ongoing slaughter at the front and the failure of the government to enact any significant reforms. On the evening of July 3, the day before the quasi-insurrection of July 4, the Bolsheviks for first time won a majority in the workers' section of the Petrograd Soviet.

Lenin warned repeatedly of the danger of provocations organized by the counterrevolutionary right to induce an armed response, which would serve as a pretext for a massive crackdown. But the anger of militant sections of soldiers and sailors, including those under the influence of the Bolsheviks, could not be contained. The Bolsheviks publicly advised against the July 4 armed action by soldiers and workers in Petrograd, but could not prevent it. Even the party's own Military Organization played a major role in organizing the action.

Under these conditions, the party decided to support the action and seek to restrict it to a peaceful demonstration and limit the political damage that would likely result.

The government, with the support of the soviet leaders, was able to marshal loyal troops to enter Petrograd and suppress the revolt. The defeat of the action was immediately seized on as the occasion to mount an attack on the Bolsheviks, aimed at eliminating them as a serious threat.

Within hours, the newspapers were inundating the population with the German Gold libel—the lie that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were on the payroll of the German General Staff.

Pravda's offices were raided and the presses smashed. Other Bolshevik papers were closed down. Hundreds of Bolsheviks among the Kronstadt sailors and Petrograd garrison troops as well as among the workers were rounded up and jailed. Arrest warrants were issued for Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev and other Bolshevik leaders. Support for the Bolsheviks fell in the army and declined as well among sections of the working class.

The post-July Days crackdown was the beginning of a counterrevolutionary offensive organized by the Coalition Government. It immediately decreed the reinstatement of capital punishment at the front. Military commanders were authorized on their own initiative to fire on Russian units fleeing the field of battle. Bolshevik newspapers were banned from all theaters of military operations and political meetings among the troops were banned.

On July 18, Kerensky appointed Kornilov as commander in chief of the army. Kornilov was known to have links to the Black Hundreds and had earlier resigned his command of the Petrograd garrison in protest over Soviet “interference” in military affairs.

Rabinowitch writes in *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* that by early August, the Coalition Government cabinet was considering proposals to militarize the railroads, the coal mines and all factories engaged in defense work. In these enterprises, strikes, lockouts, political meetings and assemblies of any kind were to be prohibited for the duration. Workers would be assigned minimum mandatory work quotas. Those who failed to meet their quotas would be summarily dismissed and dispatched to the front.

In a conversation with his chief of staff, General Lukomsky, on August 11, Kornilov said it was “high time to hang the German agents and spies headed by Lenin” and to “disperse the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers in such a way that it would not reassemble anywhere.” Commenting to Lukomsky on the newly appointed commander of the troops concentrated around Petrograd, General Krymov, Kornilov expressed pleasure that Krymov would not hesitate, if necessary, “to hang the entire Soviet membership.” [7]

The Coalition Government staged the Moscow State Conference in mid-August in an effort to intimidate growing anti-war sentiment and bring forward the counterrevolutionary right as a counterweight to a resurgent Bolshevik-led opposition. By this point, Kerensky was plotting with Kornilov to carry out a military crackdown and impose a dictatorial government. The conference hailed Kornilov as a conquering hero and Cadet and monarchist delegates denounced the soviets.

The Bolsheviks not only boycotted the conference, they called a general strike of Moscow workers that shut down the city during the entire time the conference was in session.

The impact of the July Days repression and German Gold slander dissipated within a few weeks. The Coalition Government's hold on power continued to erode. At the same time that it was smashing up the offices of *Pravda* and hunting down Bolsheviks, it was dealt a staggering blow by the collapse of Kerensky's military offensive. On July 6, the Germans launched their counterattack, quickly reconquering Tarnopol on Russia's southwestern front.

This is how Rabinowitch characterizes the political situation in the second half of July and first weeks of August:

Each day brought fresh reports of expanding anarchy and violence among land-hungry peasants in the countryside; disorders in the cities; the increasing militancy of factory workers; the government's inability to resist movements toward complete

autonomy on the part of the Finns and Ukrainians; the continuing radicalization of soldiers at the front and rear; catastrophic breakdowns in the production and distribution of essential supplies; skyrocketing prices; and the resurgence and expanding influence of the Bolsheviks, who, alone among the major political groups, appeared to profit from these difficulties and who, after the Sixth Congress, appeared to be waiting impatiently for an early opportunity to organize an armed insurrection. [8]

By early August, the Bolsheviks had entered a new period of growth. On the last day of August, following the defeat of Kornilov's coup, the Bolsheviks won a majority in the Petrograd Soviet for the first time.

Immediately following the July Days, Lenin launched a struggle in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party for a sharp change in course. There is a clear connection between this important point in the preparation for the October Revolution and the issues raised by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*.

In a meeting July 6 with leading members of the Central Committee, Lenin stressed that the July Days signified the end of the relatively peaceful stage of the revolution. Power had been consolidated in the hands of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie and the military, and the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries had irrevocably committed themselves to an alliance with these forces. Any notion of a peaceful transfer of power to the working class had to be abandoned. Lenin urged that the slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" be replaced with "All Power to the Working Class Led by the Revolutionary Party—the Bolshevik-Communists!" He stressed that the party had to focus on preparing for an armed insurrection, to be carried out as soon as the political conditions were propitious.

On July 10, Lenin wrote an article ("The Political Situation") laying out this new line, which was published August 2. It stated, in part:

The slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" was a slogan for peaceful development of the revolution... This slogan is no longer correct, for it does not take into account that power has changed hands and that the revolution has in fact been completely betrayed by the SRs and Mensheviks. What will help is a clear understanding of the situation, endurance and determination of the workers' vanguard, preparation of forces for the armed uprising... Let us have no constitutional or republican illusions of any kind, no more illusions about a peaceful path... Let us gather forces, reorganize them, and resolutely prepare for the armed uprising, if the course of the crisis permits it on a really mass, country-wide scale... The aim of the insurrection can only be to transfer power to the proletariat, supported by the poor peasants, with a view to putting our Party program into effect. [9]

Rabinowitch reports that Lenin at this time spoke of concentrating preparations for the insurrection on the factory shop committees, rather than the soviets.

At a Central Committee meeting held July 13-14, while Lenin was in hiding, Lenin's theses calling for the dropping of the slogan "All power to the Soviets!" and beginning preparations for the insurrection were voted down. It was only with some difficulty that Lenin convinced the Sixth All-Russian Congress of the party, which ran from July 26 to August 3, to agree to put aside the slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" and adopt the slogan "Complete Liquidation of the Dictatorship of the Counterrevolutionary Bourgeoisie!"

Following the defeat of Kornilov at the end of August and the

Bolsheviks' capture of a majority of the Petrograd Soviet soon after, the Bolsheviks revived the slogan "All Power to the Soviets!" However, Lenin soon launched a determined campaign within the party leadership to concentrate all efforts on the preparation of an early armed insurrection.

This episode brings to the fore the most decisive lesson of the October Revolution—the colossal and indispensable role of the revolutionary party of the working class in the socialist revolution. Lenin fully recognized the world-historical significance of the soviets not only for the Russian, but for the world socialist revolution. These were the revolutionary organs through which the masses could mobilize to overthrow the bourgeoisie, smash the capitalist state and replace it with a truly democratic workers' state.

But Lenin did not idealize the soviets. He was prepared, if the revolution required, to break with the conciliationist-dominated soviets and develop new organs of struggle, such as the factory committees, as the main organs of the revolution. The soviets were able, as it transpired, to carry through their revolutionary tasks due to the leadership provided by the Bolsheviks and the party's relentless exposure of the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary agents of the bourgeoisie. This was decisive in clarifying and preparing the working class vanguard for the taking and holding of power.

Without the struggle of the Bolshevik Party—and of Lenin, backed by Trotsky, against the right wing within the party—the soviets would not have overcome the political pressure of the bourgeoisie transmitted by the Mensheviks and SRs, and would have been smashed.

Kerensky, who had plotted with Kornilov for a military crackdown against the soviets, broke with the general only after he was tipped off on the eve of the August 27 coup attempt that Kornilov intended to dispense with him as well. The Petrograd Soviet leaders, for their part, fearing that their heads would be on the chopping block should Kornilov succeed, officially launched a campaign to arm the workers and mobilize them to smash the coup. In this, the Bolsheviks played the leading role.

But the Petrograd workers and soldiers themselves, having been educated by the political struggle of the Bolsheviks against the Provisional Government and the compromisers in the Soviet leadership, took enormous initiative in organizing Red Guards and persuading key detachments of troops mobilized by Kornilov to abandon the general. The coup collapsed before any troops from the front could enter the capital.

As he was completing *The State and Revolution* in the aftermath of the Kornilov affair, Lenin wrote an article, "One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution" (written September 7 or 8 and published September 14), which expressed the direct connection between his theoretical work and the practical tasks at hand. He wrote:

The question of state power cannot be evaded or brushed aside because it is the key question determining *everything* in a revolution's development. ...

The slogan "Power to the Soviets," however, is very often, if not in most cases, taken quite incorrectly to mean a "Cabinet of the parties of the Soviet majority..." [Not so.] "Power to the Soviets" means radically reshaping the entire old state apparatus, that bureaucratic apparatus which hampers everything democratic. It means removing this apparatus and substituting for it a new popular one, i.e., a truly democratic apparatus of Soviets, i.e., the organized and armed majority of the people—the workers, soldiers and peasants. It means allowing the majority of the people initiative and independence not only in the election of deputies, but also in state administration, in effecting reforms and various other changes. [10]

The Working Class, Socialist Revolution and the State

Let us now turn to the substance of Lenin's *The State and Revolution*.

The basic teachings of Marx and Engels on the state and the tasks of the proletarian revolution in relation to the state can be summed up as follows:

- * The role of all states as instruments of a ruling class for the suppression of exploited classes;

- * The need for the working class to overthrow and smash up the capitalist state machine and establish in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e., a workers' democracy);

- * The requirement for the working class to use force to carry out this task;

- * The role of the proletarian dictatorship in crushing the resistance of the deposed ruling class and laying the basis for the transition from socialist construction to communism, in which class distinctions have disappeared and the principle "from each according to his work" is superseded by the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs;"

- * The withering away of the state itself under communism.

These conceptions were very much in contention within the socialist movement when Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution*.

They had been under systematic attack from opportunist and centrist elements for decades, most overtly beginning with the publication of Eduard Bernstein's revisionist manifesto, *The Preconditions of Socialism* in 1899. Bernstein openly rejected the Marxist conception of revolution and argued that the working class could achieve socialism by way of gradual social reforms achieved through parliament. He attacked Marx's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as an embrace of the methods of conspiracy and putsch advocated by Louis Blanqui.

But confusion on the question of the state marked the very founding of the German Social Democratic Party in 1875. Marx, in his famous *Critique of the Gotha Program*, the founding program of the party, excoriated its call for a "people's free state." Not only did this slogan leave undefined the class nature of the state to be established by the revolution, behind the vague term "people's," it suggested that the new state would be "free" of all class influence—an impossibility for any state.

As Lenin points out in *The State and Revolution*, despite the formal acknowledgement by the German SPD leadership of the correctness of Marx's criticisms, in 1886 party leader August Bebel republished without any changes his 1872 pamphlet titled *Our Aims*, which included the following: "And so the state must be transformed from one based on class rule into a people's state."

As noted above, distortions of the Marxist conception of the state were employed by the Mensheviks in order to justify their support for the war and for the bourgeois Provisional Government and to oppose the utilization of the soviets to overthrow the capitalist state and establish a workers' state.

Lenin devotes the first chapter of *The State and Revolution* to a positive exposition, through extensive quotations from Engels, of the basic conception of the state derived through the application by Marx and Engels of historical materialism to the study of the evolution of human civilization.

Lenin quotes from Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and his Preface to the third edition (1894) of *Anti-Dühring*. Here it is possible only to present in summary form the main conceptions contained in this chapter.

First: The state has not existed from eternity. There were primitive societies that knew nothing of a state power existing above the people.

The state came into being when society became divided into irreconcilably antagonistic social classes. A special public power became necessary because, in Engels' words, "a self-acting armed organization of the population has become impossible since the split into classes." In order to prevent class conflict from devouring society, "it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, which would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order.'"

Lenin then argues against two types of distortion and falsification of this conception of the state. There is the more crude type, advanced by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologists, which claims that the state is an organ for reconciling the classes. Lenin quotes Engels to the contrary, and adds, "According to Marx, the state is an organ of class domination, an organ of oppression of one class by another; its aim is the creation of 'order' which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the collisions between the classes."

Then there is the more subtle and insidious "Kautskyist" distortion of Marx and Engels. It acknowledges that the state is an organ of class domination, but "forgets" or "glosses over" the conclusion that arises logically from this fact, and which Marx and Engels themselves drew explicitly from their analysis of the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871: namely, that (in Lenin's words) "the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power, which was created by the ruling class..." [11]

Second: As a machine for the suppression of the exploited class by the ruling class, every state establishes what Engels calls a "public power," which consists essentially "not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds, of which gentile [clan] society knew nothing." A standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power.

This is no less the case under capitalism, including in a bourgeois democratic republic with a parliament, a "free press," etc., than in all previous stages of class society. Lenin explains, "Not only the ancient and feudal states were organs of exploitation of the slaves and serfs, but [quoting Engels] 'the modern representative state is the instrument of the exploitation of wage-labour by capital...'"

Indeed, Lenin writes: "A democratic republic is the best possible political shell of capitalism... We must also note that Engels quite definitely regards universal suffrage as a means of bourgeois domination. Universal suffrage, he says... is an 'index of the maturity of the working class; it cannot, and never will, be anything else but that in the modern state.'" [12]

Third : To put an end to capitalism and begin the construction of socialism and the abolition of all class exploitation, the working class overthrows and smashes up the capitalist state and establishes a workers' state. This is the first state in history that is the instrument of the majority against a minority. It is the state of the armed working class, based on the laboring masses' democratic, self-acting organs of power, such as the soviets in Russia. It establishes genuine democracy for the masses, as opposed to the cruel charade of democracy under capitalism, which is democracy for the rich and repression for the poor.

Unlike previous states in history, this state ushers in the transition to a classless society, and therefore the end of the state, for which there is no longer any social need. Lenin quotes from Engels' preface to the third edition of *Anti-Dühring* (1894), in which Engels writes:

The first act by which the state really comes forward as the representative of the whole of society—the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society—is, at the same time, its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and

then dies down of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not 'abolished.' *It withers away.* [13]

Lenin attacks the distortion prevalent in what he calls "modern Socialist parties" which cites this and similar passages from Marx and Engels to attack the anarchists not from the standpoint of the working class, from the left, but from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie and its state, i.e., from the right. They counter the demand of the anarchists for the immediate abolition of the state by declaring, citing Marx and Engels as their authority, that the state is not abolished, it simply withers away.

"As a matter of fact," Lenin writes, "Engels speaks here of the destruction of the bourgeois state by the proletarian revolution, while the words about its withering away refer to the remains of *proletarian* statehood *after* the Socialist revolution. The bourgeois state does not 'wither away,' according to Engels, but is 'put an end to' by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after the revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state." [14]

Lenin devotes a substantial portion of *The State and Revolution* to a careful review of the writings of Marx and Engels on the state from the standpoint of the evolution and concretization of their conceptions from the *Communist Manifesto* of 1847 to their writings on the revolutionary struggles in France between 1848 and 1851 (*The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*) and their writings on the Paris Commune (*The Civil War in France*) and subsequent commentaries.

He stresses that Marx extracted from an analysis of these strategic revolutionary experiences of the working class political lessons that deepened his understanding of the struggle of the working class for state power and the nature of the state it would establish. Lenin explicitly raises the question of the scientific, materialist, historical and methodological approach that guided the evolving conceptions of Marx and Engels on the state. Discussing the development of Marx's writings on the state following the French revolution of 1848, he notes:

True to his philosophy of dialectical materialism, Marx takes as his basis the experience of the great revolutionary years 1848-1851. Here, as everywhere, his teaching is the *summing up of experience*, illuminated by a profound philosophical world-conception and a rich knowledge of history. [15]

In his review of Marx's writings on the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*, Lenin comments:

Without resorting to Utopias, Marx waited for the *experience* of a mass movement to produce the answer to the problem as to the exact forms which this organization of the proletariat as the ruling class will assume and as to the exact manner in which this organization will be combined with the most complete, most consistent "establishment of democracy." [16]

This rigorous, scientific approach, treating the socialist revolution as an objective historical process whose laws could be discovered and applied to the revolutionary strategy and tactics of the working class, is exemplified by *The State and Revolution*. This was how Lenin, in hiding and facing the alternative of revolution or counterrevolution, approached the question of the struggle for soviet power.

It is worth recalling in this context Reason Seven in the opening lecture in this series, given by David North and titled "Why Study the Russian Revolution?"

The Russian Revolution demands serious study as a critical episode in the development of scientific social thought. The historical achievement of the Bolsheviks in 1917 both demonstrated and actualized the essential relationship between scientific materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice. [17]

Lenin begins his review of the writings of Marx and Engels in relation to the 1848 and 1871 revolutions by quoting from the *Communist Manifesto*, written on the eve of the European revolutions of 1848. It speaks of the "violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie" laying "the foundation for the sway of the proletariat," and characterizes the resulting state as "the proletariat organized as the ruling class."

From the 1848 rising of the Parisian working class and its bloody suppression by the republican bourgeoisie, followed by the December 1851 coup of Louis Napoleon, Marx drew far-reaching conclusions. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he wrote: "All revolutions brought this [state] machine to greater perfection instead of breaking it up," implying that the working class would have to "break up" the bourgeois state.

Referring to this sentence, Marx wrote a letter to Louis Kugelmann in April of 1871, during the life of the Commune, in which he said:

If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will see that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution must be: not, as in the past, to transfer the bureaucratic and military machinery from one hand to the other, but to *break it up*; and that is the precondition of any real people's revolution on the Continent. And that is what our heroic party comrades in Paris have attempted. [18]

The Paris Commune and its bloody suppression strengthened Marx's conviction that the proletarian revolution would have to smash up the old bourgeois state, including the corrupt structures of bourgeois parliamentarism, and put in its place a revolutionary proletarian democracy of an entirely different character, both to suppress the bourgeois counterrevolution and to create the conditions for the transition to full socialism and communism.

Marx first used the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" in a letter to Joseph Weydemeyer dated March 5, 1852, in which he wrote:

What was new on my part, was to prove the following: (1) that the existence of classes is connected only with certain historical struggles which arise out of the development of production; (2) that class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship is itself only a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society. [19]

On the term "dictatorship of the proletariat," Lenin cites Engel's preface to the third edition of *The Civil War in France*, dated 1891:

In reality, however, the state is nothing more than a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the

democratic republic no less than in the monarchy. ...

Of late, the German philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what the dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. [20]

As Lenin points out, in *The Civil War in France* Marx stressed the fundamental difference and opposition between bourgeois democracy and bourgeois parliamentarism and the state which the Communards set about to construct. "The first decree of the Commune ... was the suppression of the standing army and the substitution for it of the armed people," said Marx. The police were turned into "responsible and at all times revocable" agents of the Commune.

The other elements highlighted by Marx were universal suffrage, the fact that all elected representatives were subject to recall at any time, all government officials received pay no higher than the average worker's, magistrates and judges were elective, responsible and revocable. The Commune, moreover, was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.

Lenin comments:

Here is shown, more clearly than anywhere else, the *break* from a bourgeois democracy to a proletarian democracy, from the democracy of the oppressors to the democracy of the oppressed classes, from the state as a "special force for suppression" of a given class to the suppression of the oppressors by the *whole force* of the majority of the people—the workers and the peasants. And it is precisely on this most striking point, perhaps the most important as far as the problem of the state is concerned, that the teachings of Marx have been entirely forgotten! [21]

The final chapter of *The State and Revolution* develops the polemic against the opportunist evisceration of Marxism in relation to the state and its glorification of bourgeois democracy and parliamentarism. Lenin focuses his assault on Kautsky.

He begins with Kautsky's reply to Bernstein's revisionist manifesto *The Preconditions of Socialism*, noting that Kautsky evaded the fact that Marx insisted as early as 1852 that the task of the proletarian revolution was not to lay hold of the existing state machinery, but rather to "break it up." Quoting Kautsky, Lenin writes:

"The solution of the problem of the proletarian dictatorship," wrote Kautsky, *in opposition* to Bernstein, "we can safely leave to the future." This is not a polemic *against* Bernstein, but really a *concession* to him, a surrender to opportunism... [22]

In regard to Kautsky's 1902 book *The Social Revolution*, Lenin focuses on Kautsky's blurring over of the fundamental differences between the forms of rule of a future workers' state and those of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

Lenin concludes with a critique of Kautsky's reply to a criticism of his [Kautsky's] positions by the Dutch socialist Anton Pannekoek. The latter published an article in *Neue Zeit* in 1912 titled "Mass Action and Revolution" in which he criticized Kautsky for "passive radicalism." Pannekoek at the time was a social democrat identified with left critics of opportunism including Rosa Luxemburg. In the 1920s he adopted ultra-

left positions and later embraced the anti-Soviet positions of state capitalism.

In his 1912 polemic, Pannekoek wrote, according to Lenin, that the task of the proletarian revolution was to destroy "the instruments of state power" and "the organization of the ruling minority."

In reply, Kautsky accused Pannekoek of going over to anarchism, writing: "Up till now, the difference between Social Democrats and Anarchists has consisted in this: the former wished to conquer the state power while the latter wished to destroy it. Pannekoek wants to do both."

Lenin writes: "His [Kautsky's] definition of the difference between Social Democrats and Anarchists is absolutely wrong and Marxism is thoroughly vulgarized and distorted."

The suggestion that Marxism opposes the smashing of the existing state is completely false, as Lenin's review of the writings of Marx and Engels comprehensively demonstrates. The difference is that the anarchists oppose the establishment by the working class of a new, proletarian state, without which the working class would be incapable of defending itself against the murderous repression of the bourgeoisie.

Engels provides a devastating response to the anarchists' rejection of all forms of authority in a passage from an 1873 essay titled "On Authority" that is cited by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*:

But the anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is an act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon, all of which are highly authoritarian means. And the victorious party must maintain its rule *by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries*. Would the Paris Commune have lasted *more than a day* if it had not used the *authority of the armed people against the bourgeoisie*? Cannot we, *on the contrary, blame it for having made too little use of that authority*? Therefore, one of two things: either the anti-authoritarians don't know what they are talking about, in which case they are creating nothing but confusion; or they do know, and in that case they are betraying the cause of the proletariat. In either case they serve only the reaction. [23]

Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*, sums up the differences between Marxism and anarchism as follows:

The difference between the Marxists and Anarchists consists in this: (1) the former, while aiming at the complete destruction of the state, recognizes that this aim can be realized only after the abolition of classes by a Socialist revolution, as the result of the establishment of Socialism, leading to the withering away of the state; the latter want the complete destruction of the state within 24 hours, not understanding the conditions under which such destruction can be carried out; (2) the former recognize that when once the proletariat was won political power it must utterly break up the old state machinery, and substitute for it a new one consisting of an organization of armed workers, after the type of the Commune; the latter, while advocating the destruction of the state machinery, have absolutely no clear idea as to *what* the proletariat will put in its place and *how* it will use its revolutionary power; the Anarchists even reject the utilization by the

revolutionary proletariat of state power, the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) the former insist upon making use of the modern state as a means of preparing the workers for revolution; the latter reject this. [24]

The crass and debased falsification of Marxism and promotion in its name of illusions in bourgeois democracy is summed up in a passage from Kautsky's reply to Pannekoek cited by Lenin:

The object of a general strike can never be to destroy the state, but only to wring concessions from the government on some particular question, or to replace a hostile government with one willing to meet the proletariat half way... But never, under any conditions, can it (a proletarian victory over a hostile government) lead to the *destruction* of the state power; it can lead only to a certain *shifting* of forces *within the state power* ... The aim of our political struggle, then, remains as before, the conquest of state power by means of gaining a majority in parliament, and the conversion of parliament into the master of the government. [25]

* * *

In his review *The Civil War in France*, Lenin writes of Marx's response to the Paris Commune:

Marx, however, was not only enthusiastic about the heroism of the Communards who "stormed the heavens," as he expressed himself. He saw in the mass revolutionary movement, although it did not attain its aim, an historic experiment of gigantic importance, a certain advance of the world proletarian revolution, a practical step more important than hundreds of programs and discussions. To analyze this experiment, to draw from it lessons in tactics, to reexamine his theory in the new light it afforded—such was the problem as it presented itself to Marx. [26]

Such was Marx's approach to the Paris Commune, Lenin's approach to the theoretical legacy of Marxism, and our approach today to the October Revolution. And just as for Marx and Lenin, an analysis and assimilation of the lessons of these great struggles and the sorting out of the theoretical and historical issues they raised were conceived of and carried out in the closest relation to contemporary political developments, so too today in our commemoration of the Russian Revolution.

The various petty-bourgeois organizations that masquerade as "left" or even "socialist," while, in fact, aligning themselves with imperialism and the capitalist state are either indifferent or overtly hostile to the October Revolution because they are hostile to the working class and opposed to its overthrow of capitalism today.

But the "Lessons of October" have immense relevance for the tasks posed to the working class by the unprecedented crisis of world capitalism today and the emergence of a new period of revolutionary struggle. The October Revolution remains intensely relevant to political events in our time.

The tendencies identified by Lenin in *Imperialism* and in *The State and Revolution*—the ever closer integration of the imperialist state and the gigantic financial and corporate monopolies (think of Google, Amazon, Apple and the CIA and Pentagon) in the form of state-monopoly capitalism; the monstrous growth of the repressive apparatus of the state and putrefaction of democratic forms (the military crackdown in

Catalonia, applauded by all of the imperialist governments and the "human rights" imperialists of the *New York Times*, rule by emergency decree in France, the entry of neo-fascists into the German parliament, a government of generals and Wall Street billionaires in the US) are far more advanced than in Lenin's day. The world war toward which imperialism is once again lurching threatens a nuclear holocaust and destruction of civilization.

With its commemoration of the centenary of the Russian Revolution, including these lectures, the International Committee of the Fourth International is following in the path of Lenin and Trotsky: clarifying, educating and politically arming the working class for the emerging world socialist revolution.

* * *

Notes:

- [1] Trotsky *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago: 2008), p. 709.
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 710.
- [3] Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 23 (Moscow: 1977), p. 106.
- [4] Lenin *State and Revolution* (International Publishers, New York: 1988), pp. 5-6.
- [5] Trotsky *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago: 2008), pp. 304-305.
- [6] Alexander Rabinowitch *Prelude to Revolution*, (Indiana University Press: 1991), pp. 82-83.
- [7] Rabinowitch *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (Chicago and Ann Arbor: 2004), p. 109.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- [9] Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 25 (Moscow: 1964), pp. 177-78.
- [10] *Ibid.*, pp. 366, 368.
- [11] Lenin *State and Revolution* (International Publishers, New York: 1988), p. 9.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- [17] North, et al. *Why Study the Russian Revolution?* Volume 1 (Oak Park, Michigan: 2017) p. 19.
- [18] Lenin *State and Revolution* (International Publishers, New York: 1988), p. 33.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- [20] Lenin *Marxism on the State* (Moscow: 1972), pp. 56-57.
- [21] Lenin *State and Revolution* (International Publishers, New York: 1988), p. 38.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- [23] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- [24] *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 32.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)