



Organizational Question

It's 1918. The leaders of the new Russian communist state have been bitterly divided as to a policy regarding German armies advancing eastward. Lenin and Trotsky represent the two sides. Lenin demands a deal with Germany in order to buy time to organize a functioning social system based on the principles of Marx. Trotsky argues that, given their current weakness, any agreement with Germany will be viewed as a surrender and deal a major blow to the prospects of the revolution overthrowing other capitalist dictatorships, especially in Germany. Only that and not a worthless promise can truly safeguard the revolution and make possible its rapid advancement to an optimal fully developed communist society.

In a close vote Trotsky loses and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is signed in March. Germany never for a moment abides by the terms it had promised to uphold and not only continues but broadens its drive eastward. The Left Socialist-Revolutionaries break with the Bolsheviks and severely injure Lenin in an assassination attempt. The allies, now under the cover of an ally having joined the enemy, invade Russia with a dozen armies to destroy the communist threat.

After an horrendous civil war in which infrastructure and industry, the material basis of a functioning nation, has been largely destroyed it must be rebuilt by a proletariat struggling with daily survival. Building communism is cast aside for getting the nation back on its feet by whatever means. Meanwhile, the conditions for advancing the revolution westward had peaked and are in decline. What happened in Russia between the revolutionary years of 1917 to 1923 had become for the outside world more of a frightful object lesson rather than inspiration for the replication of new *Octobers*.

The question is: How could so few be in such a politically strong position that they essentially control whether a revolution will succeed or fail? The answer: Because of the terms under which the party was organized.

Will it be possible for this revolution [communism] to take place in one country alone? That was one of the questions Engels answered in his pamphlet Principles of Communism written in October-November 1847. No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth. . . into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.

Marx expressed great concern about scarcity hindering or reversing the prospects for a successful communist revolution. Scarcity in this sense means lack of access to otherwise available resources sufficient to create an advanced egalitarian society. Sufficient access is the entire world. A successful local communist revolution will fail, or as Marx expressed it, *the old shit [class formation] will return*, depending on the extent to which an optimal (full access) condition is unavailable. The historical process may be described as humanity's continuous optimizing of its existential condition.

Marx and Engels knew a revolution must rapidly spread from its center to (in their time initially Europe) every corner of the Earth. Trotsky and Luxemburg knew the same, as did Lenin except that an idealist strain in his reasoning gave as much weight to the spread of the *spirit* of a successful revolution as it did to the material assistance that must at all cost be made available to struggles outside of its borders.

The Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party met in 1903. By the time it had concluded the party had split and the world had two new political lines to decipher going by the names Bolshevik and Menshevik. But the issue that caused the division first appeared the prior year in Lenin's widely disseminated *Letter to a Comrade on our Organizational Tasks*.

Lenin was responding to a complaint sent to him by a Petersburg worker. Lack of training left him alienated from comrades involved in political work. His proposed solutions included a degree of decentralization that placed more qualified cadre in the field for training and integration of a larger proportion of worker party members. Lenin agreed that the problems cited by the Comrade were real, while in the nicest possible way rejecting his solutions.

The Comrade writes that the committee elected to manage the party whose goal is a proletarian revolution should consist of both workers and intellectuals. Lenin's reply is that, *we should particularly see to it that as many workers as possible become fully class conscious and professional revolutionaries and members of the Committee*. Note the impracticality of Lenin's proposal. Most of the leadership of the RSDLP were from the radicalized middle class with independent means or connections to such support. Few members of the working class could afford the luxury of sacrificing the means by which they provide for their families and themselves in order to become professional revolutionaries, furthermore, having active Marxist party members in the workplace where they can politically educate their fellow workers and organize them in times of revolutionary upsurges should be something that a revolutionary party would encourage.

The Comrade then proposes *discussion meetings* which Lenin thinks are *wholly unnecessary*. Since the best revolutionaries will be on the Central Committee, that's also the best place for discussion. Lenin then says that under the tsarist autocracy discussion meetings are too dangerous. While the leadership remained outside of Russia members of internal groups did meet, not only to hear of rulings

from above, but to discuss current conditions and to formulate reports to be sent to the center. 'Discussion' doesn't necessarily mean decision making.

Lenin then details the party structure: Central Committee elected by a Party Congress which itself is selected by the party organization. The CC would select members to form a few District Groups with all the rest of the leadership selected by the CC. He understands the risk (*this is, of course, possible*) of a *bad egg* gaining much power under such a small tight leadership, but since decentralization is impossible under autocracy, they will have to take measures to nip any danger in the bud. He is all for factory committees that are led by a few good revolutionaries who will be, *obliged to submit to all the orders and observe all the 'laws and customs' of the 'army in the field' to which he has joined and from which in time of war he has no right to absent himself without leave.*

Workers wishing to join the party go through a strict process, later revealed to have 39 provisions. Once a member, everyone is equal in internal matters but they will never meet directly with members of the CC or Central Organization. The leadership will appoint intermediaries for such interchange.

And finally, Lenin envisions a minute division of labor in which each member is doing a definite type of revolutionary work. Managing the party is much like a conductor leading an orchestra. If Taylorism is recognized here -- Lenin was a big fan.

In the advanced preparations for the party congress it was agreed that, *all decisions and elections are binding on all party organizations and cannot be challenged, rescinded or amended until the next congress.* The time delay necessary for the arranging of such an assembly during a revolutionary upsurge, the form of which cannot be known in advance, was not thought worthy of concern.

The cause of the schism centered on a seemingly innocuous distinction -- Can a member be assigned party work under the direction of a comrade selected by a party organization, or must all implementation of party decisions be made from within a party organization under the direction of the Central Committee?

As we know from *Letter to a Comrade*, the latter position was Lenin's. We also know that Lenin, one of the greats of Marxism, was a focused and determined revolutionary. After many years of exile during which he devoted himself to Marxist study and its application to Russian and post-Marx world conditions, he developed a program that he was convinced would find success if properly implemented by a small select groups of exceptional revolutionaries.

Lenin's position on the form their party would take received much criticism in debates leading up to a vote and the resulting party crisis; he later defended in detailed form his organizational position in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. The chief objection to it was that it would lead to a bureaucratic party dictatorship. When one delegate (Akimov) proposed that local committees be

elected by active workers, Lenin hurled his favorite epithets -- it was opportunist, a term which usually means taking an easier, unprincipled, approach in hopes of quicker success, or he charged his critic with anarchism -- someone who rejects all authority, a wild exaggeration of what he felt was the privileged middle class' unwillingness to surrender their individualism.

Therefore, those who opposed his surrender to Germany must be motivated by Russian nationalism; not a desire to carry the revolution across borders, or in support of the German communist leadership who also opposed it. Lenin's program, being so pre-determined and narrowly focused led to a process of elimination. Dealing with invading armies wasn't in the plan, and neither was the risk of including workers in the decision making process unless they sacrificed everything to fully devote themselves to the party. Thus the surrender to Germany also becomes a casting aside of world revolution in order to secure a home base. And not placing the balance of power in the hands of the revolutionary class led to a bureaucratic dictatorship.

Lenin's line of reasoning is more clearly revealed in his response to Axelrod's (a Menshevik leader) assertion that they are a party of the working class. No, says Lenin, doing his best imitation of Blanqui, they are the *vanguard* of the working class, and are not to be confused with the class itself. The working class will not envelop them, what a political mishmash that would be, rather they will envelop the working class, what a very specific disaster that turned out to be.

The sad fact is that at critical junctures Lenin himself displayed the best examples of opportunism. One of the fundamental tenets of Marxism is that the proletariat is imbued with class consciousness, class conflict and class struggle directly through its material relationship with the exploiting class. Yet Lenin discounted the need of making them the core of the party, preferring instead to select from the radicalized well educated petty bourgeois because they make better political functionaries and have a lot of free time on their hands. And then, signing a piece of paper surrendering to Germany -- an example of naive misplaced trust that surpassed all the peaceful coexistence, detente and perestroika deals agreed to by the Stalinist bureaucrats in their transition to capitalism.

Trotsky's formal split with Lenin came with the publication of *Our Political Tasks* in 1904. In the Introduction he states that, *Putting the workers forward as the main revolutionary force is the source of all differences*. He then describes changes in political orientation of the party newspaper Iskra. When it first appeared it was, *the period of struggle for influence over the revolutionary intelligentsia*, the proletariat being in the background. Then from a, *democratic movement in the name of the proletariat to one detached from it in the name of Marxism*.

He criticizes Lenin for writing in *One Step Forward* that the party is its program. For Trotsky that indicated a, *neglect of the tasks of autonomous activity of the proletariat*. He then describes an 1896 strike in Odessa. The workers selected a strike date when inventory was low, raised funds, organized collective meals so

the more militant could discuss issues with the undecided (plus, it would save strike funds). They learned discipline, perseverance, and, *knowledge of the circumstances*.

Lenin's understanding of the source of worker discipline was that of the bosses acting as a corps of officers, and the workers obeying their orders. In fact, an industrial workplace is socialized by the necessity for all workers to labor as a team in order to complete the production of well-made commodities, and also to protect themselves as much as possible from the abuses of the bosses. Instead of a party organized to enroll the proletariat in a revolutionary political program that will overthrow the system that oppresses and exploits them, we have something else -- *If we consider the content of our work, and not the content of our head...we have the spectacle of a 'party' placed above the proletariat*. Rather than that Trotsky proposes that they, *draw the most advanced workers into formulating decisions and presenting them to the Congress and experience changes being made by their actions. In time they would be made vanguard of their own liberation*.

Trotsky describes the danger of basing the party on a radicalized middle class -- the notion of thinking for others, *in the internal politics of the party -- these methods lead...to the party organization substituting itself for the party, the Central Committee substituting itself to the party organization, and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee*.

And he ends with a characterization of Lenin's politics in 1904. *Really no greater cynicism can be shown towards the richest ideological heritage of the proletariat than by Comrade Lenin. For him Marxism is not a method of scientific analysis, a method imposing enormous theoretical responsibilities, it's a rag that you can trample underfoot if you want a blank slate on which to project things larger than life, or pliant rules when a state of party consciousness has to be taken into account*.

Rosa Luxemburg wrote *Organizational Question of Social Democracy* in response to Lenin's works, *What is to be Done*, and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. She sees a connection between Blanquism and Leninism with the exception that Blanqui did not directly connect with the oppressed. Like Trotsky she says, *The complexities at the local level required on the spot initiative. Local leaders cannot be trained like soldiers in an army*. As for a workers party, *Social democracy is the proletariat*, but not as a unit joined to a radicalized petty bourgeois core. The party, *would be a self-centered organization of the most advanced sector of the proletariat*. Lenin's centralized, intellectual-led, party structure without a proletariat counterweight is inherently opportunistic because of the differing social soil from which their respective class outlooks spring.

Most importantly she anticipates Brest-Litovsk -- *Central organs play a conservative role in a revolutionary upsurge. Every success creates a bastion that must be defended thus impeding an advance during the revolutionary period*.

She compares Lenin's ultra-centralism to the Narodniks People's Will (Lenin's brother, a leader - executed for an attempt on the Tsar's life), both unilaterally declare themselves the leaders of a sector of the population.

Luxemburg wrote *The Russian Tragedy* in September 1918. She was still in a German prison (where she spent most of the war years) and ill-informed as to what was happening in the outside world. She did not know at the time her essay was written that Germany's series of battlefield losses and the collapse of the southern front was to lead to a surrender two months later.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was in reality nothing but a capitulation of the revolutionary Russian proletariat to German militarism [capitalism]...they deceived themselves in hoping to purchase a genuine respite at the price of this capitulation...They did not take into account the fact that the capitulation of Russia at Brest-Litovsk meant an enormous strengthening [of Germany] and thus a lessening of chances of a revolutionary rising in Germany.

There was no respite. Instead the revolution was further endangered. *The end result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is thus to encircle, starve out and strangle the Russian revolution from all sides.* And just as she in 1905 anticipated Lenin's strategy leading to a Brest-Litovsk in 1918, she now anticipated the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo between Russia and Germany which secretly provided the latter with a way to escape the allies surrender terms by maintaining her armed forces and related industry inside Russia. This was signed a year before the last revolutionary upsurge in Germany provided perhaps the best chance for a socialist revolution. *And now the most terrible prospect looms ahead of the Bolsheviks...an alliance between the Bolsheviks and Germany!* And then goes on to declare that -- *Any political destruction of the Bolsheviks in honest struggle against overwhelming forces and hostile pressures of the historical situation would be preferable to the moral destruction.*

As to the conditions at that point facing the Bolsheviks -- *To carry out the dictatorship of the proletariat and a socialist revolution in a single country surrounded by reactionary imperialist rule....that is squaring the circle.* The only solution was help from outside -- *the German mass rising which can signal the international revolution.*

Luxemburg and Liebknecht led such a rising in January 1919. It failed and both were murdered by a proto-Nazi military force. But at least it was an *honest struggle against overwhelming forces.* And by no means did it lead to the *moral destruction* of these two great Marxist revolutionaries.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx described the differences between a bourgeois and proletarian revolution as follows:

Bourgeois revolutions...storm swiftly from success to success...but are short lived.....On the other hand proletarian revolutions...criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful

thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that they may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: 'Here is the main point, now show us what you can do!'

Marx here projects a fine image of the complex fits and starts, advances and retreats; the infinite alterations of plans to fit perceived conditions. There is none of the over thought and over planned -- the detail work, as if by pulling a lever the ruling class will hang itself. Marx is describing what those involved in the total reorganization of a world, an artificial world most humans have come to accept as their only meaningful one, must experience in the process of accomplishing their goal. Next up will be some words on how one organizes for such a project, and where to begin.

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