

From Lenin to Leninism

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In *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm defined Lenin as “the man with the greatest single impact on the history of the 20th century”. The man, as we know, was the main (but not the only) leader of the October Revolution, whose shadow hung and hangs over the world. His myth inspired the ghost that haunted the century, that of the “world communist revolution”, used to justify wars and massacres without parallel in history. In Russia, the birthplace of the “communist specter” and a “country with an unpredictable past”, we find diametrically opposed interpretations of Lenin in the writings of the same authors. This is the case of Dimitri Volkogonov, who for years supported the “official” Soviet version, presenting Bolshevism as an “absolute good” that sprang from Lenin’s head. In contrast, Trotsky was presented as the incarnation of evil, Lenin’s enemy from start to finish (but hiding this for a brief period), and the enemy of socialism because of imperialism. In a trilogy devoted to the most important characters in the history of the USSR,¹ Volkogonov changed the field completely: Bolshevism was now “absolute evil”, born out of Lenin’s (demonic) genius. As for Stalin and Trotsky, they were “enemy brothers”,

¹ Dimitri Volkogonov. *The real Lenin*. Paris, Robert Laffont, 1995; *Stalin*. Paris, Robert Laffont, 1994; *Trotsky*. The eternal revolutionary. New York, The Free Press, 1996. Volkogonov went further: “Lenin is the real father of the Red Terror, not Stalin” - an obvious statement: when terror was adopted as the transitional method of struggle for Soviet power, Stalin was still a secondary political figure.

the former a legitimate son of Lenin. Volkogonov biasedly interpreted sentences in which “note for note, letter for letter, Lenin, the demigod revered for 62 years, including by me, appears not as the magnanimous guide of legend, but a cynical tyrant, willing to do anything to seize and retain power”. “Venerated demigod”: that was Lenin’s quality in the “official history” of the USSR. A Western practitioner of leaflet history, in the wake of the post-Soviet anti-communist reaction, entitled one of his works “Lenin, the Cause of Evil”.²

“Leninism” was created on the occasion of Lenin’s death as a supposedly infallible doctrine, capable of guaranteeing, through its “application”, the victory of the socialist revolution. A century later, on the ground that has been cleared and also devastated by victorious and defeated revolutions, by bloody wars and counter-revolutions, it is worth pausing to consider the conditions that forged the man, and also those that governed the doctrine that inspired the so-called “international communist movement”. Bukharin summarized: “Marx mainly gave the algebra of capitalist development and revolutionary action; Lenin added the algebra of new phenomena of destruction and construction, as well as their arithmetic. He deciphered the formulas of algebra from a concrete and practical point of view”.³ This in a country where, in Trotsky’s words, “the fall of the monarchy had long been the indispensable condition for the development of Russia’s economy and culture. But the forces to carry out this task were lacking. The bourgeoisie was terrified of revolution. Intellectuals tried to organize the peasantry around them. Unable to generalize its efforts and objectives, the *mujik* did not respond to the calls of the youth. The intelligentsia armed itself with dynamite. An entire generation was consumed in this struggle”. This included Lenin’s older brother, Alexander Ulianov, a populist who was executed by the Tsarist regime for plotting against the monarch, without any attempt being made against him.

A member of the next revolutionary generation, Lenin began his career in the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) by fighting, within the old Russian populism (including its dynamite strand), its intended specific, “eastern” path to socialism, based on the survival of the Russian agrarian community (the *mir*). It was wrong to support the possibility of achieving a *Russian socialism* based on the rural community, as the *narodniki* did, since capitalist development had created a social differentiation within rural communities. The village was in the process of dissolving, giving way to capitalist agrarian property on the one hand and agricultural wage earners on the other. His diagnosis of the dissolution of the old rural community (confirmed by later historical research),⁴ set out in various works, especially in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, followed in the footsteps of Plekhanov’s political struggle against populism, summarized in *Our Differences*.⁵

Lenin added a differentiated appreciation of the peasant movement, which pointed

² Paul Mourousy. *Lenin. The cause of evil*. Paris, Perrin, 1992.

³ Nikolai Bukharin. *Lenin Marxist*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 1976.

⁴ Dorothy Atkinson. *The End of the Agrarian Land Commune*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983.

⁵ Samuel H. Baron. *Plekhanov. The father of Russian Marxism*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1963.

to the nodal point of the revolutionary strategy, the worker-peasant alliance. In the *Agrarian Programme of Social Democracy*, he said: “The mistake of certain Marxists is that, in criticizing the theory of the populists, they lose sight of its historically real and legitimate content in the struggle against feudalism. They rightly criticize the ‘principle of work’ and ‘egalitarianism’ as backward, reactionary, petty-bourgeois socialism and forget that these theories express advanced, revolutionary petty-bourgeois democratism; these theories serve as a banner for the most decisive of the struggles against old Russia, feudal Russia. The idea of equality is the most revolutionary idea in the struggle against the old order of things of absolutism in general and against the old feudal and landowning regime in particular. The idea of equality is legitimate and progressive in the peasant petty-bourgeoisie, because it expresses the aspiration to distribution.”

For Lenin, “the agrarian question constituted the basis of the bourgeois revolution in Russia and determined the national particularity of that revolution”.⁶ The objectives he set for the bourgeois revolution were: a democratic republic, a constituent assembly, and a provisional revolutionary government in the regime of the democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants. The means to achieve these goals would be armed popular insurrection. According to Lenin, the party should promote a workers’ and peasants’ revolution, and the latter, by carrying out the democratic revolution, although preparing the ground for the socialist revolution, could not escape, at least for a while, the fate of bourgeois revolution. Trotsky, a member of the successive generation, understood that the proletariat would have to seek the support of the peasants, but it couldn’t stop there: on completing the bourgeois revolution, the proletariat would inevitably be induced to carry out its own revolution, without a solution of continuity. The already controversial question of the revolution’s *programme* was intertwined with that of *organization*, which gave rise to *Bolshevism*, identified with Lenin.

Lenin’s political role at the turn of the century was to lay the foundations for the organization of a unified workers’ party, after the dispersion of the groups participating in the founding congress of the RSDLP in 1898. A kind of unity existed through the reference to the exiled socialists, led by Plekhanov. But “until then Plekhanov’s group had been mainly concerned with the problem of theoretical orientation, for the reason that there was no political party that identified with Marx’s theory and sought to spread this doctrine among the masses of people.”⁷ In *Our Immediate Task*, of 1899, Lenin stated that “the party has not ceased to exist; it has only withdrawn into itself in order to gather strength and face the task of unifying all Russian Social Democrats on firm ground. To achieve this unification, to work out the appropriate forms, to put aside the fractured localist work once and for all: these are the most immediate and essential tasks of the Russian Social Democrats.” How did Bolshevism, Lenin’s great political creation, come about in these conditions?

Against the a-historical interpretation, it was pointed out that “there are three

⁶ Luciano Gruppi. *Lenin’s Thought*. Rio de Janeiro, Graal, 1979.

⁷ Christopher Hill. *Lenin*. Buenos Aires, CEAL, 1987.

organizations commonly referred to as the ‘Bolshevik party’: 1) the RSDLP, between 1903 and 1911, in which many factions disputed the leadership; 2) the Bolshevik fraction within that same party; 3) the RSDLP (Bolshevik) finally founded in 1912, which would receive important reinforcements, especially that of the Petrograd ‘inter-district organization’ with Trotsky, before becoming the victorious Bolshevik party in October.”⁸ Bolshevism was a current that emerged from ideological and political disputes, splits and mergers, but with continuity. It was Lenin who took it upon himself, early on, to relativize the political and organizational principles of *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), considered (wrongly) to be the founding charter of Bolshevism, as being those of a “new type” of party. The term “Bolshevik” initially had the meaning of *majority* (from the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903). Writing in 1907 a preface to the reissue of his works, Lenin criticized the exegetes of *What Is To Be Done*, who “completely separate this work from its context in a definite historical situation - a definite period long since overtaken by the development of the party”, pointing out that “no other organization than that led by the *Iskra* could, in the circumstances of Russia in 1900-1905, have created a Social Democratic Labour Party such as the one that has been created. *What Is To Be Done?* is a summary of the tactics and organizational policy of the *Iskra* group in 1901 and 1902”.

This tactic and policy were not considered original, but a version, in Russian conditions (severe repression, lack of democratic freedoms and political democracy), of the principles of the Second International, especially the German SPD, of which the German police chief had already said in 1883 that “the socialist parties abroad consider it as the example that should be imitated in all its aspects”.⁹ Lenin proposed an organization of revolutionaries, conspiratorial and centralized, which was at the same time a workers’ organization, with ample room for internal debate, but with full unity of action. If the first aspect was emphasized, it was because it clashed with the supporters of a “lax” party, which the Bolsheviks did not consider adapted to Russian conditions. For Lenin, the revolutionary “should not have the ideal of a trade union secretary, but of a *people’s tribune*, who knows how to react against every manifestation of arbitrariness and oppression, wherever it occurs, whatever the class or social stratum affected, who knows how to generalize all the facts in order to compose a complete picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation, who knows how to take advantage of the slightest opportunity to expose his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, to explain to each and every one the historical scope of the emancipatory struggle of the proletariat”.

In short, a workers’ party as well as a professional party. This idea would be maintained in all phases of Bolshevism, including changes in the program. Based on it, combined with specific circumstances, Bolshevism began to profile itself as a different political current among socialist currents, including international ones, beyond the intentions of its founders. Lenin changed not once, but *several* times,

⁸ Pierre Broué. Observations on the history of the Bolshevik party. In: Maximilien Rubel et al. *Partido y Revolución*. Buenos Aires, Rodolfo Alonso, 1971.

⁹ Georges Haupt. Parti-guide: the rayonnement of German social democracy. *L’Historien et le Mouvement Social*. Paris, François Maspéro, 1980.

his assessment of the nature of the Russian revolution, but never the idea that its central protagonist would be the industrial proletariat, elaborated in the 1890s in a polemic against the *narodniki* (populists): “The working class is the consistent and declared enemy of absolutism, and only between the working class and absolutism is no compromise possible. The hostility of all other classes, groups and strata of the population towards autocracy is not absolute: their democracy is always looking backwards.”

It was *for and with* this working class that Bolshevism set out to build a party. It was by virtue of its effectiveness in this that Bolshevism was formed and succeeded. At first, Lenin’s comrades probably did not understand the deep meaning of his proposals. His concept of organization and discipline was, however, an effective policy in the task of unifying the underground socialist committees, whose numbers were growing rapidly in Russia, with the leadership of *Iskra*, located abroad. Many committees opposed this. The “party question” (and its fractions) arose from the disagreement between Lenin and Martov at the Second Congress of the RSDLP over the first article of the statute. Martov proposed: “A member of the RSDLP is anyone who accepts its program and supports the party, either materially or through regular cooperation under the direction of one of its bodies”. To which Lenin replied: “A member of the party is anyone who accepts its program and supports the party, either materially or through *personal participation* in the activity of one of its bodies.” A seemingly minimal disagreement.

At the 1903 Social Democratic congress, the “second”, the Bolshevik majority was actually a minority in the votes immediately before and after the vote on the statutes: “Martov’s more elastic formulation, which, in opposition to Lenin, did not consider that ‘collaboration’ should constitute a requirement in a Party organization, was accepted by 28 votes to 23. After the withdrawal of seven delegates, Lenin went on to constitute a majority of 24 against 20, so that he managed to get his own list of candidates admitted to the Central Committee... The victory was short-lived, as the result was the division of the Party leadership into two fractions [Bolsheviks and Mensheviks]. The leading positions in *Iskra* reverted to men who had become Lenin’s ideological adversaries and who soon joined Plekhanov. Lenin prepared the foundation of his own periodical; *Vperiod* (Forward) was launched at the end of 1904”.¹⁰ The Bolsheviks formed their own fraction and convened their own congress as the Third Congress of the RSDLP (London, 1905). Bolshevism, as we can see, emerged from a series of crises and political upheavals, not from a pre-existing finished project.

A popular political dictionary, however, considered Leninism to be “the theoretical-practical interpretation of Marxism, in a revolutionary key, elaborated by Lenin in and for an industrially backward country like Russia, where peasants represented the vast majority of the population”, attributing Lenin’s “party theory” to “clear populist roots” and simultaneously situating it as a “leftist” variant of Bernsteinian

¹⁰ Leonard Shapiro. Bolsheviks, in: C. D. Kernig. *Marxism and Democracy*. Madrid, Rioduero, 1975.

revisionism.¹¹ The organizational polemic in Russian Social Democracy masked a disagreement over what *kind* of party (parliamentary or revolutionary) for what kind of activity (electoral or revolutionary), for what kind of era (peaceful or revolutionary). What initially seemed to be a difference over the methods for building a workers' party in Russia, turned out to be a disagreement over the program and the world-historical epoch, which would split the international workers' movement, with Lenin and Bolshevism as the pivot of the split.

Lenin was the main organizer of the Second Congress of the RSDLP, considered the real founding congress of the party. It was the result of a series of previous political victories: "When the Congress was held in 1903, three ideological battles had already been fought and resolved, which formed the basis of the party program unanimously adopted by the Congress. In the face of the *narodniki*, the RSDLP considered the proletariat and not the peasants to be the agent of the future revolution; in the face of the 'legal Marxists', it preached revolutionary action and denied any compromise with the bourgeoisie; in the face of the 'economists', it stressed the essentially political character of the party's program".¹² The struggle against the economicists, summarized by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done*, was a common heritage of the party, including the future opponents of the supposed ultra-centralism contained in that text.

In *What Is To Be Done*, Lenin had stated that "the spontaneous development of the workers' movement is marching precisely towards its subordination to bourgeois ideology, because the spontaneous workers' movement is trade-unionist (...) Anything that bends towards the spontaneity of the workers' movement, anything that diminishes the role of the 'conscious element', the role of social democracy, means strengthening the influence of bourgeois ideology on the workers." But at the same time, he defined "the spontaneous element as nothing more than the embryonic form of the conscious. And the primitive riots already reflected a certain conscious awakening". Or: "The working class spontaneously tends towards socialism, but the bourgeois ideology, the most widespread (and constantly resurrected in the most diverse forms) is the one that most spontaneously imposes itself on the workers." The text and its consequences sparked a controversy that still resonates today. It proposed a new foundation (only partially anticipated by Kautsky) for the workers' *political* party.

In 1904, Rosa Luxemburg used her pen against Leninist "ultra centralism" in *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy*: "It is not by starting from the discipline inculcated in it by the capitalist state, with the mere transfer of

11 Domenico Settembrini. Leninism. In: Norberto Bobbio et al. *Dictionary of Politics*. Brasília, UnB, 1986. The thesis of the terrorist-populist origin of the Leninist conception of the party is widespread: Alain Besançon. *The Intellectual Origins of Leninism*. Madrid, RIALP, 1980; René Cannac. *Netchaïev, du Nihilisme au Terrorisme*. Aux sources de la révolution russe. Paris, Payot, 1961. That political action in a country cannot do without its political and cultural traditions is obvious: *What Is To Be Done?* took its title from a novel by Nikolai Tchernichevski, written in 1862 while its author was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. According to Orlando Figes, "Tchernichevski's novel converted more men to the cause of revolution than all the works of Marx and Engels put together (Marx himself learned Russian in order to read the book)".

12 Edward H. Carr. *Studies on the Revolution*. Madrid, Alianza, 1970.

the baton from the hand of the bourgeoisie to that of a Social Democratic central committee, but by breaking, by extirpating this spirit of servile discipline, that the proletariat can be educated to the new discipline, the voluntary self-discipline of Social Democracy.” Adding that “the ultra-centralism advocated by Lenin seems to us, in all its essence, to be the bearer, not of a positive and creative spirit, but of the sterile spirit of the night watchman. His concern is above all to control party activity and not to fertilize it, to restrict the movement and not to develop it, to harass it and not to unify it.” In Luxemburg’s view, “social democracy is not linked to the organization of the working class: it is the movement of the working class itself”.¹³ Lenin’s response¹⁴ was simple: Rosa’s criticisms were politely answered, one by one, stating that “what Rosa Luxemburg’s article in *Die Neue Zeit* makes known to the reader is not my book, but something else”, and saying, in essence, that “what I defend throughout the book, from the first page to the last, are the elementary principles of any party organization imaginable; (not) one system of organization against any other”. Lenin, therefore, did not proclaim himself the inventor of “democratic centralism”.

Also in 1904, Trotsky published a brochure (*Our Political Tasks*) in which, alongside a remarkable series of personal attacks on Lenin (inaugurating a practice unknown to Russian socialists: Trotsky would later justify himself by referring to his “immaturity” - witnesses at the time, such as Angelica Balabanova, claimed that there was no personal affinity between the two men)¹⁵ also accused Bolshevism of intending to establish “the dictatorship of the party over the working class”, of the central committee over the party, and of the leader over the central committee. Alongside polemical tricks, Trotsky also resorted to futurological exercises: “The tasks of the new regime will be so complex that they cannot be solved except through competition between various methods of economic and political construction, through prolonged ‘disputes’, a systematic struggle not only between the socialist and capitalist worlds, but also between many tendencies within socialism, which will inevitably arise as soon as the proletarian dictatorship brings dozens of new problems. No strong and ‘dominant’ organization will be able to suppress these controversies. A proletariat capable of exercising its dictatorship over society will not tolerate any dictatorship over itself. The working class will have in its ranks a few handfuls of political invalids and a lot of ballast of stale ideas that it will have to get rid of. At the time of its dictatorship, just as today, it will have to cleanse its mind of false bourgeois theories and experiences, and purge its ranks of political charlatans and revolutionaries who only know how to look backwards. But this intricate task cannot be solved by putting over the proletariat a handful of chosen people, or a single onslaught of power.”

Trotsky had broken with Lenin at the 1903 Congress. In retrospect, he presented this break as “subjective” and “moral”, linked to an issue that did not imply any

13 Rosa Luxemburg. *Mass Party or Vanguard Party*. São Paulo, Ched, 1980.

14 In an article sent to Kautsky to be published in *Die Neue Zeit*, the organ of German Social Democracy, it was refused and only made known in 1930.

15 Angélica Balabanova. *Mi Vida de Rebelde*. Barcelona, Martinez Roca, 1974.

political principle. Lenin proposed reducing the number of *Iskra* editors from six to three. These were to be Plekhanov, Martov and himself. Axelrod, Zasulich and Potresov were to be excluded. He wanted *Iskra*'s editorial work to be more effective than it had been recently; "to Trotsky, this attempt to eliminate Axelrod and Zasulich, two of its founders, from *Iskra* seemed sacrilegious. Lenin's harshness aroused his disgust".¹⁶ At the Congress, Trotsky spoke out against Lenin only on two points on the agenda: paragraph 1 of the party statutes and the election of the party's central bodies. Trotsky did not oppose the theses of the party program prepared by Lenin. On the contrary, on this item he defended Lenin.¹⁷ In his autobiography, Trotsky did not refer to his 1904 pamphlet; after the 1903 Congress, he was briefly linked to the Mensheviks, with whom he later broke. During the following decade, he was a supporter of the "conciliation" of the fractions (not without some successes, also ephemeral), which fed the legend of an "anti-Bolshevik" Trotsky, although he came closer to Bolshevism being as much a member of the RSDLP as Lenin, at a time when the formal split of the party had not been consummated.

Against Trotsky, Lenin said that he "forgot that the Party must be only a detachment of the vanguard, the leader of the immense mass of the working class, which as a whole (or almost) works 'under the control and under the direction' of the Party organizations, but which does not enter entirely, and nor should it, into the 'Party'".¹⁸ (The ironic quotation marks are Lenin's). Party, workers' vanguard, working class, were not identified with each other (as Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg did, according to Lenin) although they influenced each other. In 1905, Bolshevism was a party of *the* workers' vanguard, its composition was almost 62% workers (and almost 5% peasants)¹⁹: this was the party of the "professional revolutionaries". Three years later, Lenin mocked his critics: "To say that the *Iskra* (of 1901 and 1902!) exaggerated the idea of an organization of professional revolutionaries is like saying, *after* the Russo-Japanese war, that the Japanese had an exaggerated idea of the Russian military forces, and that they were too preoccupied, before the war, with fighting against these forces."²⁰

Many saw *Our Political Tasks* as a prophecy about the fate of Bolshevism and the revolution. For Isaac Deutscher, who criticized the work's personal attacks, it was also "astonishing" because it contained "great ideas" and "subtle historical insight".²¹ For E. H. Carr, "the (future) process was predicted in great detail by Trotsky, who in a brilliant pamphlet published in 1904 announced a situation in which 'the party is replaced by the party organization, the organization by the central committee and finally the central committee by the dictator'".²² Pierre Broué criticized the "pedantry" of *Our Tasks*, its invectives against "Maximilien Lenin",

16 Isaac Deutscher. *Trotsky*. The armed prophet. Mexico, ERA, 1976.

17 A. V. Pantsov. *Voprosy Istorii*. Moscow, 1989, 7/10; Brian Pearce (ed.). *Minutes of the Second Ordinary Congress of the RSDLP (1903)*. London, New Park, 1978.

18 V. I. Lenin. *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1964.

19 David Lane. *The Roots of Russian Communism*. A social and historical study of Russian social democracy 1898-1907. Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1977.

20 V. I. Lenin. Prefazione alla raccolta "Na 12 Let". In: *Che Fare?* Torino, Einaudi, 1971.

21 Isaac Deutscher. *Trotsky*, cit.

22 Edward H. Carr. *The October Revolution*. Before and after. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

stating that Trotsky later considered the work “a terribly annoying document about which he observed the greatest discretion”, and wondered why, in the circumstances of its publication (Trotsky’s break with Menshevism) he “did not renounce its publication”.²³ Lenin responded to the comparison with Robespierre by saying that “the Jacobin who is indissolubly linked to the organization of the proletariat, who is conscious of his class interests, is precisely the revolutionary social democrat”.²⁴ The strongest criticism referred to the fact that Lenin had maintained that the revolutionary intelligentsia played a special role in the revolutionary movement, providing it with the socialist perspective that the workers could not achieve on their own. Trotsky saw this opinion as a denial of the revolutionary capacities of the working class and the aspiration of the intelligentsia to keep the workers’ movement under its tutelage. The Polish socialist Machajski held a similar view of “Russian socialism” in general.²⁵

Trotsky said that, at the Congress, “my whole being protested against the merciless suppression of veterans. From the indignation I felt came my break with Lenin, which took place to some extent on moral ground. But that was only an appearance. Deep down, our differences had a political character that manifested itself in the question of organization.”²⁶ *Our Political Tasks* was “dedicated to Pavel Axelrod”. Today it seems clear that “both Trotsky and Luxemburg were unfair to Lenin when they removed the positions of *What Is To Be Done* from their concrete historical context and gave them a universal character”.²⁷ Trotsky pronounced himself, much later, on his “cursed” work, with no regrets: “In a brochure written in 1904, whose criticism of Lenin often lacked maturity and fairness, there are nevertheless pages that provide a very faithful idea of the way of thinking of the *komitetchiki* of that time (...) The battle that Lenin would sustain a year later, at the congress [Third Congress, April 1905], against the arrogant *komitetchiki* fully confirms this criticism.”²⁸ This is the aspect exploited by historians who claim that “(in 1903) Lenin was already convinced that it was the professional revolutionary, and not the masses, who held the key to the victory of socialism”.²⁹

Lenin’s position, which led to the emergence of the fractions, had nothing to do with a sudden impulse: it was the continuity of a political and ideological struggle in which he had been the protagonist since the 1890s. The struggle against populism, *What Is To Be Done*, the delimitation in the face of Menshevism, were its various phases, not based on a fetish of statutes: Lenin accepted, at the 1906 reunification congress (Bolsheviks + Mensheviks), the Menshevik wording of article 1° of the statutes... This and other episodes allow us to question the retrospective view of the Bolshevik Zinoviev: “In 1903 we already had two clearly separated groups,

23 Pierre Broué. *Trotsky*. Paris, Fayard, 1988.

24 On Leninist “Jacobinism”, see: Jean Pierre Joubert. Lenin and Jacobinism. *Cahiers Leon Trotsky*, n° 30, Paris, June 1987.

25 Jan Waclav Machajski. *The Socialism of Intellectuals*. Paris, Points, 1979.

26 Leon Trotsky. *A Life*. Paris, Gallimard, 1973.

27 Ernest Mandel. *Trotsky as an Alternative*. São Paulo, Xamã, 1995.

28 Leon Trotsky. *Stalin*. Biography. São Paulo, Livraria da Física, 2012.

29 Adam B. Ulam. *The Bolsheviks*. Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1976.

two organizations and two parties. Bolshevism and Menshevism, as ideological tendencies, were already formed with their characteristic profile, later evidenced in the revolutionary storm.”³⁰ At the 1905 London (Bolshevik) Congress, Lenin waged a battle to recruit and promote workers who were not “professional revolutionaries”, but only militant workers: the index of a conflict with the *komitetchiki*, the “committee men”.

Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, recounted in her memoirs the battle between Lenin and Rykov, spokesman for the “underground”: “The *komitetchiki* was a man full of security... he did not allow any democracy within the party... he did not like innovations”. According to her, Lenin could hardly contain himself “when he heard that there were no workers capable of forming part of the committees”. He proposed making it compulsory to include a majority of workers on the committees. The party apparatus was opposed; Lenin’s proposal was defeated, a fact that Pierre Broué related to “the sect-like spirit that kept the Bolsheviks away from the first Soviets, in which many of them feared an opposing organization”. The 1905 revolution, already underway, had witnessed the formation of workers’ councils, elected by the workers in their own workplaces. The delegates could always be revoked by their electors. Unionized or not, politically organized or disorganized, the proletarians of Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Tula, Odessa and other industrial agglomerations were creating a new form of mass organization, which appeared as the opposite of the parliamentary assemblies with which the Western bourgeoisie exercised its class domination. Their transformation into organs of government, however, was not yet the project of any political current.

The revolutionary tradition of the Russian working class played a decisive role in the 1905 revolution; the January 1905 strike was closely linked to the explosion of another general strike in 1904 in Baku, in the Caucasus. This, in turn, was preceded by other major strikes that took place between 1903 and 1904 in southern Russia, which had as their predecessor the great strike of 1902 in Batumi. We can identify the beginning of this series of strikes in the one undertaken by the textile workers of St. Petersburg between 1896 and 1897. Since the end of the 19th century, Russia had become an epicenter of the European revolution: at its 1903 congress, the RSDLP adopted a program “which included, for the first time in the history of social democratic parties, the slogan of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, defined as the conquest of political power by the proletariat”.³¹ The class struggle in Russia was gaining its own vanguard profile on the international stage; Russian Social Democracy was not simply a projection of European socialism into “wild lands”.

In the 1905 revolution, the problem of the Soviets affected all factions of the RSDLP: “Without taking into account the cooperation of many Bolshevik workers in the councils, the principled position of the Bolshevik leadership varied between a radical rejection and a somewhat disgusted acceptance of these ‘bodies alien’ to the revolution. The Bolsheviks’ position on the Soviets differed from place to place

30 Grigori Zinoviev. *History of the Bolshevik Party*. From the beginnings to February 1917. London, New Park, 1973.

31 Pierre Broué. *The Bolshevik Party*. Paris, Minuit, 1971.

and was undergoing changes; Lenin himself did not reach a definitive judgment on their role and importance, although he was the only one among the Bolsheviks who made an effort to examine this new revolutionary phenomenon in depth and add it to his revolutionary theory and tactics. During the October strike, the Bolshevik workers took part in the formation of the Petersburg Council of Workers' Deputies, as did the other workers. In the early days of the Soviet's existence, when it acted as a strike committee and no one really knew what role it would play in the future, the Bolsheviks were benevolently opposed to it. But that changed when, at the end of the October strike, the Soviet remained in place and began to evolve into a political leadership body for the working class. Most of the Bolsheviks openly opposed the Soviet; in the federative committees made up of representatives of both fractions of the RSDLP, they drew up a resolution recommending official acceptance of the programme of Social Democracy, since independent council-style organizations could not guide a clear political orientation and would be pernicious".³² The party that would project itself to the world as the vanguard of "Soviet power" was initially opposed to the leading or governmental function of the Soviet. There was no "genius Lenin" to prevent this.

For most Marxist historians, there was a link between *What Is To Be Done* and "Bolshevik sectarianism". Paul Le Blanc states that "the potential sectarianism that (Rosa) Luxemburg had noticed in Lenin's conceptions, manifested itself clearly from 1905".³³ For Ernest Mandel "it is clear that Lenin underestimated in the course of the 1902-1903 debate the dangers for the workers' movement that could arise from building up a bureaucracy within it".³⁴ The test of the revolution, and its defeat, produced new crises and political realignments. During the reaction after 1905, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split into three factions each: the "liquidators" (Potresov, Zasluch), the center (Martov, Dan) and the "party Mensheviks" (Plekhanov) among the latter; the "vperiodists" (Bogdanov), the "Leninists" and the "conciliators" or "party Bolsheviks" (Rykov, Nogin) among the former. If 1903 was not the "magic date" for Bolshevism, 1906 (the reunification congress) was not the great hour of lost conciliation (Lenin declared that "until the social revolution, Social Democracy will inevitably have an opportunist wing and a revolutionary wing"); the Bolsheviks maintained a "clandestine center" in the unified party; finally, 1912 (when the Bolsheviks definitively split from the Mensheviks) was not the "final party", because before 1912 Lenin reconciled with Plekhanov and formed a bloc in the RSDLP with the "party Mensheviks" against the "liquidators", with the aim of maintaining a clandestine apparatus. It was on this position that the (Bolshevik) RSDLP was formed, with a revolutionary wing and an "opportunist" one...

Between crises and fierce disputes between fractions, the political problems of Russian Social Democracy were at a higher level than those of the other sections

32 Oskar Anweiler. *The Soviets in Russia 1905-1921*. Madrid, Zero, 1975.

33 Paul Le Blanc. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on revolutionary organization. *Cahiers d'Étude et de Recherche* n° 14, Paris, 1990.

34 Ernest Mandel. *The Leninist Theory of Organization*. São Paulo, Aparte, 1984.

of the Second International, which were steeped in reformism and electoralism. Its particularity does not have to do with a supposed theory about “the Party, with a capital letter, (which) constitutes the great and ambiguous Russian contribution to contemporary history”, also called “the Party: a meta-political entity totally different from anything that had been seen until then on the varied scene of European socialist movements”, considered as the birth of a new anthropological variant: *homo bolchevicus*! ³⁵ It’s easy to point the finger at the confusion of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks about the role of the Soviets; the leaders of the Soviets themselves were confused about it: “Even at the second congress (of the Soviets) on October 28, no member of this assembly knew very well what their function was, whether they constituted a central strike committee or a new type of organization, similar to a revolutionary self-administration body.”³⁶

Lenin’s evolution was described ironically by Moshe Lewin: “Ever since his work in Siberian exile, Lenin tended to see capitalism behind every Russian cart. The 1905 revolution led him to nuance his ideas: capitalism was still weakly developed, the liberal forces were embryonic and timid.”³⁷ Even so, for Lenin the revolution remained “bourgeois in the sense of its economic-social content. Which means: the tasks of the revolution taking place in Russia do not go beyond the scope of bourgeois society. Not even the fullest victory of the present revolution, that is, the conquest of the most democratic republic and the confiscation of all land from the landlords by the peasants, will shake the foundations of the bourgeois social order.” But from this thesis, Lenin did not derive the conclusion that the main engine of the revolution would be the bourgeoisie, as the Mensheviks wanted, because the revolution was taking place at a time when “the proletariat has already begun to become conscious of itself as a particular class and to unite in an autonomous class organization”.

In September 1905, during the “first Russian revolution”, Lenin said that “from the democratic revolution we will soon begin to move, to the extent of our strength, the strength of the conscious and organized proletariat, to the socialist revolution. We are for *uninterrupted revolution*. We will not stop halfway.” Lenin, however, limited the immediate scope of the revolution to the bourgeois-democratic horizon. According to Trotsky, he “wanted to imply that, in order to maintain unity with the peasantry, the proletariat would be forced to dispense with the immediate implementation of socialist tasks during the next revolution. But this meant the proletariat renouncing its own dictatorship. Consequently, the dictatorship was, in essence, that of the peasantry, even if the workers participated in it.” Let us quote

³⁵ Enzo Bettiza. *The Mystery of Lenin*. Barcelona, Argos-Vergara, 1984.

³⁶ Avraham Yassour. Leçons de 1905: Parti ou Soviet? *Le Mouvement Social* n° 62, Paris, January-March 1968. Shortly after the revolution, Trotsky wrote that “the council of workers’ deputies was born to achieve a goal: in the course of events to create an organization that represents authority, free from tradition, an organization that can embrace all the disaggregated masses without imposing organizational obstacles, an organization that can unite the revolutionary currents within the proletariat and control an initiative by itself in a capable and automatic way and, what is most fundamental, an organization that could be brought to life in 24 hours”.

³⁷ Moshe Lewin. Communist illusion or Soviet reality? *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Paris, December 1996.

Lenin's confirmatory words, spoken at the Stockholm Congress of the RSDLP (1906) when he replied to Plekhanov: "What program are we talking about? An agrarian program. Who is supposed to take power with this program? The revolutionary peasants." Was Lenin confusing the government of the proletariat with the government of the peasants? "No," he said, referring to himself, "Lenin made a clear distinction between the socialist government of the proletariat and the bourgeois-democratic government of the peasantry."

Trotsky was already advocating *permanent revolution*, the perspective of which was that "the complete victory of the democratic revolution in Russia can only be conceived in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, supported by the peasantry. The dictatorship of the proletariat, which would inevitably put not only democratic but also socialist tasks on the table, would at the same time give a vigorous impetus to the international socialist revolution. Only the victory of the proletariat in the West could protect Russia from bourgeois restoration, giving it the security to complete the establishment of socialism." It was a divergence of strategic scope: "Bolshevism was not infected by the belief in the power and strength of a revolutionary bourgeois democracy in Russia. From the outset it recognized the decisive significance of the struggle of the working class in the coming revolution, but its program was limited, in the first period, to the interests of the great peasant masses, without whom - and against whom - the revolution could not have been carried out by the proletariat. Hence the provisional recognition of the bourgeois-democratic character of the revolution and its prospects. For this reason, the author [Trotsky] did not belong, at that time, to either of the two main currents of the Russian workers' movement." For him, "the proletariat, having come to power, must not limit itself to the framework of bourgeois democracy, but must employ the tactic of *permanent revolution*, that is to say, annul the limits between the minimum and maximum program of social democracy, moving on to ever deeper social reforms and seeking direct and immediate support in the revolution in Western Europe."³⁸

As positions evolved, a convergence took shape since the Fifth (London) Congress of the RSDLP: "The most notable fact of the congress was the isolation of the Mensheviks in the face of the convergence of positions of Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky. It was an objective convergence, without any agreement, and not without considerable discrepancies, between Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the one hand, and Rosa and Trotsky, on the other."³⁹ Post-Gorbachev Soviet historiography has tended to minimize the pre-revolution Lenin-Trotsky disagreements (just as Stalinism previously exaggerated them to the point of outright lies): "These disagreements do not have much significance when we consider them from a historical perspective. This includes the question of the permanent revolution, which was always taken to exaggerated proportions after Lenin's death. In fact, after 1916, Lenin never highlighted this issue again." The same author points out

³⁸ Leon Trotsky. Tres concepciones de la revolución rusa. In: *Results and Prospects*. Buenos Aires, El Yunque, 1974.

³⁹ Vittorio Strada. The controversy between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks over the 1905 revolution. In: Eric J. Hobsbawm (org.), *History of Marxism*. Vol. 3, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1984.

that “articles by Trotsky were published in magazines directed by Lenin”.⁴⁰

Strategic disagreements continued. They became more acute after the “August Bloc” (a bloc “for the unity of the RSDLP”, headed by Trotsky, with Menshevik participation) of 1912, when the Bolsheviks embarked on the path of building an independent party. For 15 years, Lenin and Trotsky exchanged various insults in writing (“mediocre”, “second-rate lawyer”, Trotsky said of Lenin; “cheap slanderer”, “*balalaika* player”, “pretender”, “ambitious”, the latter retorted), which Trotsky retrospectively attributed to immaturity and the “heat” of the factional struggle. In the middle of the period of reaction, Trotsky specified the extent of the differences: “If the Mensheviks, starting from the following conception: ‘our revolution is bourgeois’, arrive at the idea of adapting the entire tactics of the proletariat to the conduct of the liberal bourgeoisie until it conquers power, the Bolsheviks, starting from a no less abstract conception, ‘democratic dictatorship, but not socialist’, arrive at the idea of a self-limitation of the proletariat, which holds power, to a regime of bourgeois democracy. It is true that there is an essential difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks: while the anti-revolutionary aspects of Menshevism are manifest from the present, in all their size, what is anti-revolutionary in Bolshevism does not threaten us - but the threat is no less serious - except in the event of a revolutionary victory.”⁴¹ This can be read in two ways: 1) Trotsky put Bolshevism on a higher historical and political level than Menshevism; 2) he also had the opinion that there were anti-revolutionary aspects to Bolshevism, which was no small thing.

We focus here on the Lenin-Trotsky polemic because of the role of both leaders in the October Revolution and subsequent history. Before that, for more than a quarter of a century, Lenin took part in polemics with numerous currents of Russian and international socialism (even the Argentinian socialist Juan B. Justo criticized the Leninist theory of imperialism) and was undoubtedly the pivot of political debates in the workers’ movement in his country. The programmatic differences between the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and “Trotskyists” became clear with the revolution. For Rudi Dutschke, “only an understanding of the bourgeois revolution of 1905 allows us to get closer, through Lenin’s economic conceptions, to the roots of democratic centralism as a type of party”.⁴² Insofar as, initially, all the fractions agreed on the bourgeois nature of the Russian Revolution, the divergences did not appear clearly. At first, the 1905 revolution and its repression by Tsarism brought the Bolsheviks closer to the Mensheviks: both believed in the need for a “bourgeois-democratic” stage prior to the socialist revolution. However, between 1907 and 1908, it turned out that while the Mensheviks believed that the bourgeoisie could lead and complete this stage, the Bolsheviks claimed that only the proletariat and the peasants could fulfill the task of the bourgeois-democratic stage.

Divergences were overcome, not completely, in practice (the October Revolution was identified with the names of Lenin and Trotsky) and by the political

40 Vladimir I. Billik. In: *Komsomolskaia Pravda*. n° 33, Moscow, August 1989.

41 Leon Trotsky. Nos différends. In: *1905*, Paris, Minuit, 1969.

42 Rudi Dutschke. *Lenin*. Attempts to put Lenin on his feet. Barcelona, Icaria, 1976.

assimilation of this practice. Thinking of political differences as an abnormality, and homogeneity as an ideal to be achieved, means denying thought itself and its driving force (contradiction). Without the revolution, it is likely that some of these polemics would have been extended *ad infinitum*. In his autobiography, Trotsky was quite pithy on the subject: “I came to Lenin later than others, but on my own path, having gone through and reflected on the experience of revolution, counter-revolution and imperialist war. Thanks to this, I came to him more firmly and seriously than his ‘disciples’” (note the quotation marks). To which the Stalinist historian Léo Figuères replied: “It is worth asking whether Trotsky would have been able to join Bolshevism in 1917 if all his disciples (sic, without quotation marks) had followed his path, abandoned and fought Lenin after the Second Congress”.⁴³ If that had happened, Bolshevism would not have existed. Figuères, as a good Stalinist, considered Bolshevism to be a current of Lenin’s “disciples”, that is, in religious terms.

On an international level, nothing is more contrary to the truth than the legend coined by Stalin in *Foundations of Leninism*: that the Bolsheviks had acted, since 1903, to split with the reformists in the Socialist International. It was with great struggle that Lenin managed to be recognized as the representative of the RSDLP (together with Plekhanov) since 1905, in the International Socialist Bureau (BSI), a position he would hold until the First World War. Within this framework, the Russian “Unity Congress” of 1906 took place. In 1907, at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, the motion on the attitude and duty of socialists in the event of war (“to use the crisis caused by the war to precipitate the fall of the bourgeoisie”) was presented jointly by Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and the Menshevik Martov. When in January 1912 the (Bolshevik) Prague conference consummated the split with the Mensheviks, Lenin did not present it in the BSI as the break between reformists and revolutionaries, but of the defenders of the “*real workers’ party*” against the “liquidators” (supporters of a merely “legal” party), and defending “the only existing party, the illegal party” (report by Kamenev, Lenin’s representative, in the BSI of November 1913).

In 1912, the Bolsheviks fought to impose themselves as representatives of the RSDLP at the International Socialist Congress in Basel. Already in 1914 (before the war), due to the international isolation of the Bolsheviks (including in relation to the left wing of the Socialist International, whose leader Rosa Luxemburg had allied herself with the Mensheviks and the “August Bloc” led by Trotsky), the Bolsheviks accepted a new and fruitless “unification conference”. Lenin was already aware of the international projection of the “Russian split” and, after the capitulation of the main parties of the Socialist International to the outbreak of war in August 1914, he proclaimed from the end of that year the struggle for a new International, the Third.⁴⁴ Three years later, in 1917, in Russia, Bolshevism was the point of confluence for the revolutionaries.

43 Léo Figuères. *Le Trotskysme, cet Antiléninisme*. Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1969.

44 Georges Haupt. Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the Second International. *The Historian and the Social Movement*. Paris, François Maspéro, 1980.

Lenin, in the middle of the imperialist war (at the end of 1915) accused Trotsky, even though they both belonged to the so-called “Zimmerwald Left”, the ultra-minority internationalist fraction of international socialism: “Trotsky’s original theory borrows from the Bolsheviks the call for a decisive revolutionary struggle and the conquest of political power by the proletariat, and from the Mensheviks the denial of the role of the peasantry. The peasantry, it seems, became divided, differentiated, and would be less and less able to play a revolutionary role. In Russia, a ‘national’ revolution would be impossible, ‘we live in the epoch of imperialism’, and ‘imperialism does not oppose the bourgeois nation to the old regime, but the proletariat to the bourgeois nation’. Here’s an amusing example of the jokes that can be played with the word ‘imperialism’. If, in Russia, the proletariat is already opposed to the ‘bourgeois nation’, then it is on the eve of a socialist revolution. In this case, the ‘confiscation of the estates’ (put forward by Trotsky in 1915) is false and it is not a question of talking about a ‘revolutionary workers’ government’, but a ‘socialist workers’ government’. The extent of Trotsky’s confusion can be seen in his assertion that the proletariat will lead the non-proletarian masses of the people! Trotsky doesn’t even think that if the proletariat manages to lead the non-proletarian masses to the confiscation of the estates and the overthrow of the monarchy, this will be the realization of the ‘bourgeois national revolution’, the democratic-revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.”

And Lenin concluded that “Trotsky is in fact helping the liberal workers’ politicians, who, denying the role of the peasantry, refuse to lead the peasants to the revolution”. In the light of Trotsky’s work, it can be said that Lenin’s accusation was false, although it was based on elements that were still weak in the formulation of the “permanent revolution”, which Trotsky would take care to clarify in later works (not to mention that, in fact, Russia was “on the eve of a socialist revolution”). The war itself gave rise to other disagreements: on “revolutionary defeatism” (which Trotsky, along with several Bolsheviks, did not accept), on the “United States of Europe”... But the common internationalist work on Zimmerwald’s left did not fail to create the elements of future political unity. The convergence that took place in 1917 was primarily *political*, the struggle to build the instrument of the revolution, the *party*. Even at the moment of unification, however, Trotsky drafted a document, which included a “phrase with which he pointed out, in organizational matters, ‘the narrow circle spirit’ of the Bolsheviks.... The inter-district workers retained a great distrust of the Petrograd committee (of Bolshevism). I wrote at the time that ‘the circle spirit, a legacy from the past, still exists, but for it to diminish, the inter-district workers must stop pursuing an isolated activity’.”⁴⁵

Years later, he wrote that “without belonging to either faction during his emigration, the author underestimated the fundamental fact that in the differences of opinion between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks there was, in fact, a group of inflexible revolutionaries on the one hand and, on the other, a group of elements increasingly disintegrated by opportunism and a lack of principles. When the revolution broke

⁴⁵ Leon Trotsky. Lessons from October. *From Red October to my Destiny*. Buenos Aires, Barrios, 1973.

out in 1917, the Bolshevik Party represented a strong centralized organization, which had absorbed the best elements among the progressive workers and among the revolutionary intelligentsia.”⁴⁶ On the eve of the Russian revolution, Lenin, in a lecture given in Switzerland on the occasion of the anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in 1905, said that perhaps only future generations would be able to witness the revolutionary victory that brought Bolshevism to power less than a year later...⁴⁷ Trotsky reaffirmed that “the most important disagreement between Lenin and me during those years consisted of my hope that unification with the Mensheviks would propel the majority of them onto the revolutionary path. Lenin was right about this fundamental question. However, it must be said that in 1917 the tendencies towards ‘unification’ were very strong among the Bolsheviks.”⁴⁸

The October Revolution of 1917 was preceded by the February Revolution, which was not the result of a conspiracy by any political party. 1917 was called the “terrible year” by French President Poincaré, the third of the World Wars, after a harsh European winter. For millions of men, it was the end of the patriotic illusions of 1914, transformed into massacres of combatants in “offensives” that cost hundreds of thousands of lives; supply difficulties, with sharp price increases, hitting the working class in all countries; the “civil peace” defended by the unions and workers’ parties in the warring countries had resulted in the questioning of all the workers’ conquests (rhythms of production, working hours, working conditions, claiming rights); the wear and tear on equipment, machines and the economic apparatus had caused a crisis in all countries. Russia was the country that had suffered by far the worst consequences of the war, making its historical contradictions more acute and unbearable. The February Revolution led to the fall of Tsarism and ushered in a period of political crises that ended with the October “coup d’état”, which brought the Bolsheviks to power, by then already in the majority in the workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ Soviets. Lenin, as has already been amply explained throughout historiography, was at the center of these events, which were the culmination of his political career and changed the fate of the world, justifying Hobsbawm’s assertion.

The Bolshevik Party that came to power in October 1917 was an extension of the party born in 1912 and the fraction after 1903. However, it was also different. In the months of acute political crisis, it had recruited widely among the younger generations of workers, peasants and soldiers: the underground organization, which had 25,000 members in January, had almost 80,000 at the April conference, and 200,000 at the Sixth Bolshevik Congress in August: the Old Bolsheviks and the *Komitetchiki* were a minority of 10%. The membership included workers’ groups that were not defined in relation to the pre-war fractions and quarrels: the Interdistrict Organization, which had no more than 4,000 members, had three of its members elected to the Central Committee. The August 1917 congress saw the convergence of various organizations or groups; their solid foundation was Lenin’s

46 Leon Trotsky. *Results and Perspectives*, cit.

47 See the text of the conference in: V. I. Lenin. *1905: Revolutionary Days*. São Paulo, História, 1980.

48 Leon Trotsky. *Autobiography*. In: *Lenin’s Testament*. Buenos Aires, El Yunque, 1983.

(Bolshevik) RSDLP, into which flowed the “revolutionary streams” to which Radek referred.⁴⁹ Two years after the October Revolution, Lenin wrote: “At the moment of the conquest of power, when the Republic of Soviets was created, Bolshevism attracted all that was best in the tendencies of the closest socialist thought.”⁵⁰

Lenin converged with Trotsky’s theory⁵¹ from his own theory. In the *April Theses*, the historical program of the “turning point”, Lenin started from the “conclusion of the bourgeois phase of the revolution”. If what had prevented the proletariat from seizing power in February 1917 was only its insufficient consciousness and organization, this meant that there was no such thing as a “national revolution” separated by a historical stage from the proletarian revolution. Bolshevism was therefore the political instrument of the “second stage” of the revolution. It was Trotsky, in *The Lessons of October* (1924), who made the critical necrological assessment of the Leninist formula of “democratic dictatorship”: “Entirely revolutionary and profoundly dynamic, Lenin’s approach to the problem was radically opposed to the Menshevik system, according to which Russia could only claim to repeat the history of the advanced peoples, with the bourgeoisie in power and the Social Democracy in opposition. However, in Lenin’s formula, certain circles in our party did not emphasize the word ‘dictatorship’, but the word ‘democratic’, as opposed to the word ‘socialist’. This would mean that in Russia, a backward country, only the democratic revolution was conceived. The socialist revolution had to begin in the West and we could only join the current of socialism by following England, France and Germany.”

The “programmatic turn” of Bolshevism was clear in the assessment made by Lenin himself, a few years after the October 1917 victory: “In order to consolidate for the peoples of Russia the achievements of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, we had to go further, and so we did. We solved the problems of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in the course of the process, as a ‘by-product’ of our fundamental and genuinely *proletarian*, revolutionary socialist activities. We have always said that

49 Karl Radek. *The Routes and Driving Forces of the Russian Revolution*. Madrid, Akal, 1976.

50 At a conference in Copenhagen in 1932, Trotsky summarized the history of the workers’ party in Russia: “In 1903 the split between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks took place. In 1912 the Bolshevik fraction definitely became an independent party. For twelve years (1905-1917) it taught us to recognize the class mechanics of society in struggles and great events. It educated cadres capable of both initiative and discipline. The discipline of revolutionary action was based on the unity of doctrine, the traditions of common struggles and trust in an experienced leadership. This is what the party was like in 1917. While official ‘public opinion’ and the tons of paper in the intellectual press despised it, the party oriented itself according to the course of the mass movement. The formidable lever that this party wielded firmly was introduced into the factories and regiments. The peasant masses were increasingly turning to it. If the nation is understood to mean not the privileged, but the majority of the people, that is, the workers and peasants, Bolshevism became, in the course of 1917, the truly national Russian party.”

51 This is what Abraham Joffé, the Soviet leader who committed suicide in June 1927, in the midst of the rise of Stalinism, said in his farewell letter: “For more than twenty years we have fought together, since the permanent revolution. But I have always thought that you lacked the inflexibility, the intransigence of Lenin, his resolution to stand alone, if necessary, in his position, foreseeing the future majority, when everyone had recognized the correctness of the path he had chosen. You were always right politically, and I have already said that I heard Lenin recognize several times that in 1905 it was not he, but you, who was right.”

democratic reforms - we have said it and demonstrated it with the facts - are a by-product of the proletarian revolution, that is, the socialist revolution. This is the relationship between the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the proletarian socialist revolution: the former becomes the latter. The latter solves the problems of the former in passing. The second consolidates the work of the first. The struggle, and only the struggle, determines the extent to which the latter manages to impose itself on the former.”⁵² The “new Bolshevism” dominated the Congress (August 1917), which materialized the fusion and was chaired by Lenin and Trotsky (absent due to the July repression), the latter being elected to the CC with 131 out of a possible 134 votes.

The entry of Trotsky and his supporters, as well as other groups, was decisive in bringing about the “historic turning point” in Bolshevism, which took on its definitive name of *Communist Party*. The political convergence took place at a time when, according to the Menshevik memoirist Sukhanov, “the masses lived and breathed with the Bolsheviks, they were entirely in the hands of the party of Lenin and Trotsky”.⁵³ Reflecting back, Trotsky recalled that: “There were violent clashes between Lenin and me, because in cases where I was in disagreement with him on a serious issue, I carried the fight through to the end. These cases, of course, are recorded in all the memoirs, and the epigones wrote a lot about them later. But there are a hundred times more cases where we understood each other with half a word, and where our solidarity ensured that the issue passed in the Politburo without debate. Lenin greatly appreciated this solidarity.”⁵⁴

Once the revolution was victorious, Bolshevism was not the “sole party of the revolution”, due to specific circumstances (a bloody civil war, sustained by the intervention of 14 foreign powers, and the country’s international isolation). During the October Revolution, four anarchists were members of the Revolutionary Military Committee. An anarchist sailor from Kronstadt led the delegation that dissolved the Constituent Assembly. At the same time, however, Bolshevik hegemony was clear. Factory committees sprang up everywhere, quickly became strong and were dominated by the Bolsheviks. From October 30 to November 4, the first Russian Conference of Factory Committees was held in Petrograd, where 96 of the 167 delegates were Bolsheviks.⁵⁵ Even so, “during the first week of December 1917 there were some demonstrations in favor of the Constituent Assembly, that is, against the power of the Soviets. Irresponsible Red Guards then shot at one of the processions and killed some people. The reaction to this stupid violence was immediate: ***within twelve hours, the constitution of the Petrograd Soviet was changed***; more than a dozen Bolshevik deputies were dismissed and replaced by Mensheviks... Despite

52 V. I. Lenin. *Obras Completas*. Vol. XXXV, Buenos Aires, Cartago, 1968.

53 Nikolai N. Sukhanov. *The Russian Revolution 1917*. A personal record. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1984.

54 For Jean-Jacques Marie (*Stalin*. Paris, Seuil, 1967), even when “Lenin requests (in his *Testament*) that Stalin be eliminated from the post of General Secretary, he is only questioning his character, not his value”.

55 Y. M. Gorodetsky. The Bolshevik Revolution. In: AAVV. *História do Século XX*, São Paulo, Abril Cultural, 1976.

this, it took three weeks to calm public resentment and allow the Bolsheviks to be recalled and reinstated.”⁵⁶

Trotsky was explicit in recognizing the superiority of Lenin’s role in the revolution: “If I had not been in Petersburg in 1917, the October Revolution would have happened in the same way - *conditioned by Lenin’s presence and direction*. If neither Lenin nor I had been in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from happening... If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, there would have been no chance of me getting the Bolshevik top brass to resist. The struggle against ‘Trotskyism’ (that is, against the proletarian revolution) would have been open from May 1917, and the outcome of the revolution would have been a question mark. But, I repeat, with Lenin present, the October Revolution would have achieved victory anyway. The same can be said, in short, of the civil war.”⁵⁷ Regarding the party, Trotsky referred to the old organizational questions in terms that echoed, almost point by point, the terms Lenin had used to criticize it three decades earlier: “The leadership is not a simple ‘reflection’ of a class, or the product of its free creation. Leadership is forged in the process of clashes between the different layers of a given class. Once it has assumed its role, the leadership rises above its class and is exposed to the pressure and influence of other classes... A very important factor in the maturity of the Russian proletariat in 1917 was Lenin, who did not fall from the sky. He embodied the revolutionary tradition of the working class. In order for his postulates to make their way among the masses, there had to be cadres, albeit limited ones; there had to be the confidence of the cadres in his leadership, a confidence based on all past experience.”⁵⁸

Bolshevism was not just the product of a group of individuals, their political and ideological struggles, but of the history of the workers’ movement and the revolution, through a gigantic clash of ideas, programmes, tactics, organizations and men. In the early years of the revolution, Bolshevism had no problem admitting its 1917 turnaround, as demonstrated by an article by Molotov (later Stalin’s apparatchik in the highest state positions) from 1924: “It must be said openly: the party had neither the clarity of vision nor the spirit of decision required by the revolutionary moment. It did not have them because it did not have a clear attitude or orientation towards the socialist revolution. In general, the agitation and the whole practice of the revolutionary party lacked a solid foundation, since thought had not yet advanced to the bold conclusion of the need for an immediate struggle for socialism and socialist revolution.”⁵⁹

The victory of the Soviet revolution meant the shipwreck of all the parties that had bet against absolutism on bourgeois regimes, from a constitutional monarchy (the constitutional party, Kadets) to a parliamentary democracy (almost all the socialist parties, with the exception of Bolshevism). It was above all from Lenin that efforts

56 John Reed. *Ten Days that Shook the World*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2010.

57 Leon Trotsky. *Diary of Exile*. São Paulo, Edições Populares, 1980.

58 Leon Trotsky. *Class, Party and Direction*. Buenos Aires, El Yunque, 1974 [1940].

59 In: Ernest Mandel. *On the History of the Workers’ Movement*. Barcelona, Fontamara, 1978.

were made to preserve a multi-party political framework in these conditions. In an unstable framework, an olive branch was extended to the socialist parties excluded from power. The Mensheviks held a five-day conference in Moscow at the end of October 1918. The outbreak of civil war and the threat to the Soviet regime led them down the path of compromise. The conference adopted a series of theses and resolutions recognizing the October Revolution as “historically necessary” and as “a gigantic ferment that had set the whole world in motion”, renouncing “all political cooperation with classes hostile to democracy”. Attempts to collaborate with the anarchists (whom Lenin went so far as to define as “our best allies”, going so far as to have a friendly meeting with their famous Ukrainian leader Nestor Makhno) collapsed amidst the events of the civil war, which saw violent clashes between the Red Army and the Ukrainian “Black Army”.

The policy of conciliation did not stand the test of events, against a backdrop of internal counter-revolution and external intervention, both violent. The civil war first transformed the Bolsheviks into a “single ruling party”, with the attempt by the Left SRs (Revolutionary Socialists), who were part of the Soviet government, against Lenin (although Fanny Kaplan, the perpetrator, insisted that she had acted on her own) and the murders of Uritsky and Volodarsky, Bolshevik leaders: “The events of the summer of 1918 left the Bolsheviks without rivals or comrades as the dominant party in the state; and they possessed in the Tcheka an absolute organ of power. There remained, however, a strong reluctance to use this power without restriction. The time had not yet come for the final extinction of the excluded parties. Terror was at this time a capricious instrument and it was normal to find parties against which the most violent anathemas had been pronounced and the most drastic measures taken, continuing to survive and enjoying tolerance. One of the first decrees of the new regime had authorized the Sovnarkom to close down all newspapers that preached ‘open resistance or disobedience to the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government’ and the bourgeois press ceased to exist. The Petrograd Menshevik newspaper, *Novyi Luch*, was suppressed in February 1918 for its campaign of opposition to the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Nevertheless, it reappeared in Moscow in April under the name *Vperiod* and continued its career for some time without interference. Anarchist newspapers were published in Moscow long after the Tcheka’s action against the anarchists in April 1918.”⁶⁰ The civil war swept away all the compromises between Bolshevism and its political opposition.

Lenin was opposed to considering this situation as ideal, and evolved in his assessment of the nature of the Soviet power established in Russia. In 1918, he wrote: “The struggle against the bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet organization is guaranteed by the solidity of the links between the Soviets and the people, by the flexibility and elasticity of these links. The poor never regard bourgeois parliaments as their own institutions, even in the most democratic capitalist republic in the world. The Soviets, on the contrary, are their institutions, not alien to the masses of workers and peasants.”⁶¹ As early as 1921, in the course of the polemic on the trade

60 Edward H. Carr. *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917 - 1923*. Lisbon, Afrontamento, 1977, vol. 1.

61 V. I. Lenin Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power (March 1918). <https://www.>

unions, Lenin referred to the Soviet state as “a workers’ state with the peculiarity that in the country not the worker population predominates, but the peasant population, and secondly, a workers’ state with a bureaucratic deformation”.⁶² The transition from deformation to bureaucratic degeneration was a political and social process, summarized by Christian Rakovsky: “The situation of a class that struggles for power and that of a class that holds power is different [...] when a class takes power, part of it becomes an agent of that power. In a socialist state, where capitalist accumulation is forbidden, this difference starts out being functional, and then becomes social.”⁶³

Five years after the October Revolution, the isolation of the revolution, the economic hardship, the fatigue of the masses and the emptying of the Soviets were inevitably accompanied by the differentiation of a privileged bureaucratic layer in the party, which was then the only party in the state. The struggle against the bureaucratization of the state and the party was also “Lenin’s last [and unsuccessful] fight”.⁶⁴ In the crisis provoked by the Georgian national question (against the chauvinist Great-Russian policy of the nascent bureaucracy, and Stalin in particular, who was Georgian himself) and in Lenin’s political will (which proposed the removal of Stalin from the post of general secretary of the party), the main lines of this struggle were revealed. Trotsky agreed to form a political bloc with Lenin against bureaucratization, which did not mean that this bloc was guaranteed victory in advance, given the weight of the prestige of both leaders.⁶⁵

In his autobiography, Trotsky wrote: “Only Lenin and I knew about the idea of forming a Lenin-Trotsky ‘bloc’ against the bureaucracy. The other members of the Political Bureau had only vague suspicions. Nobody knew anything about Lenin’s letters on the national question or the *Testament*. If I had started acting, they might have said that I was starting a personal struggle to take Lenin’s place. I couldn’t think about it without shivering. I thought that, even if I won, the end result would be such a demoralization for me that it would cost me dearly. There was one element of uncertainty in all the calculations: Lenin himself and his state of health. Will he be able to express his opinion? Will he have time to do so? Will the party understand that Lenin and Trotsky are fighting for the future of the revolution, and not that Trotsky is fighting for the position of the sick Lenin? The provisional situation continued. But procrastination favored the usurpers, because Stalin, as general secretary, naturally ran the entire state machine during the interregnum.”

Lenin tried to make his break with Stalin public in the last days of 1922, shortly before he was sidelined by illness. As Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin had imposed a submissive government on Georgia *manu militari*, invading it in

[marxists.org/portugues/lenin/1918/04/26.htm](https://www.marxists.org/portugues/lenin/1918/04/26.htm)

62 V. I. Lenin. La crisis del partido (January 19, 1921). *Obras Completas*, vol.32, Moscow, Progreso, 1983.

63 Christian Rakovsky. The professional dangers of power (August 1928). Translation: Marcio Lauria Monteiro <https://www.marxists.org/portugues/rakovski/1928/08/06.htm>

64 Moshe Lewin. *Le Dernier Combat de Lénine*. Paris, Minuit, 1980.

65 V. V. Juravlev and N. A. Nenakorov. Trotsky and the Georgian Affair. *Cahiers Léon Trotsky* n° 41, Paris, March 1990.

February 1921 and ousting the Menshevik government headed by Noah Jordan, not only against the will of the majority of the population, but also of the Georgian Bolsheviks. Lenin said in a “Letter to Congress”: “I think that, in this episode, Stalin’s impatience and his taste for administrative coercion, as well as his hatred of the famous ‘social chauvinism’, exerted a fatal influence. The influence of hatred on politics in general is extremely harmful. Our case, that of our relations with Georgia, is a typical example of the need to use the utmost prudence and show a conciliatory and tolerant spirit if we want to resolve the issue in an authentically proletarian way.” And, referring directly to Stalin: “The Georgian who is dismissive of this aspect of the problem, who shamelessly hurls accusations of social-nationalism (when he himself is an authentic social-nationalist and also a vulgar, Great-Russian executioner), this Georgian, in fact, violates the interests of proletarian class solidarity. Stalin and [Felix] Dzerzhinsky [creator and head of the Tcheka] must be held politically responsible for this campaign.” The Georgian question signaled the transformation of the USSR, created in 1922, from a project of a free federation of socialist republics (with the explicit right to secede) into a “prison of peoples”, which would explode 70 years later.

Lenin died in January 1924, after a year of increasing health complications - partly due to the attempt on his life in 1919 - and almost total withdrawal from active politics. In the last months of his life, his concerns, recorded in his “Testament”, caused embarrassment when read out to the Central Committee; the meeting on the eve of the 13th Congress that decided not to remove Stalin also decided to release the document to only a few delegates. A series of provocations and insults against Trotsky followed, tending to polarize the political scene: the aim was to propose an incompatibility between “Leninism” and “Trotskyism”. With Lenin’s death, Stalin quickly presented himself as the legitimate heir to this “Leninism”, defined as a set of vaguely defined but infallible doctrines that would distinguish the party’s “official line” from the “heresies” of its critics. The open and changing thinking of a revolutionary method was transformed into the closed and immutable system of a conservative and counter-revolutionary interest.

The adjective (“*Leninist* theory of...”) was replaced by the noun (Leninism) first used against Trotsky and the Left Opposition (created at the end of 1923) and then as the official doctrine of the USSR and the Communist International. Within a few years, the high priest of the new single system of “thought” and, above all, political coercion naturally added “Stalinism” to the doctrinal canon of the new Holy Scriptures. The enemy of all definitive schemes and ideas, Lenin, was misrepresented and presented as the founding father of the Great Definitive Scheme, while his body was obscenely embalmed as a religious relic for public display, a fact that survives to this day. The communist parties were “Bolshevized”, bureaucratically disciplined, to be transformed into an apparatus for integrating the new bureaucracy into the world order, which precipitated the world once again into a scenario dominated by inter-imperialist contradictions that led to the greatest catastrophe in human history.

Endeavored in a “socialist world” with feet of clay, the figure of Lenin was qualified, after the end of that “world”, as the greatest villain in human history, by

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publicists recruited from the ranks of the old deifiers, recycled into representatives of a hysterical anti-communism by the ideologues of a self-confident capitalism, more savage than ever. As this self-confidence melts away in the light of capital's historic crisis, Lenin's trajectory re-emerges, a hundred years later, in its true dimension: not that of the creation of an "ism" for consumption and legitimization of conservative "left" sects, but that of an unavoidable moment of critical-dialectical thinking, the only basis for revolutionary action, against a world in which the ever-increasing unfolding of barbarism, neoliberal, fundamentalist, eco-destructive and neofascist, only leaves socialism as a viable alternative for the survival of humanity. In this historical context of ours, it is necessary to unpack Lenin's thought and action as an exemplary moment, which has not yet been surpassed, in the transformation of revolutionary ideas into material force.