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# Lenin, Bolshevism, and Social-Democratic Political Theory

*The 1905 and 1917 Soviets*

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## Abstract

Lars Lih has contributed to our knowledge of Russian Social Democracy lately. However, serious methodological flaws bedevil this advance in knowledge. Lih's overall approach displays a very static understanding of political ideas in relation to political movements. In the first section, 'Lenin, the St Petersburg Bolshevik Leadership, and the 1905 Soviet', I challenge Lih's position that Lenin never changed his mind about bringing socialist consciousness into the working class 'from without'. In the second section, 'Lenin, "Old Bolshevism" and Permanent Revolution: The Soviets in 1917', I challenge Lih's revisionist view that Old Bolshevism's pre-1917 goal of 'democratic revolution to the end' drove Lenin's partisans to make a working-class, socialist revolution in 1917. On this singular account, Lenin's *April Theses*, which called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the transfer of all power to the soviets, was merely a further expression of Old Bolshevik politics, not a break with it, as has almost universally been held.

## Keywords

Lars Lih – Lenin – Bolshevism – Menshevism – political theory – permanent revolution – party – class

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## Introduction

In a landmark contribution, *Lenin Rediscovered: 'What Is to Be Done?' in Context* (2006), Lars Lih destroyed the 'textbook interpretation' of Lenin's famous 1902 polemic. Exponents of the textbook interpretation, some operating in the Marxist 'activist' tradition, argued that *What Is to Be Done?* (hereafter, *WITBD?*) called for the creation of a special, Leninist party, unlike any other. To those operating in the non-Marxist 'academic' tradition, this uniquely Leninist party founded Soviet totalitarianism. For both, Lenin's ideas and practices were innovative and largely incompatible with Western European Social-Democratic practice and theory. This interpretation, Lih notes, has 'served as a distorting mirror for much wider topics – the nature of the split in Russian Social Democracy, the role of the *konspiratsiia*-underground as a factor in Russian history, the real impact of Bolshevik ideology on the revolution of 1917 and its outcome, to name but three'.<sup>1</sup>

Lih shows once again that *WITBD?* was a restatement of Russian Social-Democratic orthodoxy. Leon Trotsky had already confirmed this position, a commonplace in the Second International before World War I,<sup>2</sup> and Neil Harding reconfirmed it in academic terms in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Russian Social-Democratic orthodoxy itself was but an expression of 'Erfurtianism', the Social-Democratic theory of the working-class movement, elaborated by Karl Kautsky, and espoused by all European Social Democrats. Along the way, Lih demonstrates, in great detail, that Cold War academics welcomed Menshevik criticism of *WITBD?* because Mensheviks like Trotsky seemed to say that Lenin's position prefigured or led to Stalinism. Lih shows, instead, that Lenin's contemporary critics were in fact opportunistic because they were bringing in considerations that had never been brought to anyone's attention before. He also makes a convincing case that Rosa Luxemburg's attack on *WITBD?*, regularly invoked by some on the left to decry party 'dictatorship' over the workers' movement, was an 'unscrupulous hatchet job', 'baseless nonsense'.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Lih 2010, p. 172.

2 '*Lenin considered Kautsky as his teacher* and stressed this everywhere he could. In Lenin's work of that period and for a number of years following, one does not find even a trace of criticism in principle directed against the Bebel-Kautsky tendency. Instead one finds a series of declarations to the effect that Bolshevism is not some sort of an independent tendency but is only a translation into the language of Russian conditions of the tendency of Bebel-Kautsky' (Trotsky 1932).

3 Harding 1977.

4 Lih 2006, pp. 526, 529.

However, serious methodological flaws bedevil this advance in knowledge. Lih's overall approach displays a very static understanding of political ideas in relation to political movements. This prevents him from seeing how new developments in the workers' movement posed new problems, which called forth different positions from Social Democrats, positions that are incomprehensible simply by reference to or in terms of fundamental premises laid down in the Erfurtian scenario. Indeed, modifications to the Erfurtian scenario itself were not uniformly accepted and were subject to wide-ranging discussions. The great turn-of-the-century international debate over Bernstein's revisionism comes immediately to mind. Lenin contributed to this debate in *WITBD?*. A few years later, controversy erupted over what lessons Social Democrats everywhere should learn from the 1905 Revolution in Russia, as well as from the explosion of intense labour conflict in Germany the same year. Luxemburg analysed the 'new epoch in the development of the labour movement' in *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906), a seminal work. She called into question the Erfurtian vision of a smooth, uninterrupted, evolutionary development of the power of the workers' movement right up to the very eve of capitalism's revolutionary overthrow.<sup>5</sup> Events in Russia in particular, she argued, had revealed the labour movement's discontinuous, episodically revolutionary character, mandating dynamic changes in the SPD's hitherto more-or-less permanently defensive *Ermattungstrategie* [strategy of attrition]. She insisted that the party encourage the explosion of working-class activity by providing the workers' movement with political leadership oriented toward a strategy of confrontation instead of accommodation with the employers and the state, opening the way for victory.

Still, the party model and political strategy of German Social Democracy seemed to work tolerably well – until 1914. That year, the Second International collapsed in infamy. With the exception of Russian Social Democracy, all other parties of the major warring countries rushed to defend 'their' governments' imperialist foreign policy. The German Social-Democratic Party became dead for purposes of socialist revolution – 'a stinking corpse' as Luxemburg put it – but very much alive and kicking for fighting against it. At this moment of supreme crisis, International Social Democracy turned out to be not the 'merger of socialism and the workers' movement' as Kautsky had repeatedly held for over a quarter of a century, but the merger of 'loyalty to Marxism in words' and 'subordination' to counterrevolutionary, bourgeois politics 'in deed'.<sup>6</sup> Only now would Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and other revolutionaries

5 Luxemburg 1971, p. 11.

6 Lenin 1962h, p. 312.

finally recognise the need to break with Social Democracy and form new, communist, parties pursuing new, communist politics.

Most needed for a fuller and more supple understanding of this mottled history is an emphasis on practical and theoretical ruptures with, or discontinuities within the Erfurtian scenario – not in the sense of reinventing the wheel, but in the sense of revolutionary thought reflecting *in medias res* the discontinuous character of the workers' movement and drawing certain novel political conclusions from this fact.

Unfortunately, Lih deemphasises discontinuities and disagreements. Instead, his whole approach stresses overarching continuities, consensus over transient disputes, in Social-Democratic practice and theory throughout the pre-1914 period. Indeed, he even thinks the continuity extends beyond 1914, bridging the great divide in the workers' movement generated by World War I and the October Revolution. The new, Communist parties, he says, were simply 'more militant, less "careerist"' versions of the old Social-Democratic parties. Both would 'confront the same essential challenge and dilemma: being a revolutionary party in a non-revolutionary situation'.<sup>7</sup>

That is a colossal misjudgement. In the quasi-revolutionary situation of 1918–19 the German Social-Democratic Party was not 'less revolutionary', 'less militant', 'more careerist' than its communist competitors, it was an openly counter-revolutionary party that worked furiously to save capitalism and the capitalist state. Its leaders acted decisively and without pity or remorse to destroy the revolutionary left, abetting the brutal murder of Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and countless other radical socialists. Second International leaders displayed none of the 'indecisiveness', 'fatalism', 'passivity' and 'mechanistic determinism' so often attributed to them by so many on the left (Lih excepted).

Lih's assumption of continuity and essential unity within Social Democracy prevents him from asking why, in the near-revolutionary situation of 1919, German Social Democracy, under the leadership of Noske and Ebert, worked overtime to destroy an incipient German October – whereas in 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks took advantage of a revolutionary situation to make the October Revolution. Perhaps Lih one day will directly address this issue.<sup>8</sup> Until then, of the many issues Lih *has* raised, I will address two – and only two – that highlight disabling weaknesses in Lih's static approach. I have accordingly divided my essay into sections.

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7 Lih 2012.

8 See, e.g., Brenner 1985 for a probing study of contemporary Social Democracies in the West. The analysis holds good for Social Democracy, as it has existed for well over a century. For a comparative discussion, contrasting Russia and the West, see Marot 2013a, pp. 144–54.

In the first section, I offer a detailed summary and narrative of *Lenin, the St Petersburg Bolshevik Leadership and the 1905 Soviet* and then step back to interpret its historical significance. Historians have told the story before, and the issue is a familiar one:<sup>9</sup> did the 1905 Revolution cause Lenin to distance himself from, or make any changes to any of the formulations in *WITBD?* about bringing socialist consciousness into the working class ‘from without’? I challenge Lih’s position that Lenin maintained continuity of views on this matter.

In the second section, I take up *Lenin, ‘Old Bolshevism’ and Permanent Revolution: The Soviets in 1917*. I again challenge Lih’s continuity thesis, his revisionist view that Old Bolshevism’s pre-1917 goal of ‘democratic revolution to the end’ drove Lenin’s partisans make a working-class, socialist revolution in 1917. On this most singular account, Lenin’s *April Theses*, which called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the transfer of all power to the soviets, was merely a further expression of Old Bolshevik politics, not a break with it, as has almost universally been held.

## 1 Lenin, the St Petersburg Bolshevik Leadership, and the 1905 Soviet

At the height of the 1905 Revolution, St Petersburg’s workers founded a never-before-seen institution to regulate their self-movement. Workers of the city’s factories, large and small, elected factory committees and sent deputies to represent the interests of the factory’s workforce. Many Menshevik activists, acting on their own initiative, encouraged this movement. Virtually overnight, the St Petersburg Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, a splendid example of working-class creativity, came to enjoy undivided authority in the working class at large. Social Democrats debated in their press and at party meetings what attitude to adopt toward this remarkable institution.<sup>10</sup> Central Committee member Alexander Bogdanov summed up the outcome of this discussion among the Bolshevik leadership in his ‘Letter to All Party Workers.’<sup>11</sup> He, P.A. Krasikov, and A.A. Rumiantsev were responsible for the day-to-day political direction of the party and for explaining the party’s line to the membership.

The revolutionary movement, Bogdanov began, had thrown up a host of organisationally diffuse and politically immature formations. To the extent these developed independently of the RSDLP, they threatened to arrest the

9 See e.g. Cliff 1975 and Liebman 1970.

10 Schwarz 1967, Chapter 4.

11 Bogdanov 1956, pp. 188–94. Schwarz mistakenly refers to this document as ‘Letter to All Party Organizations’ (Schwarz 1967, p. 183).

development of the proletariat at a politically primitive level, leaving workers vulnerable to the ideological influence of bourgeois parties. The Soviet was one of several such formations. Workers had elected its leadership without regard to workers' political affiliation. It therefore could not play a politically directing role and had to limit itself to the technical organisation of certain phases of working-class struggle, remaining above all a professional trade-union organisation. If the Soviet took some kind of middle course, reserving the right to take political positions as the occasion arose, then Social Democrats were to stay if only to argue against such 'senseless' political leadership. If it did consistently try to give political leadership, then it risked transformation into a political party independent of Social Democracy. Therefore, Social Democrats were to demand that the Soviet accept the programme and leadership of the RSDLP and, eventually, 'dissolve' itself into the party. If it refused, Social Democrats had to leave the Soviet and expose before the masses its anti-proletarian character.<sup>12</sup>

Krasikov brought the Bolsheviks' political stance, or aspects of it, to the attention of the Soviet leadership, whose most prominent representative was Trotsky. 'The debate was very brief', Trotsky recalled. 'Krasikov's proposal hardly received any support'.<sup>13</sup> Without further ado, the Soviet smartly moved on to the next item of business. Despite this embarrassing rebuff, the Bolsheviks stayed in the Soviet, their political intuition trumping their presumptuous political judgement, determined by orthodox Social-Democratic theory.

From Stockholm, Lenin sent a letter to *Novaia zhizn* sharply criticising the Bolsheviks' attitude toward the Soviet.<sup>14</sup> Lenin took exception to the Bolsheviks' counter-posing the RSDLP to the Soviet. The 'only question' was 'how to divide and how to combine' the tasks of the Soviet and those of the party.<sup>15</sup>

The 'question of the significance and role of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies . . . now immediately facing the St Petersburg Social-Democrats and the entire proletariat of the capital' was 'a burning issue', Lenin began.<sup>16</sup> The Soviet had come into being through a general strike of the 'whole' proletariat in favour of economic and political demands. Insofar as the economic or 'trade union' aspect of the Soviet's activities was concerned, the matter was

12 Bogdanov 1956, pp. 191–2.

13 Trotsky's 'Introduction' to P.N. Sverchov, *Na zare revoliutsii* (Leningrad, 1921), p. 7, cited in Schwarz 1967, p. 182.

14 Lenin 1962c, pp. 10–28.

15 Lenin 1962c, p. 19.

16 Lenin 1962c, p. 19.

'comparatively simple'. The Soviet should strive to include '*all* who want and are able to fight for a better life for the common people'.<sup>17</sup> There was and could be no disagreement among Social Democrats about this. More complicated was the other aspect of the Soviet's activities, 'political leadership and political struggle'. Lenin advised against demanding the Soviet accept outright the party's programme and leadership or walk out. Instead, and '*at the risk of surprising the reader*' (emphasis added), 'both the Soviet . . . and the Party were absolutely necessary for the victory of the Revolution'. The Soviet was the '*embryo of a provisional revolutionary government*' and Social Democrats should put forth the idea in the Soviet that the Soviet regard itself as such or that the Soviet assume responsibility for '*setting up*' such a government.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviet, Lenin continued, had struck deep roots in the masses, unifying all genuinely revolutionary forces. The fact that non-Social Democratic parties and unaffiliated workers were in the Soviet would be more than offset by the RSDLP's presence: The party would be in a position to win over non-Social Democratic workers because the Social-Democratic viewpoint was 'supported by history itself', was 'supported at every step by reality'.<sup>19</sup> If Social-Democratic pamphlets had not won such workers over, the revolution would. And the revolution would win only on condition that the RSDLP retain its political independence within the Soviet. It would use that independence to present its programme. That programme was:

Freedom of speech, press, assembly, association . . . convocation of a national constituent assembly . . . arming the people . . . freedom to the nationalities . . . the eight hour day . . . transfer of all the land to the peasantry.<sup>20</sup>

Anticipating the letter's publication, Lenin advised the Bolsheviks what they should be saying inside and outside the Soviet:

Make your choice citizens! Here is our program, which has long since been put forward by the whole people. These are our aims in the name of which we declare war on the Black Hundred government. We are not trying to impose any innovations thought up by us: we are merely taking the

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17 Lenin 1962c, p. 21.

18 Lenin 1962c, p. 20.

19 Lenin 1962c, p. 23.

20 Lenin 1962c, pp. 24–5.

initiative in bringing about that without which it is impossible to live any longer in Russia, as is acknowledged generally and unanimously. We do not shut ourselves off from the revolutionary people but submit to their judgment every step and every decision we take. We rely fully and solely on the free initiative of the working masses themselves.<sup>21</sup>

The editorial board decided not to publish Lenin's letter.

### *Writing WITBD? and Reading It*

Surprisingly, about this conflict, no less acute for being very short-lived, Lih says 'Bolshevik attitudes toward the revolutionary soviets of 1905' is 'a separate and rather complicated issue, so I will just say here that I do not see anything in *WITBD?* that contradicts enthusiasm about the soviets'.<sup>22</sup> But this is to ignore the essential thrust of the Bolsheviks' initial response to the Soviet. They showed absolutely no enthusiasm, just the opposite. Bogdanov's ultimatum to the Soviet leadership to recognise the RSDLP as sole authorised representative of the Russian working class or see the Bolsheviks walk out flowed from allegiance to Kautsky and to *WITBD?* that only a party armed with correct theory could bring revolutionary consciousness and organisation to the spontaneous workers' movement. Lenin 'surprised' his readers in his letter because he knew his response would be so unexpected: Instead of ratifying the Kautsky/*WITBD?* position that Bogdanov and his comrades had adopted, Lenin decisively rejected it. Lenin had a completely different take on the Soviet and on the position the Bolsheviks should hold toward it.

Fundamentally at issue in historiography of the Russian Revolution are the following passages in *WITBD?*

We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is only able to develop trade union consciousness i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation. . . .<sup>23</sup>

21 Lenin 1962c, pp. 26–7.

22 Lih 2010, p. 146, n. 88.

23 Lenin 1962a, p. 375.



And:

... the spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology ... for the spontaneous working class movement is trade-unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei* and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Finally:

... the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of least resistance, leads to the domination of bourgeois ideology ... [f]or the simple reason that bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, that it is more fully developed, and that it has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination.<sup>25</sup>

According to Lih, the passages were not scandalous to contemporary Social Democrats because Lenin was stating 'something rather banal and non-controversial'. I agree. Lenin cited Kautsky in justification. Lih says there were merely scandalous 'overtones' to these axioms because Lenin was using confusing and ambiguous vocabulary. I disagree. The vocabulary is clear and unambiguous. The experience of the 1905 Revolution rendered the passages not so much scandalous as *false*, because the 1905 Revolution falsified the idea that 'socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other' as Kautsky had argued, an argument Lenin had repeated in *WITBD?*<sup>26</sup> In 1905, Russian Social Democracy did not have at its disposal 'immeasurably more means' of disseminating socialist ideology among workers than its bourgeois competitors had in disseminating bourgeois ideology; its socialist outlook was not preeminent in the printed media of the time (and, had they existed then, radio, TV, the internet, social media etc.). Yet, Russian Social Democracy ideologically dominated the spontaneous workers' movement in the 1905 Revolution. Working people everywhere eagerly read its press, and listened attentively to its speakers.

24 Lenin 1962a, pp. 384–5.

25 Lenin 1962a, p. 386.

26 Lenin 1962a, p. 383.

The 'heroic proletariat has proved by deeds its readiness to fight, and its ability to fight consistently and in a body for clearly-understood aims, to fight in a purely Social-Democratic spirit' – even without having joined the party, Lenin wrote. It 'would be simply ridiculous to doubt that' workers who will join the party tomorrow 'will be Social-Democrats in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred'.<sup>27</sup> This was a big change in Lenin's outlook, incompatible with that of Bogdanov and his comrades, who had expressed the gravest doubt on this very question. Lenin's new view was now at odds with his old view that Social Democrats must combat 'the spontaneous development of the working class movement because it leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology... for the spontaneous working class movement is trade-unionism'.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Social Democrats must embrace spontaneity in revolutionary times because it is these times, brought immediately and directly into existence by the spontaneous action of the class, not the conscious activity of the party, that provide a practical basis for workers to accept socialist ideas and the RSDLP with breathtaking speed.

Lenin did not have to say this time and again because it was obvious: It became an ideological stock-in-trade of Russian Social Democracy, and of the radical wings in West-European Social Democracy more generally. In 1917, the Bolsheviks did not counterpoise the RSDLP to the Soviet. They did not suppress spontaneity; they participated in it as a matter of course.

Why did Lenin never return to these passages – in order to disown them explicitly? Why did he disavow them only *de facto* and not *de jure*? He could have done so in 1907, when he wrote an 18-page preface to *Twelve Years*, a reprint of a collection of articles and pamphlets originally written between 1895 and 1907, *WITBD*? among them.<sup>29</sup> I offer the following considerations.

What had been important or seemingly important to revolutionaries in 1902 had become unimportant or irrelevant in 1907. The 1905 Revolution had completely altered the political environment. Hundreds of thousands of workers had participated in it, and membership in the party had zoomed from a few thousand in 1905 to an astounding 70,000 by 1907, making the RSDLP a small mass-party. In these dizzyingly new political conditions, to argue at length, or demonstrate in detail, the *falsity* of the idea that the workers' spontaneous movement led to reformist, trade-union consciousness would have been to expose oneself to ridicule, to lag hopelessly behind the times, to ignore reality. Practice had already made self-evident the erroneousness of the passages.

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27 Lenin 1962e, p. 32.

28 Lenin 1962a, p. 375.

29 Lenin 1962g, pp. 94–113.

Since no major figure in Russian Social Democracy with the least common sense upheld the passages – or held them to Lenin's face to discredit him – Lenin had no-one to argue with and, therefore, no occasion to repudiate them explicitly.

There may have been something else for Lenin to consider. In 1902, Lenin had invoked Kautsky's authority at length to justify his position. To call it into question now, when there was no political necessity to do so, would have cleared the space for others to call into question Lenin's fidelity to Kautsky, at least on this question. Lenin gave his political opponents no opportunity to muddy the waters. Indeed, to Lenin's (and Trotsky's) immense satisfaction, in 1906 Kautsky had come out four square in favour of the Bolshevik, not Menshevik assessment of the current and future roles, and relative strengths, of the liberal-bourgeois and working-class oppositions to Tsarism, respectively.<sup>30</sup> Lenin and Kautsky agreed on strategic perspectives.

The controversial passages have acquired great importance in the historiography of Social Democracy. In the history, however, Social Democrats paid little attention to them after 1905. As a matter of routine political practice, revolutionary Social Democrats consigned these passages to the dustbin of history – whence Cold War academics retrieved them, inflating their significance to gargantuan proportions. In any event, Lenin never affirmatively repeated the argument that trade unionism and reformism would sidetrack the spontaneous movement of the working class unless the party intervened to set the movement back on track toward revolution and socialism. If he had, Lih would have reproduced them. Lih has not.<sup>31</sup>

On the question of socialist consciousness, then, the 1905 Revolution contradicted the orthodox Social-Democratic premise that the workers' movement would remain in the thrall of reformist, trade-union ideology owing to

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30 Lenin 1962f, p. 379.

31 As Hal Draper correctly notes, 'no one has ever found' the 'theory that the workers cannot come to socialist ideas of themselves, that only bourgeois intellectuals are the carriers of socialist ideas' 'anywhere else in Lenin's voluminous writings, not before and not after *WITBD*? It never appeared in Lenin again. No Leninologist has ever quoted such a theory from any other place in Lenin' (Draper 1990). However, Draper's conclusion is at cross-purposes with his idea that in *WITBD*? Lenin also tried to 'modify and recast' Kautsky's views on this matter, correcting them. In that case, we should find these corrected views in subsequent contributions. But Draper, assuming he looked for them, never found them either. This strengthens my conclusion that these passages are *unsalvageable*: no modification or recasting can save them.

workers' limited, spontaneously reformist, trade-union activity.<sup>32</sup> Lenin, the Bolsheviks and revolutionary socialists generally came to see in the workers' mass, revolutionary self-activity, which first manifested itself fully only in 1905, the practical, material basis for the working class as a whole to reject, from below, bourgeois, reformist ideology and to accept the Social-Democratic worldview, revolution and socialism with astonishing rapidity.

*Revolutionary Organisations and Organising the Revolution*

1905 also falsified the standard Social-Democratic view, in Russia and the West, of the relationship between party organisation and proletarian revolution. In a polemical passage directed against non-*Iskrist* Russian Social Democrats, Lenin states in *WITBD?*:

The 'economic struggle against the employers and the government' does not at all require an All-Russian centralised organisation, and hence *this struggle can never give rise to such an organisation as will combine, in one general assault, all the manifestations of political opposition, protest, and indignation*, an organisation that will consist of professional revolutionaries and be led by the real political leaders of the entire people (emphasis added).<sup>33</sup>

As Lih shows, Lenin, following Kautsky, expected that the RSDLP's struggle to endow the working class with ever-higher levels of political education, class-consciousness and organisation would culminate in a successful, party-led overthrow of Tsarism. This is because the party simply embodied the steady, continuous and ever-more highly organised struggle of the working class itself against the employers and the monarchy. On the question of organisation, however, the 1905 Revolution showed the inadequacy of Lenin's Erfurtian view that only the party could centralise and coordinate the workers' movement as a whole to make a revolution. The struggle of the working class against the employers and the government in 1905 Russia did give rise to a 'centralised organisation' that combined 'all the manifestations of political opposition, protest, indignation' (*indignation* – how relevant is this word today!) in a failed 'general assault' on the Tsarist state: The St Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Lih seems unaware of this problematic.

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32 Since Kautsky never addressed Lenin's revisionism on this question, there was every reason for Lenin to think that Kautsky had impliedly drawn similar lessons from the 1905 experience. Lenin would not realise his mistake until 1914.

33 Lenin 1962a, p. 440.

Neither the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks nor any Social Democrat at once understood the world-historical significance of the Soviet, however. The Menshevik historian Solomon Schwarz zeroed in on Bogdanov and the St Petersburg Bolsheviks' apparent dilemma: The 'mass labour movement though close to Social Democracy in essence, and inspired by dimly perceived notions of struggling for democracy and socialism, *could not be fitted into any party-organisational mode*'.<sup>34</sup> In his letter to party workers, Bogdanov did not just criticise the Soviet's alleged deficiencies. He thought about an organisational alternative to it, a plan to shoehorn the class-wide struggle of workers into some kind of party-soviet hybrid the RSDLP would dominate and lead. To my knowledge, no secondary work has ever mentioned his plan, let alone assessed its broader significance. It merits a look.

To lead the proletariat, Bogdanov argued, the party had to democratise itself. Current conditions permitted placing the party on an elective footing. The RSDLP could openly agitate and organise for its views. Events had borne out the correctness of the party's slogans and many workers had rallied to its banner. Still, the massive influx of workers who were new to the revolutionary movement threatened, by sheer weight of numbers, to overwhelm the party's professional revolutionaries, its steadfast and tempered workers. These long-time party workers had acquired much experience. Inexperienced workers would need their guidance not just in the future but right now, when political vacillation and inconsistency could so easily flourish. To preserve this core of militants while democratising the party, Bogdanov worked out a detailed plan.<sup>35</sup>

Bogdanov's 'provisional' plan called in part for the creation of 'factory assemblies'. Factory workers would elect the assembly's executive organ. These factory assemblies would then organise a higher, 'sector assembly', embracing a number of factories. Two-thirds of its executive organ, the 'sector committee', would be elected by the rank-and-file and one-third co-opted by local RSDLP committees. At the next level, workers would organise an assembly of sector committees or 'regional soviet'. Workers would elect half of its executive organ and RSDLP committee members would co-opt the other half. This plan, Bogdanov concluded, would allow time-tested leaders to retain their leadership role while opening the party gates to new workers. In the name of the CC, Bogdanov invited local committees to express their views on this plan.<sup>36</sup>

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34 Schwarz 1967, p. 227.

35 Bogdanov 1956, p. 193.

36 Bogdanov 1956, pp. 193–4.

Bogdanov's plan – a sincere attempt to apply Kautsky and *WITBD*? to resolve this dilemma – was a flash in the pan. Bogdanov assumed that the RSDLP had sufficient authority in the eyes of all workers to have them freely accept limits to their democratic right to elect representatives to organs above the factory assembly. However, if the RSDLP had such authority, then the plan was superfluous. The Soviet resolved this dilemma. Practice, properly understood, came to theory's rescue. The Soviet represented the organisational form within which the working class could develop its politics explicitly, consciously: on the one hand, the Soviet belonged to no one working-class party; on the other hand, all working-class parties could belong to it. These parties could present their candidacy for leadership of the class in the Soviet because the latter was the acknowledged – because freely elected – representative of that class. The proletariat transmitted its will through the Soviet as an individualised collectivity – via the election of representatives from different parties.

No Social Democrat in Russia or abroad gave the Soviet an independent historical status: they saw the Soviet structure as inseparable from a transient political conjuncture, appearing and disappearing *pari passu* with the appearance and disappearance of the latter.<sup>37</sup> For the Bolsheviks of 1905, the Soviet might constitute a provisional revolutionary government and/or an organ of insurrection to overthrow Tsarism. Once accomplished, it would yield to a constituent assembly that, ideally, would then fashion a democratic-capitalist state, a Republic. For the Mensheviks, the Soviet was perhaps a permanent and salient feature of a bourgeois-democratic order, a kind of mass political party/trade union, which would 'liquidate' the 'old party order'.<sup>38</sup>

Only in 1917, when the Bolsheviks accepted Lenin's *April Theses* to guide their activity, would revolutionary socialists accord world-historical significance to the Soviet, in Lenin's path-breaking work, *State and Revolution* (1918). There, Lenin broke decisively with Kautsky and the Erfurtian conception of using the

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37 As a rule, students of social phenomena will distinguish structure from conjuncture only when the same structure appears in a different conjuncture. There are exceptions, however. Marx did not have to wait for the Paris Commune to arise a second time in a different conjuncture to realise its world-historical significance the first time around – the mark of genius. But his insight never became common currency in the Social-Democratic worldview. Lenin, like Marx, also did not wait for a second edition of the Soviet to appear in February 1917 before correctly assessing its significance in his 'Notes on the State' written in January-February 1917, the draft of *State and Revolution*. Of course, Lenin's assessment became coin of the realm among revolutionary socialists in the West and Russia only by virtue of the October Revolution, which practically validated Lenin's analysis.

38 P.B. Axelrod, *Narodnaia дума i rabochii sezd* (Geneva, 1906), p. 48; cited in Schwarz 1967, p. 234.

existing, capitalist state as an instrument to overthrow capitalism and then build socialism with it. Instead, Lenin saw the Soviet as the cornerstone of a new state, a workers' state, invoking the Paris Commune as a precedent, and Marx's analysis of it as 'the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour'.<sup>39</sup>

### *Looking Ahead: A Pedagogical Conclusion*

1905 showed that the Social-Democratic view, central to the Erfurtian scenario, of the party patiently and gradually winning workers over and developing their socialist consciousness was inadequate because in 1905 class struggle developed so quickly and to such an unprecedented extent that workers themselves, independently of the party, became quite capable of taking revolutionary action, building powerful institutions and, in the process, developing socialist consciousness *en masse*.

In 1905, the working class displayed uncommon gifts of organisation and political understanding, which Social Democrats had hitherto never suspected workers could develop outside party tutelage. These revolutionaries now implicitly understood that revolution itself and organisations arising from it could never be brought into existence simply by the party intervening in different fora and by different means to steadily draw workers to its ranks, over a long period of time, one by one, as it were, merging socialism and the workers' movement in an inevitably evolutionary process, as the original Erfurtian scenario had it. Only the sudden, spontaneous burst of action by millions of workers, 'expressing a thorough-going internal revolution'<sup>40</sup> of class relations, would provide the practical basis, in workers' activity, for the party actually to win, in competition with other parties, the majority of workers over to its programme and to socialism.

Lenin rendered explicit this implicit understanding only after the victory of the October Revolution and in the midst of the difficulties confronting Western revolutionaries in duplicating the Bolshevik achievement. In 1920, Lenin wrote *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disease*. Of course, Lenin had long ago dropped the Erfurtian idea of the party acting 'outside' the working class and bringing revolutionary consciousness to it. But he now theorised a positive alternative to that discredited idea. The Communist Party represented the most advanced section of the working class, represented the continuity of those workers who already had revolutionary consciousness, which would inevitably embrace but a minority in non-revolutionary times, not the entire

39 Marx 1974, p. 212.

40 Luxemburg 1971, p. 17.

class. The party would struggle jointly with non-revolutionary workers or workers following other parties – a strategy called the united front – to win a majority of workers over to the idea of revolution (feasible only in non-party-created revolutionary situations), thus laying the basis for the victory of the revolution itself. This qualitatively enhanced receptivity of workers to the socialist message could only arise in revolutionary conditions. However, the party, no matter how hard it tried, could not, by itself, create those revolutionary conditions: more often than not revolutions catch revolutionaries by surprise. Lih has little to say about this entire problematic.

## 2 Lenin, ‘Old Bolshevism’ and Permanent Revolution: The Soviets in 1917

What gives Lih’s revisionist argument of continuity in ‘Old Bolshevism’ through 1917 a semblance of plausibility is his extraordinarily loose handling of Social-Democratic political nomenclature, indeed, his readiness to substitute his own political definitions for those of the disputants. He also runs together the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions, thinking they are, in relevant respects, interchangeable: to talk about one is to talk about the other and vice-versa. This yields a woefully abstract and/or incoherent treatment of political differences between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in 1905 and 1917, as well as among the Bolsheviks in 1917. Finally, Lih’s excessive use, and definitional discussions of Russian terms here (and in many other contributions) – when perfectly acceptable English ones are readily available, requiring no special commentary – make for a most disagreeable estrangement effect, causing some critics lacking Lih’s linguistic skills (and even those not lacking them) to be, perhaps, a bit more diffident than they otherwise would be about challenging Lih’s novel interpretation. Below, I first present the traditional view of the April Debates and then discuss Lih’s alternative to it.

The leading role of the working class in overthrowing Tsardom brilliantly vindicated ‘Old’ Bolshevism, not Menshevism. The workers (and soldiers) had fought and died while the Kadet-led bourgeois opposition, whom the Mensheviks had looked to for leadership, had in fact led no struggles, fought no battles and risked no necks, instead conducting behind-the-scenes intrigues to save what could be saved of the old order, to salvage monarchical rule even.<sup>41</sup>

41 Rosenberg 1974, Chapter 2. Rosenberg’s contribution remains the standard work of reference on the Kadets between 1917 and 1921. Nothing has measured up to it since its publication 40 years ago.



Yet, despite this vindication, the surprising and dismaying fact remained that the Mensheviks were running the revolution, not the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks and their ally, the Socialist Revolutionaries, jointly commanded solid majorities, at least 80%, in all the newly (re)created Soviets of Workers' Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies. The Mensheviks were responsible for determining the relationship between the Soviet and the Provisional Government, dominated by liberal-bourgeois politicians of the Kadet Party. Indeed, the Provisional Government depended on the Soviet for its very existence, for its genesis lay not in popular insurrection, as with the soviets, but in back-room wheeling and dealing between and among Kadet Duma politicians and high Tsarist officials: *Two* governments, then – the Soviet and the Provisional Government – had succeeded the fallen monarchy. 'Dual power' thus uniquely characterised this situation, one without precedent. Lenin analysed it.

*Pace* Lih, in 1917 Lenin renovated Old Bolshevism by negating one aspect common to both Old Bolshevism and Menshevism, namely, that the present revolution was an exclusively bourgeois-democratic one, led by the Provisional Government. The appearance of the Soviet contained not only the potential to take the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the limit, but to go beyond it, toward a workers' state and socialism. The new perspective dovetailed essentially with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.<sup>42</sup>

Lenin's perspective and subsequent detailings of it in 1917 and in later years by other Bolsheviks, especially Trotsky, may be summarised, in the broadest of strokes, as follows: The organised, mobilised working class has overthrown Tsarism. In the short run, only socialist revolution, marked by the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the Soviet seizure of power, will give land to the peasants, bread to the workers and peace to all. Soviet Power will also permanently abolish private property in the means of production in industry and secure workers' power at the point of production through their factory committees. Along the way, workers' rule will safeguard freedom of suffrage, speech, press, assembly, and guarantee the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. In the countryside, Soviet Power will destroy anti-democratic, pre-capitalist forms of lordship over the peasantry through nationalisation of the land. However, workers' collective control of production in Russia will

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42 Though Trotsky returned to Russia in May 1917, he looked this gift-horse (the *April Theses*) in the mouth for nearly three months before formally joining the Bolsheviks as a member of their Central Committee – despite the near identity of their politics in 1917. Trotsky's affinity to Bolshevism became evident as early as the 1905 Revolution but it never led to political cooperation with Lenin's partisans in the pre-1917 period. See Marot 2013b.

clash with the interests of 25,000,000 small-holding, property-loving peasant households averse to socialised production, posing difficult political problems of democracy and majority rule. As well, a planned economy in Russia will ultimately remain illusory unless socialist revolution abroad destroys the anarchic domination of the world capitalist market over all national economies. 'All Power to the Soviets' will stimulate workers' revolutions in the advanced capitalist world. Their expected victories in the not-too-distant future will remove the threat of imperialist military intervention. In the end, they will also lay the basis for democratically resolving the antagonism of interests between workers and peasants by enabling, through material aid and technology, the socialisation of the forces of production in the countryside, transforming peasants into associated producers – Marx's 'civilised co-operators'. The Bolsheviks would make no significant modifications to this scenario until 1921, when they adopted the New Economic Policy.<sup>43</sup>

In the immediate run, the question of the state was front and centre in Lenin's thinking, even before the outbreak of the February Revolution. What Lenin was able to show in the April Debates of 1917 was that the issue of state-power, that is, power to the soviets, was the crucial issue for all the others – for ending the war; for giving land to the peasants and bread to the workers; for taking the first steps toward socialism in Russia; and for encouraging socialist revolution abroad. Lenin first publicly broke with his previous, Old Bolshevik ideas on the state in the *April Theses*, by calling for the transfer of all power to the soviets.

After sharp discussion in the party press and at party meetings throughout April 1917, Lenin won over the top Bolshevik leadership to Soviet Power and its necessary corollary, socialist revolution.

Lenin did not conduct the April Debates singlehandedly. 'In his struggle with the indecisiveness of the staff and the broad officer layer of the party, Lenin confidently relied on its under-officer layer which better reflected the rank-and-file worker-Bolshevik'.<sup>44</sup> This was particularly true of the Bolsheviks in the Vyborg district, who had expressed opposition to any support for the Provisional Government right from the start because it was led by the Kadet Party. In this respect, if not in others, the *April Theses* did represent a most welcomed continuity with Old Bolshevism: Lenin was carrying on Bolshevism's long-standing tradition of intransigent, ferocious, anti-Kadet politics.<sup>45</sup> Much

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43 I discuss these modifications in Marot 2013a, pp. 35–8.

44 Trotsky 1980, p. 326.

45 Marot 2013a, pp. 156–7.

memoir literature,<sup>46</sup> many activists on the scene,<sup>47</sup> and virtually all historians<sup>48</sup> have understood the April Debates in this way. Lih, exceptionally, understands it wholly differently.

Old Bolshevism ‘triumphed’ in the April Debates, Lih ironises. According to Lih, Old Bolshevism’s strategy for a ‘democratic revolution to the end’ ‘mandated a political course aimed at overthrow of the “bourgeois” Provisional Government’<sup>49</sup> and the establishment of ‘a genuine provisional revolutionary government, based on the classes represented in the Soviet.’<sup>50</sup> ‘Unfortunately,’ Lih adds, this ‘heroic scenario of leadership and epic struggle’ is ‘obscured’ by ‘a vocabulary that is sometimes aggressively learned (“hegemony”) or polemical (“opportunist”)’ and where even ‘the word “strategy” is perhaps insufficient, insofar as it suggests a dry, rationalistic fitting together of ends and means.’<sup>51</sup> Here, Lih introduces the reader explicitly to a remarkable characteristic of his methodology that I find hard to accept but which is an inevitable feature of his interpretation: To bowdlerise rational, ‘learned’ polemics among Russian Social Democrats, and to disparage as ‘rhetoric’ vocabulary designed to delimit and define strategies, as well as to relate means to ends. Lih avoids careful, precise, historically concrete analysis of intra-Russian Social-Democratic discussions because such analysis, I shall argue, is impossible to reconcile with Lih’s version of the April Debates. It is to this analysis that I now turn. I must at the outset apologise to the readers of *Historical Materialism* and beg their indulgence. I will severely tax their patience for I will be making the same points repeatedly, from different angles (and even from the same angle), because Lih has tangled matters in an original way. This mandates an equally original way to untangle them, using unfamiliar approaches. The payoff will be worth it, I think: in the end, the traditional interpretation of the April Debates will still stand, whilst Lih’s idiosyncratic one will have fallen.

*The Provisional Government the Bolsheviks Had Anticipated before  
1917 – and the One They Got in 1917*

In 1917, Lenin moved the discussion forward in the RSDLP on the role that the RSDLP and the Soviet should play in the current revolution, beyond the stage it had reached in the previous one, in 1905 – and at which much of the

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46 For example, Sukhanov 1955.

47 For example, Trotsky 1980.

48 For example, Rabinowitch 1967.

49 Lih 2011b, p. 199.

50 Lih 2011b, p. 217.

51 Lih 2011b, p. 209.

top Bolshevik leadership was still stuck – Lih to the contrary notwithstanding. What position to adopt toward the new, never-before-seen institution, the Provisional Government, which had succeeded the fallen monarchy, was central to this discussion.

No provisional government ever arose in 1905 owing to the failure of revolutionaries to overthrow the monarchy. But, in the middle of that struggle, the Bolsheviks did think about what position to adopt toward a provisional government, should the revolution be successful. Five months after the outbreak of the 1905 revolution triggered by Bloody Sunday on January 9, a massacre of peaceful demonstrators in front of the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, the Bolsheviks met in London to attend an all-Bolshevik Congress of the RSDLP. There, the Bolsheviks, working for and anticipating victory over Tsardom, resolved in favour of RSDLP *participation* in a provisional government *should one arise*, to give a ‘proletarian imprint’ to the ongoing bourgeois-democratic revolution. The Bolsheviks reasoned this way: They forecast the RSDLP leading a popular uprising ‘from below’ to overthrow the autocracy. Once overthrown, the RSDLP’s enormous political capital, accruing to it as uncontested and valourous leader of a people’s insurrection, would automatically spill over into any provisional government arising from the destruction of the monarchy. By formally joining such a provisional government, the RSDLP would play a leadership role ‘*from above*’, that is, from *within* this provisional government, *as well as* ‘from below’, to ‘vastly extend’ the democratic ‘boundaries’ of the bourgeois-democratic revolution without, however, transcending them.<sup>52</sup>

Months after the Bolshevik delegates left London, the St Petersburg Soviet sprang into existence, in October 1905. As noted, Lenin advised Social Democrats to put forth the idea that the Soviet regard itself as the ‘embryo of a provisional revolutionary government’, or that the Soviet should assume responsibility for setting one up to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end, i.e., establish a democratic republic, the most politically progressive form of the capitalist state featuring universal suffrage and full freedom of speech, press, and assembly. In the event, the Tsar held on to power. Nicholas II ordered the forcible dispersal of the Soviet in November, and crushed the Bolshevik-led Moscow insurrection against the monarchy in December. The Bolshevik posi-

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52 Lenin 1962b, pp. 76, 52. ‘There are bourgeois-democratic regimes like the one in Germany, and also like the one in England; like the one in Austria and also like those in America and Switzerland. He would be a fine Marxist indeed, who in a period of democratic revolution failed to see this difference between the degrees of democratism and the difference between its forms . . .’ (p. 52).

tion on the provisional government never got to be applied because no provisional government ever arose.

In March 1917, the Tsar abdicated and Duma Kadet politicians set up the Provisional Government. According to Lih, the overthrow-the-provisional-government-as-soon-as-possible 'mandate' was central to Old Bolshevism. And, indeed, the Vyborg District Bolshevik Committee did call for 'an immediate seizure of power' by workers to set up a Provisional Revolutionary Government because the current one was dominated by counter-revolutionary Kadet and Octobrist politicians.<sup>53</sup> However, after their arrival in Petrograd from Siberian exile, the two most authoritative Bolshevik leaders, Kamenev and Stalin, upon hearing of this call, *rejected* it, rejected this 'mandate'. So, contrary to Lih, the initial response of the two pillars of Old Bolshevism was *not* to implement the Old Bolshevik mandate to overthrow the Provisional Government, either now or later. On the other hand, neither did Stalin and Kamenev adhere to the Third London Congress resolution that called for joining a provisional government because that call had been premised on the RSDLP having played an integral part in the formation of that government, exercising decisive influence in it from the get go. This had not happened.

The 1917 Provisional Government was the handiwork of the Kadets. They led it. The option to take ministerial positions in it was therefore foreclosed since the Kadets would insist on retaining their leadership role. To avoid all direct political subordination to the Kadets, Stalin and Kamenev decided to subordinate themselves indirectly to them, by staying outside and offering conditional support to the Kadet-led Provisional Government. They agreed that the Bolsheviks in the Soviet, where the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries held sway, should pressure the Provisional Government to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end.<sup>54</sup> The point to remember is this: before Lenin's arrival, the Old Bolsheviks Stalin and Kamenev had no thoughts about overthrowing the Provisional Government. The question that commanded their attention was how to relate to it, not destroy it. Lih's contrary affirmation has no basis in fact. How does Lih get around this fact?

Lih acknowledges that the Bolsheviks, like the Mensheviks, had always deployed arguments in favour of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and against workers seizing power and making a socialist revolution in a country where the peasants were in the majority and uninterested in building

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53 Lih 2011b, p. 210.

54 For an admirably succinct and clear account of this critical episode, when the top Bolshevik leadership 'swung sharply toward the right', toward the Mensheviks, see Rabinowitch 1967, pp. 34–6.

socialism. But Lih thinks these arguments really do not matter all that much. Lih instead places great weight on the Bolsheviks' 'ambition', driven by the 'psychology' of Old Bolshevism, to make a socialist revolution and establish socialist forms of property – notwithstanding their pre-1917 'Marxist scruples' not to do so.

Owing to Marxist scruples, the Bolsheviks described the projected *vlast* as a 'provisional revolutionary government': the socialist proletariat was not supposed to take power permanently prior to the socialist revolution. But owing to Bolshevik ambitions, the new *vlast* would be a 'provisional revolutionary government'. The proletariat might only be in power for a limited period of time, but it would use this time to carry out wide-ranging transformations that would alter the fundamental bases of Russian life.<sup>55</sup>

Lih's formulations are confusing in the extreme. If the government is provisional, workers are presumably – I say presumably because it is hard to pin down what Lih means – carrying out a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and then relinquishing power to the bourgeoisie, according to the original Old Bolshevik schema. If the government is revolutionary, workers are presumably carrying out a socialist revolution and building socialism – but only provisionally – eventually relinquishing power to the bourgeoisie. In the latter case, either the bourgeoisie is building socialism – an absurdity – or the workers voluntarily relinquish power to the bourgeoisie, which then reverses the socialist revolution and resumes building capitalism. This, too, is an absurdity.

In any event, according to Lih, the Bolsheviks are self-evidently 'ambitious' – the example of Kamenev and Stalin to the contrary notwithstanding – and their government, whether provisional or not, will be revolutionary and 'alter the fundamental bases of Russian life', i.e., the Bolsheviks will overthrow the Provisional Government and (again, presumably) carry out a socialist revolution and never give up power. They will do all this in *defiance* of their pre-1917 Marxist 'scruples'. And that is correct. Old Bolshevism's pre-April 1917 politics cannot be reconciled with any political project that would immediately shatter the bourgeois-democratic limitations of the revolution and bring the working class to power permanently.

Nevertheless, Lih insists that the 'logic' of Old Bolshevik politics *can* be reconciled with this project. In a nearly indecipherable but key passage, Lih observes that

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55 Lih 2011b, p. 203.

Bolshevik political tactics [in 1905] arose out of opposition to liberal attempts at a *soglashenie* or deal with the tsarist establishment. In 1917, a related type of *soglashenie* became central to partisan politics, namely, the hopes of the 'moderate' (= non-Bolshevik) socialist parties for some sort of working arrangement with the liberals or other elements of elite society. The logic behind the Bolshevik rejection of this type of *soglashenie* is clearly outlined in pre-war Bolshevik writings.<sup>56</sup>

Lih thinks liberals 'dealing' with the tsarist officials is 'related' to socialists 'dealing' with liberal politicians. Both are 'types' of 'dealing'. What the difference is between the two types of dealing and how they are related, Lih does not make clear. All he says is that the Bolsheviks are against both types. Lih's Delphic paragraph requires translation into concrete historical terms to make sense of it. Only then can we assess whether Lih's logic reflects the logic of Old Bolshevism.

Going back to 1905 once more, the *only* question facing Russian Social Democrats then, the one that is relevant to this discussion, was: What must be the attitude (tactic) of the RSDLP toward a provisional government *should one arise*? Such a government would very likely have elements of the liberal-bourgeois opposition holding office in it as it would be the immediate fruit of a successful bourgeois-democratic revolution to overthrow Tsardom. Here, Social Democrats defined 'attitude' largely, but not exclusively, in terms of *joining* or *not joining* such a provisional government. Those were the hypothetical alternatives facing the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in 1905. Neither wing of Russian Social Democracy *ever* talked about *overthrowing* or *not overthrowing* a provisional government at *any* time prior to 1917, as Lih writes. *Only* in 1917 was *this* question posed, and the Bolsheviks *alone* posed it because only in 1917 did a provisional government actually arise: Disoriented in a labyrinth of his own making, Lih falsely projects the Bolsheviks' 1917 question onto the 1905 Revolution and in the years running up to 1917, where it makes no sense, because no provisional government ever emerged in that period. The governmental alternative to the Soviet in 1905 was not a provisional government but the autocracy, for, in the eyes of the Bolsheviks especially, the Soviet itself had the potential to become the provisional government. *In the absence of dual power* – Soviet *and* Provisional Government – the call to overthrow a provisional government that Lih attributes to Old Bolshevism is tantamount, in 1905, to calling on the Soviet not to assume power as a provisional government.

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56 Lih 2011b, p. 217.

In 1905, the Bolsheviks said joining liberals in a provisional government, should one materialise, to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution ‘to the end’ was *permissible*. This confounds Lih’s vague characterisation of the Bolsheviks as never willing to ‘cut a deal’ with the bourgeois opposition, i.e., to share cabinet posts with the detested liberals in a provisional government. This is the only substantive political meaning that *soglashenie* can possibly have here. On the other hand, the Mensheviks said it was *impermissible* to join such a government. This, too, defies Lih’s equally inchoate characterisation of the Mensheviks as always willing to ‘work out an arrangement with the liberals’. Why were the Mensheviks unwilling to take up cabinet posts in a provisional government and sit at the same table with the liberals? Why did the Mensheviks *reject* the conciliatory, deal-making position Lih attributes to them in 1905 and after?

The Mensheviks had *a priori* excluded the possibility of joining a provisional government, should one arise, at their May 1905 all-Menshevik Geneva Conference, held at the same time that the Bolsheviks were meeting at their London Congress. The RSDLP should follow the orthodox example of German Social Democracy, the Mensheviks argued, and remain the party of ‘extreme revolutionary opposition’ to any provisional government. They taxed Lenin and the Bolsheviks for their theoretical ‘Bernsteinism’ and practical ‘Millerandism’ (a reformist tendency named after Millerand, a French socialist who had flouted the longstanding ban on Social Democrats holding cabinet positions in a bourgeois government).

Very briefly, Lenin countered that the revolutionary parliamentary tactics of German Social Democracy made perfect sense because a bourgeois-democratic, parliamentary state already existed in Germany – but not in Russia, where it did not yet exist. He blasted them for ‘introducing categories of parliamentary struggle’ into ‘resolutions written for conditions’ in 1905 Russia where ‘no parliament exists’. Moreover, there was a revolution going on in Russia, greatly expanding the sphere of revolutionary action for Social Democrats, whereas reform, not revolution, was on the agenda in Germany.<sup>57</sup>

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57 Lenin 1962b, p. 76. Lenin’s article, ‘Two Tactics of Russian Social Democracy’, explains at great length the rationale for all the resolutions of the London all-Bolshevik Congress. Along the way, he criticises the Mensheviks, presenting the Menshevik position fairly by citing copiously from authoritative Menshevik publicists and press. What a pity so few historians have adopted Lenin’s polemical methods in their own polemics. As a rule, Lenin’s presents his opponents’ position fully, hiding nothing. Lenin’s opponents often did not adhere to the same standard when attacking Lenin’s position.



Fast-forward to 1917. Again, the only question facing Russian Social Democrats that is relevant to Lih's framing of the discussion is this: what must be the attitude of the RSDLP toward the actually existing Provisional Government. Was joining such a government permissible or not? Those Russian Social Democrats who said it was permissible and actually joined the Provisional Government were the *Mensheviks*. Those who said it was not permissible were the *Bolsheviks*. Stalin and Kamenev essentially adopt the 1905 *Menshevik* position of 'extreme revolutionary opposition' to the Provisional Government. They advocate pushing the Provisional Government to the left, not pushing it aside in favour of Soviet power.<sup>58</sup> On the narrow question of participation or non-participation in a provisional government, then, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks have exchanged positions, and Lih's 'logic' leads to diametrically opposite results in 1905 and in 1917 for both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Let us try to sort it out.

The Old Bolsheviks' learned polemics of 1905 against the Mensheviks had stipulated that should the RSDLP lead a popular uprising to overthrow Tsarism, establishing a provisional government in its place, the RSDLP ought to participate in such a government to make it a provisional *revolutionary* government, one that would push the bourgeois-democratic revolution to its outermost democratic limits. Lenin called it a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry'. However, for Lih, the way historians have traditionally understood Old Bolshevism has

the defect of excluding a priori the possibility of an insurrection against the Provisional Government in order to defend revolutionary goals and to carry out a thorough-going democratic transformation. In other words, it logically excludes the possibility of Old Bolshevism.<sup>59</sup>

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58 Even the Vyborg District Bolsheviks did not advocate the transfer of all power to the Soviets and doing without any Provisional Government. They called for a Revolutionary Provisional Government to be set up, presumably by the Soviet, as Lenin had proposed in 1905, in accordance with the London Congress resolutions. In 1905, however, Lenin had left unresolved the relationship between a putative Provisional Government (whether revolutionary or not) and the Soviet, along with their respective roles and functions, because no provisional government materialised. In February 1917, the Vyborg Bolsheviks were still in the dark about this question – but not Lenin, who had given this matter the greatest attention, resulting in the *April Theses*.

59 Lih 2011b, p. 216.

*Pace Lih*, the thought of overthrowing a provisional government never once entered the minds of the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks because there was no provisional government to overthrow at any point before February 1917. Both always thought a provisional government would arise through a revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism led by liberals, as forecast by the Mensheviks, or by workers, as projected by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks believed the Soviet of 1905 could become just such a provisional government. In any event, there could be no question of overthrowing a provisional government enjoying wide, popular support right from its inception. Any talk of overthrowing it, as Lih does here, 'because the Provisional Government' in 1917 'seemed to incarnate what Old Bolshevism had always predicted: the attempts of elite reformists to slow down, halt, or reverse the revolution'<sup>60</sup> would have dumbfounded any Social Democrat, whether Menshevik or Bolshevik. Bolshevism had *always* predicted the liberals would be counter-revolutionaries, whether they held office in a provisional government or not. That is not the point.

What Old Bolshevism advocated, should a provisional government arise, is the RSDLP *joining* it, exercising decisive influence in it and, *in this way*, preventing the liberals from derailing the revolution. And because Old Bolshevism anticipated that the RSDLP would be running a provisional government, it is senseless to hold, as Lih does, that in 1917 Old Bolshevism could have 'mandated' overthrowing an RSDLP-led provisional government 'as soon as possible in order to install a genuine provisional revolutionary government, based on the classes represented in the soviets, in order to carry the democratic revolution to the end.'<sup>61</sup> Instead of launching an insurrection, the Bolsheviks would simply have turned their power inside the provisional government over to the Soviet peacefully and as soon as possible, to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution, in accordance with the Old Bolshevik scenario. But the Bolsheviks could not have followed Lih's version of that scenario – by launching an insurrection against themselves.

To repeat, the question in 1905 was: Should the RSDLP participate in a provisional government or should it not? The Bolsheviks said 'yes', the Mensheviks said 'no'. The Bolsheviks advocated participation, not agitation for its overthrow, which they (and the Mensheviks) excluded from the start, in order to defend revolutionary goals and carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution 'to the end'. Such was the Old Bolshevik scenario. Lih premises his entire argument about the logic of Old Bolshevism operating in 1917 by ignoring the differences between the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions.

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60 Lih 2011b, p. 217.

61 Lih 2011b, p. 217.

In the April Debates, Lenin called for the (eventual) overthrow of the actually existing Provisional Government. Neither he, nor the Bolsheviks nor the Mensheviks could ever have contemplated such a call in 1905. There is neither continuity nor discontinuity with the Old 1905 Bolshevik position of participation in a provisional government here because that position was meant to respond to a provisional government that the Bolsheviks hoped would come into existence but never did. Now there is a new situation, which calls for a new position, not the application of the old one, as Lih thinks. Lenin has raised the discussion to an altogether different, superior plane. The political stakes are much higher now.

In Lenin and the Bolsheviks' view, the Provisional Government of 1917 did not seek to advance the people's weal because the RSDLP did not lead it, as they had always hoped it would. It was instead led by loathsome, self-serving, venal, perfidious, imperialist-minded Kadet Duma politicians mortally fearful of the people and revolution. However, to remedy this awful situation, Lenin did *not* follow the Old Bolshevik recipe of joining the Provisional Government, putting the nefarious liberals in their place and then carrying out the bourgeois-democratic revolution 'to the end'. Nor did he advocate putting outside pressure on the Provisional Government to achieve this long-standing goal. Instead, Lenin premised all future discussions about what the Bolsheviks should do in the coming months around the New Bolshevik idea of 'All Power to the Soviets' and socialist revolution as the practical, living *alternative* to the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the Provisional Government, a clear break from Old Bolshevism. The goal is new – socialist revolution – and so is the institution that will realise it – Soviet Power.

Without the appearance of the Soviet, any idea of destroying the Provisional Government and going beyond the bourgeois-democratic revolution was literally unthinkable. For, without the Soviet, what would have been the alternative to the Provisional Government and the bourgeois-democratic revolution that had brought it into existence? Lenin's political 'ambition' here was driven forward, toward full workers' power and socialist revolution, *because* of a new analysis, based on the new fact of 'dual-power' and built on scrupulous and politically consequent Marxist reasoning, and not *despite* that analysis, despite 'Marxist scruples', as Lih would have it, characteristically turning matters upside down: Lih does not dominate his subject-matter here, the subject-matter dominates him.

### *Steps toward Socialism*

Lenin denied Kamenev's assertion that he, Lenin, was calling on the party to immediately introduce socialism. That was not the party's role. Lih's

truncated presentation of Lenin's position ignores the key distinction Lenin made between the party taking 'steps toward socialism' and Soviet Power taking those steps. Kamenev ignored it as well.

Kamenev 'has not pondered on the fact, the significance, of the existing Soviets, their identity, in point of type and socio-political character, with the [Paris] commune state', Lenin wrote. 'I am deeply convinced that the Soviets . . . will more effectively, more practically and more correctly' than the Bolshevik party decide 'what steps can be taken towards socialism and how these steps should be taken.'<sup>62</sup> But this could only happen if the soviets had *all* the power and they could not have all the power as long as the Provisional Government existed: the two powers could not merge because they rested on structurally incompatible relations of property and class, socialist in one, capitalist in the other. As Lenin saw it, it was the Bolsheviks' business to make 'All Power to the Soviets' a reality by 'patiently explaining' to the masses the need for Soviet Power which, alone, would bring peace, land, bread and socialism. Once a socialist workers' revolution put an end to the Provisional Government, so too would it put an end to the bourgeois-democratic revolution, by completing it and going beyond it. Old Bolshevism did not have this perspective, New Bolshevism did.

### *The Soviets of 1917*

Lenin argued as follows: There was nothing provisional about the Soviet; it was permanent. It was not a type of government; it was a state. It was not a bourgeois state; it was a workers' state. In his 'Third Letter from Afar', written in the period immediately preceding his arrival in Russia on 4 April 1917, Lenin first broke the news to fellow Bolsheviks that he had cracked the framework of Old Bolshevism with respect to the state:

We need a state. But *not the kind* of state the bourgeoisie has created everywhere, from constitutional monarchies to the most democratic republics. And in this we differ from the opportunists and Kautskyites of the old, and decaying, socialist parties, who have distorted, or have forgotten, the lessons of the Paris Commune and the analysis of these lessons made by Marx and Engels.

We need a state, but *not* the kind the bourgeoisie needs, with organs of government in the shape of a police force, an army and a bureaucracy (officialdom) separate from and opposed to the people. All bourgeois rev-

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62 Lenin 1964e, p. 53.

olutions merely perfected *this* state machine, merely transferred *it* from the hands of one party to those of another.<sup>63</sup>

Lih does not discuss this passage, does not examine Lenin's categories. Instead, Lih substitutes his own categories. He defines 'soviet republic' as 'the most advanced form of democratic republic'.<sup>64</sup> This is not Lenin's definition or even a recognisably Marxist one. Lenin plainly says even the 'most democratic republic' is merely a kind of capitalist state. Lih says that a democratic republic would be a step toward socialism. Lenin plainly disagrees. A democratic republic is not a step toward socialism because in all capitalist states, no matter how democratic and republican, the 'organs of government in the shape of a police force, an army and a bureaucracy (officialdom)' are 'separate from and opposed to the people'. The first steps toward socialism only take place when the army, the police, and officialdom are not 'separate from and opposed to the people'.

According to Lih, Lenin 'now argued for the soviets as a specific political form, as a higher *type* of government, one that was fated to replace parliamentary democracy as the only adequate form of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>65</sup> Lih again muddies the waters. It is true that the soviet is the only adequate form of workers' rule. Nevertheless, this is not because it is a higher type of government but because it is a different kind of state, one fated to replace the capitalist state in *all* its forms, not just in its parliamentary democratic form. Only the Soviet fits this bill.

The Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies are a form of state which does not exist and never did exist in any country. This form represents the first steps towards socialism and is inevitable at the beginning of a socialist society. This is a fact of decisive importance. The Russian revolution has created the Soviets. No bourgeois country in the world has or can have such state institutions. No socialist revolution can be operative with any other state power than this.<sup>66</sup>

Words matter. 'The central tenet of pre-war Old Bolshevism' writes Lih, was '“democratic revolution to the end”'; 'a slogan that implied a vast social transformation of Russia under the aegis of a revolutionary government based

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63 Lenin 1964b, p. 325.

64 Lih 2011b, p. 222.

65 Lih 2011b, p. 222.

66 Lenin 1964a, p. 241.

directly on the *narod*.<sup>67</sup> Lih's vast social transformation has a name. Social Democrats called it the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution'. The vast political transformation accompanying the social revolution also has a name: it is the establishment of a bourgeois-democratic state, based on universal suffrage. All Russian Social Democrats, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike, agreed about realising both, but disagreed as to the means. Bolshevism looked to independent working-class activity to lead the struggle to overthrow Tsarism in conjunction with the poor peasantry. The Mensheviks looked to the liberal-bourgeois opposition, the Kadets above all, to lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Mensheviks and Bolsheviks agreed not to call this vast social transformation socialism because it would preserve private property in the means of production, the land and the factories. As well, private ownership of the press would circumscribe freedom of the press; private ownership of the means of communication, freedom of speech; private ownership of public accommodations, freedom of assembly. Nevertheless, circumscribed, bourgeois freedoms were better than none – a huge step forward compared to the Tsarist autocracy.<sup>68</sup> By democratic revolution to the end the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks understood a bourgeois-democratic, not socialist, revolution. Nothing Lih can say can alter this fact. But that does not prevent him from trying.

In *Letters from Afar* [Lih writes], Lenin introduced a new phraseology by talking about the first stage and the second stage of revolution . . . Unless we have a firm grounding in the Old Bolshevik scenario, we will be tempted to put Lenin's argument in *Letters from Afar* in the following framework:

first stage = democratic revolution  
second stage = socialist revolution<sup>69</sup>

Lenin *did* put his argument in just that framework. In the *April Theses* Lenin wrote:

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67 Lih 2011b, p. 199.

68 Bourgeois freedoms, where they exist, are 'formal' only in relation to socialism; they are 'substantive' where these freedoms cannot exist for structural reasons, as in non-capitalist class societies, where state and civil society are fused (Tsarism, Stalinism); or in capitalist societies where state and civil society are separate but where, under certain forms of the capitalist state (Fascism, Nazism) these freedoms do not exist for conjunctural reasons.

69 Lih 2011b, p. 217.

The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution – which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie – to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.<sup>70</sup>

But Lih decides to reject Lenin's 'framework' because it does not fit his thesis, a procedure I find hard to understand and even harder to justify:

We will reject this interpretation [Lih writes], when we grasp the logic of the Old Bolshevik scenario . . . We will then see that Lenin's usage in *Letters from Afar* should (sic) be read as follows:

first stage = the immediate post-tsarist government of 'revolutionary chauvinists' who will try to limit revolutionary transformation as much as possible

second stage = a *narodnaia vlast* that will put 'the party of the proletariat' in power and carry out the democratic revolution to the end.<sup>71</sup>

But as I have repeatedly tried to show, Lih repeatedly mischaracterises the Old Bolshevik scenario. The latter does not have two stages, only one: A provisional government is established. By joining it, the RSDLP exercises decisive influence within it. That is why the provisional government is revolutionary, a dictatorship of workers and peasants. There is no 'mandate' to overthrow it nor could there be. On the contrary, the RSDLP uses its influence in the provisional government to carry out the democratic revolution to the end, i.e., to push the democratic boundaries of the bourgeois-democratic to their outermost limits, decisively overcoming all liberal opposition and sundry 'revolutionary chauvinists'. Once a Constituent Assembly founds a Republic, the Provisional Government, its work done, dissolves, and the RSDLP, following the example of German Social Democracy, now becomes a party of revolutionary opposition to capitalism and the capitalist state, inside and outside the newly constituted parliamentary institutions. Lenin cannot be read in the way Lih wants us to because it is a distortion of both Old and New Bolshevism.

If Lih's garbled Old Bolshevik scenario, tacked on to Lih's false reasoning, makes hash of Marxist 'scruples' to stay within the limits of the

70 Lenin 1964c, p. 22.

71 Lih 2011b, p. 218.

bourgeois-democratic revolution, then Marxist scruples ought to explain the Menshevik lack of ambition to go beyond those limits. However, Lih thinks those Marxist scruples do not mean much for the Mensheviks either.

The Menshevik Woytynski, Lih writes,

... invoked the abstract ideological argument that 'to take the *vlast* completely into our hands is impossible, since we still have a bourgeois system'. This ideological argument, however, was not the heart of the matter, either for Woytynski or indeed for the moderate socialists in general. Central to their outlook was a concrete and grimly realistic view of the incipient national crisis. 'To take the *vlast* into our hands would be to destroy the revolution [because] the proletariat will not be able to cope with anarchy'.<sup>72</sup>

Once again, this summary evades a concrete discussion of the Menshevik stance toward the Provisional Government in 1917. That stance can be fully understood only in relation to the Menshevik analysis of 1905 toward a hypothetical provisional government, discussed above, where the Mensheviks came out against participation in a provisional government, should one arise, and for extreme revolutionary opposition to it – though not so opposed to it as to favour its overthrow.

To the Mensheviks of 1917, their decade-old position of extreme revolutionary opposition to a putative provisional government seemed inapplicable because irrelevant in the new conditions. 1917 was not 1905. A Provisional Government had come into existence in the wake of the February Revolution. Although initially opposed to joining it, they changed their minds and called on the RSDLP to participate in the Provisional Government, not merely prod it from below, as the Old Bolsheviks were advocating, in order to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution 'to the end'. To go beyond that revolution and overthrow the Provisional Government was out of the question since Russia had still to go through a capitalist stage of development.

This 'ideological argument' was at the 'heart of the matter' for the Mensheviks because it mandated a 'concrete and grimly realistic' political measure to thwart the working class from coming to power permanently, thus avoiding catastrophe. In early May 1917, the Mensheviks (with the SRS in tow) adopted the *Bolshevik* position of 1905 and *joined* Kerensky's Provisional Government, taking ministerial portfolios in it and giving a proletarian stamp of approval to the bourgeois-democratic revolution – even if (or, for right-wing, 'defen-

72 Lih 2011b, p. 215.



sist' Mensheviks and SRS, because) it meant continuing the war, curbing the power of factory committees, eviscerating the soldiers' committees, putting off peasant seizure of gentry estates, and postponing socialist revolution until the Greek kalends.

On the question of participation in a provisional government, then, the Mensheviks of 1917 formally caught up with the Bolsheviks of 1905. Here, indeed, is continuity of views and identity of positions – but it is not the kind Lih is looking for because in both instances this 'consensus' substantively excluded the unique, New Bolshevik combination: soviet seizure of power *and* socialist revolution. In 1905, the Old Bolsheviks had put forth the Soviet as candidate for a provisional government – but only to carry out a bourgeois-democratic revolution 'to the end'.

The post-April 1917 Bolsheviks did substantively break with the 1905 Bolsheviks – and with the Mensheviks of 1917 – because they did put 'All Power to the Soviets' and socialist revolution on the order of the day. Lih does not realise that in the April Debates Lenin is pushing for paradigmatic shift in the premises of Old Bolshevism. Had Lih so realised, he could not have written that the Bolsheviks of 1917 were always unified around 'a decade-old [pre-1917] strategic scenario that made excellent political sense in the circumstances of 1917'<sup>73</sup> because – for the nth time – the decade-old Bolshevik scenario favoured participation in a provisional government, not agitation for its overthrow. Only exact analysis of the substantive political differences between the circumstances of 1917 and those of 1905 can explain how these differences forced among the Bolsheviks a fundamental change in strategy and an alteration in perspective, toward workers' power and socialism.

*Once More: The Key Differences between 1905 and 1917*

These were the key differences: whereas the autocracy remained a central actor throughout the 1905 'dress rehearsal', a popular insurrection overthrew it in the opening act of the 1917 Revolution. Whereas soviets appeared only the last act of the 1905 Revolution, in 1917 they appeared in the first act – and never left. In 1905, the monarchy was the only locus of power and authority whereas workers were trying to build their power through the Soviet; in 1917, dual power arose, embodied in the Soviet and the Provisional Government – and the autocracy was out of the picture. Whereas Russian Social Democrats all had hypothesised a provisional government born of popular struggle before 1917 (the Bolsheviks having in mind the Soviet of 1905 as an example), the actual Provisional Government of 1917 had issued from back-door parliamentary

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73 Lih 2011b, p. 234.

haggling by a clique of bourgeois Duma politicians in whose minds fear and hatred of the ‘mob’ desperately vied for supremacy. What difference did this radical change in, and role of the major *dramatis personae* make to the two wings of Russian Social Democracy?

Many Old Bolsheviks did look to the old, 1905 scenario to make sense of the 1917 Revolution – until Lenin convinced them it made little sense. Before Lenin’s arrival, Lih reports, the Bolsheviks at their March 1917 conference

mull[ed] over various formulas, such as offering support ‘insofar as’ the Provisional Government carried out revolutionary measures, or imposing strict *kontrol’* over the actions of the government, or supporting any revolutionary measures that the government undertook but not the government itself. Perhaps none of these formulas would have been as politically effective as the striking slogan proposed by Lenin: ‘No support for the imperialist government!’<sup>74</sup>

Lih notwithstanding, Lenin will oppose these formulas not on the grounds of their lack of effectiveness, but because the formulas all effectively assume that the boundaries of the bourgeois-democratic revolution are sacrosanct, along with the bourgeois state, a provisional instantiation of which was the Provisional Government. Even the formula Lih attributes to Lenin (I have not come across it) programmatically does not directly challenge those boundaries and that state. It can easily imply support for a government that is not imperialist, specifically, one that will end the war within the framework of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Lenin’s formula, ‘All Power to the Soviets’ bars all such implications.

‘We need to step back from some very transient disputes over political tactics and rhetoric’, which have mesmerised historians, and instead ‘examine the consensus’,<sup>75</sup> Lih says. Again this is a false opposition, a topsy-turvy way of looking at the April Debates. The Bolsheviks arrive at a consensus at the conclusion of the April Debates thanks only to serried discussions throughout April that resolved disputes, making them transient. It is therefore incumbent on the historian to step up to these disputes, to examine them closely and without taking sides, and to explain how agreement was reached and on what terms. So, let us examine still more closely this dispute over ‘control’.

‘Bolshevik dispute over the *kontrol’* tactic does not seem a very profound one’, Lih comments. ‘At stake was the best method for achieving the Old Bolshevik

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74 Lih 2011b, p. 216.

75 Lih 2011b, p. 210.

goal of overthrowing the Provisional Government in favour of a soviet-based provisional revolutionary government'.<sup>76</sup> This was *not* at stake. *Kontrol'* means control, not overthrow. It was a dispute over how best to *control*, not overthrow, the Provisional Government and this dispute is certainly not a very profound one compared to a dispute over whether or not to overthrow it. Again, the Old Bolshevik (and Menshevik) goal was never to overthrow a provisional government, whether soviet-based or not, whether revolutionary or not, it was to overthrow *Tsarism*. The 1905 Revolution did not realise this, the 1917 February Revolution did: *Tsarism is defunct*. There is a world of difference. At stake now, as Lenin sees it, is what new goal the Bolsheviks should set themselves – not in relation to a no-longer-existing *Tsarism* but in relation to the actually existing Provisional Government, which has taken the place of *Tsarism* as the 'official' government. Of course, the Provisional Government and *Tsarism* were not interchangeable, they were different, and the difference required analysis. The Bolsheviks explained that the social forces backing the monarchy – capitalists, gentry, the officer corps, all with ties to European imperialism – had fled the proscenium – only to take cover behind the Provisional Government and its revolutionary phrase-mongering.

Like the Old Bolsheviks, Lih fails to recognise fully that 1917 is not 1905. This gets him into further trouble. The 'spirit in which Bolshevik speakers proposed these formulas' of support to the Provisional Government, Lih remarks, 'was diametrically opposed to the spirit of similar formulas coming from the moderate socialists', the Mensheviks.<sup>77</sup> 'Timid' Mensheviks and 'ambitious' Bolsheviks are advocating similar formulas! If this is so – and it *is* so – how can Lih say the Old Bolsheviks are for overthrowing the Provisional Government even before Lenin's arrival? How can he tell the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks apart at this juncture? Not by examining the documentary evidence, where these formulas appear.

Indeed, it is because the Mensheviks have formulas in March 1917 that are so reminiscent of the Old Bolshevik formula of 1905 – joining, supporting a provisional government – that those Old Bolsheviks who are constantly looking in the rear-view mirror as they lurch forward are canvassing the possibility of *reunification* with the Mensheviks. Lih does not recognise how widespread this phenomenon is, let alone attempt to come to terms with it. This is because every initiative by Old Bolsheviks to reach an accommodation with the Mensheviks, who wished to work with the Provisional Government, not overthrow it, cannot be reconciled with Lih's view that 'Old Bolshevism

76 Lih 2011b, p. 230.

77 Lih 2011b, p. 216.

mandated a political course aimed at overthrow of the “bourgeois” Provisional Government’.<sup>78</sup> If Old Bolshevism did mandate this, then the desire of some Old Bolsheviks to cooperate with the Mensheviks becomes inexplicable. Lenin said the new circumstances mandated fresh thinking and not rote repetition of formulas learned by heart, drawn from a decade-old scenario, as some Old Bolsheviks were doing, like Stalin and Kamenev. Lenin did not have to name names. *De te fabula narratur*.

The reason why many Mensheviks and some Bolsheviks in March 1917 are animated by the ‘spirit’ of unity and accommodation with each other – not division and epic conflict – is obvious: The goal for which all Social Democrats have fought for so long has at long last been realised: Tsarism is gone. This was not just another ill-defined ‘stage’, one of many, in the non-descript ‘democratic revolution’, as Lih believes. For a number of Bolsheviks the February Revolution was a turning point because it appeared to render moot past differences with the Menshevik wing of the party. It led some Bolsheviks (like Woytinski) and many Mensheviks to wonder: since we have always agreed on the bourgeois-democratic character of our revolution, and since the Provisional Government institutionally incarnates this revolution, albeit in a conservative variant, what, now, separates us? Some Bolsheviks answered – ‘nothing’. And that was reason enough for some Bolsheviks unconvinced by Lenin’s arguments (like Woytinski) to join the Mensheviks.

Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had previously striven for unity in 1905, and had actually reunited at the Stockholm Party Congress in 1906. However, similar strivings in 1917 were motivated for entirely different reasons. In 1905, rank-and-file Mensheviks were moving toward the Bolsheviks because the liberal opposition to Tsarism was not fulfilling the Menshevik leaders’ expectation that the liberal Kadet party would be playing first fiddle in the bourgeois-democratic revolution. In 1917, the top Bolshevik leadership was moving toward the Menshevik leadership because the Kadets, while they dominated the Provisional Government, were not using their dominance to lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution forward, ‘to the end’, and needed to be prodded from below by the RSDLP.

Kamenev, whom Lih rightly looks to as the embodiment of Old Bolshevism, best expressed this trend toward ultimate accommodation with the Provisional Government early in the April Debates. Kamenev pointed to the reality that the working class was only a small minority whereas the significance of the ‘petty-bourgeois’ peasantry was ‘gigantic’. Here, Kamenev, like all the Mensheviks, was alluding to the sociological fact that the material premises of socialism were

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78 Lih 2011b, p. 199.

missing. Could this sociological fact be wished away from 'one day to the next', he asked? Since it could not, it was beyond the strength of the working class to overthrow the Provisional Government. Consequently, in his first substantive intervention in the April Debates, Kamenev *opposed* the call for overthrowing the Provisional Government and transferring all power to the soviets because this would 'disorganize the revolution'.<sup>79</sup> Lih ignores Kamenev's initial position because it does not accord with the position Lih thinks Kamenev always held: overthrowing the Provisional Government at the earliest opportunity. Eventually, Kamenev did change his mind. 'I think that our differences with Comrade Kamenev are not very great', Lenin deadpanned a few weeks later, 'because by agreeing with us' on the question of overthrowing the Provisional Government, Kamenev 'has changed his position'.<sup>80</sup>

In the April Debates, which Lih dismisses as a tempest in a teapot, Lenin explained how unity with the Mensheviks on Menshevik terms would discourage and demoralise the working class, the soldiers and the peasantry because it would mean continuing the war, postponing land reform, and re-establishing managerial authority on the factory floor. It would also greatly embolden Kadet-inspired counter-revolutionary forces. Lenin won the Bolshevik dissidents over to his views. From April on, the Bolsheviks began to demarcate themselves from the Mensheviks on these burning issues and, therefore, from 'Old Bolshevism'.

### *Party Resolutions and Party Pamphlets: What Is the Difference?*

To support the view that there was no such demarcation, no substantive political differences between Old Bolshevism and New Bolshevism, Lih analyses pamphlets issued by Moscow Bolsheviks, and distributed at factory entrances and in the streets to non-Bolshevik workers, to soldiers and peasants, to the wider masses, in the summer and autumn of 1917. These pamphlets show that Old Bolshevik formulations predominate, not the New Bolshevik formulation of 'All Power to the Soviets', which is downplayed. But this misses the point.

The Bolsheviks alone called for 'All Power to the Soviets'. Whether they often or seldom called for it is not critical. No other political formation called for it. No other party called for workers' power. At this point, in the summer and autumn of 1917, long after the conclusion of the April Debates, the Bolsheviks were confident that if the workers came to power it would mean the overthrow

79 *Sed'maia (aprel'skaia) vserossiiskaia konferentsiia RSDRP (bol'shevikov)*; *Petrogradskaia obshche gorodskaia konferentsiia RSDRP (bol'shevikov)*: *Protokoly* 1958, p. 34.

80 Lenin 1964d, p. 244.

of the Provisional Government since there could be no stable soviet workers' state under even the most democratic bourgeois rule.

In his speech in favour of the Resolution on the War, pronounced at the Seventh (April) All-Russia Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. (B.), Lenin noted in passing that 'all our resolutions are being written for leading Party members, for Marxists, and do not make reading matter for the masses. But they must serve as unifying and guiding political principles for every propagandist and agitator'.<sup>81</sup> Lenin closed the conference with a short speech highlighting the difference between party resolutions and popular pamphlets:

Our resolutions are not written with a view to the broad masses, but they will serve to unify the activities of our agitators and propagandists, and the reader will find in them guidance in his work. We have to speak to the millions; we must draw fresh forces from among the masses, we must call for more developed class-conscious workers who would popularise our theses in a way the masses would understand. We shall endeavour in our pamphlets to present our resolutions in a more popular form, and hope that our comrades will do the same thing locally. The proletariat will find in our resolutions material to guide it in its movement towards the second stage of our revolution.<sup>82</sup>

In conveying the concept of 'All Power to the Soviets' beyond the ranks of the party, the Bolsheviks thought they should modify the terminology to reach the target audience. But they were not indifferent to a politically more refined and rigorous conception of that message. Again, the Bolsheviks distinguished their political programme from that of all other competing political formations by advancing the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets', which the Bolshevism of the pre-April 1917 period could never have advanced merely through the exercise of 'logic' alone.

#### *Soviet Power and the Constituent Assembly*

Lih raises another argument that the *April Theses* are in line with pre-1917 Russian Social-Democratic political doctrine because Lenin 'explicitly rejects the idea that he is opposed to the convening of the Constituent Assembly', which had always been a key demand of Old Bolshevism<sup>83</sup> (and, of course, of Menshevism). Nevertheless, Lenin also says in the *April Theses* that 'Soviets of

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81 Lenin 1962b, p. 264.

82 Lenin 1964d, p. 313.

83 Lih 2011b.

Workers' Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government'.<sup>84</sup> How could Lenin possibly favour establishing both? There was no contradiction here because Lenin did not place the Constituent Assembly on a par with Soviet Power.

The question of the Constituent Assembly is now, after the overthrow of the Tsar, but a sideshow, a tactical question confronting the workers' movement on the road toward socialist revolution, beyond the bourgeois-democratic revolution. New Bolshevism's strategy of discrediting the Provisional Government by 'patiently explaining' to the masses why their 'unreasoning trust'<sup>85</sup> in it is misplaced explains why the Bolsheviks accorded the Constituent Assembly a subordinate position in relation to the Soviet in 1917.

Lenin says the Provisional Government talks big about democracy but does not do much about it. One way to show this is that it promises to set a date to hold elections and convene the Constituent Assembly but hems and haws and finds all sorts of excuses to delay its convocation by stonewalling elections to it. The lesson the Bolsheviks want to teach here is that workers cannot trust the Kadet-led Provisional Government in this or *any other matter* of vital importance, i.e., democracy, peace, land and bread. Were the Bolsheviks to say that the Constituent Assembly ought not be convened because it is inferior to Soviet Power, they would have left themselves vulnerable to the charge that they were against democracy and fearful of the popular will. Worse, they would have disastrously undermined their campaign to develop among the masses a reasoned distrust for the Provisional Government's counter-revolutionary domestic and foreign policies. Lih misses this rationale.

When the Constituent Assembly finally convened in January 1918, the Right Socialist Revolutionaries commanded a majority inside the hall – but not outside. They refused to recognise the legitimacy of the October Revolution and the Soviet seizure of power, an act ratified months earlier and sustained ever since by overwhelming majorities in virtually every soviet. The Mensheviks followed the Right-SR's lead. So did the Kadets. Had Old Bolshevism remained intact in every salient respect, as Lih holds, it would have remained indistinguishable from Menshevism. The revolution would have halted at its bourgeois-democratic stage – and then been thrown back. A reunited, Menshevik-led RSDLP would have called on workers to yield Soviet Power to the Assembly. Had Soviet Power self-dissolved, little could have stopped the Right-SRs and their allies from following up on this victory by continuing the war, re-establishing the authority of the Tsarist officer corps, reversing peasant land seizures and

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84 Lenin 1964c, p. 23.

85 Lenin 1964c, p. 22. Lenin repeatedly used these expressions.

dismantling the factory committees. In brief, they would have rewound the film of history back to February 1917 and beyond – all the while writing up the most democratic constitution in the world for the most democratic republic in the world. The Right-SRS and their friends never got the chance. The New Bolsheviks rebuffed them and their supporters by pre-emptively dissolving the Constituent Assembly instead. When Civil War broke out six months later, the Right-SRS continued their struggle for ‘democracy’ by rallying to the White Armies, led by anti-Semitic cutthroats.

Had the Bolsheviks not adopted a radically new conception of the Russian Revolution, they could not have fought for it. Had the Bolsheviks rejected the *April Theses* and maintained continuity with Old Bolshevism, the October Revolution would never have taken place. Trotsky perhaps best showed what Lih wanted to show – the ‘inner continuity’ of Bolshevism in the April Debates – without depriving the April Debates, as Lih did, of their decisive significance in qualitatively developing that continuity. Trotsky wrote:

Lenin’s divergence from the ruling circles of the Bolsheviks meant the struggle of the future of the party against its past. If Lenin had not been artificially separated from the party by the conditions of emigration and war, the external mechanics of the crisis would not have been so dramatic, and would not have overshadowed to such a degree the inner continuity of the party’s development.<sup>86</sup>

### Concluding Remark

In *Lenin*, his short biography of the Bolshevik leader, Lih invokes Robert C. Tucker, Lih’s teacher and ‘one of the few scholars to fully grasp the essential content of what Lenin himself called his dream’. Inspired by his mentor, Lih holds that Lenin’s ideas cannot be understood apart from the emotions Lenin invested in them and, conversely, that Lenin’s emotional life cannot be understood apart from his ideas.<sup>87</sup> I disagree. Lenin’s emotional life is of purely bio-

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86 Trotsky 1980, p. 331.

87 Lih 2011a, pp. 15, 13. Tucker (1918–2010) was attaché to the American embassy in Moscow from 1944 to 1953, advancing the imperial objectives of American foreign policy. He furthered them as advisor to Adlai Stevenson in 1956 when Stevenson ran for President on the Democratic ticket. Tucker entered academia in 1958 as a liberal Cold War warrior. His first work was an intellectually impoverished account of Marx’s theory of alienation, which István Mészáros demolished in a scathing critique (Mészáros 1970). Tucker went



graphical interest, irrelevant to understanding Lenin's ideas, which possess world-historical significance.

Lenin writes somewhere that to realise their purpose Social Democrats need 'knowledge of how to aim and shoot, not war-cries'. Historians, too, need to bring careful political analysis to bear when they propose to convey and explain to the public Lenin's political views, above all, the intricate, historically concrete argumentation often lying behind those views. Lih's favoured master notions, freely drawn from Tucker – 'heroic scenario', 'heroism', 'heroic leaders', 'heroic followers', 'revolutionary fervour', 'epic struggle' – too often function as politically indeterminate abstractions, as verbal pyrotechnics, not as categories of political analysis. Similarly for Lih's explanatory reliance on a-rational states of mind – 'ambition', 'timidity', 'pessimism', 'optimism', 'worry', 'Old Bolshevik psychology'. They are useless for categorising political positions and strategies, and for explaining changes in political positions and strategies: They, too, stand squarely in the way of understanding the material, rational basis of Lenin's dream of human emancipation.

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on to become one of the leading lights of American 'Sovietology', widely praised in the field for his two-volume psychobiography of Stalin, a work bereft of scientific value. Boris Souvarine wrote a sharp review of Volume 1 (Souvarine 1975). See Lih, Cohen, English, Kraus and Sharlet 2011 for a fulsome tribute.

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