

The Radical Doctrine for a New Revolution:  
Lenin's Return to Petrograd and the April Theses  
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The image of the Russian Revolution sold to the world by Soviet Union leadership was always that of a communist revolution. It was hailed as the greatest (and only) victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, a creation of a rock-solid fortress of socialism, strong enough in moral value and effective enough pragmatically to arouse a global urge toward communism. While it is trivial to state that the true character of the events of October 1917 deviated from the above description, this idealization indeed strongly correlated with the platform of the Bolshevik party on the eve of the revolution. The supreme goal was now the creation of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” This doctrine, introduced by Lenin shortly after his return to Russia, was meant to replace the old doctrine of “the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry,” a doctrine which, if followed in fact, would be inherently against liberalism, but would also rely heavily on small landowners—the petty bourgeois peasantry. Due to its lack of moderation, Lenin's new doctrine was initially labeled radical, utopian, and anarchist by many of the older and highly influential Bolshevik party members. The basis for their judgment was the belief that such an immediate transition from monarchy to socialism too blatantly rejected an important step in Marxist philosophy – the development of capitalism.

Upon his return, Lenin's objective was to organize a new Bolshevik party better suited to respond and take advantage of the aftermath of the February revolution. However, its radical and simplistic character ostracized many of the “Old Bolsheviks” who had thus far followed old Leninism, the concept of higher involvement of the richer peasantry, religiously. By stating

multiple and often contradictory goals, the doctrine highlighted in the April Theses, despite its radicalism, reads more like a guidebook to Bolshevik success than a political piece tied to Marxism. It highlights “that the power pass to the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants aligned with the proletariat; that all annexations be renounced in deed and not in word; that a complete break be effected in actual fact with all capitalist interests”, yet admits to attaching to this philosophy due to opportunity rather than theory: “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 organization 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>1</sup> Thus, due to their ability to morph according to the progression of the Revolution, it can be assumed that the statements in the April Theses were the foundation behind Lenin’s triumph in October. This opinion is held by many historians such as Boris Kolonitskii, Michael Kort, and contemporary activists such as Leon Trotsky. However, some scholars such as Jonathan Frankel claim the April Theses added nothing positive to the Bolshevik campaign and served only to create confusion and disenchantment among the Bolsheviks. While both of these assessments will be studied in depth below, it should be noted that regardless of the value of the April theses, the value of Lenin’s return to the outcome of the revolution is obvious. Despite initial disputes over his philosophy, the Bolsheviks unified under Lenin’s leadership and gained the capability for the organization and militarization needed for the October revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin, V. "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (a.k.a. the April Theses)." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04>> pg. 1

Lenin's return to Russia was much awaited not only by active Bolsheviks, but also by prominent political figures returning from (or still in) exile such as Kamenev and Trotsky. The process of his return was navigated and sponsored by Germany. The benefits of this action to the German war effort are obvious: if Lenin gained total political power, he would immediately take action to remove Russia's involvement from the war; if he did not, his influence over the Bolsheviks would strengthen the party enough to add additional chaos to the already disorderly political climate in the country, weakening Russia and increasing its likelihood of surrender. However, certain precautions had to be taken to ensure that Lenin's status as a leader was not tainted by his involvement with the capitalist enemy. Thus, official German records on his release state clearly, with careful wording, that the exportation of the Russian emigres was done "absolutely regardless of their political opinions or their attitude towards the question of the desirability of war or peace" and "on the basis of an exchange of those traveling for Germans and Austrians imprisoned or interned in Russia."<sup>2</sup> While these reasons were clearly a formality, the sentiment was enough to provide Lenin an official clean slate upon his return as a leader of the Bolshevik party.

While the change of philosophy upon his return was surprising, it was not completely unexpected. Lenin's position on the political spectrum regarding the nature of the revolution had

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<sup>2</sup> Platten, Fritz. 4 April, 1917, "The Conditions for the Passage Through Germany – Report Number 960", "2/17

Lenin." *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State, 1917-1921: Documents*. Ed. Martin McCauley. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975. Print. 29-30

already changed various times. Historian Jonathan Frankel points to several examples of such changes to highlight his argument for the negative or useless nature of the April theses. In the period from 1900-1904, Lenin's concept of the revolution had the character of the more liberal Bolsheviks or even Mensheviks in 1917. "He took it for granted that the coming revolution would be bourgeois in character," stating his goal as "the overthrow of tsarist autocracy and its replacement by a republic based on a democratic constitution."<sup>3</sup> It was not until the 1905 revolution and his establishment as the leader of the Bolshevik fraction that he adopted his famous slogan of "the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry"<sup>4</sup>. During the same year he even denounced the possibility of a dictatorship of the proletariat, claiming the concept was "half-baked, semi-anarchist" and that "only the most obtuse people can ignore the bourgeois character of the current revolution"<sup>5</sup>. This ease in shifting views is an important characteristic of Lenin's nature as a leader and politician. As Michael Kort points out, Lenin's political character was much more like that of a military general rather than a political theorist.<sup>6</sup> His ultimate goal was a socialist revolution, and he was ready to adapt his theory to all circumstances to achieve it.

While still not fully surprising, the radical edge of the doctrine from the April Theses is apparent. While avoiding accusations of radicalism, Lenin states the reason for his new policy is that Russia has passed through the bourgeois stage of the revolution to "its second stage, which

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<sup>3</sup> Frankel, Jonathan. "Lenin's Doctrinal Revolution of April 1917," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, 2 (Apr., 1969), p. 119. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Feb. 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/259665>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 120

<sup>5</sup> Lenin, V. I. "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution" July 1905. Qtd. Frankel 123.

<sup>6</sup> Kort, Michael. "1917: Russia's Two Revolutions." *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010. 94. Print.

must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants”<sup>7</sup>. This sentiment closely follows Trotsky’s opinion in March: “Changes in the higher government give the bourgeoisie of Europe and America an occasion to say that the revolution has won and is now completed”<sup>8</sup>. Such claims were highly unsettling to his fellow Bolsheviks. Even Lenin recognizes that “opponents of a certain brand present [his] views as a call to ‘civil war in the midst of revolutionary democracy!’”<sup>9</sup> In *Pravda* No. 27, Kamenev’s states, “Comrade Lenin’s general line appears to us unacceptable inasmuch as it proceeds from the assumption that the bourgeois-democratic revolution has been completed and it builds on the immediate transformations of this revolution into a Socialist revolution”<sup>10</sup>. However, as Frankel points out, this was only an argument for his new doctrine, leaving still no argument against the old<sup>11</sup>. Yet the ideas from 1905 were still the basis of what “Leninism” meant to the rest of the Bolsheviks and in 1917, “Leninism” – the concept of the “the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry”, was what defined and united the party. Thus, ironically, the Bolshevik leaders were better followers of pre-revolutionary “Leninism” than Lenin himself.

To historians with views similar to Frankel’s, the value of the theses further deteriorates under close scrutiny. Lenin denounces all forms of capitalism and calls for nationalization of all land, yet still tries to include the aid of the peasants. While he tries to draw a line between the

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<sup>7</sup> Lenin, V. "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (a.k.a. the April Theses)." pg. 2

<sup>8</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "Two Faces (Internal Forces of the Russian Revolution)." March 17, 1917. Marxists Internet Archive. Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch09.htm.htm>> pg. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Lenin, V. "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (a.k.a. the April Theses)." pg. 2

<sup>10</sup> Kamenev, L. "Kamenev Dissents." *Pravda* No. 27, April 1917, *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State, 1917-1921: Documents*. Ed. Martin McCauley. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Frankel, Jonathan. Pg. 125

“poorest peasants” and the “petty bourgeoisie”, he still calls for “the control of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies”<sup>12</sup>, which would involve little, if any, peasant involvement. Furthermore, he insistently calls for a “commune state”, one similar to the Paris Commune of the French Revolution, a system whose socialist goals matched well with Lenin’s, but whose outcomes led to military rule and lack of nationalization of major institutions such as the federal bank<sup>13</sup>. These discrepancies proliferated the confusion among the Bolsheviks, which lasted even after Lenin’s death. As Frankel points out, this can easily be seen in a 1927 letter from Stalin to Pokrovsky where Stalin uses Pokrovsky’s confusion about the meaning of the April Theses to accuse him of disloyalty to Lenin’s philosophy: “You emphatically contested this and persisted in your erroneous opinion that in the February-October period the Party carried on its work under the old slogan of “alliance with the whole peasantry.” And, in contesting it, you thereby deleted from the history of Bolshevism some of its finest pages, which treat of the struggle waged by the Bolsheviks to sever the middle strata of the peasantry from the petty-bourgeois parties, to isolate those parties, and to neutralise the vacillations and compromising policy of certain strata of the peasantry.”<sup>14</sup>

While the above examples of confusion on the true meaning of the April Theses can lead to the obvious conclusion that the theses were, if not detrimental, then simply useless to the revolution in October, they fail to acknowledge the disparities between the development of Russia and the development of other capitalist nations. The concept that the revolution in Russia

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<sup>12</sup> Lenin, V. "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (a.k.a. the April Theses)." pg. 4

<sup>13</sup> Barth, Norman. "The Paris Commune of 1871." *The Paris Pages / Les Pages De Paris / Paris.Org / The Web's First Site About The City Of Light / Since 14 July 1994*. Web. 03 Apr. 2011.  
<<http://www.paris.org/Kiosque/may01/commune.html>> pg. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Stalin, J. "Reply to S. Pokrovsky." *Marxists Internet Archive*. 23 June 1927. Web. 03 Apr. 2011.  
<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1927/06/23.htm>>.

would not follow the Marxist model was not new to the party, and neither was the goal of ultimately obtaining a socialist revolution. The doctrine of the April theses was always seen to be the goal of a socialist revolution under perfect conditions, but due to Lenin's statements from 1905, the Bolshevik party assumed that the socioeconomic conditions in Russia called for the realization of "the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" first. Lenin's reasoning for skipping that initial step was that the bourgeois revolution was completed. However, one can argue, instead, that the socioeconomic conditions in Russia made the success of a bourgeois revolution impossible. In his "History of the Russian Revolution", Trotsky claims that the Bolsheviks were always, almost subconsciously, pushing their followers toward socialism and away from accepting the coming of capitalism<sup>15</sup>. This conclusion stands not so obscure. Marxist theory makes the stage of capitalism necessary for the realization of a communist revolution. However, the mere existence of the Bolsheviks and other socialist parties in the not fully developed Russia immediately creates an anachronism. The only reason for the creation of a socialist party is to promote socialism. Thus, the Bolsheviks promoted socialism to the Russian proletariat through anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois propaganda.

Boris Kolonitskii states that such propaganda, delivered to the people in the form of pamphlets, posters, etc. , more so than actual party platforms, was the true source of Bolshevik power. In his opinion society easily "adhered to a socialist orientation" and developed hatred towards the "enemies of the state"<sup>16</sup>. Countless pamphlets and flyers with statements such as

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<sup>15</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "The History of the Russian Revolution (1.16 Rearming the Party)." *Marxists Internet Archive*.

Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch16.htm>>. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Kolonitskii, Boris. "Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti - "Burzhui" Consciousness in 1917." *JSTOR*. Web. 24

“the flies are the unhappy workers who must obey all those laws the capitalist happens to think of...” and re-printings of the Communist Manifesto were distributed to the proletariat<sup>17</sup>. Thus, the Bolsheviks themselves created a proletariat, not only ready for, but patiently expecting a socialist, not bourgeois, revolution. Lenin, as a politician, recognized this fact and adapted a doctrine more suitable for the ears of his targeted group. Furthermore, in his essay “Anti-bourgeois Propaganda...”, Kolonitskii, just like Lenin, sees clear parallels between the consciousness of the Russian people before the revolution with that of the French before theirs<sup>18</sup>. Seen in this light, Lenin’s goal of a government similar to the Paris Commune does not seem so far-fetched, but rather a consequential response to the mindset of the masses.

The effectiveness of such propaganda was also the main reason for the new enlistees to the Bolshevik party. These “worker-Bolsheviks”, as coined by Trotsky, slowly became the new face of the party, while the old leaders were trapped in exile or prison<sup>19</sup>. They were younger, more energetic, and most importantly, in Russia during the beginning of 1917. These younger members were now in charge of spreading the socialist philosophy and applying its concepts for immediate goals, while the older leaders, spending years crucial to the revolution in exile, were isolated from active participation in the preparation and immediate response of the Revolution of February 1917. As Trotsky points out, most of the “old Bolsheviks” had spent years in solitude

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Feb. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/pss/130822>> 187.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 184-187

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 189

<sup>19</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "The History of the Russian Revolution (1.16 Rearing the Party)." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch16.htm>> . Ch. 37.



or in small groups of like-minded people<sup>20</sup>. Thus, they did not have the opportunity to directly observe the changes in Russia or to form political opinions based on the country's revolutionary development. This alienation allowed them to cling even tighter to Lenin's 1905 doctrine and delayed their acceptance to the new doctrine put forth in the April Theses. Lenin, meanwhile, "found support in another layer of the party already tempered, but more fresh and more closely united with the masses."<sup>21</sup> An argument, however, can be made that Lenin himself suffered from an equally intense alienation from the revolutionary masses in Russia. Trotsky dismisses this proposal, claiming that "Lenin had never lost touch with [the workers]"<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, while in Switzerland, he not only maximized communication with the Bolsheviks in Russia, but was involved in the Swiss socialist movement as well. This involvement was also part of the inspiration behind his particular stress on developing the Russian proletariat into "the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world"<sup>23</sup>.

This international goal, Trotsky claims, was another core reason for Lenin to adopt the new doctrine. In the actual theses, he only claims the need for "A new International". However, Lenin's idea was for "the Russian revolution to give the stimulus to a socialist revolution in Europe, which should then drag belated Russia into its whirlpool"<sup>24</sup>. His logic is based on the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Ch. 37

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Ch. 37 p. 9

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Ch. 37, p. 9

<sup>23</sup> Lenin, V. I. "Lenin: Farewell Letter to the Swiss Workers." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Published in the Magazine *Jugend-Internationale* No. 8, May 1, 1917. Published According to the Manuscript., 26 Mar. 1917. Web. 03 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/mar/26b.htm>>. Pg. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "The History of the Russian Revolution (1.16 Rearming the Party)." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch16.htm>> . Ch. 37. Pg. 7

belief that an overwhelmingly proletarian revolution will ignite similar revolutions in countries that developed in the proper Marxist order. “To the Russian proletariat has fallen the great honour of beginning the series of revolutions which the imperialist war has made an objective inevitability”, Lenin claims in his letter to the Swiss workers<sup>25</sup>. He rephrases this multiple times throughout the letter: “[The revolution] can facilitate the rise of a situation in which its chief, its most trustworthy and most reliable collaborator, the European and American socialist proletariat, could join the decisive battles”; “our revolution [may be] the prologue to the world socialist revolution, etc<sup>26</sup>. While far-fetched, these statements from Lenin are convenient in battling the criticism of Bolsheviks such as Kamenev based on the immaturity of Russia’s socioeconomic position. Trotsky’s analysis of this concept claims that an immediate proletariat-led revolution is the most suitable way to deal with the backwardness of Russia. He acknowledges, that “societies are not so rational in building that the dates for proletarian dictatorships arrive exactly at that moment when the economic and cultural conditions are ripe for socialism<sup>27</sup>”.

It seems obvious that Trotsky’s view on the April theses, even retrospectively, is optimistic. After all, it was the closest reincarnation to the platform he had been supporting since his early days of political involvement. He is not alone, however, in his belief that the April theses were a major factor in the development of the October revolution. Though most proponents of this belief provide, like Trotsky, clear and valid accounts for Lenin’s reasons for changing doctrines, the proofs for the effectiveness of the new doctrine are weak. While

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<sup>25</sup> Lenin, V. I. "Lenin: Farewell Letter to the Swiss Workers." *Marxists Internet Archive*. Published in the Magazine *Jugend-Internationale* No. 8, May 1, 1917. Published According to the Manuscript., 26 Mar. 1917. Web. 03 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/mar/26b.htm>>. Pg. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Pg. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Trotsky, Leon. "The History of the Russian Revolution (1.16 Rearming the Party)." Pg. 6

accounts like Frankel's justifiably highlight the obvious theoretical and logical flaws of the theses, they do not serve well to explain why or how Lenin was capable of organizing the party under such a seemingly radical new platform. Regardless, it is easy to assume that the October revolution would not have succeeded without a unified Bolshevik party. Now, the success of Lenin's theses becomes more obvious. He used the new doctrine to excite the younger Bolshevik members by providing (much expected) action immediately after his return. Slowly converting the old leaders to his new ideas (once again), he solidified his power as a leader by proving he was the only one capable of unifying the party under a single policy. Thus, he continued to not only unify all of Russia under the hammer and sickle, but to convince it (however falsely), in the success of its communist revolution.

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