

### **Lenin's Voice: Making Friends of Enemies**

At the heart of the Bolshevik insurgency in Russia was Lenin's stern and self-confident voice. His commanding oratorical abilities, coupled with the powerful rhetoric he employed in his writing, were at the crux of his influence not only as a revolutionary, but also as an individual capable of turning his enemies into his allies. This profound ability becomes exceptionally clear in his discourse with a group of disgruntled soldiers, a group who began by being hostile towards him, but ended up respecting him. During his speech, he used perceptive language and empathy in order to turn his antagonistic audience to his side. Whether he related to the soldiers' distress or shared their cultural view of camaraderie, Lenin always found a way to connect with his audience, and ultimately turn them in his favor.

Facing significant resistance following his return to Russia on April 3, 1917, Lenin began to develop the next move of his party, spending most of his time in the Pravda office.<sup>1</sup> As Michael Pearson relates in The Sealed Train, on April 10, Lenin heard that the guards of the Izmailovsky regiment were holding a meeting on the grounds where some Bolsheviks were about to have a parade. The regiment was heavily influenced by the propaganda efforts of the Cadet leader Pavel Milyukov, who desired to put an end to the Soviets and the "menace" of socialism. Milyukov took Lenin's arrival as an opportunity to create a target for all the anger he wished to instill within the populace, and it was because of his rhetoric that the regiment was so

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin, like many revolutionaries, was still exiled from Russia during the initial phase of the Russian Revolution in 1917. During his exile, he developed the crux of his Bolshevik philosophy from his independent studies (which accounts for the highly theoretical nature of many of his works). He arrived in Russia on O.S. April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917, after being allowed to pass through Germany. Pravda: a Russian political newspaper dominated by the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democrats.

disdainful towards a man who had just returned from exile. When Lenin went out to speak with the soldiers, he was greeted with angry yells.<sup>2</sup>

During his speech, Lenin firmly portrayed World War I as an imperialist effort. Even though the masses of soldiers protesting in the streets against him proclaimed their desire to bring the war to a victorious end, the general populace had grown weary of the war. Lenin took advantage of this weariness by providing short, direct, and incisive descriptions of the general mood of his audience, juxtaposing the “death, hunger, ruin, and barbarism” being brought upon the people with the material success of the capitalists.<sup>3</sup> He continued, referring to the “criminal” and “frightful” nature of the war, and the “scandalously high profits” of the capitalists. By relating to the pain of the people, specifically of the soldiers, Lenin was able to put into practical terms the theory that he had developed in Zurich, Switzerland when he was in exile. Lenin had now come face to face with the injustice buried within the common soldier, and he pinched the nerve that was necessary in order to extend his revolutionary theory on the horrors of imperialist capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

This strong feeling of injustice stemmed from the fact that most soldiers in the Russian military were peasants, men who were just as worried as the next man about the situation back home. Lenin utilizes this fact and hints at the desires which every human being on a lower level of the social ladder has: the idea of more representation, democratic government, and power belonging to the “people.” He ties his idealization of liberty to the idea that the power must be granted to the Soviets, which, as he had outlined in his April Theses, was one of his main

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2 Michael Pearson, The Sealed Train (New York, 1975), Pg. 179

3 Ibid.

4 Vladimir Lenin, “Speech Delivered at a Meeting of Soldiers of the Izmailovsky Regiment,” April 10 (23), 1917; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/10.htm>; Vladimir Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Petrograd, Russia 1917)

strategic objectives. In his speech Lenin announces his belief that the power must belong to “the people themselves...from the bottom up, from the remotest little village to every street block in Petrograd.”<sup>5</sup> He hints at the need for a “different republic,” one that keeps in mind “with the interests of the people”; in essence, one which is more “democratic.”<sup>6</sup> Lenin’s ability to empathize with his audience allowed his ideas to become rooted in the soldiers’ minds, allowing him to grab their attention, just as he would eventually grab the attention of many Russian citizens during the Bolsheviks’ rise to power.

At the core of Lenin’s speech was the belief that power must be taken away from the police, the bureaucracy, and the army, and instead be given to the “people.” This idea was not alien to the Russian populace—that very idea of unity and camaraderie was at the heart of the Russian system of thought, and it was the main desire being expressed in the villages.<sup>7</sup> He hinted at the question of land ownership, which was the main worry of the peasantry, knowing that this would rally the soldiers of the regiment towards his side. By expressing his belief that the land should not be owned by wealthy landlords, he amassed even more populist support from a crowd that was originally incredibly hostile towards him. This ability to relate with the people, to bring a voice to their concerns and desires, was one of the main factors allowing the revolution to go in the Bolsheviks’ favor. Lenin knew the mentality of the common Russian peasant, and with his empathy he spread his revolutionary Marxist ideals. He described the need to get rid of the Provisional Government, destroy the bureaucracy, nationalize the land, merge all Russian banks, and other ideas he had detailed in his April Theses. With this technique Lenin’s voice became the

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5 Lenin, “Speech Delivered at a Meeting of Soldiers of the Izmailovsky Regiment.”

6 Ibid.

7 Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Fairfax, Virginia 2000), Pg.3-4

(<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam032/99056317.pdf>)

F.D. Sorokin, *Setting up Local Soviets in Tambov Province* [86, Pg. 372, 374-377]

voice of the “people,” and it is there, within Lenin’s voice, that the power of the Bolshevik philosophy arose.

But more important than his technique to rouse a crowd were his transformational aspirations. After creating empathy with the soldiers, he called for them to organize themselves while underlining a sense of doubt and distrust, explicitly telling the soldiers to “[trust] no one, [and to depend] only on [their] own intelligence and experience.”<sup>8</sup> That idea of a tight-knit group with common ideals is reminiscent of the organized group of Bolsheviks that he called for in *What is to be Done?* (1902). Here one can see Lenin’s true power and his keen eye towards his ultimate goal. A mere few days after his arrival from exile to a country that was showing great resistance to him, he was connecting to the people and trying to instill his ideas from twelve years prior. Lenin was a staunch and strong man, with a firm, albeit fairly antagonistic, persona. Yet given this tough personality, he was capable of providing an empathetic undercurrent to his dialogue, giving, in small doses, that push that was necessary to sway a listener to his side. Lenin knew that he had to create a barrier between the Germans and himself, given the growing rumor that he was a German spy, and as such referred to the German Emperor Wilhelm II as a “crowned brigand” in his speech, attempting to quell the ideas being spread by Milyukov’s propaganda efforts.<sup>9</sup> Against all odds, Lenin somehow found a way to succeed. Whether it was combating Milyukov’s propaganda, overcoming the internal troubles of the Bolshevik party, or reconciling his Marxist ideals with reality, Lenin managed to persevere by using his persuasive voice.

As Lenin finished his speech, with a rhetorical flourish, the soldiers lifted him up, cheering.<sup>10</sup> Within a few minutes, Lenin was able to completely change the group’s opinion of

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8 Lenin, “*Speech Delivered at a Meeting of Soldiers of the Izmailovsky Regiment.*”

9 Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*: Translated by Max Eastman (New York, United States 1936) Pg. 243-248

10 Pearson, *Sealed Train*, Pg. 179

him. This simple and short interaction with a hostile audience demonstrates that the struggles Lenin considered to be inherent in the lives of the peasantry were indeed valid. The Russian people were a people in need, a people that needed a leader who could relate with their lives, and give them hope. One could say that the Russian people acted as the neutral bystander that easily moves towards the side that provides the most promise. Initially the men of the Izmailovsky regiment had taken Milyukov's side and rallied against Lenin, but now they cheered him on as he symbiotically echoed the concerns that were on their minds. Lenin saw the weakness in the loyalty of the Russian people to their previous leaders and realized that with words he could rally the masses towards the Bolshevik cause. With time this voice allowed him to slowly build up the concrete non-rhetorical power of the Bolsheviks, transforming them into the rulers of the Russian state.

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