

Jun 27: Lenin's Class Analysis and a Call for Action not Reform

Daniel Rankin

Throughout 1917 Vladimir Lenin was a major proponent of the Russian Revolution and a prominent figure in the Bolshevik party. Lenin was brilliant in conveying his ideas to his party and the Russian masses through both speeches and literature. On June 27, 1917, he published “A Class Shift” in the Bolshevik paper *Pravda*.¹ This document elaborates on the current state of the classes in the revolution and stresses that government reforms and compromises would not be conducive to a proletariat revolution.

The key message of Lenin's article is that the “revolution of February 27, 1917, swept away the monarchy and put the liberal bourgeoisie in power” and it is now time for the proletariat to seize power.² Lenin seeks to complete the revolution by having the proletariat in power under Bolshevik leadership. For Lenin's Marxist ideals to be realized, he feels that the revolution must move forward with the working class or that it would lose momentum and fail. Following the abdication of the Tsar, Lenin desired a swift start to the next stage of revolution — a replacement of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat.³ Lenin hoped to use this article to rally support from both the people and his party by convincing the proletariat that it was essential for them to push forward with the revolution.

The article by Lenin is pro-Bolshevik and frames the situation to be a prime opportunity for the proletariat to advance. Analyzing “the class shift that has taken or is taking place in the present revolution,” he explains the state of the revolution and draws many parallels with the past

¹ Lenin, “A Class Shift” (27 June 1917). (“Marxists Internet Archive”, 2002).
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/10.htm>. accessed on 21 March 2012.

² *Ibid.*

³ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Russian Revolution*. (OUP Oxford: 2002). Kindle Edition. Location 964-6.

social structure.⁴ The liberal bourgeoisie seized power and replaced the Tsar, but as the revolution progressed, in Lenin's view, "the entire liberal bourgeoisie became counter-revolutionary." The formerly revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie made up of the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties replaced the old opposition that was the liberal bourgeoisie. The issue is that the new opposition wishes to make compromises and not overthrow the class in power. Instead, "the petty bourgeoisie [are] permitted, in a harmless majority, to occupy harmless (for capital) posts in the Ministry." Lenin sees this compromise as a threat to the revolution. By the end of June, Lenin had already addressed the First Congress of Soviets and "had totally dismissed the path of 'reformist democracy', acknowledging only 'revolutionary democracy.'"⁵ In order to push the revolutionary democracy, Lenin calls on the proletariat for action.

In order to further understand Lenin's purpose in the article, it is important to recognize that it was written in the summer of 1917. At this time, the government was divided into two separate powers: the Provisional Government and the Soviets. As an imperfect two-body system, it often had conflicts and inefficient practices. Lenin recognized the opportunity in this broken, dual power system. If the Bolsheviks could control the Soviets, they would be an essential tool in forming a revolutionary Bolshevik government.⁶ The Soviets initially had very few Bolshevik party members. This is why Lenin wanted the support from the proletariat to increase Bolshevik power in the government. Lenin knew that gaining control of the Soviets would be crucial for the revolution and would stop the compromise in the current system.

⁴ "A Class Shift"

⁵ Volkogonov, Dmitri. *Lenin: A New Biography*. (New York: Free Press 1994), p. 138.

⁶ Sakwa, Richard. *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*. (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 32

The Great War also heavily influenced the events of the summer. Lenin recognizes that “the imperialist war has hastened developments fantastically” and “is hastening further developments.”⁷ The war provided a catalyst for the beginning of the revolution but, in June 1917, the war “poses problems in a revolutionary rather than a reformist manner.” Russia had suffered numerous defeats already and Lenin believed that continued participation in the war would lead to disaster. Lenin’s defeatist beliefs add more urgency to his demands for the second stage of the revolution because the “war is crushing the people and threatens to crush them completely.” He believes the war is a threat to both the country and the revolution and that revolution must act quickly in order to overcome it.

It is also important to recognize that this article was posted in *Pravda*, the leading Bolshevik paper during 1917. The Bolsheviks relied heavily on printed material to spread their message and *Pravda* reached thousands of people every day during the revolution.⁸ Lenin is addressing these masses of readers with this article. As a result, the language is not overly complicated and Lenin uses several propaganda techniques to promote Bolshevism. He describes the tsarist system with phrases such as the “financial magnates who were reaping profits” and “predatory treaties” and describes the people as having their leaders “driven underground.”⁹ These phrases include negative connotations that depict a clear, malicious enemy and an oppressed people. Lenin also used negative comparisons between the current opponents to Bolshevism and the past opponents, claiming the petty-bourgeois democrats want “to share power with the bourgeoisie but not overthrow them, in exactly the same way as the

⁷ “A Class Shift”

⁸ *The Rise and Fall*.

⁹ “A Class Shift”

Cadets wanted to share power with the monarchy but not overthrow it.”¹⁰ He also refers to “the Tseretelis and Chernovs” replacing the Cadets (Irakli Tsereteli was a Menshevik who served as Minister of Post and Telegraphs in the Provisional Government. Victor Chernov was a Socialist Revolutionary who served as Minister of Agriculture in the Provisional Government). By referring to opponents as the supporters of two anti-Bolshevik government members, Lenin draws attention to the opposition’s control of the state. These associations cast a negative light upon the opponents of Bolshevism in power and urge *Pravda* readers to seek a greater Bolshevik presence in the government.

Lenin recognizes that the state is in danger of ending the revolution through compromises between its political parties. The parties in power either resist the revolution or want to compromise, “[b]ut the objective situation in world politics is revolutionary and it *cannot be dealt with* by reforms.”¹¹ He wants the Bolshevik party to gain power and he sees that his only hope of doing so lay not with the petty-bourgeois democrats but “with the revolutionary proletariat” who “can prevent a tragic end.”¹² This article as well as countless others by Lenin and his comrades all support a Bolshevik rise to power. This persuasive Bolshevik propaganda proved successful as they raised support and were successful during the October Revolution in which the Bolsheviks seized power in a proletarian revolution.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ “A Class Shift”

¹² *Ibid.*