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The Sixth Bolshevik Party Congress: A Catalyst to the Russian Revolution of 1917

Bolshevism is certainly one of the first concepts that comes to mind at the mention of the process of the Russian revolution of 1917. In fact, many people would unknowingly argue that the revolution in its entirety was a device of the Bolshevik's making. They think of Lenin and his comrades as the sole creators of the disturbances that led Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate, the Soviet of Petrograd to form and even the ultimate fall of the Provisional Government. However, it might come as a surprise to many that even until mid-1917 the Bolsheviks were not actually playing a prominent role in the happenings of the day. It is not until the Sixth Bolshevik Congress that the Bolsheviks emerge in the form that history has come to recognize them. In fact, it is in these late July and early August days of 1917 that the Bolsheviks finally developed a clear ideology, formalized key alliances with the adhesion of the Mezhrainitsy, instituted 'Democratic Centralism' and established the necessary prominence in the Russian political scene that led them to radically change the history of Russia.

Before going on to describe the happenings in the Sixth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, it is necessary to understand the situation in Russia as it stood at the time. Tsar Nicholas II, mainly due to his incompetence as a leader and the archaic system of tsarism, abdicated in March 1917 after the Russian people could no longer endure decades of oppression. The fall of Nicholas left the country in a very precarious state, with the power to govern divided between two inefficient and irreconcilable bodies: the Provisional Government, formed by nobles and old members of the Duma, and the Soviet of Petrograd, a huge but unofficial group of workers and peasants. Even worse, war was raging in Russia's territory and showed no signs of coming to a halt. In a matter of months,

an army general had already tried to establish a military dictatorship and the dual-headed Provisional Government was still trying to figure out what to do with the country. Meanwhile, the real casualties of this situation were the Russian people who were starving in the fields and cities. This terrible economic, social and political landscape is the one that Lenin encountered when he returned in April to Russia, and the one that rapidly promoted the growth of the Bolsheviks into a commanding power.

In the days immediately before the Congress (which was held between July 26th and August 3rd) Lenin was being persecuted by the government and went into hiding. However, this did not prohibit him from directly dictating the concepts to be discussed during such meetings due to the direct influence of his recent publications. Two of them were especially pertinent to the Congress, these he titled "The Political Situation" and "On Slogans". These two separate publications basically deal with the same situation but with a different scope. They build on top of Lenin's radical ideas postulated in his famous 'April Theses' but they also go beyond a simple theoretical expansion of ideology. They present the key ideas that would later go on to define the Bolshevik party. Lenin argued in both papers that their former allies, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, had forgotten their true ideals and were now, through their control of the Petrograd Soviet, trying to align themselves with the Provisional Government and thus with capitalistic ideals. In his own words:

The leaders of the Soviets and of the Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik parties ... have completely betrayed the cause of the revolution by putting it in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries and by turning themselves, their parties and the Soviets into mere fig-leaves of the counter-revolution.¹

It is important to notice the unmistakable aggressiveness in Lenin's writings, his unfaltering determination to do whatever was necessary to achieve his ultimate goals. He argues that

¹ Lenin. "The Political Situation." Proletarskoye Dyelo. 2 Aug. 1917. Lenin Collected Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

the country is quickly and irrevocably heading away from a true proletarian revolution due to the actions of the Menshevik-controlled Petrograd Soviet, and thus states that an armed uprising in the name of the proletariat (who should ally with the peasants for this purpose, Lenin's own addition to Marxist theory in 1905) is the only option to save Russia from falling into blind western capitalism. He also states:

All hopes for a peaceful development of the Russian revolution have vanished for good. This is the objective situation: either complete victory for the military dictatorship, or victory for the workers' armed uprising...²

This is perhaps the most important statement Lenin made in his writings (and that would later get discussed in the Congress): he argued that the time when a peaceful solution to the conflict was possible had passed and the only possible course of action was a violent uprising. This statement is mentioned without any particular proof or evidence, but nonetheless at least it shows (again) that Lenin was determined to take power and make happen what he thought is right, at whatever the cost or the theoretical justification. In fact, Lenin made these claims as if they were completely obvious and self-evident (perhaps explaining his lack of justification), something that the majority of people did not recognize as such. It is also important to notice that Lenin leaves absolutely no possibility for a 'middle ground' outcome to the situation. In his mind, either his cause wins or the extreme right wing military dictatorship would rule. It is farfetched to qualify this is as true: without the revolution, Russia may have settled into some sort of capitalistic system that is not necessarily a military dictatorship. However, it is clearly of no use to Lenin to pose this possibility to the people. He phrases his words in a specific sense of urgency that calls people to action, the most lacking characteristic of the political structures at the time.

Lenin also calls for an end to the "Power to the Soviet" slogan that the Bolsheviks had not only supported but pushed as the solution to Russian political problems. He insists

² Lenin. "The Political Situation." Proletarskoye Dyelo. 2 Aug. 1917. Lenin Collected Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

that the current Soviets no longer represent the true interest of the Russian proletariat and thus should not be given power. He is quick to mention that Soviets should be in fact supported, but that their current actions (especially the Petrograd Soviet) make them unfit for power as they are not adhering to their supposed purpose. He specifically comments on this situation:

Soviets may appear in this new revolution, and indeed are bound to, but not the present Soviets, not organs collaborating with the bourgeoisie, but organs of revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. It is not a question of Soviets in general, but of combating the present counter-revolution and the treachery of the present Soviets.³

Here Lenin makes a very smart political move: in one single publication he manages to remove his direct support to the Soviet that he argues has stopped fighting for the revolution, but he also manages to keep the possibility open of taking power in the name of the Soviet. This may sound ambiguous, but in fact was a brilliant strategy in the sense that it 'justified' the interests of the Bolshevik party in the proletariat even more. This is very evident when he states:

A new cycle is beginning, one that involves not the old classes, not the old parties, not the old Soviets, but classes, parties and Soviets rejuvenated in the fire of struggle, tempered, schooled and refashioned by the process of the struggle.⁴

Here he supports an idealized view of Soviets and parties, but for the convenience of the present situation, it is better to simply go past and reject these soviets and 'hope' for a new breed of Soviets after the revolution (which would be run according to Bolshevik standards).

³ Lenin. "On Slogans." July 1917. Lenin Collected Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

⁴ Lenin. "On Slogans." July 1917. Lenin Collected Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

Lenin argues that there is no longer a true 'dual power' between the Soviet and the Provisional Government, and instead that the power is now in the hands of the Provisional Government alone. It is in this manner that Lenin manages to portray the Bolshevik Party as the sole party that has kept pure to its purposes and to the interests of the proletariat and peasants. This is one of the key factors in the later actions of the Bolsheviks: the fact that while the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet were very slowly and inefficiently trying to organize everyone, the Bolsheviks actually worked on gaining the support of the people, especially those who were most radical and wanted quick and concise action.

Why is the Congress of Soviets important then? It may seem underwhelming to know that it was in fact only attended by 157 party members at the time (with Lenin absent) from July 26th to August 3rd amidst fears of the Provisional Government raiding such Congress. However, the Congress became the catalyst in which one man's ideas were catapulted into a whole party that had now grown to around 240,000 members. It was also the official point in which Lenin effectively assumes command of the Bolshevik party and their plan of action. Before the Congress, mainly thanks to Lenin's radical postulations in his April Theses (and also due to the fact that many high ranking Bolshevik officers were outside of Russia living on exile), the Bolshevik party was split in many groups and lacked a central committee that was able to bind everyone together under a single ideological constant. In fact, during this time there was continuous debate among Bolsheviks of what exactly should be done with the political situation in Russia. While today Lenin is seen as the unresolved and unifying leader of such party, at the time there were many who doubted him and initially even rejected his propositions that an immediate armed uprising was necessary to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat over the evils of capitalism ideals. This changed greatly during the Congress. While there was certainly a fair share of debate, Lenin's ideals, which were voiced through the speeches done

throughout the Congress by Stalin, were eventually accepted in their entirety by party members, which for the first time in party history meant that the Bolsheviks had now a set of ideals that unified the party and brought it together to fight for a single common cause. Apart from this, the Congress was also historically significant thanks to the formal application of Democratic Centralism and also due to the official consolidation of the merger of the Mezhrainitsy to the Bolshevik party itself.

Regarding the ideological base for the action of the Party, the Bolsheviks agreed on three main acting points: 1) The necessity for an armed uprising. 2) The rejection of allegiance with the Mensheviks and SR's (which had 'turned evil'). 3) The renouncing of the "All Power to the Soviets" strategy. It is perhaps obvious but equally important to notice that this is exactly what Lenin pushed for in his publications right before the Congress (underscoring the importance of the contents of such documents), showing the amount of influence he was able to exert over the Bolsheviks through Stalin. Stalin's role is also very interesting, since at this point he was not close to being the megalomaniacal figure history usually assigns to him, and instead worked as Lenin's spokesman during the Congress. This is evident in the number of times he makes reference to Lenin during his speeches. Here is one example:

Comrade Lenin, in his pamphlet, goes further and definitely says that there is no dual power.... The witch-hunt against Lenin and the Bolsheviks raised by Alexinsky, Pankratov and Pereverzev is exploited to the full by the counter-revolutionaries... It was introduced into Marxist literature by Comrade Lenin in 1905....⁵

These statements by Stalin show in fact the beginning of the idolization of Lenin, which would be much intensified in later years, to the purpose of uniting the people of the future Soviet Union under one legendary hero. All this ideological unification shows the incredible importance of Lenin at the time, and how he managed to mold the outcome of the

⁵ Stalin, Joseph. "Speech Delivered at the Sixth Congress of the R.S.D.L.P." Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. Sept. 1917. Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

Congress without even being present, something people would deem unthinkable in modern politics.

Stalin was able to achieve the support of Lenin's ideals after much debate during the days of the Congress, mainly due to the support of other important members of the Bolshevik high command, including people such as Sokolnikov, Smilga, Danton and Bubnov⁶. The same were also aided by the fact that Bukharin (one of the most influential members of the Bolshevik command) chose to retain a neutral position with respect to the discussion of whether to renounce the slogan or not. Sokolnikov aided Stalin (and therefore Lenin's postulates) when he exclaimed:

We must explain [to the masses] that the main issue is not the soviets but organizing the masses for an uprising ... For the peasant masses, the road to a socialist revolution lies in the support of the proletarian avant-garde.⁷

Added to this, Bubnov made an even clearer supporting remark for an armed uprising, when he exclaimed:

The Soviets have no power now ... If, previously, we spoke of the 'transfer of power', that term is now obsolete. We must build up our strength for the decisive battle, for the seizure of power.⁸

It is through these remarks and various others that eventually the ideas posed by Lenin in his postulations and supported by Stalin eventually found their way to be accepted. Thus, by the end of the Congress, it had become clear that an armed uprising in order to take power was the only way the Bolsheviks could succeed in establishing a socialist revolution.

⁶ Rabinowitch, Alexander. *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2004. Print.

⁷ Rabinowitch, Alexander. *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2004. Print.

⁸ Rabinowitch, Alexander. *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2004. Print.

Notice that at the same time the Bolsheviks criticized the Soviet for its action but ironically ultimately ended up having a very prominent position in it after the Congress, due in large part to the newly gained allegiance of the Mezhraiontsy (as mentioned below). In fact, Stalin mentions in 1917 'we secured about 20 per cent of the 800,000 votes cast in Petrograd. The Vyborg District Duma we won entirely'⁹ when referring to the newfound power of the Bolshevik power in the Petrograd Soviet, even if they officially wanted to distance themselves from it.

One of the resolutions taken in the Congress, which perhaps was not seen as overly important at the time but which eventually had a tremendous effect on the revolution, was the fact that members of the Bolshevik party, no matter what they thought, had to support the decisions of the Party itself. This is a very important characteristic of the Bolsheviks and of what would later become the Soviet Union: the fact that even if there was debate and disagreement inside the party's command group, once a resolution was reached all members stand by that resolution. Lenin called this 'Democratic Centralism' and described it in his own words in 1906:

The principle of democratic centralism ... means precisely freedom of criticism, complete and everywhere, as long as it does not undermine the unity of action already decided upon.¹⁰

Thus, when Lenin dictated that an armed uprising was what was needed and the party gave him its support, there could be no one inside the party who was going to contradict him (and similarly for other decisions taken), thanks to the characteristics of such system of 'Democratic Centralism'. This yielded a resolute political body (at least to outside appearances), something that at the time was unheard of. This was one of the most

⁹ Stalin, Joseph. "Speech Delivered at the Sixth Congress of the R.S.D.L.P." Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. Sept. 1917. Works. Web. 26 Feb. 2011.

¹⁰ Lenin. 'Svoboda kritiki i edinstvo deistvii' ('Freedom of Criticism and Unity of Action'), May 1906, PSS, vol. 13, p. 129.

important aspects of the Congress, the fact that it allowed the Bolsheviks to finally break free of weak allegiances with parties such as the Mensheviks and emerge as a group of their own, with a definite ideology that distinctly separated them from the rest of the parties. This led people to identify more easily with the Bolsheviks, not only because the Bolsheviks supposedly remained true to their ideology but because they stood alone versus a confusing conglomerate of other parties that most people could not even tell apart. It was at this point that the Bolsheviks emerged in the Russian political scene with new found importance and integrity, qualities that permitted them to achieve a higher level of prominence than that which they had had before.

Finally, the last significant aspect of the Congress were the key allegiances that arose thanks to the formalization of the adhesion of the Mezhraiontsy (or Interdistrict) to the Bolshevik Party itself. Formed mostly by ex-Mensheviks that decided to part ways with the Mensheviks after the formation of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet, the Mezhraiontsy was conformed by many of the prominent thinkers of the time, including Leon Trotsky, the most important member of such coalition. In fact, while Trotsky was once an enemy of Lenin, since his return to Russia in May 1917 his actions started to align with those of the Bolsheviks. Particularly, he first showed his inclination to side with Bolshevik tendencies on May 5th, when he voted against the formation of a Coalition Government. Trotsky himself said that he was now following 'the same line of strategy as Lenin'¹¹. This collaboration continued, for in the First Congress of Soviets in June, the Bolshevik group even read a Statement that had been written by Trotsky himself. It becomes logical that by the time of the Congress, the unification of both sides was to be made official. It was in fact Trotsky the one that was supposed to give an address to the Congress on behalf of Lenin¹², until he was arrested and had to be replaced by Stalin (as

¹¹ Swain, Geoff. Trotsky. Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2006. Print.

¹² Rabinowitch, Alexander. The Bolsheviks Come to Power: the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd. Chicago: Haymarket, 2004. Print.

mentioned before). The addition of the Mezhraiontsy also yielded the Bolsheviks an additional 4000 members.

It is necessary to underscore the importance of the union of Trotsky to the Bolsheviks. Trotsky, an eminent politician and member of the intelligentsia, gave the Bolsheviks a lot of recognition and power in the Soviet (of which Trotsky used to be president). Also, Trotsky's eminence at the time meant that his union to the Bolsheviks would unify two very strong political bands into one body. With this union, the Mensheviks sunk in public opinion even more, and the Provisional Government kept losing the battle for popular support. Going beyond the immediate consequences of his union, Trotsky proved to be key in the organization of what would be the successful October Revolution, and even later in the establishment of the the Soviet Union itself.

While historians usually do not mention that it was in the Congress that Trotsky officially joined the Bolsheviks (among them Kort and Sakwa), it is impossible to undermine the importance of this occurrence to the Bolsheviks. In fact, it is even possible to argue that Trotsky's alliance with the Bolsheviks has as much relevance as the unification of ideals that resulted from the Congress. The presence of Trotsky as a forerunner in the race to succeed Lenin against Stalin (notice how even by the time of the Congress both were already relatively high up in the chain of command) was one that greatly determined the politics of the Soviet Union in later years, yielding consequences for millions of people and dozens of other countries. Overall, not only were the Bolsheviks growing in sheer numbers, their ideas being consolidated, but most importantly the leadership of their party was evolving by gaining valuable members. At the same time, the Provisional Government remained as ineffective as always and the Soviet lost more power everyday as people lost their trust in it, which was their only source of credibility.

In conclusion, one can see the Sixth Party Congress as one of the most critical points in Bolshevik history. It was at this point that the Bolshevik party emerged as the

party capable of creating one of the most radical political changes in history, all under the leadership of one very resolute man: Lenin. It was also the point at which Lenin's leadership became apparent, one of the most important characteristics of the political structures that would later form after the Bolshevik initiatives. The happenings of the Congress, especially the development of a clear ideal and the union of Trotsky to the ranks of the Bolsheviks went on to redefine the Russian political scene at the time of 1917. Between the dates of the Congress, the tide turned in Bolshevik history, and all the ideas that surfaced in it became critical in reaching what was thought to be an unlikely revolution. The Bolsheviks grew and prospered while the Provisional Government and the Mensheviks withered, all building up to the events in October. In short, the Sixth Party Congress led the Bolsheviks to consolidate and become ready to act, fact that enabled them to eventually establish one of the most powerful and impressive empires in modern history, the Soviet Union.

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Summary:*The Sixth Bolshevik Party Congress: A Catalyst to the Russian Revolution of 1917.*

The Sixth Bolshevik Party Congress was held in Petrograd in 1917 between July 26th and August 3rd. Attended by 157 members (excluding Lenin), it became one of the most critical points in Bolshevik history. Its importance lies on 4 main points. First, the unification of party ideals, based on Lenin's "The Political Situation" and "On Slogans", occurred during such Congress. These ideas dictate the necessity for an armed uprising and the rejection of the Mensheviks and Soviets. Lenin emerges as leader thanks to the support of his ideas. Second, new party rules were established that allow the party to act efficiently and under one banner, which were called 'Democratic Centralism'. Third, the formalization of the official union of the Mezhraiontsy, which included Trotsky, to the party. Fourth, the congress resulted in newfound prominence in the Russian political scene. In short, the congress is a catalyst for the Bolshevik revolution: leads them to consolidate and be ready to act.