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Debate

Internal Democracy and Public Debate in Revolutionary Parties

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Murray Smith replies to Doug Lorimer of the Australian DSP on the issue of internal democracy and public debate in revolutionary parties. Contrary to Lorimer, Smith argues that debating party differences in public was the norm, and not the exception, in Lenin's Bolshevik Party - and by inference should be today, a position fiercely disputed in theory and practice by the DSP.

The debate started with an article on an internet discussion list by the American Marxist Louis Proyect. Doug Lorimer replied to Proyect in the journal 'Links', issue 24. [1] Murray Smith's rejoinder (originally called 'Some remarks on democracy and debate in the Bolshevik Party') was published in the same journal, issue 26.

I would like to make some comments on Doug Lorimer's article, "The Bolshevik Party and Zinovievism": [Comments on a Caricature of Leninism](#), published in Links 24. <emb1271|right> Louis Proyect's affirmation that there is no such thing as Leninism reflects an idea that is now quite widespread on the left. Like many mistaken ideas, it has a kernel of truth. This kernel resides in the fact that the post-Lenin leadership of the Communist International invented the term "Leninism" in 1924 as what Daniel Bensaïd has called "a religiously mummified orthodoxy". Previously, as Doug Lorimer recalls, the term "Leninist" had been used only as a factional epithet in the debates of the pre-1917 socialist movement. The invention of the concept, according to Bensaïd, "corresponds to the codification of an organisational model then associated with the Bolshevisation' of the Comintern, which allowed the Kremlin to brutally subjugate the young Communist parties to its own tutelage". [2] This process, often known as "Zinovievism" after its principal author, was really nothing more nor less than the first stage in the Stalinisation of the Comintern.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/Zinoviev.jpg>]

Gregory Zinoviev

Bensaïd explains that while defending what he considers to be essential in Lenin's ideas, he prefers to avoid using this particular "ism". That may be understandable, but I think it is nevertheless useful to speak of Leninism. Not many political thinkers really deserve an "ism", because that implies that they developed a coherent body of ideas associated with their name. Lenin is quite definitely one of them. The "current of political thought" that we can also call Bolshevism was largely developed by him. If I had to give a definition of Leninism, it would be something like "the strategy and tactics necessary for the proletariat to take power in the imperialist epoch". And since strategy and tactics aren't much use without an instrument to put them into practice, the question of the party is at the very heart of Leninism.

The main point I want to take up is the question of democratic debate in the Bolshevik Party, and in particular the public expression of differences. I think that it is impossible to look at the history of the Bolshevik Party and its debates without recognising that, in their overwhelming majority, these debates were indeed public. In that sense, the norm, if we want to use that term, was for public debate. A norm does not mean an absolute principle, and there was no such principle in the Bolshevik Party. But it definitely was the normal practice to debate differences publicly, and I think it is worth looking at why, because it tells us something about Lenin's party and its relationship with the working class.

Before moving on to the main subject, I want to make a couple of other points.

The Second International

Lorimer describes Proyect's presentation of the Bolshevik Party as having "more in common with the practice of the pre-1914 West European and North American parties of the Second International than with the actual views and practice of the Bolsheviks on questions of party organisation". It is probably true that Proyect would approve of the largely inclusive nature of these parties. But I am not sure that there was a general model or practice concerning democratic debate, public or otherwise, in the pre-1914 socialist movement. National parties varied considerably. There definitely was the idea that the parties should encompass all those who considered themselves to be Marxist or at least socialist, and indeed some who didn't, or whose conception of "socialism" was pretty questionable, notably in the case of the British Labour Party. The only explicit political demarcation was with the anarchist current in the 1890s.

As Lorimer has pointed out in another article, this all-inclusive conception was not the reflection of the theoretical conceptions of Marx and Engels, who during their lifetimes systematically combated the errors and weaknesses of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and considered a split with its opportunist wing inevitable. [3] Indeed, the parties of the Second International were not an expression of any a priori theoretically worked-out concept of the party.

They were the product of the workers' movement in their countries at a given moment, quite heterogeneous, more or less influenced by Marxism and by different interpretations of it. The Marxism of the Second International was heavily influenced by the conceptions of Kautsky, Plekhanov and others, a kind of fatalistic Marxism which considered that the victory of socialism would come about inevitably as the result of objective processes, through the development of capitalism. Their parties were not built to struggle for power but to wait for it to fall into their lap. This comes out very clearly in what is usually considered to be Kautsky's most radical work, *The Road to Power*, published in 1909.

The broad Second International is sometimes presented as a model of democracy in comparison with the Bolshevik tradition. But as Ernest Mandel has pointed out, the Bolshevik Party was more democratic than the German and Austrian social-democratic parties "even in their best moments". [4] Although there were certain restrictions on bourgeois democracy in pre-1914 Germany, the SPD, unlike the Russian social democracy, was able to operate openly. However, its debates were actually less free. As the SPD became dominated by the party and trade union bureaucracy and by opportunist politics, and as the so-called "Marxist Centre" adapted to the rising bureaucracy, the party leadership increasingly tried to suppress debate on such sensitive questions as the mass strike, the demand for a republic and anti-militarism, and began to censor those, like Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who raised these questions.

As Lorimer has indicated in the article previously quoted, Lenin did not challenge the "Kautskyan conception of the workers' party" until 1914. But he certainly broke from it in practice in Russia, very early on. The fundamental thing about Lenin's party was not only its class character, but that it was a party of action organised around a programme. In defining at various times the frontiers of this party, Lenin applied criteria that were not ideological but essentially political and organisational. The two examples of expulsions that Lorimer cites (1905 and 1912) are not of individual expulsions but of mass expulsions, in fact splits. What you do not find in the history of the Bolshevik Party are individuals being expelled for having political differences or, indeed, with rare exceptions, for politically motivated breaches of discipline (see below).

Split and unity, 1905-06

Let us look at the two examples. In 1904-05, after some hesitation, Lenin concluded that the 1903 split had been justified. This was not only because of the organisational question but because the Mensheviks were beginning to demonstrate what had only been in the background in 1903 and would become the hallmark of Menshevism: the acceptance of the leading role of the bourgeoisie in the revolution and consequent adaptation to the bourgeois

liberals.

The Bolsheviks organised the Third Congress on the basis of the rule of the majority. The Mensheviks boycotted it, and the congress declared those who had boycotted outside the party. The Mensheviks were not expelled for specific political differences, but for refusal to accept the authority of the party. In fact, the division within social democracy was already being put in question by the unfolding of the revolution.

A secret resolution of the congress decided to open discussions with the Mensheviks. [5] Reunification took place at the Fourth Congress in 1906. Doug Lorimer writes, "Lenin favoured the unification because he accepted the Kautskyist conception of the socialist party as being inclusive of all those proclaiming themselves Marxists and because the previous disagreements on organisation had largely been eliminated".

The previous disagreements on organisation had indeed been largely eliminated. But more important than Lenin's acceptance of the Kautskyist conception of the party were two other factors. First of all was the pressure from below, from the party in Russia and the new adherents. Second was Lenin's appreciation that the Mensheviks had evolved positively under the impact of the revolution. Just before the congress, Lenin wrote that the revolution "had not distanced but brought together the two wings of social-democracy ... the old quarrels of before the revolution have given way to solidarity in practical questions". He went on, "Nachalo [the Menshevik paper] favours the dictatorship of the proletariat. Novaya Zhizn [a Bolshevik paper] holds to the point of view of a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. But doesn't any phase in the history of any European socialist party show us similar differences within social-democracy?" [6]

This latter point was somewhat deceptive, because although Nachalo was a Menshevik paper, its editorial line was largely influenced by Trotsky, who was not at that point a Menshevik and whose conception of the leading force of the revolution was quite different from theirs. [7] The opposition between Lenin's and Trotsky's conceptions of the revolution proved to be surmountable because both were based on the leading role of the working class. The difference with the Mensheviks was much more fundamental.

Before the congress, Lenin had defined the political basis of unity as agreement on armed insurrection and on activity within the Soviet. And he hoped that a new rise of the revolution would pull the Mensheviks to the left. [8] But in fact on the question of armed insurrection and other questions, and on the central question of the respective roles of the working class and the bourgeoisie in the revolution, the Mensheviks began wavering during the congress itself, and this was accentuated as the revolutionary wave receded. The unification of 1906 opened a period of what could be called semi-unity until 1912, a period of unstable coexistence with public factions and constant conflicts.

The party reconstituted in 1912

In 1912 Lenin did not start from the idea of splitting from a current of ideas, neither of dividing the Marxists from the others nor of uniting all Marxists. He set out to reconstitute the illegal party around its programme. By definition, excluded from this process were all those who were against the existence of the illegal party:

It is not just a difference concerning the organisation, concerning the road to follow to build the party; it is a disagreement on the question of the existence of the party. There can therefore be no question of any conciliation, any agreement, any compromise. [9]

The differences were not just organisational but also political. The liquidators who only wanted a legal workers' party

were prepared to accept the limitations that this would imply in tsarist Russia, such as abandoning the demands for the republic and the confiscation of the landed estates.

Lenin did not set out to constitute his own current as the party, but to reconstitute the party and to assemble all those who were ready to accept its authority and its programme. There was nothing in the Prague conference that would have automatically excluded Plekhanov and the pro-party Mensheviks, Trotsky or the Vperiodists. Indeed, quite a few representatives of these currents participated in the cadre school the Bolsheviks organised at Longjumeau in 1911, as part of the work of reconstituting the party. It was their choice not to continue to participate but to prefer to seek unity with the liquidators. (In fact, two of the fourteen voting delegates at Prague were actually partisans of Plekhanov, but he did not himself attend and quickly distanced himself from the Bolshevik RSDLP.)

Faced with the desertion of the currents that stood between them and the liquidators, the Bolsheviks took it upon themselves to reconstitute the party-very successfully. A police report in 1913 explained at some length the extent of Bolshevik influence and concluded, "At the present time the assembling of the entire underground party is proceeding around the Bolshevik organisations and the latter really are the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party". [\[10\]](#)

Public debates

The entire history of the RSDLP, and of the Bolshevik faction and then party, was marked by often sharp debates. Practically all of them were public. Why was that? In the first place, public debate is not necessarily contradictory with democratic centralism. Properly understood, democratic centralism is a means to achieve unity in action around decisions taken after democratic debate.

What it is not is an attempt to impose ideological uniformity. Such uniformity, or homogeneity, what Trotsky later called "a common understanding of events and tasks", is in fact desirable. But it can only be the result of prolonged common experience and debate. It cannot be imposed by statute. This is absolutely clear from the passages that Lorimer quotes from *Leftwing Communism*. All the reasons that Lenin gives for the discipline of the Bolsheviks are political-the consciousness of the vanguard (i.e. the Bolshevik Party), the merging with the broad layers of the proletariat, the correctness of the political leadership.

None of them can be imposed, and they all take time to develop. In many ways after 1917 the Bolshevik Party was quite heterogeneous-there was far from homogeneity on economic questions, on the organisation of the Soviet regime, on the economy, on the trade unions, on the national question, for example. But over fifteen years, the party had built a cadre with sufficient programmatic cohesion and confidence in its leadership to face up to the tests of the revolution and the civil war without splitting. What the history of the Bolshevik Party confirmed positively, the experiences of most of the newly formed Communist parties in the 1917-23 period would confirm negatively. Parties cannot be improvised in the heat of the revolution. The Communist Party of Germany, the party confronted with the biggest challenges, was in virtually permanent crisis from 1918 to 1923.

Democratic centralism excludes debate while an action is going on. It does not exclude debate before and after and, since it is not about achieving public uniformity, that debate can be public and generally was. Such debate in itself does not necessarily weaken party unity. The public character of debates flowed, in my opinion, from the nature of the party and its relationship with the working class.

The RSDLP and the Bolsheviks were the parties of the Russian working class. Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, even prior to 1905, Russian social democracy had serious links with the working class and many

worker members, although the structures of the underground party tended often to be dominated by non-working-class elements. But it was in 1905 that the party made the decisive junction with the advanced workers and become a mass party in the course of the revolution.

Although weakened and disorganised by the counterrevolution and the subsequent period of reaction, it never lost that mass character. After what was actually quite a short period of reflux, the Bolshevik Party again became a mass party in 1912-14. The proportion of the class that the party organised at a given moment varied according to circumstances. But there was no Chinese wall between those in the party and those outside it; the debates were relevant to and of interest to many workers not in the party, or not yet in the party.

The Bolshevik faction

Doug Lorimer says, "... full freedom to discuss and criticise party decisions-including in public-has often been misinterpreted as Lenin's view of the norm of functioning of a revolutionary Marxist party". And he argues that "Lenin's argument in favour of freedom of public criticism of party decisions" must be seen in the context that the RSDLP of 1906 was not a revolutionary Marxist party and that he wanted full freedom for the Bolshevik faction, which was then in a minority, to criticise publicly.

Now certainly the RSDLP of 1906 was not the same thing as the Bolshevik Party after 1912. But that does not change much concerning how publicly debates were conducted. Let us look at the record. Lenin's combat for a party began when he was in exile in Siberia. In 1897 he wrote *The Tasks of Russian Social-Democrats*, which was published abroad as a pamphlet in 1898. All the main debates with the Economists from 1898 to 1903 and later with the Mensheviks were conducted in the press of the different factions and by publishing pamphlets. The battle against the Economists from 1898 to 1903 was conducted publicly in the pages of *Iskra* and in the book *What is to be Done?* In 1904 Lenin published *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, his analysis of the 1903 split, as a public pamphlet.

Perhaps it could be said that before 1903 public debate was the only way to proceed, because there was no party structure to act within and no party leadership to organise the debate. You could also say that it was normal to have public debate after 1903 since the Bolsheviks were a public faction. But the practice of conducting debates publicly was a permanent feature of party life. When the differences emerged between Lenin and the ultraleft Bolsheviks after 1907, the debate was also conducted publicly, in general in the pages of the Bolshevik paper *Proletari*.

Furthermore, although agreement within a faction is necessarily greater than within a party, the discipline of the Bolshevik faction was based on the agreed political and organisational questions that differentiated it from Menshevism. The "unanimity of opinion" that Lenin referred to concerned those questions. At the national conference of the RSDLP in July 1907, Lenin voted with the Mensheviks and the Poles against boycotting the Duma elections, against the majority of the Bolsheviks.

He had reluctantly deferred to the Bolshevik majority on the same question the year before. But those were specific tactical differences that did not put into question the political bases of the Bolshevik faction. When the generalised ultraleft policies of Bogdanov and his current (known as the Vperiodists), their refusal to exploit the possibilities of legal work, took on central importance and threatened to isolate the party from the working class, it became necessary to split the faction, which is what happened in 1909.

The political necessity of the split was confirmed by subsequent practice. In the first place it was confirmed by the brilliant success of Lenin's rebuilding of the party in 1911-14 through a combination of legal and illegal work: to be precise, by taking the illegal party as the base and utilising every possible avenue of legal work (elections, trade

unions, Pravda, etc.). And it was confirmed negatively by the fact that the Vperiodists achieved very little and broke up, though most of them subsequently found their way back to Bolshevism.

The question is not, as Proyect puts it, that Bogdanov was no longer a Marxist. He was arguably no more and no less a Marxist in 1909 than before or after that date. His philosophical ideas had not changed since 1904; they just took on more importance and had concrete effects, which is why Lenin felt it necessary to wage a struggle against them and to write *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. In fact, Bogdanov did not break with revolutionary politics; after 1917 he returned to Russia and joined the Bolshevik Party.

Debates in the Bolshevik Party

Lorimer quotes largely from Lenin's report to the Brussels conference in 1914, which I have already referred to. This report is indeed worth looking at, from a number of points of view. In the first place, Lenin is obviously speaking from a position of strength, from having rebuilt the party around the Bolshevik faction, and he outlines very clearly the political and organisational framework of the party. At the same time, he is saying that for those who respect this framework, there will be full freedom of discussion. He is not actually arguing that there should be no public debate. What he is saying is that groups in the party should not publish papers arguing their own point of view:

A minority which has objections to formulate on questions of programme, tactics and organisation has the right to present them before the party in a discussion periodical which must be specially for that purpose, but it cannot engage in a rival journal, in work disorganising the action and the decisions of the majority.

He proposes: "We must create abroad, with funds collected there, an organ of social-democratic discussion where there will be widely debated, without censorship, the questions of programme, tactics and organisation". [\[11\]](#) In fact, this periodical never saw the light of day, no doubt because of the war. But there is no indication that it was not intended to be public: otherwise, why make the point about no censorship? What Lenin was combating was not public debate but rival publications defending their own policies and combating the majority line.

Doug Lorimer also mentions the differences Lenin had with Bukharin in 1915-16. It is clear that Lenin sought to avoid a public debate with Bukharin and if possible with Piatakov and Bosch, to give them time to reflect. And in fact he did manage to avoid a public debate with Bukharin. Lenin's preference was that, if the group wished to defend their positions, they should do so in a pamphlet which would be circulated within the party rather than outside. But he did not refuse a public discussion if they absolutely insisted on it, and in fact a contribution from Piatakov and a reply from Lenin were prepared for issue 3 of *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata* (the Bolshevik journal that replaced *Kommunist*). The issue never appeared because of lack of funds, so the manuscripts of Piatakov's article and Lenin's reply were circulated within the party. John Riddell (ed.), *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International: Documents 1907-1916, the Preparatory Years*, New York, 1984, p. 364. The theses on the national question by Bukharin, Piatakov and Bosch are reproduced in this book (p. 362), as is Lenin's reply to Piatakov. (This and other material by Lenin can also be found in the *Collected Works*, Vol. 23).

Stephen Cohen is right about the absence of public debate between Lenin and Bukharin, but he seems to be mistaken about Radek's article in *Kommunist*. The only article by Radek in this issue was "A quarter-century of imperialist development", described by Lenin in a letter to Zinoviev as "boring" but "useful" [\[12\]](#). But in the first issue of *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata*, there was an article by Radek on the national question with a reply by Lenin. Lenin's unwillingness to collaborate with the trio on *Kommunist* does not seem to have concerned so much the one issue of the journal that actually appeared as the political differences which subsequently emerged (and which did not concern only the national question but also issues relating to the Zimmerwald Left) [\[13\]](#).

Bolshevik debates in 1917 and after

As soon as the revolution broke out in February 1917, Lenin in Zurich wrote his series Letters from afar. He intended them for publication, the first shot in the battle to reorient the party in the new revolution. Only the first of the letters was published in Pravda (with about a fifth of it cut by the editors). This had nothing to do with norms on internal or public debate and everything to do with the fact that the acting party leadership and editorial board of Pravda didn't agree with what Lenin was saying. This was not new: Lenin was constantly complaining in 1912-14 that the editorial board of Pravda cut or adulterated his attacks on the liquidators.

On Lenin's return to Russia, he immediately launched-publicly-what was arguably the most important debate in the party's history, the one that led to the adoption of the April Theses. Lenin was so isolated at the beginning of this debate that he published his draft of the Theses in Pravda on April 7 under his own name. The following day, there appeared an article by Kamenev, "Our disagreements", pointing out that Lenin's views were not shared by the editors of Pravda or the Bureau of the Central Committee. [\[14\]](#)

The debate began, and Lenin rapidly won the support of the party's working-class base, which was to the left of the leadership. As Trotsky remarked in his History of the Russian Revolution: "These worker-revolutionists only lacked the theoretical resources to defend their position. But they were ready to respond to the first clear call. It was on this stratum of workers, decisively risen to their feet during the upward years of 1912-14, that Lenin was now banking." He would continue to bank on them throughout 1917.

The April Theses outlined the political objective of the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the poor peasantry, to be realised through the soviets. One might expect that the debate on the delicate question of the actual insurrection would be conducted more discreetly. However, what do we see? Forced to go underground after the July Days, Lenin continued to defend his ideas within the party. To a considerable extent, this consisted of a battle to convince the party leadership to prepare and lead the insurrection.

The fundamentals of this debate were public. Lenin's article "The political situation (four theses)" was published in the Bolshevik press on July 23. In it, he argued for combining legal and illegal work as in 1912-14, but for fixing the objective of an armed insurrection: "The armed insurrection can have no other objective than the passage of power to the proletariat supported by the poor peasants, in view of the application of the programme of our party". [\[15\]](#)

The political objective is clear and publicly stated. This was followed by a series of other articles. Along the way, Lenin published a public criticism of Kamenev over his speech concerning the international socialist conference in Stockholm. [\[16\]](#) At the same time, Lenin's more specific recommendations concerning the insurrection were made in private correspondence with the party leadership.

Subsequently all the major debates of the period from 1917 to 1921 were conducted publicly, from the debate over Brest-Litovsk in early 1918 to the trade union debate in 1920-21. Before and after the October Revolution, a wide-ranging debate took place over the relationship between factory councils and the trade unions and between workers' control and centralised planning. This began at the conference of factory councils in June 1917 and recurred in one form or another until 1921-22.

The main protagonists were all Bolsheviks. [\[17\]](#) All those involved were expressing points of view that were present not just in the party but among the workers they represented. That raises the problem of the relationship between the party and mass organisations. You cannot simply settle that question by permanently invoking party discipline and the majority line. That may be necessary in life-or-death questions, and even then you have to convince. But if members of a party with mass, especially majority, influence systematically vote as a bloc in mass organisations

(trade unions, factory councils, soviets) they will deform the democratic functioning of these organisations.

Breaches of discipline

Not only was debate public, but breaches of discipline were not uncommon. Lorimer gives the example of Riazanov and Lozovsky voting against the banning of bourgeois newspapers. His explanation that they were "recent recruits" is unconvincing. In the first place, Riazanov and Lozovsky were hardly new; they both had about twenty years of party membership, and Lozovsky had been a Bolshevik from 1903 to at least 1909 before becoming primarily involved in the French workers' movement. Secondly, they were far from isolated examples. The same two publicly opposed the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. Zinoviev and Kamenev's much more serious breach of discipline in October is well known.

Immediately after the conquest of power, a major debate broke out in the Bolshevik Party over the question of a "government of Soviet parties" (i.e. a coalition with the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries). The "Bolshevik right" (all longstanding Bolsheviks) comprising Kamenev, Zinoviev and other opponents of the insurrection as well as some who had been in favour of it not only publicly opposed the majority of the leadership but resigned from their party and government posts to try to exert pressure on the party. In the spring of 1918 Bukharin and the Left Communists not only publicly opposed the majority position on the Brest-Litovsk peace but brought out fifteen issues of an opposition journal, *Kommunist*, at first daily, then less frequently.

What conclusions should we draw from these facts? Not that anything goes, that there are no limits. But that in the heat of revolution, party discipline has its limits. If you think that what you are arguing for or against is vital for the future of the revolution, you are unlikely to be held back by considerations of formal discipline. Such questions as whether to take power, the nature of the new government, the Constituent Assembly and war or peace come into that category.

And there can be little doubt that if Lenin had not won a majority in the Central Committee for taking power in October, he would himself have publicly campaigned for his position and if necessary broken party discipline. As Ernest Mandel has pointed out, during the revolution public conflicts were not limited to a few leaders. The radical Bolshevik committee of the working-class Vyborg district sent its own agitators to the sailors of the Baltic Fleet to counter the influence of the Petrograd committee, which it considered too soft on the Provisional Government. [18]

This is not to say that these public breaches of party unity were not serious, but they were dealt with politically rather than administratively. Organisational measures were not absolutely excluded (Lenin at various times demanded expulsions, and Lozovsky was expelled in 1918 and readmitted a year later). But in general the party leadership tended to avoid such measures. In their turn, those who publicly defended minority positions did not push their opposition to breaking point but finally accepted the majority position. The various party leaders involved in these breaches of discipline continued to play important roles in the revolution.

Levi and the KPD

The comparison with the example of Paul Levi is quite instructive. As Lorimer points out, Levi was not expelled for his ideas; indeed Lenin basically agreed with him about the March Action. He was expelled for publishing a pamphlet publicly criticising what he (correctly) considered to be the grossly mistaken position of the party leadership. Now, as we have seen, this was not exactly unheard-of in the Bolshevik tradition, especially considering that what was

involved was not a secondary question but a major and costly blunder. Not only did the party suffer severe repression, but it has been estimated that it lost more than half its membership. Under these circumstances, coming out publicly against the leadership was bound to create tensions, but it did not have to automatically lead to expulsion. Why did it in Levi's case?

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/paulevi.jpg>]

Paul Levi

In a nutshell, the KPD was not the Bolshevik Party. It did not correspond to the description of the Bolshevik Party outlined in *Leftwing Communism*, above all as far as its leadership was concerned. That leadership was weak; the KPD never succeeded in the four or five years between its creation and its Stalinisation in forming a stable leadership team. Under Levi's influence, the "Open Letter" initiative had been adopted-in fact the development of a policy towards social democracy that anticipated the united front tactic adopted at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. But leftist positions had gained the upper hand, encouraged by Zinoviev, Bela Kun and the ludicrous "theory of the offensive". Levi and his partisans had been put into a minority, and Levi had resigned as party president in February. Tensions within the party leadership were running high.

The March Action was an ultra-left adventure driven forward by the party leadership, which consciously provoked government repression. At that point the membership did not know all the details. They had been in a battle, had fought bravely and had suffered and were still suffering severe repression. It was in these circumstances that Levi broke ranks and attacked the leadership publicly. The party leaders seized the occasion to get rid of him, but their action was certainly supported by many party members.

Levi was probably the most talented of the KPD leaders after the murder of Luxemburg, to whom he was very close. Unfortunately, his behaviour and judgment as a leader were not on a par with his capacity for political analysis. He made a serious error of judgment in launching his attack. Even then, had he been capable of retreating from his public opposition and accepting discipline, he could not have been kept out of the party. Lenin was in favour of him being readmitted under those circumstances. [19] Unfortunately, he chose to form his own group and ultimately rejoined the SPD.

That was not the end of the story. As its full effects sank in and as the role of the party leadership became known, the March Action provoked a major political crisis in the party. The majority KPD leadership dealt with it bureaucratically, seeking to avoid a debate, public or otherwise, on its mistakes. Levi's expulsion, while it could be technically justified, can't be seen in isolation. The wave of expulsions and resignations that followed, which cost the party a whole layer of cadres, was the result of a weak political leadership using organisational means to resolve political problems. That is not how any of the political conflicts in the Bolshevik Party were dealt with.

The Comintern

This episode ties in with the situation in the Comintern. Lorimer seems to assume that what is written in the Theses of the Communist International represents Lenin's thinking on party democracy. I think it is more complicated than that.

These theses and the highly centralised regime of the international were clearly a product of a particular time and place and have to be seen as such. They were a product of a situation of virtual international civil war, though no doubt also a reaction against the uncentralised Second International. The international was being formed at a time when the Bolshevik regime itself was under siege and trying to break out of isolation. The Bolsheviks were forcing the pace to try to carve out new parties and a new revolutionary international in rupture with the Second International and

to arm these parties politically.

The documents of the first four congresses of the Comintern retain much that is still enormously valuable, along with a certain amount that is out of date. But a study of the brief history of the international cannot fail to see that many mistakes were made. The statutes and the functioning of the International can be understood in their context; they are certainly not a model for all time and all places. Eighty years later, we have the right and even the duty to be critical. And finally, this model of a highly disciplined party bore very little resemblance to the actual history of Lenin's own party, where public debate was the norm and breaches of discipline were not uncommon.

The withering away of Bolshevik democracy

The material basis of the rich political life of the Bolshevik Party lay in the fact that the party was based on a strong and combative working class with solid revolutionary traditions. The withering away of democratic debate in the party from 1921 has to be seen in this light. It may seem strange that the Bolshevik Party maintained a lively democratic regime throughout the civil war and then banned factions in 1921, when the civil war was over. It is not so strange when you look at the context. By 1921 the working class that had made the revolution had been disorganised and dispersed by the war and the paralysis of the economy. The most class-conscious workers had gone into the Red Army. Many had been killed; others had been drawn into the various arms of government.

Lenin is brutally frank about the reality in his writings of the period: "The industrial proletariat is declassed ... Given that big capitalist industry is ruined and that the factories and mines are immobilised, the proletariat has disappeared". At the Eleventh Congress of the Party in 1922, Workers' Opposition leader Shlyapnikov wryly congratulated Lenin "on constituting the vanguard of a class that no longer exists". [\[20\]](#) Ironic humour did not remove the concrete problem.

As the working class weakened, the party increasingly came to substitute itself for the class. At its Ninth Congress in 1920, Kamenev could say, "The Communist Party is the government of Russia. The country is ruled by the 600,000 party members". [\[21\]](#) This could have been a temporary phase, but that is not how it turned out. Not only did the party substitute for the soviets, but the apparatus increasingly governed the party; nominations from above to responsible posts replaced election. In 1921 Lenin was speaking of "a workers' state with a bureaucratic deformation". [\[22\]](#)

No doubt the party made mistakes. The ban on factions in 1921 is widely considered to have been a mistake and to have favoured the rise of the bureaucracy. No doubt it did. But it did not drop from the sky. The fact is that, under the impact of social and economic reality, democratic debate was being undermined. The debates in the period running up to the Tenth Congress were very bitter, not only with the Workers' Opposition, but between the partisans of Lenin and the supporters of Trotsky and Bukharin.

There were reasons for that. The conflicts of 1917-18 had been over conjunctural choices, however fundamental, and in an overall context where the revolution was advancing. In 1920-21 the debates were taking place in the context of a receding revolutionary wave, of the international isolation of the revolution and of the accumulating material effects of three years of civil war-economic disorganisation, penury, famine, epidemics. In that context the debates were not about conjunctural choices but about fundamental questions of the relation between the party, the working class and the peasantry, about the unions, about how to organise the economy. A split was a real danger. At the Tenth Congress, Lenin asked: "Was there in previous congresses, even when the differences were sharpest, situations close in one of their aspects to a split? No. Is there at present? Yes." [\[23\]](#) The tendency to close ranks and curtail discussion was very strong.

We have to repeat unceasingly that, all the same, the character of the assemblies, congresses, conferences and meetings in the Communist Party and in Soviet Russia can no longer be what it was previously and what it still sometimes is with us, when we exchange speeches, like a parliamentary opposition, and afterwards edit a resolution ... We must work usefully, and not edit resolutions. [24]

It is arguable that the debate at the Tenth Congress, sharp though it was, was the last truly democratic debate in the Bolshevik Party. The debates at the eleventh and twelfth congresses and the October 1923-January 1924 debate were increasingly dominated by the bureaucratic apparatus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, new material has come to light on the consolidation of the bureaucracy in this period. It is now easier than before to see how far this had already gone in 1922-23. [25]

By way of conclusion

The Bolshevik Party is not some kind of a model to be copied mechanically. But it should certainly be an inspiration for us, to study and learn lessons from. Not the least of those lessons concerns its democratic functioning. In my opinion, the idea that discussions take place within the party and that only the decisions are made public can work only in the early stages in the development of a party, when it has weak links with the working class. In fact, as we have seen, there never really was such a stage in Russia; even in the early stages the key debates were public.

But in the far-left groups that developed from the opposition to Stalinism, this tradition definitely developed. Why? Probably as a result of a long period of being on the defensive and of relative isolation. This produced at worst regimes in which there was no democracy, or heavily controlled discussions, at best regimes where there was democratic internal discussion. But this was accompanied by extreme reticence in the public expression of differences. This has begun to change, and I think that is likely to continue. To the degree that parties start to gain an audience among sectors of the working class, then those sectors will be interested in its debates. This is reinforced by the experience of Stalinism. Organisations that try to pretend there are no differences in their ranks evoke suspicion. Workers want to know what's going on, especially if they are thinking of joining a party.

[1] To read Doug Lorimer's article go to <http://www.dsp.org.au/links/> and navigate via 'Back Copies'.

[2] Daniel Bensaïd, "[Leninism in the 21st century](#)", interview by Phil Hearse, International Viewpoint no IV335 - November 2001.

[3] Doug Lorimer, "Marx and Engels on the Proletarian Party", edited version of a talk presented in January 1998. See www.angelfire.com/pr/red/revolution/lorimerprolparty.

[4] Ernest Mandel, "October 1917: Coup d'etat or social revolution?", Notebooks for Study and Research, No. 17/18, Amsterdam 1992.

[5] Pierre Broué, Le Parti Bolchevique, Paris, 1963-71.

[6] Lenin, "The victory of the Cadets and the tasks of the workers' party", Collected Works, Vol. 10.

[7] Writing much later, the Menshevik leader Dan described the influence that Trotsky's ideas had in Nachalo, "with the obvious approval of an important sector of Mensheviks, notably the workers". T. Dan, The Origins of Bolshevism, New York, 1970, p. 343, quoted by Paul Le Blanc in his article "Programme, organisation, revolution. Lenin and the Bolsheviks (1905-14)", in Notebooks for Study and Research, No. 14, IIRF, Amsterdam, 1990.

[8] Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin*, London, 1970, p. 134.

[9] Lenin, "Report of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and Instructions to the Delegation of the Central Committee to the Brussels Conference", *Collected Works*, Vol. 20.

[10] Quoted in Trotsky, Stalin, and in Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol. 1: *Building the Party*, London, 1975, p. 361.

[11] Lenin, "Report to the Brussels Conference", *op. cit.*

[12] Lenin to Zinoviev, July 5, 1915, *Collected Works*, Vol. 43.

[13] Lenin to Shlyapnikov, March 1916, *Collected Works*, Vol. 35.

[14] Alan Woods, *Bolshevism-the Road to Revolution*, London, 1999, p. 534.

[15] Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25.

[16] Lenin, "On Kamenev's speech to the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets on the Stockholm Conference", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25.

[17] Mandel, *op. cit.* See also Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, Solidarity*, London, 1970-a fiercely anti-Leninist point of view which nevertheless contains much useful material.

[18] Mandel, *ibid.*

[19] Pierre Broué, *Révolution en Allemagne 1917-23*, Paris, 1971, p. 528.

[20] Lenin's remarks and Shlyapnikov's comment are quoted in Jean-Jacques Marie, *Lénine*, Paris, 2004, p. 381.

[21] Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, volume 3: *Revolution Besieged*, London, 1976, p. 175.

[22] Lenin, "The trade unions, the present situation and Trotsky's errors", *Collected Works*, Vol. 32.

[23] Lenin, "Conclusion of the report on party unity and the anarcho-syndicalist deviation", *Collected Works*, Vol. 32.

[24] Lenin, "Conclusion of the report on the tax in kind" (at the Tenth Party Conference), *Collected Works*, Vol. 32.

[25] See the article by Alexander Podsheldolkin, "New Light on the Origins of the Stalinist Bureaucracy", in *Frontline* 3, 2001. In his biography of Lenin quoted in note 20 above, Jean-Jacques Marie makes use of new material on the rise of the bureaucracy and also on Lenin's increasing awareness of the problem in the last period of his life. Marie calls 1922 "the decisive year".