Lenin on Revolutionary Situations

THE CONCEPT OF THE "REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION" is one familiar to all revolutionaries since Lenin. Yet it is a concept which has been strangely neglected by Western experts on revolution. Thus Chalmers Johnson in his modern classic Revolutionary Change (1966) ignores the concept altogether while Robert C. Tucker in The Marxian Revolutionary Idea (1969) gives it less than adequate treatment. This neglect can partly be explained by the fact that Western writings on revolution are not so much theories of revolution as manuals of counter-revolution. Thus Chalmers Johnson’s main concern is to advise the ruling elite on how to avoid revolution by being sensitive to signs of social disequilibrium as soon as they arise and by making suitable adjustments to economic and political policies to offset a revolutionary challenge. Lenin of course took an opposite stand. For him revolution was a necessary and progressive process and therefore it had to be welcomed and prepared for.

Lenin was a revolutionary long before the 1905 revolution but his concept of the revolutionary situation was largely a product of that revolution. In his writings of 1905-1906 Lenin already

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isolated some of the basic elements of the revolutionary situation as he was to define it in 1917 and in later years. These elements included the effects of military defeats on the ruling class and on their command of military and police power, the expansion of revolutionary struggle so that large numbers of industrial workers, peasants and middle class elements became rapidly involved, and the quick change from peaceful protest and demonstration to open armed struggle of the masses against absolutism and landlordism.

In his work "Left-Wing" Communism (1920) Lenin recognised four necessary conditions for the existence of a revolutionary situation:

1 All classes hostile to the revolution have become fully confused and weakened through internal struggle, and the ruling classes cannot continue to rule in the old way.

2 "All the vacillating, wavering, unstable, intermediate elements (the petty bourgeois democrats)" have sufficiently exposed themselves before the people and discredited themselves.

3 Among the proletariat "a mass mood in favor of supporting the most determined, unreservedly bold revolutionary action against the bourgeoisie has arisen and is growing."

4 The armed forces of the bourgeois regime are in an advanced stage of revolt and disintegration.

The above summary, prepared as advice to over-zealous revolutionaries of Western Europe, was a far from adequate exposition of the concept of the revolutionary situation. To appreciate more fully this concept, to understand its complexities and the way Lenin used it, it is necessary to work carefully through the history of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Lenin's analysis of the developments and contradictions of this revolution.

Even before his return to Russia, Lenin, in his Letters from Afar (March 1917) explained the outbreak of the March Revolution by reference to the "monstrous disorganisation" of Russian society, by the revolutionary experience and disposition of the Russian proletariat, and by the impact of the military defeats of 1916. Later on, after several displays of mass action (in early May and in early July) Lenin enlarged on the concept of a revolutionary situation in his article Constitutional Illusions (August 8, 1917);

... a revolution differs from the 'normal situation' in a state precisely by the fact that controversial questions of state life are decided by the direct
struggle of classes and the struggle of masses, even to the point of armed struggle. It cannot be otherwise when the masses are free and armed . . . It is well known that in the long run the problems of social life are decided by the class struggle in its bitterest and acutest form, the form of civil war.\(^1\) (my emphasis—L.G.C.)

Following the failure of the Kornilov uprising in September 1917 Lenin drew attention to the qualitative change that occurred in political struggle in a revolutionary situation:

Every revolution involves a severe crisis in the lives of the vast masses of the people. Unless the time is ripe for such a crisis, no real revolution can take place . . .

During a revolution millions and tens of millions of people learn in a week more than they do in a year of their ordinary somnolent life.\(^2\)

Although soon after he had written the above statement Lenin again briefly thought in terms of a peaceful solution\(^3\) to the unstable Russian situation of “dual power” the diversion was momentary. From October 12 until the uprising of November 7 weeks later he never missed an opportunity of pointing out how the situation was becoming more revolutionary and therefore making decisive action on the part of the Bolsheviks more imperative. He was handicapped by the fact that until late in October he was in hiding in Finland and therefore not fully in touch with the situation in Petrograd or elsewhere in Russia. In *The Crisis has Matured* (October 12, 1917) Lenin analysed the events of previous weeks in great detail and came out with the conclusion that;

The beginning of October undoubtedly marked a definite turning point in the history of the Russian Revolution and, to all appearances, of the world revolution also.\(^4\)

To prove this contention he drew attention to the rapid spread of peasant revolt, to revolts among national minorities in Russia, to increasing opposition in the army and navy to the policies of the provisional government, to increasing support for the Bolsheviks in the Soviet and local council elections\(^5\), and increasing opposition to the war in Germany, and to the urgency of the German threat to Petrograd.

The above letter was sent to the Central Committee of the party

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5 Lenin claimed that the Bolsheviks had won 47% of the votes in the municipal duma (district) elections held on September 24. Modern research has shown that this was an underestimate and that the Bolsheviks received 50.9% of the
in an effort to persuade it to accept the plan for an armed uprising. For Lenin, armed struggle including insurrection was an essential element in Marxist strategy. But many other Bolsheviks, particularly Kamenev and Zinoviev, adhered to the view that insurrection was synonymous with Blanquism and was anti-Marxist. It was therefore necessary for Lenin to argue repeatedly throughout the months leading up to November that by advocating insurrection in certain circumstances he was not abandoning Marxism for Blanquism. These passages provide additional detail on Lenin's understanding of the dynamics of the revolutionary situation. Thus in A Letter to Comrades (October 29-30, 1917) Lenin spelled it out in nine propositions;

A military conspiracy is Blanquism if it is not organised by the party of a definite class; if its organisers have not reckoned with the political situation in general and the international situation in particular; if the party in question does not enjoy the sympathy of the majority of the people, as proved by definite facts; if the development of events in the revolution has not led to the virtual dissipation of the illusions of compromise entertained by the petty bourgeoisie; if the majority of the organs of revolutionary struggle which are recognised to be 'authoritative' or have otherwise established themselves, such as the Soviets, have not been won over; if in the army (in time of war) sentiments hostile to a government which drags out an unjust war against the will of the people have not become fully matured; if the slogans of the insurrection ... have not acquired the widest renown and popularity; if the advanced workers are not convinced of the desperate situation of the masses and the support of the countryside, as demonstrated by an energetic movement, or by a revolt against the landlords and the government that defends the landlords; if the economic situation in the country offers any real hope of favourable solution of the crisis by peaceful and parliamentary means.

A week after writing the above letter Lenin issued his final appeal to the Central Committee to act before it was too late:

I exhort my comrades with all my heart and strength to realise that everything now hangs on a thread; that we are being confronted by problems that can be solved not by conferences or congresses (even by Congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by the people, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed masses ...

If we seize power today, we seize it not in opposition to the Soviets but on their behalf.
The understanding of the concept of the revolutionary situation is essential for the understanding of Lenin's policy throughout 1917. Between the two revolutions of 1917, a period of less than eight months, Lenin made no fewer than five tactical changes in his revolutionary policy and on each occasion the tactical change was prefaced by a detailed consideration of the concrete revolutionary situation at the time. Thus in April he recognised the significance of the dual power situation and directed the Bolsheviks towards the objective of overthrowing the provisional government and bringing "all power to the Soviets". After the failure of the July insurrection he urged the abandonment of the slogan and the preparation for insurrection but not the immediate planning for an insurrection. With the eclipse of the provisional government and the resurgence of popular enthusiasm for the Soviets following the defeat of the Kornilov conspiracy he again reverted temporarily to a slogan of "all power to the Soviets" even though the Bolsheviks did not yet have a majority in the Soviets. But two days after advising this change in tactics Lenin again (on September 16) advised preparing for an early uprising. Yet again, in early October in the context of negotiations between the "forces of the left" Lenin advised one last attempt at a peaceful development of the revolution. A fresh analysis of the situation a few days later made Lenin again swing back to planning an insurrection.

What stands out in this catalogue of change is not Lenin's inconsistency, although in one sense he was less consistent than Kamenev or Zinoviev, or even Trotsky. What stands out is Lenin's ability at analysing the changing revolutionary situation both at home and abroad and at drawing the correct conclusions from his analysis. He favored the maximum flexibility in tactics but his strategic objective remained unchanged throughout — the overthrow of the bourgeois provisional government. This strategic objective was not motivated simply by a desire to seize power or to make himself the master of the world revolution. He acted because he was already convinced that only a social revolution would end the slaughter of the World War and make it possible for future

12 The Aims of the Revolution, October 9-10, 1917.
13 The Crisis has Matured, October 12, 1917.
14 This charge is made by Stanley W. Page, Lenin and World Revolution, N.Y. University Press, N.Y., 1959.
15 The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution, April 23, 1917. Quotation from Selected Works, Vol. 6, p. 75.
generations to avoid the scourge of war. Thus immediately after his return in April 1917 he wrote:

The war has brought mankind to the brink of a precipice, to the destruction of civilization, to the brutalisation and destruction of countless millions of human beings. There is no escape except in a proletarian revolution.  

Lenin's single-minded devotion to revolution was an element in his socialist conviction and his humanism. His organisational ability and his mastery of the art of insurrection were consequences of his socialist conviction. For Lenin, a socialist could not possibly sit back and await the inevitable socialist revolution. His duty was to investigate the revolutionary potential of the given situation and, when the time was ripe, to act quickly and decisively to ensure success. For Lenin, revolution was both a science and an art.

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