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## A faction is not a party

Did the Bolsheviks seek to create a 'party of a new type' in 1912? Lars T Lih looks at the historical record



Lenin: unite the partyists

In recent online debate, the question of Lenin's thoughts on the relation between Bolshevism and the party as a whole has come up frequently. I would like to shed some light on this question by examining his views at three different points: 1912, 1917 and 1920. In this first instalment I look at material from 1912.

Lenin's views on this topic in the years before World War I can be summed up succinctly: Bolshevism was a faction (*fraktsiia*), a part of a larger whole: namely, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Bolshevism was a party within the party: just as the RSDLP stood for a specific platform within the society at large, Bolshevism stood for a specific set of tactical views within the larger Social Democratic whole. Like a political party *vis-à-vis* society, the Bolshevik faction had particular views about how to run the party: it propagated those views and tried to ensure that the central party institutions were inspired by them. But even if Bolshevism had control of the central committee, it did not become the party. One could still be a member of the party, but not a Bolshevik - in fact, this was seen as the normal situation. *Fraktsiia ne est' partiia*: a faction is not a party.

But, one may ask, if these were the views of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, what about the Prague conference of January 1912, when the Bolsheviks attained a large majority on the central committee? Aren't we assured by many writers today that this conference represented the creation of a new Bolshevik Party, where the former *fraktsiia* became the whole *partiia*? Nevertheless, if we look at

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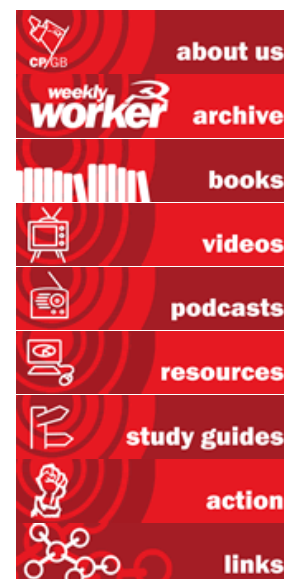
### Study guide



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sources from the period, one thing becomes overwhelmingly clear: Lenin and the Bolsheviks as a whole did not set out to create a Bolshevik Party, did not think they had created a Bolshevik Party, and denied strenuously that they had organised the conference for this purpose. Not only was this outcome not a goal: it hardly even made sense to them.

Recently Paul Le Blanc has written a long and instructive essay on the Prague conference which concludes that “for all practical purposes, the party that emerged from the Prague All-Russian RSDLP conference of 1912 was a Bolshevik party”.<sup>[1]</sup> The key words here are “for all practical purposes”. Paul points to a number of reasons for equating Bolshevism and the party: the new central committee was composed overwhelmingly of Bolsheviks; the Bolshevik effort to forge a coalition with “party Mensheviks” never amounted to much; the other factions did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the central institutions voted in by the Prague conference and they tried (not very successfully) to set up competing institutions; there is direct organisational continuity between the 1912 central committee and the Communist Party of 1918 that added ‘Bolshevik’ to its official name.

All this is true, but in no way clashes with my earlier statement about the *outlook and aims* of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1912. Paul’s argument to the contrary is partly a matter of sources. He says he is relying on “primary sources”, by which he means material coming from direct participants in party life before the war. But he relies overwhelmingly on sources written *after the event* and particularly after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Using memoirs and other after-the-event sources is always tricky, but there are a number of reasons why they are particularly unreliable in the case of the Prague conference. By the 1920s, there were indeed two parties, leading to a tendency to retroject current views back to the earlier situation. Furthermore, and most importantly, by the 1920s the whole idea of having factions in the party was delegitimised.

Another reason why later sources are unreliable is that the internal party situation in 1912 was insanely complicated. A historian friend of mine told me that he “couldn’t get his head around 1912” - and that was my own attitude before I got so fascinated by the topic that I took a couple of months off simply to absorb the details necessary to read documents from the period. Many later sources spend only a sentence or a paragraph on inner-party conflicts in 1910-14 (the most useful memoirs are those that have the space to describe party life during this period in detail). We should be aware that any source that reduces the conflict to ‘Bolsheviks vs Mensheviks’ is radically oversimplifying. (I too will be forced to vastly simplify the situation in order to bring out the main point.)

Paul Le Blanc does use one source that comes directly from the pre-war period: Lenin’s own writings. I think that if you take all of Paul’s references directly to Lenin’s writings, a rather different picture emerges than the one set forth in his own main conclusions. For example, he accurately notes that in 1912 Lenin did not yet contest the legitimacy of having an opportunist wing in a social democratic party - which leaves us with the strange picture of Lenin creating a Bolshevik Party in which opportunism was allowed.

Nevertheless, I believe that Paul does not sufficiently allow for the possibility that the Bolshevik *outlook* in 1912 cannot be directly deduced from what turned out to be, “for all practical purposes”, the actual outcome. In my own essay, I will bring out some themes from the writings of Lenin and others that Paul has not brought out or not sufficiently emphasised. In doing so, I will make heavy use of the

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Lenin material made available in Paul's own excellent Lenin anthology *Revolution, democracy, socialism* (London 2008).

One other point about sources before beginning. As mentioned above, the Soviet Communist Party radically delegitimised factions within the party. The regime was therefore embarrassed by the way Lenin and others talked about factions during this period. To lessen the embarrassment, at least in translation, they simply refused to translate *fraktsiia* as 'faction', but relied on euphemisms such as 'group' or 'section'. I have found instances of this practice in translations from Lenin, Stalin and Krupskaya. In the discussion below, I have corrected these falsified translations.

### ***Fraktsiia ne est' partiia***

One document touching on our theme is worth quoting at length, since Lenin sets out his views unambiguously on the difference between the party and a faction. The scene is a meeting of the Bolshevik faction in 1909. Lenin is arguing that a faction - defined as a group with "a specific tactical physiognomy" - can exclude members on criteria that would be improper for the party (the text is taken from *Revolution, democracy, socialism* pp202-03, retranslated when necessary):

In our party Bolshevism is represented by the Bolshevik *faction*. But a faction is not a party. A party can contain a whole gamut of opinions and shades of opinion, the extremes of which may be sharply contradictory. In the German party, side by side with the pronouncedly revolutionary wing of Kautsky, we see the ultra-revisionist wing of Bernstein. That is not the case with a faction. A faction in a party is a group of *like-minded persons* formed for the purpose primarily of influencing the party in a definite direction, for the purpose of securing acceptance for their principles in the party in the purest possible form. For this, real *unanimity of opinion* is necessary. The different standards we set for the unity of a party and the unity of a faction must be grasped by everyone who wants to know how the question of the internal discord in the Bolshevik faction really stands.

Lenin then advances his idea that 'liquidationism' and Menshevism should not be equated, since "a minority of Mensheviks" is also anti-liquidationist. He assures his Bolshevik audience that he is not going soft on Menshevism:

There is no question of sinking our tactical differences with the Mensheviks. We are fighting and shall continue to fight most strenuously against Menshevik deviations from the line of revolutionary social democracy. Needless to say, there is no question of the Bolshevik faction dissolving its identity in the party. The Bolsheviks have done a good deal toward making partyist positions dominant, but much remains to be done in the same direction. The Bolshevik faction as a definite ideological trend in the party must exist as before.

Lenin ends by praising the Bolsheviks for being the faction most dedicated to "preserving and consolidating" the party: that is, repelling challenges to its basic programme and institutions. Precisely because of this role, "in this hour of adversity it would be truly a crime on our part not to extend our hand to partyists in other factions who are coming out in defence of Marxism and partyism against liquidationism".

Lenin could not be clearer: a faction is a different sort of entity than the party, with very distinct criteria for membership. The current

danger to the party does not arise out of the tactical views that define the Menshevik faction. The fight against these tactical views must continue, but in a very different spirit than the fight against liquidationism. The Bolsheviks should seek to lead the party, but certainly not become the party.

If Lenin consciously set out in 1912 to create a Bolshevik Party, then he must have radically altered his views on these subjects between 1909 and 1912. Did he? In her memoirs, Nadezhda Krupskaya offers her opinion on this topic:

The experience of the Capri school had shown how often the factionalism of the workers was relative and idiosyncratic. The thing was to have a united party centre, around which all the social democratic worker masses could rally. The struggle in 1910 was a struggle waged for the very existence of the party, for exercising influence on the workers through the medium of the party. Vladimir Ilych never doubted that within the party the Bolsheviks would be in the majority, that in the end the party would follow the Bolshevik path, but this would have to be a party and not a faction. Ilych took the same line in 1911, when a party school was being organised near Paris to which *Vperyod*-ists and partyist-Mensheviks as well as Bolsheviks were admitted. The same line was pursued at the Prague party conference in 1912. Not a faction, but a party carrying out a Bolshevik line.

Paul Le Blanc gives some of the passage (in the misleading Soviet-era translation) and comments: "By 'not a group' Krupskaya seems to mean not simply a factional fragment, but rather the entire RSDLP." Paul's comment is correct as it stands, but it should not be taken to mean that Krupskaya wanted the Bolshevik faction to *become* "the entire RSDLP". Just the opposite: she envisions the Bolsheviks fighting for their views, *not* by declaring themselves the party, but rather by convincing the majority of the party.

Consider the following sentence from the passage just quoted: "The struggle in 1910 was a struggle waged for the very existence of the party, for exercising influence on the workers through the medium of the party." The struggle discussed here by Krupskaya was not over *which* views, Bolshevik or Menshevik, should be propagated by the party. That was a different, more normal, less existential struggle. Rather it was about a perceived threat to the very institutional existence of an underground party and its mission of propagating the basic social democratic programme shared by both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Just for this reason the Bolsheviks could appeal to right-minded Mensheviks to join them in their struggle.

When put alongside Lenin's pronouncements from 1909, we find that Krupskaya is stating with extraordinary clarity that Lenin did *not* change his views between 1909 and 1912 and that he continued to see a *fundamental difference in kind* between a faction and the party.

## Two parties

In the memoirs of the Georgian Menshevik, Gregory Uratadze, we find the following accurate description of party affairs in this period:

A fiercer struggle blazed up around 'liquidationism' than around Bolshevism and Menshevism. The party lexicon was enriched by new terms: 'liquidator', 'anti-liquidator', 'partyist' [someone who wanted to preserve the underground], 'Leninist partyists', 'Bolshevik partyists', 'Menshevik partyists', 'liquidator undergrounders', 'Trotskyist-partyist', 'Trotskyist liquidators',

'Plekhanov liquidators', and so on. And all this in one party!<sup>[2]</sup>

The terms 'liquidationism' and 'liquidator' were important enough to generate corresponding terms for their opponents: *partiinnost* and *partiets*, which can be translated as 'partyism' and 'partyist'. The partyists claimed that they were defending the very existence of the party from attack. This is the reason why the liquidationist-partyist divide was so passionate and why, as Uratadze shows, it *cut across* the usual factional lines.

The Bolshevik attack on liquidationism can be summed up by saying that this tendency posed an existential threat to the party and that therefore other factional differences should not interfere with a coordinated fight against it. The case against liquidationism had two major headings:

(a) By repudiating the need for an illegal underground, the liquidators put into jeopardy the very existence of a social democratic party that preached socialism and anti-tsarist revolution - views that could not be expressed legally in Stolypin's Russia (Stolypin was the prime minister in Russia during much of this period)

(b) The liquidators were also guilty of sabotaging efforts to revive central leadership bodies and they had done their best to prevent the resuscitation of the central committee or the calling of an all-party conference.

We do not need to pronounce a verdict on the justice of these accusations. The point is that the Bolsheviks claimed that, unlike normal factional struggles to control party policies, the liquidators posed a threat to the very existence of the party (in Krupskaya's words) as a "medium" for "exercising influence over the workers".

The case against liquidationism is set forth in the rather extensive (over 200 pages) *Two parties*, written by Lev Kamenev in 1911: that is, at the very time the Prague conference was being organised. As Kamenev relates, his book was written in close consultation with Lenin. It can therefore be called a manifesto in which the Bolsheviks explained what they were trying to accomplish with the Prague conference.

In 1924, when the book was republished (just when the anti-Trotsky polemics it contained would do most good, from Kamenev's point of view), he wrote in the preface of the reprint: "The title of the whole work - *Two parties* - points to the fact that, despite the formal unity of the party, we looked on the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks not as two factions of one and the same party, but as two hostile parties fighting each other."<sup>[3]</sup>

This is a good example of retrospective tidying-up. In the preface to the first edition of 1911, Kamenev wrote something rather different:

As firm proponents of the most merciless ideological struggle against groups and grouplets that are nourished by the counterrevolutionary atmosphere, we are also equally firm proponents of the unity under the banner of the party of all revolutionary Marxists - *irrespective of faction and tendency* and in spite of these or those differences on concrete questions of current politics ... The RSDLP must apply its energy and all its strength toward helping and serving in a comprehensive way, *irrespective of faction and tendency*, all worker circles, groups and associations, legally or illegally working toward the resurrection and strengthening of proletarian organisation in Russia [my emphasis].<sup>[4]</sup>

The contrast is striking. In 1924, Kamenev says that he argued for regarding Mensheviks as a separate and hostile party. When we read what he actually wrote in 1911, we find he appeals to all social democrats “without distinction of faction” to join the fight against liquidationism. In fact, Kamenev insists that ever since 1909 the idea of reaching out to the partyist-Mensheviks has “determined the whole internal party course of the Bolsheviks”.<sup>[5]</sup>

Kamenev is saying as insistently as he can: you don't have to be a Bolshevik to support our drive to exclude the liquidators. Our motive is *not* to impose specifically Bolshevik views on the party, but rather to save the party for all of us.

The slogan “two parties” was therefore *not* a call to create a new party - and certainly not to create a new party designed to propagate specifically Bolshevik views. In fact, this slogan represented an attempt to defend the *old* party against people who (Kamenev claimed) were trying to build a new party. Kamenev is saying to the liquidators: go ahead and create your new party - no doubt there are people who will support it - but don't do it in a way that wrecks the RSDLP.

Perhaps the objection will be made that the “partyist Mensheviks” were actually a very small minority and that “for all practical purposes” the Bolsheviks wager on a coalition with them failed. This objection is factually based (at least if we restrict ourselves to émigré politics), but nevertheless it does not challenge my description of *what the Bolsheviks thought they were doing*. They thought they were creating a cross-factional bloc against a specific existential threat to the very functioning of the party. In 1910, for example, Lenin says in a letter that he thinks that Menshevik workers in Russia itself were overwhelmingly partyist. In 1915, even after many disappointments with Plekhanov (the one party leader associated with Menshevik partyism), he still wrote that “the best Mensheviks” were revolted by liquidationism.

Lenin really believed in the possibility of such a cross-factional bloc. Hostile observers at the time and later thought all that this talk of ‘party Menshevism’ was a ruse and an excuse to obtain an all-Bolshevik party. Underneath it all, they say, he equated liquidationism with Menshevism as such. It seems to me that anyone who says that Lenin was consciously creating a Bolshevik Party is committed to a similar view about Lenin's duplicity.

## Party of a new type

A split in a party can be justified on two very different grounds. One is: your views are unacceptable; you must go. The other is: only my views are acceptable, only my group can stay. The first view excludes a specific group. The second view excludes all except a specific group.

Which type of justification was used at the Prague conference? Clearly, the first one. Besides all the arguments I have just reviewed, we can point to the resolutions of the conference, in which only a very specific group of writers grouped around a couple of newspapers were pronounced “outside of the party”.

This type of exclusion was not incompatible with the practice of ‘parties of an old type’, if by that we mean the social democratic parties of western Europe during the Second International. These parties had been set up to propagate a certain message, and they were willing to cast off groups that denied the essentials of this

message - most famously, in the case of the anarchists in the 1890s. In his defence of the Prague conference, Lenin brought up this episode, along with other actions of discipline and exclusion undertaken by western social democratic parties.

Lenin further insisted that he was *not* trying to exclude the opportunists in general - in other words, he was not trying to purge the Menshevik faction as a whole. Any such description of what he was trying to do, he told European socialists, was a vile slander. He insisted that no European party would have tolerated the sabotage and indiscipline attributable to the liquidationists for a second. Like the song says: "If you'd have been there, if you'd have seen it, you would have done the same."

There is a long-standing interpretation of what happened at the Prague conference: namely, that it inaugurated a 'party of a new type', one that contrasted strongly with the social democratic parties of the old type by a new emphasis on *homogeneity*. The logic of exclusion is now said to be the second type, according to which one faction becomes the entire party. The logic that Lenin earlier restricted to the *faction* - unanimity of outlook by "like-minded individuals" - was now (so it is claimed) extended to the party as a whole. From now on, only those who agreed with Bolshevism were welcome in the party.

This interpretation was enshrined in the famous *Short course* of party history created by Stalin's government in the late 30s. Obviously, it was congenial to a regime that had delegitimised factions within the party. Unfortunately, it was also at odds with historical documents - so much so that the records of the Prague conference were not even published until the late 1980s. This same logic of a 'party of a new type' is also central to the interpretation of the work of Carter Elwood, the main academic investigator of the Prague conference.

In his Lenin anthology, Paul Le Blanc writes:

The RSDLP was hopelessly divided by factions of liquidator and non-liquidator Mensheviks, Leninist and anti-Leninist Bolsheviks, and others - including a faction against factionalism led by Trotsky! Lenin and those around him conclude that effective revolutionary work could not be accomplished by such an entity, and in 1912 they reorganised themselves as the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, distinctive from all other entities bearing that name ... (p198).

Le Blanc explicitly rejects the 'party of a new type' interpretation. Nevertheless, his words might be read (incorrectly, I believe) as implying that Lenin regarded a multi-factional party as *per se* ineffective, so that he made sure that only one faction remained in his new "reorganised" party. Le Blanc fails to make clear enough that Lenin's case was rather that party work was made ineffective, not by the profusion of factions, but by the doings of one particular group: namely, the liquidators.

Lenin recognised that there were many people in the party who were opposed to the liquidators, but who disagreed with the necessity of excluding them - or perhaps simply disagreed with his method of excluding them. These people had to make a choice, but Lenin was nevertheless perfectly happy to have them in the party and he cannot be said to have excluded them in any meaningful way.

In my opinion, the argument over whether or not the Bolshevik Party was created in 1912 is less important than strongly rejecting any 'party of a new type' interpretation and any assertion that Lenin was

now applying the logic appropriate to factions to the party as a whole. The historical record overwhelmingly shows that, as of 1912, Lenin believed that "A fraction is not a party."

### Usurpation or continuity?

In a section of his anthology that he entitles 'Final break with the Mensheviks', Le Blanc gives us Lenin's report to the western European socialists about the recent Prague conference. In this report, Lenin has this to say about the process of organising the conference: "In all, 20 organisations established close ties with the organising commission convening this conference: that is to say, practically all the organisations, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, active in Russia at the present time" (p204).

A funny way of organising a final break with the Mensheviks, one might think: making a good-faith effort to represent all Russian underground organisations regardless of faction. The paradox goes further, since Lenin insisted on continuity between the leadership institutions elected at Prague and the older party. He claimed that the central committee elected at Prague was the authoritative representative of that party and the faithful executor of earlier party decisions (especially party conferences in 1908 and 1910, in which Mensheviks participated and agreed to the relevant resolutions).

If the purpose of the Prague conference was to set up a Bolshevik Party, then Lenin was making a strikingly arrogant claim to possession of the mutual patrimony of both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. And indeed a common hostile label for him within the party was 'usurper'. If his aim really was to set up a distinct Bolshevik entity, this label seems appropriate.

In Paul D'Amato's contribution to the recent discussion, he acknowledges that the way Lenin described his activities to European socialists was duplicitous, if in fact Lenin was doing what D'Amato claims he was doing.<sup>[6]</sup> D'Amato evidently justifies this duplicity as all in a good cause. In any event, I think he has a better insight into the problem than Paul Le Blanc, who does not seem to recognise any contradiction between his description of Lenin's activities (setting up a 'distinct Bolshevik entity') and Lenin's own description in the report to the Second International.

Whether or not the Bolsheviks actually did make a good-faith effort to organise a true 'all-party conference' is a vexed question. In my own survey of documents from the period, I was impressed by the Bolsheviks' consistent and energetic insistence that they were not organising a factional conference. Some non-Bolshevik opinion also partially supported their claim to represent at least the underground organisations of Russia proper.

I will add the strictly personal opinion I have expressed elsewhere: if indeed Lenin wanted to create a Bolshevik Party, he set about it in a way that was deceptive, disloyal, destructive and not to be imitated.

### After Prague

Looking at social democratic activity between January 1912 (the date of the Prague conference) and 1914, I do not find much evidence that people were thinking in terms of two separate parties. Rather, people continued to think of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks as two factions of a single party, factions with separate organisations and devoted (as they always had been) to destructive internecine warfare, but who still thought of themselves as parts of an ill-defined but meaningful



whole. In other words, the post-1912 situation did not seem qualitatively new.

A couple of examples, just to show what I mean. A month or so after Prague, the newspaper set up by the conference, *Pravda*, published its first issue, which contained an editorial - written, as it happens, by Iosif Stalin - which made a bid for party unity irrespective of faction. In the fight between *Pravda* and its rival *Luch* over the choice of social democratic candidates for the upcoming legislative elections, both sides based their pitch on the idea of party unity. *Pravda* called for party discipline, and *Luch* called for a common front.

During 1912-14, Lenin often defended the legitimacy of the *Pravdists* (NB: *not* the Bolsheviks as such) by saying that they represented a large *majority* of social democratic workers in Russia. That is to say, despite the exclusion of certain 'liquidator' groups at the Prague conference, Lenin still automatically thought in terms of an opportunist minority among the workers as a *legitimate* part of social democracy, even though misguided.

In his history of the party, written in the 1920s, Zinoviev makes what I consider to be misleading comments about Prague as "the moment of complete rupture with the Mensheviks" (for example, he also says, quite incorrectly, that there were no Mensheviks present at the conference). It is therefore quite revealing that immediately after making the comment just quoted, he goes on to say: "the final break from the Mensheviks came not in 1912, but in 1917 ... Up till that minute everyone thought that after the fall of tsarism social democracy would manage to unite itself and that the Bolsheviks would merge with the Mensheviks."<sup>[7]</sup>

I have reported my impressions, but certainly this is a topic that could use more research.

To conclude: Paul Le Blanc makes a good case that after Prague, the RSDLP was "to all practical purposes" a Bolshevik Party. But this conclusion tells us nothing about how Lenin and the Bolsheviks viewed the relation between faction and party. The historical record is hardly ambiguous on this point: they believed (or acted as if they believed) that a faction and the party were different kinds of things - the Bolsheviks were a faction and not a party, and the Prague conference was in truth what it claimed to be: namely, an all-party conference. They rejected as a slander the idea that they were purging the party of opportunism. They did not think in terms of a 'party of a new type', but instead justified what they were doing by norms common to the Second International as a whole.

We are free to accept or reject these views, but not free, I think, to claim that the Bolsheviks did not hold them.

## Notes

1. P Le Blanc, 'The birth of the Bolshevik Party in 1912': <http://links.org.au/node/2832>.
2. G Uratadze *Reminiscences of a Georgian Social Democrat* Stanford 1968, p218 (my translation).
3. L Kamenev *Dve partii* Paris 1911 (my translation).
4. L Kamenev *Dve partii* Leningrad 1924.
5. *Ibid* p103.
6. See P D'Amato, 'The mangling of Tony Cliff':

<http://links.org.au/node/2726>; and my comment in 'Falling out over a Cliff' *Weekly Worker* February 16.

7. G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party: a popular outline* London 1973 (original Russian edition 1923), p12. The citation can also be found at [www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/history/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/history/ch01.htm). Zinoviev's discussion in his history lectures of different possible birth dates for the Bolshevik Party is highly relevant to the present discussion of 1912.

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