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How Lenin's party became (Bolshevik)

Did Lenin seek to exclude Mensheviks from Russia's revolutionary organisation in order to forge a 'party of a new type'? Lars T Lih looks at the reality



Lenin: party of a new type?

From 1898 on, there existed a political party called the *Rossiiskaia sotsial-demokraticheskaja rabochaia partiia* (RSDRP), or Russian Social Democratic Worker Party. *Rossiiskaia* means "Russian" in the sense of citizens of the Russian state, as opposed to *rusaskaia*, which refers to ethnic Russians. Of course, the party title made no reference to either of its two later factions, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks.

At its 7th Congress in March 1918, this party officially changed its name to *Rossiiskaia kommunisticheskaja partiia (bol'shevikov)* or RKP(B). The party now referred to itself as 'Bolshevik', even if only in parentheses. The question arises: did the party ever have an intermediate title such as RSDRP(B) - for example, during the period from April 1917 to March 1918?

No. The label 'RSDRP(B)' was occasionally used informally in 1917 (for reasons to be discussed later), along with other improvised labels. Nevertheless, a party with the name 'RSDRP(B)' never existed.

The widespread impression to the contrary is due to some energetic camouflage by the Soviet editors and their presentation of Lenin's works, of the records of party meetings, and the like. The prevailing Soviet historical orthodoxy wanted the party to be officially Bolshevik

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as early as possible, as a mark of its status as a 'party of a new type'. Whenever they got a chance, therefore, Soviet editors used 'RSDRP(B)' in the *titles they provided* to historical documents. For example, the book containing the records of the 6th Party Congress in August 1917 has the title *Proceedings of the 6th Congress of the RSDRP(B)*. Yet an examination of *the documents themselves* shows that the name of the party - the one used by all participants - was still plain old 'RSDRP'.^[1]

This demi-falsification by Soviet editors creates a challenge for any investigation of how and why the name of the party was changed. In what follows, I have ignored the *titles* provided by Soviet editors, but I still rely on their usual conscientiousness about the *texts* of the documents themselves. I also recognise that making generalisations about what people did *not* say is always rather tricky. Therefore, the following remarks are somewhat provisional.

When Lenin returned to Russia at the beginning of April 1917 (I am using the old Russian calendar here), he carefully avoided using 'Bolshevik' to refer to the party. Several reasons led to this reluctance. First, he had long-standing views about the essential difference between a *faction* and a *party* (as explained in my first instalment ^[2]). A faction was more homogeneous in outlook than a party, since it was composed of people who 'thought the same' (*edinomyshlenniki*) about important tactical issues. In one of his first statements after arriving in Russia, Lenin emphasised this distinction (the Soviet-era English translation charmingly renders *edinomyshlenniki* as "comrades-in-ideas"):

On April 4 1917, I had occasion to make a report in Petrograd on the subject indicated in the title [tactics], first, at a meeting of Bolsheviks. These were delegates to the All-Russia Conference of Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies, who had to leave for their homes and therefore could not allow me to postpone it. After the meeting the chairman, comrade G Zinoviev, asked me on behalf of the whole assembly to repeat my report immediately at a joint meeting of Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates, who wished to discuss the question of unifying the RSDR Party.

Difficult though it was for me immediately to repeat my report, I felt that I had no right to refuse once this was demanded of me both by my *edinomyshlenniki* and the Mensheviks, who, because of their impending departure, really could not grant me a delay.^[3]

Further, Lenin had been accused a few years earlier, at the time of the Prague conference in 1912, of having carried out a coup d'état within the party and of declaring his own faction to be the party. He had vehemently denied the charges back then and he was not disposed to give them *ex post facto* credit in 1917 by referring to the party as 'Bolshevik'.

In Lenin's mind, Bolshevism in the strict sense was a tactical view about the Russian revolution, consisting of a scenario that described the alliance between the socialist proletariat and the peasantry as a whole. After the February revolution and the fall of the tsar, he had serious doubts about the continued applicability of this scenario. In this context - that is, in debates about the correct tactical attitude toward the peasantry - Lenin was willing to talk about Bolshevism, but his comments were rather critical. In fact, he stated that "Old Bolshevism needs to be discarded." So perhaps Bolshevism in the strict sense was already really a thing of the past - in which case 'Bolshevik' was not such a good label for the party.^[4] (Lenin later

changed his attitude toward the old Bolshevik scenario.)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Lenin had his own plans for a renaming of the party: he wanted to abandon 'Social Democratic' and replace it with 'Communist'. The reasoning behind this name change was based on developments in Europe as a whole. The official social democratic parties had disgraced themselves by their support of their respective governments' war effort. The banner of 'revolutionary social democracy' had been sullied beyond repair and had to be replaced. The whole logic of this gesture would be obscured if the Russian social democratic party was known by the extremely Russian name of 'Bolshevik'.

In a bind

As a result, the appearance of the words 'Bolshevik' or 'Bolshevism' are few and far between for the first month or so after Lenin's arrival in Russia. For example, Lenin's contributions to the 'all-Russian conference' of the party held in late April takes up 90 pages or so in volume 24 of his *Collected works*, yet I have not discovered a single use of 'Bolshevik' or related terms in these pages.

Indeed, Lenin found himself in something of a bind when talking about the party. He was extremely reluctant to call it 'Bolshevik', he was openly scornful about 'Social Democratic', yet the name 'Communist' could not be used until a party congress officially made the change. Lenin did occasionally refer to the party as the RSDRP. But for the most part, he relied on euphemisms such as "revolutionary social democracy", "party of the proletariat" or simply "our party" - the vaguest and most common label.

Such were Lenin's views - but he soon discovered that the name of the party was not up to him, or even up to the party! People outside the party, both friends and foes, knew it as the party of the Bolsheviks, and - especially in the new context of open politics and electoral competition - their outlook was decisive. We soon find Lenin is talking more and more about "the Bolsheviks" - first, to distinguish the party from its rivals in the eyes of potential supporters and, second, to respond to attacks on "Bolshevik extremism" made by political enemies. Indeed, during April-May 1917, when we find "Bolshevik" or "Bolshevism" in Lenin's writings, we can bet on finding either "electoral" or "attack" somewhere nearby.

The most revealing statement on this topic was published in May in a pamphlet explaining the differences between the parties.^[5] Lenin was writing for a popular audience and he needed to distinguish the party from "the Social Democrats, the Socialist-Revolutionaries and kindred groups" (NB: he avoids the term 'party' for this grouping). In the listing of the various parties, we find the following:

"D. ('Bolsheviks'). The party which properly should be called the *Communist Party*, but which at present is named the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party, as united by the central committee, or, colloquially, the 'Bolsheviks'."

The clumsy expression "as united under the central committee" was an earlier coinage used to distinguish Lenin's group from other social democratic claimants. This circumlocution was adopted precisely to avoid identifying the party with the Bolshevik faction. Clearly, it was inadequate as a political brand name in the rough-and-tumble of electoral competition in 1917. The word I have translated as "colloquially" is *prostorechie*, which has connotations of substandard usage. Lenin is almost saying that only uneducated people label the

party as 'Bolshevik'. Of course, he is referring not to genuinely uneducated people, but rather to political rivals and journalists who refuse to follow the subtleties of correct party usage. Throughout this pamphlet, 'Bolshevik' is always found within quotation marks - a typographical manifestation of Lenin's reluctance.

An illustration of the other main motive for using 'Bolshevik' is a passage in a polemical newspaper article published in mid-May.^[6] Here Lenin considers various accusations against the "terrible Bolsheviks" made not only by the capitalist newspapers but by the moderate socialists. He then claims that the programme of economic regulation put forward by the moderate socialists was in actuality identical with the "programme of 'terrible' Bolshevism" - only, of course, the moderate socialists could not carry it out in practice as long as they continued to make pacts with the bourgeois parties.

Lenin perforce had to become more comfortable using 'Bolshevik' when making appeals for support and responding to attacks. But he still seems to have regarded it as an imposition and a distraction from more principled considerations about the party name. The change of party name was so important to him that in March 1918, at a special congress that otherwise was devoted solely to the highly urgent topic of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, he gave an extensive speech about why the name should be changed from 'Social Democratic' to 'Communist'.

At the beginning of this speech, he adds foreigners to the list of people who would insist on using 'Bolshevik' as a label for the party: "The central committee proposes to change the name of our party to Russian Communist Party, with 'Bolsheviks' in parentheses. We considered this addition to be necessary, because the word 'Bolshevik' has acquired a right of citizenship not only in the political life of Russia, but in the entire foreign press that follows the development of events in general outline."

This curt comment constitutes Lenin's entire discussion about the inclusion of 'Bolshevik' in the party name, even if only in the humble garb of a parenthesis. No references to the glorious past of the Bolsheviks, to the necessity of creating a homogenous party or to the alleged inauguration of a Bolshevik Party back in 1912. My impression is that Lenin was still rather annoyed that ill-informed people's insistence on using the purely Russian label of 'Bolshevik' was getting in the way of his grand and principled gesture of rejecting 'Social Democracy' in favour of 'Communist'.

Internationalists

Turning from Lenin to more general usage, we may observe that within the party in 1917 the fundamental political choice was *not* viewed as 'Bolshevik vs non-Bolshevik'. The fundamental dividing line was rather the one between 'internationalist vs defencist'. In the Russian context, an internationalist was someone who wanted to overthrow the provisional government and replace it with a *narodnaia vlast*: that is, a sovereign authority based on the workers and peasants and expressing itself institutionally through the soviets. An internationalist was also committed to "breaking with the defencists": that is, refusing to stay in parties that engaged in coalition governments and otherwise indulged in "pact-making" (*soglashatelstvo*).

The 'internationalist/defencist' split was strictly analogous to, although not identical with, the 'anti-liquidationist/liquidationist' split in 1910-14. Like the earlier split, it was taken for granted that, while all Bolsheviks were internationalists, not all internationalists were Bolsheviks. In

other words, the dividing line between those who were in and those who were out of the party did not run between Bolshevik and Menshevik, but rather somewhere among the Mensheviks.

Thus the consistent official attitude of the RSDRP in 1917 was that it wanted to work with internationalists in other parties and that it welcomed internationalist Social Democrats in the party. As Lenin put in April, "... in regard to various local groups of workers who are aligned with the Mensheviks and the like, but who strive to uphold the position of internationalism against 'revolutionary defencism' ..., the policy of our party must be to support such workers and groups, to seek closer relations with them, and support unification with them on the basis of a definite break with the petty bourgeois betrayal of socialism."

The 6th Party Congress was held in August 1917, at a time when the relations between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks who were in the government and the official Soviet leadership were in a very bad way. Governmental repression after the confusion of the July Days meant that Lenin and other top leaders could not attend. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the congress, the delegates enthusiastically received Lurii Larin, formerly a prominent liquidationist and now a spokesman for 'Menshevik Internationalists'. Larin got special applause when he promised "an immediate break with the defencists" In the name of the party, Bukharin welcomed Larin's initiative:

I greet with special warmth his declaration about the necessity of a break with the defencists, that ulcer that is eating into not only the party, but all the democratic forces of the country. In order to combat this ulcer, it is necessary to unite all social democrat internationalists. In this hall there is not a single individual that does not feel the necessity of uniting all the living forces of social democracy. Comrades! I am not going to dwell on the differences of opinion mentioned by comrade Larin, but rather I will express the hope that these differences will be outgrown and that social democrat internationalists will be united in one overall party.

Larin admitted the difficulties of overcoming "nine years of disunity". Thus he dated the party split from 1908, presumably because the last more or less united party congress had been in 1907. Worth noting is the fact that Larin made no references to the Prague conference of 1912 as a significant date in the history of the split. The same could be said of remarks by Mikhail Olminsky, who opened the 6th Congress by looking back at earlier party congresses in relation to the split. More generally, I found not the slightest hint in any of the materials I looked at from 1917-18 that anybody saw the Prague conference as marking the inauguration of a new Bolshevik Party.

Larin promised that Martov himself, the leader of the Menshevik Internationalists, would address the party congress. This visit never materialised, and the mood at the end of the congress was much sourer on this issue than it had been when Larin was applauded. KK Iurenev (a member of the 'Interregional Group' to which Trotsky belonged that was now joining the RSDRP) grimly remarked that only "a minority of a minority of the Mensheviks" would end up entering the RSDRP. Nevertheless, he proposed a resolution, accepted by the congress, that contained the following language:

While opposing the dangerous slogan of uniting everybody, social democracy puts forward the class-revolutionary slogan of the unity of all internationalists who break in practice with the Menshevik-Imperialists.

Since it sees this kind of unity as necessary and inevitable, the

Congress calls on all the revolutionary elements of social democracy to immediately break organisational ties with the defencists and unite around the RSDRP.

View on the ground

A more direct look at the realities on the ground comes from results of a questionnaire circulated among local party organisations and included in the records of the 6th Party Congress. The questions of interest to us are: what is the name of your organisation? Does your organisation contain both Bolsheviks and internationalists, or are you purely Bolshevik? The very existence of these questions indicates that as of August 1917 the party was viewed not as an exclusively Bolshevik party, but as a party in which Bolsheviks dominated.

When we look at the answers, we find a large majority simply called themselves by the name of their locality plus "RSDRP". A number of local organisations did refer to themselves as "RSDRP (Bolsheviks)". On the other hand, some had titles such as the following: "Cheliabinsk committee of the RSDRP (internationalists)".

When asked to describe their factional content, most committees had something similar to the party organisation in the Vyborg district of Petrograd: "Our organisation is a united one, including only internationalists in principle, but in fact consisting almost exclusively of Bolsheviks."

Or, as the "Odessa committee of the RSDRP" put it, "We unite Bolsheviks as well as uniters (Trotskyists, former partyists) and Menshevik-Internationalists who accept the platform of the Bolsheviks: all internationalists." ('Uniters' and 'partyists' are labels from the intra-party squabbles of 1912, so that 'Trotskyist' means someone who supported Trotsky's bid for all-factional unity at that time.)

Usage had not yet settled down, so we find a variety of ways of talking about party organisations and factions. Even though some labels did not continue into the future, we should remember the way, for example, the local soviet in the Vyborg district greeted the 6th Congress - as "the all-Russian congress of the internationalists" and as "the representatives of thorough-going revolutionary social democracy".

In 1918, as we have seen, the hastily called 7th Congress officially changed the party name and called for substantial programme revisions. The new party programme was adopted in the following year by the 8th Congress. There were extensive debates over the programme at these two congresses, but very little attention was paid to the name change as such. In 1918, proposals to keep 'Worker' in the title and to remove 'Russian' were quickly dismissed.

One delegate did object to dropping 'Social Democratic' from the party's name. Iurii Steklov felt that the best course was to take steps to end the "political masquerade" of Menshevik groups who called themselves social democratic, even though they had lost all moral right to use this title. He argued that a great deal of political good will would be thrown away if the old name was dropped: "I make bold to assure you that you won't create any enthusiasm among anybody but Martov and friends by changing this glorious title of the party. We will have to re-educate all the masses who are accustomed to see this word [Social Democrat] as the expression of their own party."

Steklov therefore suggested that 'Bolshevik' be dropped from the parenthesis and 'Communist' placed there instead, so that the new name would be 'RSDRP (Communists)'. He asserted that the word

'Bolshevik' had only historical meaning that arose from the "happenstance" that the Bolsheviks had a majority (in Russian *bol'shinstvo*) at the 2nd Party Congress in 1903.

In response, Bukharin said that by now the masses saw the Bolsheviks as their champions and the Mensheviks as traitors. He followed this argument up with the following remarkable comment: "The issue is that the *word* 'Bolshevik' is a silly one that that has lost all meaning and there is no reason to retain this word. We need to keep it for the present, so that the masses, not being initiated into all the subtleties of the issue, are not puzzled by trying to figure out which party this is, since not everybody is going to read the resolutions of our congress."

Shortly after the 7th Congress, Bukharin wrote a small book entitled *Programma Kommunistov (Programme of the communists)*.^[7] At the very end of this work, he provided an explanation of "why we are called communists". No mention is made of the presence of the parenthetical 'Bolshevik' in the party's new name. According to Bukharin, the split between communists and social democrats was one that ran through the socialist movement in all countries. As an example of such a split, he mentioned the armed conflict between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks *after* the October revolution: "Blood marked a boundary line between us. Such a thing cannot and never will be forgotten."

Some people at the 7th Party Congress saw the parenthetical 'Bolshevik' as temporary and proposed that the issue be reconsidered at the next congress in 1919. Although there were extensive debates over the programme at the 8th Party Congress in 1919, the issue of the party's official name was not mentioned and the party remained 'RKP(B)'.

When we look back at how and why the party became officially 'Bolshevik', we see that it did not really decide to give itself this name - rather, it accepted the fact that outsiders insisted on using it. The party took on the Bolshevik label in 1917-18 as the result of an objective process of political competition fuelled by the imperatives of political branding.

Let us consider the case of Iurii Larin, the Menshevik Internationalist who addressed the 6th Party Congress. Larin went to join the party and played a prominent role in the economic policy of the Bolshevik government. Indeed, his daughter later married Bukharin, the Bolshevik leader who greeted his remarks at the 6th Congress. In 1917 Larin still considered himself a Menshevik, and old party hands such as he and Lenin would be aware of traditional conflicts over tactical issues. Nevertheless, as soon as he joined the RSDRP, everybody else would refer to him as a Bolshevik.

This example illustrates the nature of the process. The party did not *shrink* so that it became only one of the former factions of the RSDRP. Rather, the word 'Bolshevik' *expanded* so that it included everyone in the party, regardless of their former factional affiliation.

In so doing, the impressionistic meaning of 'Bolshevism' used by outsiders prevailed over the more precise definition of those versed in internal party affairs. This impressionistic meaning might be paraphrased as the radical movement of the lower classes to take over political power and use it for world revolution and extensive social transformation of Russia - to the horror of some and the enthusiasm of others. Those of us who are interested in party history might ask ourselves: is this more impressionistic definition perhaps the most useful one?

The third and final instalment in this series of articles will look at how 'Bolshevism' was used in 1920.

Notes

1 . All material from party congresses can be found at this site:

http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KPSS/_KPSS.html.

2 . 'A faction is not a party' *Weekly Worker* May

3 . VI Lenin *Polno sobranie sochinenii* (Complete works), Vol 31, p131.

4 . There are many misunderstandings about the debate between Lenin and the 'old Bolsheviks' in April 1917, but this problem is not relevant to the issue under discussion. For my views, see 'The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context' in *Russian History* 38 (2011), pp199-242.

5 . This pamphlet was published in mid-May. Lenin says he wrote it in early April, and it is so placed in the *Collected works*. Lenin does not say he made no editorial changes before publication, and it seems quite likely that the choice of a label for the party was such a change. Compare the very similar passage in another pamphlet issued around the same time in which Lenin introduced the resolutions of the April conference of the party (*Polno sobranie sochinenii* Vol 31, p454).

6 . VI Lenin *Polno sobranie sochinenii* Vol 32, pp74-76.

7 . An English translation of this fascinating work can be found at www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1918/worldrev/index.html.

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