

# Can Leninists Explain the Russian Revolution?

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Can Leninists explain the Russian Revolution and its lessons for today? My new book *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics Across the Russian Empire, 1882-1917* marshals extensive new primary data from across the Russian Empire to challenge longstanding myths about the Russian Revolution — and to challenge unhelpful Leninist (aka “revolutionary socialist”) political strategies based on these myths.

Here I will only address major errors of fact and analysis in Samuel Farber’s recently published review of *Revolutionary Social Democracy*, since space is limited and because the points unaddressed here are dealt with at length in my book. Farber’s review begins with one big factual mistake and proceeds on that basis, without citing new historical data and without challenging the data I provide in my book, to recapitulate the standard “revolutionary socialist” critique of Karl Kautsky and Second International, whose strategy V.I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks supposedly broke with.

The big factual error is Farber’s claim that, in imperial Russia, “most of the ‘revolutionary social democratic parties’ supported the war.” Though he cites my book as the supposed source of this claim, at no point do I make it — for the simple reason that it’s untrue. Not only is Farber’s assertion about most borderland parties’ supposed support for World War One untrue, but, as I showed in the book, revolutionary social democrats led successful seizures of power in a majority of imperial Russia’s regions in 1917-18 that had their own Marxist parties — this radical outcome placing all power in the hands of working people occurred in Estonia, Latvia, Central Russia, Azerbaijan, Finland, as well as Lithuania. And, even in other regions such as Poland, revolutionary social-democratic parties such as the PPS-Left and SDKPiL tried but did not ultimately succeed in overthrowing capitalist rule.

Having decreed by unfounded fiat that most revolutionary social democrats were not in fact revolutionary in practice, Farber then goes on to recapitulate Leninist myths about non-revolutionary Second International Marxism and the supposed strategic innovations that distinguished the Bolsheviks. But, as I showed in detail my book, and as historian Lars Lih and

others have shown elsewhere, the strategy of revolutionary social democracy (aka “orthodox Marxism”) articulated by the early Kautsky was actually shared by Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and other revolutionaries across Tsarist Russia — and this strategy was the strategic basis for *all* parties that overthrew capitalist rule in 1917-18, including the Bolsheviks and the Finnish Social Democrats. Farber provides no new evidence to bolster the old claim that the strategy of “Second International Marxism” was not as revolutionary as it claimed, or that the Bolshevik current broke from this strategy before or during 1917.

Farber asserts that what distinguishes Kautsky’s strategy and tactics from that of real revolutionaries is that the latter base their strategy on the “expectation that a socialist revolution will have to rely on the widespread use of force” and, therefore, that they base their tactics on class independence against the capitalist state and employers. The problem with Farber’s claim is that the revolutionary social-democratic strategy articulated by Kautsky *consistently advocated both of these points*.

In terms of strategy, as I cite and explore at length in the book, here is what Kautsky actually argued: “Now, as in the past, Marx’s saying remains true: force is the midwife of any new society. No ruling class abdicates voluntarily and nonchalantly ... A rising class must have the necessary instruments of force at its disposal if it wants to dispossess the old ruling class.” Similarly, I showed at length that one of the defining and central tenets of Second International “orthodox Marxist” strategy was its intransigent insistence on class struggle, its opposition to participation in coalition governments between workers and liberals, and its opposition to participation in executive government under capitalism as a general rule.

I was particularly surprised to read Farber’s claim that what’s “missing in Eric Blanc’s analysis” in *Revolutionary Social Democracy* is a case for the centrality of working-class political independence. In reality, one of my book’s central themes is that it was precisely the acceptance or rejection of an intransigent strategy of class struggle and opposition to participation in capitalist coalition governments that was *the* central divergence between imperial Russia’s radical and moderate socialists and *the* central factor explaining the revolution’s divergent outcomes across the Russian Empire.

The fact that I’m unconvinced that an extreme degree of political independence is relevant to the United States (or many other parliamentary regimes) today does not shape my analysis of imperial Russia’s movements a century ago. The contexts are different. According to the political formulae of that era’s revolutionary socialists (including Kautsky), socialist and workers should have actively opposed trying to elect not only Bernie Sanders in the US, but also Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Gabriel Boric in Chile — *all* participation in executive governance under capitalist parliamentary regimes was rejected by Second International revolutionaries. The burden of proof is on Farber and those who share his views that *this* level of independence from the state is relevant today.

Farber is on no stronger factual or analytical ground when he claims that I and Kautsky argue that “an entirely defensive politics can be successful in gaining power.” In fact, far from elaborating a case for the strategic centrality of “defensive politics,” I barely address this question at all. As I explain in the book, the line between “defensive” and “offensive” politics is usually exceedingly unclear (and often non-existent) in the class struggle. For example, each of the most plausibly “offensive” actions of the Finnish Social-Democratic Party (SDP) and the Bolsheviks — from calling general strikes to initiating revolutionary uprisings — were consistently framed and seen in “defensive” terms. A strong commitment to “defensive politics” was neither a significant theme in my book nor in revolutionary social-democratic strategy.

Nor, contrary to Farber’s claims, was “defensive politics” a major point of contention in the Finnish

Marxist debates over taking power in November 1917 — as I showed in the book, according to the Finnish SDP's revolutionary social-democratic politics, *all* the strategic preconditions for seizing power were present that month. The reason the Finnish Marxists seized power two months later —like the “delay” of the Baku Bolsheviks (April 1918) and others across imperial Russia — was primarily due to contingent questions of context and tactics, not “Kautskyst” strategy. (A few further factual corrections: Farber incorrectly claims that the Finnish SDP from its founding onwards “did not call for even the gradual contest of power.” It is also not factually correct to claim that the SDP in 1917 said “little about its social objectives.” Nor is it plausible to suggest that the trajectory of the Finnish revolution in 1918 was not leading beyond capitalism.)

Any even-handed historiographic account has to acknowledge that the main reason why the Finnish Red Government was eventually crushed in 1918 had relatively little to do the timing of its initial establishment. Far more important was the fact that, absent significant military aid from the Bolsheviks, the Finnish workers' regime was vastly outgunned by the combined military weight of the German and White Guard armies. In this sense, as well as its commitment to workers' rule through universal suffrage, the Finnish Red Government was very similar to the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871. Why should socialists like Farber today reject the socialist content and strategic lessons of the former but not the latter?

Farber's desire to cast true revolutionaries as advocates of “offensive” revolutionary politics leads him to make another inaccurate claim: that the Bolsheviks from *March 1917* onwards were “oriented towards a revolutionary insurrection.” But as Lenin and Trotsky consistently emphasized in 1917, and as even other Leninist historians have acknowledged, the demand “All Power to the Soviets” for most of the year simply meant that the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders should end their coalition with liberals, peacefully displacing the illegitimate, un-elected, widely despised Provisional Government.

Contrary to what Farber claims, all revolutionary social democrats, Kautsky included, expected and prepared workers for capitalist counter-revolution. Once workers were strong enough to win a parliamentary majority for socialism, Kautsky and his co-thinkers expected that the ruling class would resort to anti-democratic reaction. It was precisely for this reason that Kautsky and revolutionary social democrats in Finland and beyond pushed for the dissolution of the standing army, the arming of the people, and why they explicitly and consistently rejected pacifism and called for revolution. The major difference between revolutionary social democracy and post-1917 Leninism is *not*, as Farber asserts, that the latter had a more realistic understanding that capitalists would resist and refuse to accept the legitimacy of parliamentary sectioned socialist transformation.

The actual difference between Leninists and revolutionary social democrats was that the latter believed that reaching socialism and socialist revolution in democratic contexts required that socialists push to win a majority to parliament through universal suffrage elections. According to both Kautsky and the early Lenin (i.e. prior to his *State and Revolution*), workers would seek to seize the democratic governmental openings that existed under capitalism — socialists before, during, and following socialist revolution should therefore seek to preserve and expand republican parliamentary institutions, rather than discard them. Leninists, in contrast, from 1918 onwards, proposed that *only* workers' councils installed through mass armed uprisings against the *entire* existing parliamentary state (not just its anti-democratic bureaucratic and military structures) could install socialism.

Since I and others like Carmen Sirianni have explained elsewhere why Leninism has nowhere come close to becoming a viable majoritarian current in capitalist democracies and why it's an unsuitable strategy for socialists today, there's no need here to rehash those arguments. Only two points should be underscored here. First, revolutionary social-democratic strategy *was* proven to be a viable path to workers' power in Finland. And, second, the October Revolution hardly confirms the Leninist case

for “dual power” insurrections against capitalist democracies — the Bolsheviks in 1917 led a soviet revolution in a context defined by decades of autocratic rule, in which there was no existing government democratic elected through universal suffrage.

The relation of political strategy to distinct *political regimes* is a central component of my book but it nowhere figures in Farber’s review. In fact, he doesn’t engage with my book’s major thesis: that the experience of imperial Russia shows why effective socialist strategy necessarily looks different in different political contexts (autocracies like most of Tsarist Russia, semi-authoritarian parliamentary regimes like pre-war Finland or Germany, or capitalist democracies). This is true both for tactical questions — such as the relative emphasis socialists place on disruptive mass action — and for long-term strategy, such as the expected role of parliamentary institutions in the transition beyond capitalism. Farber seems to assume that I’m making a case for the relevance of Kautsky’s strategy to *all* contexts, an idea I explicitly and repeatedly reject. As I argue in the book, and as I have elaborated on recently, *neither* early revolutionary social-democratic strategy nor post-1917 Leninism is the most suited socialist strategy for capitalist democracies today.

Farber, like other Leninists, implausibly suggests that socialist strategy and tactics should be fundamentally identical in an autocracy, a semi-authoritarian parliamentary regime, or a democratic capitalist state. At no point in his review, or elsewhere, has Farber made a positive or plausible case for this claim.

It’s easy to point out the tensions and difficulties of the democratic-socialist push to overturn capitalist rule. We openly acknowledge these as well. These political dilemmas are rooted in the vastly unequal power resources of different classes and the contradictory openings and obstacles of parliamentary rule under capitalism — unfortunately, nobody has yet developed a suitable strategic formula for overcoming these dilemmas.

Given the actual historical record since 1917, it’s much harder to demonstrate in theory or practice that “revolutionary socialism” has a plausible chance of ever becoming a majoritarian current in parliamentary contexts. Learning the right lessons from the Russian Revolution is one way socialists today can start to more critically, and more effectively, develop strategies and tactics appropriate to the actual contexts in which we find ourselves.

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