

Old Bolshevism, New Bolshevism, and Lenin's April Theses

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"Can Leninists Explain
the Russian Revolution?"
—Blanc



Bolsheviks proceed from [the] abstract notion "democratic dictatorship, not socialist dictatorship" and arrive at the idea of a proletariat in possession of state power imposing a bourgeois-democratic limitation upon itself. ... The anti-revolution aspects of ... Bolshevism are likely to become a serious threat only in the event of victory.

Leon Trotsky, 1909¹

The "serious threat" Trotsky spoke of materialized in the wake of the victorious February 1917 Revolution. As he had foretold, the "Old Bolshevik" perspective had arrived at the idea of workers holding power—Lenin's "dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry"—but imposing a bourgeois-democratic limitation upon itself. The "anti-revolution aspects" of Old Bolshevism emerged clearly and assumed definite shape in the five-week period preceding Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station on the evening of April 3, 1917. By the end of April, however, the Bolsheviks had reversed course, adopting Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in everything but name.

A Menshevik eyewitness, N.N. Sukhanov, author of a seven-volume work on 1917 and cited by Trotsky in his own *History*, reports Lenin's first meeting with the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks announcing the Bolshevik chief's determination to chart a new direction:

I will never forget that thunder-like speech, startling and amazing not only to me, a heretic accidentally dropped in, but also to the faithful, all of them. I assert that nobody there had expected anything of the kind. It seemed as if all the elements and the spirit of universal destruction had risen from their lairs, knowing neither barriers nor doubts nor personal difficulties nor personal considerations, to hover through the banquet chambers of Kshesinskaia above the heads of the bewitched disciples.²

Lenin would now go beyond the Old Bolshevik program of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, toward socialist revolution at home and abroad. This reversal, or "rearming," of the Bolshevik party,

as Trotsky termed it, has long been settled history, accepted by serious historians of all persuasions, along with eyewitnesses and memoirists, until now.³

Lars Lih has challenged this narrative.⁴ Marching in lockstep with Lih is Eric Blanc. Both affirm a continuity and essential unity—not disruption and upheaval—between the pre-1917 politics of “Old Bolshevism” and those of “New Bolshevism” in 1917.⁵ (All unreferenced citations in this essay refer to the two articles by Blanc cited in note 5.) This view is not original to Lih and Blanc.

As early as 1924, the top leadership in Russia, Stalin and Kamenev in particular, minimized the conflict between Lenin and themselves over the party’s orientation in the first weeks of the 1917 Revolution. By 1939 Stalin had gone further and asserted in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Short Course) that there really had been no conflict worth mentioning.⁶ But even at this late date, Stalin still allowed that the *April Theses* represented a new orientation that flowed “naturally” from Old Bolshevik premises. The new orientation was Stalin’s concession to the truth. But this is still too much for Lih and Blanc: For them, there was not even a new orientation but a straight continuation of the old—a mere tactical articulation of a long-held strategy derived from the work of Karl Kautsky, leading theoretician of Second International Marxism, making Kautsky the “architect” of the October Revolution.⁷

In contrast, I shall reaffirm the long-standing conventional view that Lenin’s 1917 *April Theses* did represent a sea change in strategic perspectives that could not be deduced from the “logic” (as Lih says) of Old Bolshevism but required concrete political analysis. That analysis tended toward the appropriate politics in the new and unforeseen circumstances in which the Bolshevik Party found itself in 1917. Blanc’s revisionism is of concern because it tends to support his contemporary pronouncements on the feasibility of the parliamentary road to socialism in bourgeois democracies (Kautskyism) while confining the relevance of the soviet road to socialism (Leninist vanguardism) exclusively to autocratic regimes.

The Old Bolshevik Perspective: The Bourgeois-Democratic Revolution and the Democratic Republic

Until Lih and Blanc came along, it was generally understood that Old Bolshevism had only aimed to set up a republic in Russia—the most democratic form of the capitalist state—as the political expression of the coming bourgeois-democratic revolution in that country. And there is broad agreement that Lenin broke with Old Bolshevism on this matter—Lenin himself thought he was doing so—when the Bolshevik leader called on workers to permanently set up a soviet state instead, that being the only form a workers’ state could take because it was democratic through and through. On this conventional account, New Bolshevism, encapsulated in the slogan “All Power to the Soviets,” marked a critical discontinuity with Old Bolshevism, incompatible with the latter, because no capitalist state, in whatever form, could stably exist under soviet power.

Lenin’s call for an epochal transition to socialism in Russia meant transcending the bourgeois limitations of the existing, democratic revolution while retaining all of its democratic features—notably, freedom of speech, press, and assembly. As well, soviet power would inspire workers throughout the advanced capitalist world to emulate their Russian brothers and sisters by bringing a condign end to the capitalist mode of production everywhere. Indeed, in all key respects, Lenin adopted Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, masterfully translating it (better than Trotsky even, I would assert) into political practice. Blanc tries to overturn, in central respects, what we knew—or thought we knew—about all this.

Building on Lih’s work, Blanc rightly shows how Old Bolshevism was “articulated and implemented” in the very first weeks of the February Revolution, weeks that form “a necessary starting point for

understanding the ensuing developments” down to October 1917. Hitherto, that has generally meant that since Old Bolshevism was wedded to a limited, bourgeois-democratic conception of the February Revolution, it stood in the way of realizing the proletarian-socialist one in October. In sharp contrast, Blanc affirms just the opposite: Old Bolshevism, remaining true to itself, transcended with nary a hitch the bourgeois limitations of the February Revolution, paving the way for the October Revolution. The anti-socialist revolution aspects of Old Bolshevism never existed. Trotsky had only imagined them for politically interested reasons. There was no “April Crisis” and no “rearming” of the Bolshevik party. “[I]rrefutable primary sources undermine the entire edifice of Trotsky’s argument,” trumpets Blanc.

Pace Blanc, it is impossible to understand Bolshevik policy at that “particular moment”—February-March 1917—unless a longer, systematic view is taken. Some relevant, theory-sensitive, pre-April 1917 history, stretching back to 1905, and missing in Blanc, is indispensable to set the proper context.

The Question of a Provisional Government in Old Bolshevik Theory⁸

The Bolsheviks had thought hard about what to say and how to act in a revolution long before 1917. In 1905, the Bolsheviks held a series of meetings at their Third Congress, as a revolution back home was unfolding. On one issue, they resolved in favor of Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP)⁹ participation in a provisional government should one emerge in the wake of the hoped-for overthrow of the monarchy, then savagely battling for its very existence.

The Bolsheviks reasoned that a successful RSDLP-led popular uprising to topple Tsardom would earn them bountiful political capital. They would then cash out that capital by founding a revolutionary provisional government dominated and led by Russian Social Democrats—a “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry,” Lenin called it. They envisioned the following, two-step scenario.

First step: The hypothetical RSDLP-led provisional government would carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end, working hard to assure the most favorable political environment for a Constituent Assembly to lay the constitutional basis of a republic. Using its positions of power above, in the provisional governmental apparatus, jointly with those below, in civil society, in the factories, the streets, and the neighborhoods, the RSDLP would “vastly extend” the democratic “boundaries” of the bourgeois revolution to the very limit, right up to the democratic republic—without going beyond it.¹⁰

Second step: The republic would be founded. The party, its work done, would dissolve the provisional government. The RSDLP, now emulating German Social Democracy, would become a party of revolutionary opposition to capitalism and the capitalist state, inside and outside the newly constituted parliamentary institutions.

Thus did the Bolsheviks determine to give the then on-going bourgeois-democratic revolution a distinct “proletarian imprint,” the highest degree of “democratism,”¹¹ which the proletariat would use to advance and defend its class interests, along with the interests of peasants, women, Jews, ethnic and national minorities, and other oppressed groups. At the same time, the successful revolution would clear the way for the broad, smooth, unfettered “American” road to the development of capitalism in Russia.

The 1905 Revolution failed. The autocracy was not overthrown. No provisional government ever materialized. Bolshevik theory about what to do and say about this matter was never put to the test of practice. That test only came in 1917.

That year the unprecedented happened: The February Revolution swiftly won, toppling the autocracy. Finally, a new, never-before-seen institution, only hypothesized by the Bolsheviks in 1905, at last came into existence: the Provisional Government.

The Paradox of the February Revolution

The workers (and soldiers) led the revolution, vindicating Old Bolshevism. Meanwhile, the Kadet-led bourgeois opposition, to whom the Mensheviks had looked to lead the bourgeois-democratic revolution, had in fact led no struggles, fought no battles, and risked no necks, instead conducting behind-the-scenes intrigues to save what could be saved of the old order.¹²

In 1905, the soviets had remained representative of different tendencies in the workers' movement, fora for workers to discuss how to overthrow Tsarism. In 1917, soviets once again became a multi-tendency platform of political struggle, and much more, *after* the masses had struck down the Romanov dynasty—an entirely novel situation.

With the destruction of the monarchy factory committees became firmly established and authoritative institutions of democratic workers' power at the point of production,¹³ and the central electoral constituency of the soviets in every urban center of Russia. Standing at the head of the masses was the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies (the Soviet). Its famous Order No. 1 of March 1, 1917, established soviet power over the armed forces—an attribute indispensable to any state, *qua* state.

Deceived Expectations

Alarming, the actually existing Provisional Government bore absolutely no resemblance to the one the Bolsheviks had anticipated 12 years earlier. Defying all Bolshevik expectations, no Bolsheviks had participated in its creation. There were no Bolsheviks in it. Worse, Lenin's partisans confronted a political nightmare: Wealthy landlords and industrialists dominated it, and the counter-revolutionary Kadet Party, not the RSDLP, led it.

There was a disconnect between those who had made the revolution, on the one hand, and the people who reaped the harvest—the Kadets, liberals who feared popular power to the marrow of their bones. This was the “paradox” Trotsky spoke of in his *History*.¹⁴

Still, the counter-revolutionary class composition and policies of the Provisional Government—continuing the war, stonewalling land reforms, postponing elections to a Constituent Assembly, re-asserting managerial authority on the factory floor—could be opposed by the Soviet. Indeed, in 1905 Lenin had looked to the Soviet as the “embryo of a provisional revolutionary government” and argued that Social Democrats should broadcast the idea that the Soviet regard itself as such, or that the Soviet assume responsibility for “*setting up*” such a government until a bourgeois-democratic state permanently supplanted it.¹⁵

II. Initial Bolshevik Reaction to the Actually Existing Provisional Government

Fundamentally at issue here, and the focus of Blanc's essays, are the Bolsheviks' politics toward the Provisional Government in the first weeks of the February Revolution, and the reasons for them.

On the fifth day of the revolutionary whirlwind, February 27, shortly before the Tsar's abdication, the Bolsheviks of Vyborg district in the capital reiterated the RSDLP's call, dating back to the 1905 Revolution, for the formation of a “Provisional Revolutionary Government” to fight for a “democratic republic.” On that day as well, the top Bolshevik leader present in Petrograd, Alexander Shlyapnikov, summoned workers and soldiers to send “their representatives to the Provisional

Revolutionary Government.” “Long Live the Democratic Republic!”

In the next few days, however, it became increasingly clear that the just-formed Provisional Government would not be a revolutionary one. The most radical Bolsheviks, those of Vyborg, now called for the immediate formation of a revolutionary provisional government to displace the existing, counter-revolutionary one. “The Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies must immediately eliminate the Provisional Government of the liberal bourgeoisie and declare itself to be the Provisional Revolutionary Government.”

Very simply, Vyborg called for a new provisional government with no counter-revolutionaries in it—let alone leading it. It was a call for revolutionaries, for Bolsheviks—not venal, war-mongering Duma parliamentarians—to take ministerial posts and make revolutionary bourgeois democratic policy, in conformity with the Old Bolshevik resolutions of the 1905 Congress.

Blanc explains that the Bolshevik central leadership in Petrograd imposed less-radical “tactics” on the Vyborg radicals. This is true, but Blanc (like Lih) fails to recognize that behind this tactical change there remained a strategic adherence, in practice, to the Old Bolshevik goal of setting up a bourgeois republic, not soviet power.

Shlyapnikov’s view of the political situation dovetailed with Old Bolshevik perspectives. He urged extreme caution and came out against an immediate, direct assault on the Provisional Government. Instead of pushing hard for the formation of a revolutionary provisional government right away, as the Vyborg “extremists” were demanding, the Bolsheviks ought instead to pressure the existing Provisional Government to act in a revolutionary way by putting its Kadet leaders’ feet to the fire and supporting the Provisional Government “insofar as it” acted in a progressive way, and not supporting it when it did not.

Again, Shlyapnikov was recycling the Old Bolshevik project of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, where the Soviet has no other purpose than to apply pressure on the Provisional Government to carry that revolution through, and, if the provisional regime proved obdurate, to create an alternative, a “Provisional Revolutionary Government that was democratic in nature (the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry),” as explained by the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* on March 15, two weeks before Lenin’s return.

This tactical shift, prompted by Old Bolshevik leaders, did not at all anticipate New Bolshevism and socialist revolution, as Blanc declares, muddying the waters. It was, rather, a tactical inflection of Old Bolshevism to achieve the same objectives as before—only more slowly, requiring the Bolsheviks to be more patient. Blanc lists these objectives as “peace, bread, agrarian reform, the eight-hour day, and a democratically elected Constituent Assembly.” These were not specifically socialist demands, they were bourgeois-democratic ones, which Old Bolsheviks thought a bourgeois provisional government could meet—provided it was subject to sufficient revolutionary pressure from without, from the Soviet.

In this scenario, the one they would pursue for the next five weeks, the Bolsheviks would spare themselves the trouble of replacing the Provisional Government with a spanking new, Bolshevik-dominated, “revolutionary” one. It was an indirect way of realizing the Old Bolshevik program of pushing the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end. It was not the herald of a strategic break with it, and with capitalism, as was the *April Theses*. Blanc correctly points out that before they endorsed the *April Theses*, the Bolsheviks “did not project the perspective of overthrowing capitalism in Russia *prior* to the Western workers’ revolution.”

In light of the foregoing reflections, official Bolshevik policy, before April, to supplant the Provisional

Government with, if necessary, a “revolutionary” one was not a demand for a permanent soviet power and socialism but a demand for a Provisional Government that would remain provisional, eventually yielding to a Constituent Assembly that would set up the legal, constitutional basis of a permanent, capitalist state.

Let’s cross all t’s and dot all i’s: The Old Bolshevik party line did not call for “All Power to the Soviets” as the one and only *living, practical, and permanent* alternative to the existing Provisional Government. Old Bolshevism was never about the Soviet setting up a workers’ state and making a socialist revolution, as Blanc believes.

Lenin was the first Bolshevik leader whose political calculations took into account the actual existence of soviets, of this exceptionally popular and unprecedentedly democratic *state* form, in pushing for a fundamental reorientation of Bolshevik strategy, toward socialism. In the *April Theses*, Lenin *did* “project the perspective of overthrowing capitalism *prior* to the Western workers’ revolution.” Unlike the Old Bolsheviks, he would not put socialist revolution in Russia on the back burner, waiting for workers in the advanced capitalist world to make the first move.

Lenin explicitly recognized what the Vyborg Bolsheviks had only intuited: It was impossible to reconcile the existence of the counter-revolutionary Provisional Government with revolutionary soviet power. In *State and Revolution*, he would theorize a new Marxist model of the state that broke decisively with the old one, which he and all Second International Marxists, led by Kautsky, had espoused, namely, that the working class could seize control of the capitalist state and use a suitably transformed version of it to build socialism.

As long as Lenin’s partisans in Russia did not recognize in the soviet the “political form at long last found for the economical emancipation of the working class,”¹⁶ assuming the functions of a workers’ state, they were bound to fall back on the time-worn Old Bolshevik demand to establish a new “revolutionary provisional government” to fully democratize the bourgeois revolution, terminal point of the 1917 revolution. So long as they did so, the Kadet-led Provisional Government, representing the interests of the propertied classes, would not have to be destroyed, only pressured to push the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end.

III. Blanc’s Argument: The February Revolution Anticipated the October Revolution

In Blanc’s account, Lenin’s *April Theses* represented but a theoretical specification of already existing Old Bolshevik practice, really adding nothing new. The Bolshevik call for a revolutionary alternative to take the place of the existing, anti-revolutionary, Provisional Government, he believes, was simply an unarticulated call for soviet power. Specifically, in Blanc’s view, the radical Vyborg Bolsheviks’ demand for a revolutionary provisional government was tantamount to the demand for “All Power to the Soviets,” anticipating Lenin’s theses in every essential respect. This demand was implicit in Old Bolshevik politics, Blanc says, following Lih; it became explicit in April 1917.

At the same time, Blanc rightly says that the Bolsheviks “did not project the perspective of overthrowing capitalism *prior*” to their adopting the *April Theses*. Blanc recognizes that the Bolsheviks changed course *after* voting in favor of Lenin’s position, taking the initiative to immediately fight for socialism. This sets up a huge problem for Blanc.

Before the *April Theses*, could the Bolsheviks call for a “proletarian peasant government to end the war, meet the people’s social demands, and spark the international overthrow of capitalism” without *also* calling for the *immediate* overthrow of capitalism at home, not waiting for workers in the West to take the lead? Could capitalists confidently expect a return on their investments under a “workers’ and peasants’ government” or a “proletarian peasant government” or a “regime of

workers and soldiers” or a “revolutionary regime” or a “working people’s regime” or a “revolutionary government” or a “revolutionary government based on the soviet”? Blanc invented all these terms—they are not found in the primary sources he cites for the period—and uses them indifferently to characterize the future New Order before *and* after the *April Theses*. But isn’t the intrinsic political meaning of these categories fundamentally different if the Bolsheviks were, *on Blanc’s own account*, not calling for the immediate overthrow of capitalism *before* the *April Theses*, but were calling for it *after* the Bolsheviks made the *April Theses* their own? Blanc’s novel, kaleidoscopic political nomenclature signifies nothing unless he specifies the socio-property relations underlying it and the corresponding state form.

The Old Bolsheviks—as long as they remained Old Bolsheviks—could never call for the *permanent* transfer of power to the Soviet because that would mean socialist revolution and the end of capitalism, the end of the bourgeois-democratic revolution.

In other words, the Bolsheviks demanding a revolutionary provisional government before the *April Theses*, under whatever name Blanc chooses, still weren’t demanding socialist revolution and a lasting workers’ state. This is how the Old Bolsheviks arrived “at the idea of a proletariat in possession of state power imposing a bourgeois-democratic limitation upon itself” predicted by Trotsky. And because they had this idea, their outlook was fully in harmony with Old Bolshevism, with the decisions of the Third Congress to place revolutionary social democrats—Bolsheviks—in charge of running a provisional government, whatever the name, earning the honorific “Revolutionary.”

In dramatic contrast, the *April Theses* spoke of a *permanent* state power – a workers’ state, *immediately*. Its foundation was the first step toward socialism. Here, Lenin broke decisively and irrevocably with the 1905 Old Bolshevik strategy of joining the Provisional Government, then putting the nefarious liberals in their place and carrying out the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end. And he did not advocate the 1917 Shlyapnikov variation of that strategy (later adopted by Kamenev and Stalin) of having the Soviet pressure the Provisional Government from without to achieve the same goal. Nor did he follow the Vyborg Bolshevik demand for something like “All Power to a Revolutionary Provisional Government” to become the official party line—a government that would also eventually go the way of all flesh.

Instead, Lenin, the New Bolshevik, came up with a new goal summed up in a new slogan, “All Power to the Soviets!” *for keeps*. The Vyborg Bolsheviks especially, and the Bolshevik rank and file generally, would greet this slogan with the greatest enthusiasm since it was the closest approximation to their outlook, shaped by trenchant, years-long Bolshevik polemics against treacherous Kadet liberalism and milquetoast Menshevik reformism. Above all, Lenin’s perspective gave the Bolsheviks a leading role in the revolution because it gave a leading role to the proletariat, organized in soviets and factory committees.

The Old Bolsheviks—Stalin, Kamenev, Shlyapnikov—had not measured up. It wasn’t the first time. Lenin remarked acidly that other Bolsheviks similarly had played “regrettable” roles in the history of the party by “reiterating formulas senselessly learned by rote instead of studying the specific features of the new and living reality.”¹⁷

And so, upon his return, Lenin had no choice but to premise all future discussions about what the Bolsheviks should do in the coming months around the New Bolshevik idea of “All Power to the Soviets” and socialist revolution. This was the practical, living alternative to the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the Provisional Government, a clear break from Old Bolshevism. The objective was new—socialist revolution—and so was the institution that would realize it—soviet power.

There is virtually no direct evidence to support Blanc's view that the Bolsheviks, even the most radical ones, were talking about *permanently* transferring all power from the actually existing Provisional Government to the actually existing Soviet, while indirect evidence does point to the failure of the Bolshevik leadership to clearly distinguish itself strategically from its Menshevik counterparts before Lenin's arrival.

IV. The Failure of Old Bolshevism to Distinguish Itself from Menshevism

Blanc insists that the Bolsheviks "indisputably" advocated a policy very different from Menshevism. But his own narrative very much disputes the view that the Bolsheviks were sharply distinguishing themselves politically at this time.¹⁸

Upon Kamenev's return from exile, Blanc writes, the leading Bolshevik in Russia won the "majority" of the Bolsheviks to vote approval of a "text that was basically not critical of the Provisional Government and that said nothing explicit about the need to establish a government of workers and peasants." "Kamenev and his allies particularly stressed the strategic possibility and desirability of compromising with the SRs and Mensheviks on this crucial matter," Blanc continues. In "most towns outside of Petrograd and Moscow, a sharp political delineation from the conciliatory socialists [the Mensheviks] was the exception rather than the norm." Finally, Blanc concludes, "pressures towards unity" with the Mensheviks on Menshevik terms "frequently led local Bolsheviks to act on a vague, lowest-common-denominator orientation that did not go beyond calling for pressure on the government to meet the peoples' demands."

Blanc could not be clearer here. The bottom line is that the Bolsheviks had *no* line independent of the Mensheviks at this juncture, contrary to Blanc's idea that the Bolsheviks had consistently marked themselves off from the "moderate socialists"—the new, deceptive descriptor he gives, suddenly and without explanation, to Russia's "revolutionary social democrats" and followers of Kautsky, the Mensheviks.

Blanc references "objective" factors, notably the threat of counter-revolution, to explain the emerging Bolshevik-Menshevik alliance. That is neither here nor there. The point is that, for whatever reason, Bolsheviks had a hard time distinguishing themselves from the Mensheviks. Blanc merely invokes the political pusillanimity of Old Bolshevism at this juncture and makes it his own. Lenin did not see matters this way at all.

Lenin could not see how any unarmed counter-revolutionary *coup* to overthrow the Soviet could have prevailed, given that the armed forces could not and would not make a move unless the Soviet agreed to it. That was the essence of the Petrograd Soviet's Order Number 1. Surprisingly, and dispensing with logical argument, Blanc, elsewhere, agrees. "Since the insurgent workers and soldiers looked to the new Petrograd Soviet as the legitimate authority, it easily could have taken full power had it been so inclined." Indeed it could have! But what happened to the objective correlation of class forces, invoked by Blanc earlier, that ostensibly made this impossible and the demand for it utopian? Blanc ends up arguing at cross purposes: He strikes out with his right hand the truth he seizes with his left. In any event, the point is that the Old Bolsheviks camouflaged, by appealing to objective political limitations, what were in fact the self-imposed political limitations of Old Bolshevism.

The most straightforward explanation for the failure of Old Bolshevism to unambiguously differentiate itself from Menshevism was that there was no longer any rationale for such a break after the fall of the Romanovs. After all, bringing down Tsarism had long been *the* goal of the RSDLP, naturally fostering a sentiment of unity for a job well-done, especially in the upper echelons of both wings—even if the RSDLP had not organized and led the February Revolution. In the

euphoria of the moment, the Bolsheviks adapted “to the mood of the majority of workers” and their Menshevik representatives. Common sense dictates, at least to outside observers unable to read the Bolsheviks’ minds, that the Bolsheviks were acting as Mensheviks. And the Mensheviks, Blanc explains, held

that steady pressure by an independent labor movement was necessary to push from below to overcome the hesitations of the bourgeoisie. Mensheviks held firm to this relatively oppositional stance for most of March and they sought to use their strength to steer the government in a progressive direction.

How is this “indisputably distinct” from Old Bolshevism? It is not.

Blanc cites N.N. Sukhanov, who wrote that “when it came to voting” the Bolsheviks “constituted a single majority with the representatives of the third tendency [in favor of ‘dual power’ and the recognition of the Provisional Government].”

Sukhanov’s testimony is invaluable—and should give pause—because it undermines Blanc’s idea that the Bolsheviks were forging their own path. Yet, Blanc is undeterred and unfazed. Riding roughshod over his own account, he brazenly concludes that his “article has shown that Bolsheviks—in sharp contrast with conciliatory socialists—were homogeneously committed in March 1917 to class independence and the fight for proletarian hegemony over the revolutionary process.” Or, in less cryptically Gramscian terms, the fight was on for permanent revolution, for soviet power and socialism, even before Lenin had set foot in Russia.

To recapitulate: Old Bolshevism remained true to itself when it pressured the Provisional Government to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution to the end. It was incompatible with the New Bolshevism, which, in its drive to push the revolution beyond its bourgeois limits using soviet power, refused the Provisional Government *any* support.

Without the appearance of the Soviet, any idea of destroying the Provisional Government and thwarting the creation of a capitalist state, going beyond the bourgeois-democratic revolution, was unthinkable. For, without the Soviet, what would have been the alternative to the Provisional Government and the bourgeois-democratic revolution that had brought it into existence? Lenin explained,

The Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies are a form of state which does not exist and never did exist in any country. This form represents the first steps towards socialism and is inevitable at the beginning of a socialist society. This is a fact of decisive importance. The Russian Revolution has created the Soviets. No bourgeois country in the world has or can have such state institutions. No socialist revolution can be operative with any other state power than this.¹⁹

As Lenin saw it, it was the Bolsheviks’ business to make “All Power to the Soviets” a reality by “patiently explaining” to the masses the need for soviet power, which, alone, would bring peace, land, bread, and socialism. Once a socialist workers’ revolution put an end to the Provisional Government, so too would it put an end to the bourgeois-democratic revolution, by completing it and going beyond it. Old Bolshevism did not have this theory, New Bolshevism did.

That theory was essential to putting forward the specific program incarnated in the *April Theses*. Had this revolutionary alternative to Menshevism not been presented to the working class, the majority of workers would have been strung along by the Mensheviks, politically disarmed before the covert support given by the Provisional Government to counter-revolutionary forces, led by

Tsarist General Lavr Kornilov, to destroy Soviet power in August 1917. Indeed, had Kornilov won, the Menshevik objective of establishing a bourgeois-democratic state would not have been realized either, for the February Revolution would have been reversed.

Had the Bolsheviks not adopted a radically new conception of the Russian Revolution, they could not have fought for it. Had the Bolsheviks rejected the *April Theses* and maintained continuity with Old Bolshevism, the October Revolution would never have taken place.

Blanc's Dysfunctional History of 1917

Blanc's account shows little analytical and empirical mastery of the Russian Revolution. It is marred by self-contradiction and riddled with non-sequiturs.

"There have been plenty of attempts ... to prove that the April party crisis was a passing and almost accidental confusion,"²⁰ Trotsky wrote in his *History*. With only minor modifications, Lih and Blanc are trying to do the same thing a century later. They are convinced that long-held accounts of the "April Crisis" in the history of Bolshevism are entirely false, illusory. Yet what explains the staying power of this "illusion"? Is there a materialist explanation for it, just as there are for mirages in the desert? Could it be that these accounts are *true*, that is, internally coherent and properly reflective of the actual history, whereas Blanc's crypto-Stalinist account is not? Here we come to Blanc's striking failure to think through matters.

Blanc declares, "The Bolsheviks in 1917 led a soviet revolution in a context defined by decades of autocratic rule, in which there was no existing government democratically elected through universal suffrage."²¹ But the February Revolution destroyed autocratic rule virtually overnight, and thus destroyed the old "context." And, of course, there was no elected parliament of citizens, shorn of all political or economic attributes, to appear to run things as in a bourgeois democracy. So what was new in the context of 1917? The "soviet revolution."

What was new was workers organizing soviets and multiparty elections to them; it was workers organizing elected factory committees, destroying autocratic rule at the point of production; it was peasant self-rule, organized in the land commune, to flush out the gentry and gain full control of the land; it was the self-assertion of women, of minorities, of Jews, of nationalities; it was soldiers organizing soldiers' committees to question orders. It was a democratic revolution through and through, a "festival of the oppressed" as Lenin memorably put it, the masses straining, through "revolutionary practice," to rid themselves of "the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."²² In sum, it was a movement of the vast majority in the interests of the vast majority, as forecast by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

The Bolsheviks led the socialist revolution to victory—however fleeting that victory turned out to be. Is this the Kautskyism and Second International Marxism in action that Blanc assures us is the path to power for socialists today in the advanced capitalist world? Or is it Leninist "vanguardism" in action that revolutionaries should forswear because it is destined to fail in bourgeois-democracies? Blanc arrives at a historical and political dead-end either way.

Notes

1. Leon Trotsky, "Our Differences," in *1905* (Vintage, 1972), 316-317. Published in Rosa Luxemburg's Polish Marxist journal, *Pzegląd social-demokratyczny*.

2. Cited by Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 1, Max Eastman, trans. (Monad Press), 298.

3. E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, Vol. 1 of *A History of Soviet Russia* (Norton, 1986 [1950]); Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *The February Revolution, Petrograd, 1917*; S.A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Leon Trotsky, *History*; Marcel Liebman, *The Russian Revolution* (Random House, 1970).
4. Lars Lih, "The Ironic Triumph of 'Old Bolshevism.'"
5. Eric Blanc, *Before Lenin: Bolshevik Theory and Practice in February 1917 Revisited; A Revolutionary Line of March: 'Old Bolshevism' in Early 1917 Re-Examined*.
6. Joseph Stalin, "History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)." Stalin did concede that one Old Bolshevik leader, Kamenev (among others), opposed Lenin. Kamenev could not respond to Stalin by incriminating him—Stalin had joined his Old Bolshevik comrade in those fateful weeks—because Stalin had ordered Kamenev's execution three years earlier, in 1936.
7. Lars Lih, "Karl Kautsky as Architect of the October Revolution."
8. This section draws on my "Lenin, Bolshevism, and Social-Democratic Political Theory: The 1905 and 1917 Soviets," *Historical Materialism* (22.3-4, 2014), 129-171. My essay is, *inter alia*, a thoroughgoing critique of Lars Lih's interpretation of Lenin's *April Theses*—an interpretation Blanc accepts, builds on, and only modifies in inessential respects.
9. At their Second Congress, held in London in 1903, Russian Social Democrats split into Mensheviks and Bolsheviks over questions of organization. In 1904, there emerged a clearly political division between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks toward the newly emerging liberal-bourgeois opposition to Tsarism, supplementing the organizational one.
10. Vladimir Lenin, "Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, 76, 52.
11. "There are bourgeois-democratic regimes like the one in Germany and also like the one in England; like the one in Austria and also like those in America and Switzerland. He would be a fine Marxist indeed, who in a period of democratic revolution failed to see this difference between the degrees of democratism and the difference between its forms." Lenin, 52.
12. William G. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution: The Constitutional Democratic Party, 1917-1921* (Princeton University Press, 1974). The Constitutional Democratic Party (known in Russian as the Konstitutsionno-Demokraticeskaya Partiya, or K.D. for short) represented the liberal bourgeoisie in the eyes of Russian social democrats.
13. S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
14. Trotsky, *History*, Vol 1. Chapter 9, "The Paradox of the February Revolution."
15. Lenin, "Our Tasks and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies," *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, 20.
16. Karl Marx, "The First International and After," in David Fernbach, ed., *Political Writings*, Vol. 3, (Vintage Books, 1974), 212.
17. Lenin, "Letters on Tactics," in *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, 44.

18. For an admirably detailed and clear account of this critical episode, see Rabinowitch, 34-43. Blanc does not attract attention to Rabinowitch—a name known to everyone on the left who knows anything at all about the Russian Revolution; Rabinowitch's account does not support Blanc's (or Lih's) thesis.
19. Lenin, "The April All Russia Conference," *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 271.
20. Trotsky, *History*, Vol. 1, 301.
21. Eric Blanc, "Can Leninists Explain the Russian Revolution?" Originally titled, "Leninists Can't Explain the Russian Revolution."
22. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), 86.