

A Revolution without Lenin? The Great Impact of Lenin's Return to Russia in April 1917

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Abstract

Much has been written on the significance of Lenin as a party leader, revolutionary, and later statesman, with much of this research primarily focusing on his words, actions, and impact. Little work, in comparison, has considered what may have happened if Lenin did not, or was not able to, return to Russia in April 1917. The consideration of what may have happened without Lenin not only further develops an analysis of his importance, but also allows an examination of other key figures who may have stepped forward in his absence, as well as the significance of events that would likely have occurred regardless of his presence. This work makes use of a variety of studies that have focused on Lenin himself, the Bolshevik party, and the revolution as a whole, as well as Sean McMeekin's alternative study of a revolution without Lenin. Through these works an analysis of Lenin's considerable impact in 1917 is offered, as well as an examination of the likelihood of a democratic soviet government led by the Socialist Revolutionary party and a plausible separate peace had Lenin not returned to Russia.

Keywords: Lenin, Revolution, Russia, 1900s

Article

Lenin, along with a number of other political dissidents, was residing in Switzerland when news broke of the fall of the Tsar. Upon hearing of this, Lenin worked to organise his return to Russia to take charge of the Bolsheviks and guide what he considered to be the proletarian revolution. Lenin's return to Russia in early April 1917 greatly affected the course of the Russian Revolution. His 'April Theses' had great impact, managing to mobilise large numbers of young and radical revolutionaries with calls for immediate soviet power and revolutionary defeatism, and also partially resulted in propelling the Bolshevik party's popularity. The nature of his return, which saw him covertly transported back to Russia by the German government with great financial aid for revolutionary action, allowed him to finance Bolshevik operations as he desired. To better comprehend Lenin's significance however, the situation before his return, as well as the roles of other key figures should also be considered in order to formulate an educated prediction of what may have happened without Lenin.

Before Lenin's return in spring 1917, the February Revolution of 1917 had already seen Tsar Nicholas II's abdication following numerous military defeats, along with food shortages, leading to strikes and rioting. The Provisional Government was then formed, made up primarily of liberal politicians from the tsar's reign (Wade, 1997). However, alongside the formal government was the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, both of whom received more support than the Provisional Government, though they lacked its legal authority. Thus, following the February Revolution the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet essentially shared power (Hasegawa, 1972). This dual power resulted in some discordance, such as the Soviet's Order No. 1 on 1 March. The order chiefly declared to the Petrograd garrison that the Soviet's commands outweighed the Provisional Government's (Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, 1917). Nevertheless, the majority of leading soviet members decided to support, or at least accept, the Provisional Government's actions including both adhering to the system of dual power as well as accepting the Provisional Government's pro-war stance (McMeekin, 2016). Consequently, following some disorder, Russian troops remained predominantly anti-German and appeared psychologically willing to fight (Merridale, 2016).

The state of the Bolsheviks prior to Lenin's return should also be considered. On 3 March the Petersburg Committee, which led Bolshevik operations in Petrograd, voted against opposing the Provisional Government as it believed that it mainly shared the interests of the proletariat. The Pravda Group, a small faction within the Petersburg Committee associated with the production of the newspaper *Pravda*, outwardly supported the Provisional Government as they considered the revolution a 'bourgeois' capitalist one (Longley, 1972). Nevertheless, shortly after Joseph Stalin and Lev Kamenev's return from exile in mid-March and subsequent assumption of positions of leadership, a *Pravda* article published on 26 March declared that the main Bolshevik party line believed that the 'bourgeois' government's revolutionary ability was limited, and at a particular moment in the revolution's development the soviets would take over (Lih, 2011). Equally radical were the Bolsheviks of the Petrograd Vyborg District, who supported the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government made up of soviet party representatives in preparation for a Constituent Assembly. The Russian Bureau of the Central Committee similarly opposed a 'bourgeois' Provisional Government, though by late March their stance further radicalised as they proposed immediate, full and permanent soviet power, but with little influence were unable to push for this (Longley, 1972). Thus, even before Lenin's arrival the Bolsheviks had taken the role of the anti-*soglashenie* party (*soglashenie* meaning 'agreement' or 'consent'), though they remained a minority party with divisions (Lih, 2011).

On 3 April 1917 at 11pm, Lenin arrived at Finland Station in Petrograd. Lenin's presence was soon felt as he delivered his revolutionary programme at the Bolshevik party headquarters, denouncing those who had provided support to the 'bourgeois' government and accepted the 'imperialist' war. Lenin's programme, so radical that *Pravda* originally refused to publish it, later became known as the 'April Theses' (McMeekin, 2016). Chiefly, Lenin's theses advocated the immediate transition from 'bourgeois' governance to soviet power and strongly opposed the "predatory imperialist war." Importantly, there would also be no 'retrograde' step from soviet power to 'bourgeois' parliamentary control, similar to the Russian Bureau, and also no coalition with any other socialist party (Lenin, 1917: Merridale, 2016). Nevertheless, Mikhail Kalinin later stated that Lenin's theses only introduced the (new) idea that only the soviet could allow the revolution to progress (Lih, 2011). Key differences with the main Bolshevik line were also the

rapidity and method (naturally or forcefully) in which the 'bourgeois' government would fall, and be replaced.

Following Lenin's return, the appeal of his theses greatly varied depending on his audience. Although Lenin possessed prestige (Longley, 1972), his radicalism was considered out of touch with reality by many leading figures. Despite arguing his case to fellow key Bolsheviks, Lenin's proposals were generally dismissed. For example, his proposal of 'revolutionary defeatism', amongst others such as opposing the Provisional Government's authority, was rejected by thirteen to two votes at the Petersburg Committee on 4 April (Merridale, 2016). However some, such as Stalin and Kalinin, did partially agree with Lenin's ideas as they only minutely differed from those of Old Bolshevism (Lih, 2011). Predictably, responses were even less receptive outside of the Bolshevik party in the wider Soviet Executive Committee. Nevertheless, Lenin was uncompromising and tireless in the expression of his theses. Whereas other leading soviet figures (especially Mensheviks and moderate Socialist Revolutionaries) advocated patience and passivity, Lenin called for action. Lenin's doctrine resonated with working class, and primarily young Russians who had rioted for peace, bread, and land, and whose lives had not significantly improved since their revolutionary success. As a result, from 23,600 members in February, the Bolsheviks expanded to near 80,000 by late April. These young radicals, who included the majority of the Vyborg Committee, were receptive to Lenin's ideas because they desired action. What Lenin further gave them was direction, supporting theory, and leadership (Merridale, 2016).

Lenin also greatly influenced the Russian army, through his idea of revolutionary defeatism from his 'April Theses'. As well as financing Lenin's journey, the German government importantly provided him with five million gold marks for initial operations (McMeekin, 2016). Although Order No. 1 had produced chaos in the army, order was restored to functional levels by April. In preparation for an offensive in June, Kerensky attempted to rally Russian troops across the European front. Meanwhile, Lenin was making use of his German funding. Anti-war messages were soon being sent through newspapers such as *Soldatskaia Pravda* (targeted at the army) and *Okopnaia Pravda* (directly to the front-line), and print-runs increased to over 100,000 copies in May and June 1917 (McMeekin, 2016). Although it is impossible to precisely gauge the effects

of this propaganda on Russian troops, Alfred Knox, a British liaison officer in Russia, believed that anti-war ideas had had some effect (Merridale, 2016). Petrograd's 1st machine-gun regiment acts as an example of the effects of Lenin's German funded propaganda. On 30 June, the regiment refused to obey the Provisional Government's order to go the European front, and within weeks was heavily involved in July's anti-war and anti-Provisional Government demonstrations. The radical Kronstadt sailors also rallied for soviet power and around 5,000 supported Lenin during the unsuccessful, though spontaneous, Bolshevik coup in July which followed the aforementioned demonstrations (McMeekin, 2016).

Taking all of this into account, it is clear that Lenin's impact was vast. Following his return to Russia he radicalised the political scene, offering leadership towards an immediate alternative to the Provisional Government, which then held the acceptance and even support of much of the Soviet Executive Committee (McMeekin, 2016). This gave way for increased Bolshevik support, as the party of action. The protests and rioting that ensued in the months following Lenin's return occurred to the extent they did because of his widely circulated idea of revolutionary defeatism, and his call for immediate soviet power, all made possible because of German funding. Lenin's rallying of opposition to 'bourgeois' governance and the 'imperialist' war eventually succeeded in October when the Bolsheviks seized power from the Provisional Government. The coup itself was relatively opportunistic, demonstrated by the suddenness of Lenin's summoning of the troops (Lenin, 1917), although it would not have been possible without the growing support for Lenin's cause. Significantly, it should also be noted that Trotsky returned to Russia after Lenin, and after reading Lenin's theses Trotsky converted to his cause (McMeekin, 2016). Without the leadership of these two men the success of a Bolshevik dictatorship seems highly improbable.

Nevertheless, if Lenin did not return to Russia there is no guarantee that the Provisional Government would have lasted anyway. Due to the monumental task the Provisional Government faced, moderate socialists would have eventually replaced 'bourgeois' politicians at the very least. Also, as aforementioned, there already existed Bolsheviks (including leading ones) who desired sole soviet power, as well as a receptive mass of young radicals who desired immediate action to be taken to improve their livelihoods (Longley, 1972: Lih, 2011: Merridale,

2016). Thus, continuing the war beyond 1917 would have been highly improbable. Maintaining control was especially difficult following the disclosure that Miliukov had privately promised Russia's commitment to the war to the Allied nations after publicly suggesting the contrary. This resulted in the April Crisis, which saw anti-government protests and a subsequent overhaul of government personnel (Wade, 2006). Further problems arose in mid-June within the army due to Kerensky's failed Galician offensive, resulting in large numbers of Russian casualties. Arguably, this sparked the First Machine Gun Regiment's refusal to adhere to government orders as much, if not more than Lenin's propaganda (Wood, 2003). German military strength and organisation would likely have ensured the demise of pro-war politicians, then Russia's 'bourgeois' leadership would entirely lose support, allowing soviet leaders to rise using pro-peace messages. If untainted by 'bourgeois' association, the leading SR, Viktor Chernov, would likely then have chaired the Constituent Assembly (as he did anyway) and overseen revolutionary transitioning as the leading, SR, party saw fit (McMeekin, 2016). This, in theory, would have made Russia a democracy led by socialists, differing greatly to Lenin's authoritarian and frankly ruthless state.

Without Lenin's German funded arrival, the partially divided Bolshevik party would likely not have possessed the means to promote their ideas and garner support. Moreover, without his added pressure for immediate revolutionary transition, the party would not have appealed so strongly to radicals. Thus, without Lenin's efforts pushing for immediate soviet (Bolshevik) control, it appears plausible that a provisional coalition, led by SRs, would have led to a Constituent Assembly and establishment of soviet democracy. With respect to the war, a separate and early peace would still be possible, as maintaining domestic order with ongoing mass food shortages and inflation, along with reckless offensives like Kerensky's damaging morale, could have proven too difficult to manage (McMeekin, 2016). It is highly probable then that if Lenin were to have not returned until late 1918 or 1919, a SR led democracy may have already prevailed, which Lenin would likely have found more difficult to derail.

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