Russia 1905: Lenin, Trotsky and the permanent revolution

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On the 90th anniversary of the St Petersburg General Strike Paul Morris explains the debates about party, programme and revolutionary strategy that helped shape the Russian Revolution of 1905

Ninety years ago this autumn, the first Russian revolution reached its climax. On 13 October a Soviet of workers? deputies met for the first time; a mass strike wave was underway and a general strike in preparation. Armed insurrection, barricades and repression followed swiftly in November and December.

The massacre of unarmed protesters in St Petersburg on 9 January 1905 had inaugurated a year of revolution which was to see the Russian workers make their first bid for power, a dress rehearsal for 1917.

It was the moment all Russian revolutionaries had been waiting for. The revolution was to put the competing programmes, strategies and political methods within Russian Marxism to the test, in particular those of Lenin and Trotsky.

Two years before, at the Third Congress of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1903, the Russian revolutionaries had split into two rival organisations, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

Although ostensibly a split over organisational forms, with Lenin?s Bolsheviks favouring a more tightly organised and disciplined ?vanguard? party than that proposed by Menshevik leaders such as Julius Martov, events soon revealed that the initial dispute had masked radically different attitudes to the class struggle.

Those who like revolutionary history to be an uncomplicated story of heroes and traitors should steer well clear of 1905. The record of both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in that revolutionary year combines major advances with serious mistakes. By learning from those mistakes, in the long aftermath of the revolution, Lenin was able to arm the Bolsheviks for the successful struggle of 1917, just as Trotsky was to complete his evolution from a left-wing form of Menshevism to Bolshevism.

It was only after these elements had been combined and fused in the crucible of war and revolution that they were codified in the programme and practice of the Communist International in its revolutionary years (1919-1923).

Today revolutionaries can also learn a lot from this experience. Lenin and Trotsky?s struggles in 1905 were more than just disagreements over tactics: they were about programme, perspectives and the relationship between the party and the class?precisely the issues which confuse and disorientate much of the left today.
Tony Cliff, and other leaders of the Socialist Workers Party, make great play of the argument that Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the 1917 revolution with “exactly the same programme as the Mensheviks... the one written in 1903”. They aim by this to excuse their own opportunist refusal to elaborate a programme for the working class movement. This article shows how, on the contrary, before the ink dried on the 1903 programme, reality pitched both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks into a living struggle to concretise and improve their political programmes.

This made the difference between victory and defeat, between 1905 and 1917, and in the process changed the Marxist conception of the revolutionary programme.

The main events of 1905 tell a story of a weak and backward Tsarist aristocracy, unable to govern and unwilling to reform; a rising bourgeoisie with few domestic social roots, heavily dependent on Tsarism and terrified of the growing working class; a massive peasantry determined to free itself from landlordism; and a small but highly concentrated and militant working class which was to go from police-run trade unions to workers’ councils in the space of nine months, and launch a determined bid for power.

In short the Russian revolution was a bourgeois revolution, in a backward country, in which the working class would have to play a decisive role.

The immediate tasks of the revolution would be bourgeois in that they would have to clear the road for further capitalist development. This was a truth which all strands of Russian Marxism agreed with. They had spelled it out in the debates of the late 19th century against the utopian socialists and Populists who thought that on the basis of peasant communes and the near absence of modern industry, Russia could leap directly from feudalism to socialism, bypassing the entire historical epoch of capitalism.

Another fundamental belief, on which all wings of the RSDLP agreed, was Plekhanov’s famous statement that, “the Russian revolution will triumph as a workers’ revolution, or not at all?”

But it was over the concrete relationship between working class struggle and the bourgeois revolution that major differences emerged, amplifying the organisational split of 1903 into a concrete programmatic difference.

**Before 9 January**

The latter half of 1904, following Tsarism’s military disasters in the war with Japan, was characterised by vacillation in the ranks both of the Tsarist autocracy and the liberal bourgeoisie.

On 12 August 1904 the Tsar announced an “Era of Trust”, appointed Prince Mirsky to replace the hardline prime minister Plehve (who had just been assassinated) and allowed the bourgeoisie to convene a private and unofficial conference of the Zemstvos.

These were powerless, regional consultative bodies, and their November 1904 conference passed a suitably timid request for liberal reforms, which made no mention of the key questions of a Constitution and an elected Constituent Assembly to draw it up. Alongside the Zemstvo Congress, the liberal bourgeoisie organised a series of banquets, where they made radical speeches but wavered in their commitment to fight for any concrete changes.

The Tsar then decided the question for them, by ending the “Era of Trust” and threatening repression against anyone who entertained “useless dreams of a Constitution”. It was not to be the banqueting campaign of the rich bosses, but the mass strikes of the working class which first gave serious impetus to the fight for a Constituent Assembly.
The Mensheviks

During the period of the Zemstvo campaign we see a marked divergence between the politics of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Bolshevik means "the majority", and Menshevik "the minority". In time honoured fashion the Menshevik minority of the RSDLP had seized control of the party newspaper Iskra (The Spark). In response Lenin founded Vpered (Forward) in Geneva, late in 1904.

The Menshevik leaders believed that if the revolution was to be "bourgeois" then the bourgeoisie must lead it. This thought guided their actions throughout this period. In a "Letter to the Party Organisations" in 1904 the Menshevik Iskra advised:

"Within the limits of fighting absolutism especially in the present phase our attitude to the liberal bourgeoisie is defined by the task of infusing it with a bit more courage and encouraging it to join in the demands that the proletariat, led by the Social democracy, will put forward. But we should be making a fatal mistake if we set ourselves the goal of forcing the Zemstvos or other organs of the bourgeois opposition, through energetic measures of intimidation and under the influence of panic, to give us now a formal promise to present our demands to the government."

The Menshevik leaders such as Martov deduced from the bourgeois nature of the revolution that the bourgeoisie had a reserved place in the future revolutionary government. By contrast the working class should not participate in that government.

Hadn’t the left wing of Social Democracy consistently refused to serve in bourgeois coalitions? Had not they attacked the French right-wing socialist Millerand for joining a capitalist coalition? And hadn’t Marx himself advised the Communists, at the height of the German bourgeois revolution, to become the "party of extreme opposition" to the coming revolutionary bourgeois government?

The problem was that these arguments reflected a mindset learned by the leaders of Social democracy in the last two decades of the 19th century, when the workers’ parties were only preparing for power. The fundamental error of Menshevism in 1905 was that it clung to the slogans of a previous period, indeed a previous epoch, in the development of capitalism, whereas events were now placing an actual revolution on the agenda.

The Bolsheviks

From its inception, in contrast, the Bolshevik paper Vpered stressed that a new, revolutionary period had begun which required Marxists to undertake new tasks. These were to build a strong, disciplined party of revolutionaries amongst the workers, to help them draw revolutionary conclusions from their experiences and at the decisive moment to give leadership to the spontaneous revolutionary wave; in short to lead the working class to power.

Lenin criticised Martov and his co-thinkers as follows. The bourgeoisie in Russia was incapable of carrying through a democratic revolution to the finish because that revolution was both political and social. The bourgeoisie would dearly love to avail itself of the political aspects: press freedom, elections and a Constitution. But the destruction of Tsarism meant also the break-up of the landed estates and the introduction of capitalist relations into agriculture.

Even though these archaic relations of production in the countryside were the biggest obstacle to the development of capitalism in the towns, Lenin saw that the organic connection between the bourgeoisie...
and the landed aristocracy would stop the bourgeoisie carrying the struggle against the landowners to a
decisive conclusion.

At best a Russian revolution led by the liberals would lead to a compromise with Tsarism, transforming the
estates of the nobility into British or German-style capitalist land holdings. Lenin called this ?Junker
capitalism?, after the German aristocrats who had become capitalist landowners. He described such an
outcome as a ?revolution of the 1848 type??i.e. a failed bourgeois revolution.

In order to carry out a ?revolution of the 1798 type? (i.e. a plebeian, progressive overthrow of Tsarism), the
workers would have to play the same role as the radical bourgeois Jacobins in the French revolution. In
alliance with the peasantry they would have to introduce what he called ?American-style? relations into
agriculture, sweeping away the landowners and their archaic system.

In this Lenin was saying nothing more or less than Plekhanov (who was by now a Menshevik) had said in
the 1880s. But to concretise it in the 1900s Lenin had to depart from the truisms of the previous period,
developing a concrete programme of action alongside the RSDLP?s 1903 programme.

Lenin?s struggle in 1905 refutes the notion that Lenin simply let the old programme gather dust while the
revolution raged.

His outlook was summed up in the pamphlet Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic
Revolution.

The work begins from a recognition of the new, revolutionary character of the period.

It recognises that the most urgent political task of the revolution was the convocation of a Constituent
Assembly. Whereas the liberals wanted this to be granted from on high, by persuading the Tsar, the
Bolsheviks realised that only an armed insurrection would achieve it, passing necessarily through the prior
phase of a ?provisional revolutionary government?.

Lenin insisted that since it was only the workers and peasants who could carry out the revolution in full, the
Marxists should fight for the implementation of the full ?maximum programme? by the provisional
government.

The RSDLP?s minimum programme consisted of demands for:

? a democratic republic

? abolition of the standing army; the arming of the people

? nationalisation of all land

? the 8 hour day.

It was in the struggle for these goals that Lenin wanted to unite the workers and the peasants.

Since the provisional revolutionary government would be the instrument for creating the Constituent
Assembly, the RSDLP should participate in that government; not in order to become the hostage of the
bourgeoisie but in order to ensure the fullest and most progressive solution of the democratic tasks.

Lenin described such a such a government as the ?revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat
and the peasantry?.
What did the Bolsheviks mean by this ungainly formula?

It would be a dictatorship, acting like the Jacobins of 1798-92, ruthlessly suppressing reaction from within and outside Russia. It would be democratic in the sense that its immediate tasks would be limited to the realisation of the bourgeois democratic minimum programme. This was conditioned by the backward productive forces and the social weight of the peasantry, Lenin argued.

Lenin insisted it was not a question of socialist revolution. The Marxists had fought consistently against the petit-bourgeois radicals of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) who wanted to leap straight from feudal agriculture to rural communes via their plans for the so-called black repartition of land.

For Lenin, recognition of the immediate limitations of the revolution was a strength not a weakness. As he wrote in Vpered in January 1905:

"One of the most widespread and persistent illusions with us in Russia is the notion that our liberal movement is not a bourgeois movement and that the impending revolution in Russia will not be a bourgeois revolution. The Russian intellectual, from the most moderate Osvobozhdenye liberal to the most extreme Socialist Revolutionary always thinks that one makes our revolution colourless, that one degrades and vulgarises it by admitting it to be a bourgeois revolution."

But, unlike the Mensheviks, Lenin did not advocate soft pedalling on the liberal bourgeoisie. Neither did he want to keep entirely separate the two stages of bourgeois and socialist tasks. His clearest exposition of the relationship of the one to the other in this period reads:

"Marxism teaches the proletariat not to keep aloof from the bourgeois revolution, not to be indifferent to it, not to allow the leadership of the revolution to be assumed by the bourgeoisie, but on the contrary to take a most energetic part in it, to fight most resolutely for consistent proletarian democracy, for carrying the revolution to a conclusion.

We cannot jump out of the bourgeois democratic boundaries of the Russian Revolution, but we can and must fight for the interests of the proletariat, for its immediate needs (the minimum programme) and for the conditions that will make it possible to prepare its forces for complete future victory."

Alongside spelling out a revolutionary strategy, Lenin set about the task of preparing the Bolsheviks to intervene in the practical struggle. In spelling out the concrete tasks Lenin was developing, alongside the old RSDLP minimum programme, a new programme different both in form and content: an action programme, designed to take the working class from its existing struggles through to the seizure of power.

The revolutionary storm breaks

Both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were ill prepared for and isolated from the revolutionary wave when it broke. Nevertheless the RSDLP marched with Father Gapon's peaceful protest in a separate contingent, 18 strong (!) with its own banner. They organised street meetings where they argued for the minimum programme, and were shouted down by the crowd for their pains.

But that very day, as 200,000 workers marched into a Tsarist killing field, the seeds were being sown for both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to gain mass influence.

Lenin worked to organise a Third Congress of the RSDLP. At it he argued that, as opposed to the Mensheviks who had resolved to prepare the workers for an insurrection, the Bolsheviks had to organise one.
The Congress passed three major resolutions. The first sanctioned participation in a provisional revolutionary government. The second demanded that such a government ratify all peasant land seizures and the formation of peasant committees. The third aimed to organise the working class for insurrection.

For this purpose the Bolsheviks would agitate for a mass political strike and to take energetic steps towards arming the proletariat as well as drawing up a plan of the armed uprising and direct leadership thereof, for which purpose special groups of party workers should be formed as and when necessary.

Thus, in Lenin’s practical work at this time many of the key tactics of modern revolutionary socialism were formulated: the general strike, the fight for workers’ militias and the armed insurrection.

In 1905 these concepts were nowhere to be found in the programme of the Marxist movement. The minimum programme generally included reforms—democratic and economic—achievable within capitalism. The maximum programme generally concerned the policy of a workers’ government in power. The programme as a systematic plan to mobilise the masses for the achievement of power was something quite new.

Despite the political achievements of Bolshevism, however, there remained a flaw in Lenin’s politics. It was embodied in the slogan for a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. It is best examined from the standpoint of the third strand within the RSDLP, the left-Menshevism of Trotsky and Parvus.

**Trotsky, Parvus and Permanent Revolution**

In late 1904 Trotsky and Alexander Helphand (Parvus) led a left wing current away from mainstream Menshevism. Their prognosis, which Trotsky eventually developed into the Theory of Permanent Revolution, was ultimately more clear sighted than Lenin’s.

Trotsky and Parvus’ initial differences with the new Menshevik Iskra arose over the Zemstvo campaign and over RSDLP participation in the provisional revolutionary government.

Against the Menshevik leaders, Trotsky wrote a pamphlet calling for a mass strike to bring about the Constituent Assembly. Parvus’ preface to this pamphlet enunciated the fundamental premise of the theory of permanent revolution: the law of uneven and combined development.

Against the utopian Populists, Lenin had proved the existence of modern capitalist industry in Russia. But in concentrating on what was normal in Russia’s capitalist development, Lenin had under-emphasised what was peculiar to it. Parvus outlined the combined nature of Russian capitalism:

in which the most highly developed achievements of capitalist technique and structure are integrated into the social relations of feudalism and barbarism, transforming them, dominating them and giving rise to a unique relationship of classes?

Focusing on the class structure of Russia, Parvus and Trotsky evolved a more dialectical analysis of the laws and driving forces of the Russian revolution.

The strength of Tsarism and weakness of the bourgeoisie meant that the bourgeois democratic revolution could only be carried out by the proletariat and peasantry, Trotsky argued. This certainly took him closer to Lenin than the Menshevik leaders.

But Lenin’s slogan left two class questions—algebraic—that is, as unknown quantities:
Which class would dominate the provisional government? Proletariat or peasantry?

How quickly could the proletariat pass from purely democratic tasks to specifically socialist measures?

Trotsky predicted the answer. The peasantry was not capable in itself of projecting its revolutionary interests independently of the proletariat. Thus in the revolutionary alliance to bring down Tsarism, the working class would have to lead and dominate.

Because it would lead the government, the class character of that government could not be called a democratic dictatorship. It would be in effect a workers' government supported by the peasantry. Thus according to Trotsky, whether the RSDLP liked it or not, a workers' government could not be neutral in the face of strikes for better wages, against sackings, or for workers control. The workers would demand socialist answers from their government immediately. If it refused to provide them, it would be compromised from the very beginning.

That government would have to carry out the permanent revolution in two senses. It could not limit itself to the democratic tasks. And since it could not dream of completing the socialist revolution in backward Russia, it would have to go on a revolutionary offensive throughout Europe.

Despite their differences over slogans, however, at this stage Trotsky agreed with Lenin that the provisional government could implement nothing more than the minimum programme until a socialist revolution swept Europe. It was the experience of the Soviets and the mass strikes of the second half of 1905 with their complex interplay of political struggles and spontaneous economic demands which deepened Trotsky's differences with Lenin and compelled him to further reformulate the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Revolution and Counter-revolution

Throughout 1905 the revolution simmered on the land and in the factories. In October it boiled over. The new element of the revolution that now appeared was the Soviet—the council of workers' deputies. One delegate was elected for every 500 workers from all the factories; they were recallable and accountable. This purely class-based organisation of struggle forced all factions of the RSDLP to assess where and how it fitted into the revolutionary process.

Trotsky called the soviet, the axis of all events, every thread ran towards it, every call to action emanated from it. Trotsky described its nature in a way that revealed his love of the spontaneous:

The Soviet came into being as a response to an objective need—a need born of the course of events. It was an organisation that was authoritative and yet had no tradition; which could immediately involve a scattered mass of hundreds of thousands of people while having virtually no organisational machinery; which united the revolutionary currents within the proletariat; which was capable of initiative and spontaneous self-control . . .?

In contrast to Trotsky, the emergence of the Soviet highlighted the woodenness of much of the Bolshevik organisation on the ground. They were suspicious of Menshevik attempts to create a loose, broad form of party in place of a vanguard combat organisation. But they drew dangerously sectarian conclusions from this about the character of the Soviets.

The leading Bolshevik Lunacharsky called the Soviet a Menshevik Zubatov provocation?i.e. something akin to a police-run union! Later the Bolsheviks presented the Soviet with an ultimatum: adopt the RSDLP programme or we will walk out. In the event the Soviet did not adopt the programme and passed swiftly on
to next business. Dumbfounded the Bolshevik delegates stayed put.

Lenin severely criticised these tactics and argued that the Soviet, far from being an obstacle to the party or a Menshevik compromise was the embryo of a new kind of workers? government.

The Soviet grew in authority, but what attitude would it take to political developments? The Tsar?s attempt to appease the bourgeoisie?the promise of a ?consultative Duma? to be convened in January 1906?did little to appease the workers. The Soviet promised a general strike when the so-called Bulygin Duma met.

Meanwhile, a printers? pay strike drew solidarity action from rail workers, announced as a ?trial run? for the planned general strike against the Duma. By 12 October three quarters of a million workers were on strike. Although initially economic, the strike movement quickly became an unfocused political general strike: against the Duma, but for what?

On 17 October the Tsar published a concessionary Constitutional Manifesto, which finally bought off a section of the bourgeoisie and turned them against the workers. An attempt to turn the strike movement to economic goals?the implementation of the 8 hour day from below?was met with lock outs.

The new period of open work allowed both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to produce legal mass papers. Lenin?s Novaya Zhizn (New Life) replaced Vpered as the first legal Bolshevik paper. And when the Mensheviks began producing Nachalo (The Beginning) in November 1905 it was Trotsky and Parvus who were calling the shots, with the old Menshevik leaders very much trailing behind.

The Tsar?s ability to separate the liberals from the mass strike wave, and the resulting lock outs, convinced Trotsky of the impossibility of maintaining a rigid separation between the maximum and minimum programmes. He wrote in Nachalo:

?The complete victory of the revolution means the victory of the proletariat. this in turn means further, continuous revolution. The proletariat carries out the basic tasks of democracy?and at a certain point the logic of its direct struggle to consolidate its political supremacy confronts it with purely socialist problems. A revolutionary continuity is established between the minimal and maximal programmes.? 

Whereas Lenin argued that the democratic phase of the revolution could only be transcended after its achievement, Trotsky saw that democratic conquests themselves would ultimately only be guaranteed under a workers? government:

?Immediately however, that power is transferred into the hands of a revolutionary government with a socialist majority, the division of our programme into a maximum and minimum loses all significance, both in principle and in practice?A proletarian government can in no circumstances confine itself to such limits.? 

Against Lenin, who insisted that the need for a strong alliance with the peasantry confined the revolution to the fullest implementation of the democratic and agrarian revolution, Trotsky argued:

?No matter under what political flag the proletariat has come to power it is obliged to take the path of socialist policy.? 

Trotsky never argued that Russia alone could achieve socialism, without a revolution in the West. But he had concluded from the experience of October 1905 that the whole logic of the workers? position in the revolution would require their government to begin the struggle for the transition to socialism.

The strength of Trotsky?s position was that it exposed the contradictions of the ?democratic dictatorship? formula.
Trotsky’s weakness was that he formulated Permanent Revolution not as programme and tactics at this stage but as an objective law, rooted in Russia’s social development. In common with mainstream Menshevism, Trotsky at this stage underplayed the role of the organised revolutionary vanguard in bringing about victory.

For this reason Trotsky’s better grasp of the class dynamics of the revolution provided a poorer guide to action than Lenin’s flawed theory.

When the working class was on the offensive, Trotsky and Parvus reunited with mainstream Menshevism, which was now swept along on the revolutionary wave.

Of course, for most of the Menshevik leaders this proved only to be a temporary vacillation to the left, whereas Trotsky eventually sided with Lenin in 1917. Yet during the ebb-tide of the revolution, Trotsky had no organisation capable of standing against the prevailing mood of the workers and guiding them onto the counter-attack. And this proved crucial to the downfall of the revolution in St Petersburg itself.

In November 1905, after successfully splitting the liberal bourgeoisie from the workers’ movement, and after the defeat of the 8-hour day struggle, the Tsar felt confident enough to impose martial law in Poland—at that time part of the Russian Empire. At the same time he began the court martial of rebellious sailors.

In response, the St Petersburg Soviet, of which Trotsky was effectively the leader, called a general strike which managed to get the Tsar to back down on both threats. But the Soviet was not yet ready or able to organise the armed insurrection, nor had it done much to win over the peasant-based army to the side of the workers? movement. By 12 November, faced with lockouts and demoralisation, the Soviet was obliged once again to try to conduct an orderly retreat, and called off the General Strike.

This time Tsarism moved decisively onto the offensive. On 28 November Khrustalev, the Chairman of the St Petersburg Soviet, was arrested. On 2 December eight liberal and RSDLP papers were closed down by the army. When the Soviet met the following day, its call for an immediate general strike went largely unanswered. That afternoon the Soviet itself was surrounded by the army and arrested en masse.

The last days of the Soviet highlighted the weakness of the Mensheviks, including lefts like Trotsky and Parvus.

The absence of a disciplined party, working within the Soviet but sometimes necessarily campaigning against the views of the majority of its delegates, proved crucial in the failure of the revolution in St Petersburg. There was no fighting organisation built, and there was little response to the call for a General Strike. The Tsar’s armies waded into the workers’ districts with a vengeance.

The real value of Lenin’s programmatic rearmament of the Bolsheviks was shown in Moscow. There the Bolsheviks played a leading role in the working class. Their mistrust of non-party, spontaneous mass organisations delayed the formation of a Soviet until 22 November. But the strength of the party and its preparatory work allowed the Bolsheviks to launch an effective General Strike in Moscow in response to the suppression of the St Petersburg Soviet. In the midst of the General Strike, with time running out, the Bolsheviks issued the call for armed insurrection.

On 10 December barricades went up all over the working class areas of Moscow.

Alongside the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks organised a militia of about 1000 armed men, which now fought a heroic street battle with the Moscow garrison. But from 16 December the strike on the
railways began to crumble, allowing the Tsar to send the Guards from St Petersburg into Moscow. The Bolshevik stronghold of Presnya held out for two more days, but on 18 December the 1905 revolution met its bloody end.

In December and January 1,000 people were killed in Moscow; across Russia 14,000 were killed and 70,000 forcibly exiled.

**Balance sheet of Russian Marxism in 1905**

What, then, do we defend? and what do we reject? in the competing conceptions of Lenin and Trotsky in 1905?

In Menshevism as a whole we can recognise the phenomenon later to be described as centrism: opportunist vacillation in response to every spontaneous movement of the masses? tailing them in defeat as well as victory. Where the Menshevik mainstream dipped into the programmatic legacy of Marx and Engels in 1848 and 1871 they concluded that the working class should stand aside from the power struggle until its bourgeois stage was completed.

Bolshevism retained the traditional division of programme into Minimum and Maximum, a division of the programme which corresponded to a whole period of preparation for revolutionary struggle in the absence of sharp revolutionary crises and struggles.

But when those struggles broke out, whilst the Mensheviks retained the dead husk of the old programme, Lenin took over its living kernel. He believed that only a revolutionary struggle could achieve the Minimum programme. But alongside that programme Lenin had to elaborate a new tactical method, a plan of action which was to provide the model of future revolutionary action programmes in 1917 and subsequently for the Comintern.

The rigid conceptual division between socialist and democratic tasks never blinded Lenin to the complexities of reality:

> Of course in actual historical circumstances the elements of the past become interwoven with those of the future: the two paths cross. Wage-labour with its struggle against private property exists under the aristocracy as well? he wrote.

But a revolutionary plan of action must have a precise and immediate content: Lenin waged a ceaseless battle against the confused slogans of the Mensheviks. It was his conception of the immediate tasks, as opposed to the possible combination of future tasks, which led Lenin to coin the slogan of the ?democratic dictatorship?.

What prevented Lenin from seeing the contradictions within the democratic dictatorship slogan was that they were never realised and therefore never exploded in practice. It was not until 1917 when Lenin?s slogan had been given the concrete form of dual power between the ?democratic? provisional government and the soviet dictatorship that Lenin abandoned the formula, which he argued should be relegated to the ?museum of pre-revolutionary? Bolshevik? antiquities?.

In 1905 however Lenin did develop elements of the revolutionary action programme: the mass strike, the armed insurrection, the united front tactic with non-party workers in the Soviets and in the Moscow insurrection.

Trotsky?s weakness as compared to Lenin was on the crucial questions of party, programme and tactics.
Trotsky lauded the Soviet not least because as a non-party organisation it transcended the internal friction between two equally powerful factions of the social democrats . . .?

Trotsky’s spontaneism, his disregard for previously prepared conspiratorial organisations, manifested itself in three aspects of his activity in 1905.

First, Trotsky was a spontaneist with regard to the revolution itself. The very laws of revolution would lead the proletariat once in power to take measures against the capitalists, not just Tsarism. Thus, for all the superiority of Trotsky’s perspectives in 1905 his immediate demands went no further than those of the Bolsheviks. Trotsky himself quoted the Bolshevik paper Novaya Zhizn to the effect that in action its programme was the same as the left Menshevik Nachalo’s.

The logical slogan arising from Trotsky’s perspective — All power to the Soviets — was not spelled out in 1905. It was only in 1917 that Trotsky became convinced that the provisional revolutionary government would take the form of Soviet government, not a bourgeois democratic-style Constituent Assembly. Trotsky’s understanding of the class struggle as an objective process, which Lenin labelled tactics as process, absolved him of the need to draw out precise programmatic conclusions from the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky’s revolutionary activity in 1905, though spectacular, was conducted in the manner of a revolutionary tribune of the 19th century: a Lassalle, a Varlin, a Jaures. Trotsky carried out this task in what Marx once termed roman costume — that is with methods and conceptions appropriate to an earlier epoch.

In the event the St Petersburg Soviet did not conduct the most determined class policy in the spirit of revolutionary socialism as Trotsky’s theory predicted that it spontaneously should.

Ironically it met the same fate as the Paris Commune — which had revolutionary tribunes, a militia and a workers’ government, but no consistent organised revolutionary vanguard.

The third manifestation of Trotsky’s spontaneism occurred in his own attitude to the mainstream Mensheviks. Not only had Trotsky made an incomplete methodological break with Menshevism; basing his activities on the possibility of the revolution spontaneously re-uniting the two wings of the RSDLP he spent the years from 1905 to 1917 as a Menshevik conciliator, attempting to unite all factions of the party against Lenin and the Bolsheviks, without reaching common agreement on principles.

It is true that in 1906 Lenin was again prepared to accept unity with the Mensheviks, because he thought the pressure of the revolutionary masses would keep them on the path which Trotsky had won them to during the revolution. But unlike Trotsky, Lenin entertained no illusions in a spontaneous reconciliation. Trotsky’s illusions in the reformability of Menshevism, as he himself later admitted, disfigured much of his political activity between the two revolutions.

So ironically Trotsky’s more correct theory, disfigured by his Menshevik-spontaneist outlook, did not prove a better guide to action than Lenin’s flawed theory. In addition, it has to be said that none of the three groups within Russian Marxism yet understood the epochal nature of the changes which they were confronted with.

They saw the outbreak of the 1905 revolution as a change of period, from prolonged class peace to world instability.

But it was only the later theoretical insight that the 20th century had opened up a new epoch of capitalism — the imperialist epoch of decline, war and revolution — that allowed the programmatic lessons
learned in 1905 to be fused into a new revolutionary politics.

When it was finally codified in the 1930s in the Transitional Programme, it was Trotsky and the Fourth International that had absorbed the best lessons of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s combined work in the revolution of 1905.

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