

# The Bolsheviks as they really were

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This extract is from [The Bolshevik Party](#) [1], by Pierre Broué (1963). It shows what Bolshevism meant, and how different it was from the "Leninism" constructed after Lenin's death in 1924.

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The heart of the Bolsheviks' organization, the 'column of steel' of professional revolutionaries, was recruited entirely from young people, workers and students, in a period in a society which in fact scarcely gave time for childhood to drag itself out, especially in working class families.

It was those under 20 who renounced all prospect of career and ambition other than a political and a collective one, in order to identify themselves, never looking back, with the workers' struggle. A Mikhail Tomsky, lithographer, who joined the Party at the age of 25, stands out from the others, despite his years as a non-party militant. In fact, by the time they reached his age, the majority of the others had already put behind them years of full-time political struggle.

The student Piatakov, son of a rich bourgeois family in the Ukraine, became a Bolshevik at the age of 20: he had been an anarchist militant before then. The student Rosenfeld, called Kamenev, joined at 19, like the engineering worker Schmidt and the skilled mechanic Ivan Nikitich Smirnov. The engineering worker Bakaev joined the Party at 18, as did the students Bukharin and Krestinsky and the shoe-maker Kaganovitch. The office worker Zinoviev, and the engineering workers Serebriakov and Lutovinov, were Bolsheviks at the age of 17. Sverdlov worked at a chemist's when he joined at 16, as did the schoolboy Khibyshev. The shoemaker Drobnis and the schoolboy Smilga joined the Party at 15, Piatnitsky at 14.

Before leaving the stage of adolescence, these young men are already old members, cadres. Sverdlov, 17 years old, is in charge of the Sormovo social-democratic organisation, and the Tsarist police who try to identify him nickname him 'The Little One'; Sokolnikov is 18 and in charge of one of the Moscow districts. Rykov is 24 when at London he is the spokesman for the Komitetchiki and joins the central committee; Zinoviev is already known as one of the leading Bolsheviks in Petrograd and editor of Proletarian when at 24 he in turn takes his place in the Central Committee. Kamenev is 22 when a delegate at London, Sverdlov 20 at the Tammerfors Congress, Serebriakov is the organizer and one of the 20 delegates of Russian underground organizations at Prague in 1914, at the age of 24.

These young men came in successive waves, coinciding with strikes and with the course of the revolutionary movement. The older ones joined around 1898 and became Bolsheviks in 1905; after them came the generation of the period 1905 and the two years following; finally a third wave joined from 1911-12.

The life of these men consists of years of imprisonment, of underground activity, condemnations, deportations, exile, Piatnitsky, born in 1882, joined the movement in 1896. Arrested, in 1902, he escaped, rejoined the Iskra-ist organization, and then went into emigration. He worked in the organization abroad up to 1905, went back to Russia in that year, fought in the Odessa organization until 1906, then in Moscow from 1906 to 1908. Arrested, he escaped and went to Germany, where he took up important work in the technical administration of the Party until 1915.

During that period he learned a trade, that of electrician. Returning illegally to Russia in 1915, he started work in a factory and was again arrested, then deported in 1914.

Other life histories are still more striking: Serge Mrachkovsky was born in prison of parents who were political prisoners, growing up there as a child before returning as an adult, this time on his own account; Tomsky in 1917 was 37, with ten years of prison and deportation behind him; Vladimir Milyutin was arrested eight times, sentenced to prison five times and twice deported; Drobnis served six years jail and was three times condemned to death.

The courage of these men was clearly equal to every test: they gave the very best of themselves, convinced that only in this was could they express all those possibilities with which their young intelligence was bursting. Having gone underground at 19 years old, sent by the Party to organize the workers of Kostrona in the North, Sverdlov writes to a friend: "I sometimes regret Nizhni-Novgorod, but all in all I am glad to be away because I would not

really have been able to spread my wings there as I think I am doing now. At Novgorod I learned how to work and so I arrived here with a certain experience already behind me; I have a big field of action to which to apply my energies."

Preobrazhensky, moving spirit of the underground organization in the Urals during the period of reaction, was arrested and put on trial. When his lawyer, Kerensky, tried to deny the charges laid against him, he leapt to his feet, dissociated himself from Kerensky, re-affirmed his political connections and demanded to take the responsibility for his revolutionary activity. Needless to say, he was sentenced.

Only after the revolution did the Party discover a first-class economist in the man who had been a professional revolutionary from the age of 18. For these men did study: and like Piatakov, who wrote an essay on Spengler while he was being pursued in the Ukraine in 1918, and Bukharin, were outstanding intellectuals.

The others, though less brilliant, also studied, on every possible occasion, for when the Party was described as a school, this was no mere figure of speech. Often it was only in the Party that people learned to read, and every member became a tutor, responsible for a group around him who learned from him in discussion.

The enemies of Bolshevism like to sneer at this taste for books, which seemed at times to turn the Party into a sociology club, but the Prague Congress was effectively prepared by the formation, at the Longjumeau cadre school, of a few dozen members who listened and discussed 45 lectures from Lenin, of which 30 were on political economy, and ten devoted to the agrarian problem, the history of the Russian Party; the history of the workers' movement in the West, law, literature, journalistic technique.

Certainly, it was not a question of all the Bolsheviks being great men of science, but their culture raised them well above the average level among the masses, and among their ranks were numbered some of the most brilliant intellects of the century. Without a doubt, the Party raised its members to a high level, and the professional revolutionary-bears no resemblance to the-bureaucrat avant-la-lettre so often portrayed by partisan commentators.

Trotsky, who knew them well and shared that life, even though not being at that time a Bolshevik, he was not one of them, wrote about them:

"The youth of the revolutionary generation coincided with the youth of the labour movement. It was the epoch of people between the ages of eighteen and thirty. Revolutionists above that age were few in number and seemed old men. The movement was as yet utterly devoid of careerism, lived on its faith in the future and on its spirit of self-sacrifice.

"There were as yet no routine, no set formulae, no theatrical gestures, no ready-made oratorical tricks. The struggle was by nature full of pathos; shy and awkward. The very words "committee", "party" were as yet new, with a aura of vernal freshness, and rang in young ears as a disquieting and alluring melody.

"Whoever joined the organization knew that prison followed by exile awaited him within the next few months. The measure of ambition was to last as long as possible on the job prior to arrest; to hold oneself steady when facing the gendarmes; to ease, as far as possible, the plight of one's comrades; to read, while in prison, as many books as possible; to escape as soon as possible from exile abroad; to acquire wisdom there; and then to return to revolutionary activity in Russia".

It is certain that nothing can better explain the victories of the Bolsheviks, and above all the winning, first slow and then very rapid, of those whom Bukharin called the second concentric circle of the Party its antennae and its levers in the revolutionary period, the revolutionary workers, organizers of trade unions and of party committees, poles of resistance, centres of initiative, indefatigable educators and moving spirits through which the Party was able to integrate itself in the class and give it leadership.

History has almost forgotten the names of all these in most cases; Lenin spoke about them as the cadres 'of the Kaivrov type', referring to the name of the man who hid him for some days in 1917 and who had his complete confidence. Unless their existence is considered, the Bolshevik \*miracle\* defies understanding.

The description of what the Bolshevik Party was would be incomplete without an attempt to describe the man who founded it and led it right up to his death. Certainly Lenin to a certain extent identified himself with the Party: for all that, he must be seen as also different from it.

To start with, he was just about the only one of his generation, his first companion in arms, Plekhanov, his senior, and Martov, his contemporary, leading the Mensheviks.

His lieutenants of the first stage, Bogdanov and Krassin, later left. In the period of the Prague Congress, the oldest of his immediate collaborators, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Sverdlov and Nogin, were under 30. He himself was 42 and he was the only one among the Bolsheviks from the generation before Iskra, the generation of pioneers of Marxism. The young men of the Bolshevik nucleus were first and above all his pupils.

This is not the place to begin an analysis of Lenin's intellectual capabilities, his culture, his power for work, the agility of his reasoning, the penetration of his analyses and the depth of his foresight (perspectives). Let us simply outline that, convinced of the necessity of the historic instrument which was the Party, he concentrated upon its building and "strengthening, resting all the while upon the perspective and the reality of the mass movement, with a remarkable confidence in the strength of his own analysis and intuition.

Deeply convinced that ideological conflicts were inevitable, he wrote to Krassin that "it is a Utopia to expect complete firmness, agreement and strength among the Central Committee or its agents". He fought to convince, sure that he was right.

Also he could finally accept quite light-heartedly a defeat which he considered only temporary and provisional, like that which he suffered as the hands of the Komitetchki at the 1905 Congress, on the eve of a Revolution which he knew would sweep aside their routine. At the end of the same year he gave way to the pressure of members on the question of a reunification which he himself judged to be premature, at the same time making sure to limit in advance the possible damage by concentrating all his efforts to obtain within the unified Party the election of the Central Committee according to the proportional representation of tendencies.

Between 1906 and 1910, he multiplied his efforts to convince the dissidents of his faction and finally left the initiative of the break to them. In 1910 he bent before the policy of the conciliators defended by Bubrovinsky, whom he regarded as a precious comrade and whom he hoped would quickly be convinced by experience.

Intransigent on questions he considered fundamental - illegal work, in his eyes, was one of the touchstones of the revolutionary character of political work - he drew back when the need arose, and not only when, as part of a minority, it was necessary to set an example of the discipline upon which he insisted when he was in the majority. His object was not to prove himself right, but to fashion the implement which could permit him to intervene in the class struggle and be historically right, 'on the scale of millions', as he liked to say: to keep together his fraction, those men carefully tried and tested over years, he knew how to wait and even to give way, but he never indulged in show, nor did he hesitate to begin all over again if his adversaries called in question fundamentals.

In ideological or tactical controversy, he always seemed to sharpen angles, push contradictions to their extreme, point up contracts, often to schenatise and even caricature his opponent's point of view. These were methods of struggle which sought victory, not compromise, sought to dismantle the very process of thought of his adversary, to lead back the controversy to premises which were easy for everybody to understand.

But he never lost sight of the need to preserve the collaboration in joint work of those with whom he crossed swords. During the war, in disagreement with Bukharin on the question of the State, he asked him not to write anything on this subject, in order not to accentuate disagreements on points which in his eyes neither of them had yet sufficiently studied.

He argued always, bent sometimes, but never renounced the aim of convincing, for it was thus and only thus - whatever has been and still is said by his detractors - that he carried off his victories and became the uncontested leader of his fraction, a fraction built by his hands and composed of men selected and trained by him.

Moreover, that seemed perfectly normal to him, and he replied without discomfort to those who worried about quarrels between comrades: "Let sentimental people weep and moan; more conflict! more internal squabbles! more controversies! We reply: without new and constantly renewed struggles, no revolutionary social-democrat has ever been formed.

Further, his authority - an enormous authority - over his comrades was not that of the priest or the officer, but that of the teacher and companion, the master, the elder - he was called

familiarly 'The Old Man' - admired for his integrity, his perspicacity, appreciated for his knowledge and experience, whose impression on contemporary history could be measured, and who was clearly the builder of his fraction and of the Party,

His influence rested on the strength and vigour of his ideas, his fighting temperament and his polemical talent, not upon rigid discipline and conformity. From Krassin to Bukharin, his comrades will show that for them it was an awful drama of consciousness to take up opposition to Lenin. Nonetheless they did so, for that was a duty, 'the first duty of a revolutionary', he said, the duty of criticising one's leaders; the pupils would not have judged themselves worthy of their master if they did not dare to fight against his views when they thought him wrong.

Besides, a revolutionary party cannot be built with robots. He knew this when he wrote to Bukharin, that if clever men were excluded on the grounds that they were not very disciplined, in order to keep only disciplined fools, the party would be ruined, It is for this reason that the history of the Party, and that of the fraction after 1905, is only a succession of ideological conflicts from which he emerged the victor only at the cost of long and patient work.

In this respect is it difficult to separate Lenin from his fraction, where unanimity of views was born from a virtually continuous discussion on big questions just as much as on temporary tactical questions,

Moreover, there is no doubt that it was Lenin's capacity to bring together, through struggle in the realm of ideas, such diverse elements, and such opposite personalities, men of such contradictory tendencies, Zinoviev, Stalin, personalities, men of such contradictory tendencies, as Kamenev, Sverdlov, Preobrazhensky, Bukharin, which really explains the success of his organizational work; the 'column of steel' which the Bolsheviks wanted and did become, was born, as well as from the 'wonderful proletariat' spoken about by Deutscher, from the brain of the man who chose this path of party-building.

But this same thing explains Lenin's solitude. Not a single man in the party, in the end, will come up to the level of his abilities:- he will have auxiliaries and pupils, collaborators and comrades, but it was certainly only with Trotsky that he found a companionship on a footing of equality - Trotsky, whose very personality perhaps explains why he did not become a Bolshevik or recognise the hegemony of Lenin before 1917.

It was this which made him, among the old Bolsheviks, a man who could not be replaced, even if, as Preobrazhensky said, he was 'less the man at the helm than the cement holding the mass together'.

For, if one admits with Bukharin that the Party's victories were due as much to its 'Marxist firmness' as to its 'tactical flexibility' - and that was the view of the old Bolsheviks - it must also be recognised that in both these respects only Lenin was the inspirer, and that with time, educated by their defects, those Bolsheviks who crossed swords with him learned to yield.

But the revolutionary period, in plunging him into history which was being made by the millions, left him no time to train the generation of those who would have perhaps been able to continue his successful work. In any case, that is the hypothesis suggested by the Party's history up to Lenin's death, a death which only served to permit there to be born, from this essentially anti-dogmatic thought, the dogma of 'Leninism' which finally was substituted for the Bolshevik spirit which he had been able to create.