

Module 03: 1917 — Did the War Cause a Revolution?

Evidence 31: Lenin's "April Theses" (The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution)

A

Introduction

Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party, also opposed the Soviet's "revolutionary defensism." In the "April Theses," Lenin criticized the Soviet's support for the Provisional Government and set out a radical vision for making Russia a socialist society.

Question to Consider

- Consider the issues addressed in the document and Lenin's proposals for dealing with them. Why would these "theses" appeal to workers, soldiers, and peasants alike?

Document

THESES

1. In our attitude towards the war, which under the new [provisional] government of Lvov and Co. unquestionably remains on Russia's part a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of that government, not the slightest concession to "revolutionary defensism" is permissible. The class-conscious proletariat can give its consent to a revolutionary war, which would really justify revolutionary defensism, only on condition: (a) that the power pass to the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants aligned with the proletariat; (b) that all annexations be renounced in deed and not in word; (c) that a complete break be effected in actual fact with all capitalist interests.

In view of the undoubted honesty of those broad sections of the mass believers in revolutionary defensism who accept the war only as a necessity, and not as a means of conquest, in view of the fact that they are being deceived by the bourgeoisie, it is necessary with particular thoroughness, persistence and patience to explain their

error to them, to explain the inseparable connection existing between capital and the imperialist war, and to prove that without overthrowing capital it is impossible to end the war by a truly democratic peace, a peace not imposed by violence. The most widespread campaign for this view must be organised in the army at the front. Fraternisation.

2. The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution -- which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie -- to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants. This transition is characterised, on the one hand, by a maximum of legally recognised rights (Russia is now the freest of all the belligerent countries in the world); on the other, by the absence of violence towards the masses, and, finally, by their unreasoning trust in the government of capitalists, those worst enemies of peace and socialism. This peculiar situation demands of us an ability to adapt ourselves to the special conditions of Party work among unprecedentedly large masses of proletarians who have just awakened to political life.
3. No support for the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear, particularly of those relating to the renunciation of annexations. Exposure in place of the impermissible, illusion-breeding "demand" that this government, a government of capitalists, should cease to be an imperialist government.
4. Recognition of the fact that in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies our Party is in a minority, so far a small minority, as against a bloc of all the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements, from the Popular Socialists and the Socialist-Revolutionaries down to the Organising Committee (Chkheidze, Tsereteli, etc.), Steklov, etc., etc., who have yielded to the influence of the bourgeoisie and spread that influence among the proletariat. The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our task is, as long as this government yields to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an explanation especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses. As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the

necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.

5. Not a parliamentary republic -- to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviets of Workers' Deputies would be a retrograde step -- but a republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Labourers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom. Abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy. The salaries of all officials, all of whom are elective and displaceable at any time, not to exceed the average wage of a competent worker.
6. The weight of emphasis in the agrarian programme to be shifted to the Soviets of Agricultural Labourers' Deputies. Confiscation of all landed estates. Nationalisation of all lands in the country, the land to be disposed of by the local Soviets of Agricultural Labourers' and Peasants' Deputies. The organisation of separate Soviets of Deputies of Poor Peasants. The setting up of a model farm on each of the large estates (ranging in size from 100 to 300 dessiatines, according to local and other conditions, and to the decisions of the local bodies) under the control of the Soviets of Agricultural Labourers' Deputies and for the public account.
7. The immediate union of all banks in the country into a single national bank, and the institution of control over it by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies.
8. It is not our immediate task to "introduce" socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.
9. Party tasks: (a) Immediate convocation of a Party congress; (b) Alteration of the Party Programme, mainly: (1) On the question of imperialism and the imperialist war, (2) On our attitude towards the state and our demand for a "commune state" (3) Amendment of our out-of-date minimum programme; (c) Change of the Party's name. Instead of "Social Democracy," whose official leaders throughout the world have betrayed socialism and deserted to the bourgeoisie [. . .], we must call ourselves the Communist Party.
10. A new International. We must take the initiative in creating a revolutionary International, an International against the social-chauvinists and against the "Center."

Sources:

Original in *Pravda*, No. 26, 7 April 1917. *Lenin, Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: 1964), 19-26. Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/> (2005).
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm> and http://www.marxist.com/classics/lenin/april_theses.html.