

Bolshevism and Insurrection

Lenin not only restored the Marxist theory of the State (see his *State and Revolution*), he also studied and posed in practice the problem of proletarian dictatorship, and made this into the fighting slogan of the entire international proletariat. Lenin enriched Marxism by his discovery of the concrete force of that dictatorship: the soviet system.

As for insurrection, Lenin was already emphasizing by 1902 (see *What is to be Done?*) the need to prepare for imminent armed insurrection. In 1905, when the circumstances had ripened, he exerted all his authority to show that only armed insurrection – the sharpest and most decisive form of combat in a time of revolution – can lead the proletariat to final victory.

In his post-mortem on the Moscow insurrection of December 1905, Lenin vigorously attacked Plekhanov's famous phrase – parroted by every opportunist: 'They should not have taken to arms.' Lenin's criticism was an object-lesson to our Party and to the entire proletariat; it ran as follows:

We should have taken to arms more resolutely, energetically and aggressively; we should have explained to the masses that it was impossible to confine things to a peaceful strike and that a fearless and relentless armed fight was necessary. And now we must at last openly and publicly admit that political strikes are inadequate; we must carry on the widest agitation among the masses in favour of an armed uprising and make no attempt to obscure this question by talk about 'preliminary stages', or to befog it in any way. We would be deceiving both ourselves and the people if we concealed from the masses the necessity of a desperate, bloody war of extermination, as the immediate task of the coming revolutionary action.¹

During the October revolution, as we know, Lenin was the heart and soul of the insurrection, the heart and soul of the revolution.

Those professional falsifiers of Marxism, the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries, in unison with the Cadets and other monarchist and bourgeois parties, accused the Bolsheviks of Blanquism;² in his reply

¹ Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 579, in 'Lessons of the Moscow Uprising'.

² Blanquism is a revolutionary doctrine derived from the French revolutionary communist

(in 1917), Lenin provided the classic formulation of the problem of armed insurrection and the conditions for its success:

To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that *turning-point* in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the *vacillations* in the ranks of the enemy and *in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution are strongest*. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish *Marxism from Blanquism*.

Lenin at once adds:

Once these conditions exist, however, to refuse to treat insurrection as an art [i.e.

Auguste Blanqui (1805–81). Blanqui's doctrine, on many key social and political issues, is very close to modern Marxism, and is the latter's direct precursor. Blanqui was a communist and a materialist, but not a dialectician. He was openly committed to the class struggle and to the dictatorship of a centralized proletarian party. Blanqui believed firmly in the creative role of violence in the historical process.

Blanqui was 'a revolutionary of the old generation', says Engels. Paul Frölich (see his brilliant article on Blanquism in the review '*L'Internationale Communiste*', no. 12, 1925) demonstrates the accuracy of this definition, and adds: 'He was the most vivid expression, the classic representative of that epoch of revolutions which formed the transition between the bourgeois epoch and the proletarian epoch; for in that transitional epoch the conscious spokesman of the revolution was still the bourgeoisie, but was already also the proletariat. As a representative of that epoch both by origin and by activity, he constitutes an intermediate link between Jacobinism and modern communism.' Frölich is absolutely right.

Blanqui's tactic consisted in carrying out the revolution – piercing a breach in the bourgeois order and seizing power at the right moment – with the help of a secret, strongly organized and centralized, armed organization; the proletariat would be drawn in afterwards. Blanqui did not understand and could not understand that certain conditions were required before the insurrection could succeed. The attempted insurrections staged by him and by his disciples all failed. The proletariat, represented by Blanqui, had not yet become entirely aware of itself as a class, had not yet sufficiently crystallized, was still linked to the petty bourgeoisie. Immature social relations produced an immature theory.

Marxism-Leninism has inherited from Blanquism the need to organize and prepare the revolution, the ineluctable need for an implacable armed struggle against the existing order. But Marxism-Leninism has not been able to accept the ideas of the 'revolutionary of the old generation' on the tactic of conspiracy. Besides the systematic preparation of revolution, Marx and Lenin highlight the necessity of economic and social preconditions for insurrections (a powerful revolutionary upsurge on the part of the proletariat), in the absence of which victory is inconceivable.

Bernstein, in his time, accused Marx of Blanquism. Today it is the entire Second International which accuses the Communist International of Blanquism, and equates Blanquism with communism. In slandering the communists in this way, the social democrats represent Blanqui, the committed revolutionary of the past, as a petty-bourgeois fanatic.

to prepare it politically and militarily: A. N.] is a betrayal of Marxism and a betrayal of the revolution.³

This passage, in a concise and general form, says all that is essential about the preconditions for a victorious insurrection. Nevertheless, Lenin, in that same year of 1917, in his 'Letter to comrades', returns in a more concrete and detailed fashion to the difference between Marxism and Blanquism on the issue of insurrection. At the same time, he underlines the conditions in which the latter can be victorious:

Military conspiracy is Blanquism, *if* it is organized not by a party of a definite class, *if* its organizers have not analysed the political moment in general and the international situation in particular, *if* the party has not on its side the sympathy of the majority of the people, as proved by objective facts, *if* the development of revolutionary events has not brought about a practical refutation of the conciliatory illusions of the petty bourgeoisie, *if* the majority of the Soviet-type organs of revolutionary struggle that have been recognized as authoritative or have shown themselves to be such in practice have not been won over, *if* there has not matured a sentiment in the army (if in war-time) against the government that protracts the unjust war against the will of the whole people, *if* the slogans of the uprising (like 'All power to the Soviets', 'Land to the peasants', or 'Immediate offer of a democratic peace to all the belligerent nations, with an immediate abrogation of all secret treaties and secret diplomacy', etc.) have not become widely known and popular, *if* the advanced workers are not sure of the desperate situation of the masses and of the support of the countryside, a support proved by a serious peasant movement or by an uprising against the landowners and the government that defends the landowners, *if* the country's economic situation inspires earnest hopes for a favourable solution of the crisis by peaceable and parliamentary means.⁴

In his 1915 pamphlet *The Collapse of the Second International*, Lenin wrote on the same subject as follows:

To a Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the 'upper classes', a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is also necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes,

³ Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 365, in 'Marxism and Insurrection'.

⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, p. 212, in 'Letter to comrades'.

there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in 'peace-time', but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the 'upper classes' themselves* into independent historical action.

Without these objective changes, which are independent of the will, not only of individual groups and parties but even of individual classes, a revolution, as a general rule, is impossible. The totality of all these objective changes is called a revolutionary situation. Such a situation existed in 1905 in Russia, and in all revolutionary periods in the West; it also existed in Germany in the sixties of the last century, and in Russia in 1859-61 and 1879-80, although no revolution occurred in these instances. Why was that? It was because it is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary *class* to take revolutionary mass action *strong* enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, 'falls', if it is not toppled over.⁵

Lenin returned to the subject on numerous subsequent occasions, stressing again and again that the social and political preconditions mentioned above were indispensable.⁶ The extracts quoted – which could easily be multiplied – show what immense, indeed decisive importance he attached to the question of the political preconditions for revolution. It is these preconditions which determine the maturity of a revolutionary situation; they were therefore the invariable criterion adopted by Lenin in deciding problems of a historic order. Should the Party set about the immediate organization of insurrection? Or, on the contrary, should it continue its ordinary work of revolutionary mobilization of the masses, i.e. should it wait for a more favourable moment for the insurrection?

It goes without saying that Lenin never considered insurrection as an isolated act, unrelated to the other moments of the class struggle. Insurrection is prepared by the entire class struggle of the country in question, and is only the organic continuation of that struggle. All the activity of the revolutionary party – the struggle for peace; against imperialist intervention (in China, in the USSR, etc.); against the imperialist wars in preparation (in Europe, America, etc.); against capitalist rationalization; for higher wages; for social security in general; for the raising of the proletariat's standard of living; for nationalization

⁵ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 213.

⁶ See *Left-wing Communism: an infantile disorder* for Lenin's struggle against the ultra-left dogmatists at the Third World Congress of the Communist International, and especially his articles and speeches of September-October 1917.

of the land; the parliamentary struggle, etc. – all this must be directed towards the preparation and mobilization of the masses, with a view to a higher form of struggle during the paroxysm of the revolution: with a view to insurrection.

Basing itself on Lenin's doctrine, the draft programme of the Communist International outlines as follows the conditions under which the Party must lead the masses into battle for the overthrow of bourgeois power:

When the revolutionary tide is rising, when the ruling classes are disorganized, the masses are in a state of revolutionary ferment, the intermediary strata are inclining towards the proletariat and the masses are ready for action and for sacrifice, the Party of the proletariat is confronted with the task of leading the masses to a direct attack upon the bourgeois State. This it does by carrying on propaganda in favour of increasingly radical transitional slogans (for Soviets, workers' control of industry, for peasant committees, for the seizure of the big landed properties, for disarming the bourgeoisie and arming the proletariat, etc.), and by organizing mass action, upon which all branches of Party agitation and propaganda, including parliamentary activity, must be concentrated. This mass action includes: strikes; a combination of strikes and demonstrations; a combination of strikes and armed demonstrations and finally, the general strike conjointly with armed insurrection against the state power of the bourgeoisie. The latter form of struggle, which is the supreme form, must be conducted according to the rules of war; it presupposes a plan of campaign, offensive fighting operations and unbounded devotion and heroism on the part of the proletariat. An absolutely essential precedent condition for this form of action is the organization of the broad masses into militant units, which, by their very form, embrace and set into action the largest possible numbers of toilers (Councils of Workers' Deputies, Soldiers' Councils, etc.), and intensified revolutionary work in the army and the navy.

In passing over to new and more radical slogans, the Parties must be guided by the fundamental role of the political tactics of Leninism, which call for ability to lead the masses to revolutionary positions in such a manner that the masses may, by their own experience, convince themselves of the correctness of the Party Line. Failure to observe this rule must inevitably lead to isolation from the masses, to putschism, to the ideological degeneration of Communism into 'leftist' dogmatism, and to petty-bourgeois 'revolutionary' adventurism. Failure to take advantage of the culminating point in the development of the revolutionary situation, when the Party of the proletariat is called upon to conduct a bold and determined attack upon the enemy, is not less dangerous. To allow that opportunity to slip by and to fail to start rebellion at that point, means to let all the initiative pass to the enemy and to doom the revolution to defeat.⁷

⁷ *Programme of the Communist International*, Chapter VI, 1928.

It is one thing to define theoretically the indispensable conditions which, when present, make the success of the insurrection possible. It is another, totally different and far more complicated, to *evaluate in practice* the degree of maturity of the revolutionary situation, and thus decide the question of when to launch the insurrection. This problem of timing is extraordinarily important.

Experience proves that it is not always possible to resolve the problem of timing as the circumstances would require. It frequently occurs that, under the influence of revolutionary impatience, or of the terror and provocations of the ruling classes, the degree of maturity of a revolutionary situation *is exaggerated*, and the insurrection fails. Or, on the other hand, a situation which demands decisive action by the Party of the proletariat *is underestimated*, and the propitious moment for organizing a successful insurrection is thus let slip. In illustration, we will quote a few historical examples.

On 14 August 1870, the Blanquists organized an insurrection in Paris. The masses did not support the insurgents, who were crushed. Three weeks later on 4 September, when the French troops had been beaten by the Prussians at Sedan, all Paris rose. At the moment of the Blanquist action, the ferment was already great among the masses and the ruling classes were already disorganized. But what was lacking was the shock necessary to set the masses in movement. It was Sedan that provided that shock. The Blanquists had not understood this, they had chosen the date for their insurrection badly, prematurely, and had been defeated.

Kamenev, Zinoviev and others in 1917, when the question of seizing power was discussed in the Party, considered that the circumstances were not yet ripe; that the Bolsheviks would not be able to hold onto power; that the masses would not take to the streets; that they were not sufficiently revolutionary; that 'nothing in the international situation obliges us to act immediately, and we would if anything damage the cause of socialist revolution in the West if we allowed ourselves to be massacred'; that the Party was isolated while the bourgeoisie was still fairly strong, etc. In short, they considered that the right course was to wait for the constituent assembly, which would decide the destiny of the Russian revolution.

Happily, Zinoviev and Kamenev had no support in the Party. But it is easy to imagine what would have happened if these comrades, members of the Central Committee, had had on their side even if not the

majority of the Party at least a fraction, however small, on it, and had dragged out the discussion on the seizure of power. The circumstances might have changed to the disadvantage of the revolutionary proletariat; for, in general, there is no situation which does not offer some way out for the ruling classes. The favourable moment might have been lost, and thereafter the seizure of power might have been postponed for a long time. It is certain that if the Party had adopted the position of Zinoviev and Kamenev, the revolutionary crisis of 1917 could have ended in an impasse, just as the revolutionary crisis in Germany did in 1918. There would have been no party considering it as its duty to assume responsibility for organizing a genuine proletarian government.

The position of Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1917 provides a typical example of the way in which a revolution may sometimes be missed.

In July 1917, the revolutionary part of the Petrograd proletariat was burning to intervene, and did indeed intervene, with the aim of overthrowing the provisional government. The Bolsheviks, and foremost among them Lenin, warned the masses: 'It is still too soon.' The July Days (3-5 July) ended in a defeat. In September-October, the opposite happened. Lenin, despite major disagreement in the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party concerning the seizure of power, ceaselessly repeated: 'Today or never! The revolution is in mortal danger!' Simultaneously, he issued all kinds of directives of a political, military and practical character, to ensure the success of the insurrection. Here is how he evaluated the situation in September 1917:

On July 3-4 it could have been argued, without violating the truth, that the correct thing to do was to take power, for our enemies would in any case have accused us of insurrection and ruthlessly treated us as rebels. However, to have decided on this account in favour of taking power at that time would have been wrong, because the objective conditions for the victory of the insurrection did not exist:

1. We still lacked the support of the class which is the vanguard of the revolution. We still did not have a majority among the workers and soldiers of Petrograd and Moscow. Now we have a majority in both Soviets. . . .

2. There was no country-wide revolutionary upsurge at that time. There is now, after the Kornilov revolt; the situation in the provinces and assumption of power by the Soviets in many localities prove this.

3. At that time there was no *vacillation* on any serious political scale among our enemies and among the irresolute petty bourgeoisie. Now the vacillation is enormous. Our main enemy, Allied and world imperialism (for world imperialism

is headed by the 'Allies'), *has begun to waver* between a war to a victorious finish and a separate peace directed against Russia. Our petty-bourgeois democrats, having clearly lost their majority among the people, have begun to vacillate enormously, and have rejected a bloc, i.e. a coalition, with the Cadets.

4. Therefore, an insurrection on July 3-4 would have been a mistake; we could not have retained power either physically or politically. We could not have retained it physically even though Petrograd was at times in our hands, because at that time our workers and soldiers would not have *fought and died* for Petrograd. There was not at the time that 'savageness', or fierce hatred *both of the Kerensky's and of the Tseretelis and Chernovs*. Our people had still not been tempered by the experience of the persecution of the Bolsheviks in which the Social-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks participated.

We could not have retained power politically on July 3-4 because, *before the Kornilov revolt*, the army and the provinces could and would have marched against Petrograd.

Now the picture is entirely different.

We have the following of the majority of a *class*, the vanguard of the revolution, the vanguard of the people, which is capable of carrying the masses with it.

We have the following of the *majority of the people*, because Chernov's resignation, while by no means the only symptom, is the most striking and obvious symptom that the peasants *will not receive land* from the Social-Revolutionaries' bloc (or from the Social-Revolutionaries themselves). And that is the chief reason for the popular character of the revolution. . . .

Our victory is assured, for the people are close to desperation, and we are showing the entire people a sure way out. . . .⁸

This highly instructive extract from one of Lenin's works shows what enormous importance he attributed to the political conditions for insurrection, when deciding upon its timing. His evaluation of the situation in July was absolutely correct. The Party did not yet have the majority of the people on its side, the enemy was not yet sufficiently embroiled in its own contradictions, 'the oppressed were still able to live as they had done previously, and the ruling classes were still able to govern as they had previously'. In two months, the situation changed totally. Our party already had the majority of the people on its side, and Lenin now decided in favour of insurrection. Those who believed - as Zinoviev, Kamenev and others did - that he would destroy the Russian revolution, and with it the international revolution, were utterly mistaken.

In September, Lenin saw clearly that the majority of the people was behind the Bolshevik Party; judging the situation correctly, he knew

⁸ Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 366, in 'Marxism and Insurrection'.

that the moment had come for a successful insurrection. Knowing the enormous responsibility which our party bore, not only toward the Russian but also toward the international proletariat, he was afraid that there might occur some radical modification of the situation to the advantage of the ruling classes, with the result that the seizure of power would for the time being be postponed. This is why he insisted in so imperious and categorical a fashion on an insurrection in October: Today or never! Delay means death! Victory is certain, to wait is a crime against the revolution!

This is why Lenin, seeing that the moment was ripe for a victorious insurrection, attacked Zinoviev and Kamenev so furiously, calling them strike-breakers, demanding their expulsion from the Party. He was a thousand times right. Kamenev and Zinoviev underestimated the maturity of the revolutionary situation in Russia and the West, and exaggerated the forces of counter-revolution. They held views which were basically no different from those of the social democrats.

By contrast, a negative example with respect to the timing of an insurrection was provided by the action of March 1921 in Germany – or more precisely by the tactics of the German Communist Party in connection with that March action. A certain ‘theory of the offensive’ was used to justify the March action theoretically.⁹

This theory was condemned by the Third Congress of the Comintern, and characterized by Lenin as putschist. The workers of the mining regions of Central Germany, in March 1921, were more revolutionary than those in other parts of the country. The government began to adopt various repressive measures against them. The Central Committee of the Communist Party responded by calling the working masses of Germany out on a general strike, which was planned to culminate in an insurrection. In Central Germany, the directive was followed; a general strike broke out, and in certain regions this escalated into an armed insurrection. But since the proletariat in the remainder

⁹ Certain ‘theoreticians’ of German Communism in this period came up with the ‘theory of the offensive’, in other words the theory of revolutionary attack. They argued as follows: since the imperialist war of 1914-18 and the October Revolution have opened the epoch of proletarian revolutions, the only correct tactic for the Communist International must be one of revolutionary attack to overthrow the bourgeoisie. These ‘theoreticians’ did not take into account the Leninist principle that capitalism, in the epoch of its decomposition, is still capable of rallying temporarily, and that at such moments the tactic of revolutionary attack must be replaced by a different tactic – more appropriate, and incidentally no less revolutionary.

of the country did not actively support the workers of Central Germany, the latter were crushed by the superior forces of counter-revolution.

The Central Committee of the German Communist Party had over-estimated the revolutionary character of the situation. It had not understood that 'tens of millions of men do not make the revolution on the simple advice of a party' (Lenin); that 'victory cannot be won with a vanguard alone';¹⁰ and that 'tens of millions of men do not make the revolution to order; they only make it when the people has been faced with an impossible situation, in which the collective pressure and the determination of tens of millions of men break all old barriers and are truly capable of creating a new life' (Lenin). The Communist Party had forgotten that the German proletariat as a whole had suffered so many heavy defeats, and had been pushed so far back onto the defensive since the days of March 1920, that it could not without prior political preparation respond sufficiently actively to the Party's directive for a general strike and an insurrection (i.e. a call for decisive mass actions to seize power). The vanguard, accompanied by a small section of the working class, rushed into the decisive battle without knowing at all whether it would be supported by the mass of workers throughout Germany, or whether its initiative would remain isolated.

In this instance, the date for the decisive action had been fixed incorrectly by the Central Committee of the German Communist Party; the call for a general offensive was premature.

Naturally, the fact that the rising was badly timed docs not at all mean that we should condemn the March insurrection. The point is a quite different one – to find the reasons for the defeat. In certain regions of Central Germany, the proletarian masses did participate in the March insurrection. They fought the police and the troops. In view of this, it is not possible to condemn the insurrection – for it would not be the action of a revolutionary to condemn a mass struggle simply because its outcome was not such as one would have wished. But at the same time we must criticize the role and conduct of the leadership in this episode, and not cover up such faults as it may have committed.

While on the subject of how to choose the moment to strike, the Rcvl insurrection of 1 December 1924 should also be mentioned. Here, only 230–250 participants were involved. As we shall see below,

¹⁰ Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. III, p. 399, in *Left-wing Communism: an infantile disorder*.

in our detailed study of this insurrection, there were no large-scale mass actions on the part of the proletariat – either before, during or after the movement. The Party acted alone, with a tiny body of revolutionaries, in the hope of getting in a decisive first blow against the government forces and thereafter drawing in the proletarian masses to carry through the insurrection. But the rebels, as a result of their numerical weakness, were crushed before the masses could ever have moved into action.

The mistakes of the Communist Party of Estonia are evident here. The Reval experience once again confirms the truth of Lenin's principle that it is impossible to act with a vanguard alone, and that any intervention by such a vanguard which does not enjoy the active support of a majority of the working class is doomed to failure.

Lastly, the second Shanghai insurrection of 21 February 1927 is not devoid of interest from the point of view of how to time an uprising. It was launched at a moment when the general strike was already declining, and when half the strikers, under the impact of government terror, had already gone back to work. Two days earlier, the revolutionary movement of the Shanghai proletariat was at its peak: some 300,000 workers were on strike. Yet the Party, because its technical preparations were incomplete, postponed the insurrection. Two days were lost in preparations. During that time, the general situation changed to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The insurrection, therefore, could not succeed.

The example of the second Shanghai insurrection shows that sometimes a day or two can be of decisive importance.

After what has just been said about timing, we do not need to linger on the question: 'Can an insurrection be timed for a prearranged date?' – though in its time (in 1905, before the December insurrection), this gave rise to quite an argument between Lenin and the new *Iskra*, notably Martinov. As we know, the Petrograd insurrection of 1917 was timed for 7 November, to coincide with the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets. Many proletarian insurrections in other countries have been timed for precise dates, and executed according to a plan. It is certainly impossible to order a revolution or a workers' action for a fixed date. 'But if we have really prepared an uprising, and if a popular uprising is realizable by virtue of the revolutions in social relations *that have already taken place*, then it is quite possible to time the uprising. . . . An uprising can be (timed), if those preparing

it have influence among the masses and can correctly estimate the situation.¹¹

Insurrection in the broad sense of the word is of course not a purely military operation. It is basically and above all a powerful revolutionary movement; a powerful thrust by the proletarian masses – or at least by the active fraction of those masses, even if numerically this only constitutes a minority of the proletariat – against the dominant classes. It is an active and determined struggle on the part of the active majority, at the decisive moment and on the decisive issue. The military operations of the combat organization *must coincide with the high point of proletarian action*. Only in these conditions can the insurrection succeed. The intrinsically most favourable of revolutionary situations is not sufficient to ensure the revolution's victory. *The insurrection must be organized by a party*. Power will not come of its own accord, it must be seized. 'The old government . . . never, not even in a period of crisis, "falls", if it is not toppled over' (Lenin).

It is in this sense that Lenin wrote, in his previously quoted, 'Marxism and Insurrection', after listing the political conditions necessary to guarantee the success of the insurrection:

In order to treat insurrection in a Marxist way, i.e. as an art, we must at the same time, without losing a single moment, organize a *headquarters* of the insurgent detachments, distribute our forces, move the reliable regiments to the most important points, surround the Alexandrinsky Theatre, occupy the Peter and Paul Fortress, arrest the General Staff and the government, and move against the officer cadets and the Savage Division those detachments which would rather die than allow the enemy to approach the strategic points of the city. We must mobilize the armed workers and call them to fight the last desperate fight, occupy the telegraph and the telephone exchange at once, move *our* insurrection headquarters to the central telephone exchange and connect it by telephone with all the factories, all the regiments, all the points of armed fighting, etc.¹²

Not only was Lenin the great strategist of revolution. He also knew better than anyone Marx's pregnant thesis: 'insurrection is an art'. Moreover, he knew how to apply it in masterly fashion to the practical struggle for power. It was only by correctly estimating the moment for insurrection, and by treating the latter as an art – i.e. by applying all the necessary political, technical and tactical measures, that the October Revolution was made possible.

¹¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 8, p. 153, in *Two Tactics*.

¹² Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 369.

On the question of how the proletariat's decisive struggle for power should be prepared, let us first examine the problem purely from a general political standpoint. It is essential to know *when to orient* all the Party's *political action* towards *immediate* practical preparation (both political and technical) for insurrection; *when* to give the masses slogans such as 'workers' control of production', 'peasant committees for the occupation of big landlord and state-owned estates', 'create a red guard', 'arm the proletariat and disarm the bourgeoisie', 'organize Soviets', 'seize power by armed insurrection', etc. – i.e. *when to shift the centre of gravity of daily practical agitation towards slogans which raise the final objective of the working-class struggle, and when to concentrate all the Party's attention on mobilizing the masses around these slogans*, which must in view of the situation, become *the dominant slogans of the day*.

This moment is essentially the beginning of a new phase in the life of the Party, and in the life of the proletariat in general. Timing it accurately is as difficult as timing the insurrection itself. It must not be fixed too early – i.e. when the general situation still requires agitation and propaganda for the ordinary partial demands of the masses; when the latter are still insufficiently prepared for the slogans of the final struggle and for that struggle itself, and are not sufficiently impregnated with revolutionary spirit; when the enemy is not sufficiently embroiled in his own contradictions. For in that case, the slogans of all-out struggle will not be understood by the masses and the call on them to fight for these slogans will appear too sudden. Thus the Party's decision to reorient itself towards immediate preparation for insurrection will not prove to be viable, and will have no positive result.

Furthermore, any 'tailism' shown in this question of reorienting the Party and its mass activity, any delay in resolving it, will inevitably have grave consequences. These consequences could severely hamper the preparation of the uprising, and its entire subsequent evolution. Moreover, an excessive delay may liquidate the struggle for power during the period in question; whereas a correct policy on the part of the Communist Party and a correct solution to the question of reorienting the latter towards immediate preparation for the seizure of power, may make that struggle possible and indeed victorious.

If one examines the purely military aspect of insurrection, it is evident that, like any military operation, it cannot be improvised. On

the contrary, it demands prolonged, systematic and thorough preparation, for a long time prior to the date fixed. Unless insurrection is regarded as an art; unless every aspect of it is prepared systematically, and as a military operation, it is absolutely impossible for it to succeed, even if the general political situation is favourable for a seizure of power by the proletariat. This is a principle which is valid for all countries, and especially for those in which the bourgeoisie, thanks to its long domination, has been able to constitute a flexible and powerful government apparatus. Hence (even on the basis of purely military conditions, and leaving aside the more important political factors) it is of the greatest importance that the Party should decide in good time whether to orient itself towards immediate preparation for insurrection, or whether to continue to mobilize the masses in a struggle around day-to-day working-class demands.

The Party must therefore be capable – as a result of its correct analysis of the situation in the country, its close and direct relationship with the masses, and its knowledge of the adversary's situation and the thinking behind his internal and external policies – of foreseeing in good time the approach of a revolutionary situation, and of orienting sufficiently early all its political work and its organization towards immediate preparation for insurrection.

One reason for the defeat of the German revolution in 1923 was the fact that the German Communist Party *had reoriented itself too late towards immediate preparation for insurrection*. The approach of an immediately revolutionary situation could certainly – given a Bolshevik leadership in the Party – have been foreseen from the moment of the French military occupation of the Rhineland and the Ruhr (or at least immediately after that). From that moment, a deep economic and political crisis began in Germany. From that moment, in certain regions (Saxony, Halle, Merseburg, etc.) proletarian fighting 'Hundred's' began to be formed, on the initiative of the workers themselves. And yet the Central Committee of the Communist Party only began to orient itself towards arming the workers and towards insurrection on the occasion of the three-day general strike at the beginning of August – the strike which overthrew the (nationalist) Cuno government. *A lot of time had been wasted*: the Proletarian Hundreds were being formed without suitable cadres or leadership; they had not been able to obtain enough arms; work in the army and police had been carried out in a quite inadequate fashion. All these factors, combined with the

other causes,¹³ could not fail to influence the outcome of the revolutionary crisis of autumn 1923.

The German Communist Party, or to be more accurate its leadership, did not realize soon enough the importance of the French occupation of the Ruhr and Rhineland. It did not evaluate as it should have the loss suffered by the German economy (eighty per cent of iron and steel production; seventy-one per cent of coal), and hence the meaning of the government's policy of 'passive' resistance. For this reason, it was unable to foresee in good time the economic crisis which subsequently created the revolutionary crisis.

On the other hand, if the Chinese Communist Party, immediately after the disastrous Shanghai insurrection of February 1927, had not understood that the moment was becoming favourable for a new revolutionary attempt, and had not prepared for this with as much energy as it in fact did, accepting every sacrifice, then the insurrection of 21 March, even if it had still succeeded (as a result of the extraordinarily propitious conditions), would certainly have cost far more than it did after such careful preparation.

One can say the same about the Russian Bolshevik Party in 1917. The firm orientation of the entire Party towards a seizure of power by the Soviets had been adopted from the moment of Lenin's arrival (April Theses). From that moment, all the political and organizational work of the Party was consciously directed to preparing the masses for the seizure of power. It is easy to imagine what would have happened if the Party had hesitated on this essential point, if it had delayed carrying out that change of orientation, or if it had adopted the position which Zinoviev, Kamenev and others subsequently took up. Naturally, in that case there would have been no question of the victory of October, for the extremely favourable situation of October 1917 did *not derive solely* from objective causes (prolongation of the war, economic crisis, agrarian revolution, etc.), and had not so to speak simply created itself; *it was to a great extent the result of the conscious action upon events by the Bolshevik Party (revolutionary education of the masses, organizational work among the people, in the army, in the fleet, etc.).*

¹³ We shall say nothing here of the opportunist errors of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party on a whole series of issues – errors which played an essential role in the defeat of the 1923 revolution, and which were dealt with in detail at the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International. We are here simply concerned with certain factors of a political and military character.

By way of illustration, numerous examples could be cited. But this is unnecessary. The importance of the question under examination here, and the need for resolving it correctly, are clear. This question is no less important, as far as preparing for insurrection is concerned, than choosing the right moment to strike when a revolutionary situation has fully ripened.

It remains for us to deal with a question of principle – namely, that of partial proletarian insurrections.

The proletarian revolution does not follow a straight line. It proceeds by way of partial advances and victories, temporary declines and defeats. The definitive victory of the revolution is inconceivable without these ascents and descents on the long path of its development. The proletariat becomes hardened in this prolonged revolutionary struggle; it learns to know its own strength, and the strength and policies of the enemy. Thanks to this experience it succeeds in creating policies and tactics of its own. It stores up the lessons of history and goes into battle with new energy to realize its class aims. In this sense, the temporary defeats suffered by the proletariat should not be considered solely as defeats. Each of them contains the elements of an inevitable victory in the future. Engels said somewhere: 'Beaten armies get a good schooling.' These admirable words are even more applicable to revolutionary armies, recruited among the advanced classes (Lenin). Without the dress rehearsal of 1905, it would be impossible to imagine the victory of the Russian proletariat in October 1917. Without the succession of victories and heavy defeats costing innumerable sacrifices that the Chinese proletariat has experienced in the course of the last few years, it would be impossible to imagine the inevitable victory of the proletarian revolution in China. This is an incontrovertible fact. It is in these terms that we should examine the problem of insurrections which are not general but partial – the problem of the partial (not universal) struggle of the proletariat and oppressed peasantry against the ruling classes:

It is absolutely natural and inevitable [wrote Lenin in 1906 in his article 'Guerrilla Warfare'] that the uprising should assume the higher and more complex form of a prolonged civil war embracing the whole country, i.e. an armed struggle between two sections of the people. Such a war cannot be conceived otherwise than as a series of a few big engagements at comparatively long intervals and a large number of small encounters during these intervals. That being so – and it is undoubtedly so – the Social Democrats must absolutely make it their duty to create organizations

best adapted to lead the masses in these big engagements and, as far as possible, in these small encounters as well.¹⁴

This conflict, extending over quite long intervals of time, cannot be seen as a continuous victory, which has no partial failures or defeats. It frequently happens that the proletariat takes up arms and intervenes against the established order without having any chance of decisive victory, and that by doing so it obliges the ruling classes to satisfy one or other of its demands. It is quite wrong to believe that armed action by the proletariat is only permissible when there is a perfect guarantee of victory. This is an illusion. Armed insurrection is an operation 'which is based on the principles of military science' and, as such (like any other operation), it cannot have an absolute guarantee of success. Setbacks, as a result of some circumstance or other – even of a purely subjective kind (since the proletariat does not and will not always have leaders in sufficient numbers, or sufficiently prepared militarily and technically) – are always possible and even inevitable.

Marx wrote to Kugelman, when the latter had allowed himself to express certain doubts during the Paris Commune as to the Parisians' chances:

World history would indeed be very easy to make, if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances. . . . The bourgeois *canaille* of Versailles . . . presented the Parisians with the alternative of either taking up the fight or succumbing without a struggle. The demoralization of the working class in the latter case would have been a far greater misfortune than the fall of any number of 'leaders'.¹⁵

In our epoch too, can there not and indeed do there not occur cases in which the proletariat of a particular country or industrial centre, even though it has no chance of victory, is nevertheless obliged by certain circumstances (notably by the provocations of the ruling classes) to commit itself to armed struggle? Have we not seen examples of spontaneous insurrection (for example in Cracow in 1923, in Vienna in 1927, etc.), when the proletariat does not stop to calculate the probable outcome of the conflict, but simply takes up arms and joins battle? Could the party of the proletariat refuse to join the struggle of the masses, or refuse to lead it? Could it condemn it, or remain neutral? Such a party would cease to be the party of the

¹⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, p. 222.

¹⁵ Marx/Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 464, quoted by Lenin.

proletariat, and would deserve to see the masses turn from it with contempt.

The Communist Party must be in the front rank of every mass struggle, every armed struggle, without exception. It puts itself at the head of the masses and leads them, *independently of the conditions in which the particular struggle takes place and whether it has a hundred per cent chance of victory or no chance at all.* The Party, as vanguard of the class, *is obliged to decide on the utility or otherwise of the action before the conflict begins,* and to agitate among the masses accordingly. But once armed struggle has begun, there must be no further hesitation about what the Party should do – about whether or not it should support and lead that struggle. On such occasions the Party must act as Marx did during the Paris Commune, and as Lenin did during the July Days in Petrograd. From September 1870 on, Marx was warning the Parisians against an insurrection, which he regarded as madness. But once the insurrection had broken out, he ranged himself with the insurgents. During the struggle of the Parisian proletariat, Marx wrote: ‘However that may be, the present rising in Paris – even if it be crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society – is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June insurrection in Paris.’¹⁶

Lenin, as we know, was against the July insurrection. ‘The moment has not come,’ he warned. But after the masses had taken to the streets he was with them.

There are various kinds of insurrection: victorious insurrections; mass insurrections which none the less end in failure; small-scale guerrilla warfare (minor skirmishes); putschist insurrections, i.e. those which are organized by a party or other organization on its own, without the participation of the masses.

The main criterion governing the Party’s attitude towards these various kinds of insurrection is the following: do the masses take part or not? *The Party rejects putsches, as a manifestation of petty-bourgeois adventurism.* The party supports and leads every mass struggle, including minor skirmishes or guerrilla operations, if the masses really take part in them.

It would however be a crude error to draw the conclusion from this that, if such and such a detachment of the proletariat is ready to

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 463, also quoted by Lenin.

engage in armed struggle against its class enemy, the Party is obliged, irrespective of the general and local circumstances, to urge it to insurrection. Such a party would not deserve the name of leader of the vanguard class.

Insurrection [said Lenin in 1905] is an important word. A call to insurrection is an extremely serious call. The more complex the social system, the better the organization of state power, and the more perfected the military machine, the more impermissible is it to launch such a slogan without due thought.¹⁷

When it calls on the masses to rise, the Party must always take the consequences into account. It must be aware that isolated risings will not achieve any decisive success. Its duty is to call upon the masses to rise at the moment when the local and general conjuncture is most favourable to success; when the balance of forces is favourable to the revolution; when there is a chance of seizing power – if not throughout the country, at least in a number of centres which can serve as a base for developing the revolution.

Certain local organizations of the Chinese Communist Party can be cited as examples of the way not to proceed in calling for insurrection. In late 1927 and early 1928, the communist organizations in several provinces (Chihli, Hunan, etc.), aware that an immediately revolutionary situation existed, repeatedly called on the proletarian masses to rise; they did this without considering at all whether these risings had any chance of success – whether they strengthened or weakened the positions of the proletariat. These appeals to the masses and attempts to organize insurrections reflected the ultra-left mentality of a certain fraction of the Chinese Communist Party.

The Party supports every mass insurrection. However, if the insurrection does not break out spontaneously, but is organized by the Party, if the masses embark on armed struggle in response to the Party's call, then the latter bears the responsibility both for the timing and for the conduct of the struggle.

Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other art, and is subject to certain procedural rules which, when neglected, will bring about the downfall of the party neglecting them. These rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances you have to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the brief experience of 1848 made the Germans fairly well acquainted with them. Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to

¹⁷ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, p. 367, in 'The Latest in *Iskra* Tactics, or Mock Elections as a New Incentive to an Uprising'.

go the whole way. Insurrection is an equation with very indefinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline and habitual authority; unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined. Secondly, once you have entered upon the insurrectionary career, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies. Surprise your antagonists while their forces are scattered, prepare the way for new successes, however small, but prepare daily; keep up the moral superiority which the first successful rising has given to you; rally in this way those vacillating elements to your side which always follow the strongest impulse and which always look out for the safer side; force your enemies to retreat before they can collect their strength against you; in the words of Danton, the greatest master of revolutionary tactics yet known: *de l'audace, de l'audace, encore de l'audace*.¹⁸

As we study the problems of insurrection, we shall continually bear in mind this remarkable passage from Engels so rich in content and so profound; it oriented Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in their tactics of insurrection, and it *must serve as a guideline* to all communist parties as they prepare for and lead the armed struggle for power.

As we analyse the character of past insurrections in various parts of the world, we intend not only to concern ourselves with problems of principle but also, wherever possible (wherever precise information is available to us), to study in detail questions of technical organization and military tactics involved in preparing for insurrection and in the conduct of the operation itself.

A study, as complete as possible, of the various examples of insurrection offered by history will provide the necessary material for certain general conclusions concerning the organization and conduct of proletarian armed struggle.

The history of the class struggle of the international proletariat in the twentieth century is extremely rich in examples of armed struggle. Our task does not involve studying every proletarian insurrection, nor even the most important ones. We shall analyse solely the most characteristic examples. For these are the most instructive, both from the point of view of political principles – i.e. the evaluation of social and political conditions and the timing of the insurrection – and also from the point of view of the preparation and military conduct of the insurrection itself.

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Germany*, quoted by Lenin in 'Can the Bolsheviks retain State power?', *Selected Works*, vol. II, pp. 419–20.