

Analysis and evaluation of Lenin's 'For Bread and Peace'

Petrograd, December, 1917.¹ Lenin signs his name on the article titled 'For Bread and Peace',² a text he'd written at the request of Zeth Höglund, an important figure for Swedish communism, who was part of a delegation the SVV³ sent to Petrograd as a declaration of solidarity after the October revolution, as he himself held a very good relationship with the Bolshevik leadership.⁴ Höglund was also the responsible publisher for the newspaper *Stormklockan*,⁵ whose intended audience seemed to be, for the most part, the socialist democratic youth of Sweden.

The text is dated 'December 14, 1917,' although it is unclear whether it was written by Lenin on the 14th, handed to Höglund for its publication in the *Stormklockan* on the 14th, or published in the newspaper on that date. All that is known is that the Swedish delegation arrived in Petrograd at the start of the month, and accounts of their stay are based on the first two weeks of December,⁶ which coincides with the start of the formal peace negotiations with Germany.

From this follows the classification of the text as a primary source of a circumstantial nature, originally written in Russian, and although in the following years it would be translated into other languages and published in different outlets, hence, reaching a vast audience, the intended audience was the Swedish youth. This makes clear Lenin's intention in its conception and consequent reception: simplicity and undersanding.

Lenin is not praised enough for his ability to dialectically analyse the material reality around him and let that analysis inform the course of his actions, and furthermore, effectively transmit that analysis to the masses. It is a feat few have been able to do in history.

Let us examine this in greater detail. Lenin begins the text with the result of his analysis: 'Two questions now take precedence over all other political questions—the question of bread and the question of peace.'⁷ After the 'Decree on Peace'⁸ was issued by the Second Congress of Soviets on Oct 26, invitations were sent to the belligerent nations with the goal to end Russia's participation in the war, 'on the basis of no annexations or indemnities and self-determination

¹ All dates given in this commentary coincide with the Julian calendar, as the decree on the Introduction of the Western European calendar had not been issued yet.

² Lenin, V. I., 'For Bread and Peace' in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, ed. by George Hanna, trans. by Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960–1970), vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387, 568.

³ *Sveriges socialdemokratiska vänsterparti* (SSV) or Swedish Social Democratic Left Party.

⁴ Ada Berg Arbro, 'Homegrown Bolsheviks? The Swedish Left-Wing Socialists and the Question of Revolution 1917-1921,' (published BA dissertation, Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli, 2024), p. 97-98.

⁵ 'The responsible publisher of the newspaper at this time was a man named Zeth Höglund, who came to be like an unspoken leader of the youth union.' See Tova Holmqvist, 'För fosterlandet: En undersökning av ungsocialisternas och ungdomdemokraternas syn på nationalism mellan 1914 och 1917 genom tidningarna Brand och Stormklockan' [For the Fatherland: An investigation of the young socialists' and young democrats' views on nationalism between 1914 and 1917 through the newspapers Brand and Stormklockan], (Mid Sweden University, 2021), p. 4.

⁶ Berg Arbro, 'Homegrown Bolsheviks? The Swedish Left-Wing Socialists and the Question of Revolution 1917-1921,' p. 97-98.

⁷ Lenin, V. I., 'For Bread and Peace' in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387.

⁸ Lenin, V. I., 'Decree on Peace' in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 249-253.

for national minorities.’⁹ The Entente Powers ignored said invitations, but Soviet Russia would agree to an armistice with Germany, an armistice that would be automatically extended, unless one of the parties involved gave one week’s notice to resume the fighting. What followed were en masse desertions at the front, and the threat of complete collapse: winter was already upon them, and famine was about to cripple both countryside and city; municipal strikes and counter-revolutionary plots posed a security threat to the Soviet apparatus.¹⁰

The war is central to Bolshevik theory, Lenin explains:

The imperialist war, the war between the biggest and richest banking firms, Britain and Germany, that is being waged for world domination, the division of the spoils, for the plunder of small and weak nations; this horrible, criminal war has ruined all countries, exhausted all peoples, and confronted mankind with the alternative—either sacrifice all civilisation and perish or throw off the capitalist yoke in the revolutionary way, do away with the rule of the bourgeoisie and win socialism and durable peace.¹¹

In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*,¹² Lenin argues imperialism is the logical end result of a system of competition within a system of finite resources. Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.¹³

An imperialist war, a bourgeois war, cannot be won by the proletariat, it can only be won by Empire and a bourgeoisie. The only war that the workers can win is that of class struggle. Lenin is clear: ‘If socialism is not victorious, peace between the capitalist States will be only a truce, an interlude, a time of preparation for a fresh slaughter of the peoples.’¹⁴ If socialism is not victorious, there is and will only be one certainty: in time the bull is brought to bear the yoke, ‘capital can only maintain its domination only by continually increasing its military forces.’¹⁵

This dialectical analysis has to start from the material reality that surrounds the workers: famine and war. In the context of capital, in the development of capital, civilisation and culture do not amount to anything worth anything.

⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume III*, ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny, (Cambridge university press, 2006), p. 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128-129.

¹¹ Lenin, V. I., ‘For Bread and Peace’ in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387.

¹² Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Foundations, #11 (Foreign languages press, 2020), p. 17.

¹³ Karl Marx, with Friedrich Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Martin Milligan, Great Books in Philosophy (Prometheus, 1988), p. 212.

¹⁴ Lenin, V. I., ‘For Bread and Peace’ in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387.

¹⁵ Hilderling finance capital

Peace and bread are the basic demands of the workers and the exploited. The war has made these demands extremely urgent. The war has brought hunger to the most civilised countries, to those most culturally developed.¹⁶

As such, the war as it stands has two dimensions: one where it destroys everything and everyone in the end, having in mind that the resources of the system are finite, and another where it develops further and helps create a new order, a new set of rules as such for the continuation of the competition. Lenin explains:

On the other hand, the war, as a tremendous historical process, has accelerated social development to an unheard-of degree. Capitalism had developed into imperialism, i.e., into monopoly capitalism, and under the influence of the war it has become state monopoly capitalism. We have now reached the stage of world economy that is the immediate stepping stone to socialism.¹⁷

It is due to capital that social relations and production have changed: 'In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.'¹⁸ From this follows that the liberation from it would be of the same nature: international and universal.

Lenin corroborates this with his ending:

The socialist revolution that has begun in Russia is, therefore, only the beginning of the world socialist revolution. Peace and bread, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, revolutionary means for the healing of war wounds, the complete victory of socialism—such are the aims of the struggle.¹⁹

'For Peace and Bread' is a perfect dialectical materialist analysis, the same that guided and informed Bolshevik action. The aim of the text was accessibility: both of the historical circumstances that surround the text and the process in motion that dialectical materialism is itself.

¹⁶ Lenin, V. I., 'For Bread and Peace' in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Marx, with Friedrich Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, p. 213.

¹⁹ Lenin, V. I., 'For Bread and Peace' in *Collected Works*, 45 vols, vol. XXVI: *September 1917–February 1918* (1964), p. 387.

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