‘Lenin, Conspiratoriality, October’

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The accusation against Lenin of conspiratoriality, of Blanquism, was one of the common accusations by the Mensheviks through the long years of bitter struggle. After the February Revolution, this accusation was taken up with renewed force by the Mensheviks, SRS, and Kadets – by all the enemies of Bolshevism.

There is no sense in returning to these quarrels now. Not only is the October Revolution behind us, but so too are the years of the cruellest civil war, in which the great majority of the toiling masses participated on the side of the Bolsheviks.

Soviet power was won and strengthened through the struggle of millions. For many years, conspiratoriality, Blanquism (but without its revolutionary aspect, of course) became the main occupation of all anti-Soviet parties, especially the socialist parties, although this conspiratoriality found no traction at all in the broader masses.

The accusation of conspiratoriality against the Bolsheviks ignored the fact of seven years of Soviet power as a deeply popular power that could be toppled neither by conspiratorial insurrections [vosstaniia] inside the country nor by the intervention.

But maybe the October insurrection was carried out not according to Lenin, not by a Leninist path, but with corrections which fundamentally altered the Leninist line?

Unfortunately, this conclusion can be drawn from comrade Trotsky’s recollections in his pamphlet Lenin.

We are all aware that comrade Trotsky was one of the organisers of the October insurrection, both as chairman of the Petersburg Soviet and as a member of the Revolutionary Committee, which was in fact the first government of the October Revolution.

2 L.D. Trotsky, O Lenine, Gosizdat, chapter on ‘Perevorot’ [original footnote]. [Trotsky 1924a; Trotsky 1971, see chapter entitled ‘The Uprising’].
3 This refers to the MRC, the Military Revolutionary Committee that organised the insurrection.
This makes comrade Trotsky’s recollections of the insurrection most valuable, but also most verifiable.

Unfortunately, comrade Trotsky relied too heavily on his own memory and therefore probably let a number of assertions slip in about Lenin’s position, vis-à-vis the insurrection, which do not correspond to the factual evidence.

Comrade Trotsky conceded that ‘my recollections of the last few days before the actual upheaval became extremely confused and telescoped in my memory, so that it is difficult for me to sort them out and establish clearly the time and place of every incident’.4

This is a general problem with all reminiscences, which are based on personal memory and not on documents, and it must be said frankly that a large number of all the reminiscences published in our country reproduce facts with a very large portion of subjectivity, often confusing the issue at hand.

We feel that this is precisely why comrade Lenin’s position on the insurrection prior to October is so muddled in comrade Trotsky’s recollections.

On the well-known question of comrade Lenin’s decisive demand in September–October that the insurrection be accelerated, and that its timing not be linked with the convocation of the Second Congress of Soviets, comrade Trotsky stated that Lenin urged that ‘the Party must seize power, arms in hand, and then we could talk about the Congress’.5

In Trotsky’s view, comrade Lenin apparently wanted the party to seize power, circumventing the Soviets, and ‘behind the back’ of the Soviets.

In a polemic with comrade Lenin, he stated:

As in July, Lenin overrated both the shrewdness and the vigor – and perhaps the material possibilities too – of our opponents. To some degree, Lenin’s appraisal of the enemy had a purpose which was tactically correct: By overestimating the enemy’s forces, he aimed at stimulating the party and provoking it to redouble its efforts. And yet the party could not seize power by itself, independently of the Soviets and behind its back. This would have been a mistake, the consequences of which would have affected the attitude of the workers and might have had harmful repercussions within the Petersburg garrison. The soldiers knew their delegates in the Soviet; it was through the Soviet that they knew the party. If the uprising had taken place behind the back of the Soviet, independent of it, without its authority and not openly and for all to see as a further

4 Trotsky 1971, p. 95.
5 Trotsky 1971, p. 92.