



Winning over the soldiers was vital for Bolshevik strategy

Biography of a sister slogan

The demand for the ‘publication of the secret treaties’, which represented a key turning point in support for the Bolsheviks, predated the April theses by several weeks, writes **Lars T Lih**. This is the seventh and concluding part of the series, ‘All power to the soviets!’

On March 4 1917 (using the old Russian calendar), Paul Miliukov, the foreign minister of the Provisional Government newly installed by the February revolution, sent a telegram to Russian embassies abroad. He told them what Allied governments wanted to hear: the new post-tsarist government intended to fully honour the treaties between them and Russia. In Miliukov’s mind, in fact, the whole point of the revolution was to be able to carry out the obligations imposed by the treaties more effectively. Yet, in his rush to reassure the Allies, Miliukov planted a time bomb - for himself personally and, a few months later, for the Provisional Government.

For the moment, this telegram and others like it passed unnoticed in Russia itself. Yet some of the Russian revolutionaries in exile in Europe immediately grasped the centrality of the issue of the tsarist treaties. The Bolshevik, Grigori Zinoviev, living in Berne, seized on Miliukov’s statements as proof that no revolution had occurred in foreign policy. He drafted an article on the treaty issue that got itself to Russia before Zinoviev himself did: it was published in *Pravda* on March 25, right after the publication of Lenin’s ‘Letter from afar’. The Socialist Revolutionary

leader, Viktor Chernov, also in exile, realised too the discrepancy between the image the Provisional Government projected abroad and the one it projected at home. He forcefully pointed out this discrepancy as soon as he himself returned home in early April. Although both Zinoviev and Chernov thought that the secret treaties were a scandal, they drew dramatically different political lessons.

In mid-March, two senior Bolsheviks, Lev Kamenev and Iosif Stalin, arrived back in Petrograd from internal exile in Siberia. These two leaders were deadly serious about taking power and keeping it. As Kamenev put it, speaking confidentially to fellow Bolsheviks, “What’s important is not taking the *vlast* [power] - what’s important is to retain the *vlast*.”¹ The two leaders quickly realised that obtaining the loyalty of the soldiers was key to their plans. This was no easy task: the Bolsheviks had to shed the ‘defeatist’ image that made them seem the enemy of the soldier and yet also expose the war as ‘imperialist’. To solve this dilemma, Kamenev and Stalin resorted to the traditional socialist technique of agitation campaigns in order to present concrete demands to the Provisional Government to make genuine peace overtures. Their calculation was

straightforward: the inevitable failure of the Provisional Government to act on these demands would expose the real motives of the war in dramatic and visible fashion.

In late March, these three streams - Miliukov’s loyalty to tsarist commitments, Zinoviev’s focus on the secret treaties, and the agitation campaign launched by the Petrograd Bolsheviks - began to come together in explosive fashion. Immediately after the publication of Zinoviev’s *Pravda* article on March 25, the secret treaties moved toward the centre of the Bolshevik campaign. The first resolution by worker and soldier mass meetings calling for publication of the secret treaties occurred in late March. Meanwhile, the clash between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government over war aims picked up speed. Yet the response to this crisis within the socialist leaders of the soviet moved in two very different directions. On March 29, at the first national conference of soviets, the Bolshevik, Viktor Nogin, called on the conference to demand the publication of the secret treaties. In response, another newly arrived socialist leader - Irakli Tsereteli, soon to become the spokesman for ‘revolutionary defensism’ and a key member of the ‘moderate’ soviet leadership - argued against

publication. A strong majority supported Tsereteli.

And thus - on the eve of the arrival of Lenin and Zinoviev in early April - the die was cast, the battle lines were drawn. The demand to publish the secret treaties became a marker of Bolshevik identity and a gauge of their growing influence among the soviet constituency. One of the first acts of the new soviet government installed in October was to fulfil this demand by publishing the treaties. The secret treaties slogan fully deserves to be called the sister slogan to ‘All power to the soviets!’, but its story has never been told - until now.

Secret treaties and agreementism

‘Agreementism’ was a key concept in the politics of 1917, although its centrality has been hidden by inadequate translations, such as ‘compromise’ or ‘conciliation’. The Russian term *soglashatelstvo* is based directly on the ordinary word for ‘agreement’ (*soglashenie*). True, the ending of the Russian term connotes stronger disapproval than ‘-ism’. Nevertheless, the agreementists - aka the moderate socialists - did make their case by insisting on the necessity of an agreement between

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socialist and non-socialist political forces. Thus perhaps 'agreementism' can be used in English as a relatively non-partisan term of analysis. In any event, an adequate substitute is hard to find.

In the context of 1917, agreementism arises out of two political fault lines. The first is between 'revolutionary democracy' and 'census society' - between the *narod* (people) and the *tsentsoviki* (censitarians). 'Revolutionary democracy' (or simply 'the democracy') included the workers, the peasants and soldiers, and the urban lower classes. The term *tsentsoviki* originally referred to those who had enough property to vote under restrictive electoral laws. Though *tsentsoviki* was a common term in 1917, but here I shall simply use the less vivid 'elite society'.

The two sides of Russian society - 'revolutionary democracy' and elite, educated society - had strongly contrasting habits, manners and world views, as reflected in their respective political representation: the socialists had a monopoly on one side, non-socialists on the other. But this underlying political fault line led directly to a second one *within* revolutionary democracy: can we accomplish our programme by entering some sort of agreement with parts of elite society, or must we reject any such agreement? This choice was not imposed by this or that socialist theoretician, but by the logic of things.

Anti-agreementism is thus the negative flip-side of full soviet power - or rather, anti-agreementism explains why *all* power, the whole *vlast*, has to go to the political representatives of revolutionary democracy. It is not enough to say to a 'bourgeois' government or coalition government: here is our programme; carry it out. No, the soviet programme *cannot be carried out at all* by means of a political agreement with an independent, elite political force, because their very nature leads to sabotage. So said the anti-agreementists.

How does one recognise an anti-agreementist political strategy? Not through any particular term or shibboleth - and this holds true especially in the early days of the revolution, before political vocabulary fully congealed. An agreementist might say: we support the Provisional Government 'insofar as' (*postolku-poskolku*) it carries out our programme - and yet never have any real intention of withdrawing support, no matter what happened. An anti-agreementist might say exactly the same thing, in the confident expectation that the Provisional Government would soon show its counterrevolutionary nature. Or take a word like *kontrol*: that is, checking up on whether the government is making good on its commitments. Consider the following:

Kamenev, March 14: We call the revolutionary democracy, headed by the proletariat, to the most tireless *kontrol* on all the actions of the *vlast*, whether in the centre or in the localities. We must realise that the paths of the democracy and of the Provisional Government will diverge - when the bourgeoisie comes to its senses, it will inevitably attempt to halt the revolutionary movement and not permit it to develop to the point of satisfying the essential needs of the proletariat and the peasantry.²

Moscow Party Committee (Bolsheviks), March 25: By imposing *kontrol* on each step of the Provisional Government, the proletariat exposes each attempt to crush the further development of the revolution in the interests of the dominant classes and prepares the necessary conditions for the transfer of the *vlast* into the hand of the revolutionary democracy.³

Woytinsky, March 29: As long as we have *kontrol* [over the actions of the Provisional Government], it will carry out our programme. The government doesn't *want* to solve the tasks of the revolution, but [nevertheless] it will be able to solve them under the *kontrol* of the revolutionary democracy.⁴

In the first two passages, *kontrol* is a technique for exposing the government and thus for subverting any possible agreement. In the third passage, *kontrol* is used as a way of *reassuring* the soviet constituency: don't worry - even a bourgeois government *will* carry out our programme, because we're here to keep a sharp eye on it - it is only the hired clerk (*prikazchik*) of the soviets. The speaker in this instance, Wladimir Woytinsky, made this pronouncement at a Bolshevik conference in late March, quickly realised he was in the wrong party, and left - *before* Lenin arrived. He went on to become one of the top spokesmen for socialist agreementism in 1917.

The issue of the secret treaties was an ideal litmus test for bringing out the political fault lines both within society as a whole and within revolutionary democracy. In 1921, Edward

Allsworth Ross, an American sociologist who spent time in Russia in 1917 and wrote several books about the experience, described the gaping chasm between revolutionary democracy and elite society in foreign policy:

A complete contradiction exists between the bourgeois theory of the war and the socialist theory, and hardly has the first flush of the revolution passed before this brings about a startling confrontation of opposed social classes. According to the bourgeois theory, Germany and Austria, aspiring to world domination, are trying to subjugate the free democracies of Europe: England, France and Belgium. To assure them of future security it is necessary for the Allies to win a 'complete victory'. According to the socialists, the war is a result of the competition of the ruling classes in England, France and Russia, on the one hand, in Germany and Austria, on the other, who are aiming to conquer and subjugate foreign lands and peoples.⁵

The secret treaties shone a garish light on this political fault line. Viktor Chernov, a founder of the Socialist Revolutionaries, later described his message to the soviet constituency as soon as he returned from exile in early April, a week or so after Zinoviev's article appeared in *Pravda* (for some reason, Chernov refers to himself in the third person):

Russian émigré revolutionaries were now returning to Russia via England and Scandinavia, and in the executive committee [of the Petrograd Soviet] Chernov soon made a report explaining that all the communiqués, interviews, etc of the Russian ministry of foreign affairs meant but one thing: the revolution had made absolutely no change in the foreign policy and war aims of tsarist Russia; the agreements concluded by tsarist diplomacy were still considered inviolable for revolutionary Russia; no-one abroad had even heard of the proclamation of war aims, intended solely for home consumption.⁶

All of revolutionary democracy was thus strongly opposed to the secret treaties as such. But the demand to *publish* them promptly brought to the surface the fault line *within* the soviet camp. Chernov - so eloquent about "all the filth, the unceremonious greed, the saturnalia of predator appetites, expressed in the secret treaties" - nevertheless argued against publication:

Bolshevism advanced the abrupt revolutionary demand: publish these documents immediately, and thus deal a moral blow to the world war ... United soviet democracy, led by the bloc of Social Revolutionaries and Social Democrats, could follow neither Lenin nor Miliukov.

The one-sided publication of the secret documents of the Entente prior to the end of the war or the German revolution, which would simultaneously expose the secrets of Wilhelm's diplomacy, it regarded as a blow - not at the war as such, but only at one warring side. It meant disrupting the Entente from within, and consciously or unconsciously abetting Hohenzollern Germany.⁷

The same rationale was advanced by agreementists throughout the year by spokesmen like Tsereteli and Woytinsky. Agreement with the Allies was presented as the logical corollary to agreement with the liberal party at home.⁸ Looking closely at agreementist rationales, we find very quickly that the strongest motivation was not any buoyant confidence in the efficacy of a coalition or similar political agreements, but rather a *fear of isolation* - isolation from educated society at home and from the Allies abroad. And it must be added that these fears had a solid, realistic base - the costs of political isolation did prove to be very high. Unfortunately, this fact did not make agreementism in 1917 any more workable.

Give credit where credit is due: Zinoviev instantly saw the implications of the secret treaties issue as soon as he read Miliukov's instructions to Russian ambassadors in early March. Expert rabble-rouser that he was, Zinoviev framed the issue as an outrage and insult to the workers and peasants. And, far from worrying about isolating the revolution from the Allies, Zinoviev painted them as deadly enemies:

The sanctity of treaties concluded with foreign states! Comrades! Just who do you think made these treaties? Wasn't it that same Nicholas the Bloody and his gang? Does the *narod* know, does the working class know, *the content* of these treaties - nine-tenths of which are secret?

Does even Miliukov and his ilk know these treaties in all their details?

And if they do know, then why don't they publish them for everyone to see, so that the *narod* can itself judge and say: do we approve or do we repudiate? Or does Mr Miliukov make the same assumptions as the old tsarist ministers: the *narod* is "unenlightened trash" who should just die on the fields of battle, while politics, treaty-making, should be left only to the elite ministers?

Do the workers and soldiers agree with this opinion? Is this why they died on the streets of Petrograd? ...

Will Mr Miliukov publish these old secret treaties, the ones whose sanctity he announces? I don't think so! He *can't* do this. He cannot say to the workers, peasants, soldiers: go on, die on the field of battle, because we want to keep looting; go and die, because we, the Russian, English and French bourgeois, refuse to share the swag with the German and Austrian bourgeois. And publishing the secret treaties would signify telling the Russian *narod* exactly that.

The tight link besides the two sister slogans - 'All power to the soviets!' and "We demand the publication of the secret treaties" - was not hard to draw. Zinoviev did so in a speech soon after his return home (Lenin was present at this speech):

First of all, we need to make clear why the war is happening, who started the war, who needs the war. When the majority of soldiers understands this, the war is done for ...

What we need in Russia is for there to be only one *vlast*: a government of the *Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies*. Soldier deputies: these are the representatives of the peasantry. Workers and peasants, office workers, railroad workers and so on - this is the vast majority of the whole population of Russia. All of the *vlast* should belong to them. And then we would approach the issue of the war differently. Workers and soldiers! *Entrust* the issue of peace to yourself, to the government of the Worker and Soldier Deputies. You will publish the secret treaties of the tsar and shower shame on these treaties before the whole world. And then we will go with swift steps to a genuinely democratic peace.⁹

The continuing vitality of the secret treaties as an anti-agreementist slogan was guaranteed by the very visible collapse of agreementist foreign policy. The story is set out fully in Rex Wade's *The Russian search for peace*, an early (1969), but still indispensable, account. An equally valid title for Wade's study would be 'The agreementist search for a coherent response to the war issue'. With both titles, the outcome is the same: by the end of the summer, a complete "shambles" (to use Wade's term).¹⁰

The agreementists argued that revision of war aims could be accomplished *without* taking steps that would inevitably alienate the Allies - for example, publishing the treaties. They assured the soviet constituency that they could and would compel the Provisional Government to carry out the appropriate policy. A two-pronged approach was envisioned: an inter-Allied conference on war aims and an international socialist conference. Neither approach had the slightest chance of achieving results. Worse - through convoluted, yet compelling, logic, the agreementists talked themselves into endorsing the disastrous June military offensive. If Russia was going to get the Allies to revise their war aims, then it had to demonstrate that Russia's opinion was worth taking into account. In order to demonstrate that revolutionary Russia still had a powerful army, it had to launch an offensive. Unfortunately, the June offensive showed the opposite: the Russian army was on the verge of disintegration.

The agreementist policy was a disaster not only in terms of results, but in terms of the bad faith that permeated the whole exercise. Rex Wade's careful account reveals little beyond naivety, self-deception, outright deception, and much obfuscating on thin ice. Even the successes of the agreementists - such as forcing the removal of 'Mr Secret Treaties', Paul Miliukov - only reinforced the anti-agreementist message. EA Ross sums up the effects of the 'April crisis' that ended with Miliukov gone and a coalition government installed:

The contrast in attitude toward peace between the small, comfortably off classes and the huge undernourished, decimated, suffering, despairing masses has been staged for all to see. The issue being joined between the Provisional Government and the Soviet, the

bourgeoisie has rallied round the Provisional Government, while the democracy has rallied round the Soviet. The working nine-tenths of the people will mark and inwardly digest the significance of the fact that the bourgeoisie tenth regards the Provisional Government as *their* government. The spectre of civil war, which for two days hovered over the capital, vanishes for a season, but it will return ...

The Soviet issues a proclamation expressing "full confidence" in the new [coalition] government and commending it to the nation. So, with its six socialists to ten bourgeois liberals, the ministry starts off with renewed vigour; but every day from a thousand street corners and soap boxes spreads the idea, 'All power to the soviets!'¹¹

Lenin and 'honest defencism'

From the beginning of 1914 until his arrival in Russia in early April, Lenin strongly endorsed the slogan of 'defeatism'. After his return from exile, the word suddenly vanished from his vocabulary and was never heard from him again. The change was not merely verbal, since Lenin and the Bolsheviks increasingly critiqued the Provisional Government precisely for its incompetent handling of Russia's defence. Lenin was perfectly open about the motivation for this change: to craft a message that would reach the mass soviet constituency, particularly the soldiers.

These facts provide essential context for understanding Bolshevik tactics in March 1917. The record was first set out over half a century ago by an activist historian in the Trotskyist tradition, Hal Draper, in his magisterial study of the defeatism slogan.¹² To date, however, his findings have barely penetrated the consciousness of either academic or activist historians of the Russian Revolution. Draper did not consult Russian-language sources, yet such was his carefulness, comprehensiveness, and concern for following the evidence that his conclusions are only strengthened by Russian-language sources that were unavailable to him. To underscore this remarkable achievement, I will set out the facts using only Draper's own documentation, and afterwards add extra evidence from my own investigations.

In debates over the Brest-Litovsk treaty in early 1918, Lenin responded to the Left SR, Kamkov, with the following comment (parenthetical remarks by Draper):

He [Kamkov] heard that we were defeatists, and he reminded himself of this when we have ceased to be defeatists ... We were defeatists under the tsar, but under Tsereteli and Chernov [ie, under the Kerensky regime] we were not defeatists. We came out in *Pravda* with a proclamation which Krylenko, then still persecuted, published in the army, entitled 'Why I journey to Petersburg'. He said: "We do not call you to senseless riots [*bunty*]."

This was not the disintegration of the army. The army was disrupted by those who declared this great war [ie, by the imperialists who had brought the war on] ... And I assert here that we - beginning with this proclamation by Krylenko, which was not the first and which I mention because I especially remember it - we did not disrupt the army, but said: 'Hold the front - the sooner you will take the power, the easier you will maintain it.'¹³

The reason for the turnabout in message is not far to seek. Upon his return to Russia, Lenin could see for himself that the Bolsheviks were in a small minority among the soviet constituency. Their unpopularity could not be blamed on repression and obstacles to spreading the message, since "nowhere is there the degree of freedom we have".¹⁴ No, the reason was the "conscientious" defencism of the *narod*:

Here [in Russia] the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies carries its policy of revolutionary defencism into effect, not by violence, but because the masses trust it ... In Europe, there is no 'conscientious' revolutionary defencism, of the sort we have in Russia, where the people have handed over the power to the bourgeoisie, because of ignorance, inertia, the habit of suffering the rod, tradition.¹⁵

This situation imposed a tactical dilemma: either double down on defeatism and scold the masses for their naive defencism, or find a way to bring the anti-imperialist message directly to the soldiers. Lenin's choice was clear:

The masses approach the question [of the war] not from a theoretical, but from a practical, viewpoint. Our mistake lies in our theoretical approach ... Before the representatives of the soldiers, the matter must be put in a practical way - otherwise nothing will come of it ... We Bolsheviks are in the habit of adopting a maximum of revolutionism. But this is not enough.¹⁶

Draper brings out what is happening here: in European exile Lenin was completely engulfed in intra-socialist polemics, without any real chance to mobilise a mass constituency. In Russia, mobilising a new-to-politics constituency was not just a possibility - it was a necessity:

Lenin's main emphasis [when polemicising with European socialists from 1914 to 1917] is constantly to draw the hardest, sharpest line against the pro-war leaders and anyone who makes concessions to them. Only rarely does he seem to pay attention to a task which is different: how to bridge the gap between the intransigent line of opposition to the war and the *thinking of the masses of workers* who are under the spell of defeatism, how to present his ideas to *them* ...

Slogans which previously seemed to him to be dangerous concessions to social-patriotism now take on a new colour as a necessary *bridge* to the social-patriotism of the masses, as a 'practical' approach ... What motivated his new line on the war, directly, was rather the accompanying phenomenon of 'conscientious' defencism - that is, the necessity of shaping a policy of revolutionary anti-war opposition, which would mesh with the thinking of the masses.¹⁷

Draper goes on to document how the Bolsheviks moved rapidly *away* from arguing 'Even defence is illegitimate under a bourgeois government' towards arguing, 'The bourgeois government is bad because it cannot organise an effective defence.' For example:

In May 1917 Lenin, calling on the peasants to take the land, added that they should do so "using every effort to increase the production of grain and meat, for our soldiers at the front are suffering terribly from hunger". He told them to take the land themselves and work it well, because "This is necessary in order to improve the provisioning of the soldiers at the front."¹⁸

The peasants should support the army, says Lenin now, and the Provisional Government should be thrown out because it does not. In September 1917, he writes that the Kornilov revolt showed people that

the landowners and the bourgeoisie ... are now ready to commit, and are committing, the most outlandish crimes, such as giving up Riga (and afterwards Petrograd) to the Germans, laying the war front open, putting the Bolshevik regiments under fire, starting a mutiny, leading troops against the capital with the Wild Division at their head, etc - all in order to seize all power and put it in the hands of the bourgeoisie.¹⁹

Draper also cites Trotsky's August pamphlet *What's next*, in which he savages the military offensive authorised by the coalition Provisional Government in June as a criminally incompetent undermining of Russia's effective defence.

Thus Draper. In the next section, we shall see how Bolshevik leaders in March faced the same hard truths about the Bolshevik minority status and came to very similar tactical conclusions. But the question arises: if the Bolsheviks rejected defeatism and claimed that they could provide the strongest defence of Russia, was there anything substantive to distinguish them from the 'revolutionary defencism' of the Mensheviks and SRs? Yes, of course, and we already know what it is: agreementism.

Agreementists such as Tsereteli and Woytinsky argued that in order to have an effective defence you *must not* reject agreements with the elite at home and break with the Allies abroad. The Bolsheviks argued that in order to have an effective defence you *must* reject any sort of agreement with the Russian elite, as well as break with the "imperialist" Allies. And, as we have seen, the demand to publish the secret treaties brings out this crucial divide admirably.

Let me now add a few items that provide further support for Draper's case. Draper talks about "the masses," but in actuality the main challenge was winning over the soldiers in

particular. The decisive influence of the soldiers in the Petrograd Soviet was a central feature of revolutionary politics in 1917 - one that challenged the pre-war Bolshevik scenario. From a strictly theoretical standpoint, the soldiers could be labelled 'peasants in uniform' and slotted into the scenario accordingly. But, in practice, dealing with the soldier constituency of the Petrograd Soviet pushed the Bolsheviks right out of their comfort zone of 'advanced workers' and into real mass politics. As Kollontai observed in a letter to Lenin after she arrived on March 18,

The mood here is dictated by the soldier, and it is the soldier who creates the unique atmosphere, where we see all mixed up together the grandeur of vigorously expressed democratic freedoms, the awakening of a civic awareness of equal rights, and a complete incomprehension of the complexity of the moment we are living through.²⁰

According to Draper, the last recorded endorsement by Lenin of defeatism came in December 1916. We now know that Lenin was still aggressively committed to defeatism even after the February revolution. In the original draft of his first 'Letter from afar' (not available to Draper) he wrote:

Those who, openly grovelling to the bourgeoisie or simply lacking backbone, howled and wailed against 'defeatism' are now faced by the fact of the historical connection between the defeat of the extremely backward and barbarous tsarist monarchy and the beginning of the revolutionary conflagration.²¹

This passage was excised (or should I say exorcised) prior to publication of the 'Letter' in *Pravda* on March 21-22. As I remarked in my study of its publication, this is the one genuine example of censorship of Lenin's political views by the Petrograd Bolsheviks. Given the political situation within the Petrograd Soviet, crowing about the wonderfulness of defeatism was exactly what was not needed. And, as we have seen, Lenin realised this himself very soon after he stepped off the train at the Finland Station.

Draper's documentation of the Bolshevik emphasis on effective defence of the revolution can be multiplied a hundred times over. Having read all of Trotsky's 1917 writings, I can affirm that he returned again and again to the disastrous June offensive as a blow to Russia's defence - one that the Bolsheviks themselves had warned against. Trotsky's anger at the offensive is only one of many indications of Trotsky's anti-agreementist defencism. Another striking example of the Bolshevik stance is a pamphlet written by Stalin and issued in the summer that rebutted charges that Bolsheviks were responsible for the disintegration of the army. The pamphlet points to the excellent fighting record of the army units with the most pronounced Bolshevik influence.²² Or we might cite a passage from 'A basic question', the Lenin article published in April that we analysed earlier in the present series:

Can the majority of the peasants in Russia declare for the merging of all the banks into one, in a way that will ensure that there will be a branch of a single nationwide state bank in each village? It can, because the convenience and advantage for the *narod* of such a measure are unquestionable. *Even* the 'defencists' could be for such a measure, as it would heighten Russia's capacity for 'defence' enormously.

We leave this topic with a comment by Lenin in 1921 that almost seems to endorse Draper's argument decades before he made it. This comment - not published until the 1950s - throws a highly unexpected light on the nature of any 'rearming' that took place in April 1917:

At the beginning of the war, we Bolsheviks adhered to a single slogan - that of civil war, and a ruthless one at that. We branded as a traitor everyone who did not support the idea of civil war. But when we came back to Russia in March 1917 we changed our position entirely. When we returned to Russia and spoke to the peasants and workers, we saw that they all stood for defence of the homeland - of course, in quite a different sense from the Mensheviks - and we could not call these ordinary workers and peasants scoundrels and traitors. We described this as 'honest defencism' ...

On April 7, I published my theses, in which I called for caution and patience. Our original stand at the beginning of the war was correct: it was important then to form a definite and resolute core. Our subsequent stand was correct too. It proceeded from the assumption that the

masses had to be won over.²³

The "assumption that the masses had to be won over" was forced upon Lenin by his hands-on appreciation of the situation in Petrograd. The same hands-on appreciation, the same shock over Bolshevik unpopularity and the same assumption about winning over the masses can also be observed in the Bolshevik leaders who showed up in Petrograd a couple of weeks before Lenin.

Kamenev and Stalin launch a campaign

Lenin was not the only nor even the first Bolshevik leader to confront the phenomenon of 'honest defencism'. The two senior Bolsheviks in Russia, Lev Kamenev and Iosif Stalin, faced the same challenges when they arrived in Petrograd from Siberian exile in mid-March. They realised with shock that the Bolsheviks - previously the dominant voice in the worker underground - were now in a much different and more precarious position in the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies.

We are lucky to have Kamenev's on-the-spot reaction to this unexpected situation. At a party committee meeting on March 18, Kamenev explained to his fellow Bolsheviks the tactical challenge, as he saw it.²⁴ First of all, they had to face the hard truth about their present unpopularity:

It is surprising that the Bolsheviks are not occupying a dominant position in the Petrograd Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies - and why do they allow into the soviet the liquidators, who do not express the outlook of the Petrograd workers? We are the representatives of the revolutionary element in Petrograd, but, in the meantime, it seems that the wide masses do not understand us. Evidently, since we are essentially correct, we are formulating our resolutions and decisions in a way that the masses do not understand.

Compare these words of Kamenev to Lenin's outlook, as described in the previous section. Kamenev does not argue that the Bolshevik had to change their party line in order to become more popular, but rather that they had to make special efforts to make the line comprehensible to the wide masses.

Kamenev proceeded to set out the basic features of the overall political situation from a Bolshevik point of view: the present Provisional Government was doomed, the soviet would sooner or later replace it, but, since neither the soviet nor the Bolsheviks themselves were ready yet for the final battle, the highest priority was urgent organising on a national scale:

As events unfold, one of the two must perish: either the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies or the Provisional Government ... The present Provisional Government will not succeed in organising and putting to rights normal life. On this fact it will break its head ... Have we got to the point where we ourselves can create a proletarian dictatorship? No. What's important is not taking the *vlast* - what's important is to retain [*uderzhat*] the *vlast*.²⁵

That moment will come, but it is to our advantage to put it off, since right now our forces are still insufficient ... When we rest assured that throughout Russia, in every corner, there exist organised cells of the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies, then we will have [the necessary] force.

Kamenev and Stalin advocated a straightforward solution for achieving these goals. The Bolsheviks urgently needed to shake off the 'defeatism' image. To get across their fundamental anti-agreementist message, the Bolsheviks must resort to the tried and true socialist technique of large-scale agitation campaigns organised around 'demands'. Any such demands had a double ulterior purpose: to expose the real nature of the Provisional Government and to demonstrate that the Bolsheviks should be taken seriously as a governing party.

The new orientation was rolled out in *Pravda* on two successive days, March 15 and 16. Why the double-barrelled announcement? Because the first try by Kamenev on March 15 was inadequate in crucial respects, so that two corrective articles - one by Stalin and one unsigned - had to be published the very next day to remove any misunderstandings and ambiguities.²⁶

Kamenev's first-try editorial on March 15 was entitled 'Without secret diplomacy' - a foreshadowing of the soon-to-appear slogan of the secret treaties. The first half of Kamenev's editorial had the negative goal of freeing the

Bolsheviks from the taint of 'defeatism'. Midway through the article, there is a pivotal 'but': we are not defeatists, of course, *but* we also regard the present conflict as an imperialist war conducted by an imperialist government:

But [my emphasis] a liberated *narod* has the right to know what it is fighting for; it has the right to determine its own goals and tasks in a war that was not dreamed up by it. It must announce - not only to its friends, but to its enemies - that it is not striving for any conquests nor for any takeover of alien lands, and that it offers each nationality to decide how to build its own fate.

Kamenev thus calls for "a wide and energetic campaign" to demand that the Provisional Government not only announce new war aims, but also move actively toward peace talks. Crucially, the aim of 'demands' in a campaign of this kind was *not* to change the behaviour of the Provisional Government (the goal of the agreementists), but rather to open the eyes of "millions of soldiers and workers" about the real nature of the government and to drive home the need for full soviet power:

But we do know one thing: only then [after an answer is made to peace proposals] will the peoples - drawn into an imperialist war against their will - be able to give a clear answer about the reasons why this war is being fought. And *when millions of soldiers and workers on all fronts see clearly the actual aims of the governments* that dragged them into the bloody shambles, it will mean not only an end to the war, but also a decisive step against the system of violence and exploitation that causes all the wars [emphasis added].

Thus Kamenev. Unfortunately for him, however, the content of his proposal was obscured by a scandal arising from his tone in the opening portion of the article, in which he tried to distance the Bolsheviks from defeatism. The greatest scandal was caused by comments such as these:

When army stands against army, the most absurd policy is the one that proposes that one side put down its arms and disperse homeward. This policy would not be a peace policy, but a slavery policy - a policy that a free people [*narod*] would reject with indignation. No - it will firmly stand at its post, meeting bullet with bullet and shell with shell. This is indisputable.

As we saw in the preceding section, his comments here are a lot less scandalous than it seemed to party activists in March: the Bolsheviks - including Lenin - *did* reject any disorganisation of the army, *did* expect soldiers to stand at their post, *did* agree that a German invasion would cripple the revolution, and so on. But Kamenev's first stab at making these things clear was, to say the least, clumsy. His editorial caused a reaction that must have dismayed him: the 'moderate socialists' rejoiced and the militant workers were appalled.

Party leaders called a hasty meeting, where, after a stormy session, the decision was made to publish two damage-control articles the very next day - one written by Stalin and the other unsigned. When we compare Stalin's article to Kamenev's from the day before, we easily see what the Bolshevik activists thought needed fixing and what did not. (The full text of both editorials are available in the appendix.) On the one hand, any rhetorical ambiguity that obscured Bolshevik anti-agreementism and hostility to 'revolutionary defencism' was removed. Nevertheless, Kamenev's basic tactical line - disavowal of defeatism, launching aggressive exposure campaigns based on concrete proposals - was reaffirmed.

Unlike Kamenev, Stalin begins his article straightaway by attacking both the bourgeois imperialists and the socialist defencists:

Rodzianko and Guchkov took the occasion to appeal to the army and the population to prepare for a war to the end. And the bourgeois press sounded the alarm: 'Liberty is in danger! Long live the war!' Moreover, a section of the revolutionary Russian democracy took a hand in raising the alarm.²⁷

Having established his anti-agreementist credentials, Stalin can disavow defeatism without being misunderstood: *if* revolutionary freedom were truly threatened, then, like the Jacobins during the French revolution,

there can be no doubt that the Social Democrats, like the French revolutionaries of that period,

SUPPLEMENT

would rise up as one man in defence of freedom. For it is self-evident that our freedom, won at the price of blood, must be safeguarded by force of arms against all counterrevolutionary assaults, from whatever quarter they may proceed. But is this really the case?

No, it is not the case, because the current war is imperialist. Russia in 1917 should be compared not to France in 1792, but France in 1914:

Just as in the bourgeois press of Russia today, so in the bourgeois camp of France at that time, the alarm was sounded: 'The republic is in danger! Beat up the Germans!' And, just as in France at that time, the alarm spread to many of the socialists (Guesde, Sembat, etc), so now, in Russia, no few socialists are following in the footsteps of the bourgeois heralds of 'revolutionary defence' ... It would be sad if the revolutionary Russian democracy, after successfully toppling the detested tsarist regime, succumbed to the false alarm raised by the imperialist bourgeoisie and repeated the mistakes of Guesde and Sembat.

The *Pravda* editors were so determined to make clear to all and sundry that the Bolsheviks were *not* 'revolutionary defencists' that they included in the same issue a further article, unsigned, to make the point.²⁸ The unsigned article explicitly rejected direct disorganisation:

The vanguard of revolutionary democracy, Social Democracy, does not resort to the methods that the anarchists see as a panacea: desertion, individual acts of disorganising the army, and so on - these are not Social Democracy's methods for realising the principles of 'Down with the war'.

But the unsigned article gave even greater emphasis to the danger of being "hypnotised" by "nationalistic" ideas:

The 'defencism' of yore - just the other day making its peace with tsarism, or at the very least facilitating it - is degenerating before our eyes into 'revolutionary defencism', and the latter is managing to bring into its sphere of influence even groups that do not share these ideas.

The whole episode of the duelling *Pravda* editorials confirms the existence of an underlying consensus among Bolshevik activists in March. The power of a consensus is revealed by the reaction when someone transgresses it: swift anger by the community and retreat by the offender. Just so: there was an indignant pushback by Bolshevik activists immediately after the publication of Kamenev's article, angry committee sessions were held, and even Kamenev did not defend his unfortunate rhetoric. The damage-control articles published the next day corrected the record, but also set forth a positive consensus on basic tactics.

Since the present essay is an exercise in sloganology, let us turn our attention to the slogans proposed for the upcoming campaign. The traditional slogan of the underground party had been 'Down with the war!' This slogan was deemed unsuitable for an above-ground exposure campaign. At the time and still today, this judgment was interpreted as a rejection of the *thought* behind the slogan - as equivalent to endorsing the counter-slogan, 'Long live the war!' Despite the clear statements in the editorials, they are presented as an endorsement of 'revolutionary defencism'.²⁹ This interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of what the proposed campaign was meant to do.

In line with the traditional pre-war Social Democratic technique of agitation campaigns, the aim of the Bolshevik campaign was (in Stalin's words) "to tear the mask from the imperialists, to open the eyes of the masses to the real motives for the present war - precisely this is to declare war on war in a real way, to make the present war impossible". But (as the unsigned corrective article argued), even though the "principle" underlying the slogan 'Down with the war!' was still valid, the slogan itself was deemed inadequate, because it was "too general". The soviet constituency should rather compel "its own [svoi] government" to make concrete peace proposals, with the ultimate aim of inciting revolutionary civil war in Germany and the Allied countries. Implied: any government that failed to make radical proposals of this kind should be repudiated by the soviet constituency as "not its own".

Kamenev and Stalin drove home the point: the political thinking behind 'Down with the war!'

remains valid, but what we want for our campaign is a slogan that will demonstrate in concrete terms *why* the Provisional Government needs to be replaced. As Kamenev put it,

The slogan 'Down with the war!' demands concretisation. The masses do not understand what lies behind this slogan - although the bourgeoisie understands it perfectly well [!] [Its rallying cry is] 'A war for freedom!' - although the continuation of the war will kill freedom ... We need to create a situation where a Provisional Government itself wants to conclude peace.³⁰

In other words, Kamenev wants to bring the mass soviet constituency to the realisation that the present Provisional Government did *not* want a democratic peace or a Europe-wide revolution. It *does* want these things.

In the same way, Stalin's corrective article made it painfully clear that the Bolsheviks were *not* replacing 'Down with the war!' with 'Long live the war!' Rather, the older slogan would find a higher expression by 'flowing' into a large-scale campaign:

Only [with such a campaign] will the slogan 'Down with the war!' not run the risk of being transformed into empty and meaningless pacifism; only then will it be able to flow into and express itself in a mighty political campaign, which will unmask the imperialists and disclose the actual motives for the present war.

For, even assuming that one of the sides refuses to negotiate on a given basis, even this refusal - that is, unwillingness to renounce annexationist ambitions - will objectively serve as a means of hastening the liquidation of the 'terrible slaughter', for then the peoples [*narody*] will be able to see for themselves the predatory character of the war and the bloodstained countenance of the imperialist groups, in whose rapacious interests they are sacrificing the lives of their sons.

The slogan 'Down with the war!' was indeed abandoned, and for good. Lenin's return did not alter the situation. Looking through *Pravda* in April, I find only a few mentions of 'Down with the war', and almost always in accounts of demonstrations or street clashes in the provinces.

For purposes of the proposed campaign, 'Down with the war' was replaced by more 'concrete' slogans: that is, ones calling for specific actions by the government. The first choice for such a slogan was a call for radical peace proposals by the government, since the idea of calling for publication of the secret treaties had not yet occurred to the Bolshevik leaders. As we shall see in the next section, the secret treaties slogan rapidly took centre stage - although the demand to open peace negotiations remained prominent.

In mid-April, in response to Lenin's qualms, Kamenev explained the role of 'demands' in an agitation campaign. I beg the reader's close attention to this comment, because it shines a revealing light on the thinking behind the campaigns launched in mid-March:

Should we, as a political party, take on ourselves to demand the publication of the secret treaties - announce this is our political demand? People will say to me: excuse me, you're demanding something impossible. But the demands I make are not founded on the expectation that Miliukov will respond to me and publish the treaties. The policy of making demands that I am advocating is an agitational device for the development of the masses, a method of exposing the fact that Guchkov and Miliukov cannot do this, that they do not want the publication of the secret treaties, that they are against the policy of peace. It is a device for showing the masses that if they really want to create a revolutionary policy on an international level, then the *vlast* must be transferred into the hands of the Soviet.³¹

Kamenev is talking here about the secret treaties slogan, but in mid-March the proposed slogan was different: a demand that the government open peace negotiations. One may ask: is this earlier slogan much different from what the agreementists were saying and what they actually tried to do? As always, the key difference between agreementists and anti-agreementists is not the demand, but the underlying aim: to change the behaviour of the government - or to expose its inability to change its behaviour? The underlying aim of Kamenev and Stalin are sufficiently clear from their *Pravda* articles.

But let us step back for a moment and ask: is

it remotely plausible that two hard-bitten, senior Bolsheviks were actually agreementists in March 1917 - in other words, they actually thought there was more than a snowball's chance in hell that a liberal-dominated Provisional Government would actually carry out a radical, anti-imperialist peace policy, even at the cost of alienating the Allies?

Note the names of Aleksandr Guchkov and Paul Miliukov in Kamenev's remarks above. Few readers of today will recognise these names or grasp their significance - but Kamenev and his audience certainly did. They were the two most prominent 'liberal imperialist' figures in Russian politics and had been for over a decade. And probably few Russians had written more extensively during the same decade than Lev Kamenev about the imperialist nature of these two individuals.³² If Kamenev had actually any illusion that pressure from the Soviet would make these two hardened imperialists carry out a revolutionary peace programme, he must have been lobotomised.

Liberals and moderate socialists were greatly encouraged, so it seems, by the appearance of Kamenev's editorial on March 15. At last (they told themselves), the sane, reasonable voices among the Bolsheviks - we weren't sure there were any! - are taking control and moving the party toward political agreements in line with the rest of revolutionary democracy. But, had these observers understood what was really on Kamenev's mind and what was really happening within Bolshevik ranks, they would have been gloomy indeed.

The Bolsheviks had just rejected two possible alternatives that would have rendered them much less dangerous. The Bolsheviks *could* have doubled down on defeatism, scorned the 'dark' peasant soldiers - and remained a sectarian group on the margins of national politics. Or they *could* have decided that the road to popularity among the soldiers lay in crossing the fault line from anti-agreementism over to agreementism - and thus become no real threat to a moderate outcome of the revolution. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on your point of view, the Bolsheviks in March made a wager that they could win over the soldiers to an anti-agreementist attitude toward Russia's 'imperialist war'.

A slogan takes centre stage

The Kamenev/Stalin editorials calling for a campaign with concrete peace proposals appeared on March 15 and 16. On March 18, the Bolshevik central committee authorised the "organisation of a campaign against the war, setting up mass rallies in the districts and presenting resolutions".³³ The campaign would revolve around the demand that the Soviet compel the government to begin peace talks - in other words, that the Soviet act like a government itself.

The very same day, March 18, Alexandra Kollontai arrived in Petrograd with Zinoviev's article on the secret treaties in hand.³⁴ Almost immediately, the potential of the secret treaty issue became apparent to Bolshevik activists.

I will now trace with finicky exactitude how the treaty slogan percolated into Bolshevik discourse, as well as soviet discourse more generally. After plotting all the particular data points, we will be able to step back and view the overall pattern.

Even before Zinoviev's article itself was published, the influence of his argument on the *Pravda* editors made itself felt. An unsigned article on March 21 (an issue that also featured Lenin's 'Letter from afar') mentioned for the first time the Provisional Government's failure to repudiate the treaties:

But, when calling other peoples to make war against their imperialism, the labouring masses of Russia must first of all declare resolute war against the imperialist aspirations of their own country. Up to now, the annexationist aspirations of tsarism remain the official programme of Russia, because the new government of Russia is in no hurry to repudiate them. Up to now, the proletarians to whom appeals are being made with the cry of the uprising of the Russian Revolution, are being fooled by the imperialists and their minions, the social-chauvinists. These gentlemen make use of a fact shameful for free Russia: the Provisional Government has not made a peep in the direction of repudiating tsarist foreign policy.³⁵

Zinoviev's article, 'War and revolution' (written, we recall, in early March), appeared in *Pravda* on March 25 and 26. Remarkably enough, as far as I can tell, this article marks the very first use of the word 'treaties' in the discourse not only

of the Bolsheviks, but of post-February soviet discourse generally.³⁶ Prior to this article, there were a multitude of calls for "a peace without annexations and indemnities" and occasionally a vague awareness that new peace aims required a "repudiation" (*otkaz*) of what were euphemistically called "obligations" toward the Allies. On March 18, an article in *Izvestia* (under the control of the moderate socialists) talked about the scurrilous backstairs diplomacy of Rasputin and co, but even this article stopped short of mentioning treaties.³⁷

The absence of the actual word is not just a matter of vocabulary. Using this term automatically brought to people's attention the fact that the Provisional Government was *still bound* by 'imperialist' war aims. Adding the qualification, 'secret', strengthened the maddening realisation that the soviet constituency *did not even know* why the country was fighting. Asking for *publication* of the secret treaties was thus an ideal slogan for an agitation campaign based on 'tearing the mask' from the imperialists and informing the masses about the actual motives of the war.

Thus the appearance of Zinoviev's article represents a real turning point in the outlook of the soviet constituency. The new slogan quickly made itself felt. On March 29, secret treaties made their appearance in high soviet politics, in the course of a debate at the national conference of soviets over policy toward the war. The spokesman of agreementism, Irakli Tsereteli, put forth a draft of a resolution; the Bolshevik, Viktor Nogin, asked for an amendment demanding publication of the secret treaties. Tsereteli argued against publication and the proposed amendment was resoundingly defeated.³⁸ Thus the slogan already brought out for all to see the essential clash between Menshevik and Bolshevik, between agreementists and anti-agreementists.

The demand for publication played the same role of a litmus test for agreementism at an SR party conference a few days later. On April 3, Boris Kamkov - future Left SR leader and member of the Council of People's Commissars - pointed out that the "bourgeois Provisional Government reaffirmed in its declaration all the treaties and contracts concluded with England and France by the tsarist government behind the back of the people". He called for compelling the government to publish these treaties. Pitririm Sorokin, on the right wing of the party, responded:

I am happy for the Russian *narod* - it has shown greater political sense and historical understanding than our internationalist comrades. Those who call for tearing up the treaties with England and France are leading Russia not just to an isolated position, but to a possible war with all our present allies.³⁹

Sorokin's threat became a theme in agreementist polemics: remain loyal to our noble Allies or else they will stab us in the back. And he was not far wrong! Thus already in early April, on the eve of Lenin's arrival, the issue of the secret treaties indicated the fault line along which the SR party later fell apart.

Even more portentous was the first appearance of the slogan in a resolution from below:

On March 31 1917, soldiers and officers of the reserve battalion of the Finland Guard regiment, with delegates from the regiment on active duty, assembled in a mass meeting, after listening to representatives of factories in the Vasileostrovsky district of Petrograd and considering the present situation, unanimously adopted the following resolution ... :

3. We insist that the Provisional Government immediately proceed to talks with the Allies about preparation for concluding peace, and also that it move toward publication of the secret treaties, in agreement with the Allies.⁴⁰

The demand for publication is here still cautiously qualified with language about "agreement with the Allies". The resolution should thus be regarded (in Sukhanov's words) only as "the first swallow" heralding the spring.⁴¹ Very soon thereafter, workers at the copper-rolling Rosenkrants factory showed much less restraint. On April 4, they unanimously passed a resolution to the following effect:

Recognising the danger hidden within the irresponsible foreign policy of the Provisional Government - a game played in darkness from the *narod* - we demand from the Provisional Government the public availability of all treaties concluded by the old regime with Allied governments.⁴²

The floodgates were now open. I count something

like 80 appearances of ‘treaty’ in the relevant sense in *Pravda* during April alone. Publication of the secret treaties was instantly recognised as a specifically Bolshevik issue - as the following anecdote by the French journalist, Claude Anet, reveals. This episode took place on April 9 and was reported by Anet in a book published in summer 1917:

A discussion began with a workman seated near us, who was listening to the speeches delivered from the tribune [of the Petrograd Soviet] and manifesting his disapproval. This comrade was a partisan of Lenin, and the non-commissioned officer attacked him with force and directness ...

The Leninist was unconvinced and said: “I do not want to make a war about which I understand nothing. I demand that the secret treaties between Russia, France and England be shown to me.” But the non-commissioned officer replied: “So that Germany may profit by it?”

The Leninist, feeling the ground failing under his feet, sought refuge in the question of the classes: “Who is it who governs us? Bourgeois! This Shingarev is a monarchist. We ought to assume power” ... The fellow took himself off, grumbling more and more.⁴³

Anet, whose one concern was maintaining the Russian war effort in France’s hour of need, portrays the officer as easily winning the argument - but one suspects that he was whistling in the dark.

Unlike ‘All power to the soviets!’, there was no single enshrined and canonical version of the secret treaty slogan. Besides ‘publication’, I have run across the following expressive words, all bringing out different aspects of the appeal of the slogan:

- *oglashenie* - making something public knowledge, subjecting it to *glasnost*;
- *obnarodovanie* - making something available to the *narod*;
- *vskrytie* - uncovering, revealing what is hidden.

As I pointed out in the opening entry of the series, the sister slogan, ‘All power to the soviets!’, occurs for the first time in a Bolshevik Party document in early May, in a sample mandate detailing what all Bolsheviks should support in national and local soviets. Although the treaty slogan was already very familiar by May, the mandate includes a rousing version:

The present war was begun by tsars, crowned kings and uncrowned robber-capitalists; it is a predatory war, bringing only death and destruction to all the peoples of the world, but millions in profits to a handful of capitalists. The secret treaties that Nicholas the Bloody signed with the English and French capitalists have not been published to this day. Yet blood is flowing because of these dark and foul treaties up to the present moment.

Unless the *vlast* goes into the hands of the workers, soldiers and the poorest peasantry - those who genuinely do not want to be predators - we will continue to spill our blood only to serve the interests of a handful of capitalists and landowners.⁴⁴

Up to this point I have sidestepped the views on the treaty question held by the leader of the party. What did Lenin think of the slogan, ‘We demand the publication of the secret treaties’? Lenin did not himself come up with the idea of making a scandal of the secret treaties, but he instantly saw its potential. His role here is thus very similar to the one played by the sister slogan, ‘All power to the soviets!’ (he noticed the slogan on a banner and then promoted it). Lenin did have a scruple - not about the content, but about the form of the treaty slogan: he objected to making a ‘demand’ on a bourgeois government, because, he reasoned, there was no chance whatsoever of the government fulfilling the demand. Why spread illusions among the masses? This scruple had zero impact on the work of Bolshevik agitators in the barracks and factories, who were confident that such ‘demands’ tore the mask off the government and exposed its real nature. At a certain point, Lenin seems to have shrugged his shoulders about ‘demands’, but he never stopped pounding the table about the secret treaties.

Lenin talked about Miliukov’s endorsement of the tsarist government’s secret treaties for the first time on March 12, in one of the ‘Letters from afar’ that never made it to Petrograd.⁴⁵ Most likely his attention was called to the issue by Zinoviev, whose article was written a few days later. From this point on, Lenin brought up the secret treaties continuously. His scruple about demands did not stop him from appreciating the power of the issue:

The promises of the present government about repudiating imperialist policies should be accorded absolutely no confidence. Our line here should not be to give any indication that we *demand* the publication of the treaties. That would be an illusion. To demand this from a government of capitalists - this would be just the same as if we demanded the uncovering of commercial frauds. If we say that annexations and indemnities must be repudiated, then we need to show *how* to do this. And if we are asked, who will do it, we will say that this would be essentially a revolutionary step, and only the revolutionary proletariat can do it.⁴⁶

Lenin could avoid making ‘demands’ because he was not out there on the factory floor, proposing a resolution or preparing a banner of a demonstration. At one point, when he came close to such activities, he almost slipped. In a draft for instructions for Bolshevik deputies in the soviets, he included the following: “3. Our deputy must be for the immediate publication of the secret robber treaties (about the crushing of Persia, the carve-up of Turkey, Austria and others) that the former tsar Nicholas concluded with the capitalists of England, France and so on.”⁴⁷ To “be for” something is getting pretty near to demanding that something! Perhaps Lenin caught himself in time, since this draft was not published in 1917.

Whatever his thoughts about ‘demands’, Lenin clearly recognised the issue of the secret treaties as a reliable gauge of Bolshevik influence. One reason that a massive demonstration in Petrograd on June 18 was regarded as a watershed in the influence of the Bolsheviks among the masses was the presence of this issue among the waving banners:

Around half a million demonstrators. The unity of a comradely offensive. Unity around the slogans, among which the following had a gigantic majority: ‘All power to the soviets!’, ‘Down with the 10 minister-capitalists’. ‘Neither a separate peace with the Germans nor secret treaties with the Anglo-French capitalists’, and so on. There could be no doubt among those who observed the demonstration about the victory of these slogans among the organised vanguard of the workers and soldier masses of Russia.⁴⁸

The natural habitat of the treaties slogan was the bustling demonstration, the noisy rally. A paradigmatic example of the slogan at work is this item, printed here in its entirety, from *Pravda*, April 12:

Publish the secret treaties!

After a lecture by G Zinoviev in the assembly hall of the Polytechnic Institute (around 2,000 listeners), the following resolution was proposed by a member of the public and unanimously adopted: “The meeting demands the immediate publication by the Provisional Government via the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies of all the secret treaties concluded by the Romanov gang.”⁴⁹

Zinoviev gives a fiery “lecture”, an anonymous “member of the public” proposes the slogan, it is unanimously adopted, and the resulting resolution is printed in *Pravda*. The Bolsheviks as a party may not itself have gone on record as demanding that the Provisional Government publish the treaties, but its leaders actively encouraged others to do so. They calculated that the following slogans were functionally equivalent: ‘We demand that the Provisional Government publish the secret treaties’ equals ‘We demand a Provisional Government that will publish the treaties’ equals ‘All power to the soviets!’ The Bolshevik were confident that the soviet constituency would soon make the same equation, and their confidence was well-founded.

According to Rex Wade, the issue of the secret treaties faded from mainstream politics during the summer months.⁵⁰ In contrast, judging from the pages of *Pravda*, it never faded as a central talking point for the Bolsheviks, and many relevant resolutions continued to be passed by mass meetings in September and October. The agitation campaign launched in mid-March continued, and Zinoviev kept up his ownership of the issue. At the end of September, in a pamphlet entitled *What do the Bolshevik Social Democrats want?*, he answered the question, “What must we do now, this minute, to obtain peace as quickly as possible?”, by saying:

The secret treaties concluded by the tsar must be published. These treaties must be revoked and given over to execration ... Let the whole world see that the Russian revolution rips up

treaties concluded by tsars, kings and bankers.⁵¹

In October, full soviet power was declared, and the new ruling party immediately published the secret treaties. This action provides a fitting conclusion to our biography of a slogan.

Conclusions

Let us now draw some morals from this story - or, as we say now, some takeaways:

The ‘treaties’ slogan took over at top speed.

On present evidence, no more than a week intervenes between the first mention of secret treaties in Zinoviev’s article in *Pravda* on March 25-26 and its prominent presence in high-level debates at a national conference of soviets, as well as in resolutions passed at mass meetings. In late March, the stars were fully aligned: the Bolsheviks had just launched an agitation campaign to expose the imperialist nature of the Provisional Government, and the clash between Petrograd Soviet and Miliukov was gathering steam. But ultimately the treaty slogan owed its staying power to the way it vividly expressed some of the fundamental issues of the revolution.

Because it brought out the fault line between agreementism and anti-agreementism within revolutionary democracy, the demand to publish the secret treaties can truly be called the sister slogan of ‘All power to the soviets!’ Both camps within revolutionary democracy abominated the secret treaties and wanted to repudiate them in favour of democratic peace aims. But the agreementists wanted to revise these aims by means of an agreement with the Provisional Government and the Allies, while the Bolsheviks and the anti-agreementist factions in the other parties wanted to publish the treaties immediately (and in this way, although they denied it, this demand foreshadowed a separate peace).

The battle line between agreementism and anti-agreementism is drawn up and fully evident to all by the end of March at the latest - prior to Lenin’s arrival and the April theses. The interaction between the agreementism fault line and the party system was also in place: one of the three major socialist parties was united around anti-agreementism, while the other two parties had agreementist leadership, but also strong anti-agreementist currents that threatened the unity of the party.

Lenin’s personal animus against ‘demands’ had little political importance. Lenin was afraid that making demands would lead to illusions among the inexperienced masses that the Provisional Government would actually make good on its promises. The Bolshevik *praktiki* were confident that making demands would ‘tear the mask’ from the government’s lack of sincerity, and their view carried the day.

From the beginning, Kamenev and Stalin were serious about taking power and keeping it, and they proposed an ultimately effective set of methods to achieve their goal. Defensively, the Bolsheviks had to disassociate themselves from any taint of ‘defeatism’ or semi-sabotage of the army. Offensively, they had to find effective ways of bringing the anti-agreementist message to the soldiers. Their anti-agreementist rationale is clearly stated in the documents of the period. Unfortunately, the standard ‘rearming’ narrative has instilled such a strong prejudice about Bolshevik cluelessness prior to the April theses that these documents have remained hidden in plain sight.

The Bolshevik leaders worked together and not at cross-purposes. The story of the ‘secret treaties’ slogan shows Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin all independently assessing the situation in similar terms and coming up with broadly similar solutions. All defined the challenge as respecting the ‘honest defencism’ of the masses, while selling a resolutely anti-agreementist line. Misunderstandings between the leaders on these issues were superficial.

Since the (surprising?) protagonist of our story is Grigori Zinoviev, I will give him the last word. Zinoviev did more than any other single individual to draft the ‘secret treaties’ slogan and to keep it at the centre of attention. In the summer of 1917, when *Pravda* was officially closed down after the July days, Zinoviev wrote a little tribute:

Why did they close down *Pravda*? Because it fought against the capitalists and the landowners; because it demanded the publication of the secret treaties of the tsar, the treaties for whose sake the present war is fought; because it demanded *kontrol* over industry and the banks; because it wanted to restrain the capitalists.

Pravda was the newspaper, and the Bolsheviks were the party, that demanded the publication of

the secret treaties. For good or for ill, this demand defined them and paved the way to power ●

This article was originally published at <https://Johnriddell.wordpress.com>.

Notes

1. *Peterburgskii komitet RSDRP(b) v 1917 godu: protokoly i materialy zasedanii* St Petersburg 2003, pp119-23.
2. *Pravda* March 14 1917 (for the full text of Kamenev’s editorial, see ‘Bolshevism was fully armed’ *Weekly Worker* February 26 2015).
3. *Revolutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii posle sverzheniia samoderzhavii* Moscow 1957, p118.
4. For a detailed discussion of Woytinsky’s argument, see LT Lih, ‘The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context’ *Russian History* No38 (2011), pp214-15.
5. EA Ross *The Russian Bolshevik revolution* New York 1921, p113. An earlier book by Ross, *Russia in upheaval*, has recently been reissued with helpful commentary by Rex Wade (Bloomington 2017); there is sometimes a striking contrast in outlook between these two books.
6. V Chernov *The Great Russian Revolution* New York 1964 (1936), pp197-98.
7. *Ibid* pp193-94.
8. R Wade *The Russian search for peace, February-October 1917* Stanford CA 1969, pp43, 67, 87.
9. *Pravda* April 12 1917 (speech at Izmailov factory).
10. R Wade *op cit* pp116-17.
11. EA Ross *op cit* pp131-34.
12. H Draper, ‘The myth of Lenin’s “revolutionary defeatism”’ *New Internationalist* Vol XIX, Nos5 and 6; and Vol XX, No1 (1953-54). The text can be accessed at: www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1953/defeat/index.htm.
13. Fourth Congress, concluding speech on ratification (PSS Vol 36, pp112-21). The text of Krylenko’s leaflet can be found in VI Lenin, ‘Bolshevism and the disintegration of the army’ (June 3 1917) at www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jun/03.htm.
14. Remarks to Bolshevik caucus at soviet conference upon return: *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 31, pp103-12.
15. As Draper points out, Lenin’s assertion that there was no “conscientious defencism” in western Europe is highly dubious (‘Report on political situation’, April 14, city party conference *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 31, pp239-46).
16. VI Lenin *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 31, pp103-12 (remarks to Bolshevik caucus at soviet conference upon return).
17. H Draper *op cit*.
18. VI Lenin, Open letter to peasant delegates, May 1917 (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/07b.htm).
19. VI Lenin, ‘Draft report on political situation’, September 3 1917 *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 34, pp144-50. The “Wild Division” was a volunteer cavalry division from the Caucasus that remained loyal to the Provisional Government.
20. See part 3 of this series: ‘Corrections from up close’ *Weekly Worker* June 29 2017.
21. *Ibid*.
22. I Stalin, ‘Who really is responsible for the defeat at the front?’ (www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1917/08/18-2.htm).
23. Lenin’s comments were given in a talk at the Third Comintern Congress, July 1921 and were not published until the 1950s; see J Riddell (ed) *To the masses* Leiden 2015, pp1170-71.
24. *Peterburgskii komitet RSDRP(b) v 1917 godu: protokoly i materialy zasedanii* St Petersburg 2003, pp119-23.
25. Note the title of Lenin’s pamphlet in the fall: ‘Can the Bolsheviks retain [uderzhat] the *vlast*?’
26. My reconstruction of events is based in large part on Aleksandr Shliapnikov’s *Kanun semnadsatogo goda: semnadsatyi god*, Moscow 1992, Vol 2, p452.
27. I Stalin, ‘On the war’ *Pravda* March 16 2017.
28. ‘How to implement the struggle for peace?’ *Pravda* March 16 1917.
29. See, for example, A Rabinowitch *Prelude to revolution: the Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 uprising* Bloomington 1968.
30. Remarks to Petersburg committee, March 18 1917 (*Peterburgskii komitet RSDRP(b) v 1917 godu: protokoly i materialy zasedanii* St Petersburg 2003, pp119-23).
31. Cited in LT Lih, ‘The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context’ *Russian History* No38 (2011). For similar comments by Bolshevik *praktiki* such as Sergei Bagdatev, see part 4 of this series: ‘Thirteen to two’ *Weekly Worker* July 27 2017.
32. See the pre-war articles collected in L Kamenev *Mezhdvu dvumia revoliutsiiami* (1922), Moscow 2003.
33. *Voprosy Istarii KPSS* 1962, p152.
34. This assertion is based on circumstantial evidence; see part 3 in the series: ‘Corrections from up close’ *Weekly Worker* June 29 2017.
35. *Pravda* March 21.
36. An assertion about the absence of something must always remain somewhat conditional, but even if earlier mentions are found, my interpretation would scarcely be modified. Besides a thorough search of *Pravda*, my finding is based on a survey of standard document collections, as well as the evidence provided by the two day-to-day journal memoirs of Nikolai Sukhanov and Claude Anet.
37. RP Browder and AF Kerensky (eds) *The Russian Provisional Government* Stanford 1961, pp1081-82.
38. R Wade *op cit* p30.
39. *Partiia sotsialistov-revolutsionerov: dokumenty i materialy* Vol 3, part 1, Moscow 2000, pp37-39.
40. *Pravda* April 7 1917.
41. Sukhanov was tracking soldier views on the war generally, not the treaty slogan specifically. N Sukhanov *Zapiski o revoliutsii* Moscow 1991.
42. *Pravda* April 6 1917.
43. T Chretien (ed) *Eyewitness to the Russian Revolution* Chicago 2017, p45 (a very useful collection of direct participant reports).
44. For the full text, see part 1 of this series: ‘Biography of a slogan’ *Weekly Worker* April 20 2017.
45. VI Lenin *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 31, pp50-51.
46. *Ibid* p349.
47. VI Lenin *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 32, pp40-41.
48. VI Lenin *CW* (Russian version), Moscow 1977, Vol 32, pp360-62. The “demand” wording no doubt predominated in the waving banners themselves.
49. *Pravda* April 12 1917.
50. R Wade *op cit* pp101-04.
51. G Zinoviev *God revoliutsii* Leningrad 1926, p227.

APPENDIX

March 1917 *Pravda* editorials on the war**L Kamenev, 'Without secret diplomacy' (March 15 1917)**

The war goes on, the Great Russian Revolution has not cut it off. And no-one has any hopes that it will end tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. The soldiers, peasants and workers of Russia - going off to war at the call of the overthrown tsar and spilling blood under his banners - have liberated themselves, and the tsarist banners have been replaced by the red banners of the revolution. But the war will continue, since the German army is not following the example of the Russian army and still follows the orders of its emperor, which greedily aim at booty on the fields of death.

When army stands against army, the most absurd policy is the one that proposes that one side puts down its arms and disperse homeward. This policy would not be a peace policy, but a slavery policy - a policy that a free people [*narod*] would reject with indignation. No - it will firmly stand at its post, meeting bullet with bullet and shell with shell. This is indisputable.

The revolutionary soldier and officer who has thrown over the yoke of tsarism does not leave the trenches in order to clear the way for the German or Austrian soldier and officer who has not yet found the courage to throw over the yoke of their own government. We must not allow any disorganisation of the armed forces of the revolution! The war must be ended in organised fashion, with a treaty between peoples who have liberated themselves, and not by submission to the will of a neighbour who is a conqueror and an imperialist.

But a liberated *narod* has the right to know what it is fighting for, it has the right to determine its own goals and tasks in a war that was not dreamed up by it. It must announce not only to its friends, but to its enemies, that it is not striving for any conquests, nor for any takeover of alien lands, and that it proposes that each nationality decide how to build its own fate.

But that is far from all. A liberated people must say openly to all the world that at any moment it is ready to start talks about ending the war. Given a refusal of annexations and indemnities and an acknowledgement of the right of nations to self-determination, we must be ready to begin talks at any given moment about the liquidation of the war. Russia is tied in alliances with England, France and other countries. Russia cannot act on questions of peace without taking them into account. But this only means that revolutionary Russia, freed from the tsarist yoke, must openly and directly approach its allies with a proposal to review the question of beginning peace talks. What the answer of the allies will be we do not know, just as we do not know what response Germany will make, if the proposal is actually made.

But we do know one thing: only then [after an answer is made] will the peoples, drawn into an imperialist war against their will, be able to give a clear answer about the reasons why this war is being fought. And when millions of soldiers and workers on all fronts see clearly the actual aims of the governments that dragged them into the bloody shambles, it will mean not only an end to the war, but also a decisive step against the system of violence and exploitation that causes all wars.

Not the disorganisation of the revolutionary and revolutionising army - not the empty slogan, 'Down with the war!' - these are not our slogans. Our slogan: pressure on the Provisional Government with the aim of compelling it openly, before the popular masses of the whole world, to immediately try to get all the belligerent countries to an immediate opening of talks about ways of ending the world war.

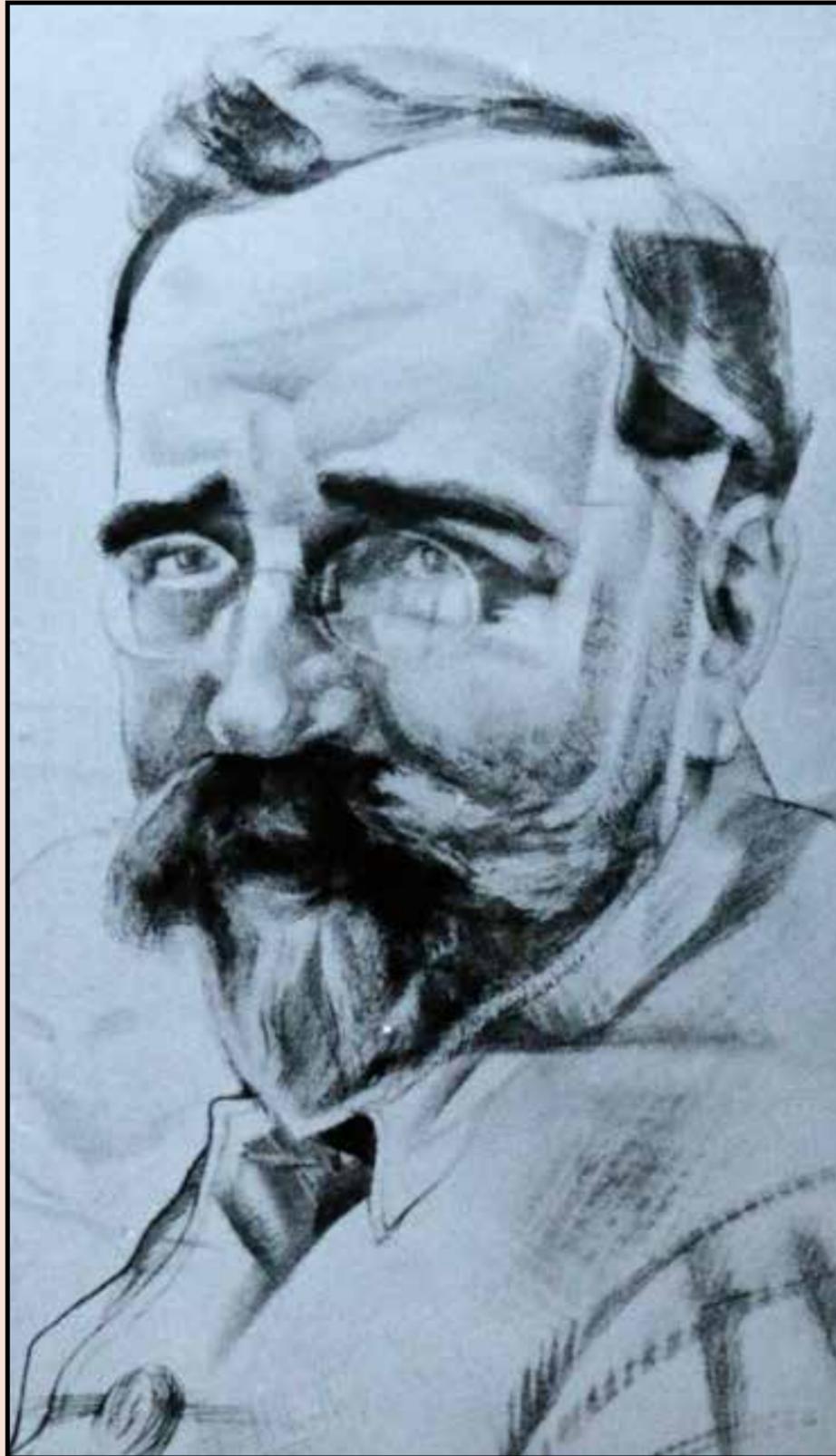
And until then everybody remains at their post.

And therefore, fervently greeting the appeal printed [in the same edition of *Pravda*] of the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies, 'To the peoples of the whole world', we see this appeal as only the beginning of a wide and energetic campaign for the triumph of peace and the end of the global bloodshed.

I Stalin, 'On the war' (March 16 1917)

The other day general Kornilov informed the Petrograd Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies that an offensive against Russia is being prepared by the Germans.

Rodzianko and Guchkov took this occasion



Lev Kamenev: went too far for many Bolshevik militants

to appeal to the army and the population to prepare for a war to the end. And the bourgeois press sounded the alarm: 'Liberty is in danger! Long live the war!' Moreover, a section of the revolutionary Russian democracy took a hand in raising the alarm ...

To listen to the alarmists, one might think that the situation of Russia today resembles that of France in 1792, when the reactionary monarchs of central and eastern Europe formed an alliance against republican France with the object of restoring the old regime in that country.

And if the external situation of Russia today really did correspond to that of France in 1792, if we really were faced with a specific coalition of counterrevolutionary monarchs whose specific purpose it was to restore the old *vlast* in Russia, there can be no doubt that the Social Democrats, like the French revolutionaries of that period, would rise up as one man in defence of freedom. For it is self-evident that our freedom, won at the price of blood, must be safeguarded by force of arms against all counterrevolutionary assaults, from whatever quarter they may proceed. But is this really the case?

The war of 1792 was a dynastic war fought by absolutist feudal monarchs against republican France, because they were terrified of the revolutionary conflagration in that country. The aim of the war was to extinguish the conflagration, restore the old order in France, and thus guarantee the scared monarchs against

the spread of the revolutionary contagion to their own countries. It was for this reason that the French revolutionaries fought the armies of the monarchs so heroically.

But this is not the case with the present war. The present war is an imperialist war. Its principal aim is the seizure (annexation) of foreign - chiefly agrarian - territories by capitalistically developed states. The latter need new markets, convenient communications with these markets, raw materials and mineral wealth, and they endeavour to secure them everywhere, regardless of the internal regimes in the countries they seek to annex.

This explains why, generally speaking, the present war does not, and cannot, lead necessarily to interference in the internal affairs of the territories annexed, in the sense of restoring their old regimes. And precisely for this reason the present situation of Russia provides no warrant for sounding the alarm and proclaiming, 'Freedom is in danger! Long live the war!'

It would be truer to say that the present situation of Russia resembles that of the France of 1914 - the France of the time of the outbreak of the war, of the time when war between Germany and France had become inevitable. Just as in the bourgeois press of Russia today, so in the bourgeois camp of France at that time, the alarm was sounded: 'The republic is in danger! Beat up the Germans!'

And just as in France at that time the alarm spread to many of the socialists (Guesde, Sembat,

etc), so now, in Russia, no few socialists are following in the footsteps of the bourgeois heralds of 'revolutionary defence'. The subsequent course of events in France showed that it was a false alarm, and that the cries about liberty and the republic were a screen to cover up the fact that the French imperialists were lusting after Alsace-Lorraine and Westphalia.

We are profoundly convinced that the course of events in Russia will reveal the utter falsity of the unbridled howling that 'freedom is in danger': the 'patriotic' smokescreen will disperse and people will see for themselves that what the Russian imperialists are really after is - the Straits, Persia ...

The behaviour of Guesde, Sembat and their like was duly and authoritatively assessed in the anti-war resolutions of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal Socialist Congresses (1915-16). Subsequent events fully proved the correctness and fruitfulness of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal theses. It would be sad if the revolutionary Russian democracy, after successfully toppling the detested tsarist regime, succumbed to the false alarm raised by the imperialist bourgeoisie and repeated the mistakes of Guesde and Sembat ...

What should be our attitude, as a party, to the present war? What are the practical ways and means capable of leading to the fastest termination of the war?

First of all, it is unquestionable that the bare slogan, 'Down with the war!', is absolutely unsuitable as a practical means, because, since it does not go beyond propaganda of the idea of peace in general, it does not and cannot provide anything capable of exerting practical influence on the belligerent forces to compel them to stop the war.

Further, one cannot but welcome yesterday's appeal of the Petrograd Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies to the peoples of the world, urging them to compel their respective governments to stop the slaughter. This appeal, if it reaches the broad masses, will undoubtedly bring back hundreds and thousands of workers to the forgotten slogan - 'Workers of all countries, unite!'

It must be observed, nevertheless, that it does not lead directly to the goal. For, even assuming that the appeal becomes widely known among the peoples of the warring countries, it is hard to believe that they would act on it, seeing that they have not yet realised the predatory nature of the present war and its annexationist aims. We say nothing of the fact that, since the appeal makes the "cessation of the terrible slaughter" dependent upon the preliminary overthrow of the "semi-autocratic regime" in Germany, it actually postpones the "cessation of the terrible slaughter" indefinitely, and thereby tends to espouse the position of a "war to the end"; for no-one can say exactly when the German *narod* will succeed in overthrowing the "semi-absolute regime", or whether they will succeed at all in the near future ...

What, then, is the solution? The solution is to bring pressure on the Provisional Government to make it declare that it agrees to start peace negotiations immediately. The workers, soldiers and peasants must arrange meetings and demonstrations and demand that the Provisional Government shall *come out openly and publicly in an effort to induce all the belligerent powers to start peace negotiations immediately, on the basis of recognition of the right of nations to self-determination.*

Only then will the slogan, 'Down with the war!', not run the risk of being transformed into empty and meaningless pacifism; only then will it be able to flow into and express itself [*vylytsia*] in a mighty political campaign, which will unmask the imperialists and disclose the actual motives for the present war.

For, even assuming that one of the sides refuses to negotiate on a given basis, even this refusal - that is, unwillingness to renounce annexationist ambitions - will objectively serve as a means of hastening the liquidation of the "terrible slaughter", for then the peoples [*narod*] will be able to see for themselves the predatory character of the war and the bloodstained countenance of the imperialist groups, in whose rapacious interests they are sacrificing the lives of their sons.

To tear the mask off the imperialists, to open the eyes of the masses to the real motives for the present war - precisely this is to declare war on war in a real way, to make the present war impossible ●