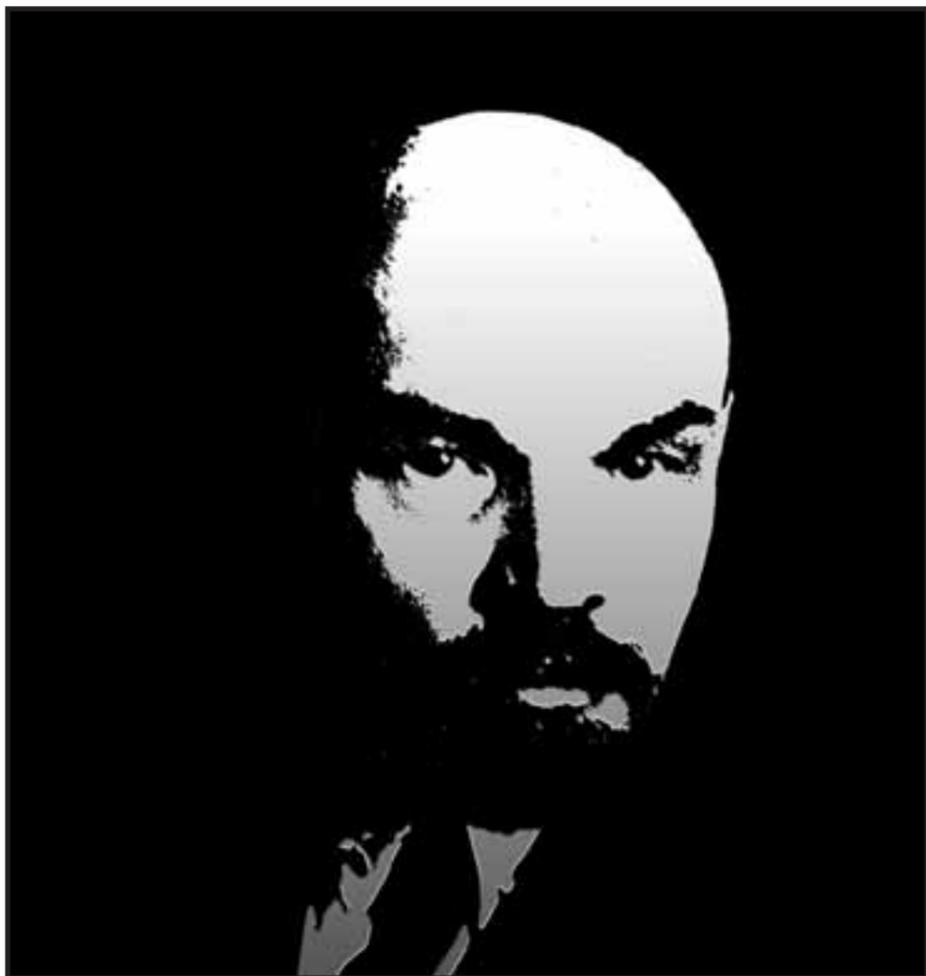


## SUPPLEMENT

# Falling out over a Cliff

Was Lenin a lying manoeuvrer? Were the Bolsheviks a cult led by an all-knowing leader and staffed by narrow-minded minions? **Lars T Lih** joins in the debate over Tony Cliff's biography and debunks some myths held by both left and right



**A**n interesting debate has broken out concerning certain issues in the history of Bolshevism. Pham Binh started things off with a vociferous attack<sup>1</sup> on the first volume of Tony Cliff's biography of VI Lenin.<sup>2</sup> Paul Le Blanc leapt in to defend Cliff and to dismiss Pham's criticisms.<sup>3</sup> Pham and le Blanc had a further exchange,<sup>4</sup> and Paul D'Amato also weighed in.<sup>5</sup>

My contribution to this discussion restricts itself to two specific issues: the 3rd Congress in 1905 and the Prague Conference in 1912. I feel compelled to make a statement because my work is cited both by Pham and Le Blanc; more to the point, I have familiarised myself with the original Russian-language sources for both episodes and therefore feel I have something to say. On one issue - the 1905 Congress - I

will repeat a critique of Cliff that I have made twice before, since, insofar as I know, no-one has really responded to it. On the other issue - the 1912 Conference - recent study of primary sources has caused me to change my mind, with the result that I am cited in defence of views I no longer hold.<sup>6</sup>

On the substance of these two historical issues I side with Pham against Cliff and his defend-

ers. I must make clear, therefore, that my essay has nothing to say about any of the other issues concerning Cliff's politics or about his Lenin biography as a whole that were brought up in the discussion. (Pham asserts that Cliff's work "shaped the approach of subsequent investigations by academics like Lars T Lih". Absolutely not, in my case.)

Even though I disagree with Cliff about the

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two episodes discussed in this essay, he is for the most part following reputable authority, and hardly to be singled out. Still, when an influential writer such as Cliff enshrines long-standing errors - and when writers with well-deserved reputations defend Cliff on precisely these errors - the cause of historical understanding requires critical attention to his interpretation.

## 'Committee men'

Due to a Menshevik boycott, the 3rd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party (RSDWP) in spring 1905 was exclusively Bolshevik in composition. Among the various debates that took place at this congress, one concerned the problem of recruiting workers to positions on local underground party committees, as opposed to the *intelligenty* (people with education), who then predominated.

In 1975, Tony Cliff published an influential description of this debate. Basing himself on earlier academic analyses, Cliff portrayed a dramatic showdown between Lenin, who wanted workers on the committees, and the Bolshevik *komitetchiki* or 'committee men', who did not. According to Cliff, the 'committee men' (members of local party committees) cited Lenin's *What is to be done?* (1902) to support their case, and Lenin in response was forced to repudiate one of the book's principal theses.

In 2006, in my book *Lenin rediscovered*, I did a fresh analysis of the original Russian-language congress records and concluded that Cliff's description of the debate was factually inaccurate and highly misleading.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who accepts and defends Cliff's version of events at the 3rd Congress does not, in my considered view, understand either *What is to be done?* or the nature of Lenin's relations to the larger Bolshevik collective. In 2010, I reprised this critique in the *Historical Materialism* symposium on *Lenin rediscovered*.<sup>8</sup>

Rather naively, I thought that further serious discussion of this issue, especially on the left, would at least take into account my detailed argument. But in 2012, a debate on this very issue has burst out as if my earlier critique did not exist. Pham Binh's basic point is the same as mine: namely, that Cliff was badly mistaken when he portrayed the Bolshevik debate as a clash over the inherent *desirability* of having workers on local party committees. Pham does cite my work, but unfortunately, only on an irrelevant side issue. Instead of referring to my account of the actual debate, he builds his case on a Lenin document that proves little (these points are discussed below in more detail).

Nevertheless, I strongly agree with Pham's essential position. Paul Le Blanc and Paul D'Amato defend Cliff, but they completely ignore my detailed account of the 3rd Congress. Worse still, Le Blanc characterises my position in such a misleading way that I appear to side with Le Blanc against Pham, which is definitely not the case.

I am forced to state my position for a third time - partly to clear up confusion about it, but mainly to try to get people to address the real issues at stake. After describing what actually happened in 1905, I will give Cliff's description of the congress in his own words, restate my critique of Cliff and finally look at the current discussion.

Let us now turn to events at the 3rd Congress of the RSDWP in 1905. There was indeed a debate on the issue of recruiting workers to the committees. It was quite emotional; Lenin was strongly involved and sorely disappointed at the narrow defeat of a resolution offered by himself and Alexander Bogdanov (who drafted the text). There was a debate - but what was this debate about? The following statement by Pham Binh is entirely correct: "The debate at the 1905 3rd Congress was over how to recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers. No one argued against recruiting workers to party committees, as Cliff claimed."<sup>9</sup>

No-one at the congress disputed the goal of getting workers onto the committees, no-one thought the existing state of affairs was satisfactory, no-one thought that worker recruitment would hurt the work of the committees. In fact, a common objection to Lenin's particular resolution was that it was too damned obvious, that it only reiterated goals that everybody shared, and that it did not go on to suggest any concrete solutions to what was admittedly a real problem.

The hugely interesting debate among the delegates was over the empirical realities on the ground. Were there enough available workers who were qualified for committee work? What were appropriate standards for assessing worker qualifications? Should these standards be the

same as for intellectuals? Were the *intelligenty* on the committees in some way prejudiced against workers? Most of the delegates with recent practical experience in the underground thought that the most promising way to get more workers on the committees was to provide workers with the necessary qualifications by means of the kind of party education that (so it was claimed) had recently been neglected. In consequence, after Lenin's resolution was turned down as unneeded, a resolution proposing this solution was passed unanimously (with one abstention). It contained the following language:



Georgi Plekhanov: pro-Party

Under these circumstances [a "colossal growth" in the revolutionary proletarian movement], the recruitment of the greatest possible number of purposive workers to leadership roles in the movement in the capacity of agitators, propagandists and especially as members of local centres and all-party centres takes on exceptional importance, since such workers have the most direct connections to this movement and help connect the party to it. Precisely the inadequate number of such political leaders among the workers explains the comparative predominance observable up to now of *intelligenty* in party centres.

In other words: the congress unanimously recognised the urgency of recruiting workers to "party centres" at all levels.

The issue debated at the 3rd Congress - how to recruit workers to party committees under repressive underground conditions - is quite distinct from problems of party democracy. Issues of party democracy arose on three levels: the relations of the committees to the mass of social democratic members in a particular locality; the relation of the committees to higher party centres; the relation of the party to society as a whole. All three levels came up for discussion at the end of the year. Some writers connect this later discussion to the earlier debate and see a year-long battle between Lenin and various 'committee men'. For example, in his usually reliable book *Lenin and the revolutionary party*, Paul Le Blanc writes about 1905: "Later in the year, Lenin wrote that it was 'absolutely necessary to create ... new legal and semi-legal organisations'." After describing Lenin's proposals made at the end of the year, Le Blanc comments: "At the 3rd Congress in April 1905, the Bolshevik committee men had revolted against such ideas and defeated a proposal offered by Lenin and Bogdanov reflecting this new orientation."<sup>10</sup>

This is incorrect and misleading. First, the political and social context at the end of the year was entirely different from the spring, because in the meantime the October Manifesto had granted widespread political freedoms, giving rise to a short-lived period called the 'days of freedom'. Party democratisation was now conceivable on a much wider scale than under the vastly different underground conditions of the spring, when "creating new legal organisations" was not on the agenda. Second, Lenin's proposals in late 1905 about party democratisation were not particularly controversial. To take his pronouncements made during the 'days of freedom' and retrofit them to the 3rd Congress in spring 1905, as Le Blanc and other writers do, is useful for making the *praktiki* look undemocratic, but it is not founded in fact.

## Cliff's account

Let us now turn to Cliff. The first thing about his account that caught my attention was his claim

that people who opposed putting workers on the committees used *What is to be done?* to 'buttress their position'. If this claim were true, it would present a real challenge to my own reading of *What is to be done?* To ensure that there is no ambiguity about his position, I will cite an extensive passage from Cliff. He writes as follows:

At the 3rd Congress, in the spring of 1905, Lenin and Bogdanov proposed a resolution urging the party to open its gates wide to workers, who should be brought forward to take a leading role in it, to "make every effort to strengthen the ties between the party and the masses of the working class by raising still wider sections of proletarians and semi-proletarians to full social democratic consciousness, by developing their revolutionary social democratic activity, by seeing to it that the greatest possible number of workers capable of leading the movement and the party organisations be advanced from among the mass of the working class to membership on the local centres and on the all-party centre, through the creation of a maximum number of working class organisations adhering to our party, by seeing to it that working class organisations unwilling or unable to enter the party should at least be associated with it" (VI Lenin *Collected works* Vol 8, Moscow 1977, pp409-10).

The debate at the congress waxed very fierce. [Here follows a long section of snippets from the debate culled from secondary sources.]

Most of the delegates to the congress were committee men who were opposed to any move that would tend to weaken their authority over the rank and file. Buttressing themselves with quotations from *What is to be done?*, they called for "extreme caution" in admitting workers into the committees and condemned "playing at democracy". Lenin's resolution was defeated by 12 votes to 9½. It was not the last occasion on which he found himself in a minority among the Bolshevik leaders, and even booed at a Bolshevik congress.

The unfortunate Lenin had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in *What is to be done?* He denied that he had "at the 2nd Congress ... any intention of elevating my own formulations, as given in *What is to be done?* to 'programmatic' level constituting special principles". [Cliff goes on to give further excerpts from Lenin's remarks - remarks made in 1907, not at the 3rd Congress in 1905.]<sup>11</sup>

I now turn to my own critique of Cliff. His account of the 3rd Congress is factually incorrect and highly misleading for the following reasons.<sup>12</sup>

1. The issue at the 3rd Congress was *not* over whether the party "should open its gates wide to workers" - an impossible move in underground conditions.
2. Cliff gives the impression that congress delegates objected to the absolutely non-controversial parts of Lenin's resolution: for example, "make every effort to strengthen the ties between the party and the masses of the working class". No-one opposed such boilerplate statement of aims.
3. *What is to be done?* was *not* mentioned by opponents of Lenin's resolution, nor indeed by anybody in this debate. In fact, the debate did not bring out the *discontinuity* in Lenin's views, but exactly the opposite: Lenin affirmed that he had already made similar proposals in earlier writings, and other delegates praised his continuity on precisely this point.
4. Cliff writes: "Most of the delegates to the congress were committee men who were opposed to any move that would tend to weaken their authority over the rank and file." Nothing in the debate provides a foundation for this motive-mongering (and besides, one would think that a worker member or two would *strengthen* the authority of the committee). Cliff's assertion that "most" of the delegates felt this way is belied a few lines down, when Cliff reports the close vote (12 to 9½) on Lenin's resolution.
5. I have not found any speaker asking for "extreme caution" in admitting workers to the committees. In any event, such an opinion was marginal.
6. Lenin did *not* "have to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in *What is to be done?*", nor did he in fact do so. Cliff also creates a very misleading impression by putting Lenin's 1907 remarks in his mouth during this 1905 debate.

7. Cliff does not mention the resolution that the congress *did* pass on the subject of worker recruitment, nor the strong, authoritative endorsement quoted above of the goal of getting as many workers on the committees as possible.

Such are Cliff's factual and interpretive errors. But errors of this kind are not really the basic problem for me. More important is the *implied story* that the unadvised reader of Cliff will take away with him or her.

Cliff's account of the 3rd Congress only makes sense in the framework of an incorrect larger story that goes something like this:

In 1902, Lenin published a book entitled *What is to be done?* that advocated keeping workers off the committees, or at least using "extreme caution" in recruiting them. This message was deeply imbibed by readers of the book and inspired the early Bolsheviks. Thus anti-worker sentiments were part of Bolshevism from the beginning. In 1905, Lenin realised that this anti-worker sentiment was inappropriate, so he himself changed course and disowned *What is to be done?* But he failed to change the outlook of party activists, who clung in a mindless way to what their leader had advocated earlier, and thus remained loyal to Lenin's earlier anti-worker sentiments.

Anyone who defends the factual accuracy of Cliff's account should realise that they are *ipso facto* endorsing this background story. For my part, I think this implied story is nonsense and should be strongly rejected. Cliff's account is a classic instance of what I call the 'Lenin vs the Bolsheviks' narrative. It also illustrates how some leftist accounts provide strong support to the academic interpretation of *What is to be done?* as imbued with 'worry about workers'.

## Exchanges

Let us now take a look at the recent discussion of this issue. As I stated before, Pham's critique of Cliff's description of the 3rd Congress is essentially correct. Unfortunately, there are some vulnerabilities in Pham's presentation that were quickly picked up by his opponents.

First, Pham's original formulation was not as precise as it could have been: "The problem with Cliff's account is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks never fought about either recruiting workers to party committees or democratising the party at the 3rd Congress. It simply did not happen." In response to criticism, Pham clarified his position (as cited earlier): "The debate at the 1905 3rd Congress was over how to recruit workers, not whether to recruit workers. No-one argued against recruiting workers to party committees, as Cliff claimed." This formulation is absolutely correct. Pham is also correct to say that there was no debate about democratising the party at the 3rd Congress.

Secondly, Pham neglected to refer to the strongest support for his case, namely, my analysis of the actual course of the 1905 debate. Pham does cite my work, but unfortunately only on a side issue: namely, Cliff's rather free use of secondary sources. I agree with Pham's critics that this issue is irrelevant to whether or not Cliff is substantively correct.

Instead of pointing to the actual congress debates, Pham built his case by using a glowing report about the 3rd Congress written by Lenin soon afterwards. The whole point of this report is to wax enthusiastic about the accomplishments of the congress, not to bring up any disappointments. Pham's critics are right to dismiss this evidence.

Nevertheless, Le Blanc and D'Amato hardly advance the discussion when they completely ignore the strongest evidence for Pham's assertion, as set forth in *Lenin rediscovered* and *Historical Materialism*. Instead, they write as if the last scholarly word on this topic was given by Cliff's sources, especially Solomon Schwarz, who was a participant in the 1905 revolution and who many years later wrote a useful academic monograph on 1905.<sup>13</sup> D'Amato suggests that the only reason to reject Schwarz's account is pure political prejudice, claiming that Pham must believe "Schwarz has a certain inexplicable 'taint' in this discussion (apparently being a Menshevik disqualifies you from ever telling the truth)."<sup>14</sup>

The issue is not Solomon Schwarz's worthiness. The issue is whether Cliff's description of the 3rd Congress is factually correct. Cliff based his account not only on Schwarz, but on the anti-Lenin academic scholar, John Keep.<sup>15</sup> I examined the congress records directly and came to the conclusion that Keep and Schwarz were tendentious and incorrect in the conclusions they drew from the debate. But I am happy to engage their work, because - unlike Cliff, Le Blanc and D'Amato - they actually had read the relevant

source material.

The congress proceedings are not hard to obtain.<sup>16</sup> Of course, they are in Russian and not available in English. I will readily participate in scholarly debate with anyone who consults this source and finds my empirical account inaccurate or misleading.

Most upsetting to me, Paul Le Blanc pulls me directly into the debate in a way that suggests I side with him against Pham. I am therefore compelled to clarify the matter. Le Blanc writes in his first post:

In a scholarly dispute with me on the matter, Lars Lih, while minimising its significance, at least acknowledges the fact that there was such debate, but argues that Lenin was wrong about the realities and unfair to those Bolshevik comrades on the other side of the debate, who outvoted him. Such matters are worth discussing now, as they were then - but Pham, too focused on making Cliff look bad, misses the opportunity to join in the discussion.<sup>17</sup>

To which I respond: I do *not* acknowledge that the debate described by Cliff - a debate about whether admitting workers to the committees was a good thing - ever took place. I do not minimise the significance of Lenin's stand in this debate: I stress it, but I see its significance in *exactly opposite terms* from Cliff. Cliff sees Lenin's effort to get workers on the committees as evidence of *discontinuity* with his earlier stand, whereas I see it as evidence of *continuity*.

Paul D'Amato correctly sees that Lenin's stand on worker recruitment in 1905 creates severe problems for "bourgeois academic 'Leninologists'". What he does not see is that, by stressing discontinuity, Cliff *agrees* with the "bourgeois academic 'Leninologists'" and gives support to their reading of *What is to be done?* According to Cliff, Lenin could only call for workers on the committees by persuading his supporters to *disavow* "the line proposed in *What is to be done?*"

Do I argue that "Lenin was wrong about the realities"? Well, I did offer the opinion in *Lenin rediscovered* that perhaps people who had direct recent experience on the ground were better informed on certain practical underground conditions than Lenin, who had been forced to live abroad for several years. When I studied the proceedings of the 3rd Congress, I saw an engrossing, focused debate about empirical realities, a debate in which everyone, including Lenin, participated as equals. I learned a great deal about how the underground functioned just by (as it were) hanging around and overhearing this debate. And, after doing so, I was extremely put off by Cliff's paltry melodrama of the wise Lenin vs the foolish, arrogant 'committee men' who only want to keep the workers at bay.

Le Blanc evidently has enough confidence in his knowledge of the empirical realities of the Russian underground in early 1905 to declare that Lenin was definitely right and the 'committee men' were wrong. I do not share this confidence. But we need not discuss this issue, since it is marginal to the question of whether or not Cliff gives us an accurate picture of the debate at the 3rd Congress.

If anyone defends a writer against criticism, they must be assumed to endorse what that writer says, unless they explicitly state otherwise. And, of course, it would be disingenuous to mock the "embarrassing mistakes" of Cliff's critics without noting one's own disagreement with some of Cliff's factual assertions. We must therefore assume that Le Blanc and D'Amato believe that the congress delegates who opposed Lenin "buttress[ed] themselves with quotations from *What is to be done?*" I would just like to ask them to present what evidence they have for this assertion.

We must also assume that Le Blanc and D'Amato agree both with Cliff and "bourgeois academic 'Leninologists'" about the anti-worker slant of Lenin's *What is to be done?* If Cliff's account of the congress is correct, Lenin "had to persuade his supporters to oppose the line proposed in *What is to be done?*" in the vain hope of getting them to support worker recruitment to local committees. I can only say that I disagree profoundly with this reading.

## Prague Conference

January 2012 was the centenary of the 6th (or Prague) Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party. At least, this was the conference's official name. But at the time and ever since, many people saw the Prague Conference as a purely Bolshevik gathering, called for

the explicit purpose of constituting the Bolsheviks, hitherto a faction within the RSDWP, as a separate party. Should we also be now commemorating the centenary of the Bolsheviks as an independent political organisation?

Such is the general consensus - a consensus challenged by Pham Binh with his assertion that during this period "the Bolsheviks were not a party".<sup>18</sup> Although Pham's criticism is directed against Cliff, Cliff's position on this issue reflects a wider consensus, so that no specific discussion of his position is required here. In rebutting Pham's assertion and defending



Lev Trotsky: August bloc

the consensus, Paul Le Blanc cites Zinoviev, Krupskaya, Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher and myself (distinguished company indeed!). He could also have cited Stalin (responsible for the 1938 *Short course* of party history, which sees the Prague Conference as the inaugural conference of a "party of a new type") and the anti-Lenin academic historian, Carter Elwood (author of the most detailed factual study of the conference in English).

On this issue, Le Blanc cites me correctly and with justice. I did share the consensus as late as last spring, when my *Lenin* (2011) was published. Since that time, however, I have become immersed in newly available primary sources about the conference and the vastly complicated internal politics of the RSDWP during this period, and I have had to revise my judgment. I now side with Pham on this issue. Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not set out to organise their faction as a separate party; they vehemently denied they had done so after the conference, and they were justified in making this denial.

I should note that Pham and I arrived at this conclusion completely independently of one another, so that the credit for publicly challenging this well-established consensus goes to Pham. He based his challenge on his reading of certain of Lenin's pronouncements during this period. The Lenin passage cited by Pham is not unique; similar sentiments can easily be found scattered through Lenin's writings in 1911-12 (which are difficult reading even in English, given the hard-to-decode alphabet soup of émigré organisations and political tendencies).

I became interested in the Prague Conference as a result of rereading Carter Elwood's 1982 essay, "The art of calling a party conference".<sup>19</sup> Elwood's essay is a superb factual introduction to the amazingly complex ins and outs of RSDWP politicking in 1912, but, in my view, its interpretive framework is highly unsatisfactory. In trying to get a sense of the conference and its context, I at first merely followed the trail blazed by Elwood, but I soon realised that newly available primary sources made a more independent judgment possible. A partial stenographic record of the conference itself (all that survives) was first published in Soviet journals in the late 80s. In 2008, a substantial volume - over 1,100 pages - was published, containing not only the conference record, but also the newly discovered record of the counter-conference called by Trotsky and others in Vienna in August 1912, as well as over 250 further documents from the period that comment on events from all possible factional angles.<sup>20</sup> I have only very recently finished a survey of these documentary riches, preparatory to writing a review essay on Elwood's *Lenin* for *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. I had planned to announce my change of mind in the review, but the unexpected outbreak of a debate over this very issue forces me to speed up the process.

I wish I could say that I was justified in my

previous assertions by the unavailability of these new primary sources, but, alas, a careful reading of Lenin should have been sufficient for a better understanding. Yes, strange as it may seem, Isaac Deutscher is wrong and Pham Binh is right - and it would not be the first time that an unprejudiced reading of Lenin material has given rise to a justified challenge to entrenched historical orthodoxies.

The ideological map of Russian social democracy was hugely complicated during this period, with both major factions divided among themselves, with crucial issues cross-cutting factional loyalties, with major fault lines between the émigrés abroad and the *praktiki* based in Russia as well as between 'national' organisations such as the Jewish Bund and underground organisations in ethnic Russia. The following remarks are perforce severely simplified and serve only to bring out the main point.

What happened was something like this: the general aim of calling an 'all-party conference' - one in which all factions had due representation - was widespread in social democracy in the period 1910-12. People felt that such a conference would help bring unity to a scandalously divided party and also that it would be able to set up leadership bodies inside Russia itself in order to give national direction to local social democratic organisations. Lenin felt the need for such a conference so strongly that in spring 1911 he took the initiative in calling it. Working through improvised organisations that sometimes had a Bolshevik majority and sometimes did not, he set in motion a process that resulted in a conference composed mainly of young *praktiki* from Russia that held a two-week session in Prague during January 1912. The conference, which had a strong Bolshevik majority, declared certain specific, very small groups of so-called "liquidationist" writers to be "outside the party". It elected a new central committee that thenceforth laid claim to the moral authority of a duly elected, representative central party institution.

The above factual account is not controversial. What is controversial is how we read Lenin's intentions and how we assess the result. From the moment Lenin and others began the process of calling this conference, his critics within the party - an impressively panoramic array of figures, ranging through all factions, including the Bolsheviks - declared that his conscious intention was to usurp party institutions for the sole benefit of the Bolshevik faction, that the conference itself was no more than a Bolshevik gathering, and that the central committee elected by the conference had no all-party authority whatsoever. This critique - voiced with special energy by Lev Trotsky - is the origin of the later standard story.

What comes out with terrific force from the new documents (although it is certainly present in Lenin's published writings) is the Bolshevik reaction to this critique. They denounced it as vile and completely baseless slander. At all times - when the conference was being organised, during its sessions, and afterwards - they maintained that it was based on a good-faith effort to contact *all* existing underground party organisations in Russia, *regardless* of faction, and to invite them to send representatives. They also maintained that in the main they had succeeded in calling a genuinely representative conference, despite the problems imposed by police repression and obstruction by people like Trotsky. The Bolsheviks granted that there were no delegates from the non-Bolshevik national organisations, but not because the conference organisers had not invited them: rather because they refused to attend. When attacking Trotsky's counter-conference in Vienna (the so-called August Conference), they maintained (and, it seems, with good reason) that their own conference was much *more* representative of the underground organisations in the ethnically Russian portion of the empire.

## Contemporary comments

I will document this Bolshevik response with a number of expressive comments made at the time. These examples are illustrative of a stance defended energetically and repeatedly throughout this whole period.

*Lenin:* In response to criticism from fellow Bolsheviks of the process by which the conference was being organised, Lenin set out his views on how to overcome factional difference. The polemic in the last sentence is directed at Trotsky.

The factions [*fraktsii*] arose out of the relations between the classes in the Russian

Revolution. The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks only formulated answers to the questions with which the objective realities of 1905-07 confronted the proletariat. Therefore, only the inner evolution of *these* factions, of the 'strong' factions, strong because of the deepness of their roots, strong because of the correspondence between their ideas and certain aspects of objective reality - exclusively the inner evolution of precisely these factions is capable of securing a real merger of the factions: ie, the creation of a genuinely and completely united party of proletarian Marxist socialism in Russia.

A practical conclusion follows from this: only a rapprochement in the work of these two strong factions - and only insofar as they purge themselves of the non-social democratic tendencies of liquidationism and *otzovism* [recallism] - represents a real party policy [that is, a policy aimed at protecting the party as a whole], a policy that really brings about unity; not easily, not smoothly and by no means immediately, but in a way that will produce real results, as distinguished from a way based on a multitude of quack promises of an easy, smooth, immediate merger of 'all' factions.<sup>21</sup>

This does not sound like the manifesto of a man determined to rid the party of Mensheviks and to create unity by the equally "easy, smooth" way of restricting the party to a single faction. Lenin's analysis also does not give much support to the assertion by Le Blanc and D'Amato that Lenin more or less equated Menshevism with "liquidationism". *Zinoviev:* Zinoviev played a central role in organising and running the conference. The following passage is taken from a manifesto of the émigré commission set up to organise it. It represents a basic statement of intent to the rest of the party:

In the localities [in Russia], all social democratic workers - Bolsheviks as well as Mensheviks, and also workers connected to the *Vpered* group and to [Trotsky's émigré newspaper] *Pravda* - harmoniously carry out work together and together fight against the liquidators-legalists, who almost everywhere separate themselves from party groups and work completely independently of our party. And these social democratic workers will never refuse to participate in the *all-party* enterprise [of calling a conference] due to considerations of a narrow factional nature or those arising out of the competition between small émigré circles; they will never put a brake on [the calling of] this conference or try to create splits [in the manner of our émigré opponents].<sup>22</sup>

Zinoviev's statement brings out the crucial distinction between émigré factional groups and the factions as they existed among social democratic workers in Russia. For example, he was very hostile to the émigrés who made up the dissident Bolshevik *Vpered* group, but he wanted to include Russian workers who identified with *Vpered* in the conference. Indeed, even the émigré *Vpered* group had been invited to join the organising commission (true, over Lenin's and Zinoviev's protest), but they refused.

*Sergo Ordzhonikidze:* Ordzhonikidze, who later became famous as Stalin's commissar of heavy industry, was a young Bolshevik *praktik* at the time of the conference. No-one played a greater role than he did in actually organising it by travelling around Russia, making contact with party organisations and obtaining representatives (sending a representative implied local support for the whole Bolshevik-initiated process of organising an all-party conference). In late 1911, he responded energetically to criticism (made by the groups referred to below as ZOK and TK: don't ask me to explain!) to the effect that Ordzhonikidze's Russian Organising Commission (ROK) had deliberately given the conference a pro-Bolshevik tilt, even creating fictive organisations to do so. After refuting specific criticisms, Ordzhonikidze summed up:

What has ROK been doing during this time [autumn 1911]? It conducted energetic work toward the re-establishment of local organisations. It approached the national parties, the Caucasian Regional Committee and other organisations that have not yet been enlisted, as well as individual well-known comrades. It has carried out and is carrying out work toward the calling of an *all-party* conference, and not a factional one, as loudly

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claimed by the members of ZOK and TK, who themselves make up the worst of the factions. And, finally, it will call an all-party conference, in spite of all the efforts of its opponents.<sup>23</sup>

*Stalin and Pravda:* One outcome of the Prague Conference was the setting up of a daily, legal social democratic newspaper in Russia itself. As Zinoviev points out in his party history, *Pravda* was conceived of as a joint production of the Bolsheviks and Plekhanov's "party Mensheviks". Stalin wrote the lead editorial of the very first issue of *Pravda* in April 1912, and made the following exhortation:

We do not in the least intend to gloss over the disagreements that exist among the social democratic workers. More than that: in our opinion, a powerful movement, one that is full of life, is inconceivable without disagreements - a 'complete identity of views' can exist only in the graveyard! [A rather grim quip, given later developments!] But that does not mean that points of disagreement outweigh points of agreement. Far from it! Much as the advanced workers may disagree among themselves, they cannot forget that all of them, irrespective of faction, are equally exploited, that all of them, irrespective of faction, are equally without rights.

Hence, *Pravda* will call, firstly and mainly, for unity in the class struggle of the proletariat, for unity at all costs. Just as we must be uncompromising towards our enemies, so must we yield to one another. War upon the enemies of the labour movement, peace and harmonious work within the movement - that is what *Pravda* will be guided by in its daily activities.<sup>24</sup>

The official English translation of Stalin's writings mistranslates *fraktsii* as "groups" rather than "factions". Thus Stalin's editorial is made to seem compatible with the standard Stalinist line that the Prague Conference three months earlier had already created a party without factions - or rather, consisting of only one faction.

The above statements and a vast amount of other documentation demonstrate how far from the truth it is to say (as does Deutscher) that "at the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the party".<sup>25</sup> The truth is that Lenin and the Bolsheviks proclaimed just the opposite, and they proclaimed it with energy, persistence and at the top of their voices. Either the Bolsheviks genuinely thought they had really organised an *all-party* conference irrespective of faction or they were out-and-out liars, as claimed by their party foes.

## Outcome

But perhaps, despite Bolshevik intentions, the actual result was a factional conference and a one-faction party? In that case, how do we account for the presence of the "party Mensheviks" - that is, Mensheviks who defended the existence of the illegal underground and therefore strongly rejected "liquidationists" who thought the underground was outmoded? Le Blanc acknowledges their presence at the conference, but seems to dismiss it as of no significance, since these Mensheviks were few in number. But surely there is a principled difference between a RSDRP conference with a large Bolshevik majority, and a *Bolshevik* conference, where Mensheviks of any description would be unwelcome.

There were 14 voting delegates at the conference, of whom two were Mensheviks: slightly under 10%. One of these two was elected to the new central committee precisely as a gesture of outreach to other Mensheviks. These Mensheviks fully participated in the proceedings, and there was even a debate in which one of the Mensheviks supported Martov's interpretation of the general political situation. Of course, he was voted down - just as he would have been at any party congress or conference where the Bolsheviks had a solid majority. So the question arises: if you want to proclaim that your faction is the party, why bend over backwards to include members of the enemy faction?

The conference declared that the contributors to certain specific, named "liquidator" publications were henceforth "outside the party". (D'Amato states that the conference "formally expelled the liquidators and their defenders".<sup>26</sup> This is incorrect: the conference did not formally expel either the liquidators as a whole or "defenders" such as Martov, as shown by the relevant conference resolution.) Lenin fully expected and desired some other Menshevik groups - in partic-

ular, Martov's - to refuse to accept this exclusion.

From the point of view of émigré politics, this was outrageous. But, according to Lenin, we should not look at the party through the émigré end of the telescope, in which Martov's group bulked large, but through the Russian end, in which Martov, *Vpered* and other groups looked very small and unimportant, while "party Mensheviks" and non-factional social democratic workers bulked very large indeed.

It remains to be said that the Bolsheviks did invite the non-Bolshevik "national" parties - Latvian, Polish and Jewish - and seem to have sincerely regretted that at least the Latvians and the Poles did not see fit to accept. To a large extent, Bolshevik predominance at Prague was guaranteed not by the overt intentions of the Bolsheviks, but by the refusal by other émigré groups to participate.

Now a word about the historiography of the Prague Conference: that is, the image of this conference in historical memory. As I have documented, during 1911-12, Lenin and his followers rejected as vile slander the charge that the Prague Conference was meant to be exclusively Bolshevik. But later on this charge did not seem to be so slanderous: first, because the organisational separation of the factions went on apace (to a large extent because of *Menshevik* initiatives) and, second, because the idea of an ideologically homogenous party seemed more attractive after the betrayal of 1914 and the formation of the Comintern. So, looking back, there was a tendency to mark 1912 as the time of the final break with Menshevism. This tendency reached its climax in Stalin's *Short course* (1938), in the section entitled "Prague party conference, 1912. Bolsheviks constitute themselves as an independent Marxist party". Stalin's textbook went on to draw appropriate lessons from this version of events: "The party strengthens itself by purging its ranks of opportunist elements - that is one of the maxims of the Bolshevik Party, which is a party of a new type fundamentally different from the social democratic parties of the Second International."<sup>27</sup> I believe this Stalinist meme of a "party of a new type" created at Prague is a principal source of today's standard story.

What about the later retrospective comments by participants in the process, such as Trotsky, Zinoviev and Krupskaya? Trotsky did not have to change his mind about what happened, but only his evaluation of events: he violently attacked Lenin in 1912 for usurping the party in the name of his faction, but later on he felt this usurpation was justified.

When we read Zinoviev's later comments, we find some slippage from his own perspective of 1912, as reflected in documents from the time of the conference. He no longer stresses the effort to organise an "all-party" conference and tends to simply equate Menshevism with liquidationism. I think this is understandable, given later events. His later accounts cannot be called a fully satisfactory account of even his own earlier outlook.

Zinoviev wrote about the Prague Conference twice: in general terms in his party history written in the early 20s; and in more concrete detail in reminiscences set down in 1932, but only published in the 1980s. Zinoviev's characterisation of the conference is, I believe, ambivalent. On the one hand, he certainly does describe it in hindsight as the time when the Bolsheviks became a separate party, and to that extent he supports today's standard story. On the other hand, a certain scrupulousness about events in which he himself participated gets in the way of a consistent narrative. A good example of this ambivalence comes from his 1932 reminiscences:

Lenin (and the Bolsheviks) came to the idea of a full split with the opportunists and the creation of his separate Bolshevik party not right away, but only in the years 1911-12, and even at that time VI wanted to continue to have a bloc (in one party) with party-Mensheviks, with the Luxemburgist Poles, with the party Latvians and so on [in an earlier passage Zinoviev writes that these non-Bolshevik groups were "invited and included in the ranks of his separate Bolshevik party, and not at all for 'diplomacy'"]<sup>28</sup>

In other words: Lenin came to the idea of an exclusive Bolshevik party only in 1911-12, and indeed, not even then!

In contrast, Krupskaya's memoirs pose a challenge to today's standard story. Le Blanc quotes from her memoirs: "The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined party line on questions of work in Russia and real leadership of practical work ... A unity was achieved on the

central committee, without which it would have been impossible to carry on the work at such a difficult time." This statement in no way supports his case. Krupskaya says the party - that is, the RSDWP - achieved some essential political unity at Prague, and this helped party activity in Russia. As we have seen, this result had always been the aim of the conference organisers, and (so Krupskaya claims) this result had indeed been achieved.

Krupskaya's actual assessment of the significance of the conference is as follows:

The Prague Conference was the first conference with party workers from Russia which we succeeded in calling after 1908 and at which we were able in a business-like manner to discuss questions relating to the work in Russia and frame a clear line for this work. Resolutions were adopted on the issues of the moment and the tasks of the party ... The results of the Prague Conference were a clearly defined party line on questions of work in Russia, and real leadership of *practical* work. Therein lay its tremendous significance.<sup>29</sup>

A rather more modest "tremendous significance" than the creation of an exclusively Bolshevik party!

Another useful description available in English by a participant in the conference is Osip Piatnitsky's *Memoirs of a Bolshevik*. Indeed, his book is the best introduction in English to the complex background and actual course of the conference. Piatnitsky published his book in the mid-20s, before Stalinist orthodoxies had set in, so that he describes an attempt to build an "anti-liquidator bloc" of various tendencies, Bolshevik as well as non-Bolshevik. Piatnitsky writes that at the beginning of the conference, Ordzhonikidze's organisational commission "proposed that the delegates should constitute themselves an all-Russian party conference with the right of electing central party bodies; for the organisational commission had taken every possible measure to ensure that all party trends and organisations should be represented at this conference (Plekhanov, Gorky, the *Vpered* group, the SDP of Poland and Lithuania and other anti-liquidator currents had been invited)."<sup>30</sup>

To conclude: memoirs from participants have to be read critically, but on the whole they confirm the view taken by Pham and supported by newly published documents.

## 'Waste of ink'?

Paul D'Amato tells us that this whole issue is not one on which we should waste any ink. Since the ultimate outcome in 1917 was the existence of two separate parties, accuracy about the process by which this result took place seems to him unimportant. ("Can a debate over the exact date when the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks split shed any more light in these critical developments in the history of the socialist movement?")<sup>31</sup>

I believe that accuracy about "the exact date" is crucial for a number of reasons. If Isaac Deutscher states that "at the conference in Prague Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik faction to be the party" and if Paul Le Blanc uses Deutscher's authority to squelch a critic without bothering to examine the new evidence brought forth by this critic - then pointing out that even Deutscher can be mistaken clears the way for real debate.

The standard story about the Prague Conference is part and parcel of larger interpretations of Bolshevik history. For example, Stalin's *Short course* makes the 1912 Conference the climax in the process of creating a "party of a new type" based on a monolithic outlook - a specific and in my view a deeply flawed interpretation of Bolshevik history. Stalin draws various lessons from his version of events: for example, the need to continually purge the party of "opportunists".

Then there is the matter of organisational ethics. If Lenin's true aim was to establish the Bolsheviks as a separate party, then we have to interpret his public denials in a very cynical way. For example, D'Amato offers this comment:

To accomplish the split, a 'Bolshevik' conference could have declared itself the 'Bolshevik' Party. But it was tactically more advantageous to manoeuvre in such a way as to formally expel the liquidators and their defenders (which included Martov and all the other key leading Mensheviks) from what they declared the 'official' RSDLP - which is exactly what the Prague Conference did. This also made sense because Lenin wanted the official sanction and funds that came with

recognition from the International Bureau.<sup>32</sup>

D'Amato's description of Lenin's duplicity (sorry, "advantageous tactical manoeuvring") is essentially the same as the one made by Lenin's most vehement critics at the time - only D'Amato seems to approve of rather than condemn Lenin's behaviour. After all, it helped Lenin fool the Europeans and get party funds! (By the way, if Lenin's aim was to get the European socialists on board, he failed pretty badly: see Elwood's informative essay, 'Lenin and the Brussels "unity" conference of July 1914'.<sup>33</sup>)

I am not a member of any left organisation and so I cannot comment on whether this kind of casual cynicism is the norm - I seriously doubt that D'Amato would apply it to issues today. But, speaking as a historian, I maintain that Lenin would have been severely annoyed by this defence: ah, that Lenin, he was a clever one - by stating the exact opposite of his real intentions, he reaped factional and financial advantage! As opposed to the D'Amatos on the left and the Elwoods on the right, I maintain that Lenin actually behaved in an honest way during this episode, saying what he meant and meaning what he said.

Let me put it this way. If the standard story is correct, and Lenin really did have the conscious intention of using the Prague Conference to make the Bolshevik faction equivalent to the party as a whole, then he thoroughly deserves the severe condemnation he received from his political foes at the time and from such informed anti-Lenin historians as Carter Elwood. Any such secret intention on his part meant that the process of calling the conference was deeply dishonest and calculated in a disloyal way to wreak as much damage as possible on the parent organisation. The claim that the new central committee had the moral authority of an *all-party* institution was precisely the breathtaking chutzpah condemned by Trotsky at the time. As for the Bolsheviks themselves, they look less like a political faction and more like a cult, with a manipulative leader surrounded by minions (who understand the secret aims of the leader and work to implement them) and dupes (who actually believe the leader's stated intentions and naively think they are helping the party as a whole).

But, since there is no real reason to believe Lenin had any such secret intention, these dire conclusions do not follow.

## Notes

1. Pham Binh, 'Mangling the party of Lenin' *Weekly Worker* February 2: [www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article\\_id=1004702](http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1004702).
2. T Cliff *Building the party* London 1975.
3. P Le Blanc, 'Revolutionary method in the study of Lenin': [www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=24112](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=24112).
4. Pham Binh, 'Paul Le Blanc's defence of Tony Cliff's *Building the party* - Pham Binh replies': <http://links.org.au/node/2718>; P Le Blanc, 'Five points in response to Pham Binh': <http://links.org.au/node/2719>.
5. P D'Amato, 'The mangling of Tony Cliff': <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
6. For my thoughts on another issue raised in the discussion, Cliff's 'bend the stick' shtick, see *Historical Materialism* Vol 18, No3, 2010.
7. LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Leiden 2006, pp540-43.
8. See *Historical Materialism* Vol 18, No3, 2010.
9. <http://links.org.au/node/2718>.
10. P Le Blanc *Lenin and the revolutionary party* New York 1993, p18.
11. T Cliff *Building the party* London 1975, chapter 8: [www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap08.htm).
12. For detailed citations, see *Lenin rediscovered* pp540-43.
13. S Schwarz *The Russian Revolution of 1905* London 1967.
14. P D'Amato, 'The mangling of Tony Cliff': <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
15. JH Keep *The rise of social democracy in Russia* Oxford 1966.
16. In fact, they can be found at this online link: [http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KPSS/\\_KPSS.html](http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/K/KPSS/_KPSS.html).
17. P Le Blanc, 'Revolutionary method in the study of Lenin': [www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=24112](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=24112).
18. Pham Binh, 'Mangling the party of Lenin' *Weekly Worker* February 2: [www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article\\_id=1004702](http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1004702).
19. Recently republished with some significant changes in C Elwood *The non-geometric Lenin* (London 2011), a retrospective collection of the articles of this important scholar of Lenin and Russian social democracy.
20. *Konferentsii RSDRP 1912 goda* Moscow 2008.
21. 'The new faction of conciliators, or the virtuous' (October 1911), in VI Lenin *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* Vol 20, pp335-36 (my translation); for English version, see [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/oct/18b.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1911/oct/18b.htm).
22. *Konferentsii RSDRP 1912 goda* Moscow 2008, p126.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Pravda* April 22 1912.
25. I Deutscher *The prophet armed* London 2003, p164.
26. P D'Amato, 'The mangling of Tony Cliff': <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
27. [www.marx2mao.com/Other/HCPUSU39i.html](http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/HCPUSU39i.html).
28. *Izvestia TsK KPSS* 1989, No5, pp194-95.
29. [www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/works/rol/rol16.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/works/rol/rol16.htm).
30. O Piatnitsky *Memoirs of a Bolshevik* New York 1935.
31. P D'Amato, 'The mangling of Tony Cliff': <http://links.org.au/node/2726>.
32. *Ibid.*
33. C Elwood *The non-geometric Lenin* London 2011.