

Lenin, the Bolshevik Party - Fortunes of a formula: From 'DEMOCRATIC centralism' to 'democratic CENTRALISM'

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Vladimir Nevsky (1876-1937) lived the life (in the words of an autobiographical sketch written in the 1920s) of an "ordinary party worker", a professional, in the Bolshevik underground. Joining the party in 1897, he was a mid-level Bolshevik praktik who played a visible role in 1917 conducting party work in the army. Like so many others in his generation, he was arrested in the mid-thirties and executed in 1937.

After the revolution, Nevsky became a pioneering party historian whose magnum opus, published in 1925, was entitled *Istoriia RKP(b): Kratkii ocherk* [History of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks): A Short Essay]. Despite the modest subtitle, this massive 500-page study constitutes the first history of the Bolshevik party to be fully documented and based on a full range of sources. It was preceded only by Zinoviev's *History of the Bolshevik Party* (1923), which was really more of an essay-cum-memoir by a leading activist than a careful historical work. Nevsky's history appeared in the short window of time most propitious for a serious historical interpretation: after enough time had elapsed since the revolution for sources to be gathered and perspectives to unfold, but before Stalinist orthodoxy imposed its own straitjacket narrative.

Nevsky's history has recently been republished in an excellent new edition by New Prometheus Press in St. Petersburg (2009). Looking through its pages, we find an unexpected slant on a wide variety of topics in Bolshevik history. One of these is the meaning and status of the formula "democratic centralism". For reasons to be spelled out later, Nevsky's discussion is one of the best sources for grasping what this concept actually meant to the Bolshevik underground. Democratic centralism is not a major theme in Nevsky's history. In fact, as far as I can tell, there are only two substantive discussions of the topic. I have translated the relevant passages and attached them as an appendix to this article.

The phrase "democratic centralism" entered the party lexicon at the end of 1905, when concessions forced on the tsar by the revolution inaugurated the heady "days of freedom" that in some respects lasted for another couple of years. The new atmosphere of political freedom and the consequent opportunity to leave the stifling underground compelled the two Social Democratic factions to make

a serious bid for party reunification as well as to restructure their party organizations in ways more fitting for above-ground activity. The Mensheviks were the first to express this imperative in a resolution passed by a conference in Petrograd in November. The relevant resolution insisted that:

"The RSDWP must be organized according to the principle of democratic centralism.

All party members take part in the election of party institutions.

All party institutions are elected for a [specified] period, are subject to recall and obligated to account for their actions both periodically and at any time upon demand of the organizations which elected them.

Decisions of the guiding collectives are binding on the members of those organizations of which the collective is the organ. [Here follows some smaller guarantees of democratic practice, e.g., agendas should be distributed ahead of time.]"

The Canadian historian Carter Elwood comments: "Perhaps the most interesting of the Menshevik resolutions [in November 1905] concerned 'democratic centralism'. This term, which usually is associated with Lenin's organizational principles inherent in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) and is considered his major contribution to party organizational theory, had not in fact been used either by Lenin himself or by the Bolsheviks in their own resolutions prior to this [Menshevik] Conference." [1]

Shortly afterward, at a conference of Bolshevik activists in Tammerfors (a town in Finland), the Bolsheviks passed a similar resolution:

"Recognizing as indisputable the principle of democratic centralism, the Conference considers the broad implementation of the elective principle necessary; and, while granting elected centres full powers in matters of ideological and practical leadership, they are at the same time subject to recall, their actions are to be given broad publicity [glasnost], and they are to be strictly accountable for these activities ...

The Conference orders all party organizations quickly and energetically to reorganize their local organizations on the basis of the elective principle; while it is not necessary for the moment to seek complete uniformity of all systems for electing institutions, departures (two-stage elections, etc.) from fully democratic procedures are permitted only in the event of insurmountable practical obstacles." [2]

These days, as we know, the emphasis in the famous term is clearly "democratic centralism". Reading both the resolution and, even more, Nevsky's gloss, we see that for the Bolshevik activists who used the term, the emphasis in the formula was clearly "democratic centralism". After describing the central role of elections at all levels in the influential Petersburg party organization prior to 1908, Nevsky goes on to insist that during these years,

"Such occurrences as the replacement or appointment of comrades to leadership posts against the will of the organization were unknown to the organizations during this period of time. If something like this did happen, it would have been considered a gross infringement of the basic principles of democratic centralism. Nearly always the most visible and authoritative members of our organization entered at the district level as completely ordinary party workers and only gradually, earning the confidence of the mass [membership], were moved up by this membership to responsible leadership posts."

This definition of democratic centralism implies that it can exist only under certain conditions,

namely, when society at large enjoyed relative political freedom and the party could operate above ground. Perhaps the most surprising yet revealing comment by Nevsky is the strict chronological limitation he places on periods of genuine democratic centralism:

“From this point on, over the course of more than two years (right up to the beginning of the gloomy era of reaction [c. 1908]), the party lived a life of complete democracy. Even in Petersburg and Moscow, where the pressure of the police apparatus was extremely high, even during 1906-7 the principles of democratic centralism were quickly realized and observed strictly and rigorously ...”

“The ensuing years of reaction [after 1908] again drove our organization into the underground for a long time, and only during 1917 and the beginning of 1918 did our party succeed for a short time in living according to the principles of democratic centralism.”

Accordingly, Nevsky's history does not take up this topic again until the downfall of the tsar in 1917. He then asserts that “as soon as the party emerged from the underground and started to live under the conditions of the bourgeois regime, the principles of democratic centralism were immediately put in place and the strictest electoral principle was put into effect”. As in 1906-7, a key feature of democratic centralism in 1917 was “free discussion, a lively exchange of opinions, and consideration not only of local but also of all-Russian issues”. (See the appendix for the relevant passages in full.)

Nevsky's discussion makes it difficult to regard democratic centralism as a distinctive or essential feature of Bolshevism. On the one hand, the Mensheviks not only introduced the term but, as Nevsky mentions, they also promptly used Russia's precarious state of political freedom to democratize their organizations. On the other hand, democratic centralism was irrelevant throughout most of Bolshevik history. We can restate Nevsky's point by saying that true democratic centralism was only possible in those short intervals of time when the Bolsheviks were neither being repressed nor repressing others.

Lenin and ‘democratic centralism’

Intrigued by Elwood's remark that Lenin never used the term “democratic centralism” prior to the Tammerfors conference in late 1905, I tried to locate each occurrence of the famous formula in his writings after that date. I relied on the usually trustworthy indexes provided by the Soviet editors to the fifth edition of Lenin's complete works. Making generalizations about when a person *doesn't* use a term is always a bit tricky, however, and I would appreciate any counter-examples being brought to my attention. [3]

The main finding of my search can be simply put. Lenin only employed the term “democratic centralism” in two strictly limited periods: 1906-7 and 1920-1. Between these two points, I found exactly one example (in a peculiar and fascinating context outlined below). In each of these two periods, Lenin's use of the term was triggered by groups to which he was opposed: by the Mensheviks in 1906-7 and the “Democratic Centralist” group headed by N. Osinsky and others in 1920. In neither period do we find any systematic exposition of the meaning of the term. Lenin uses it in passing to make particular points.

Most strikingly, there is barely any connection between the meaning of the term as used in 1906-7 and in 1920-1. This is more than a matter of differing emphases: the terms simply refer to different things in the two periods. The phrase “democratic centralism” always has a working part and a decorative part. In 1906-7, the working part was “democratic” and the formula referred to intra-party elections, control from below, and so forth. In 1920-1, the working part was “centralism” and the formula referred primarily to the uniform policies required by a ruling party. “Democratic

centralism” is in essence a homonym: two distinct formulas that use the same words.

‘Democratic centralism’ in 1906-7

In 1906-7, following the introduction of the term in resolutions passed by the Unity Congress in Stockholm in April 1906, Lenin gave “democratic centralism” a meaning similar to the one found in Nevsky’s party history: the selection of party leaders through genuine elections from below, open and lively discussion, replacibility of elected officials, and so forth. As such, it was something of a luxury—or, if this is too strong, something that was only possible in certain periods when society at large enjoyed relative political freedom.

As noted by Elwood, “democratic centralism” is often associated today with Lenin’s 1902 book *What Is To be Done?*. This association is doubly ironic. Not only is the term missing from his book, but, if he had used the term, Lenin’s point would have been: democratic centralism is not possible under underground conditions. He argued in his book that anyone who thought that full-blooded electoral procedures were possible in underground organizations either did not understand how democracy worked, or how the underground worked, or both. The proto-Mensheviks on the *Iskra* editorial board did not really disagree. [4]

According to a number of writers, especially those on the left, Lenin changed his mind in 1905 about the role of democratic procedures within the party. In actuality, Lenin never changed his mind—what changed were the political institutions of society at large. Lenin’s outlook was consistent: genuine intra-party democracy is mandatory when possible and dispensable when not.

Although the *meaning* of “democratic centralism” is pretty much the same for Lenin and Nevsky, the *attitude* displayed by the two men strikes me as distinct. Even while supporting democratic centralism, Lenin does not display the emotional investment, the pride and enthusiasm, exhibited by the Russia-based *praktik*. Although Lenin supported electoral procedures as long as they were in place, centralism is what he is really fighting for in the pre-revolutionary period.

Having said this, however, we need to remind ourselves exactly what “centralism” means in the context of an underground party fighting to maintain even the slightest organizational coherence in a hostile environment. In the underground period, the typical issue for Lenin was not how powerful the party centre should be nor its exact relations to local bodies, but rather something much more elementary and existential: whether or not the party would have any functioning and generally recognized central institutions at all.

Thus it was in 1902-3, when the party had not yet created any official central institutions at all (*What Is To be Done?* offered a plan for achieving this widely supported goal). Thus it was in 1910-12, when factional troubles rendered problematic the continued existence of any functioning Central Committee. The opposite of this kind of “centralism” was therefore *kustarnichestvo*, a term coined by Lenin that I translate as “artisanal limitations” and that refers primarily to local party organizations acting in complete independence and indeed ignorance of each other. *Kustarnichestvo* was the natural equilibrium state of an underground party.

Similarly, Lenin also used “centralism” to insist on the simple necessity for the minority to submit to the decisions of the majority. Of course, he was all the more insistent on this point when he felt that he represented the majority, as in 1903-4 and again in 1912-4.

A rule-confirming exception: 'democratic centralism' in 1915

In November 1915, Lenin—writing directly in English—responded to a leaflet issued by an American group called the Socialist Propaganda League. This group supported the anti-war line of the Zimmerwald movement and called for a new, non-opportunist International. Naturally Lenin responded with enthusiasm. He nevertheless felt compelled to criticize certain positions of the Socialist Propaganda League that he felt over-reacted to the sins of the Second International. This short piece is thus a preliminary sketch of his longer polemic in 1920 against “left-wing communism”. It also contains the single use of “democratic centralism” I was able to find between 1907 and 1920.

Lenin first stressed that “we never say in our press that too great emphasis has been heretofore placed upon so-called ‘Immediate Demands’, and that thereby the socialism can be diluted”. He then moved on to the topic of “the democratic centralism” and made clear the original source of the Social Democratic norm of centralism:

“We defend always in our press the democracy in the party. But we never speak against the centralization of the party. We are for the democratic centralism. We say that the centralization of the German Labour movement is not a feeble but a strong and good feature of it. The vice of the present Social Democratic Party of Germany consists not in the centralization but in the preponderance of the opportunists, after their treacherous conduct in the war.”

Finally, Lenin used “centralism” to invoke, not intra-party governance, but rather party leadership of the masses. The following passage is another example of what I have elsewhere termed Lenin’s “heroic scenario” of party and class leadership: [\[5\]](#)

“If in any given crisis the small group (for instance our Central Committee is a small group) can act for directing the mighty mass in a revolutionary direction, it would be very good. And in all crises [when] the masses can not act immediately, the masses want to be helped by the small groups of the central institutions of the parties. Our Central Committee quite at the beginning of this war, in September 1914, has directed the masses not to accept the lie about “the war of defence” & to break off with the opportunists & the “would-be-socialists jingoes” (we call so the “Socialists” who are now in favour of the war of defence). We think that this centralistic measure of our Central Committee was useful & necessary.”

1920-1: ‘Democratic centralism’

As far as I can tell, this 1915 discussion of “the democratic centralism” is the *single* use of the term to be found in Lenin’s writings from 1907 to 1920. At the Ninth Party Congress in March/April 1920, Lenin used it to respond to the criticisms of the opposition group within the party who labelled themselves as Democratic Centralists. This group put a high value on collegial as opposed to one-man leadership of various institutions. Lenin objected that collective leadership of this kind was not an organic part of democratic centralism. Rather, the term implied that the lower ranks of the party choose the higher bodies, which then could administer as they saw fit. In particular, the party congress examined the work of the Central Committee, removed it and installed a new one. This use of the term is not too far from pre-revolutionary usage.

After this exchange, however, “democratic” by any definition dropped out of the picture and exclusive emphasis was given to centralism. An example that was highly important for the international communist movement is a paragraph from the famous “twenty-one conditions” for

admission to the Comintern, as announced in summer 1920 (emphasis in original):

“The parties belonging to the Communist International must be built on the basis of the principle of democratic centralism. In the present epoch of acute civil war the communist party will only be able to fulfil its duty if it is organised in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline bordering on military discipline prevails in it, and if the party centre is a commanding [vlastnyi] and authoritative organ wielding wide powers and enjoys the universal confidence of party members.” [6]

Although this passage can be found in Lenin’s collected works, it was as likely as not originally drafted by Grigorii Zinoviev. To my ear, the prose sounds more like Zinoviev. But exact authorship is immaterial, since Lenin undoubtedly completely endorsed it. The exclusive emphasis is on centralism, with no allusion to any sort of democratic procedure. But this insistence on quasi-military discipline is explicitly justified by a specific context, namely, “the present epoch of acute civil war”. The heavy-handed “centralism” of the Comintern passage has thus little to do with the more elementary and existential “centralism” of the underground period.

After summer 1920, Lenin used the term in various discussions and debates that arose in response to the new and unforeseen challenges of acting as a ruling party. Didn’t the party have to defend a single line when intervening in “non-party” venues such as trade unions? Didn’t the party have a duty to ensure that uniform policies were enforced throughout the length and breadth of the land? And so on.

The anti-faction resolution passed by the Tenth Party Congress in spring 1921 is a summary of many of these concerns. The words “democratic centralism” only appears in this resolution as the name of a particular proto-factional grouping. Nonetheless, the resolution undoubtedly summed up the current meaning of party centralism. We find here an explicit mention of the right to expel people from the party. Thus we have come full circle, since the pre-revolutionary understanding of democratic centralism, as set out by Nevsky, just as explicitly insisted on the right of local bodies to choose their own leaders.

After reviewing this material, I am compelled to conclude that the common supposition that Lenin had a particular organizational philosophy called “democratic centralism” that was distinct or essential to Bolshevism is something of a myth. In the pre-revolutionary years, the term was certainly never associated with the vision of a monolithic, non-factional “party of a new type” that (in Zinoviev’s words) was “cast from one mould”. In the post-revolutionary years, the Bolsheviks did indeed become a party of a new type, since they were faced with a new and completely unprecedented challenge of running the Russian state. In my view, the quasi-military discipline mandated by the Comintern admission policy was undesired, unneeded, and impossible before the seizure of power, while afterwards it became desirable, necessary, possible and indeed just about inevitable.

Post-Lenin canonization

A larger myth is the existence of a magic formula that somehow provides a key to resolving the eternal organizational dilemma of balancing coherence and unity on the one hand vs. unforced enthusiasm and autonomy on the other. This thought leads to an intriguing historical question: when and why did “democratic centralism” receive canonization as just such a magic formula? I can’t answer this question, but I can note a few benchmarks.

Zinoviev’s party history, published in 1923, does not discuss the formula or indeed the underlying issues, except to claim that the Mensheviks were demagogic about the possibility of democracy in

the underground. Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, published in 1924, also does not mention the formula. In fact, when Stalin cites the 1920 Comintern resolution quoted above, he leaves out the opening sentence that mentions the term "democratic centralism". Nevertheless, *Foundations of Leninism* is a pretty good guide to evolving party norms.

Nevsky's party history, published in 1925, not only gives us an insight into how the term was actually used by pre-revolutionary Bolshevism, but also its new status as canonized formula. In his discussion of *What Is To be Done?* and the early Iskra period (1901-3), Nevsky states the following (emphasis added):

*"In this fashion **the foundations were laid for what is known today under the name of "democratic centralism"**, that is, a type of revolutionary organization in which maximal freedom of all members within each organization coexists with a single will of a single centre, willingly recognized by everybody, along with the strictest execution of its directives" [p. 224].*

Perfect individual autonomy with perfect unity of will! Perhaps this is possible with the angels in heaven, but not among erring mortals on this dusty earth. Nevsky's seeming discomfort with the canonized formula is indicated by the words I have emphasized. Indeed, Nevsky explicitly says in the same discussion that during this period electoral party democracy was irresponsible and destructive. In any case, this invocation of a magic formula that solves all organizational problems in all contexts is clearly distinct from the concrete historical meaning that Nevsky himself documents later in his book.

Nevsky as a source

Let me conclude by spelling out why Vladimir Nevsky's discussion of democratic centralism should be accepted as a historically accurate account of what the term actually meant to pre-revolutionary Bolshevism. First, Nevsky could answer the old vaudeville question "voss you dere, buddy?" with a ringing affirmative. Few people lived as fully the life of a Russia-based underground Bolshevik praktik. Further, he wrote his party history in the short window of time when historians could still tell the truth (or perhaps we should say more cautiously, when they didn't have to tell lies). He was writing for a very informed audience whom he could not fool on matters such as this. Nevsky's comments are also striking in their entire lack of polemics. He is not defending one interpretation of democratic centralism against another, but rather makes the automatic assumption that everybody understands what democratic centralism is all about. Finally, the pre-revolutionary use of the term by the émigré theorist Lenin is roughly congruent with its meaning as presented by the underground activist Nevsky—particularly since Lenin never applied the term to underground organizations.

The pre-revolutionary formula of *democratic* centralism was simply not applicable to the underground party. Democratic centralism existed only during those brief periods of relative political freedom when the party could operate above ground. The post-revolutionary formula of democratic *centralism* makes sense only in the context of "acute civil war" and a party that has taken on state functions.

Today we live in a situation of relative political freedom, but not one of incipient civil war or a party-state. I leave to others to judge whether the practices legitimated today under the rubric of "democratic centralism" bear any resemblance to the historical meaning of the term as described by Vladimir Nevsky.

Appendix: Vladimir Nevsky on “Democratic Centralism”

1. This resolution [the resolution on democratic centralism passed at the [Bolshevik] Tammerfors conference in December 1905] had an enormous significance in the life of our party, since even before the Unity Congress the Bolsheviks (and the Mensheviks) had restructured their organization on democratic principles. From this point on, over the course of more than two years (right up to the beginning of the gloomy era of reaction), the party lived a life of complete democracy. Even in Petersburg and Moscow, where the pressure of the police apparatus was extremely high, even during 1906-7 the principles of democratic centralism were quickly realized and observed strictly and rigorously.

The [Petersburg] organization was completely restructured as it emerged from the underground. The sub-district, district and city committees were elected by direct elections. All members of the district organization elected the members of a general city conference, and at the same time during these elections the members of the Petersburg committee of our organization were also selected. The general city conference chosen by this kind of direct election was the supreme legislative organ of Petersburg Social Democracy. Between conferences, the executive organ was the Petersburg committee, which elected from its own ranks a very small executive commission (three to five members) for day-to-day on-going work. The most complete democratism, the colossal authoritativeness of the directing centres and the most complete freedom of opinion was achieved by these methods.

Such occurrences as the replacement or appointment of comrades to leadership posts against the will of the organization were unknown to the organizations during this period of time. If something like this did happen, it would have been considered a gross infringement of the basic principles of democratic centralism. Nearly always the most visible and authoritative members of our organization entered at the district level as completely ordinary party workers and only gradually, earning the confidence of the mass [membership], were moved up by this membership to responsible leadership posts. Only by imbibing these principles of democratic centralism was our Bolshevik organization able to acquire the crushing majority of the organized workers that manifested itself at the London Congress.

The ensuing years of reaction again drove our organization into the underground for a long time, and only during 1917 and the beginning of 1918 did our party succeed for a short time in living according to the principles of democratic centralism. Obviously, following the example of Petersburg, the principles of democratic centralism were quickly realized in other organizations of the party [Istoriia RKP(b), p. 355-6].

2. It was of the highest importance [after the February 1917 revolution] that the organization of the Bolsheviks lived fully the life of a genuine proletarian democratic organization. As soon as the party emerged from the underground and started to live under the conditions of the bourgeois regime, the principles of democratic centralism were immediately put in place and the strictest electoral principle was put into effect. Indeed, in the statutes of the Petrograd organization of the RSDWP, adopted at the city conference in April, section 5 states that “the basic district organ of the party is the district assembly,” and members of the Petrograd Committee are elected by the district assembly (section 8). The Moscow organization was imbued with similar principles; party

organization was everywhere built on the same basic ideas.

Free discussion, a lively exchange of opinions, consideration not only of local but also of all-Russian issues, an unusually lively interest in current issues, an absolutely universal participation in discussing and deciding these issues, the absence of any bureaucratic attitude to getting things done—in a word, the active participation of emphatically all members in the affairs of the organization—were the distinctive features of our cells and committees [Istoriia RKP(b), p. 499].

P.S.

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2013/04/14/fortunes-of-a-formula-from-democratic-centralism-to-democratic-centralism/>

* Lars Lih is a Montreal-based educator and historian of Marxism. Copyright © 2013 Lars T. Lih. This article has also been published in Weekly Worker.

Footnotes

[1] Carter Elwood, ed., Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Vol. 1, The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party 1898-October 1917, University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. 82-3. I have used Elwood's translations of the Menshevik and Bolshevik resolutions, slightly modified

[2] Elwood, p. 87. I have left out language calling for regional conferences.

[3] The following discussion is based on material referenced in Spravochnyi tom k polnomu sobraniu sochinenii V. I. Lenina, ch. 1 (Moscow, 1970), pp. 126-7, under the heading of "democratic centralism in the party." "Democratic centralism" can also be applied to the state, but this is an entirely different topic. For example, in a passage from 1913 kindly brought to my attention by Mike Macnair, Lenin argues that "democratic centralism" in the state mandates autonomy for local nationalities (see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/6.htm#v20pp72-045>). Within the party, however, Lenin was opposed to separate organizations for different nationalities.

[4] For example, Menshevik leader Pavel Akselrod, writing in early 1905, condemned democratism in the underground because "it served as a cover for ambitious intriguers and even provided clever provocateurs with an access to the organization" (Lih, Lenin Rediscovered, p. 538). This is a harsher critique than any found in What Is To be Done?.

[5] Lih, Lenin (Reaktion Press, 2011).

[6] Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 5th ed., 41:209. The reference to military discipline is missing from translated versions of the admission conditions (see John Riddell, Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920 [Pathfinder, 1991], p. 1014).