

Bukharin Vs Lenin on the Theory of the State

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1 Introduction

A now often forgotten aspect of Lenin State and Revolution is that Lenin did not always hold those views, and they were actually heavily influenced by Bukharin. This fact would have been indisputable before about 1930, but now it is nearly fully forgotten by many people who claim to follow Lenin's ideas. This I think it shows us that Lenin too made mistakes and changed his views and helps us understand those evolution in his thinking. Originally this was just going to be a portion of the biography video on Bukharin I have been working on, but that is pushing 2 hours long so I thought this might work better as a stand alone video. Still going to make the biography video, but I wanted to get this out now.

2 Bukharin and Lenin Fight

In early 1916 Bukharin produced "Towards a Theory of the Imperialist State" sending it to Lenin to be published. Bukharin would take what were some controversial positions especially at the time, Lenin was also expecting an economic article from him, not a article on the theory of the state.

Here is a few paragraphs from it which Lenin disagreed with greatly.

"Thus, the society of the future is a society without a state organization. Despite what many people say, the difference between Marxists and anarchists is not that the Marxists are statist whereas the anarchists are anti-statist. The real difference in views of the future structure is that the socialists see a social economy resulting from the tendencies of concentration and centralization, the inevitable companions of development of the productive forces, whereas the economic utopia of the decentralist-anarchists carries us back to pre-capitalist forms. The socialists expect the economy to become centralized and technologically perfected; the anarchists would make any economic progress whatever impossible. The form of state power is retained only in the transitional moment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a form of class domination in which the ruling class is the proletariat. With the disappearance of the proletarian dictatorship, the final form of the state's existence disappears as well."

"In the growing revolutionary struggle, the proletariat destroys the state organization of the bourgeoisie, takes over its material framework, and creates its own temporary organization of state power. Having beaten back every counter-attack of the reaction and cleared the way for the free development of socialist

humanity, the proletariat, in the final analysis, abolishes its own dictatorship as well”

Lenin initially considered publishing it as a discussion article, but found it too incorrect on the question of the state. Now without fully going into the history of this, Kautsky and many prominent other ”Marxists” of this era had completely dropped any idea of the smashing of the bourgeois state and the construction of a new workers state or a dictatorship of the proletariat, this was a product of them capitulating and becoming reformists.

So Bukharin was going against the most common Marxist understanding of the state and revolution at the time.

Lenin felt that Bukharin had taken Engels out of context, and specifically his idea that Anarchists and Marxists do not differ on the state as being very incorrect. Lenin even went as far to accuse him of semi-anarchism, and said he fully downplayed the need for a state post revolution.¹ I think this was an unfounded accusation as Bukharin wrote, ”the proletariat destroys the state organization of the bourgeoisie, takes over its material framework, and creates its own temporary organization of state power”

This debate would be carried out in letters, which at least according to what I can find have never been published in full. So we can’t really take a look at those unfortunately.² This debate would act as a sort of catalyst for Lenin to take a deeper look at the state in the works of Marx and Engels, the major impact Bukharin would have on Lenin was an accepted fact in the Soviet Union even acknowledged by Stalin in 29, however in the years following that there were attempts to downplay Bukharin’s role.³

During this debate Bukharin’s mood was impacted and he fell into lower spirits, Bukharin made the choice to take a steamer to America, this was at the recommendation of a friend and fellow Bolshevik Alexander Shlyapnikov. Shlyapnikov told him he should go write for a newspaper edited by Alexandra Kollontai in New York⁴ When Lenin heard about this he became deeply worried that he had driven Bukharin away, he inquired someone to find out with what mood Bukharin was leaving and will he continue to write to Lenin and others, and still fill requests for other documents. Lenin would then receive Bukharin’s farewell letter. I am going to quote in full the closing plea that Cohen includes from Bukharin’s letter.

”I ask one thing of you: if you must polemicize, ect., preserve such a tone that it will not lead to a split. It would be very painful for me, painful beyond endurance, if joint work, even in the future, should become impossible. I have the greatest respect for you; I look upon you as my revolutionary teacher and love you.”

Lenin would respond saying the charges were valid, but he gave Bukharin praise and said ”We all value you highly.” Bukharin would respond ”Be well, think kindly of me I embrace you all,”

¹S.F. Cohen. *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938*. Vintage books. Vintage Books, 1975. ISBN: 0394712617, pp. 39-40.

²Ibid., p. 398.

³Ibid., p. 399.

⁴B.C. Allen. *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: Life of an Old Bolshevik*. Historical Materialism Series. Haymarket Books, 2016. ISBN: 9781608465583, p. 72.

3 Bukharin Wins and Lenin shifts his opinion

In December of 1916 Lenin would say he was working towards producing an article of his own on it. To do this Lenin started gathering all the works of Marx and Engels he could and rereading it all. Lenin wrote and prepared a notebook from January and February, these notes would form the basis of what would become *The State and Revolution*. Lenin after examining the question concluded that Kautsky was far more wrong than Bukharin, but he still felt that Bukharin was wrong about a few things. Then in May Krupskaya told Bukharin that Lenin no longer had any differences with him on the question of the state. According to Cohen it is possible in a letter or through someone else Bukharin might have been made aware of Lenin's shift in opinion earlier.

In July of 1917 Lenin had to go into hiding and told Kamenev if the provisional government was able to kill him that Kamenev was to publish the notes. Lenin managed to evade capture and <https://www.reddit.com/r/BreadTube/new/rned> his notes into *The State and Revolution* while hiding in Finland. It was originally planned to be published in 1917, but the revolution put a hold and it was not to be published until January 1918.

We can see Lenin came to Bukharin's positions he previously was critical of by just looking at *The State and Revolution*. Let us look on the question of the abolition or smashing of the bourgeois state.

"Engels speaks here of the proletarian revolution abolishing the bourgeois state, while the words about the state withering away refer to the remnants of the proletarian state after the socialist revolution. According to Engels, the bourgeois state does not wither away, but is abolished by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state."

"From 1852 to 1891, or for 40 years, Marx and Engels taught the proletariat that it must smash the state machine."

"This, in turn, results in state organization of the bourgeoisie, takes over its material framework, and creates its own temporary organization of state power."

Of course Lenin majorly expanded on the writings on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, as well as includes major quotation from Engels and Marx and a more polemic against Kautsky.

Now how about Bukharin's position of needing to emphasize the inherent opposition to the state, as well as that Anarchists and Marxists don't disagree on the question of the state under communism.

"To prevent the true meaning of his struggle against anarchism from being distorted, Marx expressly emphasized the "revolutionary and transient form" of the state which the proletariat needs. The proletariat needs the state only temporarily. We do not after all differ with the anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as the aim."

Lenin would agree that there is no difference with Anarchists on the eventual aim to have no state, but that it's a question of the time scale, and the need for the proletariat to construct its own state which would be abolished in the form of it withering away. As well as maybe the most famous quote from *The State and Revolution* "So long as the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state." So just as Bukharin did have here Lenin emphasising the opposition to the state. Not of revolutionary Marxists, that is

to say, communists, and that of social-opportunist traitors who have turned their backs on the teaching of Marxism and who swear by the name of Marx but at the same time betray his teaching in the most cynical way.

Lenin's little book perfectly shows this difference. And the reader cannot blame the author for extensively quoting the works of Marx and Engels. These works silence these vile slaves of capital who say they are social democrats, as they silence all the Mensheviks, the SRs, the Bundists, the followers of Scheidemann and Novaya Zhizn (New Life) who dare to speak on behalf of the great masters.

Today every comrade has to read Lenin's book."

4 Impact in 1917

I explore this more in the biography video, the position of smashing of the bourgeois state was key in Bukharin having the correct position of socialist revolution and the smashing of the bourgeois state being the provisional government in Russia in 1917. It clearly can be seen in Lenin's position once he returns to Russia calling for revolution and a DoTP or commune state. Where many other Bolsheviks lagged behind and thought the provisional government must be supported and participated in. These new views of Lenin actually got him described as an anarchist by Mensheviks and Bolsheviks

5 Conclusion

Hope this was helpful, I would highly recommend you read the works mentioned, both Lenin's *State and Revolution* and Bukharin's though Bukharin's original article apparently is not in its complete form and has been lost to time. I think all of this is important to know as I think it aids in understanding *State and Revolution* and the context behind it. I think it is a shame due to Bukharin's fall from power in 1930 and execution in 1938 this contribution was intentionally erased and then forgotten. You should also give Bukharin's *The Economics of the Transition Period*, and what he wrote alongside Preobrazhensky *The ABC of Communism*. Both are good works that touch on this same subject.

If you want to know more about Bukharin you can wait for my video to come out which is hopefully soon, but you can also pick up Stephen F. Cohen's excellent biography of him which also was a major source I used for this video.