WHIOCE PUBLISHING PTE. LTD.
PROVIDING
FIRST-CLASS SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
FOR TOP SCHOLARS

2025 Volume 3, Issue 9
Lecture Notes in Education, Arts, Management and Social Science
ISSN(Online): 2705-053X

The Making of Bolshevik Organizational Theory: A Historical Overview, 1850–1924

Zhuyu Ye
School of History and Culture, China West Normal University, Nanchong 637009, Sichuan, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Abstract: The organizational theory of the Bolsheviks was a systematic doctrine gradually developed by Lenin through his practice of founding and leading the Russian proletarian party. Its core lay in constructing a highly centralized, disciplined, and operationally effective vanguard party through principles such as "democratic centralism." From a historical perspective, this article focuses on the critical period from the late 19th to the early 20th century when this theory took shape. By examining the domestic and international context of the time, the polemics between Lenin and factions such as the "Economists" and the Mensheviks, and analyzing key texts like *What Is To Be Done?* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, this study aims to dynamically reconstruct the complex historical process through which Bolshevik organizational theory evolved from its inception and foundation to its eventual establishment.

Keywords: Lenin; Bolsheviks; Imperialism; Theoretical Construction

Online publication: October 26, 2025

1. Introduction

The Bolsheviks, as a political force that profoundly influenced the course of world history in the twentieth century, derived a significant part of their strength from their unique and tightly-knit organizational structure. This system, later conceptualized as the "theory of the new type of proletarian party," did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it was the product of prolonged theoretical debates and practical experiments conducted by Lenin and his associates under specific historical conditions, both within and outside the party. The study of the formation of this theory has long been a key subject in the history of the international communist movement and political thought. Through analysis of historical documents, this article traces how the Bolsheviks, influenced by internal and external circumstances, translated their distinctive organizational principles from conception into reality, ultimately forging a political force that reshaped the trajectory of Russian and world history.

2. The age of imperialism

The First Industrial Revolution, which began in Europe in the 18th century, and the subsequent expansion of capitalism

laid the foundation for the rapid development of natural sciences in the 19th century, spurring a wealth of technological achievements. Following directly from the first, a new wave of technological innovation once again propelled the transformation of industrial society, known as the Second Industrial Revolution. During this phase, the integration of science and industrial production became even tighter: new industries such as electricity, automotive, chemical, and petroleum rapidly emerged, while traditional sectors like textiles, iron and steel, and railways were also upgraded, empowered by new technologies. Concurrently, the reach of the Industrial Revolution expanded further, drawing countries like the United States, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan into the process of industrialization.

In the final two to three decades of the 19th century, the opening of new industrial fields and the rapid development of productive forces triggered profound changes in capitalist relations of production. As Lenin pointed out: "Previously, the owners freely competed; they were scattered, did not know each other, and produced for an unknown market. Now, this is no longer the case" [1]. The traditional production model, dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, struggled to adapt to the technically complex and structurally sophisticated new industries, as well as traditional sectors undergoing transformation. For instance, the automotive and steel industries required massive investment and mass production to be profitable due to the large-scale nature of their equipment. Consequently, the scale of enterprises continued to expand, and production and capital became increasingly concentrated. To compete for markets, monopolies and financial oligarchies gradually formed: the cartel appeared in Germany in 1857; the trust was born in the United States in 1879; the syndicate emerged in Russia in the 1880s; Japan's main monopoly form was the conglomerate (Konzern); Britain and France also saw numerous syndicates and cartels; even British India witnessed the rise of monopoly groups [2]. The rise of monopoly organizations accelerated the development of capitalism in these countries, simultaneously swelling the ranks of the working class, sharpening the traditional contradictions between labor and capital, and exposing workers to new forms of oppressive threats.

Monopoly capital groups, including cartels, syndicates, trusts, conglomerates, and financial oligarchies, after carving up the domestic market and seizing control of the national economy, turned their attention abroad as the world market system took shape. In countries where monopoly organizations were relatively developed, "with the increase of capital exports, and with the expansion of the foreign and colonial links and 'spheres of influence' of the biggest monopoly alliances, these alliances 'naturally' move towards reaching worldwide agreements, forming international cartels [1]." To protect and expand their interests, they infiltrated and transformed the state apparatus, "striving desperately to deprive the opponent of all possibility of competition, by buying up, for instance, sources of raw materials, iron ore fields, oil resources, etc.", even resorting to war to turn many regions, including China, into their colonies or semi-colonies, thereby opening up markets and sources of raw materials for their own monopoly capital while hindering the expansion of rival capitals [1]. Thus, capitalism entered the stage of imperialism.

At this stage, the major capitalist countries developed distinct characteristics based on their respective levels of development: Britain became a colonial imperialism, France a usurer imperialism, Germany a Junker-bourgeois imperialism, and the United States a trust-based imperialism, while the relatively backward capitalist nations of Russia and Japan took the path of military-feudal imperialism [3]. Despite their varied forms, the international policies of these states were, "in the final analysis, an international policy of struggle among the great powers for the economic and political division of the world [1]."

Against this backdrop, the workers' movement faced two new situations:

(1) Conflicts between imperialist states meant the broad working class faced the prospect of being sent to the battlefield by their own bourgeoisie, as starkly evidenced by the First World War (1914–1918);

(2) With the maturation of the capitalist economy and the state apparatus, organizations and ideologies advocating class conciliation proliferated within the workers' movement, such as Britain's Social Democratic Federation and Fabian Society, France's Possibilists and Ministerialists, Bulgaria's Broad Socialists, and the profoundly influential German Bernsteinian revisionism.

The emergence of these trends stemmed partly from the infiltration of the working class by petty-bourgeois elements,

and partly from the monopoly bourgeoisie's cultivation of a "labour aristocracy" to divide the workers' strength. They inadvertently undermined working-class unity and weakened the fighting power of the proletariat in various countries. Simultaneously, after the deaths of Marx and Engels, most parties affiliated with the Second International succumbed to their respective national imperialisms, sliding onto the path of opportunism. The bourgeoisie grew stronger, while the strength of the working class was diminished.

In summary, the Second Industrial Revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries injected new dynamism into capitalism while also posing new challenges for the international workers' movement, together forming the crucial international context for the emergence of Bolshevik organizational theory.

3. The development of Russian capitalism and the labor movement

The emergence of Bolshevik organizational theory was deeply rooted in Russia's unique historical conditions. Prior to the 1860s, Russian capitalism, both in industry and commerce, developed sluggishly and lagged far behind Western Europe. It was not until 1636, approximately two centuries later than in Western Europe, that Russia built its first blast furnace [3]. By the 18th century, despite the reforms of Peter I and Catherine II, Russian capitalist industry and commerce remained underdeveloped, fundamentally because these reforms never challenged the foundation of feudal rule, serfdom. In fact, these reforms reinforced the serf system. At that time, hired workers were legally still serfs, not free laborers, and were required to pay quitrent to their lords, resulting in a large portion of the surplus labor being appropriated by the feudal aristocracy, a narrow domestic market, and severe constraints on capitalist development. The situation only began to change in the 1860s with Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs.

In 1853, Tsar Nicholas I launched the Crimean War against the Ottoman Empire and was ultimately defeated. The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1856 under the auspices of the victorious powers. Facing military defeat, serf uprisings, and a financial crisis, Alexander II, who ascended to the throne in 1855, asserted that "it is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until it begins to abolish itself from below" [4]. In March 1861, the Tsar signed the edict, formally implementing the serf reform. The abolition of serfdom liberated a massive agricultural population, weakened feudal constraints, and created conditions for the development of Russian capitalism. However, the peasants' living standards did not significantly improve. They were still forced to work the landlords' land with their own tools (barshchina or "corvée") and surrender half of their harvest as rent in kind (obrok or "quitrent"), suffering a dual exploitation.

Following the abolition of serfdom and the rapid development of Russian capitalism, the working class grew swiftly. Between 1865 and 1890, the number of workers in large factories and railways alone increased from approximately 700,000 to 1.43 million; by the end of the 1890s, the total number of workers in large factories, railways, and mines in European Russia had reached about 2.2 million [4]. Under the Tsarist feudal-military autocracy, capitalists, backed by the state, ruthlessly exploited workers: workdays were long, conditions were appalling, wages were meager, and workers had no welfare benefits or political rights. To fight for their basic survival rights, the Russian working class rose in struggle. Workers in the Urals were the first to resist, marking the beginning of Russia's labor movement. In the 1870s, the movement's center shifted to St. Petersburg. In 1870 and 1872, the city witnessed major strikes at the Nevsky Spinning Mill and the Krenholm Manufacturing Company, where workers demanded improved conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages, but these were suppressed by Tsarist police and failed. The brutal repression did not crush the workers' will to fight; the labor movement continued to develop vigorously. Between 1881 and 1886 alone, Russia experienced 48 strikes involving up to 80,000 participants [4]. Repeated failures made the working class increasingly aware of the limitations of purely economic struggles and the necessity of political struggle, realizing that "in order to achieve its aims, the working class must win influence over public affairs, just as the landowners and the capitalists have won it and continue to win it" [1]. The rising consciousness of the workers propelled the labor movement towards greater organization.

In 1875, Yevgeny Ozharovsky founded in Odesa the first independent working-class organization in Russia, the South Russian Workers' Union. However, lacking a revolutionary theory and suffering from organizational laxity, it was soon

crushed by the Tsarist government. After its dissolution, workers' organizations of various kinds emerged across Russia, exemplified by the Northern Union of Russian Workers. However, these organizations were mostly influenced by Narodnik (Populist) and Blanquist ideas, believing in a heroic view of history where the masses were merely a "mob," with the People's Will party being a typical example. As Lenin stated, "Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement" [1]. It was not until 1883, when Georgi Plekhanov and others founded in Geneva the first Russian Marxist revolutionary group, the Emancipation of Labour group, that the task of disseminating revolutionary theory and pushing for change was taken up. Plekhanov not only translated and introduced Marxist works to Russia but also theoretically critiqued Narodnik views through groundbreaking works like Socialism and the Political Struggle and The Development of the Monist View of History. In terms of organizational development, numerous Marxist circles were established. The programs drafted by Plekhanov in 1883 and 1885 for the Emancipation of Labour group laid the foundation for the establishment of a Russian Social-Democratic party. Subsequently, on the group's initiative, the Union of Russian Social-Democrats Abroad was founded in Geneva in 1894, further enriching the organizational forms of the labor movement and becoming the party's overseas representative body at the First Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1898. However, "neither the Emancipation of Labour group nor the Marxist circles of the period had any practical connections with the working-class movement" [5]. This historical task ultimately fell to Lenin and his theory of a new type of proletarian party.

4. Lenin's practical explorations and the formation of Bolshevik organizational theory

Lenin's organizational thought developed through extensive theoretical study, political struggle, and practical engagement with Russia's emerging workers' movement. After entering Kazan University in 1887, he began systematic study of Marxism. By 1889, he had formed a Marxist circle in Samara and established connections with socialist groups in other cities, engaging in propaganda work and labor organization. During this period, he conducted investigations among workers and peasants and, drawing on Plekhanov's insights, produced a more incisive critique of Narodnik theory while also confronting the trend of "Legal Marxism."

Repeated repression of the workers' movement led Lenin to recognize the need for a Marxist revolutionary party. In 1895, he drafted the *Draft Programme of the Social-Democratic Party*, followed by the *Explanation of the Programme* in 1896. These documents constituted the first programmatic foundations of a Russian proletarian party, emphasizing that the working class's emancipation required a political struggle to achieve political freedom, and that Social Democrats must guide workers in developing class consciousness and organization [1]. In *The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats* (1897), he further stressed the need to organize the working-class movement, strengthen revolutionary groups, unify scattered circles, and build a Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) [1].

Under Lenin's leadership, about twenty workers' circles in St. Petersburg merged in 1895 to form the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, successfully integrating Marxism with the workers' movement for the first time. Similar organizations soon appeared in other major cities, laying the groundwork for the RSDLP, formally established at its First Congress in 1898. Yet persistent "circle" mentalities, Tsarist repression, and the rise of the "Economists," who advocated limiting struggle to economic demands, caused ideological fragmentation. Lenin responded with sustained theoretical criticism to restore unity.

Entering the twentieth century, against a backdrop of global imperialist consolidation and fluctuating domestic struggle, Lenin completed *What Is To Be Done?* (1902). This work refuted Economist deviations and systematically elaborated the principles of a new type of proletarian revolutionary party, marking the essential formation of Lenin's party-building theory.

In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin formulated several core principles as follows:

(1) A centralized and unified party is essential for revolution: Countering the glorification of spontaneity, Lenin observed that spontaneous development subordinates workers to bourgeois ideology [1]. A revolutionary party

must maintain unified will, strict discipline, and coordinated action to effectively lead class struggle;

(2) The party must serve as the proletarian vanguard. The movement's strength lay in mass awakening but its weakness lay in insufficient leadership. The vanguard must consist of the most conscious and committed workers, who elevate spontaneous struggle to the level of a revolutionary program through theory and practice [1];

(3) Marxist theory is the lifeline of the party. Lenin famously stated that without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement is possible. Since workers can spontaneously develop only trade-union consciousness, socialist consciousness must be introduced "from without", understood as a process of mutual shaping between party and class [1,7]. At the same time, Marxist principles must be flexibly adapted to national conditions;

(4) The party is the highest form of working-class organization. Although the proletariat creates various organizations, only a Marxist revolutionary party can integrate them, safeguard political independence, and unify revolutionary efforts.

Lenin refined these principles through later works, including *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905), and *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908), establishing the organizational, political, and philosophical foundations of the new party type [8]. In 1906, democratic centralism became the party's fundamental organizational principle.

At the RSDLP Second Congress (1903), Lenin opposed the lax membership conditions proposed by Martov, insisting that party members must belong to an organization to ensure systematic structure and centralized leadership of the proletarian struggle [5]. The elections to central leadership produced the historic split between Bolsheviks (Majority) and Mensheviks (Minority), marking the birth of the new type of proletarian party. As Lenin summarized, "Bolshevism… has existed since 1903" [1]. In 1912, the Prague Conference expelled the Mensheviks, making the Bolsheviks an independent Marxist party.

After the October Revolution of 1917, Lenin advanced organizational theory from the perspective of a ruling party. He insisted on the party's leadership over political and economic life as essential for the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist construction. He emphasized close ties to the masses, the struggle against bureaucracy, the development of intra-party democracy under democratic centralism, and strengthened supervision to maintain discipline. He maintained strict standards for membership, asserting that active, dedicated workers were more valuable than nominal members [1].

By the time of Lenin's death, the core principles and structural framework of Bolshevik organizational theory were firmly established, providing a systematic and enduring guide for the construction of proletarian parties in the twentieth century.

5. Conclusion

The 20th century has been characterized by some as an era of "war and revolution." Against this backdrop, the formation of Bolshevik organizational theory stands as a historic achievement born from Lenin's deep integration of fundamental Marxist principles with the practical realities of the early twentieth-century Russian revolution. It precisely addressed the urgent need to establish a resilient organizational core capable of leading a revolution and seizing political power within the complex environment shaped by Tsarist autocracy and imperialist war. Through sustained polemics against the "Economists," Mensheviks, and other factions, Lenin systematically constructed a comprehensive organizational theoretical system, founded upon democratic centralism as its fundamental organizational principle and the vanguard party theory as its political cornerstone. The vitality of this theory was thoroughly tested in the crucible of rigorous revolutionary practice. From the 1905 Revolution to the October armed insurrection of 1917, the Bolshevik Party, leveraging its high degree of organization and discipline, successfully channeled mass movements onto the path of socialist revolution, ultimately seizing and consolidating state power. Following the revolutionary victory, this theory subsequently became an organizational weapon for the ruling party in its pursuit of national construction. Its influence, radiating globally through the Communist International, not only shaped the fundamental organizational models of numerous communist parties

throughout the twentieth century but was also adopted by nationalist parties in some countries, thereby demonstrating its trans-national historical significance. Ultimately, an examination of the historical formation of Bolshevik organizational theory profoundly reveals the complex and powerful interplay between theory, organization, and revolutionary practice under specific historical conditions.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Lenin Collected Work, 2009, Volume on Capitalism, People's Publishing House, Beijing, 115.

[2] Liu X, Liu B, 2007, World History: Modern Volume, Higher Education Press, Beijing, 273, 365.

[3] Liu Z, 2011, World Modern History, Higher Education Press, Beijing, 398, 409, 426, 432, 447, 455.

[4] Wu Y, Qi S, 2011, World History: Modern Volume, Part 2, Higher Education Press, Beijing, 96.

[5] Commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course, 1975, Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, People's Publishing House, Beijing, 5.

[6] Editorial Board of History of the International Communist Movement, 2012, History of the International Communist Movement, People's Publishing House, Beijing, 118–120.

[7] Cen Z, 2023, An Interpretation of Lenin's Concept of "Infusion" from the Perspective of Party-Class Interaction: Centered on What Is to Be Done? Theoretical Research, 3(2023): 54.

[8] Wei Z, 2006, Lenin Had a Complete Theory of Party Building. Journal of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, 10(4): 43.