# Bolsheviks

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*This article is about the Bolshevik faction in the RSDLP 1903-1912. For other uses, see* [*Bolshevik (disambiguation)*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolshevik_%28disambiguation%29)*.*

Bolshevik Party meeting. Sitting (from left): [Avel Enukidze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avel_Enukidze), [Mikhail Kalinin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Kalinin), [Nikolai Bukharin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Bukharin), [Mikhail Tomsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Tomsky), [Mikhail Lashevich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Lashevich), [Lev Kamenev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Kamenev), [Yevgeni Preobrazhensky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevgeni_Preobrazhensky), [Leonid Serebryakov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonid_Serebryakov), [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin) and [Alexei Rykov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexei_Rykov).

[Boris Kustodiev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_Kustodiev)'s 1920 painting "*Bolshevik*"

The **Bolsheviks**, originally also **Bolshevists** or **Bolsheviki** ([Russian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language): большевики, большевик (singular), IPA: [[bəlʲʂɨˈvʲik]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help%3AIPA_for_Russian); derived from *bol'shinstvo*, "majority", literally meaning "one of the majority") were a [faction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faction_%28political%29) of the [Marxist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism) [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party) (RSDLP) which split apart from the [Menshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menshevik) faction at the [Second Party Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Congress_of_the_RSDLP) in 1903.

The Bolsheviks were the majority faction in a crucial vote, hence their name. They ultimately became the [Communist Party of the Soviet Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union). The Bolsheviks came to power in [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia) during the [October Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution) phase of the [Russian Revolution of 1917](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Revolution_of_1917), and founded the [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Soviet_Federative_Socialist_Republic) which would later become the chief constituent of the [Soviet Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union) in 1922.

The Bolsheviks, founded by [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin) and [Alexander Bogdanov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Bogdanov), were by 1905 a mass organization consisting primarily of workers under a democratic internal [hierarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy) governed by the principle of [democratic centralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_centralism), who considered themselves the leaders of the revolutionary [working class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletariat) of Russia. Their beliefs and practices were often referred to as **Bolshevism**.

Bolshevik revolutionary leader [Leon Trotsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Trotsky) commonly used the terms "Bolshevism" and "Bolshevist" after his exile from the Soviet Union to differentiate between what he saw as true [Leninism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leninism) and the state and party as they existed under [Joseph Stalin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Stalin)'s leadership.

## History of the split

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In the [2nd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Congress_of_the_Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party), held in [Brussels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brussels) and [London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London) during August 1903, Lenin and [Julius Martov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Martov) disagreed over the membership rules. Lenin wanted members "who recognize the Party Program and support it by material means and by personal participation in one of the party's organizations." [Julius Martov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Martov) suggested "by regular personal assistance under the direction of one of the party's organizations." Lenin advocated limiting party membership to a smaller core of active members, as opposed to "[card carriers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Card-carrying_Communists)" who might only be active in party branches from time to time or not at all. This active base would develop the cadre, a core of "[professional revolutionaries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professional_revolutionaries)", consisting of loyal communists who would spend most of their time organizing the party toward a mass revolutionary party capable of leading a [workers' revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletarian_revolution) against the [Tsarist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsardom_of_Russia) autocracy.

The base of active and experienced members would be the recruiting ground for this professional core. Sympathizers would be left outside and the party would be organized based on the concept of [democratic centralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_centralism). Martov, until then a close friend of Lenin, agreed with him that the core of the party should consist of professional revolutionaries, but argued that party membership should be open to sympathizers, revolutionary workers and other [fellow travelers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellow_traveler).

The two had disagreed on the issue as early as March–May 1903, but it was not until the Congress that their differences became irreconcilable and split the party. Although at first the disagreement appeared to be minor and inspired by personal conflicts, for example, Lenin's insistence on dropping less active editorial board members from [*Iskra*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iskra) or Martov's support for the Organizing Committee of the Congress which Lenin opposed, the differences quickly grew and the split became irreparable.

### Origins of the name

The two factions were originally known as "hard" (Lenin's supporters) and "soft" (Martov's supporters). Soon, however, the terminology changed to "Bolsheviks" and "Mensheviks", from the Russian "bolshinstvo" (majority) and "menshinstvo" (minority), based on the fact that Lenin believed that most of the party stood behind him. On the other hand, Martov's supporters won the vote concerning the question of party membership. Neither Lenin nor Martov had a firm majority throughout the Congress as delegates left or switched sides. At the end, the Congress was evenly split between the two factions.

From 1907 on, English language articles sometimes used the term "Maximalist" for "Bolshevik" and "Minimalist" for "Menshevik", which proved confusing since there was also a "Maximalist" faction within the Russian [Socialist-Revolutionary Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist-Revolutionary_Party) in 1904–1906 (which after 1906 formed a separate [Union of Socialists-Revolutionaries Maximalists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_of_Socialists-Revolutionaries_Maximalists)) and then again after 1917.

### Composition of the party

The average party member was very young. In 1907, 22% of Bolsheviks were under 20, 37% were 20-24 and 16% were 25-29. By 1905, 62% of the members were industrial workers (3% of the population in 1897). 22% of Bolsheviks were gentry (1.7% of the total population), 38% were uprooted peasants, compared with 19% and 26% for the [Mensheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mensheviks). In 1907 78.3% of the Bolsheviks were Russian and 10% were Jewish (34 and 20% for the Mensheviks). Total membership was 8,400 in 1905, 13,000 in 1906 and 46,100 by 1907 (8,400, 18,000, 38,200 respectively for the Mensheviks). By 1910 both factions together had fewer than 10,000 members.

### Beginning of the 1905 Revolution (1903–1905)

The two factions were in a state of flux in 1903–04 with many members changing sides. The founder of Russian Marxism, [Georgy Plekhanov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgy_Plekhanov), who was at first allied with [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin) and the Bolsheviks, parted ways with them by 1904. [Leon Trotsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Trotsky) at first supported the Mensheviks, but left them in September 1904 over their insistence on an alliance with Russian liberals and their opposition to a reconciliation with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. He remained a self-described "non-factional social democrat" until August 1917 when he joined Lenin and the Bolsheviks as their positions assembled and he came to believe that Lenin was right on the issue of the party.

All but one member of the Central Committee were arrested in [Moscow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow) in early 1905. The remaining member, with the power of appointing a new one, was won over by the Bolsheviks.

The lines between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks hardened in April 1905 when the Bolsheviks held a Bolsheviks-only meeting in London, which they called the Third Party Congress. The Mensheviks organized a rival conference and the split was thus formalized.

The Bolsheviks played a relatively minor role in the [1905 Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1905_Russian_Revolution), and were a minority in the [St. Petersburg Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Petersburg_Soviet) of Workers' Deputies led by Trotsky. The less significant Moscow [Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_%28council%29), however, was dominated by the Bolsheviks. These soviets became the model for those formed in 1917.

### The Mensheviks ("The minority") (1906–1907)

As the [Russian Revolution of 1905](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Revolution_of_1905) progressed, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and smaller non-Russian social democratic parties operating within the Russian Empire attempted to reunify at the [Fourth (Unification) Congress of the RSDLP](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_Congress_of_the_RSDLP) held at [Folkets hus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folkets_hus), [Norra Bantorget](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norra_Bantorget) in [Stockholm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm), April 1906. When the Mensheviks struck an alliance with the [Jewish Bund](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Jewish_Labour_Bund_in_Lithuania%2C_Poland_and_Russia), the Bolsheviks found themselves in a minority.

However, all factions retained their respective factional structure and the Bolsheviks formed the [Bolshevik Centre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolshevik_Centre), the de facto governing body of the Bolshevik faction within the RSDLP. At the Fifth Congress held in London in May 1907, the Bolsheviks were in the majority, but the two factions continued functioning mostly independently of each other.

### Split between Lenin and Bogdanov (1908–1910)

With the defeat of the revolution in mid-1907 and the adoption of a new, highly restrictive election law, the Bolsheviks began debating whether to boycott the new parliament known as the [Third Duma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Duma). Lenin, [Grigory Zinoviev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigory_Zinoviev), [Lev Kamenev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Kamenev) and others argued for participating in the Duma while [Alexander Bogdanov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Bogdanov), [Anatoly Lunacharsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatoly_Lunacharsky), [Mikhail Pokrovsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Pokrovsky) and others argued that the social democratic faction in the Duma should be recalled. The latter became known as [realists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recallists) ("otzovists" in Russian). A smaller group within the Bolshevik faction demanded that the RSDLP central committee should give its sometimes unruly Duma faction an ultimatum, demanding complete subordination to all party decisions. This group became known as "[ultimatists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultimatists)" and was generally allied with the realists.

With most Bolshevik leaders either supporting Bogdanov or undecided by mid-1908 when the differences became irreconcilable, Lenin concentrated on undermining Bogdanov's reputation as a philosopher. In 1909 he published a scathing book of criticism entitled *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909), assaulting Bogdanov's position and accusing him of philosophical idealism. In June 1909, Bogdanov proposed the formation of Party Schools as "Proletarian Universities" at a Bolshevik mini-conference in [Paris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris) organized by the editorial board of the Bolshevik magazine [*Proletary*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletary) in June 1909. However this was not accepted and Lenin tried to expel him from the Bolshevik faction. Bogdanov was then involved with setting up [Vpered](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vpered), which ran the Capri Party School from August to December 1909.

### Final attempt at party unity (1910)

With both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks weakened by splits within their ranks and by [Tsarist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsar) repression, they were tempted to try to re-unite the party. In January 1910, Leninists, realists and various Menshevik factions held a meeting of the party's Central Committee in Paris. Kamenev and Zinoviev were dubious about the idea, but were willing to give it a try under pressure from "conciliator" Bolsheviks like [Victor Nogin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Nogin).

Lenin was firmly opposed to any re-unification, but was outvoted within the Bolshevik leadership. The meeting reached a tentative agreement and one of its provisions made Trotsky's [Vienna](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna)-based [*Pravda*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pravda) a party-financed 'central organ'. Kamenev, Trotsky's brother-in-law, was added to the editorial board from the Bolsheviks, but the unification attempts failed in August 1910 when Kamenev resigned from the board amid mutual recriminations.

### Forming a separate party (1912)

The factions permanently broke off relations in January 1912 after the Bolsheviks organized a Bolsheviks-only [Prague Party Conference](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague_Party_Conference) and formally expelled Mensheviks and realists from the party. As a result, they ceased to be a faction in the RSDLP and instead declared themselves an independent party, called **Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks)** - or RSDLP(b). Unofficially the Party has been referred to as the "Bolshevik Party". Throughout the century, the Party adopted a number of different names. In 1918, RSDLP(b) became **(All-)Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)** and remained so until 1925. From 1925-52 the name was **All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)**, and from 1952-91 [**Communist Party of the Soviet Union**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union).

Although the Bolshevik leadership decided to form a separate party, convincing pro-Bolshevik workers within Russia to follow suit proved difficult. When the first meeting of the Fourth Duma was convened in late 1912, only one out of six Bolshevik deputies, [Matvei Muranov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matvei_Muranov), (another one, Roman Malinovsky, was later exposed as an [Okhrana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okhrana) [Tsarist secret police] agent) voted to break away from the [Menshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menshevik) faction within the Duma on 15 December 1912. The Bolshevik leadership eventually prevailed and the Bolsheviks formed their own Duma faction in September 1913.

Left to right: [Leon Trotsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Trotsky), [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin), and [Lev Kamenev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Kamenev)

## "Bolshevik" as an obsolete term

In 1952, at the [19th Party Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/19th_Congress_of_the_Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union), Stalin declared: "There are no more Mensheviks. Why should we call ourselves Bolsheviks? We are not the majority, but the whole party." According to his suggestion, the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of Soviet Union. Since that time, the term Bolshevik has been regarded as obsolete, and relevant only to the pre-Revolutionary times, during the Russian Revolution itself and the Russian Civil War which followed.

## Derogatory usage of "Bolshevik"

"Bolo" was used as derogatory expression for Bolsheviks used by [British](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire) service personnel in the [North Russian Expeditionary Force](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Russian_Expeditionary_Force) which intervened against the [Red Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Army) during the [Russian Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Civil_War). [Adolf Hitler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler), Joseph Goebbels and other Nazi leaders used it in reference to the worldwide political movement coordinated by the [Comintern](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comintern). During the days of the [Cold War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War) in the [United Kingdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom), labor union leaders and other leftists were sometimes derisively described as "Bolshies". The usage is roughly equivalent to the term "[Commie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commie)", "[Red](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist)" or "[pinko](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinko)" in the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) during the same period. The term "Bolshie" later became a slang term for anyone who was rebellious, aggressive or truculent.

## See also

* [Democratic centralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_centralism)
* [Left-wing uprisings against the Bolsheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing_uprisings_against_the_Bolsheviks)
* [Leninism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leninism)
* [October Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution)
* [Old Bolshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Bolshevik)
* [Soviet Revolutionary Communists (Bolsheviks)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Revolutionary_Communists_%28Bolsheviks%29)
* [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin)

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