In the early summer of 1914, Lenin had very little idea of what the looming war would mean for him personally. He even assumed his work load would be eased somewhat if war actually broke out, since his connections with the Russian underground would be thoroughly disrupted.¹ But when war finally came, it brought some devastating surprises. Even after Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August 1914, the Social Democratic parties in Germany, Austro-Hungary and France were still organizing mass protests against war. The main German party newspaper, *Vorwärts*, continued to thunder against the imperialist war and to threaten the capitalist warmongers with revolutionary action. But on 5 August Lenin received a major shock: the SPD Reichstag delegation had voted unanimously for war credits. Forgotten was the traditional cry of ‘not one penny—not one man’ for the capitalist state. When Lenin first saw the headlines in the village of Poronino (his summer residence outside Cracow), he was sure that it must be a provocation, a trick by the government to confuse the opposition.

Lenin soon had his own firsthand experience with war hysteria. The local officials in Austrian Poland suspected the outlandish Russian emigrant of espionage. A police official reported that many meetings of Russian nationals had taken place at the residence of V. Ulyanov. There were rumors that Ulyanov had been seen taking photographs in the surrounding hills, but these proved unfounded. Nevertheless, the police official was of the opinion that Ulyanov should

¹ Lenin, CW 35:154 (letter of 28 July 1914).
be under lock and key—after all, his identity papers were in French, he received money from Petersburg, and he was in a very good position to give information about Austria to the Russians.

Based on this irrefutable logic, Lenin was arrested and kept in the local jail from 8 August to 19 August. Thus the third decade of his political career began the same way as his first decade—in jail. But the big difference between 1894 and 1914 was that Lenin now had powerful friends on the outside. Among these was the leader of the Austrian Social Democrats, Victor Adler, who went to the Austrian Minister of the Interior to give personal assurance that no one was less likely to help the tsarist government than V. Ulyanov. When the minister asked, ‘are you sure he’s an enemy of the tsar?’ Adler answered, truly enough, ‘he is a more implacable enemy than your Excellency’.

Orders soon came down to release Lenin, and even to allow him to travel to Switzerland. Right after getting out of jail, Lenin received another shock, in the form of a leaflet entitled ‘Declaration of Russian Socialists Joining the French Army as Volunteers’. These Russian socialists outdid the Germans in their support of their government’s war effort—they joined the ranks of an allied army. Among the émigrés in France who showed their devotion to internationalism in this way were several Bolsheviks.

Among many harrowing scenes, Lenin, his wife and his confused and soon-to-die mother-in-law packed up and embarked on a week-long train trip to Bern, Switzerland (with a stop in Vienna to get necessary documents and to thank Victor Adler, soon to be a political enemy). When he arrived in Bern on 5 September, Lenin hit the ground running. The day he stepped off the train, he met with local Bolshevik émigrés and proposed a set of theses about the proper reaction to the war. Just a month had gone by since the outbreak of the war—a month
mostly taken up with the hassles and uncertainties of jail and of picking up stakes—and yet Lenin was ready with theses that defined a radically new chapter of his career.

Yet Lenin had to endure one more shock—in some ways, perhaps the most disorienting of all. The betrayal of the SPD majority was an unpleasant surprise, but Lenin could instantly identify its cause: today’s ‘social chauvinists’ (socialists who supported the war effort of their respective governments) were simply the incarnation of the age-old enemy: opportunism, ‘the bourgeois nature and the danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries’.

Anyone reading these words from Lenin’s theses of September 1914 would have realized whom Lenin meant by ‘the finest representatives’: Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky. Luxemburg did in fact react to the war crisis as befitted an uncompromising foe of opportunism. But Kautsky?—Lenin read with horror Kautsky’s many articles from autumn 1914 in which Kautsky seemed to tie himself in knots, not exactly in order to defend the new opportunism, but to excuse it, to cut it as much slack as possible, to avoid burning bridges within the party. Could it be that Kautsky, Karl Kautsky, was—an opportunist and a philistine? Lenin expressed his fury in letters: “I hate and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy.”

I have told the story of Lenin’s experience in the opening weeks of World War I in such detail in order to bring a home a fact that needs to be explained, namely, that Lenin took almost no time at all to arrive at the basic positions that would guide his political activity until the outbreak of revolution in Russia in early 1917. The three most prominent themes in Lenin’s

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2Lenin, CW 21:16.
3 CW 35:167 (letter of 27 October 1914).
4 According to Stathis Kouvelakis, Lenin went into semi-seclusion for close to a year to carefully rethink his basic position with the aid of Hegel (“Lenin as Reader of Hegel: Hypotheses for a Reading of Lenin’s Notebooks...
wartime program are already evident. The first is the insistence on using the war crisis as an opportunity to foment socialist revolution in Europe. The second is the interpretation of the wartime split in the socialist movement in terms of the prewar framework of “opportunism vs. orthodoxy.” This interpretation found practical form in the demand for a new socialist international that would be opportunist-free. Finally, Lenin becomes almost obsessive about a new form of opportunism that he calls *kautskianstvo*, named for its most emblematic representative, Karl Kautsky.

I believe that behind Lenin’s unhesitating adaptation of his wartime platform is something I call his *aggressive unoriginality*. Lenin did not have to arrive at new ideas: he could work perfectly well with the ideas he had, ideas that he shared with most other socialists (or at least so he claimed). “Aggressive unoriginality” is a phrase that can be applied to Lenin’s outlook and rhetoric from 1914 to about the middle of 1919. In this paper, I will restrict most of my comments to the pre-revolutionary period, 1914-1916, although I will also glance ahead at later developments. I mean three main things by the phrase “aggressive unoriginality.”

1. Lenin is *not* polemicizing with orthodox Second International Marxism.

If you just pick up and read Lenin’s writings after 1914, you would get the impression of a wholehearted rejection of the Second International and in particular of its main theoretical representative, Karl Kautsky. This impression is erroneous, as I have tried to show in detail on Hegel’s *The Science of Logic,* in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth,* eds. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoi Zizek [Duke University Press, 2007], pp. 164-204). Kouvelakis correctly sees that some such pause in Lenin’s political activities is needed to make plausible the idea that Lenin’s wartime positions resulted from his reading of Hegel, but his picture of Lenin’s reaction to the outbreak of war does not fit the facts.
elsewhere. One reason for the misleading impression is Lenin’s attacks on “Kautskyism,” which most readers naturally understand to be “the system of ideas set forth in the writings of Karl Kautsky.” “Kautskyism” is a translation of kautskianstvo, which, as can be seen, is not an “-ism” word (kautskianizm is a perfectly acceptable Russian word). And indeed, a careful examination of what Lenin means by this word is not Kautsky’s prewar ideological outlook. Very much to the contrary, it means Kautsky’s wartime repudiation of his previous outlook in deeds, if not explicitly in words. For Lenin, Kautsky’s behavior was emblematic of a general phenomenon which might be defined as “talking the revolutionary talk but refusing to walk the revolutionary walk.” As such, many people who did not particularly agree with Kautsky on ideological issues were held by Lenin to be guilty of kautskianstvo—for example, Lev Trotsky and even non-Marxists such as Arthur Henderson.

Along the same line, when Lenin dismisses the Second International as irretrievably opportunist, he is not implying that the official Marxism of the prewar International was opportunist. Very much to the contrary, he is saying that opportunism, as previously defined by the spokesmen of orthodoxy, has turned out to be stronger and more insidious than we thought, and in fact has rotted the Second International to the core—so much so that the present International is not worth saving.

2. The ideas that underpinned Lenin’s platform after 1914 came directly from Kautsky and other orthodox writers.

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5 See my remarks in the forthcoming symposium on Lenin’s What Is to Be Done? in Historical Materialism and Lih, “Lenin and Kautsky, The Final Chapter,” in International Socialist Review, Issue No. 59 (May-June, 2008), online at http://www.isreview.org/issues/59/feat-lenin.shtml. I have compiled an extensive database of Lenin’s post-1914 comments on Kautsky’s pre-1914 writings, which can be obtained from me at larslih@yahoo.ca.
In previous writings, I have emphasized the negative conclusion that Lenin is not “rethinking Marxism” or repudiating his own earlier admiration for Kautsky’s writings. But Lenin’s solidarity with Kautsky and other socialist writers goes further. The ideas most important to Lenin after 1914 are also taken directly from Kautsky and others. In other words, Kautsky’s prewar writings continue to be extremely influential for Lenin, and his political outlook in the years after 1914 cannot be understood apart from this fact.

The continuing influence of Second International orthodoxy should not be limited to Kautsky. True, Kautsky’s role is vastly important and overshadows everybody and everything else. Nevertheless, Lenin is explicit that he is building on the orthodox consensus. Very often mentioned in this regard is the Basel Manifesto of 1912.

3. Lenin himself aggressively emphasized his own unoriginality and he had good rhetorical reasons to do so.

Lenin himself insisted that his ideas were not new and original, but represented the consensus of prewar writers, particularly Kautsky. Earlier I quoted a letter Lenin wrote to fellow Bolshevik Alexander Shliapnikov: “I hate and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy.” In another letter to Shliapnikov only a few days later, he set forth the flip side of his attitude to Kautsky: “Obtain without fail and reread (or ask to have it translated for you) Road to Power by Kautsky [and see] what he writes there about the revolution of our time! And now, how he acts the toady and disavows all that!”6 In other words, Lenin explicitly endorses Kautsky’s vision of “the revolution of our times.”

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Lenin insists upon his own ideological indebtedness in an aggressive fashion not only to bring out the heinousness of the renegacy of Kautsky and others, but also to show that he, Lenin, is not just some solitary nut but is backed up by the consensus of the most learned socialist writers. These features of Lenin’s rhetoric will be apparent from the passages cited in this article.

Two comments before proceeding. First, when I speak of Lenin’s “unoriginality,” I do not mean to say that he slavishly took all his ideas from elsewhere. I make no assumption here about the actual source of Lenin’s outlook or any particular part of it. What I do assert is that central aspects of Lenin’s outlook are shared with Kautsky and others, and that Lenin himself insisted on this.

Second, today’s admirers of Lenin want him to be original and picture him as seeing through the unrevolutionary Marxism of the Second International. This is not Lenin’s own self-image. This fact is important in itself, but, as it happens, Lenin’s self-image is an objectively accurate one. People who would like Lenin to be a profound “rethinker” of Marxism may perceive my argument as an attack on him. This is not the case. If Lenin’s ideas are good ones, they are good ones, regardless of whether or not he shared them with writers such as Kautsky. (And conversely, if they are bad ones, the endorsement by socialist authorities does not make them any better.)

As we have seen, in October 1914, Lenin advised his party comrade Shliapnikov to re-read Kautsky’s 1909 book *Road to Power*. Lenin took his own advice, judging from an article published in December 1914 entitled “Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism”.7 In this article

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he cited chapter and verse to demonstrate the excellence of Kautsky’s analysis. I am going to cite the relevant passage in extenso, since it is (or, in any event, should be) central to any analysis of the historical context of Lenin’s wartime platform. As scholarly “value added,” I have inserted page numbers to the specific passages quoted by Lenin (the references are to the English-language translation by Raymond Meyer).

For decades, German Social-Democracy was a model to the Social-Democrats of Russia, even somewhat more than to the Social-Democrats of the whole world. It is therefore clear that there can be no intelligent, i.e., critical, attitude towards the now reigning social-patriotism or “socialist” chauvinism, without a most precise definition of one’s attitude towards German Social-Democracy. What was it in the past? What is it today? What will it be in the future?

A reply to the first of these questions may be found in Der Weg zur Macht [The Road to Power], a pamphlet written by K. Kautsky in 1909 and translated into many European languages. Containing a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times, it was most advantageous to the German Social-Democrats (in the sense of the promise they held out), and moreover came from the pen of the most eminent writer of the Second International. We shall recall the pamphlet in some detail; this will be the more useful now since those forgotten ideals are so often barefacedly cast aside.

Social-Democracy is a ‘revolutionary party’ (as stated in the opening sentence of the pamphlet), not only in the sense that a steam engine is revolutionary, but ‘also in another sense’ [Road, p. 1]. It wants conquest of political power by the proletariat, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Heaping ridicule on ‘doubters of the revolution,’ Kautsky writes: ‘In any important movement and uprising we must, of course, reckon with the possibility of defeat. Prior to the struggle, only a fool can consider himself quite certain of victory.’ However, to refuse to consider the possibility of victory would be ‘a direct betrayal of our cause’ [Road, p. 11]. A revolution in connection with a war, he says, is possible both during and after a war. It is impossible to determine at which particular moment the sharpening of class antagonisms will lead to revolution, but, the author continues, ‘I can quite definitely assert that a revolution that war brings in its wake, will break out either during or immediately after the war’ [Road, p.14]; nothing is more vulgar, we read further, than the theory of ‘the peaceful growing into socialism’ [Road, p. 21]. ‘Nothing is more erroneous,’ he continues, ‘than the opinion that a cognition of economic necessity means a weakening of the will ... The will, as a desire for struggle’,

8 Kautsky, The Road to Power: Political Reflections on Growing into the Revolution, ed. John Kautsky (Humanities Press, New Jersey), 1996 (this edition has been recently re-issued). A contemporaneous English translation is available on the Marxists Internet Archive.
he says, ‘is determined, first, by the price of the struggle, secondly, by a sense of power, and thirdly, by actual power’ [Road, pp. 26-7].

When an attempt was made, incidentally by Vorwärts, to interpret Engels’s famous preface to The Class Struggles in France in the meaning of opportunism, Engels became indignant, and called shameful any assumption that he was a ‘peaceful worshipper of legality at any price’ [Road, p.33]. ‘We have every reason to believe’, Kautsky goes on to say, ‘that we are entering upon a period of struggle for state power.’ That struggle may last for decades; that is something we do not know, but ‘it will in all probability bring about, in the near future, a considerable strengthening of the proletariat, if not its dictatorship, in Western Europe’ [Road, p. 42]. The revolutionary elements are growing, Kautsky declares: out of ten million voters in Germany in 1895, there were six million proletarians and three and a half million people interested in private property; in 1907 the latter grew by 0.03 million, and the former by 1.6 million! [Road, p. 49]. ‘The rate of the advance becomes very rapid as soon as a time of revolutionary ferment comes’ [Road, p. 51]. Class antagonisms are not blunted but, on the contrary, grow acute; prices rise, and imperialist rivalry and militarism are rampant [Road, pp. 60-75].

‘A new era of revolution’ is drawing near [Road, p.76]. The monstrous growth of taxes would ‘long ago have led to war as the only alternative to revolution ... had not that very alternative of revolution stood closer after a war than after a period of armed peace ...’ [Road, p. 80]. ‘A world war is ominously imminent’, Kautsky continues, ‘and war means also revolution’ [Road, p. 84]. In 1891 Engels had reason to fear a premature revolution in Germany; since then, however, ‘the situation has greatly changed’. The proletariat ‘can no longer speak of a premature revolution’ (Kautsky’s italics) [Road, p. 84]. The petty bourgeoisie is downright unreliable and is ever more hostile to the proletariat, but in a time of crisis it is ‘capable of coming over to our side in masses’ [Road, p. 88]. The main thing is that Social-Democracy ‘should remain unshakable, consistent, and irreconcilable’ [Road, p. 89]. We have undoubtedly entered a revolutionary period [Road, p. 90].

This is how Kautsky wrote in times long, long past, fully five years ago. This is what German Social-Democracy was, or, more correctly, what it promised to be. This was the kind of Social-Democracy that could and had to be respected.

The page numbers I have inserted bring out Lenin’s simple procedure: he sat down, went through the book page by page, and found something he liked on almost every page.9 In fact, the passage, extensive as it is, underestimates the full overlap between Kautsky’s analysis and

9 Compare a similar picture from c. 1901: “At one point in WITBD, Lenin portrays himself at his writing desk, telling us that ‘I am starting to leaf through Martynov’s article’ in order to find appropriate phrases. This verbal snapshot is extremely revealing. Lenin seems always to have an opposing text lying open on his writing desk, always to be quoting offending phrases, always to be expostulating ‘can you believe they’re saying such things?’” (Lih, Lenin Rediscovered (Brill, 2006), p. 217). In the present case, Lenin is saying “Can you believe the man who said such good things is now such a renegade?”.
Lenin’s post-1914 outlook. In the latter part of his book, Kautsky sketches out what I call the scenario of global revolution that he had been developing for a number of years—a scenario that Lenin accepted wholeheartedly and that became ever more important to him as the years passed.\(^{10}\)

An analysis of all the issues contained in this passage would entail a full examination of Lenin’s politics after 1914. In this essay I will comment on four major aspects of Lenin’s aggressive unoriginality during this period.

1. The General Idea of a Revolutionary Situation

Both Kautsky and Lenin adhere to the idea of a “revolutionary situation” that has very different political dynamics from a peaceful situation and therefore requires a very different set of tactics. In the famous debate between Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg c. 1910, Kautsky’s (much misunderstood) position is: we are now in a peaceful situation but soon, very soon, we will be in a revolutionary situation. Luxemburg’s proposed tactics are inappropriate to the present peaceful situation, but everything will change in the near future when we enter a revolutionary situation.\(^{11}\)

One aspect of a revolutionary situation, as seen by both Lenin and Kautsky, is the idea that the political education of the masses accelerates tremendously. As Kautsky put it in *Road to Power*:

\(^{10}\) Compare Kautsky’s scenario in *Road to Power* with Lenin’s global scenario in his last published article, “Better Fewer but Better” (1923).

\(^{11}\) I offer the very tentative hypothesis that one difference between Luxemburg and Kautsky is that Luxemburg simply did not operate with this distinction between a peaceful and a revolutionary situation that was fundamental for both Kautsky and Lenin.
When times of revolutionary ferment come, the tempo of progress all at once becomes rapid. It is quite incredible how swiftly the masses of the population learn in such times and achieve clarity about their class interests. Not only their courage and their desire to fight, but also their political interest is spurred on in the most powerful way by the consciousness that the moment has arrived for them to rise by their efforts out of the darkest night into the bright glory of the sun. Even the most sluggish become industrious; even the most cowardly, bold; even the most intellectually limited acquire a wider mental grasp. In such times political education of the masses takes place in years, that otherwise would require generations.\(^{12}\)

Kautsky offered four conditions as necessary components of a revolutionary situation: a regime hostile to the people, a “party of irreconcilable opposition, with organized masses,” mass support given to the party, combined with a regime crisis of confidence.\(^{13}\) Lenin later offered his own four-part definition of a revolutionary situation that differs in details from Kautsky’s but is obviously derived from it.\(^{14}\)

The concept of a revolutionary situation should be examined more historically and critically. What are its roots in classical Marxism? What unexamined dangers are contained in the concept (for example, the hope that a crisis will provide the political education unavailable in more peaceful situations)?

2. The Coming Revolutionary Situation and the Role of War

Lenin and Kautsky not only both relied on the general concept of a revolutionary situation, but they also both agreed that a European-wide revolutionary situation was just around the corner. In particular, a European war would ignite a process that might very well end in

\(^{12}\) Kautsky, *Road to Power*, p. 51.

\(^{13}\) Kautsky, *Road to Power*, p. 45.

\(^{14}\) Compare Lenin, CW 21: 214 with Kautsky, *Road to Power*, pp. 45, 51 (Lenin’s 1915 definition in *Collapse of the Second International* has three numbered parts, to which Lenin immediately adds a fourth, unnumbered condition). Lenin comments, after giving his definition, “Such are the Marxist views on revolution, views that have been developed many, many times, have been accepted as indisputable by all Marxists, and for us, Russians, were corroborated in a particularly striking fashion by the experience of 1905.”
proletarian rule. Lenin was therefore infuriated when Kautsky refused to act in the spirit of his own correct prediction.

Lenin puts the case in this passage from his masterpiece of aggressive unoriginality, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (written late 1918, when Lenin was recovering from the attempt on his life):

It is obligatory for a Marxist to count on a European revolution if a *revolutionary situation* exists … If Kautsky had put this question, which is obligatory for a Marxist, he would have seen that the answer was absolutely against him. Long before the war, all Marxists, all socialists were agreed that a European war would create a revolutionary situation. Kautsky himself, before he became a renegade, clearly and definitely recognized this—in 1902 (in his *Social Revolution*) and in 1909 (in his *Road to Power*) … So, the expectation of a revolutionary situation in Europe was not an infatuation of the Bolsheviks, but the general opinion of all Marxists …

The Bolsheviks’ tactics were correct; they were the only internationalist tactics, because they were based, not on the cowardly fear of a world revolution, not on a philistine “lack of faith” in it, not on the narrow nationalist desire to protect one’s “own” fatherland (the fatherland of one’s own bourgeoisie), while not “giving a damn” about all the rest, but on a correct (and, before the war, a universally accepted) *estimation* of the revolution situation in Europe.  

3. The Continuity of “Opportunism”

Lenin’s scenario explaining the collapse of the Second International goes something like this:

All during the history of the Second International, there has been a fight between revolutionary Social Democracy and opportunism. Kautsky was at one time among the foremost fighters against opportunism, and his analysis remains useful today. Everybody realized back then that opportunism was a strong and growing internal threat to the integrity of Social Democratic parties. But very few realized just how far the rot had gone until the crisis of 1914.

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15 Lenin, CW, 28:289, 292.
revealed it. Kautsky himself is an example: in the period after *Road to Power* (1909), he began to waver, only to utterly cave in to opportunism after the outbreak of war. Kautsky justifiably gives his name to a new phenomenon, *kautskianstvo*, which means “revolutionary in words, reformist in practice.” His case exemplifies the triumph of opportunism in all the official parties of the Second International.

The “social chauvinism” and “social patriotism” now current (continues Lenin) is merely the present-day expression of age-old opportunism. Opportunism has destroyed the official parties of the Second International, but its triumph will not be long-lived. Our immediate task must be to found a new, opportunism-free international.

Thus Lenin. What this scenario reveals is that even when Lenin has condemned the old international root and branch, even when he insists on the necessity of creating a new international, he is explicitly operating with the traditional concept of opportunism. In the spirit of aggressive unoriginality, he is happy to give Kautsky his due credit in fighting opportunism. Even the idea of splitting Social Democracy if opportunism becomes too powerful is taken from Kautsky and buttressed by his authority.16

The political thinking behind this wager on anti-opportunism is expressed in the following passage from *Road to Power*, one that Lenin directly cites in his article of December 1914 discussed earlier:

> The more the Social Democratic Party maintains itself as an imperturbable power in the midst of the perturbations of authority of every kind, all the higher will its authority rise.

16 “This same Kautsky wrote 15 years ago, at the beginning of the Bernstein affair, that if opportunism changed from a mood to a tendency, a split would be on the order of the day” (from “Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism”, PSS, 26:102). Lenin also credits Kautsky with the idea of changing the party’s name from Social Democracy to Communist (PSS, 26:95, December 1914).
And the more it persists in irreconcilable opposition to the corruption of the ruling classes, all the greater will be the trust placed in it by the great masses of the people in the midst of the general decay that today has laid hold even of the bourgeois democrats, who are completely abandoning their principles in order to win the government’s favor.

The more imperturbable, consistent, and irreconcilable the Social Democratic Party remains, all the more readily will it get the better of its opponents.

To demand that the Social Democratic Party participate in a policy of coalition or alliance now, when the dictum about the “reactionary mass” has become reality, is to expect the Party to commit political suicide. To want the Social Democratic Party to link itself with bourgeois parties through an alliance policy now, at the very time when those parties have prostituted and utterly compromised themselves; to want the Party to link itself with them in order to further that very prostitution—is to demand that it commit moral suicide.17

In this Kautsky passage from 1909, we see foreshadowed—no, not foreshadowed, but described in detail—Lenin’s political strategy in 1917. To compromise with “opportunism,” to cooperate with bourgeois parties, is to commit moral and political suicide. To stand forth proudly as an uncompromising party of irreconcilable opposition to the existing system is the path to receiving mass support.

4. Fighting Doctrinal Innovation

Lenin indulged in his usual share of doctrinal polemics in the period 1914-1916. People often think of Lenin as breaking new ground in these polemics. What Lenin himself says he is doing, however, is defending established doctrine against newfangled distortions. I believe his self-image as a defender of orthodoxy is an accurate one. Three issues stand out among the polemics of this period. I list them in the order of the appearance of the innovations, not the order in which Lenin responded to them in print.

17 Kautsky, Road to Power, pp. 89-90 (the italicized words are those directly cited by Lenin).
a. 1912: Kautsky on the state

The polemic against the Second International in Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (1917) fall under two categories: forgetting or overlooking vital Marxist points about the state and actively distorting Marxist theory. The accusation of forgetting applies mainly to the actions of the official socialist parties after the outbreak of war and thus is a typical example of aggressive unoriginality.

Lenin provides exactly one example of theoretical distortion, namely, an article Kautsky wrote in 1912 in a polemic with Anton Pannekoek. Nevertheless, refuting Kautsky’s arguments in this article is clearly very important to Lenin. Indeed, one gets the impression that dealing with Kautsky was a principal motivation for writing the book. In the form in which we now have it, *State and Revolution* climaxes with Lenin’s dissection of Kautsky’s 1912 article.

b. 1914-1915: Kautsky on “Ultra-Imperialism”

The historical context of Lenin’s polemics with Kautsky about imperialism is set forth very clearly in *The Socialists and the War* by William English Walling. This encyclopedic book by an American socialist was published in 1915 and represents an invaluable contemporaneous survey of disputes within the international socialist movement (Lenin, whom Walling had met in Russia after the revolution of 1905, is mentioned in his survey).

Walling introduces Kautsky as follows: “While [Kautsky] represents the orthodox Marxian view, he does not pretend to leave the Marxian doctrine intact on war or on any other matter. Indeed, he has done more than any other living writer to develop that standpoint, and this

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is why, no doubt, he is known as the world’s leading Marxian.” Walling then points out that in his latest articles on imperialism, Kautsky is breaking new ground: “Kautsky here renounces the widely prevalent Socialist belief (often seen in the following documents) that capitalism necessarily means war, or that permanent peace must wait for Socialism. He takes the contrary view.”

As a typical expression of the standard Marxist view, Walling gives excerpts from articles by a prominent American socialist, Morris Hillquit. Walling notes that “if we wish to know what the Socialist thought on war was becoming immediately before the present struggle, we must look to Kautsky and [Otto] Bauer. If we wish to know what it actually was, we must look to Hillquit.” In the excerpts from Hillquit, we find the following assertions:

The Socialists [as opposed to bourgeois pacifists] realize that under existing conditions wars are inevitable. The Socialists assert that wars are bound to become more frequent and violent as the capitalist system approaches its climax … The clash might have come somewhat earlier. It might have been delayed somewhat. But in the long run it was inevitable. It is idle to place the blame for the monstrous crime on any particular nation or government, to seek the aggressor. Capitalism has made this war, and all the nations are the victims.

In Lenin’s 1916 book on imperialism, he defends what Walling describes as socialist doctrine as “it actually was” and opposes with horror Kautsky’s innovations.

c. 1916: Bukharin and Piatakov on Nationalism

Lenin sees his differences with Bukharin and others on the national question as a replay (in a more global context) of earlier polemics on this question with Rosa Luxemburg. In so doing, he defended the existing program of the Russian Social Democratic party. In both prewar

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21 These excerpts from Hillquit are from articles published in 1914-1915 (Hillquit’s emphasis); they can be found in Walling, *Socialists*, pp. 22-3.
and wartime polemics, Lenin underlined his solidarity with “Kautsky when he was a Marxist” on the national question.

We have finished our very brief survey of Lenin’s aggressive unoriginality in the years 1914-1916. Somewhat different expressions of aggressive unoriginality characterize both the revolutionary year 1917 and the first year and a half of power. In his book-length polemic against “renegade Kautsky”, Lenin uses this kind of rhetoric to describe his differences with Kautsky on the issues of bourgeois vs. proletarian democracy, international revolution, and peasant policy.

During 1919, Lenin begins to realize that certain key Bolshevik assumptions were not panning out. Among these were assumptions about international revolution, peasant policy, economic “steps toward socialism,” and proletarian democracy. Of course, Lenin does not reject in any way his earlier outlook. Indeed, he makes as little cognitive adjustment as possible. Nevertheless, he ruefully realizes that day-to-day policy can no longer be premised on the assumption of revolution in Europe, peasant movement toward socialism, or the like. Thus this period of Lenin’s activity might be called “reluctant originality.”

We will conclude by addressing the following paradox. How is it that Lenin, standing almost alone and taking on the entire socialist establishment, emphasized his own unoriginality? The answer to this natural query is that Lenin saw his task as the one shamefully forfeited by socialists such as Kautsky, namely, devising the new tactics called for by the long-predicted revolutionary situation.

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22 Lenin’s adjustments during this period are described in more detail in my forthcoming biography of Lenin (Reaktion Books, forthcoming).
It is the ABC of Marxism that the tactics of the socialist proletariat cannot be the same both when there is a revolutionary situation and when there is no revolutionary situation … When Kautsky was still a Marxist, for example, in 1909, when he wrote his Road to Power, it was the idea that war would inevitably lead to revolution that he advocated, and he spoke of the approach of an era of revolutions … But in 1918, when revolutions did begin in connection the war, Kautsky, instead of explaining that they were inevitable, instead of pondering over and thinking out the revolutionary tactics and the way and means of preparing for revolution, began to describe the reformist tactics of the Mensheviks as internationalism. Isn’t this apostasy?23

This was Lenin’s self-appointed task: “pondering over and thinking out the revolutionary tactics and the way and means of preparing for revolution” in the new yet long-predicted revolutionary situation— not just for Russia, but for Europe as a whole. He had the strength of will (or foolhardiness, or conceit?) to move beyond his previous focus on Russia and assert a claim to European leadership because he felt that the leaders who should have worked out these new tactics had failed to do so. He had the courage to take on the entire establishment precisely because he felt he, and not they, represented the postwar consensus of Marxist socialism.

23 Lenin, Renegade Kautsky, CW, 28:289, 283.