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| Lenin, Vladimir (1870-1924) |
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| Vladimir Lenin (born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) was the most prominent figure in the translation of Marxist political economy and theories of proletarian revolution into successful practice. Marxism-Leninism was the first theoretical program of the first existing revolutionary communist state, put into effect between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Lenin’s death in 1924, and thus became a model for subsequent communist parties and revolutions around the world. Lenin’s communist ideals were formed as a young man; he participated in earlier, failed uprisings in Russia in 1902 and 1905, and lived much his life in exile. Lenin’s fundamental contributions to Marx’s basic ideas about the inevitable decline of capitalism (in *Das Kapital* [1867]) and the development and triumph of a proletarian dictatorship in the service of the destruction of bourgeois state (in *The Communist Manifesto* [1848]*,* written with Friedrich Engels), were two-fold.  First, unlike previous Communist movements (such as the First International, and the Mensheviks’ February Revolution of 1917), Lenin insisted in *What is to be Done?* ([1902] — a pamphlet intentionally bearing the same title as Nilolay Chernyshevsky’s revolutionary 1863 novel) that to succeed in overthrowing the state and maintaining power, the proletariat had to be guided by a vanguard of professional intellectuals who would organize a peasantry and industrial work-force incapable of producing their own sufficient class consciousness. In this sense, Marxist revolution could be neither the spontaneous uprising envisioned by earlier theorists, in which (as Marx and Engels implied in *The German Ideology*) the revolutionary class was itself formed in the act of revolution, nor could it be democratically elected to power, as claimed by revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein. Lenin came to disregard the more ‘scientific’ elements of Marx’s thinking, in which a true proletarian revolution could only occur after a bourgeois-capitalist revolution (Marx drew upon the French Revolution as an example of this). Second, Lenin agreed with Leon Trotsky on the idea of permanent revolution — a proletarian revolution spreading contagiously from one overthrown nation-state to the next. Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) drew heavily on J. A. Hobson’s earlier argument in *Imperialism* (1902) that either a ‘completely socialist state’ or ‘an intelligent *laissez-faire* democracy’ would do without empire simply because imperial expansion entails greater costs than profits to the conquering state as a whole. Lenin’s argued that capitalism necessarily produced policies of imperial expansion, and that revolution in one country is unsustainable unless capitalism is extirpated everywhere. To this end, Lenin advocated a policy by which communist practice would actively support nationalist (bourgeois) revolution against imperial power in individual countries, only then to turn against the new nationalist governments in the pursuit of global communism. Lenin’s elaboration of Marxist theory had a profound influence on the formation of communist and socialist parties around the globe, especially in South America, Africa, and East Asia, where long-standing control of territory and industry by imperial powers had stifled the ‘normal’ or indigenous development of capitalist markets. In such areas, nationalist revolution was often conflated with the spread of communism by both the revolutionary vanguard and their imperial opponents (the experiences of France and the United States in Vietnam are examples of this phenomenon). This perspective, however, meant that Lenin contradictorily supported the claims of oppressed national groups wishing to break away even from communist regimes, while also insisting on the re-absorption of those nations by international communism.  Lenin thus broke not only with the Mensheviks, the “minority” within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), who came to power in February, 1917, in accommodation with the existing Russian state and were more democratically and less violently inclined, but also (in the *April Theses* of 1917) with the “majoritarian” Bolsheviks, who had supported a policy of local governance by “soviets” (councils) of democratically elected workers. Lenin went further by holding that the soviets needed to become the primary centers of power throughout communist society. But this required that the vanguard intellectuals of the communist party had to possess final authority within the soviets themselves, which was contrary to their supposedly “democratic” character under the earlier Bolshevik program. Only then could wholesale economic transformation, via Lenin’s “Five-Year Plans,” be effective. In the end, Lenin’s arguments triumphed, and while his regime has been praised by some for reforms unknown in the capitalist West at the time (abortion, birth control, and homosexuality were all declared legal, and a system of national health care was fitfully initiated), it laid both the theoretical and practical foundations for a ruthless totalitarian state that would last for 73 years and cause untold death and misery. Millions died in the famine of 1921, and it has been estimated that about a half million people were the victims of the Red Terror during the Civil War of 1918-21. The execution by decree of enemies of the state by the *Checka* (secret police, founded by Lenin late in 1917) was part of Lenin’s strategy from the start, and perhaps no policy better defines what the term “totalitarian” came to mean in the twentieth century. |
| Further reading:  Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press at Harvard University, 2002. |