Lenin, Vladimir (1870-1924)

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, and as such became a model for countless 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*) and the development and triumph of a proletarian dictatorship in the service of the destruction of bourgeois state (in *The Communist Manifesto,* written with Friedrich Engels), were two-fold.

First, unlike previous Communist movements (such as the First International and that of the Mensheviks who directed the 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 novel of 1863) that to succeed in overthrowing the state and maintaining power afterwards, the proletariat had to be guided by a vanguard of professional intellectuals, who would organize a peasantry and industrial work-force that were incapable of producing sufficient class consciousness on their own. In this sense, Marxist revolution could be neither the spontaneous uprising envisioned by earlier theorists, in which (as Marx and Engels implied in the *The German Ideology*) the revolutionary class was itself formed in the act of revolution, nor could it be democratically elected to power, as revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein claimed. Just as important, 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 (the French Revolution was Marx’s example of the latter). Second, Lenin (not unlike Marx in this respect, but unlike other theorists in Marx’s wake) insisted with Leon Trotsky on the idea of permanent revolution, that is, a proletarian revolution that spreads contagiously from one overthrown nation-state to the next. Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) draws 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 generally entails greater costs than profits to the conquering state as a whole. Lenin’s argument is that capitalism necessarily produces policies of imperial expansion, and that revolution in one country is thus 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 experience of France and the United States in Vietnam are now classic examples of the phenomenon). But this perspective also meant that Lenin would contradictorily support the claims of oppressed national groups that wished 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 develop to the point where they were the primary centers of power throughout communist society. But this also meant 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.

Bibliography:

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