

LENIN: REVOLUTIONARY & LEADER

HIS IMPACT ON RUSSIA AND THE 20TH CENTURY

HELEN STEELE

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was one of the most profoundly important figures of the 20th century. Lenin organised the Bolsheviks of Russia into a disciplined force and, in October 1917, led the party to successfully manage a coup against the socialist-liberal coalition government set up after the February Revolution. His ideology – expanded from the theories of Karl Marx – provided the base for the new Soviet Union, yet despite being an ideologue, he was able to be practical during times of crisis. His New Economic Policy, despite sliding on some Marxist ideals, was a desperately necessary break from War Communism. Even after his death in 1924, he had a powerful legacy. The rise of communism and its impact upon European politics, upon the course of the Second World War and beyond into the Cold War, have had profound effects not only upon the Russian people but upon all the peoples of the world.

Lenin was influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx early in his life and he adapted them to the specific needs of Russia. Marx proposed a new sort of class-less socialist society, distinguished by a lack of state apparatus, which would gradually and inevitably become a communist society run by the principle “from each according to their ability and to each according to their needs” (McLellan 322). Lenin was initially a follower of the principle of the “People’s Will”, a theory espoused by the Populists in the 1890s (including his brother, Alexander, executed for plotting to assassinate the tsar) (Pipes 103). Lenin tried to merge the ideas of the People’s Will into conventional Marxism and accepted that a “necessary condition for [...] social revolution is the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Lenin “Programme of the RSDRP”). By this, he recognised that a conventional capitalist society, run by a monarchy or parliament dominated by the elites, could never immediately be converted into the kind of ultimate

utopian communist society Marx envisioned. Lenin, as Marx had done, recognised the need for a liminal socialist state: a society run for the working classes, theoretically by the people. Marx however never really conceptualised a means to move onto the final stage, the communist society, and it was Lenin who brought the idea of a “vanguard party” to the mix (McLellan 324).

Lenin argued a new and revolutionary idea, at odds with much of Marxist theory, to justify the need for such a vanguard party. He believed that should the workers be left to their own devices, most would compromise with their capitalist oppressors rather than fight the revolution (Pipes 106). They were too burdened by the needs of simple survival, of making enough money to put food upon the table and to clothe and house their families, that they simply did not have the will nor the means to begin a revolution, especially given the illegality of such activity. In his pivotal 1902 work “What is to be Done?”, Lenin asserted a need for a “stable organisation of leaders” that could be “professionally trained in the art of combating the political police” (Lenin “What...”). These leaders, organised into “cadres” could operate in a clandestine manner to avoid the Russian secret police, would be disciplined, well organised and strongly motivated (Service 138). Importantly, these cadres of professional revolutionaries would not operate at their own discretion but would answer to and take strong direction from a central leadership of the party and a party leader capable of directing the revolution (Harding 281). “What is to be Done?” was one of the most important Lenin ever published and it led in part to the formation of a party more unified and motivated than any of the other groups extant. In the chaos that was to come, this strength of purpose and discipline that Lenin posited and then developed among the Bolsheviks must be seen as vitally important. Had the

Bolsheviks been as divided as the Socialist-Revolutionaries or as vacillating as the Mensheviks, had they rejected the strong leadership of Lenin, then the October Revolution would have failed, or would at least have turned out very differently. That Lenin managed to unite the party despite years of forced exile is all the more impressive.

Lenin was to play a pivotal rôle in the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. In February, the constitutional monarchy reluctantly granted in 1905 by the tsar collapsed following riots over acute food shortages and the continuing slaughter of Russian soldiers in the World War. Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate and a provisional government came into power. This Provisional Government was an unstable mix of liberals, conservatives and socialists, with no electoral mandate and little base for power. It existed to fill the void of power in the chaos of rioting and the Bolsheviks did not accept any part in it. Disassociating himself and the party from the Provisional Government was to prove a wise decision by Lenin. Despite early acceptance of the Provisional Government by the people, it soon lost popularity in the face of Russia's continuing presence in the war and subsequent loss of life. The coalition was also so divided as to cause deadlock. Socialist policies aimed at curbing social unrest were halted by resistance from more reactionary groups, and nothing was done (Fitzpatrick 49). This made Russia a fertile ground for Bolshevik revolutionary ideas.

Lenin returned to Russia from exile in April 1917 to deliver his infamous "April Theses" in which he declared that the provisional government was, like the government it had replaced, "imperialistic through and through". He argued strongly against the war, that it was conducted by "traitors to socialism" as a form of "deception of the masses by the bourgeoisie" (Lenin "April"). With this passion he not only shocked his own supporters but was even accused of being a German spy (Fitzpatrick 41). Lenin did not care who he shocked, however. He was already planning the next stage of the revolution, to institute a Bolshevik state. As both Service and Pipes note, Lenin treated the business of politics much as a war. He

maintained his secrets except to all but his closest advisors, and aimed not for conciliation or gradual change but the overthrow of the status quo. Lenin had taken to heart Marx's comments after the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871 that the only way a Marxist state could survive was not to take over existing political and economic structures but to "smash" them. Yet at first he wavered and the "July Days" riots failed and almost destroyed the party. The Provisional Government was also shown as vulnerable, and it was increasingly likely that it would eventually fall either to the Bolsheviks or Soviets, or to reactionary forces supporting the monarchy.

From a temporary exile in Finland, he began pushing a shaken party to revolution. Following the Kornilov affair in July and August 1917, and further defeats by the Germans in the war, the Provisional Government had become deeply unpopular, and was wavering. Lenin saw his chance, not only to seize power, to seize it completely without recourse to another coalition. Despite the fact that membership of the Bolshevik party was rising rapidly – from 2000 members in February to over 100,000 in April to 350,000 in October 1917 – the party leadership were uncertain whether or not to act (Fitzpatrick 52). Lenin, through argument, force of will and sheer determination brought them with him, and in time to fulfil his wishes. As he wrote on October 24th 1917, "The situation is critical in the extreme. In fact it is now absolutely clear that to delay the uprising would be fatal" (Lenin "Call"). The Bolsheviks, forged by Lenin's ideas of discipline, responded. They moved the people to rise up against the Provisional Government and to take power. Despite the fact that the Bolsheviks issued a declaration that Russia was henceforth a "Republic of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies" in which "All central and local authority is vested in these Soviets" ("Declaration"), the power really accrued to the Bolshevik party itself, as Lenin wanted. At the Congress of Soviets, on October 26th 1917, the Bolsheviks announced the Council of People's Commissars to rule the new Soviet Union, a Council made up entirely of Bolsheviks and headed by Lenin.

It is hard to believe that the Soviet Union that emerged by the end of 1917 would have been the one-party centrally-controlled Marxist government under a strong, dictatorial leadership had Lenin not been involved. His ideas of an organised party had given the Bolsheviks the strength to overthrow the Provisional Government; his insistence on violent revolution on October 24th and 25th had kept out the other parties vying for power. Without him, the Provisional Government might well have fallen to groups inimical to the Bolsheviks and the shape of Russia changed utterly. Trotsky later averred that if “neither Lenin nor [Trotsky] had been in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution” (Pipes 391).

By 1921, the Bolsheviks had survived a bitter civil war against the monarchist White Russians but the burdens of “War Communism” had created disaster in the economy and thus for the people. In 1918, the Fundamental Law of Land Socialisation, issued by the Central Executive Committee, had abolished private ownership of land, confiscated privately owned farm equipment and, in Article 17, had provided for the requisitioning of food surpluses (“Land Socialisation”). This last article proved especially unpopular with the peasants, who tended to work less when there was little reward to be gained. This only increased the crisis and led to ever worsening food shortages. With food so scarce, industrial workers fled the cities to return to the rural villages where they could at least farm enough to feed themselves, and the nation’s already troubled industrial base seemed headed for catastrophe (Fitzpatrick 94). Service argues that Lenin showed no remorse for the nation’s problems but that he did recognise that something needed to be done (Service 421). At first, he argued with Trotsky about the means, but the naval rebellion at Kronstadt forced Lenin’s hand. Against the wishes of many of the Communist Party, he decided to introduce the New Economy Policy (NEP).

The NEP was first announced at the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party of Russia in early 1921 and historians often underestimate the effort it took for Lenin to persuade the various groups, including the Politburo, the Central Committee and the Party Committee, to adopt the

Policy, which seemed such at odds with traditional Marxism (Service 421). Lenin realised that the economy was simply not advanced to allow full communism and hoped that the NEP would pave the way for society to move more gradually through socialism towards communism as the economy and infrastructure improved (Davies 497). The NEP discontinued the requisitioning of grain and introduced a fixed tax on produce instead. Peasants were allowed to dispose of their surplus as they wished, and thus permitted a level of private enterprise not seen since 1917. This encouraged the agricultural sector and land use rose to levels not seen since 1913. As the agricultural produce entered the market, the government was forced to allow other products to be produced and sold freely, although it maintained its grip on heavy industry, transport, banking and the wholesale trade (Pipes 352). Although as Fitzgerald asserts, the NEP could be seen as a retreat for communism, it was also a success for Lenin (Fitzgerald 96). The NEP staved off utter disaster and with limited capitalism the economy began to slowly recover. Although the NEP was unpopular with the Communist Party for its abandonment of complete state control it stopped the rising rebellions in the countryside and cities. Lenin and the NEP had saved communism from itself.

Lenin died in 1924 after a long illness, during which he had been sidelined from the core of Soviet power, yet his legacy lasted beyond his death. His influence upon the revolution is indisputable. As I have discussed, it would probably not have happened at all – and would certainly not have happened in the same manner – had Lenin not brought his leadership and strategy to bear. Russia at the end of 1917 would have avoided the long hegemony of the Communist Party and the resulting depredations of Josef Stalin. Yet Lenin cannot be blamed entirely for his successor. Nearing the end of his life, he made attempts to radically change the party and the state. But the beast he had created was now beyond his control, Stalin wielded more power than Lenin and it was too late (Harding 282). Lenin’s legacy to Russia was thus irredeemably stained. He had tried to bring communism to the masses, but his ideals were dashed by practicalities and

his need for control and his distrust of the people he hoped to help resulted in a totalitarian state which oversaw millions of deaths in the 1930s and the economic mire that the now former Soviet Republics have yet to extract them from.

We cannot know for certain what the shape of Europe would have been over the course of the 20th century were it not for Lenin and the October Revolution, although it is possible to speculate. Service argues that the rise of fascism in Europe was in great part a violent reaction to Soviet communism (Service 491). Yet, I believe he overstates his case. Mussolini was already active in the early 20s and in power by 1922, at which point the future of the Soviet Union was by no means secure. Fascism in Germany was inspired in part by anti-communism but, I believe, in greater part to the disastrous state of the German economy in the wake of the First World War, and the deep humiliation felt by the Germans after their harsh treatment at Versailles. Pointing the finger of blame at external enemies such as communism may have been easy but without deep seated problems at home, it was unlikely to have led to such radicalism as Nazism. We can only speculate what part a different Russia might have played in World War II. Would Hitler have even invaded, had Russia not been considered such an ideological foe? And if he had not invaded Russia would he have invaded Great Britain instead thus effectively overrunning all Western Europe? Even if Hitler had invaded Russia, could a nation not held together by the stubborn dictatorship of Stalin and the uniting fervor of communist nationalism, aided by an extensive propaganda machine (first used by Lenin) have borne the twenty million dead at Stalingrad and elsewhere and held firm?

More clear-cut was the abiding hatred between the Soviet Union and the United States. Russian anger at the US help for the White Russians in the Civil War was set aside only temporarily by the shadow of a common enemy in World War II and after the war, the ensuing Cold War had a deep and abiding effect on all the world. It led to vast military build ups, the expansion of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe, wars in Korea and Vietnam and political suppression in the United States in the late 40s and 50s. The cold war bankrupted the USSR and left the economies of most of Eastern Europe in shreds. The nations that rose up in revolt, often against colonial masters, such as Korea, Cuba, Vietnam and parts of Central America often chose a Leninist ideology to guide them, while other nations – the People's Republic of China especially – adapted Leninism to their own needs. The state-less, multi-party possibilities of socialism and communism vanished with Lenin's adaptations and Marx's utopian vision of communism died in totalitarianism.

Lenin was one of the key figures of the twentieth century. He was the major instigator of the October Revolution in Russia and shaped its future beyond even his own lifetime. His practical NEP saved the communist party and the nation he had built, allowing the Soviet Union to continue and to influence others throughout Europe and the World through the entire century. Lenin's legacy may not be as hopeful as Lenin himself might have wished: it led to dark times for many, but it was fuelled by an initial idealism had good beginnings. It is abidingly tragic that distrust, experience and conflict twisted that idealism into something unrecognisable and harsh.

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