

The politics of Lenin

Paul Ginsborg



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Introduction

With thanks to John Barber for all his help and criticism in the writing of this pamphlet

LENIN ASKED before he died that no great fuss be made in commemorating his death, that no personality cult be allowed to develop around him, and that on no account should he be turned into some sort of socialist saint. This pamphlet, then, published 50 years after Lenin's death, is not intended as one more hymn in his praise. Instead it is an attempt to look at Lenin's *politics* so as to bring out the relevance of many of his actions and writings for the problems that face us today. In this way it is hoped that we can pay a tribute to Lenin in the spirit of Lenin—not by worshipping him, but by learning from what he said and did.

For those who are reading about Lenin for the first time the pamphlet begins with a brief account of Lenin's life. There then follow sections on the most important aspects of Lenin's theory and practice.



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Lenin's life

WHEN LENIN was born in 1870 Russia was a country whose population consisted almost entirely of poor peasants over whom an absolute monarch, the Czar, ruled. There were only two major cities, St Petersburg and Moscow, hardly any industry and only a small middle class. There were no elections, no freedom of the press, right of assembly or right to strike, much of which had been won by this time in western Europe. The court of the Czar and the homes of the rich nobility presented a brilliant spectacle to all who visited them, but for most of the population the realities of life were different. There was appalling misery for the poor in the towns, and a shortage of land and over-population in the countryside. In the great famine of 1891, while thousands of Russian peasants were dying of starvation, the noble landowners were exporting massive quantities of grain.

Lenin was the second son of a schools' inspector who lived in Simbirsk, a small town on the banks of the Volga. This was an area which had seen an enormous peasant revolt a century earlier that had only ended with its leader, Pugachev, being publicly hung and quartered in Moscow. The gallows had not come down in the villages for two years. Lenin's childhood and youth were comfortable and uneventful, for his family was reasonably well-off. But in 1887 his elder brother Alexander was arrested and hung for his part in a plot to assassinate the Czar, Alexander III. Lenin's brother had come into contact with radical ideas while at university, and faced with the increasingly repressive measures of the new Czar, he and his companions had, in desperation, sought terrorism as a way out. Lenin never let it be known in later life what his reactions were to his brother's death, but there seems no doubt that it had a very profound effect upon him, and pushed him away from his school studies and into reading the books that had influenced his brother. In 1888, at the age of 18 Lenin started reading Marxist literature because of the great influence of his dead brother on him. It took him five years of serious study until he became a Marxist.

Early Years as a Militant

When Lenin left school to go to the local university at Kazan, he tried to organise the students, there was a riot, and he got expelled for his pains. Four years later he was allowed back to university, at St Petersburg, and it was after he had got his degree that he began to work seriously with a revolutionary socialist group. In the great city of St Petersburg at this time the industrial working class was slowly beginning to form and to organise. Large textile mills and engineering factories were being built, and Russian industry began to develop rapidly in the 1890s. By 1917 there were over three million industrial workers in Russia, but they still remained a small island in a sea of peasantry.

It was with these factory workers in the Russian capital that Lenin, in the period 1893-5, gained his first political experience. He began a study circle, wrote leaflets and distributed them outside the factory gates. Right from the start Lenin tried to grasp the minutest details of the workers' lives so that he could learn how best to appeal to them, to find the issues which would attract them to revolutionary politics. Krupskaya, his wife-to-be, remembers that many of the intellectual Marxists of the time 'badly understood the workers' and would come and read them 'a kind of lecture'. Lenin did not shrink from the more difficult tasks of education—he read Marx's *Capital* with the workers in the study circle. But he also published a number of pamphlets, on strikes, factory acts, fines, industrial courts, which related theory to practice, Marxist ideas to the workers' conditions. This was an invaluable period in Lenin's life, for, by his mid-20s he had become moulded as a workers' leader.

At the end of 1895 the Czarist police caught up with him, and after a year in prison he was sentenced to three years exile in Siberia, the barren far east of Russia where political militants were sent to prevent them from making trouble. Krupskaya soon received a similar sentence, and while they were both in Siberia they got married.

In the West, 1900-1905

On his release Lenin soon decided to leave Russia. He had joined the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (it was not till after the 1st World War that the label 'Social Democratic' automatically meant reformist—as it does today, for example, in West Germany), and he saw the principal task as writing and producing the party's paper, *Iskra*—the Spark. This could not be done within Russia, and so Lenin and Krupskaya lived in Munich, then London and Geneva, anywhere in fact where the police would leave them in peace. Despite every sort of obstacle the paper was produced and smuggled into Russia.

In 1903, however, at the Second Congress of the Party, the Party split into two sections—the Bolsheviks (meaning the majority), and the Mensheviks, the minority (for the reasons for this split, see the section on Lenin and the Party). The

movement was divided by bitter factional fighting, and Lenin's nerves were so shattered by the Congress and its aftermath that he and Krupskaya dropped all political work and went hiking for a month in the Swiss mountains. He was soon back at work, and from the numerous reports he received from inside Russia, it quickly became obvious that Russia was seething with revolution.

1905—the first revolution

In January 1905 a peaceful procession of workers bearing a petition signed by thousands of the St Petersburg working class marched through the capital towards the Czar's residence, the Winter Palace. The petition demanded an eight-hour day, the recognition of workers' rights and a Constitution. The Czar ordered the demonstration to be shot at, many workers were killed, and revolution broke out. Unfortunately the movement lacked organisation and leadership. There were general strikes in St Petersburg and Moscow, great unrest in the countryside and many sailors serving in the Russian navy came over to the insurrection. The army, however, remained loyal, and Czar Nicholas II, having at first made concessions, brutally crushed the movement. 15,000 people were killed, over 18,000 wounded, and 79,000 imprisoned.

The Bolsheviks had been unable to influence events decisively. They were as yet too weak, not sufficiently organised, and their roots in the working class were of too recent origin. Lenin himself returned for a brief period to St Petersburg, but soon had to flee for his life. One thing of outstanding importance emerged from the revolution—the Soviet or Workers' Council. The first of these was set up in St Petersburg at the height of the revolution. There was one delegate for each 500 workers, the delegates were subject to recall, and there were frequent assemblies to hammer out policy. Trotsky was the last President of the St Petersburg Soviet before it fell to the Czar's forces.

The Years of Retreat and Revival, 1906-14

This period was perhaps the most difficult in Lenin's life. Despondency set in, party membership dropped, it became difficult to keep any organisation going. Lenin himself wrote at this time, 'We talk of organisation, of centralism, while actually there is such disunity, such amateurism among even the closest comrades in the centre that one feels like chucking it all in in disgust.' Even so Lenin worked on, from Geneva and Paris, trying to hold the movement together. He set up party training schools, continued to gather all the information he could from Russia, and spent a large amount of his time studying Russian capitalism and agriculture so as to be able to speak as an authority.

Gradually, things got better, and the period 1911-14 saw a great revival of militancy in Russia and a corresponding growth

in the Bolshevik party. In April 1912 police fired on a demonstration of striking miners at Lena in Siberia. 170 were killed and huge sympathy strikes took place in Moscow and St Petersburg. Trade unions grew rapidly, as did Bolshevik influence in them, and by the outbreak of the First World War the Russian working class was stronger than ever before.

War and Revolution, 1914-17

The Russian ruling class entered the First World War with hopes of being able to stave off revolution at home by victory abroad. By 1917 these hopes had been dashed. Hundreds of thousands of peasants and workers had lost their lives, the Russian armies had been forced back, the bread queues in the cities grew longer, and the Czar could do nothing about inflation or the rising tide of workers' agitation.

Lenin, unlike the vast majority of European socialists, had opposed the war from the beginning (see the section on Lenin and Internationalism). He had insisted that the imperialist war between nations should be turned into a civil war between classes, to put an end to exploitation and to place the means of production in the workers' hands. At first this had seemed an unrealisable dream, as the workers of each country succumbed to the nationalist propaganda of their rulers. But gradually, as the pointless and terrible slaughter continued, Lenin's arguments began to find supporters. Lenin took the initiative in trying to unite all those socialists opposed to the war and in so doing emerged unmistakably as a revolutionary leader of international significance. Even so, Lenin did not foresee how dramatically and suddenly the situation was to change. In February 1917, in a speech to a Swiss audience, he said, 'we the old shall not live to see the revolution'. Two weeks later the revolution broke out in Russia. The army this time supported the workers' riots in St Petersburg, and the Czar fell from power.

1917

At the age of 47 Lenin faced the decisive months of his life. Everything he had done up to this point had been a preparation for the situation that now faced him. In Russia a middle class government had been established with the support of all the left-wing parties. But side by side with this government, and disputing its authority were the Soviets (workers', soldiers', and peasants' councils) that had sprung up all over Russia. This was the situation of 'dual power'.

Lenin managed to get back to Russia in April 1917 and immediately declared that the Bolsheviks would not cooperate in any middle class government and that the way was open for the workers to seize power. He stressed that the workers' revolution could be made, provided that the peasantry supported them and that the Russian revolution triggered off similar revolutions in the Western European countries. Lenin

coined the slogans 'All power to the Soviets' and 'Bread, Peace and Land', and strove with all his might to get his viewpoint accepted by the other Bolsheviks, and to spread the influence of the Bolsheviks in the Soviets (see the section on Lenin and the Party).

In July spontaneous worker demonstrations in the streets of Petrograd (the name of the city had been changed from St Petersburg in August 1914) demanded the overthrow of the government. Lenin hesitated to give his support, for the workers were unarmed, the rest of Russia was not yet ready, and no plans for the revolution had been laid. He urged restraint, the demonstrations were put down by force, Trotsky and other Bolsheviks were arrested, and Lenin went underground. The chance seemed to have gone.

In August and September, however, the reactionary General Kornilov decided to stage a counter-revolution and began to march on the capital with his troops. The government was forced to lift the ban on the Bolsheviks because they needed them to help organise the resistance of the workers. By this time the influence and prestige of the Bolsheviks had risen enormously, and they effectively put an end to Kornilov by persuading his troops to desert.

The Bolsheviks now had a majority in the Petrograd Soviet and feeling was beginning to swing in their favour amongst workers, peasants and soldiers throughout the country. By the beginning of October Lenin judged the moment to be right for revolution and won a majority on the Bolshevik Central Committee for organising an uprising (see the section Lenin and Tactics). With the support of the workers and soldiers of Petrograd and with the backing of the Soviet of the city, the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace and seized power. Lenin went to address the All-Russia Congress of Soviets which had assembled in Petrograd and, to thunderous applause, leant over the rostrum and said, 'Comrades, we shall now proceed to construct the socialist order.'

Civil War, 1918-20

Lenin now had less than six years before his death in which to turn his famous words into reality. Every obstacle imaginable lay in his path. Though the new Soviet state made a costly peace with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, it faced invasion from a counter-revolutionary army, the Whites, intent on restoring capitalism. This army was equipped by the capitalist powers, and many of them, including the British, French, American and Japanese, sent their own troops to aid the downfall of the new Soviet Russia. The long-awaited workers' revolution in the West, which would end Russia's isolation, was crushed in some countries, and did not take place in others. Within Russia the rival left-wing parties plotted to overthrow the Bolsheviks (renamed Communists in 1918), and Lenin himself narrowly escaped death when he was shot at and hit by a would-be assassin. It was, as Lenin said, 'an extraordinarily difficult,

complex and dangerous situation.

The revolution survived through the heroism of the Russian masses organised by Trotsky into the Red Army; through the support they received from the Russian peasants who had been granted the land immediately after the revolution; and through the harsh discipline and relentless organisation of Lenin's party. Although at one stage it looked inevitable that the Whites would take Petrograd, the capital was successfully defended, and by 1920 the immediate threat of counter-revolution had passed. Against all the odds, the Bolshevik revolution had survived.

Attempted Reconstruction and Lenin's death, 1921-24

The price that had been paid for this survival was a very high one. Russia emerged from the Civil War in chaos. Industrial production had fallen drastically, the working class had been dispersed and decimated, the peasantry had been milked mercilessly in order to feed the armies and the cities. Because of the war situation the Communists had increasingly taken state power, and the Party had replaced the Soviets as the decision making body (see the section Lenin and Workers' Power). Bureaucracy had grown, both inside and outside the Party, the old Czarist state apparatus had hardly been touched, and in order to be sure of their services the government had been forced to pay high wage rates to specialists—engineers, doctors, technicians etc. Because of the fear of peasant insurrection Lenin felt obliged in March 1921 to introduce the New Economic Plan (NEP) by which capitalism was restored to certain sectors of the economy.

All this contrasted sadly with the high hopes that Lenin had held in 1917 for the speedy establishment of socialism. In the last years of his life Lenin worked ceaselessly against the deformations that had afflicted the Soviet state as a result of the war and the lack of similar revolutions in the West. He urged the need for a new and less bureaucratic Party, for every effort to be made to raise the political awareness of the peasantry, for increased agricultural and industrial production to improve the standard of living of the Soviet people. He also played a leading role in the formation of a new International to co-ordinate the activities of Communists throughout the world (see Lenin and Internationalism).

Time was against him. His health gave way and in May 1922 he suffered a severe stroke, which affected his speech and partially paralysed him. At the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923 he wrote his last notes and articles. In these he warned the party against Stalin. Stalin, said Lenin, had concentrated too many powers in his hands and had used his power in an unacceptable way to deprive the smaller nationalities, particularly the Georgians, of their rights in the new Russian state. He advised the Party to find a new General Secretary. In March 1923 Lenin suffered a final stroke which deprived him of all his faculties. He died ten months later, at the age of 53, on 21 January 1924.

Lenin as a leading comrade

A BRIEF sketch of Lenin's life cannot hope to do justice to his personality. So before going any further it is worth saying something about Lenin's personal and political qualities, the characteristics which marked him out for such great respect and attention from his comrades.

The first and probably most important was Lenin's total dedication to the socialist struggle. He quite clearly had only one standard by which he judged actions and personalities, and that was whether or not, in his eyes, they advanced the achievement of socialism. Trotsky commented on the overwhelming impression Lenin gave of 'concentrating on the one and unique goal'—social revolution in Russia. Lenin's Menshevik opponent Dan had this to say of him: 'There is no one else who for the whole twenty four hours of every day is busy with revolution. What can you do with a man like that?' Victor Serge received much the same impression when first meeting Lenin: 'what showed through was only the urgency of the devoted technician who wants the work to be done, and done quickly and well.'

Combined with this was an absolute decisiveness of action. Lenin hardly ever hesitated and once he had made up his mind on a particular course of action he would spare no pain to see that it was carried through. Personal considerations never entered into the picture. If Lenin disagreed strongly with a friend on political grounds he would invariably break off personal relations with that friend, rather than allow them to influence him. The pattern was always the same—Lenin weighed up a particular situation, made his decision, and then fought for it tooth and nail through every channel available to him.

This decisiveness went hand in hand with a great ability to listen. Lenin never made decisions in a vacuum, but only after he had discovered as much as he could on the subject in question. He therefore took every opportunity to question comrades and learn from them concerning situations about which he knew very little. This willingness to listen and to learn, to admit his own ignorance, impressed everyone who came into contact with him. Far from charging into a situation like a bull in a china shop, he would observe and quietly sum up before making his decision. Alfred Rosmer, a French comrade, has left this impression of working with Lenin at the

You have to judge your moment of action . . .



Communist International: 'He followed the discussion from beginning to end, listening carefully to everyone, interrupting from time to time, always with a lively and mischievous look.'

One final quality of Lenin's merits a mention. This was his refusal to let the enormous power and authority that he acquired affect the way he behaved. Angelica Balabanova, one of Lenin's sternest critics, was the first to admit this: 'after his rise to power Lenin remained the same . . . As before he would walk up to the speakers' stand at a clipped pace and ignoring the applause he would enter immediately upon the argument at hand . . . He still had that air of the provincial schoolmaster.' Serge commented: 'His manners and behaviour betrayed not the slightest inkling of any taste for authority'; Lunarcharsky wrote, 'He simply got on with the job'. Lenin was furious when any special privilege was conferred upon him. When his salary was raised in 1918 from the average 500 roubles a month to 800, he refused to accept it and severely reprimanded those who had given him the rise. In September 1920, wanting to borrow some dictionaries from a Moscow library, Lenin wrote: 'If the library regulations forbid the removal of dictionaries from the building, may I borrow them overnight? I shall return them early in the morning.'

Lenin and the party

SOME OF the greatest lessons that Lenin left revolutionary socialists were his ideas on the party and his experiences in the formation and development of the Bolshevik party. The essence of his view of the revolutionary party was that it should be disciplined, centralised and democratic, and that it should be flexible and able to respond to the needs of the moment. Let us look at these in turn.

The Need for a Vanguard Party

From early in his political career Lenin warned against the dangers of worker militancy being kept within the narrow limits of trade union agitation. The struggle for better pay and better conditions could easily become and indeed in some countries had become the be-all and end-all of the workers' struggle. In his famous pamphlet *What is to be Done?*, written in 1902, Lenin went as far as to say: 'The history of all countries shows that the working class, solely by its own forces, is able to work out merely trade-union consciousness, ie the conviction of the need for combining in unions, for fighting against the employers, and for trying to prevail upon the government to pass laws necessary for the workers etc.'

What was needed to combat this tendency was a revolutionary socialist party which would unite the most militant and aware members of the working class and which would take the fight out of the arena of mere trade unionism and into an attack on the whole political and economic system of capitalism. Such a party was necessary, according to Lenin, to *lead* 'the struggle of the working class not only to achieve profitable terms for the sale of labour but also to achieve the complete destruction of the social order which forces the have-nots to sell themselves to the rich.'

Lenin saw clearly that since some sections and individuals in the working class were more politically advanced than others, it was imperative to bring these militant workers into an organisation where they could pool their experience, overcome their isolation and plan joint political action. In a telling sentence, Lenin described the early days of such an organisation: 'We are marching along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand.' The party had to educate its members in Marxism, steep them in the history of the working class and teach them the basic political techniques

that they would need in their everyday struggles—knowledge of union procedure, experience of public speaking, of writing and producing leaflets, of organising and co-ordinating action. The task that lay ahead of the trained members (cadres) was to work within their factories and in all the institutions open to them in order to increase the political awareness of their fellow workers and win them for revolutionary socialism.

The way in which the Bolshevik party worked in a revolutionary situation, Russia in 1917, demonstrates these ideas in action. When the Czar was overthrown in February 1917 the Bolshevik party had 23,600 members. When Lenin returned in April and persuaded the Central Committee that the time was ripe for a workers' revolution, the immediate task for the Bolshevik rank and file was to win a majority for their politics within the Soviets, and to prepare the ground for a fresh revolution. This meant arguing for non-co-operation with the provisional government and raising the correct slogans which would win the Bolsheviks support in the cities and countryside. The clarity of political vision of their leadership, particularly Lenin, meant that the Bolshevik cadres, unlike the rank and file of other socialist parties, knew exactly what their tasks were. Their own experience, training and roots in the working class meant that they were prepared as a *vanguard* to carry out the tasks that Lenin had outlined. They in turn now had to assume the leadership in their own work places. By June 1917, at a demonstration 500,000 strong in Petrograd, most of the placards carried by the workers and soldiers bore Bolshevik slogans. By the beginning of October the Bolsheviks were the undisputed leaders of the working classes of Petrograd and Moscow.

Discipline, Centralisation and Democracy

Such concerted action could not have been achieved without rigid discipline and a high degree of centralisation. It was these qualities that Lenin had insisted upon from 1902 onwards. It was these qualities that lay at the root of the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in 1903. Lenin demanded at the Congress of 1903 that a party member was 'any person who' accepts its programme, supports the party with material means, and *personally participates* in one of its organisations.' Martov, the Menshevik leader, required the party member more vaguely 'to co-operate personally and regularly under the guidance of one of the party's organisations'. The difference was small but important, for Lenin's whole concept of the party was of a tightly knit organisation whose members were subject to its discipline. This was obviously only possible if members were actually *in* a party organisation and not just *under the guidance* of one. It was no coincidence that all the delegates who came to the Congress from Russia, where they had been working illegally, supported Lenin.

How were discipline and centralisation to be reconciled with democracy? The answer lay in the principles of democratic centralism. Each branch of the party elected delegates to the

party congress which was the supreme authority of the party. The delegates at this congress decided on the main problems facing the party and at the end elected a central committee which became the governing body of the party until the congress next met. All the branches were subject to the control of this central committee, though the committee was subject to recall to an emergency conference if sufficient branches expressed no-confidence in it. In this way the leadership was guaranteed wide-ranging powers, but were always subordinate to the ultimate authority of the party congress.

It is also worth mentioning that Lenin insisted, as far as conditions allowed, on a great deal of tolerance for opposition and political discussion within the Bolshevik party. The central committee was not some sort of monolithic group which dictated to the rest of the party. On numerous occasions we find great political disagreements waged and resolved—the best known examples are Lenin's struggle against the rest of the party in April 1917, and the arguments, after the revolution, over the peace treaty with the Germans.

Flexibility

Of course the system of democratic centralism was not some magic formula which guaranteed, come what may, the rights of the members or the powers of the leaders. In the illegal conditions of Russia before 1917 the need for secrecy often meant that it was impossible to have full publicity for every party election or even elections to all party posts. Similarly, during the Civil War and the period immediately after it, Lenin was often forced, through the seriousness of the situation, to act arbitrarily, and even in 1921 to agree to ban all organised opposition within the party. The exact balance between democracy and authority would always depend on the tasks and problems that faced the party.

This is the crux of Lenin's teaching on the party. Though there were broad principles—discipline, centralisation, democracy—within which the party operated, there were no iron rules. The party had to be flexible enough to respond to constantly changing situations, it could not afford to get into a rut, become conservative, or get bogged down in tradition. The acid test for Lenin of any form of party organisation was whether it furthered the cause of revolutionary socialism. Sometimes, in exceptional circumstances, this even meant that the party had to be disobeyed. Lenin was never an advocate of *blind* obedience to anyone; his whole attitude is most clearly and brutally summed up in what he said to the soldiers of the Red Army at the height of the Civil War: 'Do not obey orders or decrees if they are harmful to the cause; do as your conscience dictates. If as a result of the decree things turn out badly, but as a result of your actions well, nobody will blame you for that. But if you do not carry out the order or decree, and as a result of your actions things turn out badly, you will all have to be shot.'

Lenin's methods and tactics

LENIN was a supreme tactician. His judgement of the next move in a political struggle, and the timing of such a move, was often so far-seeing that it left many of his comrades bewildered. His 'sharp eyed' method, as Trotsky called it, rarely varied, and it is possible to isolate certain connected elements in this method and examine them more closely.

The way forward or 'the right link in the chain'

Lenin saw that at every stage of the struggle there was one key link which, if grasped, led forward to the next stage. Every comrade had to work hard to analyse the situation he or she was in order to discover this key factor. It could be a certain way of reorganising work in a district; it could be the decision to concentrate work on one factory rather than another; it could be the raising of the right slogan, or the correct motion at a union meeting. It could be something very small, like something which, modest in itself, would immediately raise the credibility of the party in a particular factory; or it could be very large, like the decision to make a bid for state power.

Lenin himself wrote very clearly on this: 'It is not enough to be a revolutionary and a supporter of socialism or a Communist in general. You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link; the order of the links, their form, the manner in which they are linked together, the way they differ from each other in the historical chain of events, are not as simple and not as meaningless as those in an ordinary chain made by a smith.' Lenin urged comrades not just to repeat the same old tasks without thinking about them, but to think hard about the ways in which they could move forward.

The correct emphasis or 'bending the stick'

Once the key link in a situation had been discovered you had 'to grasp it with all your might'. This meant stressing it again and again, until everyone had grasped its significance, stressing it to the exclusion, if need be, of other areas of work. This was what Lenin called 'bending the stick', meaning that so as to achieve your aim, you had to push the stick of political activity

far in one direction. If the need was to build a solid working class base in one area, then all the comrades had to concentrate on factory work, often to the exclusion of other types of work. If the need was then for education for party members, this became the order of the day, to be repeated unceasingly until the aim had been achieved. Once the task had been carried out it was possible to let the stick swing back to a normal position. But it would not stay there for long, for new tasks would be on the agenda, and once again the correct emphasis would need to be established, and the stick would once again be bent in a particular direction. Only in this way could the party constantly progress, could complacency be avoided.

The right moment

Emphasis by itself was not enough. You had to judge your *moment* for action, and then act decisively. Lunarcharsky wrote, 'Lenin has the ability to raise opportunism to the level of genius, by which I mean the kind of opportunism which can seize on the precise moment and which always knows how to exploit it for the unvarying objective of the revolution.' It was no good coming to the right conclusions, but coming to them too late, after the moment had passed, so that you were left musing, 'if only I had done such and such . . .' This was the most difficult task of all, to choose precisely the right moment to act.

Lenin's own ability in this respect was put to the greatest test in September and October 1917, when he had to persuade a hesitant Bolshevik Central Committee that the moment was right for seizing state power. Trotsky tells the story vividly in volume Three of his history of the Russian revolution. At first, in September, the Central Committee had voted unanimously against insurrection. Lenin had threatened to resign unless they took the problem seriously, and from his hiding place he sent letter after letter urging his comrades to prepare for an armed rising. At the beginning of October he said that any delay would be fatal and kept repeating, 'The success of the Russian and world revolution depends upon a two to three days' struggle.' Finally, at the famous meeting of the Central Committee on 10 October, Lenin won a majority of 10:2 for insurrection. Even after this vote Lenin had to struggle furiously to make sure that the insurrection was carried out.

What would have happened if Lenin had not argued, with all his might, against letting the opportunity slip? Trotsky supplies us with the answer: 'A revolutionary situation cannot be preserved at will. If the Bolsheviks had not seized power in October and November, in all probability they would not have seized it at all. Instead of firm leadership the masses would have found among the Bolsheviks that same disparity between word and deed which they were already sick of, and they would have ebbed away in the course of two or three months from this party which had deceived their hopes.'

The art of retreat

Not all the tasks of the revolutionary were this glorious; you had also to learn how to retreat when conditions were unfavourable. Lenin wrote, 'to tie one's hands beforehand, openly to tell the enemy, who is now better armed than we are, whether and when we shall fight him is being stupid, not revolutionary. To accept battle at a time when it is obviously advantageous to the enemy and not to us is a crime.' A careful retreat could be as decisive and valuable as an open attack. Again, the acid test was what happened in the long run—whether or not a retreat turned out to be the correct line of action to have taken.

Sometimes there was clearly no option—such a situation faced Lenin in the years after the 1905 revolution. As despair and apathy crept into the party you had to know how to organise in order to keep the strongest branches or members together, how to preserve a nucleus from which you could build again when conditions improved. The tasks then were doubly difficult for the whole atmosphere was not one of growth and optimism, but of black despair. The art of retreat is one that every comrade hopes that he will not have to learn, but the history of the working class movement has shown, unfortunately, how necessary an art it is.

'We will proceed to construct the socialist order . . .'
Lenin speaking in 1917



Mistakes

Finally, it is clear that no one is always right. Every comrade, Lenin included, makes mistakes. This is inevitable, particularly amongst comrades with limited experience who may find themselves, for example, leading a strike for the first time. Lenin's attitude to mistakes was straightforward. The foolish man, he said, was the one who made a mistake, but refused obstinately to admit that he'd made it. Comrades should act differently. The best comrades realised very fast when they had made a mistake, and immediately set to work to lessen the damage, if possible, of what they had done. If you admitted fast enough that what you had done was wrong, you might still be in a position to correct the mistake before it was too late.

Lenin and the state

LENIN NEVER had any illusions about 'parliamentary' or 'peaceful' roads to socialism. He stated quite simply that parliament and the capitalist state would have to be *smashed* by the working class if they wanted to take state power, and that this could only be a violent process. He then went on to say that the dictatorship of the proletariat (working class) would be necessary in the period of transition from capitalism to communism, in other words that the working class would have to be the ruling class until all traces of middle class resistance had been stamped out. Then, and only then, would the process of the disappearance or 'withering away' of the state be able to take place; only then could communism be introduced.

In view of the importance of these ideas, and their burning relevance for the strategy of revolutionary socialists today, let us examine them in detail.

Parliament, the Capitalist State, and the need to smash it

'We are in favour', said Lenin, 'of a democratic republic as the best form of the state for the working class under capitalism'. A parliamentary democracy was clearly preferable to an absolute monarchy, for the working class enjoyed more freedom under it. The workers in western Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century obviously had more chance to build their own organisations, read socialist literature etc than did the Russian workers, who faced imprisonment or exile for their every action.

One of these freedoms in a parliamentary democracy was the right to participate in parliament itself. Lenin was quite clear that this right should not be spurned. The Bolsheviks even had representatives in the far-from democratic Duma, the Russian parliament which existed for some time after 1905, with little power and a restricted electorate. In his pamphlet *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin attacked those 'ultra-left' comrades who failed to see the possible propaganda value of having comrades active in parliament: 'You want to create a new society, yet you fear the difficulties involved in forming a good parliamentary group made up of convinced, devoted and heroic Communists in a reactionary parliament.' Elsewhere in the same pamphlet he detailed the advantages to be had from participating in parliament: 'it has

been proved that, far from causing harm to the revolutionary proletariat, participation in a bourgeois-democratic parliament, even a few weeks before the victory of a Soviet republic and even *after* such a victory, actually helps that proletariat to *prove* to the backward masses why such parliaments deserve to be done away with.'

But, and it is a big but, Lenin also made it crystal clear that such participation in parliament, and even the winning of a majority in that parliament, was in *no way* a substitute for smashing the whole machinery of the capitalist state. 'We have no right to forget', said Lenin in his most famous pamphlet *The State and Revolution*, 'that wage slavery is the lot of the people even in the most democratic bourgeois republic.' Exhausted by the drudgery of work in a factory over which they have no control, deprived of leisure through the overtime they have to work in order to make ends meet, workers often come to say that 'they cannot be bothered with politics'. Numerous restrictions, such as the difficulties in finding somewhere to hold a public meeting and the expense involved, also combine to squeeze out the poor from politics. The result, said Lenin, is that capitalist democracy comes to mean freedom *only* for the minority, for the propertied classes, for the rich. As for the poor, they 'are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class shall represent and repress them in parliament.' This, argues Lenin, is the *essence* of capitalist democracy.

In any case, the real power in a capitalist society lies outside parliament, in the hands of the men who control industry, in the police and the army, 'those special bands of armed men,' whose task it is to ensure the maintenance of the capitalist system and ruling class order. No workers' majority in parliament could touch this sort of power; the only way to touch it was to smash it: 'the proletarian state cannot supersede the bourgeois (capitalist) state without a violent revolution . . . The necessity of systematically imbuing the masses with *this* and precisely this view of violent revolution lies at the root of the *entire* theory of Marx and Engels.'

The revolution had to be violent because there could be no doubt that the ruling class would use violence and every means they could to defend the capitalist system. The idea that once they had lost in parliament the ruling class would give up in the factories, would not attempt to use the army to crush the workers, was a dangerous illusion. Lenin wrote of 'those sham socialists who replaced the class struggle by dreams of class harmony, who even pictured the socialist transformation in a dreamy fashion—not as the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class, but as the peaceful submission of the minority (the ruling class) to the majority (the working class) . . . This petty bourgeois utopia, which is inseparable from the idea of the state being above classes, led in practice to the betrayal of the interests of the working classes.'

The working class, therefore, could never rely on a parlia-

mentary majority to see them into power. The only way they could gain power for themselves was by revolution, by mobilising outside parliament, by carrying out an insurrection which would destroy the state machinery of capitalism.

The dictatorship of the proletariat

Once the workers had smashed the capitalist state, what was to replace it? Lenin stressed that the problem of the working class did not end when they took state power. On the contrary, the period after the revolution was likely to be an extremely difficult one, for the workers would have to secure their power in the face of every attempt by the capitalist class to restore their own economic and political system. Lenin wrote, 'this period inevitably is a period of an unprecedentedly violent class struggle in unprecedentedly acute forms, and, consequently, during this period the state must inevitably be a state that is democratic *in a new way* (for the working class and the propertyless in general), and dictatorial *in a new way* (against the capitalist class).'

The workers' state, then, was to be far more democratic for the vast mass of the people but dictatorial towards anyone who tried to restore or continue the old order. Lenin took the basic details for its organisation from the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871, when the Parisian workers held power for a brief period. The standing army had immediately been suppressed and replaced by an armed militia of the people. The Commune itself had been formed of municipal councillors, who were elected by universal suffrage, and who could be recalled at any time. The Commune was to be a working not a parliamentary body; it was not merely to pass laws, but to put them into effect as well. The police were stripped of their political powers and turned into a force responsible to and revocable by the Commune. All jobs in the Commune were to be done at workers' wages. Finally, judges were to be elected, responsible and revocable. To this list another and vital measure was added during the Russian revolution. Through the Soviets the workers and peasants themselves took control of the factories and land.

The dictatorship of the proletariat was thus, wrote Lenin, 'the recognition of the *political rule* of the proletariat, of its dictatorship, i.e. of undivided power directly backed by the armed force of the people. The overthrow of the bourgeoisie can be achieved only by the proletariat becoming the *ruling class*, capable of crushing the inevitable and desperate resistance of the bourgeoisie, and of organising *all* the working and exploited people for the new economic system.'

Communism

When the battle against all traces of capitalism had at last been won, the workers' revolution could move into its final stage, the creation of a true communism: 'We know', wrote Lenin, 'that the fundamental social cause of excesses, which consist in the

violation of the rules of social intercourse, is the exploitation of the people, their want and their poverty. With the removal of this chief cause, excesses will inevitably begin to "wither away". We do not know how quickly and in what succession, but we do know that they will wither away'. With the ending of the economic system in which one man exploited another, many of those feelings like greed, jealousy, money-lust, which are taken to be part of 'human nature' and impossible to get rid of, would actually begin to disappear: 'freed from capitalist slavery, from the untold horrors, savagery, absurdities and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually *become accustomed* to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse . . . They will become accustomed to observing them without force, without coercion, without subordination, *without the special apparatus* for coercion called the state.'

The withering away of the state would happen in two stages. At first the means of production would belong to the whole of society, and each member of society, performing certain of society's tasks, would receive the same amount of society's wealth. Every one would be equal in the eyes of society, and all would enjoy the same rewards. But this, says Lenin, is not yet communism, because it does not take into account the differences between people. How infinitely untrue, writes Lenin, is the standard view of communism which sees it as wishing to reduce all people to one level, to establish a system that is 'lifeless, rigid, fixed once and for all'. Far from this being the case true communism will be based on the fact that people are different, and that they will have different needs. Communism, founded on the principle that the wealth of a society is produced for *all* its members, will be able to move away from the old middle class slogan, 'each according to his ability', to the communist slogan of 'each according to his needs'.

Under communism the state disappears because all the people have learnt to administer social production, to run their own communities, and not to be reliant on a state machine to do it for them. One of the concluding sections of Lenin's **State and Revolution** brings this out very clearly, and it is worth reproducing in full: 'For when all have learned to administer and actually independently administer social production, independently keep accounts and exercise control over the parasites, the sons of the wealthy, the swindlers, and other "guardians of capitalist traditions", the escape from this popular accounting will inevitably become so incredibly difficult, such a rare exception, and will probably be accompanied by such swift and severe punishment (for the armed workers are practical men and not sentimental intellectuals, and they will scarcely allow anyone to trifle with them), that the *necessity* of observing the simple, fundamental rules of the community will soon become a habit.'

Then the door will be thrown wide open for the transition from the first phase of communist society to its higher phase, and with it to the complete withering away of the state.'

Lenin, internationalism and imperialism

THERE COULD be little doubt in Lenin's mind that the communist society described in the preceding section could not be established in one country alone. The success of the Russian revolution depended, in his eyes, on what happened in other parts of the world. Europe was particularly important, because capitalism was most developed there and because the European working class was the strongest in the world.

In early 1918 Lenin wrote, 'there is no doubt that the socialist revolution in Europe is bound to happen, and will happen. All our hopes of the *final* victory of socialism are founded upon this scientific prediction'. What he and Trotsky were banking on was some sort of chain reaction, caused by the example of Soviet Russia and by the deprivations and massacres of the first World War. If the other working classes of the world did not come to Russia's aid, it was difficult to see how Russia could go it alone. The Russian workers were a small minority of the Russian population, and the peasants, though supporting the revolution, supported it for the purposes of dividing the land amongst them, not for the ideals of socialism. But if the workers of other nations came to their help, the Russian workers would no longer be isolated. Resources could be pooled, and there would be no danger of capitalist intervention to crush the workers' state, because the capitalists would have been overthrown in their own countries. The workers of Russia, Germany, America, England, France, Italy etc. could then move forward together to construct a new economic and political system.

Imperialism

Lenin thus put the emphasis for the success of the world revolution firmly on the actions of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries. But he was not blind to the connections between these countries and the more economically backward parts of the world. Unlike many of the socialists of his time who concentrated exclusively on European affairs, Lenin, coming from a backward country himself, looked outside Europe and sought to analyse the importance of the exploitation of the rest of the world by the major capitalist countries. His pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest State of*

Capitalism, written in 1916, deals with this problem.

Briefly, Lenin saw that imperialism represented a new and more advanced stage in the development of capitalism. No longer was the bulk of capitalist production carried on by numerous small firms owned and managed by individual capitalists competing against one another in a free for all on the market. Instead in industry after industry the weak had gone to the wall and the small firms were relentlessly gobbled up by the most ruthless and efficient of the capitalists.

Competition itself thus created new giant public corporations which combined with the banks, the great organs of finance capital, to form unprecedented concentrations of economic power. This was monopoly capitalism, but it did not end competition. It reproduced it on a far greater scale. For the thirst of these great monopolies for ever greater profits and ever wider markets could no longer be satisfied by the economic opportunities in their own countries. The monopolies of each capitalist state, supported by the armed might of their national governments, were thus drawn into a desperate struggle for the largest possible share of the markets and raw materials of the world.

Colonies and underdeveloped countries played a crucial role in this monopoly capitalism. The gigantic monopolies needed them as suppliers of raw materials, opportunities for investment and spheres of influence. The capitalist class of the imperialist countries (principally Germany, France and Britain in Lenin's time, for the rise of American imperialism only came later) exported much of their surplus wealth to these underdeveloped countries, not of course to assist the peoples of these lands, but to build new enterprises such as mines and refineries. These enterprises, with their abundance of raw materials and cheap labour, provided the greatest possible return on capital. The world thus came to be divided amongst the great capitalist powers, either directly or indirectly: directly, through empires such as Britain's, where control was economic and political; indirectly in somewhere like Russia, where the importance of French investment in Russian industry meant that Russia was a French sphere of influence.

Lenin analysed very carefully the results of this economic system. In the first place, imperialism acted as a possible brake upon the revolutionary strength of the working class in the advanced countries. This was because the imperialists were able to use the very high profits from their enterprises in Africa, Asia and South America to corrupt working class leaders and richer sections of the working class in their own countries: 'Obviously out of such enormous *superprofits* (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their "own" country) it is *possible to bribe* the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the 'advanced' countries are doing; they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and

covert.

This stratum of the worker-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy . . . are the *real agents of the bourgeoisie* in the working class movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism'.

This, then, was one result of imperialism which acted contrary to the interests of revolutionary socialism, and which socialists constantly had to expose and be on their guard against. But other effects of imperialism brought unintended sustenance to the cause of revolution. The Great Powers had quickly divided the world amongst them, but some of them whose economic power was enormous, like Germany, had gained very little. This unevenness of economic development and actual territorial acquisition was vital for it led to enormous tensions amongst the imperialist countries and these tensions were largely responsible for the outbreak of the first World War. But this imperialist war was bound, as Lenin said, 'to turn into a civil war between the hostile classes'. As hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants died in futile attempts to gain a few hundred yards of territory for their respective commanding officers, those who remained alive questioned more and more the right of the ruling classes to send them to such a pointless death. As a result, they turned away from the nationalism of 1914 towards the socialism of 1918-20.

Another effect of imperialism was the opportunity it gave for the successful revolt of one of the exploited countries against the imperialist yoke. Such a country, by itself, could not hope to achieve socialism and yet it could serve as an inspiration to the workers of the advanced countries. In some ways this is what had happened in Russia. Russia was both backward economically, exploited by foreign capitalists, and yet one of the great powers. It was this peculiar combination which made it the 'weakest link' in the capitalist chain. Once the chain had been broken the great question then was, would the European working class be able to follow the Russian example?

High Hopes

The European revolution came close to succeeding. The period from 1918 onwards was one of unequalled class tension, with workers' risings or attempted risings in practically every European country. Lenin himself was optimistic, as can be seen from this tremendous speech he made to the All-Russia Congress of Soviets in January 1918:

'We are no longer alone. In the last few days, momentous events have taken place not only in the Ukraine and the Don area but in Western Europe as well. You have already heard of the telegrams on the state of the revolution in Germany. The flames of a revolutionary wildfire are leaping higher and higher over the whole of this rotten old world system. It was

no pie-in-the-sky theory, no armchair pipe dream that once we had established Soviet power we would induce others to make similar attempts in other countries. For I must repeat that the working people had no other way out of the slaughter. These attempts are now being consolidated as gains of the international revolution. We close this historic Congress of Soviets under the sign of the mounting world revolution, and the time is not far off when the working people of all countries will unite into a single world-wide state and join in a common effort to build a new socialist edifice. The way to this construction runs through the Soviets, as a form of the coming world revolution'.

Working people of all countries will unite into a single world-wide state . . . Lenin with Trotsky and Kamenev at the Second Congress of the Third International



The Third International

To co-ordinate and help plan workers' action in the various countries, Lenin and the other leading Bolsheviks founded the Third or Communist International, which had its first meeting in March 1919. The First International had been founded by Marx, but had lacked any widespread workers' support and had collapsed after a number of years. The Second International, founded in 1889, enjoyed the allegiance of the mass Social-Democratic parties of western Europe, but had a loose organisation and no clear strategy. When the first World War broke out in 1914, the International was found wanting. Its long stated principles of workers' solidarity and opposition to any imperialist wars gave way to nationalist fervour, and the International did nothing to prevent the war. This terrible betrayal was analysed by Lenin in his pamphlet **The Collapse of the Second International.**

The Third International, by contrast, insisted on strict democratic centralist organisation. Condition 16 of the 21 conditions of membership of the International insisted that 'all the decisions of the Congresses of the Communist International,

as well as the decisions of its Executive Committee, are binding on all parties belonging to the Communist International. The Communist International, working in conditions of acute, civil war, must be far more centralised in its structure than was the Second International. Considerations must of course be given to the varying conditions in which the individual parties have to fight and work, and they must take decisions of general validity only when such decisions are possible'. The guiding principle of the International was that 'the world situation today demands the closest possible contact between the different sections of the revolutionary proletariat and a complete union of the countries where the socialist revolution has already triumphed'.

Failure

The International grew rapidly. Its Third Congress, held in June 1921 was attended by 509 delegates from 48 countries. But by this time it had become clear that no immediate aid was to come to the Russian revolution, that the post-war revolutionary phase had passed without a single other country being able to make and secure a socialist revolution.

This is not the place to analyse in detail the reasons for that failure. It is sufficient to say that it was largely due to the lack of decisive planning and action by the socialists of the West, to the resilience of western capitalism, and to the continuing allegiance of many of the working class to reformist ideas and leaders.

Trotsky in 1921 declared that the 'post-war revolutionary ferment is over'. Lenin in his last speech to the International in November 1922 admitted that 'we have done a host of foolish things'. Even so, he refused to be pessimistic and urged that the most important thing was now to study, to learn the lessons of what had happened. He ended by saying that the foreign comrades 'must study in the special sense, in order that they may really understand the organisation, structure, method and content of revolutionary work. If they do that, I am sure that the prospects of the world revolution will not only be good, but be excellent'. He also, in his last article **Better Fewer But Better**, written in March 1923, took great hope from the rapidity with which things were changing in the other Eastern countries: 'as a result of the last imperialist war, a number of countries of the East, India, China, etc. have been completely jolted out of the rut. Their development had definitely shifted to general European capitalist lines. The general European ferment had begun to affect them, and it is now clear to the whole world that they have been drawn into a process of development that must lead to a crisis in the whole of world capitalism'. But this was all in the far future and there was no doubt, in Lenin's mind or anyone else's, that the failure of the revolution in the West had been a terrible blow to the Russian revolution itself, and had placed it in an increasingly desperate position.

Lenin and workers power

MANY OPPONENTS of Lenin have claimed that he was never really interested in workers' power and that by the dictatorship of the proletariat Lenin always really meant the authoritarian dictatorship of the party over the workers. This final section is devoted to answering these criticisms, to looking at what he actually said on the subject.

Before the revolution, in 1917, Lenin stressed the need for the Soviets to take over state power. The All-Russia Congress of Soviets was to be the supreme authority in the new state, not the Bolshevik Party. Lenin wrote, 'The Soviets will be able to develop properly, to display their potentialities and capabilities to the full only by taking over *full* state power; for otherwise they have nothing *to do*, otherwise they are simply embryos (and to remain an embryo too long is fatal), or playthings'.

The workers were to take power into their own hands, and learn to run their own factories, their own villages and towns, the great cities and the country at large: 'Is there any way other than practice by which the people can learn to govern themselves and to avoid mistakes? Is there any way other than by proceeding immediately to genuine self-government by the people? . . . The chief thing is to imbue the oppressed and the working people with confidence in their own strength, to prove to them in practice that they can and must ensure the *proper*, most strictly regulated and organised distribution of bread, all kinds of food, milk, clothing, housing etc. *in the interests of the poor*. . . much that seemed impossible to our narrow, old, bureaucratic forces will become possible for the millions, who will *begin to work for themselves* and not for the capitalists, the gentry, the bureaucrats, and not out of fear of punishment'.

Immediately after the October revolution, one of the first things that Lenin wrote was his 'Draft Regulations on Workers' Control', in which he outlined the first stages in the process of workers taking over their own workplaces: 'Workers' control shall be exercised by all the workers and office employees of an enterprise, either directly, if the enterprise is small enough to permit it, or through their elected representatives who shall be elected *immediately* at general meetings, at which minutes of the elections shall be taken and the names of

The workers must take power into their own hands... Lenin talking with a May Day marcher in 1919



those elected communicated to the government and to the local Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies'.

But this control of factories was not in Lenin's view to act against the interests of the new socialist state. Lenin saw possible dangers of unco-ordinated action by different fac-

ories or sections of workers. There had to be overall state planning, and if the new workers' state *truly* represented the interests of the workers, then there would be no conflict between state planning and workers' control at a shop floor level: '... if we have in mind a proletarian state, i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat, then workers' control *can* become a national all-embracing, omnipresent, most exact and most conscientious *accounting* of production and distribution of goods'.

Lenin's intentions, therefore, are quite clear. If all had gone well, if revolutions had taken place in other countries, if Russia had not been invaded and plunged into Civil War, it was clear that the Russian workers and peasants would have had the greatest possible control over their own lives. But the situation rapidly became increasingly grave as the workers' state fought for survival, and more and more of the original intentions had to be qualified to meet the circumstances.

Even so we still find Lenin in 1918 sticking firmly to the principles of workers' power. In his pamphlet, **The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government**, written in May 1918, Lenin states: 'The more resolutely we now have to stand for a ruthlessly firm government, for the dictatorship of individuals in *definite processes of work*, in definite aspects of *purely executive* functions, the more varied must be the forms and methods of control from below in order to counteract every shadow of a possibility of distorting the principles of Soviet government, in order repeatedly and tirelessly to weed out bureaucracy'. Nonetheless the difficulties were enormous and Lenin admitted as much in an earlier section of the same pamphlet: 'Of course not weeks, but long months and years are required for a new social class, especially a class which up to now has been oppressed and crushed by poverty and ignorance, to get used to its new position, look around, organise its work and promote its *own* organisers'.

Everything conspired in Russia after 1917 to prevent such a process taking place. Gradually but unavoidably the party was forced, through the need for efficiency in a desperate military and economic situation, to take more and more power into its own hands. The working class itself had to leave the factories and fight and die in the Red Army. After the war many of those who survived had to serve in the party administration. *As a class*, the Russian workers had practically ceased to exist. Through the weakness and disorganisation of the Soviets, and through the need for the party to be ever stronger during the Civil War, the party encroached more and more on the Soviet's functions. By 1921 Lenin, with his customary realism, accepted what could not be altered: 'As the governing party we could not help fusing the Soviet authorities with the party authorities—with us they are fused and they will be.' Similarly, party officials were made responsible for the running of the factories. But it has been made abundantly clear that Lenin's original intentions were quite different.

Conclusion

LENIN'S LAST years were increasingly preoccupied with the distortion that had been wrought on the Soviet state by the Civil War and the lack of revolution in the west, by the gap between what was and what ought to be. Angelica Balabanova tells a revealing story of a conversation with Lenin just after the introduction of NEP, which restored capitalism in some parts of the economy. She noticed that under a big hotel in Moscow, a pastry shop had reopened after being shut for the whole period of the war. There on the counters were luxury pastries and white bread, and members of the Moscow middle classes queuing up to buy them. In great indignation Balabanova went to see Lenin and told him, 'The way things look in the Workers' Republic will make the working class lose faith in the future of Socialism'. 'Well', Lenin said in a tone that was said and ironic at the same time, 'if you can suggest another way . . .'. Balabanova had no reply.

In the last months of his life, Lenin wrote desperately of what needed to be done. The peasantry had to be educated and persuaded to join co-operatives, there had to be greater democracy in the party, the old czarist state machine 'which we took over in its entirety in the preceding epoch' had to be smashed, the rights of the smaller nationalities had to be safeguarded within the Soviet state, Stalin had to be deprived of his growing powers. So much had gone wrong, so much differed from what Lenin had taught in 1917 and earlier. And yet it was not through any lack of clarity of vision, any lack of decisiveness, any unwillingness to make sacrifices that the reality was now so different from the hopes. Lenin had been ready for anything: 'The path to Revolution is not covered with roses. We shall walk in mud up to our knees if necessary, to reach the communist goal, to achieve victory'. But the historical conditions in which Lenin operated were not favourable to him, for the backwardness of Russia and the failure of the revolution in the west presented crippling obstacles on the path to socialism.

Yet Lenin never gave up, and would never have advised later generations to be dispirited by the relative failures of the Russian revolution. His life was testimony to the importance of the individual will in determining the course of history, and to the collective power that individuals acquire

when they join together in the pursuit of a common ideal. Utterly opposed to any sort of fatalism, to an earlier sort of Marxism which had seen the iron laws of history as determining everything, Lenin is perhaps best summed up by his proud and proven claim: 'Give us an organisation of revolutionaries and we will overturn Russia'.

Our situation is different from Lenin's, and yet the tasks that face us are in many ways similar and the aims are the same. In the coming struggle we have much to learn from him.

*'He simply got on
with the job . . .'
Lenin at the Third
Comintern
Congress in 1921*



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