Lenin and the First Communist Revolutions

The history of Communism as a practical movement begins with a single man: Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The Russian Marxist movement preceded Lenin by two decades, but it was Lenin who split off a militant faction from the rest of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and forged it into a potent weapon for totalitarian revolution. Totalitarian tendencies were veritably omnipresent in the entire Russian Marxist movement - in not only the Leninists, or "Bolsheviks," but also in his [Menshevik](http://www.princeton.edu/~bdcaplan/menshev.txt) opponents. As the 1903 party program of the R.S.D.L.P. - written by Plekhanov, a Menshevik who harshly criticized Lenin - explains, "As essential precondition for this social revolution is the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the conquest by the proletariat of such political power as will enable it to quell all opposition by exploiters." But while the totalitarian impulse permeated the Russian Marxist movement, it was Lenin who gave this tendencies a rigorous theoretical foundation upon which he always acted with perfect consistency.

** Lenin's Theoretical Innovations**

Lenin accepted most of Marx's thought without alteration. He prided himself upon his Marxist orthodoxy, attacking any new idea that struck him as heretical. But probably his greatest hatred was reserved for the so-called *Revisionism* of Bernstein and other avant-garde socialist intellectuals who admitted, among other things, that contrary to Marx the absolute living standard of workers had vastly improved under capitalism.

But for all of his rage against Revisionism, Lenin's theoretical innovations begin by *accepting* the Revisionist observation that the condition of the proletariat had improved. But while the Revisionists tended to see this as proof that Marx's economics was unsound, Lenin offered an alternative explanation: the workers whose living conditions had improved were being "bribed" by capitalists who made up their losses by further tightening their grip on the hapless native workers of Europe's colonies. As Franz Borkenau explains, Lenin argued that World War I was...

...an "imperialistic" war, which meant a war by which the bourgeoisie of the big powers aimed at securing monopolistic, colonial, and semi-colonial markets for their export trade and their capital export, and cheap raw materials... But this very imperialism, by providing colonial "extra-profits" for the bourgeoisie, put it in a position to bribe the upper strata of the proletariat; these strata, so bribed, naturally behave as "traitors." (*World Communism*)

Marx was not really mistaken, but simply underestimated the duplicity of the bourgeoisie. But Lenin went one step further, and argued that even if they were not being "bribed," workers *by themselves* would never initiate the socialist revolution. As Richard Pipes explains, "The longer he observed the behavior of workers in and out of Russia, the more compelling was the conclusion, entirely contrary to the fundamental premise of Marxism, that labor (the "proletariat") was not a revolutionary class at all: left to itself, it would rather settle for a larger share of the capitalists' profits than overthrow capitalism... In a seminal article published at the end of 1900, Lenin uttered the unthinkable: 'the labor movement, separated from Social-Democracy... inevitably turns bourgeois.'" (*The Russian Revolution*) As Lenin put it in his *What is To Be Done?*, "The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade union consciousness."

If the working class by itself develops mere "trade union consciousness," then how can mankind reach the final stop on the March of History - namely, Communism? Lenin's answer was that this could only be accomplished with the firm guidance of professional revolutionaries who would be a combination of sages and generals of the proletariat. As Paul Johnson explains:

[Lenin's] entire life was spent among the members of his own sub-class, the bourgeois intelligentsia, which he saw as a uniquely privileged priesthood, endowed with a special gnosis and chosen by History for a decisive role. Socialism, he wrote quoting Karl Kautsky, was the product of "profound scientific knowledge... The vehicle of [this] science is not the proletariat but the bourgeois intelligentsia: contemporary socialism was born in the heads of individual members of this class. (*Modern Times*)

But if the intellectuals guide the workers, who guides the intellectuals? That, Lenin answered, is to be done by a rigidly hierarchical, strictly disciplined Party - headed by himself. As Lenin continued to develop his tactical views, it became clear that not only would the party lead the proletariat to victory, but would also hold the reins of power for the proletariat after victory was achieved. Leon Trotsky, though initially a critic of Lenin, eventually became his enthusiastic supporter; he explained their doctrine thusly:

In the composition of [the proletariat] there enter various elements, heterogeneous moods, different levels of development. Yet the dictatorship pre-supposes unity of will, unity of direction, unity of action. By what other path can it be attained? The revolutionary supremacy of the proletariat presupposes within the proletariat itself the political supremacy of a party, with a clear program of action and a faultless internal discipline. (*The Defense of Terrorism*)

Lenin conspicuously failed to elaborate upon the great void in Marxist theory: to wit, precisely what would "socialism" be? Marx had repeatedly declared it "unscientific" to specify - a clever trick for uniting quarreling socialists, but hardly intellectually satisfying. Lenin scarcely advanced further than this when he seized power: "All citizens are here transformed into hired employees of the state, which is made up of the armed workers... All that is required is that they should work equally, should regularly do their share of the work, and should receive equal pay. The accounting and control necessary for this have been simplified by capitalism to the utmost, till they have become the extraordinarily simple operations of watching, recording and issuing receipts, within the reach of anybody who can read and write and knows the first four rules of arithmetic." (*State and Revolution*) But Lenin combined simple-minded programs with a calculating cynicism. For whatever policies he might advocate, there was but one target in his sights, as he plainly states: **"The point of the uprising is the seizure of power; afterwards we will see what we can do with it."**

**Planning for Leninism: Forging the Vanguard Party**

Once Lenin figured out his organization strategy, he had to put it into practice. This he accomplished in a series of maneuvers within the R.S.D.L.P. At the 1903 party congress, Lenin lost a battle over the definition of party membership (Lenin's opponent, Martov, proposed a marginally less hierarchical party structure). But Lenin managed to turn this to his advantage: "But then a fortuitous incident altered the balance of forces. When the Bund and the Workers' Cause representatives withdrew from the congress because their parties were denied any independence within the structure of the R.S.D.L.P., Lenin's group found itself in the majority. From the resulting distribution of forces derive the names of the two rival factions in the R.S.D.L.P.: the Mensheviks, (i.e., members of the minority) and the Bolsheviks (i.e., members of the majority)." (Carl Landauer, *European Socialism: A History of Ideas and Movements*) This division gave Lenin's faction its name, and marked a widening division among the Russian Marxists between those who followed Lenin, and those who did not.



Lenin's next step was to split the party. In 1910, the central committee of the R.S.D.L.P. met in London; attempting to build bridges to fellow travelers, the London congress voted to offer three seats on the central committee to Lenin's hated enemies, the reformist "Liquidators" (as Lenin dubbed them). As Landauer explains:

Lenin's reaction to this effort at unity... was to split the organization and set up his faction as *the* party. He assembled a small conference of his followers at Prague in January, 1912. It was attended by only fourteen voting delegates, yet this conference proclaimed itself the supreme organ of the party and as such elected a new central committee of six members (including Lenin, Zinoviev, Orjonikidze), amended the party statutes, and passed a resolution expelling the Liquidators. Henceforth, the Bolsheviks no longer considered themselves a faction in the party; they had arrogated to themselves the dignity and the powers of the party. As it happened, events would legitimize their presumptions. (*European Socialism: A History of Ideas and Movements*)

Lenin now had an iron grip on what Paul Johnson aptly calls "a small organization of intellectual and sub-intellectual desperadoes, which he could completely dominate." (*Modern Times*) In other times and places, control of such a band would hardly have sufficed for a small gangland rumble, but as fortune would have it, Lenin had hit upon the right formula for his peculiar historical moment.

**The Russian Revolution: March, 1917**

World War I broke out in 1914. Lenin spent the war years in exile, brooding over how carry out his slogan: "Turn the imperialistic war into civil war." His antipathy towards the rest of the European socialist movement turned into hatred when, contrary to their internationalist pledges, the socialists of almost every belligerent country loyally voted to support the war efforts of their respective nations. At the same time, this left disaffected anti-war wings of the European socialist parties who would become a fruitful pool of recruits for the Bolsheviks.

Lenin and most of his associates either lived in foreign exile in neutral countries, or languished in the Czar's Siberian prisons. Few of them were present to even participate in, let alone lead, the *first* Russian Revolution which occurred in **March** of 1917. The March revolution forced the Czar to abdicate, established freedom of the press, and granted a blanket amnesty to political prisoners in Siberia - including terrorists. A much freer Russia seemed to be on the horizon. But ironically, liberalization inadvertently summoned back to Russia a small army of Bolsheviks from the far corners of the planet, often (as in Lenin's case) with transportation paid by the German Kaiser:

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| **Location of Bolshevik Leaders in February, 1917** |
| *Bolshevik Leaders* | *Location* |
| Lenin | Switzerland |
| Radek | Switzerland |
| Zinoviev | Switzerland |
| Bukharin | New York |
| Litvinov | London |
| Antonov-Ovseenko | Paris |
| Dzerzhinsky | Moscow |
| Latsis | Petrograd |
| Molotov | Petrograd |
| Kirov | Vladikavkaz |
| Stalin | Kureika (Siberia) |
| Ordzhonikidze | Pokrovsk (Siberia) |
| Sverdlov | Turukhansk (Siberia) |
| Kamenev | Achinsk (Siberia) |
| Rykov | Narym (Siberia) |
| **Location of Soon-to-Be Bolshevik Converts in February, 1917** |
| Trotsky | New York |
| Chicherin | London |
| Uritsky | Stockholm |

After the Czar's abdication, power passed to a Provisional Government appointed by a temporary committee of the Duma, which proposed to share power to some extent with councils of workers and soldiers known as "soviets." Following a brief and chaotic period of fairly democratic procedures, a mixed body of socialist intellectuals known as the *Ispolkom* secured the right to "represent" the soviets. The democratic credentials of the soviets were highly imperfect to begin with: peasants - the overwhelming majority of the Russian population - had virtually no say, and soldiers were grossly over-represented. The Ispolkom's assumption of power turned this highly imperfect democracy into an intellectuals' oligarchy. As Pipes explains, the Ispolkom "was not representative of the workers and soldiers, for its members were not elected by the Soviet but, as in 1905, nominated by the socialist parties. Members of the Ispolkom represented not workers and soldiers but their respective party organizations, and could be replaced at any time by others of these parties." In short, "Rather than serving as the executive organ of the Soviet, therefore, the Ispolkom was a coordinating body of socialist parties, superimposed on the Soviet and speaking in its name." (*The Russian Revolution*)

In sum, the abdication of the Czar left power somewhere in the hands of the Provisional Government and the Ispolkom, but no one knew quite where. This confused structure not only left the new government vulnerable to manipulation by tiny minorities claiming to speak for millions of people who had never heard of them; it also invited strong-willed factions with guns to try their hand at a coup d'etat. To add to these problems, leadership fell into the hands of one Alexander Kerensky, a moderate socialist with the foresight and resolve of Hamlet.



But these structural problems would probably have not been terminal if Kerensky and the Provisional Government had the common sense to make a separate peace with the Germans. They did not. With bravado, they swore to fight on, earning the enmity of soldiers dying at the front, peasants forced to turn over their grain at below-market prices, and city dwellers wanting for food. Energy and hope which should have been spent laying the groundwork for prosperity and freedom was instead wasted upon continuing the hopeless struggle against the Kaiser. And while the Provisional Government focused on the foreign invader, the Bolsheviks under Lenin's leadership prepared to seize power by dominating the soviets, violent action, or both. As Lenin explained his position:

No support to the Provisional Government; exposure of the utter falsity of its promises... unmasking, instead of admitting, the illusion-breeding "demand" that this government, a government of capitalists, cease being imperialistic. (*April Theses*)

<http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/hisfram1.htm>