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4. Lenin

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4. Lenin

Abstract

Marx' theory of revolutionary tactics, moreover, could not easily be applied to Russian conditions. After the revolutions of 1848 he had abandoned reliance on small, secret societies aimed at the immediate seizure of power, holding that they could not be successful without popular understanding and support. The task, as he saw it, involved long-range preparations in which educating the working classes had to take precedence over organizing for violence. Consequently, Marx favored the creation of large political parties, functioning openly. Such an approach presupposed a relatively benign political environment, such as that of England. Where ideas could not be circulated freely, it could not be adopted. This was the situation in tsarist Russia. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XVI: Developments in Socialism, \(1848-1914\)](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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4. Lenin

Of all the socialist parties in existence before World War I, the Russian warrants special attention. Ultimately, it was to capture the leadership of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and usher in the era of Communism, a development regarded by many as the most important political transformation of the twentieth century. This alone would justify separate consideration of the earlier history of socialism in Russia. Yet, the events in Russia were significant for other reasons as well, for they proceeded contrary to the expectations of Marx and involved a departure from his theory of revolution. Since the Russian Revolution will be treated in a subsequent chapter, emphasis in this section will be placed on these latter aspects.

In general, Marx had held that socialism would rise out of a mature capitalist economy, as part of a fixed sequence of phases in history. Revolution was to be based on the existence of a large industrial proletariat created by the capitalist system. Consequently Russia, still in an essentially preindustrial stage of development, seemed one of the least likely candidates for a socialist revolution during Marx' lifetime. In his later years, he played

*Russia falling in the path of Western Europe.
Never dismantled the autocratic system, but added new western ideas beside it.
Intellectuals were 't usually for the regime. Some were westerners, but some gave up hope and decided no use for reform, but have to overthrow.
For violent action others said no and found their answer in Marxism.*

with the idea that Russia might leap from an agricultural economy into a socialist one, but his tentative acknowledgment of this possibility was hedged with several qualifications. Altogether, for Marx, the prospects for a successful transition to socialism in Russia remained small.

Marx' theory of revolutionary tactics, moreover, could not easily be applied to Russian conditions. After the revolutions of 1848 he had abandoned reliance on small, secret societies aimed at the immediate seizure of power, holding that they could not be successful without popular understanding and support. The task, as he saw it, involved long-range preparations in which educating the working classes had to take precedence over organizing for violence. Consequently, Marx favored the creation of large political parties, functioning openly. Such an approach presupposed a relatively benign political environment, such as that of England. Where ideas could not be circulated freely, it could not be adopted. This was the situation in tsarist Russia.

During the centuries when democratic political institutions began to develop in Western Europe, a virtually unlimited autocracy emerged and held sway in Russia. Under the person of the tsar, who claimed a God-given right to rule, an all-powerful state was erected over the body of a country held largely in a medieval mold. Ironically, at the moment when feudal and manorial institutions were disappearing in the West, serfdom was introduced in Russia, beginning in the fifteenth century. Society comprised a relatively fixed class structure of nobles, landowners, and serfs, with a great gulf separating the privileged and the enserfed. The Orthodox church held special status, its doctrines recognized as the official religion of Russia, its clergy frequently appointed to governmental positions. Operating the administration was a vast corps of bureaucrats whose domain included extensive state enterprises in agriculture and manufacturing, in addition to agencies of government. Where legal or traditional obligations required support by force, the army and police provided the necessary power. In the nineteenth century, a far-flung network of secret police, spies, and agents was perfected, while dissent further was stifled by censorship of the printed word.

Nevertheless, forces were at work which promised to modify the existing system. The course of liberal reform, noted in an earlier chapter, presented alternatives to autocracy and feudalism. Beginning with creation of provincial councils (zemstvos) in 1864, the cause of popular self-government emerged as a growing possibility. An apparent gain came in 1906, when the tsar, faced with ominous national unrest, acceded to demands for a parliament (Duma). The new institution functioned under restrictions and increasingly lost significance. The Revolutions of 1917 cut short any possible evolution toward a more meaningful parliamentary democracy.

Meanwhile, the social system underwent changes after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Although still bound to the soil

other side Important thing about Communist Russia is that it is Communist Russian. Approach Lenin not from doctrinal views, but how his writings reflect the Russia in which Lenin operated. Lenin wrote an awful lot, but never one solidified.

for economic reasons, the serfs had the prospect of eventual land ownership. Property remained concentrated in the hands of a minority of landlords, nobility, and well-to-do peasants up to the Revolution. Another potent force which was only just beginning was the industrialization of the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The level of economic development attained by 1917 was relatively low, as we have seen, and the transformation of Russia into a modern industrial power awaited future achievement under the Communists.

Altogether, elements making for political liberalization and economic change scarcely altered the fundamental facts of life in Russia. A predominately repressive autocracy, although frequently inefficient, contained the political, economic, and social systems within traditional bounds. This left open two major forms of protest and avenues of potential change: literature and violence. In time, both were to influence profoundly the emergence and character of Russian socialism.

Among the intelligentsia several schools of thought could be distinguished after 1840. Advocates of autocracy, liberal democracy, social and economic reforms, all were present in varying degree. A small wing came under the influence of socialist ideas, particularly those of Fourier. However, isolated from the people and subject to recurring repression, socialist intellectuals (indeed all intellectuals) exercised but limited influence on the regime. In the field of literature, they contributed to the tradition of social concern which was to mark the Russian novel of the second half of the nineteenth century. This tradition, in turn, supported a climate of intellectual ferment, an element that continued into the early twentieth century and served as part of the backdrop for the Russian Revolution.

Of the early Russian socialists, two rate particular comment in standard histories. It is with difficulty that they be considered together, for they represented different strains of thought. Aleksandr Herzen (1812-1870), an exile in Western Europe after 1846, acquired wide fame as a writer and publicist. One of his most notable achievements was Kolokol (The Bell), a journal published in London, and later Geneva, from 1857 to 1868. Smuggled into Russia in thousands of copies, Kolokol was read avidly by intellectuals who shared Herzen's desire for liberal reform. Herzen was disliked during his lifetime by Marx, but, ironically, was later hailed by Lenin as "the first to raise the standard of battle by turning to the masses with the free Russian word." Herzen's views were in conflict with orthodox Marxism, for his socialism was based on the ancient peasant communes, which were reminiscent of the medieval manor in the West. This approach was to gain considerable support in later years.

Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), another of the early Russian socialists, spent much of his adult life -- like Herzen -- in exile. He took part in the revolution of 1848 in Germany, but was arrested, sent back to Russia, and exiled to Siberia. From Siberia he escaped
statement. Most were article.

to Japan, went to the United States, and returned to Europe. Founding a revolutionary movement in Italy and Switzerland, he allied it with the First International and became Marx' chief rival in the international socialist movement. As we have already seen, contention between Marx and Bakunin ultimately led to the dissolution of the organization. Bakunin was primarily a man of action; what little theory he had was anarchist. He viewed the state as an instrument of oppression and championed the cause of revolution. In many respects his outlook accorded with that of Marx. Yet, Bakunin departed from Marx in his rejection of all forms of political authority, his espousal of secret revolutionary societies of intellectuals and students, and his picture of a future society comprising cooperative communities linked in federation, employing no coercion beyond social pressure on the life of the individual. All in all, Marx considered him a dangerous romantic.

Bakunin contributed to the Russian nihilist movement which became increasingly important during the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855-1881). At first the tsar had given hope to liberals among the intelligentsia by embarking on a program of reform. The prospective rise of the lower classes, however, was regarded with apprehension by conservatives, who tended to view any change whatsoever as a threat to the stability of the entire tsarist system. The tsar himself, the target of an unsuccessful assassination attempt in 1866, grew colder to further ideas of reform and warmer to the side of repression. This stimulated, although by itself it did not cause, an intellectual movement known as nihilism, which repudiated the authority of all institutions. The Russian nihilists looked abroad to prominent exiles, such as Herzen and Bakunin, for arguments to attack tsarist institutions.

A significant turning point in the history of the nihilist movement occurred in 1874, when the tsar issued an edict recalling Russian students abroad to their homeland. This was aimed at stemming a tide of potential subversion by cutting students off from contact with the West. Instead, returning intellectuals spread the doctrines of nihilism to the far corners of Russia. For this they suffered persecution and the hardships of imprisonment and exile to Siberia, consequences which drove some into the ranks of secret, terrorists societies.

The importance of these societies for the future development of a Russian socialist movement was great. Expressing their absolute rejection of the tsardom, they undertook a series of assassinations of key officials, climaxed by the murder of Alexander II in 1881. The societies anticipated wrongly that these events would precipitate a spontaneous mass uprising which would bring an end to the existing system. Instead, they were met with severe repression, resulting in the complete elimination of the chief terrorist organization, Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) by 1883. Nevertheless, the terrorist tradition persisted in Russia and contributed to the growth and nature of Russian socialism.

Leading members of the Narodnaya Volya escaped to Switzerland, where they formed the first Russian Marxist organization, the Liberation of Labor, in 1883. Headed by Georgii Plekhanov (1857-1918), it participated in the Second International and served as a beacon to elements in Russia increasingly attached to the doctrines of Marxian socialism. In addition, the experiences of Narodnaya Volya were assimilated by Lenin, whose later organizational techniques and conspiratorial methods largely were derived from conversations he had with veterans of The People's Will. Lastly, in 1887 Lenin's elder brother and six others, comprising a would-be terrorist section of the defunct organization, made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Alexander III (1881-1894). The subsequent execution of his brother intensified Lenin's hatred of the tsardom.

While the Liberation of Labor led by Plekhanov functioned in Switzerland as the vanguard of Russian socialism, its distant location hampered easy communication with adherents in Russia. Meanwhile, the face of the homeland was changing under the impact of industrialization, as peasants freed from the land flocked to the cities to seek employment in factories. Their recruitment for a socialist party awaited the coming of men who could organize them on the spot. Chief among those who were so strategically placed was Lenin, who ultimately was able to displace the older leadership of the organization and marshal his forces to victory in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The name "Lenin" was a pseudonym adopted by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1870-1924), the son of a director of schools who was ennobled for his state service. Although Lenin thus was a member of the aristocracy, the financial position of his family was relatively modest and declined sharply after his father's death in 1886. As a youth, Lenin showed early promise of brilliance, excelling in his secondary school work. Awarded a gold medal on graduation, he looked forward to law studies at the University of Kazan. He found, however, that he and his family were viewed with suspicion by tsarist authorities, as if all the Ulyanovs had been implicated in the assassination of Alexander II. His admission to Kazan in 1887 was achieved with difficulty and, when he became involved in a student political demonstration in his third month at the university, he was swiftly arrested and expelled. Although he sought reinstatement during the next few years, he was a marked man, already subject to the petty harassments of those out of favor with the regime. Under police supervision, he lived with his family, devoting his time to extensive reading. In 1888 he was permitted to return to Kazan and use the university library, but was not readmitted to classes. Finally in 1890 his mother obtained special consent from the government for him to take the state law examinations. A year later he completed this requirement, achieving the highest grade of those who had taken the examinations. By contrast, his subsequent brief practice as a junior attorney in Samara was marked by repeated failure: he lost ten out of eleven cases.

His stay in Samara was otherwise significant, for it was here

Stay in Siberia was not really bad. Just a little village, when you tired of the place, you just escaped. It depend on the class you belonged to. Lenin had seen a lot of the outside world.

that he was converted to Marxism. Although he had previously delved into the writings of Marx, his commitment owed as much to Plekhanov. It was in Samara, moreover, that Lenin learned the techniques of conspiratorial organization from former members of the Narodnaya Volya. In 1893 he produced his first Marxist works, circulating them locally in handwritten copies. Wishing to be closer to the center of socialist agitation, Lenin moved to St. Petersburg. As he established contact with local Marxists, he made the acquaintance of the remarkable woman who later became his wife, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya (1869-1939). The meeting was doubly rewarding, for Krupskaya was active in the literacy committees of St. Petersburg, which were engaged in popular education. Utilizing the literacy committees as a respectable facade, Lenin organized Marxist study circles to bring Marx to the poorly educated industrial workers. At the same time he wrote extensively, most notably to attack the Populist movement, which offered a rival brand of socialism based on the rural peasantry rather than the urban proletariat. It was not long before his work gave Lenin a position of primacy among the Marxists of St. Petersburg.

Following a case of pneumonia in 1895, Lenin received official permission to go abroad for reasons of health. Actually, convalescence was less important to him than strengthening organizational ties with the socialist exiles in Switzerland. His success was diminished, however, when he returned to Russia. Carrying a suitcase filled with illegal literature, he was detected by the police, who chose merely to keep him under surveillance. This cat-and-mouse game finally revealed the identity of Lenin's closest associates. After participating in a wave of strikes that hit St. Petersburg in the autumn of 1895, Lenin and his group were arrested and exiled to Siberia.

Although dispersed to different towns, the core of Lenin's organization soon was reconstituted. Communication was tortuous and gatherings were infrequent, yet both were possible under the unusual freedom granted to political exiles in Siberia. Lenin was scarcely hampered in regaining contact with European Russia. Using invisible inks, codes, and messages hidden in the binding of books, he directed a steady stream of theoretical and organizational writings to his supporters. Such deceptions, however, often were nullified by the police. Thus it was that, shortly after a handful of adherents met in Minsk in 1898 to found the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, they were arrested. Yet, even an arrest was not without an occasional happy side. Krupskaya, taken into custody in 1896, later received permission to join Lenin in exile. They were married in 1899 in Siberia.

Lenin's imprisonment and exile (1896-1900) were particularly important for his ideological development. Constantly occupied with books and writing, he began to refine and amplify his thought. In 1899 he completed his major work, The Development of Capitalism in Russia. At the same time, he found himself in violent opposition to two doctrines which were finding favor in socialist groups in

Western Europe and Russia: the revisionism of Bernstein and non-political trade unionism. He looked forward impatiently to his release from exile, eager to return to the West and unite Russian socialists in a single organization, completely dedicated to revolution.

The instrument which Lenin chose to attain this end was a secret Marxist newspaper to be printed abroad and smuggled into Russia. He joined Plekhanov and his group in Geneva, publishing the first issue of Iskra (The Spark) in 1900. Writing frequently for this paper under the name of Lenin, which he now adopted, he established himself among underground circles as one of the foremost leaders of the Russian Marxist movement. Notable among the many articles he wrote was a series later put into book form under the title: What Is To Be Done? (1902). In this work, Lenin developed his most characteristic political ideas, which marked a break with Marx's conceptions. For a time, this feature was to distinguish the Russian movement from other Marxist parties, which, in practice if not in theory, had turned to revolutionary socialism. The following is an excerpt from What Is To Be Done?

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Lenin's doctrines were not unanimously accepted by the Russian Social Democratic Party. At a meeting in Brussels and later in London (1903), a schism appeared in its ranks. At issue were the membership provisions of the party constitution. Lenin's opponents

* Reprinted from V. I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement (New York: International Publishers, 1929), pp. 12-15, 26-30, 32-33, 40-41, 105-107, 112, 116-119. Used with permission.

agreed to the need for a centralized organization, but held that it should be open to all who subscribed to its program. Lenin, in keeping with his expressed views, argued for restricted membership. Although initially outvoted, he manipulated the congress to accept his formulation by a narrow margin. His victory split the party into contending factions of Bolsheviks (those who had been in the majority) and Mensheviks (those who had been in the minority).

Although briefly in control of the party and Iskra, the Bolsheviks soon gave way before a resurgent Menshevik bid for power. In the face of this opposition, Lenin voluntarily left Iskra and resigned from the Social Democratic Central Committee. While the Mensheviks dominated the party, he organized a small body of followers into a separate wing in 1904 and published a rival newspaper. Over the years his position found new adherents within the total movement until, in 1912, the Bolsheviks regained control of the party. At Lenin's insistence, a secret congress was held in Prague, at which the Mensheviks were grossly under-represented. In what was comparable to a coup d'etat, the Bolsheviks had little trouble in securing the formal ouster of the Mensheviks from the party. In the new leadership then formed, Lenin held undisputed power.

Meanwhile, in Russia, the stage was being set for revolution, but it was an upheaval not of the Bolsheviks' own making. Following economic depression and defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905, popular discontent mounted to dangerous levels. Unrest, initially reflected in strikes and demands for constitutional and economic reforms, soon passed into violence. A procession of thousands, petitioning the tsar before the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg (1905), was fired upon by troops of Nicholas II (1894-1917). The resulting massacre touched off the Revolution of 1905. Although crushed, it shook the tsardom irrevocably. For little more than a decade the old system continued to survive, modified only slightly by the concessions granted. It led a fitful existence and came to an end amid the strains of World War I in 1917. In the ensuing struggle for power, a weak provisional government was to face destruction at the hands of a corps of professional revolutionists, the party of Lenin.