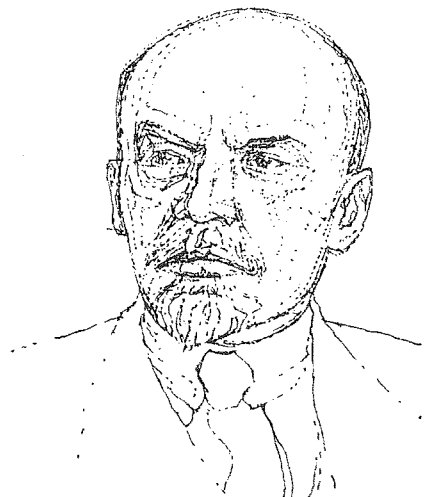


Lenin's single-minded and total devotion to revolution paved the way for successes but also led to failures

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Summary: The fall of Communism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has led many writers to depict Lenin as an evil tyrant with no redeeming features. Yet such a view is simplistic. Lenin had both virtues and vices on a large scale. He devoted all his tremendous energy and intellectual brilliance to the cause of revolution; but his total commitment led him to demand total obedience. Devotion to Lenin was the distinguishing feature of the Bolshevik party. Lenin suppressed his human feelings in order the better to foster the ideals he believed in, but his consequent loss of humanity paved the way for the perversion of those ideals.



New views of Lenin

DURING A RECENT DEPARTMENTAL SEMINAR an old friend and colleague pointed out that after having spent some 20 years severely criticising Lenin I was now defending him. The change was brought about not, I hope, simply by my own contrariness but because recent interpretations of Lenin have gone beyond the credible. Only 15 years ago even such a noteworthy critic of all things Soviet as Norman Stone wrote in *Europe Transformed* (p 385) that 'Lenin won because he offered the vision of a way forward ... he had all the answers' which suggests he had at least some positive qualities. Now, it seems, he is allowed none, thereby making it difficult to explain how he achieved what he did. Recent views, often supposedly authenticated by new archive revelations - which, in truth, have added very little to what we already knew about Lenin from the vast array of alternative sources - have presented a more evil picture. Pipes' *Unknown Lenin* is a monster thirsting for violence. Volkogonov's *Lenin* is characterised by actions described as 'superficial, haphazard and half-baked ... harsh and cruel' (p 472). Even pseudo-revelations, like Lenin's loving relationship with Inessa Armand, which, one might have thought, somewhat humanised Lenin's image, are more likely to be presented as prurient sensationalism, as on *Timewatch* (BBC 2, 2 December 1997) or even as examples of his duplicity. More balanced accounts, such as that by Robert Service and Neil Harding, have been swept aside by the new tide.

While the new freedom to criticise Lenin in Russia has no doubt led to what Lenin called bending the stick back in the opposite direction in order to straighten it out, can we form a more rounded and credible view of Lenin? Part of the difficulty in understanding Lenin perhaps lies in the fact that, as is often the case, his strengths are also, in many ways, his weaknesses. Each virtue, pushed too far, becomes a vice. Let's try to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of this powerful and complex personality.

Character and motives

All accounts agree that Lenin was a man of enormous energy and determination. Whether it be his long alpine walks during his Swiss exile, when even the beauties of nature could barely distract him from cursing the Mensheviks, his endless writing for the party newspaper while in Cracow on the eve of the First World War or his sleepless nights during the crises of the civil war, there can be no question of his total absorption in the cause. His published works come to more than 50 volumes. Much more, particularly of his correspondence, has been lost or retained in the archives. The unbridled venom against class enemies and those he thought served their cause, came from the deepest well-springs of his personality. While we might speculate that being knocked off his bike by a luxury car driven by a viscount while on his way back from a Paris air show in January 1910 did little to endear the ruling class to him, we might look a little deeper.

There can be little doubt that the decisive turning point in his formative years came with the arrest and eventual execution of his beloved elder brother Alexander in 1887. Sasha (the familiar form of the name Alexander) had been involved in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III. During the investigation and trial Sasha attempted to protect his fellow-conspirators by taking all the blame on himself. His heroic and noble character affected all who knew him and young brother Volodya (Vladimir) had idealised him without being aware of his revolutionary activities which devastated the family and made them marked people thereafter. In the eyes of the authorities the families of known terrorists were prime suspects. Although only 16 during this melancholy affair, Volodya was affected deeply and turned away from being the fairly conventional son of a school inspector. He started to read revolutionary works to find out why his elder brother had been prepared to sacrifice his own life to the cause. The younger brother decided to follow his example. In any case a

straightforward career path would have been difficult for Volodya as his rapid expulsion from the local university in the Volga region, Kazan, testified. True he was able, in 1892, to graduate in law by correspondence course from St Petersburg University, but he was a marked man, his actions watched, at a distance, by the secret police. One can only feel that the intensity of Lenin's hatred of the authorities who had dealt so savagely with his brother (the death penalty being widely considered repulsive among educated Russians, even for terrorist offences) was not just political but reached down into Lenin's own deepest feelings. The memory of Sasha was the petrol in Lenin's tank.

Intellectual gifts

The fact that, despite difficulties, Lenin graduated top of his year at St Petersburg, is itself sufficient testimony to his extraordinary intellectual gifts. He barely practised the profession for which he had so spectacularly qualified and, instead, devoted his formidable intellect to the battle against tsarism. He quickly identified the Marxist wing as the most up-to-date and forward-looking of the revolutionary tendencies and, typically, his first writings were fierce polemics against the peasant-oriented populists. His intensity brought him to the attention of Russia's leading Marxist, George Plekhanov and, inevitably, to that of the authorities, and in December 1895 he was arrested and exiled to Siberia. He profited from his enforced vacation by reading voraciously, translating Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Trade Unionism* and writing *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, his longest and most intricate work. From his release in February 1900 to 1917 he spent only a few months in Russia, preferring to live in Paris, London, Zurich and elsewhere where the eyes of the secret police, which were, of course, still on him, were not backed by the force to interfere in his life.

The Bolshevik party

Along with determination and brilliance the third major component of Lenin's personality was immense self-confidence. Let's look at two of the most striking ways in which this characteristic expressed itself. During his long years of exile Lenin devoted himself to building up his



Russian soldiers who had joined the Bolsheviks in October with the Red Flag attached to their bayonets

party. Many views exist about what exactly the principles were around which he built Bolshevik distinctiveness. The most widely believed is that the Bolsheviks weren't content to let history work through its pre-ordained (by Marx) stages while the Mensheviks, almost fatalistically, were convinced that they must wait. In 1905, however, the Mensheviks were calling for an armed workers' uprising earlier than the Bolsheviks, though by the end of the year the positions

had changed. Lenin also certainly accepted Marx's theory of stages. Only Trotsky argued that Russia could skip capitalism in his theory of permanent revolution and he was closer to the Mensheviks than the Bolsheviks at the time. Even Lenin's famous insistence that the party should consist of full-time professional revolutionaries was abandoned in the crucial year 1917 when the Bolsheviks became a mass party like any other. So principle is not, perhaps, the best guide particularly since Lenin changed his views, sometimes quite radically, as we shall see. What we should replace it with is simply devotion to Lenin. At heart, the party was composed of associates of Lenin who were prepared to follow him through the sometimes contorted evolutions of his thought. Even into the revolution and beyond, the party can best be understood as Leninists, first and foremost, devotees of the guru rather than of particular teachings.

Perhaps even more striking than the way Lenin built the party into a body characterised by personal loyalty was the way he also tried to mould it, and the country, and even, arguably, the future post-revolutionary world, into his own image. The crucial concept here is 'consciousness'. For Lenin, revolution was about 'raising consciousness', especially that of the workers, so that they became aware of their historic role in the Marxist scheme of things. The party was an instrument to achieve this. It would bring together those possessing higher levels of political consciousness and they would spread it to the rest of the population, like a spiritual elite converting unbelievers. But if revolution came about through raising consciousness, who possessed the most authentic model of consciousness if not the leader and founder? Lenin's conception of this process left no place in it for - disagreeing with Lenin. Those who did so had to be purged from the party. In this way, Lenin's self-confidence was institutionalised within the system. In all his major writings and policies on this, from his early pamphlet *What is to be Done*

Timeline: Lenin

1870	April	Vladimir Ulyanov (later known as Lenin) born
1887	May	Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's older brother, executed
1895	Dec	Lenin's first arrest
1900	July	After end of his sentence (February) Lenin goes abroad
1902	March	<i>What is to be Done?</i> containing Lenin's views on the organisation of the revolutionary party published
1903	July/Aug	Second Party Congress. Origin of Bolshevik/Menshevik split
1905		Year of revolution in Russia. Lenin briefly returns to support Moscow armed uprising
1906-17		Years of exile in western Europe. Lenin writes a multitude of articles for the party and fights to establish the Bolsheviks as a separate party
1916	July	<i>Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism</i> published
1917	April	Lenin returns to Russia and immediately proclaims his 'April Theses'
	Oct	Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, seize power in Russia
1918	March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk ends war with the central Powers. Russia loses immense resources
1921	March	Tenth Party Congress. Lenin introduces the New Economic Policy, bans factions and orders the savage suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion
1922	May	Lenin suffers his first stroke. Forced to curtail his political activity
1923		Lenin's third stroke almost totally incapacitates him
1924	January	Lenin dies. His body is placed in a mausoleum in Red Square

(1902) to the system of agitation and propaganda and party and state control set up after the revolution, it was clear that Lenin's conceptions were, in many ways unconsciously, being imprinted on the party. While he might quote, as he did at the Second Congress of Soviets on 26 October 1917, the core Marxist idea that complete creative freedom be left to the masses, in practice he was the control freak of all control freaks, never trusting anything to anyone but the most reliable of the converted. Lenin always slammed the door on pluralism on key issues and Russian culture, in any case, had little respect for compromise or agreeing to differ. The harmony of unity around truth, most likely learned indirectly from the highly dogmatic Russian Orthodox Church, was the goal to which Bolshevism aspired. Even the name of its newspaper *Pravda* (the Russian word for truth) is a minor example.

Effectiveness in action

Taken together, these characteristics produced a fearfully determined revolutionary able to use his intellectual skills to superb tactical effect. In the so-called April Theses which he enunciated on his return to Petrograd in

1917 he laid down the line that the party should prepare for the next revolution - the socialist and proletarian one - while the rest of the party was still trying to adjust to the five-week-old February revolution. His instinct for opposition stood him in good stead because the principle of no support for the Provisional Government was the key to success. All rival parties were sucked in, leaving only the Bolsheviks as the consistent voice of criticism, a voice which resounded more and more as the masses were increasingly disillusioned with the Provisional Government and those who made it up. While his touch, and the necessary luck, seem to have left him in the July Days' fiasco, he made up for it by his personal campaign for the seizure of power. A series of outspoken directives to that effect, launched from his post-July hiding place in Finland, hit his Central Committee colleagues like a salvo of Katiusha rockets. Their belief that he was out of touch and their reluctance to take his advice was only reversed by Lenin's dramatic appearance among them on 10 October. Even this had to be reinforced by a further meeting on 16 October. It was only after this that the party started to take the seizure of power seriously. Without Lenin personally as the driving force the October revolution, at least in the form which we know it, would not have taken place. So much for the organised, farsighted, disciplined Bolshevik party of legend. In practice, it was only Lenin's enormous prestige and the impossibility of crossing him that bounced the leadership into acquiescence.

Lenin in power

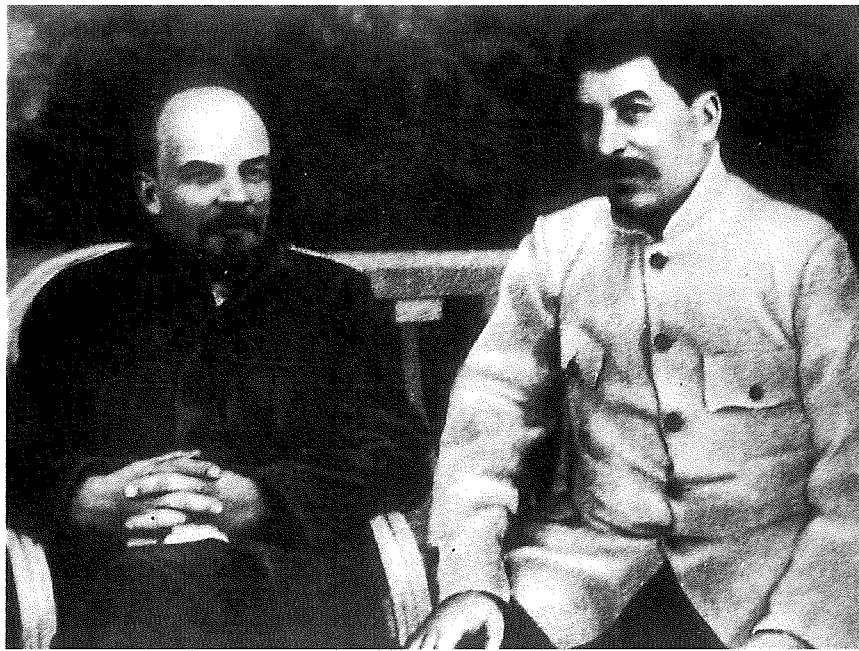
Once in power Lenin was still quick to adjust to realities, again leaving his party floundering behind him, not least by his bewildering insistence on signing the disastrous peace treaty (Brest-Litovsk) with Germany. In early 1918, far from free creative freedom for the masses, Lenin was calling, in his pamphlet *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, for 'iron proletarian discipline' and dictatorship in industry and, implicitly, in the political life of the country. In place of workers' control, former managers and engineers would be paid extra to stay on as specialists in a bid to keep the factories running. Traditional one-person management replaced democratic experimentation in the workplace. The Red Army, which, according to the principles enunciated in the April Theses, should have been a militia, was a conventional army not only having officers (often those who had served the Tsar and were attracted or forced into serving the Bolsheviks) but also political commissars to ensure political correctness on pain of being dealt with by the Cheka, the regime's new secret police. Needless to say, there was no dalliance with democratic ideas of soldiers' committees and election of officers so dear to the troops in 1917. Those who pointed out the gap between the actions of 1918 and the promises of 1917, the first of a series of organised oppositions within the party, were treated as though they were, in Lenin's word, childish, a charge he elaborated in 1920 in his bitterly polemical pamphlet *'Left-wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder*.

At the same time, he also tried to force the revolutionary issue in the countryside by fomenting class struggle in the village by means of committees of poor peasants,

followed shortly after by the fatal policy of forced requisitioning of an increasing range of agricultural products. Continuation of this desperate policy for two years reduced the food surplus catastrophically as peasants refused to produce what would simply be stolen from them.

The eventual failure of his attack on the peasants led to his final tactical change, the combined adoption, at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, of the New Economic Policy, institutionalisation of the one-party state and political and cultural repression symbolised by the ruthless attack on the Kronstadt rebellion. The measures were also intended to wind up factionalism within the party and create the harmony and unity Lenin once more established as his goal in his addresses to the Congress.

It is a sign of Lenin's imprint on the party that he was able to get his way fairly easily in this series of U-turns, which marked his progress from April 1917 until his retirement from active politics in 1922. It is also a mark of his prestige that once he withdrew from the scene his



Lenin, in 1922, with Stalin

leading associates quickly fell into serious squabbling and increasingly bitter recrimination.

Virtues into vices

While much of what has been said previously might be thought to show Lenin in a positive light, that would only really be true if viewed from Lenin's own position. As we said earlier, the flip-side of his strengths were also his weaknesses. One person's

determination is another's obstinacy; one person's self-confidence is another's arrogance or even megalomania; one person's close focus is another's tunnel vision. Intellectual brilliance can be seen as being too clever by half. His determined self-confidence, for example, led him into mistakes (like requisitioning) when listening more carefully to others might have brought about sounder decisions. His intellectual brilliance added to his sense of elitism which prevented him from seeing ordinary workers, and still more peasants, as anything other than children to be schooled in the right ideas. Perhaps his most damaging virtue, turned inside out, was his devotion and personal self-sacrifice for the revolution. In the 1870s an early, extremist revolutionary, Sergei Nechaev, had described the revolutionary as an outcast, cut off from friends and family and devoting him or herself only to the single passion of revolution. Lenin was very much like this. In his reminiscences the novelist Maxim Gorky talked of Lenin's love for life, music, theatre, companionship and revealed the extent to which Lenin thought he needed to subdue his finer feelings for the good of the revolutionary cause. As Gorky recalls Lenin, reflecting on his deep love for Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata, said:

I can't often listen to music, it ... makes me want to pat the heads of people ... But now one must not pat anyone's head ... one has to beat their heads, beat mercilessly, although ideally we're against any sort of force against people. Hmm - it's a devilishly difficult task.

Here lies the deepest complexity of Lenin's character as he steeled himself to the violence and bloodshed that accompanied his revolution. It was not that he wanted it, still less took any pleasure in it, rather it was, he felt, inevitable. In any case, he argued, who could criticise him? The ruling classes had led millions to mutual slaughter for no purpose in the First World War. At least, Lenin hoped, this last struggle against exploitation would open the way to a future for humanity based on permanent peace and social justice. Here the paradoxical sides of Lenin's personality met. Naive, romantic utopianism



The report of the Bolsheviks' capture of the Winter Palace in The Manchester Guardian, 9 November (Gregorian calendar)

combined with a ruthless determination that, to his opponents, looked like cruelty or cynicism. The suppression of human feeling, for the supposedly greater good, was his deepest error. The sacrifice of real people for principles, howsoever noble, has been a besetting evil of the twentieth century. Tragically, in suppressing his human feelings, Lenin suppressed the essential antidote to the abuse of his otherwise admirable virtues. Had he focused more on people as individuals and less on the people as an abstraction, the outcome of the revolution would have been less bloody and would have stood a better chance of achieving its inspiring goals.

Words and concepts to note

Bolsheviks: The Leninist wing of the Russian Social Democratic party. Changed its name to the Russian Communist party in 1918.

Mensheviks: The non-Leninist wing of the Russian Social Democratic party. In 1917 the majority supported the Provisional Government while an Internationalist (i.e. antiwar) left supported the soviets.

New Economic Policy: A partial restoration of free trade, mainly in agricultural products, adopted by the Communist party in 1921 to help restore the economy.

Permanent Revolution: Theory, associated mainly with Leon Trotsky who developed it, according to which Russia could pass directly from 'feudalism' (the existing tsarist system) to socialism without going through the intervening stage of capitalism. For this to be realised there would have to be a supportive world revolution of the major capitalist states. If that did not happen the Russian revolution would fail.

Soviets: Revolutionary councils set up by workers, soldiers and peasants in Russia in 1917.

Theory of Stages: The Marxian view that the history of mankind passed through a series of stages, notably feudal, capitalist and the future stages of socialism and, eventually, communism. Each stage was marked by the domination of a particular class - aristocracy, bourgeoisie and proletariat (working class) respectively - before arriving at the ultimate, classless stage of human history known as communism.

Questions to consider

- ♦ In what ways did the execution of his elder brother, Alexander, in 1887 influence Lenin?
- ♦ What should be the main parts of a character sketch of Lenin?
- ♦ What distinguished the Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks?
- ♦ How effective was Lenin as a political leader?
- ♦ Why was the outcome of the Bolshevik revolution so bloody?

FURTHER READING: N. Harding, *Leninism*, London, 1996; R. Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin*, London, 1996; C. Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution*, London, 1996; L. Schapiro and P. Reddaway, *Lenin, The Man, The Theorist, The Leader: A Reappraisal*, London, 1967; R. Service, *Lenin: A Political Life* (3 vols), London, 1989, 1991, 1995; D. Shub, *Lenin*, Harmondsworth, 1966; D. Volkogonov, *Lenin: Life and Legacy*, London, 1994.

Interpreting Lenin in the Post-Leninist World by Christopher Read.

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