A George Washington he wasn't: Why Leninism still lives

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Vladimir Lenin giving a speech to the Red Army in Sverdlov Square, Moscow, May 5,

1920. On the right of the platform is Leon Trotsky, commander of the Red Army.

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Right now, it's hard to find any pro-capitalist intellectual who will say a good word for Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, the leader of the first successful socialist revolution in history. But it used to be that every once in a while some reporter with nothing much else in mind would write, perhaps with good intentions, that Lenin was "the George Washington of the Soviet Union."

Comparing Lenin to that 18th century revolutionist could be a little unfair to the latter since he was limited by the historical period in which he found himself. Nevertheless, it may help to see Lenin's own place in history if we think for a moment of the similarities and differences between the two men. While it is pretty much the fate of all great leaders to become plaster saints after their death, Lenin's memory has been encased in more mud than plaster within the United States, and to some degree lately, in the Soviet Union itself. A brief historical reminder will correct this for our purpose here.

Both men are regarded as "fathers" of their respective republics. Each was the first president or chief of state. Washington was a slaveholder while Lenin was the leader of the greatest and most successful slave revolt in history — if we view the serf-like peasants and the often barefoot factory workers as the slaves they really were.

Washington was one of the five or six wealthiest persons in the whole 13 colonies. He was a land-grabber and a swindler of the Native people. Lenin was a passionate defender of oppressed nations and the chief expropriator of the Russian land-grabbers, giving the land to those who worked it. He was born into a middle-class family, became a professional revolutionary in his early youth, went to prison, then

to Siberian and later European exile. And he spent all his adult life before the revolution organizing, writing and planning strikes, demonstrations and a wide variety of struggle against Czarism, for democracy and for socialism.

Washington didn't even consider himself a revolutionary before 1775. He was a rich man who had occupied himself with getting richer, not even forgetting this personal preoccupation during the armed conflict with England.

It is true, of course, that Washington was a genuine leader of the Revolution of 1776 as far as that revolution went — although his main contribution was in his military generalship rather than his political leadership. He had military experience as a commander in the so-called French and Indian War of 1754-1763. His election as first U.S. president after the revolution was basically a recognition of his military services and, to a lesser degree, of his ability as an arbiter between the ruling factions, albeit he himself belonged to the right-wing faction of the revolution.

Lifetime fighter

Lenin's leadership, while not military, was a unique and in fact crucial one. Besides representing the working class and oppressed peoples, where Washington represented the merchant-capitalists, northern landlords and southern slave lords,* Lenin was the one who guided his revolution to success at moments more difficult and more complex than those of Valley Forge and Yorktown. He was the founder and leader of a fighting political party over a period of many years, a party whose experience included participation in a previous revolution (that of 1905). But there is no question on anyone's part that the party consciously sought and prepared the revolution along with Lenin.

In Washington's case, as in the case of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and many others, the revolution was forced on him. It was forced on him and most of the other notables in the sense that they had made certain demands on

the British Crown which did not appear to them to be revolutionary at the time, but the Crown refused to grant them. The demands being vital to the continued freedom and prosperity they had already enjoyed and vital to the prosperity of the colonies themselves, they began a rebellion. And because of British intransigence, the rebellion became a revolution.

The main leaders did not even "declare independence" until July 4, 1776, fourteen months after the "embattled farmers" had already taken to the field (in Lexington and Concord). This was only partially because some Northern leaders wanted to delay the vote in order to get the laggard Southern slave masters into the struggle. It was also because they themselves were still hoping for a compromise with the British monarchy. The New York delegates, for example, even waited until several days after July 4 to join in the Declaration.

Difference in revolutions

But the biggest difference between Washington and Lenin — and the most important one for the present generation — arises from the difference between the two revolutions and the historical periods in which they took place.

On assuming office, the two faced widely different problems. Lenin presided over a country of 150 million people, exhausted by over three years of the First World War, whereas Washington took office in 1788, seven years after the Revolution with the country basically at peace. Shortly after the October Revolution, the Lenin government had to cede 140,000 square miles of territory and many millions of people to Germany. Soon after that, a bloody civil war began. The counterrevolution was financed by England and France with some troops supplied by a dozen other countries, including the United States. The U.S. was by then already a nation of 100 million people and infinitely wealthier than the Soviet country, free of invasion by a foreign power for over a century.

The civil war and war of intervention lasted for over two years. After having lost two million lives in World War I and at least an equal number in the civil war, the factories were emptied, with the workers going out to defend their new country. As a result, industry and transport, already sadly overburdened, were now almost completely broken down. And in some areas, famine, disease and starvation ruled.

Lenin did not deal primarily with the questions of Free Trade and George III (although the Czar was, if anything, more absolutist and more medieval than that British king). He dealt with the questions of unemployment, poverty, homelessness, the question of war and peace and the real question of the equality of humankind rather than its mere propagandist statement in a literary Declaration. In doing this, he addressed nearly a century ago exactly the same questions that confront us now.

Even if one disagrees with his answers to these questions, even if they were not, in fact, all answered even to Lenin's own satisfaction, the fact that he raised them and raised them to a national and international level is a feat of magnificent proportions.

True, this feat would have been impossible without the mass uprising of millions of people and the self-sacrifice and long struggle of thousands of revolutionaries like himself over a period of three decades from the founding of the first Marxist party in Russia — and the struggle of thousands of other revolutionaries in three-quarters of a century of democratic and anarchistic defiance before that.

The bourgeois nation

Washington lived in a different age and it would have been all but impossible for him to have been an internationalist and still lead the bourgeois slaveholding state. The essence of the system he led was nationalist and competition with every other nation, including revolutionary nations, was inherent and inevitable.** Indeed, Washington had to be a nationalist in those days in order to create a nation out of a colony or group of colonies, and in order to assert nationhood against the "mother

country" which was denying it. Nevertheless, his limitations have to be noted.

Lenin lived in an age in which internationalism had become a realistic possibility on the basis of the tremendous advance in science, technology, and the great number of people — the great majority in every big industrialized country — who now had no material interest in warring with other countries and every objective reason to ally themselves to the working people of all those countries and the super-slaves of the colonial world.

But having said this and granting that Lenin could be an internationalist and Washington couldn't be — that did not make Lenin's task an easy one. And in fact, had had to oppose many who had considered themselves internationalists in his time, but couldn't measure up when their own time came.

In 1914, three years before the Russian Revolution, still an outcast in his own country, Lenin opposed the First World War, calling upon the troops of his country as well as the other warring countries to oppose it too. He said: "Turn the imperialist war into civil war!" At first, he was almost alone in this position. But the great masses of Russia and most of Europe were doing exactly that within three to four years.

While it took the genius and Promethean courage of a Lenin to make this position clear in the middle of the First World War, it should also be clear that any such course would have been impossible for Washington even if he had been more leftist and less pro-slavery than he was.

Coming into power late in 1917, Lenin was the first to lead his country out of the war. There was a storm of criticism in the United States against the Soviets signing "a separate peace" to get out of this "holy war." They repeatedly called the Bolsheviks "German agents." Lenin was accused of taking orders from Berlin in what was probably the first big international witch-hunt against the Bolsheviks.

Of course, Lenin's quitting the war did not stem from any pacifism on his part. It flowed from his and the Russian people's opinion that the war was not their war, that it was a war for trade, for profits, for colonies and economic influence over other countries. Washington's war of 1776 was an infinitely more just one than Russia's of 1914-1917, even though it didn't free the slaves or make the lot of the Indigenous people any easier. The colonies' struggle was against the imperialist domination of Great Britain.

But Washington, after getting vital help from thousands of French troops led by Lafayette, was unenthusiastic about helping Lafayette or any other leader of the French Revolution of 1789. He certainly did not want to spread the U.S. revolution and its new "democracy" to other countries. Of course, he didn't have the material means to do this even if he had wanted to — but neither did Lenin.

However, Lenin had international ideas, ideology, program, a new tradition — and international supporters and co-thinkers. Lenin and his comrades established an international communist organization (the Third International) for the express purpose of bringing their soviet system to whatever other countries possible. Lenin and the Bolsheviks wanted to extend the system they fought for, even at the expense of hurting their own country's immediate progress, whereas Washington and his associates (with a very few exceptions, such as Thomas Paine) did not have such a viewpoint and were, in fact, opposed to extending their own revolution abroad.

Lenin had a diametrically opposite position. He said, in effect, "We would give up the Russian Revolution for a successful German Revolution, if we could."

This, too, was a concept that couldn't even have been formulated a century earlier. He said this and meant it because German industry could bring about a socialist society much more quickly than backward Russia could do, and a German socialist revolution would give a much greater impulse to the European and world socialist revolution.

But the fact that he could be so startlingly internationalist was not so much a result of his own indisputable talents and socialist convictions as it was due to the new world he lived in. This new world, in spite of the terrible breakdown of civilization in the First World War, was the culmination of more than a century of material, social and intellectual development since the time of Washington.

And what a century! It brought the industrial and scientific revolution, the cultural and intellectual advance of many geniuses and along with that, the education of millions of people who had formerly been mere extras or “supers” on the stage of history. It brought whole new sciences, the discovery of oil and electricity, the railroad, the automobile and the airplane, the telephone, the telegraph and the production of material goods on a scale absolutely unheard of in previous centuries.

It was also the century that brought the birth of Karl Marx, who showed that all humanity could enjoy these things and end its “prehistory” with modern socialism.

Lenin was motivated by this concept as millions of other Europeans were in his day, but he more intensely and more effectively utilized it.

Lenin is a world figure, not merely in his considerable accomplishments, which include giving inspiration to the still developing Asian, African, Arab and Latin American revolutions, but also in the world perspective with which he operated and his recognition of the worldwide social and political framework which made the Russian Revolution possible and within which it took place.

The social movement and the historical forces acting upon him and upon his revolution were — and are — world forces and no account of his ideas and actions should leave them out. In fact, the true role of the individual in this case, the true function of this particular leader and his relation to his time should be that much better understood if we understand these forces.

History is not a continuum or a flow of time; it is a sequence of events made by people. The present and the future are being shaped by different people than those of Lenin's country or his generation. But the same problems that confronted Lenin are continually arising, although in somewhat different form now than then. His solutions to these problems are thus so relevant that they cry out for our attention and emulation.

In spite of the ups and downs of life and the ebbs and flows of history, the broad movement of society to more advanced positions is guaranteed by the great advance in human technology as mentioned above. But this is only in general. In particular and in essence, this movement is achieved only by social upheaval. And this upheaval can only be successful, especially because of the previous advances and the complexity of modern life, with strong and able leadership.

Lenin's leadership, contrary to the theses of his enemies and detractors, was not primarily in the force of his personality and the acquisition of "power," but in the educating of a party of revolutionaries with the understanding of the Russian and world revolution and in the nature of the struggle dictated by this understanding. While he had unusual talents and was much more intense about his objectives than most — if not all — of his contemporaries, everything about him was rational and understandable and, therefore, the revolutionaries of today have the possibility of learning just how he did it in his time as in a handbook, if not a blueprint, for doing it themselves in their time.

In this, too, he differed markedly from Washington. The leaders of 1776 were basically religious, mystical and removed from the masses (in spite of a certain freedom from "fundamentalism"). On the whole, they believed in the "great man theory" of history. They believed that leaders actually make history and generally speaking that people had been ignorant until the Age of Enlightenment (which they confused with the age of the rise of the capitalist class) and that leaders such as

themselves were the motive force of change rather than the conditions and struggle of classes over their respective rights to live and rule.

Lenin and his comrades were leaders, to be sure. But they understood thoroughly that the struggle of oppressed against oppressor — the class struggle — was the motive force of history. Washington was an aristocratic, even autocratic individual.

In discussing Lenin's struggle, it is necessary at all times to remember the kind of revolution he led and the kind of revolution he and his party began — that is, the socialist revolution in the Czarist empire and the emancipation of the proletariat and oppressed nations of the world. Whatever setbacks this ongoing revolution has had, it is still, relatively speaking, rushing onto the stage of the present and future and by the very nature of things, doing so with occasionally unique features, grim defeats, brilliant victories and sudden surprises.

Lenin was a master at the understanding of these things. And this was one reason he did so well as a person of action, too.

A study of Lenin, like the study of Marx, can give us this gift of understanding and, with a little more effort, can prepare us for leadership in the inevitable struggle for the emancipation of the human race.

*Where Lenin united two oppressed classes — the poor peasants and the workers — Washington was noted for uniting the various ruling classes — at least in the Revolutionary period. He was partly motivated by patriotism, but he was personally involved (through speculation) in the money economy of the North as well as the slave economy of the South. He had considerably more interest in banking, for instance, than the wealthy Bostonian John Adams, who in fact hated banks.

**The nationalism of the oppressed country of modern, imperialist times (which all Leninists support) is similar to this, but only in form. That is, it is often directed

against the “democratic” United States itself as the oppressor, it tends to solidarize with socialist countries and, in fact, to orient in a socialist direction because of the ambivalence of its own capitalist class, which is usually at least half-controlled by the capitalists of the oppressor nation.