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Lenin: Thinker, fighter

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George Plekhanov did not have Lenin in mind when he wrote his remarkable essay on “The Role of the Individual in History.” But the following paragraphs describe Lenin more than anybody else you can think of.

“A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time — needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes.

“In his well-known book on heroes and hero worship, Carlyle calls great men beginners. This is a very apt description. A great man is a beginner precisely

because he sees further than others and desires things more strongly than others.

“He solves the scientific problems brought up by the preceding process of intellectual development of society; he points to the new social needs created by the preceding development of social relationships; he takes the initiative in satisfying those needs.

“He is a hero, but he is a hero not in the sense that he can stop the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of this inevitable and unconscious course (of history). Herein lies all his significance; herein lies his whole power. But this significance is colossal. And the power is terrible.”

The ‘beginnings’

Aside from the exclusive emphasis on the male sex and the rather literary use of the word “terrible,” this is an almost perfect description of the relation of the individual to the historical process — and not only the “great” individual.

But it may be a little incomplete just to say that great people are “beginners,” because the historical forces they represent and the leaders and thinkers who preceded them also produce those people, too. In that sense, they are “continuers.”

Lenin would have been the first to admit — and even proclaim — that he, too, was a continuer, especially of Karl Marx and even of Plekhanov himself in that thinker’s earlier period.

However, in Lenin we have an example of a person who, although also a “continuer,” actually did clearly begin not one, but several, very important aspects of the struggle for the inevitable socialist future of humanity.

Let us review the main “beginnings” that he was personally responsible for.

But first a few words on his character and personality, which are not always clear from his writing or even from some biographical descriptions.

Love and struggle

The age of complete world socialism that Lenin visualized and fought for will bring about the end of all hunger — hunger of material goods as well as for food for everybody on earth. This can undoubtedly be achieved with the constantly improving machinery and technology already evident in the present age. This technology needs only to be released from the death-grip of an outlived profit-hungry, war-mad social system.

With a new economy and a new system, the socialist age will eventually bring the spirit and practice of universal cooperation, love and consideration for one's neighbor, and the fullest development of every individual without the necessity of trampling upon any other individual.

To bring about this age, however, requires not so much a program to convince people in the present age to love their neighbors, etc. (which would be utopian if not false and hypocritical), as it requires a relentless struggle against the ruling class enemy which resists the coming into being of the socialist age with all its might.

This struggle, in turn, requires a different kind of person to engage in it. It also requires a plan, a strategy, a theory and a leadership.

Lenin provided all those, but in order to do that effectively he had to conduct himself and even shape himself in a certain way.

Necessary explosions

He was passionate in his will to bring about the revolution to usher in the socialist age, but so absolutely devoted to the task that he was ruthless toward its enemies

and, whenever necessary, critical toward its friends. This alone required a certain austerity and at times aloofness.

His devotion to the goal, together with the constant deep study to prepare himself for battle, did not always prepare people for the occasional explosions of his great store of political ammunition. He was irresistible on the platform, but infinitely more from the logic and the political power of his position than from any so-called “charisma.”

This, of course, required a “terrible” intensity on his part.

Humor, personal love, relaxation and other human attributes he had, of course. But these were not part of the highly political personality that his contemporaries were usually acquainted with.

A well-known Menshevik named F.I. Dan said of him (probably after Lenin gave him some well-deserved political blow):

“What are you going to do with a guy who talks, writes, thinks and breathes nothing but revolution 24 hours a day?”

This was probably not meant entirely as a compliment.

But it gives us an inkling of why Lenin became the leader of the revolution, if not why Dan became one of its leading opponents.

1895: First Marxist workers’ organization in Russia

At the age of 25, Lenin founded the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, which was the first Marxist workers’ organization in Russia.

(Some time before that, Plekhanov had formed the Emancipation of Labor Group, but it was composed of professionals and exiles.)

As a result, Lenin was arrested on Dec. 8, 1895, and sent first to prison for 14 months and then to Siberia for three years. In both places he constantly kept in touch with his revolutionary followers and also wrote a powerful book, “The Development of Capitalism in Russia.”

1900: ‘The Spark’ is lit

In 1900, Lenin founded the first nationally circulated illegal Russian Marxist newspaper. It was called Iskra (The Spark) and was edited and printed abroad.

Its editorial board included Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich and other prominent Marxists.

It reached thousands of workers in Russia who, in turn, read it aloud to thousands of others.

1903: A new kind of party

Lenin founded the Bolshevik Party. He didn’t do this merely by setting up a banner and coining a few good slogans and calling upon people to rally ‘round. He did it after long struggles with the old anarchist-populist elements in the 1890s and then against a new opportunist trend among the Marxists called “economism.”

While he already had great prestige in the movement, he did not necessarily have the full confidence of all the other leading Marxists at the time — nor did he have confidence in all of them. He was dissatisfied with some of the attitudes among them — attitudes about party membership and responsibilities.

So he proposed at a convention of about 60 leaders held in exile that every party member become, in effect, a professional revolutionary. That is, the party must be a party of cadres whose main interest in life was the socialist revolution and who would subordinate their other activities to the needs of the party.

A political bombshell

When he made this proposal it was like dropping the proverbial bombshell. It led to an irreconcilable split. The Mensheviks (meaning minority) walked out. It later became clear that underneath the simple words describing what a party member should be was a determination to make the socialist revolution. And underneath the opposition to those words was not only a softness in general, but a different view of the coming revolution.

The concept of a party is generally known at the present time (although not generally practiced), but the difficulties in forming the party and keeping it together under Czarist rule are somewhat less known and even less understood.

From the very beginning, the road was hard.

But Lenin knew he was right. And he was more right than he knew. Even Lenin could not have foreseen in 1903 the sequence of events in 1917. He could not have known that the Mensheviks would actually oppose the October Revolution tooth and nail.

As a matter of fact, even the Mensheviks themselves could not have dreamed in 1903 that their own leader in 1917, I.G. Tsereteli, the president of the Soviets (until September, when the Bolsheviks won the Soviet elections), would shortly after the revolution go down to Georgia and actually organize an armed counterrevolution against the new Soviet state.

1905: Revolution and insurrection

There were many tests and crises for the new party, which were reflections of and responses to the crisis-torn Czarist regime and the workers' struggle against it.

In the 1905 revolution, for instance, when the Petersburg Soviet members were all

arrested, the Bolsheviks under Lenin (who had secretly returned to Russia from exile) led the Moscow uprising.

The insurrection was beaten down, though it lasted several days before it ended. This put an even deeper chasm between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks — the latter saying: “They shouldn’t have taken up arms.”

1907: Reaction and bourgeois parliament

During the events of 1905, the Czar had been forced to “grant” a representative parliament called the Duma. All the real revolutionaries, mostly Bolsheviks, boycotted this Duma, which they regarded as an attempt to co-opt the revolution.

But during the reaction after the revolution was over, Lenin was the first of the revolutionaries to recognize that the times had changed. Even though he had been the first to advocate insurrection, he now proposed taking part in this more or less fraudulent Duma. He was at first opposed by the majority of his own central committee, although he later convinced them to do it.

(Lenin was called inflexible and stiff-necked by his enemies, but he was really a superb tactician who tried to take advantage of every possible means of struggle, including the parliamentary.)

1908: The socialist heaven must stay on earth

During the reaction, there was a struggle over Marxist philosophy led by supporters of a form of mysticism which tried to establish itself in the party and actually form a new “religion.”

Lenin led this fight and wrote a powerful and thoroughgoing rebuttal to the philosophical revisionists known as “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.”

This did not come easy, either. Besides the tremendous theoretical work required, he had to rebuke his personal friend, the great novelist Maxim Gorky, who helped the party with funds and in other ways, too. And he had to attack leading comrades while being temporarily in a bloc with George Plekhanov, who had now become a Menshevik but still fought for the materialist view of history.

That was how Lenin saw the issue of Marxist theory and the materialist method.

How easy it would have been to gloss over the mystical maunderings of a few leaders and just make a few remarks about them! But that wouldn't have been Lenin, and it wouldn't have maintained the party's sharpness in doctrine and method that was necessary to make a revolution.

1913: Right of self-determination

There was also an important, and in the light of later events, historical dispute with Rosa Luxemburg, an otherwise very revolutionary comrade, over the question of self-determination.

Luxemburg thought the socialist revolution would solve national oppression, and anyway, the leaders of some of these oppressed nations were oppressors too, so how could a workers' party support them?

Lenin not only led a debate against this view, but was the first to set down in theoretical form the whole question of the defense of the rights of colonies and semi-colonies (called neo-colonies today) to secede from imperialist oppressors.

Later, during the First World War, when he refused to support the imperialist countries, he took care to make exception for small countries fighting for their liberation.

This was extremely difficult to do at that time, because the small European countries

fighting in the First World War (e.g., the Balkans) had completely sold themselves to the big imperialist countries and it appeared to revolutionaries like Luxemburg that there never would be any progressive war by any small country.

1914: 'Turn the imperialist war into civil war'

The greatest test for Lenin personally, parallel to that of the 1917 revolution itself, was in taking his uniquely revolutionary position on the First World War.

Earlier, the European socialist parties had all pledged themselves to oppose the coming war. But, when the war actually came, the parties capitulated and each — except for individual holdouts — supported its respective imperialist government.

In Germany, for instance, 110 socialist members of the national congress voted for the war. Only one, Karl Liebknecht, voted against. (There were other great German leaders who agreed with Liebknecht, like Rosa Luxemburg.)

It was about the same in the smaller socialist parties.

In Russia, however, all five Bolshevik representatives in the Duma, along with some “internationalist” Mensheviks, voted against the war. And they were all sent to hard labor in Siberia. (So much for parliamentary immunity!)

But Lenin not only opposed the war: he went further and proposed that socialists use the war situation to work for the overthrow of their respective governments.

“Turn the imperialist war into civil war,” he said.

And he developed the doctrine of “revolutionary defeatism” — that is, the proposition that the defeat of your own imperialist country, your own ruling class, is preferable to their chauvinist victory, especially if the defeat is brought on by the people’s struggles for their rights and for progress and socialism.

Needless to say, the imperialist rulers of all countries persecuted the opponents of their war. And they accused the strikers and fighters for justice of being enemy agents. Even a literary opposition to the war was tantamount to treason.

‘Second International is dead: Long live the Third!’

Furthermore, Lenin condemned all the socialists who supported the war or half-supported it. He condemned the whole Second International and called for the establishment of a Third (Communist) International.

He was the first person to do this. And he found no answering echo for some time, not even among the most resolute anti-war fighters in all countries.

All this was in the first few months of the war. And it must be remembered that the chauvinism and hysteria on both sides had reached heights not previously known in the modern world — and never known on such a worldwide basis.

The pressure to conform was very intense. Even within the anti-war part of the Social Democratic parties, there was a strong tendency to go along with Karl Kautsky, leader of the Second International, who had a centrist position. But Lenin vigorously condemned this grouping and Kautsky in particular for not declaring war on their own ruling class.

He took an equally hard line in his own country, of course. Plekhanov, the “Father of Russian Marxism,” supported the war, objectively supporting the same Czar against whom he had fought for most of his life.

Lenin, who had blocked with Plekhanov on the question of Marxist philosophy, now mercilessly condemned him for his terrible capitulation.

But Lenin’s hard line helped to further harden the Bolshevik Party and prepare it for the revolution that came in 1917.

1917: It began on Women's Day

The revolution itself began on International Women's Day, March 8, 1917, with a demonstration of women textile workers. It came like a thunderclap in the middle of the war under the very nose of the Czarist court.

After five days of constantly increasing strikes and street demonstrations, first unarmed and finally armed, the Czar abdicated and the capitalist democrats took over with a so-called "provisional government."

From the start, the workers and soldiers (the latter mostly peasants in uniform) established huge councils ("soviets") that really rivaled the provisional government, but appeared to be only auxiliaries.

'All power to the Soviets!'

Within a month after the spring revolution, Lenin came back from exile and immediately raised the slogan, "All power to the Soviets."

This slogan may seem simple enough and clear enough to revolutionaries looking at it from the vantage point of history.

But it caused a great furor in the whole movement when he raised the idea.

In fact, of all the difficult, creative revolutionary positions that Lenin ever took, this one was the boldest, the most courageous, the most heroic, one might say. For he mobilized his whole party, the party he had worked with and sacrificed so many years to build, in an effort to do something that had never been done before and appeared to many wise heads to be absolutely suicidal.

What? Make another revolution just weeks or months after the first? Not only that, but to make a socialist revolution, a proletarian revolution, without allowing a period

for capitalist rule (after the fall of feudalism) of the type that had developed in all the advanced countries?

Obviously, an attempt to take power followed by a failure would destroy the Bolshevik Party completely and every chance to be an opposition party in the new democratic capitalist regime would be lost.

On the other hand, think of all the wise people today who will tell you how Marx was wrong about the socialist revolution coming first in Western Europe and that its success in the underdeveloped East proves that Marx's whole thesis was wrong.

In the Russia of 1917, every socialist of whatever faction was more keenly aware of this proposition of Marx than the smartest kibitzers of today. And it was precisely this thought (in addition to sheer worry and fear) that paralyzed the movement. It was this mental paralysis that Lenin had to overcome and the Bolsheviks had to cure in action.

Furthermore, Lenin called for the Soviets to take power at a time when the Bolsheviks were in a small minority in the Soviets.

This alone required a deep historical understanding and a clear historical perspective.

If Lenin and the Bolsheviks had failed to see the special situation in Russia — both theoretically and practically — if they had failed to apply living Marxism to the given, historical Russian conditions, there might have been no successful socialist revolution in Russia. And if so there would not have been any in Eastern Europe after the Second World War and probably not so soon in China, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America in the subsequent period.

The “beginner,” who was part of the inevitable and unconscious force of history, had begun a whole chain of revolutions and a new phase in the world socialist revolution

first conceived by Karl Marx.

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