

Vladimir Ilich Lenin

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: April 10, 1870 in Ulianovsk, Russia

Died: January 21, 1924 in Moscow, Soviet Union

Other Names: Lenin, Vladimir I.; Lenin, V.I.; Lenin, Vladimir Ilich; Lenin, Vladimir Illyich; Ulyanov, Vladimir I.; Lenin, Vladimir Ilych; Lenin, Nikolai; Ulyanov, Vladimir Illyich; Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich; Richter, Joseph; Ulyanov, Vladimir Ilyich; Lenin, N.; Ulyanov, V.I.; Ulyanov-Lenin; Lenin, Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov

Nationality: Soviet

Occupation: Head of state

The Russian statesman Vladimir Ilich Lenin (1870-1924) was the creator of the Bolshevik party, the Soviet state, and the Third International. He was a successful revolutionary leader and an important contributor to revolutionary socialist theory.

Few events have shaped contemporary history as profoundly as the Russian Revolution and the Communist [revolutions](#) that followed it. Each one of them was made in the name of V. I. Lenin, his doctrines, and his political practices. Contemporary thinking about world affairs has been greatly influenced by Lenin's impetus and contributions. From Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points to today's preoccupation with wars of national liberation, imperialism, and decolonization, many important issues of contemporary social science were first raised or disseminated by Lenin; even some of the terms he used have entered into everyone's vocabulary. The very opposition to Lenin often takes Leninist forms.

Formative Years

V. I. Lenin was born in Simbirsk (today Ulianovsk) on April 10 (Old Style), 1870. His real family name was Ulianov, and his father, Ilia Nikolaevich Ulianov, was a high official in the czarist educational bureaucracy who had risen into the nobility. Vladimir received the conventional education given to the sons of the Russian upper class but turned into a radical dissenter. One impetus to his conversion doubtless was the execution by hanging of his older brother Alexander in 1887; Alexander and a few associates had conspired to assassinate the Emperor. Lenin graduated from secondary school with high honors, enrolled at Kazan University, but was expelled after participating in a demonstration. He retired to the family estate but was permitted to continue his studies in absentia. He obtained a law degree in 1891.

When, in 1893, he moved to St. Petersburg, Lenin was already a Marxist and a revolutionary by profession, joining like-minded intellectuals in study groups, writing polemical pamphlets and articles, and seeking to organize workers. The St. Petersburg Union for the Struggle for the Liberation of Labor, which Lenin helped create, was one of the important nuclei of the Russian Marxist movement. The most important work from this period is a lengthy pamphlet, "What Are the 'Friends of the People,' and How Do They Fight against Social-Democracy?" In it Lenin presents the essentials of his entire outlook.

In 1897 Lenin was arrested, spent some months in jail, and was finally sentenced to 3 years of exile in the Siberian village of Shushenskoe. He was joined there by a fellow Marxist, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, whom he married in 1898. In his Siberian exile he produced a major study of the Russian economy, *The Development of [Capitalism](#) in Russia*, in which he sought to demonstrate that, despite its backwardness, the economy of his country had definitely transformed itself into a capitalist one. If Lenin had produced nothing else than this learned though controversial work, he would today be known as one of the leading Russian economists of his period.

Emigration to Europe

Not long after his release from Siberia in the summer of 1900, Lenin moved to Europe, where he spent most of the next 17 years, moving from one country to another at frequent intervals, periods of feverish activity alternating with those of total frustration. His first step was to join the editorial board of *Iskra* (*The Spark*), then the central newspaper of Russian [Marxism](#), where he served together with the top leaders of the movement. After parting from *Iskra*, he edited a succession of papers of his own and contributed to other socialist journals. His journalistic activity was closely linked with organizational work, partly because the underground organizational network within Russia to some extent revolved around the distribution of clandestine literature.

Organizational activity, in turn, was linked with the selection and training of personnel. For some time Lenin conducted a training school for Russian revolutionaries at Longjumeau, a suburb of Paris. A perennial problem was that of financing the movement and its leaders' activities in their European exile. Lenin personally could usually depend on financial support from his mother; but her pension could not pay for his political activities. Much of the early history of Russian Marxism can be understood only in the light of these pressing money problems.

His Thought

A Marxist movement had developed in Russia only during the last decade of the 19th century as a response to the rapid growth of industry, urban centers, and a proletariat. Its first intellectual spokesmen were people who had turned away from populism (*narodnichestvo*), which they regarded as a failure. Instead of relying on the peasantry, they placed their hopes on the workers as the revolutionary class. Rejecting the village [socialism](#) preached by the Narodniks, they opted for industrialization, modernization, and Westernization. Their immediate aim they declared to be a bourgeois revolution which would transform Russia into a democratic republic.

In accepting this revolutionary scenario, Lenin added the important proviso that hegemony in the coming bourgeois revolution should remain with the proletariat as the most consistently revolutionary of all classes.

At the same time, Lenin, more than most Marxists, made a clear distinction between the workers' movement, on the one hand, and the theoretical contribution to be made by intellectuals, on the other. Of the two, he considered the theoretical contribution the more important, the workers' movement being a merely spontaneous reaction to capitalist exploitation, whereas theory was an expression of consciousness, meaning science and rationality. Throughout his life Lenin insisted that consciousness must maintain leadership over spontaneity for revolutionary Marxism to succeed. This implies that the

intellectual leaders must prepare the proletariat for its political tasks and must guide it in its action. Leadership and hierarchy thus become key concepts in the Leninist vocabulary, and the role and structure of the party must conform to this conception. The party is seen as the institutionalization of true consciousness. It must turn into the general staff of the revolution, subjecting the working class and indeed all its own members to command and discipline.

Lenin expressed these ideas in his important book *What's To Be Done?* (1902), the title of the work expressing his indebtedness to Nikolai Chernyshevsky. When, in 1903, the leaders of Russian Marxism met for the first important party congress, formally the Second Congress, these ideas clashed head on with the conception of a looser, more democratic workers' party advanced by Lenin's old friend Iuli Martov. This disagreement over the nature and organization of the party was complicated by numerous other conflicts of view, and from its first important congress Russian Marxism emerged split into two factions. The one led by Lenin called itself the majority faction (*bolsheviki*); the other got stuck with the name of minority faction (*mensheviki*). Lenin's reaction to the split was expressed in his pamphlet "One Step Forward--Two Steps Back," published in 1904.

Mensheviks and Bolsheviks disagreed not only over organizational questions but also over most other political problems, including the entire conception of a Marxist program for Russia and the methods to be employed by the party. Bolshevism, in general, stresses the need for revolution and the futility of incremental reforms; it emphasizes the goals of Marxism rather than the process, with its timetable, by which Marx thought the new order was to be reached; in comparison to menshevism it is impatient, pragmatic, and tough-minded.

The Revolution of 1905 surprised all Russian revolutionary leaders, including the Bolsheviks. Lenin managed to return to Russia only in November, when the defeat of the revolution was a virtual certainty. But he was among the last to give up. For many more months he urged his followers to renew their revolutionary enthusiasm and activities and to prepare for an armed uprising. For some time afterward the technology of revolutionary warfare became the focus of his interest. His militancy was expressed in an anti-Menshevik pamphlet published in 1905, "Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution."

The major impact of the aborted revolution and its aftermath was a decided change in Lenin's attitude toward the peasantry. Lenin came to recognize it as a class in its own right--not just as a rural proletariat--with its own interests, and as a valuable ally for the revolutionary proletariat. His pamphlet "The Agrarian Question in the Russian Revolution of 1905-7" presents these new views in systematic fashion.

Bolshevism as an Independent Faction

In the 12 years between the Revolution of 1905 and that of 1917, bolshevism, which had begun as a faction within the Russian Social-Democratic Workers party, gradually emerged as an independent party that had cut its ties with all other Russian Marxists. The process entailed prolonged and bitter polemics against Mensheviks as well as against all those who worked for a reconciliation of the factions. It involved fights over funds, struggles for control of newspapers, the development of rival organizations, and meetings of rival congresses. Disputes concerned many questions about the goals

and strategies of the movement, the role of national liberation movements within the Marxist party, and also philosophic controversies. Lenin's contribution to this last topic was published in 1909, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*.

Since about 1905 the international socialist movement had begun also to discuss the possibility of a major war breaking out. In its congresses of 1907 and 1912, resolutions were passed which condemned such wars in advance and pledged the parties of the proletariat not to support them. Lenin had wanted to go further than that. He had urged active opposition to the war effort and a transformation of any war into a proletarian revolution. He called his policy "revolutionary defeatism." When World War I broke out, most socialist leaders in the countries involved supported the war effort. For Lenin, this was proof that he and they shared no aims or views. The break between the two schools of Marxism had become irreconcilable.

During the war Lenin lived in Switzerland. He attended several conferences of radical socialists opposed to the war or even agreeing with Lenin's revolutionary defeatism. He read extensively on the Marxist theory of state and wrote a first draft for a book on the subject, *The State and Revolution*. He also immersed himself in literature dealing with contemporary world politics and wrote a book which may, in the long run, be his most important one, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), in which Marxism is effectively made applicable to the 20th century. By the beginning of 1917 he had fits of despondency and wrote to a close friend that he despaired of ever witnessing another revolution. This was about a month before the fall of czarism.

Lenin in 1917

It took a good deal of negotiation and courage for Lenin and a group of like-minded Russian revolutionaries to travel from Switzerland back to Russia through enemy country (Germany). Much has been made of Lenin's negotiations with an enemy power and of the fact that some Bolshevik activities were supported financially by German intelligence agencies. There is no convincing evidence, however, which might show that acceptance of funds from objectionable sources made Lenin an agent of these sources in any way. And from his point of view the source of aid was immaterial; what counted was the use to which it was put.

The man who returned to Russia in the famed "sealed train" in the spring of 1917 was of medium height, quite bald, except for the back of his head, with a reddish beard. The features of his face were arresting--slanted eyes that looked piercingly at others, and high cheek-bones under a towering forehead. The rest of his appearance was deceptively ordinary: a man of resolute movements clad quite conservatively in a middle-class suit.

Versed in many languages, Lenin spoke Russian with a slight speech defect but was a powerful orator in small groups as well as before mass audiences. A tireless worker, he made others work tirelessly. Self-effacing, he sought to compel his collaborators to devote every ounce of their energy to the revolutionary task at hand. He was impatient with any extraneous activities, including small talk and abstract theoretical discussions. Indeed, he was suspicious of intellectuals and felt most at home in the company of simple folk. Having been brought up in the tradition of the Russian nobility, Lenin loved hunting, hiking, horseback riding, boating, mush-rooming, and the outdoor life in general. He sought to steel himself by systematic physical exercise and generally forbade himself those hobbies which he

considered time-wasting or corrupting: chess, music, and companionship. While his life-style was that of a dedicated professional revolutionary, his tastes in art, morals, and manners were rather conventional.

Once he had returned to Russia, Lenin worked feverishly and relentlessly to utilize the revolutionary situation that had been created by the fall of czarism so as to convert it into a proletarian revolution which would bring his own party into power. These were the crucial 6 months of his life, but space does not permit a detailed account of his activities in the period. The result of his activities is well known: Opinions in Russia quickly became more and more polarized. Moderate forces found themselves less and less able to maintain even the pretense of control. In the end, the so-called provisional government, then headed by Kerensky, simply melted away, and power literally fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks. As a result of this so-called October Revolution, Lenin found himself not only the leader of his party but also the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (equivalent to prime minister) of the newly proclaimed Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic.

Ruler of Russia

During the first years of Lenin's rule as dictator of Russia, the major task he faced was that of establishing his and his party's authority in the country. Most of his policies can be understood in this light, even though he alienated some elements in the population while satisfying others. Examples are the expropriation of landholdings for distribution to the peasants, the separate peace treaty with Germany, and the nationalization of banks and industrial establishments.

From 1918 to 1921 a fierce civil war raged which the Bolsheviks finally won against seemingly overwhelming odds. During the civil war Lenin tightened his party's dictatorship and eventually eliminated all rival parties from the political arena. A spirited defense of his dictatorship can be found in his "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky" (1918), in which he answers criticism from some more moderate Marxists. Lenin had to create an entirely new political system with the help of inexperienced personnel; he was heading a totally exhausted economy and had to devise desperate means for mobilizing people for work. Simultaneously he created the Third (Communist) International and vigorously promoted the spread of the revolution to other countries; and meanwhile he had to cope with dissent among his own party comrades, some of whom criticized him from the left. The pamphlet "Left-wing [Communism](#): An Infantile Disorder" is a response to this criticism.

When the civil war had been won and the regime established firmly, the economy was ruined, and much of the population was bitterly opposed to the regime. At this point Lenin reversed many of his policies and instituted a trenchant reform, called the New Economic Policy. It signified a temporary retreat from the goal of establishing communism at once and a resolve to make do with the social forces available: the Communist party declared itself ready to coexist and cooperate with features of the past, such as free enterprise, capitalist institutions, and capitalist states across the borders. For the time being, the Soviet economy would be a mixture of capitalist and socialist features. The stress of the party's policies would be on economic reconstruction and on the education of a peasant population for life in the 20th century. In the long run, Lenin hoped that both these policies would make the blessings of socialism obvious to all, so that the country would gradually grow into socialism. The wariness, the caution, the fear of excessive haste and impatience which Lenin showed in the years 1921-1923 are expressed only inadequately in the last few articles he wrote, such as "On Cooperation," "How We Must Reorganize the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate," and "Better Less but Better."

In 1918 an assassin wounded Lenin; he recovered but may have suffered some lasting damage. On May 26, 1922, he suffered a serious stroke from which he recovered after some weeks, only to suffer a second stroke on December 16. He was so seriously incapacitated that he could participate in political matters only intermittently and feebly. An invalid, he lived in a country home at Gorki, near Moscow, where he died on Jan. 21, 1924. His body was preserved and is on view in the Lenin Mausoleum outside the walls of the Moscow Kremlin.

Further Readings

- Numerous collections and selections of Lenin's writings have been published in English. No first-rate biography has as yet been written in English to match Gérard Walter, *Lénine* (1950). Louis Fischer, *The Life of Lenin* (1964), was praised highly. It is based on exhaustive research, is fair and comprehensive, but is disorganized and poorly written. Interesting glimpses into Lenin's life are provided by his widow, N. K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin* (trans., 2 vols., 1930-1932); Nikolai Valentinov's studies, *Encounters with Lenin* (1953; trans. 1968) and *The Early Years of Lenin* (trans. 1969); Richard Pipes, *Social Democracy and the St. Petersburg Labor Movement, 1885-1897* (1963); Angelica Balabanoff, *Impressions of Lenin* (1964); and Leon Trotsky, *Lenin: Notes for a Biographer* (trans. 1971), with a good introduction by Bertram D. Wolfe. See also David Shub, *Lenin: A Biography* (1948; rev. ed. 1967); Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (1967; trans. 1968); and Isaac Deutscher, *Lenin's Childhood* (1970).
- For a survey of Lenin's ideology see Leopold H. Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (1955); Alfred G. Meyer, *Leninism* (1957); and Adam B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (1965). A general appraisal of the man and his work is Leonard Schapiro and Peter Reddaway, eds., *Lenin: The Man, the Theorist, the Leader* (1967). For the broader political background see Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism* (1934); Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1959); Robert V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution* (1960); and Theodore I. Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism* (1964). An objective and concise biography is Helene Carrere d'Encausse's *Lenin* (2001).

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2016 Gale, Cengage Learning.

Source Citation

"Vladimir Ilich Lenin." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Student Resources in Context*. Web. 30 Apr. 2016.

URL

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/suic/BiographiesDetailsPage/BiographiesDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Biographies&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=true&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=SUIC&action=e&catId=GALE%7CAA000039248&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1631003891&source=Bookmark&u=nchs&jsid=8a58f0c1ab384c1e06ece5783675d673

Gale Document Number: GALE|K1631003891