

# Lenin's Other Testament

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First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to participate in such an important event. In view of the short time for our intervention, what we propose is just to draw attention to a question that we consider of great strategic importance, and also very relevant for the challenges facing the international working class nowadays, in a scenario of profound decomposition of the dying capitalism, and for the tasks that this brings along for all of us. As you know, Lenin, in the final phase of his life, already severely affected by illness, wrote between December 1922 and the first weeks of 1923 the letter to the Congress of the Russian CP known as his Testament, and a series of associated documents, which went down in history as his political testament. At that moment, Lenin intended to initiate a struggle to change the party regime in the PCUS. These documents constituted a critique of the state of the Soviet government and warned about a series of dangers that threatened the revolution, the danger of bureaucratization, the risks associated with the composition of the Central Committee at the time, and in particular about Stalin, its general secretary, as well as a series of suggestions on how to face the challenges of the economy and the administration. The text, we know now, was not published and anyone who distributed it was accused of being a counterrevolutionary and enemy of the revolution.

In that same historical context, a month before, in November 1922, Lenin

delivered his last speech before the Communist International, where he addressed the issues he considered a priority at that particular juncture, issues that are directly related to the content of the political testament. In his speech, Lenin took stock of the conquests in the five years following the victory of the October Revolution and addressed two main issues. Most of his speech was concerned with the problems and difficulties of the New Economic Policy and the state of Soviet society. But in the end, in his final words before the delegates from all over the world gathered at the Fourth Congress of the IC, he referred to the perspectives for the international revolution. In that final part of his speech, Lenin concentrated his considerations on a critical questioning of the resolution adopted by the Third Congress of the International *On the structure, methods and action of the communist parties*. The resolution had the defect, he said, of being too long, so that foreigners would not be able to assimilate all its contents. Another problem was that it was too Russian, that it was completely imbued with the Russian spirit. Its greatest virtue, synthesizing the Russian experience, was at the same time “its greatest defect”. Thirdly, said Lenin: “Even if foreigners could understand it, they would have no conditions to apply it.” The conclusion, for him, was that had been made “a great mistake”. In Lenin’s own words: “We have blocked with it our own road to success.”

What is unique in Lenin’s assessment is that he also said that the resolution was “excellent”, and that “I am ready to subscribe to each of its points”. The document, indeed, is a veritable treatise on revolutionary political structuring. Its 59 theses constitute an attempt to transmit in an exhaustive and detailed manner the experience of the Bolshevik party and its methods. Just by mentioning here its eight chapters, it is possible to observe the breadth of its content: **1. In the generalities, the fundamental theoretical guidelines of the resolution are established; 2. The democratic centralization; 3. The duty to work of the communists; 4. The problem of the resolution; 5. Organization of political struggles; 6. The party press; 7. The structure of the party as a whole; and 8. The nexus between legal and illegal work.**

The biggest problem with the resolution, Lenin said, is that “we have not learned to present our Russian experience to foreigners,” which can be interpreted, actually, as two problems: that foreigners would have difficulty assimilating the Bolshevik experience in those terms, but also the problem that the Russians themselves would not be able to transmit their own experience, the lessons of the October victory. Lenin’s answer is, in a sense, enigmatic. For his answer is that these problems must be solved through study, “study, and study in a special way, study from scratch.” Where it resounds, clearly, that famous note written in Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* about the fact that “it is impossible to understand Marx’s *Capital* without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!”

Despite his shortcomings, Lenin concluded, “the resolution must be carried out,” but also warned that “the resolution is unintelligible to foreigners, who cannot content themselves with hanging it in a corner like an icon and praying to it; nothing will be achieved that way. They must assimilate part of the Russian experience. I don’t know how they will do it.” At the historical juncture at which Lenin was

speaking, in a way he was thinking also in the perspective of his own physical absence, in the perspective of death and of the political challenges opened up by that absence. And this is not in general sense, but as an issue of crucial importance regarding the prospects of the world revolution.

Lenin points out that the Bolsheviks and he himself have committed a lot of foolishness since the October Victory. But he also analyzes the moves of the capitalist powers and says that it was no exaggeration to say that these blunders were nothing beside those made by the capitalist powers and the Second Social-Democratic International. He specifically cites the Treaty of Versailles and his conclusion is that the world revolutionary perspectives were favorable and that, "if certain conditions" were fulfilled, they would be even better. These conditions referred, indeed, to the level of assimilation of the Bolshevik political conquests as a factor for the victory of the revolution, and in particular, we can say, Lenin was alluding to the expected German revolution, which was an open question.

It is within the context of the critical relationship between the perspectives of the world revolution and the process of assimilating the Bolshevik experience that the critical questioning of the resolution adopted at the Third Congress arises. In hindsight, considering Lenin's remarks, it becomes evident that, according to Lenin and Trotsky's conception of the socialist character of the Russian revolution as the initial link of the European revolution, the historical assessment of the failure of the German October can only be appropriately addressed through an evaluation of the extent to which the real Bolshevik experience influenced the politics of the German communists, and, crucially, the actual level of understanding of the nature of the Bolshevik experience even among the leadership of the Communist International.

Among the various interpretations of the failure of the German revolution, there are not a few which affirm that the objective conditions for such a revolution were not given, and that this would have been what ultimately led to its failure. However, Lenin's orientation suggests otherwise. What initially appears enigmatic in Lenin's reservations on the resolution of the Third Congress, is precisely what emerges as a decisive factor for the evaluation of both events, the victory of the Russian revolution and the defeat of the German revolution: the problem of revolutionary leadership, and the relationship between the action of the masses, the party, and its leadership. This strategic lesson from October sheds light not only on the fate of the German revolution but also that of the international revolutionary movement in the decades to come.

Lenin's last call to the Fourth Congress was ill-fated because, a year later, after the failure of the German October, the Executive Committee of the Communist International promoted the so-called Bolshevization of the Communist parties at the behest of Zinoviev and Kuusinen. Notably, this initiative was led by those responsible for drafting, under Lenin's supervision, the *21 Conditions for Admission into the Communist International* in 1920 (Zinoviev) and the *Theses on Structure and methods* in 1921 (Kuusinen). The intervention of the Communist parties, endorsed at the Fifth Congress of the International in 1924 based on the theses of "Bolshevization," aimed precisely at deflecting attention from the Executive Committee's responsibilities in the German failure. Simultaneously, it sought

to hold non-aligned factions critical of the CI leadership within the German CP accountable.

Bolshevization, with its apology of “monolithism”, prevented a political balance of the German revolution, fundamental for the future of the world Revolution, paralyzed the political development of the Communist parties, and consolidated the rise of the ascendant bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, opening the road for the later Stalinization and the subordination of the CI to the interests of the counterrevolutionary bureaucratic caste in the USSR. In other words, the exact opposite course to Lenin’s warnings, both in the destiny of Soviet Russia and in the field of the International. This process had among its most serious consequences the blockage of that which Lenin warned of as an essential and problematic challenge, namely, the question of the adequate assimilation of the political, organizational and methodological experience of the October revolution as a decisive factor for the perspectives of the world revolution.

The great questions that arise for us, and which are at stake in Lenin’s warning at the IV Congress, can be summarized in the following: “How does genuine revolutionary leadership develop historically? What paths and methods enable individuals to emerge from the historical movement of the working class to carry its struggle to victory? How is leadership forged to respond triumphantly to the violent shifts that characterize revolutionary situations? How is the capacity to synthesize, in practice, the mixture of historical necessity and contingency that define each unique revolutionary situation developed?”

The answer for these questions can be extracted from Lenin’s own historical trajectory as a party builder and revolutionary leader. This can be better understood in the light of Plekhanov’s analysis on *The Role of the Individual in History*, well known by Lenin himself, and clearly inspired by Hegel’s dialectical logic. The so-called “father of Russian Marxism” said that a great man is a pioneer because he sees further than others and wants more than others. “He solves scientific problems prioritized by the previous course of the mental development of society; he points out new social needs created by the previous development of social relations; and he takes upon himself the task of satisfying these needs. He is a hero, not in the sense of a hero who can stop or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activity is a conscious and free expression of this inevitable and unconscious course. This is his whole meaning, this is his power.”

In this last scene at the stage of the Fourth Congress of the IC, at the end of Lenin’s political life, what we have is an invaluable methodological orientation on the structuring and political development of the working class: his legacy, Lenin said to us, should not be understood as a universal solution, but as the rigorous formulation of a problem, a call launched to the world working class to assume a critical task, to be faced in a renewed way in each historical circumstance. Lenin’s definitive contribution lies in revealing that the process of constituting the working class as a conscious subject of the revolution—its structuring as a political party for the conquest of power—is inseparably linked, in its forms and dynamics, to the development of a political leadership. This leadership is forged through the dialectical relationship between revolutionary practice and theoretical

understanding, a relationship rooted in the systematic assimilation of the entire historical experience of struggle by the exploited masses.

The contemporary challenge of building revolutionary workers parties around the world and the world party of revolution demands a profound effort of study and re-evaluation of the legacy of October, and a broad deliberation and implementation of it among the masses. The condition for future victories, as Lenin tells us, requires a decisive, unavoidable and anti-dogmatic special study, a *study from scratch*, of the Bolshevik experience and the manifold lessons left by the great leader of the contemporary proletarian revolution.

Communists, I have a few words for you  
whether you lead a state or you're in prison  
whether you're a foot soldier or party secretary  
Lenin should always and everywhere be able to enter  
your work, your home, your whole life  
as his own work, his own home, his own life.

Excerpt from Nazım Hikmet's poem, *Communists, just a  
few words*