

Lenin as alternative

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There are revolutionary leaders or great thinkers who, notwithstanding their overall historic importance, are no longer of burning relevance for the future. Such are Spartacus, Babeuf, or Sandino.¹ There are those whose action and thinking have been invaluable for our epoch, but as conditions have changed irreversibly, they are no longer a source of inspiration for future generations. Such are Hugo Blanco, Steve Biko, or Miguel Enríquez.

There are, however, some revolutionary leaders, who were born 200 years ago or died 100 years ago, but whose thought and action are as topical today as when they first uttered their words or accomplished their action. Their thinking even becomes more actual and more topical as time goes by. Such is Marx, such is Lenin.

¹ This article is based on the translation of an article of ours published in January 2024 in issue 56 of *Devrimci Marksizm*, the Turkish-language mother publication of *Revolutionary Marxism*. in memoriam the centennial of Lenin's death. Yet it is not identical in its content with that original. There, Lenin's original contributions to Marxism were discussed for his entire lifetime, including his first period up until 1914 before he was faced with the task of the leadership of world revolution and thus included, in particular, his contribution in *What Is To Be Done?*, to the deeper grasp of the political life of bourgeois society and how the proletarian vanguard should fight against the rule of the bourgeoisie, with particular reference to Lenin's theory of the revolutionary proletarian party. Here, concerns of space and time have led us to omit this aspect of Lenin's contribution, as well as his contribution to the understanding of and struggle against the specific aspects of Tsarist Russia. For the rest, this translation is quite loyal to the original text, but does veer, from time to time, from it on some secondary aspects, not, let us hasten to add, in substance, but in the formulation of that same substance. One final point: the titles of the two articles are also different. The original article's title can best be translated as "Lenin's legacy denied". This change is by no means due to a change in our views on Lenin's contribution to Marxism.

Lenin was not only indisputably the greatest leader of the worldwide revolutionary wave of early twentieth century. He is the leader of world revolution who now, precisely a century after his death, shows us the way forward so that the catastrophic collapse of the experience of socialist construction of the twentieth century is not repeated. He is the leader who shows us the *alternative* to the degeneration, decay and destruction that the first experience of socialist construction fell prey to.

Lenin's practice and theory are fully actual and topical in the twenty-first century.

This is what we will try to show in this article. We are aware that "it is harder to crack prejudice than the atom", an idea attributed to Einstein. In those who have laid the entire blame for the collapse of the socialist experience of the twentieth century at Lenin's door, this article will create cynicism or even anger. But revolutionaries who look at history without prejudice, and honest people still looking for a way out of the prevalent despair of the present situation, we hope, will start to reconsider the importance of Lenin's practice and theory in order to save humanity from the barbarism approaching with the putrefaction of the capitalist world order.

1. Another Lenin

Many readers may at this stage suspect that we will repeat the positive aspects of Lenin's thinking and practice that have been rehearsed often in the past: the decisive importance of Lenin's conception of the revolutionary party, the clairvoyance of his theory of imperialism, the democratic vision of socialism depicted in *State and Revolution* that contrasts sharply with all the calamities that visited Soviet socialism after Lenin's death, the conflict that opposed Lenin to Stalin in the last months of Lenin's conscious life, his testament, which advised the party to dismiss Stalin from the office of party secretary etc. etc. Nothing of the kind.

There is not a shred of doubt that all this is extremely important. But this is not the alternative that we are talking about. The import of this article is different. We contend that the initiatives Lenin took and the ideas he developed in the final period of his life, say between 1919 and spring 1923, are of a nature that shows the way forward in the twenty-first century. All this has been either overlooked or deliberately ignored, neglected, misrepresented and denied. This is the topic of this article.

Lenin made a striking observation on Marx and Marxists. He made this as he was reading Hegel's *The Science of Logic* and other works in the autumn and winter of 1914, after the war had started. In the light of this reading, which made it possible for him to grasp Hegel's dialectic in all its depth, Lenin reached the following conclusion:

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!²

² V. I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *The Science of Logic*", *Collected Works*, c. 38, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 180.

We are afraid what befell Marx turned also to be the fate of Lenin! It seems that the strategy and the programme developed by Lenin has still not been understood by Marxists even 100 years after Lenin's death. Our claim that Lenin's legacy can and should be resorted to as an alternative to the lived experience of twentieth-century socialist construction is with reference to this hardly noticed, misunderstood, underrated or, alternatively, deliberately denied Lenin. Had the leaderships of the socialist revolutions that occurred around the world in the twentieth century followed in the footsteps of Lenin's theory and practice, the world would have been a different place from what it is now. History might have taken an entirely different path.

2. From the leadership of Russian Marxism to that of world revolution

Irony of history, if there ever was one, the secret to this new strategy and programme developed by Lenin lies in the betrayal of the social democratic leadership of the Second International in the summer of 1914. This is such an unexpected turn of events that when the news of the vote in the Reichstag in which the entire social democratic group voted in favour of the war budget of German imperialism, Lenin exclaims that this is a trick of the German general staff, that it is a pure lie. There is surely a long road that separates that Lenin from the mature leader of the October revolution and the Communist International (Comintern). The reading of Hegel is only a minor part of that road.

With a resolve displayed by very few Marxists, Lenin immediately draws the conclusion that a new International is necessary. In order to assess the full significance of this, we should remember how Lenin viewed the task of leadership of the international socialist movement up until that point.

To make a long story short, it may safely be said that for Lenin, as Plekhanov was the teacher of the Marxist movement in Russia, despite all the discord that arose over the course of the practical movement after the Second Congress of the Russian party in 1903, so was Kautsky the theoretical mentor of the entire international movement up until the summer of 1914.

It is this confidence in the leadership of the German movement that evaporates with the onset of the Great War. Although not as chauvinistically as some of their colleagues, both Kautsky and Plekhanov have joined the bandwagon of warmongers. In fact, of the larger parties of the International, only the Bolshevik Party in its entirety has resisted the drift towards this betrayal. There are of course other forces that have withstood the pressure of jingoism, most importantly the current called Spartacus led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht of the German party. But despite their no less determined insistence on proletarian internationalism the Germans were not able, for reasons that need not detain us here, to lead the struggle for a new International.

So the task of resurrecting the revolutionary and internationalist Marxist leadership of the world proletariat is now a responsibility that Lenin cannot shirk.

If the Bolshevik Party is the party best-placed to lead the new movement, then by the nature of things Lenin has to undertake the leadership of the revolutionary proletariat worldwide.

The irony of history is that the betrayal of the midgets of reformist social democracy threw forward this giant of the century to undertake the leadership of the world revolutionary movement in the decade that was to remain for him.

3. The preparation for the leadership of world revolution

Having grasped the full significance of the new task he was facing, Lenin immediately set to work to prepare for this new responsibility in single-handed fashion. One aspect of this was the theoretical work he undertook for a broader understanding of the new situation of the world and of the international proletarian movement. The major areas of this theoretical preparation consist of a study of the dialectic, a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the modern imperialist age of capitalism, and the entire gamut of questions taken up in his 1917 book, *The State and Revolution*.

Hegel's dialectics and Lenin's "Philosophical Notebooks"

As a revolutionary preparing to play his part in the mission of re-founding the world party of revolution and thus undertaking the leadership of world revolution, Lenin immediately moved to prepare the theoretical basis upon which the entire task would be carried through. Having realised as a result of the miserable failure of the old leadership that the entire edifice of the leadership of the Second International stood on shaky ground, he went back to the basics and delved into a study of the dialectic. He studied assiduously a wide range of the works of Hegel, starting out with his *Science of Logic*, the most authoritative source of dialectical thinking in the entire history of philosophy. The study of Hegel started in September, immediately in the aftermath of the catastrophe of 4 August, and lasted until December.

Reading Hegel brought home for Lenin, above all else, how much in the thinking of both Kautsky and Plekhanov the part played by the subject within the dialectical object-subject relationship had been pushed to the background. This outlook, which may conveniently be labelled as the "Marxism of the Second International", assumes that history progresses as a succession of pre-defined stages. It remains aloof to the possibility of sudden historical leaps, of hybrid mixtures as a result of original formations unsuspected in earlier epochs, of the possibility of thrusts forward despite the immaturity of certain material preconditions etc.

It is easily understandable that this type of quasi-deterministic approach, bordering at times into a historical fatalism, has inevitably left a certain mark on Lenin's own thinking in the prewar period. After all, he was heavily influenced by the brand of Marxism espoused by both Kautsky and Plekhanov. It was through reading Hegel that he realised how much of a deterministic kind of Marxism these two subscribed to. The irony is that his bourgeois critics have always accused Lenin of sticking to a "voluntaristic" view of the world, of forcing the pace of history when material

conditions did not really warrant the kind of development Lenin was trying to achieve. This was not true, at least concerning an issue of burning importance. This had to do with the tasks of the revolution in Lenin's native Russia. It was certainly impossible for any Marxist to deny that the immediate tasks of the revolution in early twentieth-century Russia was the accomplishment of a democratic revolution. The Mensheviks drew from this premise, in the most mechanical manner possible, the conclusion that since the revolution would be "bourgeois-democratic" in nature, social democrats (i.e. Marxists in the parlance of the epoch) should support the efforts of the bourgeoisie. They were the real followers in Russia of what we have labelled the Marxism of the Second International. Lenin believed that they were under the influence of the revisionists and the opportunists *à la Bernstein* in Germany, without realising Kautsky was of the same ilk on this question.

Lenin himself did not entertain a schematic point of view. Quite the contrary. He did certainly concur that the proximate task of the revolution was of a "bourgeois-democratic" nature. However, because he believed that the Russian liberal bourgeoisie was far from being a revolutionary class, he claimed that the democratic revolution in Russia would be led by an alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry. This was a revolutionary leap in the domain of strategy. Lenin did not stop there, either. He contended that if the Russian revolution coincided with a revolutionary wave in Europe, this would create the dynamics of an "uninterrupted revolution" in Russia itself. In other words, the revolution in Russia could possibly proceed, without a break in continuity, to a socialist stage. This was a real divorce from the classical schema of revolution by stages.

Nonetheless, Lenin insisted that if no revolution occurred in Europe, the Russian revolution could not proceed further than the democratic stage. This was the insuperable frontier for Lenin. The material conditions were absent for a socialist revolution in Russia alone. Trotsky, on the other hand, had concluded from a study of the writings of Marx and Engels on the 1848 revolutions that in Russia, too, as in Germany, the bourgeoisie could no longer play the leading part in a revolution, and deduced from the events of the laboratory of the 1905 revolution in Russia that revolution in that country could bring the proletariat to power, which would then have to resort to socialist measures. This he called "permanent revolution", borrowing the term from Marx's 1850 circular to the Communist League.

The 1917 revolution was to confirm Trotsky's prediction to the full. What is interesting for us in the context that we are discussing in this article is this, though: Lenin, with his new command of Hegel, now removed the iron frontier that he had raised earlier and, on the night of the taking of the Winter Palace, started his address to the All-Russia Second Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies with the following sentence: "Now we are moving to the construction of socialism".

In all the decisions that Lenin made after 1914, it is possible to see the same tremendous impact of this profound grasp of the dialectic.

The place of imperialism in history

The second important step Lenin took was the comprehensive study of imperialism he carried out. This work started in 1915 and culminated in his famous book *Imperialism. The Highest Stage of Imperialism* published in 1916. His analysis of imperialism served as the groundwork for his correct comprehension of the world situation from very different angles. Thanks to this study, Lenin now approached capitalism as a full-blown world system. He dwelled on the tendencies towards parasitism and stagnation present within the bosom of imperialism and the relations between these and counteracting tendencies. But the most important points in relation to revolution and socialism were, first, the formation of a “labour aristocracy” in imperialist countries and, secondly, the significance of the imperialist stage with respect to historical development. We will be returning to the labour aristocracy presently when we take up *The State and Revolution*. Let us now consider the question of the place of imperialism in history.

It is not a wanton whim for Lenin to have characterised imperialism as “the highest stage of capitalism.” The imperialist stage is one during which capitalism centralises productive forces to a progressive degree, where all workers are unified in every workplace as the “collective worker” whose labour can no longer be seen in isolation from each other, where all units of production and all sectors are indissolubly tied to all others, and where the economies of all countries become enmeshed on the scale of the world and production and capital itself are internationalised. Lenin devotes Chapter 10 of his book to these tendencies. His conclusion is the same as that reached by Marx in *Capital*. Productive forces that are socialised to such an extent can only be administered through central planning. The world is now ready for a socialist economy in which capitalist private property is done away with, all large means of production and circulation are nationalised, and the economy is controlled on the basis of a central plan. That is why Lenin raises the question of the “highest stage of capitalism”. There remains no further possibility of development within the capitalist mode of production.

Hence, the determination has been made that the world situation is now mature for the transition to socialism. After the dialectic, this is the second stepping stone Lenin has discovered to reach for world revolution.

The State and Revolution

The third great theoretical thrust of the Great War period for Lenin is the publication of the book *The State and Revolution*. On the surface, the book seems to focus on the democratic character of the socialism advocated by Marx and Engels, and subsequently of Lenin, who is but a loyal student of theirs on this question. There is no doubt that this is indeed the major theme of the book. But that clear theme that dominates the entire argument of the book is not the reason why Lenin undertook to write the book in the months of September and October (new calendar), when Lenin himself was in hiding in Finland and when the revolution was definitively on the agenda in Russia. The book was clearly written with a view

to *expose* all the revisionists and the opportunists who had turned their back on the Marxist theories of the state and of revolution and, above all, to attack Kautsky. For Lenin had already decided that the moment of insurrection had arrived in Russia, he was trying to convince the leadership of the Bolsheviks to reach out for power, and was even exerting great pressure on elements within that leadership who were prevaricating. Who says the time is ripe for insurrection obviously believes that the insurrection will win. What then is the place of *The State and Revolution* in all this?

Lenin was convinced that after the working class took power in Russia, it would be the turn of world revolution. Having arrived at Finland Station in Petrograd a month after the February uprising, he finished his address to the working-class crowd there with the following battle-cry: “Long live the world socialist revolution!”. It is quite obvious that, for him, the Russian revolution was only a stairway to world revolution. However, notwithstanding his faith in the European proletariat, he had no confidence in the social democratic leadership. This was the contradiction behind the almost panicky mood that pushed him into writing *The State and Revolution* in the heat of the revolution. What he was aiming for was the isolation of the revisionist and opportunist leadership from the cadres, the militants and the working-class rank and file of the parties of Western Europe.

These political currents and tendencies that harboured a deep-seated hatred to revolutionary Marxism would play a great part in Lenin’s political moves after the Great War as well. The reason for this was that a *structural* characteristic of imperialism begets a tendency within the working classes of the imperialist countries towards an assimilation to the established capitalist-imperialist order. As imperialist countries provide extra advantages to the higher echelons of their working classes out of the super profits they appropriate as a result of their domination over the world economy, they “bribe” these layers into acquiescence, which breeds revisionist, opportunist and reformist tendencies at the level of the political movements of the working class. The conclusion that Lenin drew from this division of the working-class movement is that the revolution will move forward with fits and starts until the revolutionary proletariat finally takes the upper hand in the struggle against capitalism.

Thus, the real aim of The State and Revolution is not to sing the praise of democracy, but to expose the enemies of revolution.

4. Lenin as leader of world revolution

We have already pointed out that the catastrophic collapse of the Second International left Lenin face to face with a task that nothing shows he had even imagined he would have to shoulder one day, the task of leading world revolution. We now proceed to show that Lenin accomplished this task in an extremely original and faultless manner. And not only that. Alongside his contribution to the spread of the revolution internationally in his day, through his practice between 1914 and 1924, he also left behind for us an alternative route as opposed to the miserable failure of the leaderships that succeeded him in the rest of the twentieth century. We will deal with these two questions in conjunction with each other.

World revolution

We first need to eliminate a long-standing prejudice. The close affinity of Lenin's thinking with the concept and programme of world revolution was consigned to oblivion in the process of the imposition of national-communism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, starting from the mid-1920s. An article of Lenin's ("On the Slogan of the United States of Europe") dating from 1915 was adduced as evidence for his subscription to the idea of "socialism in a single country", but propaganda aiming to show that Lenin refused the concept of "world revolution" was never advanced. How could it have been otherwise? The concept "world revolution" played a central role in the entire corpus of Lenin's declarations of a theoretical, organisational, programmatic, propagandistic or agitational nature. It is, of course, possible to censor this or that article or declaration from his *Collected Works*, as was done for instance to his article on "Autonomisation" until 1956 (see below), thus concealing his ideas on certain topics from the Soviet people. But trying to wage war against "world revolution" is another thing. You then have to submit to censorship dozens of his articles and the records of hundreds of his addresses and speeches. For Lenin, as it was for Marx and Engels, world revolution is of the essence of Marxism. He never really attempts to highlight it since to his mind it is the basic revolutionary programme of Marxism. It should not be forgotten that *never even once* did Lenin hear or see the formula "socialism in a single country" in his lifetime. The concept was first advanced by Stalin *after* Lenin's death, at the end of 1924, when he revised a text, published earlier, which contended the exact opposite of what he said now, i.e. it said earlier that "socialism in a single country" is impossible. That is why Lenin did not feel any need to polemicise against this concept, which would later become the mainstay of twentieth century (Stalinist) socialism, of the national-communist current.

Moreover, if anything, the whole experience of the period of the October revolution brought to Lenin new additional evidence of how genuine and realistic the programme of "world revolution" was. The 1918 November revolution in Germany broke out precisely in the country where the Bolsheviki expected it most. Soviet republics were established, albeit for a brief period, in Bavaria and Hungary. Revolution searched new outlets for itself in Italy, Scotland, Finland and elsewhere. While this was happening in Europe, the Middle East (West Asia) and North Africa were in flames: Egypt, the Ottoman lands/Turkey, Iran and Morocco experienced outright revolutions and other territories such as Palestine and Syria followed suit. Revolutions would later erupt in China (1925-1927) and Spain (1936-39), but unfortunately Lenin did not live to see them.

The record of classical Marxism is so clear on this question that if anyone dares to claim that any of the prominent Marxists of that period refused to swear by world revolution, the burden of proof would be on them to provide the evidence. We said "any of the prominent Marxists". Let alone Lenin.

The first test in the leadership of world revolution: Lenin and the Great War

We already know that Lenin's irreversible rupture from mainstream social democracy had its source in the political orientation adopted by its leadership. But all we know at this point is the following: Lenin and the Bolsheviks (along with a minority of the parties of the Second International or a part of the leadership of other parties) adamantly stood against the support the mainstream extended to the bourgeoisies of each warring country, thus forcing the workers and peasants of all countries to slaughter their counterparts in other countries. We have not yet, in the context of this article, spoken about the other aspects of Lenin's own policy. True, Lenin is against the drift from proletarian internationalism into national chauvinism. But what kind of policy should socialists pursue when the world has become a slaughterhouse?

An orientation on this question exists from the period before the war, which served to show the way forward to Lenin and other socialists in the internationalist minority. The resolutions adopted in all three congresses that were convened before the war (Stuttgart, Copenhagen, and Basel) pointed in the same direction: there is a rising threat of war; socialists are duty-bound to prevent the onset of a war and to fight militarism; if, despite every effort, war should break out, socialists should use the new situation in order to do everything to achieve the victory of proletarian revolution.

This means that the mainstream pursued a nationalist, even chauvinistic policy by trampling upon all the resolutions adopted persistently by the International. Lenin made this official orientation of the international organisation the backbone of his policy line. This was summarised as "turning the world war into civil war in each country" or, in shorter form, "turn war into civil war". "Civil war" here is not any civil war, but one that is characterised by the final settling of accounts between the two major classes of capitalist society. In other words, the task is defined as to transform world war into revolution.

What we have so far discussed is the aspect of the policy that Lenin and the Bolsheviks shared with other revolutionary Marxists. To cite the most prominent instance, the policy advocated by Lenin and Karl Liebknecht, one of the leaders of the Spartakusbund in Germany is identical up until this point. However, on top of this common policy, Lenin created a more complex and ambitious policy superstructure. In order to see this, one should first realise that Lenin's policy during the Great War is divided into three distinct periods. The importance of this observation lies in that it shows the *utterly fallacious nature* of the idea that Lenin advocated the implementation of the famous policy of "revolutionary defeatism" in the context of all types of war. No, "revolutionary defeatism", an ingenious policy discovered by Lenin in the context of the world war, is *not* a policy that Lenin advises socialists to pursue in all kinds of wars. This is so true that Lenin did not implement this policy *even* throughout the Great War itself.

Lenin's war policy between 1914 and 1918 should be examined by breaking it into three different periods: (1) From the onset of the war to the February revolution:

“turning war into civil war” and its special Leninist variant, “revolutionary defeatism”. (2) From the February revolution to the victory of the October revolution: A policy of “just peace” so long as the proletariat has not yet taken power. (3) From the October revolution to the German November revolution (which also ended the Great War): diversionary tactics in order to temporise with the aim of guaranteeing the survival of the Soviet state until world revolution spreads to other countries.

We would like to draw the attention of the reader to the fact that, contrary to the impression that is created when one reasons in terms of years (1914-1917), the February revolution did not occur three years after the onset of the war but only two and a half (August 1914 to February 1917). In other words, the implementation of the policies of “turn the war into civil war” and “revolutionary defeatism” lasted for 30 months, while the war spread over a period of fully 51 months. 21 of these 51 months saw the implementation of policies other than “revolutionary defeatism.” Food for thought.

Let us also draw the attention of those who imagine Lenin as an aficionado of “revolutionary defeatism” that in the last of the three phases listed above, Lenin would have resorted to a policy of “revolutionary defensism” had he believed that the young Soviet state was capable of coping with the might of the German empire. All evidence points in this direction. For a single moment, in fact, in 1920, Lenin defended the advance of the Red Army troops into Poland, on the basis of the hope that the Polish working class would rise up in a revolutionary insurrection as a result. (Trotsky, who was the commander-in-chief of the Red Army and who, later, would be accused of wishing to “export” revolution, insisted that this was a wrong decision). Lenin’s prediction did really prove to be wrong and the Red Army would have to withdraw from Poland as a result. But what is important for us here is that this attitude on the part of Lenin proves that he was for “revolutionary war” even if for a moment.

Once it has been established that the policy of “revolutionary defeatism” is entirely contingent on a number of conditions, we can now turn to an inquiry into the question of its substance and aim. The clearest definition of this policy is the following: the revolutionaries of each country fight towards the defeat of their own country. What heavy burden this policy lays at the door of any political party and its representatives vis-à-vis the state and even the people in times of war is self-evident. To insist on this policy loud and clear could have taken many a revolutionary to court martial. This extremely dangerous policy was in fact rejected by many, leaving Lenin and a small minority of his Bolshevik comrades alone in its defence. Lenin faced alone almost the entire world.

Why is it that Lenin proposed to his party and the rest of the left such a dangerous policy? We are now entering a discussion of Lenin’s performance during the first test he confronted as he was undertaking the part of the leader of world revolution. Could Lenin have been oblivious to the dangers such a policy implied? The fact that in some of his statements about this policy he stressed that it excluded things like sabotage of the war effort or the blowing up of bridges or special effort to paralyse the war industry by mounting powerful strikes seems to aim at paring down the “extreme” character of the policy so that, for instance, an earnest Bolshevik soldier

would not proceed to blow up the ammunition depot in his unit and end up in court martial and, finally, on the gallows. Whatever the reason, these warnings clearly show that he himself is very much aware of the sharp nature of this policy.

The question we need to answer is the following: why did Lenin defend this extremely dangerous policy? The answer is this: Lenin is trying hard to save his party and any other parties or minorities he can from the plague of chauvinism. The first function of the policy of revolutionary defeatism is, at a moment when the International is being drowned in a sea of nationalism, to save those that have not yet succumbed to the deluge and, thus, to preserve the human material necessary to form a new International safe and sound. In other words, his whole effort is geared to make those who still remain in the domain of revolutionary Marxism impervious to the nationalist pest.

To think that the danger does not exist implies a lack of comprehension with regard to the catastrophe the European proletarian movement had been stricken with. In other writings, we have explained the polemics Lenin had to engage in against other giants of the period, such as Rosa Luxemburg or Trotsky or how he remained entirely isolated within even the “Zimmerwald left” or his own party. We will only cite two striking examples here. If a revolutionary Marxist leader of Rosa Luxemburg’s stature brought herself to write, in her otherwise much praised work, the *Junius Brochure*, with reference to imperialist Germany, that every country has the right to defend itself in war, that is, if she experienced even a momentary spell of social patriotism that falls outside of the policy of “turn the war into civil war” so bravely defended on the streets of Berlin by his closest comrade Karl Liebknecht, i.e. if she capitulated to the general atmosphere even if for a short moment, who can be considered to be immune to the nationalistic, patriotic or chauvinistic pestilence?

Even more fatally, if the Zimmerwald Conference, the only effective move against the debacle of the leadership of the international proletariat, is not able to insert into its declaration the formula “if war breaks out despite all efforts, then revolution”, which already has existed throughout three congresses of the Second International, as we saw above, if it cannot call every socialist to vote against the war appropriation of his own country as Karl Liebknecht has done in the German Reichstag all on his own in December 1914, this clearly proves that nationalism has a very strong hold on the socialist movement. (Ledebour, a German centrist and a comrade of Kautsky, as well as French socialists of his ilk, participated in the Zimmerwald Conference. They certainly were instrumental in preventing the adoption of such consistent internationalist policies. But this in itself shows nothing else than how nationalism was able to permeate even the most internationalist environments available to revolutionary Marxists.)

It is thus that Lenin protected the Bolshevik Party and some other parties or minorities from falling into the swamp of nationalism. Obviously, his primary aim was to implant immunity against chauvinism in his own party for he had direct access to the membership and could act most efficiently upon it. If Bolshevism remained a strong fortress of internationalism, proletarian internationalism could then be able to fight to instil a renewed vigour to the world movement, using the party as a base from which to spread the word. This is exactly what was

to happen in practice after the October revolution.

The other achievement of Lenin's policy was to "turn war into civil war". From the very beginning of the war, Lenin insisted that the world was facing a revolutionary situation. According to him, if those who rule cannot rule in the same way as before and those who are ruled do not wish to be ruled as before, and, finally, if the masses descend on the streets to voice their grievances and advance their demands, that means that there is a revolutionary situation. It was, in fact, the case that, despite the ravages of the war, large strikes, street action, mutinies in military units were rampant. The Easter Uprising in Ireland in the spring of 1916 was the culmination of these struggles. (There was a similar, even larger uprising in Central Asia against the Tsar, but this became part of humanity's collective memory much later.)

It is necessary to distinguish carefully between a "revolutionary situation" and "revolution" *per se*. What is needed to meaningfully talk about a "revolution" is, beyond all the conditions that define a revolutionary situation according to Lenin, the reaching out of the masses towards political power and the social order thus being threatened with collapse. This is, at times, possible as a result of the smallest spark acting as a trigger, thanks to the fact that a "revolutionary situation" was already present. And this is exactly what happened when working-class women rose to demand bread on International Working Women's Day at the beginning of 1917 (25 February on the old calendar). This event vindicated Lenin's view fully. War in Russia now turned into civil war.

From that moment on, conditions changed completely. The policy of "turn war into civil war" immediately lost its validity. For civil war had already started. "Revolutionary defeatism", a sharp, pointed roof placed upon the more basic policy of "turn war into civil war", was thereby also a thing of the past now. Now the task was to win the civil war. For this, the war policy of Bolshevism needed to establish the peace demanded by the soldiers at the front and their wives and mothers and grandfathers in the villages. The slogan of "land, peace, bread" adopted by the Bolshevik Party under Lenin's guidance expresses the sum total of the demands, respectively of soldiers, peasants and workers and is the passage way to the realisation of the battle cry "All power to the soviets!" It is clear that in such a situation the only aim of war policy can be peace. The people aspire to peace, but the bourgeoisie that holds the power now cannot provide this. Hence the fate of the revolution revolves around peace. Revolutionary policy merges with war policy. The swift adaptation of Lenin's war policy to the requirements of the new period is, among the tactical moves that are decisive for the victory of the revolution (to which we will return), unquestionably the most important.

In the years following the victory of the October revolution, as long as the Great War was continuing, the war policy of Lenin merged into the extremely significant policy of the protection of the young Soviet state (in other words, of the dictatorship of the proletariat) as a support of the leadership of world revolution, so we will take up this phase of war policy below. But we should remember that although revolutionary defensism, that is to say the waging of war by the socialist state in whatever region with the capitalist world for the purpose of vanquishing its opponent(s) is an entirely legitimate act, Lenin pursued a totally different policy

(with the exception of the hapless Poland case depicted above).

The key link of the chain: the October revolution

What happened in the eight months from February 1917 to October 1917 determined for 80 years the destiny not only of Russia and the other lands that became part of the Soviet Union, but of the *entire world*. One should reflect deeply on this statement. In his study of the two revolutions of February and June 1848 in *Class Struggles in France*, Marx had characterised revolutions as the “locomotives of history”. This sentence is very famous, but we do not think that those who are not genuine revolutionaries can internalise its meaning fully. Of course, everyone understands the idea that when a revolution is successful, it creates radical change in the society in which it occurs. But the determination of the history of the entire world by a single revolution! That is hard to imagine for many a simple soul. We will explain later on in what sense the October revolution was truly a world revolution. It is too early to delve into this at this stage. But if that statement is true, it means that everyone who did something to contribute to the victory of the revolution between February and October 1917, even without knowing this, perhaps realising to a certain extent that they are “making history” in their own country, but never imagining that they “are determining world history”, did precisely this.

The working-class women who rose and lit the signal flare of the revolutionary uprising on the occasion of the International Working Women’s Day, the working-class men who entered the fray following the footsteps of their women, the soldiers who, after obeying their commanders for a brief moment, rapidly started to favour the masses of workers, the workers and soldiers who gradually broke from the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries and voted for the Bolsheviks in the elections to the soviets, the peasants who, after waiting patiently for some months, themselves resorted to direct action in order to quench their hunger for land, the entire rank and file of the Red Army, the uncountable number of people from the minority nationalities who, after the October revolution, struggled to achieve sovietisation in all corners of the former Tsarist Russia—all of them, without necessarily being conscious of this, fought in a manner that would leave a different world to posterity and contributed to the opening of a new era for humankind, not only in their own country, the Soviet land, but humankind all around the world.

But, whether no-party or member of this or that party or a Bolshevik, no one played so special a role in this as Lenin. Lenin, then, is a leader that has played an immense part in shaping the entire 20th century around the world. Moreover, as opposed to the great majority of people who did play their part, he did this fully conscious of the sense in which revolutions are the “locomotives of history”.

It is simply impossible to exaggerate the part Lenin played in the victory of the October revolution. In somewhat similar fashion to what happened in the area of war policy, Lenin found himself *alone to a great extent* concerning the policy that the Bolshevik Party should pursue in the aftermath of the February revolution. Among the prominent leaders of the Russian movement, all parties taken together, only Trotsky had a position that was no less perspicacious than that of Lenin. But because

up until that moment he had not understood the importance of the construction of a consistent and disciplined revolutionary party, he lacked that instrument absolutely necessary to carry the revolution through and, however accurate his assessment of the situation and however to the point his grasp of the tactics to be followed, he had no party apparatus in his hands that can put all of this into action. Only after joining the Bolshevik Party together with the cadres and militants of the small organisation called *Mezhraiontsy* did he finally accede to such an instrument. Hence, there is only one person who united all the conditions necessary to lead the October revolution to victory on the basis of an effective policy and that was Lenin.

The full import of the policies Lenin pursued in the course of the October revolution can only be properly explained in a special article devoted to this matter or even in a book-length study. Here we intend to take up only the most delicate turning points among these, in other words those aspects that render him unique among his peers.

To start out, we should first dwell on the skilful manner in which he grasped the dialectic of the general picture created by the February revolution as rapidly as he did, even from his exile in Switzerland when he was able to follow the rapidly unfolding developments in Russia only from the international bourgeois press. We have already made clear that those who rose up during the February revolution were the workers. The soldiers who swiftly moved to the side of the proletariat then facilitated the fall of the Tsar. In other words, this was a proletarian revolution supported by the peasantry under military uniform. It was the working class that brought down the Tsar. But because the soviets that this class immediately moved to form and the highest instance of those soviets in Petrograd were dominated by the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, whose horizon was bounded by a bourgeois revolution, the government had been offered to the representatives of the Russian bourgeoisie. Lenin saw through this immediately, that *the bourgeoisie had come to power on the crest of another social class*.

There is a second aspect he saw clearly. The bourgeoisie had set up a government, but its power remained shaky, for the body that had appointed the bourgeois government belonged to those who had made the revolution, in other words the executive of the Petrograd Workers' Deputies Soviet. In that case, said Lenin, resorting to a new conceptualisation of historic significance, there was *dual power* in the country.

Lenin grasped this tenuous hold of the Provisional Government on power, set forth a propaganda slogan, i.e. a slogan that could only be realised after the cumulation of certain conditions, "All power to the soviets!", and convinced the mass of the Bolshevik Party to march in the direction pointed to by that slogan, which, in class terms, signified "All power to the workers and peasants", through the maze of the complex stages of the revolution. All the others in the Russian socialist movement (excepting of course Trotsky and his comrades) were inclined towards conditional support to be provided to the bourgeois government born of the revolution.

How did Lenin know, how did he foresee that there would be endless contradictions between the two organs of power? Which contradictions were the basis for his call of the turning of power over to the Soviet? There are two answers to this question,

mutually complementary. First, because, despite the insistence on “democratic revolution” as being the horizon of this stage of the revolution, Bolshevism had always refused to accept that the Russian bourgeoisie was revolutionary. It was hence comprehensible that Lenin should not give in to the idea that the bourgeoisie was ordained to lead the revolution. What was surprising was the fact that other Bolsheviks were prone to support the government of the bourgeoisie in a manner reminiscent of the Menshevik model for Russia. Secondly, it was the fact that Lenin did not let go the link of the chain that he had earlier grasped, that the decisive factor for the fate of the revolution was the war. Lenin understood that the Russian bourgeoisie could not undertake a *break* with its imperialist allies, England, France and America (the latter-day ally), deduced from this the certitude that it could not meet the demand of “peace” raised by the popular masses, and would plainly be unable to meet any of the other demands. This would constantly lead to a clash between the Provisional Government and the executive of the Soviet. Once this dynamic has been discovered, it is no longer necessary for us to go into the other details and phases of the unfolding process for our purposes here.

However, after having briefly recapitulated the strategy between February and October, we need to dwell, albeit briefly, on two instances of the fine-tuning of tactics also. One of these pertains to the finesse displayed in propaganda and agitation, in particular the determination of slogans, with particular attention paid to the mood of the masses. For Lenin the continuation of the war was simply a murderous policy. He insisted that the choice between war and peace was vital, going so far as to say, at a certain stage, “we cannot be defensist even if Petrograd were to fall”. But because he knew that a sizeable section of the popular masses, in particular those who followed the Socialist Revolutionaries in their nationalistic policies, sided with the war effort, he was adamant that the anti-war propaganda should be formulated in very careful language.

Another tactical delicacy in terms of paying attention to the state of mind of the masses was displayed in the attitude to the Provisional Government before the July Days. Up until those days, the Bolsheviks refrained from attacking the entire government, in which there were also workers’ representatives, but used the slogan “Ten capitalist ministers out now!” Hence, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in the government were not directly attacked because the workers and peasants still supported them, the demand was advanced on the basis of class contradictions, yet the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries were nonetheless exposed for collaborating with the non-revolutionary bourgeoisie in a revolutionary period.

It should not be forgotten that, with the exception of the struggle against the Kornilov coup attempt, the Bolsheviks never attempted to set up a united front with these political parties. So, it is not because they spare the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries for that purpose. It is the sentiment of the masses that really set the stage for the slogans. (The tactic adopted when faced with the Kornilov coup attempt, on the other hand, was the manifestation of an incredible capacity for manoeuvre. Having made the opposition to the Provisional government a *strategic* aim all along (this is the meaning of “All power to the soviets!”), the party acted

in a spirit of united front with the government, let alone the other socialist parties, when faced with the attempt of counter-revolution. But as soon as the danger had been averted, that is to say as soon as Kornilov's defeat had become fully obvious, the party went immediately back to its strategic line.)

The second point not to be missed is the set of instances that display an extraordinary skill for correct timing. The outstanding case here is the chain of events that has gone down in history as the "July Days", a case still unique in history for its dialectical splendour. On 3-4 July, the workers of the largest factories of Petrograd organised, together with the armed troops resident in the city, a spontaneous insurrection in order to take power from the Provisional Government and marched to the Kseshinskaia Mansion, where the Bolsheviks had set up their headquarters after the February revolution, to summon the party to lead the insurrection. Lenin stepped out into the small balcony facing a park full of workers and armed soldiers to address them and implored them not to turn this into an insurrection aiming at taking the power. Of course, it was neither possible nor correct to convince such an angry mass of workers and soldiers to turn back and head for their factories or barracks. The Bolshevik organisation marched together with the mass and did its best to convert the insurrection into a display of armed force on the part of the revolution. (In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky will characterise the July Days as a "semi-insurrection".)

Why did Lenin and the Bolsheviks take this route? That this powerful mass movement, armed to the teeth, could easily take Petrograd that day had it so willed is beyond doubt. Why not then encourage them to do so? Because Lenin wanted to avoid a repetition of the experience of the Paris Commune. He knew that sufficient support for the revolution had not accumulated outside the industrial basins of Petrograd, Moscow and the Volga region, and this especially among the rank and file of the army, and did not wish to make an early move that would then abort the entire revolutionary process.

The second striking example of delicate timing is Lenin's insistence from September on that the time to organise an insurrection and take power had arrived. This man, who only two months earlier had tried to limit the aim of the action of the July Days, now displayed the skill of determining the actuality of insurrection. The contrast here is one of the most striking lessons in tactical finesse in the entire history of revolutions.

And because the timing was right, power was taken on the 7th of November (25 October on the old calendar) and turned over to where it belonged, the general assembly of the Second All-Russia Congress of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

The internationalisation of Bolshevism: the Comintern

When did the second period of Lenin's political life, that is the period of his leadership of world revolution, start? We saw above that a very punctual date is possible to quote in answer to this question: 4 August 1914. In the light of the betrayal of the social democratic leadership *en masse*, Lenin immediately concluded

that the Second International had be consigned to history and a new International be founded. Within the context of the work started with the Zimmerwald Conference based on a very small minority of socialists internationally, the “Zimmerwald Left” acted as a consistently internationalist beacon that shed light on the way forward. This policy gained in strength thanks to an accurate war policy. Later with the victory of the October revolution, Bolshevism became a centre of attraction in the international arena as well. When, in November 1918, revolution broke out in Germany, a new International became a fully actual question on the agenda of internationalist Marxists. Since the German revolution also led to the end of the War, the leaders of the Second International were now busy trying to resuscitate the Second International. With his acute sense of timing, Lenin decided that the time to establish the new International had come, so as not to leave the mantle of internationalism on the shoulders of the impostors. Thus was born the Third or Communist International (Comintern) in February 1919.

It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the re-founding of a revolutionary International was a true case of crossing the desert for Lenin. Having remained almost on his own in 1914, disagreeing even with almost all internationalist Marxists on the question of war policy, having been forced to set up a left bloc even at the Zimmerwald Conference in order to be able to establish a consistent internationalist policy, having been treated as a lunatic within the Russian and European left movement for defending the idea of fighting for working-class power after the February revolution, having been isolated at first even in his Bolshevik Party, Lenin had now, four years later, accomplished the task of founding a new International. In several years’ time the Comintern would be able to organise hundreds of thousands or even millions of workers and youth all over the world. Mission accomplished against all odds.

The new International was superior in a qualitative sense to the Second International. For one thing, the latter had never been able to penetrate countries exploited and oppressed by imperialism and remained mostly confined to European countries. The Comintern, on the other hand, was to organise in many poor and colonial countries from China to Egypt and from Brazil to South Africa, especially in the years 1920-1921.

Even more important than this geographical expansion was the fact that the new International gained the character of a *world party* capable of undertaking the leadership of world revolution. The greatest part here was played by the internationalisation of Bolshevism through the Comintern. We need to understand in what difficulty Lenin and his comrades found themselves at the outset. With a few exceptions only, the movement that was expected to unite in the new International had to emerge from the prewar social democracy. The programmatic, strategic, and political perspectives of these parties had been marked the by the Marxism of the Second International, their party cadre had been educated along the lines of Kautsky’s thinking and the *Neue Zeit* school, and the organisation had been influenced by the centrism of Jaurès in France and the reformism of the Labour Party in Britain. A passage from this raw material to a communism of the Bolshevik type was obviously a great challenge. The combination of tactical flexibility and

principled discipline displayed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in order to win over, to educate and to organise this material was once again a test that Lenin passed as the leader of world revolution. Openness to almost all kinds of socialist organisations, on the one hand, combined with the strict requirements contained within the famous 21 Conditions of affiliation to the Communist International was a line that finally gave birth to a whole new generation of Marxist combatants ready to fight capitalism in intransigent manner.

Lenin's skills were decisive here as well. The striking example is the policy adopted vis-à-vis the USPD (the Independent SPD of Germany), which had hundreds of thousands of workers in its membership, but was led by a leadership that had capitulated to the imperialist war, Kautsky, Hilferding and Ledebour being the most prominent leaders. Kautsky had refused to support the October revolution and become a chief target for both Lenin and Trotsky. Despite this, Lenin insisted that the Comintern had to reach out to the workers and the communists within that party. The successful attack on the party by the Comintern paid off and the USPD suffered a scission with hundreds of thousands of workers taking the side of the Comintern and a unified communist party being established in Germany.

The place of the Soviet state within the world system

War had been turned into civil war and the civil war had been crowned with a victorious revolution. The working class had risen to power, supported by the peasantry. As the leader of world revolution Lenin had passed great tests in both phases (i.e. the phases of war and civil war).

These two topics have been given ample attention, the part Lenin played has been studied closely and analysed at length, not in the same way we have so far taken up things, but nonetheless have not been neglected. But the domain we are about to enter has never been studied *as a whole*. Some of the aspects of what we are going to delve into have surely been discussed seriously, but nowhere have we come across the idea that Lenin attributed a special importance and *a very specific role to the Soviet state in achieving the victory of world revolution*.

Let us describe this with a simile so as to impress it on the reader's memory. The Soviet state is to Lenin's mind like the King in the chess game of world revolution. He conceived the first dictatorship of the proletariat (the Paris Commune was too short-lived) in history as the heavy battalion of this universal revolution and made use of it accordingly.

Let us elaborate on this a bit lest the reader misunderstand what we are saying and our proposition be perceived as a run-of-the-mill conception of the Soviet Union. A great revolution, one to which only the Great French Revolution of 1789 can be compared, has smashed the state of the *ancien régime* and established a new state *under the power of a different class*. Common sense dictates that this state will do now whatever other states do in order to preserve its place within the international system of nations-states. There is nothing wrong here. We can even say that such common sense is much healthier than saying "well, now that the Soviet state has signed (for instance) a trade agreement with Britain (March 1921), it must be

considered to have become an ordinary nation-state no different from the others.” When Marx chides the national narrow-mindedness of Lassalle in the “Critique of the Gotha Programme” and reminds his interlocutor that Germany can only exist as a state within a system of states internationally, he is really stressing that the socialist state will have to cope with this reality.

No qualms so far. What we wish to point out is that this is not Lenin’s *exclusive* vision of the Soviet state in its relationship with the international system of states. For Lenin, world revolution is, just like revolutions at the national level, a form of class struggle. But a class struggle that is woven of a much more complex web of mediations than revolution at the national level. In this struggle, imperialist states are the organisations of the bourgeoisie at the level of the international system and as organisations of the bourgeoisie, i.e. as class organisations, oppose revolutions in other countries when these break out. The Soviet state, on the other hand, is the *first organisation of the proletariat that has assumed the form of a state*. In other words, the Soviet state, which, initially appeared as “another state within the system of nation-states”, appears, when considered under its class character, as a proletarian class-struggle organisation. By this token it is precious solely by its very existence as a class organisation and must at all costs be preserved. Its preservation is not important solely for the Soviet working class, but for the interest of the international proletariat and its allies as well.

This vision manifests itself in certain episodes that caused a lot of debate in the post-revolutionary period, episodes that are amply discussed, but in which Lenin’s real motivation has not been dwelled upon seriously.

The Brest-Litovsk episode that moved to the centre of attention of all communists in the immediate aftermath of the October revolution is a major case in point. Let us explain without going into detail. The Brest-Litovsk affair was born when Soviet Russia withdrew from the war in perfect fidelity to the promises made to the masses before the October revolution triumphed. Germany capitalised on the new situation and used the weakness of the Soviet state in the most aggressive manner possible, making very heavy territorial claims on the new state. Brest-Litovsk is the name of the town where deliberations for peace took place. The debate within the Bolshevik Party was centred around the response to be given to German demands.

It may be remembered that Lenin had said “no defensism”, seemingly in total indifference to “national interests”. When the question of Brest-Litovsk came on the agenda, a very strong tendency within the Bolshevik Party, called “left Communists”, reminding to their interlocutors that the situation had changed since the party was now in power, called for “revolutionary war” in defence of Soviet territory. Trotsky, the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, who was involved naturally in the forefront during the negotiations with the Germans, advanced the idea of temporising until the German revolution broke out, using the formula “neither war nor peace”. Lenin, on the other hand, defended an outright policy of concessions to the Germans. Why was this? Because the policy of revolutionary war, however heroic it may sound, might end in a cataclysmic defeat and might lead to the collapse of the Soviet state. For Lenin, the Soviet state should be preserved at all costs, as we explained above. After long debates within the party and the

government, Lenin's position gained the upper hand and the Brest peace was signed, with great concessions being granted to Germany.

When we were discussing war policy above, we stressed that throughout the war Lenin pursued three different policies. We delved into a discussion of the first two, i.e. that until the February revolution and that between February and October, and then pointed out that we could discuss the third policy only later. This is now the period in question: the policy of temporising and preserving the Soviet state while waiting for the German revolution. This became a policy that drew the nationalist ire of the left Socialist Revolutionaries, who had become the allies of the Bolsheviks in the wake of the October revolution. But of course, when the German revolution broke out and the Great War came to an end, it became crystal clear that this policy was correct as well as those that went before it.

The iron necessity of preserving the Soviet state also played a very significant part in the adoption of the New Economic Policy. The combination of the destruction wrought by the civil war of 1918-1920 waged against the Soviet regime by the counter revolutionaries of the White armies, with the additional support of the armed forces of 14 imperialist states, and the economic scarcity created by the policy of "war communism", centred around the forcible seizure of the agricultural surplus from the peasantry which, although sufficiently responding to the needs of the war effort, impoverished the peasantry, had led to growing resentment and social unrest within the peasantry and even within certain layers of the working class. Having planned a radical turn in economic policy in late 1920 and early 1921, Lenin presented this to the 10th Congress of the party. The New Economic Policy (NEP) lifted the heavy burden on the shoulders of the peasantry and made a policy framework that gave primacy to market relations, made trade a major element in the allocation of resources, and even attributed a part to foreign capital for the recovery of the economy the major orientation of state policy.

After the adoption of NEP as the central policy in the economic domain, Lenin constantly underlined the idea that what was being practised was capitalism under the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is clear that this is a grand retreat. But the entire reasoning was based on the role the Soviet state would play in world revolution. The importance of keeping the Soviet state alive until revolution spread to other countries was a justification even for this grand retreat.

What was, then, the advantage that would be brought by preserving this organisation of the international proletariat embodied in the form of a state? Let us answer this question at two stages, looking first at the period when Lenin was alive and later at the developments that were to succeed his death.

The vision of the revolution of the 20th century in Lenin

We said above that Lenin was a loyal student of Marx and Engels on the question of world revolution. We do not mean by this that Lenin did not contribute to Marx and Engels' vision in this area. On the contrary, his premise was that of the masters, but his conclusions definitely enriched, diversified and extended the programme and strategy of world revolution.

Let us start from the last mentioned. In the time of Marx and Engels, the perspective of socialist revolution was confined to Europe and North America for it was only in these geographic regions that capitalism had developed yet. Hence, Marx and Engels always spoke about the “European revolution”, not even bringing, in the name of realism, North America into the picture (the period of the American Civil War (1861-1865) may be considered an exception in this sense). The politics of the Leninist leadership pursued in the aftermath of the October revolution resulted in the spread of the communist movement to all corners of the world, thus making the concept “world revolution” much more fully topical, palpable and concrete. We have already mentioned how the parallel concept of “world party” became a reality with the growth of Comintern.

The question of “diversification” may be examined through two distinct key concepts. One is the question of *peasant societies*. After the October revolution, Lenin realised that these poor countries, once labelled the “Third World” and now more commonly called the “Global South”, have entered the vortex of international seisms and expanded his horizon in a manner that would bring them into the flow of world revolution. While it was the advanced capitalist countries that acted as the major actors of world history up until then, the peoples of the poor countries of the East and of similar regions were now being, according to Lenin, sucked up into the maelstrom of world history. India, Indonesia, China, Korea, and the Middle East (or West Asia) were large countries and territories that entered Lenin’s radar. Hence, Lenin started to attribute great importance to the development in creative fashion of new strategies and tactics that would adequately respond to the revolts and revolutions peculiar to peasant societies.

The second major area to be brought under the process of “diversification” of world revolution finds its source in the new contradictions engendered by imperialism. This is in fact again a reference to the same “peasant societies” that we have already referred to, but here the cause behind the emergence of struggles is a different type of contradiction. Lenin is of the opinion that rebellion against imperialism and in particular colonialism will play a great part in characterising revolutions in the 20th century. He now stresses how, alongside and together with the contradiction between the capitalist class and the proletariat, revolt and revolution against imperialism will be vital in marking revolution in this “highest stage” of capitalism.

It was in this context that, according to Lenin, as revolutionary tendencies developed in those countries subordinated to imperialism, where peasants were subjected to dire levels of exploitation, that Soviet Russia (and from the end of 1922 on the Soviet Union) would play an indispensable role as *an international centre*.

Is it possible not to see here *a new type of worker-peasant alliance* emerging had Lenin’s life not ended at the very early age of 53? The alliance between the proletariat organised as a state and the peasantry suffering under imperialistic exploitation and oppression was, for Lenin, becoming the key to world revolution. In some of his speeches Lenin went so far as to state that revolution in the 20th century would advance not only on the basis of proletarian class struggle, but primarily as a result of the uprising of the international peasantry. Now that the 20th century is over, we can turn back and say retroactively that almost all great popular revolutions were

peasant revolutions under the political hegemony of communism (China, Korea, Vietnam, Albania, Cuba or even Yugoslavia, a somewhat more advanced society than the others).

We would now like to draw the reader's attention to a very fine nuance. Throughout the 20th century, both the Soviet Union and all the workers' states under its sway, on the one hand, and the official communist parties in the capitalist world repeated the following slogan enthusiastically: "Workers of all countries and oppressed nations, unite!" There is not a shred of doubt that this slogan was invented at the time when Lenin was still alive and active. But after Lenin's time, the slogan implied the situation where the liberated former colonies had each established an independent nation-state, bearing the form and class character of a bourgeois state or strongly resembling such. So, alongside those countries that called themselves either "communist" or a "popular democracy" or, in the case of China, a "people's republic", this slogan celebrated bourgeois republics of the type of independent Egypt, Algeria, India, Indonesia etc.

Was it this that Lenin also had in mind in his own time? Extremely doubtful. If we look carefully in what Lenin said after 1919 regarding peasant societies and anti-imperialist struggle, we see that his perspective was "organising the peasantry in soviets". So, Lenin's horizon reached out not to the independent bourgeois state of India, but all the way to the People's Republic of China. We will return once again to this topic below when we are discussing what we call "the question of nations".

The part played by the "Soviet centre" after Lenin

We know how history unfolded. Lenin died prematurely. His death was no accident, but the gradual product of an assassination attempt that was the result of the wrath felt by Russian nationalists of the left against his internationalism. The price of the tactical finesse that accompanied Lenin's commitment to keep the Russian revolution on an internationalist track was paid by the forced withdrawal of the towering actor of internationalism of the 20th century from the stage of history.

The developments of the post-Lenin period are not the stuff of this article. We have analysed the development of the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin elsewhere in the past. Our topic now is what impact the *mere existence* of the Soviet Union made on world history to the extent that that can be distinguished from the *mode of development of the Soviet Union itself*. Why is this important? Because we contend that Lenin attributed a special role to the Soviet state as *an organisation of the international proletariat*. We have already seen how Lenin considered the Soviet state could play this role in his own time. Now it is time to see if the Soviet state did have that kind of a function in the post-Lenin period.

We have done this elsewhere so we will make do with a summary. The mere existence of the Soviet Union, that is to say irrespective of the kind of policies pursued by the rulers of the country in the different periods of its history, has deeply marked the history of the 20th century. First, the scourge of Nazism and fascism, the greatest and most barbaric threat that has so far faced humanity in modern times, was repelled by the Red Army and the heroic resistance of the Soviet people, along

with the revolutions that erupted in Europe and Asia. Secondly, as capitalism was restructuring itself in the postwar period so as to avoid new defections to the set of socialist countries that was growing by the year, the adoption of the measures commonly known under the label “welfare state” were clearly the product of the fear provoked in capitalist circles of the rights recognised by the Soviet workers’ state (and its allies especially in Europe) for its proletariat and working people at large (employment guarantee, a more humane work pace, low-cost housing, free education and health care etc. etc.).

Thirdly, in the context of the colonial revolution and overall decolonisation that came about after World War Two, the existence of the Soviet state as a force on which the colonial peoples could rely was a great support for them. Fourth, the communist movement that the Soviet proletarian power helped form and organise in other countries contributed immensely to the emergence of workers’ states (China, Vietnam, Korea, Yugoslavia, Albania etc.) as an end-result of struggles against colonialism and imperialism.

This much should suffice. Today, everyone on the left is bitterly aware that the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (in parallel with the fall of other workers’ states) opened up new horizons for international capital, led to the brazen encouragement of imperialistic practices all around the world, and made possible the policies of “globalisation” and neoliberalism as strategies that atomise and impoverish great masses of people on every continent.

In the light of all this, Lenin’s adamant insistence on the protection of the Soviet state under all conditions emerges as an extremely wise and clairvoyant posture in terms of the course of world history.

The policy of nations from the October revolution to the foundation of the Soviet Union

We now come to the indisputably greatest contribution made by Lenin to Marxism and to the future of humanity: This is his perspective and programme on the question of nations. We will examine this question under three headings. But before we proceed further let us immediately draw attention to an important point: Lenin’s approach to this area is usually called the “national question”. We, on the other hand, are talking about the “question of nations”. The reason is that usually it is Lenin’s analysis of the problems faced by oppressed nations and the policy solutions he advocates vis-à-vis these problems that take pride of place concerning this general area. Lenin, however, has so much more to say on the relations of nations and on the nexus between nations and internationalism. We are going to use the concept “question of nations” to designate this entire field of discussion that transcends the “national question” proper. What we mean by this will become clearer as we proceed.

It is obvious that chronologically speaking the first issue that Lenin was interested in when looking at the “question of nations” is the “national question” in the narrow sense of national oppression and its proposed solution. From very early on in his political career, he showed great interest in this question for Tsarist Russia was a

country notorious for being a “prison house of nations” and he defended the “right of nations to self-determination”, up to and including the right to secession, a right historically identified with his name in the socialist movement (as well as, in a wider context, that of Wilson, the US president during the Great War). Consistent with this early engagement with the issue, the question of the liberation of oppressed nations ranked as one of Lenin’s priorities in the post-October period as well.

It is of utmost importance to underline that the young Soviet state recognised in practice the right to national self-determination the Bolshevik Party had for years defended in theory. The proletariat in power responded with respect to the will manifested by five peoples of the former Tsarist state to secede: the Baltic trio of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Finland and, a bit more controversially, Poland. However, the only type of national question that Lenin dwelled on when the new state was raising its scaffolding was not that which existed on the European continent. For Lenin, the national question that existed among the non-Russian, even non-Slavic peoples living in the Southeastern borderlands of Caucasia and Transcaucasia, in various regions of the interior of Russia proper, and in Central Asia, conquered as late as the second half of the 19th century, was even of greater import than what was going on in the European territories.

If one of the reasons for this was to establish a democratic basis for the relations among nations that were going to form the new state, another was the fact that the political line the young Soviet republic was going to follow vis-à-vis the world at large would be deeply conditioned by the approach of the new state to peoples who had so far been indisputably heavily oppressed inside the country. We have already talked about Lenin’s approach to the national question, colonialism and imperialism. Now it is the turn of internal questions.

We have stressed the point elsewhere: it is not right to limit the Russian revolution that established a multinational socialist republic that lasted for three quarters of a century to the upheavals of 1917 alone. If, in the last analysis, revolution is the act of smashing the old state apparatus and establishing a new one, then perforce revolution in Russia must have started in February 1917 and continued until December 1922, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was founded. Here, the ambiguity of the term Russia may confuse the issue. In this context, we use Russia to signify the entire territory of the Tsarist state. In other words, “all-Russia”, as it is sometimes designated.

In the narrower sense, i.e. in the sense of the territories that the population of Russians inhabit, the revolution has of course triumphed in October 1917. As a result, the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (Soviet Russia) was founded at an early stage. But the revolution has not yet been able to reach Ukraine, Belarus, Transcaucasia, and the Muslim peoples living in the interior of Russia proper and in Central Asia. This will only transpire as a result of the Civil War, when the revolution was embodied in that war. Yet wars, and in particular civil wars, are won not as a result of military operations alone, but also on the ground of political struggles. Lenin and his comrades won the war through the heroic and steadfast fight of the Red Army as a class army and the masterly leadership of the command structure, but also thanks to the untiring efforts of Lenin in pursuing

a national policy that won the hearts and minds of the minority nationalities of the ex-Tsarist territories. The war that raged across the territory of “all-Russia” had naturally drawn in the plethora of peoples that populated Russia. The correct political line pursued played a decisive role in the winning of that war.

This policy consists of four major planks. The first is obviously the self-determination of nations, which Lenin has already been defending from the very beginning of the 20th century and which, as we pointed out a moment ago, was observed in practice for many nations.

The second is the federal principle. As a matter of fact, all his life Lenin advocated large and centralised territorial administration with the largest population possible living in that very territory for reasons of economic efficiency and judicious division of labour leading to rapid growth and development. For this reason, before the October revolution his tendency was to refuse negotiations on the degree of centralisation once the decision was made to stay within the frontiers of the larger national unit. However, after October, he realised that Great Russian chauvinism had an afterlife even within the ranks of communist cadres and rapidly embraced the federal principle. This can be seen even in the name of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR), which was established almost immediately after the revolution. But much more important was the struggle Lenin waged during the foundation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics at the end of 1922. We will return to this in a little more detail presently.

Third was Lenin’s insistence, to the end of his life, on the necessity of going beyond *formal* equality between nations in order to strive for *real* equality. This aspect of the question became a burning issue within the Soviet government and the Bolshevik Party on an ever-growing scale in the years 1921-1922 and even brought Lenin and Stalin to the brink of a personal break. Dwelling on this issue briefly will make it much easier for the reader to understand why Lenin was so unbending on the federal principle and real equality rather than formal.

To summarise a long story through its most striking aspects, Stalin, who had been the People’s Commissar of National Affairs since the revolution, had adopted a rigid and aggressive stance on developments in Georgia, together with some of his assistants who were in charge of Transcaucasian affairs. The Mensheviks were strong in Georgia and the Menshevik Georgian government had been pro-British. Although having taken power at a certain stage with the support of the Red Army in a development parallel to what happened in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Georgian Bolsheviks were aware that they had to pursue a nuanced policy mix that took note of the high level of support the Mensheviks enjoyed within the popular masses. This strained relations between the representatives of the People’s Commissariat of National Affairs, on the one hand, and the Georgian communists. An interesting detail is the obvious fact that Stalin himself was Georgian by origin, as well as Ordzhonikidze, who was one of the top people in charge of Transcaucasian affairs. The leadership of the People’s Commissariat was glowing with resentment against the Georgian communists, who did not comply sheepishly with the line imposed on them. During a heated debate, one of the representatives of the Commissariat had even gone so far as to slap a Georgian communist on the face. Conduct of this type

between communists of two nations implied that the Russian representatives (who, even if some of them were Georgian, officially represented the RSFSR) believed that Russia was superior in some sense to Georgia.

Meanwhile, there was also another debate going on that generalised this question of equality between nations. Stalin, the People's Commissar of National Affairs, had transformed the unification of all sovietised territories under the roof of a single state into one of bringing all others under the sway of the RSFSR. This meant that the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Transcaucasian nations would all become subordinated to the RSFSR, would, in other words become "autonomous" republics under that political entity. For this reason, this project had come to be known as "autonomisation". There was no doubt that this project aimed at sustaining the superiority of the Russians at the expense of the other nations. Moreover, in order to control the Georgians, as well as the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, these three states were to be brought together on a federative Transcaucasian republic. This was evidence that showed the slap on the face was not a product of momentary rage, but a sign of a real feeling of superiority.

Lenin was furious when he took notice of the incident. He had already been very sceptical of the "autonomisation" project. There happened to be other matters of discord between Lenin and Stalin at the time: the former was against the relaxation of the monopoly of foreign trade, which the Central Committee had decided for when he, Lenin, was absent out of illness; he was also very critical of the neglect shown to the development of the central planning mechanism; he observed that after the government apparatus, the party apparatus was also becoming bureaucratised; and he held Stalin personally responsible for all of this. For all these reasons he engaged in a frontal struggle against Stalin, which would turn into a personal break when Stalin bullied and threatened Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya.

It was in this overall context that Lenin advanced an alternative formula against Stalin's "autonomisation" project, which clearly brought all other nations under Russian sway, a formula that stipulated unification among equals, embodied in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. He won the day. Accompanying this political drive towards full equality, he dictated, from his sick bed, an article to his secretaries in which he squarely attacked the "autonomisation" project. He contended, in extremely direct and harsh language, that formal equality between nations was the product of a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois approach. What distinguished the Marxist attitude was the advocacy of real equality. The defence of real equality required, according to him, positive discrimination in favour of the oppressed nations. This, then, was the third component of the Bolshevik policy in the context of the formation of the *Soyuz* (union). This article on "autonomisation" was to be hidden from the Soviet people and published in his *Collected Works* only in 1956.

The official foundation of the USSR on 30 December 1922 was the last victory of Lenin at the very end of a life that was full of triumphs, small or large. From spring 1923 all the way to the end, Lenin was in a state of paralysis and could never again intervene in political life. We shall see in a moment that this last victory, although on the face of it concerned only the land of October, was, in fact, a victory on the scale of the world revolution.

To return to this point in a moment, let us now look at the last component of Bolshevik policy set that was applied with the aim of winning the Civil War and the winning over of the peoples that populated in the All-Russia geography. The USSR was the first and only state of the modern age that did not make a reference to any nation or specific geography. In other words, as a *nationless state*, it confronted as a *unique political formation* all the nation-states that had been established since the age of bourgeois revolution. (We would like to remind the reader at this point of the two-level analysis we made of the Soviet state above, one as simply another nation-state within a system of nation-states and another as a dictatorship of the proletariat that was out to fight and destroy that whole system of nation-states in a process of world revolution.)

Looking at the other side of the matter, Lenin advocated, as we saw a moment ago, measures of positive discrimination to be implemented in favour of hitherto oppressed nations so as to work towards not only formal but also real equality between nations. So, the previously oppressed nations of the *Soyuz* had to have the special privilege of sustaining their national sensibilities, which had been suppressed or even denied under the Tsars, developing them and passing them on to future generations without external restrictions. These nations needed also to manage their own affairs locally to the extent possible. This policy was called *korenizatsia*. Despite all the future distortions and degenerations and despite Russian nationalism being reawakened from the time of World War Two on, the policy of *korenizatsia* was to be preserved and applied in earnest to the very end, up to the dissolution of the USSR.

Thus was the Soviet Union a nationless state, but a state within which oppressed nations found a national home and flourished in a rich diversity of peoples. Thanks to this dialectic unprecedented in any capitalist country, the USSR became a land where nations fraternised and coexisted peacefully. The overarching consciousness of Soviet citizenship capped this diversity in a projected unity of nations in the future. If a country as riven as Yugoslavia between nations before the revolution in 1944 was transformed into one where a considerable part of the population identified themselves as Yugoslav rather than Serb or Croat or Bosniac or any other nationality in censuses until the late 1980s, that is thanks to this Leninist conception being taken over in other post-revolutionary climes.

Lenin made all of this possible because he had succeeded in making a great leap in reformulating the “national question” and cast it in a new light in his second period, during the Great War. Everyone knows that there are widely diverging views on the Marxist left on the “national question”. However, all of these were unified under one overarching assumption: the national question was a question of democracy between nations and not one of socialism. Lenin inverted this view when faced with the task of the leadership of world revolution, i.e. during the Great War. He squarely put the fundamental question of this sphere as “how does socialism overcome the barriers set up by millennia of division and discord between different peoples that modern nations had inherited from history and reproduced over the previous centuries?” Thus, for Marxism, the fundamental aim was now to find the methods for transcending national animosity in order to march towards

fusion between nations. The leader of world revolution had discovered the most pressing issue concerning the “question of nations” for Marxist leadership in the age of proletarian revolutions and the transition from capitalism to socialism.

From the USSR to the World Socialist Federation

When the structure of the USSR is brought together with the resolution called “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions”, which Lenin presented to the Second Congress of the Comintern back in 1920 and which, after being twice deliberated upon at the relevant commission, was adopted unanimously by the delegates (excepting three Western delegates who refrained from voting because of the special atmosphere in their country) and thus became *a programmatic document of the Comintern*, it becomes clear that Lenin has bequeathed humanity with an extremely original formula for the future transition from capitalism to socialism/communism on the world scale.

At the beginning of this article, we quoted Lenin from his *Philosophical Notebooks* to the effect that half a century after the publication of *Capital*, not even a single Marxist had understood that book for lack of a full understanding of the dialectic. We then added that, ironically, the same thing has happened to Lenin: we made the bold assertion that not even a single Marxist has understood the programmatic and strategic legacy that Lenin left to humanity as a result of his leadership of world revolution in the last decade of his life (1914-1924). There was an entire series of points that corroborated that statement throughout this article. But none has remained as opaque and misunderstood in the centennial period after Lenin’s death as the point we are raising now. Perhaps two related points we have already made come closest to this in having remained in the dark: the fact that Lenin changed the entire framework of the so-called “national question” in his last decade and made it an organic part of the process of transition from capitalism to socialism and the quality of a nationless state that makes the USSR a *unique state form* in the modern era. No Marxist to our knowledge has so far pointed out these two aspects of Lenin’s thinking and practice. We are now going to discuss how these two points led to Lenin’s creation of an unprecedented strategy of transition to the future World Socialist Federation.

This avenue should be depicted in the most concise form: for both those capitalist countries that will in future undergo a victorious socialist revolution and those peasant countries that will succeed to oust the colonial power that has enslaved them, *Lenin advocates their adherence to the Soviet Union*. Moreover, this has not remained a personal idea, however powerful and compelling. Lenin has presented this idea to the Comintern, the world party of socialist revolution and succeeded to have it approved by unanimous vote! This has, therefore, become *the programme and the strategy of the international communist movement!*

What is the basis of this assertion? Which principles put forward in the “Theses” justify our reading? We have taken this question up in detail in our book published

in Turkish in January 2024 in memoriam of Lenin's centennial.³ We intend to have an English translation published in the near future. Until then let us provide the basic elements of our reading of the Theses.

Our general methodological contention is that the Theses have been misread and misunderstood overall. They are very widely interpreted as the communist programme on the liberation of oppressed nations. This is not at all the full substance of the Theses. It is only a specific aspect of a much more general approach to the question of nations. Lenin presents here the road map from a world of (bourgeois) nation-states to a world socialist federation for all nations, from the most advanced to the most enslaved colonial people. Once this is understood, the text becomes much more transparent. A discussion of two points should suffice for our purposes here.

Paragraphs 5 to 7 together assert, very clearly, that (a) the world situation is determined by the struggle of the world bourgeoisie against the Soviet state, (b) therefore the struggle for the unity of the working classes of different nations should not be considered in abstract terms but should aim for close cooperation with the Soviet state, (c) this cooperation should take the form of a federation as a form transitional to full union (d) with the aim of the proletariat of all nations to create a world economy based on a common plan. What is this but a world socialist federation constructed gradually through an adherence of all post-revolutionary countries to the Soviet state on an ever-growing level of integration?

We then move to the question of peasant societies. Paragraph 10, clause f asserts boldly that after liberation, the former colonies and semi-colonies will remain economically subordinate to imperialism if they attempt to form independent states, that their independence will therefore be illusory, and, for that reason should instead unify with the Soviet republics. So, the programme of emancipation advocated by Lenin is not "full independence" but federating with the Soviet state. The reader may at this point remember that we expressed above our doubt regarding whether the slogan "Workers of the world and oppressed nations, unite!" really meant independent states for the former colonies and semi-colonies. Here lies the basis for that reserve.

We hope the reader has now grasped the solemnity of what is being said. The communist movement in its most glorious moment in history draws the road map of world revolution. But not one leadership implements this programme and strategy after the death of Lenin. No one even remembers this. When socialist revolutions triumph, as in Yugoslavia (1944), Vietnam (1945), China (1949), Korea (1950), Cuba (1959-1961) etc., no one appeals to them to adhere to, to join, to unify with the Soviet Union.⁴ When the first workers' state after the USSR is to be formed, Trotsky is no longer alive. No one else, to our knowledge, within the communist opposition to Stalinism, whether Trotskyist or otherwise, raises a voice.

³ Sungur Savran, *Lenin: Dünya Devriminin Önderi* [Lenin: Leader of World Revolution], Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2024, especially Chapter 9 on "Towards a World Federation: How Will the Fusion of Nations Be Achieved?", pp. 239-247.

⁴ Of this we cannot be totally sure since there is a vast history and geography concerned. But this is at least theoretically verifiable in the future.

A hundred years on, the new generations of communists are entitled to discover this legacy.

Let us draw some conclusions. Had communists remained loyal to Lenin's legacy and implemented the resolution of the Comintern (the Theses), then in the post-World War Two period, we would have had a single socialist state that extended from the Sea of Japan to Central Europe and from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean, a country that would be ruled by a single plan. We have already pointed out that Lenin (who in fact took this principle over from Marx) favoured a centralised state economic apparatus for economic efficiency. This would have made it possible for the new socialist federation to survive much longer than what was possible under the fragmented state structure of the actual socialist state system.

Secondly, it would have been much more difficult for capitalist powers to threaten this giant of a socialist country militarily.

Third, as a result of this cooperation and increasing integration, the former colonies and newly liberated peoples would be convinced that this was a truly international union which no one nation would be able to command and bully and thus they would be much more prepared to unite their economic fate with the socialist commonwealth than suffer the scourge and humiliation of being subordinated to imperialism. This could at a certain point bring in India, in addition to the already present gigantic countries like China and Russia into the federation, reproducing, at an even higher level, the advantages of this route.

Conclusion

In this article we pointed out that there were two different periods in Lenin's political life with different tasks and concerns taking centre stage. The first extends from the 1890s to 1914 (roughly a quarter of a century) in which Lenin is the prospective leader of the Russian revolution. The second is much shorter, lasting hardly a decade (1914-early 1924), in which he is the rising leader of world revolution.

We limited our discussion to the second period for concerns of space. However, the choice of the second period as our topic is fundamentally due to our belief that this period of Lenin's theory and practice have formed the backbone of the little understood and misinterpreted and at times deliberately denied legacy of Lenin, of great importance for the younger generations of revolutionaries.

We then went on to explain the elements that formed this powerful legacy, which culminated in the road map that Lenin left for the future communist movement in the form of a nationless state acting as the avenue through which humanity can most forcefully march towards a society that is not only classless but also nationless, i.e. a society in which, ultimately, all nations can and will fuse into one human nation.

So, Lenin is not of the past but of the future. He is the alternative. He alone can unite honest and serious communists of all nations and persuasions. But only the Lenin depicted here, the genuine Lenin can that fountainhead be.