

Lenin and Leninism: A Centenary Perspective

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‘Throughout its entire history the Russian revolutionary movement included within it the most contradictory qualities.’¹

Vasilii Grossman, *Everything Flows*, 1961.

On 15 July 2018, over 80,000 football fans will descend on Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium, at the bottom of the tongue-shaped Khamovniki district south of Red Square, for the World Cup final. As they approach the recently-renovated, beautiful old Olympic stadium, they cannot but be struck by the sight of a large statue of Vladimir Il’ich Lenin. [Slide] Few will struggle to recognise the man depicted, and few will be entirely surprised at its sight. Lenin’s image is ubiquitous in Russia, unlike in neighbouring Ukraine, for example, where no statue of Lenin remains standing in the former Soviet republic. In Russia, almost every city and town has a Lenin street, replete with a Lenin statue. In Moscow, the metro still bears his name, and several stations contain murals and busts of his head. His embalmed body still lies on display in the centre of the city. As I walked around Moscow last month, I found the image of Lenin as arresting as it was the first time I visited Russia, over a decade ago. It was just a few weeks after the violent events in the United States, North Carolina, had drawn global attention once again to the politics of public memory, to the contentious issue of historical statues. Looking at Lenin’s image in Moscow, and thinking about the lecture this evening, I became aware of another thought. Despite his status as a towering figure in modern history, Lenin had lived most of his life in relative obscurity. Few people in Russia had heard of him at the beginning of 1917. When he came to power that year, he had less than seven years to live. There is a story that Lenin returned to the Kremlin one day in 1918, without his identification papers. Before the days of widespread photography, of course, the guard on duty didn’t recognise him, and initially refused to let him in!

Lenin’s journey into the textbooks of history was, literally, extraordinary. On 9 April 1917, a group of Russian revolutionaries, headed by Lenin, boarded a train in Zurich, Switzerland, bound for the north German coast. It was a train journey that, in the words of historian Catherine Merridale,

¹ Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*, tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with Anna Aslanyan, London: Vintage, 2011, p.181.

‘changed the world.’² The journey was risky for several reasons, through wartime Europe and enemy territory, but a week later, they arrived at the Finland Station in St. Petersburg (Petrograd as it was called during the war). Seven months later, this group of revolutionaries had helped overthrow the government in the Russian capital, and had set about trying to establish a new type of political power not just in Russia, but throughout the world.

The centenary of 1917 is generating a lot of interest in many parts of the world - in the media, in public exhibitions, and in academia. For historians of the Russian Revolution, the centenary provides opportunities to think more deeply about it and its legacies; to take stock of what we know about the Revolution and approaches to writing it; and to reach a broader audience than we might be accustomed to. The invitation to speak at this conference has provided me with a very welcome excuse to re-engage more deeply with Lenin and Leninism than I have done for several years. I hope that you find the lecture this evening interesting – and in a lecture on Lenin and Leninism during this centenary year, my job, really, is to avoid making an interesting topic seem dull – and I hope that we can open up to a good discussion afterwards.

[Slide] The lecture this evening will be divided into three parts. [C] The first part will be an ‘introduction,’ but it will be quite an expansive one, as I would like to provide some thoughts on a variety of themes. This section will touch on the historic importance of Lenin, and to my mind, perhaps the key question that we should ask when considering the October Revolution specifically, namely: What was the October Revolution actually for? [C] The second part of the lecture will be devoted to the question, ‘What is Leninism’? I want to avoid a long discussion of Leninist theory, and so this will be a relatively condensed overview. We can adopt a simple understanding of Leninism as Marxist thought, developed by Lenin in the twentieth century, and as the ideological foundation of the Soviet state. We will see that Leninism should be understood diachronically, that is, as a body of thought that developed over time in response to changing circumstances in Russia and Europe more generally. [C] The third and final part of the lecture will examine the question whether or not Leninism is still relevant, in the sense of its usefulness for addressing some of today’s national and global issues.

The Importance of Lenin

The ways in which the Russian Revolution is being commemorated, in the English-speaking world and in Russia, and by specialists and non-specialists, suggest a good deal of complexity, diversity, and multiplicity. If we look at the academic community, then we see the multiplicity of the

² Catherine Merridale, *Lenin on the Train*, London: Allen Lane, 2016, p.5.

Revolution reflected in recent publications and discussions that seek to capture what the Revolution meant, that is, what it meant to different political parties and to political and social elites, and what it meant to ‘ordinary people.’ We find discussion of the problems associated with speaking about particular groups of ordinary people, such as ‘peasants,’ without acknowledging the diversity of peasant experiences. We can detect the importance of approaching the meanings of the Revolution from the perspectives of gender and generational differences. We read and hear frequently now about the importance of examining the Revolution outside of the major capital cities and in areas of the Russian empire inhabited predominantly by non-Russians. This allows us to appreciate that the relationship between the political centre and the peripheries was complex, and that power did not simply flow from the top to the bottom.³ We have also seen much discussion about the complexity of the crucial period of the Revolution itself. Historians are now largely agreed that the Revolution was not just about 1917, and that 1917 and its significance should be placed firmly within the context of the larger ‘continuum of crisis’ that Russia faced from 1914, with the onset of war.⁴ Of the major books on the Revolution published this year in English, and written by highly-respected academic specialists, Mark Steinberg’s excellent book is most explicitly foregrounded in the search for giving expression to this theme of diversity and multiplicity of experience.⁵ I have no criticism to make of that approach. [Slide] I also have no criticism to make of Steve Smith, in his wonderfully comprehensive book on the Revolution (also published this year), where he writes that ‘revolutions are not created by revolutionaries, who at most help to erode the legitimacy of the existing regime by suggesting that a better world is possible.’⁶ Smith’s point is that revolutions occur during times of ‘deep crisis’ in the existing order and through popular action, and that the role of revolutionaries is to direct that action.

I am not going to suggest this evening, by contrast, that Lenin and other revolutionaries ‘made’ the Russian Revolution. However, my lecture is premised on the assertion that we should be careful not to render the centre peripheral to its story, and that we should be careful not to adopt an overly romanticised conception of revolutions as ‘festivals of the oppressed,’ to use Lenin’s own characterization. The October Revolution was a major turning-point in world history, and the course that the Russian Revolution took was determined above all by Lenin and his ruling Bolshevik party, often by mobilizing ‘the people,’ but often also by force against them. The Russian historian Elena Kotelenets has asserted that, in this centenary year, Lenin is – or at least

³ See, for example, the articles in the special issue devoted to the centenary of the Revolution of *Kritika*, Vol.16, No.4 (Fall, 2015).

⁴ Particularly influential in this regard has been Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

⁵ Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905-1921*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.350-1.

⁶ S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890-1928*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p.4.

should be – considered perhaps the central figure in world history.⁷ We should certainly accord Lenin (the man) and Leninism (the ideology) central places in our centenary discussions.⁸

My lecture operates in part on the premise that the ‘Lenin factor,’ the ‘role of personality’ matters quite a lot in the story of the Russian Revolution. However, it will be necessary, also, to avoid exaggerating this. [Click] In 1935 Lev Trotskii, one of the Bolshevik leaders in the autumn of 1917, wrote in his diary that ‘if neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring – of this I have not the slightest doubt!’⁹ This has become a standard view of the October Revolution, and one reiterated most clearly this year by Tariq Ali in his book on Lenin.¹⁰ Trotskii, though, undoubtedly exaggerated the significance of Lenin, and himself, in 1917, and the extent to which they had to convince their own party to take power in October. In fact, it seems that in autumn 1917, Russia was going to become a socialist, soviet country anyway, at least temporarily; that is because the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, scheduled to meet the day after the Bolsheviks moved to take power, was due to vote in favour of forming a government of exclusively socialist ministers, based on the authority of the Congress.¹¹ The significance of Lenin (and indeed Trotsky) in the October Revolution was less the creation of soviet power than the nature of that power. Lenin wanted power seized before the Congress met in order to avoid coalition with more moderate socialists.¹² Even after the seizure of power, there were good chances for more moderate socialists, and more moderate Bolsheviks, to forge a coalition government that would rule until a democratically elected parliament would convene. However, the hard-line Bolsheviks led by Lenin and Trotskii managed to ensure that there would be no place for moderate socialists in government, and that ‘Soviet’ power would not be compromised by a parliamentary democracy.

What was the October Revolution actually for?

Lenin has always been a controversial figure, even among his comrades in Russian Marxist circles. For the well-known historians Richard Pipes and Robert Gellately, Lenin was ‘merciless and cruel,’ deserving to be placed alongside Stalin and Hitler in a triumvirate of brutal twentieth-

⁷ E.A. Kotelenets, *Bitva za Lenina: Noveishie issledovaniia i diskussii*, Moscow: AIRO, 2017, p.9.

⁸ The popular Russian history journal *Istoriik* (*The Historian*) devoted its April 2017 issue to examining the role of Lenin in the Revolution, with some interesting and important – if sometimes exaggerated – observations. See the editorial by Vladimir Rudakov, ‘Faktor Lenina,’ *Istoriik*, Vol.28, No.4 (April, 2017), p.1.

⁹ Quoted in Joshua Rubinstein, *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary Life*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2011, p.83.

¹⁰ Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution*, London: Verso, 2017, p.2.

¹¹ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Power in Petrograd*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007, p.10 and note 6, p.409.

¹² Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, pp.9-10.

century dictators.¹³ By contrast, for those on the political far Left, Lenin might not exactly be revered, but he is usually held in high regard, and typically counterposed to Stalin's alleged 'distortions' of Leninism. Lenin is indelibly associated with 1917 and the Russian Revolution, and one's views of him tend to be determined by whether one thinks of October 1917 primarily as a moment of revolutionary emancipation, or as the prelude to a violent, dictatorial regime associated with the Gulag and the Cold War. (But) To think of it as both, and to recognise its complex, contradictory character, will help us to arrive at a suitably complex understanding of Lenin and Leninism.

This leads us to address what I think is an essential, core question not just for assessing Leninism, but for thinking about the Russian Revolution as a whole: what was the October Revolution actually for? Why did the Bolsheviks take power? We cannot answer that question adequately without first acknowledging that Lenin was absolutely committed to the triumph of his political cause, the establishment of socialism and later communism around the world. Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders were supremely theoretical politicians, for whom matters of doctrinal orthodoxy were of cardinal importance. Lenin and his comrades (including Stalin) were not above opportunism and cunning, lies and brutality, but they were motivated more by theoretical vision than by personal interest. The problem, though, is that this is far from an accepted view. (For example) The most recent book on Lenin in English is by the writer Victor Sebestyen, just published, with the title *Lenin the Dictator*. Written for a wide audience, I have seen it on very prominent display in good bookshops [Slide]. Sebestyen seems to consider that parallels are evident between Lenin and Donald Trump. [Slide] Like Trump, 'In his quest for power, he [Lenin] promised people anything and everything [...] He lied unashamedly. He identified a scapegoat he could later label "enemies of the people." [...] Lenin was the godfather of what commentators a century after his time call "post-truth politics".' Sebestyen acknowledges that Lenin was a communist idealist, but, 'when ideology clashed with opportunism, he [Lenin] invariably chose the tactical path above doctrinal purity. He could change his mind entirely if it advanced his goal.'¹⁴

I disagree firmly with Sebestyen's premise. Lenin was not a populist or a demagogue, and in our age of 'post-truth' politics, with many politicians focused on short-term electoral cycles, Lenin should stand in stark contrast – regardless of one's views of his politics. He was convinced of the

¹³ See Richard Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin: Revelations from the Secret Archive*, New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1998, pp.1-11; Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p.9.

¹⁴ Victor Sebestyen, *Lenin the Dictator: An Intimate Portrait*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2017, pp.2-4.

importance of leading a revolutionary movement rather than merely listening opportunistically to the winds of popular change. His politics were indeed a ‘politics of truth,’ and he would have had little time for post-modernism. [Slide] What was his goal? What were his ‘politics of truth’? [Click] It was not power for its own sake, but communism. [Click] It was a vision of a perfected society, whereby people would live in complete social harmony, without any need for coercive instruments of state power such as a police and army. Communism would bring with it the complete, comprehensive development and realization of each individual, but unlike liberal capitalism, individuals would only achieve this through collective social means, by ensuring collective harmony. For communism to exist, humanity would need to be improved and transformed. [Click] The essence of the October Revolution, then, was a cultural revolution, that is, the creation of a new type of person, the so-called ‘new person’ (or New Man, without whom communism could not exist. The October Revolution represented the most ambitious and sustained attempt at human transformation and liberation in modern European history. However, the Soviet regime became the most violent state in modern peacetime European history. [Click] We arrive here at the complex and contradictory essence of the Russian Revolution, and of Soviet history.

What is Leninism?

The second part of the lecture will address the question, ‘what is Leninism’? The context for the development of Leninism was, initially, the Russia of tsarist autocracy, whereby there was little or no space for legal political opposition, and then wartime Europe. Our starting point should be 1905. In that year, Russia experienced revolutionary upheaval that lasted into 1907, although the autocracy remained largely in place. Lenin was in exile, but returned to Russia briefly late that year. The significance of those years, for our purposes, is that we see Leninism as a distinct version of Marxism come into outline form, in response to the possibility that revolution was on the immediate agenda in Russia. It was an especially uncompromising and militant version of Marxism, born of the particular circumstances of autocratic Russia, but also of the particular conceptions of Lenin and his close comrades. Lenin was completely convinced that full-blown revolutionary civil war, in the form of guerrilla violence and mass insurrections, would be necessary in Russia to remove completely all remnants of the autocracy, and to ensure a democratic republic with civil liberties. In other words, the creation of a constitutional monarchy would not be enough. [Slide] ‘Revolutions,’ he declared, ‘are festivals of the oppressed and exploited,’ and the task would be ‘to wage a ruthless and self-sacrificing struggle for the direct and decisive path.’¹⁵ Directness and decisiveness were characteristics of Lenin’s politics and leadership,

¹⁵ V.I. Lenin, ‘Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,’ June-July 1905, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm#ch13> Accessed 20 April 2017.

reflecting the militancy of his thought and the absolute clarity and confidence that he sought to project in his pronouncements. They also reflected his impulse to hasten the dawn of socialism in Russia. [Click] ‘Revolution,’ he wrote in 1905, ‘is a life-and-death struggle between the old Russia, the Russia of slavery, serfdom, and autocracy, and the new, young, people’s Russia, the Russia of the toiling masses, who are reaching out towards light and freedom, in order afterwards to start once again a struggle for the complete emancipation of mankind from all oppression and all exploitation.’¹⁶

Lenin’s objective until 1917 was that the Russian revolution would make a decisive break with autocracy, thereby allowing the full flourishing of democratic liberties, in order the more quickly to advance to the next, higher, socialist revolution. Typically, ‘democratic’ revolutions would establish the political dominance of the bourgeoisie. In Russia, however, Marxists believed that the middle classes were too small and politically timid to play a leading role, but Lenin took this a step further in 1905. Unlike their rival Marxist grouping, the Mensheviks, the Leninists thought that socialists, representing the working people, should enter and direct a provisional revolutionary government after the overthrow of the tsar, until a democratic parliament would convene.¹⁷

[Click] It was the First World War that brought about revolution in Russia, and it was the war that allowed Leninism as a distinct body of Marxist thought to develop more fully. In 1905, Lenin had assumed that a successful revolution in Russia would be about establishing democracy and preparing for socialism in the future. In 1917, Lenin did not think that Russia was developed enough yet for socialism, but crucially, he thought that Russia was, as he put it, on its ‘threshold.’ What had changed? What had changed is that Lenin realised, during the war, that Marx’s thought was out-of-date, because Marx had not lived through the age of imperialism. Marxism now had to adapt to this new era. [Click] Developing his views on imperialism from earlier accounts written by economists and socialists, Lenin (and many other socialists) understood the war as the inevitable consequence of imperialism as a more aggressive form of capitalism. Imperialism, he reasoned, had resulted from the fact that the logic of capitalism’s pursuit of profit had driven capitalists and imperial states to conquer overseas colonies, in order to exploit natural resources and cheap sources of labour. Rivalries between imperial states for colonies had structured international tensions. The war, Lenin declared, had not resulted from accident or contingency, but from the necessary logic of imperialism.

¹⁶ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Black Hundreds and the Organisation of an Uprising,’ 16 August 1905, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/aug/29b.htm> Accessed 20 April 2017.

¹⁷ Was this a complete innovation on Lenin’s part? Perhaps not entirely. See Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A study in twentieth-century revolutionary patriotism*, London: Routledge, 2002, p.39.

What Lenin was saying was that capitalism had entered its final stages; it had served its historic function of preparing societies for socialism, but now, in the early twentieth century, it had become so violent and repressive that it threatened civilization. [Click] Imperialism had inaugurated a whole era of violence, and the present war, as he put it, ‘will soon be followed by others.’¹⁸ The only solution for humanity was socialist revolutions internationally, and during the war, Lenin had become absolutely convinced that the historically necessary moment for socialist revolutions was now or never.

The war, according to Lenin, had made revolutions imperative, but it had also made socialism eminently possible and perhaps relatively straightforward to achieve. Wartime societies, he thought, were ‘pregnant’ with socialism. The very fact of millions of working men conscripted into armies and fighting a long, brutal war had created the potential for socialist revolution. In addition, imperialism had been facilitated by the establishment of increasing economic concentration and monopolisation, whereby banks had become fundamental to national economies. Economic centralization and state control were then given a major push by the exigencies of waging war. Lenin thought that this had greatly facilitated the creation of rational, state-controlled but *socialist* economies, because, really, all that the working classes would need to do would be to seize control of the state and to nationalise the banks and large industries.¹⁹

Why is this discussion of Lenin’s understanding of imperialism relevant to the Russian Revolution? It is relevant because this was the theoretical foundation for the October Revolution and the particular course that the Russian Revolution would take under Bolshevik control. One of the reasons that the First World War is of central importance to our understanding of modern history is because it was of central importance to the development of Leninism. Lenin described the war as a ‘mighty accelerator’ of history, hastening the process by which socialism would be achieved. He thought that Russia’s path to socialism would be much shorter because of it, and especially when revolutions would occur in the more advanced industrial societies. Due to uneven levels of economic development globally, and greater prosperity in the more advanced societies, Lenin thought that revolutions were likely to begin in the colonies, or in Russia, and then spread to those more advanced societies. In 1917, revolution did indeed break out in Russia when the tsarist autocracy was replaced by a liberal Provisional Government, backed up by the socialist soviet structure.

¹⁸ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Position and Tasks of the Second International,’ 1 November 1914, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/oct/x01.htm> Accessed 20 April 2017.

¹⁹ The best introduction to Leninism remains the two-volume study by Neil Harding, *Lenin’s Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic and Socialist Revolutions*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

Returning to Lenin's historic role in 1917, the standard account is that he returned to Russia in April and surprised his fellow Bolsheviks by proclaiming that there could be no support for the Provisional Government, and that a socialist revolution was on the immediate agenda. He then managed, over the coming months, to convince his party of the need to take power in October. We now have a more complex picture of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917, thanks in large part to the excellent scholarship of historian Lars Lih, although this has not yet found its way into most accounts of that year.²⁰ Lih's work has suggested that, in fact, Lenin's views in 1917 were largely similar to those of leading Bolsheviks as a whole. Bolsheviks as a whole took a consistent, uncompromising stance with regard to the need for complete soviet power, rather than continued soviet support for the Provisional Government. The real source of contention within the party, it seems, was about the extent of Russia's proximity to socialism, and the nature of the coming revolution as a socialist political revolution. It seems that Lenin's belief that Russia could proceed to transition towards socialism by itself, without revolutions elsewhere – and indeed that Russia was on its 'threshold' – was not one that was easily sold to the party as a whole, considering Russia's relative underdevelopment. Once again, the point that I am making here is that Lenin's historic role in 1917 concerned less the occurrence of a revolution in October, or the creation of a soviet government – although he certainly played a major role in driving the party's strategy – and more the nature of that revolution and government. In 1917, Lenin's thought was permeated by a striking optimism about the abilities of the Russian working people, led by true socialists, to establish a successful post-revolutionary state, and the relative ease with which that would happen. Crucially, Lenin was also prepared not to share power with other large socialist parties, something that more moderate Bolshevik leaders thought unimaginable. The nature of the subsequent Soviet state as a single-party (Bolshevik) dictatorship owed much to the ability of Lenin and other hard-liners to outmanoeuvre more moderate Bolsheviks, as well as other socialist parties. However, and this is worth noting, Lenin was not opposed in principle to socialist coalition. In fact, for much of 1917, when he spoke of 'all power to the soviets,' he was urging the more moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet in the capital to take complete state power. They did not, and by September, he had become absolutely convinced that the Bolsheviks were the only sufficiently steadfast representatives of the working people.

The paradox of Leninism is that, as an ideology of popular emancipation and empowerment, of 'real' democracy, if you like, it became an ideology of dictatorship and violence, more a dictatorship *over* the proletariat (workers) and peasants than a dictatorship *of* the proletariat and

²⁰ See, in particular, Lars T. Lih, 'The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: The Debates of April 1917 in Context,' *Russian History*, 38 (2011), pp.199-242.

poor peasants. Throughout 1917, Russia's political parties, including the Bolsheviks, expected a parliament elected by universal suffrage, a constituent assembly, to be convened in the near future. The exact relationship between the parliament and the soviets was not clear in Bolshevik minds, but it appears that even before taking power, Lenin did not see a future for a constituent assembly elected by universal suffrage. Friedrich Engels, Marx's collaborator, had written that proletarian dictatorship – that is, socialist government – would take the form of a democratic republic. However, in his major work of political theory of 1917, *State and Revolution*, Lenin corrected Engels.²¹ Proletarian dictatorship would not take the form of a democratic republic, he wrote, but would be formed of the soviets of working people only, a point that he had made very explicitly in his 'April Theses.' [Slide] Any state, according to Lenin, was simply an instrument of the ruling class in any society, and the proletarian socialist state would, as he put it, be 'democratic in a new way (for the proletariat and the propertyless in general) and dictatorial in a new way (against the bourgeoisie).'²² The Leninist interpretation of 'proletarian dictatorship' was, then, more literally dictatorial than many other Marxists would consider justifiable. The narrowness of democracy in Leninist thought, alongside the almost necessary relationship in Leninist thought between socialism and the use of violence and repression against the revolution's enemies, would soon become the targets of severe criticism by non-Bolshevik socialists inside and outside Soviet Russia.²³

Within months of the October Revolution, the Leninist enthusiasm for unleashing popular initiative and radical democracy had given way to a more sober appraisal of the difficulties of building state authority on the remnants of a state that had failed during wartime, and during an economic crisis. [Click] Lenin now spoke about lack of discipline amongst the Russian people, and both Leninist thought and Bolshevik rule became noticeably more authoritarian. From summer 1918, the Soviet state intensified dramatically its practices of violence and repression, in response to deepening economic difficulties and civil war between supporters and opponents of the October Revolution. All of this was justified in Leninist thought by reference to the better future toward which the Revolution would lead.²⁴ Lenin would not countenance any restrictions or significant legal checks on the powers of the revolutionary state; as he put it in late 1918, 'The revolutionary

²¹ Ryan, *Lenin's Terror*, pp.75-6.

²² See Ryan, *Lenin's Terror*, p.74.

²³ See especially the polemic between Karl Kautsky and Lenin and Trotsky, in *ibid*, pp.123-5.

²⁴ See here James Ryan, 'The Sacralization of Violence: Bolshevik Justifications for Violence and Terror during the Civil War,' *Slavic Review*, Vol.74, No.4 (Winter, 2015), pp.808-31.

dictatorship of the proletariat is rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws.’²⁵

However, before he died, Lenin oversaw a significant alteration in the course of the Revolution. The New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1921 in response to major popular unrest with Bolshevik policies, suggested a slower, more moderate path to socialism and communism than that pursued until then. The absolute power and intolerance of Bolshevik party rule remained in force, but in one of his last writings, in 1923, [Click] Lenin explained that ‘a radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism’ was necessary. There needed to be a shift of emphasis, he thought, from political struggle to ‘peaceful, organizational, “cultural” work.’²⁶ After his death in 1924, Leninism remained the source of legitimacy of the party’s rule, but Leninism could mean different things to different people, at different times. [Slide] Stalin, when seeking justification for a terrible renewal of full-scale assault on class enemies and rapid construction of socialism, declared in 1929 that ‘Destruction of classes by means of bitter class struggle of the proletariat – that is Lenin’s formula.’²⁷ He wasn’t wrong. However, to a significant extent, Stalin had taken Lenin’s thought out of context, and he had hollowed out the meaning of Lenin’s last writings. Following Stalin’s death, the Leninist party remained in power, but the Soviet Union became a less violent and more open society. [Click] The 1961 Party Programme stated that the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was no longer necessary. [Click] It was only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the unquestionable role of Lenin and Leninism as the sources of legitimacy of the Soviet state was undermined, and the party’s monopoly on power was revoked by Mikhail Gorbachev, that the Soviet experiment ended in failure.

Is Lenin/Leninism Relevant Today?

Leninism, then, is best understood as a historically specific understanding and application of Marxism in order to bring about communism. Leninism, and the Soviet state, should not be thought of as synonymous with socialism, or even Marxism. Leninism was about communism and the salvation of humanity from itself. It was motivated by very lofty ideals of the complete development of humanity, and emancipation from all exploitation and unnecessary suffering. However, it sought to achieve those goals by encouraging class enmity and hatred; by the practice and justification of an enormous amount of repression and violence; and by establishing an extremely authoritarian, more accurately totalitarian, political dictatorship under which millions

²⁵ Quoted in Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror*, p.124.

²⁶ V.I. Lenin, ‘On Cooperation,’ 4 and 6 January 1923, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/06.htm> Accessed 19 April 2017.

²⁷ I.V. Stalin, *Voprosy leninizma*, 11th Edition, Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1952, p.244.

of people suffered. It was an extremist, absolutist political ideology that allowed almost no room for compromise. And yet compromises were possible. Lenin drove his party to adopt an uncomfortable retreat in the early 1920s. He recognised the limits of violence, that the Revolution could not survive simply by force, and he would probably have been horrified to witness the violent consequences of Stalinism. Many Soviet citizens, and indeed many people throughout the world, were genuinely enthused and mobilized by the Revolution's rhetoric of empowerment, emancipation, dignity, and the chance to create a new and better life. Leninism, in other words, is a complex bundle of contradiction and irony, but its historic importance and intellectual fascination are undoubted.

[Slide] When addressing the final part of the lecture, the question of the relevance of Lenin and Leninism today, I want to begin with a brief outline of opinions on Lenin and Leninism in Russia.

[Click] According to an opinion poll conducted in Russia by the respected Levada Centre in early 2016, 53% of respondents considered that, overall, Lenin played a positive role in Russian history (13% considered his role to be 'wholly positive'), although the reasons for this are not entirely clear. Roughly the same percentage of respondents (56%) regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁸ [C] When we look at the approach of Russia's political elite to the centenary of 1917, and to Lenin specifically, then we see a complex and not entirely coherent message, although what is striking is hostility to the very idea of revolution. The message from President Putin and the Russian government is that social divisions that can result in and arise from revolutions could prove fatal for Russia, that Russia has had enough of revolution, and that Russia needs a strong state. There is recognition that the revolutions of 1917 were motivated by ideals of justice. For the most part, however, Russia's political leaders want to stress the supposed continuity of a strong state through Russia's history. This has led to an interesting ambiguity towards Lenin amongst the political elite. On the one hand, Leninism as an ideology of revolution is firmly associated with social division and class struggle, and with undermining and 'smashing' existing states, precisely what Russia's elite is opposed to. Putin last year criticised Lenin for, as he put it, placing 'an atomic bomb' under the Russian state by supporting a policy of national autonomy with the right to leave, within the structure of the USSR. On the other hand, the imperial Russian state collapsed of its own accord in 1917, but Lenin and the Bolsheviks restored a state - albeit in Soviet guise - that encompassed much of the former Russian empire. In other words, for Russia's political elite,

²⁸ 'Bol'she polovinyi Rossian sozhaleiut o respade SSSR,' 19 April 2016, available at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/19/bolshe-poloviny-rossiyan-sozhaleyut-o-raspade-sssr/> Accessed 16 April 2017.

Leninism was destructive and there is little of use in the substance of Lenin's thought, but it served a useful role, nonetheless, in helping to reconstitute a strong Russian state.²⁹

[Slide] What can we say about Lenin and Leninism from our perspective 100 years later? Is there any use for Leninism in our own time? In recent years, several parts of the world have witnessed something like a crisis in liberal democracy. The politics of consensus around parties of the centre have been undermined. The shortcomings of globalized, neoliberal capitalism have been demonstrated by the financial crash at the end of the last decade, and by events such as Britain's decision to leave the European Union. It is no wonder that intellectuals on the far Left have responded to the centenary of 1917 by suggesting that the political Left needs to re-capture the spirit of 1917, and that both the Revolution and Leninism should be considered 'unfinished.'³⁰ Even before the crash of 2008, some far Left intellectuals were suggesting the benefits of 'reloading' Lenin [Slide]. The idea is not simply to repeat Leninism, but to be inspired by it when confronting the political realities of today.³¹ In 2017, it has become almost commonplace to point to Lenin's relevance, and not just on the Left. The *Economist* magazine columnist Adrian Wooldridge last year bemoaned the fact that, as he put it [Slide], 'Bolshiness is back.'³²

However, there are problems, I think, with the ways in which Lenin's relevance is being discussed. The subtitle of Wooldridge's article reads: 'the similarities to the world that produced the Russian revolution are too close for comfort.' Victor Sebestyen tells us that 'Lenin would very probably have regarded the world of 2017 as being on the cusp of a revolutionary moment.'³³ In reality, there are few indicators today that revolutions are imminent in economically advanced parts of the world, at least not anti-capitalist revolutions. A more accurate observation is to be found in this year's volume of the British *Socialist Register*, that 'our times cry out for the need to transcend capitalist oppression, exploitation, and degradation [but] Revolution's current capacities and claims, associated with 1917 [...] have seldom been held in disregard by so many, including a considerable section of the ostensible left.'³⁴ Socialism, as we know, is also held in disregard by

²⁹ This paragraph is derived from James Ryan, 'The Politics of National History: Russia and the Centenary of Revolutions,' available at: <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/russia/the-politics-of-national-history-russia-and-the-centenary-of-revolutions/> Accessed 18 April 2017.

³⁰ See, for examples, Paul Le Blanc, *Unfinished Leninism: The Rise and Return of a Revolutionary Doctrine*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014, and Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster, 'The Distinctive Heritage of 1917: Resuscitating Lenin's *Longue Duree*,' in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (eds), *Socialist Register 2017: Rethinking Revolution*, London: Merlin Press, 2016, pp.30-1.

³¹ Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Zizek (eds), *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007, p.3; see also Le Blanc, *Unfinished Leninism*, pp.185-6.

³² Adrian Wooldridge, 'Bolshiness is back,' available at <http://www.theworldin.com/edition/2017/article/12579/bolshiness-back> Accessed 20 April 2017.

³³ Sebestyen, *Lenin the Dictator*, p.2.

³⁴ Palmer and Sangster, 'The Distinctive Heritage,' p.1.

very many, but what is crucial for understanding 1917 is that, first, the context was a devastating and ‘total’ war that resulted in state failure and the collapse of four empires, and second, Russia at the beginning of 1917 was ruled by an essentially uncompromising autocrat. In short, economically advanced parts of the world today, and Russia, are very different to what they were in 1917.

The main problem that I see with the notion of Leninism’s relevance, though, is how this is presented by some intellectuals of the far Left. The Left intellectuals that I have been reading typically acknowledge that there are problems with Leninism’s legacy, and that Lenin made mistakes.³⁵ However, there is a lack of clarity about those mistakes, often a lack of clarity regarding what it is about Leninism that ought to be revived, and usually an inability to acknowledge that the major problems in Soviet history were effectively put in place under the leadership of Lenin, Trotskii, and others. If we adopt a properly historical understanding of Leninism, and see what it looked like in practice, then I think the evidence is that Leninism does not work as an approach to creating a better world, and should not be tried again. I think the Left ought largely to remove itself from the long shadow of Leninism, and from the consequences of the Russian Revolution, however inspirational the hopes and optimism of 1917.

Nonetheless, although I think much of the substance of Leninism is either not relevant or not desirable today, I think our approach to Leninism ought to be more complicated than that. In our own age of politics as the realm of cynicism, sound-bites, and distrust, when our mainstream media often struggle to conceptualise political issues more deeply than the short-term, the trivial, and the personal, I think there are things to be learned from Leninism. On a more personal note, the years that I have spent reading Lenin and Leninism have been central to my political awareness and education, as well as my development as a historian. I have learned especially the importance of looking beneath the surface of the political, and to see deeper structures of power and meaning at play. I have admired Lenin’s steadfast convictions, and his passionate advocacy of a better world, however misconceived. In particular, I have admired his principled opposition to the First World War, when socialists in Europe all-too-easily resorted to support for their own national war efforts. Our world today continues to be riven by problems of massive inequalities, excessive corporate power and corruption, military strength and warfare, and the more recently prominent problems of climate and environmental sustainability. Leninism was an ideology of partisanship and sectarianism, of absolute conviction in what it took to be truth, and of the importance of principled and steadfast political leadership. Soviet history teaches us the potential dangers of all

³⁵ See, for example, Panitch and Albo (eds), *Socialist Register 2017*, p.ix.

that, but it should not necessarily invalidate a politics of principled conviction, even of truth. That is needed today as much as a century ago, and perhaps even more.

In this lecture, I have tried to bring out the complexities and contradictions of Lenin and Leninism, and I would like to conclude on a suitable note. Is Leninism relevant today? My answer is: not really, but yes, actually it is!