One Hundred and Fifty Years Since the Birth of Lenin

By David North
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Today marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in the Russian city of Simbirsk on April 22, 1870. Known in history under the name of Lenin, he was the founder of the Bolshevik Party, leader of the 1917 October Revolution and, undoubtedly, a towering figure in the political and intellectual history of the twentieth century.

Leon Trotsky once wrote that all of Lenin is summed up in the October Revolution. Trotsky illuminated the meaning of his observation when he wrote, in his history of the events of 1917: "Besides the factories, barracks, villages, the front and the soviets, the revolution had another laboratory: the brain of Lenin."

This brain had been at work on the problem of revolution for decades. The conquest of power by the Russian working class in October 1917 marked the intersection of two world historical processes: 1) the development of the contradictions of Russian and world capitalism; and 2) Lenin's protracted struggle, based on a philosophical materialist, i.e., Marxist, analysis of objective socio-economic conditions, to build the revolutionary socialist party necessary for the working class to establish its independence from all the political agencies of the bourgeoisie.

Attempting to describe the genius and unique historical role of Lenin, it can be said that there is not another figure in the history of the socialist movement, apart from Marx and Engels, in whose political work the relationship between the conscious application of philosophical materialism—enriched by the latest developments in natural science (especially physics)—and the development of political analysis and revolutionary strategy, achieved such explicit, systematic and internally unified expression.

The most striking characteristic of Lenin's theoretical-political work was its concentrated effort, spanning decades, to raise the class consciousness of the working class and, thereby, enable the alignment of its practice with objective socio-economic necessity. Bourgeois moralists, innumerable academics, and other enemies of Leninism have frequently denounced the great revolutionary's "ruthlessness." But they misuse the word. The political essence of Lenin's "ruthlessness" was, to quote Trotsky again, the highest qualitative and quantitative appreciation of reality, from the standpoint of revolutionary action."

It is worth noting that among Lenin's earliest writings, titled *What the "Friends of the People" Are and How they Fight the Social Democrats* (written in 1894 and published in Volume One of his *Collected Works*), was a passionate defense of philosophical materialism, in which he opposed the "subjective sociology" of the populist theoretician, Nikolai Mikhailovsky. Lenin wrote that the materialist position—that "the course of ideas depends on the course of things is the only one compatible with scientific psychology." Lenin continued:

> Hitherto, sociologists had found it difficult to distinguish the important and unimportant in the complex network of social phenomena (that is the root of subjectivism in sociology) and had been unable to discover any objective criterion for such a demarcation. Materialism provided an absolutely objective criterion by singling out "production relations" as the structure of society, and making it possible to apply to these relations that general scientific criterion of recurrence whose applicability to sociology the subjectivists denied. [*Collected Works,* Vol. 1, p. 140]

Underlying Lenin's defense of materialism were decisive questions of political perspective and strategy: to what social force should the work of the socialist movement be oriented? To the peasantry or the working class?

Lenin's insistence on a rigorous analysis of objective socio-economic processes had nothing in common with political passivity, in which the socialist had merely to wait on history to take its course. Lenin contrasted materialism to objectivism. In a further attack on populism, written in 1894-95, Lenin wrote:

> The objectivist speaks of the necessity of a given historical process; the materialist gives an exact picture of the given social-economic formation and of the antagonistic relations to which it gives rise. When demonstrating the necessity for a given series of facts, the objectivist always runs the risk of becoming an apologist for these facts: the materialist discloses the class contradictions and in so doing defines his standpoint. The objectivist speaks of "insurmountable historical tendencies"; the materialist speaks of the class which "directs" the given economic system, giving rise to such and such forms of counteraction by other classes. Thus, on the one hand, the materialist is more consistent than the objectivist, and gives profounder and fuller effect to his objectivism. He does not limit himself to speaking of the necessity of a process, but ascertains exactly what social-economic formation gives the process its content, *exactly what class* determines this necessity … [M]aterialism includes partisanship, so to speak, and enjoins the direct and open adoption of the standpoint of a definite social group in any assessment of events. [*Collected Works*, Vol, 1, pp. 400-01]

This passage was written in response to Pyotr Stuve, the "Legal Marxist" and future leader of Russian bourgeois liberals. But it also anticipated Lenin's struggle, a decade later, against the Menshevik tendency, which required the acceptance by the working class of the political leadership of the capitalist class in a future bourgeois democratic revolution.

Lenin was arrested in 1895 by the Tsarist police, and was to spend the next five years in prison and Siberian exile. These were valuable years of

intense theoretical work, which included his study of the Hegelian philosophy and his engagement with and eventual mastery of dialectics.

Lenin's term of exile ended in 1900 and he soon made his way to Western Europe, where he began, despite a difficult initial encounter, a close collaboration with the "Father of Russian Marxism," G. V. Plekhanov.

By the turn of the century, the European Social Democratic movement was confronted with a revisionist challenge, led by Eduard Bernstein, to Marxism. Politically, revisionism sought to replace the program of socialist revolution with bourgeois labor reformism. Theoretically, it advanced the idealist philosophy of academic neo-Kantianism in opposition to dialectical materialism.

It is especially significant, in the light of the subsequent development of the European social democratic movement between 1898 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, that the most important contributions to the theoretical and political fight against revisionism were made, not by the German social democrats, but by the Polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg, and the two major figures in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party [RSDLP], Plekhanov and Lenin.

Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution* was a devastating exposure of the political consequences of Bernstein's revisionism. Plekhanov's critique of the neo-Kantian revisionism of Bernstein and his supporters remains, to this day, among the most brilliant expositions of historical development and theoretical methodology of dialectical materialism.

However, it was Lenin's contribution to the struggle against revisionism and opportunism, *What Is To Be Done?*, that proved to be the most theoretically acute and politically far-sighted. With greater depth and consistency than any other Marxist of his time, including Kautsky, Lenin revealed and explained the objective significance and political implications of the belittling of Marxist theory.

Moreover, Lenin demonstrated the inextricable connection between the struggle against the influence of opportunism in all its diverse forms—theoretical, political and organizational—and the building of the revolutionary party and the establishment of the political independence of the working class.

Denouncing as opportunist all tendencies that downplayed the significance of the explicit struggle for the development of socialist consciousness and, instead, glorified the spontaneous development (i.e., without the intervention of Marxists) of the consciousness and practice of the working class, Lenin wrote:

> Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is—either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a "third" ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk about spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology. [*Collected Works,* Vol. 5, p. 384]

Drawing a sharp contrast between socialist consciousness and trade unionism, which he defined as the bourgeois ideology of the working class, Lenin wrote:

> Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy. [Ibid, pp. 384-85]

What Is To Be Done? was published in 1902. But it was not until 1903, at the Second Congress of the RSDLP, that the far-sightedness of Lenin's analysis of the political implications of the struggle against opportunism was substantiated. The split that occurred at the Second Congress—ostensibly over a "minor" difference over the definition of party membership, which gave rise to the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions—was initially seen by many delegates as an unnecessary and even malign disruption of party unity, caused by Lenin's excessive factionalism.

Lenin's answer to this accusation was to undertake a detailed analysis of the proceedings of the Second Congress, which spanned 37 sessions held over a period of three weeks. This analysis, which was published under the title *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*, demonstrated that the Menshevik faction was a manifestation, within the Russian socialist movement, of politically opportunist tendencies—inclining toward compromise and conciliation with the liberal and reformist parties of the bourgeoisie—that had developed in Social Democratic parties throughout Europe.

Subsequent developments in Russia, particularly during and in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, substantiated Lenin's analysis of the class character and democratic-liberal orientation of the revisionist and opportunist tendencies. To trace, even in outline form, the evolution of the political differentiation of Bolshevik and Menshevik tendencies in the years that followed the Second Congress is necessarily beyond the scope of this commemoration of Lenin's life.

However, it must be stressed that Lenin's understanding of the "inner-party struggle" against opportunism, in all its diverse forms, was profoundly different from that which generally prevailed throughout the Second International. Lenin analyzed conflicts over matters of program, tactics, organization and program as manifestations, within parties and factions, of objective divisions within society. Such divisions were not to be seen as distractions from the socialist movement's engagement in the class struggle, but as an essential and unavoidable element of that struggle.

Striving to uncover the socio-economic processes underlying to development of the struggle between tendencies, Lenin saw opportunism as the manifestation of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois interests and pressure upon the revolutionary vanguard. The appropriate response to such pressure, in whatever form it exerted itself, was not to seek accommodation and compromise. Opportunism was not, in Lenin's view, a legitimate part of the workers' movement. It was, rather, a debilitating, demoralizing and reactionary force, working to divert the working class away from the program of social revolution and toward capitulation to the bourgeoisie.

It was this uncompromisingly hostile attitude toward opportunism that distinguished Bolshevism from all other political parties and tendencies within the Second International prior to the outbreak of World War I.

The world historical significance of the struggle that Lenin had waged against opportunism was substantiated in 1914. Almost overnight, the leading parties of the Second International abandoned the pledges they had made to uphold the solidarity of the international working class and capitulated to the ruling classes in their countries. Lenin's opposition to the betrayal of the Second International, and call for the building of a Third International, elevated him and the Bolshevik Party to the forefront of the world socialist movement.

The outstanding features of Lenin's response to the collapse of the Second International were first, that he demonstrated the connection

between the betrayal of August 1914 and the antecedent development of revisionism and opportunism in the Social Democratic parties. Second, Lenin demonstrated that the growth of opportunism was not to be explained in terms of personal treachery (though treachery there certainly was), but in powerful socio-economic tendencies arising out of the development of imperialism in the final years of the nineteenth century and the first decade and a half of the twentieth. In a series of brilliant theoretical works—above all, the monumental *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*—Lenin provided a comprehensive analysis of the economic essence of imperialism, its place in the history of capitalism, its role in the growth if opportunism and the general corruption of the labor organizations affiliated with the Second International, and, finally, its relationship to the development of world socialist revolution.

In a concise summation of his work on the causes and significance of the war, titled *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, Lenin wrote:

> Imperialism is a specific historical stage of capitalism. Its specific character is threefold: imperialism is monopoly capitalism; parasitic, or decaying capitalism; moribund capitalism. The supplanting of free competition by monopoly is the fundamental economic feature, the *quintessence* of imperialism. Monopoly manifests itself in five principal forms: (1) cartels, syndicates and trusts—the concentration of production has reached a degree which gives rise to these monopolistic associations of capitalists; (2) the monopolistic position of the big banks—three, four or five giant banks manipulate the whole economic life of America, France, Germany; (3) seizure of the sources of *raw material* by the trusts and the financial oligarchy (finance capital is monopoly industrial capital merged with bank capital); (4) the (economic) partition of the world by the international cartels has *begun*. There are already over *one hundred* such international cartels, which command the *entire* world market and divide it "amicably" among themselves—until war *re*divides it. The export of capital, as distinct from the export of commodities under non-monopoly capitalism, is a highly characteristic phenomenon and is closely linked with the economic and territorial-political partition of the world; (5) the territorial partition of the world (colonies) is *completed*. [*Collected Works*, Vol. 23, P. 195]

Lenin called attention to several critical political characteristics of the imperialist epoch.

> The difference between the democratic-republican and the reactionary-monarchist imperialist bourgeoisie is obliterated precisely because they are both rotting alive … Secondly, the decay of capitalism is manifested in the creation of a huge stratum of rentiers, capitalists who live by "clipping coupons". … Thirdly, export of capital is parasitism raised to a high pitch. Fourthly, "finance capital strives for domination, not freedom". Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism. Corruption, bribery on a huge scale and all kinds of fraud. Fifthly, the exploitation of oppressed nations—which is inseparably connected with annexations—and especially the exploitation of colonies by a handful of "Great" Powers, increasingly transforms the "civilised" world into a parasite on the body of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations. The Roman proletarian lived at the expense of society. Modern society lives at the expense of the modern proletarian. Marx specially stressed this profound observation of Sismondi. Imperialism somewhat changes the situation. A privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations. [Ibid, pp. 106-07]

For all the developments in the global economy over the past century, Lenin's analysis of both the economic and political characteristics of imperialism retains immense contemporary relevance. A passage which resonates with exceptional force in the present period calls upon socialists "to go down *lower* and *deeper*, to the real masses; this is the whole meaning and the whole purport of the struggle against opportunism. [Ibid, p. 120]

Imperialism and the Split in Socialism was written in October 1916. Lenin was living in Zurich, which served as his political headquarters as he provided political leadership for the revolutionary internationalist opposition to the war. In January 1917, Lenin delivered a lecture commemorating the twelfth anniversary of the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution. He said:

> We must not be deceived by the present grave-like stillness in Europe. Europe is pregnant with revolution. The monstrous horrors of the imperialist war, the suffering caused by the high cost of living everywhere engender a revolutionary mood; and the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie and its servitors, the governments, are more and more moving into a blind alley from which they can never extricate themselves without tremendous upheavals. [Ibid, p. 253]

Just six weeks later, the revolution anticipated by Lenin was born in the streets of Petrograd. The Tsarist regime was overthrown by a mass uprising of the working class, bringing to power a bourgeois Provisional Government, supported by the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary parties. With Lenin trapped in Zurich, the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, who were in Petrograd, principally Lev Kamenev and Josef Stalin, offered critical support to the Provisional Government and to the continuation of Russia's participation in the World War.

Lenin dispatched "Letters from Afar" to Petrograd, in which he made clear his opposition to the Provisional Government. But it was not until he managed to return to Russia, aboard a "sealed train" in April, that Lenin was able to initiate the political struggle that brought about a fundamental change in the program and strategic orientation of the Bolshevik Party and set it on the course that led to the conquest of power in October 1917.

The struggle initiated by Lenin, immediately upon his return to Russia, represents the most politically consequential of his life. Lenin's "April Theses" repudiated the program of "the Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Peasantry" that had directed the political strategy and practice of the Bolshevik Party since the Revolution of 1905. This program had defined the struggle for the overthrow of the tsarist regime as a bourgeois democratic revolution. The Bolshevik formula insisted upon the leading role of the working class in the coming revolution, and aspired toward the destruction of all the feudal and anti-democratic remnants of the tsarist regime. But the program of the Bolsheviks did not call for the overthrow of the Russian bourgeoisie and the elimination of capitalist property relations.

Moreover, the programmatic formulation of the Bolsheviks—defining the new revolutionary regime as a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry"—imparted a significant degree of ambiguity regarding the precise nature of the state power that was to emerge from the overthrow of the tsarist regime.

In the years between 1905 and 1917, the most comprehensive leftwing critique of the Bolshevik program of the democratic dictatorship was that advanced by Leon Trotsky. His theory of permanent revolution envisaged

the overthrow of tsarism as leading, more or less rapidly, to the conquest of power by the working class. Notwithstanding the economic backwardness of Russia, the global development of capitalism and imperialist geopolitics foreclosed the possibility of the development of the Russian Revolution along bourgeois democratic and capitalist lines, as had been traditionally anticipated by Marxists. The Russian revolution would place before the working class the task of overthrowing the bourgeoisie and taking power in its own hands. Viewing the Russian Revolution as the opening of the world socialist revolution, Trotsky insisted that the survival of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia would depend upon the overthrow of capitalism by the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, above all, in Germany.

Prior to 1914, Lenin had discounted Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution as "absurdly left." However, it is undoubtedly the case that the outbreak of the world war led Lenin to reevaluate the old Bolshevik formula and reconsider his attitude toward Trotsky's program. This was not a case of political plagiarism. Lenin arrived at conclusions very close to those of Trotsky, if not entirely identical, as a consequence of his own analysis of the global economic and political dynamic of the world war. Immensely principled in his approach to politics, Lenin recognized the need to change the party program. In the course of a political struggle that extended over several weeks, he was able to reorient the Bolshevik Party and set it on a course that led to the conquest of political power in October.

There is one further episode in the drama of 1917 that testifies to the extraordinary link between theory and practice in the work of Lenin. In the aftermath of the defeat suffered by the Petrograd working class during the July Days, the eruption of counterrevolution forced Lenin into hiding. Under the most difficult of political conditions, with his life in constant danger, Lenin prepared for the renewal of the struggle for power by writing *The State and Revolution*. Lenin's conception of how the Marxist party prepared itself and the working class for great political tasks finds characteristic expression in his preface to this remarkable work, whose significance has not been diminished even by the passage of a century.

> The struggle to free the working people from the influence of the bourgeoisie in general, and of the imperialist bourgeoisie in particular, is impossible without a struggle against opportunist prejudices concerning the "state". …
>
> The question of the relation of the socialist proletarian revolution to the state, therefore, is acquiring not only practical political importance, but also the significance of a most urgent problem of the day, the problem of explaining to the masses what they will have to do before long to free themselves from capitalist tyranny. [*Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 388]

The seizure of power by the Russian working class, led by the Bolshevik Party, took place on October 25-26. In his account of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, John Reed witnessed Lenin's triumphant entry into the Petrograd Soviet, and wrote this evocative description of the great revolutionary leader. "Dressed in shabby clothes, his trousers much too long for him. Unimpressive, to be the idol of a mob, loved and revered as perhaps few leaders in history have been. A strange popular leader—a leader purely by virtue of intellect; colorless, humorless, uncompromising and detached, without picturesque idiosyncrasies—but with the power of explaining profound ideas in simple terms, of analyzing a concrete situation. And combined with shrewdness, the greatest intellectual audacity."

One can legitimately dispute Reed's description of Lenin as "colorless" and "humorless." There are many accounts of Lenin's personality that provide ample evidence of the qualities that Reed did not notice on the day when the Bolshevik Party leader was entirely absorbed with the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the establishment of a revolutionary government. But Reed's characterization of Lenin as "a leader purely by virtue of intellect" is, apart from a certain one-sidedness, justified. Lenin represented a new type of political leader, who sought to base the program and practice of his party and the working class on a scientific understanding of objective reality.

The problem of establishing the proper alignment of theory and practice was a central preoccupation of Lenin's entire political life. "The highest task of humanity," Lenin wrote in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, "is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one's social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as possible." [*Collected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 325]

Fifty years ago, in 1970, the centenary of Lenin's birth was the occasion for countless meetings, seminars, symposiums, demonstrations and rallies, at which his life was celebrated. But for the most part, these events were devoted to falsifying his political work. All traces of his close collaboration with Trotsky had to be obliterated. Lenin, who had waged a life-long war against capitalism, had to be transformed into an advocate of the parliamentary road to socialism and peaceful coexistence between classes. The Soviet Union still existed and the ruling bureaucracy dispensed vast resources to promote a version of Lenin's life compatible with the needs of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy.

Having consigned his mummified body to a mausoleum, the Kremlin imposters attempted to present themselves as the legitimate heirs of the great revolutionary. In fact, the Kremlin officials, who stood atop the mausoleum in Red Square to celebrate the centenary, were the heirs of Stalin, the counterrevolutionary criminal, and the beneficiaries of the betrayal of the principles and program of the October Revolution.

Lenin, in the opening chapter of *The State and Revolution*, had anticipated his own fate. "During the lifetime of great revolutionaries," he wrote, "the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* to a certain extent for the "consolation" of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it." [*Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 390]

But now, as we mark the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth, history has come full circle. In the midst of unprecedented global crisis, the legacy of the real Lenin—which was defended by the Trotskyist movement—will once again educate and inspire a new generation of revolutionary workers and youth.