LEIN: ANATOMY OF A REVOLUTIONARY

1870 Born
1897 Exiled to Siberia
1900 Fleed to western Europe
1902 What Is to Be Done?, Lenin’s first book
1905 Revolution of 1905
1917 Returned to Petrograd
1918 Russian surrender to Germany at Brest-Litovsk
1924 Died

The factual outline of Lenin’s biography is well known. He was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in 1870, the son of a superintendent of public schools for the province of Simbirsk on the Volga and a member of the lesser nobility that provided most of the minor officialdom of Czarist Russia. Vladimir was a bright student. After high school, he went to study law at the regional university of Kazan. His political activities and growing radicalism led to his arrest, and for a year he was under police surveillance. He was soon arrested again, however, and in 1897 was exiled to Siberia. During his exile, he turned away from the tradition of populism, as the native Russian radicalism was called, and became an ardent Marxist. Later, he was to be the principal force in the unlikely task of applying the doctrines of Marx to vast peasant Russia.

Returning from exile in 1900, Lenin fled Russia for western Europe. It was at this time that he began writing under the name Lenin. He became active in the underground of radical émigrés and exiles; published a shoestring newspaper, Iskra (The Spark); and began to build a group of disciples who would become the inner circle of his revolutionary party. In 1902 he wrote his first major prescription for revolution, a book entitled What Is to Be Done? The following year he seized the leadership of the majority of delegates—the Bolsheviks—to the conventions of the tiny, splintered Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, meeting in London and Brussels. He hurried back to
Russia when the Revolution of 1905 broke out. But the Revolution failed, and Lenin returned to his self-imposed exile in the West. When World War I came, he watched anxiously from Geneva as revolution again broke out in Russia under the stress of war.

Lenin was soon approached by the German government. Would he and his radical followers return to Russia under German safe conduct? The Germans, of course, hoped that Lenin would further radicalize the revolution already under way in Russia, paralyze the government, and destroy military resistance. Lenin agreed, and, in what is surely one of the most bizarre incidents in modern history, Lenin and his party were put aboard a train, granted extraterritorial rights to pass through Germany, and shipped across Germany to the Baltic and to Petrograd. They arrived at the Finland Station in mid-April 1917.

Lenin quickly became involved in the Revolution and soon was its leading figure. By November he had organized his faction and driven the hopeless Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky out of power. After the fall of Kerensky, Lenin was elected chairman of the new Council of People’s Commissars. He was now, in fact, the head of a new state, ready to implement his theoretical ideas by direct political action. “Not a single problem of the class struggle has ever been solved in history except by violence,” he told the third All-Russian Congress of Soviets on January 24, 1918.

Lenin had already made the bold and controversial decision to take Russia out of “the imperialist World War,” not to please the Germans—though it did—but to preserve his revolution and to save his country from sure defeat. The war had been useful as a “powerful accelerator to overturn the filthy and bloodstained cart of the Romanov monarchy,”¹ but it served no further useful purpose. Lenin accepted the German peace terms at Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918. He called it not so much a surrender as a “compromise” with the “bandits of German imperialism,” which would enable the imperialists to do whatever they wished while he and his comrades consolidated their revolution.²

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk, however, did not signify the end of war for the Russians. Between the collapse of the old Czarist government and a secure new revolutionary government lay years of civil war and invasion by Russia’s former allies, outraged at the surrender at Brest-Litovsk and frightened by the apparent success of the Revolution. Lenin later recalled, “Our Red Army did not exist at the beginning of the war. . . . Nevertheless, we conquered in the struggle against the world-mighty Entente” and did so with “the alliance between the peasants and the workers, under the leadership of the

²Ibid., X, 75–76.
proletarian state.” They indeed did conquer, and by the early 1920s modern Soviet Russia was a reality. Lenin had worked ruthlessly and tirelessly. In 1918 he had been seriously wounded in an assassination attempt from which he never fully recovered. Then in 1922 he suffered a stroke, followed by another that partially paralyzed him. In 1924 he died.

Lenin was the most famous figure in Russia and one of the most famous in the world. The picture of the Father of the Revolution looked benignly down from giant posters over Red Square, and countless photographs of him appeared in the Western press. But the man behind the picture was almost unknown—in Russia as well as in the West. Lenin was obsessively secretive about himself. In all his vast collected works, in page after page of mind-boggling theories and bitter polemics, there are no more than a handful of brusque personal anecdotes. When his friends inquired too closely into aspects of his personal life, his tastes, his likes and dislikes, he shoved their questions aside as “trivial” and “unimportant.” The cause, the work, the Revolution—these were the things that mattered.

(In the post-Soviet period of modern Russian history, Leninism and especially Stalinism are gone, and détente between Russia and the West is the leading feature. Nevertheless, Leninism and Lenin’s theories and accomplishments stand as important components in the history of modern Russia.)

It became almost an obsession with those closest to Lenin to penetrate the “secret corner of his life,” that “special room completely to himself,” as Lenin called it, in order to understand Lenin the man and to know what made and moved Lenin the leader and revolutionary. His friend the historian M. N. Pokrovsky found the key to Lenin “his tremendous political courage.” “Among revolutionaries,” Pokrovsky wrote, “there has been no lack of brave people unafraid of the rope and the gallows or of Siberia. But these people were afraid of taking upon themselves the burden of great political decisions.” Not so Lenin, “no matter how weighty the decisions.” The novelist Maxim Gorky asked a friend “what, in his opinion, was Lenin’s outstanding feature. ‘Simplicity! He’s as simple as the truth,’ he answered without hesitation, as though reiterating a long established fact.” Lenin was not simple, of course, and Gorky did not find him so. On the other hand, he never did

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3Ibid., IX, 246.
succeed in identifying to his own satisfaction Lenin's "outstanding feature."

At least two others succeeded somewhat better. And they also isolated what they regarded as the causes that moved Lenin to be the person he was.

We turn now to the first of these, Leon Trotsky.
Like Lenin, Trotsky was both a radical revolutionary intellectual and an exile. He opposed Lenin in the split of the Russian Social-Democratic Congress in 1903 and took a middle position between Lenin’s Bolsheviks and the Menshevik “minority.” Unlike Lenin, Trotsky was one of the heroes of the unsuccessful Revolution of 1905, after which he was imprisoned. In the successful Revolution of 1917, however, he joined forces with Lenin, and his brilliance, audacity, and organizational ability contributed mightily to its success.

In the power struggle following Lenin’s death, Trotsky lost out to Stalin and in 1929 was exiled from Russia. Finally, in 1940, he was assassinated in Mexico, allegedly by Stalinist agents. While in exile, as earlier, Trotsky was a prolific writer, and he continued both his struggle against Stalin and his self-justification in his many books and articles. But he often came back to the subject of Lenin and wrote about him extensively; for example, in his My Life (1930) and his three-volume History of the Russian Revolution (1936). In many ways, the most interesting of Trotsky’s works on Lenin is The Young Lenin, from which the following selection is taken. The book was written in the early 1930s as the first of two volumes on Lenin’s life. The second volume was never finished, delayed by other projects and ultimately by Trotsky’s death. The work as it stood was translated by the American journalist and publicist Max Eastman, who had translated Trotsky’s other works. Then the manuscript was lost, and it did not turn up again until the late 1960s. The Young Lenin was at last published in 1972, almost forty years after it was written.

More interesting than the curious history of the manuscript is the book’s insightful treatment of Lenin’s early years, very nearly unique among the memoirs and recollections of other Lenin intimates—including the Reminiscences of Lenin’s wife, which reveal almost nothing about him. Especially intriguing is the importance Trotsky attaches to a series of tragic incidents that occurred at the end of Lenin’s adolescence. Trotsky finds in these tragedies of Lenin the boy the key to understanding Lenin the man—and the revolutionary.

“Happy families are all alike,” says Tolstoy. “Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” The Ulyanov family had lived a happy life for almost twenty-three years, and been like other harmonious and fortunate families. In 1886 the first blow fell, the death of the father. But misfortunes never come singly. Others followed swiftly: the execution of Alexander, the arrest of Anna. And beyond these there were more, and still more, misfortunes to come. Henceforth everybody, both strangers and intimates, began to consider the Ulyanovs an un-
happy family. And they had truly become unhappy, though in their
own way. . . .

When Ilya Nikolayevich had completed twenty-five years of ser-
vice, the ministry retained him for but one supplementary year, and
not five as was usual with important government officials. . . . In
1884, simultaneously with the new university constitution, new rules
were issued for parish schools. Ilya Nikolayevich was opposed to this
reform—not out of hostility to the church, of course, for he zealously
saw to it that religion was regularly taught in zemstvo schools—but out
of loyalty to the cause of education. As the winds of reaction grew
strong, the Simbirsk superintendent of public schools, by the very fact
that he felt concerned for the cause of literacy, willy-nilly found him-
self opposing the new course. What had formerly been considered his
merit had now, it seemed, become a fault. He was compelled to retreat
and adapt himself. His whole life’s work was under attack. When an
occasion presented itself, Ilya Nikolayevich was not averse to pointing
out to his older children the disastrous consequences of revolutionary
struggle, and how instead of progress it produced reaction. This was
the mood of the majority of peaceful educators of the time.

A Simbirsk landowner, Nazaryev, in sending in his regular dispatch
to the editor of the liberal journal Vestnik Yevropy, wrote to him confiden-
tially about Ulyanov: “He is not in the good graces of the ministry,
and is far from doing well.” Ilya Nikolayevich took to heart the gov-
ernment’s attack upon the elementary schools, although he obeyed
the new policy. His former buoyancy had vanished. His last years
were poisoned with uncertainty and anxiety. He fell sick suddenly in
January 1886, while preparing his annual report. Alexander was in
Petersburg, wholly immersed in his zoology term paper. Vladimir,
only a year and a half away from high-school graduation, must have
been thinking already about the university. Anna was at home for the
Christmas holidays. Neither the family nor the physician took Ilya
Nikolayevich’s illness seriously. He continued to work on his report.
His daughter sat reading some papers to him until she noticed that
her father was becoming delirious. The next morning, the twelfth,
the sick man did not come to the table, but only came to the dining
room door, and looked in—“as though he had come to say good-by,”
remembered Maria Alexandrovna. At five o’clock the mother, in
alarm, called Anna and Vladimir. Ilya Nikolayevich lay dying on the
sofa which served him for a bed. The children saw their father shud-
der twice and go still forever. He was not yet fifty-five years old. The
physician described the cause of his death—“hypothetically although
with overwhelming probability,” to quote his own words—as a cere-
bral hemorrhage. Thus the first heavy blow fell upon the Ulyanov
family. . . .

Anna remained in Simbirsk for a time in order to be near her
mother. It was at that time that the elder sister and Vladimir grew
close to each other. The winter walks together date from that time, and the long conversations in which her brother revealed himself to her as a rebel and nonconformist, the embodiment of protest—so far, however, only in relation to “high-school authorities, high-school studies, and also to religion.” During the recent summer vacation, these moods had not yet existed.

The death of the father had suddenly destroyed the lulling flow of life in a family whose well-being had seemed sure to go on indefinitely. How can we avoid assuming that it was this blow that imparted a new critical direction to Vladimir’s thoughts? The answers of the church catechism to questions of life and death must have seemed to him wretched and humiliating, confronted with the austere truth of nature. Whether in reality he threw his cross into the garbage, or whether, as is more likely, Krzhizhanovsky’s memory converted a metaphorical expression into a physical gesture, one thing is beyond doubt: Vladimir must have broken with religion abruptly, without long hesitation, without attempts at an eclectic reconciliation of truths with lies, with that youthful courage which was here for the first time spreading its wings.

Alexander was staying up nights engrossed in his work when the unexpected news came of his father’s death. “For several days he dropped everything,” relates a fellow student at the university, “pacing his room from corner to corner as though wounded.” But wholly in the spirit of the family, in which strong feelings went hand in hand with discipline, Alexander did not leave the university, and did not hasten to Simbirsk. He pulled himself together and went back to work. After a few weeks his mother received a letter, brief as always: “I have received a gold medal for my zoological study of annelids.” Maria Alexandrovna wept with joy for her son and with grief for her husband.

... Life was beginning to move again in its new, narrower channel, when a totally unexpected blow, and a double blow at that, descended upon the family: both son and daughter were involved in a trial for an attempted assassination of the tsar. It was dreadful even to breathe those words!

Anna was arrested on March 1 in her brother’s room, which she had entered while a search was in progress. Shrouded in dreadful uncertainty, the girl was locked up in prison in connection with a case in which she had no part. This, then, is what Sasha was busy with! They had grown up side by side, played together in their father’s study with sealing wax and magnets, often fallen asleep together to their mother’s music, studied together in Petersburg—and yet how little she knew him! The older Sasha grew, the more he withdrew from his sister. Anna remembered bitterly how, when she visited him, Alexander would tear himself from his books with evident regret. He did not share his thoughts with her. Each time he heard of some new
vileness of the tsarist authorities his face would darken, and he would withdraw more deeply into himself. "A penetrating observer could have predicted even then his future course. . . ." But Anna was no penetrating observer. During the last year, Alexander had refused to share an apartment with her, explaining to his companions that he did not want to compromise his sister, who showed no desire for public activity. During that winter Anna saw Alexander with some strange objects in his hands. How far she was from the thought of bombs! . . .

A Petersburg relative of the Ulyanovs wrote of the arrest of Alexander and Anna to a former teacher of the children, asking her to prepare the mother cautiously. Narrowing his young brows, Vladimir stood silent a long time over the Petersburg letter. This lightning stroke revealed the figure of Alexander in a new light. "But this is a serious thing," he said. "It may end badly for Sasha." He evidently had no doubt of Anna's innocence. The task of preparing the mother fell to him. But she, sensing tragedy in the first words, demanded the letter, and immediately began to prepare for a journey.

There was still no railroad from Simbirsk; one had to travel by horse and wagon to Syzran. For the sake of economy and for safety on the journey, Vladimir sought a companion for his mother. But the news had already spread through the town. Everyone turned away fearfully. No one would travel with the mother of a terrorist. Vladimir never forgot this lesson. The days that followed were to mean much in the forming of his character and its direction. The youth became austere and silent, and frequently shut himself up in his room when not busy with the younger children left in his charge. So that is what he was, this tireless chemist and dissector of worms, this silent brother so near and yet so unknown! When compelled to speak with Kashkadanova of the catastrophe, he kept repeating: "It means Alexander could not have acted otherwise." The mother came back for a short time to see the children and told them of her efforts and her dream of a life sentence to hard labor for Sasha. "In that case I would go with him," she said. "The older children are big enough and I will take the younger with me." Instead of a chair at a university and scholarly glory, chains and stripes now became the chief object of the mother's hopes. . . . She was admitted to sessions of the court. In his month and a half of confinement, Alexander had grown more manly; even his voice acquired an unfamiliar impressiveness. The youth had become a man. "How well Sasha spoke—so convincingly, so eloquently." But the mother could not sit through the whole speech; that eloquence would break her heart. On the eve of the execution, still hoping, she kept repeating to her son through the double grating: "Have courage!" On May 5, on her way to an interview with her daughter, she learned from a leaflet given out on the street that Sasha was no more. The feelings that the bereaved mother brought to the
grating behind which her daughter stood are not recorded. But Maria Alexandrovna did not bend, did not fall, did not betray the secret to her daughter. To Anna’s questions about her brother, the mother answered: “Pray for Sasha.” Anna did not detect the despair behind her mother’s courage. How respectfully the prison authorities, who knew already of the execution of Alexander, admitted this severe woman in black! The daughter did not yet guess that the mourning for her father had become a mourning for her brother.

Simbirsk was fragrant with all the flowers of its orchards when news came from the capital of the hanging of Alexander Ulyanov. The family of a full state counselor, until then respected on every side, became overnight the family of an executed state criminal. Friends and acquaintances, without exception, avoided the house on Moscow Street. Even the aged schoolteacher who had so often dropped in for a game of chess with Ilya Nikolayevich no longer showed his face. Vladimir observed with a keen eye the neighbors around them, their cowardice and disloyalty. It was a precious lesson in political realism.

Anna was set free some days after the execution of her brother. Instead of sending her to Siberia, the authorities agreed to have her restricted, under police surveillance, to the village of Kokushkino, the home of her mother. . . .

What ideas and moods captivated Vladimir in the summer of 1886, on the eve of his last year at high school? In the preceding winter, according to Anna Yelizarova, he had begun “rejecting authority in the period of his first, so to speak, negative formation of personality.” But his criticisms, for all their boldness, still had limited scope. They were directed against high-school teachers, and to some extent against religion. “There was nothing definitely political in our conversations.” On her return from the capital, Vladimir did not put any questions to his sister about revolutionary organizations, illegal books, or political groupings among the students. Anna adds: “I am convinced that with our relations being what they were at that time, Volodya would not have concealed such interests from me,” had he had any. . . . Vladimir remained completely untouched politically and did not show the slightest interest in those economics books that filled Alexander’s shelf in their common room. The name of Marx meant nothing to this young man whose interests were almost exclusively in belles lettres. Moreover, he gave himself up to literature with passion. For whole days he drank in the novels of Turgenev, page by page, lying on his cot and carried away in his imagination into the realm of “superfluous people” and idealized maidens under the linden trees of aristocratic parks. Having read through to the end, he would begin all over again. His thirst was insatiable. . . .

Some years later, the Social Democrat Lalayants questioned Lenin about the affair of March 1. Lenin answered: “Alexander’s participa-
tion in a terrorist act was completely unexpected for all of us. Possibly my sister knew something—I knew nothing at all.” As a matter of fact, the sister knew nothing either. The testimony of Layants fully corroborates Anna’s story and coincides with what we know on this subject from Krupskaya’s Recollections. In explaining this fact, Krupskaya refers to the difference in their ages, which wholly destroys her own account of the closeness of the brothers. But this reference, inadequate to say the least, does not alter the fact itself. Lenin’s grief for his brother must have been colored with bitterness at the thought that Alexander had concealed from him what was deepest and most important. And with remorse over his own lack of attentiveness toward his brother and his arrogant assertions of his own independence. His childish worship of Sasha must have returned now with tenfold strength, sharpened by a feeling of guilt and a consciousness of the impossibility of making amends. His former teacher who handed him the fateful letter from Petersburg, says: “Before me sat no longer the carefree cheerful boy but a grown man buried in thought...” Vladimir went through his final high-school experiences with his teeth clenched. There exists a photograph evidently made for the high-school diploma. On the still unformed but strongly concentrated features with the arrogantly pushed-out lower lip, lay the shadow of grief and of a first deep hatred. Two deaths stood at the beginning of the new period of Vladimir’s life. The death of his father, convincing in its physiological naturalness, impelled him to a critical attitude toward the church and the religious myth. The execution of his brother awakened bitter hostility toward the hangmen. The future revolutionary had been planted in the personality of the youth and in the social conditions that formed him. But an initial impulse was needed. And this was provided by the unexpected death of his brother. The first political thoughts of Vladimir must inevitably have arisen out of a twofold need: to avenge Sasha and to refute by action Sasha’s distrust.

Lenin the Revolutionary

NIKOLAY VALENTINOV

Like Trotsky and so many of Lenin’s other early intimates, N. V. Volsky (d. 1964)—who wrote under the name of Nikolay Valentinov—was fascinated by Lenin even though they broke over philosophical disagreements while Lenin was still in exile, long before the Revolution of 1917. But Volsky’s recollections of Lenin remained vivid and became the subject of Encounters with Lenin, the
During my attempts to understand Lenin, I made some "discoveries" which agreeably surprised me (his love of nature or his attitude to Turgenev, for example), but I also made others which simply non-plussed me. I shall now describe one of these.

At the end of January 1904 I ran into Lenin, Vorovsky, and Gusev in a small café near the square of the Plaine de Plainpalais in Geneva. As I arrived later than the others I did not know how the conversation between Vorovsky and Gusev had started. I only heard Vorovsky mention some literary works which had been very successful in their day but had quickly "dated," and now aroused only boredom and indifference. I remember that he included in this category Goethe's Werther, some pieces by George Sand, Karamzin's "Poor Liza," and other Russian works, including Mordovtsev's A Sign of the Times. I butted in to say that since he had mentioned Mordovtsev, why not Chernyshevsky's What Is to Be Done? too? "One is amazed," I said, "how people could take any interest or pleasure in such a thing. It would be difficult to imagine anything more untalented, crude and, at the same time, pretentious. Most of the pages of this celebrated novel are written in unreadable language. Yet when someone told him that he lacked literary talent, Chernyshevsky answered arrogantly: 'I am no worse than those novelists who are considered great.'"

Up to this moment Lenin had been staring vacantly into space, taking no part in the conversation. But when he heard what I had just said, he sat up with such a start that the chair creaked under him. His face stiffened and he flushed around the cheek-bones—this always happened when he was angry.

"Do you realize what you are saying?" he hurled at me. "How could
such a monstrous and absurd idea come into your mind—to describe as crude and untalented a work of Chernyshevsky, the greatest and most talented representative of socialism before Marx! Marx himself called Chernyshevsky a great Russian writer.

“It wasn’t What Is to Be Done? that made Marx call him a great writer. Marx probably didn’t read the book,” I said.

“How do you know that Marx didn’t read it? I declare that it is impermissible to call What Is to Be Done? crude and untalented. Hundreds of people became revolutionaries under its influence. Could this have happened if Chernyshevsky had been untalented and crude? My brother, for example, was captivated by him, and so was I. He completely transformed my outlook. When did you read What Is to Be Done?? It is no good reading it when one is still a greenhorn. Chernyshevsky’s novel is too complex and full of ideas to be understood and appreciated at an early age. I myself started to read it when I was 14. I think this was a completely useless and superficial reading of the book. But, after the execution of my brother, I started to read it properly, as I knew that it had been one of his favourite books. I spent not days but several weeks reading it. Only then did I understand its depth. This novel provides inspiration for a lifetime: untalented books don’t have such an influence.”

“So,” Gusev asked, “it was no accident that in 1902 you called your pamphlet What Is to Be Done?”

“Is this so difficult to guess?” was Lenin’s answer.

Of the three of us I attached the least importance to Lenin’s words. On the other hand, Vorovsky became very interested. He began to ask Lenin when he had become acquainted with Chernyshevsky’s other works besides What Is to Be Done?, and, in general, which writers had had a particularly strong influence on him before he had become familiar with Marxism. Lenin did not usually speak about himself—this in itself distinguished him from most people. However, on this occasion he broke his rule, and answered Vorovsky’s question in great detail. The result was a page of autobiography which has never been recorded in print. In 1919 Vorovsky, who was chairman of the Gosizdat (State Publishing House) for a short time, wanted to reconstruct and write down what Lenin said on this occasion. . . .

Vorovsky’s reconstruction of Lenin’s words throws new light on Lenin’s intellectual and political development. I have to admit that it was only very much later that I realized this. It might have been thought that Vorovsky’s transcript would be published in the USSR, where even the most worthless scraps of paper connected with Lenin are carefully preserved. However, I have not been able to find it anywhere in the Soviet literature available to me. There is no mention of it whatsoever. What can the explanation be? The point is that Vorovsky records Lenin as saying, in his own words, that he had been “transformed” by Chernyshevsky and that such a change in people’s outlook was typical of books which are good both in content and form.
revolutionary before his introduction to Marxism. It is thus impossible, unless one gives credence to a wanton misconception, to believe that Lenin was shaped only by Marx and Marxism. By the time he came to Marxism, Lenin, under Chernyshevsky’s influence, was already forearmed with certain revolutionary ideas which provided the distinctive features of his specifically “Leninist” political make-up. All this is extremely important and sharply contradicts both the party canons and Lenin’s official biographers. It is very probable that this is the reason why Vorovsky’s transcript has not been published. . . .

. . . This is the gist of what Lenin said: “During the year that followed my banishment from Kazan, I used to read greedily from early morning till late at night. I think this was the most intensive period of reading in my whole life, not excluding my time in prison in Petersburg and my exile in Siberia. On the assumption that I might soon be permitted to return to the university, I read my university textbooks. I read a great deal of fiction, I became a great admirer of Nekrasov; what is more, my sister and I used to compete to see who could learn the greater number of Nekrasov’s poems by heart. However, I read mainly articles which had once been published in the periodicals Sovremennik (Contemporary), Otechestvennye Zapiski (Fatherland Notes), and Vesnik Evropy (Herald of Europe). These periodicals included the best and most interesting social and political writings of the previous decades. Chernyshevsky was my favorite author. I read and reread everything he had published in the Sovremennik. Chernyshevsky introduced me to philosophical materialism. It was again Chernyshevsky who first gave me an indication of Hegel’s role in the development of philosophical thought, and I got the concept of dialectical method from him; this made it much easier for me to master the dialectic of Marx later on. I read Chernyshevsky’s magnificent essays on aesthetics, art, and literature from cover to cover, and Belinsky’s revolutionary figure became clear to me. I read all Chernyshevsky’s articles on the peasant problem and his notes on the translation of Mill’s Political Economy. Chernyshevsky’s attack on bourgeois economics was a good preparation for my later study of Marx. I read with particular interest and profit Chernyshevsky’s surveys of life abroad, which were remarkable for their intellectual depth. I read him pencil in hand, and made long excerpts and abstracts of what I was reading. I kept these notes for a long time. Chernyshevsky’s encyclopedic knowledge, the brilliance of his revolutionary views, and his ruthless polemical talent captivated me. I even found out his address and wrote a letter to him; I was very pained when I did not receive any answer, and I was greatly distressed when I heard the news of his death in the following year. Chernyshevsky was hampered by the censorship and could not write freely. Many of his views could only be conjectured at; nevertheless, if one reads his articles carefully for a long time, as I did, one acquires the key to the complete decipherment of his political views, even of those which are expressed
allegorically or by means of allusions. It is said that there are musicians with perfect pitch: one could say that there are also people with perfect revolutionary flair. Marx and Chernyshevsky were such men. You can't find another Russian revolutionary who understood and condemned the cowardly, base, and perfidious nature of every kind of liberalism with such thoroughness, acumen, and force as Chernyshevsky did. In the magazines I read there may have been a few things on Marxism too—for example, Mikhailovsky’s and Zhukovsky’s articles. I can’t say with any certainty whether I read them or not. One thing is certain—they did not attract my attention until I read the first volume of Marx’s Capital and Plekhanov’s book, Our Differences, although thanks to Chernyshevsky’s articles I had begun to take an interest in economic questions, particularly in Russian rural life. This interest was prompted by essays of Vorontsov, Glep Uspensky, Engelhardt, and Skaldin. Only Chernyshevsky had a real, overpowering influence on me before I got to know the works of Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov, and it started with What Is to Be Done? Chernyshevsky not only showed that every right-thinking and really honest man must be a revolutionary, but he also showed—and this is his greatest merit—what a revolutionary must be like, what his principles must be, how he must approach his aim, and what methods he should use to achieve it. This compensates for all his shortcomings which, in fact, were not so much his fault as a consequence of the backwardness of social relations in his day. . . ."

After this conversation with Lenin, on our way back to the hotel, Gusev said laughingly:

"Ilyich could have scratched your eyes out for your disrespectful attitude to Chernyshevsky. Our old man has apparently not forgotten him to this very day. Still, I would never have believed the extent to which Chernyshevsky turned his head when he was a young man."

I found it even more difficult to believe. Lenin’s infatuation with Chernyshevsky was quite incomprehensible and bewildering to me. It seemed strange that such a dreary, tedious, and feeble book as What Is to Be Done? could “transform his whole outlook” and provide “inspiration for a lifetime.” It had never occurred to me that there was a special and hidden, yet strongly revolutionary, ideological, political, and psychological line running from Chernyshevsky’s What Is to Be Done? to Lenin’s What Is to Be Done?, and that there was more to it than the identity of titles. I had to admit that I had not understood an apparently very important part of Lenin’s way of thinking.
Both Western and Russian writers on modern Russian history have also been fascinated by Lenin, the man who, more than any other, made the most significant revolution of the modern world. The Russian general Dmitri Volkogonov is one of the most insightful of these. In his book Lenin, A New Biography, Volkogonov argues—based substantially on unpublished secret archival material—that Lenin was the real godfather of Stalinism and that he was hostile to the true interests of Russia. He ultimately pictures Lenin as a megalomaniac state terrorist. We turn now to a selection from Volkogonov’s revisionist account.

Lenin at the turn of the century was almost a typical Russian social democrat. He was the Lenin-Ulyanov who could observe Russia from abroad and create his abstract scenarios, abuse the Tsar, and send advice on how to organize revolutionary action. But he separated himself from the liberal trend in social democracy and set off on the more radical course. From the time of the 1905 revolution his attacks on the liberal intelligentsia became savage, as he saw in liberal politicians the chief obstacle to his plans. His anti-liberalism was a mark of his general antipathy to liberty as a political and moral value.

The ‘bolshevization’ of his mind then took place. It seemed as if he could not envisage himself back in Russia unless a revolution took place, yet even in January 1917 he did not believe the revolution would happen. Had it not been for the First World War and the February revolution, Lenin might have lived out his days vegetating in Zurich or Geneva. Lenin was one of the few social democrats who saw in the war an ally for his cause. It had been the chief factor of the fall of the tsarist regime, but the Provisional Government that followed did not know how to get out of it with honour. Lenin knew how to get out of it, even if there was to be no honour. He came to the conclusion that the war must be buried, even at the cost of Russia’s defeat. Indeed, he staked everything on Russia’s defeat, and went still further, calling for the war between nations to be turned into a war within nations, a civil war. This is crucially important to an understanding of Lenin: to achieve his goal he was prepared to transcend patriotism, national honour, and common humanity.

When he took control of the revolutionary government, Lenin was armed only with theoretical plans, and had never governed anyone, other than his wife. He was simply helpless when confronted with the
mountain of Russia’s problems. All he could think of was to confiscate, requisition, and expropriate everything. To do this he needed only one device, merciless dictatorship. A mere two or three months before, he had been talking about the withering away of the state, and now he was feverishly creating an army, tribunals, people’s commissars, an inspectorate, secret departments, and a diplomatic service. The new state structure could only be made to work by recourse to the despised bourgeois “experts.”

Lenin’s dispositions as founder and leader of the new state may have been superficial, haphazard, and half-baked, but they were also harsh and cruel. He was not, in my view, the Janus he is often said to be: his character was of a piece. He was a total Bolshevik who combined in himself a number of traits which made him unique. He was committed to the revolution to the point of frenzy, and only what Viktor Chernov called Lenin’s ‘irrational common sense’ saved himself and his party in hopeless situations.

He was willing to commit appallingly cruel acts in the name of the revolution. Although he was not personally vindictive, like Stalin, he did believe that the revolution would fail if the millstones of the dictatorship ceased to grind for a moment. While this Jacobin outlook was little better than Stalin’s brutality, it seemed to give a noble purpose, a certain revolutionary aura, to force and cruelty.

In a letter to Trotsky of 22 October 1919, Lenin wrote that the way to “finish off [White General] Yudenich” is to mobilize another 20,000 [Petrograd] workers plus 10,000 of the bourgeoisie, put machine-guns at their backs, shoot a few hundred and put real, massive pressure on Yudenich.” Twenty-two years later, in the autumn of 1941, when Zhukov and Zhdanov reported to Stalin that the Germans were advancing on the defenders of Leningrad behind a living shield of Russian civilians (the old men, women, and children were crying out, “Don’t shoot, we’re your people!”), Stalin at once signalled back: “My advice is don’t give in to sentimentality, bash the enemy and his accomplices in the teeth. . . . Give the Germans and their delegates everything you’ve got, whoever they are.”

Believing that “everything is moral that facilitates the victory of Communism,” Lenin readily sacrificed long-term strategy to short-term tactics. Defending the excesses of War Communism in January 1920 against the arguments of Trotsky, who was by then convinced of the need to alter course, he said: “We sacrificed tens of thousands of the best Communists for 10,000 White officers and it saved the country. We have to apply the same methods now, or there’ll be no grain.” Only when hundreds of thousands more had died from execution,
hunger, and above all rebellion, did Lenin yield and resort to the NEP, a solution forced on him to resuscitate the basic economy.

Lenin's ideas for creating the just and equal Communist society were delusions, yet they also possessed their own iron logic. The Russian revolution, as he saw it, was only the beginning. Russia was only the detonator of world upheaval. He was ready to sacrifice Russia in order to trigger the continental conflagration. The campaign against Poland, which was his initiative, "Cost the country dear," in Trotsky's words, and its outcome, in the Treaty of Riga, "cut us off from Germany and... gave a powerful impulse to the consolidation of the European bourgeoisie." Trotsky, however, no less a Jacobin than Lenin, believed the goal was worth the risk. He did not mention that the senseless policy had also cost the lives of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers, and reparations to Poland of more than thirty million gold roubles. Another symptom of this senselessness was the transfer of ninety-three tonnes of tsarist gold to Berlin only two months before Germany capitulated in November 1918.

Lenin's dream of turning the planet red was based on false thinking bred by years of sitting in isolation and making up schemes for world Communist revolution, without taking account of ethnic, national, religious, geographical or cultural factors. He saw only class and economic motives, and the only value he was prepared to defend was power. There is no hint in any of the vast array of archival material to suggest that he was troubled by his conscience about any of the long list of destructive measures he took. Lenin was not personally vain, but he genuinely identified himself with the idea in which he believed. Because his delusions to some extent reflected universal values of social justice, he succeeded in converting them into a programme for millions of people, and imposing it by force.

As we have seen, the Party kept both the delusions and the image of Lenin alive as its most valuable asset. In April 1970, his centenary was marked with special pomp. For two years before the event the Politburo discussed and refined the details of the celebration. On 20 June 1968, for instance, Politburo member Gennady Voronov complained that "the question of Lenin's cooperative plan has been dropped, yet it was a most important stage in the life of the Party and in Lenin's commandments"; Prime Minister Kosygin thought it was a mistake to write that "the Party has become the leading force. I think that's wrong, because it has always been the leading force"; summing up the various statements that had been made in this vein, Brezhnev said: "We are building the whole of our life and all our work on Lenin." The centenary itself opened a floodgate of every kind of commemorative act: statues and busts, books and films, festivals, read-

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ings, conferences, tours to the Lenin sites, new medals, new museums, postage stamps, gramophone records, and so on. Top Party officials were assembled in the Kremlin to receive special decorations. As Podgorny pinned yet another gold disc onto Brezhnev's lapel, he remarked: "I don't know for sure whether V. I. Lenin held meetings or worked in this hall, but let us think that he is among us now at this ceremonial moment." The regulation storm of applause greeted his words.

A two-day event in the Kremlin on 21 and 22 April 1970 brought sixty-six Communist and workers' delegations from the capitalist and developing countries, eighteen from the People's Democracies, a dozen from socialist parties, and many others from illegal and semi-legal organizations whose presence in Moscow was facilitated by the special services. The Soviet leadership wanted to astonish world public opinion by the sheer scale, influence, and quantity of Leninists inhabiting the planet. Nothing was said, of course, of the fact that most of these parties and groups had been supported materially by Moscow for years, or that many of the "general secretaries" had come to Moscow in the hope of receiving fresh infusions of hard currency.

In the immediate aftermath of the Twentieth Congress in 1956, the Russian people heaved a sigh of relief and waited for their emancipation. The period of post-Stalinism, however, was to last another thirty years. During that time, the people somehow adapted themselves, formally carrying out their Leninist rituals, keeping a low profile, but mainly by working and hoping. The old bureaucratic shell remained the same, while below there were increasing signs of free-thinking, internal dissidence, and attempts to point out what was wrong, often using Aesopian language. The new phenomenon of "kitchen frankness" was born. The erosion of Leninism was under way, and the cracks in the monolith were well advanced. The leadership, at all levels, tried to halt the decay and preserve the "purity" of Leninism. . . .

In June 1981 the Central Committee decided it was time to start preparing a new edition of Lenin's collected works, the sixth. Since each previous edition had been between ten and fifteen volumes larger than its predecessor, the new one could have run to some seventy volumes. It is unlikely, however, that most of the 3,725 documents secreted in the Party archives would have seen the light. For that to happen, Lenin would first have to be removed from his pedestal. Instead, the new edition would probably only have incorporated the material published in the "Lenin Miscellanies" since the fifth edition of his works had appeared in the 1960s. Gorbachev, then a relative novice on Olympus, suggested "we leave the fifth edition and publish the new materials as a collection, or as a supplement to the fifth edition." He was overruled, and the Institute of Marxism-
Leninism was instructed to start on the sixth edition, with the additional task of preparing a ten-volume collection of memoirs to be completed by Lenin's 120th anniversary in 1990: five of these volumes have been published. In a mood which anticipated glasnost, the publishers were also permitted to include in the collected memoirs suitably edited extracts from the reminiscences of Trotsky, Martov, Valentinov, Kautsky and a few other heretics.

By this time, however, the unanimity shown by the Politburo, and its dedication to Lenin's ideals, were no longer shared by a large part of the population. Leninism had been going through a long process of erosion. The authorities were of course aware of this. While Brezhnev was in the Kremlin reading his speech about Lenin's genius, or perhaps signing his new Party card, reports of a different kind were being written in the Lubyanka. The KGB had for many years been collecting material on its struggle against anti-Leninism. Andropov's report to the Central Committee for 1982 reads in part:

10,407 anonymous documents and 770 leaflets of an anti-Soviet, nationalistic and politically harmful character, and written by 1688 people, were distributed throughout the country in the past year. Most of the anti-Soviet documents were written anonymously and with the aid of various devices, such as spray-paint, home-made printing, stencil and photo-reproduction. Among perpetrators who have been apprehended were 118 Party members and candidate members, and 204 members of the Komsomol. 498 culprits had acted under the influence of the enemy's ideological sabotage, 228 were psychologically ill, 220 were hooligans, 37 were protesting against living conditions.

The leadership could not accept that Soviet society was not merely mired in stagnation, but also in a state of psychological disaffection and doubt about values that had previously been universally accepted. The gap between what people said in public and what they thought was widening to the extent that it had become an everyday fact of life. The public mood was like Lenin's physical condition after 10 March 1923. Leninism seemed on the surface to be alive, but it was incapable of a single fresh idea. By the beginning of Gorbachev's period of perestroika, Leninism was entering its death throes. The Russian people had not yet understood that Leninism was not amenable to reform, that either it must remain what it had been for decades, or be totally discarded.

Questions for Review and Study

1. Given Lenin's temperament, character, and personality, how do you account for his success in gaining control of revolutionary Russia?
2. What does Trotsky identify as the key to understanding Lenin the revolutionary?

3. How did Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* turn Lenin into a revolutionary?

4. How does Volkogonov explain Lenin’s rise to power and his inner motives?

5. How did political events of the early twentieth century help turn Lenin into a revolutionary?

Questions for Comparison

1. Compare Lenin’s revolutionary vision to Hitler’s (see p. 217). Against what aspects of their respective societies were the young Lenin and Hitler reacting? How was each a product of the First World War? What were the essentials of their respective doctrines? What did each hold sacred? Whose critique was more severe? Why did Lenin succeed and Hitler ultimately fail?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Lenin’s own voluminous writings, although they do not illuminate his life, nevertheless reveal his ideas and policies and the scathing declamatory style of virtually everything he wrote. The standard English-language edition is his *Collected Works*, published in forty-four volumes, but most students will prefer either the five-volume revised and annotated *Collected Works*, or the one-volume *Selected Works*. A separate edition of *The Letters of Lenin* has been translated and edited by Elizabeth Hill and Doris Mudie, and his important revolutionary pamphlet, *What Is to Be Done?*, has been edited by V. J. Jerome. Lenin’s pamphlet is named after an earlier one by Nikolai Chernyshevsky; the version listed here is the first full English translation of this important work in Lenin’s intellectual background.

Lenin was endlessly fascinating to his own close associates—magnetic, harsh, demanding, domineering, but fascinating all the same. This, added to the fame of Lenin the man and Lenin the symbol, has brought into print a steady stream of memoirs and recollections of uneven quality and usefulness. Two excerpted in this chapter, Trotsky’s *The Young Lenin* and Valentinov’s *Encounters with Lenin*, are valuable and interesting, as is Trotsky’s *Lenin*, a new translation of a work first published in 1925. *The Early Years of Lenin*, by Valentinov is part of the same memoir as his *Encounters with Lenin*, but its hostility destroys much of its usefulness. Angelica Balabanoff’s *Impressions of Lenin* is a memoir of another early socialist colleague. N. K. Krupskaia’s *Reminiscences of Lenin* is the recollections of Lenin’s wife, but it is more political polemic than domestic memoir. *About Lenin*, edited by George Hanna, is a series of readings
from fellow revolutionaries and colleagues, published for "official" purposes and carefully sanitized of all unorthodoxy. Much more interesting and useful is Not by Politics Alone, edited by Tamara Deutscher, an excellent collection of readings from Lenin himself and many of his contemporaries, about his views on a broad range of topics and revealing Lenin as casual and informal as he ever was.

The same fascination with Lenin that prompted the many recollections of those who knew him has created a flood of biographies. The best and most definitive is The Life of Lenin, by Louis F. Fischer. Two straightforward, unbiased, workmanlike shorter biographies are Lenin and the Russian Revolution, by Harold Shukman, and V. I. Lenin, by Robert Conquest. The great authority Isaac Deutscher's Lenin's Childhood is the separately published first chapter of a proposed definitive biography; it can be favorably compared with Trotsky's The Young Lenin. Another work on Lenin's youth and the influences that formed him is the Lenin, by R. H. W. Theen. A special study is Lenin in Zurich, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; another is Lenin and the Revolutionary Party, by Paul LeBlanc.

A classic piece of exciting history and biography is Three Who Made a Revolution, by Bertram D. Wolfe, the interconnected story of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin. Lenin and the Twentieth Century, a collection of Wolfe's essays on Lenin—most of them not previously published—can also be recommended. More interesting and informative than Krupskaya's own memoirs is Bride of the Revolution, by Robert H. McNeal. A work on the history of the Soviet Union, by the French authority Hélène Carrere d'Encausse, is organized, respectively, around the figures of Lenin for the first volume and Stalin for the second. Piero Melograni's Lenin and the Myth of World Revolution is a major revisionist interpretation of Lenin, holding that he did not advocate world revolution but rather Russian Marxist revolution alone.

Robert V. Daniels's Red October is an excellent account of the actual outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Another key event is detailed in J. W. Wheeler-Bennett's Brest-Litovsk, a brilliant, now classic account. Three important works on the theoretical-intellectual background to Lenin and the revolution must also be recommended: Franco Venturi's Roots of Revolution is the definitive work on its subject; Edmund Wilson's To the Finland Station is probably the classic work of the great American social and literary critic, a kind of intellectual history of socialist radicalism ending with Lenin and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution; and Alain Besançon's The Rise of the Gulag is a piece of brilliant intellectual history on the ideological framework of the Soviet system and its crucial ties with Lenin's theories. Esther Kingston-Mann's Lenin and the Problem of Marxist Peasant Revolution is a specialized essay dealing with a crucial problem faced by Lenin in adapting classical Marxism to peasant Russia. Finally, Robert V. Daniels's Russia is an excellent brief book, specifically intended as an introduction to Russia in the twentieth century, as is Richard Pipes's Russia under the Bolshevik Regime. (Titles with an asterisk are out of print.)


