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Review

# Lenin Reconsidered

- Reviews section -

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**Few historical figures on the international revolutionary left have been the subject of as much historical myth-making as Lenin. Born V.I. Ulyanov in 1870, the son of a liberal Tsarist educational official, Lenin (the pseudonym he adopted in the 1890s) became a central leader of the Russian socialist movement, in particular its Bolshevik (majority) wing. The Bolsheviks not only led the world's first successful workers revolution in 1917, but launched the revolutionary Communist International in 1919.**

For most commentators – from the revolutionary left to anti-communist conservatives – Lenin was a political innovator. According to mainstream historical accounts, Lenin abandoned the strategy and tactics of the pre-1914 European socialist parties that made up most of the Socialist (Second) International: building broad, class-based political parties committed to combining political and social democracy. He rejected the pre-war movement's optimism about the capacity of workers to build their own organizations and the inevitability of socialism. Lenin was the inventor of a new form of political organization – a tightly organized, highly centralized, conspiratorial party of “professional revolutionaries” (intellectuals) well versed in Marxist theory. This party would take power and rule for the workers. In this account, there is a straight line from Lenin's pre-revolutionary politics to Stalin's bureaucratic dictatorship.

Few on the left have done more to debunk these myths than Lars Lih. His *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008) thoroughly discredits the claims that Lenin, worried about the capacity of workers to make a revolution, advocated a new form of political organization. [1] Instead, Lenin emerges as a mainstream left-wing European social democrat (the term all pre-1914 socialists used to refer to themselves), a loyal follower of Karl Kautsky, the leading theorist of the Second International, and an advocate of building a party like the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) “under Russian conditions.” Lenin's famous 1902 pamphlet *What is To Be Done?* was thoroughly unoriginal, embracing the SPD's vision of a fusion of socialism with the worker movement, and prioritizing the struggle for democracy, the “light and air of the worker movement.”

Lih's short new biography combines interesting insights into Lenin's personal life (the likelihood of his grandfather being a converted Jew, his much debated relationship with Inessa Armand, and his indifference to food) with a systematic contextualization of the entirety of Lenin's thought and practice. Again, Lenin emerges not as a political innovator, but a quite mainstream pre-1914 left-wing socialist. His nearly religious belief in the capacities of workers and worker leaders to win democracy and socialism shaped his rejection of the “opportunism” (reformism) that led the leaders of European socialism to limit the movement to parliamentary and bureaucratic union activity and support for their “own capitalists” in the First World War. Throughout his political career, Lenin remained a devoted follower of Kautsky – even when Kautsky himself, in Lenin's words, “releged” on his political commitments during the war. Only in the last years of his life, facing the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the emergence of a conservative bureaucracy in the Soviet state, did Lenin take his first, tentative steps beyond the theoretical and political orthodoxy of the Second International.

Lih's account of Lenin's political activity starts with the dilemma of Russian socialists and revolutionaries in the late nineteenth century. The growth of mass socialist working class parties in Western Europe – in particular the SPD – was founded on the fusion of socialist theory with the actually existing worker movement (unions, cooperatives, political organizations). [2] One of the main pre-conditions for this merger were the democratic rights – a free press, free assembly, free association and elected, representative government – that did not exist in late Imperial Russia. The Tsarist state practiced a repression of all forms of dissent that made the emergence of a mass socialist movement impossible. The populist underground of the late 19th century advocated terrorism, in particular assassination of Tsarist officials, as the only way of overthrowing the absolutist Tsarist regime, establishing

democracy and creating the conditions for a mass socialist movement in Russia. The abject failure of the populists, led many young revolutionaries to seek “another way.”

Lenin was part of a new generation of Russian revolutionaries in the 1890s who came to understand that the development of capitalism in Russia was creating new social forces that could become the mass base for a successful radical democratic revolution. On the one hand, industrialization was creating a highly concentrated urban working class that could lead the struggle for democracy and socialism. On the other, capitalism was transforming the countryside, undermining feudal class relations, increasing inequality (“social differentiation”) among the peasants and transforming the peasantry into a mass potentially revolutionary force against Tsarism.

The capitalist transformation of Russia allowed Lenin, in his first major political work, *Who Are These “Friends of the People” and How Do They Fight Against the Social Democrats?*, (1894) to formulate a “political credo” which guided his politics for the rest of his life:

*“When the advanced representatives of this class [the working class] assimilate the ideas of scientific socialism and the idea of the historical role of the Russian worker when these ideas receive a broad dissemination when durable organizations are created among the workers that transform the present uncoordinated economic war of the workers into a purposive class struggle, then the Russian WORKER, elevated to the head of all democratic elements, will overthrow absolutism and lead the RUSSIAN PROLETARIAT (side by side with the proletariat of ALL COUNTRIES) by the direct road of open political struggle to THE VICTORIOUS COMMUNIST REVOLUTION.”* [Cited on p. 46.](#)

Lih divides his biography of Lenin into three major episodes, each corresponding to a key element of the “historical drama” Lenin outlines in *Friends of the People*. The first episode (1894-1904) sees Lenin focused on the creation of a clandestine Russian socialist party that would merge socialism with the most conscious (“purposive”) worker leaders. With the founding generation of Russian Marxists living in exile, a young generation began organizing clandestine socialist circles of workers and young intellectuals in various Russian towns and cities. Despite repression and lack of coordination, these circles played a crucial role in promoting and generalizing the wave of workers’ strikes that shook Tsarism and won legislation limiting the working day in 1896. Buoyed by the success of the scattered social democratic organizations and convinced that greater coordination could bring even greater victories, in 1900 Lenin and other newly exiled revolutionaries launched *Iskra*, the first, national, underground socialist paper in Russia.

*What is To Be Done?* (1902), rather than reflecting a “worry about the workers,” expressed Lenin’s boundless optimism about the possibilities of a merger of socialism with the worker movement in Russia. While building a party modeled on the SPD “under Russian conditions” required a centralized, underground organization schooled in *konspiratsiia* (the “fine art of evading the police”), this party of “revolutionaries by trade” would be able to sink deep roots among the “purposive,” class conscious worker leaders. Lenin’s project came to fruition with the establishment of the Russian Social Democratic Worker Party in 1903. Contrary to historical myth-making, the subsequent split in the party into Bolshevik (majority) and Menshevik (minority) wings was not the result of Lenin’s authoritarianism, but his insistence that the editorial board of *Iskra* elected at the congress be preserved.

The second episode of Lenin’s “drama” (1904-1914) centers on the emergence of Bolshevism as a distinct political current during the first Russian Revolution of 1904-1906. The experience of the first mass uprising against Tsarism confirmed Lenin and the Bolsheviks’ vision of the role of the workers and peasants in the Russian “bourgeois-democratic” revolution against the autocratic regime.

All Russian socialists, with the exception of Leon Trotsky and his small group of supporters among the Mensheviks, believed that the dominance of peasant agriculture would limit the Russian revolution to “bourgeois-democratic” tasks — distribution of land to the peasants, the eight hour day and a democratic republic created by an elected

Constituent assembly. [3] For Lenin and his followers, the Russian capitalist class, tied by “thousands of threads” to the landlords and Tsarist officials and fearful of popular revolts, was incapable of leading the Russian “bourgeois-democratic” revolution. Only the workers and peasants, acting independent of the capitalists, could over-throw Tsarism, establish a temporary revolutionary regime that would organize a constituent assembly and create a democratic capitalist state in Russia. Unlike Trotsky, Lenin did not believe that a provisional revolutionary government supported by the workers and peasants would begin “socialist tasks” (measures that attacked capitalism, such as the nationalization of industry). But Lenin did believe that a radical democratic revolution in Russia would spark socialist-workers’ revolutions across the rest of Europe.

The majority of Mensheviks drew a very different conclusion from the revolution of 1905. They believed that the working class (and peasants, whose revolutionary potential the Mensheviks tended to minimize) had to support liberal capitalists organized in the Constitutional Democratic Party in the struggle for a democratic regime in Russia, even if that required abandoning struggles for land reform, the eight-hour day or a democratic republic. Many Mensheviks believed that the establishment of a parliament (Duma) with extremely limited powers had created a sufficient democratic opening that Russian socialists could abandon their illegal underground organization.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks rejected this perspective, arguing that Russian socialists had to continue the struggle for a democratic revolution “to the end” — the overthrow of Tsarism. Against those within their ranks who refused to take advantage of small openings for open political agitation, like the Duma and quasi-legal trade unions, Lenin argued for the combination of an underground organization that could openly agitate for the end of the Tsarist regime wherever possible. After years of post-revolutionary repression, Lenin and his supporters saw the strike wave of 1912-1914 as confirmation of their strategy.

The final episode of Lenin’s drama was the years between 1914 and 1924, which opened the prospect of global socialist revolution. Lenin was initially shocked when the leaders of European socialism, in particular Kautsky, supported their respective states in the First World War. Lenin and other revolutionary, anti-war socialists attempted to preserve the pre-war socialist movement’s commitment to build opposition to the war into a revolutionary movement that would overthrow capitalism.

The February 1917 revolution in Russia again confirmed Lenin’s vision in practice, as war-weary Russian workers, peasants and soldiers overthrew the monarchy and formed radically democratic councils (soviets) which coexisted alongside the pro-capitalist, pro-war Provisional Government that replaced the Tsarist regime. Returning to Russia in 1917, Lenin issued his “April Theses,” arguing that a government based on the councils would not only root out the last remnants of absolutism (convoke a constituent assembly, distribute land to the peasants) and end the war but would begin “socialist tasks.” Lih argues that while a majority of “old Bolsheviks” — the underground cadres of the party — were won over to the struggle for soviet power, they were not convinced that socialist tasks could be initiated, rejecting Lenin’s claims of looming struggles within the peasantry between capitalist farmers (kulaks) and the poorer peasants and rural wage-laborers. [4]

Despite these internal disagreements, the Bolsheviks (now including Trotsky and his supporters, since Lenin’s new perspective converged with theirs) were able to win the support of a majority of the radicalized Russian working class and significant portions of the peasantry for the struggle for a council government that would end the war, implement radical land reform and establish workers’ control (co-management) of industry. In October 1917, the councils, in which the Bolsheviks had majority support, over-threw the Provisional Government, moved to end the war, abolish landlordism and, in Lenin’s words, “begin the construction of socialism.”

Lih insists, correctly, that Lenin remained a relatively consistent “Kautskyian” Marxist through 1921. [5] The only partial exception was on the question of the state, where Lenin’s *State and Revolution* points to Kautsky’s failure in *The Road to Power* (1909) to see the need to smash the capitalist state and replace it with a totally new, highly

democratic, revolutionary workers' state in order to begin a transition to socialism. In light of Lih's magisterial *Lenin Rediscovered*, it is clear that Lenin never developed an original "theory of the party" — he merely adapted the SPD model to "Russian conditions." While Lenin's practice clearly broke with the Kautskyian model — in particular after 1914 — he never produced a distinct theory of socialist organization.

Nor was Lenin's strategy for the Russian Revolution — a radical democratic revolution made by the workers and peasants — unique. Kautsky's *The Driving Forces of the Russian Revolution and Its Prospects* (1906) outlines an analysis and strategy that both the Bolsheviks and Trotsky's supporters claimed as their own. Lenin's explanation of "opportunism" (reformism) in the workers' movement — he saw it as the result of the influence of a privileged layer of workers, "the labor aristocracy" — was also derived from Kautsky's early work. Even *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which polemicizes against Kautsky's post-1912 notion of "ultra-imperialism" (where a single, dominant imperialist power would make inter-imperialist military conflict a thing of the past), only rehearses Kautsky's earlier writings on the relationship of monopolies, finance capital and global capitalism in *The Social Revolution* (1902). There is evidence that Lenin's argument in April 1917 that growing conflicts within the Russian peasantry would allow the Russian workers to take power and "initiate socialist tasks" was derived from an essay by Kautsky published after the overthrow of the Tsar. [6]

Three developments forced Lenin to begin to reconsider the "textbook À la Kautsky" after 1921. First, workers in Germany, Italy, and Hungary failed to seize power in the immediate post-war upsurge. Second, the class struggle within the peasants between kulak capitalists and the village poor never materialized. Finally, the Soviet state was developing its own bureaucracy — including many former Tsarist officials — contrary to Lenin's expectations in *State and Revolution*. Each of these developments forced Lenin to begin, with great hesitation, to innovate politically and theoretically.

The failure of post-war revolutions forced Lenin to rethink socialist strategy and tactics for the west. While splits in socialist parties across the capitalist world had produced mass, revolutionary Communist parties that won the allegiance of many radical working-class militants, the majority of workers remained loyal to the reformist parties. The "united front" policy, in which Communist parties would seek united actions with other workers and their leaders against capital and the state, while maintaining their own independent organizations, aimed to "win the masses to Communism." Through common activity, revolutionary workers would demonstrate the limits of the social democratic trade union officials and parliamentary politicians' strategy of relying on bureaucratic collective bargaining and parliamentary maneuvering in defending or winning gains under capitalism.

While Lih has little to say about what is perhaps Lenin's most original work, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, it is here that Lenin takes some initial, hesitant steps beyond the notion that a privileged labor aristocracy is the main source of "opportunism" in the labor movement towards a recognition that the uneven character of working-class struggles produced a layer of union and parliamentary officials who were committed to reformist politics. [7] Ultimately, the fate of the Russian revolution and state continued to depend, for Lenin, on the ultimate success of workers' revolutions in the advanced capitalist world.

The failure of class struggle between kulak capitalist farmers and rural wage earners to emerge during the Civil War of 1918-1921 led Lenin and the Bolsheviks to seek, under the auspices of the New Economic Policy, an alliance with the "middle peasants" based on state industry providing manufactured goods in exchange for food-stuffs. By the late 1920s, this strategy had also failed as middle peasants joined better off peasants withholding grain from the cities unless prices were increased radically.

Lih never discusses the theoretical roots of Lenin's overestimation of the level of social differentiation among the peasants or his unrealistic hope that the increased availability of manufactured goods would induce middle peasants to produce more food for the cities. Both rested on faulty notions, inherited from Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question*

(1899), that once pre-capitalist restraints were removed and new consumer goods became available, peasants would respond to market incentives by specializing output, introducing labor-saving tools and machinery and accumulating land and labor. Lenin did not understand that in Russia after the revolution peasants “now free of landlord exploitation and in control of their own land” were under no economic compulsion to increase output to feed people in the cities. [8]

Finally, the emergence of a bureaucratic state, which Lenin saw as the “haven for the shattered remnants of the capitalists and the landowners,” forced Lenin to rethink the Marxian expectation that the workers’ state could dispense with a bureaucracy and allow “every cook to rule.” Lenin believed that the new Soviet bureaucracy was the product of the low level of *kultura* “literacy, elementary habits of organization and the like” among Russian workers and peasants. As an antidote, Lenin advocated the creation of a “Workers’ and Peasants Inspectorate” to supervise the officialdom. He also demanded the recruitment of more workers to serve in the state apparatus. Lenin failed to realize that the abolition of capitalism, especially in a relatively economically under-developed society, could still create an environment in which a new post-capitalist officialdom (many of whom had been workers) could emerge. [9] As a result, Lenin tended to underestimate the importance of socialist democracy “including competition among pro-working-class parties” at the level of the state and the workplace. This was reflected in his belief that the existing “capitalist economic apparatus,” including “scientific management,” could be adapted to “socialist construction.” Unfortunately, Lih has little to say about the democratic deficiencies of Bolshevik practice before, and especially after, 1921 that Samuel Farber details in his *Beyond Stalinism*. [10]

Lih’s biography is both an excellent introduction to Lenin’s life and a provocative interpretation that will challenge those familiar with his life and work. But revolutionaries trying to create a socialism for the 21st century also need to ask “what is living and what is dead” in Lenin’s political legacy? To be blunt, there is little of “Leninism” as a theory “an invention of Bolshevik leaders Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin after Lenin’s death in 1924” that remains viable. Lenin was, by his own admission, a Kautskyian “an advocate of the Marxism of the Second International before World War One. Since the Second World War, growing segments of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left have rightly rejected Kautsky’s belief in the inevitability of socialism as the result of the continued degradation of the working class under capitalism. Instead, they understand that while capitalist crises intensify class struggle, the outcome of the class struggle depends upon the organization and activity of growing layers of the working class acting independently of the reformist bureaucracies of the unions and social democratic political parties.

While there is little of Lenin’s theory “with the exception of *State and Revolution* and *Left-Wing Communism*” that is either original or of enduring value, the practice of the Bolsheviks through 1917 remains relevant. [11]

While revolutionaries in the capitalist democracies today live in societies fundamentally different from early 20th century Russia and do not have to create clandestine, illegal organizations, the experience of the fusion of revolutionary socialism with rank and file worker leaders and the creation of workers’ political and economic organizations independent of the forces of official reformism (union officials and reformist political leaders) remains of enduring importance for contemporary socialists.

*This essay has also appeared on the Canadian [New Socialist website](#). Charlie Post would like to thank David Camfield for comments on an earlier draft.*

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of *Lenin Rediscovered* see my “Party and Class in Revolutionary Crises,” [ATC 150 \(January-February 2011\)](#).

[2] For a discussion of the historical process of this “merger,” see my [“The Emergence of the Mass Workers’ Parties and Trade Unions”](#).

## Lenin Reconsidered

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[3] For a discussion of the different currents in the Russian socialist movement, see L.D. Trotsky, 'Three Concepts of the Russian Revolution', in *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941). [www.internationalist.org/three.html](http://www.internationalist.org/three.html)

[4] Lih, "The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: The Debates of April 1917 in Context," *Russian History*, 38 (2011) 199-242.

[5] L. Lih, "Lenin's Aggressive Unoriginality, 1914-1916," *Socialist Studies*, 5,2 (Fall 2009), 90-112.

[6] L. Lih, "[Kautsky, Lenin and the 'April Theses.'](#)" *Weekly Worker* 800 (January 14, 2010).

[7] For an alternative theorization of reformism, derived from Luxemburg and Trotsky's work, see R. Brenner, "[The Problem of Reformism.](#)" *ATC* 43 (March-April 1993).

[8] See E.M. Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), Parts I and II for a critique of the "Commercialization Model" of capitalist development.

[9] Trotsky's initial analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy suffered from the same problems. See T. Twiss, "Trotsky and the Problem of the Soviet Bureaucracy," (Ph.D. Diss.: University of Pittsburgh, 2009), Chapters 3-5 [forthcoming as part of the Historical Materialism book series published by Brill].

[10] London: Polity Press, 1990.

[11] Victoria Bonnel's excellent study *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) provides important insights into the actual practice of the Bolsheviks in the workers' organizations, legal and illegal, in Tsarist Russia.

Ernest Mandel produced a convincing theoretization of the Bolshevik (and early Comintern) practice, based on a theory of consciousness that owes more to Luxemburg than Lenin and Kautsky, in "The Leninist Theory of Organization: Its Relevance for Today," in [Revolutionary Marxism and Social Reality in the 20th Century: Collected Essays](#) (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994).