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Marxism

Why doesn't official Russian historical politics need the real Lenin and how is his method relevant at a time of crisis

- Features -

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"The (Russian) state needs a Lenin shorn of his political ideas and real biographies, a Lenin-monument. Whenever he becomes a true Lenin, a rebel and destroyer of the old order, the authorities automatically begin to regard him as a monster." says the historian and political theorist Ilya Budraitskis. In this comprehensive interview, conducted in Russian by Marine Voskanian for *Business-Online* and most generously translated for *LeftEast* by Sean Guillory, Budraitskis explains how Lenin was a heretic for the socialists of his time, and why demanding greater redistribution doesn't necessarily mean being a leftist.

Q: Ilya, April 22 marked the 150th anniversary of Vladimir Lenin's birth. In the 1990s, he was demonized as part of a wave of negativity against the entire communist past. In today's Russia, the state is trying to remove him from the public and media. Did Lenin, as opposed to say, Josef Stalin, become a less meaningful historical figure for the government and the public?

I don't entirely agree. In recent years, Lenin's image has often been found on products of mass culture, and in the speeches of high state officials. And all these references in speeches are usually extremely negative. He is portrayed as a criminal, a foreign agent, and a fanatic who was willing to trample the interests of the country for the sake of realizing his utopian ideas. So, the political criminalization of Lenin in Russia as a negative historical figure is quite obvious. And, of course, it is directly connected with the general line on the criminalization of the Russian Revolution and revolution in principle as a phenomenon.

Lenin, however, remains a controversial figure for the today's Russian state. On the one hand, he's a toxic historical figure—he is a revolutionary and a destroyer of the state. On the other hand, he is the founder of the new Soviet state, and, as a result, Lenin fits into the official idea of the continuity of the state throughout Russia's history. According to that narrative, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and today's Russian Federation flow smoothly into each other. There is no historical break between them. They only represent different names and faces of the same state. From this point of view, Lenin deserves respect as much as Ivan Kalita, Empress Elizabeth or Boris Yeltsin. Cleansed of his political ideas and real biography, this Lenin is the functional-Lenin and the memorial-Lenin. As soon as he stands for the true historical Lenin, the rebel and destroyer of the old order, he instantly transforms from a well-deserved ruler into a monster.

There's a strange schizophrenia in today's official historical politics that directly prefigures the absence of any serious celebrations and public discussions around this anniversary. At the same time, there is a long tradition of demonizing Lenin among the post-Soviet intelligentsia. It seems to me that this liberal criminalization of Lenin as a fanatic and apologist for violence paradoxically echoes the conservative condemnation of him as a destroyer of the empire and a German spy.

Q: At the same time, if we take the Russian conservative-patriotic community, putting aside its religious-monarchist aspects, as a rule, this idea of the Russian state's historical continuity recognizes Lenin and the Bolsheviks' role in creating the USSR into what they think is a great country despite their disavowal of the Revolution. How do you assess today's attitude towards Lenin by different Russian social and political forces?

– You are right. Our patriotic public does tend to view Lenin positively, but only in so far as it connects him with the Soviet period, which is primarily perceived as a powerful state, an empire. But such a favorable view of him as the founder of this state requires a complete misunderstanding or denial of the ideas that Lenin actually held and guided

his actions.

Vladimir Ilyich's ideas aren't state-patriotic in any way. On the contrary, they are based on the necessity of the state withering away. He consistently argues this idea in his *State and Revolution*. The Leninist model of the Soviet Union is not a national state, but a prototype of an international non-state socialist community that any country can join. Statist-Patriots' respect for Lenin (which usually includes Stalin) is based on disregarding and neglecting him as a political theorist and practitioner. And theory and praxis have always been inextricably linked for Vladimir Ilyich.

Q: In Lenin's time, political parties or movements were built on ideology, principles, and visions of the future. In our postmodern era, politics has become an area of political technology and PR, not ideas. If we are talking about political practice, how much do you think Lenin's political praxis is relevant now?

Yes, today's politics is perceived in terms of effectiveness irrespective of any ideas. This is why Lenin's life in and of itself is a challenge to such a cynical attitude towards politics. He was, of course, an ideological man, who for the sake of his principles was willing to go against the grain and circumstances and risk remaining in almost complete political isolation. On the other hand, it was this idea and principle that allowed him to lead the revolution in 1917. Lenin's famous phrase that principled politics is the most practical is fully confirmed by his own life. And, of course, Lenin's life is at odds with the instrumental and cynical notion of politics we see today. His life is a constant reminder not only that ideas need to be followed to the end, but that they are also able to change reality.

Q: How does the well-known perception of Lenin as a tactical genius, political conspirator, and having the ability to navigate situations and make decisions when others are at a loss, correspond with him making compromises and necessary tactical alliances despite his principles? If you look at his biography, he looks like an extremely pragmatic man, which in no small way led to the Bolsheviks' success.

I wouldn't call Lenin a pragmatist, but a man who is able to revise his own views according to changing realities. These are different things. Lenin not only closely followed events, but really learned from them. For example, he advanced the slogan "Power to the Soviets" when worker soviets were born from below during the 1905 Revolution. As we know, Vladimir Ilyich had nothing to do with the appearance of the Petrograd Soviet in early 1917, but he saw power in the hands of workers and soldiers themselves as an alternative to that of elite that established the Provisional Government. It is also important to remember that Lenin did not have any immutable "plan" for the party. While in *What is to be Done?* (1902) he defended the idea of the party as a narrow organization of professional revolutionaries, then right after the revolution began in 1917, the Bolsheviks, under his leadership, turned into a mass party, where throughout the year tens of thousands of people joined without prior political experience. It is also worth mentioning Lenin's relations with other revolutionaries. He had a bitter debate with Lev Trotsky or Alexander Bogdanov for many years, but during and after the 1917 Revolution, he cooperated with them as comrades and like-minded people. But all these changes took place within a worldview that Lenin retained to the end. He never reconsidered his place in the class struggle or his views on the inevitable end of the capitalist order.

Q: Historical figures who are so ideological and only driven by principles are quite uncomfortable for contemporary discourse because they are so unlike contemporary politicians, who are mainly guided by practical results, and probably even look threatening to the state machine itself? Even the historical memory of such figures undermines today's political systems as totally phony.

Absolutely. People with firm principles are not as much a danger to the current system, as they are incomprehensible to it. When it comes to what principles, that's another issue. If we look at Russia at the turn of the 20th century, a difference from today is the existence of some number of people (mostly military and state officials) who were sincerely devoted to the monarchy and for whom its collapse was a personal tragedy. It's hard to imagine that today's Russian state would have the same principled supporters as those who stood against and lost to the Reds in the Civil

War.

Therefore, the question is not just in the steadfastness of principles, but also in the extent the inevitable collapse of the current order can be seen. It was Lenin's Marxist approach that allowed him to foresee the future more than those wanting to save the Russian Empire.

Q: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the prevailing view around the world is that communism has proved infeasible as a utopian idea. We don't mean elements of the social state, but they too are now being curtailed. In the 1990s, this was due to the complete victory of liberalism. But now it's because the world has changed. There is no longer a proletariat and class society. Even leftwing experts admit how difficult it is to analyze labor, digital reality and so on with Marxist analysis. Given this, how relevant is Lenin's theoretical legacy of Marxism-Leninism?

It should be said that Lenin was analyzing, for example, imperialism or the development of capitalism in Russia in a context where after Marx's Capital the world had also radically changed. The beginning of the 20th century was unlike the world of the mid-19th century. Lenin's idea was a rather bold renewal of Marxist theory. Lenin was convinced of the necessity of a socialist revolution in Russia though capitalist relations hadn't fully developed and the working class was an absolute minority of the population.

Therefore, Lenin teaches us, first and foremost, that we shouldn't see Marxist analysis as dogma and completely reject it if it poorly applies to existing conditions. The problem is that for the majority of Russia's older generation, Marxism is associated with perceptions that were instilled in Soviet political education that only consisted of a set of dogmas disconnected from reality and simply had to be memorized.

Of course, few can argue with the fact that today's world is very different from Lenin's time. The industrial working class has lost some of its importance and has changed a lot. On the other hand, new forms of wage-labor have emerged. Nevertheless, the main contradiction of capitalism—between labor and capital—has not only not disappeared but is also felt more and more acutely.

Q: At first glance, modern capitalism and modern forms of employment are very flexible, networked, and extremely individualized. That is to say, today's "proletarians" don't have much in common with their fellow workers. Trade unions do not protect their interests, and no one compels them to work long hours. Is it possible to speak generally about the worker solidarity that occupied such an important place in the Bolshevik ideology?

Industrial capitalism in the first half of the 20th century also did not automatically spawn solidarity among workers. Remember that Fordist production did not require any communication between workers on the assembly line. If solidarity and the need for collective action were born between workers, it wasn't just because they were in the same factory. It was because workers became aware of their common interest thanks to political struggle, the activities of the socialists, and the spread of socialist ideas, despite the widespread division and alienation between people in capitalist production. Not to mention the fact that at the time of the 1917 revolution, the vast majority of the Russian population did not belong to the working class. Nevertheless, this non-proletarian majority became the revolution's driving force—for example, if we speak of the soldiers and sailors that came from the peasantry.

Therefore, if we want to talk about what forces can challenge the established order today, we must understand that they can only become a movement through their participation in politics, and not just based of their place in the modern social structure.

Q: But we are witnessing a very serious weakening of parties as institutions of change around the world. People's confidence in the majority of political forces is falling, as we see in elections in various countries. One of Lenin's key ideas was the party's leading role as a force to change reality. Are leftwing parties able to play such a role and how viable are they in today's world?

Lenin's concept of the party was a challenge to the party form as it existed in his time. Not only to the elite parliamentary parties, but also to mass workers' parties like the German Social Democratic Party. European Social Democrats assumed that workers, by virtue of their relation to means of production, should consider the party as an expression of their class interest. Lenin rejected this approach and insisted that the party is an organization of revolutionaries, not a mass organization of the working class. For Marxists of the time, Lenin's view of the party looked flat-out heretical, but it was actually very rooted in the conditions of autocratic Russia and the peculiarity of the 19th-century Russian revolutionary tradition, on which Lenin also relied on to an extent.

So, if we are talking about today's crisis of the party system, we are, first of all, speaking about the crisis of parliamentary parties within existing liberal democratic institutions. The lesson of the Leninist party form today is that it we need to look for new forms of political organization that could adequately respond to political and social crisis.

Q: If we are talking about contemporary Western left parties, it seems that at some point they have shifted their focus from protecting the interests of the majority of working people to that of various minorities, feminism, and environmentalism. At the same time, the new right, in contrast, has begun to position itself as representatives of the working class. Isn't this the reason why the popularity of the parliamentary left has declined? Why was there even a shift in the agenda?

I don't think this view is entirely right. Take, for example, Bernie Sanders' very successful campaign in the United States, even though he has now withdrawn from the presidential race. He spoke directly about the fact that he appeals to all workers, regardless of their identity and cultural attitudes. At the same time, over its history, the socialist movement has never differentiated the struggle for the interests of the majority of working people from the struggle for the rights of women and minorities, including national ones.

If such an opposition occurred somewhere, it happened, I think, because some of the left parties, in becoming part of the establishment, began to pursue social policies actually aimed against the interests of those they had previously represented. At times, this pivot was hidden by new rhetoric related to the protection of minority rights. Although we see that the status of minorities supposedly protected by these liberal-left parties remains very vulnerable.

Q: The Sanders phenomenon is interesting because it emerged in a country like the United States where, unlike in Europe, there is no great social democratic tradition. And suddenly socialist ideas entered American political discourse and, it seems, even frightened the Democratic Party establishment. How do you explain Sanders' popularity? Have people become more attracted to leftwing ideas?

Yes, of course. Over the past four decades, we have seen a steady increase in inequality and the disillusionment by large part of the population of western countries with the institutions of liberal democracy. And, most importantly, the notion that capitalism guarantees an increase in the welfare of society as a whole, has been completely discredited today. It is completely out of sync with the way things really are.

Q: In Russia, we are now experiencing a very severe economic crisis provoked by the coronavirus pandemic. To what extent can leftwing ideas become popular in Russia and who can take advantage of them?

Today, all the existing inequality and injustice in our society have become very acute thanks to the social and economic crisis associated with the pandemic. And, of course, the demands for fairness and redistribution of income can gain mass appeal. Another question is the extent to which they are specifically leftwing. Even though social-economic slogans will inevitably become part of the liberal opposition's rhetoric, this doesn't necessarily mean a shift to the left, since the socialist idea is associated with the alternative to the market as a main principle.

Q: Does the left consider this alternative viable? If Lenin and the Bolsheviks wanted to transform the entire world, today leftwing parties are more modest in their proposals, like trying to squeeze something, roughly speaking, from the capitalist system—tax the rich, support for the socially vulnerable. But does the left demand a total abandonment of the market economy? This is their key pretense, after all—they dream of something that is completely unrealized or has been implemented like in the USSR, only in a limited space.

On the one hand, we can say that Sanders' demand in the United States for Medicare for All is moderate, and doesn't affect the foundations of capitalist society and or offer any alternative to the existing system. On the other hand, all alternatives are born and put into practice not just because they exist in intellectuals' minds. Leftist politics is not only connected with the right theory, but first and foremost with changes in mass consciousness. And in this respect, the demand for universal healthcare just happens to be the moment for such a change in consciousness to at least begin.

It is worth remembering Lenin's comment that we do not know the exact path towards socialism, but we will know it when millions take up the cause. That is to say, when this happens, all proposals that exist as ideas among a few intellectuals will acquire specifics and get a historical chance to be translated into reality. In this sense, I fully share Marx's well-known assertion that one step of a real movement is more important than a thousand programs. And for today's left, it is first necessary to understand what precise moment consciousness will turn.

I think this is why democracy is central for the today's left, which, incidentally, is completely consistent with Leninist views. But democracy not just as procedure or as a principle for succession of power, but also in terms of people's ability to make decisions concerning their own destiny at the level of both politics and the economy. Why were these such a problem in the Soviet experience? Evidence of its failure boils down to the fact that the system was built so that ordinary people were completely alienated from decision-making. That is why the planned economy did not work, and the soviets, which were at the center of the Leninist democratic project, degenerated into the façade for the power of the state bureaucracy.

Q: One of the most difficult questions about both Lenin and the Revolution is violence and the cost of revolutions. The left at the time came to power with the help of violence and their opponents were often simply liquidated. One of the main claims the left makes, including the Soviet Union, is that you all want to be happy, but at the same time you must be ready to eliminate all opposition. Does the left have any idea whatsoever of restructuring society without such methods? After all, the revolution is not just a historical event, it is also a tragedy that includes sacrifices, conflicts, and civil war.

Violence is not a phenomenon revolutionaries invented, but is an integral part of the capitalist order. World wars, genocides and colonialism have repeatedly confirmed this. The forces seeking to change the status quo operate in this world with its contradictions and methods, including the willingness of the ruling elites to use any means necessary to defend their position. Therefore, for the most part, revolutionary violence began as a response, a reaction in a situation where no other methods were practiced. But since socialists' task is to build a society for the benefit of the majority, violence can't be one of the main methods of this society: a minority in power, by definition, needs violence always more than the majority that is deprived of it. Therefore, the violent nature of social revolutions is primarily not connected with revolutionaries solving political problems with force, but with the conditions in which they were compelled to act.

Q: There is a belief that no one wants a repeat of those tragic events and therefore revolution is not needed in Russia. However, what is often concluded from this is that since no one is willing to sacrifice for change, then it's necessary to accept that there will be no change. Is there hope that this problem will go away and societies will find a way to change without the tragic destruction associated with upheaval and victims?

I would like to answer yes this question, but I have no way to confidently predict the future. However, I think the very argument that the transition to the new will be accompanied by such sacrifice should be abandoned because it distorts the very statement of the problem. The fact is the existing society constantly produces victims. We are now living in a situation where victims are continuously being made through economic crises, impoverishment and ongoing military conflicts, and where most people are victims in one way or another. But they are encouraged to remain victimized to avoid some other terrible sacrifice, which is by definition worse than the existing ones. I think it's just worth trying to look at this from a different perspective—why the current situation continues to be tolerable for the people who are constantly suffering and sacrificing.

Q: Lenin's legacy is enormous. He wrote a lot of books and articles. People often don't have much time, unless if he or she is a historian, to read all the works of a past thinker. What would you recommend if someone wants to understand Vladimir Ilyich's general philosophy and views? Particularly what is the most relevant today?

First of all, the aforementioned book *State and Revolution* because not only does it give an answer to how Marxists treat the state, but it also allows us to see the difference between the Leninist approach and the distortions we unfortunately witnessed for most of Soviet history.

Of course, I would also recommend *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* because it accurately describes the mechanisms for the permanent reproduction of wars within the capitalist system. It must be said that the new, current wave of interest in Marxist theory of imperialism and this Leninist work was specifically connected to the events of the early 2000s—the Iraq War and all the ensuing military conflicts, which increasingly had an openly imperialist and inter-imperialist character.

Finally, today it is worth rereading the article “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” where Lenin clearly opposes imperial state policy restricting the rights of national minorities and links the struggle for the full realization of these rights with the objectives of the socialist transformation of society.

Q: So, in your view, Vladimir Ilyich's legacy continues to be relevant for understanding what is happening in the world today?

It continues to be relevant not because Lenin has given comprehensive answers to all the questions of our time, but because he uses a method in which you will find such answers for yourself.

Source: [LeftEast](#)

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