



84

LENIN

1870 - 1924

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, best known today by his pseudonym, Lenin, was the political leader principally responsible for the establishment of Communism in Russia. An ardent disciple of Karl Marx, Lenin initiated policies that had only been hinted at by Marx himself. Because of the rapid spread of Lenin's variety of Communism into many areas of the world, he must be acknowledged as one of history's most influential men.

Lenin was born in 1870, in the town of Simbirsk (now called Ulyanovsk in his honor), in Russia. His father was a loyal government official, but his older brother, Alexander, was a young radical who was executed for having taken part in a plot to assassinate the Czar. By the age of twenty-three, Lenin had

himself become a fervent Marxist. In December 1895, he was arrested by the Czarist government for his revolutionary activities and spent fourteen months in jail, after which he was exiled to Siberia.

In the course of his three years in Siberia (which do not appear to have been particularly unpleasant for him), he married a fellow revolutionary, and produced the book *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. His term in Siberia ended in February 1900, and a few months later Lenin traveled to western Europe. He spent the next seventeen years there, working as a professional revolutionary. When the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, to which he belonged, split into two factions, Lenin became the leader of the larger faction, the Bolsheviks.

World War I presented Lenin with his great opportunity. The war was a military and economic disaster for Russia, and it greatly increased dissatisfaction with the entire Czarist system. The Czarist government was overthrown in March 1917, and for a while it seemed that Russia might be governed by a democratic regime. Upon learning of the czar's downfall, Lenin immediately returned to Russia. When he got there, he was perceptive enough to see that the democratic parties, though they had already established a provisional government, had no great power, and that there was an excellent opportunity for the well-disciplined Communist party to seize control, despite its small numbers. He therefore urged the Bolsheviks to work for the immediate overthrow of the provisional government and its replacement by a Communist one. An attempted uprising in July was unsuccessful, and Lenin had to go into hiding. A second attempt, in November 1917, succeeded, and Lenin became the new head of state.

As a government leader, Lenin was ruthless but highly pragmatic. At first, he pushed for an uncompromising and rapid transition to a completely socialistic economy. When this did not work out, he was flexible enough to reverse himself, and to institute a mixed capitalist-socialist economy, which continued in the Soviet Union for several years.

In May 1922, Lenin had a serious stroke, and between then

and his death in 1924, he was almost completely incapacitated. Following his death, his body was carefully embalmed and preserved, and put on display in a mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow.

Lenin is primarily important as the man of action who led the Bolsheviks to power in Russia, and by so doing established the first Communist government anywhere in the world. He was the man who first took the theories of Karl Marx and translated them into actual political practice. The establishment of that first foothold was one of the turning points of modern history. From 1917 to 1979 there was a continual expansion of Communist power throughout the world, and for a while approximately one-third of the Earth's population lived under Communist rule.

Although primarily important as an active political leader, Lenin has also exerted considerable influence through his writings. Lenin's ideas were not really in contradiction to those of Marx, but they did represent a marked change in emphasis. Lenin was enormously interested in the tactics of revolution, and he considered himself an expert at them. He constantly stressed the need for violence: "Not a single problem of the class struggle has ever been solved in history except by violence," is a typical quotation. Marx makes only occasional reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin was almost obsessed by the topic, e.g., "The dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing else than power based upon force and limited by nothing—by no law and by absolutely no rule."

How important are Lenin's purely political ideas? In the first edition of this book I wrote:

The most distinctive feature of the Soviet government has not been its economic policies (there are socialist governments in various other countries), but rather its technique for retaining political power indefinitely. Since Lenin's day, not a single Communist government anywhere in the world, after once being firmly established, has been overthrown. By firmly controlling all institutions of power within the country—the press, the banks, the churches, the labor unions, etc.—Communist

governments seem to have eliminated the possibility of internal overthrow. There may be a weak point in their armor, but if so, no one has yet found it.

That paragraph might have sounded reasonable at the time I wrote it, in 1977; but the events of the past few years show that I was completely mistaken. Far from being invulnerable, Leninist regimes have been toppling right and left. Lenin hoped—and his opponents feared—that by combining prison camps and propaganda, he had devised a system of government that would endure for centuries. He was wrong, and his historical importance is therefore much less than I had feared.

However, even if Lenin's importance as a theorist has been overrated (his economic ideas, of course, are derived almost entirely from Karl Marx), he nevertheless has significance as a man of action—the practical political leader who seized power and used it to transform his country. But in judging his place in history, we must first compare the importance of his actions with those of his successor, Joseph Stalin.

Lenin, after all, ruled for only five years. During those five years he completely destroyed the power of the Russian aristocracy, and he *started* the country on the road to socialism. But it was Stalin, not Lenin, who forced most Soviet farmers into collectives; it was Stalin, not Lenin, who virtually eliminated private business enterprises within the Soviet Union; and it was under Stalin, not Lenin, that Soviet Communism was transformed into a global force, with activities vigorously challenging the West in virtually every country on Earth.

Lenin, during his few years in power, was responsible for several million deaths, and he did establish a set of prison camps as a means of crushing political opposition to the Communist program. However, it was under Stalin that that set of prison camps (the so-called "*Gulag Archipelago*") reached their full extent; and it was under Stalin that the great majority of the government purges and killings occurred.

Should we nevertheless say that, since Lenin preceded Stalin



*Woodcut of Lenin and Red Guards with the motto:
“We stand on guard for freedom.”*

and prepared the way for him, Lenin should be considered the more important of the two? A case which is perhaps closely corresponding is that involving King Philip II of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great. Philip was a brilliant leader whose military and organizational skills certainly prepared the way for Alexander and gave him his opportunity. However, Alexander did so much with that opportunity—far more than anyone had anticipated, and probably far more than most other men would have done—that I consider it appropriate to assign the larger part of the responsibility for what occurred to Alexander. By similar reasoning, I conclude that Stalin was a more influential figure than Lenin.

But even if Lenin is not as important as Stalin (or as Marx, whose writings provided the theoretical basis and stimulus for the whole Communist movement), he is still a major figure. Not only did he pave the way for Stalin in the USSR; but in addition, his writings, his policies, and his example all had a profound influence on Communist movements in many other countries.

It is sometimes claimed that the extraordinary loss of life that occurred in the Soviet Union was not due to the Leninist system

itself, but was a result only of the extreme cruelty and ruthlessness of Stalin. This view seems incorrect to me. In the first place, millions of people in the USSR were killed during the period of Lenin's rule, before Stalin took power. Furthermore, there have been leaders in various other Communist states who have engaged in the utmost brutality and destructiveness. A prominent example is Pol Pot, who ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. In that relatively brief period roughly two million Cambodians died—an even greater proportion of the population than were killed by Stalin during the twenty-five years he headed the Soviet Union. Even if the system which Lenin established does not *invariably* result in such massacres, it certainly seems to make it relatively easy for such excesses to occur. Lenin may have spent his entire life in an attempt to eliminate oppression, but the net result of his activities was the destruction of individual liberties throughout a sizable portion of the world.

Since it now appears that the Marxist/Leninist movement will *not* endure for many centuries (as I had feared when I wrote the first edition of this book), it no longer seems appropriate to include Lenin among the top twenty persons in this book. However, it still seems reasonable to rank him in the top 100. His transforming influence on Russia is sufficient to make him comparable in importance to Peter the Great; and if one also takes into account his impact on other countries, it seems clear that Lenin should be ranked even higher than Peter, although well below Stalin.