LENIN’S TOMB

Shortly after the death of Vladimir Ilich Lenin in 1924, and despite the opposition of his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Soviet leaders built a mausoleum on Moscow’s Red Square to display his embalmed body. The architect Alexei V. Shchusev designed two temporary cube-shaped wooden structures and then a permanent red granite pyramid-like building that was completed in 1929. The top of the mausoleum held a tribune from which Soviet leaders addressed the public. This site became the ceremonial center of the Bolshevik state as Stalin and subsequent leaders appeared on the tribune to view parades on November 7, May 1, and other Soviet ceremonial occasions. When Josef V. Stalin died in 1953, his body was placed in the mausoleum next to Lenin’s. In 1961, as Nikita Khrušchëv’s attack on Stalin’s cult of personality intensified, Stalin’s body was removed from the mausoleum and buried near the Kremlin wall. Lenin and his tomb, however, remained the quintessential symbols of Soviet legitimacy.

Because of Lenin’s status as unrivaled leader of the Bolshevik Party, and because of Russian traditions of personifying political power, a personality cult glorifying Lenin began to develop even before his death. The Soviet leadership mobilized the legacy of Lenin after 1924 to establish its own legitimacy and gain support for the Communist Party. Recent scholarship has disproved the idea that it was Stalin who masterminded the idea of embalming Lenin, instead crediting such figures as Felix Dzerzhinskiy, Leonid Krasin, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, and Anatoly Lunacharsky. It has also been suggested that the cult grew out of popular Orthodox religious traditions and the philosophical belief of certain Bolshevik leaders in the deification of man and the resurrection of the dead through science. The archival sources underscore the contingency of the creation of the Lenin cult. They show that Dzerzhinskiy and other Bolshevik leaders consciously manipulated popular sentiment about Lenin for utilitarian political goals. Yet this would not have created such a powerful political symbol if it had not been rooted in the spiritual, philosophical, and political culture of Soviet leaders and the Soviet people. More than a decade after the fall of communism, Lenin’s Tomb continued to stand on Red Square even though there were periodic calls for his burial.

See also: CULT OF PERSONALITY; KREMLIN; KRUPSKAYA, NADEZHDA KONSTANTINOVNA; LENIN, VLADIMIR ILICH; RED SQUARE

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LENIN, VLADIMIR ILICH

(1870–1924), revolutionary publicist, theoretician, and activist; founder of and leading figure in the Bolshevik Party (1903–1924); chairman of the Soviet of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR/USSR (1917–1924).

The reputation of Vladimir Ilich Lenin (pseudonym of V.I. Ulyanov) has suffered at the hands of both his supporters and his detractors. The former turned him into an idol; the latter into a demon. Lenin was neither. He was born on April 22, 1870, into the family of a successful school inspector from Simbirsk. For his first sixteen years, Lenin lived the life of a child of a conventional, moderately prosperous, middle-class, intellectual family. The ordinariness of Lenin’s upbringing was first disturbed by the death of his father, in January 1886 at the age of 54. This event haunted Lenin, who feared he might also die prematurely, and in fact died at almost exactly the same age as his father. Then, in March 1887, Lenin’s older brother was arrested for terrorism; he was executed the following May. The event aroused Lenin’s curiosity about what had led his brother to sacrifice his life. It also put obstacles in his path: As the brother of a convicted terrorist, Lenin was excluded from Kazan University. He eventually took a law degree,
with distinction, by correspondence from St Peters-
burg University in January 1892. However, his real interests had already turned to serving the op-
pressed through revolution rather than at the bar.

All the indications suggest that Lenin was ini-
tially attracted to populism, and only later came under the sway of Marxism. He joined a number of provincial Marxist study circles, but first began to attract attention when he moved to the capital, St. Petersburg, and engaged in illegal political ac-
tivities among workers and intellectuals. In Febru-
ary 1894, he met fellow conspirator Nadezhda
Krupskaya, who became his life-long companion. After his first visit to Western Eu-
rope, in 1895, to meet the exiled leaders of Russian Marxism, Lenin returned to St. Petersburg and helped set up the League of Struggle for the Eman-
cipation of the Working Class. He was arrested in December 1896 and, after prison interrogation in St. Petersburg, was exiled to the village of Shushen-
skoe, in Siberia. Krupskaya, who was exiled sepa-
rately, offered to share banishment with him. The authorities agreed, providing they married, which they did in July 1898. Siberian exile, though rig-
orous in many respects, was an interlude of rela-
tive personal happiness in Lenin’s life. His lifelong love of nature asserted itself in long walks, obser-
vation of social and animal life of the area, and fre-
quent hunting expeditions. He read a great deal, communicated widely by letter with other social-
ists, and undertook research and writing. Direct po-
itical activity was not possible, and Lenin played no part in the formation, in 1898, of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDLP), to which he at first adhered to but from which he later split. His term of exile ended in February, 1900. In July of that same year, he left Russia for five years.

Up until that point much of Lenin’s political writing, from his earliest known articles to his first major treatise, The Development of Capitalism in Russia, written while he was in Siberia, revolved around the dispute between Marxists and populists. The populists had proposed that Russia, given its commune-based peasant class and underdeveloped industry, could pass from its current condition of “backwardness” to socialism without having to first undergo the rigors of capitalist industrializa-
tion. Such a notion was an anathema to Lenin, who believed the Marxist axiom that socialist revolution could only follow from the overdevelopment of capitalism, which would bring about its own collapse. Lenin attacked the populist thesis in several articles and pamphlets. The main theme of his trea-
rise on The Development of Capitalism in Russia was that, in fact, capitalism was already well-entrenched in Russia, and therefore the question of whether it could be avoided was meaningless. Nonetheless, it remained obvious that Russia had only a small working class, and much of the rest of Lenin’s life could be seen as an attempt to reconcile the actual weakness of proletarian forces in Russia with the country’s undoubted potential for some kind of popular revolution, and to ensure Marxist and pro-
letarian dominance in any such revolution.

THE EMERGENCE OF BOLSHEVISME (1902–1914)

Lenin worked to develop theoretical and practical means to accomplish these closely related tasks. The core of Lenin’s activity revolved around the organ-
ization and production of a series of journals. He frequently described himself on official papers as a journalist, and he did, in fact, write a prodigious number of articles, as well as many longer works. In 1902, Lenin produced one of his most widely read and, arguably most misunderstood, pam-
phlets, What Is to Be Done?, which has been widely taken to be the founding text of a distinctive Lenin-
ist understanding of how to construct a revolutionary party on the basis of what he called “professional revolutionaries.” When it was first published, however, it was read as a statement of Marxist orthodoxy. Lenin asserted the primacy of political struggle, opposing the ideas of the economists, who argued that trade union struggle would serve the workers’ cause better than political revolution.

It was only in the following year, 1903, that Lenin began to break with the majority of the social-democratic movement. Again, received opinion, which claims Lenin split the party at the 1903 social-democratic party congress, oversimplifies the nature of the break. Lenin’s key resolution at the congress, in which he attempted to narrow the definition of party membership, was voted down. Later, by means many have judged foul, he garnered a majority vote on the issue of electing members to the editorial board of the party journal, Iskra, on which Lenin and his supporters predominated. It was from this victory that the terms Bolshevik (majoritarians) and Menshevik (minoritarians) began to slowly come into vogue. However, the split of the party was only fully completed over the next few months, even years, of arid but fierce party controversies. Lenin’s bitter polemic One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Crisis in Our Party, published in Geneva in February 1904, marks a clearer division and catalog of contentious issues than did What Is to Be Done. It was criticized not only by its target, Yuli Osipovich Martov, but also by Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov, Pavel Axelrod, Vera Zasulich, Karl Kautsky, and Rosa Luxemburg. Lenin’s remaining allies of the time included Alexander Bogdanov, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Grigory Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev.

So much energy was involved in the dispute that the development of an actual revolutionary situation in Russia went almost unnoticed by the squabbling exiles. Even after Bloody Sunday (January 22, 1905) Lenin’s attention remained divided
between the revolution and the task of splitting the social democrats. With the latter aim in view, he convened a Third Party Congress (London, April 25 to May 10) consisting entirely of Bolsheviks. Only in August did Lenin's main pamphlet on revolutionary strategy, Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Russian Revolution, appear. Inevitably, the wrong tactic—the identification of the revolution as bourgeois—was attributed to the Mensheviks. The correct, Bolshevik, tactic, was the recognition of “a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry,” which put less reliance on Russia’s weak bourgeoisie. It also marked a significant effort by Lenin to incorporate the peasantry into the revolutionary equation. This was another way in which Lenin strove to compensate for the weakness of the working class itself, and the peasantry remained part of his strategy, in a variety of forms, for the rest of his life.

In the atmosphere of greater freedom prevailing after the issuing of the October Manifesto, which was squeezed out of the tsarist authorities under extreme duress and appeared to promise basic constitutional rights and liberties, Lenin returned to Russia legally on November 21, 1905. Even so, by December 17, police surveillance had driven him underground. He supported the heroic but catastrophically premature workers’ armed uprising in Moscow in December. As conditions worsened he retreated to Finland and then, in December 1907, left the Russian Empire for another prolonged west European sojourn that lasted until April 1917. Even before the failure of the 1905 revolution, the party split continued to attract an inordinate amount of Lenin's attention. The break with Leon Trotsky in 1906 and Bogdanov in 1908 removed the last significant thinkers from the Bolshevik movement, apart from Lenin himself, who seemed constitutionally incapable of collaborating with people of his own intellectual stature. The break with Bogdanov was consummated in Lenin’s worst book, Materialism and Empiriocriticism (1909), a naive and crudely propagandistic blunder into the realm of philosophy.

Politically, Lenin had wandered into the wilderness as leader of a small faction that was situated on the fringe of Russian radical politics and distinguished largely by its dependence on Lenin and its refusal to contemplate a compromise that might reunite the party. Lenin was also distinguished by a ruthless morality of only doing that which was good for the revolution. In its name friendships were broken, and re-made, at a moment’s notice. Later, when in power, he urged occasional episodes of violence and terror to secure the revolution as he understood it, although, like a sensitive war leader, he did so reluctantly and only when he thought it absolutely necessary.

For the next few years Lenin was at his least influential. Had it not been for the backing of the novelist Maxim Gorky, it is unlikely the Bolsheviks could have continued to function. He had close support from Grigory Yevseyevich Zinoviev, Lev Borisovich Kamenev, Inessa Armand (with whom he may have had a brief sexual liaison), and from his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya. He also remained close to his family. When possible, he vacationed with them by the beaches of Brittany and Arcachon, or in the Swiss mountains. Lenin’s love of nature, of walking and cycling, frequently counteracted the immense nervous stresses occasioned by his political battles. He was prone to a variety of illnesses, which acted as reminders of his father’s early death, convincing him that he had to do things in a hurry. However, the second European exile was characterized by frustration rather than achievement.

**FROM OBSCURITY TO POWER**

**(1914–1921)**

The onset of the First World War began the transformation of political fortune which was to bring Lenin to power. His attitude to the war was characteristically bold. Despite the collapse of the Second International Socialist Movement and the apparent wave of universal patriotism of August 1914, Lenin saw the war as a revolutionary opportunity and declared, as early as September 1914, that socialists should aim to turn it into a world-wide civil war. He believed that the basic class logic of the situation, that the war was fought by the masses to serve the interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie, would eventually become clear to the troops who, being trained in arms, would then turn on their oppressors. He also wrote a major pamphlet, Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism. A Popular Outline (1916). Returning to the theme of justifying a Marxist revolution in “backward” Russia, he argued that Russia was a component part of world capitalism and therefore the initial assault on capital, though not its decisive battles, could be conducted in Russia. Within months, just such an opportunity arose.

Lenin’s transition from radical outcast to revolutionary leader began after the fall of tsarism in February 1917. A key moment was his declaration,
in the so-called April Theses, enunciated immediately on his return to Russia (April 16–17, 1917),
that the party should not support the provisional government. By accident or design, this was the
key to Bolshevik success. As other parties were sucked into supporting the provisional govern-
ment, they each lost public support. After the Kor
nivak Affair, when the commander-in-chief, Lavr Kor
nivak, appeared to be spearheading a counter-
revolution in August and September of 1917, it was
the Bolsheviks who were the main beneficiaries be-
cause they were not tainted by association with the
discredited provisional government which, popular
opinion believed, was associated with Kornivak’s
apparent coup. Even so, it took immense personal
effort by Lenin to persuade his party to seize their
opportunity. Contrary to much received opinion
and Bolshevik myth, the October Revolution was
not carefully planned but, rather, improvised. Lenin
was in still in hiding in Finland following pro-
scription of the party after the July Days, when
armed groups of sailors had failed in an attempt to
overthrow the provisional government and the auth-
orities took advantage of the situation to move
against the Bolsheviks. He had been vague about
details of the proposed revolution throughout the
crucial weeks leading up to it, suggesting, at dif-
f erent moments, that it might begin in Moscow,
Petrograd, Kronstadt, the Baltic Fleet, or even
Helsinki. Only his own emergence from hiding, on
October 23rd and 29th and during the seizure of
power itself (November 6–7 O.S.) finally brought
his party in line behind his policy. The provisional
government was overthrown, and Lenin became
Chairman of the Soviet of People’s Commissars, a
post he held until his death.

October was far from the end of the story. The
tragic complexity of the seizure of power soon be-
came apparent. The masses wanted what the slo-
gans of October proclaimed: soviet power, peace,
land, bread, and a constituent assembly. Lenin,
however, wanted nothing less than the socialist
transformation not only of Russia but of the world.
Conflict was inevitable. By early 1918, autonomous
workers and peasants organizations, including
their political parties and the soviets themselves,
were losing all authority. Ironically, at this mo-
moment one of Lenin’s most libertarian, almost anar-
chist, writings, State and Revolution, written while
he was in Finland, was published. In it he praised
direct democracy and argued that capitalism had
so organized and routinized the economy that it
resembled the workings of the German post office.

As a result, he wrote, the transition to socialism
would be relatively straightforward.

However, reality was to prove less tractable.
Lenin began to talk of “iron discipline” as an es-
sential for future progress, and in The Immediate
Tasks of the Soviet Government (March–April 1918)
proclaimed the concept of productionism—the
maximization of economic output as the prelimi-
nary to building socialism—to be a main goal of
the Soviet government. Productionism was an ide-
ological response to Russia’s Marxist paradox, a
worker revolution in a “backward” peasant coun-
try. Indeed, the weakness of the proletariat was
vastly accentuated in the first years of Soviet
power, as industry collapsed and major cities lost
up to two-thirds of their population through dis-
ease, hunger, and flight to the countryside.

Like the events of October, early Soviet policy
was also improvised, though within the confines
of Bolshevik ideology. Lenin presided over the na-
tionalization of all major economic institutions and
enterprises in a crude attempt to replace the mar-
ket with allocation of key products. He also over-
saw the emergence of a new Red Army; the setting
up of a new state structure based on Bolshevik-led
soviet; and a system of direct appropriation of
grain from peasants, as well as the revolutionary
transformation of the country. This last entailed
the taking over of land by peasants and the disap-
ppearance from Soviet territory of the old elites, in-
cluding the aristocracy, army officers, capitalists,
and bankers. To the chaos of the early months of
revolution was added extensive protest within the
party from its left wing, which saw production-
ism and iron discipline as a betrayal of the liber-
tarian principles of 1917. The survival of Lenin’s
government looked improbable. However, the out-
break of major civil war in July 1918 gave it a new
lease of life, forcing people to choose between im-
perfect revolution, represented by the Bolsheviks,
or out-and-out counter-revolution, represented by
the opposition (called the Whites). Most opted for
the former but, once the Whites were defeated in
1920, tensions re-emerged and a series of uprisings
against the Soviet government took place.

THE FINAL YEARS (1922–1924)
Lenin’s solution to the post–civil war crisis was his
last major intervention in politics, because his
health began to fail from 1922 onwards, exacer-
bated by the bullet wounds left after an assassina-
tion attempt in August 1918. The key problem in
the crisis was peasant disaffection with the grain
appropriation system. Lenin replaced requisitioning by a tax-in-kind, which in turn necessitated the partial restoration of market relations. Nonetheless, the state retained the commanding heights of the economy, including large factories, transport, taxation, and foreign trade. The result was known as the New Economic Policy. It was Lenin's third attempt at a form of transition. The first, outlined in the April Theses, was based on “Soviet supervision of production and distribution,” a system that had collapsed within the first months of Bolshevik power. The second, later called war communism, was based on iron discipline, state control of the economy, and grain requisitioning. Lenin believed his third solution was the correct one, arrived at through the test of reality. It was accompanied by intellectual and political repression and the imposition of a one-party state on the grounds that concession to bourgeois economic interests gave the revolution's enemies greater power that had to be counteracted by greater political and intellectual control by the party. Lenin remained enthusiastic about the NEP, and did not live to see the complications that ensued in the mid-1920s.

In his last writings, produced during his bouts of convalescence from a series of increasingly severe strokes beginning in May 1922, Lenin laid down a number of guidelines for his successors. These included a cultural revolution to modernize the peasantry (On Co-operation, January 1923) and a modest reorganization of the bureaucracy to get it under control (“Better Fewer but Better,” March 1923, his last article). In his “Testament” (Letter to the Congress, December 1922), Lenin argued that the party should not, in future, antagonize the peasantry. Most controversially, however, he summed up the candidates for succession without clearly supporting any one of them. His criticism of Stalin—that he had accumulated much power and Lenin was not confident that he would use it wisely—was strengthened in January of 1923, after Stalin argued with Krupskaya. Lenin called for Stalin to be removed as General Secretary, a post to which Lenin had only promoted him in 1922. There was no suggestion that Stalin should be removed from the Politburo or Central Committee. In any case, Lenin was too ill to follow through on his suggestions, thereby opening up vast speculation as to whether he might have prevented Stalin from coming to power had he lived longer.

Lenin’s last year was spent at his country residence near Moscow. In the company of Nadezhda Krupskaya and his sisters, he lived out his last months being read to and taken on walks in his wheelchair. In October 1923 he even had enough energy to return for a last look around his Kremlin office, despite the guard’s initial refusal to admit him because he did not have an up-to-date pass. However, his health continued to deteriorate, and he died on the evening of January 21, 1924.

See also: Bolshevism; February Revolution; July Days of 1917; Kornilov Affair; Krupskaya, Nadezhda Konstantinovna; Lenin’s Testament; Lenin’s Tomb; New Economic Policy; October Manifesto; October Revolution; Populism; War Communism; What Is to Be Done?

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