



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS



Rediscovering Lenin

Dialectics of Revolution and
Metaphysics of Domination

Michael Brie

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Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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This book is dedicated to my father, Horst Brie (1923–2014)

SERIES FOREWORD

THE MARX REVIVAL

The Marx renaissance is under way on a global scale. Whether the puzzle is the economic boom in China or the economic bust in ‘the West’, there is no doubt that Marx appears regularly in the media nowadays as a guru, and not a threat, as he used to be. The literature dealing with Marxism, which all but dried up 25 years ago, is reviving in the global context. Academic and popular journals and even newspapers and online journalism are increasingly open to contributions on Marxism, just as there are now many international conferences, university courses and seminars on related themes. In all parts of the world, leading daily and weekly papers are featuring the contemporary relevance of Marx’s thought. From Latin America to Europe, and wherever the critique to capitalism is reemerging, there is an intellectual and political demand for a new critical encounter with Marxism.

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This innovative series will present monographs, edited volumes and critical editions, including translations, to Anglophone readers. The books in this series will work through three main categories:

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The series will include titles focusing on the *oeuvre* of Marx and Engels which utilize the scholarly achievements of the on-going *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, a project that has strongly revived the research on these two authors in the past decade.

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Volumes will awaken readers to the overarching issues and world-changing encounters that shelter within the broad categorisation 'Marxist'. Particular attention will be given to authors such as Gramsci and Benjamin, who are very popular and widely translated nowadays all over the world, but also to authors who are less known in the English-speaking countries, such as Mariátegui.

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Political projects have necessarily required oversimplifications in the twentieth century, and Marx and Engels have found themselves 'made over' numerous times and in quite contradictory ways. Taking a national perspective on 'reception' will be a global revelation, and the volumes of this series will enable the worldwide Anglophone community to understand the variety of intellectual and political traditions through which Marx and Engels have been received in local contexts.

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Marcello Musto
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PREFACE

The title of this volume, *Rediscovering Lenin*, is in a way highly personal. What I present on these pages constitutes nothing less than my own personal journey. More than 40 years ago as a young philosophy student in Leningrad, I stepped into the international bookshop on Nevsky Prospect and bought the first of the 40-odd dark brown volumes of Lenin's *Collected Works*—each one costing about one rouble. Over the years I managed to acquire the entire set, including the volumes containing his letters, and referred back to a number of writings from this edition extensively during special seminars at the Humboldt University and in my *Habilitation*.

Nearly 40 years later, in the spring and summer of 2016, I finally managed to catch up on something I had wanted to do for a long time: namely, to read the works and letters chronologically and compile comprehensive excerpts from them. This volume represents the outcome of that reading. My ultimate aim was to gain a better understanding of how Lenin thought—for, as Louis Althusser once wrote, ‘no one could deny that Lenin does *think*, i.e. thinks systematically and rigorously’ (Althusser 1971, 48). He managed, in a way that only a very small number of figures in history have, to perfectly merge two distinct roles—that of an iron-willed, intervening politician, and that of a strategic, social-analytical thinker (Hill 1971, 162). It was no accident that Lenin loved chess. He is said to have been a ‘chess player of considerable talent’ (Elwood 2011, 126). During his visit to a party school organised by the Russian author Maxim Gorky on the island of Capri, he fought with his comrade Bogdanov not just over philosophical questions but also on the chess board. As Carter Elwood writes: ‘He became involved in fiercely competitive chess

matches with Bogdanov and, according to Gorky, was a poor loser' (Elwood 2011, 142). But in 1917 Lenin started a new, real game—now on the stage of world history. For this he had prepared his whole adult life since the execution of his beloved older brother Alexander by Tsarist authorities in 1887. This book begins at the point when Lenin finished preparing for the most important 'game' of his life—the socialist revolution in Russia.

I have attempted, above all, to *understand Lenin*, to engage with his line of argument and reconstruct it in its specific context. I assumed and continue to assume that Lenin acted upon the most profound Marxist convictions and was prepared to accept all of the responsibilities his beliefs entailed. I sought to understand this conviction and flesh out its consequences. This volume, then, is neither a biography or complete representation of Lenin's work, nor a contextualisation thereof in its respective historical moment. Rather, it represents an attempt to reconstruct and substantiate some of his central, strategically relevant positions *from within his work itself*. My focus is on the period beginning in 1914, the years that preceded Lenin's intervention in Russian and world politics, and the years leading up to his death. I consciously limit myself to a single aspect—the formation and development of his strategy and the significance of central insights and ideas in the process. This is a deliberate constriction of the analysis of Lenin's work and represents the foundation of this book. Yet this is precisely the aspect that always intrigued me about Lenin most: what can we learn from Lenin in order to intervene strategically?

In my view, Russia's revolutionary epoch from 1905 to the 1930s illustrates the tremendous impact ideas can have. What is possible during extreme social and political crises does not lie in the hands of the actors involved. But they must choose between various options or risk disappearing into historical oblivion. The option they select is largely determined by the ideas guiding them. The stronger these ideas and greater the actors' faith in their validity are, the more determined their intervention and their willingness to stake everything on one card.

While reading Lenin's works and letters I focused on four questions in particular. Firstly, I was keen to understand Lenin's strategic leverage during the Russian Revolution in 1917 to the extent that it was conditioned by his own work. I therefore dedicate the first section of the book to his work between August 1914, the beginning of World War I, and October 1917. Through this decision, one of Lenin's most important achievements is presupposed in this depiction—namely, the development of the

conception of the party of a new type. On this, see, *inter alia*, Tony Cliff (2002) and Lars T. Lih (2008). Secondly, I inquire as to why he was so insistent on the armed insurrection in October 1917 and so readily prepared to dissolve the freely elected Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Thirdly, I seek to understand how he attempted to address the internal contradictions of the Soviet system as it evolved out of revolution and civil war, taking into account the dynamic international developments between 1918 and 1922. Fourthly, I turn to the question of Leninism, which constitutes less an investigation of Lenin himself so much as the ideological-political-social system he so decisively helped to construct. In the following I discuss Rosa Luxemburg's analysis of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevik rule after October 1917. The concluding section addresses the question of to what extent Lenin's politics in 1917–1918 stands in the tradition of Marx's views on socialism and communism. This problem has sparked major controversies until today, for good reason. After all, here once again we find the crucial role of ideas when attempts are made to set a new course in times of great crises.

Readers seeking to learn more about events in Petrograd in 1917–1918 are best advised to turn to the books by Alexander Rabinowitch (1976, 2007). Russian historian Vladlen Loginov depicts Lenin's impact on the year 1917 with great empathy and detailed knowledge (2019). In terms of a document composed by a brilliant contemporary witness, Nikolai Sukhanov's *The Russian Revolution* (1962) is highly recommended. A harsh, realistic account of the period from the late nineteenth century until 1924 in Russia is presented by Orlando Figes (1997). Among the many Lenin biographies available I would also like to highlight the three-volume work by Tony Cliff, written from the standpoint of a dedicated Trotskyist (2002, 2004, 2012). The last three months between early December 1922 and early March 1923 are reconstructed in great detail in Moshe Lewin's *Lenin's Last Struggle* (2005). Slavoj Žižek's most recent work on Lenin (2017) noticeably falls far behind Lewin's work and even some earlier works of Žižek himself (2002). Whoever seeks to delve into Lenin's intellectual biography can draw on the more recent, well-founded and comprehensive work by Tamas Krausz (2014). To this day, Georg Lukács' study of Lenin—conducted in the spirit of Leninism—impresses through its brilliance and reconstruction of Lenin as a materialist-dialectical practitioner of revolutionary *realpolitik* (2009).

A very lively account was written by Angelica Balabanoff (1964), who worked in Lenin's immediate milieu for many years, at over 90 years of age.

Another informative source is the documentary compilation by Arnold Reisberg in two volumes (1977a, b), despite the fact that it is coloured to some extent by traces of Marxism-Leninism. Readers seeking to refamiliarize themselves with the historical Lenin debate, which dates back half a century, ought to refer to the work on Leninism produced by Projekt Klassenanalyse (1972). Because the body of literature on the Russian Revolutions of the twentieth century and on Lenin himself is seemingly endless, I prefer to confine myself to these rather personal recommendations for further reading.

I would like to thank Lutz Brangsch and Wladislaw Hedeler for their comments on the manuscript, shielding me from numerous mistakes and helping to sharpen my thoughts. Likewise, I would like to thank Gerd Siebecke from VSA Verlag for his tenacity in demanding the manuscript, and my colleagues at the Institute for Critical Social Analysis at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung for exhibiting such tolerance and patience for my journey of discovery. Special thanks go to the translators Loren Balhorn and Jan-Peter Herrmann. The fifth section was translated by Eric Canepa.

Given that this volume emerged from an intense reading of Lenin's works, it is fairly self-evident that it contains a large number of quotes. In order to restrict the number of references, I refer to the English editions available online free-of-charge in PDF form, originally published by Progress Publishers in Moscow in the 1960s and based on the Russian editions commissioned by the Ninth Congress of the RCP(b) and the Second Congress of Soviets of the USSR. 'LW' stands for Lenin's *Works*, followed by the volume and page number. Much has been written about the shortcomings of these editions—shortcomings which later editions have largely failed to correct. For the collected works of Marx and Engels (MECW) a similar approach will be used. A number of Lenin's previously unpublished documents have become available since that time (Pipes 1996; V. I. Lenin 1999). They do not change my perception of Lenin, but rather sharpen its contours at best—albeit in a way which I already could have gathered from the edition I purchased on Nevsky Prospect many years ago.

Berlin, Germany

Michael Brie

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CHAPTER 1

What Is to Be Done in Times of Powerlessness? Lenin's Years in Switzerland, September 1914 to April 1917

'Russia – that is the France of the current century. The revolutionary initiative for a new social transformation is correctly assigned to it in accordance with the laws.'

Friedrich Engels (quoted in Lopatin 1883, 488)

USING THE EXILE PROPERLY

This book begins in August 1914. These were leaden times in which the mole of history had buried itself deep in the ground. No date revealed the powerlessness of the Left in Europe like 4 August 1914, when the SPD group in the Reichstag voted unanimously to approve war credits. Rosa Luxemburg spoke of a 'world tragedy' (Luxemburg 2004, 313). The outbreak of World War I marginalised the radical Left in Europe entirely. Only a few immediately and definitively branded the war an inter-imperialist conflict and declared war on it in turn. They formed a small, upright grouping: the German Gruppe Internationale, the Russian Bolsheviks and the grouping of internationalist Mensheviks, the Dutch Tribunists, the French syndicalists, the small Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, as well as minorities in other political groups. Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Vladimir Lenin, and Anton Pannekoek all belonged to this group. The state of war marked a deep caesura. Class struggle was removed from the political agenda in favour of the war of nations. Censorship and political repression made work among the proletarian masses and the army nearly impossible.

Thus, what is to be done in times of powerlessness? The following section takes a closer look at Lenin's Swiss years between August 1914 and April 1917 as well as the summer of 1917 in Russia. News of the outbreak of World War I reached him in Austro-Hungarian-occupied Poland. He had moved to Krakow in July 1912 from Paris, where he primarily resided since 1908, in order to intensify his contacts to Russia. He spent the summer of 1914, as he already had in 1913, in the Gutóv-Mostovich guest house in Poronin, a tourist location in the High Tatras. He was arrested immediately after war's outbreak on suspicion of spying for Russia. Released through the intervention of Polish and Austrian socialists, he travelled to neutral Switzerland together with his wife and her mother as fast as possible. He would remain there for two years and eight months until he was able to take a train through imperial Germany to Sweden (for more details see Gautschi 1973; Solzhenitsyn 1976). From there he boarded a ship to Finland and went to Petrograd carrying with him his famous *April Theses*, his slogans for a socialist revolution in Russia.

After settling in Switzerland Lenin was largely isolated and contact to Russia cut off almost entirely. He sought out collaborators. Grigory Zinoviev together with his wife and G.L. Shklovsky as well as Ines Armand also came to Bern. This constituted 'the circle of friends with which he discussed daily' (Reisberg 1977, 560). The most important organ of communication with the member of the party in Russia, the newspaper *Pravda*, had already been banned in July 1914. The members of the Bolsheviks' Duma delegation were sentenced and banished to East Siberia.

Using the Time of Exile Properly

On 19 September 1915, Lenin wrote to the left Socialist Revolutionary Alexandrovitch: 'Dear Comrade, Comrade Kollontai has forwarded your letter on to me. I have read and reread it attentively. I can understand your passionate protest against the emigrant colony, which apparently did anything but please you. The experience of 1905, however, has proved, in my opinion, that there are emigrants and emigrants. Part of the emigrant body, which prior to 1905 had devised the slogans and tactics of revolutionary Social-Democracy, proved in the years 1905-07 to be closely linked with the mass revolutionary movement of the working class in *all* its forms. The same applies today, in my opinion. If the slogans are correct, if the tactics are the right ones, the mass of the working class, at a given stage of development of its revolutionary movement, is bound to *come round* to these slogans.' (LW 43: 493)

Looking back on the 32 months Lenin spent in Switzerland one can say with certainty that no one before him ever used their time in exile to prepare for their major political moment quite as systematically and consequently as Lenin did. During a period in which he was unable to take any action, he did what he did best: *he prepared the conditions for his own actions*. Lenin turned 'inward' in the truest sense of the word. Everything was put to the test. As he remarks in his overview of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which will be referred to again at a later point: 'The movement of cognition *to* the object can always only proceed dialectically: to retreat in order to hit more surely—reculer pour mieux sauter' (LW 38: 277f).

In the following, the individual elements of this 'retreat' are sketched out in their *internal interconnectedness*. Some details of Lenin's work in this period were due to circumstance, often external occasions were the trigger. But the whole of his work in this time of external powerlessness is characterised by impressive consistency and explains to a large degree Lenin's ability to unfold a strategic efficacy far overshadowing that of his opponents when the opportunity arose in the revolutionary months of 1917.

While Lenin's individual writings from this period are often taken for themselves, here we address their embeddedness in a strategically oriented searching process. Proceeding from the firm conviction that the war would lead to a European socialist revolution, much like a chess player Lenin sought to anticipate a whole series of possible moves in advance. Eight elements in Lenin's decisive contribution enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power in autumn 1917 and establish their dictatorship (see Fig. 1.1). Moreover, these eight elements are conducive to a better understanding of why the Bolsheviks' epoch-making success ultimately led them into a historical dead end.

Although the individual elements of Lenin's search process depicted in the following were developed in relative temporal succession, owing above all to the concrete possibilities for action at hand at the time, the succession was of course fluid. Adding to this were what cybernetics calls feedback: each subsequent step sharpens the 'No' that forms the starting point, modifies social analysis, radicalises revolutionary theory, specifies scenarios, contributes to new ideas about the emancipatory horizon and the role of state power, and prioritises new strategic focal points accompanied by specific corresponding transitional projects.

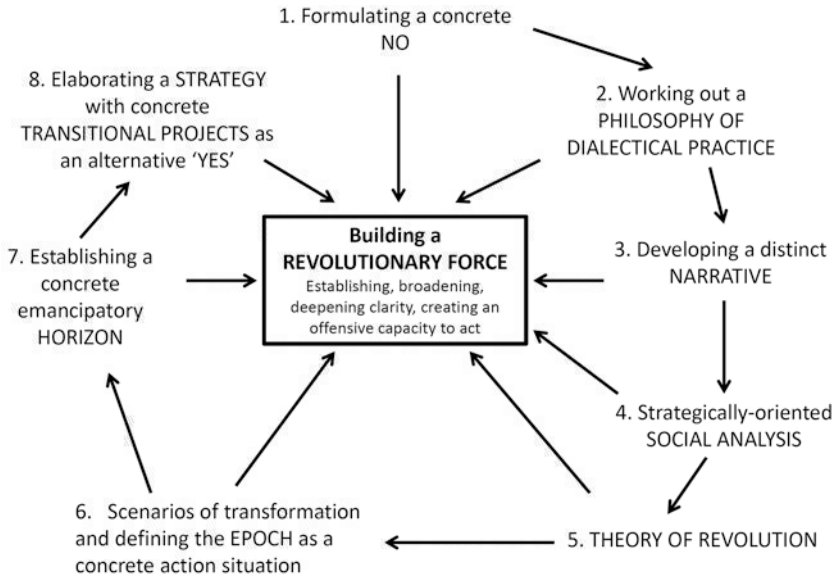


Fig. 1.1 Lenin's impact between August 1914 and April 1917

FORMULATING A 'NO'

Small groups in many Second International parties rejected the World War, opposed their own party leadership, and searched for a strategy commensurate to the new situation. A network began to form around Social Democracy's left pole that would go down in the history of European socialism as the 'Zimmerwald movement'.

The Zimmerwald Movement

The declaration passed in September 1915 described war—'Regardless of the truth regarding immediate responsibility for the outbreak of this war'—to be 'the result of imperialism, the striving by capitalist classes of each nation to feed their greed for profit through exploitation of human labour and natural resources around the entire globe'. Addressing the proletarians of Europe, it called: '*Since the war began you have placed your energies, your courage, and your endurance at the service of the ruling classes. Now the task is to act for your own cause, for the sacred aims of socialism, for the deliverance of oppressed peoples and subjugated classes through irreconcilable proletarian class struggle.*' (International Socialist Conference 1915)