

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Vladimir Lenin

1

(1870-1924)

Regarded as one of the greatest revolutionary leaders in history, Vladimir Lenin was the founder of the Russian Communist Party, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the first head of the Soviet State.

From "Lenin, Vladimir Ilich." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001.

Vladimir Lenin was a Russian revolutionary leader and theorist, who presided over the first government of Soviet Russia and then that of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Lenin was the leader of the radical socialist Bolshevik Party (later renamed the Communist Party), which seized power in the October phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917. After the revolution, Lenin headed the new Soviet government that formed in Russia. He became the leader of the USSR upon its founding in 1922. Lenin held the highest post in the Soviet government until his death in 1924, when Joseph Stalin assumed power.

Lenin was born Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov in the city of Simbirsk in central European Russia. (He adopted the pseudonym Lenin, probably derived from the river Lena in Siberia, while doing secret work as a revolutionary....) While Lenin was finishing school in Simbirsk in 1887, his older brother, Aleksandr, was arrested and executed in St. Petersburg (then the capital of Russia) for his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Russian emperor Alexander III. Later that year Lenin entered Kazan University (now Kazan State University), where he intended to study law. Before completing his first term at the university, however, Lenin was expelled for his involvement in a student demonstration....

While living on [his mother's] estate, Lenin began to immerse himself in the radical political literature of the time. A particular favorite was the novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863), by Russian writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky. One of the novel's main characters, a man named Rakhmetev, lived a life of extreme self-discipline and single-minded focus on revolutionary politics. Rakhmetev served as a model for Lenin, and it was largely these ideals of the Russian revolutionary tradition—which glorified political action and a life fully committed to the cause of revolutionary political change—that shaped Lenin's political personality. Also about this time, Lenin became acquainted with the revolutionary ideas of German philosopher Karl Marx

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Vladimir Lenin

2

through Marx's greatest work, *Das Kapital* (published in three volumes from 1867 to 1895). Marx's ideas had a profound impact on Lenin, and he soon came to consider himself a Marxist....

Lenin received his law degree in 1892. He moved to the city of Samara and took a position as a lawyer's assistant. Lenin's earlier brush with the authorities limited his prospects as a lawyer, however, and he soon began channeling his ambitions into revolutionary politics. In the mid-1890s Lenin quit his law practice in Samara and settled in St. Petersburg. There he became associated with a group of radicals who were similarly impressed by the ideas of Marx and the influential Russian Marxist Georgy Plekhanov....

The implications of Lenin's vision for the Russian Marxists became evident at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), held in 1903. (The First Congress, held in 1898, ended shortly after it convened when most of the delegates were arrested). At this meeting, Lenin and his colleagues debated the issue of party organization and membership. Lenin argued for a tightly organized party, limited in number, with its members actively engaged in organizational work....

In 1904 Russia went to war with Japan. A string of military defeats and the strains placed on society by the war made for a tense atmosphere in St. Petersburg, and by the beginning of 1905 various segments of Russian society, including students and liberal members of the nobility, were calling for political reform. When an unarmed crowd of workers marched to the city's Winter Palace on January 9 (or January 22, in the Western, or New Style, calendar) to submit a petition to Emperor Nicholas II, security forces fired on the crowd, killing or wounding several hundred marchers. The crackdown resulted in further strikes and demonstrations throughout the country, beginning the crisis that would become known as the Russian Revolution of 1905.

In October 1905 the emperor issued his October Manifesto, in which he made a number of political concessions, including a commitment to establish a popularly elected legislative assembly called the Duma.... In December 1907 Lenin began his second extended stay in Western Europe, settling first in Geneva, Switzerland, and then in Paris.... In 1912 Lenin and his supporters organized a party conference in Prague. At this conference, Lenin formally

broke from his Menshevik opponents and the rest of the RSDLP to form an independent Bolshevik Party.

Lenin settled again in Switzerland, where he spent the initial years of World War I (1914-1918). The war inspired one of Lenin's most influential works, titled *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). In this book, Lenin argued that the world war was an inevitable outcome of Western capitalism and imperialism, whereby the capitalist states of Europe had come to rely upon aggressive foreign expansion in order to maintain economic profits. Lenin was convinced that the war signaled the final decline of the worldwide capitalist economy and thus was bringing nearer the socialist revolution. He declared himself a "defeatist," arguing that imperial Russia's defeat in the war would be the surest means of bringing about revolution in Russia. In advocating Russia's defeat in World War I, Lenin found himself very much alone among his fellow Russian Marxists, for whom the war had aroused a fair measure of patriotism....

In March 1918 the Bolsheviks renamed themselves the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). That summer, former officers of the imperial military, as well as political figures who had been deposed in the Bolshevik seizure of power, began to form anti-Bolshevik armies in southern Russia and Siberia. Called the White Armies, these groups strongly opposed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the antidemocratic seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party. The Whites were supported by the World War I Allies, who believed that their victory over Germany depended on Russia rejoining the Allied cause. Meanwhile, the Soviet government began to organize its own military force, the Red Army, under the direction of Lenin's longtime associate Leon Trotsky. In August 1918 Lenin was seriously wounded by two bullets in an assassination attempt carried out by a political opponent. His strong recovery from the wounds, and his quick return to work, did much to contribute to the "cult" of Lenin as a Christ-like figure who could perform miracles.

From 1918 to 1921 Russia was torn by a civil war between the White Armies and the Red Army of the Soviet government. In the summer of 1918 the Soviet government, under Lenin's leadership, launched the Red Terror, a brutal campaign aimed at eliminating political opponents among the civilian population. The government also introduced a series of economic policies in an effort to put socialist principles into practice and to respond to Russia's

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Vladimir Lenin

4

pressing economic needs. As part of this program, which came to be known as War Communism, the government began forcibly seizing grain and other food products from the peasantry in order to increase the supply of food to army troops and workers in the cities. In urban areas, factories were nationalized and workers were subject to strict discipline.

While contending with civil war and economic upheaval at home, Lenin also turned his attention to the international arena. In March 1919 he organized the Third International, popularly known as the Communist International, or Comintern, to promote world revolution according to the Russian communist model. The Comintern initially focused on Europe as the center for the future revolution. However, when a European upheaval failed to materialize, the Comintern shifted its attention to Asia, where it supported the cause of colonial peoples struggling against European imperialism.

The policies of War Communism led to significant declines in Russia's agricultural and industrial output. Widespread strikes and uprisings broke out in cities and rural areas, and by early 1921 mass unrest was threatening the stability of the Soviet government. At the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, held in March, Lenin introduced a policy of economic liberalization known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The policy signified a temporary retreat from Lenin's goal of transforming the Soviet economy into a fully communist one.

In May 1922 Lenin suffered a stroke. He recovered and resumed work three months later, but then in December he suffered a second stroke and it became apparent that his health was in serious decline. That month the Soviet government declared the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a federal union consisting of Soviet Russia and neighboring areas that were under Russian military occupation or ruled by branches of the communist movement. Lenin became preoccupied with how the new USSR would be governed after his death. He favored a collective leadership to succeed him and was particularly concerned about the political infighting that had come to divide the party leadership and the Soviet government. In late 1922 and early 1923 Lenin dictated what became known as his "testament," in which he expressed regret at the direction the Soviet government had taken, with particular emphasis on its dictatorial manner and its complex bureaucracy. He singled out

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Vladimir Lenin

5

Joseph Stalin, then general secretary of the Communist Party, as the main culprit in many of these trends. Stalin's aggressive behavior had brought him into conflict with the ailing Lenin.

Lenin was one of the foremost revolutionary leaders of the 20th century. As a politician, he was characterized by remarkable determination, ruthlessness, and sometimes cruelty. Although it was Lenin's clarity of vision that ultimately guided the Bolsheviks to power, his vision for the future of Russia and the USSR was less clear. Lenin was more successful as a revolutionary leader than as a statesman, and his legacy would contribute to the political and ideological divisions that characterized the Soviet leadership in the 1920s. Lenin's greatest achievements were those attained in struggle—such as in the Bolsheviks' bid for power in 1917 and their effort to preserve their authority during the civil war. His leadership, and his conception of the revolutionary party as a disciplined, military-style organization, served as an important model for later revolutionary leaders of the 20th century, such as Mao Zedong of China and Fidel Castro of Cuba. Lenin was also one of the leading Russian writers and thinkers of the period, and his works made important contributions to the development of revolutionary socialist theory.

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