

HOW DID LENIN ADAPT MARXIST THEORY TO THE SITUATION IN RUSSIA?

Marx had seen the proletarian revolution occurring in those countries where capitalism was at its most advanced. Those countries that seemed ripe for revolution were therefore to be found in Western Europe, such as Britain and Germany. In the early twentieth century Russia was still semi-feudal with little industrial development. For those who wished to see revolution in Russia, according to Marx's theory, the signs were not good, for the following reasons:

- **The lack of capitalist development.** The bourgeoisie seemed incapable of carrying out their own revolution. Power remained in the hands of the Tsar and his supporters from the landed aristocracy. How could a socialist revolution be expected before capitalism had developed?
- **The limited size of the proletariat.** Small-scale industrial development had failed to produce an industrial workforce of a size sufficient to have the potential for revolution.
- **The lack of an organised proletariat.** The industrial workforce that did exist lacked those elements Marx saw as necessary to galvanise themselves into action, e.g. education at a level that would raise awareness of their own position. The repressive measures of the Tsarist regime made the formation of workers' organisations extremely difficult.

Lenin was to make adaptations to Marxist theory in the light of these factors. In practice, the application of Marxism to the Russian experience was to divide revolutionary groups. These divisions were often widened by the way in which ideas from other radical groups were incorporated into debates. There were arguments over whether capitalist development should be aided in order to speed up the process of historical change or whether the circumstances could be used to promote proletarian revolution without further delay. Lenin's interpretation of Marxist theory was as follows:

- 1 **Do not delay the Revolution.** Lenin believed that the Revolution need not be delayed until capitalism had developed. This was a direct attack on the view of other revolutionary groups, such as the Mensheviks, who believed that the way forward was to work with the bourgeoisie to improve workers' conditions, whilst waiting for capitalism to collapse. There was, Lenin argued, little point in using the democratic process to promote the interests of the industrial workers when, under the Tsarist regime, there were no real democratic institutions to use.
- 2 **The role of the peasantry.** To Marx, the idea of revolution was based firmly around the proletariat, rejecting those who saw revolutionary

potential in the peasantry, and Lenin's early writings echoed this view. Yet in Russia the lack of an organised proletariat posed a particular problem. The vast majority of the population were peasants and Russian radicals had long since debated their role in revolution. The *narodniks* of the nineteenth century had believed in the theory of peasant revolution and, although Marxists rejected this notion, some revolutionaries, such as the SRs, believed the peasantry could be harnessed to the cause of proletarian revolution. The harsh conditions under which the peasantry worked and lived gave them some common ground with the industrial workers. Both the peasants and the industrial workers could be seen as oppressed classes. It was not until 1917 that Lenin's writings show a change in his view towards the peasantry. Sometimes he used the term 'proletariat' to include poorer peasants and during the summer of 1917 Bolshevik propaganda was often targeted at the peasantry when their interests coincided with those of the industrial workforce.

- 3 **The Party as the vanguard of the Revolution.** If the proletariat was unable to carry out its own revolution, it could be achieved by the organisation of a highly centralised and disciplined party on their behalf. To Lenin, this was best achieved by a group of intellectuals dedicated to furthering the interests of the industrial workers. This group would be small enough to maintain the secrecy necessary against the Tsar's secret police. It would be the role of this party to speed up the process of historical change by direct intervention, i.e. by organising revolution. The Revolutionary Party would act as the vanguard of the Revolution, steering it to a successful conclusion. This view, first outlined in *What is to be done?* in 1902, differed from Marx's opinion that the Revolution would be based on the proletariat's own efforts. Very few Marxists believed that a small elite of revolutionaries would ever be able to carry out a successful revolution. To Lenin, it was the only way of overcoming the limitations of the Russian proletariat. This difference over tactics was to lead to the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in 1903.
- 4 **Russia as the weakest link in the capitalist system.** Whereas Marx had seen the potential for revolution as greater in the more advanced capitalist countries, Lenin saw the possibilities for attacking capitalism's weakest link. In *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) Lenin had developed Marx's idea on the capitalist system's use of foreign expansion to further its own existence. Marx had stated that capitalism would seize foreign territories in order to exploit their economic resources. Lenin believed that these resources had been used to buy off the workers by enabling the capitalist countries to improve working conditions and, therefore, reduce the revolutionary tendencies of the workforce. In this respect Russia was a weak link in the capitalist

system because it had failed to exploit foreign territories as effectively as Britain, France and Germany.

5 The Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Lenin saw this phase as a seizure of power by the party on behalf of the industrial workers. The party would form a dictatorship in order to ensure the Revolution survived in the face of counter-attacks by the bourgeoisie. Given the power of the bourgeoisie, this would require violence to be used and the party should not flinch from this. The use of violent action divided Lenin from other Marxists, such as Plekhanov, but it had been a notable feature of the Russian Populist movement of the nineteenth century. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat would also promote socialism by removing private ownership and by the state taking over the economy to be run in the interests of the workers. When the risk of counter-revolution was dealt with Lenin believed that the state would wither away and communism would develop. The result would be as Marx had indicated but the role to be played by the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was very much Lenin's own view.

Lenin's main works include *What is to be done?* (1902), *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) and *The State and Revolution* (1917). He was a prolific writer, whose collected works amounted to fifty-five volumes. The fact that in the Soviet Union the ideology of the state was referred to as Marxism-Leninism gives an indication of the importance attached to Lenin's ideas. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to view Lenin as primarily a theorist, he was above all else a practical politician. His ideas and interpretation of Marxism need to be seen within this context. In *The Bolshevik Revolution* (1950) E. H. Carr drew attention to Lenin's 'greatness as a political strategist and as a political tactician' who used his writings to carefully build up his position in advance, and his instinct to know 'where and when and how to strike or to hold back'.

One important example of Lenin's application of Marxist theory to the reality the Bolsheviks faced is the 'April Theses' of 1917. This article, published in *Pravda*, the party newspaper, was short and to the point. It was, as might be expected, more propaganda aimed at the Provisional Government than Marxist theory. Although it was written from the Marxist perspective of historical change, Lenin called for immediate proletarian revolution. This was seen by other revolutionaries, including some Bolsheviks, as moving away from a rigid Marxist approach. The 'April Theses' also contained a carefully prepared appeal to the industrial workers, peasants and soldiers: 'Peace, Bread and Land'. These were the three basic needs that urgently needed addressing during the chaotic months of the summer of 1917 and demonstrated Lenin's skill in translating Bolshevik ideas into accessible slogans which were so in tune with the demands of the Russian masses.

Lenin was able to adapt the basic principles of Marxist theory to the situation facing the Bolsheviks in Russia during the early part of the twentieth century. These modifications reflected an awareness of the peculiarities of the Russian context: both the reality of circumstances as well as the traditions of Russian radicalism. As a result his adaptations showed some significant divergences from Marxist theory in terms of the way forward for the Revolution. Lenin was not prepared to wait for the inevitable process of history to occur. He was ready to use the Bolshevik Party as an instrument of intervention to speed up the historical process in Russia.