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Russia: The Anti-Colonial Revolt Was Key to Lenin's Vision of Revolution

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The Russian Revolution enthused anti-colonial movements around the world, fueling hopes that the European empires could be overthrown. But the revolt against empire was also fundamental to Lenin's own strategy, as he worked to unite workers' revolts in the metropolises with national struggles to end colonial exploitation.

In Paris in 1920, a young migrant worker found employment toiling in hotel kitchens and painting trinkets. When he had a free hour, he dipped into basement bars to attend socialist meetings. These were heated and divided times: the loosely unified French workers' movement was being torn apart by the Russian Revolution and the sharply competing socialist approaches to it. In one of these meetings, someone passed our migrant worker a copy of Vladimir Lenin's new *Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions*.

In that text, written as part of a debate in the young Communist International, the leading light among Russia's revolutionaries set out an uncompromising anti-colonialism. Indeed, this marked a line in the sand between Bolshevik militancy and all those moderate European socialists who equivocated on questions of empire. Like so many others from Peru to India, this young itinerant worker was electrified. "What first drew me to Leninism?" he asked years later. He answered in a single word: *patriotism*. He would become known to the world as Ho Chi Minh: leader of the Vietnamese struggle against France and then the United States, and a face adorning banners on every continent.

Empires and Catastrophes

If Lenin's name is overwhelmingly associated now with gray monuments, an authoritarian state, and its complement in a conspiratorial party, much that he represented has become buried treasure. So much of the language of the radical 1960s and 1970s, from feminist criticism of the oppressive regulation of sexuality and reproduction to talk of a capitalist world system and its exploitative underdevelopment of poorer nations, harked back to a previous revolutionary moment in the 1910s and 1920s.

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Here, Bolshevism broke new ground. The later claim that colonialist thinking was so "of the times" that no one should be held to blame for it involves a great deal of amnesia — or, indeed, describes respectable high society in fin-de-siècle Western capitals as if that were the whole world. To be sure,

in 1913, John Maynard Keynes described the ravages of empire as “[semi-barbarous countries under civilised administration](#).” But the same year, Lenin reacted to revolution in China with a spate of articles describing “backward Europe and advanced Asia,” deliberately mocking and upending the colonial binary between the civilized and the barbarous. He wanted the Russian Revolution to spread to Germany, but he wanted it to spread to India, too.

Lenin’s classic 1916 text *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* borrowed liberally from Nikolai Bukharin and was subtitled *A Popular Outline* — Lenin was only one famous face associated with a massive, collective intellectual and political project. Its protagonists came often from populations spurned and derided by imperial racism. In 1920, the Bolsheviks assembled the Congress of the Peoples of the East at Baku, where they called for a jihad against British imperialism and suggested that socialists with sympathies for colonialism should consider themselves lucky not to be hanged.

This was no mere moral protest, nor was it simply a call for national independence; the political form that eventually replaced empire around the world, the nation, was not then assumed as its inevitable successor. Instead, Lenin’s call for national self-determination was part of a transnational strategy for ending global capitalism and (in theory) establishing more egalitarian federations. Broad national struggles to break free of empire would cut off Western capitalism’s access to colonial superprofits, while revolutionary workers in the metropole would smash the leviathan in its engine room.

Here was a two-pronged assault to topple imperial state apparatuses and the class relations of domination and exploitation that they sustained. It was, then, highly historically particular in its prognosis. Bolsheviks noted that worker militancy in Europe and North America and faraway anti-colonial struggles were both rising at the same juncture, and so their strategic roadmap fused the two.

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This meant thinking of global space not as a flat world market where commodities flow in all directions but as a variegated, hierarchical nexus structured by capitalist power concentrated in just a handful of countries. Empire meant that the global expansion of capitalism could not take the form of “developing” Asia and Africa by repeating there the social and technological innovations that may have marked European modernity. Regions, almost like classes, were slotted forcibly into interdependent positions within a hierarchy of plunder instead. That Lenin was more implacably anti-colonial than Keynes was no coincidence; rather, it followed from the intellectual anatomy of his Marxism.

Disagreements about empire were central to the split between reformers and revolutionaries that defined European socialism after 1914. The founders of what became modern democratic socialism oriented to the nation-state as the central arena of politics and foresaw the creation of stable Western polities (and comfortable working classes) in part through colonially derived prosperity — in Germany, some of them advocated expanded colonization to rival Britain and France. This they celebrated, and it made possible a nationally bounded politics appealing to domestic electorates.

On the dissenting left flank, of which Lenin was a key member, it was denied that imperialism would improve either the subjugated periphery or the metropolitan core. Instead — displacing optimistic teleologies of progress leading neatly from feudalism to capitalism to socialism — an arresting thing about Lenin’s writing is the place of catastrophe as a terrifying specter looming on the horizon.

Wars induced by imperialism — as Lenin and his comrades read the slaughter of 1914 — constituted an urgent catastrophe to be avoided by way of revolutions. This was revolution as “an emergency brake,” as Walter Benjamin later had it — though nuclear annihilation and now climate disaster have functioned in the same role for later radical thinking. A transnational strategy of insurrections was needed. Comintern anti-colonialism, in other words, demanded a rethinking of time as well as space.

Who Will Make the Revolution?

The distinctiveness of this form of anti-colonialism was achieved in part by connecting the problem of empire to the bureaucratic power of the state. In one sense, that was deeply traditional. Modern “imperialism” had been rhetorically linked to domestic authoritarianism ever since the term first circulated to lambast Napoleon. By the turn of the twentieth century, Marxism’s left flank warned of the parallel decline of free markets and parliamentary sovereignty under the growing weight of monopolistic cartels and overweening, aggressively expansionist executive power. In American anti-imperialist liberals, Lenin saw [“the last of the Mohicans of bourgeois democracy.”](#)

Here, again, revolution came as an emergency brake to rescue in higher form those ideals that bourgeois society had birthed but was now killing. But a more fundamental thought was involved, too. Imperialism exemplified a denial of autonomy that communists also saw in the condition of the worker under capitalism: power over their lives was systematically alienated from workers, in political life to the police officer and president and in social life to the boss. Lenin’s hopes for the soviet (a kind of council government for the oppressed) lay in its promise to replace indirect, insufficient, and class-bound parliamentary representation by direct and participatory democracy. This was the political form consistent with the transition to classless society, he thought; its core was less material equality than an experience of empowerment and thus self-transformation through the exercise of popular sovereignty.

An ambitious conception of self-determination, then, produced Bolshevik anti-colonialism and anti-statism. The two were umbilically connected. Some recent scholarship has treated Marx as a radically “republican” political theorist, seeking a social republic beyond subjection to the arbitrary power of capitalists and the impersonal domination of markets. That picture is much better suited to Bolshevism. “Citizen Marx” was one title used in the First International, slightly inappropriately given Marx’s skepticism about abstract citizenship since at least 1843.

Though he, too, hoped to supersede sovereign power, Citizen Lenin actually forged a Republic. Both a “neo-Roman” opposition to domination and a “neo-Athenian” stress on participation structured Lenin’s objection to capitalism. It explains Lenin’s decidedly political theory of capitalism: his language of oppression as disempowerment and soviet power as its solution, and his turn to the critique of the state (on which Marx never offered a comprehensive treatise) as a central mechanism explaining capitalism’s reproduction, which was one rich question that preoccupied his generation of Marxists.

Proletarian internationalism challenged orthodox Marxist accounts of revolutionary agency. Just decades after Marx’s death, it is striking how far Marxism’s left flank thought his picture of capitalist society needed updating. Perched often outside capital’s classic heartlands, they hoped to derive a systematic theory of a complex world system where multiple states and expropriation scaffolded the exploitation of surplus value in English mines and American factories; hence, Rosa Luxemburg produced, in her *Accumulation of Capital*, a thorough critique of Marx’s schema of capitalist reproduction in *Capital, Volume II*, which was grounded — she said — in the impossible illusion of a single “national economy.”

Lenin’s global picture involved subtracting from Marx’s revolutionary agent and adding to it, too.

For Lenin, imperialism had generated within the proletariat a “labor aristocracy” whose investment in the profits of empire attained signal political importance because this class fraction influenced the wider workers’ movement in favor of its distinctive, “chauvinistic” class interest. Since this labor aristocracy epitomized the possibility of contradictory class interests, pitted either against their exploiters to win the earth or with their exploiters to defend the crumbs of empire, Lenin’s analysis saw class interest as contingent and politically constructed, not automatic and wholly socially determined.

Imperialism had also brought millions of peasants, not really subsumed into capitalist production relations, under the sway of global capitalism, since their production was a condition of possibility for its reproduction. Much as Nancy Fraser has [recently addressed](#) the connection of feminist and ecological struggles, peasant and anti-colonial struggles could be objectively anti-capitalist if they could break the food supply on which the hydra relied.

At Baku in 1920, delegates echoed Lenin at the Second Congress of the Comintern and deliberately expanded Marx’s invocation “Workers of the world unite!” to include “oppressed peoples” beyond the proletariat. Rather than the stuff of total voluntarism — as is often assumed by critics and admirers alike — this was a model of situated political theory, whose prescriptions were rooted in a critical social theory of contemporary capitalist society and the possible political subjects it generated. Of course, that raises fundamental questions about its applicability today.

Rethinking Lenin Today

Recent years have seen a welcome revision in understandings of Lenin’s early work, with [Lars Lih](#) and others questioning the established image of Lenin’s undemocratic and authoritarian vanguardism. A reassessment of his later work — after his break with the mainstream of contemporary European Marxism, evident from the 1907 socialist Stuttgart Congress and its debate over empire — offers even more promising possibilities. In what canons should we place Lenin? He followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the old lineage of revolutionary popular sovereignty. He faced the question of proletarian impotence with a keenness usually ascribed first, in the Marxist tradition, to the subtler works of Antonio Gramsci and then the late Frankfurt School.

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He saw burning revolutionary possibilities in peasants and lumpen-proletarians and in those marked by the fictions of race and nation for extra exploitation and oppression, sounding sometimes like Frantz Fanon or later “black Marxism.” Instructively, he married these concerns about the difficulties of emancipatory agency in the wealthy world and its presence elsewhere, stressing the necessity of transnational struggle across that fatal border for the sake of both.

Distinct from the later communist and social-democratic vocabularies of state power delivering equality to national citizens, in 1917, Lenin’s language of socialism as freedom was oriented against established states and across borders. Since 1989, generative new readings of Marx have often distanced him from twentieth-century disasters in order to rescue nineteenth-century ambitions. Lenin might seem like the perfect villain, then. But the real story is more complicated, and challenging.

A new [online class](#) introducing the Russian revolutionary’s thought begins on March 7, showing that he offers some surprising and forgotten anti-colonial and republican lessons. In this month-long class over Zoom, we will explore both the romance of this 1917 moment and its undoing. If Lenin, more

than Marx, spoke like an eighteenth-century radical republican, he shared their fate, too; Marx and Engels were ambivalent about the Jacobins and their Terror, but in the Soviet Union, Lenin erected a statue to Robespierre. For Lenin, he was the slaughterer of the feudal past and the author of the bourgeois world, who had seen the tides of history and fought hard to make them come true. Lenin's voluntarism — his belief in the conscious force of human agency — dictated his thinking about the possibility of revolution less than has been supposed. Its real presence came in his picture of what should follow revolution. In that, he was a transitional figure of deep importance.

Positioned uneasily between the hope of socialism as freedom and a twentieth-century norm of socialism as government, amid a nascent and awful bureaucracy he had built while trying to destroy another, Lenin's very last works are, in turn, frantic and despairing. Isolation, war, scarcity, and chaos made the realm of freedom feel very distant; if capital left no room but desperate, unrelenting force for its opposition, he asked, how could people possibly build a new community of equals? Why did Lenin fail? That is the tragedy that should still draw us back into early twentieth-century Russia. It is the noble and the sad dialectic of popular power and its opposite that recurs, and that requires explanation if we are to author a properly emancipatory politics capable of pronouncing the word *victory*.

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