

# **Back to Lenin A Political Introduction to Lenin and Leninism**

**By Edwin Madunagu  
Administrator  
Socialist Library & Archives (SOLAR)  
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# I

On November 7, 1917, a world-historic event took place in the Old Russian Empire: the first socialist state in history was established. It is appropriate at this time – for reasons that will appear clearer as we proceed – to recall the life and works of the man who inspired, led and symbolized that world-historic event. And we shall start this important exercise by deliberately presenting an assessment of this man, known to history as Lenin, by a source that is authoritative, but non-communist. The identity of the source itself is not important: It is only important to state that the assessment is the bottom-line of all informed and objective assessments of our subject that we know. It is as follows:

“If the Bolshevik Revolution is, as some people have called it, the most significant political event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Lenin must, for good or ill, be regarded as the century’s most significant political leader. Not only in the Soviet Union, but among non-communist scholars, he is regarded as both the greatest revolutionary leader and revolutionary statesman in history, as well as the greatest revolutionary thinker after Karl Marx”.

The points made need to be underlined: Lenin is the greatest revolutionary leader and the greatest revolutionary statesman of all time, as well as the greatest revolutionary thinker after Marx.

If this is the bottom-line of the assessment of our subject, an assessment from a non-communist, then it is easy to appreciate the tremendous moral and political authority which Lenin enjoys among the progressive forces of the world. These forces now include working peoples, national independence revolutionaries, revolutionary democrats, anti-imperialists, socialists, communists, Marxists and all opponents of every form of oppression, originating in, or promoted by capitalism. For the theory of proletarian socialist revolution, as originated by Marx and Engels, and brilliantly applied and developed under Lenin’s leadership and inspiration, is today the ultimate basis for the legitimacy of every anti-capitalist revolutionary movement anywhere in the world.

Put more directly, all arguments within the world anti-capitalist revolutionary movement over strategy or tactics, perspectives or policy, ultimately reduce to the articulation and construction of the *Leninist approach*. Provided, of course – and this is very crucial – that all the sides in the argument proceed from Marxist premises and accept Marxism as the general theoretical and ideological framework of the disputation. For Lenin was, first and foremost, and above all, a Marxist.

Because of the tremendous authority and political vindication of Lenin, worldwide, it is fatal to revolutionary credibility to attack Lenin. Hence opportunists, revisionists and dogmatists within the revolutionary movement usually start by accepting Lenin theoretically; they then move quickly to contradict or distort him in application and practice. While deviating fundamentally from

Leninism, revisionists, infantilists, dogmatists and opportunists use Lenin's name both as a cover and as a basis for attacking opponents – who may, in fact, be genuine Leninists. Slanderers of Leninism come from both the **Right** and the **Left** and, strangely, their motives and methods often converge: By accusing opponents of anti-leninism, they absolve themselves of the responsibility of proving their charges. It is like accusing someone in Khomeini's Iran of "waging war against God". No proof is considered necessary.

Now, to the multiple-objective of this essay: In the first place, it is an attempt to remove genuine ignorance: It is thus an introduction to Lenin. Nigerians have no reason to be ignorant of a personage whose ideas continue to influence the ideas and inspire the actions of thousands of people in their own country. In the second place, the essay aims at protecting the ideas of Lenin against distortion. This needs no justification. In the third place, it aims at exposing deliberate opportunistic slanders – some of which are, in fact, criminal.

In the fourth place, this exercise is a commentary on the present conjuncture in the politics of the world communist movement. And finally, I strongly feel that the present conjuncture in Nigeria demands that all those who are resolutely committed to the struggle for human progress and freedom should return to the **true ideas** of Lenin. Taking a long view of history, this is a humanistic exercise.

Vladimir Ilich, who later became Lenin, was born on April 22, 1870 in Simbirk in the Old Russian Empire. He adopted the pseudonym Lenin in 1901 during his "clandestine party work after exile in Siberia." He was the third of the six children of a couple which many biographers describe as "warm, loving, cultured and highly educated." Lenin's mother was the daughter of a physician, while his father, "though the son of a serf, became a school-teacher and rose to the position of inspector of schools."

The following facts about his early life have been confirmed by all biographers: Lenin was intellectually gifted and physically strong. He had a "voracious passion" for learning. By the age of 16, he had become very critical of the official orthodox religion and the politics of Tsarism. Like all the other children of his parents and many young people of his age he joined the revolutionary movement as a teenager. There was simply no other way for the average Russian youth – because the denial of elementary civil and political rights in Tsarist Russia was complete.

Two events in Lenin's early life accelerated his revolutionary development, but they were not responsible for it, as anti-communists and mechanical historians claim. First, Lenin's father was threatened – towards the end of his life – with dismissal from his teaching job "by a government grown fearful of the social, ideological and political multiplier-effects of public education." Then in 1887, Lenin's elder brother, Aleksander, a university student, was hanged for "conspiring with a revolutionary terrorist group" that was blamed

for the plot to assassinate Emperor Alexander III. Thus, at the age of 17, Lenin saw, at close quarters, the hazards of the revolutionary enterprise. I have reasons to believe that even at this early age Lenin came to some conclusions on strategic and organizational imperatives.

In autumn 1887 Lenin entered the Kazan University's Law Faculty. But within three months he was expelled, arrested and banished to his grandfather's estate. His exile became a school for revolutionary political education and apprenticeship. Although the authorities allowed him to return to Kazan nine months later, he was refused re-admission.

## II

In mid-1895, Lenin was sent by his comrades on a brief visit to Western Europe. Here, he made contact with Russian exiles, including Georgy Plekhanov, who at that time was one of the leading Marxist thinkers in Europe. On his return, he and others intensified their efforts to unite the various revolutionary groups into one centralized and disciplined organization called the **Union for the Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class**.

In December 1895, Lenin and some other leaders of the revolutionary movement were arrested, jailed and then exiled. Lenin himself was jailed for 15 months and then exiled to Siberia for three years. He was joined in exile by Nadezhda Krupskaya, who was also a leading member of the movement. They later got married in Siberia. On the completion of his term of exile in January 1900, Lenin again left for Western Europe "to join Plekhanov, Martov and three others in bringing out the newspaper *Iskra (or The Spark)*". The strategy of the newspaper was to unify the anti-Tsarist groups scattered throughout Russia and Western Europe, and then distill from this a revolutionary party. It was a strategy that he pursued with a singleness of purpose.

Lenin's political biographers have isolated three questions to which he devoted his attention at this time, mainly through the medium of his articles in *Iskra*. First, Lenin fought political voluntarism and idealism by exposing the socio-economic foundations of tsarist despotism. He insisted that tsarist exploitation, obscurantism and oppression-together with the mass impoverishment, which they carried in their trail-were rooted not in the Emperor's "evil nature," but in the feudal-capitalist economic system of the Russian Empire. The despotic system, though sustained by terror, cannot be terminated by individual terror, but through political action by the working people.

Second, Lenin attacked *economism* in the working-class movement: where, by economism, we mean the confinement of worker's struggle to purely economic demands – ignoring the political question. From 1895 to the end of his life, Lenin insisted that the primary question – which was also the fundamental question – of social change is the political one, namely, the capture of state power,

the dismantling of the oppressive state machinery, and the construction of a liberating state apparatus.

Third, Lenin paid close attention to the “peasant question,” that is, the place of agriculture in the national economy; the sociology of the peasantry; the root and mechanism of peasant exploitation and backwardness, the revolutionary potential of the peasant class and the conditions and forms of its liberation. But the strongest element of this question is the revolutionary strategic imperative known as the **Alliance between the working class and the peasantry** in the struggle to overthrow tsarism and construct socialism. The peasant question or in its new form – the problem of agriculture – remains, even today, the central question in soviet economic strategy. Over this question many bitter battles have been fought and many Soviet leaders have risen and fallen.

Next, Lenin turned attention to organizational questions. It was on this question that he drew a number of conclusions which today constitute the premises of the **Leninist theory of organisation**. We may underline five of the premises:

First, there can be no revolution without a revolutionary theory and a revolutionary organisation.

Second, in the same way as the working class is the vanguard of the socialist revolution the proletarian party must be built as the **vanguard of the proletariat**. The proletarian party appears as the vanguard of the socialist revolution, not by some **a priori** construction but as an objective need of the proletarian mission.

Third, the party itself has to be simultaneously **monolithic, centralized** and **democratic** and highly disciplined.

Fourth, the party should ideally be an organisation of professional revolutionaries; but **minimally** it should be composed of people who devote considerable part of their time and energy to revolutionary work. But definitely a revolutionary proletarian party cannot be a collection of idle card-carrying members.

Finally, the party emerges not autonomously or spontaneously through working class economic-bound activities, but through the conscious unification of the revolutionary Marxist movement and the trade-union movement. These conclusions were contained in Lenin’s 1902 book: *What is to be done?*

When we combine these conclusions on organisation with the criticism of economism and voluntarism and his attitude towards the peasantry, we have a rough outline of Leninism.

From 1902 to the end of his life, and throughout the tortuous path and turbulence of anti-tsarist struggle, Lenin remained unbending and uncompromising in his conception of the proletarian vanguard party. On the basis of this conception, and its defence, he fought many bitter battles; broke with long-standing friends and collaborators and reunited with yesterday’s mortal enemies. Lenin pursued the construction of this party, the party of a new type – as he called it – with a singleness of purpose that is rare in history. He fought all deviations with a determination and a consistency that

earned him a towering moral and political authority not only in Russia, but also in the circles of European socialists. The result was the emergence of the Bolshevik Party which led the working people of Russia through the Revolution of 1917.

For a complete picture, it is perhaps necessary to state, even at this stage, that Lenin also became gradually convinced that though the Russian Revolution would not immediately introduce socialism, it would nevertheless be a proletarian revolution, rather than a bourgeois one: the **democracy** that the revolution would institute would not be bourgeois. It would be proletarian democracy: That is, popular democracy under the political hegemony of the proletariat.

In other words, Lenin disfavoured the revisionist two-stage strategy. In Lenin's view, imperialism is a chain of contradictions; and Russia, the weakest part of this chain had, by that very fact become ripe for proletarian revolution earlier than the more developed capitalist countries.

This strategic conclusion, together with the conclusion that the Russian proletariat was capable of coming to power **immediately** under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party brought Lenin and Trotsky together – after a political separation of 15 years. This reconciliation, together with the admission of the latter into the Bolshevik Party at its sixth congress in Petrograd<sup>i</sup> (July 26-August 3, 1917) was of immense historical significance.

### III

If Marxism is defined, politically, as the theory of proletarian socialist revolution, then the definition of Marxism-Leninism follows immediately: It is the theory of proletarian socialist revolution considered as an immediate political project.

The Leninist theory of proletarian socialist revolution and the Leninist theory of organisation are the two sides of the same coin. For the organisation which Lenin theorized and went on to construct was not an organisation-in-general, but an organisation for the proletarian socialist revolution. There is, therefore, only one composite, interconnected, theory.

Lenin's theory of the proletarian socialist revolution proceeds from Marx's characterization of the state. The capitalist state is, in the first place, the organisation of the capitalist ruling class. Its main function is the maintenance and reproduction of the capitalist social formation-together with its hierarchy of powers and privileges. Hence, to change the existing social formation from capitalism to socialism the capitalist state must be over-thrown and dismantled, and a new state – the proletarian state – constructed.

Furthermore, the capitalist state, together with the capitalist social formation over which it stands guard, constitutes a single entity: It is a social order none of whose constitutive elements must be regarded as independent. Hence, the proletarian socialist revolution must develop a strategy which aims at overthrowing the capitalist state and the capitalist social formation as a whole, not in

parts. If this strategic aim is to be realized, then the revolutionary organisation must be centralized, tough, monolithic and disciplined. It must possess the main characteristics of a general staff of an army-in-combat.

The discipline which Lenin demanded in a revolutionary proletarian party is not an abstract or arbitrary one. It is based on a democratic principle derived from the nature of the revolutionary project, namely, the self-liberation of the working class. This principle is now known as **democratic centralism** whose main elements are as follows: collective and centralized leadership; the periodic election of all organs of the party – from the lowest to the highest; a clear hierarchy of organs and officials; the responsibility of lower organs to the higher ones; exhaustive discussion of all matters in the appropriate organs; decision by a majority vote, and obedience of all to majority decision; strict adherence to party rules; criticism and self-criticism, etc.

It is therefore clear that a Leninist party cannot be a *federation* or alliance of autonomous organisations. For this, in Leninist view, will be incompatible with the nature and demands of the revolutionary enterprise. It is also clear, as I had earlier indicated, that the Leninist party is an organisation of active and working members. For discipline has meaning only when applied to activity. An idle organisation has no need for discipline. Finally, a Leninist party, far from being a cult, is rooted in the popular masses and their organisations, in whose ranks the members openly educate, campaign and agitate. The authority of the Leninist party is not only political, but also, moral. Its leadership in society, after the revolution, is derived less from political authority than from moral authority. Any Leninist party that loses this moral authority ceases to be Leninist.

Armed with the singular conviction that his theory of the proletarian socialist revolution, together with strategy for carrying it out was the only correct one and that the revolutionary party of his own conception was the only one that can lead a successful proletarian revolution, Lenin, in 1912, convened the conference of the Bolshevik faction of the **Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party** (RSDWP) in Prague. The conference split the RSDWP forever, for Lenin proclaimed at the conference that the Bolshevik faction of the party, which emerged in 1902 was the real RSDWP while the Menshevik faction contained mere "schematists". Thereafter the Bolsheviks maintained "a separate central committee, party apparatus, and press". That was how the party which later became the present Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was born.

We may add here, perhaps as a footnote – but an important one – that no revolutionary organisation, other than a Leninist one, has so far succeeded in making a socialist revolution. In other words, no other theory of socialist revolution has so far been successful, in practice. Those who are amazed at the strength of Leninism should look into this factor.

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 provided the first major test for Leninism on the international arena. Before then the Second International Working Men's Association, popularly known as the Second International, was a revolutionary organisation that brought together the most advanced workers' parties (then known as Social-Democratic Parties) and groups in Europe and America. The commitment of this formation and its constituent members to the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois social order, worldwide, was, except possibly for the German wing, in little doubt.

Anticipating the war, the Second International had, in its conferences in Stuttgart (1907) and Copenhagen (1910), passed resolutions demanding "joint revolutionary actions" by the workers of all nations to prevent what would essentially be an imperialist war among European bourgeois leaders to redivide the world. In the alternative, the resolutions urged workers to turn the war into a civil war against the bourgeois rulers in each belligerent country.

But when the war broke out, most of the parties of the Second International abandoned the Stuttgart and Copenhagen platforms and rallied behind "their" governments. Just as Lenin had initiated a bitter struggle against opportunism, idealism and economism in the RSDWP, so did he now raise the battle cry against the pro-war socialist leaders in Europe. He denounced them as "social-chauvinists," that is, socialists in words but national chauvinists in deeds (see Lenin's 1916 pamphlet: **Opportunism and the Collapse of the Second International**).

From this point on Lenin campaigned vigorously not for the reform of the Second International, but for the construction of a new one: the Third International which, as he insisted, would be different from its predecessor not only by being Marxist and revolutionary (Lenin called leaders of the Second International "ex-Marxist"), but also by being constructed along Bolshevik principles, as sketched above.

In March 1919, that is 17 months after the Bolsheviks came to power, the inaugural congress of the Third International was held in Moscow. It existed as a revolutionary umbrella for more than 60 communist parties spread across the five continents of the world. But in May 1943, during World War II, this Leninist International was dissolved. The world socialist movement paid very dearly for that dissolution.

#### IV

In the week of March 8-15, 1917, while Lenin was still in exile in Western Europe, the "starving, freezing and war – weary workers and soldiers of Petrograd" suddenly turned their fury against the Tsar. Under the war-cry "peace and bread", Russian workers and soldiers forced the tsar out of the throne of his ancestors. The Russian popular masses thus answered Lenin's call to turn the First World War – then raging – into a civil war to overthrow the warmongering, empire-seeking rulers of Europe. As expected, the



bourgeoisie – who also had grievances of their own against the tsar – quickly moved to put themselves in the leadership of the mass revolt. But their aim was to prevent the mass revolt from going beyond bourgeois – democratic limits.

The Russian bourgeoisie succeeded, but only half-way. A regime of dual power, characteristic of exceptional revolutionary situations, was formed after the tsar's forced abdication. While the bourgeoisie formed the council of ministers in Petrograd popularly elected representatives of workers, peasants and soldiers constituted revolutionary assemblies which were called the *Soviets of Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers' Deputies*. While the Council of Ministers (or Cabinet) derived its legitimacy from the bourgeoisie, the Soviets (or legislatures) derived their legitimacy from the proletariat, supported by peasants and soldiers. A similar situation of dual-power had developed during the 1905-07 revolution.

Exiled Russian revolutionaries, including Lenin, hurried home. Lenin arrived in Petrograd in the night of April 16, 1917, exactly one month after the tsar's abdication. He had started studying the situation very closely as soon as the revolution broke out. And, on the journey to Petrograd, he started drafting his now famous *April Thesis*, whose central messages was a call to the workers of Russia to seize power immediately. For he found that the accession to power of the bourgeois provisional government was made possible only by the assent of the Petrograd Soviet. But the bourgeois political leaders had already begun to betray the popular demands: Peace, Land and Bread. Lenin saw that the Bolshevik Party, by March 1917, had become the best organized and the most revolutionary party in Russia. Although the party initially constituted a minority in the Petrograd Soviet, its membership steadily increased until it became a majority. Lenin concluded that the conditions were ripe for a proletarian revolution in Russia.

The day after his arrival in Petrograd, Lenin read his theses at two meetings: **first** at a mass meeting of the Bolshevik Party; and *second*, at a meeting with delegates to the just concluded All-Russia Conference of Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

Lenin's analysis and conclusion presented at these meetings and repeated with increasing insistence over the succeeding months was that what took place in February 1917 was a bourgeois – democratic revolution: "State power in Russia had passed into the hands of a new class, namely the bourgeoisie and land-owners who had become bourgeois. To this extent the bourgeois – democratic revolution is completed .... The new government has already begun to hinder, in every way, the revolutionary initiative of mass action and the seizure of power by the people *from* below which is the sole guarantee of the real success of the revolution ...."

Insisting that the new bourgeois government did not deserve the confidence of the proletariat "even in the sphere of internal policy," and that no support of the bourgeois provisional government by the proletariat was "admissible," Lenin called on the workers,

peasants and soldiers to assume full power. Lenin advanced the slogan: "All power to the Soviet," The message of this slogan, together with the demand for peace, land and bread, constituted the new revolutionary agenda.

Having come to the conclusion that the conditions were ripe for the working people to seize power, Lenin devoted all his energy to education, mobilization and agitation. This he did with the same singleness of purpose he exhibited in the construction of the Bolshevik Party.

Between August and September 1917, Lenin, wrote the now famous *The State and Revolution*. In it, he reminded the proletariat and their leaders of the class character of the state, and hence, the fundamental task of every social revolution: the capture of state power, the dismantling of existing structures and the construction of new structures, reflecting the wish and will of the new ruling class. Eventually, the bulk of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviets were carried for the proletarian revolution.

By the middle of October 1917, the Bolshevik Party which now controlled a majority in the Petrograd Soviet had become the de-facto leader of the impending revolution, Leon Trotsky who had joined the party in July had also become both the President of the Petrograd Soviet and the Chairman of its Revolutionary Military Committee.

The issue of seizure of power was debated openly by workers, peasants and soldiers. But the technical details were left, for obvious reasons, to the Bolshevik Party leadership and the Revolutionary Military Committee. It is, however, instructive to note that the revolutionary plan was not put into effect until the Central Committee had adopted it and Lenin was sure of majority in the Soviet, the popularly elected organ of workers, peasants and soldiers.

We shall omit the details of the political and technical preparations and the actual conduct of the seizure of power. Suffice it to say that at 10 o'clock in the morning of November 7, 1917, the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies issued a proclamation announcing the fall of the provisional Government. The proclamation ended with a summary of the manifesto for the revolution. "The cause for which the people have fought, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landlord ownership, workers' control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power – this cause has now been secured. Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants."

Two lessons in Leninism need to be underlined here. In the first place, Lenin adopted the mass-line in his approach to the question of proletarian revolution. If a revolution was to be carried out by the masses in their own interest, then the duty of the Vanguard Party is to educate and lead them. The vanguard cannot, and must not attempt to, substitute for the masses. In the second place, Lenin insisted on the democratic principle of decision-making

even in the most delicate and most critical of all political questions: the seizure of power. He did not resort to barracks commandism.

## V

In the morning of November 9, 1917, that is two days after the collapse of the Provisional Government, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies (which can be described as the *Soviet of Soviets*) ended a 2-day meeting in Petrograd. Before rising, it passed a Resolution on the formation of a Workers' and Peasants' Government. It also endorsed an action already taken by the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. It is important to quote the text of the Resolution, drafted by Lenin, in full because of the insights it gives into Lenin's conception of *Socialist Democracy*.

- "The All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies resolves to establish a Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government, to be known as the *Council of People's Commissars* to govern the country until the Constituent Assembly is convened."
- "The management of individual branches of state activity is entrusted to commissions whose members shall ensure the fulfilment of the programme announced by the Congress, and shall work in close contact with mass organisations of workers, soldiers, sailors, peasants and of the employees. Government authority is vested in a collegium of the chairmen of those commissions, and named the Council of People's Commissars."
- "Control over the activities of the People's Commissars with the right to replace them is vested in the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers, Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies and its Central Executive Committee."

After decreeing that "all power in the localities shall also pass to the Soviets," the Congress named the members of the 15-member Council of People's Commissars. Lenin was named its chairman while Trotsky and Stalin were confirmed as Commissar for Foreign affairs and Commissar for Nationalities Affairs respectively.

Because of the enduring bourgeois myth about the 1917 Russian Revolution, it is important to take note of the character and composition of the All-Russian Congress which elected Lenin's government and passed the first set of revolutionary decrees. First, of the 649 delegates, 390 were Bolsheviks: A clear overall majority. Secondly, delegates from 241 provincial Soviets, out of the 318 which were represented in the Congress, came with a Bolshevik mandate: Another clear majority as regards geographical spread.

An insight into Leninist foreign policy is provided by one of the first acts of the new Soviet government under Lenin: the promulgation of the *Decree on Peace*. This was a message addressed to all belligerent nations in the raging World War I. In the message, the government proposed the immediate opening of negotiations for

a “just, democratic peace”, by which the government meant “peace without annexations and without reparations.”

As is well-known, Russia’s pre-revolution military allies (Britain, France etc.) refused to recognise the Soviet government. Consequently, Lenin’s government was compelled to enter into separate peace negotiations with the Central Powers, that is, Germany and her allies. The negotiations took place at the town of **Brest-Litovsk**. As is also well-known, the Central Powers imposed on the new government very severe conditions, including the stripping away from Soviet Russia “the western tier of non-Russian nations of the old Russian Empire.”

Here, on the question of whether or not to sign the clearly humiliating peace agreement with imperialist Germany, Lenin fought his fourth major *internal* political battle. The first battle was over the character, programmes and rules of the proletarian party (1902-1912). The second battle was over capitulation, at the beginning of the war, of leaders of the Second International, to imperialism. This fight ended only in March 1919 with the formation of the Third International. The third fight was over the question of workers’ seizure of power (April-November 1917).

Now (on the fourth battle), Lenin insisted with the same singleness of purpose that the German terms, however “ruinous and humiliating” must be accepted. He argued that it was in the interest of the people, and the revolution to accept the terms. Unless these terms were accepted, he argued, the revolution would be destroyed. But if the revolution was saved, the proletariat will, sooner or later, repair the injustice of the peace terms. And this was what happened. Lenin knew that the revolutionary trajectory cannot be linear. Present-day Leninists often forget this.

But the opponents of the treaty who, for a long time, constituted a majority in the party and government leadership argued that the Russian proletariat could not overthrow the Tsar only to capitulate to the German bourgeoisie. They accepted the possibility, if not inevitability of the collapse of the revolutionary government. But they argued that should that happen, the Bolshevik party would conclude that the time was not ripe for the revolution. The party would then initiate a guerilla war against a German occupation force.

At a stage, Lenin threatened to resign from the government and the leadership of the Bolshevik Party in order to free himself to carry the agitation directly to the masses. Perhaps this helped to shift his comrades. In any case on February 28, 1918, the Central Committee of the party approved the peace treaty. It was signed three days later but not before German troops had penetrated deeply into Russian territory, and compelled the new government to move the seat of government to Moscow (February 26, 1918).

When the sixth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolshevik) opened on March 8, 1918, Lenin proposed that the name of the party be changed to the Russian Communist

Party (Bolsheviks) or RCP(B). Lenin argued here that it was necessary for the party to reflect, even in its name, the objective of the proletarian revolution: “the creation of a communist society.” Lenin proposed the adoption of the name *Communist Party*, not to indicate the present state of affairs but to indicate the ultimate turn of the movement.

The Congress revised the party’s programme, including in it the definition of imperialism and indicating that “the era of the *international socialist revolution*” had begun with the victory of the Russian proletariat.

With the recent return\* of the Soviet Union and some other East European countries to bourgeois-type parliamentarism, it is instructive to recall another important amendment which Lenin placed before the 1918 Congress:

“Our party does not reject the use even of bourgeois parliamentarism, should the course of the struggle hurl us back, for a certain time, to this historical stage which our revolution has now passed. But in any case, and under all circumstances, the party will struggle for a Soviet Republic as the highest form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The proposal was adopted by the Congress.

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\*Readers should not forget that this essay was drafted and published between November 1989 and January 1990, a momentous period in the history of socialism. (Edwin Madunagu).

## VI

Lenin remained at the head of the Bolshevik Party and Government from the time of its formation on November 7, 1917 till his death on January 21, 1924. Within this relatively short period the young nation was confronted by a succession of historic challenges. The generalization from responses to these challenges under Lenin's leadership, and inspiration, together constitute an important segment of the heritage which we now know as Leninism, or Marxism-Leninism.

These challenges may be listed as follows: A counter-revolutionary civil war; a war of imperialist intervention; economic problems of transition to socialism; the national question under socialism; the status and character of trade unions under the dictatorship of the proletariat; contradictions within the revolutionary forces; factionalism in the party; bureaucratization of party and state; etc. We shall sketch these important elements of Leninism, one after the other.

After the Bolshevik victory, the main detachments of counter-revolution merged, in the course of their attack on the Soviet State, with the forces of the Allied powers which were determined to restore their ally – the Tsar – to power. This convergence of interests became stronger when Lenin's government repudiated payments of all foreign loans obtained by the tsarist regime and the provisional government that succeeded it. The new government also nationalized imperialist properties in Russia *without compensation*.

To meet the armed intervention, the Soviet State was compelled to raise a revolutionary army – the Workers and Peasant's Red Army. It was commanded by Trotsky, as Commissar for War (after his redeployment from the Commissariat of Foreign Relations). Lenin knew that the proletarian state under imperialist attack needed a revolutionary army that is militarily efficient and highly political. The undivided commitment of Lenin and his team also helped to reinforce the army's determination and heroism. By the end of 1920, the war had been won.

As is well-known, the Russian Empire under the tsar was a huge territory made up of Russia and scores of non-Russian nationalities. Proceeding from the proclamation of the right of the people to self-determination, Lenin offered a solution to the question of minority/oppressed nationalities that was quite new. He rejected the proposal that minority nationalities in the Old Russian Empire should now enter the new Russian Federation as Autonomous Units. This proposal, Lenin insisted, still reflected inequality. Instead, he proposed "the voluntary union of all Soviet Republics, including the Russian Republic, in a new state structure – the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, or USSR, on the basis of complete equality". This resolution was unanimously adopted by the first Congress of the Soviets of the USSR which was held on December 30, 1922.

On trade unions, opinions which had emerged in the Bolshevik Party by late 1920 can be grouped under three main tendencies. The first tendency, led by Trotsky, later joined by Bukharin, wanted the trade unions to be absorbed into the state machinery. Trotsky had argued, among other things, that the evolutionary proletarian state, in a struggle for its very existence, had the right and duty to call up its workers for production just as it had called them up to defend their state, with arms, against internal counter-revolution and external armed intervention.

At the other extreme, the Workers' Opposition, led by Shlyapnikov and Alexandra Kollontai, demanded, in a quasi-syndicalist fashion, that trade unions, factory committees and a National Producers Congress should not only be independent of party and state but should assume "control" over the entire economy. It was a strange proposition. And stranger still that it was made in the ranks of Bolshevik leadership.

Between the two extremes emerged the Leninist solution. Although trade unions should be "autonomous, mass organisations capable of exerting pressure on government and industrial management", the workers' party and the workers' state have the right to call upon workers to make exceptional sacrifices, but only in exceptional periods. Lenin's position thus combines the positive elements of both extremes.

Early in March, 1921, sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt, situated just outside Petrograd, rose in rebellion against the Soviet State – reportedly in support of Petrograd workers who were then on strike. It was a thoroughly embarrassing situation. For these same sailors had risen in support of the Bolshevik Revolution in the uncertain days of November 1917. After repeated warnings, the Bolsheviks on March 17, reluctantly and with great pains, ordered an attack on the rebellious sailors. This eventuality was inevitable. For counter-revolutionary forces were beginning to send "support" to the rebels. It was a bloody affair. But at the end of it all, the Bolsheviks still referred to the rebels as *comrades*. Lenin did not attempt to rewrite history to rationalize the present, a method later perfected by Stalin.

During the tenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party (March 1921), Lenin introduced the **New Economic Policy** (NEP) which, among other things, ended the system of grain requisitioning and permitted the peasant to sell his harvest in the open market. This was a retreat. But, according to Lenin, Bolshevism, faced by acute consumer shortages, had to retreat in order to be in a better position to advance. This decision, which re-echoed the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany saved the Soviet economy, and perhaps the revolution itself, from total collapse.

Faced by a real and imminent danger of the party tearing apart over the serious questions that confronted the revolution, and against the reality of the new lease of life which the middle classes now enjoyed as a result of NEP, Lenin, at the tenth Congress,

submitted a resolution banning organized factions and platforms in the party and empowering the Central Committee to expel offenders, no matter how high their standing in the Party. Lenin's resolution, adopted by the Congress, encouraged disputers to express dissent and liberally invited them to state their views in the Bolshevik newspapers. Furthermore, it asked the Congress to elect the leaders of all shades of opinion to the new Central Committee.

This resolution like Lenin's testament, was kept secret for some time probably because of its sensitive nature, or because the Bolsheviks hoped that the critical situation would pass. However, the trajectory of intra-party struggle later forced it to the open. And having been made open, it was distorted and used by Stalinism with a level of bestial brutality rare in history. International socialism is today reaping the bitter fruits.

## VII

AS the world knows, Joseph Stalin was, in 1922, named the first General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party by the Eleventh Congress of the Party. The Congress and the Central Committee had thought that a functioning secretariat, headed by a secretary, were necessary at that stage. In the first place, Lenin was becoming progressively incapacitated as a result of the 1918 assassin's attack on him. His ability to effectively co-ordinate the activities of the party was therefore declining. In the second place, the need to strengthen the party apparatus and its unity was becoming both urgent and critical.

When Lenin, who stood at the head of the revolutionary party and state, died on January 21, 1924, Joseph Stalin became the effective leader of the Party, and later the head of government as well. He was thus in effective leadership of the Bolshevik Party for a period of almost 30 years. During the Second World War (1939-45), Stalin, in addition, served as Chair of the State Defence Committee and the Commander-in-Chief of the USSR Armed Forces.

During this long period of Stalin's leadership, the Soviet State laid the foundation of heavy industry, industrialised the country; collectivized agriculture; introduced five-year development plans; fought the Second World War; expanded the frontiers of socialism to the middle of continental Europe, resolved the huge national question inherited from tsarism, secured the Soviet territory and borders from internal and external violations, etc.

It was on account of the longevity of Stalin's leadership, the fact that he directly succeeded Lenin and the fact that the consolidation and development of the Soviet State took place under his leadership that an assessment of Stalin's era is considered central to the assessment of Leninism as a practical ideology.

In my article, **Imperialism and the crisis of Stalinism** (The Guardian, June 15, 1989) I defined the crisis of Stalinism as "the management and resolution of the problems that arise in the process of dismantling the Stalinist structures within the socialist states and



the Communist Parties that control these states". I expected responses from readers; and I got many of them. I have, in my subsequent articles, taken account of all the responses except one: the one that denied that there was such a phenomenon as *Stalinism*. Although the present assessment goes beyond this scandalous assertion, it is a settlement of accounts with it.

On February 25, 1956, in the Kremlin, Moscow, Nikita S. Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), addressed a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the Party. Because of the seriousness (or perhaps, explosiveness) of the subject to be raised, the Central Committee had thought it necessary to ask for the withdrawal of journalists and all unofficial observers. Khrushchev's speech, whose full text was officially published after 33 years, was a severe criticism of Joseph Stalin who died 3 years earlier. The speech was titled "On the cult of the individual and its consequences."

It is necessary to recall that speech at this time for four main reasons. In the first place the inevitability of the momentous events that are now taking place in Eastern Europe can be articulated from Khrushchev's "secret speech." In the second place, the speech constituted the first official programme for the change of course that is now known in history as the *de-Stalinisation of the Communist Movement*. Gorbachev's *Perestroika* is a continuation of de-Stalinization.

In the third place, the speech explains the contradictory Soviet attitudes at the time to the processes leading up to the entry of Warsaw Pact forces to put down the uprisings in Berlin (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). These uprisings and the manner of their suppression were nodal points in the crisis of de-Stalinisation. In the fourth place, it is simply embarrassing to hear many political historians in Nigeria comment on the history of the communist movement and the present crisis in a manner that implies either that they are unaware of Khrushchev's speech, or that they regard it as unimportant.

Khrushchev started his speech by paying tribute to Stalin's merits and achievements: "The role of Stalin in the preparation and execution of the Socialist Revolution, in the Civil War, and in the fight for the construction of Socialism in our country is universally known." Having said this, Khrushchev went on to level his charges against Stalin. The charges can be summarized as follows:

*Gross violation of party norms and rules; usurpation of functions and powers of party organs, concentration and abuse of powers, replacement of ideological struggle with police terrors, arbitrariness, lack of faith in his colleagues, gross violation of socialist legality and Soviet laws, state terrorism leading to the liquidation of "thousands of honest communists", slanderous campaigns against honest workers, lack of humility and promotion of the cult of personality, terror and aggression against East European socialist states, disrespect for Lenin*

*both before and after the latter's death, etc. In short Khrushchev accused Stalin of gross deviations from Leninism.*

I do not intend to elaborate these charges. For this I refer readers to Krushchev's 75-page speech, now available in Nigeria. I am however convinced, more than ever before, that unless socialists of Marxist-Leninist orientation come to terms with this criticism and admit to themselves and to the people that the charges made under it, though incomplete, are nevertheless true, unless they absorb the criticism, extending and deepening it, unless they draw critical lessons from the consequences of the criticism which include the present situation in Eastern Europe, unless socialists allow this criticism to inform their programme, political practice, and internal organizational life, unless socialists do all these, they will hardly be able to come to power in any new theatre of political struggle. And even if they come to power, they will not be able to retain power. Afghanistan and Burma can never be repeated.

The crimes listed and largely substantiated by Khrushchev are facts of history. And they are known to the people. And socialism, as a system, is being associated with them. The errors cannot be denied, they are now being exposed and denounced even by genuine socialists in the lands where they were committed. The duty of socialists everywhere is to explain the circumstances under which these errors were committed. Through this explanation socialists must be able to convince the working and toiling people that similar errors will not be committed in renewed struggles for socialism which, in spite of these errors, remains mankind's only hope.

This generation of socialists must renew their social contract with the people by restoring their credibility through self-criticism and a change of course informed by a return to Leninism. Only then will they be able to put themselves at the head of the masses, in the struggle against Euro-American imperialism and for socialism and human progress.

## VIII

*"Theoretically, there can be no doubt that between capitalism and communism there lies a definite transition period. It cannot but combine the features and properties of both these forms of social economy. This transition period has to be a period of struggle between dying capitalism and nascent communism – or, in other words, between capitalism which has been defeated but not destroyed and communism which has been born but which is still very feeble." (Lenin: Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat; 1919).*

I have so far, in this essay on Lenin, tried to present the life, career and ideas of the great personage both chronologically and thematically. The objective, as I indicated at the beginning, is to implicitly situate the present crisis in the world socialist movement within the context of Leninist revolutionary perspectives and tradition. The theme of this concluding section is drawn from the

passage cited above. It summarizes Lenin's enduring message to present-day socialists. It is a message whose iron truth re-asserts itself with tragic consequences whenever it is disregarded.

Lenin regarded the socialist regime as *the dictatorship of the proletariat*. He used the two terms – socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat interchangeably. Following Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, Lenin saw the dictatorship of the proletariat, or socialism, as a definite period of transition between capitalism and communism. During this transition period, the social order *necessarily* combines features of both. In other words, there is nothing like “pure socialism”.

Following Marx and Engels, Lenin defined communism as a classless, and hence, stateless society. He rejected the concept of *supra-class* state (or state-in-general), but saw the state essentially as an instrument of class domination. It follows that, in a strict Leninist sense, there has not been, and there is no communist society anywhere in the world. Hence both Stalin (who declared in 1937 that the Soviet Union was at the threshold of communism) and Khrushchev (who in 1959 introduced the term “the state of the whole people”) deviated from a fundamental tenet of Marxism-Leninism. And concrete history has shown that deviations from Marxism-Leninism in theory, merely followed deviations in practice. In other words, theoretical deviations or revisions merely rationalized previous or current deviations in practice.

Lenin, following Marx and Engels, saw imperialism – which he defined as the highest stage of capitalism – as a world system. It is even more so today than in the days of Lenin. Imperialism is nothing if not a world – chain. Its national forms are capitalist systems. Hence, whenever Lenin spoke of capitalism, either in Russia or elsewhere, he was always referring to the two sides of the same coin; national and international. Capitalism cannot be completely negated until its two aspects have been negated. And these two forms, linked together in a world chain, cannot be completely negated within a single country. Hence, it is ridiculous to speak of the completion of communist construction in a single country or even in a number of countries. In other words, communism, whenever it arrives, can only be a world system.

But Lenin, as a Marxist dialectician, nevertheless insisted that a successful proletarian revolution must inscribe *Communist* aims in its banner. This is because the construction of a communist (or classless) society is the aim of a proletarian revolution. This explains why Lenin, in March 1918, proposed that the party should change its name from the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (*Bolshevik*) to the Russian Communist Party (*Bolshevik*) and insert the construction of communism in its general programme.

Two important and inter-locked conclusions flow from the above. In the first place, there are two aspects or phases of a proletarian or socialist revolution: the overthrow of the capitalist political regime and the reconstruction of the social order along

communist lines. The first can be attained *at once*; but the second, which is simultaneously economic, political and cultural, is a *long process*. And this process can only end with the attainment of communism on a world scale or – what is almost the same thing – the destruction of imperialism world-wide. The confusion of the first aspect of the socialist revolution with the second aspect lies at the root of the excesses which the world witnessed in Cambodia (1975-1978), in China (1959-1961 and 1965-1968), and during the Stalinist era in Eastern Europe.

The second conclusion is that there are classes, and therefore contradictions, under socialism. A socialist revolution only *transforms* the relations *between* classes and *within* classes. In other words, a socialist revolution *abolishes* neither classes nor relations between them. Furthermore, under socialism there are contradictions: not only between classes but also within classes. From Lenin's formula, cited above, it is easy to comprehend the contradictions between the revolutionary classes – workers and peasants (in the main) and the capitalist classes. These are rooted in the economic structure which cannot be dismantled completely at once, in the morrow of the revolution.

But what of the contradictions between, and within, the revolutionary classes? They exist in *reality* and cannot be wished away. The history of actually – existing socialism and particularly the current upheavals in the socialist world have forced this fact on dogmatists and voluntarists. The genius of Lenin lies, in part, in his apprehension of this reality – in theory and in practice. This apprehension explains, for example, the position he took in the debate on trade unions in 1920. Against those comrades who advocated the militarization of trade unions and their forcible integration into the state apparatus, Lenin argued for trade unions' relative autonomy and the recognition of workers' right to struggle against the proletarian state.

Lenin fully recognised that there are different strata with different levels of consciousness within the revolutionary classes; that these strata are formed historically, not mechanically; that though the proletarian party and state are the highest levels of unification of these strata, neither the party nor the state can dissolve the strata; and hence that there are bound to be differences between the strata, and between the strata on the one hand and party and state on the other. Lenin recognised that only with the attainment of communism will these strata, and hence the differences between them, vanish – together with the disappearance of classes. The dogmatists in Asia and Eastern Europe who have brought untold embarrassment and even reversals to socialism must return to Lenin on this question. They should also return to Mao's teaching on the *resolution* of "contradictions between the people."

It is also important to restate that Lenin did not proclaim the one – party state as a universal form of socialism or proletarian rule. The other parties in revolutionary Russia did not re-emerge after the

(1918-1921) civil war precisely because they died politically and organizationally during the bitter struggle. They could not be revived. In general, however, multi-party system is compatible with socialism.

Finally, Lenin, following Marx and Engels, did not subscribe to the idealist conception of democracy as *democracy-in-general* or *general democracy*. Although he recognised proletarian or socialist democracy as superior to bourgeois democracy, he did not see the former as “paradise”, as the “end of history” or as a regime which cannot be influenced by developments in the bourgeois world. Hence, Lenin saw the need to continue to struggle to broaden proletarian socialist democracy – but always with the strategic objective: Communism.

**Edwin Madunagu**  
**Administrator**  
**Socialist Library & Archives (SOLAR),**  
**Calabar,**  
**Cross River State,**  
**Nigeria**

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<https://socialistlibraryandarchives.org/>

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<sup>i</sup> **Note:** Petrograd, the pre-Revolution capital of Russia was later re-named Leningrad. It is now called St. Petersburg, the name it was called before it became Petrograd.