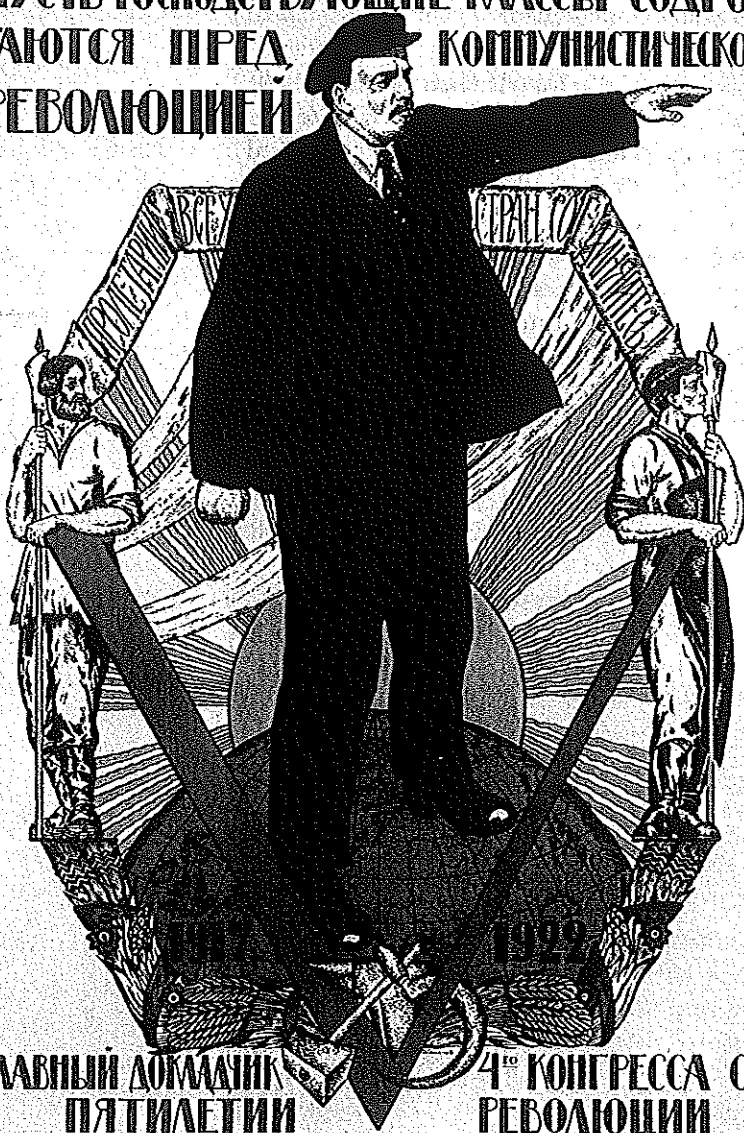


Lenin in power

His strengths and weaknesses

Was Lenin the great leader that Russia needed or an amateurish tyrant?

ПУСТЬ ГОСПОДСТВУЮЩИЕ КЛАССЫ СОДРО-
ГАЮТСЯ ПЕРЕД КОММУНИСТИЧЕСКОЙ
РЕВОЛЮЦИЕЙ



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Soviet propaganda poster, 1922: Lenin constructs socialism in Russia.

Key concept

Interpretations: Role of the individual

Before you read this

Find out about Lenin's life and career before October 1917. Enquire also into his ideas as expressed in his published books and political tracts.

According to historian Christopher Read, one of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's biographers, Lenin's 'incredible self-belief was at the core of his political personality', as he would rarely question whether he was doing the right thing. Read suggests that this was 'both his greatest strength and greatest weakness', as it gave him 'the dynamism to achieve what he did', but it also led him to 'impose his own views at times when compromise and cooperation would have been beneficial'.

In practice, this meant that whatever Lenin did, he always believed that he was right, a conviction which, according to historian Beryl Williams, stemmed from his certainty that 'he was destined to uphold Marxist orthodoxy'. Even when he was forced to change policy and accept that pragmatic policies rather than ideological answers were necessary, Lenin remained supremely confident that this was the correct approach to take. Lenin's belief in his ideas, combined with his ability to know when to do things differently — including knowing when to compromise — were clear strengths of his. As historian Robert Service notes, Lenin was a 'utopian thinker, but he was able to adjust his policies in the interests of political survival'.

However, while his willingness to change policy when necessary was a strength, the way that Lenin enforced this change at times displayed a weakness. Rather than debate such issues, he would use force

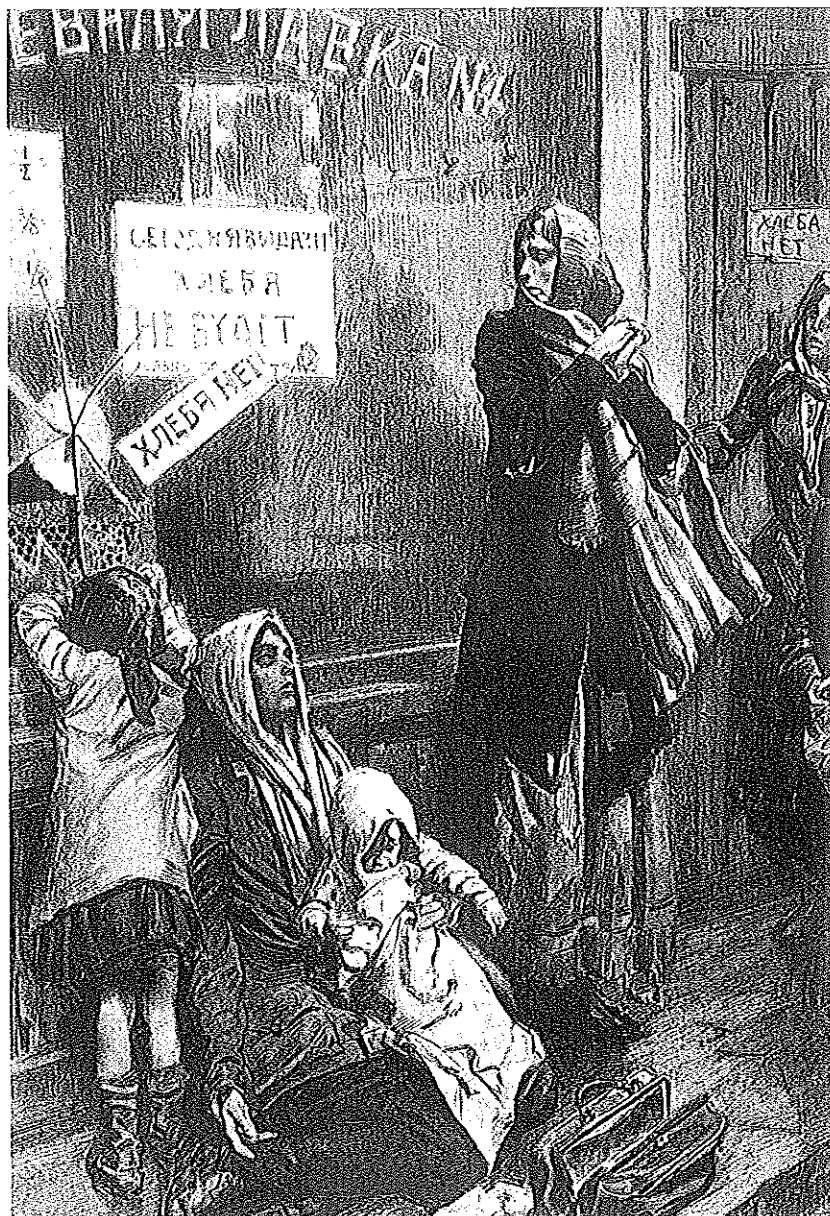
to coerce unwilling party comrades into agreeing with him. This approach to problem solving was extended outside the party during the Civil War, and was a policy that led to a ruthless persecution of non-Bolsheviks, known as the Red Terror. While this was a reaction to the violent counter-revolutionary war launched by the tsarist old order (the White Terror), Lenin's willingness to use extreme violence as a means of ensuring that the Bolsheviks got their way was a definite weakness. Despite the fact that he sometimes knew when to compromise, Lenin's heavy-handed, oppressive measures greatly undermined his overall aim: the construction of socialism in Russia.

Lenin's determination to lay the foundations of socialism was greatly hampered by the terrible conditions that beset post-revolutionary Russia. By 1921, the country had been involved in a war of one type or another for nearly 7 years, and this led to domestic turmoil as the economic, social and political basis of Russia was devastated. These conditions forced Lenin to rethink how socialism would be constructed and his strengths and weaknesses were highlighted by the way that he dealt with these issues.

Lenin's strengths

Lenin accepted that the transition from capitalism to socialism would take time to complete. In his *April Theses* of 1917, he declared that the task was not the immediate introduction of socialism, but only to bring 'social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies'. This did not mean, however, that he was against introducing Socialist policies and practices as quickly as possible.

This vision was one of Lenin's strengths, as it allowed him to prepare the Bolsheviks for the seizure of power and, through various ways and means, to consolidate that power. These included a willingness to cooperate when he thought it necessary and an



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acceptance that, at times, a radical change in policy was needed.

The issue of cooperation was a difficult one. Not only did Lenin rule out working with non-Socialist groups, but he also rejected a coalition with parties supporting the pro-war Provisional Government. This policy ensured that, after the revolution, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) were increasingly sidelined, to the point that they were outlawed by 1922 and Soviet Russia became a one-party state. Prior to this, however, there was a coalition between the Bolsheviks and the Left-SRs that lasted until the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which took Russia out of the war with Germany. While the terms of this treaty emphasised Lenin's pragmatism and his willingness to compromise when necessary, it did so at the expense of the relationship with the Left-SRs, who wanted to turn the Civil War into a revolutionary war.

Lenin realised that Russian soldiers were too war-weary to continue fighting and accepted that just changing the reason why they were fighting

Lenin persecuted non-Bolsheviks ruthlessly under the Red Terror; food was monopolised for Bolshevik supporters. The Moscow bakery sign says 'No bread will be distributed today'.

Civil War: Whites (supporters of the old regime and some anti-Bolshevik socialists) and Greens (anarchists and peasants) fought a counter-revolutionary war against the Reds (Communists) between 1918 and the winter of 1920/21.

Provisional Government: unelected government that ruled between March and October 1917.

Key points

- Lenin's strengths included his clear vision of what he wanted to achieve and a pragmatic approach to problems when necessary.
- His weaknesses included a willingness to resort to undemocratic practices and extreme violence.
- These weaknesses became more obvious as the circumstances in Soviet Russia became more difficult.
- Both the strengths and weaknesses had a positive and negative impact upon the development of post-revolutionary Russia.
- They resulted in a contradictory situation in Soviet Russia as NEP introduced economic freedom but the Ban on Factions greatly limited political freedom.

Left-SRs: a more radically Socialist section of the Socialist Revolutionaries which split with the Bolsheviks over the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the spreading of the revolution.

International revolution: Lenin and other 'Left' Bolsheviks (e.g. Trotsky and Bukharin) did not believe that socialism could be built in Russia alone and hoped that the revolution would spread to more industrialised countries such as Germany and Britain.

War Communism: extreme wartime policy with centralised economic control, nationalised industries and coercive methods used to ensure grain deliveries from the peasantry.

Cheka: Bolshevik organisation established to fight counter-revolutionary forces. It ultimately became the KGB.

would not give them any more strength to carry on. He also assumed that any concessions made to the Germans would be won back after the **international revolution**. He was right about the exhausted soldiers, but wrong about the revolution spreading.

Another example of Lenin's strength and of his willingness to compromise was the New Economic Policy (NEP). This was accepted at the tenth party congress in 1921 and it ended the forced grain requisitioning of **War Communism**, allowing peasants to sell surplus grain at local markets. It also reintroduced market forces into the Russian economy as private trade was legalised, despite the fact that the Bolsheviks came to power promising to end capitalism in Russia. Lenin now accepted that it was necessary to form an alliance (*smychka*) between the workers and peasants (hence the hammer and sickle on the Soviet flag) and to introduce a new stage into the transition to socialism.

Although he was forced into this change, due to the devastating famine in the Volga region and revolts in Tambov and Kronstadt, NEP was a victory for Lenin's pragmatism, showing that he knew when to change things. This pragmatism did not replace Lenin's overall ideological aims though, and he was still as determined as ever to build socialism. But he accepted that 'only an agreement with the peasantry can save the Socialist revolution in Russia until the revolution has occurred in other countries.' He now recognised that his initial assumptions about the transition to socialism needed a radical rethink.

Lenin's weaknesses

One of the consequences of the Civil War was that the party became more cautious and more secretive, and this greatly affected the way that it acted after the war. It had also established a counter-revolutionary organisation — the *Cheka* — to find and arrest anyone who opposed the revolution. This saw an excessive use of violence both during and after the Civil War. While the two sides committed terrible acts during the war (the Red and White Terrors), the founding and continued use of the *Cheka* after the war highlights one of Lenin's great weaknesses — his willingness to use extreme violence to ensure that his ideas were implemented. The use of coercion and repression was not limited to those outside the party.

At the same congress at which NEP was introduced, Lenin's self-belief led to the extreme decision to ban political factions inside the Communist Party. In some ways this was a reaction to the Civil War that caused the party to believe that there were enemies everywhere. But it could also be seen as part of Lenin's centralising, dictatorial nature that had so often led him to be intolerant of criticism from party comrades.

This was always a trait of Lenin's. It caused him to fall out with old friends if they disagreed with

Questions

- Would a Bolshevik revolution in Russia have happened without Lenin's leadership of the Party?
- How far do you agree that Lenin may have been more suited to writing critiques of the state of Russian and global economics and politics than actually being a leader of the world's largest country?
- Did Lenin's willingness to resort to extreme violence in order to achieve his aims make him a better or a worse leader?

him, such as Georgi Plekhanov and Yuli Martov, two of Lenin's most respected and closest comrades. As historian Beryl Williams notes, the attitude of cutting off any close relationship where political differences intervened was to become a noticeable part of Lenin's 'hardness'. Such an attitude, perhaps unsurprisingly, was also found in the wider party, which denounced fellow Socialists who opposed the Bolshevik view as fiercely as they denounced capitalism itself.

The Ban on Factions curtailed democratic debate within the party and various groups were denounced for 'deviationist' practices. This lack of freedom for groups to argue for alternative ideas concerning the transition to socialism now meant that there was no right to criticise the Communists outside the party and little room to criticise Lenin inside it. While reasons for this shift from debate to dictatorship can be found in the terrible socioeconomic, political and material conditions in which the Bolsheviks were trying to construct socialism, they can also be found in Lenin's willingness to use undemocratic and dictatorial methods to ensure that he got his own way.

Lenin's excessive self-belief ultimately meant that there would be little room for discussion or disagreement. It also led to a reliance on extreme violence and dictatorial methods, instead of democratic debate, to solve difficult problems; policies which began during the Civil War and which continued to be used afterwards by means of the *Cheka*.

Weblink

There is a good, brief, but informative, look at Lenin's early career at: www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pvteach/imprus/papers/06b.html.

Encyclopaedia Britannica's entry on Lenin is also well informed and worth looking at: www.britannica.com/...Lenin/, although it will try to block access to some of its entries — persist!

The Lenin page on the *Spartacus* website contains a lot of information about Lenin's life, including interesting extracts from contemporary views of Lenin: www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSlenin.htm at the bottom of the page.



A Cheka officer interrogates a suspected 'enemy of the people'.

Peter Newark

Lenin: a contradictory character

After the Bolsheviks came to power, Lenin's strengths and weaknesses became more pronounced the more pressure he was under. Lenin may, perhaps, have been more suited to writing critiques of the state of Russian and global economics and politics than actually being a leader of the world's largest country. While his analysis of capitalism before and during the First World War made many excellent observations, this 'keen-brained, dogmatic professor in politics', as the British socialist Ethel Snowden once called him, turned more and more to oppression and violence when problems mounted. Snowden also noted that Lenin's 'firm belief in the necessity of violence for the establishment throughout the world of his ideals makes one doubt miserably.'

Lenin's nature was contradictory and this was most evident in 1921, when Lenin's pragmatic and centralising tendencies came to the fore. The tenth party congress saw the reintroduction of market forces and inner-party and intra-party democracy greatly curtailed, despite the fact that the Bolshevik Revolution promised to end capitalism and ensure that pluralism, freedom of speech and freedom of ideas became a part of Russian life.

Lenin's strengths and weaknesses had a paradoxical impact on the development of socialism in Russia. Both traits led to the securing of power for the Bolshevik Party, which, after a brief coalition,

ruled alone. But the sidelining of other Socialist parties ensured that there was a small range of ideas to call upon when discussing how socialism could be achieved. The reintroduction of elements of capitalism through NEP, while a victory for cooperation, set Russia along a different path from the one that Lenin had embarked upon in October 1917.

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Further reading

Read, C. (2005) *Lenin: a Revolutionary Life*, Routledge. Effectively uses Lenin's own works and ideas to illustrate the development of the revolution and Russian socialism.

Sandle, M. (1999) *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, UCL Press. Helpful chapters on the ideological changes in Lenin's thoughts and Bolshevik policy.

Service, R. (2000) *Lenin: a Biography*, Macmillan. A detailed account of Lenin's life that makes extensive use of declassified Soviet documents from the Russian archives.

Williams, B. (2000) *Lenin: Profiles in Power*, Pearson. A useful overview of Lenin's life and politics.

Key words

Bolsheviks

Cheka

Civil war

Marxism

New Economic Policy (NEP)

Socialism

The Communist dream

These rather grim, earnest Soviet posters about the forward march of communism can easily make the heart sink. Did Russians find them equally dispiriting or did they take their message on board?

There was no advertising in the USSR: all industry was owned by the state, so there was no need to exhort one brand over another. These posters were part of the backdrop to everyday life, the only images that Soviet citizens commonly saw in the streets. The idea was to give Russians a sense of mission, a sense that they were embarked on a journey towards a better future, a journey that simply could not fail.

The first poster, dating from 1950, conveys this both through the eyes of the man and woman, looking beyond the viewer onto the road ahead, and in the flag the man holds, as if leading a procession. The man and the woman are given similar but not quite equal prominence — a reminder that the USSR preached sexual equality but still expected its womenfolk to get the supper ready on time. Their clothes, which could indicate either factory or farm work, emphasise the unity of industry and agriculture, an idea endlessly promoted by government in order to wipe out bitter peasant memories of collectivisation in the 1930s, and underlined here by the industrial and agricultural work in the background, especially the tractor; the symbol *par excellence* of worker and peasant unity.



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The second poster, from the 1960s, takes the idea of the march of progress onto a wider plane. The people in the crowd are modern but the big flags they carry aloft show three giants from the past: Marx, Engels and Lenin. Thus we have a continuum from past into present. The people themselves represent a range of types and races (though, interestingly, all the visible faces are white) and their flags carry the word *Mir* (peace) in French, German and English, as well as Russian, suggesting that the USSR is at the head of a worldwide movement. The emphasis on peace is, of course, an implicit accusation that the West wants war and that, therefore, only the USSR can save the world from Western folly and aggression.

The USSR may not have had commercial advertising, but it knew all the advertiser's techniques, especially the value of constant repetition. These posters may seem rather grim and serious, but that did not necessarily prevent their message from getting across.

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Key words

- Agricultural unity
- Communism
- Industrial unity
- Marx, Engels, Lenin
- State ownership
- Peace

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