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SEVEN REASONS NOT TO LEAVE LENIN TO OUR ENEMIES. CONFRONTING AND RENEWING LENIN'S LEGACY ON THE CENTENARY OF HIS DEATH

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Abstract: Lenin's enduring significance for the left in the 21st century lies above all in his ability to learn strategically in times of war, revolution, civil war and the beginnings of socialist transformation. The periods between 1900 and 1905, 1914 and 1917 and 1920 and 1923 stand out in particular. It is about the connection between (1) clear positioning in the decisive political conflicts, (2) the development of a philosophy of dialectical practice, (3) the elaboration of an independent intervening narrative, (4) strategically oriented social analysis, (5) the theory of revolution and transformation, (6) the definition of the epoch and possible scenarios of development, (7) the identification of an emancipatory horizon and (8) the translation into a strategy of revolutionary and transformational entry projects. All of these eight strategic elements are aimed at building a revolutionary and transformational force in the form of the revolutionary

party and a socialist state. The paper will concentrate on the period between 1914 and 1917 as well as 1920 and 1923. Conclusions will be drawn for the strategy of the left under the conditions of war and disaster capitalism in the European Union. The crucial question is how a connection can be established in a new way between the development of strategic learning, the building of transformative organizational power and intervening action to change the relation of power and to built-up new transformative institutions.

Keywords: Lenin, Ideology, Crisis of Capitalism, Russian Revolution, Military Conflicts

... *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.
And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.
Walter Benjamin (2006a: 391)

Let me start with the poem *The Carpet Weavers of Kuyan-Bulak Honour Lenin* written by the communist German writer Bertolt Brecht. The story of the poem is very simple: The poor carpet weavers collected money to erect a small monument in honour of Lenin. But once they had enough money, they decided to fight a disease instead with the money. Bertolt Brecht wrote: “So they helped themselves by honouring Lenin, and, honoured him by helping themselves, and thus, had understood him well.”

The significance of this conference in Barcelona is that it can usher in a renaissance of serious and thorough analysis of Lenin's work and his influence. But this would work out only if we are helping by this ourselves. And this is only possible if the younger generations and today's left-wing political forces can recognize Lenin's significance for the past and for possible futures. But we are still a long way from this. The invocation of Lenin still evokes, at best, shuddering or even horror among many on the left. In Germany at least, Lenin is considered almost as much an enemy of humanity as Hitler.

A larger part of the Left has tossed Lenin's corpse to the victors of history — both the Stalinists and their liberal opponents. One group mummified him into an idol for the worship of their own power, while the other demonized him as an enemy of democracy and human rights. The New Left viewed itself primarily as an anti-Leninist Left, and celebrated its break with his legacy. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, seemingly consigning it to the dustbin of history, it seemed that the final word had been spoken on that state's founder. The leaders of the very party he founded and shaped buried his work.

The demand not to leave Lenin to our enemies has but a single purpose. Namely to ensure that his legacy can be of use to the left in preparation for

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that hour of redemption, when, as Walter Benjamin wrote in 1940, the “firm, seemingly brutal grasp” (Benjamin 2006b: 179) becomes the order of the day.

We must learn from Lenin and from the consequences of his actions. Part of this is a recognition of the inversion of ends and means, of the significance of the threshold that separates us from inhumanity, a threshold leftists must not transgress, for our own sakes and for the sake of our objectives. For revolutionary energy alone, as Rosa Luxemburg wrote in 1918, in part in reference to the Russian Revolution, does not constitute the “true breath of socialism”, but must go hand in hand with the “most generous humanity” (Luxemburg 1918). This connection was far too often broken by Lenin and by those who acted in his name.

In May 1953, speaking to a group of workers in Paris about the October Revolution and the Soviet Union, Albert Camus summarized the situation thus:

The revolution brought about by workers succeeded in 1917 and marked the dawn of real freedom and the greatest hope the world has known. But that revolution, surrounded from the outside, threatened within and without, provided itself with a police force. Inheriting a definition and a doctrine that pictured freedom as suspect, the revolution little by little became stronger, and the world's greatest hope hardened into the world's most efficient dictatorship. (Camus 1961: 91)

In a situation where humanity is facing the greatest crisis since World War II, in an age of unfettered war and disaster capitalism, in a moment Europe is close as never to a nuclear war, the Left — at least in Europe — is today a mere shadow of itself. The real challenge to the liberal ruling elites comes from the far right and not from the radical left.

The elimination of Lenin from the Left's collective memory has been part of this historic demise of the left as a force of socialist transformation. But how can we speak of Marx without Lenin? How of Luxemburg, Gramsci, Che Guevara or Allende, but not also of Lenin? How can a renewal of the Left be possible if it disavows an important part of its revolutionary heritage? What remains of socialism at all if Lenin has no place in its history?

I would like to put forward seven reasons why Lenin should not be abandoned to our enemies.

One. Lenin's Rejection of War

Lenin's rise to become a figure who would change the course of history began with his unwavering rejection of World War I (along with a few others, such as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg) and the call to turn their weapons on the chief enemy, the ruling class. This rejection was unflinching. Lenin came to the conclusion that this war could only be brought to an end through a revolutionary civil war. He did not want to curb the policies of the ruling class but to combat them head on.

This rejection was aimed at the essence of war, not at its specific cause or trigger. Lenin always viewed the differences and contradictions of World War I from the perspective of their significance for this refusal of war. He persistently sought to sharpen these contradictions so long as he believed that by doing so he could pave the way for revolution.

Let me add something for today: Both the German and the European left are finding it extraordinary difficult to formulate an independent peace policy under the conditions of the military conflict in Ukraine and a new Cold War that is gaining increasing momentum. Such a policy is formulated in its own language, and this is lacking. Ferdinand Lassalle put it in a nutshell: "All great political action consists in and begins with the enunciation of what is. All political small-mindedness consists in concealing and glossing over what is." It is time for the left to stop this glossing over. In his government declaration of 27 February 2022, Olaf Scholz formulated the prevailing interpretation of the military conflict in Ukraine as follows: "With the invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Putin has cold-bloodedly launched a war of aggression — for a single reason: the freedom of Ukrainians challenges his own oppressive regime." German and EU policy has been guided by this interpretation of this conflict: the failure of negotiations in spring 2022 and escalating arms deliveries to the attacked Ukraine were the result. The opportunities for a quick peace agreement were wasted and the disastrous path of a long-lasting war was taken.

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The character of a war is not primarily determined by who started it, but rather which interests are being politically pursued in this war. And the more a war escalates, the clearer these interests become. In the meantime, it is obvious that the military conflict in Ukraine is a war between two empires — the US-led West and Russia. It is an inter-imperialist war on Ukrainian soil, turned into a slaughterhouse for the soldiers from both sides.

Following Lenin and Luxemburg, the left must always look at wars from a class perspective: whom does it benefit? The working classes are the victims. They are murdered on the battlefield and their living conditions deteriorate dramatically. It is not the oligarchs who pay the price, but the mass of the population - in Ukraine, Russia and much further beyond. The war has mutated into a "proxy war" between two empires on the soil of Ukraine. And once again what Luxemburg wrote at the beginning of World War I comes true: "The dividends rise and the proletarians fall."

Two. Lenin's Dialectics

The Second International had treated dialectics like a dead dog. It succumbed to the ideology of evolutionary progress, becoming incapable of conceptualizing ruptures. Placing their trust in the "universal principles" to which they reduced Marxism, they closed their minds to the realization that what is required is to recognize the potential offered by the individual event for breaking out of the universal prison of complicity with capitalism and imperialism.

It was Lenin who recognized in the correspondence between Marx and Engels, published prior to World War I, the source of their revolutionary communist approach. That is why Lenin used the first months of his exile in Switzerland, when he was condemned to an almost complete lack of agency, to study this very dialectic at its source — in Hegel's most abstract work, his "Science of Logic". In the place of evolution, Lenin came to see "leaps" as central, which suddenly placed everything on its head. He rediscovered Hegel as a revolutionary thinker for the Left.

Of the many insights that Lenin gained through this, here is just one: “the transformation of the individual into the universal, of the contingent into the necessary, transitions, modulations, and the reciprocal connection of opposites” (Lenin 1915: 360). To forge a convincing left-wing politics, it is not enough to be right at the level of the “universal” — rather, the task is to act decisively for that individual issue that specifically moves the masses in a specific moment, with the goal of facilitating interventionist, left-wing politics. Anybody who fails in this individual instance has also failed at the “universal” level, and becomes meaningless.

Lenin summarized the most important lesson that he took from his studies on dialectics in his analysis of the epochal significance of the Easter Uprising in Ireland in 1916:

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. — to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. ... Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is. (Lenin 1916: 355f.)

Let me again add something for our current struggles: It is one of the Left’s maladies that it fails to engage with the real contradictions of the real working class in the real relations of the imperialist world order and capitalist competition. This engagement demands that we address national, ethnic, and patriarchal “prejudices”, which develop among the working class under such relations, in order to extract energy for left-wing politics even out of this “impurity”. It is only if we manage to do this that we will be able to sail against the storm in these imperialist times.

As you may all the German party Die Linke (The Left) has split. And the starting controversy which lead to this split was the position of the leadership of the party under the slogan “open borders”. I quote the

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electoral platform of 2021: „DIE LINKE stands for open borders for all people in a Europe of solidarity that does not seal itself off. We fight for safe escape routes and a society that realizes human rights — instead of building walls and adapting basic rights to the current budgetary and mood situation.” (DIE LINKE 2021)

The slogan "open borders" is opium for a well-meaning libertarian left. It refuses "revolutionary realpolitik" under the conditions of neoliberal global capitalism and high social inequality. Under the conditions of a capitalist class society, the rule of capital valorization is carried out through competition among the working classes and between capitalist companies and states. The regulation of migration is a field of struggle in which the various groups of workers assert their interests, which are determined by their class position. Interest in protecting the national welfare state in Western countries on the one hand and interest in advancement in the global labor market through migration from countries of the global South on the other are not identical. A left-wing party is only credible if it formulates its policies on the basis of these contradictions and does not suggest any illusions without taking these contradictions into account.

Three. Lenin's Epochal Analysis

Deficient or incorrect diagnoses of the historical moment is a common criticism of the Left that is made to explain its weakness. However, there is certainly no lack of such diagnoses. What we do lack are historical diagnoses based on strategic lines of questioning that lead to clear conclusions for left-wing strategy. All too often, the purity of critiques of capitalism is accompanied by an attempt to avoid the "impure" consequences that these relations leave with the working classes. It is for this reason that these analyses remain sterile.

In the brief period between late 1914 and 1916, Lenin not only produced the book "Imperialism, the Latest Stage of Capitalism", but also read up once more on the agrarian question, as he saw the behaviour of the peasantry as the decisive issue in a coming revolution. He juxtaposed the US path of capitalist agrarian development to that employed in Prussia in

order to understand the possible decisions with which the peasantry would be faced in a revolution.

During this same period, he studied the complexity of the national question in an era of imperialism because he assumed that a revolution could only be successful if it absorbed the energy of the national question and was able to account for it without succumbing to it. As such, he directed his attention not so much at the organized proletariat (whose revolutionary potential seemed evident to him) but at the peasants, the petit-bourgeois nationalist forces and the anticolonial movements. His interest was directed not so much at the class limitations of these forces, but — beyond any kind of sectarianism — at their potential to transform society.

In other words, what are the dominant tendencies of the present moment, which scenarios are realistic, where are the ruptures in the ruling system most likely to appear, what are the possibilities for forging strong alliances even from a position of weakness in order to intervene in undecided situations, and what is then to be done — Lenin asked himself these questions in the wake of 1914, making him more prepared than anybody else on the Left for the revolutionary circumstances that emerged between 1917–19. Indeed, these are the questions that today's Left once again must ask itself.

Again, I want to add with regard for today: The socialist left must not only oppose the official linguistic policy of labeling the military conflict in Ukraine as a "Russian war of aggression", but also the attempt to classify this war as a confrontation between "democracy" and "authoritarianism". Such an attempt is not left even if one speaks of the confrontation between democratic and authoritarian capitalism. The staging of international politics as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is a central component of the USA's efforts to maintain its own supremacy and gain allies for this purpose. According to the US think tank Transatlantic Council, they are concerned with "preserving collective economic and technological superiority; protecting the global status of the US dollar; maintaining an overwhelming conventional military deterrent ..." (Anonymous 2021). To

this end, the USA is prepared to use very confrontational, often even belligerent means if necessary. The construction of a global opposition between "democracy" and "authoritarianism" is part of the US geopolitical strategy.

The left must under no circumstances submit to the Cold War ideology of a struggle between the liberal, democratic West and the forces of authoritarianism, but must focus on a completely different conflict: the conflict between those who are committed to cooperative multilateralism and common security and development and want to contribute to solving global problems and those who have chosen the path of confrontation and militarization. For this is the main contradiction of the current era. This contradiction runs through many states and political forces and takes on an ever-changing form in the respective concrete conflicts, crises and wars. The point is not to side with either the USA or China or Russia, but to analyze which real forces are pursuing which policies and what their interests are. The question is whose interests and strategies serve common security and which do not. We can only warn against the missionary zeal of so-called regime change through war. Consequently, socialists must not leave the definition of the fundamental contradictions of the present to those in power in East and West. They must find their own understanding of these contradictions.

Four. Lenin's Vision and Immediate Programme of Action
Lenin wrote "State and Revolution" from his illegal exile in Finland, in the middle of the horror of World War I and the rapid political shifts taking place in Russia after the February Revolution, all while facing persecution as an alleged paid agent of Germany and being directly involved in the preparations for the seizure of political power by the Bolsheviks.

He had already carefully gathered together everything he could find in terms of statements made by Marx and Engels about a future communist society, and he guarded these notebooks with his life. His objective was nothing less than the rediscovery of Marxian communism as the guiding orientation for policy after the success of the revolution.

In “State and Revolution”, the notion of the direct self-management of society from below by armed workers and the direct seizure of control of the economy by the workers in the factories butts up against a vision of the utmost centralization of power in the hands of the working class. It is as if Bakunin and Marx had both guided Lenin’s pen at the same time. This was possible in part because in his analysis of the Paris Commune, Marx himself had taken up many anarchist ideas, and both he and Engels assumed that in the course of a successful revolution, the state would wither away, since social and individual interests would increasingly coincide with one another. It is no coincidence that with Lenin (as with Marx before him), the vision of free association and of the organization of the entire society as a massive bureaucratic undertaking went hand in hand.

Everything depended purely on the prevailing power relations and the political decisions that were made. For an enduring left-wing politics, that was far too arbitrary.

At the same time as Lenin was working on “State and Revolution”, he drew on the debates around the war economy and his understanding of planning and guiding the economy acquired from studying the alliance between monopolies and the state to develop a program for stabilizing Russia through a form of state capitalism under the leadership of a revolutionary government. It was this program that he then deployed in 1918, and to which he turned again with the transition to the New Economic Policy in the early 1920s.

Lenin’s visions were deeply and internally contradictory, and his immediate program was not organically connected with these visions. This made it possible to shift, in an almost entirely arbitrary fashion, between the harshest dictatorship and the most radical democracy, the immediate abolition of markets and law as well as measures to consolidate them. War communism and state capitalism could thus be justified as socialist policies. Everything depended purely on the prevailing power relations and the political decisions that were made. For an enduring left-wing politics, that was far too arbitrary.

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If the current Left would seriously want to transform the societies in a socialist way it must develop its own understanding of socialism of the 21st century which is able to find solidary forms of mediating the contradictions of complex societies safeguarding at the same time the communist foundations of modern societies and the liberal freedoms avoiding an either-or.

Five. Lenin's Party

Certainly, since the founding of the paper *Iskra* (The Spark) in 1900, Lenin's central concern was creating a party of professional revolutionaries that would be capable of combining the struggle for the economic interests of the workers with the political struggle of bringing down Tsarism.

In his programmatic text "What Is to Be Done?", he states in all clarity: "Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we will overturn Russia!" (Lenin 1960a: 467) This line grew directly out of his own, shame-laden experience of powerlessness when attempting to train and educate the workers without being able to resolve the fragmentation and separation of the economic and political struggle. Lenin wanted to get away from this "primitiveness", as he disparagingly called it, and developed the concept of a "party of a new type":

Without such organisation the proletariat will never rise to the class-conscious struggle; without such organisation the working-class movement is doomed to impotency. With the aid of nothing but funds and study circles and mutual benefit societies the working class will never be able to fulfil its great historical mission — to emancipate itself and the whole of the Russian people from political and economic slavery. Not a single class in history has achieved power without producing its political leaders, its prominent representatives able to organise a movement and lead it. (Lenin 1960b: 370)

What are the organizational forms that can facilitate successful struggles that connect ecological and social questions with a radical social transformation, that merge economic demands with long-term economic restructuring, that enforce proactive peace policies while still preserving our

own security, and that make a convincing contribution to the implementation of the UN objectives for sustainable global development? One thing is certain: without such organizational forms, we will not be able to overturn disaster capitalism. Instead, we will be condemned to the descent into naked barbarism.

Six. Lenin's Struggle for Power and the Quest for a Socialist identity

Particularly in the current situation, the Left should be painfully aware of what powerlessness means. It leads to splintering and degradation, and to a profound feeling of impotence in the face of ever-growing threats and the possible descent into naked barbarism.

Power is a form of seduction, but without power, we are left with nothing but empty intentions. In 1920, Clara Zetkin conveyed a remark by Luxemburg about Lenin from the year 1907:

Take a good look at him. That is Lenin. Look at the self-willed, stubborn head. A real Russian peasant's head with a few faintly Asiatic lines. That man will try to overturn mountains. Perhaps he will be crushed by them. But he will never yield. (quoted in Reisberg 1977: 396)

Lenin led the socialist Left to a power it had never known before. In the course of seizing and securing that power, he was often merciless, and subjugated everything to this objective. His attempts to prevent the abuse of this power by Stalin and to install forces that could counter this came too late. Already weakened by his terminal illness, his efforts were entirely in vain. His final dictated words, his testament, bear witness to his failure in the face of forces of uncontrolled domination, forces he himself had failed fuelled with his struggle to seize power through the Bolshevik Party.

What one can learn is that dealing with power is at least as challenging as getting to power. The arts of both are different. It is mandatory to prepare for both of them.

One can learn from Lenin that in the struggle for power to overcome the world of capitalism and imperialism, one must have a decidedly socialist

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identity of one's own. And just as Lenin made a hard separation from the social-chauvinism of the Second International during the First World War, the socialist left must free itself from the hegemony of left-liberalism and develop its own ideological and political-strategic identity. This also includes a new understanding of socialism - as a society based on solidarity and as a movement towards a society based on solidarity on the basis of an economic, social and political order that anchors this solidarity in all basic structures of society and ends the rule of capital exploitation over the economy and society in order to provide positive answers to the social, ecological and peace issues both globally and locally. If this does not succeed, the left ends up with a well-meaning left-liberalism and are becoming — to use Marx's term — “vulgar socialists” (Marx 1875: 88).

Such a socialist identity, however, requires thinking of capitalist society from the point of view of the wage-earning class and its emancipation and not from the abstract individual and the conditions on the surface of bourgeois-capitalist society. The proclaimed global war (cold or hot) in the name of democracy and human rights, euphemistically referred to as “value-led”, is the concentrated expression of a foreign policy with an imperial sign. As so often in the past, it imagines a fundamentally false identity of interests between the wage earners and the ruling classes who are driving this course of war. Social cuts and accelerated climate catastrophe are the inevitable consequences. Consequently, a Marxist-oriented analysis of society, class and imperialism is indispensable for the left if it does not want to become an ideological and strategic appendage of liberalism.

Seven. Lenin's Failure Is Our Collective Failure

The crisis of capitalist liberal civilization has become organic and universal. And for this very reason, to put an end to this situation of perpetual catastrophe, it is time to look back and, as Walter Benjamin put it, “prepare a banquet for the past”, so that we can turn to the future.

Lenin's massive impact cannot be separated from his failure to establish a political system that respected the freedom of the individual and that

facilitated learning, rather than sacrificing these things in the interests of the pure struggle for power. Lenin attempted to tackle this failure in the final years of his life. His writings from 1922 and early 1923, before he lost his ability to speak, were new and open-ended search processes.

Under Stalin, these processes were snuffed out during the Great Terror, before being revived under Khrushchev and later Gorbachev. In the People's Republic of China, these processes never stopped, beginning in the civil war and then continuing in the 1950s and early 1960s, and they have continued unbroken since 1978. Showing that there was no reason why a party guided by the traditions of Lenin had to be incapable of renewal.

The only people who can learn from history are those who invite the figures who set out in search of an emancipated humanity to our table, viewing them as comrades, speaking with them about their great attempts and also about their failures. Lenin also belongs at this table. If we cannot do justice to him, we will have no future.

Finding a Way Out

In an era in which the ruling classes in Europe and the US are increasingly incapable of carrying out their current policies, when catastrophic events are becoming increasingly frequent, when the trust of the citizens in the agency of the ruling classes and the institutions of the bourgeois-capitalist economy and democracy is exhausted, when the spirit of the times ceases to echo the spirit of the ruling class, then we have reached the hour of the “firm, apparently brutal grip” that Benjamin demanded, and of which Lenin was capable like few other leftist politicians.

Just as in the lead-up to 1933, confronted with such a fundamental crisis of liberal civilization, we are faced with a choice between fascism or socialism. Karl Polanyi wrote on this in 1934:

Fascism is that form of revolutionary solution [to the crisis of liberal civilization] which keeps Capitalism untouched. ... Obviously, there is another solution. It is to retain Democracy and abolish Capitalism. This is the Socialist solution. (Polanyi 2018: 127)

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But for this, socialism needs to be refounded — intellectually, politically, and organizationally. This is impossible if the existing history of socialism and Lenin's legacy are not incorporated into this new socialism.

During the collapse of the Bulgarian state socialist system, the Bulgarian partisan, communist, and novelist Angel Wagenstein made the following observation to his party:

I believe that socialism is a human project, a human project, the most fundamental project in global civilization since the advent of Christianity. ... We will see how things progress. Jesus Christ never knew — after all, he was not a Christian — how Christianity would progress in the 3rd century or in the dark depths of the Middle Ages. The Inquisition was the gulag of Christianity. Christianity had its gulag too, multiple gulags, actually. I am no prophet when it comes to socialism. I only know that there is no other path for humanity. There is no other way out. (quoted in Vollmer/Wenzel 2019: 449)

But if and how this way out will be found will also depend on how socialists and leftists deal with Lenin and his legacy. This will honour him and help us.

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