

LENIN'S TERROR

The ideological origins of early Soviet state violence

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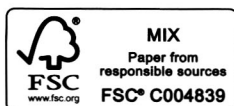
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Lenin's Terror

This book explores the development of Lenin's thinking on violence throughout his career, from the last years of the Tsarist regime in Russia through to the 1920s and the New Economic Policy, and provides an important assessment of the significance of ideological factors for understanding Soviet state violence as directed by the Bolshevik leadership during its first years in power. It highlights the impact of the First World War, in particular its place in Bolshevik discourse as a source of legitimating Soviet state violence after 1917, and explains the evolution of Bolshevik dictatorship over the half decade during which Lenin led the revolutionary state. It examines the militant nature of the Leninist worldview, Lenin's conception of the revolutionary state, the evolution of his understanding of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and his version of 'just war'. The book argues that ideology can be considered primarily important for our understanding of the violent and dictatorial nature of the early Soviet state, at least when focused on the party elite, but it is also clear that ideology cannot be understood in a contextual vacuum. The oppressive nature of Tsarist rule, the bloodiness of the First World War and the vulnerability of the early Soviet state as it struggled to survive against foreign and domestic opponents were of crucial significance. The book sets Lenin's thinking on violence within the wider context of a violent world.

James Ryan is a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral CARA Mobility Research Fellow in the Humanities and Social Sciences, based at the Department of History, University of Warwick, UK and School of History, University College Cork, Ireland.

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James Ryan

Cork

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Note on style

The system of transliteration used in this book is the Library of Congress style, with certain exceptions. I have chosen to use 'Bolsheviks' rather than 'Bol'sheviki', 'Trotsky' rather than 'Trotskii' and 'Zinoviev' rather than 'Zinov'ev'. I have chosen to continue to refer usually to 'Bolsheviks' rather than 'Communists' after March 1918. Dates used correspond to the calendar in use in Russia at the time. The Gregorian calendar, adopted in Russia in March 1918, was 13 days ahead of the Julian calendar in the twentieth century.

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Introduction

Ideology and violence

The imagination and the spiritual strength of Shakespeare's evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no ideology.¹

(Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

This book provides a comprehensive and systematic narrative study of V.I. Lenin's thinking on political violence from his early writings in the 1890s until his retirement from active politics in 1923. This topic is important for understanding Lenin the man and theorist as well as the nature of the Soviet state that came into existence in Russia at the close of 1917. It places Lenin's ideas firmly within their Russian and European historical contexts, and delineates narratively the interactive relationship between ideas and circumstances/events. It is also a study of Lenin's practice as leader of the Soviet state and Bolshevik (Communist) party after 1917, that is, his direct advocacy of and actual directives for the use of violence. These were certainly not always implemented, at least in the manner urged, and in any case violence usually occurred 'from below' whether Lenin advocated it or not.² Bolshevik rule was not firmly established across Soviet-controlled territory for quite some time after the October Revolution of 1917, and in fact much of the state and state-sponsored violence that occurred in early Soviet Russia took place without Lenin's (prior) knowledge. The Bolshevik Party and Soviet state were much more than Lenin. He was not a dictator in the sense that all his recommendations were accepted and implemented, nor in that his colleagues did not at times sharply disagree with him. However, he was the leading and most influential figure in Party and state, and while at the helm of power policies largely bore his imprint.

How and why did Lenin and his Party, committed to a vision of a 'beautiful future' of peaceful prosperity for humanity as a whole, visit a violent dictatorship upon the Russian people? To what extent did their system of ideas and beliefs contribute to this, what were these ideas and beliefs, and does the world that they were reacting to bear some measure of responsibility for the Soviet political system? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this book. The principal research question posed is one of the most debated amongst scholars: whether Soviet state violence, in this case as approved and directed from the

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centre of power, was the product of ideological factors or a response to circumstances, or whether it is possible to attribute explanatory primacy to one or other in this regard.

The book focuses on the theory and practice of the leading actor of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet state, Lenin. It does not provide a comprehensive study of early Soviet state and state-sponsored violence. It does not examine why 'ordinary' people or regular 'state agents' – local Cheka (political police) forces or Red army units and partisans – engaged in violent practices, violence that was certainly not simply 'political' or ideological in nature. Hence the ideology in question is 'high ideology' rather than how it was understood 'on the ground'. Nonetheless the role of the state and its leadership was crucial. Joshua Sanborn points out that, though violence reached endemic levels in Russia after the collapse of the autocracy in 1917, the Bolshevik state did not so much attempt to curtail such violence engendered by the brutalization of the First World War as 'deploy an ideology of violence that was conducive to the further escalation of uncontrolled carnage.'³

The Soviet regime proved to be one of history's most repressive and violent experiments in social engineering. For almost all of its existence the Soviet state ruled its people with an iron fist, but widespread state violence and terror were by no means endemic features of the system. Following Iosif Stalin's death in 1953, terror in the sense of widespread physical violence ceased to characterize the mechanics of Soviet power. The bulk of Soviet state violence was committed during the 25-year rule of Stalin but between December 1917 and February 1922 – during the rule of his predecessor, Lenin – there were, at lowest estimates, 28,000 executions (excluding battlefield deaths) on average per year directly attributable to the Soviet state, a sharp contrast with the approximate total figure of 14,000 executed by the Russian Tsarist regime between 1866 and 1917. This figure approximates with that of the years of 'dekulakization' in the early 1930s, though it is considerably below the average of the bloodiest years of Stalinism.⁴

Scholarly and popular attention has invariably focused primarily on the phenomenon of Stalinism. The violence of Lenin's rule can appear more readily understandable as the inevitable accompaniment of the foundation of a new revolutionary state, especially amidst the destruction wrought by the World War and the brutal Russian Civil War, but Stalin deployed the worst of his terror in peacetime. Yet, if one accepts that Stalin and his colleagues' professed Leninism was genuinely important for their political practice, then Stalinism should be studied in the light of Leninism – Lenin's understanding and development of Marxian ideas that formed the ideological basis of the early Soviet system. Indeed, expertise regarding the significance of the violence of the early Soviet years is under-developed in the general body of work on Soviet, particularly Stalinist, state violence. Leninism (as distinct from Stalinism, Maoism, etc.) and Lenin's rule are highly interesting and important subjects in their own right, but the legacy of Leninism for the development of Stalinism is an important reason why a detailed study of Lenin and violence is valuable and necessary.

Lenin, and his Bolshevik colleagues such as Lev Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin and ultimately Stalin, were to exert radical influences on the meaning, global

influence, and fate of Marxism as an intellectual tradition and revolutionary movement. Though Marxists were certainly not averse to using violence, Lenin was the first and most significant Marxist theorist to dramatically elevate the role of violence as revolutionary instrument and function of the ambivalent Marxian concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (working class). This concept became, in Lenin's theory and practice, explicitly violent and truly 'dictatorial', and led to bitter polemics between the Bolsheviks and their European and Russian Marxist critics who condemned the terror and dictatorship of Bolshevism and sought to discredit its pretensions to be recognized internationally as Marxist orthodoxy.

Some scholars have effectively sought to implicate Lenin and his comrades as the sources of the 'original sin' that led to the holocaustic consequences of the Stalin era,⁵ and this attests to the importance of a full-length, balanced study of Lenin and violence. It is also interesting to consider how Lenin's ideas on revolutionary violence and terrorism differ from those of terrorists in his time and those today, but more significantly it is important to understand the often idealistic, indeed moralistic motivations and justifications for violence that unite some of today's violent practitioners with advocates of political violence of an earlier era. Understanding such motivations can help illustrate how best to circumvent the general phenomenon of political violence.

Despite the end of the Cold War Lenin is still a controversial figure, reviled by some (including on the Left) and revered by others. For historian Richard Pipes, Lenin was 'a heartless cynic' who displayed 'utter disregard for human life', and was in fact even more severe than Stalin.⁶ Robert Gellately considers that Lenin was 'merciless and cruel', deservedly placed alongside Stalin and Hitler in a triumvirate of brutal twentieth-century European leaders.⁷ On the other hand some left-wing thinkers advocate reviving Lenin's uncompromising revolutionary and partisan spirit to address today's global problems.⁸ Most scholarly literature on Lenin is not so polarized, and there is much of a balanced and scholarly nature available. Recently some scholars have explicitly set about 'retrieving the historical Lenin', that is re-appraising him through careful examination of historical sources free from politicized stereotypes.⁹

Violence is often a source of interpretive contention and polemic when writing about significant historical figures, and this has certainly been the case with Lenin. Chris Read, one of Lenin's most recent English-language biographers, remarks that 'No aspect of Lenin's rule has generated more heat and less light in recent years than this one'.¹⁰ Though a considerable volume of literature from Western, Soviet and post-Soviet Russian scholars deals with the subject, there is little sustained and lengthy scholarly treatment focused on this topic. To the author's knowledge, there is no full-length monograph study, at least in English.¹¹ This book will contribute to Lenin's biography by directly addressing the subject of his relationship with violence in a sustained, scholarly and systematic manner, and will make an especially significant contribution toward 'retrieving the historical Lenin'.

The book is largely one of intellectual history, and will draw principally on Lenin's *Collected Works* and published documents in Russian. Since the opening

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of the former Soviet archives some new material has come to light but nothing that undermines an interpretation based on Lenin's published works, although some of his more starkly violent pronouncements were only discovered in the archives in the 1990s. The book's principal purpose is to examine Lenin's relationship with violence, but it will also make an important contribution to understanding and explaining Soviet state violence more generally, and indeed the political violence of early twentieth century Europe more broadly. It does not provide a comprehensive portrait of Lenin. Its focus is on one dimension of his thought and political practice, the aspect of violence and repression, although the broader context of his political thought is explained. It is likely that a more comprehensive portrait of his thought and practice would make it clearer to the reader that, in light of what came after his death, in several respects Lenin pointed to a more humane Marxism. Lenin does not appear in this book as an endearing or admirable individual, but neither does he appear as an utterly cruel, reprehensible despot.

Robert Service is undoubtedly correct that 'nobody can write detachedly about Lenin.'¹² However it is possible to write balanced and scholarly history, regardless of one's personal beliefs and viewpoints. The present author sympathizes with certain of the Marxist diagnoses of the problems of the modern world and is not averse to an uncompromising approach to certain issues, but does not support the violence accompanying, or indeed some of the radical pretensions of, the Marxist-Leninist project. Some of Lenin's analyses, though often overstated, rang true at least to some extent. Certainly some of his indomitable and unflinching spirit, if not his ideas, could be useful for addressing some of today's national and global problems. Yet the practical experience of the often narrow-minded doctrinal Leninism, typically precluding compromise, agreement and conciliation, serves to remind of the possible dangers of absolutist and sometimes radically revolutionary approaches to politics.

Balanced and fair-minded history should not, however, preclude historical judgement. Was the amount of state violence employed by the Bolsheviks 'necessary' or counter-productive, reasonable or reflective of a particular entrenched assessment of circumstances? Could the early Soviet system have been considerably less violent and oppressive and survived, rendering less likely the later atrocities of Stalinism? The viewpoint expressed here is that, though the use of violence was essential for the Bolsheviks to hold onto their absolute power (apart from defeating the White forces in Civil War), the revolution could have been prosecuted in a less extremist manner such that its use would have been much diminished, a more stable socialist state could have been constructed, and twentieth-century Russian (and Eastern European) history could have taken a more humane course. Why this proved not to be tells us much about the nature of Bolshevism.

By 'judgement', then, is meant a scholarly appraisal of the reasonableness, significance and ultimate legacy of Leninist violence. The extent of Bolshevik violence and dictatorship was, paradoxically, both effective and ultimately counter-productive, for the price of survival was a bloody dictatorship that

distorted the lofty ideals that animated the Bolsheviks to take power in the first place. Though the collapse of the Soviet regime was not inevitable, it was largely the product of its own structural weaknesses as established from the outset. It is probable that no reader or author can or indeed should engage with this subject without forming a moral judgement, but a scholarly approach to the subject serves to allow the reader to formulate a balanced, informed appraisal. This ultimately is the historian's purpose.

Introducing Lenin

For over 70 years the Soviet state, originally the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and then the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), commanded the attention of the world. Its first leader, Vladimir Il'ich Ul'ianov, known to history by his revolutionary pseudonym of Lenin, has been one of the most significant and influential figures of modern history, an iconic revolutionary leader absolutely and single-mindedly committed to Marxist, working-class revolution. Socialist-communist regimes professing adherence to Lenin's ideas and political legacy appeared in different parts of the world in the last century, exercising enormous influence upon the shaping of the contemporary world; it is certainly clear that Leninism 'should be seen in world-historical terms.'¹³ Even without Lenin, an exclusively socialist government (probably leaning on the soviets – the democratic councils of the working people – or even exclusively soviet) would almost certainly have been formed in Russia in the late autumn of 1917, at least for an interim. However the particular socialist Soviet government that was created by his Bolshevik party would almost certainly not have come to be were it not for Lenin, and his successors continued the Soviet regime and, ironically, ultimately dismantled it by claiming Leninist legitimacy.

Lenin was born in the town on Simbirsk (now Ul'ianovsk) on the river Volga in April 1870. His father achieved the status of a member of the lower nobility, and the Ul'ianov children were brought up to value hard work and the intelligentsia ideal of public service. The young Vladimir excelled at school, but in the space of a year his world was severely affected by the deaths of his father and elder brother Aleksandr, in 1886 and 1887 respectively. His political awareness was aroused by the shock of Aleksandr's death, for he was hanged for his involvement in an attempt to assassinate Tsar Aleksandr III. Vladimir was expelled from university in Kazan but demonstrated his considerable academic talent by graduating with the equivalent of a first-class honors law degree from St Petersburg University, despite having been prevented from attending classes. He was an avid reader of classical Russian literature, and also of revolutionary works. He soon became involved with Marxist reading circles and his first book, a study of the development of capitalism in Russia, appeared in 1899. Four years previously he had been arrested in St Petersburg along with his activist revolutionary comrades and sent to Siberian exile. In exile he married Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, to whom he would remain married for the rest of his life, but they had no children. With the turn of the century Lenin left Russia and would only return for a brief