

# Marxist-Leninism

## *An Exploration of Ideological Adoption and Influence*

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### **Abstract**

Questions of “Marxism in Action” are prominent in many aspects of political discourse. This study proposes that the main tenant of Marxist thought missing in Leninist political theory and the application thereof to the U.S.S.R. is the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This argument draws on Marxist theory, Leninist theory, and the on-the-ground dictatorship of the proletariat in the U.S.S.R. between 1917 and 1924. This paper serves as a reminder of the common discrepancy between political theory and application, as every significant political doctrine is subject to an inevitable play of influences, modifications, and alterations in the geopolitical arena.

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Marxist political theory requires careful interpretation and specification. Various Marxist interpretations of political life highlight unique tensions within Marxism, which are less noticeable in the area of political theory. The United Socialist Soviet Republic (U.S.S.R.) was founded on Marxist Leninist ideology: that is, Marxism as interpreted by Vladimir Lenin. Through this, Lenin sought to adapt the central tenets of Marxism to the experience of Russia. Upon reflection, Marxism has not been applied to geopolitical situations as a static ideology. As such, we may ask ourselves, what aspects of Karl Marx's thought were altered by Lenin as an adopter of Marxism and a revolutionary Russian politician? In this essay, I investigate aspects of Marxism not represented in Marxist-Leninism and discuss how Marx's death has affected this aspect of politics. Considering this question, I argue that the key element of Marx's thought missing in Leninist political theory and the application thereof to the U.S.S.R. is found in the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This paper seeks to make this argument by highlighting Marxist theory, Leninist theory, and the on-the-ground dictatorship of the proletariat in the U.S.S.R. between 1917 and 1924.

First, we must investigate Marx's idea of communism as a social, political, and economic goal. To explore this, we can look at Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. While this work focuses more on the rise of capitalism than articulating communist principles, we still gather some elements of Marx's vision of communism. These elements include an overhaul of existing economic and, thereby, social relationships and collective ownership of the means of production (Tucker, 1978 p. 207). In the *Communist Manifesto*, we see Marx provides us with an account of communism as a final stage of history, marking the end of class struggle and the beginning of the state of social and economic equilibrium. He highlights the dictatorship of the proletariat in the *Communist Manifesto*, as he says: "The proletariat will use its supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all

capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class” (Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, Ch. 2).

As we gather, the *Communist Manifesto* is more framed as a call to action than an articulation of principles. However, it provides a brief glimpse of the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For this reason, we can look to other writings on Marx to supplement this piece. Marx’s first reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat occurs in the third trilogy of articles under “The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850” (Bellis, 1979, p. 4). These writings are written about the Paris Commune, which was a revolutionary government that took control of Paris in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian war. This historical moment is of great importance to Marx and appears in many of his writings. We can see Marx highlight the dictatorship of the proletariat as he says, “the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations” (Marx & Engels, 1850).

Additionally, according to Marx in “the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, the Paris Commune intended to abolish that class property, to make the labour of the many the wealth of the few, and to transform the means of capital, production, land, and social relations (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme: Section 1*). However, the most crucial aspect of the Paris Commune was an instance of the working class holding political power. As such, the Commune allowed for the opportunity to lay out elements of the transition period between capitalism and a classless communist society. It is essential to understand the transitory stages of communism, as it is through the Paris Commune that Marx

highlights that communist revolutions “cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme: Section 1*). However, the Paris Commune still serves as an example of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is a central point for Marx's idea of communism.

After Marx wrote about the Paris Commune, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was incorporated into the first of six statutes of the universal society of communist revolutionaries (Bellis, 1979, p. 173). As such, the dictatorship of the proletariat is central to the end goal of Marx's teleological account of history via the revolution. The dictatorship of the proletariat serves as an intermediary stage between a capitalist economy and a communist society. As well, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not necessarily a goal but rather a means of reaching the goal of a developed communist society. A developed society in this sense is a “new society with no classes and no system of private property” (Feigan, 2015, p. 23). In a letter, Marx himself wrote, “Only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois law be left behind in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Feigan, 2015, p. 24). As such, the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat comes from the politically dominant class, i.e., the proletariat (Kivotidis, 2019).

Upon analysis, we can see that the classical texts of Marxism agree that the dictatorship of the proletariat is an essential element of the communist revolution. It is also important to recognize that the dictatorship of the proletariat, as defended by Marx, requires the development of the conditions for the elimination of classes and the abolition of class rule and the state.

Once we take the foundational principles of Marxism and apply them to the political atmosphere, we gain insightful ground for political analysis. Marxism–Leninism was the official ideology of

the former U.S.S.R. and, by extension, of the international communist movement during the twentieth century. Lenin is an important figure in Russian history, as the essential establisher of communism in Russia. Leninism is an ideology that highlights and interprets various aspects of Marxism. While Marxist-Leninism can be understood as one unit of political theory, there are some divergent aspects contained within the two ideologies. It is important to note that many divergent aspects occurred because of socio-political struggles implementing communism rather than as a point of ideology for Lenin. As such, due to the uniqueness of the Russian political situation, Lenin is often credited with turning Marxism on its head. This can be argued as both a conscious effort and a political-environmental reaction. I will now outline some of Lenin's philosophy. However, it is still important to note that because of Lenin's position as a political actor, there is no clear-cut distinction between his ideology and leadership approach.

Lenin wrote that the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat involved the proletariat obtaining political and economic control within a democratic system. He argued for the destruction of the foundations of the bourgeois state and its replacement with what is described as an ultra-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat based on the Paris Commune system (Bellis, 1979, p. 30). Following the conclusion to which Marx led in their appraisal of the Commune, Lenin argued that the proletariat must, upon seizing power, destroy the existing state apparatus, a political form inscribed in its socio-economic subjection (Bellis, 1979, p. 30). Lenin's emphasis on the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus did not imply that the revolution could be equated with violence or that a degree or extent of violence could be taken as the measure of its success. The proletarian revolution involves not only the transfer of power from one class to another; it constitutes replacing one type of power with another. Both aspects are necessarily interlinked (Bellis, 1979, p. 30). The bourgeois state

apparatus would be supplanted by something which was no longer state proper, that is, by a state so established that it begins to wither away. Although he maintained that the new proletarian state would consist of the “proletarian armed and organized working class,” there are few indicators of the specific form (Bellis, 1979, p. 31). In 1917, following the revival of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies, Lenin wrote his letters from afar that represented the dictatorship of the proletariat as the “embryo of a worker's government.” At the same time, he argued that the proletariat must smash the existing state apparatus. Lenin acknowledged that it was not possible to eliminate bureaucracy “at once, everywhere and completely” (Bellis, 1979, p. 33). It was necessary to convert the functions of the bureaucracy into simplified administrative operations. Thus, for Lenin, this was the practical meaning of the abolition of the state and the deinstitutionalization of political power (Bellis, 1979 p. 35).

One divergent factor was that Marxism believed people would spontaneously become aware of their status and rise for a revolution. However, Leninism thought that a party should be formed to guide people because otherwise, the revolution happening would not be a practical idea. We explore these divergences through Lenin's theory of the vanguard party, the essentials found in the classic pamphlet “What Is to Be Done? Painful Questions of our Movement and Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism”. It is here that we see Lenin outline his analysis of imperialism and state theory. Lenin's revolutionary theory is constructed on the economic grounds of the theoreticians of the Second International; the break with their mechanistic and evolutionary materialism has not been undertaken in its entirety (Santamaria & Manville, 1976, p. 79). Lenin, in effect, will formulate a problematic transition in which the movement of history, even in its most brutal ruptures, will be conceived as a development of productive forces, objective structures anchored in social matter with intrinsic principles of

emergence for new relations of production (Santamaria & Manville, 1976, p. 79).

Having provided a summary of Marx's goal of history and Lenin's theoretical approaches, I will now highlight some gaps in the Leninist application of Marxism. As such, this section is focused on the on-the-ground application of Leninism instead of theoretical analysis. Here, I will discuss the primary gap with the application of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The organization of the Bolshevik government was partly a product of the Russian revolution of 1905. At this time, the proletariat engaged in mass action, which required a form of mass organization (Kautsky, 1919, p. 70). In Russia, the Paris Commune model form of government was realized in the Russian Revolution of 1905. Here, it was the task of the Soviets to depose the capitalist-monarchical state to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. Additionally, when the second revolution broke out in 1917, the Soviet organization again came together. However, this time, it was on a firmer basis, corresponding with the development undergone by the proletariat since the first revolution (Kautsky, 1919, p. 71).

As we saw in the earlier section, within the phrase "the dictatorship of the proletariat," Marx had in mind the class content of the power system. However, Lenin's application of this got mixed in with the dissolution of democratic institutions. Lenin expressed that "the social union is to be the organ of the dictatorship of the proletariat," which is the most painless transition to socialism made possible (Kautsky, 1919, p. 74). However, this was not a repudiation of democracy entirely. In his speech in April 1917, Lenin described the Soviet organization as a higher type of democracy. It was higher in the sense that it was a complete break from "middle-class distortion, and the proletariat thereby secured freedom (Kautsky, 1919, p. 74). We also see in his writing of "What is to be done" that

the proletariat could not necessarily make the revolution as Marx theorized. Instead, the revolution would be led by a vanguard party. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat was then, in practice, transformed into the dictatorship of the communist party in the name of the proletariat (Ball & Dagger, 2022). As such, as some scholars had foreseen, the proposed dictatorship of the proletariat in turn became a dictatorship of the proletariat *by extension*. This development cannot be fully accredited to Lenin's approach to the revolution. However, there is a connection between his adjustment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the ground transformation.

Some Marxists have claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states had little to do with Marxism, as they were not Marxists (Townshend, 1995, p. 74). This argument highlights that the regime of the Soviet Union had little in common with Marxism, precisely when it came to proletarian emancipation. However, others argue that it is essential to recognize the connection between the U.S.S.R. and Marxism. This is because the soviet state had been overseen by individuals who were acting in the name of Marxism. Furthermore, they implemented some critical aspects of the Marxist political programme, such as public ownership and welfare employment measures (Townshend, 1995, p. 75).

Overall, it is a mistake to see Lenin as a leader uninfluenced by their political environment. It is essential, in this analysis, to consider the vast complexity of the Russian political climate in this era. To argue that Lenin and the Bolsheviks somehow betrayed their revolutionary principles by not adhering strictly to Marxist policies is far too optimistic for the actualities of political life (Debo, 1991, p. 106). As such, one must place both Leninism and Bolshevism in the context of the Russian revolutionary movement. Lenin is a Marxist of a highly original variety in this application of theory. Additionally, his political realism structurally informed his Marxism on the ground. Considering this, some may argue that Leninism, in



some ways, is more practical than Marxist thought. Alternatively, Leninism and Lenin's legacy as a political leader may highlight some crucial aspects of applying Marxist principles to political life.

It is also essential to consider how Leninism influenced Marxism as an ideology after the death of Marx. After Marx died in 1883, Engels became the chief expositor of Marxist theory, which he simplified in several respects (Ball & Dagger, 2022). This is important considering that early 20th-century Russia was an unlikely setting for the proletarian revolution that Marx predicted. As such, Lenin has a significant effect on how Marxism's ideology has continued since Karl Marx's death. As the leader of the revolutionary uprising that brought communism to power in Russia, he is an important figure in the political history of the 20th century. The fact that Lenin did not create the political dream he wanted highlights some key areas of struggle for communism's implementation. As such, his legacy lives on both in terms of a historical-political force and part of the brutality which developed under the U.S.S.R.

This essay argued that the primary difference between Marxist political theory and Leninist political theory and the application thereof to the U.S.S.R. is the differing application of “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” From this discussion, I also discussed the diverging factors of the rise of the revolution and despotic socialism between Leninism (both in theory and on the ground) as compared to Marxism. In conclusion, the Leninist version of Marxism was no more than a version; an attempt to put into practice Marxist ideas, which Marx presented without straightforward principles of political interpretation. In many respects, the communism we saw posited by Lenin is not the communism that Marx theorized. This is quite a common occurrence, as every major political doctrine is subject to an inevitable play of influences, modifications, and alterations in the geopolitical arena. The bigger question may be, was the functioning of the U.S.S.R. a logical

outcome of Marx's doctrine? Perhaps any intrinsic contradictions or weaknesses of Marxist political theory are one thing, and what happened, and is happening in Russia, is simply another.

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