

Was Lenin a master tactician or an extremist? Analyse his role in the lead up to the October 1917 revolution.

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his alias of Vladimir Lenin, is arguably one of the most infamous men of the twentieth century. He played a leading role in the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, setting up the single-party dictatorship which would govern large swathes of Eastern Europe for the next seventy-five years. His followers revered him as not merely a great leader, but as “the great proletariat strategist”¹ who “creat[ed] the Republic of Soviets... [and] gave a practical demonstration to the oppressed masses...that hope of deliverance [was] not lost.”² To his enemies, he was a mad extremist, “too opinionated and narrowly orthodox”³ to be a good leader and a man who enjoyed killing on a grand scale.⁴ However, an analysis of Lenin’s role in the lead up to the fateful October Revolution of 1917 shows him to be both a tactician *and* an extremist who was able to use his skills expertly in any situation.

Like most of those who would grow into Bolsheviks, Lenin became a Marxist while at university⁵ but he had been exposed to revolutionary ideas in his early life. While his parents were monarchists, his brother Aleksandr “Sasha” Ulyanov was part of a revolutionary student group who planned to assassinate Tsar Alexander III in 1887.⁶ Ulyanov and the terrorists were caught before the plan could go ahead and he was executed. Lenin was already reading Marx and starting to move in radical circles at university, but the execution of his beloved brother had a profound effect on him and drove him deeper into revolutionary politics. Historians Dr. Helen Rappaport and Dr. Daniel Beer actually argue that the October Revolution of 1917 had a personal dimension for Lenin; they claim that Lenin wanted to murder the Tsar not just because he was a totalitarian monarch and the antithesis of Marxism, but because Lenin held him and his family responsible for the death of his brother.⁷ Acts of personal revenge are common among extremists, who often assign blame to certain individuals or groups and engage in acts of mass murder and terrorism, which Lenin did both leading up to and after the October Revolution. In 1905, following the Bloody Sunday massacre in St. Petersburg, he argued that terrorism was no longer something risky to be avoided, but a form of heroism and that those who committed acts of mass terror should be held up as examples to all.⁸ These are clearly the thoughts and words of an extremist encouraging violence against others, but Lenin knew how to temper his extremism with cool

¹ J. Stalin, “On the Death of Lenin”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Russia, Pravda, 1924 (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/01/30.htm>)

² Ibid

³ B. Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, London, UK, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1920, p.44

⁴ A. Gates, “Churchill on Lenin”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, New International, 1942 (<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol08/no08/churchill.htm>)

⁵ *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ V. Lenin, “A Militant Agreement for the Uprising”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Russia, Vperyod, 1905 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/feb/21.htm>)

calculation and was clever enough to stay one step ahead of those hunting him until the day the Bolsheviks kicked down the doors of the Winter Palace.

For Lenin and his party, that day would go down in history as a day of glorious revolution and triumph of the proletariat over the enemies of the working class,⁹ however it didn't happen through luck or extremism alone. The October Revolution was a well-orchestrated coup which Lenin planned and executed with military precision. The coup was virtually bloodless and the Bolsheviks successfully took control of the railways in the city and many of the communication hubs, including post offices, telegraph stations and print shops.¹⁰ Within less than twenty-four hours, they had seized the Winter Palace in a spectacularly anti-climatic fashion that was described by an eyewitness as “no more dramatic than the changing of the guard.”¹¹ While Lenin the extremist may have been disappointed by the lack of a glorious take-over, Lenin the tactician would have been delighted with how smoothly the coup had progressed. “Lenin understood it wasn't your numbers that mattered...you just paralyse the country by occupying the key points, and then you take over”¹², this is not a surprising attitude from someone who had spent “sixteen years going from one bolt hole to another”¹³ and had ample time to study his surroundings and become familiar with the technology of this time.

Lenin's strategy of sending Bolsheviks to occupy the key points mirrors another (ultimately unsuccessful) revolution of a year earlier: the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland. Lenin was aware of this event and wrote about it just months after with enthusiasm¹⁴ so it is not a stretch that he would have known from the newspapers at the time that the rebels had seized key-buildings such as the post office and attempted to seize army barracks. Lenin would have likely also studied where the rebels went wrong, despite declaring simply “that they rose prematurely, before the European revolt of the proletariat had *had time* to mature.”¹⁵ When Lenin launched his revolution in 1917, he had first shored up support from the army, many of who were already Bolshevik party members, and prioritised the seizure not just of communications buildings, but of the apparatuses too, such as telegraph lines and railways.¹⁶ Lenin was also aware that he was not going up against a well-armed enemy with a stable government behind them. Given that the Provisional Government had been forced to rely on *Bolshevik soldiers* to defend itself against a right-wing coup in August¹⁷ and that its reforms and continuation of the war were highly unpopular, Lenin would have been confident his Bolsheviks could avoid the same as the Irish of 1916. However, despite his military-like

⁹ V. Lenin, “To the Citizens of Russia”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Robochy I Soldat, Petrograd, Russia, 1917 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25.htm>)

¹⁰ R. Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p. 308

¹¹ “How The Bolsheviks Took The Winter Palace”, *The Guardian*, 28 December 1917

¹² *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ V. Lenin, “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata, Moscow, Russia, 1916 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm>)

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ R. Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p. 311

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 299

ability to plan, Lenin was also prone to fantasy and delusion, traits much more aligned with a fanatical extremist than a level-headed tactician.

One of the most prevalent fantasies Lenin entertained in the years leading up to the Russian revolution, and which he continued to believe until his death in 1924, was that a worldwide, Marxist revolution was imminent.¹⁸ In their works, which Lenin read with a religious devotion,¹⁹ Marx and Engels argued that the path from capitalism to eventual communism must begin with revolution, as communism “can only be attained by forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”²⁰ Lenin’s fanatical devotion to Marxism led him to believe that, from the moment the Tsar was ousted in the February Revolution and the Soviet and the Provisional Government took power, the coming universal Marxist uprising was inevitable. This shows further deviation from the mindset of a tactician into the wild fantasies of an extremist, especially as he not only believed this, but acted as if it were imminent and ignored mounting evidence to the contrary.²¹

Further evidence of his tendency towards fantasy can be seen in his writings; both before and after 1917 they were frequently addressed to ‘All Russia’ or ‘The World.’²² This was despite the fact that his works were barely distributed except within the major cities of Petrograd and Moscow and the majority of the Russian population was illiterate.²³ This indicates a complete detachment from reality and a belief, not supported by the evidence, that Lenin was better known and more important than he really was. Extremists often believe they have a large following or the support of an imagined ‘silent majority’; Lenin *did* have a major following in the cities, but he was not widely known over Russia until well after the Bolshevik take over in November 1917. His party was very popular among the working classes in the lead up to the October Revolution²⁴ and he appears to have equated this with his own individual popularity, despite the fact that the two were not linked. Lenin was never elected to the Petrograd Soviet prior to the Bolshevik take over, unlike his much more popular compatriot Trotsky, and was not even in Petrograd until 10 October 1917, less than a month before the Bolsheviks would seize power.²⁵ He was not an entirely unknown entity, but he was certainly never as popular as he believed. The most extreme example of his tendency towards fantasy was certainly in July 1917, when he pushed for an armed uprising against the provisional government²⁶ in the belief that the time had come to heed “all power to the soviets!”²⁷ The uprising, later known as the July Days, was a spectacular failure: the Provisional Government

¹⁸ C. Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, London, UK, Routledge, 1990, p.173

¹⁹ B. Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, London, UK, Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1920, p.8

²⁰ K. Marx & F. Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, England, 1888 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch04.htm>)

²¹ *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

²² D. Walters, “Lenin Works Archive 1917”, *Marxists Internet Archive* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/date/1917.htm>)

²³ J. Brooks, *When Russia Learned To Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861 - 1917*, New Jersey, USA, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 47

²⁴ C. Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, London, UK, Routledge, 2005, p.180

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.179

²⁶ R. Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p.282

²⁷ V. Lenin, “All Power To The Soviets!”, *Marxists Internet Archive*, Russia, Pravda July 18, 1917 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/18.htm>)

successfully counter-attacked Lenin's poorly armed and poorly organised Bolshevik forces and a ruthless crackdown followed.²⁸

But it was also in the July Days, and especially their aftermath, that Lenin once again showed he had the ability to be a brilliant tactician when it was called for - especially when he needed to save his own skin! "Lenin never did anything that might be politically damaging"²⁹ and he had a keen sense for the way the wind was blowing. He had left Petrograd shortly before the July Days - despite calling for the uprising! - and it appears he did not anticipate the Bolsheviks acting of their own accord.³⁰ As the violent protests began to descend in chaos and the ordinary civilians began to turn on the Bolsheviks, he returned to Petrograd and did everything in his power to distance himself and his party from the movement. He initially refused to see the protesters and when he finally acquiesced, his speech was brief and he did not encourage further action that day.³¹ The unpopularity of the sudden uprising, which was followed by Lenin's disappointed supporters going on a spree of looting through Petrograd,³² caused a wave of public anger against the Bolsheviks and Lenin was once again forced to go on the run. While his enemies disparaged this as cowardice³³ Lenin recognised that a good leader, like a military officer, cannot risk getting himself killed and leaving his men without a general. Furthermore, despite all his blustering speeches and eloquent writing, there is no indication that Lenin was prepared to die for the revolution.³⁴

He also recognised, in the days following, the need to win back support from those who were now inclined to view the Bolsheviks as thugs. While Lenin could be fantastical, his writings following the July Days are very calculated and he makes calm, logical assertions, often backed up by facts (or what Lenin asserts to be facts), about what happened and who was to blame for the violence.³⁵ While he does downplay the role of the Bolsheviks in the failed uprising, he also condemns the violence and appeals to the workers not to be taken in "by these foul slanders [against Lenin]."³⁶ By cleverly implying that he was not supportive of the uprising and replying to his enemies' accusations with calm, measured rebuttals, Lenin was able to present himself as a reasonable man, who only wanted what was best for "fellow workers, soldiers and peasants."³⁷ This return to his base also shows his tactical ability; his writings from this time lose the fantastical 'to the world!' quality and speak once more to his original supporters. With direct language he implores them to remember that the Provisional Government does not have their best interests at heart, that he has always been the champion

²⁸ R. Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p.284 - 285

²⁹ *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

³⁰ C. Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, London, UK, Routledge, 2005, p.157 - 159

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 160

³² *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

³³ C. Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, London, UK, Routledge, 2005, p.147

³⁴ *The Russian Revolution*, [streamed], Director C. Seville, Netflix, 2017

³⁵ V. Lenin, "Slander and Facts", *Marxist Internet Archive*, Russia, Pravdy, July 6, 1917 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/05c.htm>)

³⁶ V. Lenin, "Foul Slander by Ultra-Reactionary Newspapers and Alexinsky", *Marxists Internet Archive*, Russia, Pravdy, July 6, 1917 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/05b.htm>)

³⁷ V. Lenin, "Slander and Facts", *Marxist Internet Archive*, Russia, Pravdy, July 6, 1917 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jul/05c.htm>)

of the working man, and that this hasty attempt at seizing power was clearly the work of rogue elements and counter-revolutionaries.³⁸ Lenin's ability, during this time, to reconnect with his supporters and once again build up the Bolsheviks' popularity was instrumental in the success of the October Revolution later in 1917, when both sides of Lenin - the fanatical extremist and the expert tactician - came together for the decisive act that changed Russia forever: the October Revolution.

In the years following the Russian Revolution, as different factions within and outside Russia fought for both control of the country *and* control of the narrative, Lenin's character became increasingly hard to identify. An Australian socialist paper of the time lauded his "iron will... [and] incorruptible character"³⁹ and praised his sharp, tactician's mind; like many papers favourable to Lenin, it did not mention his tendency to extremism, although this was latched onto by his detractors. In a speech in 1920, Winston Churchill asserted the Lenin was part of "a...terrible sect of fanatics"⁴⁰ who "destroyed Russia and plunged it deep into unspeakable misery"⁴¹ without any acknowledgement of the skill and forward planning he had demonstrated leading up to the revolution. Both admirers and detractors continued to put forward a two-dimensional view of Lenin for decades and it is only in recent years that history has begun to appreciate that Lenin, a polarising figure who will always incite debate, cannot be easily defined. The master tactician who led a successful revolution was also a violent extremist. He caused thousands of his own countrymen to be murdered and it is impossible and unnecessary to separate one from the other.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Lenin", *The Worker*, 29 November 1917, p.11

(<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/71041330?searchTerm=Lenin>)

⁴⁰ W. Churchill, "Bolshevism and Imperial Sediton", *National Churchill Museum*, 4 November 1920

(<https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/bolshevism-and-imperial-sediton.html>)

⁴¹ Ibid.

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