

# V.I. Lenin on his fiftieth birthday<sup>1</sup>

Leon Trotsky

Lenin's internationalism needs no recommendation. It is best characterized by Lenin's irreconcilable break, in the first days of the world war, with that counterfeit internationalism which reigned in the Second International. The official leaders of "Socialism" used the parliamentary tribune to reconcile the interests of the fatherland with the interests of mankind by way of abstract arguments in the Spirit of the old Cosmopolites. In practice this led, as we know, to the support of the predatory fatherland by the proletarian forces.

Lenin's internationalism is in no sense a formula for verbally reconciling nationalism with internationalism. It is a formula for international revolutionary action. The world's territory in the clutches of the so-called civilized section of mankind is regarded as a unified arena where a gigantic struggle occurs, whose component elements are constituted by the individual peoples and their respective classes. No single major issue can be kept restricted within a national framework. Visible and invisible threads connect such an issue with dozens of events in all

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corners of the world. In the evaluation of international factors and forces Lenin is freer than anyone else from national prejudices.

Marx concluded that the philosophers had sufficiently interpreted the world and that the real task was to change it. But he, the pioneering genius, did not live to see it done. The transformation of the old world is now in full swing and Lenin is the foremost worker on this job. His internationalism is a practical appraisal plus a practical intervention into the march of historical events on a world scale and with worldwide aims. Russia and her fate is only a single element in this titanic historical struggle upon whose outcome hinges the fate of mankind.

Lenin's internationalism needs no recommendation. But at the same time Lenin himself is profoundly national. His roots are deep in modern Russian history, he draws it up into himself, gives it its highest expression, and precisely in this way attains the highest levels of international action and world influence.

At first glance the characterization of Lenin as a "national" figure may seem surprising, but, in essence, this follows as a matter of course. To be able to lead such a revolution, without parallel in the history of peoples, as Russia is now living through, it is obviously necessary to have an indissoluble, organic bond with the main forces of the people's life, a bond which springs from the deepest roots.

Lenin personifies the Russian proletariat, a young class, which politically is scarcely older than Lenin himself, but a class which is profoundly national, for recapitulated in it is the entire past development of Russia, in it lies Russia's entire future, with it the Russian nation rises or falls. Freedom from routine and banality, freedom from imposture and convention, resoluteness of thought, audacity in action – an audacity which never turns into foolhardiness – this is what characterizes the Russian working class, and with it also Lenin.

The nature of the Russian proletariat, which has made it today the most important force of the world revolution, had been prepared beforehand by the entire course of Russian national history: the barbaric cruelty of the Czarist autocracy, the insignificance of the privileged classes, the feverish growth of capitalism fed by the lees of the world stock-market, the escheated character of the Russian bourgeoisie, their decadent ideology, their shoddy politics. Our "Third Estate" knew neither a Reformation nor a great revolution of their own and could never have known them. Therefore the revolutionary tasks of the Russian proletariat assumed a more all-embracing character. Our past history knows no Luther, no Thomas Münzer, no Mirabeau, no Danton, no Robespierre. Exactly for that reason the Russian proletariat has its Lenin. What was lost in way of tradition has been won in the sweep of the revolution.

Lenin mirrors the working class, not only in its proletarian present but also in its peasant past, still so recent. This most indisputable leader of the proletariat, not only outwardly resembles a peasant, but there is something inwardly in him strongly smacking of a peasant. Facing the Smolny stands the statue of the other great figure of the world proletariat: Karl Marx, on a stone pedestal in a black frock coat. Assuredly, this is a trifle, but it is impossible even to imagine Lenin putting on a black frock coat. Some portraits of Marx show him wearing a dress shirt against whose broad expanse something resembling a monocle dangles.

That Marx was not inclined to foppery is quite clear to all who have an inkling of the spirit of Marx. But Marx was born and grew up on a different national-cultural soil, lived in a different atmosphere, as did also the leading personalities of the German working class, whose roots reach back not to a peasant village, but to the corporation guilds and the complex city culture of the middle ages.

Marx's very style, rich and beautiful, in which strength and flexibility, wrath and irony, severity and refinement are combined, also contains the literary and esthetic accumulations of the entire German socio-political literature since the days of the Reformation and even before. Lenin's literary and oratorical style is awesomely simple, utilitarian, ascetic, as is his whole make-up. But in this mighty asceticism there is not a trace of a moralistic attitude. There is no principle here, no elaborated system and, of course, no posturing; it is simply the outward expression of inward conservation of strength for action. It is a peasant's practical proficiency but on a colossal scale.

The entire Marx is contained in the Communist Manifesto in the foreword to his Critique, in Capital. Even if he had not been the founder of the First International he would always remain what he is today. Lenin, on the other hand, is contained entirely in revolutionary action. His scientific works are only a preparation for action. If he never published a single book in the past, he would forever enter into history just as he enters it now: the leader of the proletarian revolution, the founder of the Third International.

A clear, scientific system – the materialistic dialectic – is necessary for action on such a historical scale as devolved upon Lenin – it is necessary but not sufficient. Needed here in addition is that irreveivable creative power we call intuition: The ability to judge events correctly on the wing, to separate the essential and important from the husks and incidentals, to fill in mentally the missing parts of the picture, to draw to conclusion the thoughts of others and above all those of the enemy, to connect all this into a unified whole and to deal a blow the moment that the “formula” for this blow comes to mind. This is the intuition for action. In one of its aspects it merges with what we call shrewdness.

When Lenin, screwing up his left eye, listens over the radio to a parliamentary speech of one of the imperialist makers of destiny or goes over the text of the latest diplomatic note, a mixture of bloodthirsty duplicity and polished hypocrisy, he resembles a very wise mouz-hik whom words cannot cajole nor sugary phrases ensnare. This is the peasant shrewdness elevated to genius, armed with the last word of scientific thought.

The young Russian proletariat was able to accomplish what it has only by pulling behind itself, by its roots, the heavy mass of the peasantry. This was prepared for by our whole national past.

But precisely because the proletariat has come to power through the course of events, our revolution has been able suddenly and drastically to overcome the national narrowness and provincial benightedness of Russia's past history. Soviet Russia has become not only the haven for the Communist International, but also the living embodiment of its program and methods.

By paths, unknown and as yet unexplored by science, by which the human

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personality is molded, Lenin has assimilated from the national milieu everything he needed for the greatest revolutionary action in the history of humanity. Exactly because the socialist revolution, which has long had its international theoretical expression, found for the first time in Lenin its national embodiment, Lenin became, in the full and true sense of the word, the revolutionary leader of the world proletariat. And that is how his fiftieth birthday found him.