

100 years since the death of Vladimir Lenin

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Yesterday marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known as Lenin. Lenin ranks among the most remarkable figures in world history. He was the theoretical and political genius who founded the Bolshevik Party and led a revolution that not only transformed Russia and created the Soviet Union, but gave an immense impulse to all the revolutionary political struggles of the 20th century.

Lenin's untimely death on January 21, 1924, at the age of 53, came 10 months after he suffered a devastating stroke, in March 1923. It was his third stroke in just over a year, and it removed him from political activity. Though there were some signs of recovery in the summer and early autumn of 1923, which gave rise to hopes that he would be able to resume some level of political activity, these were dashed by the fourth and fatal stroke.

Lenin's death was a political tragedy that had disastrous consequences for the fate of the Soviet Union and the world revolution. It came at a critical point. After the stroke in March, Trotsky came under escalating attack in the political leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev formed an unprincipled faction within the Politburo (the "Triumvirate"). Following the establishment of the Left Opposition in October 1923, Stalin led an increasingly ferocious campaign against Trotsky, which included efforts to misrepresent and falsify the differences that had existed between Lenin and Trotsky prior to 1917. These differences had been resolved in the course of the revolution.

One cannot state with certainty what would have happened if Lenin had not died in early 1924. However, it is undeniable that the death of Lenin left Trotsky isolated, depriving him of his most powerful ally in the struggle against the bureaucratic reaction, personified by Stalin, to the revolutionary internationalism of the October Revolution.

In the final years of his life, even as his health deteriorated, Lenin had initiated a struggle against the developing nationalist and bureaucratic degeneration within the Soviet state apparatus and Bolshevik Party. In late December 1922, Lenin began writing what would go down in history as his "Last Testament." This included an addendum, written on January 4, 1923, calling on the leadership of the Bolshevik Party to remove Stalin from the post of general secretary.

Lenin's Testament coincided with moves to establish a bloc with Trotsky on critical questions related to Soviet policy: the defense of the state monopoly on foreign trade, opposition to the growth of Great Russian chauvinism within the party and the fight against bureaucratism. It was only the stroke he suffered in March 1923 that prevented Lenin from launching an open struggle, alongside Trotsky, at the Twelfth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, which took place a month later.

Moreover, Lenin's influence and political leadership in the Communist International in these critical years would have shifted the international situation in favor of world revolution, profoundly undermining the nationalist reaction within the Soviet Union itself. If Lenin had been alive and politically active, he would have waged a pitched battle against the nationalist and anti-Marxist theory of "socialism in one country," advanced by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924.

In the aftermath of Lenin's death, the developing Stalinist apparatus would not only mummify his corpse, but also his ideas. In their campaign against Trotsky, Stalin and his allies treated Lenin's thinking in the most formalistic manner, tearing quotes out of context in a way that completely belied Lenin's own methodology.

Trotsky, in an essay he was working on at the time of his assassination by a Stalinist agent in August 1940, addressed the complex relationship between objective

developments, revolutionary leadership and individuals, drawing on Lenin's own role in the Russian Revolution. Opposing those who argued that without Lenin, the October Revolution would have taken place "just the same," Trotsky replied:

But that is not so. Lenin represented one of the living elements of the historical process. He personified the experience and the perspicacity of the most active section of the proletariat. His timely appearance on the arena of the revolution was necessary in order to mobilize the vanguard and provide it with an opportunity to rally the working class and the peasant masses. Political leadership in the crucial moments of historical turns can become just as decisive a factor as is the role of the chief command during the critical moments of war. ["The Class, the Party and the Leadership"]

Lenin's role was decisive in the spring of 1917 in reorienting the Bolshevik Party to the conquest of power. With his "April Theses," Lenin adopted Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution and set the party on a new political course that led to the October Revolution.

In the aftermath of Lenin's death, his political ideas and conceptions were developed by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, while the Stalinist faction represented the unfolding reaction against the program of world socialist revolution upon which the Russian Revolution was based. Trotsky's fight to maintain the historical continuity of Bolshevism—that is, genuine revolutionary internationalism and Marxism—culminated in the founding of the Fourth International in 1938.

This legacy now assumes immense significance in what is clearly a new period of disintegration of the bourgeois order—of the normalization of genocide and world war—and of the resurgence of class conflict throughout the world. In this new revolutionary period, Lenin will again be seen as a monumental historical figure.

For a fuller examination of the life and ideas of Vladimir Lenin, we recommend the following essays by WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David

North:

- *Lenin's Theory of Socialist Consciousness: The Origins of Bolshevism and What is to Be Done?*
Lenin's Place in History
Lenin's last struggle



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