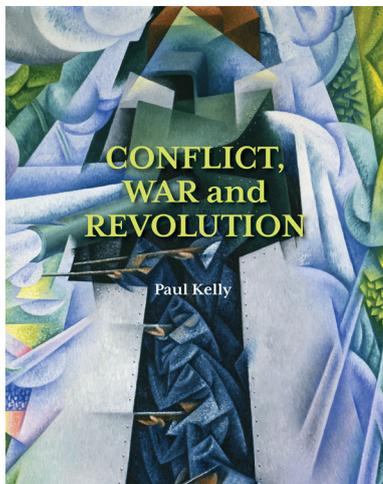


# Lenin and Mao – Revolution, violence and war

Paul Kelly

## Chapter 9 from



Paul Kelly

# CONFLICT, WAR and REVOLUTION

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## CHAPTER 9

# Lenin and Mao

## Revolution, violence and war

Whilst Marx undoubtedly had a significant impact on the development of social and political theory, it is through his followers, especially Lenin and Mao, that his doctrines have had the greatest impact on international thought and affairs. Marx theorised (for some, predicted) the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, but it was actually Lenin in 1917 and Mao in 1949 who presided over the two great socialist revolutions of the 20th century. Their writings on the theory and practice of revolutionary politics have also had the most impact on modern international political thinking. I briefly discuss the Marxist framework, but then focus on Lenin's theory of the vanguard party as the vehicle for establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat – a conception that took seriously the idea of dictatorship. Lenin's theory also saw imperialism as the latest ('highest') phase of capitalism and he frankly recognized the role of violence in the revolutionary overcoming of the state.

Turning to Mao, his thought transforms Lenin's legacy in the specific context of the Chinese struggle against Western imperialism. Mao's thought identifies the peasant masses as a revolutionary class in a way that transforms his account of revolution. Mao's influential writings on revolutionary war stress the role of guerrilla forces. Lenin and Mao's thinking about the practice of revolutionary politics has reshaped contemporary political and international theory.

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The party was to be a kind of universal machine uniting social energies from every source into a single current. Leninism was the theory of that machine, which aided by an extraordinary combination of circumstances proved effective beyond all expectation and changed the history of the world. (Kolakowski 2005, p. 686)

The Marxist tradition has posed perhaps the most significant challenge to the model of international politics as a system or society of sovereign states, especially Marxism–Leninism (ML), which became the official ideology of the USSR from 1917 to 1989. ML's revised version, Maoism, still officially forms the basis of the state ideology of the People's Republic of China. Whatever its superficial legal status as a union, the USSR was effectively a single state. And preserving the unity of the People's Republic has been perhaps the most important single plank of the Chinese state ideology. Yet, the impact of Marxism–Leninism in global politics has transcended the boundaries of realist theories of the international realm as a system of states of differing size and power.

Throughout the Cold War, up to the collapse of Soviet power in 1989 (followed by the formal collapse of the USSR in 1991), the USSR represented itself as an example of 'socialism in one country', operating in a holding position until the final collapse of capitalism. The USSR was the primary model of a rival ideology to capitalism, one that transcended borders, ethnicities and nationalities. It claimed to inform and direct the historical process of global revolution that was the inevitable consequence of the material contradictions at the heart of capitalist modernity. As such, it also claimed to reveal the true nature of international politics masked by the state system, or its transformation in the nationalist and postcolonial struggles that followed the break-up of western empires from 1945 onwards. Until the mid-1970s, the ideological stand-off between the western capitalist powers and global communism included China (and smaller countries such as Cuba and Vietnam) as simply offshoots of the USSR. This global stand-off was a dominant concern of much international relations theorising and the preoccupation of western foreign policy, to the extent that classical concerns with individual states' interests and competition were absorbed into a hyperrealism based on a clash of ideology.

Amongst the architects of post-war international relations in the United States were figures like George F. Kennan. He advocated containment of the USSR and its eastern European satellites, on the grounds that they were motivated by an inherently expansionary ideology, one that could only be contained and not brought into a stable scheme of mutual cooperation by the traditional tools of diplomacy or economics. Of course, war remained a theoretical possibility, but because the USSR was a nuclear power it was not a realistic military option. Some realist theories sought to dispense with official political ideologies as a superficial manifestation or projection of state interests and power (a view that is curiously similar to the materialism of Marxist theory). But most western theorists took the Marxist–Leninists at their word and saw their opponent as

a single global ideological adversary with only superficial local variation. The idea of a ‘domino theory’ was used to justify confronting Marxism–Leninism in Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, as well as other regional conflicts. It assumed a monolithic ideological opponent despite the other factors that are now seen as crucial in understanding these events.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of the Soviet bloc in Europe are often seen as the beginning of a new era of post-ideological politics. Yet, it also marked the rise of China as a global economic power. Following the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (regarded in China as Mao’s equal in shaping the country’s political and economic destiny), China began to exercise a significant global influence. Many observers saw China as moving away from any continuing adherence to Maoism/Marxism–Leninism into just a form of capitalist authoritarianism as its economy grew very rapidly and it took an ever larger place in global trade. China joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 (agreeing to respect western patents and other trade rules) became one of the main stabilisers of the global financial system during the global financial crisis in 2008 (Tooze 2018, pp. 239–255). But, following the rise of western populism and the Trump presidency’s effective withdrawal from most of the institutions of the global economic order for a time (2016–2020), many western observers have re-emphasised China’s continuing communist system in language once again reminiscent of the Cold War – a stance driven by some political leaders and movements who never really abandoned the idea of a global conflict between the west and communism.

Marxist approaches are important in their own right, and undoubtedly have a claim to be considered central to understanding contemporary international relations and international and political theory. However, since I do not aim here to provide a comprehensive chronological overview of international thought, my primary focus is on Lenin and on Mao. Both are undoubtedly world historical figures associated with major revolutions and with the politics and tragedies of 20th-century history. Yet, many Marxists and non-Marxist scholars alike will argue that both are surely second in rank as political theorists to Marx himself. If one wants to understand Marxism–Leninism, does one not need to focus on Karl Marx himself – or at least the later Marx’s writings with Friedrich Engels?

My response to that obvious question has several aspects. Marx is undoubtedly a major political and social theorist but as a political thinker or as an international thinker he is most interesting when viewed through the theories of his followers. Secondly, Marx is a central figure around whom a very broad tradition of thought and politics has grown up, with many variants. So it is very difficult to make definitive statements about Marx’s own views without taking sides on political interpretative debates within that tradition. It is no more straightforward to state uncontroversially what an orthodox Marxist political theory is than it is to state what an orthodox Catholic political theory is, because both are families of theory and ideas in continual conversation dialogue and debate.

Even in Lenin's lifetime there were fierce debates within the Marxist tradition about whether he was a 'revisionist' (a charge that became akin to naming someone a heretic in Catholic thought) because he moved beyond Marx and Engels and sought to adapt their theory to new circumstances. Lenin refused to accept that charge and was quick to defend his own orthodoxy against others, whom he in return charged as revisionists. Later the same challenge faced Mao as he was accused of departing from orthodox Marxism–Leninism as defined by Lenin's successor as Soviet leader, Stalin. In consequence, it would be easy, but not informative, to be drawn into interesting debates about whether Lenin or Mao was an orthodox Marxist or revisionist.

A third (perhaps most significant reason) for focusing on Lenin and Mao is not just their success as the political architects of the two globally significant Marxist revolutions in 1917 and 1949. Both are thinkers who saw the primary task of politics itself as progressing revolution and so they developed diverging but complementary approaches to thinking about politics, institutions and agency in the context of revolution. As well as historical agents they were theorists whose prescriptions looked beyond the structure of the nation, the state or the global state system. They also thought about the place of the Communist Party as the site of politics and its peculiar role in relation to the institutions of the capitalist state system. Both also addressed the character of the revolutionary class, in Mao's case replacing the industrial proletariat by a revolutionary peasantry. They examined the tasks and internal organisation of the party in relation to the revolutionary class. And they explored the conduct of revolution in detail, including the use of violence and war. Because they confronted the revolutionary moment, whether it turned out to be Marx's final crisis of capitalism or not, both thinkers became central in rethinking international politics, raising immense issues about totalitarianism and the destruction of human rights and stimulating the external criticism of these developments. Both their bodies of thought also raise issues about the underlying economic imperialism of the current globalised world. In the chapter's conclusion I also argue that some elements of Lenin's and Mao's fiercely activist and ruthless styles of party organisation, and their stress on the character of politics as revolutionary destruction, have been transferred from the Marxist tradition into the radical transformation of the political system by revolutionary terrorists. These themes have even influenced those on the populist right who believe in the creative destruction of neo-liberal globalism as a prelude to re-establishing political order and authority.

### Two revolutionary lives

The personal and political context of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov (whose revolutionary name was Lenin) was shaped by two important factors. The first and most obvious was the socialist tradition following Marx and Engels (who were

close intellectual as well as political collaborators) and the Second International. But his Russian heritage was equally important. He was born into the Russian tsarist empire at the height of its expansion, and not a mature European nation state or even a colonial maritime empire like Britain or France, where the main implications of imperialism were obscured in domestic politics by occurring beyond their borders. The tsarist empire was different. It was the third largest in history after the British maritime empire and the Mongol empire. The tsar's sway spanned the Eurasian landmass from eastern Europe to the Pacific Coast. Indeed, until 1867 it included what after its sale to United States became the state of Alaska, plus the Aleutian Islands and settlements on the North American continent as far south as northern California (Lieven 2003). To the west, the Romanov tsars expanded their swallowing of much of Poland, the Baltic states of former Poland–Lithuania and Finland. Until its final collapse during World War I in 1917, the tsarist empire was an expansionary one. It constantly pushed the boundaries of its territory and influence, particularly with respect to its borders with neighbouring empires such as the declining Ottomans and in the 19th century with the British in the 'great game' played out on the northern borders of the British Indian empire and the western reaches of the Chinese Qing Empire. The form of government appropriate to this enormous territorial scale is another feature distinguishing the tsarist apparatus from a European nation state. Even with the strongly hierarchical structure of a monarchical empire, the formal centralisation of authority meant that the actual site of political authority was always remote. That changed the way power was exercised and authority was communicated, even after the invention and spread of the telegraph and the railways.

Yet, the main distinguishing feature of empires over republics and principalities was their necessary pluralism and diversity. Whilst the Russian people dominated, they were only one of many ethnicities and nationalities that formed the empire. And, whilst Russian Orthodoxy was a defining feature of Romanov rule, it was only one of many religions throughout the empire, which encompassed a significant Jewish population in the west, and animist paganism in Siberia and the far east. The Islamic central Asian khanates were also brought under Russian dominance throughout the 19th century. Geographical, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity shaped the political experience of the world into which Lenin was born in April 1870 in Simbirsk, a town on the Volga River about 700 km from Moscow.

During the 18th century, Russia became an increasingly important power within European politics and in the early 19th century it played a critically important role in the defeat of Napoleon's imperial projection of the legacy of the French Revolution. However, whilst Great Britain, France and Germany followed the Napoleonic Wars with a period of industrial, commercial and social transformation, Russia fell behind. The 19th century was a period of cultural uncertainty marked by a struggle between European reformers known as 'westernisers' (such as Alexander Herzen), and 'Slavophile' thinkers (such

as Dostoevsky) who championed Russian culture and civilisation against the decadence of European rationalism. This debate shaped the way in which Russian thinkers responded to and engaged with currents in European politics such as the rise of socialism. It was also linked to concerns about why and if Russia was different in terms of its stage of industrial development from the Marxist perspective, and consequently whether it had reached the material conditions for proletarian revolution that orthodox Marxists associated with highly industrialised economies such as Britain, Germany and France. Whether Russia was ready for a proletarian workers' revolution was certainly an issue that shaped Lenin's life and thought, but other types of revolution (such as peasant uprisings, populist insurgency, criminal partisans and terrorism) were very familiar in Russian political life. Russian contemporaries of Marx and Engels, such as the anarchist Bakunin (1814–1876), preached revolutionary violence and assassination as political tactics that have become part of the character of the modern terrorist. Lenin's elder brother was executed after being implicated in a terrorist plot and this was one of the events that turned the young Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov to revolutionary politics.

His law studies at Kazan University were interrupted after he was expelled for agitation against the tsarist government, but he continued to study, eventually becoming an external student of the University of St Petersburg. His move to St Petersburg marked his formal commitment to revolutionary and socialist politics. He was subsequently arrested and exiled to Siberia, where he continued his work as a revolutionary and began his career as a socialist theoretician studying the social and economic development of Russia. After exile in Siberia, he became an exile in Europe from 1900, visiting London and Paris and settling in Switzerland after a brief return to Russia between 1905 and 1907 (following the revolution of 1905). He became a leading voice of the Russian social democrats (Marxists), a publisher of clandestine journals and a socialist organiser or professional revolutionary. During this period, he engaged with leading figures on the European left such as the German social democrats Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, but always primarily focused on debates amongst the Russian social democrats. When this group split into two over revolutionary tactics, he became leader of the activist and hard-line Bolshevik faction, bitterly opposing the larger Menshevik faction, who saw the Russian industrial working class as yet too small to sustain an immediate socialist revolution.

The onset of the Great War in Europe and the failure of a European proletarian revolution in the face of mass war posed a critical challenge for many on the left. The workers of the world had patently ignored Marx and Engels's call to unite and cast off their chains in favour of nationalist war mobilisation. Lenin and his party were one of the few socialist groupings across Europe to take the unpopular route of utterly opposing the war as an imperialist confidence trick. Three years after hostilities began, in February 1917, the collapse of the Russian war effort and the tsarist regime led to a revolutionary government

from February 1917. Lenin returned to St Petersburg, arriving on a sealed train at Finland Station (arranged by the German Secret Service). He mobilised all the Bolshevik forces to undermine the Mensheviks' government, with a St Petersburg *coup d'état* in October 1917 that set off a wider Bolshevik revolution. The enormous challenges of leadership and conduct of the revolution, including the Russian Civil War of 1917–1922 and fighting off multiple hostile forces, consumed Lenin's intellectual and physical energies until his death in 1924. He was eventually succeeded as unchallenged Soviet leader by Joseph Stalin. Stalin's long and brutal leadership, combined with his espousal of 'socialism in one country', has cast a long shadow over Lenin's legacy, especially questions about whether the brutal and systematic violence of Stalin's regime was always immanent in Lenin's ruthless views of the party, state and revolution, or whether Stalin betrayed Lenin's revolution. This is a large and complex scholarly question that goes well beyond the remit of this chapter, but I do explore the central place that violence occupied in Lenin's thought and practice.

Like Lenin, Mao Tse-Tung (Máo Zédōng) was born into the last years of the Qing Empire (1644–1912). Born in 1893, Mao was brought up in a regime that, unlike that of the tsars, was in terminal decline. The Qing Empire had Manchu roots from beyond the northern border, as opposed to the Han Chinese Ming Dynasty that it had displaced and defeated. In its heyday in the 18th century, the Qing Empire was expansionary and extended far into central Asia, as well as exercising suzerainty over Tibet and much of what is now Myanmar. This populous and wealthy empire used the longest continuous literary civilisation and the mandarin educational and bureaucratic system as essential parts the Qing state. Yet, in the 19th century the empire-state had already entered a period of decline leading to its 1912 collapse, often associated with the insistent incursions of the rising western imperial powers, especially following the 1868 Meiji Revolution, which rapidly built up nearby Japan as a modern military power. However, China's long-term decline and collapse were more complex and had roots in a population explosion, and a fiscal crisis, as well as an economy that did not industrialise. A series of 19th-century wars, mostly fought by the British to extend their drug trade into China (the so-called Opium Wars), did stimulate some reform processes, particularly in the military. But the catastrophic defeat of the recently modernised Qing army by the Japanese in 1895 led to the further loss of Taiwan and the growth of Japanese influence in northern Korea, beginning the end of the Qing Dynasty. Further weakened by foreign intervention following the populist Boxer uprisings against foreigners in 1900, the dynasty finally collapsed in 1912. It was replaced by an unstable republican regime nationally, with powerful regional warlords. Mao's educational and political formation was closely tied to the intellectual and political struggles that were unleashed in this period.

Whilst the Qing Empire was wealthy and powerful during its 18th-century high point, Qing China overwhelmingly remained a peasant agricultural

economy, a peasant world that still by 1900 hardly differed from that experienced by the ordinary Chinese over many centuries. Mao was born in Hunan province, as opposed to an east coast city, so as a child he would have seen little of the slow industrialisation that was taking place, or even much of the western influence that came from missionary activity or trade. The pace of life was dictated by nature and the long-established culture and conventions of Chinese peasant life, which were ultimately to play an important part in his approach to Marxism–Leninism and to his own revolutionary thought and practice towards the end of his life. For the few more middle-class people, education played an important part in social mobility in this largely Confucian culture. But it was the highly literary classical education that alone gave access to the Qing bureaucracy, and not a modern scientific or technical education.

Mao's education included a traditional literary formation that enabled him to become an accomplished poet. But at schools in Changsha (the capital of Hunan province) he never cultivated the skills of a traditional literati. Nor did he confine his quest for learning to either classical literature or the new learning coming from the west, such as recently translated works by Adam Smith, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Liberated from the demands of peasant life when his father became relatively wealthy, Mao pursued his education, interrupted by a brief period in the republican army. By August 1918 he had arrived in Beijing with an opening as a clerical assistant in Beijing University Library. For the next few years, Mao shuttled back and forth between Beijing and Changsha as he was introduced to Marx's writings and cultivated his interest in revolutionary socialism. He became involved in the organisation of the fledgling Communist Party of China, which was steered from Moscow by the Communist International. The early and mid-1920s saw Mao engaged in organisational activity and research in the countryside amongst the peasants whilst the party formed part of a popular front with Sun Yat-Sen's Guomindang (KMT).

This temporary coalition was always unstable, and it collapsed spectacularly in 1927 when Chiang Kai-Shek became leader following Sun's death. Chiang sided with local warlords and sought the defeat of the Communists and opened a long period of civil war that spanned the period until the establishment of the party state as the People's Republic in 1949. During this time, Mao rose within the ranks of the Communist Party leadership, especially after the Long March, when the party relocated its military and political headquarters and core armies and personnel from the more developed south-east China to the rural far north-west to evade pursuing Guomindang armies. This became an iconic event in the mythology of the new party state, and Mao marked himself out as a charismatic leader as well as theorist of revolution and especially revolutionary war. The mythology of Mao the revolutionary leader is brilliantly captured, if not actually created, for western readers in the Canadian journalist, Edgar Snow's (1938) book *Red Star over China*. Following the expulsion of the Japanese in 1945, a resumed Chinese civil war ended in 1949 with the communist

armies occupying all of China, and expelling Chiang Kai-Shek's remnant forces to Taiwan.

Like Stalin, and far more than Lenin ever did in the USSR, Mao came to dominate the party state and to represent the 1949 revolution, but, as with Stalin, he could not exercise such extraordinary power and influence without allies and supporters. In the subsequent 27 years until his death in 1976, his relationship with the rest of the party and its leadership was neither straightforward nor simply dictatorial. These years saw a rush to modernise and industrialise, leading to both extraordinary economic change as well as devastation, violence and famine under the Great Leap Forward agricultural collectivisation push from 1957 to 1960.

Mao's ideas of peasant war were also put to effective use (albeit with high casualties) in pushing back the US-led United Nations army in the Korean War (1950–1953). The death of Stalin and the rise of Khrushchev (1894–1971) marked a significant break in the communist world, and the rise of Chinese communism as a focus for attention by revolutionaries throughout the world. The final decade of Mao's life was shaped by his unleashing of the Cultural Revolution, in which the masses and especially young people were encouraged to turn against and question the institutionalised leadership of the Party. Armed with Mao's *Little Red Book* and inspired in huge rallies, a spirit of unrestricted revolution and revolutionary violence was again unleashed against all aspects of society including within the party itself. Key leaders were killed or subjected to humiliation and re-education ('criticism'), which often broke them physically. The violence also tore through ordinary life, with families destroyed as children denounced parents; school pupils denounced and sometimes killed teachers. 'Bourgeois' occupations, such as science, intellectual work or high culture, were particularly suspect, with universities and other institutions closed and their staff sent to work in the fields. To many outside analysts, this unleashing of revolutionary violence simply confirmed the extreme nature of communist ideology. For others, the idea of total revolution was inspiring, whether to groups seeking to overthrow colonial domination in South East Asia, or amongst western radicals challenging the cultural hegemony of capitalism (Lovell 2019). Following Mao's death and the fall of the 'Gang of Four', a ruling clique in his later years, the new party leader, Deng Xiaoping, began a process of economic liberalisation that transformed China into a global economic power. How far any of Mao's legacy remains important in the Chinese Communist Party's rule across subsequent decades is deeply contested, but it clearly remains a party state. And, beyond the boundaries of the People's Republic, Mao's style of politics is still prevalent, perhaps most clearly in the rise of political populism.

Mao's legacy as a political actor is unquestioned, however one judges it. But his legacy as a political thinker is more ambiguous, especially outside of China. Whereas Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci and others still feature in lists of PhD dissertations in the west, with waves of revisionist scholarship either saving them

from the judgement of history or condemning them as moral monsters, Mao's work is less well studied. Much of this is due to the availability of quality texts in translation beyond the relatively small number of Mandarin speakers. Whilst he was a prolific writer, Mao does not have substantial contributions to the central questions of Marxist theory, choosing to defer to the classic statements of Lenin or Stalin. His writings are heavily influenced by China's historical and cultural experience: Mao was a careful student of classical Chinese thought, even though he often disparaged it in polemics, and he was an accomplished poet. His most influential works were often essay-style addresses or speeches to party organisations that are hard to generalise from. His most influential work, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* or the *Little Red Book* (Mao 1966), is a series of selections from such works designed to give an overview of his ideas. It is not a systematic work, and, like a religious catechism, it is a series of statements and aphorisms, rather than developed arguments. Yet, on the specific challenges of the conduct of a revolutionary war against imperialism, his works from the mid-1930s are substantial contributions to thinking about the conduct of revolution. They influenced later revolutionaries from Che Guevara to many radical European leftist sects, as well as East Asian national liberation struggles. It is in these works that Mao develops the vision of revolution as an anti-imperialist war, and that are central here.

### Marx: the essentials

What matters for our purposes is the thought of Lenin and Mao, and not whether they were authorities on Marx's thought or the source of significant distortions of his ideas. Many scholars of Marx have spent considerable effort freeing the interpretation of his thought from the legacies of his major followers. Although Lenin and Mao became significant theorists of revolution in their own right, they nonetheless retained a strong commitment to what they took to be the central tenets of Marxism as the framework for their thought. So, many key concepts or positions defended by Marx and Engels are central to situating the context of Lenin and Mao's revolutionary theories, and I briefly outline them here.

#### *Historical materialism*

Marx saw himself as the successor to the great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and many of his early ideas are best seen as a revolutionary transformation of Hegel's philosophy of history. For Hegel, history is ultimately the history of thought and ideas and their progressive development through a dialectical process (the development of ideas through overcoming opposition or contradiction). Institutions and actions are instances of that overarching

conflict of ideas. The process of dialectic seeks a complete and consistent understanding of human experience (often referred to as spirit or *Geist*) and so there is a direction or pattern to history that underpins all moral, political and social progress. Marx and his student friends (who became known as left-Hegelians) liked the concept of dialectical development. But they objected to the way Hegel's philosophy of history was employed as a justification of the policies and authority of the Prussian state. Instead, they argued for the radical transformation of Hegel's philosophy of history into an account of human liberation.

Marx's breakthrough as an independent philosopher came about through his rejection of the inherent idealism of Hegel's thought, which held that ideas drive history. Marx substitutes a materialist conception of history and human experience in place of Hegel's idealism. He develops this in a number of works, some of which he did not publish, such as *The German Ideology* (1846). However, historical materialism underpins his most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and his great later work *Capital* (1867). Put simply, Marx saw that social and political life was not becoming more rational as a result of philosophical progress but more conflictual and chaotic. The scope of this crisis was accelerating as modernity and industrialisation were developing across Europe. It was precisely the core character of that process, which he called the capitalist mode of production, that was the driving force of conflicts between social classes in societies, and the source of the different political and ideological disputes that followed from that conflict.

To really understand social and political conflict, one needs to focus on its material conditions, that is, its productive forces and the consequent relations of production. In the first instance, that means that societies and human relationships are shaped by the technology of the society, which enables humans to sustain their existence and reproduce their society. For much of human history, technology had been limited by human or animal physical power, and consequently society was largely agricultural, with only limited industrial production. With steam power, and eventually electricity, production shifted to cities and towns. People were liberated from the land, but capitalism created a new despotism of factory-based wage labour in poor conditions for minimum wages. This material base of society then shaped the relations of production, which have a dominant role in shaping individual identities. Modern urban-industrial societies create propertyless factory workers in large numbers, and factory and capital owners in ever smaller numbers. These two groups become Marx's proletariat (working class) and capitalists. The forces and relations of production constitute the historical mode of production. Marx saw history as a succession of modes of production and not merely philosophical systems, and his own time as the triumph of the capitalist mode of production displacing the prior feudal mode of production.

Marx's theoretical life work was the analysis of the capitalist mode of production in his book *Capital* (1867) and its subsequent unpublished volumes. Central

to this analysis is his theory of ideology and the claim that the economic base of society shaped (or determined) the superstructure of that society. By this he meant that the political, legal, cultural and philosophical ideas of a society must ultimately reflect the economic or material power relations in that society. New philosophical ideas are therefore not ways of reconciling prior conflicts within a philosophical synthesis but reflections of those power relations. They must either act as justifications and rationalisations of these power relations or be attempts to critique and overthrow them. Thus, the struggle between conservative and liberal forces in Europe following the French Revolution was, for Marx, nothing more than the consequence of the economic transformation of Europe by the triumph of mature capitalism.

### *Crisis and revolution*

The first part of Marx's revolution in thought was the material analysis of society and social relations. However, he also saw a material dialectic in the historical progress from one mode of production to the next, and this was to be the most important part of his analysis for his successors. The conflict of ideas and political arguments that we find at the heart of political life is only a superficial sign of the fundamental conflict that lies at the heart of the mode of production, and it is only the resolution of this conflict that ultimately leads to the transition from one to the next. One might see the arguments of social contract theorists from the 17th century on as reflecting the emergence of a new capitalist mode of production out of the old feudal order (Macpherson 1962). Central to Marx's theory of historical change is crisis and revolution. Crisis tendencies arise as technology develops and opens up the possibility of further social and political change. Marx saw these tendencies in the way that capitalism accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation, bringing more people into factory-based production, which in turn had an impact on the market for the goods that capitalism produced. The process of exploitation of labour power is vital to create the surplus value that form the capitalists' profits, and competition between capitalists results in the progressive impoverishment of the industrial workers. Although mechanisation opens up enormous productive potential, it paradoxically accelerates the immiseration of the mass of factory workers, who presumably would otherwise form the potential market for capitalist products. This exploitative logic of capital accumulation creates a contradiction at the heart of the mode of production that must lead to its overthrow and replacement.

The important point about this crisis tendency, and why Marx saw it as inevitably creating a revolutionary moment, is that crisis is inherent in the material conditions of the mode of production. Therefore, it cannot be addressed by any form of political settlement between labour and capital, as many optimistic 19th-century novelists (such as Disraeli, Dickens or Gaskell) or utopian thinkers

(such as Owen and Fourier) hoped. The logic of exploitation was structural and not personal or alterable. It could only be overcome through fundamentally changing how work and the economy are organised to the new relations of production made possible by the advance of technology. This crisis-induced overthrow of the relations of production is precisely what Marx meant by the idea of revolution, and it is the inevitable condition of historical change. Although Marx is permanently associated with the concept of revolution, he actually says little about it, because he is more concerned with the material logic of the crisis tendencies in capitalism. Despite his journalistic leanings, this is also why he is less interested than many of his contemporaries in the minutiae of 19th-century politics.

### *Class politics*

The concept of revolution applies to Marx's analysis at a number of levels. However, the most familiar one is the analysis of transformative political struggle through class conflict. The concept of a social class is an important feature of his analysis of the superstructure of a society. Marx is not an individualist, nor is he an unambiguous humanist, unlike utilitarians and natural rights theorists. Like Hegel, he thinks that an individual's identity, aspirations and political interests are socially constituted, but, unlike Hegel, he also thinks that the social constitution of identity is shaped by one's position in the mode of production. The opposing class interests of workers and capitalists shape their respective identities and their relationships. They can have no common interest and therefore there is not much for a politics of bargaining and compromise to address. Instead, the members of both classes are in mutual and irreconcilable opposition to one another. This is why Marx is so dismissive in *The Communist Manifesto* of types of socialism that seek to overcome social conflict through achieving political compromise. It is also why his followers considered the most devastating criticism was to be called a revisionist – i.e. someone who thought that political reform could replace or avoid the need for revolutionary conflict.

The concept of class is a complex one in Marx and Marxist thought. It is used to explain the (fundamental) identities or interests of the proletariat, the agents of revolutionary transformation. It is not intended as a celebration of the folkways of the urban working class, because those will be overcome once capitalism is overthrown. But it does establish a hierarchy within identity that explains political, national or gender struggles as ultimately reducible to the structures of economic power and interest that are shaped by the capitalist mode of production. Revolution is a consequence of class conflict brought about by the material crisis tendencies within the capitalist mode of production. Those crisis tendencies work themselves out in history through the vehicle of the mutual opposition of classes. So classes are the real agents in history and not individuals ('great men') or nations. Consequently, the goal of revolutionary

transformation is not to end individual suffering and misery but the overthrow of the structures of domination that are at the heart of capitalism. Human liberation is the liberation of the working class from capitalist domination. Ending class domination will directly result in an improvement in most individuals' well-being. But it is class liberation that matters, because without it no individual goods, rights or interests are possible. Marx's focus on classes as the primary agent in history as opposed to individuals has led to numerous problems for subsequent Marxists. It would be wrong and foolish to accuse Marx of being indifferent to individual human suffering. It is crucial to remember that most of Marx's writing was in the light of the failure of the liberal wave of revolutions across Europe in 1848, and the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1870. As a result, he thought that only the complete overthrow of the underlying material structure of capitalism would enable any genuine human emancipation. Despite all of this, Marx uses the concept of class as an analytical tool to explain the structure of politics and the revolutionary crisis facing capitalism. But those looking to *The Communist Manifesto* for a political programme will be disappointed. It devotes considerable attention to criticising those socialists who have a plan for revolution, or who think they are best placed to direct and lead the working class to triumph. Marx's ambiguity about how class politics should be conducted left considerable room for his followers to disagree about what his legacy was and how the communists should conduct themselves.

### *Communism*

Marx's historical materialism explains the rise and nature of capitalism and why its inherent crisis tendencies must lead to revolution. What follows on from that revolution? Marx's answer is communism, but what does he mean by that? The name suggests the holding of property and organisation of the economy in common (and the abolition of private ownership), but in a very general way. Towards the end of his life, Marx gave some brief outlines of what a communist society might be like, but he was always cautious about prescribing the conditions of life under communism. The main reason for this reticence was that the revolutionary transformation from capitalism would create new forms of social life but it also would transform the lives of people and their social interactions in fundamental ways. In his approach, this material transformation must overcome ways of thinking about human nature and society's interests that are merely the inheritance of the capitalist mode of production. There is no constant and trans-historical human nature that persists through the various historical modes of production. That said, some things can be said of communism in terms of absences of essential features of the capitalist mode of production. Wage labour will be abolished as a result of socialised production and thus there will be no private property or money as a means of resource allocation. With the abolition of private property and the democratisation of

ownership, social class will be abolished, because the fundamental relationship of domination of worker by capital owners disappears. In this respect, a communist society will be a society of equals.

Marx was not a utopian thinker who imagined a post-capitalist society. He took exception to those early socialist utopians who thought that a better society merely needed an exercise of imagination. Instead, for Marx, what replaces capitalism must be better simply because it overcomes the contradictions of capitalism in the struggle between labourers and owners of capital. The precise form that emancipation will take is not something that can be derived by philosophical speculation. Instead, it will be worked out in the practical struggle of revolutionary change. As Marx famously said in the ‘Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach’ in *The German Ideology*, ‘[p]hilosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ (McLellan 2000, p. 173).

Marx and Engels chose to use their leadership in the Second Communist International to support the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by defending the forces of the working class from those who claimed to have plans and blueprints for a new society, or who said that they had a better understanding of the requirements of revolutionary change than the proletariat itself. This theoretical legacy later inspired both Lenin and Mao, the two most significant leaders of Marxist revolutions. Yet, Marx’s studied ambiguity about the character of revolutionary politics and the building of a communist society left both these successors with multiple challenges and opportunities to shape the conduct of revolutionary change and impose their own orthodoxy on Marx and Engels’s thought, which the original thinkers may not have shared or appreciated. The concepts and positions involved in the ideology of Marxism–Leninism and then Maoism were not inherent in Marx’s own work.

### Lenin and the party – ‘what is to be done?’

Lenin wrote on Marxist theory in a style affected by Friedrich Engels’s quest to make Marxism into a science. Yet, the primary assumption behind Lenin’s work was that Marx and Engels had provided the theoretical framework to understand history, so that the task was no longer to seek how to understand the world but to change it. He accepted the materialist theory of history, the inevitability of the collapse of capitalist modernity and its replacement by communism, and the class analysis of politics and revolutionary change. Theory was important because ‘without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement’ (Lenin 1988, p. 91). But, for a Russian professional revolutionary, this theory only set the framework – it did not prescribe what is to be done. This question was the starting point of Lenin’s life work and the title of one of his most famous works. It is also the work in which the idea and character of the Marxist professional revolutionary is first defined. Lenin’s contribution to theory concerns the role and task of the professional revolutionary.

Lenin's serious engagement with Marxism began during his studies in St Petersburg and developed in his exile in Siberia, where he spent time studying the Russian economy and especially its relative development on the path to mature capitalism. Given the orthodox Marxist account of historical development, it was necessary for economies to go through the stage of capitalist development to the point where a genuinely revolutionary transformation was possible. The problem for many subsequent Marxists was that Russia still appeared superficially to be a peasant economy, and consequently largely without the necessary revolutionary class of the proletariat or industrial workers. The question of development was not simply one of political economy but manifested itself in the political and revolutionary struggles of Russian life. There had been a long history of peasant revolts against the Russian nobility and state that had uniformly been brutally suppressed. By the 1900s, there was also a long sequence of radical challenges to the tsarist autocracy that manifested itself in populist uprisings and revolutionary assassination and terror, of the sort that had led to Lenin's brother's execution. Yet, the presence of radical violence was not enough to trigger a revolutionary moment, as Marx had warned in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Bomb throwing, assassination and uprisings were all very well, but, unless they were manifestations of the inevitable uprising of the working class, they stood little chance of success. The material conditions needed to be in place for a genuinely revolutionary moment as opposed to another ill-fated coup or uprising, like the Paris Commune of 1871. An appropriate grounding in theory was necessary to understand that part of the logic of history. The risk for the proletariat was being constantly led into premature uprisings by anarchists, populists and terrorists – such ungrounded and ill-fated rebellions only had the effect of allowing the forces of the capitalist state to strengthen and reassert their power.

When Marx and Engels wrote of 'the Communist Party' in their 1848 *Manifesto*, they were referring to all those who took the side of the working class in the impending struggle with the capitalist bourgeoisie. To express a preference for the communists was to take a side. What it did not mean at that stage was to be a member of a single, hierarchical political organisation of the sort we now associate with political parties, either in one-party states or multiparty democracies. The move towards this modern understanding of a political party was developing in the period following the death of Marx, especially in countries like Britain and Germany with modernised political systems and where the question of who represents the working class began to emerge. It was in this context that Lenin's earliest writings on political organisation were written – and later consolidated into his pamphlet, *What Is to Be Done?* On leaving Siberia for exile in Switzerland, Lenin began to establish himself as a leader of the Russian social democrats (another name for the communists) and to transform that group into a structured organisation that became recognisable as a political party.

The significance of Lenin's pamphlet can be lost in its involvement in detailed historical context and debates. However, Lenin sets out a number of fundamental elements of the revolutionary movement and its conception of, and approach to, politics. The party is composed of a small group of professional revolutionaries. They are the vanguard leading the proletariat, but they do not themselves have to be part of the industrial working class. The party should be built as a centralised, clandestine and hierarchically organised authority, in the pursuit of revolution. Its objective is the emancipation of the proletariat, the cultivation of class consciousness and the overthrow of class domination once and for all. The party is not about social reform. Consequently, bourgeois values such as democracy, liberty, equality and rights are of secondary importance to Lenin and any professional revolutionary. Thus, Lenin uses this pamphlet to make the case for a significant transformation of Marxist theory, one in which the party takes a leadership role for the working class by directing it towards revolution:

Only a centralised, militant organisation that consistently carries out a social-democratic policy and satisfies, so to speak, all revolutionary instincts and strivings, can safeguard the movement against making thoughtless attacks and prepare attacks that hold out the promise of success. (Lenin 1988, p. 198)

Lenin begins his defence of the party in the context of working-class politics in the late 19th century. The belief that the working class are the agent of revolutionary change has given rise to a mistaken belief that industrial workers must be left to work out their transformative role themselves, and not be misdirected into coups and utopian reform projects. However, as the working class developed a self-consciousness in countries like Britain or Germany, it was diverted by earlier reformist ideologies that had sought to better the conditions of the working class through social reform and labour representation. Policies such as labour legislation (including the right to strike, factory regulation and social welfare reform) all appeared to offer the short- or medium-term route to improve the conditions of the labouring poor. They might also avoid out-and-out conflict with the coercive powers of the state, such as the military and the police. Exponents of this view claimed that the interests of the working class were best served by the self-organisation of trades unions, labour representation committees, and making alliances between these bodies and radical intellectuals – such as the Fabians in Britain, who continued the tradition of radical liberal and utilitarian reformers from the early 19th century.

For Lenin, the lure of the trade union model of working-class politics was a dangerous deceit because the conflict between the interests of labour and capital were mutually antagonistic and irreconcilable. Perhaps it was his experience of a more violent autocracy in Russia that reinforced his suspicion of bourgeois

concessions as superficial and temporary, but Lenin remained convinced that the working class were in a mortal struggle with capital that could only end in the overthrow of capitalism. His understanding of Marxist theory convinced him that the key to the emancipation of the working class was through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. But he recognised that the proletariat, which carried that historical role, was not always well placed to understand its historical significance. The first task of the party was to lead the working class in the direction of its true interests by building a revolutionary class consciousness. This seemingly original departure from Marx's theory of ideology was made possible, according to Lenin, because the professional revolutionaries possessed a revolutionary theory. The theory was the key to understanding class politics and the material struggle between labour and capital, and it was vindicated because it emerged from the material conditions of conflict and historical change. It was not just a free-standing theory about change but something that was given by the material logic of history. Lenin did not just have a faith in Marx's theory; he genuinely believed that Marx had unveiled the logic of history in the same way that Darwin and other scientists were unveiling the logic of biological change.

Two things follow from this transformative insight. Firstly, to avoid the corruption of class interests by labour and trade union politics there needed to be a dedicated revolutionary vanguard who understood and were fully committed to the task of revolution and not reform. Secondly, that group would not be swayed and corrupted to the short-term gains offered by reformist or liberal politics but would work to direct the working class towards its own interest, namely the overthrow of class domination and the ultimate emancipation of humanity. Lenin writes that 'we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to social-democratic activities and that such people must train themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries' (Lenin 1988, p. 188). Who were these people? This question is particularly important because it has a direct bearing on the authority of Lenin and his colleagues, and indeed of the master theoreticians Marx and Engels (who was actually a Victorian capitalist). As we have seen, Lenin first became a revolutionary at university and during his captivity in Siberia. His move to exile placed him at the heart of a group of émigré intellectuals and revolutionaries, none of whom were industrial workers. Running risks and producing clandestine newspapers and pamphlets bridged the gap with industrial workers, but it did not really ground these people within the working class. Consequently, for Lenin the professional revolutionary vanguard could be drawn from the educated working class, but it could equally be drawn from university students and intellectuals. This stance linked his ideas to the long-standing views of intellectuals and students as those who had broken their ties with their birth origins and become devoted to the universal cause of emancipation. But, again, what must now link and discipline these individuals is their adherence to Marxist doctrine, as opposed to a

subjective or personal sympathy with the plight of the urban poor or the lives of the workers.

The task of this group is to be guided by revolutionary theory so as to become a revolutionary movement and to lead the working class in their historical role. It cannot be sentimental, or become preoccupied with the living conditions and welfare of the workers and the poor. As a scientific socialist, Lenin's concern is not with the welfare of the aggregate of working men and their families – that is the fundamental difference between reformist and trade unionist labourism and his professional revolutionaries. The beneficiaries of the revolution were never expected to be assignable individuals within an aggregate social class. The working class is not simply the group of all the industrial labourers who do not own capital. From an historical point of view, those individuals gain their significance through their class position. Moral considerations about the rights or welfare of individuals are merely a diversion from the fundamental power relations that exist between classes. Lenin does not devote much attention or moralistic concerns to the welfare and rights of workers, except as offering objective evidence of the need to overthrow class exploitation. The professional revolutionary is therefore attentive to the dangers of sentimentalism and simplistic moralism, and the way these can be exploited by the capitalist class to co-opt the leaders of the labour movement.

For it is not enough to call ourselves the 'vanguard', the advance contingent: we must act in such a way that all the other contingents recognise and are obliged to admit that we are marching in the vanguard. And we ask the reader: are the representatives of the other 'contingents' such fools as to take our word for it when we say that we are the vanguard? (Lenin 1988, pp. 147–148)

Lenin's professional revolutionaries are the group who serve as the vanguard of the working class, not just those who identify with the interest of the working class. The party is an advance contingent because it leads the proletariat in the direction of its own world historical interest by being the repository of their class consciousness. The role of the working class is being the agent of the overthrow of class domination. As such, their class interest is different from the perceived interests of the members of the proletariat as a contingent collection of individuals.

Individual members of the proletariat might be content with shorter working hours, higher wages, paid holidays and better housing. Yet, a focus on those individual interests leads only to class exploitation and failure, and this is why Lenin thinks the workers need a professional vanguard who become the 'head' of the workers as a political movement. This clearly shifts the focus of revolutionary politics away from any preoccupation with short-term material gains and political positioning within the domestic systems of capitalist states. The

politics of Fabians, reformers and trade unionists or labour parties is ultimately epiphenomenal (secondary to the real politics of class conflict) and, as such, a distraction. In exercising its leadership role, the vanguard must therefore co-opt and control the other manifestations of working-class politics and direct them towards the ultimate goal, which is not reconciliation with the capitalist system and its state but their overthrow.

This form of revolutionary politics has several consequences. Firstly, as Lenin's career prior to 1917 shows, it focuses a lot of attention on asserting its leadership amongst the working-class movement, and defeating the other 'contingents'. From an external perspective, this can make revolutionary politics look preoccupied with factional status and position, as opposed to concrete reform. Yet, for Lenin and his professional revolutionaries, and from the point of view of history, this politics of status and position is far more important than seeking the election of labour representatives. The ultimate task of the revolutionary party is to safeguard against 'thoughtless attacks and prepare attacks that hold out the promise of success' (Lenin 1988, p. 198), by which he means seeking the objective opportunities to accelerate revolutionary transition. For Lenin and his professional revolutionaries, there was no question that capitalism was heading to its ultimate crisis and therefore was not reformable; the question was readiness to exploit those moments that might expose the final transition.

To this end, the party needed professional revolutionaries, and to conduct its affairs in a clandestine and conspiratorial fashion to avoid infiltration by the tsarist secret police, who were keen to disrupt its activities and personnel. Once the party became the primary focus of political activity, then the training and disciplining of its militant membership would be part of its reason for existence. The party was tasked with distinguishing genuine revolutionaries from either those who were weak in their revolutionary commitment or (more seriously) spies, traitors and collaborators who infiltrated the party to disrupt it. A perennial feature of this form of class politics is the assertion of authenticity amongst the membership and the rooting-out of collaborators. Although this type of political activity may again seem obsessively inward-looking, it is actually of fundamental importance, given the party's historic role and the relative insignificance of individuals in achieving that goal. The later Soviet history of purges and intra-party violence is already built into the logic of the party in its vanguard role. The necessity for discipline and authority also manifests itself in Lenin's indifference to internal party democracy and his preference for a centralised and hierarchical leadership.

'the broad democratic principle' will simply facilitate the work of the police in carrying out large scale raids, will perpetuate the prevailing primitiveness and will divert the thoughts of the practical activists from the serious and pressing task of training themselves to become

professional revolutionaries to that of drawing up detailed ‘paper’ rules for election systems. (Lenin 1988, p. 200)

To ensure the appropriate direction of the party, Lenin rejects what he calls ‘the broad democratic principle’ – the idea that authority is dispersed throughout the party and decisions are based on elaborate constitutional (‘paper’) rules. Such a form of governance opens the party to manipulation by the secret police and others who wish to frustrate its success. For Lenin, it was this unnecessary preoccupation with party constitutions and procedures that was such a feature of the trade union politics that he rejected. Instead, the party needed a centralised form of authority and leadership, coupled with absolute discipline in the implementation of decisions. His preferred form of politics was that of a strong executive prerogative, as opposed to a constitutional and constrained form of politics designed to spread the legitimacy of decisions. This executive conception of politics has become a perennial feature of revolutionaries of left or right and more recently of the resurgence of populism. It appeals to the idea that politics is about getting the job done and not endlessly discussing process, but it also fits well with agendas that are simple and unitary, whether this be in wartime or in responding to an emergency. The crisis of late capitalism is effectively a permanent emergency and the task facing the revolutionary party is overthrowing the system, so superficially there is little scope for complex policy agendas and the weighing of conflicting but necessary ends. As Lenin moved from being a clandestine revolutionary to being the leader of an actual revolution, and a government enmeshed in a civil war from 1917 to 1922, the task of deciding became more pressing, as the choices became more complex.

Who forms that centralised party leadership? This issue remains an opaque question in *What Is to Be Done?*, although it was to become a hugely important issue as Lenin moved from leading one faction in the complex world of anti-tsarist Russian politics to leading the Bolshevik revolution some 15 years later. He writes of party political authority being in the hands of a small central group, but there is no clarity on how small that group should be, or on the nature and authority of leadership. His own position as a dominant figure amongst a leadership group suggests that a small group is possible, but the problems that arose following his premature death in 1924 illustrate the cost of that ambiguity – as Stalin came to replace him. For many subsequent communists, Stalin betrayed the legacy of Lenin by consolidating rule in his own hands as a permanent dictator. Other communists took the orthodox line of the party, which claimed that Stalin was simply fulfilling the inherent logic of Lenin’s account of party leadership with its clandestine and centralising decision-making processes.

*What Is to Be Done?* was published in 1902, shortly before the abortive rebellion of 1905 and long before the momentous events of World War I and the collapse of the tsarist autocracy. Since Lenin was a practical revolutionary, his thought developed in the light of experience, and during the 1917 Revolution

and the civil war that development was to accelerate significantly. Yet, the principal elements of his theory of the party, and its dominant position in his thinking about political agency, did not change. The party and the conduct of politics were centralised, clandestine and conspiratorial, with primary focus directed at enemies of the party outside and inside the party structure. To describe politics in this way is not to offer a partisan caricature of Leninism, because this form of conduct was the necessary consequence of the party's historical role and purpose. The party and its goal as the class-conscious leader of the proletariat was all that mattered to Lenin and his close followers, as it was ultimately the reality of politics liberated from the distortion of the bourgeois state. As Hannah Arendt, no friend of Lenin, pointed out, despite the sloganeering of the 1917 Revolution and its cry of 'All Power to the Soviets' it was the consistently claimed purpose of the Bolsheviks to 'replace the state machinery with the party apparatus' (Arendt 1963, p. 269).

As the history of the USSR unfolded in the aftermath of the revolution, the Communist Party remained the principal site of politics, despite the addition of state institutions in the intervening years. What happened within the party and its leadership always dictated what happened in the world's first communist state. A striking feature of Lenin's early account of the revolutionary party is how little he says about the state, the international order, and the territorial dimensions of international politics. As the revolution of 1905 failed, and the tsarist autocracy reasserted its position up to 1914, it became clear that the final crisis of capitalism was still over the horizon and that Russia's international context was as important as the domestic struggle against the tsarist regime. The revolution in other countries that Marx had envisaged on the verge of triggering the world uprising against capitalism had failed to materialise, and the system that showed all the tendencies of crisis also demonstrated a curious resilience. It was precisely this challenge that led Lenin to examine how capitalism was adapting and transforming itself in a new form that Marx could not have fully appreciated, namely imperialism.

### Capitalism, imperialism and the nation

Lenin's short pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was published in 1916 following an intense period of study from 1915 onwards. This was the height of World War I, with the launch of the British spring offensive on the Somme in order to relieve the unrelenting pressure of German attacks on the French army at Verdun. On the Eastern Front, the Russian army was in retreat from Poland and facing challenges in the south created by Romania's entry into the war alongside Austria-Hungary and Germany. The stalemate on the Western Front, with increasing carnage and limited or no prospects of breakthrough, represented war at its most brutal and futile. This was the context for Lenin to address the nature of capitalism and its new form as

imperialism. Although the text attempts a social scientific analysis of a new social form, the work's significance (in both Lenin's thought and the prospects for proletarian revolution) is far more than the sum of its tables charting external investment and returns on capital would suggest.

Lenin was convinced that capitalism was in the midst of its final crisis and the revolutionary's task was to exploit the opportunities that this crisis posed for a complete overthrow of the forces of the bourgeoisie concentrated in the modern state system. As the ill-fated revolutionary uprising of 1905 had shown, the forces of the capitalist state (in this case the tsarist autocracy) were resilient. Yet, for Lenin, this simply meant that the revolutionaries needed to show care in seizing their moment and not be forced into precipitate actions when the time was not right. The tasks for formation and mobilisation of the workers continued to be the primary goal of the class-conscious vanguard leadership. Whilst Lenin focused this activity within the Russian Social Democratic Party, he at first understood his work as continuous with that taking place throughout the mature capitalist economies. The revolutionary moment was structural and not simply national. When the working classes of the mature capitalist economies were at the right stage, they would trigger a worldwide revolution. This might begin in one country but that would signal a rapid spread across the united working class, who shared more in common as members of an economic class than they did as members of a state.

By 1915, Lenin had realised this was a naïve view at best, because the workers of the world had enthusiastically gone to war against each other. More importantly, the leadership of the various national social democratic parties, including such venerable figures as Karl Kautsky in Germany, had voted to support the war effort once war was declared. Lenin remained opposed to the war and a committed internationalist who preferred to work for Russia's defeat. Yet, he saw how the labour movement was co-opted into the mass mobilisation for the war, with one nation's workers co-opted into a war with their fellow workers. For him, a civil war within the proletariat was unconscionable, but a civil war within the capitalist class was another matter. The capitalist class had an interest in co-operating amongst themselves to defeat a socialist revolutionary uprising. But, if capitalists were threatened by other capitalists, then competition and struggle were indeed inevitable, an important tenet of the Marxist analysis of class struggle. Some socialists asked why the workers of Germany had gone to war with the workers of Britain or France, as opposed to manifesting class solidarity and pursuing a Europe-wide general strike, as some (such as Jean Jaurès in France) had hoped. But for Lenin this was not the real issue.

Instead, he asked why the capitalist class had entered into and still pursued such a brutal civil war between national capitalisms. To answer this question, one needed to understand how capitalism had developed since the end of the 19th century. Lenin saw the answer in terms of a development towards a globalised form of capitalism that he described as imperialism. His analysis is also intended to show that this development does not stave off the final collapse of

capitalism but instead is a sign that the mode of production is entering on a final crisis moment. Although superficially a technical study of modern imperialist capitalism, Lenin's work remains an optimistic one from the point of view of revolutionary consciousness. The apparent collapse of revolutionary consciousness amongst the workers across all combatant countries, in favour of backing patriotism and extreme militarism, was only superficial: history was all going to plan.

Imperialism was not a new phenomenon, but it had grown in significance in the late 19th century, with economic arguments used to promote and rationalise what some countries had been doing for centuries. With the incorporation of the British East India Company into the British state after 1857, and the declaration of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1876, the idea of Britain as a world imperial power grew from a political fact into a self-ascribed ideology. Advocates of imperial expansion in Africa and South East Asia formed a new political voice that challenged the prevailing ideology of free trade guaranteed by the Royal Navy, which had ensured Britain's global presence. The opening up of continental (and not just coastal) Africa in the mid-19th century to the major imperial powers of Britain and France, alongside new competitors like Belgium and Germany, and the older Portuguese presence, began a scramble for Africa. This attempt to partition the whole continent into European-owned territories became an important contributory factor in the path to war. The United States also began its expansion into the Philippines and Cuba. To the defenders of imperialism, such as Milner and Rhodes in Britain or Theodore Roosevelt in the USA, the justifying argument was not simply national pride and assertiveness but economics. Traditional colonialism secured tariff-controlled markets of traditional colonialism. But the new imperialism sought control of access to supplies for resources essential for modern economies, such as oil and rubber, as well as new sources of cheap labour. Colonialism was not just an opportunity to resettle surplus populations in the metropolitan countries that had grown significantly during industrialisation. It was also an opportunity to export capital into new markets where investment returns would be better than could be gained in the mature markets of the old capitalist powers, as with the British banks building railways across Latin America.

Lenin drew on the analysis of heterodox economists like J.A. Hobson (1858–1940), who was also to influence John Maynard Keynes, and Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941) in seeing the financialisation of capitalism. But he rejected the implication that this trend could postpone the long-term crisis of capitalism. All the major theorists of imperialism recognised the transformation of modern industrialised economies away from being heterogenous collections of industrial capitalists with interests in particular manufactures and industries competing vigorously with each other for market share. As industrial economies mature, the logic of capitalism is towards creating monopolies

within national economies, and the diversification of firms' ownership across industries through financial capital. The real powers of the new era were not the original industrial magnates of a single industry town but instead those who dominated whole industries. Through diversification of share ownership, these hegemonic figures also increasingly dominated multiple related industries – for example, steel magnates having an interest in railways as a primary consumer of steel as well as coal. The exploitation of other raw materials was increasingly essential for the development of the chemical industry or more advanced forms of engineering. These fields relied on metals such as nickel or chrome (especially important for the modern arms industry) as much as iron and steel. The new metals were often not available in large deposits in Europe, but they were plentiful in Africa, Canada or Australia, which powerfully drove imperial expansion.

Capitalism begins its transition to imperialism as it matures, and the process of industrialisation and urbanisation is completed. The further development of capitalism is always driven by the capitalists' need for profits, and now requires security of supply for all basic raw materials, encouraging internationalisation because they are dispersed across the world. However, domestic rates of profit in metropolitan core countries are at risk from growing international competition (by other countries' monopolies) and fully mobilised domestic markets. The opportunities for domestic exploitation of labour are diminished, but this falling rate of profit now does not lead to the revolutionary moment that Marx and Engels expected. Instead, the opportunity for overseas investment and expansion to defer the crisis exists, and opens up new opportunities for capital in terms of investments in overseas industry and development. Building railways in imperial possessions, colonies and spheres of influence is a simple example of the opportunities for exploiting new markets for goods, such as steel and machinery. It also provided opportunities for investing capital in new companies exploiting the new possessions, and all with the added advantage of cheap labour to exploit.

As the returns on capital invested overseas become increasingly important for economies such as Britain, the political imperative to protect it rises. The state extends its reach either through direct takeovers of territory, as in India and Africa, or indirectly through building dominant economic control, as in South America. This logic of imperial expansion extends the life of mature capitalism and postpones a domestic revolution, a change that is captured in Lenin's quotation from a speech by a leading British imperialist, Cecil Rhodes, in which he campaigns for empire as a solution to domestic social unrest. The opportunity to exploit native labour in imperial possessions and colonies would raise the relative standard of living of the domestic working class in the metropolitan country and undermine their self-perception as the most impoverished class. Below the industrial workers of European industrial economies there was always 'the wretched of the earth' in the colonies.

My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists. (Lenin 1978, p. 75)

The growth of imperialism amongst the established capitalist economies displaced the traditional land powers of continental politics. Whilst the maritime power of Britain was important, it had been peripheral to the important European power struggles of France, Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Habsburg empire in the 19th century. The United States' rise as a solely hemispheric power (following the Monroe Doctrine) had made it marginal to European politics. Yet, with the transformation of capitalism into imperialism, Lenin identifies Britain, America and Japan as major imperial powers (a particularly prescient judgement in light of later 20th-century history). Like the United States and Britain, Japan had rapidly risen to become a modern industrial power with ambitions across north-east Asia in China, Manchuria and Korea, but also with a powerful and modern navy that had already inflicted a major defeat on Russia (one factor triggering the abortive 1905 revolution).

Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of 'advanced' countries. And this 'booty' is shared between two of three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, Japan) who are drawing the whole world into war over the division of their booty. (Lenin 1978, p. 11)

The rise of new capitalist imperial powers was not without war and conflict, because the control of imperial possessions and the sea lanes necessary for imperial trade and protection often gave rise to boundary disputes. In addition, there were conflicts between the old traditional powers and new rising powers, as with Japan's aggressive interventions into China or the far east of the tsarist empire with the Russo-Japan War of 1904–1905. It is not a surprise that naval power was a key feature of imperial power and the naval arms race was one further destabilising fact in the run-up to war in 1914. But Lenin was not only interested in the fact of imperialism as a new form of what we now call global capitalism. His concern was not just to show that imperial expansion was a feature of the modern world order and a potential source of the world war going on around him. He primarily sought to show that imperialism remained locked within the crisis logic that historical materialism predicts, so that the proletarian revolution (although it was seemingly overtaken by and lost to patriotism and military mobilisation) was actually still inevitable.

The advocates who celebrated imperialism as a positive development of a globalised political economy failed to see that the long-term tendency towards national monopoly fuelling imperialism was also leading to conflict between imperial powers. Imperial powers could not live in harmony with other imperial powers because they competed for territory to colonise and resources to monopolise. In fact, Lenin points out, all that imperialism manages to achieve is to spread the crisis of capitalism from the territorial states of Europe into the wider world, hence globalising the crisis of capitalism. Imperialism defers the final collapse in time, and spreads the crisis out in terms of space and territory, but at the end of this temporal and spatial extension there remains a final conflict and a global revolution. Nor had imperialism deferred revolution by a long stretch of time. Lenin's main concern was to show that it had accelerated the revolution into a global conflagration – because imperial dominion had imposed the conditions of crisis on still developing economies that on their own would not yet have reached sufficient maturity to form part of crisis capitalism.

Lenin's theory of imperialism had significant implications for understanding the international order and the tensions within it. Rather than a system of states of differing sizes, the global order was made up of very unequal capitalist imperial powers, constantly jostling each other to secure the interests of their globally dispersed capital. The (nation) state was no longer the highest stage of political development but the plaything of larger global capitalist powers. However, this displacement of the state by imperial powers was also a source of potential crisis because the very size and scale of imperial powers made them vulnerable to the pressures of traditional empire where the centre exert its authority through military force, violence and coercion of the peripheries. The instability of such imperial powers was illustrated by nationalist uprisings. These had proved a recurring problem for the continental great powers of the Europe in the 19th century and they were again emerging in Europe leading up to 1914. They also played a part in the internal power structures of colonies and possessions, which in turn made imperial power unstable. For example, throughout World War I Britain faced uprisings in Ireland and in India, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was riven by national claims for self-determination.

Lenin was also interested in the plight of nationality, not just as an epiphenomenal diversion from the true politics of class, as classical Marxist theory maintained. Nations served as a vehicle through which the pressures of class conflict manifested themselves in territorially dispersed empires, Nationalism was a sign of how capitalism had sought to disrupt class interests by creating the national enmities and oppositions that manifested themselves in the willingness of European workers to slaughter each other on the battlefields of the Western and Eastern Fronts. According to Lenin, this fact should not have been a surprise to professional revolutionaries. He did not endorse nations and nationalism as an autonomous source of political allegiance and agency. But he thought that the emergence of national struggles was an essential element of global class struggle and that national movements could be incorporated

into the mobilisation of revolutionary forces. At the same time, he was equally aware of how national sentiment could be mobilised by the forces of reaction to frustrate the revolutionary change. Consequently, in practical politics it was essential for the party and professional revolutionaries to be at the vanguard of nationalist movements as well as class struggle.

For many social democrats, the apparently easy diversion of the workers into supporting patriotic militarism caused a crisis of confidence. Yet, Lenin was able to see this as a vindication of his fundamental class analysis of politics and revolutionary change. Lenin's theory globalised the revolution and considered the way in which the territoriality of revolution must necessarily extend beyond the realm and structure of the nation state, which is always only a contingent manifestation of western capitalism. The state is merely the vehicle through which capitalist power is exercised against the interests of the workers whether on a national or an imperial scale. The state is an instrument of coercion, domination and violence and so it can only be dealt with through its violent destruction.

### **'The state and revolution' – Lenin and violence**

The central elements of Lenin's argument about the role of party, the crisis of capitalism and imperialism as a sign of the new globalised nature of capitalist power and consequently the extension of revolution beyond national boundaries seem to omit or downplay the role of state. Yet, the state remained an important challenge for Lenin's account of revolution, especially during the establishment of the new revolutionary regime in Russia after 1917.

The revolution in Russia began after significant defeats for the Russian army on the Eastern Front in 1916 and early 1917. The prospect of a military mutiny led to factions in the Duma (or Russian Parliament) taking control of the government and the subsequent abdication of the tsar and royal family: this was the February revolution. During this time, when a provisional government sought to establish itself, Lenin was at first still an exile in Switzerland. He quickly returned to St Petersburg, but due to the war had to proceed through Germany, which was still in conflict with Russia. The German authorities no doubt hoped to force Russia out of the war, which would allow them to concentrate all their forces on the Western Front. So they facilitated his return via a sealed train that took him through Germany and then to Helsinki in Finland, from where in April he began his famous journey to St Petersburg's Finland Station, a journey often seen as the opening of the Bolshevik revolution. On his arrival in St Petersburg, he took up the leadership of the Bolshevik faction, but was unable to spend all his time in St Petersburg – because he was being pursued by opponents within the provisional government as well as by the military leaders, who hoped to overthrow the provisional government and re-establish the tsarist regime. During the extraordinary turmoil of mid-1917, Lenin wrote another book, *The State and Revolution*. This was not a manifesto for his subsequent

conduct of the revolution, but it does address issues of political organisation, governance and the place of the state in a new revolutionary order. As with many of Lenin's theoretical writings, it is a reflection on the works of Marx and Engels, and most explicitly on their views of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the place of the state and violence in revolution. I noted above that Marx and Engels actually said very little on the theory and practice of conducting a revolution, yet that is precisely the situation in which Lenin found himself. He felt it was essential to ground the new experience and policy in aspects of Marx's thought. Once again, the question is not whether Lenin was an accurate expositor of Marx and Engels but what these reflections tell us about the state, governance within a proletarian revolution, and the conduct of revolution.

### *The problem of the state*

Along with orthodox Marxism, Lenin had a complex relationship with the idea of the modern state as the primary institutional structure of politics. The essential Marxist position is that the state developed as a mechanism for constraining and reconciling the conflicting interests of labour and capital, worker and capitalist, within the capitalist mode of production. Accordingly, it inherently reflects the dominance of capital over labour. It institutionalises that domination through its coercive mechanisms, which are primarily the police, the military and more recently the security services or a counter-revolutionary secret police. Unlike social democrat revisionists in Germany and trade unionists and Fabians in Britain (who had sought a parliamentary path to socialism by working within the state on labour reforms and welfare policies), Lenin's experience as a clandestine professional revolutionary facing the tsarist autocracy was of the state in its pure aggressive role, as the direct enforcer of capitalist power. The constant fear of police agents infiltrating the Bolshevik Party, or attempting to subvert party members, was an everyday experience for the professional revolutionary, and the reality of Lenin's career in 1905–1917. Even the collapse of the tsarist regime and the start of the provisional government left hostile state forces in the military and the secret police confronting Lenin and his colleagues after his return to St Petersburg in April 1917. The logic of his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* was that these military and police functions would grow in all states under the demands of imperial rule, just as they had always been dominant in imperial states such as Russia. Similarly, as the crisis tendencies emerge even with the extension of global capitalism, the concessions towards labour that the revisionists relied on would be withdrawn and shown to be a sham. And the mechanisms of direct coercive rule developed in the colonies would be repatriated for dealing with the domestic proletariat.

Thus, for Lenin and his cadre of professional revolutionaries, the state was and remained an enemy. However, it was also a fact. So the question remained how to reconcile the state with the Marxist commitment to the

dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx had retained some anarchist tendencies in his thought, which reinforced the view that the central functions of state power would be overcome by technological advances. So the governance of men by coercive means was replaced by the 'administration of things', a largely evolutionary process impelled by technological development. By contrast, Lenin was confronted with a coercive state in a major war that would not just disappear. Furthermore, his own theory of the party suggested that he took seriously the idea of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as an actual political dictatorship stage in revolutionary change, and not just as a metaphor akin to Rousseau's 'general will' suggesting the end of dictatorial power. In contrast to these more philosophically nuanced readings of Marx, Lenin's view of the challenge of overcoming the power of the state through proletarian agency is clear:

The doctrine about class struggle, when applied by Marx to the question of the state and of socialist revolution, leads necessarily to the recognition of the *political rule* of the proletariat, of its dictatorship, i.e. of power shared with nobody and relying directly upon the armed forces of the masses. The overthrow of the bourgeoisie can be achieved only by the proletariat being transformed into the *ruling class*, capable of crushing the inevitable and desperate resistance of the bourgeoisie and of the organising of *all* the labouring and exploited masses for the new economic order.

The proletarian needs state power, the centralized organisation of force, the organization of violence both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to *lead* the enormous mass of the population – the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, the semi-proletarians – in the work of establishing a socialist economy. (Lenin 1992, pp. 24–25)

Engels had hoped for the 'withering away of the state' under socialism. But, for Lenin, this was first going to require direct, coercive action by the proletariat under the leadership of the party. This action was going to have a forceful and violent character because the state itself was a vehicle for violence, either against the domestic proletariat or internationally against the imperial powers and perhaps the proletariat of other states. The challenge was not simply to defeat the forces of the state in battle, although that was to become a pressing challenge during the 1917–1922 civil war, but to deal with the way that the capitalist state had created counter-revolutionary and reactionary consciousness amongst the people. Capitalist power was exercised in the interests of a small group of people, but the instruments of that power were considerable numbers of ordinary people drawn from the working population and peasantry as soldiers, and from the petit bourgeoisie in terms of police and government functionaries in the bureaucracy and legal system. Even with the effective work of a revolutionary party leading the cultivation of class consciousness amongst the workers

and peasants, it was too simple an idea to imagine that a completely mobilised proletariat would withdraw from the institutions of a capitalist state, leading to its implosion and the consequent emergence of a proletarian dictatorship. This hope was naïve and not the historical reality that Lenin faced.

### *Party, state and bureaucracy*

The October Revolution of 1917 that brought Lenin to power was the result of an armed insurrection in St Petersburg that overthrew the provisional government of Kerensky and formally placed power in the hands of the workers' councils, or soviets, that had been organised and led by the Bolshevik Party. Lenin had announced the replacement of the state by the soviets with his rallying cry of 'All Power to the Soviets' in an article in the party paper *Pravda* in July 1917. Although a rallying slogan, this claim is also important because it indicates the way in which Lenin and the Bolsheviks intended to deal with the power of the state. The provisional government had struggled to establish its authority because it confronted a divided opposition to the old regime and its residue in the key institutions of the state, in particular the army and the Church. This situation confirmed Lenin's view that the state was a problem to be confronted in revolution, but that left the issue of how to do governing and governance. The dictatorship of the proletariat entailed that all power must lie with the revolutionary working class, but that still left pressing practical questions about how that power is constituted in political institutions and how it is exercised. Even the anarchists had structures of power and organisation when they enter the field of combat and political action. The fragmentation of the tsarist army created the opportunity for Leon Trotsky to develop the organised workers into a Red Army. During the revolution and the subsequent civil war, this became a formidable fighting force. Yet, all of this simply re-emphasised the need for some structure of authority and a mechanism for government.

Lenin's solution was the soviets or workers' councils. These would be locally organised and would take on the tasks of administration. In this way, the workers would displace the petit-bourgeois class of professional managers and administrators and democratise the practice of governing.

Capitalist culture has *created* large-scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones and so forth, and *on this basis* the great majority of the functions of the of the old 'state power' have become so simplified and can be reduced to such very simple operations of registering, filing and checking that those functions will become entirely accessible to all literate people, that these functions will be entirely performable for an ordinary 'workman's wages' and that these functions can (and must) be stripped of every shadow association with privilege or preemptory command. (Lenin 1992, p. 40)

Capitalism itself had developed the style of bureaucratic administration that had simplified the tasks of government so that they could be democratised and there was no need for expertise. The passage above also shows that the modern state had relatively limited state-wide functions beyond the instruments of coercion, confined to such things as transportation and the postal service. Lenin has little to say about regulation or about welfare provision. In urban areas the soviets would take over aspects of local government covering such things as public health, water and sewerage.

But Lenin did not at first see the national organisation of a complex economy as the pressing task of the revolution – that was dominated by sheer survival, and consequently his focus was on the coercive structures of former state power such as the army. However, as the immediate threat to the revolution from military attacks by former tsarists and from western powers' allied armies both receded, the challenges of the New Economics Policy became more pressing – and, with that, domestic opposition from peasants, landowners and the business classes. This exposed tensions inherent in Lenin's initial commitment to transferring all power to the soviets.

The ideal model of the soviet was as a council of workers with a commitment to equal status and a belief in relatively equal competence, directly exercising executive power. In reality, they were far less democratic and egalitarian. The real focus of power within them was always the Bolshevik Party and the soviets were only authoritative to the extent that the party exercised leadership within them. This guiding role was also centralised and directed by the party leadership, and ultimately by Lenin and his closest allies, such as Trotsky in the conduct of the civil war. This tension between the potential for democratic governance and centralised authority is also manifest in Lenin's generally disparaging remarks about democracy:

Democracy is a *state* which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e., it is an organisation for the systematic use of *violence* by one class against another, by one section of the population against another. (Lenin 1992, p. 73)

Democracy only has value and authority when it results in decisions that accord with the dictates of the party, the class-conscious leaders of the revolutionary masses. Majorities and minorities are not in themselves of any significance because the majority will can be distorted by class interests and by reactionary or counter-revolutionary will, as can the interests of the minority. In Rousseauian terms, the class consciousness of the vanguard is the general will, whereas the aggregate interests of party members or the proletariat is merely the will of all. The prevalence of counter-revolutionary consciousness amongst the population, and opposition from the beneficiaries of the old order, posed serious problems for the revolutionary leadership. The conduct of revolution required

iron discipline and a lack of sentimentalism. There must be a forceful response to counter-revolutionary insurrection, even when that began amongst workers or others committed to revolution but who had deviated from the central direction of the party leadership – as in the infamous Kronstadt naval uprising, which was brutally suppressed. This tension between the objective needs of the revolution, as defined by the party and its leadership, and the popular will of the workers' councils, led to the need for institutions of coercion and discipline. These increasingly came to define the structures of the Leninist party state, as with the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB, founded by Felix Dzerzhinsky, a former Polish aristocrat turned communist. The Cheka served as Lenin's secret police, disciplining the party and rooting out counter-revolutionary sentiment wherever it arose.

### *Violence and the conduct of revolution*

Whilst tight organisation and strict bureaucratic discipline became distinctive features of the revolution, the other striking feature of the new Soviet order was the place of violence as a tool of revolution and regime-making, a feature that was to persist in the institutional history of the USSR. Everyone is now aware of the vast purges and executions of the Stalin years (Solzhenitsyn 1974), but much scholarship is still preoccupied with whether that violence was imminent in Lenin's revolution or whether it was added by Stalin to the party structures that he inherited. Whatever the truth of the relative moral culpability of Stalin over Lenin, it remains clear that violence was always a necessary tool, and not merely a contingent consequence of Lenin's revolutionary overthrow of the tsarist state. The violence of the immediate revolution, the subsequent civil war and the subsequent implementation of the New Economic Policy was real and appalling in its scale and magnitude. Lenin might have argued that the fact of violence was unexceptional, since violence is prevalent in human history, and had escalated radically during World War I and the subsequent disorder in central and eastern Europe that followed it (including a bitter frontier war between the Soviets and Poland). To understand his theory, though, the real question concerns his attitude to violence as a tool of choice for accomplishing revolutionary politics and accomplishing social change, and how this fits into his vision of the new society.

The place of violence as a tool of politics has to be set against two fundamental issues that are often overlooked in popular judgements of revolutionary politics: firstly, the status and dignity of persons, which we characterise most commonly as human rights (a discourse that only came into its own after World War II); and, secondly, the state as a site of violence. Post-Enlightenment thought in Europe and political ideologies place the individual at the heart of the defence of political agency, with the state as a guarantor of peace and stability. Marxists distance themselves from this tradition, on the ground that it is

merely a rationalisation of the interests of the dominant class. Marxist thought – and Lenin's is no exception – abandons the central position of the individual in moral and political theory. This does not mean that the lives of individual human beings do not matter – indeed, it would be hard to explain what is wrong with class domination without linking it in some way to the lives and well-being of persons. That said, structural power relations shape the ideological and the material conditions in which individuality is formed.

Consequently, Lenin is not a fundamental humanist, in this sense – the value of human lives is derivative from the collectivities within which those lives become concrete and real. Class establishes the hierarchy of relationships between individuals that determines ultimate value, and so exploiters are not of equal value to the exploited. Thus 'moral' egalitarianism prior to the state of communism (as the only form of society that could make egalitarianism possible) is fundamentally abandoned. The rights or status of the exploiters and their agents are not of equal concern and value to the agents of revolutionary change. This argument does not entail that the exploiters should always be subject to violence. But it does mean that, should this be so, it can be justified in terms of legitimate punishment or as the consequence of other legitimate emancipatory actions such as the civil war. There are no human rights, as such, that limit the revolutionary struggle for emancipation from exploitation. And, secondly, there is no limit on the conduct of that struggle: there is no scope for 'just war' arguments in the conduct of revolution.

The absence of a theory of liberal or human rights does not automatically entail violence and killing; something else is required for that, and it follows from Lenin's theory of the state. The fundamental issue is that the state is the vehicle for containing class conflict in the interests of the capitalist class. It is not an impartial legal institution but an instrument of class domination with coercive powers monopolising violence in the interests of the capitalists. The overthrow of capitalism will involve the overthrow of the capitalist state and that entails direct confrontation with the instruments of state violence such as the police, judiciary and military. All of these instruments are controlled and exercised in the interests of an ever-narrower social group of capitalists. Yet, in practice they also co-opt a very large number of people into the maintenance of capitalist power, creating temporary interests in maintaining the regimes that grant them privileges, employment and even subsistence.

Crude Marxist theory suggests that the progressive immiseration of the proletariat during the final stages of capitalist crisis would break the bonds of attachment to the capitalist state. But Lenin argues that the development of advanced capitalist states as imperialist states shows that process is unreliable for achieving rapid change. The proletariat, at the direction of the vanguard party, therefore, needs 'state power, the centralized organisation of force, the organization of violence ... to crush the resistance of the exploiters' (Lenin 1992, p. 25). Accordingly, the revolutionaries need to infiltrate the institutions

of the workers' state so as to build a class consciousness amongst its functionaries, but also that (like the capitalist state) it must use similar powers against those who resist the revolution. Consequently, violence against opponents remains a principal tool of revolution.

The challenge of capitalist state power has two dimensions, one repressive and the other ideological. Firstly, there is the direct confrontation with the counter-revolutionary forces that we see in the early stages of Lenin's revolution and the civil war. These issues were addressed by the formation of the Red Army under Trotsky's direction and later by creating police functions for the new regime, such as Dzerzhinsky's Cheka. Both are involved in enforcing the will of the vanguard party and its instruments, the soviets. Those who stand in the way of the will of the party need to be defeated, because there cannot be any compromise with capitalism.

The second challenge of capitalist power is the legacy of its ideological force on those who were implicated in its exercise, either as direct functionaries or as beneficiaries of capitalist power. Many of this large class have a weak attachment to the previous state but a correspondingly weak commitment to the revolution, and they are therefore potential counter-revolutionary opponents. Whilst the revolution is proceeding, the development and spread of revolutionary consciousness is spreading, but that process is made difficult because of the prevalence of pre-revolutionary consciousness. By definition, this is something that also needs to be defeated. Replacing the consciousness of the previous regime requires making new 'men' (a new humanity). But it cannot be achieved overnight or even in a relatively short period, as Lenin appreciated in the course of making revolution. However, if the process of making the new humanity of the revolution is a long-term process, perhaps spanning generations, then the prevalence of counter-revolutionary consciousness is a persistent threat. The difficulty and timescale of such a cultural/ideological change are compounded by the fact that the process of revolution will only be complete when it has occurred everywhere. So the revolution was under constant threat from counter revolutionaries, both at home and abroad.

These internal and external threats place the revolution on a constant war footing with its opponents and this shapes the institutional organisation of the state mechanisms used to deliver the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin never completed *The State and Revolution*, since it was superseded by the reality of the unfolding revolution. He died in 1924 whilst the revolution was in its infancy and was confined to the territory of the former Russian Empire. The Russian revolution did not immediately trigger a global revolution, and ineffective Bolshevik-style 1919 uprisings were put down in Germany and Hungary. The USSR's isolation was to create problems for Lenin's successors and for the revolutionary movement, not least the question of whether a proletarian revolution could succeed if it were confined to only one country (however large). As early as 1919, the 'Comintern', or Third International, was established in

Moscow to promote global revolution through supporting genuinely revolutionary groups and agents throughout the world. The clandestine activity of professional revolutionaries that had characterised Lenin's early life became a career path for world revolutionaries. They went to Moscow to absorb doctrine and to perfect key skills, or they were influenced by Moscow-trained agents, tasked with founding communist parties across the world. Lenin's successors, especially Stalin, became the leaders of a global movement based in the world's first socialist state. But the relationship between Moscow and those other parties was to become a complex issue, especially with the rise of communist parties in countries that were also seeking to overthrow the dominance of western imperial powers. This issue was particularly important for the second leader of a communist revolution and the only figure to rival Lenin in this role, Mao Tse-Tung.

### **Revolution and the challenge of imperialism – the development of Mao's Leninism**

As with Lenin, the challenge of imperialism was central to Mao's political and revolutionary theory, but in ways that extended beyond Lenin. His thought encompassed the difficult relationship between leadership of the first socialist revolution and the subaltern status of the Chinese Communist Party, until its triumph in 1949 and Mao's separation from the dominance of Moscow in the 1950s. Lenin saw imperialism as the most recent development of global capitalism that explained the resilience of the European capitalist powers and the onset of an inter-capitalist war. For Mao, imperialism was the lived experience of his political formation, from the impact of Japanese expansionism in the 1890s and the western imperial 'concessions' on Chinese territory that persisted beyond the republic and World War I. These treaty-based limitations of Chinese sovereign power reinforced China's subordinate status at the hands of the superior military might of western powers. Although China's dealings with the western powers were disguised in the form of legal agreements, they reflected the unequal capabilities of the respective parties. China was forced to accept conditions that were nationally humiliating, and which continued to complicate international relations into the late 20th century, especially with regard to Hong Kong.

Mao's intellectual formation was also deeply influenced by the wider imperialism of ideas as much as the exploitative power of economic imperialism. His early education in classical Chinese thought was supplemented by influential western thinkers as China opened to the west and recognised the relative success of western economic and technological development. Many Chinese thinkers turned to western ideas for theories of modernisation to account for China's relative decline since the early 18th century, and to search for a manifesto for rapid technological and social change. This ambition was further inspired by

the Japanese crash course in modernisation. In a few short decades, this led Japan from almost complete cultural and economic isolation to becoming a modern military power that could decisively defeat the Russian tsar's navy in 1905. Marxist ideas were part of that western-fuelled ferment of thinking about modernisation. However, from 1917 onwards, Marxism (under Lenin's leadership) ceased to be just a theory of modernity and became a global revolutionary project directed from Moscow. The survival of the October Revolution and the Red Army victory in the civil war provided evidence for Lenin and his followers that their particular analysis of the challenge of late imperialist capitalism as a revolutionary moment was correct, and gave them an authority over communists in all parts of the world. Lenin had shown the way, and his leadership mantle was subsequently assumed by Stalin. Other, less developed communist struggles had to follow that lead and acknowledge the authority of Moscow. The Bolshevik revolution and the 'Moscow line' provided an undoubted template for successful struggle, to be followed by loyal communist cadres throughout the world. Mao was initially no exception in this mould, although the peculiar circumstances of China's path to revolution were to challenge that loyalty to Moscow.

The fortunes of China's small domestic Communist Party changed following its expulsion from the cities of the eastern seaboard by Chiang Kai-Shek. As the party and its forces retreated deep into the countryside, the character of its role as a proletarian revolutionary party changed. There was an increasing focus on the peasantry as a revolutionary class, alongside the urban proletariat. This inspired different responses from the leadership of the party, and it was in this context that Mao emerged as an increasingly important figure. China's situation shaped his early theoretical writings. The Communists' move from a civil war against the Guomindang (KMT) to an imperial/colonial war against the Japanese from 1937 also transformed attention away from the directions coming from Moscow to the struggle for survival against a technologically advanced foreign foe. Mao's theoretical works are relatively unsophisticated endorsements of Leninism in terms of fundamental theory and analysis. Texts such as 'On Contradiction' (1937) are basically explanatory essays applying Leninist concepts to China's experience. Underlying this apparent deference, there remained the obvious fact that the 'Moscow line' was another western importation, offering their wisdom for China's redemption. And, whilst Mao stayed loyal to Stalin's role as the supreme leader of the global revolution, it was also clear that his own thinking was more deeply focused on the particular challenges of the Chinese experience. For him, the Soviet model was only a model at the most general level. Mao's loyalty was no more than a form of filial piety, which he did not feel for Stalin's successors, especially after having led his own successful revolution with the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The challenge of imperialism was not just exposed by Leninist analysis. It was something that was reinforced by the Comintern and its interwar focus on Europe as the primary site for the continuation of the proletarian revolution.

Imperialism had echoes within the language and structures of the global revolutionary movement and its attitude towards the underdeveloped economies of the Far East.

Building a revolution in China required Mao to focus on the particular challenges of an undeveloped peasant economy that had been the site of a major war theatre from 1937 to 1945, as well as a two-decade civil war stretching before and after the conflict. The realities and legacy of imperialism encouraged Mao to look to the 'contradictions' within China's recent political and historical experience for signs of the revolutionary possibilities and strategies. In turn, these new opportunities changed the Communist emphasis to liberating the masses from the tyranny of imperialism and its political forms throughout East and South East Asia. Central to Mao's revolutionary theory was the place of the peasant masses and their relationship to the party.

### *The role of the peasants*

The peasantry appear early on in Mao's writings, largely as a result of his early familiarity with peasant life as child and as a result of fieldwork amongst the peasants recounted in his 'Report on The Peasant Movement in Hunan' (1927). The peasants were to retain a special and elevated place in his thinking that is novel within Marxism. For Marx and Engels, the agricultural peasantry were a leftover of the incomplete modernisation of western capitalist societies. The growth of the urban-industrial bourgeoisie was displacing them as an important force in history. The peasantry remained largely trapped in a feudal mode of production, and as such a potential reservoir for reactionary armies, such as the French forces that suppressed the Paris Commune. For Lenin, the situation was more complex, given the huge relative size of the peasantry compared with the still-small industrialised proletariat in Russia. In his address at the Finland Station, he evoked themes that could appeal to farmers as well as workers:

The people need peace; the people need bread; the people need land. And they give you war, hunger, no bread ... We must fight for the socialist revolution, fight to the end, until the complete victory of the proletariat.

Set against that, though, was the peasants' potential as a counter-revolutionary force, evident especially during the civil war and the New Economic Plan period.

For Mao's China, the peasantry formed the majority of the population and, without a process of rapid industrialisation, that was likely to remain the case for a long time into the future. (China did not become a majority urban population until about 2000.) This obviously raised a central Marxist question: was China remotely close to the historical-material conditions essential for a proletarian revolution? Furthermore, the limited size and extent of the industrial

proletariat challenged the idea of a sufficiently developed revolutionary consciousness amongst the masses or within the proletariat itself. The educated offspring of the small bourgeois class might be the basis of a revolutionary intelligentsia that could be incorporated into the party, but they too were few in number. Mao first made sweeping statements in 1927 about the role of the peasants as a revolutionary class:

The present upsurge of the peasant movement is a colossal event. In a very short time ... several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves. Every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade will be put to the test, to be accepted or rejected as they decide. There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing? Or to stand in their way and oppose them? Every Chinese is free to choose, but events will force you to make the choice quickly. (Mao 1966, p. 53)

The peasants are the undoubted vehicle of revolution in China because of their numbers as the foot soldiers of the revolutionary struggle, and because they became the key basis for supply of the Communist Party as it retreated deep into the countryside during the 1930s civil war, moving ever further away from the urban centres that were held by the Guomindang Nationalists.

But how does this conveniently activist stance fit within the Marxist framework? Can a revolutionary status of the peasantry be retained within a Marxist–Leninist framework? Mao's slender ventures into theoretical work aimed to interpret orthodox Leninism in a sufficiently broad light so as to encompass a revolutionary role for the peasants. Contradictions remain the motor of historical change and development in Leninist thought. But for Mao these need to be seen as the actual material contradictions of Chinese society and not some idealised or generic view of the contradictions found in late 19th-century European economies. The struggles of China's peasants against exploitative landlords were the basis for the fierce class oppositions necessary for revolution. These contradictions were exacerbated by the interference of foreign imperial powers such as Britain, France, Germany and Japan – all of whom sought to keep China weak in order to exploit labour and resources, whilst at the same time dominating domestic markets for manufactured goods.

The normal process of material development within an economy that (in an earlier age) would have resulted in industrialisation, urbanisation and the development of a proletarian class (with the appropriate class consciousness) was thus frustrated by imperialism. Mao and his colleagues recognised that a proletarian consciousness was latent, rather than developed, in China. But this

was precisely because of the impact of imperialism. Imperialism might have appeared to postpone the development of revolutionary consciousness until such a time as domestic capitalist modernisation had taken place in China. Yet, Mao was to argue that this was not the case at all, because imperialism had the effect of shifting the burden of being the revolutionary class directly onto the peasants themselves. In countries like China, imperialism was unleashed in a form that accelerated Lenin's insights, and arguably shifted the site of global revolution to those imperial possessions. The advantage of the peasantry under imperialism was that they did not have a pre-revolutionary consciousness that needed to be overcome to make them the vehicle of the revolution. Nor were China's peasantry potentially counter-revolutionary, although some of the small-landowning peasants posed that risk. Indeed, the significance of the 'Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan' (1927) was precisely to show that the peasants had already demonstrated their ability to function as a revolutionary class and not merely an obstacle to change as a leftover from feudalism.

In a later piece from 1958, Mao explains why the peasants remain an important revolutionary class:

Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are 'poor and blank'. This may seem a bad thing, but in reality, it is a good thing. Poverty gives rise to the desire for changes, the desire for action and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written: the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted. (Mao 1966, p. 16)

Mao's claim about the peasants being 'poor and blank' is an important clue to his thinking. The 'blankness' is the absence of any developed counter-revolutionary consciousness that might pose an opposition to the consciousness-leading role of the party. The party cadres, or local party leaders, had to direct the masses of the peasants so that they were not victims of counter-revolutionary ideologies and forces such as the Nationalist Guomindang. This was to be achieved by party cadres immersing themselves in the lives of peasants and in their local struggles, and learning from that experience. Because of their material conditions, namely grinding poverty, the peasantry are constantly open to the message of the revolutionary party.

Mao emphasises the struggle against poverty in a way that departs from orthodox Marxism. For European Marxists, poverty was merely a consequence of the fundamental exploitative relations of mature capitalism, whereas exploitation was the real issue. For Mao, exploitation remains important but poverty becomes a direct driver of revolutionary consciousness and the opportunity to eradicate it the motive for revolution. This is especially so because the structure of imperialism made the sources of exploitation ever more remote from the experience of the exploited, in ways that were not true of more traditional

(and inherently local) feudal exploitation. Poor peasants, seeking to improve their desperate material condition, had a sufficient motivation for revolutionary action, so long as it was subject to the discipline of the party. For all of Mao's celebration of the peasants and their experience, the leading position of the party remained unchallenged in his thought. A centrally organised and disciplined party of professional revolutionaries, on Lenin's template, was never challenged by Mao, however much it needed to be accommodated to the circumstances of China's peasant economy. The relationship between the peasants as the revolutionary class in China under imperialism and the party was to be one of Mao's constant preoccupations, even into his later years and the Cultural Revolution.

### *The peasants, the masses and the challenge of liberalism*

Mao's focus on the extreme poverty and unremitting labour of the peasants struck a chord with other Asian and African national liberation struggles, which saw the interests of the imperial powers as the source of domination over the people, and their complete exclusion from the benefits of economic development. Yet, his position also raised complex issues for a Marxist revolutionary. Whilst the material conditions of the oppressed is an obvious feature of exploitation, the Marxist tradition has always rejected the idea that their hostility to capitalism is a moral condemnation, or one that is reducible to capitalism's denial of rights of individuals, or judgements about the low welfare levels of masses of individuals. If the key problem was the denial of rights, then rights could be extended; indeed, radical liberals made precisely this argument. What is wrong with capitalism is that in its primitive forms it fails to recognise the equal human rights of all. The liberal solution is political emancipation and the extension of rights. For other liberals (such as the utilitarians, influenced by Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill) the issue was not rights but low social welfare and its maldistribution across people. In each case, the solution was not revolution and the overthrow of the capitalist system but reform and redistribution, leading erstwhile revolutionaries into the Marxist heresy of revisionism.

For Mao, the problem of poverty is the common motivating force of the peasantry and this deprivation has its roots in the system of private landlords owning almost all property in land. But focusing on peasant poverty is not a concession to individualism and liberalism, because in China poverty is a unifying force within the revolutionary class, and it is class struggle that ultimately matters. For Mao, his turn towards the peasants is a further, double-emphasised rejection of liberalism and individualism. In a short piece entitled 'Combat Liberalism' (1937), Mao rejects the idea of the individual as a rights bearer and liberal ideas such as free speech and discussion. These ideas are a form of 'petty-bourgeois selfishness' that places the claims of the individual above those of the unity of the party and the revolutionary collective. Mao praises discipline above

the assertion of self or freedom, and advocates the overcoming of the personal perspective as a potential threat to the interests of the revolutionary class or its party. The disciplined party member subordinates their personal interest to the interest of the peasant masses and the party as its leader. They overcome the idea of a person as the subject of rights or welfare that preoccupies liberal thinkers.

Mao's focus on the extreme and pervasive poverty of the peasants, and their 'blankness', is a celebration of the impersonality of class membership and the overcoming of the idea of the subject of liberal moralism. He is indifferent to the claims of individuals and sees the world in terms of these classes in conflict. Whilst this stance is common to all Marxists, it is more extreme in the case of Mao because China's peasants lack the formation of western conceptual superstructure, such as Christianity, which legitimised social relations by appealing to a world beyond time in which all individuals' lives would be redeemed and all injustices would be rectified. This strong form of anti-humanism, and the denial of the subject as a bearer of rights or interests independently of their class position, was later to inspire many radical French social theorists during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution.

An absence of concern for the individual members of the peasantry and the need to suppress any liberal individualist prejudices amongst the party cadres are both celebrated in Mao's account of the violence of the peasant associations against landlords and others in his 'The Peasant Movement in Hunan' (1937). The revolutionary spirit of the peasants is demonstrated by the ways in which they use violence to overcome injustice. But Mao also uses these stories of punishment – many of which were to become commonplace during the Cultural Revolution – to silence those who argue against the peasants' violence and what he calls the 'Going Too Far' misconception. In a famous statement reproduced in the *Little Red Book*, Mao claims:

[A] revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind and courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another ... Without using the greatest force, the peasants cannot possibly overthrow the deep-rooted authority of the landlords which has lasted for thousands of years. The rural areas need a mighty revolutionary upsurge, for it alone can rouse the people in their millions to become a powerful force. (Mao 2014, pp. 18–19)

For Mao, the peasants have the advantage of being a mass that is united by its common experience of poverty and being blank in terms of different ideological accounts of its own condition (which might otherwise have tended to fragment that common class identity). Mao does not deny that there are sources of fragmentation and false consciousness amongst the peasants. Indeed, he

recognises the different layers of class identity from the peasantry through the feudal classes to the urban proletariat. But he claims that the peasant experience was the most authentic, to the point that he feared that the revolutionary consciousness of peasant fighters was corrupted by too much time in the urban areas during the conduct of revolutionary war. The authenticity of peasant revolutionary consciousness made it particularly appropriate for party cadres to lead it in its struggle against the imperialist global order. For Mao, the real risks of fragmentation, corruption and false consciousness are more pressing within the party itself, and the experience of the peasants is presented as a model for party discipline.

### *The mass line and the party*

The peasantry as a revolutionary class is Mao's response to the challenge of whether a genuine Marxist–Leninist revolution was possible in China. Fundamentally, the peasants provided the mass support that supplemented the proletariat in creating a genuine revolution. In this he distances himself from Lenin, whereas in his commitment to the central political agency of the party he remains an orthodox Leninist. The party has an exclusive mission as the vehicle for political action and a role in leading the masses in their revolution. This, of course, raises the question of the relationship between the peasant masses and the party – given Mao's celebration of the revolutionary actions of the peasant associations in his 'Peasant Movement in Hunan' (1927) report, where the associations acted independently of the party and its cadres.

The answer to this question is complex, especially given the way in which Mao created a leadership cult around himself early in his career and exploited this at various times to challenge rivals and potential successors. He also flirted with using populism against the party bureaucracy at a number of points following the 1949 establishment of the PRC, and most significantly during the Cultural Revolution. Mao followed Stalin in his conception of personal leadership, but, like Stalin, he remained enough of a Leninist to leave the authority of the party unchallenged. Where he differed from Lenin was in the way he linked the party to the masses. For Lenin, the relationship between the party and the proletariat was a hierarchical and centralist one: the party was the arbiter of the consciousness of the proletariat, and so the unchallenged leader of the workers. For Mao, there is a more complex and less hierarchical relationship between the party and the peasant masses, which is manifested in the idea of 'the mass line' and which is captured in the following passage from the *Little Red Book*:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily 'from the masses, to the masses'. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the

masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge. (Mao 1966, p. 57)

The mass line is both an account of the revolutionary legitimacy of a policy and action and an account of party discipline. In terms of legitimacy, the masses are seen as the active agent in revolutionary change and the party cadres need to embed themselves in their midst in order to learn from them how to advance the revolution. In doing this the party cadres must avoid two errors: 'tailism' and 'commandism.' The former is the idea that the party cadres must just follow whatever the peasant masses appear to be doing, as the tail of an animal always follows it wherever it goes. This failing misunderstands the dynamic relationship between the masses and the party, whose task it is to lead the revolution by its professional service of the revolution. The critique of 'tailism' is also an assault on a naïve form of direct democracy, where the opinion of the masses at a given point becomes the will of the people, which it is the party's task to receive and implement. Mao was no democrat. Policymaking is a dynamic relationship between the masses and the party, where the party develops and systemises the ideas of the masses, and then disseminates them through education and propaganda. The important point here is the proximity and interconnectiveness of the party and the masses.

It is equally important to avoid a second failing that is common for any technocratic policy elite or group of professional revolutionaries, namely 'commandism.' This is the idea that the party cadres or the party central leadership have a special technocratic role independently of the masses, and are able to direct the masses towards their real interests. It is a persistent danger for Leninist parties, which are by definition a professional revolutionary elite. Mao was suspicious of the tendency of a revolutionary intelligentsia to capture the party, and later its bureaucracy, so as to impose its own ideas on the masses as their class interest. His experience with the peasants in Hunan exposed a populist tendency that was lacking in Lenin and especially Stalin (who used the secret police as the primary vehicle for intra-party discipline). Mao also used secret police tactics and had similar enforcers. But he retained and cultivated a direct line of communication to the masses over the heads of key rivals, echoing the idea of populist leadership expressing the authentic voice of the people against a corrupt political elite. It is in this context that the mass line becomes a form of party discipline.

The assertion of the revolutionary authority of the masses as the ultimate source of policymaking was reinforced by the use of re-education amongst the

peasants, as well as self-denunciations and the use of punishments that had their roots in the peasant associations. Mao's report on the 'Peasant Movement in Hunan' (1927) described the wearing of conical paper hats as a ritual humiliation, and that became a familiar sight during the purge of the party leadership and bureaucracy in the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Similarly, the return to the land to work amongst the peasants was both a standard punishment for party cadres with erroneous tendencies in their political thinking, and a way of disciplining the urban youth, who went from city schools and universities to work with the peasants in the fields. The unleashing of popular violence was often celebrated as part of demonstrating mass revolutionary spirit, but it remained something that Mao controlled carefully. Whilst there is undoubtedly a populist tendency in his thought and leadership style, this was to reinforce his position within the party, and not to undermine the position of the party as the vehicle of political and military control of the masses.

For all of Mao's celebration of the masses, the doctrine of the mass line does not liberate them from party discipline, or recognise the people as a totally independent source of power. As with most populists (who appeal to an ideal of the people as the basis for their claim to power), the masses were not vested with a distinct authority, nor did they have a clear and conscious identity that could exercise any authority independently of the party: 'if the masses alone are active without a strong leading group to organize their activity properly, such activity cannot be sustained for long, or carried forward in the right direction' (Mao 1966, p. 58). So Mao remained a revolutionary committed to overthrow the existing imperialist order as a condition of emancipating the masses. Indeed, towards the end of his life it was clear that revolution was not just a protracted event prior to the institution of a dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism. Instead, it was a continual process whereby new contradictions would emerge from society that needed to be overcome by revolutionary struggle. His model for that revolutionary struggle was inextricably linked to the protracted revolutionary war that dominated his life until 1949.

### Violence and the conduct of revolution

Perhaps Mao's most well-known phrase is that 'Every Communist must grasp the truth: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun"' (Mao 1966, p. 28). It became a global revolutionary slogan in the 1960s and 1970s amongst new Maoist communist groups in the west and in the developing world. They reacted against the sclerotic statism of the USSR as much as the imperialism of the United States at war in Vietnam. Mao appeared to offer a more authentic revolutionary spirit, one that was detached from the second-class capitalism of the post-Stalin USSR, and more appropriate for the rising peoples of the postcolonial world. His aphorism reflects the importance of the protracted war against the Kuomintang, regional warlords and the Japanese in building a

revolution and a unified state in China. Yet, Mao's realist claim is also a familiar one about the nature and constitution of political power in a violent conflict.

From the mid-1920s to the late 1940s, China was in a state of constant war. Across five earlier decades, too (1859–1916), China had barely seen a period of sustained civil peace due to the wars and uprisings that marked the decline of the Qing Dynasty and foreign incursions, plus the chaos of the first republican regime of Yuan Shikai. Consequently, the Chinese revolution was not an uprising within a stable but capitalist state; it occurred within a territory that had a disputed government, imperial interference from European powers, and few of the trappings of an effective state. It was only in the last years of the revolutionary wars following the defeat of Japan (1947–1949) that the Communists' struggle with the Kuomintang became a genuine civil war between a government and a civil opponent seeking to overthrow it. Unlike the Bolshevik revolution led by Lenin, there could be no simple seizure of power. Both Mao's communists and his KMT opponents, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, built their political power in the context of mutual struggle and war against a foreign power. Also, whereas a bitter civil war followed after Lenin's seizure of power in a *coup d'état* (and as Russia withdrew from World War I), Mao's revolution was forged throughout in the context of pre-existing war. In consequence, Mao's early and most important writings on revolution are writings on war. In these works he carved out a reputation as one of the most important theorists of war in the 20th century, abandoning the Clausewitzian model of war. His approach came to shape thinking about colonial wars of liberation, insurgencies and the organisation of terrorist wars into the 21st century.

### *Revolutionary war in China – rejecting the Clausewitzian trinity*

Like Lenin, Mao was a careful reader of Clausewitz. He fully understood how the challenges of a revolutionary war, especially one conducted in the context of a huge territory such as China, without a strong central state opponent, could not fit into the principal categories of a Clausewitzian war. Although many of his writings on revolutionary war are directed at the specifics of the struggle against Japan, and were written to help the party and its army to understand the new challenges of the conflict, he also contested three central elements of the Clausewitzian view – Clausewitz's 'trinity' of war-shaping forces; the importance of territoriality; and the impossibility of a war of annihilation.

For Clausewitz and his followers, war was an activity pursued by relatively stable modern states to achieve state interests. Even the American Civil War was a war of secession between two self-proclaimed states. Although this idea was tested severely during World War I's mass conflicts, it still remained the model for most military strategists and high commands. Yet, Mao saw that many of its presuppositions failed to apply in the context of a revolutionary war. Clausewitz's trinity of state (or government), army and people placed

most emphasis on the state as the source of policy. The army was the institution that pursued and implemented policy in war, by the concentration and application of overwhelming violence in engagements where rival armies confront each other.

For Mao, the role of the state gave way to that of the people: 'The revolutionary war is the war of the masses; only mobilising the masses and relying on them can wage war' (Mao 1966, p. 40). This does not challenge the idea that 'war is the continuation of politics' (Mao 1966, p. 30) but it transforms the substance of the claim. The mass of the people is the source of the revolution and therefore war is their policy, as opposed to the professional armies of the imperialist powers, who are obeying the orders of their superiors, whatever their view of their orders might be. According to Mao, this gave the Chinese an advantage over the Japanese Imperial Army, and it underpins his confidence in the long-term victory in that conflict. By exercising the power of war against imperialist aggression, the whole population assert themselves as a people with a single revolutionary will, and overcome the contradictions that existed in the fragmented and weakened state of China before the revolutionary war. The people are also the source and sustenance of the army and eventually of the new revolutionary state that was to be built following victory in the civil war in 1949.

In this way, Mao reverses the order of the Clausewitzian trinity, with the people given priority over the state but close parity with the army. The relationship between the people and the army should be close and carefully cultivated, unlike Clausewitz's suspicion of the people as a potentially unruly threat to military professionalism and discipline. For Mao, the people provide the manpower and the supply and provisioning of the army. The relationship between the army and peasants was something that the party sought to cultivate to ensure those logistics. Given that much of the war involved movement, Mao argued that this connection proved an advantage over both the Japanese and their puppet occupation government, as well as over the Kuomintang, who could not rely on such support outside of some urban areas and were often seen as alien and hostile occupying forces.

The relationship between the army and the people was also more nuanced than the Clausewitzian ideal. Mao was determined to build a professional revolutionary army and saw the necessity of confronting the Japanese and the Nationalists during the civil war in traditional engagements, using all the technology of modern warfare. This would take time and resources but was always vulnerable to the progress of events. So the boundaries between the masses and the army remained fluid, particularly during guerrilla war and strategic defence and retreat. The regular army units would sometimes need to disperse and engage in guerrilla actions alongside irregular peasant fighters. They could often disappear into the peasant masses until the opportunity to re-form emerged. This fluid identity was not seen as a threat to military discipline and order but as an essential response to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the revolutionary war.

### *Territoriality and protracted war*

The exploitation of territory for strategic advantage is an essential feature of the Clausewitzian model of war, but it has a different role in revolutionary war. The theatre of the Chinese revolutionary war was huge in size, and this transforms the idea of territoriality and replaces it with the people. The revolutionary people are not responding (just) to territorial incursion, and the goal of conflict is not simply to expel the external invader and return to a territorial *status quo*. Of course, the imperialist powers, whether Japan or the western powers in their treaty 'concessions' areas, are a threat to the masses. However, Mao saw the real threat in the idea of imperialism not the temporary incursion. In 'On Protracted War' (1937) he saw the struggle against Japan as a contribution to the class struggle of Japanese people against their military and imperial elite. The goal of victory was as much the overthrow of the imperial power through revolution in Japan as it was the expulsion of an alien, occupying force.

The narrative of occupation was to become a more important issue in the long-term legitimation of the PRC regime, but it was not high on the agenda of Mao and the party. Furthermore, where for Clausewitz taking and holding territory was essential to the defeat of an opponent, it became less important in the revolutionary war. Indeed, when confronting the 'encirclement and suppression' strategy of Chiang Kai-Shek's army, the Communists' key strategy was not to hold territory and be vulnerable to encirclement but rather to be mobile and avoid it. This stretched the supply and communication lines of the opposing army and exploited the depth of space made possible by the vastness of the Chinese interior.

Mao was determined to counter the overly traditional view of some of his colleagues who saw the loss of territory as a failure. Against that view he developed the concept of the 'strategic retreat' as an active (rather than passive) strategy, because it denies the enemy the opportunity to take and hold territory and to concentrate forces for a massive attack. Territory is transformed from being one of the goods that the military strategy is designed to secure and protect. Instead, it becomes one of the weapons used to diminish the advantages of a technologically advanced and numerically superior enemy. By spreading the theatre and extending lines of supply and communication, the superior advantages of the imperialist army are weakened, and the defensive strategy of the revolutionary army is transformed into an offensive one. The central concept is movement, which again weakens the control of the battle space by the superior force.

Alongside the spatial dimension of territoriality, Mao also explores the temporal dimension of the revolutionary war in the appropriately named 'On Protracted War' (1937). He emphasises here that the time dimension of a revolutionary war is different to that of a Clausewitzian war, which is concentrated and time-limited. The ultimate goal of the revolutionary war is the creation of a revolutionary people and the overthrow of the imperialist order. The immediate focus of that might well be the incursion of Imperial Japanese forces in

1937. Yet, even at that time, Mao saw this as only a dimension of the wider revolutionary struggle against imperialism as a social form of late capitalism. As the peasant masses were the revolutionary people, they had an historical role that was not dependent on the success or failure of individual military engagements. The final overthrow of the forces of imperialism might take a long time. Indeed, if one links the agrarian war, struggles against the warlords, and actions against the Kuomintang and Japanese as a single anti-imperialist struggle, it clearly lasted more than three decades. Throughout that time, the Chinese masses were developing their revolutionary consciousness and identity as a people. Thus, the passage of time was an advantage to the revolutionary forces, whereas the constant attrition against an apparently undefeatable army sapped the morale, resources and will amongst those forced to defend imperial interests.

This is not simply a naïve denial of the suffering of revolutionary forces in this protracted struggle, although Mao could appear rather cavalier about the well-being of the individuals who made up the peasant masses, the guerrillas and the regular army. Rather it was a reassertion of the class-based conception of political change that underlay Mao's account of the war. The struggle is not between aggregates of individuals whose welfare is being pursued or protected by war; it is about the inevitable overcoming of historical contradictions in China. A failure to defeat imperialism prolongs the exploitation that underpins the present conflict and promises only further conflict in the future. Furthermore, the people have nowhere to retreat to in order to avoid that conflict, unlike a temporarily invading army that is limited by the resources and manpower it can devote to this specific engagement. Time was on the side of the Chinese people, and their numbers were also a key advantage. They were able to absorb losses much more effectively in their own territory than an invading power, who faced the risk of domestic uprising or opposition from waging a protracted war of attrition.

### *Justice and a war of annihilation*

Unlike Clausewitz, and perhaps surprisingly given Mao's rejection of the moral categories of liberal individualism, he nevertheless speaks of revolutionary war as being a just war:

History shows that wars are divided into two kinds, just and unjust. All wars that are progressive are just, and all wars that impede progress are unjust. We communists oppose all unjust wars that impede progress, but we do not oppose progressive, just wars. Not only do we Communists not oppose just wars: we actively participate in them. (Mao 1966, p. 27)

What makes a war just or unjust is where it stands in the court of history. Wars such as World War I are considered unjust because they were between imperial

powers vying for positional advantage in the exploitation of the masses. A war to overthrow imperialism is both just and required, because it removes exploitation and domination. The justice of war is defined in terms of the interests of the revolutionary class or people, and not in terms of the individual rights and interests of members of that class. For Mao, even more than for some western Marxists (like Louis Althusser), the concept of the individual as a site of moral concern is completely absent: he does not even attempt a derivation of moral significance from class position. The justice of going to war (*jus ad bellum*) is settled by the historical role of class agency in terms of the revolutionary overthrow of exploitation and domination.

Mao has less to say on the just conduct of war (*jus in bello*). The emphasis he places on class interest, and on the masses as the arbiters of that – see his discussion of punishments by the peasant associations in ‘The Peasant Movement in Hunan’ – suggests that the concept of justice in the conduct of war gives way to the justice of the struggle. This is further illustrated by the place of annihilation in his concept of revolutionary war. However, even here we need to be careful not to introduce inappropriate moralistic concepts into Mao’s thought. The concept of annihilation means total destruction of the enemy and is familiar from Clausewitz. The task of an engagement is to annihilate the enemy as an opponent by destroying its capacity to fight or oppose the will of the victor; it does not necessarily mean killing all of the enemy. But, in the context of a revolution, it makes no sense for one’s opponents to be stopped and disarmed if they are then able to regroup and re-enter the field at some stage. Whereas Clausewitz saw war as a relatively frequent activity amongst states who may be frequent belligerents, Mao inevitably saw the revolutionary war as existential.

The imperial classes need to be overcome once and for all in order for the revolution to be effective, and so the annihilation of the fighting power of the opponent is only one element of their annihilation. The long-term overcoming of a class opposition completes the process of annihilation and, as with Lenin’s view of overcoming the state, this might require a considerable amount of violence and death. But there is another equally important part of this process of annihilation that has more relevance in relation to the immediate engagement. The forces of the imperialists are ultimately drawn from the people. Even in the case of the war against the Japanese, Chinese forces of the collaborationist regime of Wang Jingwei formed an important part of the forces in the field. These troops could be annihilated by being turned to the interests of the revolutionary people and incorporated into the regular Red Army or into guerrilla forces that continued the war. The total annihilation of such forces was also important because it was a major source of supply of materiel in order to continue the conflict and arm the people. The nature of revolutionary war entails that annihilation is the only appropriate long-term response to an enemy, and that it is always justified to use as much force and violence as necessary to overcome this enemy.

## Guerrilla wars

Mao's account of guerrilla war was to be one of his most closely studied works on war and revolution, not least because of the importance of such forces and operations in the anti-colonial wars of liberation following the end of World War II. Guerrilla warfare was not new or unique to China. The name goes back to the insurgent and irregular groups who fought the French occupying forces in Spain during the Napoleonic Wars. Mao's famous essay 'On Guerrilla Warfare' (1937) locates the rise of this mode of combat within a history of war from the time of Clausewitz, but stresses the new importance of guerrilla operations within the context of revolutionary wars against imperialism. Guerrilla wars are asymmetric at the most fundamental level. Armies are often unequal in numbers, resources or technology, without being fundamentally unmatched. Napoleon showed how a numerically smaller army could still defeat a larger one. The asymmetry of numbers was overcome by skill, initiative and the drive of senior commanders. Yet, even in such cases the opponents are still fundamental equals in being national armies with populations, governments and resources behind them. The fundamental asymmetry for Mao is that the revolutionary army is not simply less well equipped or less professional than its imperialist opponent, but it is unequal or different in kind. Writing about the relationship between regular forces and guerrilla forces, Mao emphasises that guerrilla forces are appropriate for the period prior to the building of a sufficiently powerful regular army. Guerrillas are both a tactic for conflict in a revolutionary war and a stage in the building of a revolutionary army, which will eventually subsume the guerrilla forces as part of the centrally controlled military. His discussion of guerrilla warfare covers who the guerrillas are, how they are controlled, what they are for, and how they fight.

*Who are the guerrillas?* This question is important because military hierarchies are traditionally hostile to irregular forces, which they regard as tricky to distinguish from bandits and rabble, hard to discipline, and difficult to bring within an ordered battle plan. This discomfort was equally felt by senior Chinese commanders, who were concerned with growing the professionalisation of an effective People's Liberation Army, and party leaders, who feared losing party control over such groups. Mao's lecture defends the necessity of guerrilla forces to the party and shows how they come under the central authority of a mass party revolution. The guerrillas are drawn from seven sources:

- a) From the masses of the people.
- b) From regular army units temporarily detailed for the purpose.
- c) From regular army units permanently detailed.
- d) From the combination of a regular army unit and a unit recruited from the people.

- e) From a local militia.
- f) From deserters from the ranks of the enemy.
- g) From bandits and bandit groups. (Mao 2014, p. 82)

There is a relationship here with regular forces, including regular forces from the opposing side who have deserted or been captured and changed side. But the most important source is the mass of the people and those from the locality in which the guerrillas operate, whether these individuals are from regular forces, militias or local bandits with knowledge and experience of the terrain in which they operate. The ultimate legitimacy of these forces is their link to the people, who will support, shelter and supply them during their operations. This link to the people is especially important because it enables the forces to maintain constant activity and movement, whilst remaining rooted in a source of supply and personnel. In addition, it reinforces morale and the guerrillas' motivation to act in defence of the people they live and fight amongst.

*How are guerrillas controlled?* As a Leninist, Mao was always concerned with maintaining the party's authority amongst the people and exercising firm central control. That said, in the case of guerrilla forces he was not only prepared to relinquish central direction but required the guerrilla forces to act independently.

In guerrilla warfare, small units acting independently play the principal role and there must be no excessive interference with their activities. In orthodox warfare particularly in a moving situation, a certain degree of initiative is accorded subordinates, but in principle, command is centralized. This is done because all units and all supporting arms in all districts must co-ordinate to the highest degree. In the case of guerrilla warfare, this is not only undesirable but impossible. Only adjacent guerrilla units can coordinate their activities to any degree ... But there are no strictures on the extent of the guerrilla activity nor is it primarily characterized by the quality of co-operation of many units. (Mao 2014, p. 68)

This discretion was partly a response to the necessity of the battle space, where the guerrilla forces do not control communications, supply or access to link up with the regular units. Instead, guerrilla forces are expected to create their own initiative and to operate independently within the broad remit of annihilating the enemy's forces and frustrating its ability to concentrate forces for a strike. Mao's guerrilla units were expected to function as small independent armies with their own command structure and plans of engagement that are dictated by the proximity to the enemy in their particular space, and by the resources, terrain and opportunities that are available. The duration and success of a guerrilla unit is down to the commanders and the population that sustains it. Mao did not see such units as merely dispersed forces of the regular army that would be recalled and reunited after a successful engagement. The life and duration

of guerrilla forces would be determined by the concentration of forces facing it. The independence of the guerrillas' command and battle plans meant that a unit being destroyed or its commanders captured or killed could not comprise the central strategy. This part of Mao's theory was to have a considerable influence on the development of terrorist and insurgent operations in later wars, and in shaping the cell structure of revolutionary political groups in the late 20th century.

*What are the guerrilla forces for?* Mao summarises their tasks as follows:

to exterminate small forces of the enemy; to harass and weaken large forces; to attack enemy lines of communications; to establish bases capable of supporting independent operations in the enemy's rear, to force the enemy to disperse his strength; and to co-ordinate all these activities with those of the regular armies on distant battle fronts. (Mao 2014, p. 69)

These types of tactic achieve two main strategic ends. The first is to diversify away from the fundamental objective of a Clausewitzian strategy of concentrating lethal force onto the enemy so as to achieve its annihilation. When a smaller and less powerful force confronts a stronger force, it instead needs to diminish the major power. The goal is not victory or defeat but attrition as a means of annihilation. In a regular conflict, time and personnel are the basic limitations on waging a war of attrition. Yet, in the context of the anti-imperialist war in China, those constraints did not apply to the communists or to the guerrilla groups. Dividing and harassing the enemy's supply lines and communications limit the possibility of concentration, and increase the 'friction' that Clausewitzian generals so feared. A dispersed but active enemy is also harder to concentrate on because there is always more than one point of contact. Mao's strategy is a textbook inversion of the central tenet of Clausewitzian strategy.

The second end of guerrilla strategy is building a mass revolutionary army by training non-regular soldiers to fight the imperialist forces, but also to recognise the context of the imperialist war. Propaganda is one of the central tasks of the guerrilla forces. Propaganda by deed occurs in engaging with the enemy, but their wider propaganda war is advanced by organising the peasant mass as a revolutionary force with the party at its head. As his discussion of 'Protracted War' shows, Mao saw the military campaign against Japan, and later against the Kuomintang, as part of the wider struggle for the liberation of the masses. Building an army and building a revolutionary people went hand in hand and, in Mao's account of guerrilla conflict, this was as important as the harassment of occupying forces.

*How do the guerrillas fight?* The common image of the guerrilla army is of poorly armed but highly motivated columns of peasant soldiers. Yet, Mao also makes clear that effective guerrilla forces need to fight a sophisticated war

deploying communications equipment and the materials necessary to destroy supply routes (such as bridges, roads and railways), as well as engaging in direct attack on the enemy: 'a demolition unit must be organised in each regiment' (Mao 2014, p. 90). This is a model that was to be copied by special forces and commando groups in subsequent wars and in colonial wars in pursuit of the guerrillas and insurgents, as commanders realised that one way to defeat guerrilla forces was to copy and fight like guerrilla forces.

The theatre of engagement for guerrilla conflict is determined by the enemy's deployments. Consequently, guerrilla units are constantly active and mobile, probing the weak points of enemy supply lines and forces but also avoiding the encirclement and suppression tactics of anti-guerrilla operations by regular armies. However, central to Mao's thinking about guerrilla forces and operations was the idea of base areas where they could supply, recuperate, establish medical services and engage in training and propaganda. As Mao writes, 'Propaganda is very important. Every large guerrilla unit should have a printing press and a mimeograph stone, they must also have paper on which to print propaganda leaflets and notices' (Mao 2014, p. 91).

Guerrilla operations require the capacity to fight without a rear area: this is an advantage for guerrillas, but it is also a challenge. So Mao insists that the long-term success of guerrilla operations require base areas that are carefully chosen and can be easily defended. Mountainous areas were ideal as they served as natural fortresses against which regular troops were less effective and not easily concentrated. But the base area also needs to be able to supply food and shelter, as well as additional recruits and space for training. So, whilst mountainous areas are preferable, Mao does not exclude 'plains country' or 'river, lake and bay' areas. The point of contrast between base areas and guerrilla areas is that in guerrilla engagement the task is never to take and occupy territory. Guerrilla units will hopefully establish ties with the local population and benefit from it, but the point is not to hold and defend territory, so the normal distinctions between defensive and offensive operations do not apply to guerrillas: every attack is also a retreat. Base areas are different since these are held in order to sustain the long-term possibility of guerrilla operations and to provide the economic support that a complex campaign relies on. The defence of base areas also creates opportunities for guerrilla units. The base area serves as a target for the enemy, but because of its location it should ideally divide the enemy's forces in seeking to overcome it, unlike a fortress, where defence is concentrated within it. This fragmentation of the enemy's forces allows guerrilla units to weaken supply lines and communications, making direct conflict more successful when finally required.

The focus on guerrilla war should not distort the historical understanding of the Red Army as a regular army in conflict with the Japanese Imperial Army or the Nationalist Army between 1945 and 1949. The Red Army fought regular engagements and built itself into a large and powerful fighting force, even if it did not always prevail in the field. The guerrilla forces played an important

part in the struggle against Japan and the Nationalist forces, vindicating much of what Mao argued in 'On Guerrilla War'. However, the long-term importance of that work is not solely its role as a rallying cry, or as a statement of strategy, but rather its long-term impact as a model for subsequent guerrilla, insurgent and 'terrorist' fighting and organisation in the future. Mao was an important figure in the reshaping of military strategy and tactics following World War II and in the context of the nuclear age that rendered problematic, if not impossible, the large-scale wars of position and manoeuvre that were familiar from eastern Europe, and from the Chinese war of 1937–1945. The insurgents in the colonial wars for South East Asia, ranging from the collapse of the Dutch and French Indo-Chinese empires to the Communist insurgency against the British in Malaya, all adopted aspects of the cellular division of authority and the tactics that the communist guerrillas had deployed against Japan and the Nationalists. As western militaries were forced to confront the tactics of guerrillas, they adjusted their own tactics accordingly, often deploying counter-insurgency methods that mirrored precisely those deployed by their guerrilla opponents.

### **Leninism and Maoism in the modern era**

The legacy of Lenin and Mao is the main legacy of Marxism on 20th-century politics and international affairs, however unfair that attribution to Marx might be in the view of some Marxist scholars. Lenin and Mao have dominated the theory and conduct of revolutionary politics, even amongst their opponents and those tasked with confronting their challenge politically or militarily. In international affairs they enjoy the peculiar status of being both a problem with which international theorists have to wrestle and a source of ideas that have informed the way in which political and internationalist theorists make sense of world politics. However much anti-Marxist critics of Lenin like to depict him using the racially loaded idea that he is 'Asiatic' and not therefore truly western, an increasingly important recognition has developed that sees Lenin and Mao as representatives of different hemispheres and cultural presuppositions. A racially loaded characterisation as 'Asiatic' is irrelevant when applied to Mao, who was Chinese and deeply proud of that, combining a strong nationalist streak with his revolutionary communism. This brief concluding section distinguishes how Leninism and Maoism are still a problem for international affairs from their contribution to international political theory.

#### *Leninism and Maoism as an international problem*

From the very beginning, revolutionary Russia (which soon became the USSR) was a challenge to the western global order. Lenin's 1917 withdrawal from World War I destabilised the previous British–French–Russian alliance against

Germany and Austria at time of uncertainty for the western powers, prior to the arrival of U.S. forces on the battlefield. Western powers were quick to intervene in the revolution and the civil war, partly in order to retain some eastern pressure on Germany and Austria, as well as destabilising the communist regime that threatened to spread revolution across the rest of Europe. Though real, the threat of such interventions was negligible in the first years of the regime, because it was preoccupied with surviving the civil war and seeking economic stabilisation. By the time of Lenin's death in 1924, his successor, Stalin, was on the way to exercising a dominant position over the USSR and its foreign policy.

Throughout the pre-1941 period of Stalin's rule, the fundamental policy direction was ensuring the stability of the USSR above all else, despite Moscow offering support for nascent communist parties beyond its borders through the Comintern. Communism remained an expansionist and revolutionary creed, but the focus of communists and fellow travellers was supporting the interests of the USSR against its neighbours and imperialist rivals. Stalin claimed to continue the direction of the revolution that had been set by Lenin, however much later historians have sought to separate their positions.

In these years, many western intellectuals visited the USSR and saw a new society, albeit one that was strictly controlled and carefully presented to the outside world. The USSR remained a potential modernist utopia in the eyes of many, especially following the economic collapse of 1929 and the great depression of the 1930s. It attracted overt support from intellectuals, as well as the covert support of those who were to become Soviet agents and assets. The fortunes of the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s became part of the backdrop of E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939). This is one of the founding texts of the realist tradition in international relations, because it sought to overthrow the post-Versailles idealism of the League of Nations.

Yet, whilst some intellectuals saw the USSR as a beacon for the future, others observed the disturbing conduct of the USSR from the inside and began to turn away from the Soviet world view. The experience of the Spanish Civil War (as depicted by George Orwell and Arthur Koestler) began to undermine the faith of many socialists that Soviet communism was anything other than a new source of tyranny. Anti-communism was fuelled by former communists such as James Burnham, who retained a belief in technocratic government but without the millennialist belief in a future revolution.

For intellectuals on the right, Soviet Marxism was an atheistic and 'Asiatic' doctrine that threatened western civilisation, or what came to be known as 'Judeo-Christian' values. This concern with godless communism led many on the right to flirt with fascism and in some cases Nazism, as a restraining force to combat Bolshevism. The experience of World War II complicated how the role of the USSR was understood in global affairs. Stalin at first joined Hitler in partitioning Poland, following the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in 1939. When Hitler attacked the USSR in mid-1941 (to Stalin's initial disbelief), the USSR

became a British ally of necessity, later joined by the USA after Japan's attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and Hitler's declaration of war on the USA. In the European theatre, the USSR provided the manpower to sap the strength of the Wehrmacht, following its defeat at Stalingrad in 1943. At the end of the war, Soviet armies dominated much of eastern and central Europe, and the Red Army was established as the only rival to US military power. The brief alliance of convenience soon gave way to a Cold War between the capitalist west and the communist east that dominated international politics until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought an end to the Warsaw Pact. The USSR broke up into its constituent republics in 1991 and Russia re-emerged as a chastened and economically weak state, but one with a huge nuclear arsenal.

The Cold War dominated the post-war study of international relations, and much of the demand for international relations scholars was shaped by the rapid change in circumstance from 1945 to 1948. A key figure at this time in US politics was George F. Kennan (1904–2005), a career diplomat with experience in the Moscow embassy before World War II and one of the leading academic Soviet watchers. He shaped US post-war strategy with his 'Long Telegram' of 1946 and an article, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', in *Foreign Affairs* (1947), famously published anonymously as by 'X'. Kennan argued that the logic of Soviet policy was relentlessly expansionist, but that the Soviet state was insufficiently strong in economic terms to carry this through to world domination. This made the USSR an unstable adversary and risked a collapse into a further war that was doubly problematic once the USSR acquired nuclear weapons. Kennan's response was not to seek the ideological or military defeat of the USSR but to operate a policy of containment. For many anti-communists, this failure to advocate communism's defeat seemed just a form of accommodation to a bipolar world. To many observers, Kennan was a classic Cold Warrior, providing a justification for the long-term US engagement in Europe, whereas for more militant anti-communists he was almost an appeaser.

The implications for realism in international relations followed from Kennan's rejection of the ideological and military defeat of communism, and its replacement with a technical policy problem that saw expansionism as the issue and left the judgement of the evils of the regime to the popular press. Military planners and the new strategy scholars still sought to construct policies and plans for undertaking a limited nuclear war against the Soviets, or mutually assured destruction. But Kennan's influence, and the new realism that had grown across the political spectrum since Carr's 1939 essay, transformed itself into the dominant paradigm of international relations, where all questions were either about the truth of realism or why realism was inadequate.

In all of the changes after 1945, China and Mao's legacy were seen in the terms of the global ideological struggle between the west and communism, to the point that few scholars took China's revolution seriously as anything other than an extension of the global expansionism of the USSR. Interestingly,

Kennan did not have this simplistic view of China and East Asia. He was a sufficiently sophisticated student of Soviet affairs to appreciate that Mao was not simply a delegate of Stalin or just following the Moscow line. Indeed, Kennan became increasingly sceptical of the 'domino theory' model of Asian national liberation struggles, which led to all such anti-colonial wars being seen as continuations of Soviet efforts at domination. The Korean War (1950–1953) was complex. It involved (unacknowledged) Soviet military support and massive Chinese forces intervening to save the North Koreans from defeat. So it appeared to reinforce the model of an expansionist ideology, but without taking account of the difference between communism as a globally expansive doctrine and the USSR being an expansionist power.

China's 1949 revolution and the subsequent cult of Mao certainly had a significant impact on anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles but, apart from intervening in Korea when U.S. forces under MacArthur neared the Chinese border, China otherwise fought only small border wars with India in the 1950s and in the 1960s with the USSR. The Chinese also helped the North Vietnamese struggle to expel the French in the 1950s, and at first also backed the North and the Viet Cong battle in the 1960s against the USA and South Vietnam (although they withdrew from this from 1968 on). In no other respect did China engage in expansionist military adventures (Lovell 2019).

Much international relations scholarship on China continued in a Cold War intellectual frame, although Mao's China failed to behave according to the expectations of scholars. It was only in the 1960s that scholars began to take a serious interest in the domestic base of Mao's mass revolution, as opposed to the broader Soviet-dominated geopolitical framework. The significance of China in international affairs changed radically with its opening to the USA and President Nixon's subsequent visit to meet Mao in 1972. The USA's approach to China was originally conceived as a way of dividing the communist 'bloc', exploiting the growing hostility between China and the USSR that had increased since the death of Stalin. US–China relations remained cool until the end of the Cultural Revolution, following the death of Mao in 1976 and his eventual replacement by Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997).

Deng was a colleague and rival of Mao who became the most important subsequent leader of the PRC, and came to enjoy a respect amongst Chinese people that was equivalent to or greater than that in which Mao is held. Although an uncompromising Communist leader who was prepared to use the PLA against the protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989, he also opened up the Chinese economy to global trade and investment, leading to the spectacular rise in Chinese economic power over the following 40 years. Yet, whilst the crisis year of 1989 saw the beginning of the collapse of the USSR, Deng's China survived Tiananmen Square and went on to achieve spectacular economic growth. China rose from a developing state to a regional power and hundreds of millions of Chinese people left the countryside to move into the new industrial cities, with many also moving out of poverty into middle income status. Eventually China

grew into a global manufacturing hegemon that threatened U.S. economic domination as the largest global economy, a status that China has already assumed.

With China's ascent, international relations scholars have turned their attention from its role as a communist state to simply regarding it as a global superpower that has displaced the USSR and any other imperial power and which now confronts the USA as a challenger if not yet quite an equal. The study of China–U.S. relations centres on concerns about how this bipolar rivalry will impact on peace, international political economy and regional and global international relations. For a sub-discipline that since the 1940s has focused on U.S. power and its impact on the world, this is a big change. China remains an authoritarian, one-party and communist state, albeit one that Mao would have found in some ways incomprehensible. Yet, for all its transformations since Mao and Deng's time, the basic structures of the state and party, and their interrelations, are still much as Lenin or Mao would have expected a party state to be.

### **Conclusion: imperialism, party politics and war**

The communist threat, the rise and decline of the USSR and the spectacular rise of the PRC to world power status have been normalised in international relations thought. Yet, both Lenin and Mao set out to challenge the state-focused idea of international order, and to replace it with different conceptions of the context, site and ends of political power, now reshaped by the concepts of imperialism, party-centralism, and the organisation of war in very different forms from the Clausewitzian trinity. Both men's accounts of imperialism, party organisation and discipline, and the conduct of revolutionary and guerrilla war have had a huge influence on subsequent theorists within the socialist tradition. Much subsequent western Marxism has been a struggle to transcend the bounds of Lenin's legacy, with his critics seeking either to rehumanise Marxism–Leninism or to broaden its remit into cultural struggles, as was the case with Antonio Gramsci and his followers. Similar arguments can be made about Mao and his influence on socialism in Asia and the developing world. These impacts would be important enough given the impact of Leninism and Maoism on the 20th and 21st centuries. But it would distort the significance of their thought to confine a consideration of later impacts just to the socialist tradition. The key concepts deployed and developed by Lenin and Mao have had as much significance beyond Marxism.

Lenin was not the first thinker to describe imperialism as a new economic form and he acknowledged both the non-Marxist J.A. Hobson (1858–1940) and the Austrian Marxist Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941) in his work – unlike his Marxist contemporary Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), who is not mentioned. Lenin gave important additional impetus to the concept in international politics and relations. Imperialism was an account of why revolution was no longer a solely national issue and why capitalism was able to accommodate

its crisis tendencies. Yet, the phenomena of capitalist development on a global stage and operating beyond the context of the nation state did not need to be linked to the logic of dialectical materialism as a source of contradictions that would require overcoming in a revolution. The Marxist–Leninist acknowledgement of the development of capitalism as the driver of all social relations was useful even without positing a necessary historical crisis.

As former communists (such as James Burnham) lost their revolutionary faith, they retained the basic material analysis of society and the recognition of new social and political forms that followed the international growth of the capitalist society. The Cold War world created the circumstances in which the new international power of the USA was coupled with an extension of American economic interests. Many scholars might have described the USA as a benign empire that helped underpin the global economic order, but it was nevertheless seen as an empire – with its combination of economic power opening up national markets to its own advantage, and with its overwhelming military might (Ikenberry 2001). The Leninist and Maoist stories of how this economic form led to war might not have applied directly given the United States' role as a power without an economic challenger, although the USSR restrained its global military power. But the way the U.S. exercised its interests in destabilising or changing regimes that were not to its economic interests (e.g. in Iran or Chile) suggested that international political economy could be understood through concepts such as imperialism, by both its friends and its foes.

With the collapse of the USSR as a restraint on U.S. power in 1991, the USA was the leader of a unipolar, although not necessarily a peaceful world, as the Middle East saw a number of major traditional-style wars. The same period also saw the high point of economic globalisation with the offshoring of manufacturing jobs into high-skilled but low-wage economies (like India, China and Vietnam), and the hollowing-out of the domestic manufacturing economies within western democracies. What Lenin and Mao saw as the detachment of capital from the nation state, and its consolidation in international hands, became the phenomenon of globalisation. Its exponents claimed that it was the only realistic model of the global economy and a fact that domestic political regimes needed to reconcile themselves to (Held 2004). Yet, as the global financial crash of 2008 and its long-term consequences have shown, the new model of a 'weightless' economy of global financial capitalism was not without its own crisis tendencies. These were especially manifested in the growth of populism, 'democratic backsliding' and economic nationalism after 2016. But they were also illuminated by the rise of China as a global economic power, and the lender of last resort to the global economy following 2008. From the 2010s onwards, China also built up its military and made territorial claims in the South China Sea, and over Taiwan. So it is by no means clear that rival economic imperial powers will not come into conflict through trade and technology wars, even if not outright military conflicts.

In addition, illuminating the broadest phenomena of contemporary global politics, Lenin and Mao's writings on party organisation and in Mao's case

the organisation of guerrilla war have had a considerable impact beyond the confines of Marxism–Leninism, on the micro-organisation of political power and its exercise. The ideal of ruthlessly disciplined and tightly organised parties of professional party functionaries has become normalised across all political regimes, to the extent that we can forget how much of that tendency has its roots in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* Mass parties, whether in one-party states or in multiparty democracies, are dominated and controlled by inner cores of professionals, who largely direct rather than respond to the aspirations of the broader membership. The more authoritarian the regime, the more the Leninist model of parties is the norm, as illustrated by nationalist populists such as the Ba'ath Party in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. In populist regimes, these cores of professional cadres (a term widely used by the Maoists) are central to the leader's authority in a loosely organised mass party. Similar structures may also be formed by 'entryist' groups seeking to wrest power from the mass membership, as seen in the fragmented politics of the left after 1968 in Europe. The secretive centralised character of some of these groups led them to shift from political struggle within a political system to revolutionary struggle against a settled political system. Some went further into the politics of terrorism and insurrection, which also drew on aspects of Mao's theory of guerrilla war. So-called Maoists of the radical European left were often tightly organised but decentralised to avoid infiltration and decapitation strategies by police and security services.

For those that became terrorists, such as the Baader–Meinhof Group in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Provisional IRA, and various Palestinian terrorist groups, the strategy of decentralised cell-structures with only the loosest of central direction allowed them to develop successful operations that withstood infiltration or wider failure to gain support, for a time. This strategy has reappeared most recently and effectively in global-reach terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS (outside its doomed caliphate in Iraq/Syria). In those cases there is no strict central command or strategic leadership but instead a fiercely activist brand identity that is adopted locally to recruit and inspire those who work in strictly isolated cells. All of these phenomena extend, develop and modify ideas and forms that have their roots in Lenin and Mao's political and organisational writings on the conduct of revolution. Whilst revolution remains a political aspiration for some, or a problem that militaries and security forces need to understand in order to confront, both sides will turn to Lenin and Mao for insights, rather than to Marx.

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*Suggestions for finding open access versions of Lenin's and Mao's texts*

**Lenin**

Marxists Internet Archive

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/index.htm>

**Mao**

Marxists Internet Archive

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/index.htm>

A 1963 edition of the *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* is in the Marxists Internet Archive at:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/military-writings/mao-selected-military-writings-1963.pdf>

And *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* is at:

[https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/mao/Quotations\\_from\\_Chairman\\_Mao\\_Tse-tung.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/mao/Quotations_from_Chairman_Mao_Tse-tung.pdf)