

Lenin

A Speech Delivered by **J.V.STALIN** at a Memorial Meeting of the Kremlin Military School (January 28, 1924)

Comrades, I am told that you have arranged a Lenin memorial meeting here this evening and that I have been invited as one of the speakers. I do not think there is any need for me to deliver a set speech on Lenin's activities. It would be better, I think, to confine myself to a few facts to bring out certain of Lenin's characteristics as a man and a leader. There may, perhaps, be no inherent connection between these facts, but that is not of vital importance as far as gaining a general idea of Lenin is concerned. At any rate, I am unable on this occasion to do more than what I have just promised.



The Mountain Eagle

I first became acquainted with Lenin in 1903. True, it was not a personal acquaintance, but was by correspondence. But it made an indelible impression upon me, one which has never left me throughout all my work in the Party. I was in exile in Siberia at the time. My knowledge of Lenin's revolutionary activities since the end of the nineties, and especially after 1901, after the appearance of *Iskra*,^[1] had convinced me that in Lenin we had a man of extraordinary calibre. At that time I did not regard him merely as a leader of the Party, but as its actual founder, for he alone understood the inner essence and urgent needs of our Party. When I compared him with the other leaders of our Party, it always seemed to me that he was head and shoulders above his colleagues—Plekhanov, Martov, Axelrod and the others; that, compared with them, Lenin was

not just one of the leaders, but a leader of the highest rank, a mountain eagle, who knew no fear in the struggle, and who boldly led the Party forward along the unexplored paths of the Russian revolutionary movement. This impression took such a deep hold of me that I felt impelled to write about it to a close friend of mine who was living as a political exile abroad, requesting him to give me his opinion. Some time later, when I was already in exile in Siberia—this was at the end of 1903—I received an enthusiastic reply from my friend and a simple, but profoundly expressive letter from Lenin, to whom, it turned out, my friend had shown my letter. Lenin's note was comparatively short, but it contained a bold and fearless criticism of the practical work of our Party, and a remarkably clear and concise account of the entire plan of work of the Party in the immediate future. Only Lenin could write of the most intricate things so simply and clearly, so concisely and boldly, that every sentence did not so much speak as ring out like a rifle shot. This simple and bold letter still further strengthened me in my opinion that Lenin was the mountain eagle of our Party. I cannot forgive myself for having, from the habit of an old underground worker, consigned this letter of Lenin's, like many other letters, to the flames.

My acquaintance with Lenin dates from that time.

Modesty

I first met Lenin in December 1905 at the Bolshevik conference in Tammerfors (Finland). I was hoping to see the mountain eagle of our Party, the great man, great not only politically, but, if you will, physically, because in my imagination I had pictured Lenin as a giant, stately and imposing. What, then, was my disappointment to see a most ordinary-looking man, below average height, in no way, literally in no way, distinguishable from ordinary mortals....

It is accepted as the usual thing for a "great man" to come late to meetings so that the assembly may await, his appearance with bated breath; and then, just before the "great man" enters, the warning whisper goes up: "Hush!.... Silence!.... he's coming." This ritual did not seem to me superfluous, because it creates an impression, inspires respect. What, then, was my disappointment to learn that Lenin had arrived at the conference before the delegates, had settled himself somewhere in a corner, and was unassumingly carrying on a conversation, a most ordinary conversation with the most ordinary delegates at the conference. I will not conceal from you that at that time this seemed to me to be something of a violation of certain essential rules.

Only later did I realise that this simplicity and modesty, this striving to remain unobserved, or, at least, not to make himself conspicuous and not to emphasise his high position, this feature was one of Lenin's strongest points as the new leader of the new masses, of the simple and ordinary masses of the "rank and file" of humanity.

Force of Logic

The two speeches Lenin delivered at this conference were remarkable: one was on the current situation and the other on the agrarian question. Unfortunately, they have not been preserved. They were inspired, and they roused the whole conference to a pitch of stormy enthusiasm. The extraordinary power of conviction, the simplicity and clarity of argument, the brief and easily understood sentences, the absence of affectation, of dizzying gestures and theatrical phrases aiming at effect—all this made Lenin's speeches a favourable contrast to the speeches of the usual "parliamentary" orators.

But what captivated me at the time was not this aspect of Lenin's speeches. I was captivated by that irresistible force of logic in them which, although somewhat terse, gained a firm hold on his audience, gradually electrified it, and then, as one might say, completely overpowered it. I remember that many of the delegates said: "The logic of Lenin's speeches is like a mighty

tentacle which twines all round you and holds you as in a vice and from whose grip you are powerless to tear yourself away: you must either surrender or resign yourself to utter defeat.”

I think that this characteristic of Lenin’s speeches was the strongest feature of his art as an orator.

No Whining

The second time I met Lenin was in 1906 at the Stockholm Congress^[2] of our Party. You know that the Bolsheviks were in the minority at this congress and suffered defeat. This was the first time I saw Lenin in the role of the vanquished. But he was not in the least like those leaders who whine and lose heart after a defeat. On the contrary, defeat transformed Lenin into a spring of compressed energy which inspired his supporters for new battles and for future victory. I said that Lenin was defeated. But what sort of defeat was it? You had only to look at his opponents, the victors at the Stockholm Congress —Plekhanov, Axelrod, Martov and the rest. They had little of the appearance of real victors, for Lenin’s merciless criticism of Menshevism had not left one whole bone in their body, so to speak. I remember that we, the Bolshevik delegates, huddled together in a group, gazing at Lenin and asking his advice. The speeches of some of the delegates betrayed a note of weariness and dejection. I recall that to these speeches Lenin bitingly replied through clenched teeth: “Don’t whine, comrades, we are bound to win, for we are right.” Hatred of the whining intellectual, faith in our own strength, confidence in victory—that is what Lenin impressed upon us. It was felt that the Bolsheviks’ defeat was temporary, that they were bound to win in the very near future.

“No whining over defeat”—this was the feature of Lenin’s activities that helped him to rally around himself an army faithful to the end and confident in its strength.

No Boasting

At the next congress, held in 1907 in London,^[3] the Bolsheviks proved victorious. This was the first time I saw Lenin in the role of victor. Victory turns the heads of some leaders and makes them haughty and boastful. They begin in most cases to be triumphant, to rest on their laurels. But Lenin did not in the least resemble such leaders. On the contrary, it was precisely after a victory that he became especially vigilant and cautious. I recall that Lenin insistently impressed on the delegates: “The first thing is not to become intoxicated by victory and not to boast; the second thing is to consolidate the victory; the third is to give the enemy the finishing stroke, for he has been beaten, but, by no means crushed.” He poured withering scorn on those delegates who frivolously asserted: “It is all over with the Mensheviks now.” He had no difficulty in showing that the Mensheviks still had roots in the working-class movement, that they had to be fought with skill, and that all overestimation of one’s own strength and, especially, all underestimation of the strength of the enemy had to be avoided.

“No boasting in victory”—this was the feature of Lenin’s character that helped him soberly to weigh the strength of the enemy and to insure the Party against possible surprises.

Fidelity to Principle

Party leaders cannot but prize the opinion of the majority of their party. A majority is a power with which a leader cannot but reckon. Lenin understood this no less than any other party leader. But Lenin never became a captive of the majority, especially when that majority had no basis of principle. There have been times in the history of our Party when the opinion of the majority or the momentary interests of the Party conflicted with the fundamental interests of the proletariat. On such occasions Lenin would never hesitate and resolutely took his stand in support of principle as against the majority of the Party. Moreover, he did not fear on such occasions literally to stand alone against all, considering—as he would often say—that “a policy based on principle is the only correct policy.”

Particularly characteristic in this respect are the two following facts.

First fact. It was in the period 1909–11, when the Party, smashed by the counter-revolution, was in process of complete disintegration. It was a period of disbelief in the Party, of wholesale desertion from the Party, not only by the intellectuals, but partly even by the workers; a period when the necessity for illegal organisation was being denied, a period of Liquidationism and collapse. Not only the Mensheviks, but even the Bolsheviks then consisted of a number of factions and trends, for the most part severed from the working-class movement. You know that it was just at that period that the idea arose of completely liquidating the illegal organisation and organising the workers into a legal, liberal Stolypin party. Lenin at that time was the only one not to succumb to the widespread epidemic and to hold high the banner of Party principle, assembling the scattered and shattered forces of the Party with astonishing patience and extraordinary persistence, combating each and every anti-Party trend within the working-class movement and defending the Party principle with unusual courage and unparalleled perseverance.

We know that in this fight for the Party principle, Lenin later proved the victor.

Second fact. It was in the period 1914–17, when the imperialist war was in full swing, and when all, or nearly all, the Social-Democratic and Socialist parties had succumbed to the general patriotic frenzy and had placed themselves at the service of the imperialism of their respective countries. It was a period when the Second International had hauled down its colours to capitalism, when even people like Plekhanov, Kautsky, Guesde and the rest were unable to withstand the tide of chauvinism. Lenin at that time was the only one, or almost the only one, to wage a determined struggle against social-chauvinism and social-pacifism, to denounce the treachery of the Guesdes and Kautskys, and to stigmatise the half-heartedness of the betwixt and between “revolutionaries”. Lenin knew that he was backed by only an insignificant minority, but to him this was not of decisive moment, for he knew that the only correct policy with a future before it was the policy of consistent internationalism, that a policy based on principle is the only correct policy.

We know that in this fight for a new International, too, Lenin proved the victor.

“A policy based on principle is the only correct policy”—this was the formula by means of which Lenin took new “impregnable” positions by assault and won over the best elements of the proletariat to revolutionary Marxism.

Faith in the Masses

Theoreticians and leaders of parties, men who are acquainted with the history of nations and who have studied the history of revolutions from beginning to end, are sometimes afflicted by a shameful disease. This disease is called fear of the masses, disbelief in the creative power of the masses. This sometimes gives rise in the leaders to a kind of aristocratic attitude towards the masses, who, although not versed in the history of revolutions, are destined to destroy the old order and build the new. This kind of aristocratic attitude is due to a fear that the elements may break loose, that the masses may “destroy too much”; it is due to a desire to play the part of a mentor who tries to teach the masses from books, but who is averse to learning from the masses.

Lenin was the very antithesis of such leaders. I do not know of any other revolutionary who had so profound a faith in the creative power of the proletariat and in the revolutionary efficacy of its class instinct as Lenin. I do not know of any other revolutionary who could scourge the smug critics of the “chaos of revolution” and the “riot of unauthorised actions of the masses” so ruthlessly as Lenin. I recall that when in the course of a conversation one comrade said that “the revolution should be followed by the normal order of things,” Lenin sarcastically remarked: “It is

a pity that people who want to be revolutionaries forget that the most normal order of things in history is the revolutionary order of things.”

Hence, Lenin’s contempt for all who superciliously looked down on the masses and tried to teach them from books. And hence, Lenin’s constant precept: learn from the masses, try to comprehend their actions, carefully study the practical experience of the struggle of the masses.

Faith in the creative power of the masses—this was the feature of Lenin’s activities which enabled him to comprehend the spontaneous process and to direct its movement into the channel of the proletarian revolution.

The Genius of Revolution

Lenin was born for revolution. He was, in truth, the genius of revolutionary outbreaks and the greatest master of the art of revolutionary leadership. Never did he feel so free and happy as in a time of revolutionary upheavals. I do not mean by this that Lenin approved equally of all revolutionary upheavals, or that he was in favour of revolutionary outbreaks at all times and under all circumstances. Not at all. What I do mean is that never was the genius of Lenin’s insight displayed so fully and distinctly as in a time of revolutionary outbreaks. In times of revolution he literally blossomed forth, became a seer, divined the movement of classes and the probable zigzags of the revolution, seeing them as if they lay in the palm of his hand. It was with good reason that it used to be said in our Party circles: “Lenin swims in the tide of revolution like a fish in water.”

Hence the “amazing” *clarity* of Lenin’s tactical slogans and the “breath-taking” *boldness* of his revolutionary plans.

I recall two facts which are particularly characteristic of this feature of Lenin.

First fact. It was in the period just prior to the October Revolution, when millions of workers, peasants and soldiers, impelled by the crisis in the rear and at the front, were demanding peace and liberty; when the generals and the bourgeoisie were working for a military dictatorship for the sake of “war to a finish”; when the whole of so-called “public opinion” and all the so-called “Socialist parties” were hostile to the Bolsheviks and were branding them as “German spies”; when Kerensky was trying—already with some success—to drive the Bolshevik Party underground; and when the still powerful and disciplined armies of the Austro-German coalition confronted our weary, disintegrating armies, while the West-European “Socialists” lived in blissful alliance with their governments for the sake of “war to complete victory.”...

What did starting an uprising at such a moment mean? Starting an uprising in such a situation meant staking everything. But Lenin did not fear the risk, for he knew, he saw with his prophetic eye, that an uprising was inevitable, that it would win; that an uprising in Russia would pave the way for ending the imperialist war, that it would rouse the war-weary masses of the West, that it would transform the imperialist war into a civil war; that the uprising would usher in a Republic of Soviets, and that the Republic of Soviets would serve as a bulwark for the revolutionary movement throughout the world.

We know that Lenin’s revolutionary foresight was subsequently confirmed with unparalleled exactness.

Second fact. It was in the first days of the October Revolution, when the Council of People’s Commissars was trying to compel General Dukhonin, the mutinous Commander-in-Chief, to terminate hostilities and open negotiations for an armistice with the Germans. I recall that Lenin, Krylenko (the future Commander-in-Chief) and I went to General Staff Headquarters in Petrograd to negotiate with Dukhonin over the direct wire. It was a ghastly moment. Dukhonin and Field Headquarters categorically refused to obey the order of the Council of People’s

Commissars. The army officers were completely under the sway of Field Headquarters. As for the soldiers, no one could tell what this army of fourteen million would say, subordinated as it was to the so-called army organisations, which were hostile to the Soviet power. In Petrograd itself, as we know, a mutiny of the military cadets was brewing. Furthermore, Kerensky was marching on Petrograd. I recall that after a pause at the direct wire, Lenin's face suddenly shone with an extraordinary light. Clearly he had arrived at a decision. "Let's go to the wireless station," he said, "it will stand us in good stead. We shall issue a special order dismissing General Dukhonin, appoint Comrade Krylenko Commander-in-Chief in his place and appeal to the soldiers over the heads of the officers, calling upon them to surround the generals, to cease hostilities, to establish contact with the Austro-German soldiers and take the cause of peace into their own hands."

This was "a leap in the dark." But Lenin did not shrink from this "leap"; on the contrary, he made it eagerly, for he knew that the army wanted peace and would win peace, sweeping every obstacle from its path; he knew that this method of establishing peace was bound to have its effect on the Austro-German soldiers and would give full rein to the yearning for peace on every front without exception.

We know that here, too, Lenin's revolutionary foresight was subsequently confirmed with the utmost exactness.

The insight of genius, the ability rapidly to grasp and divine the inner meaning of impending events this was the quality of Lenin which enabled him to lay down the correct strategy and a clear line of conduct at turning points of the revolutionary movement.

Notes:

- 1.** *Iskra (Spark)*—the first all-Russian illegal Marxist newspaper, founded by V.I. Lenin in December 1900. It was published abroad and brought secretly into Russia (on the significance and role of *Iskra* see *History of the CPSU(B) Short Course*, Moscow 1952, pp. 55–68).
- 2.** The Stockholm Party Congress—the Fourth ("Unity") Congress of the R.S.D.L.P.—took place on April 10–25 (April 23–May 8), 1906 (See *History of the CPSU(B) Short Course*, Moscow 1952, pp. 136–39).
- 3.** The Fifth (London) Congress of the R.S.D.L.P. took place from April 30 to May 19 (May 13 to June 1), 1907 see *History of the C.P.S.U.(B) Short Course*, Moscow 1952, pp. 143–46).

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