

# Introduction – Lenin: A Century After

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Over a hundred-fifty years ago, Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, Lenin was born. He engaged with the world, he thought and actively organized masses of people and a hundred years ago, in the January of 2024, he died. His life is one of *the* lives of the century, one of the lives that will determine the century. That is, seen from afar, from the distance of just one century, Lenin's death can hardly seem more symbolic and – in retrospect – symbolically overdetermined. Not only did with his death Stalin become the leading figure in and of the Soviet Union – a reign that will last almost thirty years and will fuel the imagination of many with questions about what could have happened if Trotsky and not Stalin would have reigned or what would have happened if Lenin would have lived longer – however unhelpful these questions may be. But these thoughts also and unavoidably raise the question about the (political and conceptual) heritage of Lenin – and what will come to be called Leninism – itself. Lenin was, without any doubt, one of the most important and influential politicians of the 20th century and his life and death are intimately linked to the century's grandiose political aspirations, to the creation of new possibilities as well as to its greatest horrors and disasters, to its "passion for the real" (A. Badiou). Lenin thought that another organization of the planet was possible – a possibility he not only, in his own descriptions, inherited from Marx (with the assumption that the Paris Commune, even though, it was unable to maintain itself for long against its enemies, was the "finally found political form" of how to organize the emancipation of the workers) but also from the French revolutionary tradition –the Jacobins being a repeated reference throughout Lenin's oeuvre. What is the passion called "Lenin" then? We do not mean a passion for a "real" Lenin but rather the "Real" (articulated with and under the name of "Lenin"). What happened to that Real 100 years later – does it have a history?

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The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* raises this question because during Lenin's lifetime certain things that could not but seem more improbable or more impossible actually happened and took place and became possible. There took place, actually and in real life, as everyone knows, a successful revolution that led to those without power taking state power. Yet, a hundred years after his death, the very concept of revolution appears to be more opaque and disorientating than ever before, for taking state power did not lead to abolishing power and invented atrocities and disasters of an entirely novel kind. This is part of a process of chaotic disorientation that continues till our very day when winning in election on some countries is celebrated as if it were a revolution and when "revolution" is nowadays a signifier used to introduce new forms of domination. This complicates the former situation, where any attempt to change life through overtaking the center(s) of power always ended by reinstating power.

Does “Lenin” stand for the last – and maybe the first ever – attempt to change this dynamic? Or for its ultimate failure? Its inauguration? Or the most actual depiction of the contemporary task of emancipatory politics? Is there anything that is so really Leninist, so Real in Lenin that it could or would have ever escaped its overtaking for the most obverse causes? For, we witnessed a fundamental transformation of the very instruments of political organization: The (revolutionary) party-form allowed Lenin and the Bolsheviks to find a lasting principle of organization (when also the right form of military discipline was involved), yet the party-form does today – globally – hardly seem emancipatory and its main success appears to be situated today on the far right of the parliamentary spectrum. Worse, Leninism – almost as the signifier “resistance” – has become a signifier not of any emancipatory meaning or leaning. Not only did the concept of the revolution and the organizational form of the party become obscure and therefore practically disorientating or even invalidated, with them the very end, idea and formatting of emancipatory politics has been obscured as well: what does emancipation actually aim at? Mildly better living conditions? The avoidance of (the) suffering (of all or some or many)? An equality of everyone with everyone? What would either of these effectively and practically mean?

A hundred years after Lenin’s death, *Crisis and Critique* wants to discuss what, if anything, is left of Lenin’s thought – for thought, for emancipation, for equality, for history, for today. Does what the name Lenin stands for (still) pose a condition for contemporary (philosophical, political or other) thought? How to ruthlessly evaluate the achievements and shortcomings of the ruthlessly pragmatist Leninist thought and politics? What can we learn from the exceptional form of politics that was Leninist politics after its demise and disastrous end? Can one even think of a Leninism for the 21st century?

By raising these questions, the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* seeks to commemorate Lenin’s life as much as it aims to draw up a balance sheet of what only became visible after and with his death. This balance sheet will not simply be written by those who come later and therefore can arrogantly claim to know more. Rather what the present issue gathers are contributions that look at the present through the theoretical eyes of Lenin so that we can detect what these very eyes allow us to see or blind us to today. Let us start looking at the contemporary world, if it at all deserves this name, from the immanence of Lenin and report what we see! It might be more than nothing and even if it is nothing we at least know how to never look at things anymore.

Heidelberg / Prishtina, December 2024