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9. April: With German support, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin travels to Russia

**H**istorical studies designate the year 1917 as a landmark epoch year, because it marks the year when two future global players take to the stage, and will shape it for the entire twentieth century. On the one hand, the United States, which has remained officially neutral to this point in time, enters the First World War, sending soldiers to Europe. On the other hand, a radical revolution takes place in Russia, the October Revolution of the Bolsheviks, which ultimately leads to the foundation of the Soviet Union.



In reality, the German Empire played quite a significant part in the emergence of the Soviet Union and, thus, indirectly in the later confrontation between the West and East in the Cold War. In 1917, the German Empire's prospects for actually being able to win the war militarily can only be described as extremely slight. The Schlieffen Plan fails as early as September 1914, when the German troops are brought to a standstill just short of Paris at the Marne River. In particular, the unexpected Belgian resistance is the primary reason behind the German schedule being set in disarray, seriously delaying ongoing plans. The preceding mobile warfare has already cost hundreds of thousands of human lives when millions of soldiers on both sides are subsequently bogged down into tactical trench warfare, settling for years into trenches from the Swiss border through to the North Sea. The unexpectedly rapid Russian mobilisation and the resulting German defensive battles that are necessary in East Prussia also thwart the German plans in the West. In 1915 and 1916, both sides attempt to make decisive breakthroughs through unsuccessful offensives in Flanders, at Verdun and in the Somme. And yet, apart from costing millions of lives, the offensives remain without any tangible results. As far as propaganda and morale are concerned, the German Empire lost the war way back in August 1914 when it marched into Belgium contrary to international law and perpetrated attacks on the civilian population. From the German perspective, the deadlocked situation on the western front only adds to the mounting difficulties on the southern and eastern fronts. German troops also need to intervene to support Austro-Hungary in its war with Italy, which has joined the battle on the side of the Allies contrary to its 1915 treaty obligations. The Germans also have to assist their Austrian-Hungarian comrades-in-arms time and again in the Balkans and in Galicia. German soldiers even need to serve in Palestine and the Dardanelles in order to help their allies from the Ottoman Empire. In the end, as a result of the English sea blockade, the Empire is also cut off from the replenishment of food and essential supplies and from delivery of raw materials. In order to be able to wage war at all, the German



Empire is placed under the dictates of an authoritarian-administered wartime economy. Demonstrating amazing ingenuity, German researchers develop substitutes for a wide array of necessities, such as saltpetre to make gunpowder, candle wax and honey. Even so, millions of Germans starve; countless children and old people are malnourished and die of exhaustion. And yet, in spite of all the suffering, the German military holds outwardly firm that it wants to, and is able to, win the war against eine ganze Welt von Feinden (an entire world of enemies).



Against this context, there is hope in Germany for assistance from unusual quarters. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, known simply as Lenin, a socialist professional revolutionary in exile in Switzerland, would destabilise the enemy in the East. The Tsar had been forced to abdicate in the February Revolution in 1917. A liberal revolutionary government now rules the country, which is also increasingly exhausted and war-weary, and continues to wage war against the will of the general population. As far as Lenin and his revolutionaries are concerned, the overthrow has been nowhere near sufficiently radical. He and his comrades-in-arms call themselves Bolsheviks (one of the majority). They want to create a socialist state in which the new person in the classless society is to put the theoretical teachings of the Communist originators Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels into practice. In order to realise his plans, however, Lenin first wants to make peace with the external world. The German military and the German government are declared opponents of all socialist tendencies, but Lenin's unconditional desire for peace and the anarchical potential of his plans make him attractive to them. And so, in the aftermath of a series of secret negotiations, Lenin's legendary train journey through Germany to Russia eventuates. Lenin and his comrades-in-arms board a railway carriage in Zürich, which they are not permitted to leave. They travel across the German Empire via Berlin through to Sassnitz on Rügen Island. From Rügen, the passengers transfer to Sweden via the rail ferry, and travel through Finland, which is a part of Russia at the time, and on to Petrograd (Leningrad, now St Petersburg). After his arrival, Lenin immediately starts to engage with the democratic government in speeches and various publications. Ultimately, he leads the Bolsheviks to success in the October Revolution and establishes a radical social system that still needs to assert its legitimacy against his opponents in a year-long civil war. He adheres to his promise of peace to the Russian people and to the German government. In March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is signed between the German Empire and Soviet Russia. In this peace treaty that is effectively forced on the Bolshevik government, Russia is required to cede large parts of its territory in the South to the German Empire. In this way, the Empire secures considerable grain resources for its own consumption. However, the troops required to occupy these territories are sorely missed by the German Empire in the Spring Offensive of 1918, when the military desperately attempts to bring about a decisive change in the course of the war with a final large-scale offensive in the West. Shortly after this unsuccessful Operation Michael, the exhausted German Army's spirit of resistance collapses completely.

As early as 1917, in the operation surrounding Lenin's journey, the first signs of unscrupulousness and moral indifference become evident, characteristics that the German military leaders will display plainly in the Second World War. In accordance with the saying that the end justifies the means, they support Lenin's seizure of power, even though they would hate to see his totalitarian social experiment in their own country. In their occupation of Russian territories following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the German military and German administration already demonstrate the rudiments of racist-based master-race behaviour, concepts that will be seen once again in the war against the Soviet Union. Even the excessiveness seen in the plundering of enemy territory in the east is a precursor to the events that will happen little more than twenty years later.

**T**ranslated into English by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski



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