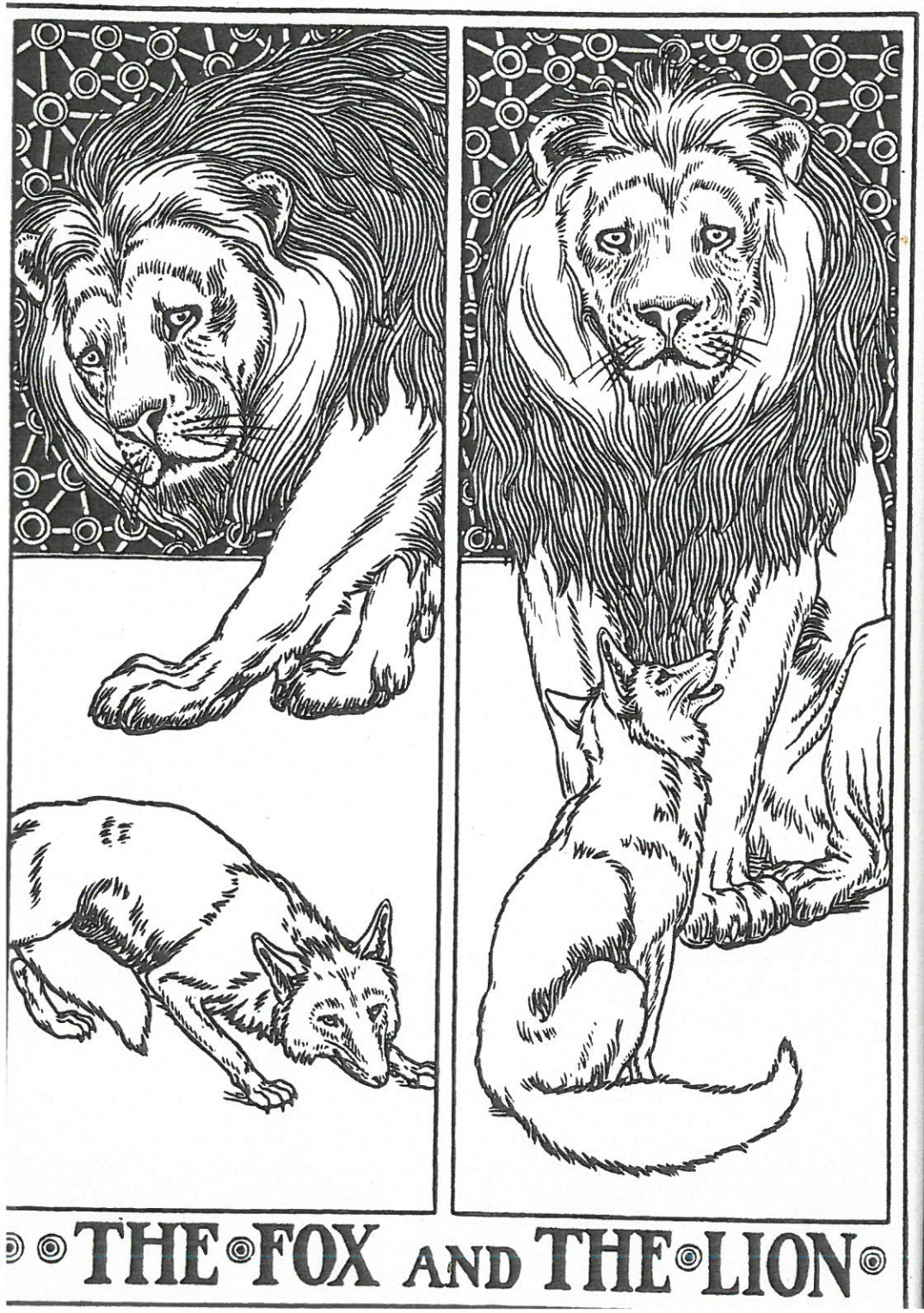

'The Fox and the Lion', from *A Hundred Fables of Aesop*, by Percy J. Billingshurst, 1903.

LENIN: THE MACHIAVELLIAN MARXIST

The leader of the Soviet Revolution was an armed prophet who adopted the characteristics of the lion and the fox. *Graeme Garrard*

Vladimir Lenin, after a decade in exile, stepped onto the platform at the Finland Railway Station in Petrograd around midnight on 3 April 1917. He did so as a man convinced that he had finally arrived at a meeting with destiny. Certain that it was the beginning of the end of capitalism, he could now lead both Russia and eventually Europe to the promised land of communism, much as Moses had done with the ancient Israelites. This would be the most important moment in human history and he was in the vanguard.

Few shared Lenin's messianic belief in his destiny, because few had even heard of him. Beyond the inner circle of the revolutionary Bolshevik Party, which he led, this austere, unprepossessing, middle-aged, middle-class Marxist intellectual was little known in Russia, where he had been absent for ten years. He had played no part in the failed revolution of 1905 and was abroad during the events of February 1917. Yet by the end of the year he would be leading not only the party, but Russia itself and implementing the revolutionary ideas of Karl Marx in the world's first socialist state, whose official and exclusive ideology would become Marxism-Leninism. In Petrograd in 1917, theory and practice converged in the person of Lenin, the pilot who guided Russia to socialism.

Although he was a lawyer by training, Lenin rarely practised law. He did not need to, as he was supported by income from family estates, just as the exiled Marx survived on handouts from his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, a wealthy factory owner in the north-west of England. Marx and Lenin were able to live as full-time intellectuals and political activists thanks to the hard work of Russian peasants and English workers. Lenin had the zeal of a religious fanatic, who looked on the theories of Marx as holy writ. According to Marx, communism is the 'riddle of history solved' and Lenin credited him with revealing this truth, which illuminated the road leading to emancipation. Lenin saw advancing humanity's progress along this path as his mission. Against Marx's expectations, it had begun in Russia.

Lenin was at the radical end of the spectrum of Russian Marxism. He advocated armed insurrection against the Provisional Government that had been established after the February Revolution, which was dominated by liberals and moderate socialists. He viewed it as a sham and a betrayal of the Revolution. But the Bolsheviks, his own party, were opposed to insurrection against the new government and, after Lenin's tireless campaign to change their minds, only voted for open rebellion in October. He played a decisive role in pushing his reluctant party towards an uncompromising policy of opposition to the Provisional Government, which was inherently weak, torn by divisions and wracked by crises. Lenin followed the advice of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: 'That which is falling should also be pushed.' As soon as he arrived in the capital, Lenin published his 'April Theses' in the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda*, urging 'no support' for the government and calling for soviets (workers' councils) to take power from the Duma. 'All power to the soviets!', he demanded, even though the Bolsheviks were still a minority within them.

The government would probably have collapsed even in Lenin's absence. It was already fatally wounded when the Bolsheviks

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pounced on it, which is why the October Revolution was relatively bloodless. As the historian Adam Ulam has written: 'The Bolsheviks did not seize power in this year of revolutions. They picked it up.' Lenin's historical significance lies in his picking up of power and his use of it to establish a new socialist state, rather than bringing down the government. He had shaped a determined, centralised, disciplined, ideologically committed party of militant Marxist radicals, ready to strike at the decisive moment. 'It is not in the maker of the revolution that we can see Lenin's genius in its fullest', Ulam writes of October 1917. 'Far greater is his achievement as its conqueror.'

Lenin was an idealist in his goals and a Machiavellian in his political tactics, for whom the use of force was an essential element of effective statecraft. He hated 'sentimentalism' in politics, which he believed required a cold, flinty detachment of the kind practised by Maximilien Robespierre during the most violent phase of the French Revolution. Lenin admired Robespierre's fanaticism and willingness to shed blood for the revolutionary cause without flinching; he referred to the Bolsheviks as the 'Jacobins of the 20th century'. In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli observes that successful rulers combine the cunning of a fox, which astutely discerns the key moment to act, with the courage of a lion, which is able to act boldly and ruthlessly on that knowledge. These dual qualities served Lenin particularly well in October 1917. He was a Machiavellian Marxist in the mould of an 'armed prophet', praised as the highest form of statesmanship in *The Prince*.

Central to Lenin's view of revolutionary political agency is the idea of a vanguard party. It is one of his most important and controversial contributions to Marxist theory. Although Marx had written that the 'emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself', Lenin thought that it was unrealistic to expect them to spontaneously rise up against their oppressors, given the forces deployed against them. He assigned, therefore, a pivotal role to a small, radical vanguard party to provide the working class with the leadership needed to galvanise latent discontent

'For Marx and Lenin, there could only be one route to a stateless communist society: dictatorship'

and steer the revolution along the right path. This vanguard of the proletariat would be a small cadre of totally committed, full-time activists and Marxist intellectuals, who would harness and direct the revolutionary energy of the workers.

Lenin himself was the epitome of the activist intellectual. The Bolsheviks under his leadership were the perfect vehicle for this elite to fulfil its historical role as the spearhead of revolution. When Russia's Provisional Government fell and a political vacuum opened up in Petrograd in October 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were ready and able to fill it. Having 'picked up' the state, Lenin set about reconstituting it according to Marxist principles, thereby shaping so much of the political character of the 20th century.

Lenin was accused by some of his critics of setting up a party state, substituting the elite, mostly bourgeois, vanguard party for the actual working class, an expedient denounced by his political opponents as 'substitutionism'. The Bolsheviks, renamed the Communist Party in 1919, eventually became the only legally sanctioned party in Russia under Lenin. The short-lived Constituent Assembly (the successor to the Duma) was dismissed in 1918, after the Bolsheviks won only 25 per cent of the votes in the November elections. In reply, Lenin would say that this was both necessary to eventually achieve communism and consistent with the doctrines of Marx, which called for dictatorship.

Marx believed that the failure of capitalism was inevitable; it would collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions, leading to revolution. A 'battle for democracy' would then follow in its wake, where the working class would seize the bourgeois state and make it a workers' state that would use its power to destroy the remnants of capitalism and abolish class. Marx called this necessary interim stage on the path to true communism the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Only when its destructive work was complete would it be possible to progress to pure communism: a form of classless society where spontaneous cooperation and fellowship would eliminate the need for a state, since force is unnecessary in the absence of class conflict. When class disappeared the state would simply 'wither away' into irrelevance. But for Marx and Lenin, there could only be one route to a stateless communist society: dictatorship.

Marx said little more than this about the path to communism in the thousands of pages of his writings. Lenin, by contrast, wrote extensively about the dictatorship of the proletariat and gave it a centrality lacking in Marx's writings, calling it 'the touchstone on which the real understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested'. His most important book of political theory, *The State and Revolution* (1917), grew out of a debate he had with his fellow Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin over the existence of the state after a proletarian revolution. Bukharin chose to emphasise the idealistic 'withering away' aspect, whereas Lenin focused on the necessity of a dictatorial, post-revolutionary state to forcibly 'suppress the oppressors' and 'expropriate the expropriators'. After the *real* Revolution (the Great October Revolution of 1917), much destructive work remained to be done to dismantle the capitalist system, which could only be achieved by means of a dictatorship. As Lenin's Bolshevik colleague Leon Trotsky said in defence of the Marxist regime established after October 1917: 'We have trampled underfoot the principles of democracy for the sake of the loftier principles of a social revolution.'

The Marxist state that Lenin established in 1917 was not, and was never intended to be, communist, since communism would have no state. Like Marx, he had an entirely negative view of the state, which he defined as 'an organisation of violence for the suppression of some class'. Where class existed, a state must exist as the enforcing arm of the dominant class to oppress subordinate classes; that is its purpose. Just as the capitalist state is a tool for oppressing the working class, the post-revolutionary workers' state would suppress the capitalists until both they and the remains of their system had been eradicated. Only then would humanity be ready to move to pure communism. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), created by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, was the transitional stage between capitalism and communism that Marx and Lenin called the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thereafter the practical problem for Marxist-Leninist theory was that the Soviet state, far from gradually 'withering away', persisted for decades and only grew in power and scope, until it finally collapsed completely in 1989, much as the tsarist regime had done seven decades earlier. Marx never specified how long the transitional dictatorship of the proletariat should last, leaving Soviet leaders, starting with Lenin, free to invoke his concept to justify the persistence of the powerful state that they controlled on behalf of the workers.

The institution of dictatorship first arose in republican Rome, where provision was made under special circumstances for a ruler to wield absolute power temporarily in emergencies, when only an unchecked executive authority could respond effectively to urgent threats, such as wars, natural disasters and plagues. When Lenin died in 1924, the Soviet state that he had established was still in its infancy; it would last a further six decades. The longer it lasted, the more awkward and pressing became the question: how long should a 'temporary' dictatorship last? And why was 'pure communism' nowhere in sight?

Graeme Garrard is Reader in Politics at Cardiff University.