

Study Guide for *The State and Revolution* by Vladimir Lenin

First Edition

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Introduction

The State and Revolution is one of multiple essential works of Vladimir Lenin. Lenin is notable for not only defending, but also reinforcing, the principles of Communism that were previously outlined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ranging from dialectical materialism and scientific (in the original German, *Wissenschaft*, meaning thought-craft) Socialism, to the necessity and purpose of the proletarian state to establish the first stage of Communism (which we call Socialism), the latter example being what this piece of theory is discussing.

As new terms come up in the document that may be unfamiliar or have experienced lingual drift, they’ll be clarified for their individual sections. Additionally, to encourage reading the document rather than seeking summaries, key takeaways for different sections will be presented as questions for the reader to answer, allowing them to seek the answers themselves and come to a greater understanding of the document.

This is unfortunately due to the fact that—while being somewhat viable as onboarding to reading Socialist theory, assuming someone is actively encouraged to learn and possibly assisted in doing so (as opposed to berated)—summarized Socialist theory significantly waters down the original documents and will only provide a rudimentary understanding.

The headings beyond this point in this document will simply denote the relevant sections of *The State and Revolution*.

Preface

Important Context:

- This document will frequently use the terms *proletariat* and *bourgeoisie*. Proletariat (or *prole*) refers to people who sell their labour to capitalists, and own no private property—property that exists for the production of capital; this isn’t the same as personal property. This term is synonymous with the term *working class*.

Some sub-categories of the proletariat, often referred to as the semi-proletariat, do exist, such as the lumpenproletariat, the petit bourgeois, and the bourgeois proletariat (these latter two forming overlap between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, as these classes own private property, but may still need to work to survive, operating as, “small masters,” as Marx phrases it in *Capital*; they don’t necessarily need to purchase the labour of others directly to be exploitative, as, for example, a streamer has a petit bourgeois interest to acquire more efficient private property—in the form of computer parts—as cheaply as possible, and consequently contribute to the exploitation of other proletarians, for example via Congolese cobalt and copper mines), but these are still ultimately proletarians, even if their positions of power (or lack thereof, in the case of the lumpenprole, which are the outcasts of society who neither own private property nor can find work; for example, the homeless and the labour reserve army, i.e. those deliberately made unemployed, which may oftentimes include minority populations) may cause reactionary, opportunist, and idealist tendencies to foment wherein revolutionary tendencies aren’t nurtured.

Bourgeoisie refers to people who own private property and purchase the labour of proletarians to perpetuate the cycle of capital with that private property, and is interchangeable with the term *capitalist*.

- The social chauvinism Lenin is describing here refers to Socialism-appropriating opportunists utilizing the popularity of Socialism to reinforce a nationalist-supremacist tendency, as opposed to the internationalist tendency of Socialist nationalism (not to be confused with national socialism, a Socialism-appropriating reactionary movement that performed this exact problem, while actually seeking to preserve capitalism by any means necessary while placating the workers).

A modern example of this would be the splinter faction removed from the Communist Party USA, the, “*American Communist Party*,” a Socialism-appropriating opportunist group that advocates for USAmerican nationalism through the medium of, “MAGA Communism,” similar to their nazi and nazbol (“national Bolshevism”) precursors. Lenin will later use similar terms such as *social opportunism* and *social imperialism*.

- The imperialist war Lenin is describing refers to World War I. Further details about what this means can be found in another document by Lenin called *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The basic takeaway for this section would be in reference to late-stage capitalism (i.e. imperialism) inherently requiring the forced redistribution of land through colonialism, settler colonialism, or outright war of conquest.

This means that the social chauvinists Lenin is branding are advocating for the supremacy of their bourgeois states, which is inherently counter-revolutionary and props up the interests of their own bourgeois class.

Key Takeaway:

- What is the urgent purpose of this document?

Chapter 1: Class Society and the State

Section 1: The State: A Product of the Irreconcilability of Class Antagonisms

Important Context:

- Class antagonism describes the conflicting interests between the ruling and oppressed classes. Under capitalism, this describes the conflicting interests of the oppressed proletariat (ex. Better working conditions) and the ruling bourgeoisie (ex. Expanding the cycle of capital).
- Karl Kautsky, who will be mentioned often in Lenin's works, was a revisionist and ultimately anti-Marxist social democrat who caused major damage to the Socialist movement, contributing to the development of social democracy as we know it today (who, in turn, had been inspired by Mikhail Bakunin, an anarchist who attempted to find a middle-ground between Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (an idealist, and the first anarchist) and Karl Marx (one of the two first scientific Socialists) despite inherent contradictions in philosophy and methodology).

In Lenin's work, you will often see mentions of *Social Democracy*—pre-USSR, this referred to Bolshevism (what we call Marxism-Leninism today), and at the time was synonymous; Eduard Bernstein (another social democrat who will be frequently critiqued) and Kautsky are largely responsible for the lingual shift of social democracy to describe movements such as European social democracy and its later development into democratic socialism, which took on a distinctly more neoliberal character than its equally idealist and opportunist precursor.

- Lenin will often use a term that could be considered a derogatory term for Palestinians due to its etymology. Where he uses the term, the term *anti-intellectual* can be used in its place.
- The Socialist-Revolutionaries were a group present in pre-USSR Russia who advocated against working legally (particularly by boycotting the Duma, the congress of the Russian Empire), and posited that Socialism could be achieved by deliberately expanding the peasant class (who were the majority at the time, as opposed to the proletariat) into many small land-owners, as opposed to collectivizing the land for everyone.

Similarly, the Mensheviks were another group present in pre-USSR Russia who advocated exclusively for legal work, and believed that Socialism could only be achieved after capitalism had fully developed and fully proletarianized the population (i.e. making the proletariat the overwhelming majority, as opposed to the majority of peasants at the time).

Lenin, a Bolshevik, will frequently criticize these groups; notably, in *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin demonstrates that Marxists need to operate both legally and illegally wherever possible (albeit directly stating that any revolutionary activity should occur during economic crises, which allows a revolutionary Socialist movement to explosively snowball into a popular revolution, whereas individual acts of terrorism will just push workers away from the

movement), including providing an example of legalizing trade unions in the Russian Empire and short-lived Russian Republic.

Key Takeaways:

- How do social chauvinists harm Marxism?
- How does Marx describe the purpose of the state? What are the relationships of classes in reference to the state under capitalism?
- What is necessary for workers' liberation?

Section 2: Special Bodies of Armed Men, Prisons, etc.

Key Takeaway:

- What is the difference in the style of power projection between pre-state and state society?

Section 3: The State: an Instrument for the Exploitation of the Oppressed Class

Important Context:

- The democratic republic referenced by Engels refers to a bourgeois democracy, i.e. a state that provides the illusion of democratic control, while in reality, the capitalists wield the true power. A rather blatant example of this would be the United States of America, wherein roughly 30 companies fund the two major bourgeois parties, 10 of them often being in the same slots every election, only shifting between them depending on whether open reactionaries or opportunists are more profitable.

This can also be seen in the *Mandate for Leadership* documents given to Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump, which were both funded by a coalition of capitalists known as The Heritage Foundation. Under Socialism, a true democracy of the proletariat will be realized, albeit gradually, as classism (for example, racism—which may potentially be the priority class system to erode post-USA) will still exist for some time, and active efforts will need to be made to erode the leftovers of classism after leaving capitalist society.

- Syndicates are another term for trade unions.

Key Takeaways:

- What is the best type of state for capitalists to retain power? Do changes in leadership affect the power of capitalists?
- What does voting actually do in bourgeois democracies? (Note: This isn't an argument against voting; rather, Marx and Lenin instead advocate in other documents to establish independent workers' parties and vote for those as opposed to only supporting the existing bourgeois parties, except wherein strategic voting is necessary, as only supporting the existing bourgeois parties

will only prolong the struggle and worsen conditions over time, and consequently building dual power is non-optional.)

- What happens to the state under Communism? (Note: This is due to capitalism developing as a consequence of finally being able to produce enough commodities to equitably distribute to everyone, a feature not present in previous economic systems like feudalism.)

Section 4: The “Withering Away” of the State, and Violent Revolution

Important Context:

- When Engels discusses democracy withering away with the state, what he refers to is the political system we use as a response to class antagonisms. Under the second stage of Communism (simply referred to as Communism), this style of election will be wholly unnecessary, as the withering of the state structure additionally withers relationships of power; consequently, people will freely participate in society according to the principle of, “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” This additionally provides the pleasant side effect of people working in society for the betterment of themselves and others, rather than as a forced consequence of economic pressure.
- A panegyric is a public speech in praise of someone or something.
- *The Poverty of Philosophy* is a comedically titled rebuttal by Marx against Proudhon’s *The Philosophy of Poverty*. This document was such a thorough rebuttal of Proudhon’s arguments that it resulted in the cordial relations between Marx and Proudhon completely fracturing, as Proudhon no longer wanted to listen to Marx’s arguments.
- While *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is an important Marxist document, its points are far better explained in the current document, *The State and Revolution*.

Key Takeaways:

- What is the distinction between withering and abolition in regards to the state?
- What type of state is abolished? What type of state is withered?
- What does *dictatorship of the proletariat* mean?
- With the requirements for withering in mind, can the state wither if the bourgeoisie still exist?
- Why are the terms *free* and *people’s* oxymoronic in relation to the state?

Chapter 2: The Experience of 1848-51

Section 1: The Eve of Revolution

Important Context:

- *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, oftentimes simply referred to as, “*The Communist Manifesto*,” was an agitational sequel to Engels’ *The Principles of Communism* (a basic Q&A about Communism) drawing from the experiences of the Paris Commune, the first Socialist experiment.
- The *petty-bourgeois democrats* (or *petit bourgeois democrats*) Lenin refers to were what we recognize as social democrats today.
- The vanguard Lenin describes refers to a politically-educated and ideally combat-trained spearhead of Marxist proletarians who serve to lead the proletarian revolution. This is why, in *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin describes *Iskra* (“The Spark,” an illegal Bolshevik newspaper) as only needing to achieve a force of, “countless thousands,” and issuing tens of thousands of newspapers, despite having a population of over 100 million; at the spark of the revolution, the Bolsheviks only had a population of approximately 46,000, compared to the approximate 38,000 of the Mensheviks, only having a bit under 85,000 between them.

Extrapolating on this data, in more technologically and economically advanced countries, especially those of larger populations, this vanguard will likely need to be proportionately larger, albeit practical experience is the only way to properly ascertain the approximate amount needed—the more precisely (as opposed to generally) one plans ahead for yet unknown conditions, the less materialist and more idealist one’s concepts are.

Key Takeaways:

- How does Marx describe the proletarian state in *The Communist Manifesto*? What does nationalization actually mean in this context, as opposed to what it would mean in a bourgeois state?
- What is the only class the proletariat must oppress?

Section 2: The Revolution Summed Up

Important Context:

- Dialectical materialism is a key philosophy within Marxism, which is sometimes abbreviated as diamat. Dialectical materialism considers the material world, oftentimes referred to as the base, to be the primary factor that affects human thought, oftentimes referred to as the superstructure.

The base includes the workers and the means of production, the latter of which includes tools, machines, factories, land, and raw materials, whereas the superstructure includes human concepts like politics, economics, and culture. This is affected down to the individual level as a consequence of human thought coming from the human brain, a structure created and affected by the material world, which consequently develops thoughts in response to that world.

Critically, these thoughts don’t change anything unless material action is taken to change the world. For example, thinking about what flavour pudding might be will never answer the

question, and neither will thinking about eating it, but acting on that thought and eating the pudding will reveal it to you, and in turn you acting on your thoughts has changed the pudding.

Notably, as later pointed out by Mao Tse-Tung (Zedong), you can also derive information from other people who have done the research into the topic you want to know about. He additionally brings up the fallacy of mechanical materialism, a misinterpretation of dialectical materialism in which it's assumed that the material world will always be the dominant structure, whereas in dialectical materialism it's recognized that human concepts may become the dominant force to change the material conditions when something interrupts the progress of the base, providing an example from Lenin discussing in *What Is to Be Done?* that a revolutionary movement cannot begin without the existence of revolutionary theory, of which revolutionary Socialist theory in itself occurs in response to the contradictions of capitalism, or its previous system of revolutionary capitalist theory arising in response to the contradictions of feudalism, et cetera.

When these conditions affect many individuals, and more importantly, when these individuals affect each other, it becomes change on a social level—for example, one may teach a handful of others Marxism and create a Marxist group, who in turn may create a few new Marxist teachers who create overlapping Marxist groups, repeating this cycle of cadres and explosively growing a Marxist movement.

Additionally, as dialectical materialism is rooted in science, and took great observations from scientific discoveries such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, dialectical materialism observes the universe, and consequently also human societies, not as something static, but as something fluid, constantly changing and evolving to solve its own contradictions; just as we see genetic evolution responding to physical obstacles, cultural evolution will occur in response to social obstacles.

Key Takeaways:

- What must be done to the bourgeois state?
- How do bourgeois parties, no matter how allegedly progressive, develop in response to proletarian class consciousness?

Section 3: The Presentation of the Question by Marx in 1852

Important Context:

- The *dictatorship of the bourgeoisie* is the inverse of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and describes the current system: the one in which the bourgeoisie oppress the proletariat.

Key Takeaways:

- What are the three primary contributions to the theory of class struggle which Marx discovered?

Chapter 3: Experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. Marx's Analysis

Section 1: What Made the Communards' Attempts Heroic?

Key Takeaways:

- Can the existing state apparatus be used by the proletariat?
- Why did it become impossible for a peaceful transition to a proletarian state in Britain and the USA after the years surrounding WWI?
- What is the distinction that defines a *people's* revolution?

Section 2: What is to Replace the Smashed State Machine?

Important Context:

- As is briefly mentioned at the beginning of this section, Marxism is not a utopian ideology; rather, it's a scientific one. While it does draw from the natural sciences (biology, physics, chemistry, etc.), this more refers to the social sciences, particularly using dialectical materialism and historical materialism. An equally long document by Engels called *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (which in itself is part of a very long rebuttal called *Anti-Dühring*) goes in-depth about this.

For now, the main takeaway should be that our job is to examine the existing material conditions and come up with realistic solutions to those problems based on tangible experiences, rather than performing the inverse many an alleged, "Marxist," will perform, wherein they think about the kind of world they believe would be ideal (note: utopianism and idealism overlap) and try to plan around that, even while certain changes may not be feasible in current conditions, leading to something we refer to as *ultraleftism*.

(Note: *Ultraleftism*, sometimes referred to as *left-wing Communism*, refers to when people try to establish too many changes at once before a society has met the conditions that allow those changes; for example, if someone had attempted to establish Socialism, an economic system that requires there to be enough commodity production to supply everyone equitably, in feudalism, a society created by not having sufficiently efficient enough production to provide for everyone. Commonly cited examples are Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourg (for her support of Trotskyism, opposition to a one-party system, and opposition to the dissolution of bourgeois state systems such as the Constituent Assembly—a pseudo-democratic parliament), and the anarchist movement.

Inversely, *conservative Communism*, sometimes referred to as *right-wing Communism*, are ideologies that attempt to hold the party line in its existing place despite conditions that allow societal progression, and will sometimes even attempt to backtrack social progress. This is

sometimes divisively applied to Joseph Stalin.

Critically, ideologies on both sides consider themselves to be, “anti-revisionists,” and will sometimes describe themselves as, “the true Marxists.” This can be seen in the modern Trotskyist movement, but can also be seen in allegedly Maoist movements such as The Shining Path (following Peruvian Maoist Manuel Guzmán’s, “Gonzalo Thought”) in Peru, or in the dogmatic Hoxhaist (following Enver Hoxha, an Albanian Stalinist) movement.)

- For more information on what Lenin is talking about when he mentions Christianity, “forgetting,” its revolutionary spirit, consult *On the History of Early Christianity* by Friedrich Engels. Further information about the Socialist response to these problems can be found in *The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion* by Vladimir Lenin and *Classes and Parties in Their Attitude to Religion and the Church* by Vladimir Lenin.

Key Takeaways:

- What are the four key changes that occur to bureaucratic (unelected, appointed) positions, such as administrators and the police?

Section 3: Abolition of Parliamentarism

Important Context:

- Anarcho-syndicalism is the concept of anarchism with trade unions.
- The description of anti-bourgeois-parliamentarism merging executive and legislative powers is advocating that legislators, rather than just being pencil-pushers, also have to actually participate in the execution of the laws they sign. For example, if legislators passed a vote to construct train lines across the country, they would then also be required to assist in its construction.
- For clarification of why the immediate abolition of all bureaucracy is utopian, please consult *The Principles of Communism* by Friedrich Engels, particularly question 18.

Key Takeaways:

- Why does anarchism function as a counter-revolutionary movement which postpones proletarian revolution?
- What concepts from the existing postal service can be applied immediately to the Socialist revolution?

Section 4: Organisation of National Unity

Important Context:

- Centralism in this context refers to democratic centralism, a principle of Marxism wherein the workers are working towards a unified goal, and will hold elections to determine the best path

towards that goal. A majority vote—commonly 60% or greater—will determine the outcome, and be binding for all workers involved.

Key Takeaway:

- How did social democrats like Bernstein and Kautsky warp Marx's theory of the state?

Section 5: Abolition of the Parasite State

Important Context:

- “The opportunists of present-day Social-Democracy,” Lenin mentions refers to the people we would consider social democrats today, as opposed to the Bolsheviks; i.e. there was a social democrat trend fomenting within the Marxist-Leninist bloc.

Key Takeaway:

- What was the secret to the flexibility of the Paris Commune's government?

Chapter 4: Supplementary Explanations by Engels

Section 1: The Housing Question

Important Context:

- Due to inherent maintenance costs of housing (water, electricity, repairs, etc.), rent relations will unfortunately still be necessary until these services, as well, don't require payment, which in turn requires that the state has been fully withered away. However, rather than renting out to landlords, it's renting to the collective working people, meaning that these costs will be significantly more reasonable.

Additionally, due to workers inherently having unequal contributions to labour (on account of age, disability, and other mediums that cause a worker to work above or below the average intensity of labour), and consequently having unequal relations of wages and labour, it becomes the job of the state—the collective workers—to supplement the costs of people who would otherwise be unable to afford housing, creating the need for collective taxation from those who can work.

Key Takeaways:

- How does Marx describe solving homelessness and overcrowding? (Note: In the USA, there is approximately 1 house per 2 people, many of them vacant, and this has been the case for nearly 3 decades, according to both the US Census Bureau and Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED); presumably longer, albeit this data started being graphed in quarter 2 of 2002.)

Subsection 1: Controversy with the Anarchists

Key Takeaway:

- What was Marx's critique of anarchist state abolition?

Subsection 2: Letter to Bebel

Key Takeaway:

- What was Engels' criticism of Bebel's understanding of proletarian power? What did Engels suggest instead?

Section 2: Criticism of the Draft of the Erfurt Programme

Important Context:

- A federal republic differs from a unitary state in that it has smaller federative states inside of it; for example, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, or the United Mexican States. Federal republics are unfortunately less democratic than unitary states, as will be explained by Engels and Lenin in this section, but instant centralization isn't always possible—for example, Engels cited the USA as still requiring a federal republic at the time; whether this is still necessary, or whether we can progress to a unitary state, will be determined by the conditions after revolution.

Key Takeaways:

- What was the misunderstanding reformists had in regards to imperialism (the highest stage of capitalism)? How is this similar to the misunderstanding that has led to the term *technofeudalism*?
- What was Engels' proposition for self-government, including on the, "American model" (a federal republic)?

Subsection 1: The 1891 Preface to Marx's "The Civil War in France"

Key Takeaways:

- How did the Paris Commune ensure elected officials remained servants to the workers?
- What were Engels' remarks which were highlighted by Lenin?

Subsection 2: Engels on the Overcoming of Democracy

Important Context:

- The Proudhonists mentioned by Lenin were anarchists—while it seems odd at present, they did in fact call themselves social democrats at the time.
- Lenin later fully addressed the inaccuracy of the term Social-Democrat when his Bolshevik faction simply began to refer to themselves as Communists, which began the distinction of capital-C Communism, and which he directly alludes to in this section.

Key Takeaways:

- Is the name a Communist Party chooses to describe itself with as important as what it does?
- What is the distinction Lenin makes between state democracy and true democracy under Communism?

Chapter 5: The Economic Basis of the Withering Away of the State

Section 1: Presentation of the Question by Marx

Key Takeaway:

- How should Marxists think about the development of Communism?

Section 2: The Transition from Capitalism to Communism

Important Context:

- This section and the following section concern what we call *the first stage of Communism*, oftentimes just called Socialism.
- While Marx unfortunately had hypocritical racism and misogyny, which can sometimes be seen in his works (examples being *Capital* and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, wherein he refers to Indigenous people as, “savages,” and considers womens’ labour inferior to mens’ labour), Lenin, like Engels, and later Mao, established that women were equal to men, and that racism was inherently counter-revolutionary, and fought hard to break down racism and misogyny in the Soviet Union (including anti-semitism, of which a gramophone recording still exists of his critiques of anti-semitism titled *Anti-Jewish Pogroms*; fascinatingly, a similar critique of antisemitism can be found from Marx—who himself was raised in a Jewish family—titled *On the Jewish Question* wherein he asserts that 1. any critiques of Jews can equally be applied to Christians, 2. any alleged seizure of economic power by Jews would be necessary to counteract their ethnic oppression under capitalism, and 3. even if the anti-semites were correct, the way to break down that power would be Socialist revolution, not the oppression of Jews).
- *Soviets* literally means *unions*.

Key Takeaways:

- How does Marx critique bourgeois democracy? (Note: Did you know that as far back as 2014, even the bourgeois propaganda outlet *The Washington Post* released a meta-analysis of 1,779 policy outcomes demonstrating that the USA is an oligarchy, and that this assertion is still being acknowledged in the 2020s by multiple organizations?)
- How does Lenin criticize liberal professors and petit bourgeois opportunists? How does this compare to modern USAmerican democrats invoking the trolley problem thought experiment?
- How does democracy change in the transition from capitalism to Communism?

Section 3: The First Phase of Communist Society

Key Takeaway:

- Can lower Communism provide true equality? (Note: Consider the difference between *equality* and *equity*.)

Section 4: The Higher Phase of Communist Society

Key Takeaways:

- What are some of the preconditions of true equality?
- What does democratic centralism—the unification of workers into a single, united force—open the doors to?

Chapter 6: The Vulgarization of Marxism by the Opportunists

Section 1: Plekhanov's Controversy with the Anarchists

Key Takeaway:

- What are the flaws of anarchist philosophy? (Note: Modern anarchists have, generally speaking, discarded the concept of the peaceful dissolving of the state into statelessness through social democracy that was espoused by Bakunin.)

Section 2: Kautsky's Controversy with the Opportunists

Key Takeaways:

- What revisionism did Kautsky omit from Bernstein?
- What did Kautsky avoid discussing in reference to revolution?
- What are the three anti-bureaucratic measures taken in workers' organizations? (Note: In an audiobook of *The State and Revolution* read by *dessalines_*, this line is inexplicably skipped; if using this audiobook, please consult the written copy on the Marxists Internet Archive—albeit this, in itself, also contains many typos.)

Section 3: Kautsky's Controversy with Pannekoek

Key Takeaways:

- What are the distinctions between Marxists and anarchists?
- What is the distinction between elected workers under capitalism and Socialism?
- What is the distinction between Kautsky and Lenin on the response to bourgeois state power?

Section 4 (Untitled)

Key Takeaway:

- How did the Second International distort Marxism?

Chapter 7: (Postscript 1) The Experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and Postscript (2) to the First Edition

Important Context:

- Chapter 7 was never finished—Lenin, after writing a single line of Chapter 7, was interrupted by the October Revolution occurring, the proletarian revolution that followed shortly after the bourgeois revolution, which ushered into existence the Soviet Union.