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## The Centrality of Africa in Lenin's Theory of Imperialism

### Abstract

Lenin's ideas have significantly advanced African anti-imperialist struggles and the study of Africa. Recently, however, scholars have reinvigorated the post-colonial critique of Marxism as a Eurocentric doctrine, one that misunderstands and marginalises Africa and its peoples. Following Cedric Robinson, several analysts mention Lenin alongside Marx and Engels as a founder of Eurocentric Marxism. This article, by contrast, argues that Lenin displayed a deep concern for Africa that was fundamentally non-Eurocentric. Lenin researched Africa extensively in his *Notebooks on Imperialism*. Upon the basis of this research, Lenin placed Africa at the centre of his analysis in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which still influences African Studies. It is impossible to understand the insights of Lenin's theory of imperialism without appreciating Africa's centrality within it. Although Lenin displayed the racist views of Africa that dominated his era, these were marginal in his thought. Lenin militantly opposed colonialism and supported African independence.

**Key Words:** Lenin, Africa, imperialism, Eurocentrism, racism, Marxism

### Introduction

V. I. Lenin, the founder of Bolshevism, has had a significant impact upon the history and study of Africa. During the twentieth century, many African revolutionaries used Leninism as a guide in their struggles to overcome Western imperialism and construct socialism (Mayer 2021; Verhoeven 2021). Several African socialists understood Marxism primarily through Lenin's works. In Tanzania, for example, Julius Nyerere 'undoubtedly read Marx but perhaps much more Lenin', and his attempt to combine a strong post-colonial state with popular support from below showed that he understood politics 'in the Leninist sense' (Shivji 2012, 108). Likewise, Kwame Nkrumah 'saw himself quite consciously as an African Lenin' (Mazrui 1966, 106). His enduring work, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, was both a homage and a sequel to Lenin's seminal contribution to Marxist theory, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Ndlovu-Gathensi and Ndlovu 2021, 19). In hindsight, some claim that African socialist governments ended up distorting Lenin's emancipatory vision into a form of authoritarian state capitalism (Swagler 2018). Nevertheless, many of their leaders genuinely saw themselves as Lenin's disciples, and as African *Leninists*, contributing to the global struggle for human freedom. African socialist governments demonstrated their Leninist heritage by, amongst other things, placing gigantic portraits, busts, and statues of Lenin in the halls of power seized from the European colonialists.

Twentieth century African intellectuals also endorsed Lenin's thought, though observers have again offered differing evaluations of their ideas. In 1991, amidst the demise of Soviet socialism, Pearce (1991, 112) accused African Marxist-Leninist intellectuals of utilising Lenin's thought 'dogmatically and unphilosophically as a simple and singularly blunt-edged instrument for criticising former colonial and current neo-colonial powers'. They reduced Lenin's sophisticated ideas to 'a set of moral and practical rules to be learned and uncritically applied as a recipe for action in all situations'. Other intellectuals, including Frantz Fanon, mined Lenin's ideas more creatively to develop their own distinctive theories (Newlove 2019). Lenin's book *Imperialism* provided rich insights into African political economy. Udofia (1984, 353-54, 357) used Lenin's analysis to explain how and why multinational

corporations were dominating Africa; whilst Bangura (1986, 25) used Lenin's explanation of how imperialism produced an authoritarian politics to explain the creation of corrupt, repressive dictatorships in Nigeria during the period of Western-imposed structural adjustment.

In the twenty first century, Lenin's *Imperialism* continues to theoretically inform African studies (Mpofu 2021, 41), particularly those endorsing theories of imperialism, neo-imperialism, neo-colonialism, world systems theory, dependency theory, and development theory. In 2021, for example, the *Review of African Political Economy* published a special issue examining Samir Amin's contributions to Marxist studies within the field. Musthaq's contribution utilised Amin's writings to formulate a contemporary form of dependency, manifested in the subordination of developing countries into a financialised global economy. Musthaq (2021, 17) recognises that Amin built upon Lenin's ideas, especially the notion of uneven development as an inherent feature of global capitalism.

It is therefore strange, given these facts, that scholars have seldom focused upon what Lenin himself said about Africa and African peoples. One of the few scholars to discuss this subject was the Black American socialist W. E. B. Du Bois, who in 1959 published an article in a soviet journal titled 'Lenin and Africa'. Du Bois' analysis was double-edged. On the one hand, he encouraged Africans to adopt 'Lenin's doctrine' as a guide to defeat imperialism. On the other hand, Du Bois didn't think that 'Lenin had Africa as well as Europe in mind' when he led the establishment of the Soviet Union. In fact, Du Bois (2019, 253) didn't 'know of any passage in the writings of Lenin which refer specifically to Africa'.

Soviet scholars disagreed. In 1960, the South African Communist Party published an article by I. Potekhin, the director of the Soviet Union's Africa Institute, also titled 'Lenin and Africa'. Potekhin did not mention Du Bois' article, published only a year previously, but he repudiated Du Bois' claim that Lenin never discussed Africa. According to Potekhin, Lenin said much on the subject. He explored the history of Europe's imperialist partition of the continent, the African peoples' oppressed condition, the European powers' persecution of them, as well as the African liberation movement's inception (Potekhin 1960, 18).

Since Potekhin issued this rebuttal, little else has appeared on the subject. However, the evaluation of Lenin's views on Africa remains important today. In recent years, scholars have reinvigorated the post-colonial critique of Marxism as an orientalist doctrine, one that misunderstands and marginalises non-European peoples. John M. Hobson, an authoritative proponent of this view in the discipline of global political economy, has identified four characteristics or stages in the development of Orientalism, or what is now more commonly known as Eurocentrism or Western-centrism: 1) the splitting of the East and West into two separate and self-constituting entities; 2) the evaluation of the West as superior to the East, in the sense that the West is endowed with rational characteristics, including liberal democracy and capitalism; whilst the East is endowed with irrational ones, such as barbarism and slavery; 3) the 'Eurocentric Big Bang theory', which accords a monopoly of global developmental agency to the West; and 4) an imperialist politics, in which imperialism is either i) ignored, or presented as the benign civilising mission; or ii) empire is critiqued (direct imperialism), but the Western universalism of the theory renders its politics as a form of indirect imperialism. Hobson has accused Marx himself of endorsing these four characteristics of Eurocentrism (Hobson 2013).

The field of African studies has not ignored the critique of Eurocentric Marxism. According to Agozino (2014, 174), one can find in African studies a ‘frequent reference to Marxism as a theory that must be rejected as Eurocentric, even while being identified as a major perspective adopted by many scholars in the field of African Studies’. Indeed, scholars working in this field have shown increasing praise for Cedric Robinson’s 1983 book *Black Marxism*, which argues that Marxism neglects and misconstrues the history of Black and African peoples, because it is based upon a Western worldview derived from the historical experiences, social orders, and cultures of European peoples. Robinson includes Lenin alongside Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as a founder of Eurocentric Marxism, though curiously enough, he ignores Lenin’s remarks on Africa. As an indicator of the surge in support for *Black Marxism*, the mainstream publishing house Penguin rereleased it in 2021, thereby introducing this academic text to a public readership.

The furore surrounding *Black Marxism* has impacted the study of African political economy. Mporu recently commended Lenin’s *Imperialism* for illuminating capitalism during its monopoly phase, but right after praising this book, Mporu endorsed Robinson’s analysis: ‘Perhaps what has limited the bite of Marxism against the imperialism, colonialism and coloniality that are critical African problems is its own Eurocentrism, which has made its philosophy and praxis blind and impotent’ (Mporu 2021, 41; see also Grosfoguel 2021, xix).

This narrative has become increasingly prominent since the rise of Black Lives Matter, a movement that has highlighted the structural nature of anti-Black racism under a Western-based system that Robinson described as ‘racial capitalism’. In the wake of BLM, many have sought to expose and ‘decolonise’ the Eurocentric traditions in academia.

Crucially, not everyone has followed this trend. Agozino persuasively rejects the notion that Marxism is Eurocentric by showing that Marx devoted significant attention to Africa in his mature works, including *Capital*, which ‘contains hundreds of references to the “Negro”’. In fact, ‘the Negro, slavery, the struggle for emancipation and the African featured prominently in that last testament of Marx’ (Agozino 2014, 172, 175; see also Pateman 2020).

Taking inspiration from Agozino’s study of Marx, this article offers a sequel of sorts by making a similar argument for Lenin, whose influence upon African studies and African socialism has also been significant. It does so by addressing the following two research questions: Firstly, did Lenin marginalise Africa in his studies? And secondly, was Lenin a Eurocentric thinker, who examined Africa from a European perspective? By examining Lenin’s statements, published and unpublished, this article argues that the answer to the first question is a resounding no. In contrast to Du Bois, this article argues that Lenin was deeply concerned in the African continent and its peoples when he established the Soviet Union. He was interested in both colonialism in Africa and the struggles of African people against it. In fact, Lenin explored these issues from an early stage in his intellectual development. Walter Rodney (1970) claims that ‘Lenin very rarely mentioned Africa in his writings on colonialism’. This may be true for his published writings, but it remains the case that Lenin conducted a vast amount of research on the continent in his *Notebooks on Imperialism*, which illuminate important aspects of his political-economic thought. Upon the basis of this research, Lenin placed Africa at the centre of his analysis in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, a work that remains significant in African studies, especially the study of African political economy. The centrality of Africa in this book has gone insufficiently acknowledged in the literature, including in Potekhin’s analysis.

This article answers the second research question with a qualified no. Lenin did display some Eurocentric assumptions, though these are now widely endorsed by Africans and African studies scholars. Lenin also expressed some of the racist perceptions of Africa and African peoples that dominated European thinking during his era. This article highlights these, but it shows that racist notions are rare in Lenin's works, and they did not characterise his theoretical thinking. Lenin was a militant critic of colonialism in Africa and a consistent defender of African liberation. It was precisely these positions that earned Lenin a substantial degree of prestige amongst African socialists.

This article begins by exploring Lenin's views on European colonialism in Africa prior to the First World War. During this period, he criticised colonialism whilst isolating African struggles from the European proletariat. The second part explores Lenin's analysis of Africa in relation to his theory of imperialism, which he developed during the war. The third part highlights Lenin's opposition to colonialism in Africa during and after the war, when he linked the African liberation struggle to the worldwide proletarian revolution. The fourth part scrutinises Lenin's racist views and evaluates the importance they have in his thought. Finally, the conclusion shows how Lenin refutes Hobson's four characteristics of Eurocentrism, and defends the relevance of his theory imperialism for the study of African political economy.

### **Africa and colonialism**

Lenin said little on Africa before the Great War. His main concern was to examine, organise, and support the socialist movement in his native Russia and Western Europe. This fact has provided the basis for the perception that Lenin was Eurocentric. Such a view is misleading. Lenin displayed a concern for African affairs early in his intellectual growth. He was particularly interested in Western Europe's colonisation of the continent, since this, in his view, was inextricably bound up with the global development of capitalism.

In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, published in 1899, Lenin noted how the imperialist government located in the wealthy centre of the country was colonising the poorer national minorities in the outer regions, and extracting their resources upon the basis of expanded agricultural production. The abundance of 'free' land in the outer regions attracted a stream of settlers from the inner regions, who violently forced the natives off this land and proceeded to ramp up capitalist agriculture. Lenin described Russia's exploitative internal core-periphery relation as 'a sample of colonial policy that bears comparison with any of the German's exploits in Africa' (Lenin 1977a, 258). In making this 'comparison', Lenin argued that colonialism was rooted in the economic imperative of capitalist development. Capitalism could expand and survive only through the constant, and often violent appropriation of land and resources. Russia's internal colonialism and Europe's colonial conquest of Africa had the same economic rationale.

In 1912, Lenin published his article 'The End of the Italo-Turkish War' in the Russian communist newspaper *Pravda*. Here, he examined Italy's military invasion of Libya, which was then subordinated under the Ottoman Empire. Lenin denounced Italy's seizure of the capital Tripoli, and mocked its claim to be 'a "civilised" twentieth century nation'. Lenin rejected the imperialist propaganda that Italy invaded Libya to spread civilisation. He argued that profitmaking was the real cause. Italian capitalism required 'new markets' to grow. Lenin described the war as 'a perfected, civilised blood bath, the massacre of Arabs with the help of the "latest" weapons'. He emphasised Italy's military brutality, showing that its well-

armed troops massacred defenceless women, children, and families with impunity. He also pointed out that the war cost Italy as well; since its expenses increased domestic unemployment and economic stagnation. Lenin recognised that the Libyans put up a strong resistance, and he was convinced that they would never submit, regardless of their losses. The brave Arab tribes would continue to ‘be “civilised” by bayonet, bullet, noose, fire and rape’ (Lenin 1978, 337-338; Potekhin 1960, 19).

Lenin denounced the left-wing politicians and organisations that supported Europe’s colonial exploitation and plunder of Africa. He sought to expose them when the press failed to do so. In January 1913, Lenin wrote an article examining the French government of the left-wing prime minister Aristide Briand. When discussing Briand’s cabinet, liberal papers, Lenin noted, focused upon petty issues, such as the ministers’ education and employment history. Lenin chastised the press for avoiding ‘the crux of the matter’, which was that several ministers were ‘financial sharks and swindlers’. He pointed out that one of them, Charles Jonnart, used his power as the French governor of Algeria to exploit the dominion’s resources, by securing for himself rich iron ore deposits (Lenin 1978, 491).

In all these critical observations, Lenin did not link the subjugation of Africa’s colonised peoples to the exploitation of Europe’s working class. He did not connect the anti-imperialist struggles of African peoples to the anti-capitalist struggles of the European proletariat. For the most part, Lenin separated the two struggles. He did not identify interrelations between them, and he did not argue that one had any importance for the other. Africa was inconsequential to this theory of Western socialist revolution. Lenin radically revised his approach after the outbreak of the Great War, a conflict that transformed the global politico-economic landscape. During the war, Lenin developed his theory of imperialism, which would go on to reshape Marxism. In this theory, Lenin combined the destinies of the European working class and the peoples of Africa.

### **The centrality of Africa in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism***

Africa has a central place in Lenin’s theory of imperialism. As early as February 1915, less than a year into World War I, Lenin presented Europe’s ‘repartition of Africa’ as ‘the objective content’ of the conflict (Lenin 1974b, 144). The Great War, in his view, i) resulted from the imperialist conquest of Africa, and ii) it was waged over Africa’s redivision. Lenin’s first claim did not deny the significance of other causes. His point was that Africa’s subjugation was the tipping point; and had made war virtually inevitable. Lenin’s second claim differs from a more common scholarly interpretation of his analysis, which is that he saw the war as a ‘struggle over “economic territory” as a whole’, and not Africa specifically (Patnaik 2014, 35). This interpretation is flawed. Although Lenin certainly recognised the significance of other territories during the war, he repeatedly placed Africa at the centre of the conflict.

Lenin’s theory of imperialism provides the key to understanding this stance. As he initially explained it in May 1915, free trade and peace would reign for as long as the developed capitalist countries were able to enlarge their ‘colonies without hindrance, and seize unoccupied land in Africa’. This was the situation in the period prior to modern imperialism, the period of pre-monopoly capitalism. By 1900, however, most of Africa was under colonial control. The European imperialists had forcibly appropriated all the land. Free competition was impossible. A war over this land was inevitable. The conquest of Africa ushered in the imperialist epoch, including the Great War (Lenin 1974b, 226). To be clear, Lenin thought

that African colonisation itself resulted from a deeper cause: the European ‘struggle for control over raw materials, markets and investment outlets’ (Beckman 1981, 15). This point, however, does not diminish the significance of his claim. In Lenin’s view, the period of imperialist rivalry preceding the world’s total colonisation was that of pre-monopoly capitalism (Lindsey 1982, 6-7). It was only after Africa was completely colonised that imperialism arose, since Africa was the last remaining uncolonised territory. It is crucial to note that this was not an isolated or anomalous argument in Lenin’s work. As the remainder of this article will show, he maintained it consistently. Lenin defended this position time and time again throughout the war, as he further developed his theory of imperialism.

From 1915-1916, whilst living in exile in Switzerland, Lenin undertook a period of deep and extensive research on Africa, in preparation for his book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. During this time, Lenin studied and wrote notes on hundreds of books on history and economics. The Soviet Union published these notes in volume 39 of his *Collected Works*, under the title *Notebooks on Imperialism*. A thorough study of these notes can not only illuminate the research process and methodology through which Lenin gathered the data for his book on *Imperialism*. It can also further elucidate the centrality of Africa in his research, particularly ‘the plundering policy of the imperialist powers’ (Potekhin 1960, 18).

Lenin’s *Notebooks on Imperialism* contain 179 references to ‘Africa’, 38 references to ‘negro’, and hundreds of references to the individual African countries. Lenin made detailed notes on dozens of scholarly books focusing upon European imperialism in Africa. From numerous secondary sources Lenin amounted a mass of statistical data on the continent, from the smallest details, such as the amount of water power accrued from the Congo’s waterfalls, to larger-scale figures and facts, including the amount of European and US capital invested in Africa from 1876 to 1900, Europe’s ownership share of African land and its population, the length of Africa’s railways, and the number of German banks in Africa. He meticulously traced the key developments in the imperialist scramble for Africa, and catalogued the various exchanges, deals and conflicts between the European powers over the acquisition of African lands (Lenin 1974c, 138- 39, 151, 210, 252-55, 286, 289, 290-92, 294, 296, 356).

Throughout the *Notebooks*, Lenin commented on the importance of Africa to imperialism and the Great War. In his comments on *The Principles of Social Economics* by S. Altmann, Lenin wrote ‘N. B.’ (nota bene) beside a passage stating that the future of Germany’s foreign banking depended largely upon ‘the creation of a German colonial empire in Africa’ (Lenin 1974c, 69-70). From J. A. Hobson’s book *Imperialism*, Lenin concluded that imperialism arose with the partitioning of Africa in the 1880s, a development that he described as ‘the struggle for Africa’ (Lenin 1974c, 407). Germany, he argued, began its ‘real imperialist policy’ in 1884, when its ‘African protectorates arose’ (Lenin 1974c, 406). Likewise, France revived its ‘old colonial spirit’ in 1880, when it extended ‘its possessions in Senegal and Sahara’, whilst later acquiring Tunisia (Lenin 1974c, 406). Here is more evidence that Lenin viewed Africa’s colonial division as the realisation of the imperialist stage of capitalism.

Although Lenin’s quoted material consisted predominantly of statistics, facts and dates, his own notes and comments in the margins included ‘angry, scourging descriptions of the colonisers, of their predatory methods of seizure and division of the African colonies’ (Potekhin 1960, 18). For instance, Lenin disparagingly described King Leopold of Belgium as a ‘business manipulator, financier, swindler’ who ‘bought the Congo for himself and “developed” it’ (Lenin 1974c, 523). In several other places Lenin described Europe as a ‘rentier’ that ‘rides on the **negroes**’, and ‘on the back of the Negroes’ (Lenin 1974c, 452,

755). Lenin emphasised Hobson's view that in Britain's 'pax Britannica' ideology was 'an *impudent falsehood*', which had 'become in recent years a grotesque monster of hypocrisy' in Africa (Lenin 1974c, 417). Moreover, whilst Lenin relied heavily upon secondary sources, he was not uncritical of them. He exposed the chauvinist views of the authors who supported the partition of Africa, such as the 'imperialist patriot' S. von Waltershausen and the 'apologist' Sigmund Schilder (Lenin 1974c, 107, 568).

Finally, Lenin remarked that Africans themselves had resisted their colonisation, and were put down with military force. He noted 'the flogging and execution' of Egyptian rebels (Lenin 1974c, 762), the *Hottentot* and Herero revolts (Lenin 1974c, 682), as well as the German colonisers' execution of the Duala tribe leader in Cameroon (Lenin 1974c, 310; Potekhin 1960, 19). All in all, Lenin's *Notebooks on Imperialism* showcase his deep concern for African peoples.

It is now time to examine Lenin's 1917 book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which drew directly upon his *Notebooks on Imperialism*. In this book, Lenin gave the definitive outline of his view that the predatory nations of the European core developed their capitalist economies by exploiting and thereby under-developing the territories of the global periphery. When discussing this text, however, Smith (2015, 91) claims that 'Marxists in imperialist countries have often ignored Lenin's insistence on the economic and political centrality of the division of the world into oppressed and oppressor nations'. Some even deny the importance of this facet. Marshall (2014, 326), for instance, laments that Lenin's analysis was 'hijacked and interpolated by others into the debate over the Third World and "underdevelopment" of the 1960s and 1970s'. Marshall should not lament this, because the core-periphery model of underdevelopment is in fact crucial to Lenin's theory of imperialism in this book, and Africa is at the centre of it.

In *Imperialism*, Lenin reiterated his view that Africa's colonisation heralded imperialism. In his view, European powers colonised Africa in order to exploit its labour and resources, and thereby secure the development of their national capitalist economies. In section six: 'The Division of the World Among the Great Powers', Lenin quoted statistics from A. Supan's book, *The Territorial Development of the European Colonies*, showing the percentage of African territory owned by the European colonial powers between 1876 and 1900. In 1876, Europe owned 10% of Africa, whilst in 1900 it owned 90%. Likewise, Polynesia went from 56% European ownership in 1876 to 98% in 1900. The other major world regions- Asia, Australia, and America- saw negligible changes in the same period. They were already colonised. As such, Lenin recognised that Africa saw the biggest and most significant changes. Summarising this statistic, he endorsed Supan's view that 'the characteristic feature of this period' was the 'division of Africa and Polynesia'. But Lenin did not merely repeat Supan's argument (Rodney 1970). He expanded it, by arguing that imperialism had partitioned the entire world. There was no more 'free' land left to grab. This was an unprecedented situation in human history, and 'a peculiar epoch of world colonial policy', one that signalled the birth of imperialism (Lenin 1974d, 254).

In saying this, however, Lenin mentioned the partitioning of Africa alongside Polynesia, and so he did not give Africa cardinal importance. Later in the text, Lenin positioned the conquest of Africa unequivocally as the key moment in the emergence of imperialism. Moreover, he did so independently, without reference to any scholar. The key passage is in section ten: 'The Place of Imperialism in History'. Here, in the final section of the book, Lenin argued that Africa's partition 'ushered in the era of monopoly possession of world colonies and,



consequently, of particularly intense struggle for the division and redivision of the world' (Lenin 1974d, 299-300). This passage captures the essence of Lenin's views on the significance of Africa to imperialism. His point was that Africa was not just one amongst several other regions subordinated by imperialism. The struggle over Africa was not just one of the war's causes. No. In Lenin's view, Africa was the most important arena of imperialist contestation. The subjugation of Africa signalled the rise of imperialism; a new stage of capitalism characterised by military conflicts over territory. This meant that the African continent was of unparalleled geopolitical and economic importance, for both the European colonial powers and the global socialist cause. For as long as Africa was subordinated by imperialism, the world socialist revolution would be impossible. But if African countries achieved independence, then socialism would become a possibility on a global scale. It is significant that Lenin placed this definitive argument in the final section of the book. He wanted it to be a core take-away lesson, one that every reader should remember. Lenin's message was that his theory of imperialism couldn't be grasped without recognising the centrality of Africa within it.

### **Lenin's opposition to imperialism in Africa**

Although Lenin examined imperialism in Africa as early as 1899, and whilst, as early as 1903, his own Russian Social Democratic Labour Party endorsed the right to national self-determination in its programme, it was only after the outbreak of World War I that he devoted serious attention to Africa's anti-imperialist struggle. Lenin wholeheartedly supported this struggle, not only because he believed in it morally, but also because he thought it would strengthen the European workers' movement. Colonialism nourished capitalism, and so anti-colonial revolutions would weaken it. Imperialism, socialism, and self-determination were therefore 'intertwined' in Lenin's writings (D'Souza 2013, 62). This meant that African independence was fundamental to his theory of imperialist collapse and the socialist revolution.

Lenin first considered the possibility of a successful African liberation movement in *Imperialism*, whilst discussing Britain's colonial policy. Quoting Schulze-Gaevernitz, he observed that Britain, by creating industry in its African colonies and using African labour to work it, was laying the basis for the proletarianization of African people and their future struggle for freedom (Lenin 1974d, 281). Lenin also noted Hobson's view that 'the formation of armies recruited from subject peoples' would weaken Europe's powers in the long run, since by relying upon native troops to do their bidding, Europe was becoming dependent on the armed force of the very people it was subjugating. With regards to Africa, Hobson applied this perspective mainly to Britain, which used natives for nearly all the fighting (Lenin 1974d, 279). Lenin recognised that this policy could easily backfire upon Britain.

During the Great War, many socialists temporarily abandoned their anti-capitalist struggles in their respective countries, and instead supported the national war effort. British socialists supported Britain, French socialists supported France, German socialists supported Germany, and so on. Lenin was one of the few socialists to consistently denounce this tendency (Natufe 2011, 52). The war, he argued, was an imperialist war. The belligerent powers were fighting primarily over the distribution of African colonial territories. The Kaiser would agree to peace and even 'give back all, or nearly all of France and Belgium in return for a "fair" share of their African colonies' (Lenin 1974e, 264). By supporting their respective national governments, Lenin argued that socialists were succumbing to opportunism, social-chauvinism, and endorsing the colonial domination of Africa (Lenin 1974b, 291). One of

Lenin's main reasons for breaking with the Second International and establishing the Third International in 1919 was that the socialists of the former ignored his calls to oppose imperialism and the war (Natufe 2011, 52). Unlike them, Lenin identified colonial revolt as 'the driving force of international socialist revolution' (Callinicos 2018, abstract).

Under Lenin's guidance, the Comintern's Second Congress in 1920 established anti-colonialism as a membership condition: All members based in the metropole had to denounce the imperialist ventures of their own governments, support the workers in the colonies, and encourage their troops to stop oppressing colonial peoples (Swagler 2017). Hopfmann, however, warns against overestimating the Comintern's initial global impact. Although the Second Congress raised the colonial question, the discussions focused mainly upon the 'Eastern' peoples subordinated under Tsarism in Russia's Asian regions (Hopfmann 2017, 647). Likewise, Makalani argues that Lenin 'continued to see the European proletariat as *the* historical agent of socialism' at this time, 'despite encouraging European workers to support anti-colonial movements'. In a discussion with the Indian radical M. N. Roy during the Congress, Lenin apparently admitted to knowing little about Africa (Makalani 2011, 163).

Nevertheless, it is worth recognising that Lenin displayed his support for African liberation prior to establishing the Third International. In March 1917, Lenin remarked that a soviet government under workers control would withdraw from the war, demand an immediate armistice, expose the European governments' 'predatory' imperialist aims, and propose, as peace terms, the 'liberation of all colonies...dependent, oppressed and unequal nations'. In a statement that acknowledged Africa's central importance, Lenin called upon Russia's workers to oppose their country's participation in the war. It was absurd, he argued, for Russia to pay '*hundreds of millions of roubles every year* for a war waged for the division of the African colonies' (Lenin 1974e, 338). After the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, the soviet government made good on its anti-war programme. It swiftly negotiated its way out of the war, surrendering a substantial area of territory to Germany in the process.

Lenin argued that the Great War was a significant event in developing the African independence movement. France, he observed, enlisted 'millions' of Africans into its military ranks under threat of execution, and forced them to fight for France's colonial territories in Africa. 'They were formed into shock units and hurled into the most dangerous sectors, where they were mown down like grass by machine guns'. African soldiers fought bravely and died for the imperialists' interests. In doing so, however, 'they learnt something'. Lenin compared their situation to that of Russia's military. When Tsarist Russia entered the war, Russian soldiers and sailors recognised that they would be better off turning their weapons against Tsarism, a system that oppressed them, instead of fighting for Russian imperialism. Many Russian soldiers and sailors were radicalised during the war; and ended up aiding the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution. Likewise, Lenin argued that African soldiers would turn their weapons against their colonial oppressors, instead of risking their lives in defence of them (Lenin 1974f, 390). Essentially, Lenin thought that the Great War would encourage Africans to fight even harder for their freedom against imperialism.

'Lenin mercilessly exposed the ideologists of colonialism, who falsified African history, concealing from public opinion the heroic struggle of the African peoples for independence' (Potekhin 1960, 19). In his article 'War and Revolution', written in May 1917, Lenin disparaged the propaganda attempt to portray Europe's murderous rampages in Africa as 'little wars' barely worth remembering. This racist narrative ran roughshod over the atrocities committed against African peoples, it downplayed the scale of these atrocities, many of

which were inflicted on a mass scale and upon unarmed people, it ignored the various forms of African resistance, and it deceived Europe's working masses (Lenin 1974a, 406). Lenin sought to reveal the European powers' various massacres of the African population; and to destroy the myth that they were bringing civilisation and prosperity to Africa. In making these arguments, Lenin showed himself to be a staunch critic of colonialism in Africa. Whilst highlighting its immorality, he also highlighted its material basis in Western capitalism.

In 1922, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs G. V. Chicherin sent Lenin his draft of a programme outlining the soviet position on imperialism. The programme stated that the soviets supported the African peoples' inviolable right to self-determination, to participate equally with European peoples in conferences, and to prevent external influence in their affairs. Lenin (1976, 509) underlined this section of Chicherin's programme and wrote 'true!' in the margins.

Lenin remained unreservedly in support of African independence. He ensured that the Soviet Union also maintained this position within the Communist International (Natufe 2011, 52). During the Comintern's Third Congress, the last that Lenin attended, the 'Thesis on the Negro Question' urged the communist movement to support Black struggles around the world, including in Africa (Swagler 2017). Contrary to what Robinson (2021) argues in *Black Marxism*, Lenin was fully aware of the 'black radical tradition', and he gave this tradition his unwavering support.

### **Lenin, Africa, and racism**

Lenin lived in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in a White culture inundated with racist images of Africa and Africans. Europeans of the time viewed Africa as a mysterious and dark continent inhabited by savages, who could 'develop' only with the help of European civilisation. Mainstream discourse portrayed Africa as a prehistoric land of primitive and primordial savagery. Popular and social science theories frequently divided the human species into a series of physical and geographical races, each possessing distinctive biological, behavioural, cognitive, and temperamental capacities. White Europeans were at the apex of this racial pyramid, whilst 'negroes' were frequently at the bottom. These scientific and popular conceptions commonly included racist descriptions of Africans.

Lenin was a man of his time, who occasionally fell victim to this cultural context. In April 1918. In a meeting, he ridiculed the possibility of building socialism 'without learning from the bourgeoisie'. This notion displayed 'the psychology of an inhabitant of central Africa'. In Lenin's view, socialism would inherit 'all the lessons learned through large-scale capitalist culture. Socialism without postal and telegraph services, without machines is the emptiest of phrases' (Lenin 1974g, 310). According to one possible reading of this statement, Lenin thought of Africans as possessing a distinctive primitive 'psychology', one that was less developed than that of Europeans. Africans, he assumed, could not fathom the importance of 'telegraph services' and 'machines', the products of advanced capitalism. Only Europeans could appreciate the importance of advanced technologies, and they were essential for socialism. The present analysis does not adopt this interpretation of Lenin's beliefs, for the simple reason that he never expressed this sentiment elsewhere in his works. Such a view also contradicts everything else he stood for. That said, this statement does showcase another popular assumption that dominated European thinking during his time, namely, the association of civilisational 'progress' with technological advance. Does this viewpoint show Lenin to be Eurocentric? Not necessarily. Today, many Africans and African studies scholars

also adopt this view of progress, and for better or for worse, they do not see it as a Western imposition, let alone a racist imposition. Today, there is nothing inherently European about this view, besides the fact that it may have originated in Europe. Those who disagree must do so carefully. Westerners in particular should be aware of the racist dangers of fetishizing cultures and giving them eternal characteristics. Only the African people have the right to establish what is and isn't African.

Lenin made what may be his final problematic remark on Africa in 1919, during a lecture on the history of 'The State' delivered at Sverdlov University. Here, Lenin expounded Marx's historical materialist view that human society developed in a sequence of linear stages, in accordance with a law governed socio-economic process. Beginning with primitive communism, all societies would inevitably progress through to slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and finally communism, the highest stage of human socio-economic development. Each successive phase was more progressive than the last, in the sense of featuring higher levels of technological innovation, productive power, and material prosperity. Lenin claimed that 'the whole of modern, civilised Europe' had transcended primitive communism and slavery. In fact, most of the world's peoples had transcended these stages. However, 'traces of slavery survived' amongst 'less developed peoples', including Africans (Lenin 1974h, 475). Lenin's description of Africans as 'less developed peoples' expressed his belief that societies became more advanced the closer they got to modern communism. Based on this assumption, Lenin thought that Africa was lagging behind most of the world by maintaining slavery. As such, from Lenin's historical materialist perspective, the African continent was backward and underdeveloped. Some may describe this view of progress as Eurocentric, since Lenin based it upon his analysis of Western Europe. Then again, prior to the collapse of soviet socialism and the victory of neoliberalism, this view was popular amongst African socialists and African studies scholars. They too measured Africa's progress in accordance with its proximity to socialism, and they did not see this view as being inherently western. Today, few Africans would reject Lenin's view of slavery as a sign of African underdevelopment.

It is also important to recognise that Lenin's anti-African racism was tame in comparison to most of his contemporaries. The remarks identified above are the only ones that this study could locate. The racist word 'nigger' does not appear in Lenin's *Collected Works*, even though Europeans casually used the term to describe Black people. And although Lenin sometimes referred to Africans as savages or less developed peoples, he more frequently denounced the fraudulency of European 'civilisation', which he dismissed as a hypocritical sham. On several occasions Lenin implied that 'savage' peoples were more advanced than 'civilised' Europeans. In his article 'War and Revolution', for instance, Lenin said that 'if any savage nation should disobey our civilised bank we send troops to restore culture, order, and civilisation...as the French republican troops did in Africa, where they exterminated peoples with...ferocity' (Lenin 1974a, 412; see also Lenin 1974i, 157).

Lenin did not associate savagery exclusively with Black people, and he was not a scientific racist. In his article on the famine afflicting the Russian peasantry in 1912, Lenin said that Russia's peasants were 'just as defenceless in the face of the elements and of capital, as the savages of Africa' (Lenin 1977b, 528). Here, he equated white Russians with Black Africans. In Lenin's view, the savagery or development level of a given people reflected their degree of economic development, not their biology. Lenin's commitment to historical materialism gave him the conviction that all nations and regions would inevitably progress, one way or another, through the stages of socio-economic development and arrive at communism. Lastly, it is

worth noting that Lenin's racial thought evolved over time. After advancing the colonial question at the Second Congress of the Comintern, a key anti-colonial organisation, he stopped expressing anti-African racist sentiments. As such, the portrayal of Lenin as a racist is misleading; since it ignores the wealth of evidence to the contrary, and it fails to encapsulate his predominantly anti-racist, 'decolonial' legacy (Mayer 2021). Although Lenin held some unacceptable views of Africans, he was a militant critic of imperialism and colonialism, and a consistent supporter of African self-determination and racial justice.

### **Conclusion: Lenin, African studies, and Eurocentric Marxism**

There are many longstanding myths about Marxism. They tend to come in and out of vogue, depending upon the political climate. One of them is that Marxism is a Eurocentric doctrine, which side-lines and misinterprets the history of Africa and African peoples. Agozino has shown that this myth has little textual or historical basis in the case of Marx. This article has argued that the same is true for Lenin, a figure whose influence upon African studies has been equally profound.

In both theory and practice, the founder of Bolshevism eschewed Hobson's four characteristics of Eurocentrism. First, Lenin did not separate the West from Africa. He envisioned imperialism as a global system, one that intimately connected European and African peoples. Second, Lenin did not view the West as superior to Africa. although not fully consistent, he often portrayed Africans as more civilised than the European imperialists, who showed higher levels of violent barbarism. Third, Lenin did not endorse the 'Big Bang' theory of European development. He recognised that Western capitalism relied for its expansion upon the subjugation of Africa. Finally, Lenin did not endorse imperialism. In contrast to the chauvinists of his era, he was a consistent supporter of African independence.

Lenin's status as a non-Eurocentric figure is key to understanding his impact on African socialism, a movement that did much to overcome Western imperialism during the twentieth century. African revolutionaries looked to Lenin because they recognised that his theories spoke to their lived experience. If Leninism was only relevant for Europe, then African socialists would not have voluntarily championed its theories or applied them to their struggles. Likewise, African intellectuals drew upon Lenin's ideas precisely because they illuminated Africa's position in the world.

Whilst developing his theory of global capitalism, Lenin was concerned, firstly, in unearthing the predatory nature of Western imperialism, and in showing how this system relied upon the exploitation of colonial territories. He was concerned, secondly, in showing how imperialism laid the objective basis for the socialist and national liberation revolutions, led by the oppressed peoples themselves. In both these concerns, Lenin gave a cardinal place to Africa. His analysis of imperialism situated Africa at the centre, and his theory of anti-imperialist revolution recognised and affirmed the emancipatory aims of African peoples. It therefore makes sense that African revolutionaries and intellectuals endorsed his analysis.

The decolonial thrust of Lenin's thought also explains why scholars of African political economy still utilise his *Imperialism* today. Although the global political economy has evolved under globalisation, Lenin's fundamental thesis remains compelling. Today, as during the twentieth century, several African countries continue to face Western imposed imperialism, defined as a distinct phase in the development of global capitalism. Whilst the extent and details of this phenomenon are contested, and although some elements of Lenin's

theory may be outdated, imperialism remains a key category of analysis for the critical examination of Africa.

Despite this, however, Lenin's name appears less frequently in contemporary studies of imperialism in Africa, even though these discussions build upon his ideological legacy. One explanation for this is that scholars are wary of championing Lenin in the current intellectual environment. It is fashionable now, in the afterglow of BLM, and amidst the campaign to decolonise academia, to celebrate Cedric Robinson's critique of Eurocentric Marxism. The takeaway lesson of this article is that Lenin does not deserve that criticism. His enduring legacy recognised the tremendous significance of Africa in both the global political economy and the struggle for human freedom.

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