



THINKER
IN
BOXES

VLADIMIR LENIN

Team: October Red Coats

Position: Deep gully

Status: In repose

Vladimir Ilich Lenin (1870–1924) has been all but deified for his role in the Russian Revolution, or demonized if you go the other way. Seriously, his embalmed body is still on display in a glass coffin in Moscow. And no, he is not a vampire. He looks kind of scary, but he's not a vampire. His nonvampiric contribution to the theoretical foundations of the study of international politics are also grossly underappreciated.

It is reasonably safe to say that Lenin's *Imperialism*^a is the foundation for all modern discussions of international economic exploitation, and it is surely to blame for all of the angst-ridden hand-wringing over globalization. Essentially, Lenin explained how imperial capitalism had extended the economic exploitation identified by Marx into the international arena. The exploitation of labor in capitalist regimes was still a fundamental flaw that would bring about the collapse of capitalism, but the consequences of that flaw had been delayed by the imperial powers' extraction of capital from colonial holdings and their use of that capital essentially to buy the acquiescence of the domestic working class. This delay in the fall of capitalism, however, was just that, a delay. Lenin argued that capitalism could continue only for as long as the capitalist empires could continue to expand, and at the beginning of the twentieth century they had basically run out of new territories to subjugate. Pointing to the wars over colonial territory and the conflicts within those territories, Lenin argued that the end was near.

It wasn't. Lenin was probably right that growth is a necessary condition for modern capitalism to evade the consequences of its internal exploitative contradictions, but Lenin's analysis failed to take into account the fact that territorial expansion is only one way that capitalist economies can grow. They can also expand with efficiency gains and technological advances, among other things. The lasting effect of Lenin's analysis was his discussion of international capital flows and imperial exploitation, a significant element of any study that examines almost any aspect of international political economy. If the protester yelling about globalization and throwing a garbage can through a Starbucks window can't explain the argument in Lenin's *Imperialism*, you have my permission to hit him or her with a large fish.

^a Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916; repr., New York: International Publishers, 1939).