The years 1900 to 1917 were triumphant for Lenin. He returned from Siberian exile in 1900 at the age of 30, settled briefly in European Russia, and then left for Western Europe. He came back seventeen years later in April 1917 as a famous revolutionary and the leader of a militant party. While abroad, he had helped create that party, attracting followers both inside and outside of Russia. Once in Russia again, he planned for the seizure of power of which he had long dreamed.

Lenin’s writings prior to the October Revolution are notable for his preoccupation with appropriate tactics for making a revolution and for the innovations he made to Marxist theory. Most notably, Lenin believed that peasant Russia was ripe for revolution despite Marx’s argument that a developed bourgeois society must precede a proletarian one. Readers of Lenin’s “April Theses” (Document 6) and the other selections in this chapter can identify several constants in his pre-revolutionary thought, including hostility to bourgeois life and practices, unwavering interest in acquiring and employing state power for revolutionary ends, and impatience for the revolution to begin. In 1902, in What Is to Be Done? (Document 2), Lenin explained how to make a revolution in a backward society with a “party of a new type,” that is, an elite centralized party that could seize power and also rule. The Revolution of 1905 and the effects of World War I (1914–1918) on the great bourgeois nations convinced him that an opportunity for European revolution unforeseen by Marx and Engels had arisen.

The documents in this chapter also illuminate Lenin’s struggle for power. In almost every one, Lenin the pragmatist wrestles with Lenin the ideologue. Believing that he alone knew how to take power, however, Lenin was always innovating and modifying the teachings of Marx and Engels. Where then does the balance rest between his flexibility and his commitment to Marxism in his theoretical writings and his tactical directives?
From *The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement*
December 1900

The following excerpt reveals the logic of Lenin’s early belief in the imminence of revolution. Many of his fellow Marxists were drawn to the workers’ struggle for improved working conditions and better wages, but Lenin had a more radical vision. In that respect, this essay is pivotal to his thought. Why, if he sought a proletarian revolution, did Lenin refuse to identify himself with the workers’ struggle for a better life? Why did he believe that incremental victories that improved workers’ lives were no victories at all?

Our principal and fundamental task is to facilitate the political development and the political organization of the working class. Those who push this task into the background, who refuse to subordinate to it all the special tasks and particular methods of struggle, are following a false path and causing serious harm to the movement. And it is being pushed into the background, firstly, by those who call upon revolutionaries to employ only the forces of isolated conspiratorial circles cut off from the working-class movement in the struggle against the government. It is being pushed into the background, secondly, by those who restrict the content and scope of political propaganda, agitation, and organization; who think it fit and proper to treat the workers to “politics” only at exceptional moments in their lives, only on festive occasions; who too solicitously substitute demands for partial concessions from the autocracy for the political struggle against the autocracy; and who do not go to sufficient lengths to ensure that these demands for partial concessions are raised to the status of a systematic, implacable struggle of a revolutionary, working-class party against the autocracy.