Offer a comparative analysis of Wilsonian liberal internationalism and Lenin’s revolutionary internationalism during and after the First World War. How did they influence the outcome of the war and postwar order? In your paper, discuss the role of realism and idealism in the internationalism of these two leaders and their supporters.
Introduction:

“The causes of war and the conditions of peace:” such was the description of the central problem of international relations furnished by Kalevi Hosti in his 1985 book *The Dividing Discipline*. Both Vladimir Lenin and Woodrow Wilson fall within the purvey of what Holsti called the classical tradition of IR\(^1\): both men saw war as the product of the structure of the international environment and both were able to present a manner by which that environment could be reformed in order to eliminate the problem of war. Their incongruous solutions led Stanley Hoffman to refer to the First World War as a “war that saw the mobilization and slaughter of millions, marked the demise of the old diplomatic order, and ended as a kind of debate between Wilson and Lenin for the allegiance of mankind” (Hoffman 29). Why Hoffman should make such a claim, and an analysis of where that debate led, will form the basis of this examination. Also, I will discuss the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Paris Peace Conference as concrete outcomes of Wilson and Lenin’s policies.

For Wilson, the First World War was the result of the system of world politics that existed prior to the war. Key elements of this system included secret diplomacy, an absence of democracy (particularly in the formulation of foreign policy), and other problems addressed in his Fourteen Points. Wilson’s points were largely based on what Hollis and Smith identify as the “four idealist conclusions” on the First World War in their book *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. The conclusion reached by idealists following the First World War\(^2\) was that war is a senseless act that occurs when leaders lose control of foreign policy. Misunderstandings play a major role in instigating conflict and the spread of democracy serves to alleviate the tensions culpable for the outbreak of conflict. Disregarding historical re-examinations, such as Fisher’s, on the question of

\(^{1}\) As soon as the term international relations is mentioned in a paper featuring both Holsti and Marxist international theory, Holsti’s astonishing claim that Marx was not a theorist of international relations ought to be addressed. While Marx was concerned with the worldwide interaction of classes, not states, he was certainly interested in politics on a world level. To avoid ambiguity, I will use the term ‘world politics’ to denote the totality of world political interactions, including those between states and non-state actors.

\(^{2}\) And others prior to the war, such as Norman Angell.

Milan Ilnyckyj (81260010)
just how ‘accidental’ WWI was, this perspective depicts war\(^\text{3}\) as the unhappy consequence of a flawed system of world politics: the correction of which requires zealous and effective reform, but not the all-out revision of the world political system. In stark contrast to this liberal view stands Lenin’s theory of the origin of war. In “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” Lenin charts the development from competitive capitalism, as envisioned by Adam Smith and others, to monopolistic capitalism (183) through to imperialistic capitalism and colonialism. He explicitly rejects the liberal idea that economic interdependence leads to political co-operation (the view expounded prior to the war by Angell). For Lenin, only the abolishment of capitalism will be sufficient to prevent the inevitable progression to imperialism and war.

Wilson and Lenin were similar in many ways. Both were intellectuals: Wilson being the first President to earn a PhD. Both men studied and briefly practiced law before being disillusioned with the profession and rejecting it. Both pursued their aims tirelessly, whether it was Lenin recovering rapidly from being shot twice in August 1918 or Wilson’s year and a half long session of Congress in 1913 and 1914. Had Lenin not been so unshakeably resolved against incremental change on social issues, he might well have applauded the sort of domestic reforms that Wilson introduced during that mammoth session. By creating comprehensive moral, political, and economic theories, and by seeking to apply those theories to the world’s problems, both Lenin and Wilson contributed towards the development of a more moral world.

\(^3\) Particularly the First World War
Lenin: Peace through Communism

Three of Lenin’s essays are vital in outlining the fundamentals of his ideology. Of these, “What is to be done?” is perhaps the most thoroughly intellectual. Writing in 1902, Lenin’s concern is largely to rebut the doctrines of “Economism” and “Bernsteinism,” both of which represent a departure from a revolutionary Marxism and involve seeking improvement for the position of the workers within society as it already exists. As in his essay “The State and Revolution” – written in 1917 – Lenin is adamant about rejecting non-revolutionary forms of Marxism, which he sees as emasculated by compromise. (Lenin, The State and Revolution 272) Lenin’s 1902 essay conveys important information about the international focus of Lenin’s thought. Indeed, the same cosmopolitanism that provoked Holsti’s assertion that Marx is not an IR scholar - namely, his focus on entities that transcend national boundaries - is also found in Lenin’s thought (Neumann 94).

Since the state exists only because of class antagonism, and the period of class antagonism is a finite one, the state is an entity of only passing concern to Marxists. The other major theme stressed in “What is to be done?” is the need for a revolutionary class that will serve to organize and direct the massive energies of the proletariat. Lenin derides those who are content to simply wait for a spontaneous workers’ revolution to overthrow the bourgeois state. Lenin asserts that while capitalism creates the conditions under which workers are favourable to socialism, it does not actually make them into conscious socialists. A grave danger exists that they will be drawn to a watered down “trade unionism” instead of accepting revolution as the only real means of progress. As the “vanguard of the proletariat,” the communist party must assist the workers in maintaining a true course (Lenin, What is to be done? 70).

When discussing the ideas of Lenin, a caveat must immediately be introduced about the unusual descriptive/normative character of Marxist philosophy. Karl Marx expounded the view that capitalism would necessarily give way to a “dictatorship of the proletariat” which, following a violent revolution, would eventually “wither away” leaving behind a classless society (Lenin, The State and Revolution 312). The inevitability of the transition complicates the examination of Lenin’s ideology because one cannot simply say that he identifies imperialism as a problem – or accepts Marx’s identification of it as such – and proposes revolution in response to it. Still, the language employed throughout Lenin’s writing strongly implies that the proletarian revolution is a welcome and just development, as well as an inevitable one.
Lenin’s 1916 essay “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” constitutes a scathing indictment of the international capitalist economic system. Elements such as his references to accounting fraud (Lenin, *Imperialism* 205) and the influence of big oil companies on politics (223) demonstrate the continued relevance of the critiques being made therein. Lenin sees history as proceeding from stage to stage, with each subsequent form of political, social, and economic organization evolving from the previous one. Lenin describes the systemic problems of capitalism, particularly the inescapable tendency for consolidation of industries into oligopolies: capitalist trusts built on the basis of finance capital.\(^5\) Domestic dominance by a capitalist elite is linked with international capitalism (Lenin, *Imperialism* 219), the domination of wealthy capitalist countries over others (214), and the division of the world between imperialist nations just as oligopolies divide national markets among themselves (221). The wealth produced by this process allows the capitalists to bribe a portion of the proletariat in order to exert social and political control over the rest. Lenin uses this as an explanation for why labour groups supported their national governments during the First World War, rather than condemning it as an imperialist monstrosity.

Lenin sees a logical and consequential chain existing between the capitalist economic system, the desire of each firm or group of firms to monopolize access to necessary raw materials, aggressive competition in securing those resources worldwide, and imperialism. This search on the part of each nation for its “rightful” share of the world’s resources can be seen in the rhetoric used by Germany, Italy, and Japan to justify territorial expansion during the First and Second World Wars. In a deterministic way, Lenin sees capitalism as breeding inequality which in turn breeds strife (Lenin, *Imperialism* 244-5): states become slavishly dedicated to satisfying the fancy of a parasitic minority that is capable of subverting a portion of the proletariat to subservience (252). Lasting peace under an imperialist system is impossible since such an arrangement consists of brief periods of stability

\(^5\) Lenin goes as far as to imply that finance capital becomes such a mighty force as imperialism develops that states themselves become subservient to it (Lenin, *Imperialism* 231)

Milan Ilnyckyj (81260010)
punctuated by war and crisis. It is likewise unacceptable to take the “reactionary” step of trying to recreate competition and free trade to break the strength of the oligopolies (Lenin, *Imperialism* 263). Keeping hold of colonies requires ever increasing levels of oppression and violence, which necessarily breed resistance. These trends lead inevitably towards the next stage of history.

In “The State and Revolution”, Lenin’s 1917 essay - written just months before the Bolshevik revolution in Russia - Lenin declares communism and Western democracy to be fundamentally incompatible. The revolution necessarily involves the proletariat seizing control of the powers of government and then turning those powers towards the destruction of government itself. Three relevant historical stages are discussed: the first two representing elements of the ageless dialectic between the oppressing and oppressed classes and the final one representing the conclusion of that conflict: the development of the classless society that is the ultimate aim of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. Because the state is “the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms” (Lenin, *The State and Revolution* 272) there can be no *modus vivendi* between communism and the state. The first stage, the “despotism of the bourgeois”, gives rise to imperialism and war. The revolution replaces this version of the state with a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” This change must be executed by means of violent revolution and never through gradual internal reform. Indeed, Lenin stresses repeatedly the need that these existing institutions must be *smashed* (Lenin, *The State and Revolution* 297). Following the revolution, the state would simply “wither away” along with the class antagonisms that have thus far been the mechanism by which war arose.

**Wilson: The Liberal Peace Plan**

Of the leaders present at the Paris Peace Conferences of 1918, Woodrow Wilson was the most revolutionary. When the German government asked for an armistice in October of 1918, they explicitly gave their support to the Fourteen Points that Wilson had formulated earlier as the basis
for a just peace. Rather than just tinkering with the balance of power and setting up a system to contain Germany, Wilson’s aim was to revamp the very structure of world politics through the introduction of revolutionary new ideas quite contradictory to the sort of diplomacy that took place earlier. Negotiations were to be held openly, national self-determination was to be granted, free trade was to be encouraged, and the peace was to be kept through a system of collective security overseen by a new sort of entity: a League of Nations that would serve as an open forum where nations could come together in a position of equality to deal with the problems of the world. Even if Wilson’s vision failed to prevent the outbreak of another world war, one can still admire his efforts to apply liberalism and optimism to defeat what the UN Charter would describe far later as the “scourge of war.”

Wilson’s 1917 “War Message” is a key document for understanding the motivations behind Wilson’s policies. In calling German naval aggression “warfare against mankind” (Wilson, *War Message* 38) Wilson explicitly makes America’s opposition to Germany one of principle and ideology and not simply of national self-interest. While the cynical might identify a general trend in Presidential rhetoric in linking the good of America with the good of the world, Wilson’s words and actions give every reason to believe that he saw his mission as a genuinely moral one. An interesting reference made in this speech is to the recent overthrow of the Czar in Russia, which Wilson attributes to Russia being “in fact democratic at heart” (Wilson, *War Message* 39). He was an enthusiastic supporter of this instance where democracy prevailed over autocracy.

Liberal ideas underlie each of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, first publicly outlined in 1918. The provisions of this plan address disarmament, open diplomacy, freedom of navigation upon the seas, free trade, national self-determination, and international co-operation (Wilson, *Fourteen Points* 41-

---

6 For evidence of this, one need only consider the force of will required for his cross-country tour in 1919 trying to sell the idea of the League of Nations directly to the American people: a tour that would compromise the President’s already fragile health and that would be cut short by the paralytic stroke that incapacitated him for the rest of his Presidency.

Milan Ilnyckyj (81260010)
International co-operation through the League of Nations is accorded a vital role in Wilson’s formulation, not least because this new entity would be charged with implementing the objectives of the Fourteen Points and working out the particulars of how the new system of diplomacy was to function. Many historians have asserted that Wilson’s faith in the power of the League to correct initial flaws in the Paris Peace Treaties led to his making concessions that would later severely undermine the overall effectiveness of the system.

During his defence of the Treaty of Versailles, which was formulated largely according to his ideas, many of the justifications which Wilson had for those ideas came to the fore. His talk of a “civilization of mankind” and suggestion that nations should treat one another as neighbours was characteristic of his overall world view (Wilson, Wilson Defends 44). Indeed, Wilson’s defence often gives an impression of unfounded optimism, if not naivety. Wilson’s belief in the degree to which nations were willing to co-operate, and the power of democracy, led him to “illusory appraisals and quixotic solutions” at times, according to Arthur Link, his sympathetic biographer (“Bloodhounds”). Wilson’s confidence that nations would co-operate to find peaceful solutions, that they would disclose the contents of all treaties, and that they would co-ordinate their actions against aggressors is sharply different from Lenin’s view of states as selfish agents drawn inexorably into conflict through competing economic interests. Given the subsequent history of Europe, one can be forgiven for seeing Lenin’s view as the more accurate.

**Lenin and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk:**

The attempt to apply world political theory to the government of specific countries and the creation of particular institutions necessarily involves a confrontation between ideals and a world that often proves less malleable than reformers would like it to be. In evaluating the impact of Wilsonian liberal internationalism and Leninist revolutionary internationalism on the period during

---

It is worth noting the requirement in the League Covenant that the majority of decisions made by the League be made by means of consensus – a system that served to paralyze the League during crises which followed.

Milan Ilnyckyj (81260010)
and after the First World War what Allen Lynch calls “the test of practice” serves as an effective barometer for the concrete manifestations of these two theories. The stress placed by Holsti on actually examining events in the world, as opposed to engaging in theorizing for its own sake (Crawford 11), is an appropriate one, as is perhaps indirectly demonstrated by Lenin’s lengthy dissertations on the minutiae of Marxist debate in Russia in both “What is to be done?” and “The State and Revolution.”

The support of workers in various countries for the First World War shocked Lenin and forced a reappraisal of his understanding of the worker/capitalist dynamic. With the publication of “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism” Lenin created a theoretical framework within which this “betrayal” could be understood. Lenin’s fervently anti-war stance initially alienated him from the majority of the Second International as well as from many Bolsheviks in Russia. Finally, in 1917 and after many years of war, the Czar was overthrown and the German government transported Lenin back to Russia, from neutral Switzerland, with the hope that his presence would undermine the Russian war effort. Had Lenin not advocated his ideology so forcefully, and in the face of such opposition, it is unlikely that he would have been in Russia at the crucial time when the Bolshevik revolution took place. Upon arriving in Russia, Lenin denounced the Provisional Government which previously had the broad support of Russian socialists, including those in the Petrograd Soviet. By autumn, Kerensky’s government had lost popular support. Lenin’s message of peace and the redistribution of land resonated among those weary of the war. Lenin’s tenacious opposition to the war and insistence on an immediate peace, no matter how humiliating and damaging to Russia, led to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 (Keylor 86). Lenin’s insistence that he would resign from government if the Treaty was not adopted is considered by some to have been the deciding factor that led to its adoption. Russia left the war having lost the “Baltic States, Finland, Russian Poland, part of White Russia, the Ukraine, Bessarabia, and part of Trans-caucaia” (Keylor

Milan Ilnyckyj (81260010)
According to a speech given by Woodrow Wilson in San Francisco: “Russia lost in dead 1,700,000 men, poor Russia that got nothing but terror and despair out of it all” (Wilson, *Wilson Defends* 47).

Lenin went on to cancel payment on foreign loans and expropriate foreign property with no restitution. Harmed particularly was France, whose high level of investment in Russia Lenin had specifically commented on in “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.” Lenin then went on to fight and win the Russian Civil War and found the COMINTERN. What did not occur, however, was the realization of his idea that Russia would spark European and, indeed, world revolution. The “withering away” of the state under the “dictatorship of the proletariat” proved as illusory as effective co-operation of states through Wilson’s league.

**Conclusion:**

Hoffman’s reference, in passing, to the “debate” between Lenin and Wilson’s views is followed immediately by an explanation that neither view is sufficiently “scientific” and that such “utopian thinking… delayed the advent of social science” (Hoffman 29). The general conclusion among mainstream IR scholars was that the sort of utopianism envisioned by Lenin and Wilson had no place within an understanding of international relations: an understanding that should be based on a ‘realistic’ perspective on the nature of the world. Ultimately, however, no purely descriptive theory of world politics can have any value. D. H. Lawrence once said that “a map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth having.” Lenin and Wilson were never trying to be detached, objective observers of international politics; the normative element that permeated their thought is their essential contribution to world political theory, both academically and more generally.
Sources Cited and Consulted:


---


9 Cited according to (Gibaldi 159)