

# Revolutionary Russia

## Lenin's Final Fight: Speeches and Writings, 1922-23

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### BOOK REVIEW

V. I. Lenin, *Lenin's Final Fight: Speeches and Writings, 1922–23*, 2nd ed., New York: Pathfinder, 2010. Pp. 379; notes; glossary; index. £16.00 (paperback). ISBN 9-781-604880-274

Lenin, it seems, has truly been a man for all seasons. From the moment of his interment in the mausoleum on Red Square, generations of Soviet leaders sought to bestow legitimacy on their actions by reference to 'Il'ich'. Today, one can find diametrically opposed appraisals of the first leader of the Soviet state – whether sitting comfortably in the pantheon of twentieth-century European despots alongside Stalin and Hitler, or suggesting the only way out of the most serious crisis of capitalism in the post-Cold War era, the failure of the Soviet system notwithstanding.

Readers familiar with Pathfinder Press will know already that the purpose of this book is to present Lenin's final writings within the latter approach. Pathfinder is the publishing organ of the American Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), a historically Trotskyist organisation that parted with the Fourth International and now devotes considerable attention to supporting the Cuban revolution.

The first edition of this book, published in 1995, brought together for the first time in one volume Lenin's speeches, articles and notes of the period from late September 1922 to early March 1923, including some additional documents written by Stalin and others. One document appeared for the first time in the book, part of the report prepared for Lenin by three of his secretaries in March 1923 concerning the alleged wrongdoings of Stalin's associates in Georgia at the time of the formation of the Transcaucasian Federation and creation of the USSR. This edition is supplied with a new 25-page introduction, written by Jack Barnes, National Secretary of the SWP, and Steve Clark.

So, why bring out a second edition of this book now? The reader is informed that 'programmatic and strategic matters in dispute in the communist workers' movement in the early 1920s once again weigh heavily in prospects for the working class worldwide to advance along its historic line of march toward the conquest of power' at the present time of capitalist crisis (p. 32). The 'political lessons of Lenin's final fight' are identified

as the necessity of avoiding internal self-destruction by maintaining the proletarian 'class trajectory' of the revolutionary movement, and Barnes and Clark devote a number of pages to upholding the prescience of Fidel Castro's fear that the Cuban revolution would dismantle due to the country's 'inescapable immersion in the capitalist world' (p. 30). Hence, Barnes and Clark frame Lenin's last communications not just in terms of the Leninist–Stalinist dichotomy, the question of what if Lenin had lived for another decade or two, but more profoundly (from the perspective of radical left-wing politics) in terms of 'the objective social forces and class relations underlying *all* challenges confronting the party and still-young proletarian dictatorship,' according to which reasoning Stalin and his allies would be considered the unwitting representatives of the bourgeoisie (p. 22).

Nonetheless, scholars are and have been primarily interested in whether or not Lenin, at the very end of his life, attempted to offer a very different compass to his successors than the path that led to Stalinism, and of whether Lenin was in fact revolting against the products of his own previous work. The late Moshe Lewin's classic *Lenin's Last Struggle* has been most influential in establishing the notion that Lenin's last writings offered a viable alternative to the Stalinisation of the Soviet system, though he also recognised that Lenin's proposed reforms might not have succeeded. Writing in this journal a decade ago, by contrast, Erik van Ree convincingly argued that in his final communications Lenin probably did more to open the gates to Stalinism than attempt to close any such possibility [“Lenin's Last Struggle” Revisited, *Revolutionary Russia* 14, No. 2 (2001): 85 – 122]. Barnes and Clark have not attempted to engage with any of this scholarship – their brief notes refer to other Pathfinder publications – and from a scholarly perspective they add nothing meaningful to these debates.

There is no doubt that these documents attest to Lenin's serious attempts to reform the Soviet system, and to avoid potential dangers such as a split between Trotskii and Stalin in the Politburo (see pp. 223 – 224). The principal issues encountered herein are the problems of the bureaucratic, inefficient apparatus of party and state; the question of loosening the state's monopoly of foreign trade; relations between the various national entities of the Union; and how to restructure the economy after calling a halt to any further deepening of NEP concessions. The editors begin the collection with Lenin's political report to the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922, and what is particularly interesting here is that they approvingly bring attention to a passage that could very well have been uttered by Stalin a decade later, one that in fact demonstrates that the language and mentality of Stalinism had a distinct Leninist pedigree: 'today we are not being subjected to armed attack. Nevertheless, the fight against capitalist society has become a hundred times more fierce and perilous, because we are not always able to tell enemies from friends' (p. 76).

It is also clear that Lenin wished to combat signs of 'Great Russian chauvinism' amongst Stalin and his associates (sections 2 and 9, and Appendix 1), and that he wished to avoid any future conflict between state and peasantry. The Civil War 'emphasis upon political struggle' was changing to 'peaceful, organizational' work, Lenin reasoned, with particular need for raising the cultural/educational standards of the masses (p. 261). This evolutionary path constituted, Lenin believed, a 'radical modification in our whole outlook on socialism'. The encouragement and expansion of rural cooperatives would provide a gradual means of achieving socialism. This, however, was a vision of collectivised agriculture, whereby the land would 'belong to the state', and whereby the peasants would attain sufficient cultural advancement to realise this vision within a decade or two, maybe more (pp. 257, 260). Certainly the later horrors of collectivisation cannot be recognised in such a plan, but van Ree's contention that Lenin's plan appears 'gradual' only in hindsight, that he actually wanted to achieve socialism in a relatively short time, is well made.

Lenin's attempts to overcome the problems of bureaucracy, inefficiency and splits

in the party are revealing of the particular Leninist mindset wherein attempts to reform the system partly indicate the reason for the problem in the first place. Lenin's concrete proposals consisted of increasing the size of the Central Committee and of the latter's Central Control Commission with the cream of the workers and peasants, and fusing it with the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate headed by Stalin (pp. 273ff.). That is, he sought to reform an institution that he explicitly decried as indicative of the unsuitability of the current state apparatus, and together with the party - which he also recognised was suffering from 'bureaucracy' - reform the entire system. This may, at best, have resulted in what Lewin termed a 'rational dictatorial regime', but it is clear that Lenin ended his career a Leninist, unwilling to accept that the revolution he had overseen had been in any way mistaken, and incapable of contemplating a loosening of party dictatorship - surely a more effective way to reduce the likelihood of the later 'Stalinisation' of the system.

In short, it is certainly welcome to draw attention once again to these final speeches and writings of Lenin. The editors have gathered these together in an easily accessible form, ordered chronologically and thematically, but the introduction will provide interest rather than much stimulation to students of the Russian Revolution.

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