

LENIN'S
LAST
STRUGGLE

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Lenin's Last Struggle

Moshe Lewin

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LAST
STRUGGLE

MOSHE LEWIN

TRANSLATED BY
A. M. SHERIDAN SMITH

With a New Introduction



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The worst thing that can befall the leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents, and for the realization of the measures which that domination implies. . . . Thus he necessarily finds himself in an insolvable dilemma. What he can do contradicts all his previous actions, principles and immediate interests of his party, and what he ought to do cannot be done. . . . Whoever is put into this awkward position is irrevocably doomed.

—F. ENGELS, *The Peasant War in Germany*

Those Communists are doomed who imagine that it is possible to finish such an epoch-making undertaking as completing the foundations of socialist economy (particularly in a small-peasant country) without making mistakes, without retreats, without numerous alterations to what is unfinished or wrongly done. Communists who have no illusions, who do not give way to despondency, and who preserve their strength and flexibility “to begin from the beginning” over and over again in approaching an extremely difficult task, are not doomed (and in all probability will not perish).

—V. I. LENIN, “Notes of a Publicist”

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PREFACE

A considerable number of left-wing dictatorships have appeared on the international political scene since World War II, the only precedent for states of this type being the Soviet Union, which is now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. These fifty years of socialist experience could no doubt be very useful to the new states if they took the trouble to acquire a thorough knowledge of them and to reflect on the vicissitudes of the first proletarian dictatorship. Thus the failure of the “agroindustrial combines” created in the USSR in 1929–1930 foreshadowed that of the communes of the People’s China, and Nikita Khrushchev was a victim of the same megalomania when he tried to launch his *agroroda* in 1950. However, apart from a small number of Soviet writers, it is largely the English-speaking specialists who have pointed out how singularly rich in economic and social lessons is the period of the New Economic Policy, and it is they who have least to gain from such knowledge. Many other periods and other aspects of Soviet history remain, to a greater or lesser degree, in obscurity, illuminated here and there by the researches of a few scholars. It is unlikely that the governing elite of the USSR knows the history of its country—apart from what each individual has experienced at first hand—

for Marxist countries, for some peculiar reason, tend to treat their history as a state secret. The leaders seem to believe that knowledge of an often tragic past acts as a discouragement for those whose duty it is to build the future; whereas in fact ignorance of history destroys any forward-looking attitude far more surely than its divulgence and analysis. But as long as history can be publicized only with official permission it will remain obscure, for it is the scientific discipline most likely to be vitiated by state monopoly.

This study of Lenin and of his thought during his last year is not, of course, entirely new. A good deal was learned on this subject from Trotsky's revelations in the 1920s, and again from the repercussions of the affair of Lenin's "testament," set in train by the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. But recent Soviet publications have enabled us to take up this subject again and to attempt a more accurate and more detailed reconstruction of the relations that emerged among the top Party leaders at the time of Lenin's illness. We hope at the same time to extend the analysis of Lenin's "testament," that is, of his political thinking during this last period, and to offer on occasion a new interpretation of it.

Among the documents from which our source material has been taken, three are of exceptional importance: first, the latest edition of Lenin's *Works*—the fifth edition—not only more complete than previous ones but accompanied by an important body of notes and commentary; second, the memoirs of Fotieva, one of Lenin's personal secretaries; and third, the "Journal of Lenin's Secretaries," working notes made between November 21, 1922, and March 6, 1923, and published for the first time in 1963 by a Soviet historical review.¹ These notes are as important in content as they are

¹ *Voprosy Istorii*, No. 2, 1963. The "Journal" is also reproduced in V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniya* (Works), 5th ed. (Moscow, Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1958-65), Vol. XLV, pp. 455-86.

peculiar in form. They are in the form of a four-columned notebook showing the date, the secretary's name, instructions given, and notes on how they were carried out; the last column also contains notes on the day's events in the office of the chairman of the Sovnarkom, the Council of People's Commissars. Accounts are given, sometimes day by day, of the chairman's appointments, his correspondence, and even his slightest actions and gestures. This information is enlightening as to Lenin's working methods, but at the outset it provides no particularly startling revelation. It soon becomes obvious, however, that Lenin is slowing down the pace of his work; he no longer comes to his office regularly, but often prefers to send for one of the secretaries and dictate in his private apartment. His health was already failing and his doctors had ordered him to work less, to take frequent rests in the country, and to miss certain meetings of the Council of Commissars or of the Politburo. On December 13, 1922, the day after an important meeting with Dzerzhinsky, Lenin had two serious attacks and was forced at last to obey the orders of his doctors to postpone his work and take to his bed. At this point the "Journal" begins to be quite fascinating. When Lenin sends for his secretaries, in order to give them instructions or to dictate, they observe him with scrupulous attention, and hang on his every word and movement, which they note down in the "Journal." Lenin was confined to his bed in a small room of his Kremlin apartment, his right hand and right leg paralyzed, almost completely isolated from the outside world and, apparently, cut off from all government activity. The doctors' orders were strict on this matter and they were reinforced by a decision of the Politburo.

But however fragmentary the notes of the "Journal" may be, they are enough to show the intense and passionate struggle that Lenin, paralyzed and no doubt aware of his ap-

proaching end, was waging not only against physical decline but also against the leadership of his party. With great effort he drew up a comprehensive survey of the situation of the country, worked out a program of action, and tried hard to persuade his colleagues on the Politburo and the Central Committee to accept it. This program, which was not requested by the members of the Politburo, involved considerable changes in government methods, in personnel, and to some extent in objectives. The majority of the Politburo were unenthusiastic.

With the help only of a few women—Krupskaya, his wife, Maria Ilinichna, his sister, and three or four secretaries, notably Fotieva and Volodicheva—Lenin fought obstinately to get hold of the dossiers he needed. He spoke to influential members and suggested specific lines of action; he sought allies and sounded out the opinions of various leaders, by indirect means if necessary; he worked on a lengthy report for the next Party Congress and published articles, for he finally managed to obtain the permission either of his doctors or of the Politburo itself to continue with some of his activities. But there were other activities that he pursued in secret—and with good reason. With the help of his closest friends, Lenin was engaged in nothing less than a plot to ensure the future success of his life's work. The center of the "conspiracy"—the word is Lenin's own—consisted of a private commission that he had secretly formed to inquire into certain events in Georgia in which leading figures in the Party had been implicated. The circumstances of this affair, which the "Journal" enables us to reconstruct in detail, reveal or confirm what were the personal and political relations of the three leaders, Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. The notes also give us some idea of the physical and mental effort expended by a man as seriously ill as Lenin was; they help us to feel

his presence, the intensity of his feelings, the power of his personality, the charm of his laughter.

But at this point we are confronted by something that goes well beyond autobiographical trivia. Historians have often spoken of an "intellectual crisis" that Lenin may have experienced during this final period, of a "*coup d'état*" that he was preparing, of a revolt against the results of his own work, and of the tragedy of a great revolutionary who thought he could see his ideal of emancipating the masses disappearing before his eyes and who felt that he was losing all control of events because of the unfortunate coincidence of an accident in his physical life and implacable political realities. In the course of this study we shall have occasion to re-examine these postulates.

But the situation in which the Soviet regime found itself during Lenin's illness and the problems that confronted Lenin in his last months are still relevant to the world today. Consequently, we shall find ourselves confronted with issues that go beyond the scope of a biography. Lenin wanted to give the regime he had helped to establish an adequate socio-economic framework and to create methods of management that would be adaptable both to this framework and to the ultimate aims of the Revolution; the result was the NEP, the New Economic Policy. He tried to impart a new style, vigor and efficacy to the dictatorial machine. His behavior poses the problem of the duties and responsibilities incumbent on the leaders of a dictatorship that claims to be socialist. These three key questions are always interdependent during the earliest stages of a regime of the Soviet type and of a dictatorship that sets out to develop a backward country.

The first question, as it presented itself to Lenin, concerns the balance to be struck between the spontaneous forces necessary to the launching of the economy, namely the peas-

ant smallholders, artisans and businessmen, and the centralized, state-owned and more or less planned sector that must give the economy as a whole the general direction required. Under the NEP, this was already the dilemma of the "market" and the "plan." Even today, despite the disappearance of the peasant smallholders and of the middle classes of a capitalist type, it is still one of the major problems pre-occupying the minds of the Soviet leaders, who are discovering that the two notions are not mutually exclusive, but complementary if they can be implemented simultaneously in a harmonious fashion.

The second question, that of the functioning of the dictatorial state, will require more of our attention. In the beginning the dictatorship is organized with the aim of accomplishing its mission of developing the country and establishing a greater degree of social justice—the principles for which the revolution was fought. But the dictatorial state tends to become a rigid organism with its own laws and interests; it may become a mere distortion of its original purpose; it may escape the control of its founders and disappoint, for a long time at least, the hopes of the masses. The instrument then becomes an end in itself. A coercive system set up to promote freedom may, instead of providing the social forces outside the state machine with an increasing share of power, become a machine of oppression. Every state that tries to carry out in an efficient way difficult tasks that are often unpleasant for the masses inevitably creates a privileged body of cadres who enjoy a certain prestige and material and political advantages. If these privileges are not controlled and kept within strict limits by social and economic realities, they soon become dangerous and impede development.

There is always a risk that men will become corrupted by power and privilege. The leaders and administrators of the

state that has emerged from a revolution, even if they belong to the often courageous, idealistic and dedicated elite that made the revolution, are tempted to attach more value to their privileges than to the function that justifies them—especially if they are isolated among a mass of new administrators who are of neither the level nor the value of the founders. How then can decline be avoided and the purity of the revolution be preserved? There is no easy answer. All that can be said is that the moral level and political consciousness of the elite, together with certain institutional guarantees, are positive factors. In these conditions it is all the more valuable to remember Lenin's injunction to Communists to retain "strength and flexibility" and to be always ready "to go back to the beginning"; they must not lose their critical spirit and must be willing, if necessary, to rebuild all or much of what has been attempted.

No more will be said of the implications of these questions for the present day. After drawing attention to them here, we shall merely try as objectively as possible to provide the material required for such a reflection, as it comes out of Lenin's last struggle.

GLOSSARY OF RUSSIAN TERMS

In cases where it is difficult to find an exact equivalent in English, a number of Russian terms have been used in this book. Here is a short list of them.

Administrirovanie: a system of management based on coercive measures, used by the bureaucracy

Apparatchik (pl. *apparatchiki*): functionary of the Communist Party apparatus

Cheka (*Chrezvychainaya Komissiya*): Extraordinary Commission, the Soviet political police (1917–1922), operating against counterrevolutionary activities

Chinovnik (pl. *chinovniki*): bureaucrat, in a pejorative sense; *chinovnichestvo*: bureaucracy

Dzerzhimorda (pl. *dzerzhimordy*): literally, he who holds you by the muzzle; the nickname for the Tsarist police

Edinonachalie: Russian term for monocratic rule by directors or other senior administrators

Gensek (*Generalnyi Sekretar*): General Secretary of the Party's Central Committee (CC), leader of its secretariat

Gosplan: State Planning Commission

Kavburo: Caucasian Bureau of the Party

Kombedy (*Komitety Bednoty*): Committees of Poor Peasants, village organizations during the civil war

Kulturnichestvo: the promotion of culture in the widest sense

Nepman (pl. *nepmany*): beneficiary of the NEP (New Economic Policy), a member of the new bourgeoisie

- Nezavisimets* (pl. *nezavisimtsy*): a supporter of *nezavisimost*, national independence
- Orgburo*: Organization Bureau; its membership was elected by the Central Committee; its function was to deal with problems referred to it by the Politburo and to coordinate organizational problems under the Politburo's guidance
- Politburo*: Political Bureau, the highest political organ in the Party and the state; members were elected by the CC; at the period of Lenin's illness there were seven members and four deputies
- RKI (Raboche-Krestyanskaya Inspektsiya)*: Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, the commissariat charged with the control of the state administration; it worked in tandem with the CCC
- RSFSR*: the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic
- Secretariat*: composed of secretaries of the CC, who were elected by the TSKK and its apparatus; created for executing current organizational work of the Party and for guiding the apparatus
- Sovkhoz* (pl. *sovkhozy*): state farm
- Sovnarkom (Soviet Narodnykh Komissarov)*: Council of People's Commissars, sometimes abbr. SNK
- STO (Soviet Truda i Oborony)*: Council of Labor and Defense, a committee of the SNK, charged with implementation and coordination of policy in the fields of economics and defense
- Tsekist* (pl. *tsekisty*): member of the Central Committee (*Tseka*)
- TSKK (Tsentral'nyia Kontrol'naya Komissiia)*: the Party's Central Control Commission (abbr. CCC in this book)
- Uchraspred (Uchetno-Raspredelitel'nyi Otdel)*: Records and Assignments Department
- Velikoderzhavnik* (pl. *velikoderzhavniki*): supporter of a Great Power policy, imperialist, chauvinist
- VSNKH (Vysshi Soviet Narodnogo Khozyaistva)*: Supreme Council of National Economy
- VTSIK (Vserossiskii Tsentral'nyi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet)*: All-Russian Central Executive Committee
- Zakkraykom (Zakavkazsky Kraevoy Komitet)*: Party Committee in the Transcaucasian Federation, grouping the Republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

EARLY SUMMER 1918–
DECEMBER 1920 Civil war (and period of “war communism”).

1921

MARCH New Economic Policy proclaimed (grain requisition replaced by a tax, first in kind, later in money).
DECEMBER Lenin sick.

1922

JANUARY–
FEBRUARY Lenin gets additional six weeks vacation from the Politburo because of his illness.
MARCH 3 First letter to Kamenev against any weakening of the state’s monopoly of foreign trade.
MARCH 6–
MARCH 25 A new long vacation because of poor health.
MARCH 27–
APRIL 2 Eleventh Party Congress.

- APRIL 23 Operation to extract from Lenin's body one of the two bullets fired at him in August 1918 by the Social Revolutionary Fanya Kaplan.
- MAY 15 Letter to Stalin suggesting a decision of the Politburo to reconfirm as inalterable the principle of state monopoly of foreign trade. Stalin resists.
- MAY 22 Politburo accepts Lenin's demands concerning foreign trade monopoly.
- MAY 25 Lenin partly paralyzed and loses ability to speak.
- MIDDLE OF JUNE Lenin's health improves.
- AUGUST 10 Decision to convene a commission on relations among the Soviet Republics.
- AUGUST 11 Commission works on and adopts Stalin's "autonomization" project.
- AUGUST 21 Lenin talks with Stalin about the RKI and the next day writes a letter to RKI leaders criticizing the work of this institution.
- SEPTEMBER 15 Stalin's project bluntly rejected by the Georgian Central Committee.
- SEPTEMBER 22 Lenin asks Stalin to keep him informed about the decisions concerning relations among the Republics.
- SEPTEMBER 24-25 Stalin's commission reconvenes and adopts Stalin's "autonomization" project in a more definite version.
- SEPTEMBER 25 The dossier on the commission's work transmitted by Stalin to Lenin.
- SEPTEMBER 26 Lenin invites Stalin for a talk on the unification of the Republics.

- Lenin writes to Kamenev proposing his own version: the creation of the USSR.
- SEPTEMBER 27 Lenin receives Mdivani for a talk on the unification project.
Stalin, in a letter to Politburo members, accuses Lenin of "national liberalism."
- SEPTEMBER 28-30 Lenin meets separately with Ordzhonikidze, three members of the Georgian CC, and Myasnikov from Azerbaijan, to discuss the unification problems.
- OCTOBER 2 Lenin back from Gorki and working in the Kremlin.
- OCTOBER 6 The Politburo session (Lenin absent) decides to limit the state's foreign trade monopoly; Lenin's USSR project adopted; Lenin writes to Kamenev that he is going to fight Great Russian chauvinism.
- OCTOBER 11 Lenin meets Trotsky. They discuss the monopoly problem and common fight against bureaucracy.
- OCTOBER 13 Letter to Stalin criticizing decision on foreign trade and asking for it to be revised.
- OCTOBER 21 Lenin assails the Georgians for their refusal to accept the Transcaucasian Federation.
- OCTOBER 22 The Georgian CC resigns collectively.
- NOVEMBER (FIRST PART) Numerous complaints from Georgia to Moscow against Ordzhonikidze.
Tsintsadze's letter reaches Lenin and arouses his suspicions against the Stalin-Ordzhonikidze line in Georgia.

- NOVEMBER 5—
DECEMBER 5 The Fourth Congress of the Comintern in Moscow.
- NOVEMBER 13 Lenin's speech at the Fourth Comintern Congress.
- NOVEMBER 20 Lenin's last public speech (at the session of the Moscow Soviet).
- NOVEMBER 24 Lenin, suspicious, abstains from voting on the composition of the investigation commission on the Georgian affair.
- NOVEMBER 25 Politburo approves the composition of this commission under Dzerzhinsky; the commission leaves for Tbilisi.
- END OF
NOVEMBER "The incident": Ordzhonikidze strikes Kabanidze, Mdivani's supporter.
- DECEMBER 7—12 Lenin on leave in Gorki.
- DECEMBER 9 Rykov comes back from Georgia, sees Lenin.
- DECEMBER 12 Proposition to Trotsky to defend, at the next CC session, their common opinions on the foreign trade monopoly.
- DECEMBER 12—15 Exchange of letters between Lenin and Trotsky on Lenin's proposition and Trotsky's suggestions.
- DECEMBER 13 Lenin suffers two dangerous strokes.
- DECEMBER 15 Lenin writes to Stalin that he "has taken the necessary steps to retire" and that he has concluded an agreement with Trotsky, who will defend their common position on the foreign trade monopoly.
- DECEMBER 18 CC session rescinds previous decision and reaffirms adoption of the Lenin-Trotsky position on foreign trade; CC makes Sta-

- lin responsible for Lenin's medical supervision.
- DECEMBER 21 Lenin's brief letter congratulating Trotsky on the victory at the CC session.
- DECEMBER 22 Stalin assails Krupskaya for having written letter dictated by Lenin.
- NIGHT OF
DECEMBER 22-23 Lenin again half paralyzed.
- DECEMBER 23 Lenin asks his doctors' permission to dictate some notes.
- DECEMBER 24 Lenin says he will refuse to be treated by his doctors if he is not permitted to dictate his "journal." Permission is granted by the Politburo.
- DECEMBER 23-31 Lenin dictates his notes, known as his "Testament." The memorandum on the national question and the Georgian affair, dictated on December 30-31, is the last of these notes, with a subsequent addition on Stalin.
- DECEMBER 30 The first Congress of Soviets proclaims the creation of the USSR.

1923

- JANUARY-
FEBRUARY Lenin dictates five articles: "Pages from a Journal," "On Cooperation," "Our Revolution," "On the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection," and "Better Fewer, But Better."
- JANUARY 4 Lenin adds to his "Testament" a proposition to demote Stalin.
- JANUARY 24 Lenin asks for the dossiers of the Dzerzhinsky commission findings. The Politburo is reluctant.

- JANUARY 25** The Politburo session endorses the conclusions of the Dzerzhinsky commission on the Georgian affair which whitewashes Ordzhonikidze and condemns Mdivani and the Georgian CC.
- FEBRUARY 1** The Politburo yields to Lenin's demand and turns over to him the commission's papers. Lenin asks his secretaries to study the material and gives instructions how to do it.
- MARCH 3** Lenin's private investigation committee submits to him its findings on the Georgian affair.
- MARCH 5** Letter to Trotsky asking him to take up, in both their names, the defense of the Georgian CC at the CC session. Trotsky answers the same day. Lenin begins dictating a letter to Stalin.
- MARCH 6** Lenin finishes a letter to Stalin demanding that he apologize for his rude treatment of Krupskaya. Another letter to the Georgians, Mdivani and his friends, announcing that Lenin is on their side against Stalin and Ordzhonikidze. Kamenev hears from Krupskaya that Lenin intends to crush Stalin politically. Lenin's health worsens critically.
- MARCH 10** A new stroke paralyzes half of Lenin's body and deprives him of his capacity to speak. Lenin's political activity is finished.

1924

JANUARY 21 Lenin's death.