

## ARCHIVE

### **PREFACE TO THE REISSUE OF 'LENIN 1917'**\*

**Victor Serge**

I sketched this portrait of Lenin in 1924. We are now on the threshold of 1938, beyond the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. Lenin, worn out by over-exertion, died at the age of 55, on January 22, 1924. Twelve years ago, his embalmed remains were placed in the mausoleum in Red Square, a few steps from the Kremlin wall. A striking symbol! The pathetic [*dérisoires*] remains of this simple, modest and great man, who strove to be nothing more than a servant of the proletariat, have become the object of a cult that seems more appropriate to the ancient traditions of the theocracies. This symbol is enough to betray the great changes that have occurred in the new society born of the victory of a socialist revolution. They are profound indeed.

History does not proceed in a straight line, as Lenin often emphasized. He insisted that before socialism would be established, set-backs were possible, even probable. All the great revolutions have been followed by periods of reaction, but these periods, grievous and hateful as they were, could not reverse the essential conquests. The egalitarian republic of Robespierre and Saint-Just gave way to the Napoleonic Empire; the last of the Montagnards died as deportees in Guyana.

But in spite of the reconstitution of the nobility in full regalia [*chamarrée*], neither feudalism nor the *ancien régime* were reborn: a new economic order was founded. Through all the changes of government, the bourgeoisie maintained its supremacy. The development of capitalist production proceeded.

Twenty years after Nov. 7, 1917, the bureaucratic reaction installed in the USSR under the old banners - which it betrays every hour - nevertheless maintains the socialization of the means of production, of transportation, of foreign and domestic trade, and still struggles to impose - by barbaric methods - agricultural regulations that are more or less collectivist. In any case the new mode of production effects considerable progress over the capitalist mode and is undeniably an advance toward socialism. Whatever the Stalinist nightmare may be today, these acquisitions remain. Henceforth the workers must struggle to rescue these gains from the caste of case-hardened parvenus who have developed a new instrument for the exploitation of labor and to truly lay the foundations of socialism with the return of liberty.

In this regard, they will find no more effective weapons than those provided by the Marxist thought of Lenin and Trotsky, inseparable in the elaboration of doctrines, in the victorious actions of 1917-1923, and in the subsequent resistance to bureaucratic counter-revolution. The last works of Lenin, who was already seriously injured, his testament, the last letter that he dictated before his death - which is the letter of his break with Stalin - are the precursor of the works of oppositionists who today, despite all the persecutions, represent the

---

\* Reissued by Spartacus (France) in 1937. Text of preface reprinted (in French) in *Spartacus*, n. 50, Oct.-Nov. 1972.

consciousness and living will of the October Revolution.

That is to say that, in the concrete form appropriate to the peculiarities of the Russian Revolution, this tradition represents the greater interests of international socialism. And like nothing else in this Marxist arsenal, Lenin's thought in the great days of 1917 has withstood the test of time.

Even the very degeneration of the Soviet regime can only be explained in Marxist terms: by the elimination of the vanguard of the working class and the accession to power in the dictatorial state, of a new caste of bureaucrats. The numerical weakness of the Russian proletariat, its losses in the civil war, the defeats of the revolutions in Europe and Asia, the consequent isolation of the Soviet state, its internal contradictions (relative weakness of industry vis-à-vis the peasant masses) allow us to understand Thermidor, Brumaire, the Bonapartist Stalin and his Empire.

And so it is that twenty years after 1917 the USSR is dedicated to belying the promise of the revolution that gave it birth. The doctrine of 'socialism in one country' has replaced internationalism. There are no more soviets in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The workers' democracy of 1917-1918 that brought together face to face communists, social-democrats, syndicalists, anarchists, maximalists, left social-revolutionaries and national parties has been replaced by a personal dictatorship that suppresses all freedom of opinion and dresses itself up in a plebiscitary constitution.

The revenues of collective production, instead of serving to improve the conditions of the workers, are used, outside of any control by the masses, to care for and defend the privileged few. While in 1917 the Bolsheviks demanded the abolition of the death penalty, in Moscow today the executioner is the principal personage of the state. The entirety of the old Bolshevik Party has perished under his blows. Most of Lenin's companions-in-arms have been shot after monstrous trials or non-trials. The survivors are perhaps in prison. Banishment saved Trotsky....

The internal counter-revolution has triumphed, but while enjoying absolute power, it is menaced from all quarters. Bureaucratic despotism is at the same time incompatible with the socialist tradition and with the most pressing needs of the new mode of production. It is impossible for socialized production to function well without workers' democracy. The collective nature of the factory calls for free workers.

Stalinism cannot assert itself without placing itself in a crisis. Like any regime blatantly contrary to the interests and aspirations of the masses it can only find relief from its insecurity in terror. It is doomed.

Two remarks in closing - Lenin formulated in 1917 his libertarian (in the etymological sense of the word) doctrine of the Commune State. The civil war later forced the Bolshevik leaders to undertake a different course. They made it through, but only by sacrificing the Commune State and building, on the contrary and partly in spite of themselves, another. This State, first authoritarian and subsequently totalitarian, facilitated the accession of the bureaucracy to power and finally overwhelmed the Bolsheviks. The contradiction between these two phases of Bolshevism is in reality that between socialist thought and action on the one hand, and on the other the expedients imposed by the greatest danger.

The Russian Revolution combined two revolutions: the bourgeois, called upon to clear the paths for capitalist development, and the proletarian, in one of the countries the least prepared for socialism. This is what made the Bolsheviks internally vulnerable from the start and delivered the revolution into the hands of bureaucratic reaction at the end of ten years.

Everything leads us to believe that the more industrialized countries, with their large working classes and democratic customs will not have to begin this painful development all over again. The social transformation there can and must assume profoundly different forms from those that were given to the revolution in peasant Russia with the collapse of the autocracy and the world war. The consciousness of the Russian experience itself should allow socialism elsewhere to follow on surer paths.