

History was not made by one authoritarian man

By Al Richardson*

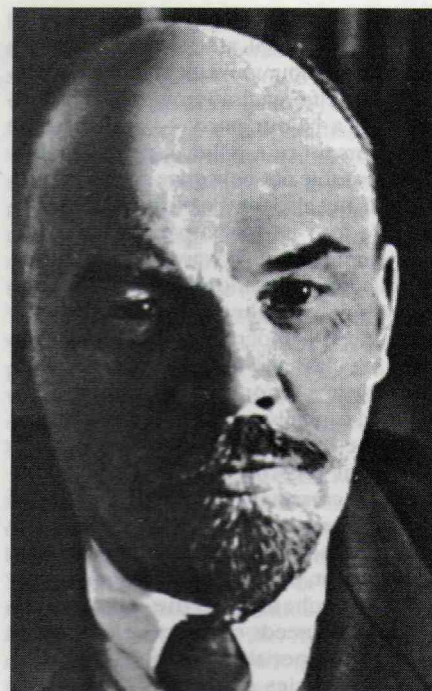
I WAS SURPRISED by Robin Blick's reply to my argument (See *Workers' Liberty* no 18, February 1995). My original review in *Socialist Organiser* dealt mainly with Blick's methodology: tearing small quotations from Lenin out of context in order to make an entirely new thought-construct out of them; creating a sort of guilt-by-association by way of quoting right-wing and even fascist statements supposedly akin to Lenin's; creating a counter-construct made up of all sorts of other people's opinions of Bolshevism, which is then mistakenly fathered upon Martov. It is the old technique of erecting your own straw man, and then demolishing him. Nowhere did Blick's reply take up this purely methodological criticism: instead, he shifted to the wider political questions. I will try to do the same here. But, if I now leave methodological considerations aside, that does not mean I find his way of arguing at all convincing.

The main problem of Blick's book is that it is ahistorical. *Seeds of Evil* shoot up into monstrous growths irrespective of the nature of the soil in which they are rooted. Lenin's words and actions are not placed in the wider context of world history in general, or even of Russian history in particular. Everything takes place against a blank canvas. Moreover, there seems to be no awareness of the development of Lenin's own thought, of the changes he made to what he saw as Marxism's historic tasks at any given time. Blick's view of Lenin is that he was unchanging in his aims, views and

motives throughout, a caricature shared with most bourgeois commentators, and all too many Stalinist, and unfortunately Trotskyist, ones as well.

Much emphasis is placed upon the elitist, authoritarian and conspiratorial aspects of Bolshevism before 1917, with no realisation that Czarism was an autocracy, and its ban on political parties of every kind before 1905 made any opposition by its nature conspiratorial. Lenin's views are attacked on page after page for being Jacobin, Blanquist or "Jacobin-Populist" rather than Marxist. Yet until the First World War we all know that Lenin's opinion was that the next stage in Russian history would be a bourgeois revolution against the autocracy — not a workers' revolution at all — for which the appropriate form of organisation is indeed a Jacobin one. Obviously, if you think that the historic necessity for Russia is a French-style revolution against absolutism, Jacobinism is the appropriate form of organisation for it. If you then change your views about the class character of the coming revolution, then logically you change the forms of your organisation for it as well, which Lenin duly did in 1917.

Comrade Blick also does not seem to be aware that the basic argument in his book that Lenin was aiming at centralised autocratic power from the beginning flatly contradicts the quotation he produces in his reply to me showing that Lenin was willing in 1905 to share a coalition government with other parties — even the liberal Cadets. Here again, the historic context provides the answer. Since Lenin then



Lenin

believed that the coming revolution was to be bourgeois, there is nothing illogical about sharing power in a brief revolutionary dictatorship with the bourgeoisie. The Menshevik appeal to the resolution of the Amsterdam Congress of the Second International against socialist entering bourgeois cabinets had nothing to do with revolutionary intransigence in this context, since on the basic nature of the revolution they shared Lenin's perspectives. All it showed is that they were not serious about taking the necessary steps to bring about any revolution at all, even a bourgeois one.

Similarly ahistorical is the argument about the internal organisation of the RSDLP as reflected in *What is to be Done?* The pamphlet — and, indeed, all Lenin's subsequent arguments for some years afterwards — shows that he regarded himself as an orthodox Kautskyan up to 1914, and if you read it carefully enough you will see that he believed that he was trying to apply what he thought were the organisational principles of the German SDP to Russian conditions. Whether his view of German Social Democracy was correct is another question, but unless we realise this it is impossible to understand why Lenin was so amazed when he saw the pro-war policies of the German Party organ, *Vorwärts*, in 1914, and thought it was a forgery of the German high command.

But the most ahistorical assumption of all is that during the Russian Revolution Lenin's "elitist and coercive 'blood and iron' state socialism" triumphed over Martov's "vision of a society that was both collectivist and democratic" (p5), as if the latter really were on offer in 1917.

Let us remind ourselves of the world context at the time, as well as the Russian one. The Czarist empire was not the only old-style absolutism to crash early in this

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