

## The Bolshevik Revolution

## Seeds of hope?

Robin Blick, author of "The Seeds of Evil: Lenin and the Origins of Bolshevik Elitism" (Ferrington, 1993), replies to Al Richardson's review of his book in *Socialist Organiser* no. 615,

ALMOST INVARIABLY, so-called disputations amongst religious believers have been conducted according to the presumption that the faith, being true (and why else should it be believed?) is beyond criticism and therefore incapable of refutation. It has been my experience in politics (though surely not mine alone) that debates between followers of ostensibly secular sects frequently adopt a similar procedure, ensuring that the objections of doubters, dissenters, heretics and, like myself, apostates, are given less than a fair hearing. Generally accepted norms of discussion, such as evidence, logical argument and the accurate representation of the ideas of opponents, are dispensed with and replaced by methods more akin to casting out the devil.

That is why I am pleased to acknowledge that Al Richardson's review of my book (*Socialist Organiser*, 6 October) departs in some degree from this sad and sterile tradition. True, like so many devotees of the Lenin cult, Al can not (yet) quite bring himself to utter a single public criticism of its founder. But I have learned to be patient. The faith of a lifetime is not easily questioned, even less discarded. I suspect that, for reasons I will explain later, Al, in common with many of a like mind, has not said his last word on Leninism. To think otherwise would do less than justice to his intelligence and integrity.

Be that as it may, I would like, in the space kindly offered me (that too gives me cause for hope) to respond to at least some of the criticisms Al makes of my book.

1. Al objects that on page x of the Foreword, the longest of a series of quotations from Volume Five of Lenin's *Collected Works*, purporting to prove Lenin's elitism, amounts to eleven words, and that they are each separated by at least ten pages of Lenin's own text. But surely should he not also have mentioned that on pages 15 and 16 of the main body of my book, I reproduce not eleven words, but 16 lines of (small printed) text from the very same volume, for the purposes of making the very same point? As Al would say, he should not do such "violence" to what I have actually written.

2. I quote not only Lenin, but Stalin, vintage 1923 (page 3) on the virtues of "transmission belt" trade unionism. Al, predictably, defends Lenin's exposition of the policy. Does he defend Stalin's? If not, can he explain wherein they differ?

3. The argument that Lenin's conspiratorial methods arose purely as a response to the repressive policies of the Tsarist police state is not sustained either by Lenin's writings or actions. Even when, to quote Lenin, Russia became (fleeting)ly the "freest country in the world" after the overthrow of the Autocracy, Lenin never for one moment abandoned these methods.

The reader will find an extensive treatment of this question in the greatly expanded Third Appendix to the second edition of my book, due out early 1995. But for now, let one instance suffice. During the attempted Kornilov coup, in the course of predicting (correctly) to his Central Committee colleagues that the struggle against Kornilov could "even tomorrow" "put power in our hands", he not only urged



The Tsar and Tsarina

that having won power, "we shall not relinquish it", but warned that of this policy and outcome "we must speak as little as possible in our propaganda". (CW Vol 25, p.289)

4. Al's attempt to construct a classic Leninist amalgam between Leiber's views on *What Is To Be Done?* in 1903, and what he advocated should be done to "disobedient workers" in 1917, I find totally irrelevant to a serious discussion of Lenin's theory of class consciousness. Either Lenin or Leiber could have been right in 1903, but for the life of me I cannot see how proposing the stationing of troops outside factories in 1917 constitutes proof either way. If it demonstrates anything, it is how Leiber, (like Lenin on freedom of the press, or the Constituent Assembly) failed to match his words with commensurate actions. In view of Al's evident outrage at Leiber's proposal, I would like to ask him; can I assume that we at least agree that we both find it repellent not merely to advocate the imposition of military discipline on the working class in 1917 under Kerensky, but to actually implement such a policy under the "War Communism" of Lenin and Trotsky, or the Five Year Plans of Stalin?

5. Re *Nachalo*. If Al reads the relevant passage again (page 6) he will see that I refer to its association with "left tendencies close to and within Menshevism" and that, so far as the later were concerned, they were represented by the journal's joint editor (with Trotsky), Martov. Nowhere do I say, as Al seems to be implying, that Martov's thinking reflected the dominant tendency with Menshevism in 1905, or that he shared Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In fact, I say that in so far as *Nachalo* advocated "a direct transition to a workers' government" it did so "in accordance with the latter's [that is, Trotsky's] theory of "permanent revolution" (page 6).

But even if Al were correct on the points of detail, he does not address the substantive point. I asked in my book, and I ask Al again now, is it not strange that in 1920, Lenin could write that by no later than 1906, the Mensheviks had become "bourgeois agents in the working class" and were "clearly realised" as such "by the entire bourgeoisie", when in that very year, so far from realising this himself, Lenin advocated and actively participated in what proved to be a but temporary merger of the two factions at the 4th (Stockholm) Congress of the RSDLP?

6. On a related issue, Al's (correct) assertion that another of Lenin's critics in 1903, the former "economist" turned Menshevik (and then, after 1917, Leninist turned Stalinist), Martynov, advocated in 1905 a "multi-class bloc policy with the Cadets, SRs etc" could, if not placed in the broader historic context of that year, convey the false impression that firstly, Martynov's was the official Menshevik policy and, secondly, that Lenin's was at all times fundamentally different. To make the point more specific, I ask readers: Of the following two policies being advocated in 1905, which is Lenin's, and which the Menshevik?

A) "Representatives of the Party may participate in the provisional revolutionary government for the purpose of relentlessly combating, together with the revolutionary bourgeois democrats, all attempts at counter revolution, and of defending the independent interests of the proletariat, provided that the party maintain strict control over its representatives and firmly safeguard the independence of the Social-Democratic Party..."

B) "...the Social Democratic movement should endeavour to maintain, throughout the course of the revolution, whatever position will best enable it to advance the revolutionary cause, not tying its hands in the struggle with the inconsistent, self seeking policies of bourgeois parties and not allowing itself to become merged in bourgeois democracy. It follows that the party should not aim to seize power or share it with a provisional government, but should remain a party of the extreme revolutionary opposition."

7. Did Trotsky believe that only proletarian revolutions could establish "workers' states"? His writings on the "class nature" of the territories occupied (and then statified) by Stalin under the terms of his pact

with Hitler are ambiguous on this point, but I concede can be construed to imply that, however unfortunate their consequences, occupation and statification by the Kremlin constituted a kind of "deformed workers' revolution" capable of creating a no less deformed, but nevertheless defensible, "workers' state".

8. Al finds "most unpleasant" the suggestion that elements of Leninism contributed to the formation of Nazi and fascist doctrine and practice. And so he should! The point is, however, is the charge true? To refute it, Al invokes Ernst Nolte, an exponent, so we are told of "bourgeois scholarship" on the matter. Evidently then, when it suits the polemical purposes of Leninists, even the arguments of the ideologists of the class enemy can be pressed into service. But woe betide any non-Leninist who dares cite from the same sources!

But, unlike Al, I have no need on this occasion of "bourgeois scholarship". Had he read my book more closely, he would have noticed that, concerning the Bolshevik inspiration for fascism and Nazism, on page 46, I quote Trotsky as arguing (this was in his uncompleted biography of Stalin) that "Mussolini stole from the Bolsheviks", to which I could have added, instead of paraphrasing as I did, Trotsky's own words, that "Hitler imitated the Bolsheviks and Mussolini". Al will, I suppose, be upset by this judgement, but what can I do about that?

Neither am I to blame for the existence, but only for the reproduction, on page 40, of a quotation from a Soviet journal, dated 1923, which saw in fascism "a politically conscious imitation of Bolshevism", or on the same page the citations from both Lenin and Trotsky praising Mussolini the fascist as, respectively, "a strong man who could have led our party to victory" and "our best pupil"?

Also in 1923, at the 12th Congress of the Bolshevik Party, Bukharin spoke in the same vein. "More than any other party", the Fascists had in their "methods of combat" "adopted and applied in practice the experience of the Russian Revolution", undertaking a "complete application of Bolshevik tactics and especially of Russian Bolshevism", for example in the "rapid concentration of forces" and "energetic action of a tightly structured military organization..." (Cited in: R. Pipes: *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, p.253)

Like Al, the Stalinist editors of the 1968 edition of the Congress proceedings found Bukharin's analysis distressing, dismissing it as "ridiculous", "baseless" and "unscientific" (ibid). But at the time it was made, it was regarded by Bukharin's political peers as self-evidently true. After all, did not Trotsky enunciate the *Fuehrerprinzip* of all totalitarian movements when he insisted, contrary to the entire tradition of pre-Bolshevik Marxism, that the "rule of the proletariat" could be expressed not only "through an open struggle of parties" but "the monopoly of a single party" and even "the factual concentration of power in the hands of a single person" (*Writings 1937-*

38, p.61). And, by this time, that "single person" was Stalin. If Al has a quarrel concerning the relationship between Bolshevism and fascism, it is not only with me, but the founders of his own political movement and doctrine. And in this dispute, I don't think that the "bourgeois scholarship" of Nolte will be of much avail.

I could go on, and demonstrate (as I did in my book) that leading Fascists and Nazis were no less aware of their debt to Bolshevism than the Bolsheviks themselves. On this subject too, the second edition will carry additional material, none of it by the way derived from the judgements of "bourgeois scholarship". For now, I will make do with an aphorism of Joseph Goebbels: "Lenin sacrificed Marx and in return gave Russia freedom".

9. Al concludes his review by ridiculing my contention that it takes courage for an orthodox Bolshevik to "consider the possibility" (not concede) that "Stalinism was the necessary outcome of Leninism" with the retort that the (chiefly bourgeois) enemies of Bolshevism have come to the very same conclusion long ago.

Let me answer Al by way of an analogy. A priest can warn a troubled but still essentially loyal Catholic that all Rome's enemies — Jews, Protestants, Moslems, pagans, Satanists and atheists — deny the infallibility of the Pope. This statement is not only undeniably true but also, for Catholics, probably very persuasive. But surely Al will also agree that its truth has no bearing whatsoever on whether the Pope is indeed infallible. And so it must also be with the claims of Leninism. They stand or fall, not



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by the real or supposed congruencies of its critics, but the facts of the case.

What makes it difficult for my book to receive a fair hearing (and Al's review is an example of this) is that the near unanimity of Bolshevism's critics, and the predominance amongst them of opponents of revolutionary socialism, render doubting Leninism as daunting an undertaking morally and psychologically as it is politically. Fear of betrayal, of "breaking ranks", "selling out", "moving to the right", and the ensuing inevitable public excommunication and condemnation by one's mentors, comrades and lifelong friends, paralyses the critical faculties and stifles reasoned

judgement.

Precisely for that reason does it indeed require courage, on the part of Leninists that is, to question Leninism today, no less than it did in 1956 for Communist Party members to accept the judgement of political opponents (amongst them not only Trotskyists, but vehement foes of any kind of socialism) that Stalin was a tyrant, that Trotsky was not a Nazi agent, and the Hungarian Revolution was not a fascist putsch inspired by US imperialism.

I repeat: Whether Leninism is or is not a viable means for achieving proletarian emancipation rests entirely upon the facts of the case, and not on whether one's opinion concurs in any sense with this or that school of "bourgeois scholarship". After all, do we not have it on Al's authority that in one instance at least, the latter can be superior to the collective wisdom of Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin?

So much for Al's criticisms, and my responses. But that does not conclude the matter. I am no less interested in what Al does not criticise in my book. Whilst often focusing on secondary points of detail (and even in these he is sometimes wrong) he does not, for example, take issue with the way I treat one of its central themes, which is Lenin's deviation from the Marx-Engels view of the party/class question. This, interestingly, is an omission his review shares with two others that have appeared in Leninist publications. He is no less reticent where I take issue with Lenin's reneging on the democratic demands in his party's programme — for example freedom of the press and respecting the will of the Constituent Assembly — and Trotsky's justifications for the one party state.

Could it be that here, if nowhere else, Al finds my critique of Bolshevism better grounded? I sincerely hope so, I believe that on its approach to the democratic issues (and here I include the class/party question) depends the future of the revolutionary Left. I am also encouraged by Al's refusal to take upon himself the defend of Lenin's advocacy and use of terror, in particular the latter's proposal (cited on page 59) to award a bounty of 100,000 roubles per man for Polish "kulaks, priests and landowners" hung by the advancing forces of the Red Army in the summer of 1920.

Let us hope that Al, and other reflective Leninists like him, find the courage to go beyond silence to public repudiation of this and other policies which I am convinced they in their hearts now believe were injurious to the cause for which they are fighting. That would be progress indeed. ■

## Marxists and Parliament

By Martin Thomas

ALAN JOHNSON'S REPLY ("Parliament and

revolutionaries", SO 619) to my comments (SO 617) on his book review (SO 616) raises many interesting issues. I shall try to respond as briefly as possible, point-by-point.

**Was it wrong to set up the (then-revolutionary) Communist Party in 1920?** I agree with Alan that "revolutionary Marxist parties of any size have never been built by tiny groups of Marxists setting up in direct organisational competition with mass reformist parties". It was necessary for the revolutionaries — the communists, to use a term which was not then debased by Stalinism — to organise in the Labour Party.

But neither Lenin nor anyone else could have managed to regroup the communists as a faction in the Labour Party in 1920. Most of the best revolutionaries were hostile to work in the Labour Party, and could be won over only by patient argument in a common organisation.

In "Left-Wing Communism" Lenin argues in detail *both* why communists should seek affiliation to the Labour Party *and* his case for initially regrouping all revolutionaries, "ultra-left" or otherwise. His argument still seems convincing to me.

There is a more general issue here, relevant to other points in Alan's argument and to revolutionary orientation today. Good tactics for winning the masses are essential for building a revolutionary organisation; but so are good tactics for initially winning a revolutionary minority, *who in many conditions will be "ultra-left"*. Both sides of the task must be kept in mind.

**Should the general rule be "shutting down, in its organisationally separate form, the revolutionary party, thus allowing the Marxists to act as a lever...?"** I agree it is best if Marxists can organise as a affiliated party within the Labour Party — as the early Communist Party sought to do — or as an open not-yet-banned organisation within the Party like the Socialist Organiser Alliance of the 1980s.

Usually, however, Labour's dominant right wing does not leave this possibility open to us. We then have to use a "combination of 'Labour Party legal' and 'Labour-illegal' work".

Resorting to such a combination is a retreat, and Alan is right to warn against making it a preference. When *Militant* was banned in 1983, some *Socialist Organiser* supporters felt hurt in their revolutionary credibility that we were not banned too, and wanted to find some way to provoke a ban. They were wrong.

But now we are banned. We do have to make the retreat.

Alan gives far too much credence, I think, to the arguments of the Communist Party leaders Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt, who said in 1929 that the CP must shut down the National Left Wing Movement in the Labour Party because it would deflect workers from joining the CP.

By doing effective "illegal" work in the Labour Party, CP members could and did both build the NLWM and win other Labour Party members to join the CP "illegally". The shutting down of the NLWM was fol-

lowed by a collapse, not a rise, in CP membership.

**Parliament and workers' councils.** I agree with Alan that we should "fight to defend and deepen Parliamentary democracy" and that "the most likely scenario for the development of workers' councils in Britain is the defence of Parliament". I do not propose that we campaign under the slogan "Soviets not Parliament"!

All that is very different, however, from arguing the workers' rule of the future must "merge the power of a transformed Parliament with the nascent power of popular local councils".

Take the scenario. A leftish Labour parliamentary government attempts serious reforms, and the ruling class tries to sack it, maybe in the fashion that the Governor-General, using the Queen's authority, sacked the Australian Labor government in 1975.

*"The Independent Social Democrats did argue "to merge Parliament with popular local councils".*

*That led to subordination*

*to a bourgeois*

*Parliament."*

The working class reacts more militantly than the Australian workers in 1975. There are mass strikes. Local councils of action are set up and fight to enforce the Labour government's reforms against a new provisional government established under the Queen's authority.

There you have workers' councils developing in defence of Parliament. But that is not the end of the story.

If the workers' councils developed beyond a certain level, *the leftish Labour government which the ruling class initially wanted to sack would probably become its best defence!*

Its soft-left leaders would certainly be in anxious conclave with ruling-class strategists about how to "restore order". Quite likely they would produce a deal: the Labour government and some or even all of its reforms are restored, guarantees are given about future stability (for example by "broadening" the government to include Lib-Dems), and the workers are called on to demobilise.

Marxists would argue against demobilising. We would not make "Soviets not Parliament" a slogan; but we would say: defend, extend, and co-ordinate the power you have won locally. Demand that the Labour leaders go forward to new reforms, instead of giving guarantees to the ruling class.

We would be going on a path which counterposed a new workers' power, based on workers' councils, to the old parlia-

mentary regime. To preach "merging" of Parliamentary power with workers'-council power would be disorienting.

**What are the lessons of Germany 1918-19?** Despite Alan, I believe that the cause of the workers' defeat then *was* the absence of a solid revolutionary party.

Rosa Luxemburg and her close comrades knew, and argued, that it was wrong for the communists to boycott the National Assembly elections; that a patient battle of ideas in the workers' councils was necessary; that any attempt at an uprising in Berlin in January 1919 was disastrous. They were unable to lead the workers on the basis of what they knew because they had operated for too long as a loose propaganda group inside the Social-Democrat and Independent Social-Democrat parties. The new Communist Party was formed only after the revolution had broken out. Its scanty, ill-organised cadres were overwhelmed by the mass of impatient youth new to revolutionary politics.

Had it not been for the special qualities of the Bolshevik party, the Russian revolution of 1917 would have ended in equally crushing defeat. The Bolshevik leaders would have continued the line of "pushing the Provisional Government to the left" which they had until Lenin's arrival in Russia from exile; the most militant workers would have broken away untidily, forming some new anarchistic or ultra-left party; that party would have attempted an uprising in the "July Days" and broken its neck.

Moreover, the lesson of 1918-19 is not just the failure of the Communist Party. It is also the failure of the Independent Social-Democrats, who did argue "to merge the power of Parliament with the power of popular local councils". That approach led to the workers' councils being subordinated to a bourgeois Parliament.

And it did not even save them from ultra-left foolishness: the initiators of the Berlin uprising of January 1919, who then managed to bring Karl Liebknecht (though *not* other CP leaders) in on their folly, were Independent Social-Democrats.

**But what about differences of national conditions? Revolutionary strategy in Britain or Germany cannot be copied from the very different conditions of Russia.** I agree that different national conditions are important. A discussion of what exactly their import is would take us much wider.

But it seems to me that relating to parliamentary politics is important *everywhere*, and not just in particular national conditions.

The Bolsheviks did not campaign for "Soviets not Parliament" in 1917. They campaigned for soviets, and at the same time for the convening of a Constituent Assembly (a parliament with full powers). After they had won power, they convened the Constituent Assembly. They dispersed it, not under some general slogan of "Soviets not Parliament", but on the specific grounds that it refused to recognise the authority of the Congress of Soviets, which was more democratic and accurately representative. ☐