

Lenin's Troubled Legacies: Bolshevism, Marxism, and the Russian Traditions

by Vladimir Tismaneanu

I will start with a personal confession: I have never visited the real Russia, so, in my case, there is indeed a situation where Russia is imagined. But, on the other hand, my both sisters were born in the USSR during World War II, where my parents were political refugees following the defeat of the Spanish Republic for which they fought as members of the International Brigades (my father, born in Bessarabia, i.e., in the Russian empire, lost his right arm at the age of 23 at the battle of the River Ebro; my mother, a medical student in Bucharest, worked as a nurse at the International Hospital in Barcelona, then, during the war, finished her medical studies at the Moscow Medical School no. 2, where she was a student of one of professor Kogan, later to be accused of murderous conspiracy in the doctors' trial). They all returned to Romania in March 1948, three years before I was born. So, though I never traveled to Russia, my memory, from the very early childhood was imbued with Russian images, symbols, songs, poems, fairy tales, and all the other elements that construct a child's mental universe. My eldest sister was born in Kuybishev (now Samara), where my mother was in evacuation, together with most of the Soviet government workers--she was a broadcaster for the Romanian service of Radio Moscow. My sister was born on November 25th, 1941 in an unheated school building, under freezing temperature, without any medical supplies, food, or milk. Miraculously, she survived. No wonder her name is Victoria. My other sister was born in Moscow in April 1944, when hopes of return to Romania were increasingly high, and so was my mother's nostalgia and yearning for her family in northern Moldova (part of the old Regat). Her name was as Romanian as you can get: Rodica (inspired by a classic poem of Romanian literature). My parent's boss at Radio Moscow's Central European and Balkan bureau was Rudolf Slansky. Among their colleagues were Imre Nagy, Leonte Rautu, and Veljko Vlahovic, all major figures of Central European communism. One of the broadcasters was the Czech Mania Zahariadis, married to the head of the Greek Communist Party, deported by the Nazis to Mauthausen. In 1951-52, when the

Slansky affair exploded in Czechoslovakia both my parents were under heavy party investigation: they had the misfortune of having had in their party files references from the now exposed arch-traitor, once celebrated as the faithful son of the Czech proletariat. Add to this their personal friendship with other victims of the purges, including Ana Pauker, and one can imagine the atmosphere in which I grew up: fear, whispers, and, after Stalin's death, as sense of relief, the illusion of a return to the pure ideals of their romantic revolutionary days. One of my first memories is that we were not speaking Romanian in our house: my sisters came to Romania without knowing a single word in their mother's tongue. They both attended the Russian School in Bucharest (like so many of my friends from Central Europe: Miklos Haraszti, Adam Michnik, Janos Kis). In our house, Russian was the language of revolution, and Lenin's name was considered sacred (less so Stalin's). Years later, in the 1960s, my mother told me that at the moment of doctor's trial she realized that there was something deeply rotten with the system. During the war, she also had noticed the lingering anti-Semitism rampant among many of her fellow Medical School students, but preferred to close her eyes and ears to these unpleasant signals. Like so many true believers, my parents regarded any uncomfortable evidence as false.

As for me, I was born in Orasul Stalin (Stalin City), formerly Kronstadt, or Brasov, or Brasso, a multiethnic community at what used to be the border between Austria-Hungary and Romania before World War I. There were discussions in my family whether to call me Alexei or Sergei: finally they decided to give me Lenin's (and Mayakovski's) name. Lenin was my father's political model, Mayakovski his favorite poet. There was no statue of Lenin in Bucharest, Romania capital city in which I grew up. There was instead a huge statue of Stalin at the entrance of Bucharest's most beautiful park, in the residential northern neighborhood, where the party big shots lived. Later, after Khrushchev's Secret Speech at the 20th CPSU Congress, my city of birth regained its original historical name, but there is still a huge mark on the mountain Timpa, where trees were cut in such a way as to compose the name of the generalissimo (one can still see it from the plane or helicopter). In 1961, one night, Stalin's statue was pulled down, without any public comment. In April 1960, on the occasion of Lenin's 90-birthday anniversary, a statue of Lenin was erected and inaugurated in Scinteia Square in Bucharest. Scinteia was the name of the party daily newspaper. It meant, of course, the Spark. In December 1989, once Ceausescu was overthrown by a combination of plebeian rebellion and intra-party conspiracy, Scinteia

became Adevarul. From Iskra to Pravda. Lenin's statue was pulled down and the image of this demolition made the international media delight (it appears on the cover of my edited volume *The Revolutions of 1989*, Routledge, 1999). I rediscovered Lenin's statue later, in 1994, invaded by mold, weeds, and rust, in the outskirts of Bucharest, in the backyard of the aristocratic Mogosoiaia Palace, once the residence of Princess Martha Bibesco, Marcel Proust's friend. *Habent sua fata* monumenta*. In brief, I never visited Russia, but I have always had a deep, most intimate relationship with the Russian culture. I grew up reading not only Russian classics (my father had complete collections of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoi, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Herzen, etc), but was also a subscriber to *Roman Gazeta*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Novyi Mir*, etc. My favorite children books authors were Samuil Marshak and Anatoly Rybakov. Whenever I was bored, I was leafing through the *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia*, contemplating the photographs of prominent Soviet leaders (I remember my surprise when looking after Lavrenti Beria, I discovered the missing entry replaced by the additional information on the Behring Sea--an obedient Leninist, my father had done what he was supposed to do, cutting off the Beria entry and gluing the substitute pages, after Beria's fall and denunciation as spy in June 1953). I vividly remember the heated conversations between my parents and their friends on Yevtushenko's poems (*Stalin Heirs*, *Baby Yar*), on Ilya Ehrenburg's memoirs, or on Solzhenythin's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (a masterpiece that the Romanian anti-Soviet Stalinist regime never allowed to be translated). As a highschool student, I listened to Vladimir Vyssotski and Bulat Okudjava (and much earlier, as a kid, I had listened to Mark Bernes, and among the opera singers, to my mother's favorite one, Lemeshev). Our first "pick-up" was a Soviet one, and so was our first TV set: a Temp 2. I remember Khrushchev's visits to Romania, but also German Titov's triumphant trip to Bucharest in 1963. And I also remember my sister Victoria's telling me about her enthusiasm when she was chosen to deliver a speech to welcome the visit to the Russian-language school by Lyubov Kosmodemyanskaya, the mother of our favorite heroes, Zoia and Shura. As a teenager, in addition to my fascination with Gide, and Proust, and Nietzsche, I read Dostoyevski' novels many times. I think that I still remember by heart fragments of the conversations between Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov. And as a student, while reading the officially sanctioned Leninist texts, I was also reading Shestov, and Soloviov, and more than any other Russian thinker, Berdiayev. Add to this the Solzhenytsin shock: I read the *Gulag Archipelago*

in a few nights (in French translation). I belonged to a generation who saw Russia in more than color: yes, there was the Brezhnevite obscurantism, but there was also the world of Syniavski, Daniel, Brodsky, Pavel Litvinov, Aleksandr Zinoviev, and Sakharov. And there were the poems of Blok, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Pasternak, and Mandelstam. For those of us in Eastern Europe who thought that socialism had been betrayed by the Stalinist despotism, there was always something appealing and luminous in the Russian tradition. Like Michnik, I always found condescending attitudes towards Russia deeply disturbing, annoying, and counterproductive. Yes, Russia was the name of the colonizing power, but for many of us it was also the territory of resistance to autocracy and ideocratic tyranny.

Why do I mention all these autobiographical details? Because I consider Leninism, a Russian cultural and political phenomenon, the foundation stone of the system that came to an end with the revolutions of 1989-91. In other words, post-communism means a continuous struggle to overcome the "remains of Leninism" (I once proposed the term "the Leninist debris"). In her acceptance speech for the year 2000 Hannah Arendt Award, given jointly by the city of Bremen, the Heinrich Boll Foundation, and the Hannah Arendt Association, Elena Bonner writes: "One of Hannah Arendt's key conclusions was 'The totality of terror is guaranteed by mass support.' It is consonant with a later comment by Sakharov: 'The slogan 'The people and the Party are one', painted on every fifth building, are not just empty words.'" (Elena Bonner, "The Remains of Totalitarianism," *The New York Review of Books*, March 8, 2001, p. 4). This is precisely the point: the internalization of Leninist forms of thinking by millions of denizens of the Sovietized world, their readiness to accept paternalistic collectivism as a better form of life than risk-driven, freedom-oriented experiences. In my view, the major cleavage in today's Russian political culture is that between the Leninist heritage and the democratic aspirations and practices associated with the name of Sakharov and Russia's human rights movement. To quote Elena Bonner again: "In the preamble to his draft for a Soviet Constitution, Sakharov wrote: 'The goal of the peoples of USSR and its government is a happy life, full of meaning, material and spiritual freedom, well-being, and peace.' But in the decades after Sakharov, Russia's people have not increased their happiness, even though he did everything humanly possible to put the country on the path leading to the foal. And he himself lived a worthy and happy life." (*ibidem*, p. 5).

As a political doctrine (or perhaps as a political faith) Leninism was synthesis between radical Jacobinism (elitism, minority, pre-destined vanguard: see Jacob Talmon, Kolakowski, Szamuely); Russian "Nechaevism" (on Nechaev and Tkachev, see Billington, Szamuely, Confino, Besancon), and the authoritarian-voluntarist component of Marxism. Is this all over? No: the Leninist (Bolshevik) formation is rooted in a political culture suspicious of open dialogue, democratic procedures, and hostile to spontaneous developments from below. Spontaneity (stikhinost') has always been the Leninists nemesis. Remember Gramsci on Russia "gelatinous" civil society and the omnipotence of the bureaucratic state? Wasn't Lenin himself, by the end of his life, terrified by the resurgence of the time-honored traditions of rudeness, violence, brutality, and hypocrisy that he had lambasted and against which the revolution was presumably directed? Now, for the East European intellectuals there is always a problem: What Russian tradition do we refer to? The Decembrist or the czarist-autocratic one? The liberal humanists who opposed the pogroms and the blood libel or the Black Hundreds? Korolenko or Pobedonostsev? The Bolshevik apocalyptic scenario or the Menshevik evolutionary socialism? The terrorist rejection of status quo, the intelligentsia's perpetual self-flagellation and outrage, or the dissident vision of a liberated polis? And even within the dissident culture, there has always been a tension between the liberals and the nationalists, between the supporters of Sakharov and those of Shafarevich. All these questions remain as troubling now as they were one hundred years ago. Once again, Russia is confronted with the eternal questions: "What is to be done?" and "Who is to be blamed?" And, in different versions, whether they admit it or not, all participants in the debate are haunted by Lenin's inescapable presence. Lenin was the most influential Russian political personality of the 20th century, and for East Europeans Lenin's influence resulted in complete transformation of their life worlds. It would be easy to simply say that Leninism succumbed in the events of 1989-91, but the truth is that residual Bolshevism continues to be a major component of the hybrid transitional culture of post-Soviet Russia (and East-Central Europe). The major theme of the Richard Pipes-Martin Malia explicit or implicit controversy is thus important for our interpretation not only of Russian modern history, but also for the discussion of the nature and future of left-wing, socialist politics in the 21st century: Was it Russia that destroyed (compromised) socialism-as Pipes and, earlier, Max Weber put it, or rather it was revolutionary socialism that, because of its political, indeed metaphysical hubris, imposed immense

sufferings on Russia (see the subtitle of Malia's book, see also Nicolas Werth in *The Black Book of Communism*). Thus, objecting to young Lukacs's celebration of Lenin's takeover of power in Russia, Weber insisted on the impossibility to build up the socialism Karl Marx had envisioned in the absence of genuine capitalist, bourgeois, market developments: "It is with good reason," he wrote, "that the Communist Manifesto emphasized the economically revolutionary character of the bourgeois capitalist entrepreneurs. No trade-unions, much less state-socialist officials, can perform this role for us at their place." (Quoted by John Patrick Diggins, *Max Weber: Politics and the Spirit of Tragedy*, Basic Books, 1996, p. 239). Earlier than many later critics of Sovietism, Weber concluded that the Leninist experiment would discredit socialism for the entire twentieth century. (Ibid., p, 230: see also Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left*). The debate on Leninism bears upon the possibility of radical-emancipatory practice and the need to reconstruct areas of autonomy in opposition to the logic of instrumental rationality: the burning question remains whether such efforts are predestined to end up in new coercive undertakings, or, rather, Leninism was a peculiar, sui generis combination of Marxism and an underdeveloped political and economic structure. Indeed, the defeat of "world revolution," after all the main strategic postulate on which Lenin had built his whole revolutionary adventure, made the rise of Stalinism a sociological and political necessity. Here we may remember Isaac Deutscher's analysis: "Under Lenin, Bolshevism had been accustomed to appeal to reason, the self-interest, and the enlightened idealism of 'class-conscious' industrial workers. It spoke the language of reason even when it appealed to the muzhiks. But once Bolshevism had ceased to rely on revolution in the West, once it had lost the sense of its elevation above its native environment, once it had become aware that it could only fall back on that environment and dig itself in, it began to descend to the level of primitive magic, and to appeal to the people in the language of that magic." (See Isaac Deutscher, "Marxism and Primitive Magic," in Tariq Ali, ed., *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on the 20th Century World Politics*, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 113-114).

How does one make sense of the fact that unlike all other East European societies, Russia is the only one that seems unable to restore the pre-communist traditions and parties? Where are the SR, Kadets, Mensheviks, even Bolsheviks? The answer is that, whatever one says or thinks about the final disintegration of Leninism, it was a quite successful experiment in reshaping political community

according to a certain interpretation of social science (see Daniel Chirot's review essay on *The Black Book*, *EEPS*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2000). As Louis Althusser once put it, Leninism was not a new philosophy of praxis, but a new praxis of philosophy. In fact, this meant that a group of self-appointed revolutionary pedagogues managed to coerce a large population to accept their obsessions as the imperative of History. Indeed, as Vassily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* poignantly reveals there was no significant distinction between the way the denizens of the Soviet world and the subjects of the Nazi dictatorship experienced ideology and power (which, of course, does not mean that the ideologies were identical, but simply that what Steven Lukes calls "moral blindness" functioned in both systems). In this paper, I will further concentrate on the originality of Leninism and the need to be very cautious in writing its definitive obituary. Yes, as a Russian model of socialism it is exhausted, but there is something in Leninism, if you want its antidemocratic, collectivist pathos associated with the invention of the party as a mystical body transcending individual fears, anguishes, despair, loneliness, etc, that remains with us. All political figures in post-Soviet Russia, all parties, movements, and associations define themselves, must do so, in relationship to Lenin's legacies. In this respect, Leninism is alive, if not well. This is because the cult of the organization and the contempt for individual rights is part and parcel of one direction with the "Russian tradition" (I have doubts that one can speak of the Russian tradition, or, together with Helene Carrere d'Encausse, of *le malheur russe*, etc). There is a plurality of trends in the Russian memory, and one should avoid any kind of Manichean taxonomy. At the same time, it is doubtless that, as Berdyaiev noticed, there is something deeply Russian in the love for the ultimate, universally cathartic, redeeming revolution, which explains why Lenin and his followers (including the highly sophisticated philosophers Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch) did embrace a certain cataclysmic, absolutist direction within the Marxian tradition (Aleksandr Yakovlev writes extensively about this in his otherwise very uneven and much too vehement *The Fate of Marxism in Russia*). At the same time, one should place Leninism in contradistinction to other versions of Marxism, at least as legitimate if not more. It is not at all self-evident that one can derive the genocidal logic of Gulag from Marx's universalistic postulates, whereas it is quite clear that much of the Stalinist system existed more than in embryo in Lenin's Russia. One can ask then: What was Lenin's unique, extraordinary innovation? The party, what Gramsci called the "New Prince"; a new figure of the political that absorbs and incorporates up to the point of definitive

osmosis/asphyxiation the independent life of society. It is, in the words of A. J. Polan, "the end of politics" via the ultimate triumph of political will. Mayakovski was right when he identified the two: "When we say Lenin/We mean the Party/And when we say Party/We mean Lenin." The Leninist party is dead (it is quite ironical that the Zyuganov-style epigones combine Slavophile Orthodoxy, xenophobia, imperialism, and Bolshevik nostalgia in a baroque nationalist-cum-egalitarian collectivistic mishmash). But the cult of the institution, the sectarian vision of a community of virtuous, righteous individuals, selflessly committed to improving the life of humanity and erect the "Crystal Palace" here and now is not extinct (Aileen Kelly mentions this in a recent piece in NYR, referring to an excellent article on Weimar Russia by Stephen Hanson and Jeffrey Kopstein). It explains the nature of the transitions, where the initiatives from below are still marginal, and the center of power remains as conspiratorial, secretive and nondemocratic as it was in pre-Leninist and Leninist times (see Peter Reddaway's discussion of "market Bolshevism"). Is this bound to stay the same? No: after all, the monolith was broken, the dream of communism as the secular kingdom of God has failed. The challenge remains however: coming to terms with Lenin's legacies, admitting that Sovietism was not imposed by extra-terrestrial aliens on an innocent intelligentsia, but rather found its causes, origins, and most propitious ground in the Russian political culture (see Robert C. Tucker, Ken Jowitt).

The 20th century was one of revolutions and counter-revolutions, and the Bolshevik takeover of power in October 1917 inaugurated a period of ideological warfare that may have come to an end only with the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (the "age of extremes", as Eric Hobsbawm calls this epoch). I will refer here to a recent volume by Claude Lefort, the distinguished French political philosopher, author of important studies on modern bureaucracy, Fascist and Communist totalitarianisms, the Jacobin tradition, as well as Machiavelli's thought. In his important new book *La complication: Retour sur le communisme* (Fayard, 1999), Lefort proposes a deliberately controversial thesis: engaging in a polemic with both Francois Furet (*Le passe d'une illusion*) and Martin malia (*The Soviet Tragedy*), Lefort maintains that Bolshevism (or, in general, 20th century communism) was not simply an ideological mirage (illusion, chimera, delusion, etc). Ideology mattered enormously, as Solzhenytsin, on whom Lefort wrote extensively, had demonstrated. But the ideological passion alone, or the frantic will to impose a utopian blueprint, cannot explain the longevity and intensity of the communist phenomenon. In the spirit of

French sociology (Durkheim, Marcel Mauss), it would be fruitful to regard communism as "total social fact". In other words, the totalitarian system cannot be seen only as an emotional-intellectual superstructure, but as an institutional ensemble inspired by these passions. In other words, it is not the original Marxism, as constituted in the Western revolutionary tradition that explains the Soviet tragedy, but rather the mutation introduced by Lenin. There is, undoubtedly, a dictatorial propensity at the heart of the Marxian project, but the idea of the ultra-centralized, sectarian, extremely militarized party, a minority of knowledgeable "chosen ones" who know the esoteric gnosis while preaching the egalitarian rhetoric to the masses, this idea is directly linked to Lenin's intervention in the evolution of Russian and European Social Democracy. In this respect, Lefort is right to reproach to Furet the neglect of the anti-totalitarian critique formulated by the Western democratic left (the French groups Socialisme ou barbarie, Arguments, Italian "heretics" as Carlo Rosselli with his vision of "liberal socialism", etc).

Lenin's revolutionary novelty consists in the cult of the dogma and the elevation of the Party to the level of uniquely legitimate interpreter of the revealed truth (a major distinction with the right-wing revolutionary totalitarian movements). Indeed, Lenin carried to an extreme the idea of a privileged relation between "revolutionary theory" and "practice." The latter constitutes (substantiates) itself in the figure of the presumably infallible Party, custodian of an omniscience ("epistemic infallibility," to use Giuseppe de Palma's term) that defines and exorcises any doubt as a form of treason.

In opposition to Furet, who was ready to grant Marxism and Leninism certain legitimacy in their claim to a liberal-democratic pedigree, Lefort demonstrates that Leninism is inherently inimical to political liberties. It is not a deviation from the democratic project, but its direct and unequivocal opposite. As Tocqueville put: "To grant the epithet of democratic to a government that denies political freedom to its citizens is a blatant absurdity." The annihilation of democracy within the Leninist practice is determined by the nature of the Party as a secular substitute for the unifying totalizing mystique in the political body of the absolute sovereign (the medieval King). In other words, the Leninist model breaks with the Enlightenment tradition and re-asserts the integral homogenization of the social space as a political and pragmatic ideal. There is therefore no way to democratize Leninist regimes precisely because the doctrine's original intention is to organize total domination. At the opposite pole, writes Lefort, "liberal democracy was born from the refusal of monarchic domination, from the collectively shared discovery

that power does not belong to anybody, that those who exert it do not incarnate it, being simply the repositories of public authority, in a temporary form*" Here lies the essence of the Leninist (or communist) question: the institution of the monolithic, unique party that emerges as a "besieged fortress" after 1903 (the great schism between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) and acquires planetary dimensions after 1917. Marxism, converted and adjusted by Lenin, ceases to be a revolutionary doctrine aiming at grasping/conceiving (begreifen) reality, and becomes an ideological body that requires from militants a discipline of action that makes them "members of a collective body." Thus, Bolshevism adds to the 19th century revolutionary mythologies something brand new: the inclusion of power in a type of representation that defines the party as a magical entity. For understanding the impact of the communist ideas in the 20th century, it is not enough to insist, as Furet does, on the attraction of the anti-Fascist myth, but also on appeals of regimentation, what La Boetie called *la servitude volontaire* - "voluntary servitude.")

To conclude, it is not enough to say, with Furet, that communism (Leninism) was an illusion, or together with Malia that it was a "house of cards." The persistence of totalitarian mentalities is inseparable from the institutional order created by Bolshevism, and especially the central role of the party, including the universe of symbolic representations, myths, and symbols that explain the paradoxical nature of the Bolshevik (communist) engagement. The breakdown of state socialist regimes does not mean therefore the end of a certain totalizing yearning to which Leninism tried to respond (more often than not in destructive, expansionist, terrorist forms). It is thus important to keep in mind the significance of the political and symbolic structures of Leninism, the underpinnings that ensured its success as a the worldview of a "despotism without a despot, a democracy without citizens, of a proletariat without a working class movement." No matter how we look into this story, Leninism was not an accident on the trajectory of modernity, but rather the proof that a certain threshold of the possible has been transcended and that the political realm contains as much the temptation of authoritarian regimentation as the one of civic liberty.