

Did Lenin admit defeat?

Lenin's Last Struggle, by Moshe Lewin. *Faber and Faber*. 36s.

Lenin's Last Letters and Articles, *Progress Publishers, Moscow*.

Lenin made his last public speech in November 1922 at the Moscow Soviet. He died in January 1924, but had been unable to speak or write since the previous March. So the letters he wrote between December 1922 and March 1923 were his last.

Moshe Lewin's book provides an interesting and useful background to the Moscow pamphlet. The most famous of Lenin's last writings is his "testament" in which he criticises Stalin. Some of the others are about the handling of the dispute with the Georgian Bolsheviks over the structure of the Soviet state, in which Stalin was again implicated. But those which are perhaps of most interest to Socialists concern Lenin's attempt to justify the Bolsheviks' position in Marxist terms. The arguments he uses are so weak as to suggest that Lenin realised that, as his opponents had predicted, the Bolsheviks were being defeated by Russia's backwardness.

With the end of foreign intervention and the civil war in 1921 the Bolshevik government found itself in charge of a vast backward country with a predominantly small-peasant economy. This situation worried Lenin. His main concern was that the Bolsheviks should retain at least the passive acceptance of their rule by the mass of small peasants the revolution had created. To get this acceptance he was prepared to make far-reaching concessions.

Lenin should have known that if the Bolsheviks were left isolated in charge of Russia they would become the prisoner of that country's economic backwardness. They had been warned of this by some of their opponents before they staged their November 1917 coup and Lenin obviously disliked being reminded of this.

In Marx's view, capitalism paves the way for Socialism both by developing modern industry (so that an abundance of the things people need can be produced) and by raising the general cultural level of the people (so they can manage their own affairs in a democratic way). Capitalism, however, existed only in a few scattered parts of Russia; the bulk of its people were illiterate and ignorant peasants,

The Bolsheviks soon came up against this. Commenting on figures which showed that in 1920 only 32 per cent of the population were literate Lenin wrote:

"It shows what a vast amount of urgent spade-work we still have to do to reach the standard of an ordinary West-European country . . . We must bear in mind the semi-Asiatic ignorance from which we have not yet freed ourselves . . ."

He knew that, without modern industry and without civilised people, Socialism was impossible. The only argument he could find to justify Bolshevik rule was that, now they had power, they would be able to educate the people for Socialism!

"We lack enough civilisation to enable us to pass straight to socialism, although we do have the political requirements for it."

“Our opponents told us repeatedly that we were rash in undertaking to implant socialism in an insufficiently cultured country. But they were misled by our having started from the end opposite to that prescribed by theory (the theory of pendants of all kinds), because in our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution, that very cultural revolution which nevertheless now confronts us.”

“You say that civilisation is necessary for the building of socialism. Very good. But why could we not first create such prerequisites of civilisation in our country as the expulsion of the landowners and the Russian capitalists, and then start moving towards socialism? Where, in what books, have you read that such variations of the customary historical order of events are impermissible or impossible?”

In 1917 Lenin would not have dared put forward so crude an argument, which obviously turned Marxism upside down, for seizing power. It would have been torn to pieces by those who understood anything of Marx’s views.

It was not what was written in books which said that, given the rest of the world stayed capitalist, the only way forward for Russia was capitalism, in one form or another. This was the way social evolution worked as Marx had discovered. As he pointed out in his Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

“New higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society”,

and again in his Preface to the first German edition of *Capital* (1867):

“. . . even when a society has got upon the right track of the discovery of the natural laws of its movement . . . It can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.”

In saying the “socialist” revolution could precede the development of modern industry and culture, Lenin was adopting the unscientific position of the pre-Marxist revolutionary communists. For an active minority seizing power first and then educating the people was the perspective of men like Blanqui. It was in opposition to these self-proclaimed “liberators” that Marx insisted that the emancipation of the working class could only be achieved by the workers themselves. Lenin, however, had long abandoned (in fact he never accepted it) this part of Marxism when in 1902 he formulated his theory of the vanguard party.

The similarity between the theories that came out of the French and Russian revolutions is not accidental. Both were capitalist in nature in that they were led by minorities who used state power to clear away the obstacles to the development of large-scale commodity production, the wages system and capital accumulation. Bolshevism can in fact be seen as a theory of capitalist revolution for peasant countries.

Russia’s economic backwardness had political consequences too. Only a tiny minority

had the education to man the state machine, and many of these had served in the same capacity under the Tsar. Before 1917 Lenin had laid down that the Bolsheviks must completely smash the old state machine when they seized power. In 1918 he claimed that this had actually been done:

“In Russia the bureaucratic apparatus has been completely smashed up, not a stone of it has been left unturned” (*The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*),

But in 1923 he had to confess:

“With the exception of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, our state apparatus is to a considerable extent a survival of the past, and has undergone hardly any serious change. It has only been slightly touched up on the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of our old state machine.”

But this was not really a question of a “survival” from Tsarism. As Lenin noticed the new Bolshevik officials behaved in the same old bureaucratic way. What he was observing, though of course he did not realise it, was the gradual (but inevitable in view of the country’s economic backwardness) emergence of a new class structure in Russia. Lewin touches on this point in his book, though his view is heavily influenced by that of Trotsky and Isaac Deutscher.

(April 1970)