

# Lenin and His Discontents: An Interview with Tariq Ali

Friday 13 March 2020, by [NAEEM Raza](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2020).

**On the anniversary of his communist father Mazhar Ali Khan's death, 27 years ago, an extraordinary writer and activist speaks on what makes communism resonate to this day.**

On a cold rainy afternoon on January 28, I made my way to the house where the renowned writer and activist Tariq Ali was staying during his latest visit to Pakistan to deliver one of the keynote addresses of the Lahore Biennale 2020 at the National College of Arts.

His views on current events can be found in his keynote address. In this conversation, I interview Tariq about Lenin, the subject of his most recent work; some other foundational figures of the Communist movement; and about literature and his forthcoming work.

What follows is a transcript of this wide-ranging conversation:

**Raza Naeem (RN): It was on this afternoon, 27 years ago, in this very city, that you lost your father, Mazhar Ali Khan, a militant communist, upright journalist, and husband to fellow firebrand, Tahira. What are your memories of that day?**

**Tariq Ali (TA):** I was in London. My mother rang me up; naturally, I was very upset. I reached Lahore early the next morning. My father had already been buried. A large number of people came to condole and many memories flooded back; of the early days, both of Pakistan, and the newspaper he edited. It was a huge tragedy that this chain of newspapers, the Progressive Papers Limited, was taken over by a military government. The line was illustrious: *Lail-o-Nahar* was edited by Sibte Hasan; *The Pakistan Times* was edited by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, later by my father; and *Imroz* was edited by Chiragh Hasan Hasrat, and later by Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi. The thing which the editors were shy of saying then, but which we can be proud of today, is that most of the people who were hired were communists or fellow-travellers; and they educated an entire generation of Pakistanis. The basic line of the newspapers was staunchly anti-imperialist.

When the first Martial Law was declared in October 1958, the United States was very keen that this newspaper was closed down. A case was manufactured against the paper. I will never forget the day when they came to tell Mazhar Ali Khan about the takeover; Mazhar Ali Khan asked his name to be taken off the newspaper and resigned. *TIME* magazine referred to *Pakistan Times* as the best edited newspaper in Asia. The takeover was a vicious attack against press freedom, and a tragedy. *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqt* wrote vicious editorials supporting the takeover. It was the end of a certain phase in Pakistani politics.

Ten years later, a huge wave of protests overthrew the military dictatorship. It was then that those memories flooded back to me. People from that generation came to the funeral and told old stories.

My father was a very principled man and did not suffer fools gladly. I was very proud that he resigned from Progressive Papers Limited after the government takeover, and that he was

blacklisted for the rest of his life. Afterwards, he started *Viewpoint* and wrote a column for *DAWN*, but it was never the same. He was healthy and in the prime of his life when he passed away.

**RN: Coming to Lenin, the subject of your most recent work, how did your father see him, and would he have disagreed with your portrait of Lenin in your book?**

**TA:** I am sure he would have disagreed. His generation of communists, from the 1930s, were very loyal to Moscow. They saw Lenin as a secular saint who did no wrong, almost as a god, and accepted the image of Lenin as presented by the Soviets under Stalin and Khrushchev. Lenin as a thinker and human being, as someone who makes mistakes and is capable of coming to terms with them, was not the Lenin they were taught.

There is no trace of dogma in Lenin's *Collected Works*. He developed and refined the Marxist view of politics. In his last years, crippled by a stroke, Lenin began to write articles which so shocked some of his colleagues that his comrades even thought of publishing a fake issue of *Pravda* just to deceive him (eventually vetoed by the Politburo). They were frightened, lest his ideas penetrate too deep.

Very few other leaders have ever challenged their own ideas in this way. Russian anarchism plus Marxism plus the experiences of the European labour movement made Lenin what he was. He was very determined to break with Czarism. Without Lenin, there would have been no October Revolution. I wanted to produce a book on Lenin which made people go back and read his actual writings.

**RN: Today also happens to be the fateful day when, 80 years ago, a great Muslim comrade of Lenin's, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiyev, was executed in Moscow by firing squad for being a reactionary. How did Lenin see his efforts to popularise socialism in Muslim states? Has history been kind to Galiyev despite his execution?**

**TA:** Lenin's last struggle inside the Soviet Communist Party was a struggle to defend the right, of minority communities, to self-determination. The mistreatment of Georgian leftists by his Georgian colleagues greatly angered Lenin, and he berated them. He said that any constituent republic of the Soviet Union had the right to self-determination. Once, Lenin said: 'Why do you think Soviet Turkestan is any different from French colonialism in Algeria?' These republics were modernised, though not perfectly; everyone, male and female, was educated; there was upward mobility from the lowest rung of society, including for women. I often meet professors from that region at conferences, who give fantastic and progressive interpretations of Islam, because they were educated in the Soviet Union and liberated by the Soviet Union. This does not apply to all of the countries of the world.

Lenin was a strong believer in the equality of women, and was very angry with women who remained confined to household chores. If we look at the constitutions of post-Soviet leadership in Russia and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, it is almost as if women do not exist. The older generation of communists saw Lenin largely through Stalinist eyes; the dissidents saw Lenin through anarchist or Trotskyist eyes; I want readers to see Lenin as he himself was, through his own writings.

**RN: It's interesting how one of the final thoughts in your book is about how Lenin foresaw the ritual mummification of his ideas — leave alone his body. Even Marx, his great predecessor, predicted this towards the end of his own life, saying in exasperation, 'I am not a Marxist!' Wouldn't you say the appellation 'Marxism-Leninism' is itself a form of mummification to which many have added 'Maoism', 'Hoxhism', etc.?**

**TA:** Marx certainly believed in historical materialism. You can't write a history of a country or society based purely on the dynastic rule in these countries. We have to understand social and economic forces that shaped these ruling classes. When Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* that 'Hitherto the history of the entire world is a history of class struggle', it was a code for historical materialism.

There are many other aspects of historical materialism apart from economic suppression and oppression. Some became reductionist; Marx, Engels, and Lenin were not like that. Lenin angrily said, when people used to misquote and misuse him, that if they are saying that, then I am not a Leninist. Political theory was constantly in flow and you couldn't completely freeze these ideas for all time to come. They will be changed by changing circumstances, both on a national and global scale. Some of the groups that came afterwards never understood that.

**RN: How would you compare Lenin with some of the other revolutionary leaders of ages past? Let's start with the leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and then discuss Robespierre, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro and Khomeini.**

**TA:** Basically, all earlier revolutionaries became what they were by the force of circumstance: history made them what they were. Lenin was the only leader on a historic scale who predicted the revolution and said what revolution should be; what the role of the party he was creating should be. If you like, Lenin pre-ordained his revolution. You cannot say that about other leaders.

Toussaint was a great leader, but he waited and waited until there was no way he could act; the same was the case with the Jacobins in France. The October Revolution, because of its incredible ability to see and understand the world, and the nature of imperialism, was a decisive factor in decolonization; from China to Cuba to Vietnam, the revolutions were all led by communists, and it was all because of the Russian Revolution.

I have always liked Ho Chi Minh's reply to K. Damodaran, a communist from Kerala. When asked how Ho Chi Minh had come to lead the Vietnamese Revolution, while in India the communists could not, in spite of the size of the party being the same as the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. Ho said that in India you had Gandhi; here I am Ho Chi Minh and Gandhi. You were outflanked by the Indian bourgeoisie and here the communists were in charge of the national struggle from the beginning.

In China and Vietnam, both leaders fought against Japanese and French occupations, which gave them prestige. Both owed their ideological success to the Russian Revolution. The Chinese Revolution was stronger than the Russian Revolution because it was 20 years in the making. The Russian Revolution was a short and sharp revolution. Mao's armies were travelling the country, so the relationship between the peasantry and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was very different to that in Russia. In China, the CCP hegemonised the peasantry; in Russia, the majority of the peasantry remained hostile.

**RN: So how are these revolutionary leaders doing in terms of mummification?**

**TA:** Going back to your question about Khomeini, the Iranian Revolution was of a very different character; it was a counter-revolution within a revolution. The revolutionaries crushed the Iranian Tudeh Party and the Fedayeen after coming to power. It was a revolution against both the United States and the left. It has remained extremely hostile to the latter, which is tragic. After all, the Iranian intelligentsia was the most advanced in the Muslim world, both in terms of culture and politics, much more than its counterparts in the Arab world, leave alone South Asia.

The French and the English Revolutions were bourgeois revolutions. The Russian Revolution was the

only revolution intended to be a socialist revolution. The Nicaraguan Revolution was an anti-imperialist revolution, inspired by the Cuban Revolution. What the Russian Revolution did for the world, the Cuban Revolution did for Latin America. Some good people left the Sandinistas. There are of course many tragedies in revolutions.

Lenin was completely opposed to mummification and his widow pleaded with the Politburo not to mummify his body. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin has a passage on 'how leaders can become mummified'. Mao was mummified; Ho was mummified; Lenin was made into a Byzantine relic. It's a substitute for lack of real support in the country, and completely unnecessary. In his last years, Mao did promote a personality cult during the Cultural Revolution. Some of his battles were around the New Economic Policy, which made concessions to capitalism. He understood that the Cultural Revolution had failed and that you couldn't do things in a voluntarist manner.

**RN: How has Lenin been commemorated in subcontinental literature, if at all? I mean in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, etc.?**

**TA:** Lenin was written about a great deal in the 1930s and 1940s, and his books were translated into every major Indian language. Iqbal wrote a poem, 'Lenin's Interview with God', where God summons Lenin for an interview, and Lenin goes to Heaven and explains to Allah what trouble is going on in the world. Allah is impressed by the argument and sends an injunction to His angels. I used to remember it by heart. It is a very radical poem. That is probably the most famous poem in Urdu literature on Lenin by a poet who was not a communist, but a modernist Muslim poet. But I don't think this poem is taught here in schools.

**RN: This year also marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lenin's birth. You talked about young people protesting in various parts of the world yesterday in your keynote address. Which text or quotation from Lenin would you offer them by way of inspiration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

**TA:** I do not offer young people any advice. I think Lenin should be discovered by young people themselves; being told what to do is not a good way of stimulating them. Do they need those people anymore? One of the big problems in the post-Lenin period of communism: in many parts of the world, communism has been taught like a religion. Communism has its gods, saints, and martyrs. There is a big tradition in India and Pakistan of guru shagird (students of the guru); you are taught and you cannot question. There has to be a total agreement with the leader and the ideology being taught. It's completely counter-productive.

**RN: This year also marks the bicentennial of Marx's great comrade Frederick Engels. How would you evaluate his contribution to Marxist thought, and what can an activist and intellectual learn from him in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

**TA:** Engels was an intellectual in his own right, a partner of Marx. Both taught each other and learnt from each other. He was not a junior partner of Marx in any way. Engels wrote on subjects Marx didn't write about. He described arranged and forced marriage as a form of prostitution in *The Origins of the Family*.

He was very strong on armed struggle and the peasant wars in Germany. He was nicknamed 'The General', owing to his military knowledge. Ideas become important when they connect with the needs of the masses; if they don't, they will die. The biographies of Engels which I have read are the classic ones; the modern ones I don't like. They concentrate on his class background; that he was an industrialist. Engels was less conventional than Marx on matters of personal life. Marx was very Victorian in morality; Engels had a far more open and creative life. He didn't believe in marriage, leave alone the sanctity of marriage.

**RN: In your keynote address at the Lahore Biennale yesterday, you also remarked that Palestine has been wiped out of the world agenda.**

You also talked about the amnesia regarding Gamal Abdel Nasser's idea of a unified Arab Republic. Memory often takes the form of resistance in such cases. This September marks 50 years since the death of Nasser, as well as the anniversary of the infamous Black September massacre in Jordan. How did the death of Nasser and the massacre affect the Middle East, especially the balance of progressive forces in the region?

**TA:** It wasn't just the death of Nasser. It was the 1967 defeat in the Arab-Israel War that destroyed Arab nationalism. That was a huge defeat for Arab nationalism. Nasser died a very popular, respected and loved man, but he failed in what he wanted to achieve. That was the beginning of the end of the Arab world as an entity. Now we see sectarianism, factionalism, and US intervention to destroy country after country, and the success of the Israelis in wiping out the Palestinians as a credible national movement with Palestinian collaboration.

My late friend Edward Said always attacked the Oslo Accords as a complete betrayal of Palestinian interests. He has been vindicated. The two-state solution lies dead in the water. Israelis are not interested in permitting a viable Palestinian state. Ironically, they have created the conditions for a one-state solution, and they have realised it.

Black September was a big defeat and Jordan was involved. General Zia-ul-Haq earned his military spurs helping the Jordanian monarchy. It was a severe blow for Palestinian national aspirations, but they recovered and carried on.

The first intifada completely shook the Israeli political and military establishment. Yasser Arafat accepted the Oslo Accords. The Israelis negotiated with Palestinian leadership, which was not the one which had led the intifada; rather it was the leadership in exile in Tunisia. There is a strong colonial racist element in Israeli thinking. The Palestinian leadership is at an impasse; it has stopped thinking. They put all their eggs in the Israeli basket. This has been a disaster for the Palestinians. They should have appealed to the world for support after the first year of the Oslo Accords and declared their independence. Every day there are killings taking place and the world watches and does nothing. What Israel is doing against Palestinians, it is recommending to the Modi government in India against the Kashmiris and any other minorities which do not accept permanent occupation by Delhi.

**RN: Why is it important to remember both these events today when the odds are even more greatly stacked against both Arab unity and Palestinian liberation?**

**TA:** History is important, and memory shouldn't be obliterated. If you forget the past, you cannot fight for a decent future. Memory and history both are important. Distortion of history is a huge problem now in almost every country in South Asia. Modi's attack on Irfan Habib and Romila Thapar is very well-considered, organised and prepared.

The Hindu Right's own version of history is farcical; but at least there is resistance to this rewriting of history, I'm glad to say.

**RN: Lastly, please tell us about your forthcoming work.**

**TA:** I am writing a book on demystifying Churchill; to deconstruct him a bit. The Churchill cult has gotten out of control both in Britain and the United States, and in Australia and New Zealand. Boris Johnson, the current British Prime Minister, has recently written a bestseller, *The Churchill Factor*,

which by the way is not an unintelligent book. It needs to be responded to.

My book is titled *Winston Churchill: His Life and Crimes*.

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