

The Uses of Dmitri Volkogonov against Lenin and the Bolsheviks

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Contents

- [I. The Old, the New, The Ugly](#)
- [II. Stalinism, The Malady \(...\)](#)
- [III. The Winds of Fashion](#)

AS THE MAN appointed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to manage the secret files housed in the KGB, Communist Party and government offices, the late former General Dmitri Volkogonov utilized his privileged access by publishing a number of works, notably the lavishly acclaimed *Lenin. A New Biography* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

Throwing elementary good sense and fairness to the winds and devoid of any subtlety, the author, publishers and mainstream reviewers joined in a chorus proclaiming that this biography shows a heretofore unknown and truly diabolical Lenin. The old and complicated controversy about the relationship of "Leninism" to Stalinism practically disappears since, in this new view, there is a seamless continuity from Lenin to a Stalin who is hardly different from his predecessor.

I. The Old, the New, The Ugly

In quantitative terms, there is new material here. But the overwhelming bulk of this new material constitutes no more than additional evidence and further details on what are essentially very old issues and accusations against Lenin. The only qualitatively new discovery that I found in Volkogonov is that it may not have been Socialist Revolutionary activist Fanny Kaplan who shot Lenin in August of 1918, even though she was present at the scene and was summarily executed after taking responsibility for the assassination attempt. (Since the book was published, the Prosecutor General of the Russian Republic formally reopened Fanny Kaplan's case on June 9, 1995.)

In addition, Volkogonov confirms that Lenin's maternal grandfather, Dr. Alexander Blank, was Jewish. The book also contains photographs of a barely recognizable Lenin taken shortly before his death. Collectors of socialist trivia will be reminded that the headmaster of Lenin's high school was Alexander Kerensky's father who, according to Volkogonov, often expressed his admiration for the ability and intelligence shown by Volodya Ulyanov.

War Atrocities and "Revolutionary Virtue

The additional evidence in Volkogonov's book, bearing on many of the old accusations against Lenin do point to a truly horrible record of atrocities. Most Trotskyists, and people influenced by historians E. H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher and contemporary "revisionists" such as Stephen Cohen and Ronald Grigor Suny have tended to ignore, downplay or explain away this awful record.

Some of the arguments that have been used in this effort are based on a convenient relativism which has since become especially fashionable in the Postmodernist era. A little more persuasive are those who argue that the atrocities were a situationally justifiable response to enemy ruthlessness, or understandable excesses born of the desperation caused by famine and war.

Yet even the best of these arguments are ultimately unconvincing, as I discussed at length in *Before Stalinism* (Verso, 1990). For one thing, they fail to take into account how for “Leninism in power” repression became not only a necessary means to political survival but also a set of action emblematic of revolutionary commitment as such. Thus, toughness and brutal callousness came to be seen as intrinsic revolutionary virtues independent of whatever instrumental value they may have had in any given situation.

This was evident in the widespread use of collective punishment directed against people belonging to certain classes or groups, as in the case of peasants during the “Green” rebellions (so named to distinguish them from the “White” inspired Civil War), knowing full well that these particular individuals had not engaged in any actions against the Bolshevik government.

The same political posture of toughness and brutal callousness for its own sake can be detected in the regime’s strong proclivity to arbitrariness and contemptuous attitude to legality, including the laws adopted by the revolutionary government itself.

II. Stalinism, The Malady Lingers On

“There are many aspects of this [Stalinist] mentality still inside me, and I lose them only slowly.” General Dmitri Volkogonov as told to David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 409.

Having acquired Volkogonov’s book on Lenin after reading some very favorable reviews, I was not prepared to find how much the intellectual methods and tools of Stalinism thoroughly permeate this volume.

One cannot help but be struck by Volkogonov’s vulgarity as expressed in an ad hominem “below the belt” gossipy tone, political crudity, and a tone-deafness and obtuseness concerning serious moral issues that he unproblematically deals with — all the while displaying a great deal of moral outrage, smugness and self-satisfaction.

In fact, this book is an excellent example of how certain people dramatically change their substantive political positions without altering a certain method or approach to intellectual and political life. Here are some of the areas where Volkogonov displays his Stalinist-type approach:

Demagogic, ad-hominem attacks. As Volkogonov tells it, Lenin and other “professional revolutionaries” (his quotation marks) lived quite well before as well as after coming to power. Thus, in describing Lenin’s life before the Revolution, Volkogonov writes that for seventeen years Lenin lived in the capital cities of Europe and stayed in some of the most congenial resorts (49).

He then adds “neither in Russia nor abroad did Lenin suffer deprivation” (51) and “the fact is, Lenin, whether in Russia or abroad, was never short of money. He could decide whether to live in Bern or Zurich, he could travel to London, Berlin or Paris, visit Gorky on Capri...doss-houses and attics were not for him” (62).

Volkogonov concludes by asking how could Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, having nothing in common with the working class, “had the right to determine the fate of a great nation, and to carry out their

bloody, monstrous experiment.” (63) Here, the former General has reached a low point even by the standards of Cold War historiography. Perhaps one could have found this sort of drivel in hard right-winger Stefan Possony, but not, for example, in Leonard Shapiro’s work.

Political crudity. In writing a biography of Lenin, Volkogonov could not avoid dealing with the political theories of the Bolshevik leader, nor with the numerous political controversies in which he was involved.

It is very clear that quite independent of Volkogonov’s retrospective political attitudes and identification with the period he covers (I would place him closest to the Kadets or Constitutional Democrats, pre-revolutionary Russia’s main bourgeois party), his understanding of the issues verges on political illiteracy.

I suspect that many years ago the former General learned by heart the lessons and homilies contained in the Stalinist party manuals, but the passage of time and his newfound political ideas made him forget even that comic book version of the history of Russian Communism.

Thus, for example, Volkogonov grossly underestimates the differences between the Marxist and populist/terrorist view of political violence (17), doesn’t have a clue about Lenin’s positions concerning participation in Duma elections (84), and does not at all understand Lenin’s views, whether before or after the “April Theses,” on the nature of the future workers’ revolution in Russia and its relation to socialism (68-9).

Moral Smugness and Obtuseness. One of the more striking features of Volkogonov’s biography of Lenin is that his numerous expressions of moral outrage are combined with a very shallow treatment of moral issues.

At least one of Volkogonov’s moral accusations against the Bolsheviks demonstrates a great ignorance of elementary economics. Thus he is outraged to find that in December 1922, Lenin’s Politburo decided to export almost a million tons of grain while the country was starving and foreign countries were sending food aid to Russia. (345)

Apparently, it did not occur to the author that countries need hard foreign currency to pay for a wide variety of essential articles other than food. To earn hard currency, a country has to export and it can only export goods that are both desired and competitive in the eyes of foreign buyers. What else could the newly founded Soviet Union have exported in 1922 after years of civil war and economic collapse?

The Dilemma of Internationalism

Volkogonov is if anything more outraged about the fact that the new Soviet government sent millions of gold roubles to support revolutionary political activities abroad, while their own people were dying in the hundreds and thousands from famine and disease. (400) With this, Volkogonov has stumbled onto a real moral dilemma, but is so blinded and self-satisfied with his own nationalism and opposition to revolution that he sees no dilemma at all.

So, because he cannot see a dilemma, he attacks the Bolshevik government as immoral pure and simple. Volkogonov ignores that the Bolshevik government was, unlike himself, revolutionary and internationalist and saw its political survival as entirely dependent on the success of the world revolution. In light of this, the answer to the real problem the Bolsheviks confronted was far from simple as the former General claims.

Volkogonov’s own moral obtuseness prevents him even from using his privileged access to the

government and party files to find out whether the Bolshevik government, in their single-minded pursuit of world revolution, may have been in fact indifferent to famine and disease at home. But in order to raise the question in this manner you need at least a degree of empathy with revolutionary political goals — a task well beyond Volkogonov's nationalist and anti-revolutionary philistinism.

Evidence uncovered by a number of historians seems to indicate that Lenin, in addition to the famous means of transportation that allowed him and Martov among others to return to Russia, may have accepted money from the German government. This issue is still not fully settled; for example, it is far from clear as to how much money was actually transferred. Again, for Volkogonov this was a simple moral issue: treason to Mother Russia.

Was there an issue of revolutionary morality involved here, even if it wasn't the one Volkogonov imagines? This isn't hard to test. Had Lenin softened his political critique of German imperialism or, even worse, advised the German revolutionaries to "go soft" on their own government and ruling classes because of the financial support he was obtaining from the German rulers, this would have been a violation of revolutionary morality.

Nothing of the sort occurred as Leon Trotsky, among others, clearly demonstrated with his exemplary behavior at Brest Litovsk. Consequently, there was no moral issue here — except, of course, for a Russian nationalist or for a supporter of the Allied war effort.

In this context, it is again worth noting Volkogonov's obtuseness. He cannot understand why Lenin would not allow Parvus to return to Russia as a self-proclaimed supporter of the Bolshevik revolution, even though Parvus had apparently been instrumental in obtaining the German money for Lenin. Lenin rejected Parvus' request, in mid-November of 1917, by stating that "the cause of the revolution must not be sullied by dirty hands."

Volkogonov then comments: "Parvus was deeply disappointed. Were the Bolshevik hands that had taken his money any cleaner? His name, however, could only compromise Lenin. His appearance in Petrograd would only confirm the accusation of treason against the Bolsheviks." (125)

Volkogonov is unable to see the critical moral and political distinctions involved here; namely, that Parvus, besides being a businessman, had politically supported Germany's side on the war! Thus, politically and morally, Lenin could and should not have allowed Parvus to join the revolution as he had requested.

Volkogonov's explanation — that Parvus' return would have confirmed that the Bolsheviks were German agents — is quite silly, inasmuch as it would have been easier for Parvus to "spill the beans" about German aid outside of Russia than in Petrograd.

In fact, Volkogonov writes that once the German government cut off Parvus' access to credit for new commercial ventures, he threatened to publish incriminating documents unless he was given one million marks. So much for Parvus' newly found revolutionary faith. It is not known whether he was given the money or not, but there was no scandal at the time.

While I believe that there were no moral issues involved in taking German money, there was a very real political problem at stake. The Bolsheviks were heavily attacked as German agents during a good part of the period immediately preceding and following the October revolution. A large part of the working class and especially the peasantry were at least "soft" on Russian nationalism. Thus, the Bolsheviks took a serious risk of grave political damage and isolation when they took money from the Germans.

Obviously, they must have thought it was a political risk worth taking. In this context, I cannot help

but again note Volkogonov's vulgarity. Thus, he tells us that "when they came to power, however, the Bolsheviks had debts to repay, and this could only be done by way of national defeat." (189)

The Royal Family's Execution

Volkogonov also explores in great detail the execution of Tsar Nicholas Romanov and the entire royal family in July of 1918. There is little doubt that these executions were carried out in a devious manner. The government also justified its actions in a disingenuous and far less than straightforward fashion. Moreover, it seems that the government did not seriously consider the important distinction between the adult, presumably politically and morally responsible members of the Romanov family and their children.

Granting all of the above considerations, there was still a very strong case to be made for bringing the Tsar and several of his adult relatives to trial, in order to publicly expose the Romanov's crimes against the Russian and other peoples, and then shooting them instead of doing it all in secret behind the peoples' back. Such a trial conducted by Russian revolutionaries would have been far superior to the Nuremberg Trials where the victorious imperialist powers executed leading Nazi war criminals.

Hadn't the Bolshevik leadership, as Volkogonov himself admits, earlier decided to go in precisely the direction of a public trial? (207) Was there any merit to the Bolsheviks' claim that Civil War conditions in the location where the royal family was being held prevented the holding of a trial? How should the government have handled the Romanov children, who would have certainly become a symbolic rallying cry for the counterrevolution?

These are the sort of questions required by a serious political and moral discussion. Volkogonov doesn't even remotely approximate such a treatment of the event. Instead, he regales us with a second-hand report and highly dubious speculation about Lenin's presumed admiration for the terrorist Nechaev (208) and, more tellingly, with the General's own softness towards the Tsar.

Thus, Volkogonov favorably contrasts the Tsar's willingness to abdicate "in the name of the country's good and tranquility" with the Bolshevik revolutionary drive that made them want to turn the imperialist war into a civil war, and concludes with the statement that "perhaps Nicholas was not an outstanding personality, but he was at least noble and brave." (217)

III. The Winds of Fashion

What explains the welcome and for the most part uncritical mainstream reception to a book that just a few years ago would have been criticized, if not dismissed, as a cranky outburst of the then marginal Right?

Robert Conquest, one of Volkogonov's favorable reviewers ("The Somber Monster," *New York Review of Books*, v. xlii, no. 10, June 8, 1995, 8-12), had the intellectual honesty to suggest that it is our times and authors that have changed, rather than the available evidence about Lenin. Conquest reports that he himself had written a short biography of Lenin in the 1970s which "though thoroughly critical...reads very mildly today."

Yet having stated that, Conquest joins, a few paragraphs later, in Volkogonov's primitivism. He then tells us that, "reading Lenin's Collected Works (or most of them, and at least skimming all), this reviewer found himself more depressed even than in studying Stalin. The obsessions with sheer destructiveness struck me as even more dominant, even more humorless than those of Stalin, to say

nothing of the extreme virulence of his polemics against other radicals, noted by Martov as early as 1904.” (8)

Twenty years ago, a group of rightward moving French ex-Maoists “discovered” the slave-labor camps and many other monstrous atrocities committed by Stalin. Stalin’s crimes had for several decades been denounced by a wide variety of people ranging from Trotskyists, Anarchists and Social Democrats to liberals, democrats and Cold Warriors of every political shading. Besides, this very question had embroiled the French left in intense controversies during the forties and fifties. None of that prevented these so-called “New Philosophers” from adopting an air of fresh discovery and injured innocence, thus easing their drift with a right©wing wind.

Nobody should be fooled by the mainstream reviewers’ portrayal of Volkogonov as a conscience-stricken or disinterested historian, bravely pursuing the truth and clearing the historical record. While this book is ostensibly dedicated to unearthing the real antecedents of Stalinism, it is even more dedicated to discrediting revolutionary ideas in the eyes of the former Soviet peoples and foreign readers.

Volkogonov leaves no doubt, throughout this volume, that he thinks that the evils committed by Lenin were the inevitable consequence of the Bolshevik leader having followed a revolutionary, rather than an evolutionary, route in transforming Russia. Volkogonov tried to do for history what his boss Boris Yeltsin is attempting to do in the realm of politics and economics.

Little surprise that in carrying out his task, Volkogonov turned out to be remarkably similar to Yeltsin, in his political ideas as well as in his fundamental lack of moral and human sensibility.

Samuel Farber

This review essay was completed prior to the posthumous publication of Dmitri Volkogonov’s work on Trotsky.

P.S.

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