

Lenin on Tolstoy

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Mass protests of women workers on International Women's Day 1917 sparked the Russian Revolution.

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A new book on the Russian Revolution by the professional anti-communist Richard Pipes, “History of the Russian Revolution” (1990), informs us that Lenin was a cruel, cowardly leader (but of course with plenty of “charisma” to account for his success), inflicted with a “lust for power” — meaning personal power rather than proletarian power, and intellectually a definite secondrater.

The accusation of having a low IQ is by no means the worst thing this writer with a sophomoric conception of a revolutionary has to say about Lenin. But Pipes’ claim is worth repeating here if only to introduce a little-known comment on Russian literature made by Lenin in 1910, when he had more time to deal with such things than during the 1917 revolution that disturbs this professor the most.

“In the words of Bertram Wolfe,” he says, “Lenin was the only man of high theoretical capacity which the Russian Marxist movement produced who possessed at the same time the ability and the will to concern himself with detailed organizational work. Plekhanov, who on meeting him in 1895 dismissed Lenin as a second-rate intellect, nevertheless valued him and overlooked his shortcomings because, in the words of Potresov, ‘he saw the importance of this new man not at all in his ideas but in his initiative and talents as a party organizer.’ Struve, who was repelled by Lenin’s coldness, contempt and cruelty, admits to having ‘driven away’ such negative feelings for the sake of relations which he regarded as ‘both morally obligatory for myself and politically indispensable for our cause.’”

Potresov and Plekhanov became Mensheviks; Struve became bourgeois; and Wolfe was a renegade U.S. communist who, to put it most charitably, became a State Department socialist.

Pipes continues with a putdown of Lenin’s internationalism and allegedly the “reason” he understood Russia so badly:

“Lenin was first and foremost an internationalist, a world revolutionary for whom

state boundaries were relics of another era and nationalism [except the nationalism of the oppressed, which Pipes forgets here! — V.C.] a distraction from the class struggle. He would have been prepared to lead the revolution in any country where the opportunity presented itself, and certainly Germany rather than his native Russia. He spent nearly one half of his life abroad — from 1900 to 1917, except for two years in 1905-1907 — and never had a chance to learn much about his homeland.” (!!!)

“I know Russia poorly,” he quotes Lenin as saying, “Simbirsk, Kazan, Petersburg, the exile — that’s all.”

(These three places where his childhood and early manhood were spent would have given him a tremendous advantage over our Kremlinologist “expert” even if he had not studied the Russian situation so deeply from afar!)

“Although he was no stranger to the sentiment of nostalgia for his homeland, Russia was to him an accidental center of the first revolutionary upheaval, a springboard for the real revolution, whose vortex had to be Western Europe. In May 1918, in defending the territorial concession he had made to the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, he asserted: ‘We insist that it is not national interest (but) the interests of socialism, of world socialism that are superior to national interest of the state.’”

Pipes looks sourly on this truly revolutionary statement and since in other lines he says the Bolsheviks took German gold to make the revolution in 1917, he obviously is telling his readers that the Soviets should have continued the war against Germany in 1917 and that Lenin was only using Russia as a laboratory test, so to speak.

“Lenin’s cultural equipment was exceedingly modest for a Russian intellectual of his generation. His writings show only a superficial familiarity with Russia’s literary classics — Turgenev excepted — most of it apparently acquired in secondary school. ... Lenin’s knowledge of history, other than that of revolutions [!!], was also

perfunctory."

Pipes has read somewhere that at the age of 14 or 15 Lenin was an avid reader of Turgenev's romances and has assumed, since Lenin became so single-minded a revolutionist, that he could not have read much else.

However, it would be hard to find any other political writer, Russian or otherwise, who quoted so many of his country's authors — and so many times — in his political and polemical works. Chekov, Pushkin, Gogol, Saltykov-Schedrin, Goncharov, Gorky, Tolstoy, even Dostoyevsky, whom he regarded as a reactionary. His wife Krupskaya tells us that the young people around the movement told her the same thing about Lenin when she first met him — that he had no use for literature since he was a 24-hour revolutionist. But she said he kept a whole shelf full of Russian classics at the foot of the bed when they were in Siberian exile and would read them over a second and third time for relaxation.

He did indeed use everything he could about literature to help the revolution. And he understood the connection of one to the other, we will venture to say, better than Mr. Pipes.

The following excerpt from one of several essays he wrote right after Tolstoy's death in 1910 may illustrate this with a certain poignancy and literary as well as political effect:

"Leo Tolstoy is dead. His universal significance as an artist as well as his universal fame as a thinker and preacher both reflect, each in their own way, the universal significance of the Russian revolution.

"L.N. Tolstoy emerged as a great artist when serfdom still held sway in the land. In a series of great books, which he produced during more than half a century of literary activity, he depicted mainly the old, pre-revolutionary Russia which remained in a

state of semi-serfdom even after 1861 — rural Russia of the landlord and the peasant. In depicting this period in Russia's history, Tolstoy succeeded in raising so many great problems and succeeded in rising to such heights of artistic power that his works rank among the greatest in world literature. The epoch of preparation for revolution in one of the countries under the heel of serf-owners became, thanks to its brilliant illumination by Tolstoy, a step forward in the artistic development of humanity as a whole.

"Tolstoy the artist is known to an infinitesimal minority even in Russia. If his great works are really to be made the possession of all, a struggle must be waged against the social system which condemns millions and scores of millions to ignorance, benightedness, drudgery and poverty — a socialist revolution must be accomplished.

"Tolstoy not only produced artistic works which will always be appreciated and read by the masses, once they have created human conditions of life for themselves after overthrowing the yoke of the landlords and capitalists; he succeeded in conveying with remarkable force the moods of the broad masses that are oppressed by the current system, in depicting their condition and expressing their spontaneous feeling of protest and anger. Belonging, as he did, primarily to the era of 1861-1904, Tolstoy in his works — both as an artist and as a thinker and preacher — embodied in amazingly bold relief the specific historical features of the entire first Russian revolution, its strengths and its weaknesses.

"One of the principal distinguishing features of our revolution is that it was a peasant bourgeois revolution in the era of the very advanced development of capitalism throughout the world and of its comparatively advanced development in Russia. It was a bourgeois revolution because its immediate aim was to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, the tsarist monarchy, and to abolish landlordism, but not to overthrow the domination of the bourgeoisie. The peasantry in particular was not aware of the latter aim, it was not aware of the distinction between this aim and the

closer and more immediate aim of the struggle. ...

"Tolstoy's works express both the strength and the weakness, the might and the limitations, precisely of the peasant mass movement. His heated, passionate and often ruthlessly sharp protest against the state and the official church that was in alliance with the police, conveys the sentiments of the primitive peasant democratic masses, among whom centuries of serfdom, of official tyranny and robbery, and of church jesuitism, deception and chicanery had piled up mountains of anger and hatred. His unbending opposition to private property in land conveys the psychology of the peasant masses during that historical period in which the old, medieval land ownership, both in the form of landed estates and in the form of state allotments, definitely became an intolerable obstacle to the further development of the country, and when this old land ownership was inevitably bound to be destroyed most summarily and ruthlessly. ...

"But the vehement protester, the passionate accuser, the great critic at the same time manifested in his works a failure to understand the causes of the crisis threatening Russia, and means of escape from it, that was characteristic only of a patriarchal, naive peasant, but not of a writer with a European education. His struggle against the feudal police state, against the monarchy, turned into a repudiation of politics, led to the doctrine of non-resistance to evil, and to complete aloofness from the revolutionary struggle of the masses in 1905-1907. The opposition to private property in land did not lead to concentrating the struggle against the real enemy — landlordism and its political instrument of power, i.e. the monarchy — but to dreamy, diffuse, and impotent lamentations. ...

"The contradictions in Tolstoy's views are not contradictions inherent in his personal views alone, but are a reflection of those extremely complex, contradictory conditions, social influences and historical traditions which determine the psychology of various classes and of various sections of Russian society in the post-

reform, but pre-revolutionary era.

"That is why a correct appraisal of Tolstoy can only be made from the viewpoint of the class which has proved, by its political role and its struggle during the first denouement of these contradictions, at a time of revolution, that it is destined to be the leader in the struggle for the people's liberty and for the emancipation of the masses from exploitation — the class which has proved its selfless devotion to the cause of democracy and its ability to fight against the limitations and inconsistency of bourgeois (including peasant) democracy; such an appraisal is possible only from the viewpoint of the social democratic [i.e. communist] proletariat."

Of course, Lenin subordinated everything to the revolution and he subordinated the revolution itself to the socialist emancipation of the human race. That shines out in every word of the above quotation. And it does not make any difference whether his unsparing police-minded critic has read this particular essay or not. On the basis of everything else in his book, he would only have done so to find a sentence he could quote to somehow show ignorance, cruelty, narrowness, personal power-hunger, etc., etc. And the careful analysis of a writer's connection to revolution would escape him anyway, on account of his own much more obvious and much less artistic connection with the counterrevolution.

