



Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution*

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Reviewed by Marina Simakova
European University at St Petersburg

A Concrete Lenin in a Concrete Situation

The latest book by historian and activist Tariq Ali, written just in time for the hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution, is a notable and timely work of research. A nuanced, politicized recompilation of materials from widely known and available Anglophone sources, it offers the reader a contemporary take on the history of the Russian revolution, at the center of which stands the figure of Vladimir Lenin. Lenin, whom Ali describes with sympathy and even a certain reverence, is not allotted much space in the book, and differs somewhat from his familiar characteristics. An awesome strategist; an acerbic publicist; a militant, calculating politician, theorist, and polymath who stormed *The Science of Logic* as resolutely as the Winter Palace; the infallible hero of Socialist Realist mythology; the demon who ruined the empire—Ali rejects these clichéd images, promising to de-mummify the Lenin who has been locked away in the glass coffin of his own personality cult. The living Lenin is, first and foremost, a man answering to the demands of his time, a sensitive and critical thinker, compelled to make difficult choices with far-reaching consequences and capable of “the concrete analysis of the concrete situation.” This is why neither Lenin nor Leninism, but rather Lenin’s dilemmas—the things that caused them, and the ways in which they were resolved—become the subject of this book. Lenin was a politician of his era, belonging as much to the Russian revolutionary tradition, with its anarcho-terrorist past, as he did to the European workers’ movement. Primarily targeting Western readers, Ali reconstructs both of these contexts, within which, he believes, Lenin’s political principles were formed and the political challenges he would face ripened.

The book consists of five parts, each of which thematically analyzes the historical circumstances that formed the background of, and became the basis for, a given “dilemma.” These parts are varied and differ substantially not just in volume and subject matter, but also in narrative intensity

and factual scope. Ali begins by disputing the interpretation, common in post-Soviet historiography, of the October events as a coup. The fact that power was seized by armed force should not discredit the social (and socialist) revolution: the Bolsheviks forced changes that were being demanded by the masses, and which were expected as much in Russia as they were beyond its borders. As he moves from one chapter to another, Ali tries to defend this thesis by reconstructing situations in which there occurred, on the one hand, a necessary awakening of the oppressed who came to believe “in their own capacity to emancipate themselves,” and on the other hand, the emergence of Lenin’s dilemmas. Studying the conditions in which these dilemmas emerged helps to follow the logic of the revolution: it eventually appears as though there was no other alternative, but only because history is fraught with alternatives, managing which is the art of politics.

The first part of the book serves as an introduction to the history of Russian anarchism. It describes the political climate in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the young Lenin emerged from a patriarchal family, deeply shaken by his older brother’s death sentence. Analyzing Sergey Nechayev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary* and referencing classical Russian literature, Ali attempts to decipher the cultural code of nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary romanticism, from the Decembrists to the *narodnik* terrorists. It is precisely this lineage (romanticism, anarchism, terrorism) that Lenin breaks with: the author shows that the dilemma of “anarchism versus mass struggle” was resolved unequivocally in favor of the latter. Ali describes Lenin’s early political development not as a consequence of his personal political intuitions, but rather in the context of his brother’s story and debates within party circles. Ali concludes that terrorism “as a political tactic could not be resuscitated. It simply did not work. It was an inefficient substitute for mass action. It concentrated on individuals while leaving the system intact, which was why it had long ceased to interest or attract the bulk of the intelligentsia” (88). At the same time, he discovers many signs of Lenin’s anarchist sympathies, from his writing to his relationships with Martov and Kropotkin.¹ Thus, the Russian revolution, even as it was led by a centralized vanguard party, was made possible by its anarchist “underbelly,”² and possibly

¹ In a recent interview Ali discusses Lenin’s anarchist “habit” even more directly. See Ali and Weissman (2017).

² At first glance this thesis is far from original. Tens, if not hundreds, of works have been written about the significant influence of Russian anarchism both on the processes of socialist revolution and on the political/communist culture as a whole. At the same time, in the Anglophone context, a truly dominant tendency is not only to portray Leninism as opposed to anarchism, but also to portray Lenin as an uncompromising adherent of rigid “organization,” centralization, political leadership, and, in some cases, as a bloody tyrant. It is these claims that Ali disputes.

by Lenin's steady "displacement" (i.e., simultaneous actualization and containment) of the anarchist tradition.

The second part of the book looks at the confrontation between Lenin and the mainstay of the European Marxist movement—the German Social Democrats who had supported Germany's participation in the First World War. It is known that Lenin was strongly opposed to the war from its very start and firmly believed in an international struggle against imperial regimes and class oppression. Of great value here is Ali's decision to place the well-known conflict between Lenin and the SDP at the end of a broad survey of the era's socialist movements. The chapters titled "Birth of Internationalism" and "Socialism" span not only Germany, France, and Britain; they also analyze the status of socialists in the United States and Japan, as well as the Bund (the General Jewish Labor Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia). Ali believes that socialist movements in different countries, despite their differences, encountered similar problems, which were at the center of their internal debates and conflicts. This allowed Lenin to hope for an opportunity to transform imperialist warfare into an international civil war against respective national governments. A similar approach allows Ali to insist on the necessity of looking at Lenin as a universal revolutionary figure whose political experience resonated with global history.

The middle part of the book is, unsurprisingly, devoted to the events of 1917–20 and the key dilemma regarding the seizure of power authorized by Lenin on the night of 25 October. Ali's position is that even the strongest party, whose activity is focused on achieving its sole goal (to carry out a revolution), tends to commit fatal strategic errors at a critical moment. A successful revolution demands political intuition, a feeling for "the moment" that energizes political action (akin to the relationship between virtue and fortune described by Machiavelli). According to Ali, it is the particular attitude towards a situation, the "conscious utilization of events," that distinguishes Lenin from Oliver Cromwell and Maximilien Robespierre, who entered the foreground of revolutions by virtue of the events themselves—that is, carried by the revolutionary wave. Historical circumstances are impossible to subjugate to one's will, but they can be spun to the benefit of a political cause: this is what happened with the First World War, which Lenin opposed, but which played into his hands—and the hands of the Russian Revolution. Reacting quickly in a given situation, learning from it, and converting the lesson into a tactic—this, according to Ali, is Lenin's recipe. It is what he wants his readers to take away from his own work, and from Lenin's. Lenin did not change his course, his allies, or his political messaging because he lacked conviction or was cynically pursuing his personal interests—he did it because such were the political demands of each new situation.

If the revolutionary uprising and seizure of power demanded a quick and precise judgment of the circumstances and their internal "potential-

ties,” how did the Bolsheviks succeed in containing counterrevolutionary outbreaks and preventing a Thermidor after winning the Civil War? For Ali, the answer is obvious: he wholly credits the Red Army, its military strategy, and in particular Commander Mikhail Tukhachevsky (whose extremely complimentary biography appears in the book). It should be noted, however, that the book’s greatest weakness is in its coverage of the Civil War. It is essentially an abridged history of the Red Army’s formation based on the work of military historian John Erickson. The chronology of the war is missing, as is any representation of the life on the front lines or propaganda work, let alone a description of the social fabric or public sentiment at the time of the Civil War. A logical question arises: if the final victory of the revolution, according to Ali, was directly tied to movement from the bottom up and winning over the masses (especially considering the author repeatedly brings attention to Lenin’s anarchist roots and his admiration for the Paris Commune), then why does the victory in the Civil War turn out to be the achievement of the Army, and, in particular, its leadership? Taking into account the availability of Anglophone research on this subject, and the vast amount of translated fiction, which the author refers to in other chapters, claims that there is a categorical lack of materials on “this decisive ordeal” seem like a stretch.³ It is possible that the period never really interested Ali—he is much more concerned with the eight months between February and October. These appear to him to be “the freest in history”: he writes that life at this time became a “festival of the oppressed,” during which every square, every fair turned into an *agora* of sorts—a site of discussion, a site of presence, a site where politics was made. Nonetheless one must overcome the symbolic confines of 1917 in order to appreciate the scope of the festival. Its political meaning, its qualities that were genuinely Dionysian, tragic, and carnivalesque (“With five-pointed stars / we were branded / by Polish voivods,”⁴ etc.) emerged precisely during the years of the Civil War.

The fourth part tells the history of women’s participation in revolutionary struggle, starting with their involvement in *Narodnaia volia*. There is also an excursion into postrevolutionary gender politics. This part mentions the unprecedentedly progressive (for the time) government reforms (e.g., the adoption of a new Family Code intended to liberate Soviet women from patriarchal norms, etc.) and the work of the Women’s Departments, which promoted sexual education and women’s political self-organization. According to Ali, it was accusations of promoting promiscuity directed at Alexandra Kollontai, the ideologue of the Women’s Departments, which accounted for their dismantling and her honorable exile to Norway. However another reason for this seems much more

³ To be fair, Ali mentions Babel’s “compelling” stories in passing, but he treats them with caution, calling them “sketchy and autobiographical”.

⁴ Mayakovsky (1972: 235).

valid, namely the party's attempt to curb the departments' growing autonomy amid criticism of their "feminist leaning."⁵ Ali also sorts out the "love dilemma," reconstructing Lenin's outlook on sexuality and immersing the reader in the vicissitudes of his personal life. Here the author carries out a peculiar, and at times excessive, exercise in the hermeneutics of experience, the results of which appear, on the whole, sufficiently plausible (between Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand, Lenin predictably chose the revolution both in spite of, and thanks to, the deep and reciprocated feelings he had for both of them). One way or another, Ali proves that first of all, the history of the Russian Revolution is unimaginable without the participation of women, and second of all, it is unthinkable without the rejection of the bourgeois, individualistic outlook on sexual relations—a rejection that was shared by leading members of the party and became an organic part of early post-Revolution government policy.

The final part of the book is devoted to the final years of Lenin's life, which were filled with reasonable concern for the future of the young Soviet state and the party, whose death approached as swiftly as his own. Here, the author cannot reduce the narrative to a single dilemma of Lenin's, so the conversation shifts to doubts and anxieties, as well as the inevitable tallying up of things. In the sunset of his own history, Lenin is finally shown as a political thinker, and an assessment is given of his contribution to the "theory of praxis": "It was Lenin who developed Marx's ideas and politicised them further, stressing the autonomy of the political" (319). And it was Lenin who, in the 1920s, insisted on the necessity of promoting and strengthening party culture and the culture at large, anticipating Gramsci's theoretical intuitions. However, for Ali, Lenin was not simply an "organic intellectual" and Marxist apologist *par excellence*: he was primarily a person who thought, befriended, loved—that is, *acted*—in accordance with the demands of a concrete situation and in agreement with the political will.

In place of an epilogue we find a somewhat lyrical excerpt from a late text by Lenin, "Notes of a Publicist," admired by Bertolt Brecht and published soon after Lenin's death. This becomes yet another reason to believe that this book is not only, and not so much, a work of historical research, but, first and foremost, an *homage*. In this case, its flaws—emotionality and haste, theoretical weakness, a lack of sources, and confusion of certain names and surnames⁶—are not so significant. If we look at the task at hand, namely the declared intention to de-mummify Lenin, then the author has accomplished it. Lenin stands before the reader both as a figure in flesh and blood, caught in the maelstrom of events, and as

⁵ Cf. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2003: 308).

⁶ For example, *raznochinty* are called "raznochiny," Turgan-Baranovsky is "Tugan-Baransky," and Konkordiya Samoilova is "Samoilovna."

a part of the history of the international Marxist movement, the revolutionary struggle, and Russian political culture. The discussion of the role of the individual in history, inherited from nineteenth-century historians, is widely known; however, although it has often been the cause of new debates and theoretical nitpicking among Marxists,⁷ Ali refers to this basic position as if there were a consensus: material and social forces set the trajectories for the development of the individual and the circumstances in which they can act. Sticking to this simple position, Ali shows why it is wrong to frame Lenin against history, against the party, and against the revolution-minded masses—neither as a political genius, nor as an authoritative leader, and much less as a tyrant. This is not just the logic of Ali's argument—it is another lesson he believes is worth learning: without Lenin, who was able to set up and resolve various dilemmas precisely when “the crisis ripened,” there would have been no revolution; but without the crises or critical situations that structured the inner life and demanded answers (thoughts, decisions, actions) there would not have been a Lenin. It is no accident that Lenin's circumstances—as well as his associates, opponents, and comrades—are given as much, if not more, space in the book than Lenin himself. For this reason, Ali's book has a rightful claim to become part of the canon of auxiliary Marxist literature, along with works such as Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*. In 1924, after Lenin's death, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1925: 49) read a lecture about heroism to homeless children, in which he spoke of the coming future, which would be without individualistic philistines or people flawed with hubris. Lenin also hoped for this—he despised demonizing and heroizing cults. Despite references to our contemporary political situation, Ali has tried to write about Lenin from a future that never took place.

Translated by Alina Sidorova

⁷ There is a text on this subject by Georgi Plekhanov, which is extremely important for Russian Marxism, called “On the Role of the Individual in History.” First published in 1898, it states: “Social relationships have their inherent logic: as long as people live in given mutual relationships they will reel, think and act in a given way, and no other. Attempts on the part of public men to combat this logic would also be fruitless; the natural course of things (i.e., this logic of social relationships) would reduce all his efforts to naught. But if I know in what direction social relations are changing owing to given changes in the social-economic process of production, I also know in what direction social mentality is changing; consequently, I am able to influence it. Influencing social mentality means influencing historical events. Hence, in a certain sense, I can make history, and there is no need for me to wait while ‘it is being made’” (Plekhanov 1961 [1898]: 35).

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