**Soviet Marxism's Obituary?**

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Robert Service looks at how Gorbachev's revolution has left an open agenda for Soviet historians.

Soviet Marxism's death has officially been certified after recent world-shaking events. Mikhail Gorbachev avoided Marxist-Leninist doctrines in his draft party programme in July. Those who plotted the abortive coup against him in August sought to reverse the trend. As the price for Gorbachev's return to office, Boris Yeltsin secured his consent to the dissolution of the Communist Party and the disintegration of the USSR as a unitary state.

Pictures of Lenin were removed from the Congress of People's Deputies in September. Nothing more graphically illustrates the end of a state ideology. Lenin’s historical image has been a sensitive indicator of the vicissitudes of political and ideological change ever since Gorbachev's accession to the highest party post in 1985. This is hardly surprising; generations of Soviet citizens have been taught that Lenin was Marxism's truest exponent. In fact this notion is only a half-truth. Lenin developed but also distorted Marx's ideas. But the notion is rarely challenged by writers in Moscow. Debates on Marxism are encased in the discussions about Lenin. Polemical thrust is followed by counter-thrust, and the interlinked themes of Lenin, the Soviet past and Marxist ideology have an urgency of interest for the general public which is scarcely conceivable in the West.

Historians in the USSR are a divided group; but about one thing they are welded together with the solidity of a T-34 tank: all of them bless the day when the stipulation was dropped that everyone had to conform their views to the perspective of a single imposed textbook. Well, nearly ail of them. A few scholar-dinosaurs are nostalgic about the decades-old verities. But anyone visiting Moscow to give a talk on Lenin or Stalin nowadays need not worry about the harangues that were mandatory – as I know from personal experience – as recently as two years ago.

The USSR-based historians are relishing their freedom. We can date with precision when they were let off the leash: November 2nd, 1987. This was the day when Gorbachev delivered his seventieth anniversary speech on the October Revolution. Disappointment was expressed, in the West as in Moscow, that he appeared to offer a new authoritative schema of interpretation of Soviet history. But in the following week it was emphasised that 'authoritative' was not the same as 'compulsory', and a beacon was lit for liberated historical scholarship in a Communist regime. The first thing to vanish was the plan for a single-party history textbook. Then even the pressure to produce an officially-approved selection of 'sketches' of the history of Communism was quietly relented (and those scholars who had virtually been commanded to clock in daily at specific libraries could work normally again).

By 1990 it was possible for professional historians in the Academy of Sciences to criticise not only Stalin but also Lenin. Even writers under party discipline, in the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, have written about him with something less than devotion. This has been well reported in our newspapers. Less well-known is the outbreak of what might pompously be called methodological pluralism. The Soviet intellectual bloodsport of hunting down 'bourgeois falsifiers' has been abolished; it is acknowledged that many past alleged perpetrators of falsification in the West had really contributed importantly to the world's understanding of the politics of the USSR. It is no longer necessary to claim to be a Marxist-Leninist to be taken seriously.

The more restless of the professional historians are leaving Marxism-Leninism behind. They are also no longer transfixed by the Lenin question and the Stalin question. Social groups and social classes, especially the peasantry, are being studied with an intellectual zest discouraged in days when the proper form for a scholar was to parrot slogans about the leader, the party and the masses. The number of fine studies of rural customs is growing, and authors no longer have to say that everything done by the peasants in the Revolution of 1917 was directed by Lenin and the Communist Party. An interest is also being shown in broader issues of attitudes in society. The notion that Russians had a certain mentalite is widely-held. And religion, too, is at last attracting investigation. Few professional historians mention that this sort of history is compatible ^with the scholarly interests of Marx and Engels themselves. Privately, moreover, many scholars have never considered themselves as Marxists. As they reveal their innermost thoughts, some turn out to be social-democrats, liberals or conservatives rather than followers of Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The ambition of nearly all of them is to compose accounts judgeable by standards accepted in the rest of the global scholarly community; unthinking ideological allegiance is increasingly uncongenial for them. Thus the Leninist modes of thought in professional writings about Soviet history are waning in the schools, the universities and the academies.

But this is not the complete picture. The cultural effervescence under Mikhail Gorhachev has witnessed the publication of works assailing the old official claims of Soviet history more brusquely than have those of the professional historians. Attacks on Stalin came first from the film-makers and novelists. Then the TV documentary teams got going. The professional historians eventually caught up; but by then the prime object of assault had changed from Stalin to Lenin. The novelist, Vladimir Soloukhin, used Lenin's own texts to show that the Soviet regime was a terror-state by intention and in practice from the October Revolution's early months. Emigre writers also came into the reckoning in 1989 when Alexander Solzhenitsyn's account of the labour camp system, with its imprecations against Lenin as well as Stalin, was published in Moscow. Several Western works, including Robert Conquest's Great Terror (which was equally critical of Lenin) began to appear.

There is practically nothing negative said in the West about Lenin that has got been said in the weekly colour magazine Ogonyok. But the oddity persists that much anti-Lenin commentary in Moscow, sincerely felt though it is impregnated with ways of understanding the Soviet past that are reminiscent of Marxism-Leninism. The focus is typically upon the thought and actions of the paramount leader, be he Lenin nr Stalin or Brezhnev. Stress is laid also upon the machinery of power at the leader's disposal. Soviet society 4s a whole is little examined.

The great difference is that Communism is described as wholly malignant rather than wholly virtuous. But the modes of thought are eerily unmodified. No one in their right mind would deny that Lenin was powerful or that a Soviet state was built by him which by and large obeyed his policies. Even less would anyone want to deny that Stalin was a dictator. (Actually there are a few such odd-balls, but they live in the West and are a diminishing band). And yet more general factors also helped to give Soviet history its shape and direction. International concerns; economic and geographical pressures; social aspirations; demographic shifts; bureaucratic imperatives; these had a deep impact on the results of the October Revolution. But such complexities are not to the taste of the Lenin-hunters, searching for him in every nook and cranny. It is MarxismLeninism turned inside out. Taught in their schooldays to regard him as ubiquitous and omnipotent, they repeat the idea today.

Not that exceptions do not exist. Many memoirs, for example, offer a searing indictment of the Soviet political system without delving into the politics in the Kremlin. A recent compendium of recollections by women survivors of Stalin's labour camps has been published. Its deeply-moving pages give a piercing insight into the conditions and aspirations of themselves and their families before their (usually wholly unanticipated) arrest.

Even the compulsive concentration on Lenin and Stalin has had its compensations. The older textbooks portrayed them as demiurgical figures. They were unbelievable as human beings. The film-makers and novelists and the rest of the so-called publitsisty (media) are trying to put a human touch to their portraits, to add 'colour'. This reflects a common yearning in the USSR. On a trip to Moscow in December 1990, I was struck by the change in publishing trends since the spring. Well-produced booklets about the last tsar's 'holy man', Rasputin, were being hawked at the Metro stations. There was an attractive little tome called The Lovers of Catherine the Great. There is no end to the interest in the country's history. The various popular weekly magazines rarely appear without their historical essay; and they would not sell so well (and indeed sell in grubby second-hand copies) if people did not find them appealing.

As yet there is no sign that the public thirsts simultaneously after details about Marx or Engels. Their collected works are not much on display. The literature on Lenin meanwhile increases. The vivid and frank memoirs of the doctors, nurses and relatives who attended him in his first illness have at last been published. But nothing similar is attempted for Marx and Engels. It is yet another example of the fact that Lenin and his career are taken as the criterion whereby to measure Marxism.

It is a predictable process. But it is somewhat misleading to identify the cofounders of Marxism exclusively with Lenin's thought and action. Marx and Engels subjected their opinions to constant substantive revisions and were hostile in principle to unquestionable standpoints (and even Lenin, who removed much subtlety from the Marxism of his day, displayed a flexibility unfashionable under Stalin). For instance, Marx's books on French politics in the middle of the nineteenth century are still worth reading. Both Marx and Engels regarded it as naive to analyse politics in terms mainly of great men; they explicitly repudiated the approach to history espoused by contemporaries such as Thomas Carlyle. The interplay of individuals, organisations, social classes and economic conditions was a favourite theme of Marx; and he seldom pressed concrete cases into a predetermined mould of interpretation.

What would Marx the historian and politician have made of Soviet history? Perhaps he would have opposed the October Revolution as being a premature attempt to establish socialism. Certainly he cannot be shown to have assumed that a one-party, terror-based state which owned the means of production would be more or less sufficient to produce the rudiments of a socialist society. Most reasonable accounts of the co-founders of Marxism would concur that severe distortions of their thought occurred at the hands of Lenin, Stalin and their successors.

And yet there were also strong affinities between Marx's Marxism and Lenin's. The stress upon violence, intolerance and dictatorship existed in Marxism long before Lenin was born. Marx, while being one of the most imaginative social thinkers of the nineteenth century, made proposals pervaded with immense political nastiness. Moreover, certain aspects of Marxist thinking have deeply affected Soviet society. Seven decades of propaganda have crudified attitudes to individualism, private enterprise, parliaments, universal civic freedoms. This crudity was dinned into generations of school pupils in the 1920s and 1930s whose own children, similarly educated, are now ruling the country. It will take further decades for such attitudes to be eroded.

The USSR's inhabitants are not resistant to taking up new social and political attitudes. The changes over the past half-decade are remarkable. But many Russians (and non-Russians) discern the immediate risks inherent in a transition to more capitalistic policies, The break-up of those old economic units, the state-owned factories and the collective farms, threatens people with the withdrawal of the state's minimal provision of welfare. The prospect of famine is talked about daily.

In such circumstances it is too early to speak of the death of every vestige of Marxist-influenced thought in the lands of the October Revolution. Even the resurgent nationalist movements have echoes, however baffled, of Leninism. Boris Yeltsin once belonged to the leadership of the Soviet Communist 'arty; he has yet to prove that he has entirely shed his past ideological and political authoritarianism. Georgian President and ex-dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia has no similar connections with the Brezhnevite establishment; but his harassment of non-Georgians in his republic owes not a little to the political style of Communism in its hey-day. Possibly the poet Vladimir Mayakovski was right: 'Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!'