

BOOK REVIEWS

AN INSPIRING WORK ON LENIN

THE LIFE OF LENIN. By P. Kerzhentsev, 336 pp., International Publishers, New York, 1938, \$1.75.

IN THE years since 1917, much has been published in this country about Lenin and his role in the Russian Revolution. Despite this, the American reading public remains surprisingly ignorant of the real Lenin and even more so of the true history of the Russian Bolshevik Party. While this observation is especially valid of the general public, it is also in a measure true of that portion of the masses which is seriously interested in studying and assimilating the lessons and teachings of Lenin and his Party. Reactionary journalists and historians have been able with a certain degree of success to confuse large numbers of people by distorting Bolshevik history, by peddling Trotskyite slander about Lenin and his best disciples, and by portraying Lenin with bias and calumny.

The particular importance of Comrade Kerzhentsev's book, *The Life of Lenin*, is that it provides the American readers, and first of all our Party, with an inspiring picture of Lenin woven into the background of an enlightening short history of the Russian Revolution and its Bolshevik Party. Lenin emerges from the pages of this book, not only as political genius—but as man, comrade, student, and fighter. For Kerzhentsev had sharply focused something of the fiery spirit and warm personality of the man, Lenin.

The author traces Lenin's influence upon the Bolshevik Party from its formative period to that of the first years of Soviet power. Lenin stands forth as a towering giant: a man characterized by an iron will and steadfastness of purpose which could not be

shaken by any number of setbacks or defeats. His was an inextinguishable faith in the masses, in their revolutionary urge, in their creative powers. That is why he never gave way to despair, never suffered moods of despondency, never became affected by the vacillations which so typified the petty-bourgeois intellectuals of his day. When the difficulties were greatest, when the struggle was most intense, that was when Lenin was calmest, surest. The Russian democratic and revolutionary movements met many obstacles, passed through many heart-breaking days. The bold, clear policies of Lenin were not always victorious even within the revolutionary camp. At every grave disappointment, there were those who lost faith and wanted to give up the struggle; their disillusionment was sometimes disguised by ultra-Left phrases.

In 1906, after the defeat of the first revolution, despair and defeatism set in. At the April unity congress, the Bolsheviks led a stubborn struggle against such views held by the Mensheviks. Lenin insisted that the defeat of 1905 was only temporary; that it was necessary to learn the lessons of that setback and to prepare the masses for a new upsurge. But the Mensheviks carried the congress. Discouragement also began to creep into the ranks of the Bolsheviks. In this connection, Kerzhentsev cites an account given by Stalin of a conversation of a group of Bolshevik delegates, which vividly illustrates Lenin's supreme confidence:

"In the conversation of some of the delegates one detected a note of weariness and depression. I remember Lenin, in reply to such talk, sharply saying through clenched fists: 'No snivelling, comrades, we shall certainly win, because we are right.' Hatred for snivelling intellectuals, confidence in one's own strength, confidence in victory—that is what Lenin talked about at that time.

"No snivelling in the event of defeat.' This is the peculiar feature in the activities of Lenin that helped him to rally around

himself an army that was faithful to the last and had confidence in its own strength." (P. 108.)

These lines assume particular significance at the present moment, in the wake of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia. The perfidy of Chamberlain-Daladier has brought some individuals to despair in the peace forces, to doubt in the possibility of stopping fascism. But how narrow is the vision of such people. The Soviet Union stands as a mighty bulwark, unswervingly loyal to the interests of world peace. The people of Spain and China continue their heroic armed resistance to the fascist invaders. In France, England and throughout the world the masses are learning from this latest betrayal. As Comrade Browder stated in his recent speech on the international situation, the present moment is not only characterized by betrayal, but also by the growing intervention of the masses. Today the policy of betrayal seems victorious; but this policy carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. The last word has yet to be spoken by the forces of peace.

That Lenin's faith in victory did not come from an abstract sentimental love for the masses, or from personal egotism, is made clear by Kerzhentsev. It arose from a profound understanding of revolutionary theory; it was rooted in Marxist reality. His was the ability properly to estimate the relationship of class forces at every stage of development, to foresee events, to grasp those concrete elements of a given situation which make possible a change in the entire course of events. At every turning point, because of his stability to "study history afresh," Lenin put forth new slogans and tasks corresponding to the new situation. Consequently, Lenin never made a fetish of slogans or tactics.

The ability to think dialectically, to see events and problems in their manysidedness, to be ready to change or modify tactics or policies with every change in objective conditions made Lenin the great Marxist strategist that he was and transformed his small revolutionary group into the mass Party destined to lead the first proletarian state.

Without understanding this essential quality of Lenin and Leninism, one cannot ex-

plain why, for example, in 1906, Lenin opposed Bolshevik participation in the tsarist Duma and why only a year later, when it became clear that the rising revolutionary tide had given way to a period of ebb, he fought just as hard for participation, for the need to utilize every legal possibility, no matter how slim, in order to advance the interests of the masses.

Of great practical importance at this moment is an understanding of how Lenin applied this concrete historical approach to the struggle against war, to the fight for peace. Kerzhentsev's book demonstrates how Lenin enriched Marxist thought by his exhaustive analysis of imperialism as the final, monopolistic stage of capitalism. It also shows how Lenin, on the basis of this study, worked out the tactics and objectives of the proletariat in the period of the last World War and later in the period of the existence of Soviet Power.

In 1914-18, recognizing that both warring camps were conducting a reactionary imperialist war for plunder, that both sides were equally aggressors, Lenin rallied the proletariat around the slogan: "Turn the Imperialist War Into a Civil War!" With the ending of the World War, following the victory of the working class in Russia, Lenin realized that the existence of Soviet Power on one-sixth of the world was a new and most important factor on the international political scene, a new force in the struggle for the preservation of world peace. Under the new conditions, he advocated a policy of utilizing the contradictions between the imperialist powers in order, at every given moment, to block the road of the most rapacious, most imperialist forces driving towards war. It was this new tactic which helped the Soviet state in defeating the interventionists in 1918-20 and played no small part in maintaining world peace these last twenty years.

It was Stalin who, basing himself on the teachings of Lenin, developed this policy for the present period, the period of fascist aggression, the period when only the unity of the whole democratic world around the peace program of the Soviet Union can stop the further advance of fascism and the precipitation of a new world slaughter.

The story of Lenin's struggle also teaches

us that in the course of bringing about such necessary changes in policy, there are always individuals who fail to measure up to the needs of the new situation and fall by the wayside. History in this respect is ruthless, respecting neither former service nor title. Those who stand in its path are brushed aside. Thus, Kerzhentsev quotes Stalin in connection with the sharp turn made by the revolutionary movement under the guidance of Lenin in 1903:

"The Party at that time was headed by six people, Plekhanov, Zasulich, Martov, Lenin, Axelrod, and Potresov. The turn proved fatal for five of the six. They fell out of the cart. Lenin remained alone. . . . It is clear now to every Bolshevik that if Lenin had not determinedly fought the five—if the five had not been beaten off, our Party could not have been welded as the Party of the Bolsheviks capable of leading the proletarians to victory." (P. 74.)

As Kerzhentsev shows, these were not the only people who fought their way out of the Party and into the camp of the enemy. Later, the Trotskyites-Bukharinites, who at every crucial turn in the revolution had been at loggerheads with Lenin and the Party, found themselves outside its ranks and in the camp of counter-revolutionary fascism. This book, giving the background of the whole Russian Revolution, helps one better to understand the treachery of these scoundrels. One sees recent events in their process of development and not as some unexpected "sudden" happenings. Upon this same background of history one also sees Stalin in his true stature—the best disciple of Lenin. Throughout the history of the Bolshevik Party, Comrade Stalin stood unflinchingly at the side of Lenin, supporting him and his policies even when the majority of the Party leadership were in opposition.

Some of the best chapters of Kerzhentsev's book deal with Lenin as a human being, a comrade. Ruthless towards enemies of the Party, towards vacillators within the Party, Lenin was most patient and considerate to Party comrades and workers. Never was he too busy to concern himself with the welfare of others. A number of examples are given of how Lenin, who never spared himself, demanded that proper attention be given to comrades who were ill, referring to this as

his interest in "safeguarding Party property."

Of great interest was also the section dealing with Lenin's method of work. He was a strict taskmaster, but first of all towards himself. His time was never wasted, but always highly organized. From early youth he disciplined himself, and no matter how crowded with tasks, he demanded strict adherence to plan. The insistence upon proper utilization of time is illustrated by Lenin's loss of patience with those who came late to meetings. Even when head of the Soviet state, Lenin started the meetings of the Party leading committee punctually, and himself came on the minute. Under no circumstances would he tolerate long-winded speeches, but demanded concreteness and brevity.

Every assignment or task Lenin undertook was handled with meticulous care. When still in school he learned to draft outlines for every composition, and this habit was continued in later life in preparing his articles and speeches. Sloppy, careless work was alien to his very training and nature. Kerzhentsev, for example, shows with what care Lenin prepared his book *Imperialism*.

"For this work he consulted hundreds of books in all languages, and made copious notes. His preparatory work and rough drafts comprised three volumes. He did not overlook a single book or article of any importance on the subject of imperialism which had appeared in the European press." (P. 158.)

Above all else, the book shows Lenin as a modest, unpretentious man. He loved to mix with people and spent many hours talking and especially listening to workers. As one of his acquaintances remarked: "There was only one thing that Vladimir Ilyich, like Marx, could not endure: humbug, pretense, and phrasemongering."

The Life of Lenin should be read by all Party members in order better to absorb the great lessons of the Russian Bolshevik Party and in order to invigorate themselves by drinking from an inspiring fountain of Lenin's personality. The book is written in a clear, lucid style. Its only drawback, if we can call it that, from the point of view of the American scene, is that it was written in

the first place for a Soviet public. The author, therefore, takes many things for granted, starting with the premise that the reader is already a follower of Lenin, or at least, a Communist sympathizer. Kerzhentsev has made a serious contribution to our

literature on the subject; but the job still remains to be done of providing a history of Lenin and his Party written primarily to meet the needs of a wider American audience.

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