
Review article

What was Bolshevism?

John Biggart

Lars T. Lih, *What was Bolshevism?*, Brill: Leiden, 2023; Haymarket Books: Chicago IL, 2024; 582 pp.; ISBN 9789004684454, £134.00, hbk; ISBN 9798888903292, £50.00, pbk.

In this volume Lars T. Lih has gathered together sixteen scholarly articles published between 1986 and 2016 and added three chapters of unpublished material (on Aleksandr Tsiurupa, Nikolai Bukharin, and ‘Masks and lies in Stalin’s Russia’). Lih’s studies take in aspects of the politics, economics and culture of Soviet Russia (including theatre, music and poetry). His approach involves a close reading of the texts of well-known Communist leaders. Russianists and Sovietologists in a variety of disciplines will find much that is challenging in his book.

Lih’s analytical starting point is a distinction between the ‘external’ ideology of the Soviet régime (as disseminated to the population), and the ‘internal’ ideology of its leaders (their world-view or self-image). But should ‘Bolshevism’ be reduced to these two intellectual frameworks? Certainly, when the party in power branded itself the ‘Russian Communist Party’ in 1918, it made sure to claim the designation ‘Bolshevik’ – RKP(b) – but to understand this term fully, we need to explore what it meant before 1918. Lih does not provide this back story in his volume.

The history of ‘Bolshevism’ is anything but straightforward. The famous ‘split’ at the Second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDRP) in 1903, which gave rise to a ‘Bolshevik’ faction around Lenin and his supporters, and an opposing ‘Menshevik’ faction, was only the beginning. By the end of 1911 there were already three tendencies within the RSDRP which considered themselves to be ‘Bolshevik’: the ‘Left-Bolsheviks’ of the ‘Forward’ group, the ‘Party Bolsheviks’ or ‘Conciliators’, and Lenin’s own group of supporters. A key objective of Lenin’s group was to reconstruct the RSDRP on a much narrower basis, excluding the ‘Forward’ group and the ‘Conciliators’ together with the Mensheviks of the Paris-based paper *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata*, and the group around Leon Trotsky, based in Vienna. Consequently, two rival ‘RSDRP’ conferences were convened in 1912: one by the Leninists in Prague in January; and another by an assortment of groups of the RSDRP in Vienna in August. The outbreak of war in 1914 led to further fragmentation. By the eve of the revolution of February 1917, although the Leninists still upheld the legitimacy of the ‘Central Committee’

formed at their Prague conference, the RSDRP as a coherent political entity had ceased to exist.

During 1917, efforts were made to unite social democrats around a platform of 'internationalism' – opposition to the policy of Russia's post-February Provisional Government of remaining loyal to the Entente and sustaining the war effort. One outcome of this was a 'Congress of RSDRP Internationalists' held in July–August 1917. Convened jointly by the Petrograd Inter-District Group of United Social Democrats (a.k.a. 'Mezhraionka') and Lenin's organisation,¹ this congress resolved to unite on the basis of a 'narrow coalition' of internationalists.² In official histories, this congress was later designated the Sixth Congress of the RSDRP(b). In the Central Committee elected by this congress, alongside the Leninists we find such disparate elements as the independent Aleksandra Kollontai (a former Menshevik), Aleksei Rykov and Nikolai Krestinsky (former 'Conciliators'), Moisey Uritsky (a 'Party-Menshevik' and member of the 'August Bloc'), and Leon Trotsky and Adolf Joffe of the editorial board of *Pravda* (Vienna).³ Later in August 1917 the Menshevik factions within the RSDRP held their own 'unification' congress, an event that effectively completed the long drawn-out process of dividing the former RSDRP into two completely separate organisations at all levels.

By the time the newly-created party of internationalists held its next congress – on 6–8 March 1918 – it was already the ruling party. The decisions of this congress signalled a more radical break with the political traditions of the RSDRP, with regard both to the state structure of a post-revolutionary Russia, and to the means of determining that structure. The RSDRP programme, adopted in 1903 and accepted by all its factions, had called for 'popular self-government, that is, the concentration of all higher state authority in a single chamber legislative assembly' and for 'universal, equal and direct suffrage in elections both to the legislative assembly and to all local authorities'.⁴ During the revolution of 1905, the immediate goal of a 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' had not been questioned within the party.⁵ Leaflets issued by the St. Petersburg Committee at that time had frequently called for a 'Constituent Assembly', an aspiration widely shared across the Russian revolutionary movement.⁶ The next year, in April–May 1906, the Bolshevik section's motions to the RSDRP's so-called 'Unification' congress declared that the task of the party and proletariat was to secure a genuine 'democratic revolution'.⁷ The London congress of May–June 1907, at which the Bolsheviks had a majority, denounced the inadequacy of the State Duma (a largely ineffectual representative body conceded by the Tsar in October 1905) and called for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly 'on the basis of universal, equal, direct and equal suffrage'.⁸ 'A democratic republic' and 'universal suffrage' also featured in the resolution on 'Elections to the Fourth State Duma' adopted by Lenin's conference in Prague in January 1912.⁹

However, by the time of the congress of 6–8 March 1918, a very different policy had been implemented – the creation of a 'commune state', as outlined in

Lenin's 'April Theses' of 1917 and implicitly endorsed by the congress of July-August 1917.¹⁰ Although a Constituent Assembly had been elected in November 1917, it had refused by a majority to ratify a declaration by the Central Executive Committee of Soviets proclaiming a Republic of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, and so, after just one session in January 1918, it had been closed down.¹¹

This congress set up a commission to review the party's programme,¹² and during the evening session of 8 March Lenin proposed that the title 'Russian Communist Party' should be adopted. However, in order to demonstrate both a break with the past and an umbilical link with the pre-revolutionary RSDRP, he also proposed that the designation 'Bolsheviks' should be added in brackets.¹³ In this way, the new party became the RKP(b). In 1938, the tag 'Bolsheviks' was preserved in the title of Stalin's 'Short Course' history of the CPSU;¹⁴ it was not dropped from the party's official title until the 'Nineteenth' Party Congress of October 1952. With the same purpose of constructing a party history that was continuous with that of the RSDRP (in fact a teleological connection), party historians numbered all congresses and conferences of the RSDRP before and after 1917 as an uninterrupted series. Consequently, the London congress of 1907 (the last before the revolutions of 1917) became the 'Fifth Congress', and the congress of July-August 1917 became the 'Sixth'.

The purpose of this historical excursion is to question Lih's contention that the Soviet-era 'Bolsheviks' were the 'heirs to pre-war revolutionary Social Democracy'. (p.433) To make this claim is to disregard not only the content of the programmes of the RSDRP, but also the outlook of many tendencies within the party before the war, Bolsheviks included. Perhaps the book would have been better titled 'What was Soviet Communism?'

Lih's approach to the 'internal ideology' of the new rulers is also problematic. Examining a hardly representative sample of texts, he claims to have discovered a 'narrative', 'story' or 'path metaphor' that, he maintains, is not to be confused with political doctrine.¹⁵ He tells us that the 'central themes of the canonical narrative'... include 'the proletariat's mission to conquer state power (*Macht, vlast*) in order to construct socialism' and 'the inspired and inspiring leadership required first to accept and then to carry out this mission'.¹⁶ In his introduction he 'unapologetically' admits that his 'understanding of Lenin and the Bolshevik outlook comes in large part from Lenin's closest allies and life-long comrades in arms: Zinoviev, Kameney, Krupskaya and, even the young Stalin'. (p.22) Later this narrow band of sources is broadened, and he claims to have found evidence of the canonical narrative also in the writings of Bukharin, Trotsky and Kollontai. (p.107) It is his contention that we would have a better understanding of the development of the Soviet régime if we paid more attention to the canonical narrative, and less to interpretations offered by historians.

As a prime example of the manner in which historians, neglecting 'Bolshevik stories', have misinterpreted the thinking and behaviour of Communist Party leaders, Lih chooses the period of siege economics between 1918 and 1921 that has been labelled 'war communism'. Scholars as distinguished, and as diverse, as E. H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher, Alec Nove, Laszlo Szamuely, Moshe Lewin, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Andrzej Walicki and Stephen Smith, are upbraided for having created a 'myth' of 'war communism'.¹⁷ According to Lih, the measures taken by Lenin's government between 1918 and March 1921 involving ever more draconian attempts to control all economic activity on Soviet territory, far from being a product of political dogma, represented a reluctant, pragmatic response to a political and economic emergency.¹⁸ It is certainly true that some of the features of 'siege communism' had been present in embryonic form in wartime measures adopted by the Tsarist and Provisional governments (mobilisation of production, centralisation of distribution, and price controls),¹⁹ and that the Civil War and Allied interventions in Russia added to the pre-existing social and economic upheaval. Nonetheless, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the ruling party's own mismanagement of the economy were also accelerators of Civil War and of continuing economic dislocation. Lih cites, and implicitly endorses, the assessment of Sergei Lukyanov (a liberal who had emigrated in 1918 but by 1921 had become a 'fellow-traveller'), that the Constituent Assembly was 'bankrupt, both politically and morally'.²⁰ 'A case can be made', Lih writes, that it could not possibly have responded to the challenges outlined by our writers'.²¹ Maybe, but that is not the point: a Constituent Assembly had been the objective of the RSDRP, Bolsheviks included, until 1917. In adopting Lenin's idea of a 'commune state', the RKP(b) broke not only with the mainstream of Russian social-democracy but also with the more broadly-supported representatives of agrarian socialism.²² With 'dictatorship', came inescapably, political and economic chaos and, of course, 'terror'.

Lih gives insufficient weight to the fact that *some* Marxists in Russia *did* see the political and economic system of 1918-1920 as a prototype (albeit an unstable prototype) of Communism. The economists Yuri Larin and Lev Kritsman are well known examples. Although Nikolai Bukharin, in his *Programme of the Communists* (1918) and in his *Economics of the Transition Period* (1920) 'emphasised the lengths and hardships of the journey', he cannot be excluded from this group. Lenin made his position clear on 12 October 1919, when he rejected the view of the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin that the Soviet government, with its centralisation of the management of production and restrictions on factory self-management, was employing forms of compulsion that reproduced those of the old régime. 'Unfortunately', Lenin wrote, there is an almost complete absence of real centralization'. Nor did he accept Chicherin's opinion that the party was presiding over a system of state capitalism: 'Not so; in my opinion our struggle belongs to *the first stage of a transition to communism*; [my emphasis] this struggle is

with the peasantry and with capitalist efforts to defend (or revive) commodity production.’²³ Of course, these prominent writers acknowledged that the system of 1918-1920 was a work in progress, but they certainly saw it as a step on the road to communism.²⁴

In his determination to explain the history of the inter-war period in terms of the Communists’ alleged ‘master narrative’, Lih’s interpretation more often than not turns into rationalisation. ‘The legitimate (*sic*) uses of coercion’, he writes, ‘and its relation to the pace of transformation can only be understood within the matrix of this story’. (pp.132-133) We are told that for Trotsky a ‘socialist régime has a particular right to apply compulsion for the public interest. Socialism means a universal obligation to work’. (pp.243-244) Paraphrasing Trotsky, he writes: ‘socialists have the right and duty to use compulsory methods in order to defend the proletarian *vlad!*’. That this was Trotsky’s view is not surprising: a justification of this policy had been published by Lenin in *Pravda* on 28 April 1918.²⁵ But leaving the matter there begs all the well-known questions concerning the degeneration of dictatorial régimes. There was no room for ‘thanks, but no thanks’ for those on the receiving end of compulsion. Was the policy, as Lih implies, really only applied to ‘slackers’?

Such is the redeeming power of the ‘canonical narrative’ that Lih even finds some ‘attractive human features’ in the ‘relatively populist version of Bolshevism’ of Grigorii Zinoviev. (pp.21, 259-260) He offers a ‘systematic survey of Zinoviev’s many speeches during his time in the top leadership of the ruling Bolshevik party’. But is there any evidence that these speeches were an expression of Zinoviev’s ‘internal ideology’, and not simply curated party rhetoric? In Lih’s survey we follow the contortions of the Communists in their attempt to reconcile their earlier role as champions of the hegemony of the working class with their policy of compromise with the peasants and small traders in the 1920s. (pp.273-275) As for Lih’s very forgiving portrait of Zinoviev, there is ample evidence in published material to suggest that Zinoviev’s reputation as Lenin’s ‘attack dog’, even before 1917, was well deserved.²⁶

A short review cannot do justice to the breadth of coverage of Lih’s book. However, the ‘canonical narrative’, that he claims to have discovered thanks to exegesis of selected texts, is hardly distinguishable from themes that were common in the propaganda of the Soviet Communist Party throughout its existence. Perhaps the most appropriate response to his search for an underlying ‘heroic scenario’, was pronounced in 1859 by Karl Marx, when he wrote: ‘Just as one cannot judge an individual by what they believe themselves to be, neither can one judge an era of upheaval according to its consciousness; rather one must explain this consciousness in terms of the contradictions of material life, in terms of the conflict existing between social productive forces and relations of production.’²⁷

Notes

- 1 See Ian D. Thatcher, 'The St Petersburg/Petrograd Mezhraionka, 1913-1917: The Rise and Fall of a Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party Unity Faction', *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 87. No. 2 (April, 2009), pp.300-306. Upon their arrivals in Petrograd in 1917 both Trotsky and Uritsky had avoided the Lenin group and affiliated to the Mezhraionka.
- 2 The main groups of social-democratic internationalists who remained outside this new party were the group around Maksim Gorky's daily paper *Novaya zhizn'*, and the 'Menshevik-Internationalist' faction around Julius Martov. Andrei Bubnov later maintained that the congress had approved unification 'with all internationalists who had broken with the Menshevik Internationalists'. See his introduction to *Protokoly shestogo s'ezda RSDRP(b)*, Moscow, 1934, p.xxxvi.
- 3 For the membership of the Central Committee, see *Deyateli S.SSR i revolyutsionnogo dvizheniya Rossii*, Moscow, 1989, p.822.
- 4 See Paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Programme of the RSDRP, in *Vtoroy S'ezd RSDRP. Iyun'-avgust 1903. Protokoly*, Moscow, 1959, p.42.
- 5 The topic does not figure in the protocols of the Congress convened by the Bolsheviks in London in 1905 while the upheavals of that year were in progress. See *Tretii S'ezd RSDRP aprel'-may 1905 goda. Protokoly*, Moscow, 1959.
- 6 See *Listovki Peterburgskikh bol'shevikov 1902-1917, Vol. I (1902-1907)*, Leningrad, 1939.
- 7 See 'Klassovye zadachi proletariata v sovremennyy moment demokraticeskoy revolyutsii', in *Chetvertyy (Ob'edinitel'nyy) S'ezd RSDRP aprel' (aprel'-mai) 1906 goda. Protokoly*, Moscow, 1959, pp.478-480.
- 8 *Pyatyy S'ezd RSDRP (may-iyun' 1907)*, Moscow, 1935, pp.638-639.
- 9 *Konferentsii RSDRP 1912 goda*, Moscow, 2008, p.450; and, for the full resolution, V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, Moscow, 1977, p.468.
- 10 See the resolution 'On the political situation' in *Protokoly shestogo s'ezda RSDRP(b)*, Moscow, 1934, pp.238-241.
- 11 See the Decree of the Central Executive Committee of 16 January 1918 and the declaration of Yakov Sverdlov in James Bunyan and H. H. Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1918. Documents and Materials*, Stanford CA, 1934, pp.369 and 371.
- 12 Lenin had proposed a revision of the party's programme in his 'April Theses' and the matter had been under discussion during 1917. See *Sed'moy Ekstrennyy S'ezd RKP (b), Mart 1918. Stenograficheskiy otchet* (Moscow: Institut Marksizma-Leninizma pri TsK KPSS, 1962), p.177 and p.382, n.109. In March 1918, a review commission was set up, consisting of Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin, Smirnov, Sokol'nikov, Stalin and Zinoviev, with Radek and Obolensky as candidate members. However, it was not until the Congress of March 1919 that a new programme was adopted.
- 13 *Sed'moy Ekstrennyy S'ezd RKP (b)*, p.176.
- 14 *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). Short Course*. Authorised by the Central Committee of the CPSU (B) in 1938 (English language ed., Moscow, 1939). On p.12 of Chapter 4 we are told that the Bolsheviks constituted

- themselves 'an independent Marxist Party' at the Prague Conference of January 1912. 'Bolshevik Party' figures in the titles of following chapters, accordingly.
- 15 The theorists from whom Lih has derived his analytical approach are named in Chapter 5, footnote 2.
 - 16 Lih explains in detail what he means by 'canonical narrative' in Chapter 5.
 - 17 See Chapter 3. In Chapter 10, p.252, Lih writes that historians have been 'next to unanimous' (*sic*) in maintaining that the Bolsheviks 'viewed the institutions of 1920 as an embodiment of full socialism and as an admirable long-term system'.
 - 18 See, for example, Chapter 10 in which the Communist leadership is represented as valiantly struggling to cope with a crisis exacerbated by a civil war for which they were themselves at least partly responsible.
 - 19 See, for example, Vladimir Mau and Irina Starodubrovskaya, *The Challenge of Revolution. Contemporary Russia in Historical Perspective*, Oxford, 2001, pp.114 passim.
 - 20 Lukyanov was a contributor to the anthology *Smena vekh* ('Change of Landmarks') published in Prague in 1921. He later became one of the editors of a newspaper of the same name, published in Paris, and of its successor, *Nakanune*, published in Berlin. Both papers were subsidised by the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs.
 - 21 See Lih, pp.219-225 and pp.233-234. He accuses liberal historians of fetishising the Constituent Assembly.
 - 22 Although the first Soviet government did include representatives of the recently-formed Party of Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, at the Constituent Assembly elections the mainstream agrarian socialists of the 'Right' Socialist-Revolutionary Party had won 370 deputies, whereas the Left SRs had won only 40. See Bunyan and Fisher, *Bolshevik Revolution*, p.371, n.74.
 - 23 V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochineniy*, Vol. 51, Moscow, 1970, p.357. One might add that Lih is mistaken in thinking that the term 'war communism had no currency during 1918-1921', and that 'Lenin coined the term in 1921 as part of his efforts to justify and popularize NEP'. In fact, it was used as early as 1918 by Aleksandr Bogdanov in his *Voprosy sotsializma*, reviewed by Bukharin in *Kommunist* (1918), No. 3, pp.19-20.
 - 24 On this subject, see James D. White, *Lenin. The Practice and Theory of Revolution*, London, 2001, pp.163-166.
 - 25 See 'The current tasks of the Soviet government', *Pravda*, 28 April 1918, in particular the sections 'Raising the productivity of labour' and 'Harmonious organisation and dictatorship'. Before being published, Lenin's article was approved by the Central Committee of the RKP(b). See V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, Moscow, 1972, pp.235-277 and pp.580-581, n.99.
 - 26 See for example Zinoviev's interventions from 1911, recorded in the minutes of the meetings of the Organisation Commission for an 'all-party conference' that was never held, in *Konferentsii RSDRP 1912 goda*.
 - 27 Karl Marx, 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', translated from 'Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie' in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 13, Berlin, 1961, p.9.