

THREE WHO MADE A REVOLUTION

FEW WOULD TODAY wish to deny that the Russian Revolution has, whether by attraction or repulsion, more than any other single cause transformed the social and political outlook of our time. It is strange, therefore, that more than thirty years after its occurrence so little sustained effort should have been made by Western historians to elucidate or even to construct in detail a factual account of the circumstances which led to this great historical upheaval. Neither the devoted labours of such non-Russian writers as Maynard, Pares, Chamberlain, Souvarine and Deutscher, nor the publication of the state papers in the imperial archives, at one time thrown open so widely by the revolutionary governments, nor the autobiographies and memoirs of such participants and contemporaries as Trotsky, Sukhanov, Kerensky, Miliukov, Krupskaya, nor the material copiously poured out by exiles, foreign agents and diplomats, journalists and observers of every brand and hue, has thus far done more than provide the evidence upon which it is possible to build such great and abiding monuments as those by which the French Revolution, for example, has been commemorated. It will be said that conditions are very different: the kind of access to archives and indeed to eyewitness accounts, which was available to Thierry or Guizot or Mignet, is not open to modern researchers; partisan feeling still runs too high not to frighten off all but the most intrepid of objective historians; we are still too close to the facts; and so on. Yet these hardships can be exaggerated: despite the flatly uncooperative attitude of the Soviet authorities, a sufficient body of material exists in the West to make possible far more than has in fact been done.

The French Revolution had aroused passions no less violent or long-lived; thirty years should afford an adequate historical perspective; but a more real proof of the pudding has been provided by the triumphant use of his material by the author of this good and important book. It is the first volume of a projected

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study of the Russian Revolution, and begins with the lives and works of its three principal creators: Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. The story begins in the later nineteenth century, is continued to the outbreak of the First World War, and is the best and most complete account of its subject at present in existence in any language. Whatever its faults, it is a very notable achievement and wholly supersedes earlier works on the subject. The minute and scrupulous research with which facts and opinions are reconstructed and placed in their historical and personal setting is sustained in the face of all temptation to digress or fall into facile impressionism; and this alone gives Mr Wolfe's work a degree of authority possessed by no other enterprise of similar scope in this field. For this reason it is, and is likely to continue for some years to be, the best exposition of its subject available to serious students.

There is a sense in which the task the author has set himself must of necessity be both difficult and dull: the lives of his three protagonists, except for the brief interlude of the Revolution of 1905, are mainly composed of tortuous, arid, bitter and above all unending controversies and polemics which induce even in the scholar a sense of frustration and disgust comparable only to the least rewarding stretches of medieval scholasticism. A feeling of despair is bound to come upon the reader as he is led through this immense and waterless desert broken only by a few poverty-stricken oases, and if he and the author do not succumb, it is only because they know that the journey will suddenly end with a spectacle of terrifying grandeur. The revolutionaries with whom Mr Wolfe's story is concerned were neither original thinkers nor, in the period under review, had they yet achieved notable results in the world of action. Neither Lenin nor Trotsky (not to speak of their successor) were, primarily, ideologists at all: scarcely any coherent new hypotheses, few bold new ideas can rightly be attached to their names. Lenin's celebrated view of imperialism, for instance, is plainly derivative, and in any case is wholly overshadowed by his concern with tactics in the realms both of theory and of practice. Since he was a man of very strong and fanatical personality he imparted to all that he did an easily recognisable form and temper, and thereby created an attitude and a technique of action – canons of behaviour and of interpretation – which are commonly described as Leninism; but an attitude is not a doctrine, not a body of teaching, nor an original contribution

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to the sum of human thought or of human insights in the sense in which Marxism or Hegelianism or Utilitarianism can be so described. Leninism – and for that matter Trotskyism and perhaps even Stalinism (although this last is remarkably difficult to identify) – denote habits of thought and of action, psychological dispositions to react in this or that way to historical circumstances, ways and methods of thinking and speaking and dealing with situations which, however important and far reaching, cannot be reduced to independent theories or doctrines. ‘Leninism’ and ‘Trotskyism’, Menshevism and Bolshevism, are not (unlike Marxism) theories any more than ‘Bismarckism’ or ‘Rooseveltism’, which no one, fortunately, has yet conceived as ‘ideologies’. The history of the movements which Mr Wolfe describes is the history not of theories but rather of the interpretation and application of dogma by leaders of dissentient factions, of exercises in casuistry and hermeneutics, which often seem maddeningly obscure and petty but which acquire life and significance in the context of the political tactics which they seek to rationalise or justify, and of which they are always the most sensitive and revealing symptoms. In contrast with the less or more lucid and coherent ideological structures of the great Western thinkers of the nineteenth century in Germany and France, the works of Lenin and his Russian contemporaries present a confused mass of social and economic analysis dedicated to party, and sometimes personal, problems as they arose, day-to-day journalism, polemical boutades notable in Lenin’s case for powers of coarse and violent abuse which left even Marx far behind, ad hoc guides to immediate action, notes, memorandums, letters, bits and pieces of every kind and description, in which only the most devoted attention to the events and necessities of the moment by which they were generated can discern patterns and trends. Mr Wolfe is at his best in these ungrateful but indispensable and valuable labours: he succeeds in revealing a certain kind of order – not an order of ideas but an intelligible pattern of action – beneath this, at first bewildering, chaos; with infinite patience and great intelligence he restores and clarifies, connects and explains. He has not, perhaps, the vivid sense of actuality which a participant in this confused world of perpetual disintegration and re-crystallisation of parties, factions, fractions, minute groupings and re-groupings which someone like the late Theodore Dan, upon whose work Mr Wolfe must necessarily lean heavily, possessed to such a useful degree. But his

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gaze is more microscopic than that of Dan and far less exaggerated and doctrinaire; if he lacks the drive and brilliance of Trotsky, the mordant irony of Plekhanov, the dull sledge-hammer effectiveness of Lenin, he makes up for it by the workmanlike solidity, accuracy and comprehensiveness of his all-inclusive method. The facts are presented in detail: in a world where so much vagueness and evasiveness, the influence of personal loves and hatreds and sometimes open dishonesty, distort and obscure the issue, and distract and exasperate the student, Mr Wolfe has accomplished the most important of all tasks, the accumulation, reconstruction and marshalling of the facts. He has extracted and laid bare the core of the events and verified the moves as they were made in the complicated game in which his heroes were engaged, and provided the evidence on which all dependable opinion must ultimately rest. If his account sometimes grows bleak, if the pages devoted to the question, let us say, of what Georgian or Armenian did or did not start the first clandestine press in Transcaucasia seem comparatively thankless and even trivial to the reader who is looking for the contours of the great historical process itself, at least the exaggeration is in the right direction: what has been lacking, from the point of view of those interested in the Revolution, has been less a view of the wood – which their own memories provide – than that of the individual trees; and if Mr Wolfe sometimes forgets the trees for the shrubs and the dead wood lying unnoticed on the ground, that, in the present state of research in this field, must be accounted a virtue.

A graver criticism which may be urged against the author's method is that in the course of telling the day-to-day story of schisms and intrigues and manoeuvres Mr Wolfe forgets, or at any rate does not state, the central point of it all – the purpose and aim and ideal of the socialist movement, whatever the guise adopted by it in any given country or period or movement. At no point is the account of the facts illuminated by that deeply needed sense of direction, of the interplay of historical conditions and human fears and aspirations which is responsible for the predicament of all the actors in the situation, revolutionaries and reactionaries, moderates and extremists, bourgeoisie and proletariat – which alone can give significance and importance to what is otherwise a succession of flat and disconnected episodes. The authors of the Revolution indulged in controversies which seem even to the sympathetic eye often insanely petty; they lose all significance whatever unless they

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are seen as a nodal point of a great historical pattern of which Marxism itself is but a large and important segment. Mr Wolfe is so absorbed in the details of his heroes' lives and controversies that in effect he omits to bring this out, well as he must know it. He is at his weakest when dealing with ideas – thus he provides insufficient analyses of such crucial issues as 'Economism' vs. political Social Democracy; democratic Menshevism vs. 'Democratic Centralism'; Social Revolutionary views with their stress on personality in general and the peasant in particular vs. Marxist industrialism; and above all of the specific points of conflict and of agreement between the 'soft' and the 'hard', humanist as opposed to ruthlessly anti-liberal groups within the various parties both inside Russia and in the greater European world beyond. And yet without a firm sense of orientation among the leading ideas and the mental and moral outlook of the period, how can the reader be expected to appreciate the importance, let alone the full force, of the criticisms made by and of such figures as Rosa Luxemburg, Kautsky, Bernstein, Guesde, Plekhanov, etc., which are the very life blood of the Russian socialist movement? Indeed it is perhaps because of this curious aversion to the analysis of ideas that Mr Wolfe fails to give his due to Plekhanov, who, during the period covered by this volume, was with Martov a more considerable figure than either Lenin or Trotsky; and makes his chapter on Lenin's own effort to produce a philosophical doctrine as dull and unconvincing as the doctrine itself. Mr Wolfe relates the circumstances in which this ill-fated book was produced, and then vacillates between the view that Lenin thought a correct theory of knowledge to be indispensable to correct political judgement and the view that he did not, and more or less lends countenance to both hypotheses. But this is relatively unimportant beside the fact that he makes little sense of the theory itself—which has, after all, for thirty years been responsible for the bulk of ideological teaching in the Soviet Union—either by exposition or refutation. Materialism and Empirio-Criticism is probably the worst philosophical book in human history to have achieved any degree of celebrity, but this does not absolve the specialist on Lenin's intellectual development from the task of applying himself to a serious critical consideration of its contents and its influence; and this applies equally to Mr Wolfe's failure to trace the process of gradual diminution of the utopian element in Lenin's thinking as afterwards in Stalin's—which is the Ariadne's thread in the

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labyrinth of Bolshevik 'ideology'. This curious lack of discrimination in the realm of ideas on the part of an otherwise acute and serious author is paralleled by his equally odd unawareness of climates of thought and of general historical contexts; too little is said about the history of the other classes and parties either in Russia or Europe, without which the growth of Russian Communism is almost unintelligible. This unhistoricism may in part be responsible for Mr Wolfe's failure to distinguish what is important from what is trivial, in his account of the views of the three eminent revolutionaries. Thus, although he does indeed mention the celebrated episode at the crucial Congress of 1903 when Plekhanov, upon being asked whether even the fundamental civil liberties-the 'inviolability of the individual' might have to go by the board if the Revolution demanded it, made the ungrammatical but fatally important reply, 'Salus revo-lutioe suprema lex', Mr Wolfe does not sufficiently treat it for what it was-the crucial breaking point of the entire movement, the real issue upon which Bolshevism split from the rest of Social Democracy, the awful moment which marked the birth of the sinister mood and attitude which has dominated Soviet Russia and world Communism ever since. Or again he lays justified stress on Lenin's agrarian opinions but does not discuss on what disagreements with orthodoxy they rest-what divided, let us say, Stalin, who, as Mr Wolfe shows in an original piece of research, agreed with Lenin, from other Socialists. This persistent treatment of all facts as equally interesting and significant makes for a flat level in Mr Wolfe's narrative which, without obscuring the story, makes it even more tedious than it must in any case to some degree remain. As if aware of this fault the author tries to enliven his style not altogether happily with touches of mythological fantasy and other flowers of speech. Thus the Goddess Success and Mistress Nature make disconcerting appearances in pages otherwise devoted to serious matters. History is suddenly described as a 'sly and capricious wench'. Why is Alexander III a 'stern and atrabilious father'? 'Atrabilious' is only the Latin equivalent of 'Ipelancholy', and no description fits that hearty emperor less well. And this is no stranger than the description of Herzen as 'gentle', or Mill's logic as filled with 'cool formalism', or, worst of all, a description of the new Russian industries of the nineties as 'exhibiting a fantastic elephantiasis', which suggests an abnormal and diseased growth, when all that the author can mean

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is phenomenally rapid progress. On the whole it would have been better if Mr Wolfe had kept to a steady jog trot without attempting sudden flights – which merely serve to draw attention to the more homely virtues of his normal-and very useful-method.

Mr Wolfe's true strength lies in detail: no other work moves so surely in the obscure world of parties and splinter parties, factions and heresies with their alternation of intrigue and crude force, nowhere else are such fine distinctions drawn between Boycottists, Ultimatisers, Conciliators, Liquidators, Otzyvist, Vperedisti etc. It is therefore a pity that his use of names and titles should be so frequently slipshod, nor does the presence of numerous misprints improve the situation in a work otherwise marked by much impeccable scholarship. In the absence of a bibliography and detailed references some of Mr Wolfe's facts seem subject to doubt. The reference to Nicholas I as the son of Alexander I is doubtless a mere slip; but why does the author say that 'bondage [in Russia] began to develop under Peter and Catherine'? Is it the case (after the isolated episode of Guchkov and his friends in 1881) that disaffected students laid wreaths upon the grave of the assassinated Alexander II in the Volkov Cemetery? The emperor was certainly not buried there, and it seems almost unthinkable that radical students of the eighties or nineties could have acted in this fashion. Was Plehve's attempt to inject anti-Semitism into government-controlled Socialism his own invention or did it have roots in the earlier anti-Semitism which derives from Ruge and Bakunin and occurs unexpectedly in some of the early propaganda of the *Zemlya i Volya*? Is the Taratuta episode more important than the horrible episode of Bauman, which Mr Wolfe does not mention? Was Gapon a conscious police agent in 1903? Did he formulate the program of Bloody Sunday himself, or is Dan right in supposing that his workers' group was permeated by Socialist agitators of whose work Gapon at the time was scarcely aware? What part, if any, did the police play in the demonstration before the Winter Palace, and is it certain that Gapon was killed by direct orders of Azeff?

But all this is of minor importance in contrast with the serious achievement of Mr Wolfe. His two felicitous quotations, one from Lenin and one from Trotsky (p. 294), in which each makes a remarkable prophecy about the disastrous consequences likely to arise from the doctrines and practices of the :Other, are in a sense the central motif-and a very original and important one – of his

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entire work. His exposure of the legend, perpetually remade and enriched by the party's biographers whereby Stalin is made to play a vastly significant role in the Revolution at an improbably early age, in places and at times in which his name had scarcely been heard of even within his native Caucasian movement, is a model of remorseless historical exposure. Mr Wolfe has made the most serious and successful attempt to date to draw a portrait both of Lenin and of Trotsky as men endowed neither with superhuman strength and virtue, nor with inhuman ruthlessness and brutality, but as thinkers and men of action still in some sense connected with the humanist and libertarian tradition of which eighteenth century rationalism and nineteenth century liberalism were the fine flower. Mr Wolfe seizes on every 'human' aspect of Lenin and of Trotsky, every disarming foible which he can discover, in his effort to draw the sharpest possible contrast between their intellectual and moral qualities and those of his bete noire-the present ruler of the Soviet Union. The result is impressive but not convincing: Lenin remains impersonal, remote, indifferent to the normal civilised values, and despite all his sensitiveness as a tactician, the prisoner of a fanatically simple view of history and mankind. Trotsky, despite Mr Wolfe's partiality to his attractive qualities and faith in his accounts of the part which he and others had played (including a historically unpalatable representation of Trotsky's father as a simple rustic-'farmer Bronstein'-as Mr Wolfe likes to call him), remains a figure generating heat but himself curiously icy and rigid. But in the course of this labour of love (and hatred) Mr Wolfe has laid bare more relevant facts and arranged them more clearly and honestly than any of his predecessors in a held which more than any other deserves the specialist's devoted skill. If he succeeds in completing his self-imposed task and writes the history of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, he will have earned the respect and gratitude of all serious historians. As it is their debt to him is great.

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