

AUTHORS & CRITICS

The Case of Comrade Bukharin

By David S. Anin



AN IMPORTANT, IF FAMILIAR, debate has now been revived by Stephen Cohen's recently published "political biography" of Bukharin. Was Bukharin a sound interpreter of Lenin's views and recommendations as they are outlined in his last "pro-NEP" arti-

cles (and purportedly also in Bukharin's personal conversations with the dying leader)? If the answer is Yes, was Bukharin then a serious contender for the leadership of the Party after Lenin's death? How—and this has always been the most enigmatic question—could Bukharin's strange, and at times even incoherent, attitude before and during his great Show Trial be explained? In this note I do not intend to discuss these questions *per se*; I will limit myself to only one point which concerns the "atmosphere" around the NEP and convey a fact which testifies to the *état esprit* of Bukharin in 1936—a fact which might, at least partly, explain his subsequent attitude.

FIRST THE "ATMOSPHERE." It seems that when we are discussing the NEP—its antecedents, its merits, prospects, attitudes to it from the leaders—we should bear in mind that Lenin did not "grant" the NEP voluntarily. He was *forced* to do so by the conditions in which Russia found herself at the time: the Civil War; War Communism which brought Russia's economy to a chaotic state; the relentless peasant uprisings; and finally Kronstadt—all these events together imposed on Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership a NEP-type change.

Having met with strong resistance from

numerous opposition groups, Lenin, threatening to resign, *forced* the Tenth Party Congress to adopt his New Economic Policy unanimously. However, from its inception, the NEP (which most probably saved the Bolshevik power from collapse) bore a dual and ambiguous character. For some it represented a capitulation before the peasants and the remaining "capitalist elements" in the cities; for others, including Lenin, it was the only possible "transition from capitalism to socialism." For some Bolsheviks, the NEP meant an honest "lasting and serious collaboration with the peasantry"; for others, it was only a "breathing spell," a "tactical retreat."

The ambiguities and equivocal character of the NEP made it liable to be interpreted differently—especially after Lenin's death, and by both Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks. Lenin's heirs sought to draw arguments from the leader's wisdom. Hence one can fully agree with Professor Sidney Hook (ENCOUNTER, December 1974) when he says that he did not find in Lenin's articles "Bukharin's programme either implicitly or explicitly." Bukharin certainly amplified Lenin's original intentions. He brought into Bolshevik revolutionary and offensive tactics, strategies and notions of an evolutionary and semi-Menshevik character—such as "growing into socialism," "genuine competition with the private sector," etc. Sidney Hook says rightly that Bukharin's ideas, if they had been followed, would have resulted in a kind of society "not too different from the programmatic perspectives of the socialist parties that controlled the Constituent Assembly."

However, here comes the other side of the story. Indeed, in view of what happened later—in view of what the Trotsky-Preobrazhensky faction recommended and of what Stalin did—could not one assume that the ambiguous, equivocal, and dying Lenin of these years (or, rather, months) was closer to Bukharin on the major issue of the time—the NEP—than to his opponents? Lenin really believed in a "*smychka* (close collaboration)" with the peasantry. Since 1905 this had been, in fact, his central "tactical" idea: "a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" (led, of course, by the proletariat or, more exactly, by the apparatus of the Bolshevik Party). In 1922–23 Lenin himself did not yet know whether he wanted the NEP to be a permanent solution or only a transitory one. Hence, his biographer and Professor Leonard Schapiro (who subscribes to Cohen's view of Bukharin as the true interpreter of Lenin) are justified both by numerous pronouncements of the leader and especially by what happened subsequently. In other words, while Professor Hook is undoubtedly correct when he examines

the texts *à la lettre*, the author and Leonard Schapiro remain closer, in my view, to the *spirit* of Lenin's attitudes in his last months.

To be sure, Bukharin was not a democrat or a "humanist" in the general sense of the term. He was not even a "rightist" Bolshevik like Kamenev and Rykov who pleaded in 1917 for a multi-Party socialist government. Somewhat "dogmatic" and "scholastic", he was a radical in comparison to such moderate and liberal Bolsheviks like Krasin or Lunacharsky or to such a *franc-parleur* as Riazanov. It was Bukharin who coined the cynical maxim: Of course we should have two parties—one in power and the other in jail. Bukharin's speech in the Constituent Assembly was one of the most vicious of the day. In comparison, the speech of the other Bolshevik, Skvortsov-Stepanov (who merely tried to convince the Assembly that all parliaments are, according to Marx, *class* parliaments) was an example of moderation. Bukharin was the first (before Stalin) to insist on *recantation*—one of the most revolting practices in the history of political struggle and persecution in general. He could also occasionally falsify history when the "cause" required it, as Max Eastman has proved.¹

And yet, in spite of all his sins, he symbolised in the middle and late 1920s the "other solution." Justified or not, the belief has been widespread (especially among the people) that, with Lenin and Bukharin jointly at the helm, there would have been a "different Russia." Indeed, the first gave the peasants the land; the second wanted them to keep it.

MY UNDERSTANDING of the essential attitudes of Bukharin was influenced by Lydia Dan. Her account ran as follows. When Bukharin visited the Dans (this is in Paris of the early 1930s before his return to Moscow) he was vivacious and talkative. The three had an animated discussion on Russia which was followed by exchanges of views on the international situation. Here both were on common ground. Both anticipated a war with Hitlerite Germany, and both

believed that only a military and political alliance between Russia and the Western democracies could forestall the war. Dan was co-author of the "Military Theses" of a group of representatives in the Socialist International (the so-called Bauer-Dan theses), and Bukharin was for a united front with the Socialists.

Suddenly, during the conversation, Bukharin exclaimed: "And what would happen to you, Fyodor Il'ich, and to Lydia Osipovna, if the Nazis attacked and defeated France? . . . I think that in that case you should contact the Soviet embassy and ask it for protection. . . ." The Dans were stunned. In 1936, after all that had been going on in the already fully Stalinised Russia, Bukharin, who (as it became known later) had confided to André Malraux and to others "*now Stalin is going to kill me*", the same Bukharin advised the Dans to seek protection in the Stalinist embassy. The sober and sceptical Dan could not swallow it. He had no doubts of Bukharin's sincerity, but he started to ponder whether the man was not quite out of touch with reality.²

In view of this "incident" (the authenticity of which is beyond any doubt), the question is how to explain Bukharin's return and behaviour? One suspects that there was an amalgam of reasons—some known to us, others unknown. Cohen dismisses Arthur Koestler's theory of "the last service to the Party." Professor Hook does not believe that Bukharin was guided by his desire to save his family since his young wife, as he says, accompanied Bukharin in Europe. What, then, was the reason? We could ask the same question about other returnees and we will, I am afraid, remain without completely convincing answers. Why did Ilya Ehrenburg voluntarily return at the height of the purges in Moscow when almost all his friends and even relatives were being arrested? Ehrenburg was not a man of physical courage, and he could have stayed in France. Ehrenburg did not know that he would (to use his own phrase) "draw the winning lottery ticket." Why did Antonov-Ovseyenko return? He could not have had the slightest doubt about the fate that awaited him. F. Raskolnikov and General Krivitzky defected . . . and they were both killed abroad.

The theory of Bukharin's American biographer is, in the last analysis, similar to that of "the last service." Bukharin, suggests the author, wanted to remain the "symbol" of a true Bolshevik in the humanistic and socialist tradition. Certainly, one should assume, not of the Bolsheviks of his own day. About the latter, his Moscow contemporaries, he spoke in "Trotskyite" terms (*i.e.* degenerate bureaucrats, etc.).

BOLSHEVISM CERTAINLY BELONGS to the Russian revolutionary tradition, but not to the humanistic

¹ See Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died* (1925), pp. 97–105.

² According to Professor Cohen, in addition to the well-known meetings which Bukharin had during his visit to Paris, he also met an old Comintern friend who advised him to remain abroad. He proposed that they put out a publication together. It would have been interesting to know who this could have been—Humbert-Droz? Taska (Rossi)? Certainly not Boris Souvarine whom he refused to see, pretending that he did not know him. (In fact, Bukharin knew Souvarine very well and even used to call him affectionately "Souvarinionok.")

one—unless “humanism” is re-defined in a Bolshevik sense. The Bolshevik forerunners were radical and, at times, heroic revolutionaries, but they were not humanists. The list of these Bolshevik precursors would include the dictatorial and totalitarian types of revolutionaries—the Pestels, Nechaevs, Tkachevs, to name only a

few. A great many of them perished at the scaffold. Bukharin could have been one of them if he believed that his death might serve “the Cause.” Russian revolutionaries, and especially Bolsheviks, have often been guided by a moral and political code which we must not think is an easy one to decipher.

The Relations of Love

Aimé?

Yes, Aimé still lives.

He's been elected to the Académie.

Still subject to occasional fits of passion

—I heard of some shopgirl only last year—

but more and more inclined to enjoy his friendships,
drinking wine in the cafés.

. . . Agapē is a monk now on Patmos.

Eros runs an illegal abortion clinic

for wealthy foreign girls in London.

Liebe?

We don't speak of him.

He was arrested in Argentina in crossdress.

I don't think the extradition has come through yet.

And Lyubov?

I haven't heard from Lyubov in a long time.

A beautiful, exquisite

girl. Do you recall her in that Chekhov play?

No one could ever cry like her.

It was said she could weep real tears

that blurred a thousand programmes

and in the same instant smile

that the theatre burst open like a frenzied day
in spring when every leaf is in love with the blue vault.

I haven't heard of Lyubov in a long time.

There are rumours. Some actor who vanished

as Mercutio, reappeared as King Lear, said he had seen her

before the war in the Lubyanka

being dragged along a corridor, a mask of death

caked with dried blood,

but who knows what to believe about Russia?

D. M. Thomas