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Review: The Man at the Vanguard

In his quest to overthrow the czar, Lenin was motivated both by Marxist theory and by revenge for the execution of his older brother. Douglas Smith reviews 'Lenin' by Victor Sebestyen.



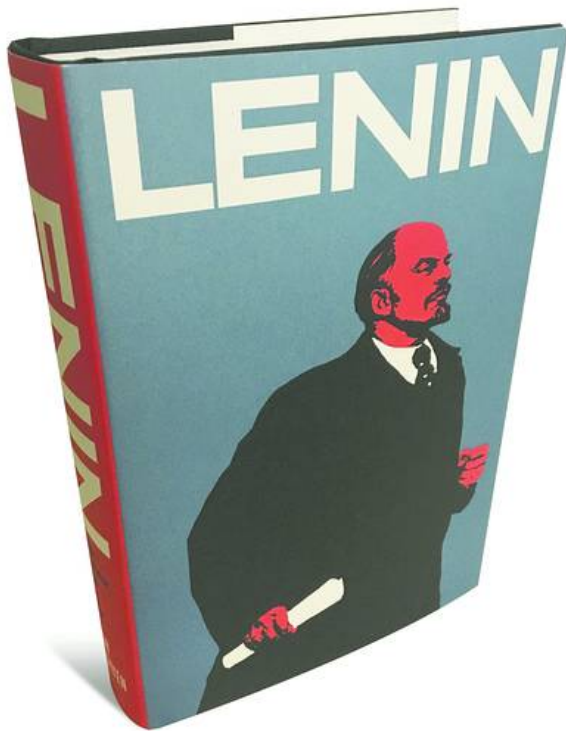
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By Douglas Smith

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Historians used to debate whether Stalin had been Lenin's rightful heir or an evil usurper. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of archives in Russia during the 1990s, the debates stopped. Once the true Lenin had been exposed, no one in good conscience could deny the similarities between the two dictators. Dmitri Volkogonov's "Lenin: A New Biography" (1994), the first work based on access to evidence in once-closed archives, exploded like a bomb, with its horrifying quotations of Lenin's calls to hang, shoot and destroy anyone who stood in the Bolsheviks' way. Two years later a collection of hitherto-secret documents under the title "The Unknown Lenin," edited by the eminent historian Richard Pipes, appeared and confirmed Volkogonov's dark portrait. And Robert Service, arguably the world's greatest authority on Lenin, came to a similar conclusion in his meticulously researched studies of the man published around the same time.

Lenin, we now know for certain, spawned Stalin.



Now, to coincide with the occasion of the centenary of the Bolshevik coup, comes an accessible, fair and marvelously written biography that reinforces what we have learned in the past three decades. Victor Sebestyen, a Hungarian-born

LENIN

By Victor Sebestyen
Pantheon, 569 pages, \$35

journalist and historian, signals his view of his subject in the book's punchy subtitle: "The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror." For

anyone interested in an introduction to the world's greatest revolutionary that draws on the latest research, Mr. Sebestyen's "Lenin" would be the place to start.

The man who dedicated his life to destroying the czarist regime was one of its favored sons. Like other Russian radicals before him—the Decembrists, Mikhail Bakunin, Prince Pyotr Kropotkin — Vladimir Ulyanov was born into gentile luxury. He grew up in a manor house in the provinces, his days spent playing out of doors, fishing, hunting, flying kites. He liked to have fun but was a serious child and showed an early love of reading.

This idyll came to an end when Vladimir's brother Alexander was hanged in 1887 for his participation in a plot on the life of Czar

Alexander III. Vladimir, then 17, had worshiped Alexander, but worse than the loss of his brother was the reaction of polite society. Henceforth, it shunned the Ulyanov family, as friends turned their backs and stopped visiting. “The bourgeois . . . they will always be traitors and cowards,” he would write later. Under his nom du guerre Lenin, it was a maxim he would repeat throughout his life.

This double tragedy of his childhood, according to Mr. Sebestyen, politicized Lenin and turned him onto the path of revolutionary struggle. “He was driven by emotion as much as by ideology,” the author writes. “His thirst for revenge after his elder brother was executed . . . motivated Lenin as powerfully as did his belief in Marx’s theory of surplus value.” Indeed, there’s little about Lenin’s writings or his theories in Mr. Sebestyen’s book. This is very much an intimate portrait, squarely focused on Lenin the man.

If, after the death of his brother, Lenin became withdrawn and intensely focused, he was never the cool and self-controlled figure of later mythology. Lenin was so maniacally obsessed with the question of revolution that, at several points in his life, he teetered on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The person who kept him whole and stood watch over his volatile temperament was Nadya Krupskaya, Lenin’s dutiful wife of 25 years. They shared a commitment to radical politics, and Lenin proposed to Nadya in a letter penned in invisible ink—Mr. Sebestyen calls this “the ultimate romantic gesture” for young revolutionaries.

Much of their life together was spent in exile in western Europe, theorizing and arguing with other revolutionaries. When the pressure became too great, Nadya would take Lenin hiking up in the Swiss alps

or bicycling in the woods outside Paris. Lenin became a fanatic cyclist and was forever cleaning his bike and checking to see that the chain was well-oiled. (Mr. Sebestyen's book is full of little gems like this.) But the intellectual battles of the exiles were ruthless, thanks largely to Lenin's win-at-all-costs attitude. Though he could be kind and courteous when he wanted, Lenin had to win every argument, regardless of how insignificant the point of contention. Yuli Martov, leader of the Mensheviks, once remarked he hoped there was no afterlife: "Do you think it would be fun to continue arguing with Lenin even after death and in the hereafter listening to his gutter abuse?"

Lenin's belligerent style that aimed to destroy his opponent as much as his ideas would leave its mark on the Bolshevik party. From the moment of the Bolshevik coup in October 1917, he showed not the least hesitation in crushing any threat to his party's hold on power. A stifling censorship of the press was introduced, political parties were outlawed, opponents were jailed, and terror was unleashed on society in the form of the Cheka, the brutal political police. Mr. Sebestyen correctly notes, however, that although these tactics were taken to a heightened level of savagery by the revolutionaries, none of them were new. In fact, they had all been learned from the czarist regime, the "violent, tyrannical and corrupt Russia" that had produced Lenin. His being a Russian was as important as being a Marxist.

As Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (effectively the prime minister) Lenin subjected himself to a punishing schedule, often working 17-hour days in his Kremlin office. He suffered his first stroke in May 1922; more followed. Lenin died in January 1924 at the age of 53. His corpse still lies encased in glass for all to see on Red Square, although his star no longer shines as it once did. According to the latest poll, Russians now consider Lenin only the fourth most outstanding man of all time, behind Stalin, Pushkin and Vladimir Putin.

Mr. Smith, the author of "Former People" and "Rasputin," is writing a book on the Soviet famine of 1921-23.

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