The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/2kZOwQP

BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

The First Totalitarian

By JOSEF JOFFE OCT. 19, 2017

LENIN
The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror
By Victor Sebestyen
Illustrated. 569 pp. Pantheon Books. $35.

Can first-rate history read like a thriller? With “Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror,” the journalist Victor Sebestyen has pulled off this rarest of feats — down to the last of its 569 pages. How did he do it? Start with a Russian version of “House of Cards” and behold Vladimir Ilyich Lenin pre-empt Frank Underwood’s cynicism and murderous ambition by 100 years. Add meticulous research by digging into Soviet archives, including those locked away until recently. Plow through 9.5 million words of Lenin’s “Collected Works.” Finally, apply a scriptwriter’s knack for drama and suspense that needs no ludicrous cliffhangers to enthrall history buffs and professionals alike.

It is surprising that a man who showed no sign of greatness in his youth and wasn’t even interested in politics should have become the leader of a revolution. Back in the U.S.S.R., a perplexed party hack mused: “I have always wondered how he could have done such extraordinary things.” Lenin ruled for less than seven years, and his Soviet empire crashed on Christmas Day 1991. Its 74-year career was a mere episode compared with Rome, Hapsburg or Britain. Communism, Soviet Russia’s ersatz religion, has ended up as a gory failure, claiming tens of millions of dead from Moscow to Mao’s China.

"How could this obstinate little man … Lenin have become so important?" the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig asked in 1927. Yet 90 years later, Russians queue daily at Lenin's tomb to gaze reverently at an embalmed corpse. The mausoleum was refurbished by Vladimir Putin at vast expense in 2011 to make an obvious point — that Russia needs a "dominant, ruthless, autocratic leader." Lenin, the Robespierre of Bolshevism, now serves as patron saint of Russian nationalism and Putinist despotism.

This "little man" also foreshadowed a thoroughly "modern political phenomenon," Sebestyen reminds his readers. He was a demagogue familiar to present-day democracies and dictatorships alike. Contemporary policy wonks will recognize Lenin as the "godfather … of 'post-truth politics.'" Offer the electorate "simple solutions to complex problems." Lie shamelessly. Designate scapegoats to explain all misery. Winning is everything, the ends justify the means. In politics, Lenin decreed, "there is only one truth: what profits my opponent hurts me, and vice versa." Rings a bell, doesn't it?

All of Leninism may be reduced to two famous words uttered by the Founder in 1921 and repeated by Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin: "*Kto kovo*?" "Who, whom?" That is, who will *do in* whom? A comrade-turned-foe gave Lenin something of a pass by invoking tragedy. Lenin "desired the good … but created evil." Sebestyen seems to agree: The "worst of his evils was to have left a man like Stalin in a position to lead Russia after him. That was a historic crime."

This sounds a familiar note: Lenin was history's agent of necessity and justice, bringing down a decrepit czarist regime that had enslaved an entire nation. Yet his heir, Stalin, was evil incarnate, sending millions to the gulag or murdering them outright. Robert Conquest, the cleareyed historian of the Soviet Union who wrote "The Great Terror," the definitive work on Stalin's purges, quipped in a limerick: "There was a great Marxist named Lenin / Who did two or three million men in. / That's a lot to have done in / But where he did one in / That grand Marxist Stalin did 10 in."

To be fair, Sebestyen doesn't fall for those exculpatory tales spun by so many

Westerners to wrest “good” Marxism from Stalin’s butchering hands. And neither did Conquest. Yes, Stalin “did in” 10 times more than the First Bolshevik. But factor in time. Lenin had only seven years in power while Stalin had 30. Then consider the most glaring truth: Whatever Stalin perfected was rooted in the Leninist system.

It was Lenin who created the “basis for a one-man tyranny,” the Polish scholar Leszek Kolakowski notes in his magisterial “Main Currents of Marxism.” “We do not promise any freedom, or any democracy,” Lenin exclaimed at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. “We were never concerned with the Kantian-priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle about the sacredness of human life,” his comrade Trotsky declared in “The Defense of Terrorism.” As Kolakowski put it *tout court*: Like Lenin, Stalin “was the personification of a system which irresistibly sought to be personified.”

Where the system was heading, shattering all “hopes and dreams for freedom under the revolution,” became cruelly obvious as early as 1921, when sailors revolted at the Kronstadt naval base. At first, they clamored for larger rations, echoing the mutiny of 1905 — the original Russian revolution — immortalized in Eisenstein’s “Battleship Potemkin.” Then it escalated, though peacefully. A mass meeting drew up a list of political demands: free elections, free trade unions, a free press and the abolition of the Cheka, the secret police that had taken over from the czar’s Okhrana.

“They must be shown no mercy,” Lenin thundered. He dispatched 20,000 troops under the command of Trotsky, who unleashed an “inferno,” according to Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who would rise to Marshall of the Soviet Union. Sebestyen rightly depicts the massacre as a turning point. “After the savagery … few people would be under any illusions that Lenin would brook serious opposition.”

The terror was systemic, not Stalin’s creation. As Dostoyevsky observed in “The House of the Dead,” “Tyranny is a habit. It has its own organic life; it develops finally into a disease. … Blood and power intoxicate.” Maxim Gorky, an early supporter who would soon call Lenin a “coldblooded trickster,” concurred: Former

slaves “will become unbridled despots as soon as they have the chance.” So radicalization was not a matter of personality, but destiny.

Lenin used his chance well. “From his first few hours as leader of Russia, he laid the ground for rule by terror,” Sebestyen writes. On the second day, he began to censor the press. On Dec. 7, 1917, he set up the Cheka to combat “counterrevolution, speculation and sabotage.” He abolished the legal system in favor of “revolutionary justice,” which legitimized every perversion of the law. “To us,” Lenin pontificated, “all is permitted. … Blood? Let there be blood.” For victory was not possible “without the very cruelest revolutionary terror.”

The scholar Robert Service puts it all in a nutshell in his acclaimed book “A History of Modern Russia”: “The forced-labor camps, the one-party state … the prohibition of free and popular elections, the ban on internal party dissent: not one of them had to be invented by Stalin. … Not for nothing did Stalin call himself Lenin’s disciple.” But why blame only Lenin and Stalin? As Sebestyen emphasizes: “The structure of the police state had been established under Nicholas I in the 1820s.”

The difference between czarism and Leninism is the one between absolutism and totalitarianism. It is one-man rule in both systems, but the critical ingredient is the total state — what the Nazis imposed as *Gleichschaltung* — the liquidation of civil society top to bottom: parties, unions, media, churches, guilds and associations.

Lenin’s most brilliant invention was a secular religion: Communism. If you believe in me, you will gain salvation — not in the Great Beyond, but in the Here and Now. And if you don’t believe, the revolutionary faith pronounced, we will kill you. With this brand-new choice — paradise on earth or speedy demise — the “obstinate little man” made a revolution that shook the world and inspired tyrants round the globe.

Though dead for more than 90 years, Lenin lives on in his mausoleum and in the minds of millions of Russians who have stood in line to commune with a

corpse. Today, as Sebestyen writes in his concluding words, Lenin is being “used by a new breed of autocrats, extreme nationalists who may have dispensed with Communism but nevertheless respect Lenin as a strongman in the Russian tradition.” Lenin is dead; Leninism lives.

Josef Joffe is a founder of The American Interest and a fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where he teaches international politics. His most recent book is “The Myth of America’s Decline.”

A version of this review appears in print on October 22, 2017, on Page BR18 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: The Godfather of Post-Truth Politics.