

## Leftists Blatantly Celebrate Lenin's Legacy in New Book

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Let it be admitted that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was consequential. One of the most consequential people in history.

He was essential to the Bolshevik Revolution, which overthrew the feckless liberals and socialists who had ousted the tsar. He led the campaign to defeat the divided Whites in a bitter civil war. He created a system that pioneered terror and yielded Joseph Stalin — a system that later imposed communism on Eastern Europe and aided China's Maoist revolution, as well as encouraged an assortment of petty tyrannies across Africa, Asia, and South America.

Yes, Lenin mattered.

So much so that Ray Bush of the *Review of African Political Economy* exults, “The mention of Lenin's name generates anxiety and concern among the ruling class and reactionary social and class forces everywhere.” Not just among them. His name also excites fear among merchants, workers, farmers, intellectuals, expatriates, foreigners, neighbors, students, soldiers, and just about everyone else.

Unfortunately, Lenin's success resulted in mass slaughter, starvation, and tyranny. Historians argue over the exact numbers and how many deaths were intended. But the macabre tolls in the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China were in the scores of millions. Understandably, then, “many on the contemporary Left continue to disavow any association with Tovarish Lenin,” observe book editors Hjalmar Jorge Joffe-Eichhorn and Patrick Anderson. Not, however, them and the other contributors to *Lenin: The Heritage We (Don't) Renounce*.

Writes historian Tamás Krausz: “Lenin is the voice of the political and social awakening of the subordinated classes and the historical embodiment of their revolutionary will on a global scale. The more aspersions the capitalist media casts at Lenin, the clearer the gigantic significance of his legacy becomes.” The Bolshevik leader was a great success, argues KYRGSOC, a Kyrgyz organization: “Lenin fought for socialism and democracy, never once in his life retreating from his political ideals.... Lenin's administrative abilities and Bolshevik discipline underpinned the decisive success of the October Revolution.”

Independent researcher Adrien Minard, a “collector of Soviet artifacts” (like me!), describes Lenin's mourners and the offerings they left: “The size of these crowds and especially their sense of creativity reveal a true spirit of spontaneous communion and a deep popular attachment to

Lenin.” Aimo Minkkinen, former director of Finland’s Lenin Museum, writes how he “took along [his] girlfriend Lea on the trip that became a nine-year honeymoon in Moscow.” He went to the museum because “[he] thought that it was important to tell the truth about Lenin: his national policy, the right to self-determination of nations, international solidarity, the fight for peace, against imperialism and great Russian chauvinism.”

Remember all the elections that Lenin won? “Independent scholar” Jacques Pauwels lauds Lenin’s democratic values: “[I]t is obviously an absurdity of Western mainstream historiography that Lenin is condemned as a nasty dictator, while Churchill is praised as one of the greatest democrats in recent history.” But why even pretend that democracy matters? Philosopher Slavoj Žižek asks: “Is it not that, if we are to confront seriously our challenges, from ecological crises to immigration, we will have to change our entire political system along the lines suggested by Lenin?” After all, the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites were widely known as environmental paradises!

Lest someone seek to separate Lenin and Mao Zedong, Alain Badiou, a French philosopher (naturally!), rises to the occasion:

I would like to describe here the striking continuity between how Lenin, shortly after the insurrectional victory of 1917, viewed the very young communist revolution in Russia, and how Mao, in the 1960s and 1970s, after twenty years of practice of power by the Chinese Communist Party, reflected on the political results of this power.

Indeed, Badiou writes of “the problems to be addressed by the Cultural Revolution,” as if the latter was just another committee meeting at work. In truth, Mao’s Cultural Revolution was a mad mix of chaos, party purge, mob violence, and civil war, unleashed by Mao to retrieve his political fortunes, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

On the book goes. According to writer Marcela Magalhães:

Lenin’s ideas—paradoxically—resurface as a voice that challenges resignation and stimulates reflection on what can be achieved when we dare to dream. As such, dreaming is not an escape from reality, but a way of creating a vision that guides our actions. Lenin, in his quest for a more just society, believed in the possibility of radical transformation. His ideas were hence not mere theoretical abstractions: they were calls to action, to build a society that would transcend the inequalities and violence intrinsic to the capitalist-colonial system.

What of the occasional blip along the way? Lenin “remained steadfast in his conviction that humanity could achieve a higher state of equality and justice.”

The University of Brighton’s Christian Høgsbjerg lauds Lenin’s support for black liberation: “In other words, Lenin was truly himself a ‘tribune of the people [...] able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects.’” Daria Dyakonova, a self-proclaimed “Marxist historian,” explains that “Vladimir Lenin, like many communists of his time, was a champion of women’s emancipation, which he linked to the revolutionary socialist transformation of societies.”

Economist Demba Moussa Dembélé lauds Lenin’s opposition to colonialism: “Lenin’s insights

on imperialism have inspired analysis of foreign domination and imperialism in Africa and the Global South for many decades.” If only so many of the people Lenin so heroically liberated hadn’t ended up in prison or dead!

Churning through the seemingly endless musings of Lenin fanboys and girls — there are 104 contributions, including poetry, imagined conversations, and “love letters” — isn’t easy. There are even unintended comedic scripts. For instance, author Constantino Bértolo explains:

[L]ittle attention has been paid to the Lenin who, against this image of rough and ruthless coldness, provides a vision of the revolutionary tasks in which aspects and concepts are present that can be identified and found within that very humanist tradition that the sanctimonious bourgeoisie accepts, approves of and acclaims. The right to dream, for example.

The volume’s essence was well captured by two essays. One is by Anatoli Ulyanov. Born in the Soviet Union, he went West and was disappointed:

I ran to a supposed paradise: a world where cops brutalize Black teens; veterans of endless wars rot under bridges; quality healthcare remains a mocking dream for the impoverished; inmates labor for pennies in prisons more crowded than the GULAG; students graduate indebted to bankers.... The facade shattered, and from the debris, Lenin winked. In his writings, I met not the towering idol but a mere comrade. An imperfect voice that ignites with a timeless message: another world is possible; the guiding stars are those who work.

Another world indeed, of institutional terror and the Gulag.

Also uniquely clueless was Göran Therborn, a “Swedish intellectual.” In his view one of history’s great tyrannies was responsible for what little progress occurred in liberal, capitalist, democratic Western systems:

Lenin was one of the creators of the 20th century.... The USSR was decisive for the defeat of Nazi Germany. It was an important support of the decolonization process, of African Americans in the USA.... Racist resistance was ferocious, and without Cold War competition, President Eisenhower, by no means a committed anti-racist, would never have sent federal troops to protect the first token Black children going to school from the White mobs of the Southern states. Also, without the Soviet Union, the Cuban Revolution would have been liquidated. Social protection and labor rights in Western Europe would have been fewer and slower without bourgeois fears of Communism and the USSR. The Soviet bloc in the United Nations was behind the UN’s tremendously successful and globally inspiring 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico.

Who can forget that 1975 U.N. conference? *The* highlight of the 20th century!

There are serious issues the book could have discussed. The flaws of Western societies are obvious, and the ensuing reform path usually is tortuous. Nevertheless, the volume’s contributors fail to grapple with the tragic reality that Lenin’s national progeny greatly compounded preexisting injustices. Indeed, Lenin’s socialist states proved unique in their contempt for human

liberty and inability to feed their people. They were almost always much worse than what they replaced.

Journalist Mahir Ali writes: “Despite all the ‘foolish things,’ [to which Lenin admitted,] the Bolshevik experiment turned out to be globally transformative. It still has much to contribute.” Alas, the Bolsheviks committed more than “foolish things.” Consider the apparently beneficent Soviet Gulag of Ulyanov’s imagination. In celebrating the 50th anniversary of the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, Northwestern University’s Gary Saul Morson wrote:

Millions of people lived and died in the Gulag’s many “islands,” the camps scattered over the vast country. The worst were located in the Kolyma region in northeastern Siberia, where prisoners labored at 50, 60, even 70 degrees below zero and were given insufficient calories to sustain life.

At least Leninist states were equal opportunity oppressors, guaranteeing *all* the rights to be arrested, tortured, murdered, and impoverished. Russia’s decrepit Romanoff dynasty looks pretty good compared to Lenin’s Bolshevik state. Similar was the result of most other Leninist revolutions.

By numbers, Mao is probably the greatest mass killer in history, yet he is still venerated in the People’s Republic of China. Beijing has lifted its people out of poverty only by rejecting Maoism and turning toward the market and capitalist West. Cambodia’s Pol Pot committed the greatest proportional slaughter, most likely killing around 2 million people, but possibly as many as 3 million, out of a population of about 7.8 million. The Killing Fields should be visited for their horror to be truly grasped. North Korea is perhaps the world’s most tyrannical society today, with ruthless repression, a mini-Gulag, and a rigid social classification system. It also warrants a visit from any enthusiastic communist.

*Lenin: The Heritage We (Don’t) Renounce* illustrates well the importance of individuals in history. Lenin was charismatic, determined, prescient, confident, and ruthless. More than anything else, he understood how and when to use power. Without him, the Bolsheviks, a minority among revolutionary wannabes — let alone the larger population — likely would have faded from history.

After ascending to the pinnacle of power, Lenin suffered a series of strokes beginning in 1922. He died a century ago, only 53 years old. And his best student, in terms of gaining and using power, won an extended political struggle: Joseph Stalin completed Lenin’s mission, solidifying the Soviet state and spreading revolution wherever the latter’s armies roamed. Even if Lenin had second thoughts at his choice of Stalin as party general secretary — the authenticity of the former’s supposed last testament remains in doubt — they were over Stalin’s incivility, not his brutality.

Bush calls *Lenin: The Heritage We (Don’t) Renounce* an “exhilarating collection.” That’s true, in the sense that most people would call a root canal an “exhilarating procedure.” The book

performs, however, at least one useful function: It reminds us that even the worst ideas sometimes persist, despite repeated flagrant and costly refutations.

The persistence of Lenin's nostrums should energize reform efforts within our constitutional and democratic order that respect human life, dignity, and liberty. The editors opine that their product is intended "to help liberate the old Ilyich from the musty, petrifying solitude of his mausoleum." That is a worthy objective. It's time to bury him. Literally. And forever put behind us more than a century of mass repression and murder in the name of the proletariat.

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