

* BUKHARIN RECALLED

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Born to Moscow school teachers in 1888, Bukharin joined the revolutionary movement as a young man in the heat of 1905, aligning himself the next year with the Bolsheviks. His career was linked to his home city, and after prison and exile, he was involved in the seizure of power in the old capital in 1917. Close to Lenin personally, he nevertheless had serious differences with the Bolshevik leader on theoretical questions of imperialism and the nature of the state, as well as on strategy, in the first year of Soviet government. Bukharin was a leader of the Left Communists, who opposed Lenin's treaty with the Germans, which removed Russia from World War I. The Left called for a revolutionary war against German imperialism, a risky, even foolish (if principled) policy that would have cost the Bolsheviks territory and possibly their hold on power. An enthusiastic supporter of the radical program of the Soviets during the civil war (1918-21), known afterward as War Communism, Bukharin later became the major promoter of its reversal in Lenin's New Economic Policy (1921-28). He favored the *smychka*, the unity of the peasants and workers symbolized by the hammer and sickle, which was officially promoted for six years when the state conceded control over much of the agricultural economy to the peasants. He allied himself with Stalin, then a party centrist, in his opposition to Trotsky's more radical approach to industrialization, which entailed heavier taxes and pressure on the peasantry.

Bukharin and Stalin enjoyed a few years of unprecedented economic success in the mid-1920s, when the battered Soviet economy grew steadily if slowly. As his biographer, Stephen F Cohen, has argued, Bukharin was in those years a far more influential member of the party than Trotsky, whose defeat earlier in the decade had marginalized the fiery orator to a role of permanent oppositionist. But by 1927 it was evident to all the leaders that the pro-peasant policy could no longer satisfy growing peasant demand, given the meager and high-priced industrial goods available. Bukharin agreed to increased financial pressure on the peasants but within the general contours of the New Economic Policy. Stalin, however, turned abruptly toward a far more coercive program reminiscent of civil war tactics—forced requisitioning of grain from the peasant villages, removal of the well-to-do peasants, the so-called kulaks, and armed suppression of all resistance. Bukharin tried reason and persuasion to stop Stalin, and even made a futile and foolish attempt to ally with other oppositionists, but the wily Georgian already controlled the levers of power and was able to portray Bukharin and company as a deviant “Right Opposition.”

In 1929 Bukharin was removed from the Politburo and lost his chairmanship of the *Comintern*. For the next decade he was at the mercy of Stalin, who played an elaborate cat-and-mouse game with him, at times feigning friendship by allowing him to edit the government's newspaper, *Izvestia*, work on the 1936

“Stalin Constitution” and travel abroad on a mission to buy the Marx archive. Bukharin had his sympathizers in the party, but few dared to stand up to Stalin now that he had consolidated his hold on the party/state. Even the “president” of the Soviet Union, the old Bolshevik Mikhail Kalinin, told Bukharin privately: “You, Nikolai Ivanovich, are 200 percent right, but there is nothing more effective than a monolithic party. We have missed our chance, Stalin has too much power.... The rest you understand yourself.” One by one Bukharin’s supporters were dismissed from their positions. Some were arrested and forced to implicate Bukharin in various anti-Soviet activities. Bukharin knew Stalin well enough to realize that his life was hanging by a thread; yet his *joie de vivre* kept him afloat. And in his last years he found a young woman with whom to share his joys and sorrows.

Anna Larina was the daughter of a distinguished old revolutionary, Iurii Larin, a close friend of Bukharin’s. She had known Bukharin from girlhood and eventually fell in love with him. They married in 1934, when Bukharin was already in disgrace. Stalin phoned him “in the dead of night,” and when Larina picked up the phone, he barked: “Stalin. Call Nikolai.” “More trouble again,” Bukharin told his bride as he took the receiver. But Stalin was in a good mood. “Nikolai, I congratulate you! You outspit me this time, too!” “How?” asked Bukharin. “A good wife, a beautiful wife, a young one...younger than my Nadya!” Stalin answered. Nadya, of course, was Stalin’s late wife, Nadezhda Allilueva, who had killed herself two years earlier after a quarrel with her husband. Bukharin and Allilueva had been friends and confidants, and Stalin had bitterly demonstrated his jealousy when he discovered the two walking alone in the dictator’s dacha in Zubalovo. As Larina tells the story in her memoirs, Stalin “crept up stealthily behind them. When they turned in surprise, he looked Nikolai Ivanovich straight in the face and uttered a terrible threat: ‘I’ll kill you.’” Bukharin took it as a crude joke, but Allilueva shuddered and turned pale.

As late as the spring of 1935, Stalin encouraged Bukharin to think of him as a friend. At a banquet for military graduates, he proposed a toast to Bukharin: “Let bygones be bygones.” Yet at the various show trials of top Soviet leaders in 1936 and 1937—personally orchestrated, as people now know, by Stalin—accusations were made against Bukharin. The noose was tightening. Bukharin pleaded, protested and went on a near-fatal hunger strike. But this tactic backfired, weakening him when he was called before the Central Committee to defend himself. He was accused of treason and arrested on February 27, 1937. He spent the last year of his life in Lubyanka prison, where his interrogators prepared him for the third of the great show trials, the one that would link Bukharin as a conspirator with Trotskyites and fascists in plots against Stalin. It was in the final twelve months of his life, in the infamous Lubyanka, after hours of questioning, that he wrote his last manuscripts and letters.

Forty-nine years old, a condemned man, Bukharin remained ever the intellectual, full of fire and fight for his youthful ideals even as his spirit and life’s work were under assault. He worked on four book-length manuscripts, writing by

hand, mining a lifetime of memories and knowledge, along with the few books permitted him. He poured out a cycle of almost 200 poems and a long autobiographical novel, *Vremena* (Times), which, though unfinished, was translated and published in 1998 by Columbia University Press under the title *How It All Began*. The first work he completed (in four weeks)—*Socialism and Its Culture*, an investigation of the current “crisis” in Europe employing the tools of Marxist analysis—would have been familiar to his party comrades. Such studies were standard at party meetings and congresses, sociological settings of “the current moment” with the requisite strategic propositions to which such an analysis would lead. “For Bukharin,” Cohen says, ‘culture’ meant modern civilization; fascism was its mortal crisis and socialism its only possible salvation.” Against all odds, Bukharin argued for a restoration of the humanist and democratic potential of the Soviet system, which would stand as the principal bulwark against fascist barbarism. His penultimate work was a philosophical treatise of the sort that only a few Bolshevik theorists could have attempted. Bukharin once again would demonstrate that he had a major contribution to make to the Soviet experiment: if not in politics, where Stalin had easily outplayed him, then in the development of theory, where Stalin was not even in the game.. Alone in his cell, Bukharin took up issues and arguments that he had explored in his 1921 master-work, *Historical Materialism*, a text that became for a decade required reading for all aspiring Communist theorists at home and abroad. Widely recognized at the time as a major thinker on questions of epistemology and the philosophy of science, Bukharin privately had to live with his mentor Lenin’s critical remark at the end of his life that Bukharin “has never studied and, I think, never fully understood dialectics.” *Philosophical Arabesques* was Bukharin’s respectful reply to Lenin, at once a defense of Leninist orthodoxy on ontological and epistemological issues and a challenge to the petrified official Marxism of the Stalinists. He believed that what he was doing was extremely valuable and wrote to his wife, “The most important thing is that the philosophical work not be lost. I worked on it for a long time and put a great deal into it; it is a very mature work in comparison to my earlier writings, and, in contrast to them, dialectical from beginning to end.”

Dialectics is a tricky business. It was part of a time when thinking and working toward alternative futures was all the rage. In our anti-utopian world, when common sense, pragmatic politics and adjusting to the way things are have displaced dreams and schemes of social engineering, not to mention social justice, the grand claims that were made in the name of dialectics—as a scientific method, a theory of knowledge and a conclusive description of the way history, society and even nature move—appear nonsensical. Yet for centuries the term in its various meanings possessed a power that when deployed skillfully in polemics might demolish an opponent’s arguments. Dialectics referred to the relationship between an external, objective “real world” and human activity’s creative interaction with it, the idea that human beings are both shaped by and shape their environment. Marx took from Hegel the concept of negation, that everything carries within it the conditions of its own disappearance, and a hundred years ago Marxists were obsessed with the Hegelian triad of dialectics:

the transformation of quantity into quality, the interpenetration of opposites and the negation of the negation. Dialectics was also used to refer to the interconnectivity of phenomena, mutual interdependence or “the unity of opposites,” in one of Lenin’s favorite phrases.

Contradiction is central to dialectics. Dialectical thinking refers to an awareness of the deeper essences that lie behind mere appearances. In other words, to be dialectical is to recognize that the world is in process, is ever-changing, to see the existing phenomenal state of things in flux. Evolution is a dialectical theory when it includes not just gradual change but leaps and eruptions. Since in dialectics the only thing permanent is change, a dialectical politics requires flexibility, not simple deduction from first principles but creative responses to new circumstances. It proposes not confusing the present with the future.

With such a vague and multivocal term, it is no wonder that Bukharin struggled so hard to prove that he was no vulgar materialist but had grasped the elusive dialectic. The difficulty of the dialectic for Marxists, however, was that even as they clung tightly to their materialism they might have moved too far in the direction of Hegelian idealism. Bukharin began his philosophical investigations with an attack on the “vulgar empiricists,” whom he accused of being metaphysical in divorcing “sensation from understanding, feeling from thought.” This is crudely anti-dialectical, he asserted. In a classically Marxist approach, he stated that ideas, like language, are “social products.” An individual experiences sensations, but “only a socialized human being thinks.” He then went on to reject the view of those he called “solipsists,” who believe everything is in the individual mind, that the external world is only a mental product and can only be known through sensations. The real world, Bukharin claimed, exists and forces its existence on the human subject.

The philosophical issues that animated Marxists for much of the first half of the twentieth century were never considered by them to be purely contemplative or speculative; they were tied to politics. Knowledge and political practice were inseparable. To think of the observable world as simply a product of mind or the senses, rather than objective and real, was intolerable. Such cognitivist views were as threatening to activists like Lenin as postmodernism is to many today. Developments in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century physics, like the electromagnetic theory, relativity and quantum theories, opened a new front in the philosophical wars between materialists and idealists. Traditional understandings of matter as permanent, hard, impenetrable and inert were disrupted. Philosophers no longer saw matter as “material”; in the words of Bertrand Russell, “Matter has become a mere ghost.”

While accepting the new physics that seemed to confirm the fluidity of nature, Lenin resisted the shift among philosophers who seemed to posit a new idealism that saw the external world as a product of mind. When he discovered that such thinking attracted members of the Bolshevik faction, like Alexander Bogdanov

(1873-1928), Lenin wrote a philosophical manifesto, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909), in which he argued not only that we know the world through our senses but that our perceptions correctly and accurately reflect the objective external world. Lenin would not accept that since humans can perceive and know only through sensations, there is no independent, nonsubjective way to verify the existence of the external world. As a great simplifier, the leader of the Bolsheviks liked dichotomies—idealists versus materialists, faith versus science, the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat, true revolutionaries versus opportunists—and considered Bogdanov and his followers idealist deviants. Like Bukharin, Lenin too had to deal with an accusation—this one from his mentor, Georgii Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism—that he was “organically incapable of dialectical thinking.”

Deeply embedded in political struggles that sapped his physical strength and mental energy, Lenin was always partisan, in philosophy as well as politics and political economy. And in this way, as well as others, Bukharin was a Leninist: A philosopher’s views were never simply neutral but were engaged in the political and social conflicts of the time. But Bukharin was very scrupulous about the philosophical issues at hand—an intellectual proclivity that was not always esteemed by his fellow revolutionaries. Trotsky, who was almost invariably on the opposite side of most issues from Bukharin, wrote critically that his rival was “inclined toward professorial ways in distinction from Lenin, for whom the structure of a composition was determined by its political or polemical interest.” More professorial, perhaps, but Bukharin echoed Marx’s critique of earlier philosophers that the external world is not simply there to be contemplated but is the object of practical action. Philosophers were to change the world. Like Lenin, Bukharin rejected the view put forth by the Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838-1916) that science, even as it strives to eliminate all metaphysical and faith-based assumptions, must limit its investigations to phenomena perceivable by the senses. For Mach scientific categories were human constructions, conventions through which humans understand the world, rather than an accurate picture of an underlying reality. Lenin considered Mach and Bogdanov (incorrectly) to be idealists who claimed that physical objects were fictions and that only sense data were real. Bukharin followed Lenin, forgetting his earlier infatuation with Bogdanov’s views, and in *Philosophical Arabesques* he proposed the completely “orthodox” view that scientific categories “are in no sense conventional signs, labels selected arbitrarily for the purpose of distinguishing between things.” Like Lenin, he regarded concepts not as conventions or mental constructions but as “representations of objective characteristics, qualities, relationships, and laws of things and of real processes.”

In this last philosophical work, as well as in earlier treatises, Bukharin set out as his principal task the defense of Marxist historical materialism as a science. Convinced of the connection between knowledge and the social world, Bukharin shared Marx’s notion of science as the investigation and discovery of the complex of social laws that determine the evolution of the human species, human society and thought. For Marx society was natural, and human nature could not be separated from society. Human evolution was the product of the structure of

society through time as well as human action on nature and society. Bukharin subscribed to and elaborated on this “sociology of thought” through application of a “materialist dialectics” that examined “the historical process of its rise and development...above all in relation to practice, to labor. Like language, thought itself.. .is a social product.”

Bukharin’s tragedy did not end with his last writings or his pathetic pleas to “Dear Koba” to save his life. There was a coda to his career, half a century after his execution. During the years of Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost, Bukharin’s ghost haunted the halls of the Kremlin as the superannuated “men of the ’60s” tried to think their way out of the Stalinist system they were determined to reform. Not only were his widow’s efforts to have Bukharin exonerated and posthumously restored to party membership vindicated; a short, intensive revival of interest in this fallen opponent of Stalinism gripped the Soviet public. Scholars in the West had long discussed whether Bukharin’s moderate policies toward the peasants and continuation of Lenin’s New Economic Policy were a viable alternative to Stalin’s ferocious war on the peasantry. For a brief time Gorbachev’s talk about a market socialism, as well as his personal interest in Bukharin (he read the Russian translation of Cohen’s biography), seemed to some to promise a more tolerant, democratic, participatory socialism along the lines envisioned by Bukharin. ❧❧❧

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