

## BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Lars T. Lih. *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context*. Historical Materialism Book Series, 9. Leiden: Brill, 2006 (xix + 1-867). \$210.00. ISBN: 978-9004131200. Reprinted Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008. \$50.00 paper. ISBN: 978-1931859585.

On March 25, 1902 Pavel Aksel'rod wrote his colleague on the board of *Iskra*, Vladimir Ul'ianov, that he had so far “only glanced at the just published *Chto delat'?*.”<sup>1</sup> Aksel'rod reassured the author as to his good intentions. He had joined a discussion circle in Zürich. Two of its participants “raved” about the new publication, calling for twice-weekly meetings of the circle rather than gathering only once a week. The expanded number of meetings was to give *Chto delat'?* the attention that it deserved.<sup>2</sup> Ul'ianov could forgive his friend's tardiness in reading the new work. Aksel'rod had already “made minor suggestions” to improve the text of *Chto delat'?* when in draft.<sup>3</sup>

The scrutiny that Social Democrats accorded *Chto delat'?* at its publication does not surprise. Why now a monograph devoted to that work of the magnitude of the one under review? The author insists that in over a century, scholars have yet to understand Lenin's meaning and motivation in the publication of the work. For that reason alone, Lih's admission to “minute philological investigation” would seem to be a worthy enterprise (p. 658).

A reviewer must then ask, is Lih's interpretation of *Chto delat'?* really new; and, if so, is it compelling? Has he brought to light a credible explanation of why Lenin wrote the text that Lih insists requires reinterpretation? Was the Lenin that Lih claims to have rediscovered really lost? I will now address those questions.

Lih objects to what he labels the effort “to orientalize” Lenin, that is, “in Western scholarship to tie Lenin as closely as possible to the Russian revolutionary tradition and . . . to distance him as far as possible from European socialism” (p. 377). He, on the other hand, is determined “to link Lenin's outlook with European Social Democracy as opposed to the Russian revolutionary tradition” (p. 169).

Lih insists that for Lenin, as for all Russian Social Democrats, the Erfurt Program of the German SPD along with Kautsky's commentary on it, “defined Social Democracy” (p. 74). The Erfurt program constituted “the essential model”

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1. I refer to Lenin's work in transliterated Russian, *Chto delat'?*, to emphasize the Russian identity of the author, the language in which it was written, and that of its intended audience. Lih uses the acronym WITBD which suggests the non-Russian sources for the work. Elsewhere he transliterates the titles of Russian publications (*Iskra*, *Rabochee delo*, and so on)

2. L.B. Kamenev, ed., *Leninskii sbornik*, Institut Lenina pri TsK RKP(b) (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1924), 2: 101.

3. Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 40.

for Russian radicals (p. 152). Lih labels Lenin “a Russian Erfurtian” and goes so far as to write of his “Erfurtian faith” (p. 157). As a result *Chto delat’?* bears nothing peculiarly Russian about it nor is it original in conception. It must be interpreted within the mainstream of late nineteenth-century German Marxism. Its “organizational values were completely in the mainstream of Western Social Democracy” (p. 472).

How original is Lih’s conception of an “occidental” Lenin? How original was Lenin’s own work, dependent, as Lih insists, on German Social Democracy? The notion that the Erfurt program and Karl Kautsky influenced Russian Social Democrats, Lenin in particular, is not new. The question that remains is, in what way? According to John Keep, Lenin invoked traditional Marxism to cover the originality and departure from orthodoxy of *Chto delat’?* “At the time Lenin strenuously denied that he was making any significant innovation, and went out of his way to claim that his views on consciousness and spontaneity had the backing of Karl Kautsky.”<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Keep argues, in its originality the work “deserves to rank as a major document of twentieth century political thought.”<sup>5</sup>

Nor was Lenin quite so enthralled with German Social Democracy and its party program as Lih maintains. I will leave aside the question of their relevance for Russia to be discussed below. Lenin praised Engels for “accusing the Erfurt program in its excessive detail and repetitions of sooner resembling commentaries [than a party program].”<sup>6</sup>

Philip Pomper also argues for Lenin’s independence of thought, stating that in social theory “he had looked to German Social Democracy and Karl Kautsky for support of his positions.”<sup>7</sup> But with *Chto delat’?*, “his theorizing began to take its peculiarly Leninist turn, demanding that the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party be “a revolutionary organization comprised of professionals.”<sup>8</sup>

Was Lenin the German Social Democrat manqué that Lih argues that he was or something more? Pomper suggests the difficulty of drawing a hard and fast line between an alleged “occidental” and “oriental” Lenin. Lenin belonged to “a shared [European and Russian] culture of radical ideologies, strategies, and techniques.”<sup>9</sup> That fact alone made “it impossible to draw a hard line between ‘native’ Russian socialism and imported variations.”<sup>10</sup>

In rediscovering an “occidental” Lenin, Lih cuts him loose from the Russian populist tradition and, in particular, from its hero Chernyshevskii. Lih admits, citing Nikolai Valentinov in *Encounters with Lenin*, that the “choice of title [for *Chto delat’?*] is rightly seen as a [sic] homage to Chernyshevskii” (p. 562). But

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4. J.L.H. Keep, *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 94.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Leninskii sbornik*, 2: 90.

7. Philip Pomper, *Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin: The Intelligentsia and Power* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), p. 74.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*

the reader is left wondering why such an homage when elsewhere Lih observes that “Chernyshevskii was more explicitly praised by Lenin’s opponents during this period [1900-1902] than by Lenin” (p. 564). A fact that suggests that Russian Social Democrats were not nearly so Erfurtian as Lih argues. Twice Lih observes that Lenin answered *Iskra*’s rival *Russkaia mysl’* by “testily responding” or by “protesting” that Chernyshevskii had his weak as well as strong sides” (pp. 377, 564) when that paper praised the Tsarist martyr.

Why would Lenin invoke an error prone Russian radical to entitle a work whose “fundamental inspiration,” according to Lih, “was the Social Democratic workers’ movement in western Europe” (p. 5)? Who in fact was Chernyshevskii for Lenin and what can that conception reveal about *Chto delat’*?

For Lenin, before there was Marx, there was Chernyshevskii. Two years after completing *Chto delat’*?, Lenin recalled what Chernyshevskii had meant to him in the 1880s. Significantly, Lenin emphasized that Chernyshevskii prepared him to understand Marx and first provided him with the conception of the professional revolutionary<sup>11</sup>:

Chernyshevskii was my favorite author. I read everything in *Sovremennik*, every line of it, and more than once. Thanks to Chernyshevskii, I was first acquainted with philosophical materialism. He first showed me Hegel’s role in the development of philosophical thought, and from him came the concept of dialectical method, after which it was easier to master Marx’s dialectic. . . . Chernyshevskii’s encyclopedic knowledge, the clarity of his revolutionary views, his merciless polemical talent captivated me. . . . Until my acquaintance with the writings of Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov, only Chernyshevskii had a major, overpowering influence on me, and it began with *Chto delat’*? . . . He not only showed that every clear thinking and genuinely decent person had to be a revolutionary but what rules he ought to follow, how he had to pursue his goals, what methods and means to use to realize them. In view of this service all his errors fade; furthermore, he was not so much guilty of them as were the undeveloped social relationships of his time.

The passage cited revealed that even Chernyshevskii’s “weak sides” lay with “undeveloped social relationships” rather than with errors inherent to him. Lenin’s reference to Plekhanov’s influence on him occurred when the two were already estranged. Nonetheless, Lenin balanced Marx and Engels with two Russians as his revolutionary forbearers. Lenin himself acknowledged both the “oriental” and the “occidental” in his formation.

Lih contends that “*Chto delat’*?” originated as a weapon in *Iskra*’s rivalry with *Rabochee delo* for leadership within Russian Social Democracy” (p. 324). The work constituted an answer to A. Martynov’s challenge made on the pages of

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11. A. I. Ivanskii, ed., *Molodoi Lenin* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1964), pp. 419-23, as cited with modifications in Pomper, *Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin*, pp. 32-33.

*Rabochee delo* that *Iskra* had failed to answer the question of the *praktiki*, what are we to do to make a revolution in Russia?

Lih's argument that *Chto delat'?* arose from *Iskra*'s polemics with *Rabochee delo* is not new. Leonard Schapiro first described the struggle between the two publications and what it meant for Lenin. For *Iskra*, the conflict constituted an uphill battle. "*Rabochee delo* supporters were . . . about twice as numerous as *Iskra* supporters in the emigration at the end of 1900."<sup>12</sup> Schapiro explained that "for a short time . . . the émigré theorists [of *Rabochee delo*] had swept the field," putting "the *Iskra* group" in the minority.<sup>13</sup> Lenin therefore crafted *Chto delat'?* to make "a vigorous statement of the case against . . . 'party democracy', 'spontaneity', 'freedom of discussion' . . . all slogans much canvassed by *Rabochee delo*."<sup>14</sup> Lih adds to the story, citing Martynov's memoir in which Lenin's rival acknowledged that the war with *Iskra* "ended with our defeat. A particularly devastating blow against us came from Lenin's book *Chto delat'?*"<sup>15</sup>

But Lenin had one more antagonist at the time that he composed *Chto delat'?*. Lih only mentions that in the midst of *Iskra*'s challenge to *Rabochee delo* for leadership of Russian Social Democracy, Plekhanov labored on his own project, a new party program, last undertaken by him in 1887 (p. 636).

Lenin in fact honed his arguments for *Chto delat'?* in the last six months of 1901 as he fought with Plekhanov over his vague and inadequate draft for the party program. According to Haimson, Lenin "found nothing in . . . [Plekhanov's] elegantly phrased document to distinguish it from the program of any other socialist party in Europe."<sup>16</sup> The real Russian Erfurtian, it would seem, was Plekhanov, not Lenin. Lenin objected to Plekhanov's draft precisely because he found it "unsuitable . . . for the party of the Russian proletariat . . . the Russian program cannot be identical with European ones. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Part of the originality of Lih's work turns on his interpretation of what he dubs the "scandalous passages" of *Chto delat'?*. For example, he cites the well-known phrase that left to its own devices, the working class will develop "only a trade-unionist awareness" (p. 650). Lih argues that up to now the statement has been improperly understood. Its meaning amounts to no more than that "the worker class with its own forces could not have discovered the doctrine of scientific socialism" (p. 651).

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12. Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, p. 38.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

14. *Ibid.*

15. A. Martynov, "Avtobiografiia," in *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii: entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Granat* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopedia, 1989 [1925-26]), as cited in Lih, p. 305.

16. Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 143.

17. *Leninskii sbornik*, "Lenin: otzyv o 'vtoroi proekte' Plekhanova," 2: 88.

The passage can best be explicated by Lenin himself. Lenin told the 10<sup>th</sup> party congress<sup>18</sup>:

Marxism teaches us that only the political party of the working class, i.e., the communist party, is capable of uniting, educating and organizing such a vanguard of the proletariat and of the working masses as is capable of resisting the inevitable petty bourgeois wavering of these masses . . . [and] their trade union prejudices.

Leonard Schapiro noted that the statement contains “the central doctrine of *Chto delat’?*”<sup>19</sup> He would agree with Lih that “trade-union” did not mean “trade unionism,” rather an ideology “that urged workers to limit themselves to economic improvement” (p. 569). But then why form a conspiratorial underground party simply to lead workers in “discovery of scientific socialism”?

Haimson provides further confirmation of the control by the party that Lenin already intended when he published *Chto delat’?* in 1902. The work revealed “not merely a lack of faith in . . . the labor movement to grow in consciousness by its own resources, but a basic distrust . . . of any man . . . to act in accord with the dictates of his ‘consciousness’ without the guidance . . . of the party and its organization.”<sup>20</sup> I would add that by 1921 and the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, with Lenin’s introduction of the ban on factionalism, it was clear that he did not even trust the “consciousness” of the party.

In conclusion, I do not agree that Lih has “rediscovered” Lenin. What is Erfurtian about Lenin already exists in the literature in our field. Lih has, however, in delineating a seemingly new Lenin mistaken a part for the whole. Lenin drew on both Russian and European traditions of socialism. He drafted *Chto delat’?* in answer both to Martynov and Krichevskii of *Rabochee delo* as well as to his ally Plekhanov. One has to seek the meaning of *Chto delat’?* not only in the “fleeting moment” in which Lenin “scored off . . . specific opponents” (p. 5); but in the full trajectory of his career, as Leonard Schapiro revealed.

Lih’s condemnation of the so-called “orientalization” of Lenin along with his determination to diminish Lenin’s Russianness requires Lenin’s own words. The author of *Chto delat’?* told Kamenev in 1913: “Do as I do in moments of despair. Go back to Chernyshevskii to renew your revolutionary faith and commitment.”<sup>21</sup> Lenin’s “Erfurtian faith” had to share pride of place with his *narodnik* heritage.

Lih is at work on a biography of Lenin. Given his encyclopedic knowledge of European and Russian radicalism as well as his facility for nuanced reading of a text, it should make a genuine contribution to the field, provided he can make the story of Lenin whole. Alexis Pogorelskin                      University of Minnesota Duluth

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18. *Desiatyi s’ezd KPSS: stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gos. politizdat, 1963), pp. 523-36, as cited in Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, p. 215.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

20. Haimson, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*, pp. 138-39.

21. L.B. Kamenev, *Chernyshevskii* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1928), p. 5.