Book Review: Lenin in Zurich

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The recent death of Alexander Solzhenitsyn on August 3rd of this year might prompt a fresh look at that writer’s oeuvre. While Solzhenitsyn is mainly associated with well known works, such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, one should not neglect his less widely known books. Among those is his *Lenin in Zürich*. This volume should be of particular interest to readers engaged with all things Swiss, given its overt subject matter. One learns much about Switzerland in the early years of the last century as a major locus for Russian émigrés. Solzhenitsyn deals not just with the sectarian debates within Bolshevik and Menshevik circles but fleshes out more broadly the entire Marxist spectrum in Switzerland during that time period, ranging from moderate Swiss Social Democrats all the way to Lenin’s radical and unyielding revolutionary ethos. In addition, *Lenin in Zürich* also provides important insights into the mind of one of the 20th centuries most enigmatic writers and literary/philosophical intellectuals, namely the mind of Solzhenitsyn himself.

In addition to the obvious subject matter of Lenin and his years in Switzerland, Solzhenitsyn also parades a remarkable array of fascinating individuals around the Bolshevik leader. Chief among them are the highly influential and complex Karl Radek (1885–1939) and Alexander Parvus (1867–1924). It is arguable that without their collaboration, Lenin would not have succeeded in bringing himself and the Bolsheviks to power, and thus the Soviet Union might never have happened. Of course, Solzhenitsyn could not avoid the temptation to delve into Lenin’s family and romantic life, as it developed into the ménage à trois between Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869–1939) and the spirited Inessa Armand (1874–1920). In a pivotal moment of the book, Solzhenitsyn even compares Lenin to that most famous and unyielding Swiss Protestant Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), whose single-minded pursuit of a Cause makes the two otherwise very unlike thinkers and polemists alike in some ways. If a search is limited to Russia, a more favorable comparison would be between Peter the Great and Lenin, as both were Westernizers with considerable vision, bringing change and reform to Russia. (166)

Solzhenitsyn expects his readers to be more or less familiar with this dazzling set of characters who crossed Lenin’s path in Switzerland. He weaves his story with the literary skills that we have come to expect from
this indefatigable critic of Soviet oppression. It bears underscoring that Solzhenitsyn was not just a courageous anti-Soviet dissident but also a deeply convinced Slavophile and Russophile, whose world view was constructed with bold strokes that did not easily lend themselves to ambivalence and a searching exploration of complexity. This is both the book’s ultimate strength and simultaneously its greatest weakness. Solzhenitsyn was a great simplifier, also when it came to Lenin, whom he demonizes in interesting and perhaps somewhat disturbing ways. While there is much that can and should be said against Lenin’s self-righteous temper and tyrannical treatment of those who disagreed with him on fundamental issues, let alone the murders he condoned, one dimensional he was not. Solzhenitsyn’s ideological agenda, of illustrating how the Soviet experiment was reckless and tyrannical not just since the distortions of Stalinism but since its very inception by Lenin, informs much of Lenin in Zürich.

The historian Robert Service reminds us, in his well-considered and well documented Lenin biography, that reductionism and oversimplification might bring certain comforts of certainty to their proponents but ultimately do not advance our knowledge.

In trying to kill [Lenin] off, many anti-Leninist historians in Russia have opted for the weapons traditional among many Western writers. Nearly always this is attempted by representing him in a mono-dimensional way. Lenin the state terrorist. Lenin the ideologue. Lenin the party boss or the writer or even the lover.”

Given the seemingly perennial human interest in Romantic love and its entanglements, Solzhenitsyn showcases the relationship between Lenin, Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, and Lenin’s intimate friend and close associate Inessa Armand. This truly complex relationship becomes another tool for Solzhenitsyn to show Lenin as a deeply flawed man. He portrays the Bolshevik leader as opportunistic and calculating in his relationships with these two women, while not really exploring the complexities inherit in them. In addition, Solzhenitsyn employs certain rather ungenerous clichés, especially when it comes to Lenin’s wife Nadezhda/Nadia. She suffered from Graves’ disease, which accounted for

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77 Solzhenitsyn not only expects his readers to be familiar with the characters but also the events that transpired before Lenin’s return to Russia, for example the importance of Lenin’s changing alliances while considering which country’s socialist party would be host to the revolution. At various times in the book, Lenin believes and convinces those around him that Switzerland is the place for the revolution and socialism, and at others, he opts for Russia or Sweden.

her physical transformation from a once very beautiful and attractive women to her appearance of later years. The symptoms of Grave’s disease include not only a severe disruption of the menstrual cycle but also a tightening of the neck and bulging of the eyes. In addition to carving out her unfortunate physical features, Solzhenitsyn frames Nadia’s intellect in equally unflattering terms. In essence, Solzhenitsyn’s version of Nadia is that of a modest woman with much to be modest about, including an uncritical devotion to her husband, for whom she performs secretarial services as his intellectual inferior. While this description of their relationship is somewhat correct, it also very much glosses over the intellectual abilities of Nadia, who wrote several works on pedagogical theory and was drawn to Tolstoy’s theories on education long before she met Lenin. Nadia particularly focused on Tolstoy’s sense of allowing the free development of each child and student as well as the importance of developing a positive and nurturing teacher-student relationship. She also worked tirelessly fighting illiteracy and improving the Soviet library system, after the Bolsheviks sized power in 1917 in the old Russian Empire.

The beautiful and precocious Inessa Armand is presented in more nuanced terms by Solzhenitsyn, who nevertheless instrumentalizes her to discredit Lenin. With some measure of empathy, Solzhenitsyn observes that [a]ll the men and women that Lenin had ever met in his life he had valued only if, and as long as, they were useful to the Cause. Only Inessa, although she had entered his life through the Cause – and there was no other way, no outsider could ever get near him, – existed as if for him alone, complementing his existence with her own. Inessa revealed to him things he would never have thought of, never imagined, and might have lived without discovering . . . Long ago, when the whole world was carefully measured, appraised and regulated, she had shaken his certainties, bidding him break bounds and follow her through a world which was the same yet unlike anything he had imagined, and he had gone with her, like a timid but delighted schoolboy, anxiously clinging to her guiding hand, full of childish, doglike gratitude towards her, worshipping her right down to the blue veins of her slender foot for all she had revealed to him, and made to last as long as her love for him.” (70–71)

One cannot help but be amazed at Solzhenitsyn’s ability to combine a deep and poetic understanding of what drew Lenin to Inessa with his galling sarcasm for Lenin’s devotion to her. Lenin’s “doglike” attachment amounted, according to Solzhenitsyn, to him showering her with attention and letters, while she responded more sparsely. Historian Dimitri Volkogonov, who shares Solzhenitsyn’s strong dislike for Lenin as a thinker, politician, and even human being, offers a significantly more complex version of the relationship between Lenin and Inessa. Emphasizing
how well-educated Insessa was (being fluent not only in Russian and French but English as well), she devoured Russian and French philosophy early on, especially Rousseau. She published on feminism, free love, and a range of other topics, which may have equally intrigued and disturbed Lenin. Volkogonov, who had more detailed access to archival holdings than Solzhenitsyn on the matter, argues just the opposite, pointing out that Insessa often wrote to Lenin, lovingly-impatiently calling for swifter responses. Volkogonov understood that “Inessa had been perhaps the brightest ray of sunshine” in Lenin’s life. This assessment differs from the way that Solzhenitsyn frames the relationship; he, as a Russian nationalist and Slavophile par excellence, in all likelihood was not immune to a fair degree of masculine sexism. In this light, perhaps the greatest insult, in a culture that valued masculinity as a virtue in and of itself, is the diminishment of one’s manhood in slavish devotion to a woman.

Alexander Parvus, alias Dr. Helphand, was one of the most intriguing and complex figures in Lenin’s proximity. He managed to combine his deeply felt Marxist critique of capitalism with immense talents as a business man and financial wizard. Advising not only Lenin and the Bolsheviks but also the Young Turks and the Imperial German government, Parvus managed to become a wheeler and dealer, with his fingers in many pies. Naturally, this did not only garner him friends. Born as Israel Lazarevich Gelfland in the small Jewish settlement Berezino in Belarus, Parvus grew up in the famous Ukrainian harbor town of Odessa and entered politics at a young age. Associating with the Jewish Bund, which had great appeal to Russian-Jewish intellectuals with socialist leanings, he was introduced early on to revolutionary activities. Parvus, a man of many identities, left Russia for Switzerland. Eventually settling in Zürich, Parvus earned his credentials as a Doctor of Philosophy in 1891 and moved to Germany, where he befriended a variety of Marxist theoreticians and activists, like Rosa Luxemburg and eventually Lenin himself. Parvus met the latter in 1900 in Munich and was as impressed with Lenin’s intellect as Lenin was with Parvus’ most original mind. In fact, it has been frequently asserted that Parvus first came up with the idea of starting a socialist revolution by trying to transform a foreign war into an internal revolt, which then would turn into revolution. Both Lenin and Trotsky were to develop this further. When Revolution broke out in Russia in 1905, Parvus – at that time an associate of Leon Trotsky – moved to St. Petersburg and was arrested for his activities against the Tsarist government. Parvus, who was sentenced by the

80Ibid., 49.
Russian Imperial government to three years of exile in Siberia, managed to escape to Germany and eventually took up residency in Istanbul, where he made a large fortune supplying the Turkish army with food and advising the Turkish nationalists. It was in Istanbul as well that Parvus forged close ties with Baron Hans von Wangenheim, the German ambassador there. Von Wangenheim was of course no supporter of Parvus’ socialist dreams but saw potential in undermining Russia, which since August 1914 was at war with Germany. Both men found common ground in trying to destabilize Russia by showering the Bolsheviks under Lenin with considerable financial and logistical support. As the source of Lenin’s money, he is portrayed as an unfavorable character kept only for resources and powerful connections. Their relationship’s dynamics can perhaps be seen in Parvus’ incorrect assumption that his meeting in Switzerland with Lenin would be successful.81 One of the chief components of the deal arranged between Parvus and the Imperial German government was to offer Lenin safe passage from Switzerland through Germany in order to get him to Russia. Parvus, whose reputation in Marxist circles had been compromised for several years, due to his Machiavellian approach to politics as well as his fabulous personal and seemingly very capitalistic wealth, ultimately succeeded in convincing Lenin that a temporary Bolshevik-German alliance could be mutually useful.

Solzhenitsyn’s personal dislike for multi-faceted characters like Parvus translates into how he portrays him. The Polish-American historian Richard Pipes, whose distaste for socialist Utopianism of any sort is well known and thus cannot be seen as idealizing Parvus, reminds his readers in his eulogy of Solzhenitsyn, published in the St. Petersburg Times on August 7th, 2008, that “Solzhenitsyn depicts Helphand-Parvus as a slimy character who tries to persuade Lenin to return to Russia and start a revolution.” Pipes very perceptively links this one-dimensional and rather ungenerous description of Parvus to Solzhenitsyn’s knee-jerk anti-Semitism, indeed “a common vice of writers of the conservative-nationalist persuasion in Russia.” Slimy, scheming, cunning, and ruthlessly opportunistic are the descriptors that Solzhenitsyn used in carving out his vision of Parvus. One typical segment reads “Parvus, however, in spite of his exquisite ugliness, could be captivating. The German ambassador in Copenhagen ... enchanted by Parvus’s incomparable intelligence, was his already.” (136).

Solzhenitsyn casts another close associate of Lenin in somewhat similar terms; Karl Radek is framed as the constantly scheming intellectual, “with his black whiskers that run from ear to ear under his chin, with his horn-

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81 Frequently in the book Parvus is portrayed as more of a methodical businessman and Lenin the ideological thinker and dreamer.
rimmed glasses, his quick glance and his buck teeth, restlessly switching his eternally smoking black pipe from corner to corner of his mouth...” (42) Solzhenitsyn’s Lenin notes that [w]hen Radek was nice he was really nice, a super-pal. At present there was no living without him. And how well he spoke and wrote German! He took the sharpest bends in the road with ease – there was no need to waste time explaining. A scoundrel, but a brilliant one – such people were invaluable. (43)

When Lenin announces to his rather surprised listeners that this most bourgeois and laid-back country of Switzerland, is to become the center of world revolution, Radek is not horrified by Lenin’s strange misjudgment but rather takes it as an intellectual challenge, where real lives become pawns to his sense of intellectual adventure and strategic playfulness, disregarding the human costs. “Radek wriggles, licks his lips, and excitement flashes behind his glasses: if that is the way of it, what fun he will have.” (55).

Radek, a polyglot intellectual, gifted journalist, and polemicist, was born as Karol Sobelsohn in Lemberg, when it was still part of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. Like Parvus, Radek’s Jewish background made him an outsider, and he put great hope into the socialist movement as a way to overcome mainstream anti-Semitism. After some involvement with the Polish Social Democrats, Radek moved to Germany and joined its SPD there. Again like Parvus, Radek came to know and admire Rosa Luxemburg as well as other leading Marxist intellectuals and politicians. When World War I broke out, he moved to Switzerland and became part of Lenin’s inner circle and ended up, together with Parvus, negotiating the deal with the German General Staff that got Lenin safely through Germany in a sealed train. Just like Solzhenitsyn’s interpretation of Parvus, his portrait of Radek leaves out a great deal. He does not show us why both men, who doubtlessly possessed unusually sharp and unorthodox minds, were drawn to the Marxist dream of a society free of exploitation. And Solzhenitsyn fails to illustrate how and why both Parvus and Radek were complex and contradictory beings, who might perhaps have truly believed in the workability of a socialist society that safeguarded not merely social justice but individual liberty as well.

Stefan Heym, one of former East Germany’s most popular dissident socialists, with a strong interest to defend the dream of a better society beyond capitalism against the frequently tyrannical and narrow-minded GDR Communist regime, also tried to come to terms with Radek, Parvus, and even Lenin. In his novel Radek, published in German in 1995, Heym develops both his protagonist Radek and Parvus as human beings of flesh and blood, who lived through the first parts of the violent and barbarous 20th century, trying in their own imperfect ways to bring about a better future.
They were hopeful and idealistic, narcissistic and vain, brilliant and naïve all at the same time and ultimately paid a high price for their role in shaping the events which ultimately turned against them. For while Parvus was shunned by Lenin and the Bolsheviks after he helped bring them to power and ultimately died a lone and disappointed man in his thirty-two room Berlin mansion, Radek was condemned by Stalin in one of the Soviet Union’s show trials to a ten year hard labor sentence in a Gulag, where he was most likely murdered by the NKVD. The difference between Heym’s characterizations and Solzhenisyn’s stand in stark contrast and seem to reflect important differences in the passions and beliefs of the people whose lives were directly touched by the consequences of Lenin’s efforts and vision.

Solzhenitsyn’s evaluation of Lenin in Lenin in Zurich provides readers with the opportunity to look into his mindset regarding Lenin, the other the players who helped to shape the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the years preceding. As Solzhenitsyn’s personal beliefs take center stage, the book is a valuable interpretation. It should be of particular interest to those interested in the pivotal events relating to the Russian Revolution and their development in Switzerland, since the majority of the book is set there.

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