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STÉPHANE COURTOIS, *LÉNINE, L'INVENTEUR DU TOTALITARISME*. PARIS: PERRIN, 2017, 502 p.

Reviewed by Boris Milosavljević*

Essentially a political biography of Lenin (1870–1924), Stéphane Courtois's book looks at the important theoretical and practical principles which underlay the revolutionary system ran by the main leader of the October Revolution and which justify his being considered as the architect of totalitarianism. Courtois demonstrates why the dominant idea that seeks to absolve Lenin of all responsibility for totalitarianism and lay the blame on Stalin is deeply erroneous. Based on Lenin's political beliefs put into practice, he shows the consistency of the theory and practice that produced the totalitarian system in the twentieth century. His book is one of a number of books on Lenin published in the last twenty or so years. Its goal is not to present any previously unknown sources or information about Lenin's life, nor is it to rebut some of the proposed interpretations or to check the trustworthiness of some data. Its specific goal is both to offer a political biography of Lenin's and to present the reasons behind the assertion made in the book's title that it was Lenin who invented totalitarianism.

Courtois points to Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov's unclear mixed ethnic origin (Russian, Kalmyk or Kyrgyz-Mongolian, German-Swedish (Lutheran) and Jewish (converted to Christianity) and his family's social status of nobility (*dvoryanstvo*). Lenin's father, a mathematician and physicist, was granted personal and then hereditary nobility being a deserving civil servant. He was the son of a merchant coming from a peasant serf family in the Nizhny Novgorod Governorate. The author gives an account of Lenin's privileged childhood and youth, discussing also the family and personal tragedy – the death sentence by hanging pronounced on his elder brother, a student at the University of Sankt

Petersburg, found guilty for leading a "terrorist faction" of the People's Will organization (*Narodnaya Volya*) and of participating in an attempted assassination of emperor Alexander III in 1887. The sentence laid a stigma on the entire family and had a tremendous effect on Lenin personally. The author depicts the political and intellectual climate in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the influence exerted by Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, the socialist ideologue credited with, or responsible for, the revival of the revolutionary spirit, and Sergey Gennadievich Nechaev, a hero of revolutionary violence who inspired Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, appalled by the murder of the student Ivanov who tried to leave Nechaev's group, for the character of Pyotr Verkhovensky in his novel *Demons* (pp. 53–54).

Seeking to establish the date of formation of the basic tenets of Lenin's ideology, the author points out that Lenin, while in Bern in 1914 and 1915, read with particular attention the Prussian general and military theoretician Carl von Clausewitz's book *On War*, which depicts war as an instrument of politics (p. 306).

Courtois describes as prophetic the words the former interior minister Pyotr Nikolayevich Durnovo addressed to the emperor in 1914. He spoke of the revolutionaries stirring up the masses with socialist slogans, the army that had lost its best men, the demoralized forces that were supposed to protect law, order and institutions, the intellectual opposition parties incapable of gaining popularity, all of which threatened to throw Russia into the state of anarchy and hopelessness (p. 318).

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Courtois points out that Erich Ludendorff, who served as Deputy Chief of Staff under Paul von Hindenburg at the time the United States declared war on Germany (1917), recognized the possibility of fomenting a revolution which would destroy Russia's military power and buy Germany the time (some three months) to suppress the British and French before the Americans could get to Europe (p. 324). This, Courtois suggests, led to the unnatural alliance between the German aristocracy and Russian revolutionary socialism. Revolutionaries were transported in sealed carriages from Switzerland to Russia via Germany to start a revolution, which would put an end to Russia's war against Germany. All previously set boundaries were gone, which meant that now everything was permitted because only victory counted whatever the cost. In a letter of August 1918, Lenin speaks of the coincidence of interests: "We would've been idiots not to seize the opportunity" (p. 324).

The author rightly points to Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the Bolshevik party as a party of the declassed from all classes (p. 348). Lenin set up a paramilitary organization (some 6,000–7,000-men strong) called the Red Guard, which mounted a coup and took the strategic points in the capital, Petrograd. As the author suggests, Lenin's (October) November proclamation introduced the first totalitarian regime in history (p. 349).

The book speaks of a number of rebellions that Cossacks and the peasantry raised against Lenin's revolutionary government (Bolshevik dictatorship), and of a true war of the Bolshevik party against the peasantry (pp. 397 and 398). In quelling the Cossack rebellions Lenin followed Friedrich Engels's thought that no revolution can tolerate a Vendee. In 1919 the Central Committee adopted a secret resolution on beginning a merciless struggle, massive terror against the wealthy Cossacks; they were to be physically destroyed to the last man. Despite Lenin's well-known statement that his

brother Alexander, who had been sentenced to death, had not been much of a revolutionary because he had been too carried away by science and research, the author suggests that a considerable role in Lenin's decision to have the whole imperial family murdered must have been played by the emotional motive of revenge.

Lenin destroyed all proprietor classes, including the rich peasants, thereby causing the first famine in the Soviet era. Such fanatical ideological undertakings could only be carried out by a particular kind of people, the one that Dostoevsky portrayed with Nechaev in mind (p. 411).

Courtois finds that Lenin is responsible for suppressing socialism committed to democratic culture in favour of communism, which is totalitarian both in essence and in practice (p. 446). Stalin simply took up where Lenin left off. In terms of efficacy, functionally speaking, the most successful politician of the twentieth century, as the author describes him, given that he spread his communist ideology over nearly one-quarter of the world. Almost one-third of the world population lived in socialist communist countries.

Apart from Lenin's political biography and his role in the world's history, Courtois takes a look, in several places in the book, at the French reception of communism and Leninism, mentioning the controversial Roger Garaudy and other writers such as, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, but we believe that he should have offered an assessment of the even more controversial Louis Althusser and his understanding of Lenin's philosophical importance.

Marx said that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various way; the point, however, is to change it". As we all know, however, he left no instructions as to how. As we also know, Lenin drew on the methods of the French Revolution, the Jacobin methods. The book speaks of the French radical revolutionaries, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Babeuf nicknamed Gracchus.

Courtois draws from François Furet and refers to him in several places as well as to Mona Ozouf and Raymond Aron, but also to some writers who are not considered to be completely reliable. He indirectly points to the totalitarianism of the French Revolution, the topic addressed by some earlier writers, for example, by Jacob Talmon (*The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, first published in 1952). The logical question, then, is why the honour of being called the inventor of totalitarianism is conferred on Lenin and not on a French revolutionary.

Perhaps the answer to this question should be sought in the author's definition of totalitarianism. It is understood above all as the monopoly over politics of a single party headed by a charismatic leader; in that way, the party becomes the state, absorbing the state prerogatives of government and administration; it is also the monopoly of a single ideology that commands all areas of knowledge and creativity (through methodology) – from philosophy, history and science to art, as well as the media (through censorship); it is also the monopoly of the party-state over all means of the production and distribution of material goods in order to suppress private ownership; and

last but not least – the terror of the masses used as an instrument of rule (p. 24). It may be assumed that the author believes that it was only with Lenin that totalitarianism achieved all the features required to fit the definition, although he refers to the French revolutionary roots of totalitarianism more than once in the book.

It is known that Courtois has drawn a parallel between the Nazi “race genocide” and what he calls, following Ernst Nolte, “class genocide”, and that he has advocated the establishment of an equivalent of the Nuremberg Tribunal which would try the communists responsible.

There is also a personal touch to the book, because the author used to be a communist (like Furet, at that), and of the Leninist-Maoist type (1968). He evokes his memories and describes the feelings he had as a young man and then, much later, during his visit to Moscow in 1992. Stéphane Courtois (born in 1947) is a French historian and university professor, Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and Professor at the Catholic Institute of Higher Education (ICES). He specializes in the history of communist movements and regimes.

CATHERINE MERRIDALE, *LENIN ON THE TRAIN*. LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2016, 353 p.

*Reviewed by Rastko Lompar**

Months before the centenary of one of the most influential and controversial train rides in history, the British historian and writer Catherine Merridale published her take on Lenin's trip to Russia in April 1917. The book is not aimed at fellow historians, but rather at the general public eager to learn more about the events surrounding and preceding the ascent to power of a man who left his mark on the history of the world like few others. The author followed

no clear path when describing events, and therefore the book is neither chronologically nor thematically organized. The structure is quite loose and resembles much more that of a novel than of a history book. The description is also rich with author's personal observations and impressions as well as numerous hypothetical excursions. That does not, however, mean that it is not based on

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