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## Lenin: A New Biography

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provides a balanced treatment of the subject.

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Volkogonov, Dmitri. *Lenin: A New Biography*. New York: The Free Press, 1994. 529pp. \$30

General Dmitri Volkogonov—World War II Soviet tank commander and combat veteran, former dean of Soviet military history, biographer of Trotsky and Stalin, advisor to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and co-chair of the U.S.-Russian commission on prisoners of war and missing-in-action matters, died in December 1995. He possessed undoubtedly the best possible credentials for writing what many reviewers have lauded as the definitive biography of Lenin. Volkogonov had access to the innermost sanctum of the Communist Party archives, which houses documents written by Lenin and about Lenin that the Party deemed too embarrassing to reveal or that otherwise illuminated too clearly the true nature of the founder of the Soviet state.

These documents confirm what good Western scholarship has pointed to for decades: that Soviet totalitarianism, embodied by the dreaded secret police, the GULAG prison camp system, the use of terror, and the repression of potential opposition, had its roots in Lenin, not Stalin. For this alone, Volkogonov's book is of immense value. I only wish that it had been available to me during innumerable debates in graduate school over the nature of the Soviet Union. By citing

specific documents in the various archives, Volkogonov's work essentially ends the debate. Lenin and the totalitarian state he wrought were, from the beginning, devoted to the maintenance of Bolshevik power and nothing else.

Volkogonov provides much corroborating evidence of Lenin's utter ruthlessness once in power and faced with opposition. In coded telegrams to Bolshevik functionaries, Lenin exhorted them to take hostages among the populace, shoot without trial priests and peasants, use poison gas against rebels, and so forth. The use of any means, however violent, was justified to preserve his regime, and the violent and often crude language that Lenin used in his directives should once and for all destroy the myth of the "good Lenin" whose legacy was distorted by Stalin.

Beyond his personality and its implications for the nature of the USSR, there is much more that will interest Lenin scholars. For example, Volkogonov reveals that in the final months of Lenin's life, he requested poison and trusted Stalin to provide it. Also, Lenin was able to live comfortably before the Revolution, as a "professional revolutionary," despite the fact he had worked as a wage earner for only about two years in his entire life. The sources of Lenin's livelihood included German generosity and Bolshevik bank robberies. Volkogonov also presents strong evidence that Inessa Armand was Lenin's lover, as well as conclusive proof of Lenin's Jewish heritage. However, the author explains that these facts are less important than the lengths taken by the Soviets to suppress them for decades.

What makes this book particularly fascinating is that Volkogonov had to shatter his own mental icon of Lenin to write it. Brought up on the hagiographical lies that constituted Soviet history, Volkogonov, in post-Soviet Russia, had to deal honestly, even painfully, with the damning evidence he unearthed. He explains, "None of us—the present author included—could begin to imagine that the father of domestic Russian terrorism, merciless and totalitarian, was Lenin." Volkogonov's conversion was complete, however: he routinely describes Lenin as "totalitarian" in his policies and proclivities, a moral cynic who betrayed the Russian people.

Despite its value as a reference book, and quite in contrast to the one-sided praise Volkogonov has received from other reviewers (for example, Peter Rodman in *National Review*), I cannot recommend this book for the general reader. I hold to the old-fashioned view that books are meant to be read, and this one is nearly unreadable.

Organizationally, it is a mess. It is more a collection of essays than an integrated work. It jumps around enough chronologically and thematically to make one's head spin. One could say it is a breathtaking narrative, but not in a positive sense. As just one of many possible examples, a discussion of Lenin's creation of the Politburo as the primary instrument of Bolshevik control is gratuitously interrupted by a lengthy paragraph about Lenin's personal hatred for the Mensheviks, followed by an overview of the Politburo up to Krushchev's era, and then by a

description of Soviet grain purchases in the 1970s.

There are other serious problems. Despite apparently severe editing by the translator, there are many redundant passages, non sequiturs, and verbose passages that detract from the focus of the entire work, which is, after all, supposed to be about Lenin. Volkogonov's writing, at least in translation, lacked the beauty, coherence, and wit of a Richard Pipes or Adam Ulam.

Overall, one would more profitably and enjoyably spend time reading these authors' treatments of Lenin and his crimes, either Pipes's *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* or Ulam's classic from the late 1960s, *The Bolsheviks*. Volkogonov's contributions are that he has made public whatever nuggets the Russian archives provided and confirmed Western beliefs about Lenin. However, for now, the best histories of the Soviet Union and its leaders continue to be written by Western scholars.

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Dobrynin, Anatoly Fyodorovich. *In Confidence*. New York: Times Books, 1995. 672pp. \$30

*In Confidence* is Dobrynin's memoirs of his years of service in the Soviet diplomatic corps, the majority of which (1962 to 1985) were spent as Soviet ambassador to the United States. He takes great pains to convince the reader that his philosophy was based upon a sincere attempt to learn as much as possible about the United States and its culture, and that, with this knowledge, he would transmit to his