

# Russia: Lenin's Laughter

Thursday 4 May 2023, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 2 May 2023).

**What should we make of Lenin today? How should he be framed within what Hayden White calls a 'practical past' narrative, one that provides an orientation to the past that might usefully illuminate the present? In the century after his death, Lenin fell victim both to a hagiographic approach in the USSR and to a more or less aggressively anti-Communist Sovietology in the West. This 'campism' over the historiography survived the end of the Soviet system and limited the readership to Lenin's core haters or supporters, leaving behind the non-aligned majority. Today, the place Lenin occupies in official Russian 'politics of memory' illustrates the latter's contradictory nature: Lenin is respected as a page in the state's history but rejected as an insurrectionary. This emancipation of Lenin as a symbol from his essence as a revolutionary Marxist has roots deep in the Soviet period. During Stalin's time, and especially under Brezhnev, a huge memorial infrastructure was created to him which includes dozens of Lenin museums—from his native city of Ulyanovsk to his last residence in Gorky, near Moscow. The complete edition of Lenin's collected works was published in tens of millions of copies; nearly every month of his life was carefully described in the twelve volumes. In the national Marxism-Leninism Institute there was a special building, in whose long corridors each room was dedicated to a specific period of Lenin's life, titled 'First half of 1898' or '1.07.1917-10.07.1917'.**

During the period of Perestroika, the significance of Lenin in Soviet propaganda changed. Gorbachev's reforms were announced as the implementation of Lenin's ideas of genuine Soviet democracy, betrayed by Stalin and his heirs. However, this last short burst of Lenin's popularity was soon followed by the Russian 1990s, with a radical turn towards the market. Liberal anti-communism became the new state ideology. In a country where hundreds of streets still bear his name, and even his body still lies in the Mausoleum in the capital's main square, Lenin was legitimized only as a silent part of the state tradition, equal in this status with any other artifact from the Soviet or Tsarist past.

According to the official view, in the triad of twentieth-century Russia's historical figures, Lenin represents an absolute evil, while Stalin's reputation is mixed: 'bad' as a revolutionary and as the fanatical architect of the mass terror, but 'good' as a state-minded person who led the country to a great victory in the Second World War. The third figure, Tsar Nicholas II, is literally a saint, canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Over the last twenty years, an impressive cult of the last Tsar has been established, presenting him as a great ruler and an innocent victim who died for the sins of the nation. This conservative, clerical and anti-revolutionary vision of national history has many similarities with other 'illiberal' Eastern European regimes, such as Hungary or Poland; the main difference with Putin's Russia being that the Soviet legacy could not be interpreted here as a product of foreign domination, something fully external for the national history. That has lent the collective memory constructed by the contemporary Russian state a semi-schizophrenic character, whereby Lenin could occupy a legitimate place only as an empty form—a mummified body or a meaningless monument—while his ideas and beliefs could barely be treated as the object of public discussion.

In the official propaganda of the past decade—say, since 2012—Lenin and the Bolsheviks are usually portrayed as criminal fanatics, ready to sacrifice the country for their utopian ideas. During the 2017 centenary of the Revolution this view of history was widely aired, with tv series such as *Trotsky* (a monstrous figure) or the sprawling costume drama *Wings of Empire*. One of these series, *Demon of Revolution*, later re-worked as a movie, focused on Lenin's relations with the German authorities in early 1917 and reproduced the old 'German money' conspiracy-theory narrative. A simple lesson could be drawn from all this material produced by the modern Russian culture industry: all revolutions, from the Bolsheviks to the Ukrainian Maidan of 2014, were iterations of the same 'regime change' strategy used by the West to destabilize and destroy the Russian state.

A few years ago, Ukraine's symbolic 'decommunization' and the removal of Lenin monuments were strongly condemned by Russian officials from this conservative position, as revolutionary acts that were a 'betrayal of our common history'. Yet in his speech justifying the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin placed the blame for its independence on Lenin. From Putin's point of view, the Bolsheviks' nationalities policy and the principle of self-determination inscribed in the very foundation of the USSR made it possible for Ukraine to emerge as an 'artificial country' with a fictitious people. The goal of Russian aggression is explicitly proclaimed to be the destruction of the principle of Ukrainian independence, and thus the correction of Lenin's 'mistake'.

How to begin to think freely about Lenin, in this context? How to find a new way to talk about his life and ideas that could start a reconsideration of them, in Russia and elsewhere? Lev Danilkin began approaching these questions in the run up to the centenary, with a commission from an old publishing house—once that of the Komsomol—which specializes in popular biographies of historical figures. Born in 1974, Danilkin is one of the leading literary critics of a younger generation, who came to the fore thanks to his regular book reviews in *Afisha*, a listings magazine that emerged in the 1990s and was largely responsible for the promotion of a 'hipster' lifestyle and culture in Russia. Danilkin can certainly not be labelled left-wing, but at the same time he was always slightly critical of the pro-market, anti-Communist orientation of his own liberal milieu. Initially, he presented his ambitious attempt to reinvent Lenin as a flesh-and-blood man and historical figure as an experiment upon himself: what will happen to a contemporary Russian person who tries to read all 55 volumes of Lenin's collected works, to visit all the still-preserved Lenin museums and journey to all the far-flung places where Lenin stayed? Is it possible, in fact, to understand Lenin through these artifacts, which are still at hand for everyone in Russia, but remain silent?

Danilkin's approach is populist in the best sense and highly effective for attracting a new mass readership. He is neither a professional historian nor a 'partisan', trying to defend his predictable—apologetic or negative—view of Lenin, but a gifted, independent-minded writer, willing to follow the research where it leads. As he confesses, Danilkin's trip through the Lenin archives, which lasted five years or more, altered his own view of his subject, which by the end of the book came to be one of 'unquestionable respect'. *Pantocrator of Solar Dust*—the biography's enigmatic, almost sci-fi title remains a mystery up to the final pages—is full of references and hidden quotations from Soviet and post-Soviet literature, from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* or Ilf and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* to the latest novels by Victor Pelevin. At the same time, Danilkin freely mixes high and low cultural references—comparing Plekhanov to pop-star Shakira, or delegates of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903 with gnomes knocking on Bilbo Baggins's door—which probably help to make the book excitingly readable for a young Russian audience, though they may make it untranslatable outside.

Not only the language and literary style but also the method of Danilkin's book is very different to conventional treatments of Lenin in Russia today. At times, *Pantocrator* seems more like a work of fiction, investigative journalism or even a travel guide than a standard biography of a historical figure. Danilkin opens with an arresting discussion of a birch-bark 'letter in totems' that the 12-year-

old Vladimir Ilyich drew for a schoolfriend who had moved to another town. The pictographic elements recall the famous Petitions of the Indian Tribes to the US Congress, Danilkin thinks—and in summertime the six Ulyanov children, having devoured Cooper and Mayne Reid, ran wild in the countryside, building wigwams and hunting with bows and arrows. The biographer lingers on the sophisticated Latinate use of hendiadys, two nouns in one ('letter totems'), highly unusual in Russian. But the coded letter also contains the pictograms of Egyptian tombs and the stick figures of prehistoric cave paintings. Then there are the precisely drawn totems—samovar, lobster, crane, snake, frog, pig—the surreal-looking Sleeping Man, the Bearded Swimmer, the Kingdom of Food in the right-hand corner, with a jug of milk, a sausage cut in two and mustachioed faces looking like Guy Fawkes masks.

The young cryptographer will be familiar to readers of Isaac Deutscher's great fragment, 'Lenin's Childhood': the boisterous middle child, full of mischief and a lover of noisy games, swimming in the Volga, leading night-time expeditions through the woods; though also top of his class in Greek, Latin, German and Russian literature, commended by his headmaster (Kerensky's father) for his exceptional talents and diligence; brimming with enthusiasm for fiction and poetry, while his elder brother and sister were working their way through *Das Kapital*—before the extraordinary blow of his brother Sasha's execution on charges of regicide destroyed the world of his childhood and lent a steely determination to his political commitment. Yet as Danilkin notes:

Lenin's birch-bark document is discouraging for the biographer: ancient symbols, hallucinations, bottomless lakes, Indians, secret connections between objects and phenomena, visual metaphors, series of doubles, samovars that are not what they seem. The field is generously sown with keys, but not one of them opens anything. Document Number One [in the Lenin archive] . . . doesn't lend itself to easy interpretation. Lenin was a professional cryptographer. Memoirists ascribed to him the ability to move unnoticed, to quickly disappear and other 'Indian' pathfinding abilities. There are apocryphal stories about him finding his way through the woods by the stars, and through meadows by the flight paths of bees. But never mind the woods—even in his room, writing articles, he paced silently like Cooper's Indians, not stepping on his heels. Detecting him—and then grabbing him in your fist: got you!—won't work.

By implication, Danilkin's method is to tread lightly himself, following his subject's tracks. His presentation of Lenin's family history and childhood exemplifies this deft touch. The biography consistently refrains from cheap sensations of the 'demon of revolution' type. Describing Lenin's ethnic heritage, he correctly mentions both the Jewish and German ancestors of his mother, who also had Swedish and Baltic relations, and the Kalmuk ancestors of his father, whose portraits show his high-cheekboned Mongol features. Lenin's maternal grandfather, Dr Alexander Blank, was a highly cultured physician who insisted on the education of his daughters and retired to a country place at Kokushkino, near Kazan, where the Ulyanov children would spend their holidays. His paternal grandfather was a Kalmuk tailor from the poorest quarter of Astrakhan, near the shores of the Caspian Sea. His youngest son, Lenin's father, won admission to the local school with the help of the family's priest, studied astronomy at Kazan University and wrote a thesis on Olbers' Paradox before becoming a teacher, then a school inspector. Such mixed origins, Danilkin emphasizes, were characteristic of the middle classes of the Russian Empire, in which Orthodox faith was the main criterion for 'Russianness'.

Born in 1870, Lenin's teenage years were spent under the darkening clouds of the 1880s: the limited opening of the late 1860s and 70s was brutally reversed after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Narodnaya Volya militants in 1881. Under Alexander III, the country schools that Lenin's father had laboured so hard to improve reverted to the charge of parish priests. Shattered by the defeat, Ulyanov died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1886, at the age of 55. The following year, the execution

of Sasha, who took full responsibility for an ill-conceived student conspiracy against Alexander iii, left the young Lenin alone with his mother, sisters and younger brother, stigmatized as the relatives of a regicide. Throughout his life, this tightknit family group remained the people he was closest to and with whom, along with Nadezhda Krupskaya, he had relationships of the deepest trust.

In structure, *Pantocrator of Solar Dust* follows two lines of Lenin's material legacy: his writings and the places where he lived. For the latter, Danilkin travelled thousands of miles, from the village of Kokushkino to the remote Siberian outpost of Shushenskoe, from Paris to Krakow, Zurich and Capri. Detailed descriptions of these places—as Danilkin finds them today, as well as reconstructions of their condition a century ago—play a significant role in the book. Even if not entirely justified as biography, these witty and well-crafted depictions are a pleasure to read. And in fact this mapping of Lenin's life adds to our understanding of his outlook, as a person who had a deep knowledge both of Russia and of Western Europe, where he spent nearly half his short adult life. Danilkin follows in his footsteps, from left-wing discussion groups in Samara—where, aged 19, Lenin translated the *Communist Manifesto* into Russian—to underground work in St Petersburg, where he met Krupskaya in 1894; from meetings with revolutionaries in Geneva, Paris, Berlin to arrest and exile in Shushenskoe, where Lenin worked up the mass of data he had taken with him into *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899). Danilkin discusses its significance as a large-scale picture of social transformation in a country on the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, racked with poverty, with a colossal breakdown in the existing structures of peasant life—that is, the absolute majority of the population—and the dynamic emergence of a new working class. His Lenin sees the coming of capitalism as both a vast tragedy and an opportunity for revolutionary change.

Detailing the battles to build the rsdlp before and after the 1905 Revolution, Danilkin doesn't flinch from comparing *Iskra* to a successful start-up, or the Bolshevik Party to an effective business team. Partly for this reason—his part-playful attempt to bring to bear the language of a modern middle-class Russian readership—such figures as the Bolsheviks' 'men of deeds' Leonid Krasin or Nicolay Bauman get more attention than 'men of words' Zinoviev or Radek. Discussing Lenin's pre-revolutionary everyday life, Danilkin draws attention to the importance of secrecy. Lenin was constantly improving his skills of concealment and self-transformation, not just in Russia in the early years and on his return in 1917, but all through the period of emigration. He had a talent for looking like an average person wherever he was, in a Siberian village or a Parisian café, ready for small talk with everyone. (On this basis, Danilkin ventures that Lenin may well have encountered the Dadaist Tristan Tzara during World War One in Zurich.) For Lenin, though, these practices were not just a matter of underground tactics but gave him access to a great empirical trove of public sentiments. This proved crucial for informing his analysis of the internationalist movement's perspectives during the First World War or the prospects for seizing power in October 1917.

Danilkin does a fine job of presenting Lenin's intellectual legacy. He gives a careful rendering of all Lenin's principal texts in chronological order, from *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* and *What Is to Be Done* to the last writings. In his exposition of *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Danilkin bluntly states that Lenin's analysis largely retains its relevance today, and quite simply and convincingly for the modern Russian reader explains why this is so. He provides a detailed and impressive analysis of Lenin's reading of Hegel from the *Philosophical Notebooks*, drawing on Kevin Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism*. Perhaps the most telling analysis is that of *State and Revolution*. Danilkin correctly explains the anti-statist intention of Lenin's text and contrasts this stateless and self-organized alternative with the future development of the Soviet state. For Danilkin, this exemplifies the tragic nature of Lenin as a historical figure, whose ultimate legacy was just another vast machine of state—against his own manifest will. *Pantocrator* shows that in his last years Lenin clearly understood the danger of the rising party bureaucracy and its domination over society; despite his failure to stop this process, his 'stateless' perspective remains

necessary and relevant.

Danilkin's narrative is overwhelmingly focused on Lenin himself and those around him. It provides only a minimal and selective account of the broader historical context. The author takes for granted Russian readers' knowledge of the major episodes of national history: the bloody beginning of Nicholas II's rule in the mid-1890s, when a new generation of revolutionaries was sent to the scaffold; the stunning defeat of the Russo-Japanese War, prologue to the 'dress rehearsal' of 1905; the February and October revolutions of 1917 and the devastating 1918–21 civil war. Danilkin concentrates instead on a kind of historical contextualization that lies beyond the conventional political-historical curriculum: he provides vivid insights into the social conditions of Russian workers at the turn of the century, or Lenin's crucial role in the debates on the Soviet electrification plan.

Nevertheless, the biography finds room not just for theoretical insights but for historiographical discussion. Danilkin refers to—and succeeds in popularizing—the work of Vladlen Loginov, author of probably the best historical studies of Lenin written in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Russia and unfortunately not widely known. (Curiously, Deutscher's work goes unmentioned.) He quite rightly polemicizes against anti-Communist interpretations of Lenin, such as those of Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Dmitry Volkogonov, but at the same time partially adopts the dubious view of the semi-Stalinist historian Valentin Sakharov, who suggested that Lenin's 'Testament' and 'The Question of Nationalities, or "Autonomization"', both sharply critical of Stalin, were fakes, probably fabricated by Trotsky. Danilkin agrees that the 'Testament' was not written by Lenin, but thinks the real fabricator was not Trotsky but Krupskaya. This strange version is not based on serious archival research but on a writer's intuition. The argument is that, with Lenin's grave illness and the growing struggle between Trotsky and Stalin, the latter gaining the upper hand, Krupskaya began to play a game of her own, in order to re-establish the balance of forces within the party and ensure the possibility of a pure Leninist line even after Lenin.

Weak on evidence, this account was apparently invented by Danilkin in order to foreground Krupskaya's political role, rather than portraying her as a mere shadow of Lenin. (As a corollary, in his discussion of Lenin's *Privatsache*, he argues that Krupskaya's husband saw Inessa Armand, the beautiful Bolshevik widely thought to be his secret mistress, as exclusively a close friend; practically a sister.) This strong dramaturgic move by the writer—almost certainly incorrect for the historian—is consistent with Danilkin's overall strategy, which focuses not so much on the predictable figures of Lenin's entourage, but on those who have been unjustly forgotten. For example, he provides impressive portraits of Ivan Babushkin, a leading militant in Lenin's first group, the League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, organized in the mid-1890s in St Petersburg; of the Swiss socialist Fritz Platten, who accompanied Lenin on the train through Germany in April 1917, stayed in Russia and later died in Stalin's purges; and of Roman Malinovsky, one of Lenin's great disappointments, a leader of the Bolsheviks' parliamentary group in the Duma who was exposed as a police provocateur.

It is impossible to miss *Pantocrator's* change of tone after 1917. If during the emigration there are elements of humour in the presentation of Lenin, especially during his never-ending micro-struggles within the party during the inter-revolutionary period, after the October Revolution it becomes much more sublime and tragic. In the process, Danilkin emerges as a sincere Lenin advocate, defending his position on the most vulnerable episodes—the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the execution of the Romanovs. These events are central for the allegations against Lenin of immorality, cruelty and waging an unprincipled struggle for power. Danilkin understands them as rational responses to concrete circumstances. So, for example, he analyses in detail the charge put forward by the Provisional Government in the summer of 1917, and extremely sensitive for Russian political mythology, that Lenin collaborated with the German authorities over

his return in the 'sealed train'. Danilkin proves the inconsistency of the case. He also analyses in detail such controversial moments as the conclusion of the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the introduction of the nep in 1921, each time defending his hero and supporting his decisions as forced by the prevailing conditions, the only possible ones at the time.

Danilkin defends Lenin not as a Leninist, but as a biographer who was able to get a deep sense of his subject. For him, Lenin is not just a revolutionary who believed in the possibility of a socialist society but a thinker with an expansive and realist vision of the contradictions and limits of capitalism as a system. This understanding, grounded in a Marxist dialectic, allowed Lenin to grasp the link between inter-imperialist wars and revolutionary uprisings, to see the great potential of anti-colonial struggles. From this perspective, Danilkin describes the creation of the Comintern under Lenin's direction as not just the instrument of an abstract 'world revolution' but a 'red globalization' project, related to the specific circumstances of the crisis of the capitalist world order after 1918—a reversal of present-day globalization, in that it would empower 'the losers' and offer peripheral countries their independence.

Danilkin's might be called a 'Leninocentric' biography, an inner-directed attempt to get to the heart of Lenin's political logic. We might compare it to another recent work that sets out to offer a new perspective on the subject. Tariq Ali's *Dilemmas of Lenin* takes the opposite approach—explaining the Bolshevik leader through a number of insights into his epoch. His book is structured around five 'situations' that Lenin confronted: terror, war, empire, love and revolution—political challenges that found provisional answers in Lenin's life and thought. Each 'dilemma' could stand as a separate essay that illuminates some debatable or non-obvious part of Bolshevik legacy. Despite the differences with Danilkin's approach, the two writers share similar goals: a quest to 'de-mummify Lenin', to find both a new method and a new language with which to talk about him today. While Danilkin is trying to do this in a Russian context, Ali's narrative is intended for an English-speaking readership. Accordingly, an introduction to the history of the Russian revolutionary movement occupies an important part of the book. According to Ali, Lenin's first dilemma was rooted in his complicated relations to the populist Narodnik movement (the *narodniki* are equated to anarchists, which in the Russian context is not quite right). The explanation—that Lenin became a Marxist and developed a critique of revolutionary terrorism after the execution of his brother—largely tallies with the canonical version. But it gives Ali the opportunity to explore the broader revolutionary tradition in Russian, the prehistory of the Bolsheviks, from the 1825 Decembrists to the 'People's Will' and their heirs in the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (srs). On the one hand, Lenin was an irreconcilable critic of this tradition, but on the other, he took an unrelenting interest in it; he and Krupskaya paid visits to old *narodniki*, and he made sure that the Soviet government organized a festive funeral for Kropotkin, the patriarch of Russian anarchism, in 1921.

*The Dilemmas of Lenin* shows the ferocious polemicist as capable of respecting his opponents within the socialist movement and recognizing their merits. Ali describes in detail the complex relationship between Lenin and Julius Martov, the Menshevik leader, who stayed a personal friend until the end. In the chapters detailing the crisis of the Second International after 1914 and the Russian Civil War—where special attention is paid to Mikhail Tukhachevsky—Lenin himself is practically absent. He returns, however, in the chapter on love, centred on his personal 'dilemma': his relations with the two most important women in his life, Krupskaya and Armand. Ali takes the opposite line to Danilkin—Lenin and Armand were passionately involved—but describes it as an unusual love triangle: devoid of conflict and based on gender equality and fidelity to the common cause. For Ali, Armand's personal story serves as an opening to discuss the broader question of gender relations within the Russian revolutionary movement, drawing on Richard Stites's classic, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*.

Like Danilkin, Ali ends his book with a reflection on 'Lenin's last battle'—his struggle against the

degeneration of the party and his own illness. Despite the difference in their approaches, Ali and Danilkin come to the same conclusion. Lenin fought to the end against bureaucratization, 'Great Russianism' and the strengthening of the Soviet state machine. He lost, politically—but not morally or intellectually. He remains a colossal political figure and an approachable if bafflingly complex human being. In an extraordinary 'post credit sequence', after imagining the hundreds of names that have peopled his book scrolling up the darkened screen, Danilkin invokes the work of Lenin's father on Olbers' Paradox. This notes that, given the innumerable stars in the sky, all radiating light, we should see a solid blinding wall of light, just as when looking at a forest we see a wall of trees. And yet the sky at night is dark, with only a scattering of twinkling stars. Olbers's explanation for this was that between the stars there was a veil, a cloud of cosmic dust. Modern physics has asserted that, if so, the dust particles themselves should shine like stars.

'The Big Bang of the Revolution filled space with an astonishing number of people who, for the first time in history, shone so that they could be seen from the other end of the universe', Danilkin writes. Metaphors of Lenin's 'solarization' proliferated after his death—a veritable 'solar cult'. Faith in him as a reliable energy supplier was diminished by the events of 1989. Yet the Lenin phenomenon, 'a massive luminous body displaying unauthorized and unpredictable activity', remains an inexhaustible source of anxiety. A 'final peace agreement on Lenin'—among his supporters, biographers or in modern Russian society—is still impossible, Danilkin explains. Instead, his post-credit sequence fills the screen. Darkness, the banks of the Yenisey River; the bobbing floats of the fishing rods; the ripple of the water; the crackle of a fire. Three people around it: Stroganov, the Shushenskoe village shopkeeper whom Lenin has taught to play chess; the peasant boy Sosipatich, fast asleep; and Vladimir Ilyich, dreaming in his sheepskin coat. Stroganov checks the lines and finds a massive wriggling freshwater codfish, scaly and mustachioed. For a joke, he shoves it inside Lenin's coat, then runs back to his place by the fire. Lenin leaps up, yelling, shakes the fish out of his clothes, imagining some horror—then sees Stroganov, rocking with laughter, and returns to the real world, 'a world still knowable, and promising to anyone who can see its absurdities and infinite range of possibility.' At this moment, Danilkin writes, the stars flash so brilliantly, it becomes as light as day. 'Lenin puts his thumbs under his armpits, closes his eyes and begins to laugh, leaning back, then bent in half, back and forth, brightly, striking, rolling like a bell. Hahahahaha-hahahahaha-hahahahaha.'

---

**Ilya Budraitskis**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

---

**P.S.**

New Left Review

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/ilya-budraitskis-lenin-s-laughter>