

# Bukharin in Retrospect

*Edited by*

**Theodor Bergmann,**

**Gert Schaefer and Mark Selden**



# **BUKHARIN IN RETROSPECT**

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EDITED BY

THEODOR BERGMANN  
GERT SCHAEFER  
MARK SELDEN

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## FOREWORD

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MOSHE LEWIN

This book is the product of a conference that was held just about the time Bukharin was officially rehabilitated. His widow, as she herself tells us in a friendly note to the editors, could not attend because of another historic event occurring in Moscow at the same time—the first public meeting in Bukharin's honor. That was in 1988.

But the Soviet scene is changing with enormous rapidity. Only a short time ago, Bukharin's rehabilitation and the publication of materials about him (which still continues) created much excitement, as well as relief, among the proponents of *perestroika*. It was a sign that the still fragile wave of reforms was actually continuing and the expected conservative backlash was either broken or at least blocked.

Yet only a year or so later, Bukharin, both as a man and as a symbol, was once again virtually forgotten in Moscow. Another landmark event was drawing attention: the election of a parliament. In the aftermath of that event—as a natural consequence—the party agreed to relinquish its claim to a monopoly of power. In fact it had no choice: It was deprived of its monopoly constitutionally by a decision of the new parliament. With this came a steep decline in the party's legitimacy, a growth of public political activity, mostly directed against the ruling party (especially against its apparatus), and the proliferation in newspapers of far-reaching revisions and reassessments of Soviet history. Much of this reflection, notably concerning Stalinism, permitted many schools of thought to emerge, most, if not all of them, ideological and political, often emotional, and directed against all symbols, ideas, and ideals to which the previous regime had claimed to adhere. There is undoubtedly some degree of justice in this, as all that had been suppressed comes back in force. The unavoidable and posi-

tive role of critical ferment is clearly evident. As a reaction to the previous regime's anathemas, the intellectuals launched their own "rehabilitation" of many schools and ideologies from the past and from the West that had long been banned. Notable among these were schools representing diverse religious thinking. The question of historical justice coincides with an important cultural function: All of these opinions that had been suppressed are reintroduced into cultural and political discourse and enjoy the advantages of free inquiry and debate.

These revisions and rehabilitations inevitably have a hurried and reactive character. Too often, they have an "account-settling" or avowedly "self-cleansing" nature, perceived by many as an attempt to exorcise the demons of the recent past, or simply to demonstrate the ability to stand on one's own feet. The process is therefore fraught with imbalance, beginning, as it does, with a sweeping condemnation of Stalin, and then proceeding to exclude from all serious reconsideration Lenin, Leninism, and Marxism, indeed the very idea of socialism. In many cases, in fact, a deeply conservative stance has been taken, well known to us in the West, that finds fault not only in various forms of "Stalinism," but in any blueprint of ideology whatsoever that implies societal change. Hence, of course, the Marxist school is rejected by definition, and rarely on the basis of in-depth study and knowledge.

This wave of revisions after the rehabilitation of Bukharin left bolshevism with no internal alternatives of any interest to the revisionists. To such people, and they are quite influential in the Soviet Union today, a Bukharin, a Trotsky, or anyone else from the bolshevik camp is equally repugnant.

This forcible elimination of central figures from history and their relegation to oblivion is surely too dismissive to be acceptable to historians. A practice of the previous regime, it seems that it is being repeated by many of the old regime's critics. Whoever embarks on such a course is equally at fault.

It is true that the very history so many now reject was entirely falsified, including the history of revolutionary and other parties, the revolution, Lenin, and Leninism. And in regard to Marxism, not only was it falsified, it was actually eliminated as a scholarly discipline, along with most of the social sciences and history. We are thus observing quite an interesting phenomenon of again assailing what has already been thoroughly destroyed. However this phenomenon might be explained, it nevertheless remains unacceptable to those who pursue

the truth. To reject a falsified past, on the pretense that it was real, is far too cavalier. After all, despite what that past was, it will not go away. The idea of studying seriously the “before” and “after” while disregarding the “middle” may be psychologically satisfying, but it is nevertheless self-deluding. We should take note of these Moscow moods to disregard the past, but it is a fashion that cannot be followed. The past, with both its achievements and its failures, must be studied seriously.

That historical reinterpretations can be politically explosive is nothing new in Russia or elsewhere. And there has as yet been no final word on history, if there ever will be, in today’s volatile USSR (an acronym that may no longer even exist by the time this book appears). It is also possible that the various pasts, or rather the various selections and interpretations of the past, whether popular or unpopular, may simply be dormant. At another historical turning point, reversals in public preference of one kind or another may occur, or even the re-emergence of some former precedent. Thus, tsarist Russia is back again and the NEP, it can be said, is enjoying its moment of revenge, staging a comeback of its own; the Stalinist drive is being repudiated lock, stock, and barrel in a complete reversal, which may itself be later regretted in the face of other specters.

The study of the past is not a matter of likes or dislikes. It is an illusion to think that one can simply shop freely to find a past that one prefers. The past should be understood, not rearranged and distorted, as is often the case. We can surely expect that there will continue to be re-revisions and newer rethinking. Eventually, some may emerge that are less politically motivated and emotionally charged. Perhaps then the history of Russia and of its parties, including the Social Democratic party and its Bolshevik faction, of its revolutions and its personalities, will receive critically balanced treatments. The verdict is unpredictable, but we can assume that there will be several interpretations and that some will share lines of thought that have been proposed in the West, for Western scholars have been and will continue to be participants in this process.

One reason for expecting renewed interest in the Bolsheviks, Bukharin among them, is that they were not all of a piece. They had alternative blueprints and strategies, the worst only one among them. Lenin, as is well known, carried more than one strategy in his political bag and it was not just a matter of selectively juggling quotes to serve

any purpose; his strategic shifts were responses to dramatically changing situations and to changing tasks. His last such shift—when he was still in power, although already quite ill, and which became known as the “testament”—was to tone down or even discard many radical formulas and to argue strenuously against forcibly imposing “communism” on rural Russia of the day. What this attitude might have done for Russia is an interesting matter for reflection, but what is important for us is that it highlights another Bolshevik who picked up this particular thread of the “testament” and in his fight to preserve it lost his power and eventually his life.

History is replete with cases in which alternatives existed only to be squandered by failures of leadership and judgment. Such turning points must be proven and argued using all possible analytic methods. Slim chances and few existing choices, exacerbated by the failures of a shortsighted elite, comprise another version to consider. And if some leaders had good insight and took brave, though ineffectual, stands, that story should also be told.

The broader historical heritage must be constantly kept in mind: It may have loomed larger than was expected or understood, or thrown up barriers that could not be surmounted. From this perspective, one can also defend the more rigid, deterministic thesis that there were in fact no alternatives—an idea proposed in various guises. But a historical situation in which all options were foreclosed, whether by the presumed immobility of the Russian past or by the rigidity of revolutionary ideology, must be argued according to the usual procedures of inquiry and proof.

And, finally, what about ideology? What role did it and could it play? Some today see it as a sinister force, while for others it played no role whatsoever. Yet again, ideology might initially have played a salutary role and may one day deserve a new look (a day that might be just around the corner in today’s mercurial Russia) because if there was ever a betrayal of a great ideal, the Soviet case is surely a *locus classicus* of it. And the betrayed ideal is socialism. Are we simply to take Trotsky’s formula in *The Revolution Betrayed* as the last word on this theme? Trotsky directs us to the study of Soviet history as mainly a process of “betrayal,” of ideological deviance, bound one day to be straightened out by the efforts, say, of a Fourth International, or through industrial development. But this shortcut will not. The demise of the Bolshevik party and its ideology, and the role of Trotsky him-

self, need to be approached from a variety of perspectives, perhaps using some of Trotsky's own insights against other much less convincing viewpoints.

These are just some of the problems historians must deal with in a far-from-finished job of trying to grasp an intricate process filled with amazing tilts and reversals. In this framework, the existence of the "anti-Stalinist bolshevism" that Bukharin represented when he was still in power is significant, as is the fact that he clearly continued the line presented in Lenin's "testament." It can be said that after Bukharin's fall, bolshevism, warts and all, died for good, and the use of the term became an anachronism.

The idea that "bolshevism" as a political movement perished while supposedly in power is a beautiful example of history's ironies, one that historians need to think and rethink. But there was more to the history of Russia and the Soviet Union than the problems of bolshevism or even Stalinism. It makes sense to consider the idea, already alluded to above, that alternatives and choices were not only a matter of decisions by politicians, Bolsheviks, politburos, or Stalin—although none of them should be exempted from responsibility for their roles. The historical wherewithal and potential of the whole country remain key considerations insofar as they set limits to the action of individuals at different stages of social development and shape the political forces and leaders of majorities and minorities. No history worth its name can be written without paying attention to this "trifle."

There were forces for change and renovation at work in the country, including inside the party, and some of them found support among Bolsheviks who can be considered progenitors of today's new currents. Yet Stalin so viciously and relentlessly reviled the old Bolshevik organization (no less than the so-called bourgeois or petty-bourgeois parties) that it is difficult to restore to the pantheon political leaders who let themselves be crushed in such a degrading way.

Current developments in Russia have the impetus to cross the constricting threshold set by Stalinism and move on to another historical stage. Countries and people respond to and are shaped by more than one past: for all of them were, and some still are, at work, and none can simply be stricken from the record because of their ugliness. Especially not a Stalin.

As history shows, Stalin's great conspiracy did not entirely fail. In every previous effort to extricate the Soviet Union from the deadly grip

of the Stalinist system, the first logical move was always to try, however timidly, to restore to history some of the leaders who stood up to Stalin, warned against him, or proposed alternative policies. Today, the possibility is not excluded that some may even still try to restore Stalin to the pantheon. If this were to happen it would testify to the bankruptcy and degradation of the Soviet polity and society and to the view that the rehabilitations and rethinking undertaken before and especially during the era of *perestroika* were not sweeping enough.

Reflecting on Bukharin is an occasion not only to engage in historical inquiry but also to learn about greatness, frailty, and shortsightedness, and to revisit moments of lucidity, courage, cowardice, and breakdown. Bukharin exhibited all of these at different times in his life, which makes him a very human and humane figure. That such figures are often the “natural” prey of political powermongers cannot be held against him.

## **PREFACE**

---

**GERT SCHAEFER**

Bukharin was the leading theoretician of socialism in the Soviet Union who (Trotsky and the Left Opposition aside) advocated a path of development fundamentally different from that pursued by Stalin. After Lenin's death, he more than anyone else tried to draw conclusions from the insight expressed by Lenin in his study "On Cooperation" (1923):

We must admit that our entire perception of socialism has changed fundamentally. This change consists of the following: in former times, we put the main accent on the political struggle, the revolution, the conquest of power, etc. and we had to do this. But today the accent changes so far that it falls on peaceful organizational cultural work. I would say our main job now is cultural, if it were not for international relations, if we did not have the obligation to fight for our position on the international scale. (460)

Bukharin never forgot Lenin's warning to the Eleventh Congress of the CPSU(B):

The task consists of understanding the organization of our work in the right way, to organize so that one does not lag behind, does not separate administration from politics. Because our politics and our administration are based on the fact that our cadres are united with the entire proletarian masses and the entire peasant class. If one forgets these little wheels, and allows oneself to be carried away by mere administration, everything will collapse. (1922a, 287)

Even those who are skeptical of Bukharin as a practical politician or administrator or who criticize his cooperation with Stalin against the



Left Opposition in the twenties nevertheless must concede that Bukharin “was the most able theoretically and the best educated personality in the party leadership which crystallized slowly after Lenin’s death. His opinions were notable for their logical conception, their comprehensive overview, and well-thought-out structure” (Reiman 1987, 127, 132). Roy Medvedev wrote in a similar vein. Although skeptical about Bukharin’s ability as a political leader, he wrote: “If after Lenin’s death Bukharin had led our party instead of Stalin, there would not have been collectivization in its Stalinist form nor the terror of the thirties and forties” (1980, 8).

Lenin in his notes of 24 December 1922 characterized Bukharin as an exceedingly valuable and distinguished theoretician who was rightly considered “the favorite of the party.” He added that he would hesitate to count Bukharin’s theoretical beliefs as strictly Marxist: “There is something scholastic about him, he has never studied dialectics and I believe has never completely understood it” (1922b, 579). In this context, Lenin doubtless meant by dialectical thinking the ability to analyze a real situation. And for the young Bukharin, an independent person, one can often agree with what Alec Nove wrote regarding *The Economics of the Transition Period*: “I believe the link is the tendency to a kind of youthful theoretical extremism. He pushed the perceptions of his time a bit too far, as was usual among the Bolsheviks” (1988, 5). Added to this was Lenin’s aversion to a certain influence of Bogdanov’s thinking on Bukharin.

In any case, Bukharin, after taking leave of “our illusions” about the transition period and accepting the realities of a multifaceted transition (Löwy 1969, 109ff.; Cohen 1973, 123ff.) instead of a forced “speeding up” of historical processes, took great pains to analyze the situation in a concrete way. He thus embraced Lenin’s advice: “Communism will not take root through violence” (LW, 29:60, 20, 160). This becomes very clear in his criticism of Trotsky’s concepts and sometimes it is even polemically excessive: “Here comrade Trotsky has not taken into consideration the peculiarities of our situation . . . [with regard to the transition to a planned economy]. Instead of an analysis we have a model, abstractions instead of concrete facts, formal logic instead of dialectics. Trotskyism instead of Leninism.”

Except for the fatal confrontation of Leninism versus Trotskyism, he was echoing Lenin’s exhortation, the words of the “teacher” Lenin to the “pupil” Bukharin.

According to Löwy's pioneering biography of 1969, Bukharin "had the obvious characteristic to awaken friendship and affection in all those who knew him intimately." (p. 3) And he had the ability to respect the personal integrity of his opponents and to become reconciled with them, despite polemical exaggerations during the fight. The Austrian physicist Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski, who had survived the tortures of the NKVD and the "great purge" and was one of those who were handed over to the Gestapo in 1939, described his impression of Bukharin in the mid-1930s:

Bukharin was not an organizer like Piatakov. He was rather a thinker and an artist. He gave me the impression of an *anima candida*. It was incomprehensible to me how this delicate creature could have fought the hard fight without which no one reaches a leading position in the party. . . . Bukharin was small. His fine features and his quiet, almost tender way of talking immediately captured every visitor. . . . He always liked to help, but he gave the impression of being a stranger in this house, in which the pulse of great industry throbbed (1951, 291f.).

Roy Medvedev (1987) criticized Bukharin's lack of hardliness and resolve in the political power struggle: "A theoretical brain, a weak politician, no steeliness."

Bukharin ended tragically, like so many after the show trials against "the bloc of the Right and the Trotskyists." His executioners were those he had stigmatized with the words of Ranke and a glance at the Borgia popes and "the Holy Inquisition," as follows:

Among the popes there were not only simple criminals, there were true masters of dirty, bloody enterprises, virtuosos of murder out of ambush, virtuosos of treason and of crime . . . with their inquisition, their Jesuits, their crusades, with the wild mass extermination of heretics. . . . They will not escape the nonpartisan judgment of history. . . . They constructed an organization whose members considered it their highest virtue and their highest moral duty to renounce their own convictions. It was said rightly that there is no infamy in this world that had not found an ideological justification.

This was written in 1930, before his ritual declaration of submission in November of that year (*Inprecor* 1930, 26, 639ff.; compare Löwy 1969, 379ff.).

In his last words before Stalin's court, Bukharin repeated the terrible

sentence ascribed to Hegel: "World history is the world tribunal," which originates in Schiller's poem *Resignation*. Bukharin uttered the sentence with reference to Trotsky, who was to be reviled: "In reality everything is clear. World history is the world tribunal. And one must be a Trotsky in order not to yield!" (12 March 1938).

At the Plenum of the Central Committee in February 1937, Molotov had appealed to him: "If you don't confess, you prove that you are a servant of fascism, because their press says that our trials are provocations." Bukharin's answer to this madness: "That is the mousetrap" (Medvedev 1978, 64). Shatrov, in his play *Onward, Onward, Onward*, lets Bukharin say: "I must add one more mistake to all our others; it is perhaps the most serious one. We have chased ourselves into a corner. Because we were afraid to offend those rules of unity which we have created."

Bukharin's last years still need further investigation. When will the archives be opened? What is left in them? How can we decipher the Aesopian, the slave language (Löwy 1969, 380; Cohen 1973, 377) in the publications and speeches; how can we recognize the real thoughts, the tactics, and also perhaps the perplexity, the vacillation, the inner splits in the Bukharin of those last years? As he stated before the tribunal on 12 March 1938: "This split, double consciousness . . . which one has to comprehend above all. . . . It resulted in a certain semi-paralysis of the will, a suppression of reflexes. . . . There was a double psychology. Every one of us can find it in his own soul." The "mousetrap" was the belief in the need for party unity even in the face of Stalin and his supporters' crimes on one side and the fascism of Nazi Germany and the expected war on the other.

In his letter of 1937 handed down by Anna Mikhailovna Larina—who like most of Bukharin's relatives and acquaintances was arrested and thrown into prison and camps—Bukharin asks "the new, young, and honest generation of party leaders to vindicate me at a Plenum of the Central Committee and to restore my party membership." Despite everything, Bukharin had not lost his belief in the party, the leadership, and progress: "But we are saved by the belief that development will go forward" (quoted from Löwy 1969, 383). Yet, as Leonard Schapiro wrote in 1974: "To rehabilitate Bukharin, in other words to permit an open discussion and the study of his works and his activities, that would mean to do away with the foundations of Brezhnev's police state" (7).

In the spring of 1988 Bukharin was legally rehabilitated,<sup>1</sup> and in the summer of 1988 his party membership was restored. On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his birth and the fiftieth anniversary of his death, scientific conferences took place to study Bukharin's writings: in Oxford, Wuppertal, Budapest, Beijing, a memorial meeting in Moscow and a conference in Naberezhnye Chelny (formerly Brezhnev) 900 kilometers east of Moscow. As Valerii Pisigin, one of the initiators, says in an essay included in this collection, "We talk of [Bukharin's] return, because the word 'rehabilitation' is hardly the right one. A just cause and the truth do not need rehabilitation."

The papers published here are from an international symposium on the work of Bukharin held in Wuppertal (10–13 October 1988). Unfortunately, not all the presentations could be published here. Researchers from nineteen countries participated in the symposium, which received financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation. The idea of organizing the symposium came from a conversation between Anna Mikhailovna Larina and Theodor Bergmann in Moscow in 1987. In addition to Bergmann (Stuttgart), the following researchers from West Germany took part in the preparations: Detlev Albers (Bremen), Bernd Biervert (Wuppertal), Walter Euchner (Göttingen), Iring Fetcher (Frankfurt), Gert Schaefer (Hannover), and Günther Trautmann (Hamburg). The symposium was attended by participants with diverse, often dramatic life stories (long prison terms, persecution, exile), with different opinions and traditions and belonging to different generations. The debate was open, intense, and generally disciplined. For many, the symposium was an extraordinary experience. A complete picture of the thoughts and activities of Bukharin did not emerge. A strong emphasis on certain questions, above all the development perspective linked to the NEP, was obvious. Many questions remain open: Bukharin's role in the October Revolution, the Civil War, and war communism.

Even if we conclude, like Alec Nove, that there is a temptation to "assign to Bukharin our concept of an alternative to Stalinism, which doubtlessly existed—but which the real Bukharin in 1927–28 neither fought for nor formulated" (1988, 15), still the discussion of his thought and work remains extraordinarily fruitful.

## Note

1. On the prehistory see Coates (1978).

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## PROLOGUE

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### ANNA LARINA-BUKHARINA

The conference in Wuppertal, devoted to the hundredth anniversary of N.I. Bukharin's birthday and convened before the long-expected post-humous rehabilitation of Nikolai Ivanovitch in the Soviet Union, demonstrated that Bukharin was an important figure even without rehabilitation. He was neither traitor nor spy, but rather an honest and sincere revolutionary who fought for the welfare of his people.

During the period of war communism, Bukharin belonged to the left wing of Bolshevism for which he was predestined by his age. The continuation and further development of Lenin's New Economic Policy and his humanistic endeavor—socialist humanism—have been called Bukharin's alternative for the development of the USSR. Bukharin's theoretical works aimed at proving that a mixed, multivariuous economy embodying cooperation and economic accountability is the best path to development—all true even today. Stephen F. Cohen has said:

The defense of NEP led Bukharin in the 1920's to a whole system of ideas and policies, which was radically unlike what became known as Stalinism and which anticipated the criticisms and proposals of anti-Stalinist reformers, in the search of "lost" ideas in the USSR and Europe after 1953. Or as Czech reformers, in the search of "lost" ideas, said during the Prague spring, "Bukharin's alternative can be viewed as a forerunner of Eurocommunism; his ideas make themselves heard, so to speak, in the language of the contemporary era." He became the greatest critic of willful temptations of monopolistic state power incited by ideological zealotry—the opponent of warfare measures and great leaps, administrative caprice and lawlessness, overcentralization and parasitic bureaucratism, gigantomania and systematic inefficiency. (p. xiii)

N.I. Bukharin was, in Lenin's words, the best theoretician of the party. His writings—*Imperialism and World Economy*, *The ABC of*

*Communism, Historical Materialism, etc.*— were published in “dozens of Russian and foreign editions, becoming standard reading for communists and sympathizers around the world. By the mid-twenties, his political stature was second to none in the Soviet leadership.” (Cohen 1982, p. xi).

It is no accident that N.I. Bukharin was officially rehabilitated as one of the first of the many victims of Stalin’s great purges and that the main themes cited are his theoretical work and his political activities. After the final failure of the Stalinist model of transformation of the economy and society this strategy became clearly perceived as a deformation of the high objectives of socialism. Those who aim at a genuine socialist society are searching for the liquidated and buried alternative to Stalin’s abortive strategy. In the different fields of his theoretical work, Bukharin established equilibrium between workers and peasants, city and countryside, investment and consumption, that is, between the tasks of workers as producers and their demands as consumers. He strove for a gradual transformation—i.e., for a cultural revolution: education in all fields and for everyone—instead of hasty and forced collectivization leading to an extended process of voluntary cooperativization, for civil peace instead of Stalin’s “aggravated class struggle.”

This alternative strategy for socialist construction probably originated from an entirely different understanding of revolution. For Bukharin the victory of the revolutionaries after a long physical and psychological struggle was irreversible. No landlord could hope, no liberated peasant should fear, that the old system would ever be reestablished. No serious internal threats were looming. Thus, it was possible to take into account how much people could bear and the capacity of the economy to build the new society slowly and steadily.

These basic concepts, which Bukharin expressed clearly in the memorial speech on the fifth anniversary of Lenin’s death in 1929, included a different attitude toward his party comrades and toward the nation led by his party, and finally also incorporated Lenin’s distrust of an overdeveloped state machinery. This could strangle the initiative and cooperation of the masses, so necessary for the construction of socialism with a human face.

Though Stalin and his faction methodically silenced all their opponents and finally liquidated them in the Moscow purges, until the end Bukharin fought for his views. Even in his last speech in court after being sentenced to death he expressed his opposition to the concepts

and methods of the temporary victor. "The show trial of Bukharin in 1938 was therefore designed to deny the Bukharinist alternative by criminalizing his entire political biography." (Cohen 1982, p. xiv)

Today, Bukharin and many others who were banished from their native country are returning posthumously to public life. Truth will be victorious said N.I. Bukharin on February 27, 1937, the day of our leave-taking.

June 1990

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The contributions to the international scientific symposium on Nikolai I. Bukharin presented in this book were written in 1987. The conference was held in March 1988. The chapters of this book have remained unchanged according to the first German publication in 1989.



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## **Part I**

# **The Revolutionary Politician: Human Greatness and Tragedy**