

Helen Rappaport. *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. viii, 384 pp. \$18.99 paper. ISBN: 978-0-465-02859-7.

The book under review joins a number of recent works on Lenin by Western scholars such as those by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Philip Pomper which utilize hitherto unavailable or overlooked sources and pose questions that scholars could not hope to address before 1992.¹ At the same time it diverges markedly from their approach. Rappaport shows little interest in Lenin's ethnic heritage which she describes in less than half a paragraph (p. 11). The question of Lenin's Jewish identity and what he knew about it, consumes Pomper and Petrovsky-Shtern. It appears to be irrelevant for Rappaport.

Her concerns are closer to those of Lars Lih in *Lenin Rediscovered*, that is who was Lenin in exile as opposed to Russia.² But she diverges from Lih's conclusions, taking the opposite viewpoint. Lih places Lenin in the tradition of German Social Democracy and has discovered an "occidental" Lenin whose roots lie in nineteenth-century German Marxism. Rappaport, on the contrary, at times in riveting detail, retraces Lenin's sixteen years and seven days in European exile. Her book is a brief for Lenin's unalloyed identity as a *Russian* Marxist. He may have resided in numerous dingy, rented lodgings throughout Europe; but his focus remained on events in the Russian empire and how he might use them to launch revolution there.

Rappaport's account of Lenin in exile constitutes an important work, of use to scholars as well as undergraduates. She reveals the daily, human side of a figure whose whole political life, it seemed, consisted of imposing an unpopular, minority position on others, whether he remained in exile or had acquired power. She ably describes the toll that effort took on Lenin and the intimates who surrounded him. Her account of Lenin at the Second Party Congress in 1903 and the Fifth Party Congress in 1907, both in London, reminded this reader of Stalin at crucial moments of the succession struggle in the 1920s at similar party congresses and conferences. Both men exhibited the same implacable intensity. They were, to use Ulam's phrase, the "most active Bolsheviks." Lenin and Stalin lusted for power to the same degree, yet both had to overcome a similar handicap. In the emigration, when voting still counted in the party, Lenin invariably found himself in the minority. Stalin, by the same token, faced the nearly insurmountable handicap of entering the succession struggle bearing the noose that Lenin had placed around his neck: he should be removed as General Secretary. Each therefore had to play politics for keeps.

1. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Lenin's Jewish Question* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2010); and Philip Pomper, *Lenin's Brother. The Origins of the October Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). See my review of both works in *The NEP Era*, vol. 5 (2011).

2. Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? in Historical Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008). See my review of it in *The NEP Era*, vol. 3 (2009).

Rappaport is able to recount the history of Lenin's affair with Inessa Armand devoid of previous controversy, based as it is on irrefutable evidence that the two enjoyed a romantic relationship in the period 1911-1916. Comparing Rappaport's account of their relationship to that of Carter Elwood in his biography of Armand³ provides a cautionary tale to those of us in pursuit of the truths of Soviet history. Elwood, writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, rejected the possibility of such an affair, "irrelevant to the course of Russian history" anyway, because "a long-term affair . . . was alien to Lenin's moral code."⁴ Similarly, "like Lenin, . . . [Armand] eschewed a bohemian lifestyle."⁵

To his credit, Elwood acknowledged the truth of the affair when confronted with the evidence, but he did not address the earlier question of its significance or insignificance.⁶ Rappaport does. She argues that Armand's "premature death no/doubt contributed to . . . [Lenin's] final decline . . . He seemed visibly destroyed by grief at her funeral . . ." (pp. 305-06). Precisely the timing of Lenin's "final decline" rescued Stalin from removal as General Secretary, a matter of incalculable import for "the course of Russian history."

But Rappaport is guilty of her own speculation. She sides with those who argue that Lenin died of syphilis, maintaining that he contracted it early in the century during the first years of his impoverished exile. Certainty over Lenin's relationship with Armand, however, does not justify the suggestion that Lenin engaged in promiscuous behavior throughout his residence abroad. While such a diagnosis may be accurate, Lenin exhibited the symptoms of recurring strokes, not syphilis, in the crucial period May 1922-March 1923. Each illness may have aggravated the other, but Rappaport provides no definitive evidence for consistent promiscuity on Lenin's part.

Her astuteness in portraits of Lenin's inner circle unfortunately does not extend to Zinoviev and Kamenev, whom she dismisses as mere "yes-men" (p. 221). It is a misleading phrase that distorts the reality of their often contentious relationship to Lenin and their distinctions from each other. From 1907 to 1909 Kamenev drew close to Bogdanov, praising the so-called "god-builders." He joined Bogdanov in calling for a Bolshevik boycott of the Third Duma, while Lenin insisted on the party's participation in elections to it. Other disagreements followed and by 1911, Lenin, in utter frustration, labeled both Zinoviev and Kamenev "Trotskyists." See Kamenev's *Mezhdumia revoliutsiiami* (1923) for his account of his many disagreements with Lenin.

In his Testament Lenin termed the "strike-breaker" incident on the eve of October "no accident." Shortly before the Bolshevik coup d'état, Kamenev

3. R. C. Elwood *Inessa Armand. Revolutionary and Feminist* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 173 and 188.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

6. See Carter Elwood, "Lenin and Armand: New Evidence on an Old Affair," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes*, vol. 43, no. 1 (March 2001): 58-59.

led Zinoviev in denouncing Lenin's intentions as premature. Kamenev remained alienated from Lenin over the coup and was the last of his political intimates to enter the new Bolshevik government, only doing so at the end of November 1917. Lenin chose his words in the Testament carefully, referring to a long-established pattern of opposition and disagreement between him and his so-called "yes-men," hence their opposition on the eve of October could be termed "no accident."

Nor could it be said that Kamenev and Zinoviev had the same or similar relationship to Lenin. Kamenev remained far more independent-minded than Zinoviev, at least until they attained power. He did not follow Lenin through Europe as Zinoviev did. He pursued his own research on the Russian revolutionary movement, using Western libraries and sources. Lenin made Kamenev his literary executor in part out of respect for the latter's unparalleled knowledge of the Russian revolutionary heritage and its diverse sources.

Rappaport has captured Lenin, the impecunious fanatic, condemned to seemingly interminable exile, but consumed by the determination to make a uniquely Russian revolution, in the guise of Marxism. In that sense he conspired against both the Okhrana as well as his fellow Marxists, because he sought to impose a single stage revolution on an agrarian country.

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