

Relocating Lenin

Book review

Service, R (2000) **Lenin: A biography**. London: Macmillan. ISBN 0-330-49139-3. 561 pages.

*Derek Hook
School of Human & Community Development
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, &
Center for the Study of Public Scholarship
Emory College
Atlanta, USA*

Service's Lenin is a man of undisclosed history, of powerful emotion, of unrivalled revolutionary fervor, a political and despotic ideologue who changed the course of 20th century world history. Dogmatic, acerbic, famously single-minded, this Lenin is as much intellectual, as revolutionary, a composite politician and strategist, a full-blooded Marxist who claimed a privileged understanding of the doctrine, even whilst bending it to fit the unique contingencies of his times, and his own political will. Interestingly, Service's Lenin is also a man of women, in as much as his wife, his mother, his sisters and mistress were - in their capacities as either co-revolutionaries, or caretakers, as emotional, financial, moral, administrative *supports* - indispensable to what Lenin was to become.

Service's biography of Lenin is unlike many others, which is an important distinction to make, given that a voluminous amount of literature has been generated in this respect. Lenin, after all, is one of the great political and intellectual figures of the last 100 years, despite that he seems to have represented something of a flagging cause for the Left over the last decade. To its credit, Service's book avoids the route of hagiography, the quasi-religious monumentalisation of a man as absolute icon of truth and value, which proved the minimal standard expected of Soviet biographers. As importantly though, Service avoids the route of moral demonization. This was a tendency of many cold war Western histories of Lenin, which routinely failed to properly distinguish his political era from that of Stalin's, or, worse yet, that produced stark caricatures of Lenin as, in Service's own terms, "a psychopath whose political ideas were secondary to a fundamental motivation to dominate and kill" (p4). Importantly though, this is not to say that there is no moral center to Service's book, there is, as we shall go on to see. Indeed, this is the special challenge of the biographer of Lenin: where and how to situate one's account relative to the moral and political expediency of one's subject.

Service cuts his teeth as a biographer in the standard way, clearing the ground by arguing against the accepted “wisdom” already offered. His narrative is to be distinguished from that of biographers who have represented Lenin as the man whose ideas, practices and politics were pure distillations of Marxism. There is no doubt to Service that Marxism was the primary ingredient of Lenin’s thought, and that Lenin was fiercely and passionately committed to Marxist doctrine. Lenin was also though a man who felt the need to *adapt* theory to the particular needs of a concrete situation; Goethe’s sentiment that “Theory is grey, but life is green” was a favourite maxim in this regard. Hence, in stark contrast to existing Marxist orthodoxy, Lenin’s determination to introduce large-scale socialist revolution *before* a reasonable period of capitalist ascendancy.

Lenin did also not shy away from contorting theory to suit *his own political objectives*. Service’s Lenin is throughout a man whose socio-political analyses slant more to the side of what he *wanted* to be the case than perhaps what was the case. It was *Lenin’s* version of Marxism, *Lenin’s* impression of the economic logic of Tsarist Russia, of Imperial Capitalism, of party structure and leadership that became not only authoritative, but basic, despite notable flaws in his reasoning. Lenin’s dogmatic myopia in such matters is noted by Service: “He could live for years in a locality - be it London, Zurich or Moscow – and fail to draw the conclusions about his surroundings that came easily to others without his hardened prejudices” (p8).

Service is at pains to avoid the more Utopian strain of certain recent biographers who suggest that the later Lenin strove to minimize authoritarianism in his party and the Soviet State. For Service it most certainly is *not* the case, that shortly before his death Lenin attempted to reform Communism in the direction of eliminating its association with dictatorship, class war and terror. Service is not to be lured into an easy revisionist history; neither is he tempted on painting too friendly a face onto his subject. Service’s Lenin is unchanging, and his biography seems a strangely traditional account in view of this fact. This Lenin “lived and died a Leninist. In his basic assumptions about politics Lenin was no chameleon” (p8). Right until the end of his life:

“[Lenin] did not challenge his own political creation: the one-party state, the one-ideology state, the terrorist state, the state that ought to dominate all social life, economy and culture. The foundations of his thought also remained in place. The October 1917 seizure of power, revolutionary amorality, “European socialist revolution”, scientific correctness, ideological intolerance and a temperamental and political impatience: all these stayed untouched. Nothing in his testament challenged the tenet of *The State and Revolution* that a classless, egalitarian, prosperous society could be established only by means of socialist dictatorship” (p468).

It is worth briefly pausing here to reflect on Service’s style. One of his greatest assets as a biographer is exactly the economy of his expression in passages like this one. Service is a master of summary, and it is his ability to *précis* so clearly the terms of such a dense social, political and ideological history of Lenin that facilitates the reader’s grasp on the material.

Service’s book is most directly motivated and conditioned by access to previously barred material, most notably the central party archives “opened” by Boris Yeltsin in

1991 after the collapse of the USSR. Politburo, Central Committee and Congress minutes punctuate the biography (including the details of Lenin's previously hidden campaign to unseat Stalin), as do archived memoirs and letters by Lenin's political associates, rivals, doctors, and even bodyguards. Vital here are the written words of his wife and mistress, both of whom were revolutionaries in their own right, and both of whom proved more than adept diarists of the turbulent period of history that they lived through. On this point it is interesting to speculate what a *feminist* history of Lenin might look like. An undertaking of this sort would involve an accounting of the role – which, following Service, was more than considerable – that the significant women (particularly Lenin's mother Maria Ulyanov, his long-suffering wife Nadezhda Konstantinovna, his mistress Inessa Armand, and his sisters, Maria and Anna Illinichna) played in Lenin's life. Indeed, towards the end of the book Service concedes "Without his entourage of women, he might not have risen to his historical eminence" (p493).

Service, understandably, shies away from a more exploratory commentary of this sort (although he does characterize Lenin as "by and large a manipulator of women") - aiming for a more thoroughly *documentary* work. This documentary element at times seems to over-burden the narrative. The mid-section of the book, for example, is so focused on the party politics of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, and the various social, global and partisan forces that buffeted it, that the text reads somewhat more like an account of the rise of Bolshevism than that of a single man. Here one should not neglect the fact that Service is first and foremost a historian, and more directly, a scholar of modern Russian history. It shows. Studious, fastidious, strongly contextual, the book is a historical work, largely structured and, in an odd sort of way, limited by the newly accessible political documents. It is evidence of this sort which ensures that the book is never a simply redundant contribution in the virtual ocean of pre-existing Lenin scholarship. By the same token however, this approach - that of the *factual* logic of historical biography – leads one to consider whether Service's text is in fact *conjectural enough*.

At times one feels as if Service's explorations of the man and the myth – which have at times seemed so entwined as to be virtually inseparable – comes up somewhat dry. It is as if Service is so determined not to admit any possible element of myth into his work – as if nothing outside of documented fact will feature here - that we have a strangely distanced protagonist. Put differently, Service's seemingly objective procession of historical information, and the according *lack* of mutual penetration between Lenin as man and myth (despite a few cursory comments in an abrupt closing chapter) typically fails to fuel a more speculative imagination. Given the iconic character that Lenin was to become, and the forceful role his phantom figure would have in later Russian politics, this lack of engagement with Lenin as exactly *a figure of the political imaginary* seems a shortcoming. This might seem misdirected criticism however; Service's text is allegiant to the documentary form, and should not hence be attacked according to the criteria of a different genre altogether. [Slavoj Zizek's recent (2002) **Revolution at the Gates** – Verso, London, is a useful counter-example here, taking up as it does, far more forcibly (or opportunistically, depending on your perspective), the task of *intellectually re-inventing* the legacy of Lenin. In this respect it makes for a useful compliment to, although not replacement for, Service's book.]

The problem that results from what we might term Service's *exploratory reticence* is that a number of apparent clichés spring to the surface, not only in respect of Lenin, but in respect of political biography as a genre as well. And these clichés - which are also typically the trappings of crude psycho-biography it must be said - arise at the holes in the documentary evidence. Service's Lenin, for example, is a man unable to process emotion, and we are hence presented with the man of greatness whose indomitable political will, is, at least in part, the product of restrained remorse and anger. Similarly, an increasingly aggressive and despotic style of politics can be tied to a viciously destructive aspect, which could never, seemingly, be sufficiently vented:

"Lenin was a human time-bomb. His intellectual influences thrust him towards Revolution and his inner rage made this impulse frenetic. Lenin had a greater passion for destruction than love for the proletariat. His personality is closely linked to the kind of personality that he became. His angry outbursts were legendary... But usually he took a grip on himself and channeled his anger into a controlled form of aggression. He was a political warrior ..." (p8).

Where Service succeeds as a historian, he fails as an armchair psychoanalyst. Such bland stereotypes do not advance Service's cause; they yield little insight, other than to point to an area in the subject's life where the biographer has been unable to offer a more convincing, or more *original*, explanation. Not only does Service fail to illuminate the personality of his subject, he, much by the same token, is unable to shed any light on the key relationships in Lenin's life. The stereotype of political biography that emerges here is the portrayal of Lenin as "married to the revolution", the unwavering revolutionary whose wife maintains a perfunctory and supportive role, but who could never be the object of his greatest passion, which of course is that of political struggle. The key relationships in Lenin's life, particularly those with women, are all depicted in rather static categorical terms – locked within the constraints of a given defined relationship – they hence seem lacking in any depth or texture. Again, one might counter that Service's objective is not to write a psycho-biography; nonetheless, we are left with a narrative with something of a hole at its centre, that fails to gain any purchase on the emotional life of its subject.

Where this seeming failure does breed success of a sort is in Service's ability never to lose the wood through the trees, that is, never to lose sight of the momentum of greater historical movement by fixating too closely on his core cast of characters and their emotional dynamics. Balancing the biographer's sense of singular agency, and the historian's sense of unfolding time, Service is aware both of the fortuitous series of events and sets of circumstance leading up to the two Russian revolutions in 1917, *and* of the irreducible importance of the individual role of Vladimir Ulyanov – Lenin – in moving history along. This is an important balance to strike; too many previous accounts have ended up privileging one such aspect of Lenin's story over the other, hence forsaking their grasp on what was *most unique* in this propitious yet *nonetheless forced* moment of historical rupture. Lenin's environment was immensely significant, as Service points out:

"The fact that fellow Bolsheviks shared his political vision meant that a party existed for all-out Revolution ... Without that party's zeal and practicality, Lenin would have been a political nullity. He was also helped by the widespread antagonism among Russia's

intellectuals, workers and other social groups to tsarism and to many aspects of capitalism. And the peculiar nature of Russia – its political tensions, its administrative fragility, its internal national and social divisions, its violent popular culture – played into his hands ... [In addition]...[First World War] fighting on the eastern front brought disaster as transport, administration and economy started to implode. There can therefore be no doubt that luck was on the side of the Bolsheviks in 1917-18. If the Germans had won the First World War ... Lenin's government would have been strangled in its cradle" (p4).

Having noted this, it is nonetheless re-emphasizing that Lenin was an exceptional figure, the founder of a communist faction that made the October revolution of 1917, and founded the world's first socialist state:

"Lenin did make history. In the **April Theses** of 1917 he drafted a strategy for the party to seize power. In October he insisted that power should be seized. In March 1918 he fended off a German invasion of Russia by getting a separate treaty signed at Brest-Litovsk. In 1921 he introduced the New Economic Policy and saved the Soviet state from being overwhelmed by popular rebellion. If Lenin had not campaigned for these strategical shifts, the USSR would never have been established and consolidated" (p10).

In fact, if Lenin is retrospectively to be granted historical or political credit, it is largely for the pragmatics of the Brest-Litovsk treaty and the New Economic Policy. Both have traditionally been criticized, either as a case of revolutionary compromise (in the case of the former), or as proof of the lack of sustainability of communism (in the latter); in both cases Lenin had to break from reigning wisdom and fight bitterly against even his fellow Bolsheviks for a mandate. (Service in fact argues that most previous biographers and historians have understated the size of Lenin's achievement in the case of the latter).

Of course Lenin's legacy is not all positive, and this brings into focus one of the major achievements of Service's text. Lenin's approach to matters of rule, and to political issues generally, was frequently violent, vitriolic, vicious even. Service here brings to the fore a series of historical facts that forestalls any premature heroising of Lenin; this Lenin is no friend of democratic liberalism. He was a "eulogist for dictatorship" (p354), a "despiser of free and universal suffrage elections as a mode of political struggle" (p336), and had no particular problem with using tactics of terror as a viable political instrument. This was a political leader who "eliminated concern for ethics ... [who] ... justified dictatorship and terror" as Service puts it in his introduction (p10).

Where Service gets it just right – regarding the unique quandary of Lenin's biographers, the question of how one positions oneself morally regarding one's subject – is in realizing that a morality play is not his chief narrative responsibility. In the same vein, Service is aware that an overbearing moralist in this regard would seem ideologically suspect. More than this, such a moralist would seem to have foreclosed the terms, and undoubtedly the tone, of their biographical analysis. On the other hand, a total evasion of the issue, a refusal to take *any* position on one's subject would seem as unsatisfactory, given that clearly elements of Lenin's politics were scandalous, brutal, murderous even. In a key passage towards the middle of the book, Service breaks his attitude of objectivity – in what seems to me a well-timed and necessary manner - to

make the following comments (he includes first a series of Lenin's orders to the Bolsheviks, I include the whole extract):

"Lenin's choleric intensity is obvious from a letter he sent to the Bolsheviks of Penza on 11 August 1918: *'Comrades! The insurrection of five kulak districts should be pitilessly suppressed ... Hang (and make sure that the hanging takes **place in full view of the people**) **no fewer than one hundred** known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers...Do it in such a fashion that for hundreds of kilometers around people might see, tremble, know, shout: they are strangling and will strangle to death the bloodsucking kulaks'*. These words were so shocking in tone and content that they were kept secret during the Soviet period. The lax definition of victims ... was a virtual guarantee that abuse would occur ... People were to be judicially murdered simply for belonging to a social category ... It is the vicious relish in exemplary death that is so disgusting [here] ... Not even just a firing squad and a quick death. No, Lenin demanded a public hanging" (pp365-366).

What is one to make of this? To my mind, a biographer being faithful to his subject, even in the tenor of this commentary (which, one should note, is uncharacteristic relative to the text as a whole). Given the demeanour of historical objectivity adopted by Service throughout the majority of his work, it is only in those few moments, like this one, in which we glimpse a not totally dispassionate handling of his protagonist. As a result, it is in these moments where the real power of his narrative comes to the fore.