Lenin's Impact on Australia

THE LENIN CENTENARY happens almost to coincide with the half century of the Communist Party of Australia. Therefore, it is an opportunity to consider how the Australian left became aware of Lenin and his thought (or that part of it which reached the Australian public in the years immediately after the October Revolution) and how Leninism first affected the development of the socialist movement in Australia. The impact of Leninism created the conditions for the formation of a Communist Party, as well as providing a new dimension to Marxism and revolutionary strategy.

In November 1917, Tom Barker, the prominent member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was in the Albury gaol. The gaol governor came to him to ask who the Bolsheviks were. Recalling the incident many years later, Barker relates that he had never heard of Lenin or Trotsky although he had organised support for the February revolution. Barker's lack of knowledge would have been fairly typical of the Australian left in 1917. Only very few, if any, would have known much of the Russian socialist movement. There were some in Australia, however, who were in a position to know a bit more than the average left-winger. After the 1905 revolution, there was a certain amount of Russian emigration to Australia. Among the revolutionaries there were socialists and anarchists, and among the socialists there were some Bolsheviks including F. S. Sergeyev (Artem) and Peter Simonoff. Sergeyev was the outstanding figure in this circle and around him the Bolsheviks formed a group which led the Russian organisation in Australia.2

When Sergeyev returned to Russia after February (he became a member of the Bolshevik central committee, the vice-president of the Ukrainian Soviet Government, Commissar for Mines and a member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern) Simonoff succeeded him as editor of the Brisbane-based paper *Workers'*

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2 The Russian organisation in Australia and the Bolshevik part in it is still inadequately understood.

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Life. Then, at the beginning of 1918, Simonoff became Consul-General for the Soviet Government in Australia.

He shifted to Melbourne where he received assistance from the left-wing Labor MP, Mick Considine, and the Victorian Socialist Party whose most notable member was the editor of the Party paper, R. S. (Bob) Ross. Like most of the Australian left, the VSP, was enthusiastic about the Russian revolution which Ross described early in 1918 as “greater than the French Revolution because it had given to the world a proletarian republic.” But at this stage the socialist movement had absorbed little of the detail of Bolshevik strategy; the aims of the Bolsheviks were said to be (1) to free Russia, and (2) to end the war. With this in mind, F. J. Riley proposed successfully to the regular Sunday meeting in the Socialist Hall that “a delegate from the militant Labor movement of Australia” be sent to Petrograd “to represent the Australian movement in negotiations affecting the revolution and for peace”. After the Labor Party had rejected socialist overtures for a joint project, the Federal Government refused a passport to the chosen VSP delegate, A. W. Foster.

Simonoff began to publicise the significance of the Russian events. He gave an authentic account of Lenin’s role. He spoke on many platforms, gave interviews and wrote for the press. Although Simonoff’s appreciation of the Revolution lacked the immediacy of the actual views of the Russian leaders, the book he wrote, What is Russia? published in mid-1919, gave the first substantial account to Australians of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement and especially the socialist influence in it.

He distinguished between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, and emphasised the importance of What is to be Done? without being able to expound Lenin’s ideas. He gave some idea of the nature of the Soviets. Towards the end of 1918 Simonoff was charged under the War Precautions Act and in the first half of 1919 he served four months in prison.

In the second half of 1918 and the first half of 1919 the ideas of the Russian Revolution had to compete with the prevailing view of the road to socialism — One Big Union. Over more than a decade the Australian left, especially in New South Wales, had absorbed the syndicalism of the IWW until in 1918 the trade

3 The Socialist, 11 Jan. 1918.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Later a judge of the Arbitration Court.
union movement officially decided to reconstruct itself on "industrial" lines. With the national OBU conference in January 1919, the ideology of "bigger" unionism dominated the scene. Although there was much debate and different trends, virtually the whole left held to some form of One Big Unionism. It was thought that by class struggle and the application of "big" unionism, socialism could be achieved.

It is difficult to sort out completely cause and effect but the failure of the One Big Union to take on to any real extent and the greater opportunities to appreciate the Bolshevik strategy occur together. The fact that Lenin had proposed workers' control over industry to the Congress of Soviets which took power on November 7 and had followed this up nine days later with detailed proposals, created common ground between the Bolsheviks and syndicalists and "industrialists". Several eye-witness accounts which were reprinted in Australia in 1919 emphasised this aspect of the revolutionary process. It is hardly surprising that men prominently connected with syndicalist or industrial union ideas—Earsman, Laidler, Baracchi, Glynn, Garden and a group of "red" trade union officials—associated themselves with the Bolshevik position and were closely connected with the subsequent steps taken towards establishing a Communist Party. Even more important, perhaps, were the many militants who had either been in the IWW or strongly influenced by it or its ethos. In 1919-20 they were the living substance through which the first Leninist ideas were carried into the Australian labor movement and they stamped the ideas with their own style.

The early aura around the Russian revolution persisted in spite of Lenin's subsequent revisions. In fact, in Australia the original sequence of the development of Lenin's thought was reversed. The first important Lenin work was published under the title "Soviets at Work", late in 1919.\(^7\) Despite its title, it was really Lenin's *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*,\(^8\) one of a set of similar, closely-argued doctrinal statements, turning the Revolution in a new direction. Coming immediately after the Brest-Litovsk debate, this pamphlet propagated the ideas of one-man management, productivity, the importance of specialists, payment by results and discipline. Compared to *State and Revolution* written earlier, but published in Australia later, the emphasis had changed.\(^9\) Lenin's famous Spring address, as *The Immediate*

\(^7\) *The Socialist*, 28 Nov., 1919.


\(^9\) *State and Revolution* was first published in Australia in April 1920.
Tasks was often called, was the source of much of the early discussion of Lenin’s ideas. It seems the actuality of the Soviet government had more meaning than the discussion of a more fundamental nature contained in State and Revolution.

Karl Radek's The Russian Revolution came out in Australia about the same time as Soviets at Work. Originally an introduction to Bukharin's The Communist Programme of World Revolution, it is marked with the brilliant pungency for which Radek was justly famous. Radek's theses are generally close to Lenin's but there is sufficient difference to illustrate that Bolshevism was not a monolithic doctrine. For instance, Radek suggests that in highly developed capitalist countries the proletariat will have to fight the peasantry.10

The Bukharin pamphlet itself was printed in Australia about the middle of 1920 by the Proletarian Publishing Association which, along with Andrade's Bookshop, Melbourne, was responsible for the bulk of the Bolshevik reprints in 1919 and 1920. Percy Laidler who had been assistant secretary of the VSP in the early days under Tom Mann, then an IWW, managed Andrade's, and started the most important early communist-orientated journal The Proletarian Review in June 1920 with Guido Baracchi as editor. J. B. Miles attested to the importance of The Proletarian Review in consolidating the trends towards a Communist Party in 1920.11

Baracchi, at least, took a critical interest in the various Bolshevik writings. He described Bukharin's pamphlet, which in a way seems to have been a pre-cursor of The ABC of Communism, as "distinctly inferior to the writings of Lenin, of whose revolutionary genius Bukharin's falls short." Perceptively Baracchi referred to the Bukharininist approach to the national question. Unlike Lenin, Bukharin did not regard self-determination as a principle; the right to national autonomy could be overridden by the international working class crossing national boundaries.12

Other of Lenin's writings published in the second half of 1920 were Bourgeois Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship, The Great Initiative and in particular The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky. As well there were two by Zinoviev: The Communist Party and Industrial Unionism and V. Lenin: His Life and Work. Apart from the intrinsic interest, no doubt the scandal produced by allegations of unusual sexual arrangements in Soviet

11 Interview with the author, 12 January, 1965.
12 The Proletarian Review, August 1920.
Russia, prompted the publication of *Marriage under Bolshevism*, an exposition of Soviet marriage law, and A. Kollontai’s *Communism and the Family*. A couple of Trotsky’s pamphlets, *The History of the Russian Revolution* and *Bolsheviki and World Peace*, completed a wide range of Bolshevik opinion available to the Australian left.

Apart from Baracchi’s, there were few important Australian contributions to debate on the significance of the Russian revolution. Maurice Blackburn, ex-VSP, left-wing Labor Victorian parliamentarian, put out a pamphlet which was largely a commentary on Lenin’s views of the immediate issues facing the Soviet government in the Spring of 1918, i.e., it was probably based on *Soviets at Work*. Interestingly, Blackburn warned against the possibility of growing bureaucratism due to the use of experts who could easily become a new governing class. But easily the most important Australian view came from sometime secretary of the VSP, editor of *The Socialist*, R. S. (Bob) Ross.

Ross had been an enthusiast of the Revolution from the beginning but had refused to endorse the universality of its methods. In a series of “Letters” to the Queensland *Worker*, subsequently reprinted as a pamphlet, he expounded most sympathetically the nature of the state and economic systems of Soviet Russia and the Russian interpretation of the Marxist theory of democracy but finally proposed that “our own industrial and parliamentary machinery can be more rapidly altered or used to ensure reconstruction towards emancipation than beginning anew on Russian lines.” Ross maintained that Parliament could be bent to whatever the people wished and that One Big Unionism offered as many advantages as Soviets. There is an evolutionary-revolutionary analysis of the road to power, with what appears to be a lack of appreciation of the sharpness of changes which may be necessary: “on the day that education and events enable us to return to power a party with a mandate to establish the proletarian dictatorship and overthrow capitalism, on that day it shall be done.”

There is repeated reference to Marx’s estimate of the likely course of the English revolution and “what Marx said is our heritage”.

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17 Ibid., p. 48.
While Ross obviously regarded himself as writing in the Marxist tradition, he wrote as if he regarded the state as neutral, failing to assess the class character of state power. Nevertheless, he raised important points: the effect of the social standards reached in Australia, the importance of hard-won freedoms and the moral influence of Labor in national life. Ross insisted that restriction of the franchise was not essential to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Unbeknown to Ross, Lenin had already conceded this point: "it would be a mistake, however to guarantee in advance that the impending proletarian revolutions will be necessarily accompanied by restriction of the franchise. It may be so . . . but it is not absolutely necessary . . . it is not an essential earmark of the logical concept 'dictatorship'."

Ross opposed the reorganisation of the VSP as a Communist Party of Australia based on the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels and the New Communist Manifesto of the Third International. A significant section of the party, however, favoured the idea, and others on the left proceeded with arrangements to form a party upholding Bolshevism. After the rejection of the OBU by the New South Wales Labor Party Conference in June 1919, the OBU-ites left the ALP. After an Australian Socialist Party-inspired conference failed to achieve socialist unity the OBU-ites moved towards a communist position. The ASP itself adopted the line of the Third International in December 1919. The Brisbane branch of the ASP went ‘communist’. Finally, the ASP in Sydney invited those interested to a conference to consider “communist unity”, and they formed a Communist Party.

Although the left of 1919-20 did not have a complete knowledge of Leninist thought, sufficient was known to begin a ferment of ideas. The debate on the left explored many of Lenin’s theses on revolution; and the Leninist strategy won many adherents, especially among the ranks of syndicalists and “industrialists”. The successes of the Russian revolution made Soviet-style government popular. Some demurred—at least to some degree—maintaining that too close an attachment to the Russian model would be misleading. However the Soviet trend had made genuine impact and in the years ahead the influence grew.

Most people know what Lenin D I D
But what did he S A Y that is relevant today?

"Marxism differs from all other socialist theories in the remarkable way it combines complete scientific sobriety in the analysis of the objective state of affairs and the objective course of evolution with the most emphatic recognition of the importance of the revolutionary energy, revolutionary creative genius, and revolutionary initiative of the masses — and also, of course, of individuals, groups, organisations and parties that are able to discover and achieve contact with one or another class."


From the original manuscript of Lenin’s April Theses (1917).

Lenin was born 100 years ago, on April 22, 1870.

A wide range of Lenin’s books, pamphlets and Collected and Selected Works are available from:

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