

Bertrand Russell

Lenin: An Impression

THE DEATH OF LENIN makes the world poorer by the loss of one of the really great men produced by the war. It seems probable that our age will go down to history as that of Lenin and Einstein — the two men who have succeeded in a great work of synthesis in an analytic age, one in thought, the other in action. Lenin appeared to the outraged bourgeoisie of the world as a destroyer, but it was not the work of destruction that made him pre-eminent. Others could have destroyed, but I doubt whether any other living man could have built so well on the new foundations. His mind was orderly and creative: he was a philosophic system-maker in the sphere of practice. In revolutions, three types of men come to the fore. There are those who love revolution because they have an anarchic and turbulent temperament. There are those who are embittered by personal grievances. And there are those who have a definite conception of a society different from that which exists, who, if the revolution succeeds, set to work to create a stable world in accordance with their conception. Lenin belonged to this third type — the rarest, but by far the most beneficent of the three.

Only once I saw Lenin: I had an hour's conversation with him in his room at The Kremlin in 1920. I thought he resembled

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Cromwell more than any other historical character. Like Cromwell, he was forced into a dictatorship by being the only competent man of affairs in a popular movement. Like Cromwell, he combined a narrow orthodoxy in thought with great dexterity and adaptability in action, though he never allowed himself to be led into concessions which had any purpose other than the ultimate establishment of Communism. He appeared, as he was, completely sincere and devoid of self-seeking. I am persuaded that he cared only for public ends, not for his own power; I believe he would have stood aside at any moment if, by so doing, he could have advanced the cause of Communism.

His strength in action came from unwavering conviction. He held his beliefs in an absolute way which is difficult in the more sceptical West. Beliefs other than his own — for example, the belief that climate or race might affect national character in ways not explicable by economic causes — he regarded as heresies due to the bourgeois or the priest. The ultimate coming of communism he regarded as fated, demonstrable scientifically, as certain as the next eclipse of the sun. This made him calm amid difficulties, heroic amid dangers, able to regard the whole Russian revolution as an episode in the world struggle. In the early months of the Bolshevik regime, he expected to fall at any minute; I doubt whether Scotland Yard was more surprised by his success than he was. But he was a true internationalist; he felt that if the Russian revolution failed, it would nevertheless have brought the world revolution nearer.

The intensity of his convictions, while it was the source of his strength, was also the source of a certain ruthlessness and a certain rigidity of outlook. He could not believe that one country could differ from another except in the stage of economic development that it had reached. In my record of the interview I had with him, written immediately afterwards, I find the following: "I asked whether and how far he recognised the peculiarity of English conditions. He admits that there is little chance of revolution now, and that the working man is not yet disgusted with parliamentary government. He hopes this result may be brought about by a Labor Ministry. But when I suggested that whatever is possible in England may occur without bloodshed, he waved aside the suggestion as fantastic". I hope this opinion was mistaken. But it was part and parcel of what made his strength, and without his creed he could never have dominated the wild forces that had been let loose in Russia. Statesmen of his calibre do not appear in the world more than about once in a century, and few of us are likely to live to see his equal.