REVIEWERS HAVE REMARKED of Adam Ulam’s lengthy work Lenin and the Bolsheviks that in it Lenin appears as a much more complex and interesting figure than in any of the lives of him yet written. For what it is worth, this conclusion can hardly be avoided, if one reads the Collected, or even the Selected, Works. Although it is subtitled “The intellectual and political history of the triumph of communism in Russia”, the study falls far short of being either a satisfactory political biography or of giving an account of the political and social environment within which Lenin’s revolutionary ideas were moulded. It does not fill the gap left by Isaac Deutscher’s failure to complete the trilogy of political biographies of Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin.

A vivid picture of Lenin the man certainly does emerge, largely evoked from the recollections of contemporaries, and there is some brisk puncturing of the speculative accounts of recent

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years of Lenin's relations with Inessa Armand. They were just good friends is all that the available evidence will permit us to say, in Ulam's opinion — although the direct telephone line between Lenin's office and Inessa's apartment, and her photograph still to be seen in his apartment may suggest something more.

There is also a refreshingly cool look at the Mensheviks. Ulam rejects the sanctimonious defence by some apologists that the Mensheviks were moral men disarmed by the unscrupulousness of the Bolsheviks. He points out that from 1902 to 1905 the Mensheviks were as deeply involved in the political in-fighting as their opponents. If we look for the reason why they lost the advantage again and again, it would seem to lie not so much with Lenin's ruthlessness as with their own lack of an immediate and concrete revolutionary perspective in a political situation which in spite of the ebb and flow of repression and upsurge, was profoundly revolutionary.

This brings us to the question of Lenin's revolutionary outlook. No account of Lenin, which is not a study of the revolutionary strategy and tactics which he worked out in detail within a framework of orthodox Marxism to apply to the political conditions in which the Russian revolutionary movement operated, can hope to explain what it was that made this sulphurous polemicist unique among the factional brawlers in the emigration. Nor why it was, when they all went back in 1917, that he alone of the party men, although endowed with no gift of foreseeing future events, knew what to do next, while the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries squandered political time and capital in endless talk in the soviets.

Ulam has not attempted such a study. Although, in his contra-suggestible way, he has avoided emphasising the tedious and unproductive view of Lenin the opportunist, with the obsessive lust for power, which has been a standard interpretation in the West for many years, he has come up with a frequently repeated discussion stopper of his own, which is, that Lenin had an obsessive hatred of the social group from which he sprang, variously described as the middle class or as the intelligentsia. No adequate explanation of this hatred in terms of personality or rejection of his family background is suggested, for there is none. As is well known, Lenin remained to the end of his life devoted to his family, a collar and tie man of unshakably bourgeois tastes and habits and the sort of man who knew exactly what flattering remarks to make to Rosa Luxembourg about her cat Mimi, in 1912, when she and Lenin were seeing eye to eye on Kautsky's descent into reformism.
To explain Lenin’s attitude to the intelligentsia, liberal and radical, one must turn to his political beliefs. It is true that, particularly from 1905 onwards, Lenin never ceased to pour vitriol on the liberals as the spokesmen of the bourgeoisie, but the reasons are clear. The political task before Russian Marxists at the beginning of the twentieth century was that of the struggle for the bourgeois democratic revolution. The socio-political feebleness and ideological wavering of the bourgeoisie were common knowledge amongst revolutionaries. Plekhanov had long since recognised that the working class would have to play the main part in overthrowing the autocracy and winning political and civil liberties. But a political alliance between the bourgeoisie and proletariat against the autocracy was still seen as essential.

In July 1905, after months of intense observation of the behaviour of the liberal opposition, Lenin stated (in Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution) that the bourgeoisie would be too treacherous, inconsistent and fearful to carry through its own revolution but would desert its proletarian allies and become counter-revolutionary before victory was won. The bourgeois democratic revolution would have to be achieved by an alliance of proletariat and peasantry in the face of the opposition of the bourgeoisie. A few months later the crumbling of the liberal opposition before the pseudo-concessions of the October Manifesto bore out Lenin’s estimate of the bourgeoisie, but his heretical strategy of the revolutionary alliance of workers and peasants remained under attack from Menshevik exponents of orthodox Marxism. Lenin’s savage and incessant hammering of the liberals had two ends in view, the first, to prove by constant demonstration the counter-revolutionary stance of the bourgeoisie, and the second, to block pragmatic alliances of revolutionaries and liberals against the autocracy.

The rigorous tactics flowing from the strategy of no alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie from 1905 to 1914 put severe strains on the loyalty of the Bolshevik following. Again and again, what seemed to be fruitful opportunities of forming a united opposition front against the autocracy had to be foregone. Electoral agreements with the Cadets, joint opposition to the government in the Duma and contributions by socialists to the bourgeois opposition press were all renounced.

Lenin’s attacks however were by no means confined to the liberal intelligentsia. From 1900 he had been concerned to define a revolutionary Marxist policy and to build a revolutionary political party. This meant differentiation and separation from the mass
of the motley oppositional intelligentsia that had come into being by the end of the nineteenth century — an opposition ranging from “legal” Marxists, indistinguishable from liberals, to the neopopulist terrorists. Lenin’s most consistent assaults were directed against the groups closest in the political spectrum, the right-wing Social Democrats and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

With the final defeat of the revolution and with the severe repression ushered in by the Stolypin coup in June 1907, the semi-anarchist left wing of the Bolshevik faction were also the object of Lenin’s wrath. They wanted to renounce altogether the limited opportunities for legal political action won in the revolution and to reconstruct the faction entirely as an underground conspiratorial body dedicated to the preparation of an armed uprising. Apart from philosophical wrangles the main point at issue was whether to participate in parliamentary work and in legal mass organisations. The left wing, the otzovists, argued for the recall of Bolshevik deputies from the Duma, Lenin was adamant that the Duma was to be used as a platform for revolutionary agitation but not as a testing ground for the effectiveness of parliamentary pressure in squeezing concessions from the autocracy.

The combination of legal with illegal activity insisted upon by Lenin was a razor edge path between the Mensheviks on the right yearning to cut all connections with the underground and move into legal mass work “in order to take their place with the class”, and the otzovists on the left clamoring for a totally illegal revolutionary underground. The Bolshevik faction split again and again, with Lenin, irascible and vituperative, finding his only reliable supporter in Zinoviev. The formal split with the Mensheviks in 1912 was engineered by new workers in the field, crude Georgians, Ordzhonikidze and Stalin. All the old Bolshevik functionaries had either been hunted down by the police or had retired baffled and dissident from active work.

The isolation of the years of repression ended in 1912 with a great revival of working class militancy in mass strikes sparked off by the shooting of workers on the Lena River goldfields. A new era of revolutionary activity began with the return of the practical men to Petersburg and the establishment of legal daily newspapers, Bolshevik and Menshevik.

In an article, The Revolutionary Upswing, in June 1912, Lenin wrote of the militancy of workers in terms which reveal a remarkable rise in his estimation of the development of the working class above that seen in What is to be Done?. In 1912 Lenin wrote, “The proletariat . . . is drawing the masses into a revolutionary
strike, which indissolubly links politics with economics, a strike which wins the support of the most backward sections by the success of the struggle for an immediate improvement in the life of the workers, and at the same time rouses the people against the tsarist monarchy". This is a view of the role of the revolutionary mass strike in arousing the political consciousness of the workers which is similar to Rosa Luxemburg's.

Between 1902 and 1912 Lenin had learnt a great deal about the revolutionary potential of the working class. The revolution had shown to the embattled and wrangling intelligentsia the enthusiasm, initiative and political educability of the workers, and the scattered and isolated revolutionary groups had briefly grown into a mass party in which workers outnumbered intelligentsia.

A considerable change had also occurred in Lenin's thinking about the mass organisations of the working class. The deep reservations which he still had in 1905 about trade unions and his suspicious insistence that they should remain politically neutral and entirely separated from the party had, under the impetus of the many sided activity of the newly formed unions and the prodding of Bolshevik practical men, been abandoned by 1907. In their place was a recognition of the importance of combining the economic and political struggle and giving the industrial struggle itself a political character through Social Democratic leadership.

The history of the development of Lenin's revolutionary strategy and tactics has not been adequately recounted in English, at least to the point where E. H. Carr takes up the story in 1917. Certainly it has not been done by Ulam — nor by those of the English academic school who write political histories but who would not recognise a political meeting or a trade union meeting if they fell into one — nor by those Americans who see rivalries between Marxists as variants of the deadly Tweedledum and Tweedledee ritual of presidential contests. One can only regret once again the death of Isaac Deutscher.