

“IF LENIN WERE ALIVE TODAY, HE WOULD KNOW WHAT TO DO”

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Throughout the history of the U.S.S.R., Lenin was the main legitimising symbol, the “master-signifier”, of Soviet ideology, external to the ideological discourse.³ In other words, the postulate that Lenin’s ideas were correct and incontrovertible was the premise underlying all ideological statements, and hence could not be called into question by them. As a result, all reforms and changes in the Soviet system were carried out under the pretext that they were combating perversion of Lenin’s ideas in order to revert to what he really meant.

This was also the task which perestroika initially set itself. In 1990, however, the Communist Party press changed the way in which the task was formulated. If in the past the speeches of Party leaders had explained that distortion of Lenin’s ideas had occurred during particular periods (under Stalin or Brezhnev), the suggestion now was that Lenin’s ideas had been distorted throughout the whole of Soviet history. This cast doubt on the authenticity of any of Lenin’s statements to be found in Soviet sources. That apparently minor shift in 1990 created a paradox within Party discourse. On the one hand, it was declaring that the main task of the perestroika reforms was to return to the ideas of the real Lenin, while on the other it was asserting that the real Lenin was unknown.

A typical early 1990 article in *Kommunist*, the Central Committee’s official theoretical journal, begins in familiar vein: the main task of perestroika is to “rid socialism of Stalin’s perversions, to restore to it the ideals of Marx

3. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), pp 73–4.

and Lenin, its heart and soul, which Stalin had cut out . . .”⁴ Later, however, the article formulates the task of perestroika somewhat differently: “to proceed by way of experimentation rather than dogma, enriching the ideals of socialism with new, hitherto unknown meaning”.⁵ Returning to the ideals of Marx and Lenin was going to be a leap in the dark. The emergence of this contradiction in Party discourse in 1990 was one of the most significant events of that eventful year. It greatly hastened the undermining of the principle that legitimised Soviet ideology, and accelerated the irreversible collapse of the Communist Party and the Soviet system as a whole.

This process began and ended in 1990.

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Admitting that Lenin’s words and ideas had been distorted throughout Soviet history created the necessity to establish the Leader’s authentic, undistorted identity. The first step was to understand how and why his words had been distorted. Party writers, debating the issue in the spring of 1990, noted that this had been done by all manner of commentators, paraphraser and editors. Some had done it as a result of misunderstanding, some with the best of intentions and some maliciously. Other people’s reports of what Lenin said had occasionally been treated as tantamount to what he actually said. *Kommunist* observed that, “Sundry views, opinions and statements by the authors of reminiscences” of Lenin were still being treated as “fundamental propositions by Lenin himself”.⁶ For example, the journal continued, although in a well-known publication on the Party’s cultural policy, Clara Zetkin was only reporting a conversation she had had with Lenin, her paraphrase was treated “as if the words were written by Lenin himself”. Moreover, “. . . for many years we have been using a far from perfect translation”, even of the paraphrase. In this instance, Lenin’s words and ideas were doubly distorted, having been inaccurately reported

4. Vladimir Sogrin, “Levaia, pravaia gde storona?”, *Kommunist*, 3 (February 1990), pp 33–4.

5. *Ibid.* p. 36.

6. V. Polevoi, “Khudozhnik i vlast’”, *Kommunist*, 2 (January 1990), pp 66–75.