

Chapter Nine. The Interregnum and the New Opposition

On January 21, 1924, Lenin died. The problem of his formal succession had already been settled. The colourless Rykov became President of the Council of People's Commissars. Trotsky, who was still away from Moscow, was warned too late to return in time. It was the members of the troika who presided at the funerary ceremonies, delivered the speeches and celebrated the memory of the deceased. Stalin, the last orator, recited the "commandments" of the dead man in the style of a litany. This almost mystical exaltation, reminiscent of the bible and nearer to the tradition of the priests of the Orthodox Church than to the teachings of Marx, sounded strangely in the great hall of the Congress of Soviets: a page had been turned.

The transformation of the Party

The campaign to recruit industrial workers, decided by the Thirteenth Conference, was placed under the patronage of the dead leader. The so-called "Lenin Appeal" was to bring in more than two hundred thousand new members in a few months, and ended by raising the party membership by 50% in a year. Despite its label, the campaign sanctioned a profound break from the methods employed during Lenin's lifetime. On the one hand, it was no longer a question of the enthusiastic, convinced joining by workers who had been won by other party members, nor even of that of ambitious people obliged by the force of things to give the proofs of themselves and to show capacity and devotion. It was now an almost official recruitment, carried out within the framework of the factories, under the pressure of secretaries who were the official authorities and who did not lack means of pressure with which to make workers, concerned above all with their day to day problems and the necessity to keep their jobs, join the one and only party. The newcomers, moreover, were for the most part completely or largely lacking education. They formed the majority of the 57% illiterates who, according to Stalin, were in the party in May 1924. Consequently they were a long way away from the problems of politics, inexperienced and malleable.

In the hands of the apparatus they formed a docile army, always falling in behind the leadership, very distant in every way from the revolutionary spirit of the Bolshevik workers, who were to be swamped under the numbers of mulish members. In their favour the restrictions imposed by the earlier congresses were waived: the newcomers were to use their membership rights to the full, were to vote, to fill responsible posts, were to be able to be delegates at conferences, without any account being taken of how long they had spent in the probationary stages which had earlier been demanded. We can imagine more easily what a trump card this flood of new members could be for manipulating cells and responsible party organisms at the hands of the apparatus and of the General Secretary, when we remember that the recruitment based on the "Lenin Appeal" was carried out in parallel with a purge that, this time, was aimed at the supporters of the Opposition of the 46. We can understand how Molotov could declare, in these conditions: "The development of the party in the future will, without any doubt, be based on the Lenin Appeal" (1).

The Cult of Lenin Begins: the Suppression of the Testament

The funeral speeches and articles set the tone for a new period. The Congress of Soviets, which was in session at the time of Lenin's death, changed the name of Petrograd, which became Leningrad. It made January 21 an annual day of mourning. It decided to erect monuments to his memory in every city, to embalm his body and place it in a mausoleum under the Kremlin walls, so that pilgrimages could be made to the mummy. The voice of Krupskaya alone was raised against these decision, the semi-religious inspiration of which was surprising in revolutionaries:

"Do not permit your mourning for Ilyich to take on forms of external reverence for his person. Do not erect monuments. Do not give his name to palaces. Do not organise ceremonies to his memory. He attached so little importance to all that. All that so annoyed him. Remember the poverty... that still exists in the country. If you want to honour the memory of Vladimir Ilyich, build creches, kindergartens, houses, schools, libraries, medical centres, hospitals, homes for invalids, and, especially, put his principles into practice".(2)

Zinoviev was promoted to the rank of High Priest and declared: "Lenin is dead, Leninism lives".(3). The Central Committee resolved to start a new journal, "The Bolshevik", intended to summarise "Leninism" systematically in simple proposition which all could understand. None the less, the problem of Lenin's testament still had to be settled, with Krupskaya believing that it should be brought to the notice of the party in respect for the dead man's wishes. The document was read on May 22 to a session of the Central Committee enlarged by the attendance of the oldest party members; it there produced the effect of a bomb. Zinoviev at ^{once} flew to the help of Stalin, whom the document, in the atmosphere of adoration of the deceased, seemed to condemn beyond forgiveness: he declared:

"Ilyich's last word is the highest law for us... but on one point at least the fears of Lenin have shown themselves to be unfounded. I wish to speak of that concerning our General Secretary. You have all witnessed our common work during these last years and, like myself, have been happy to confirm that the fears of Ilyich have not been realised."(4)

With the support of Kamenev he proposed that Stalin be retained in the position from which Lenin wished to remove him. No opposition was openly raised. The natural consequence followed. Despite Krupskaya, who wanted the testament read to the party congress, the Central Committee decided by some 30 votes to 10 to keep it secret and to communicate it only to the leaders of the delegations to the congress. Trotsky remained silent from the beginning of the meeting to the end: for years, his silence was to make him the accomplice of the falsifiers. For the second time his abstention rescued Stalin and those who, in deifying Lenin and concealing his last wishes, showed that maintaining themselves in power dominated their other pre-occupations. In any