The Way We Hate Now
by William Voegeli
Journalist Victor Sebestyen’s *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror* is a fast-paced, absorbing new biography of one of history’s greatest revolutionaries—or, if you share my perspective, political mass murderers. Scrupulously researched and vividly written, it is the first major new biography of Vladimir Lenin in 20 years and makes extensive use of the archival materials that have become available in that time. It will be an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the founder of the Soviet Union.

Much of the interest in the book has been over its revelations about Lenin’s personal life, hitherto largely unknown. Although his wife, Nadya Krupskaya, has often been portrayed as a dour helpmate in a loveless marriage who cooked and cleaned for the Iron Man, Sebestyen reveals real depth of feeling and complexity in their private lives. At the same time, Lenin carried on a passionate love affair for a decade with a beautiful French émigré, Inessa Armand, “by far the most glamorous of all the Russian émigrés in the radical circles of Paris.” His “ménage à trois” with Inessa and Nadya (who condoned the affair) was “central to Lenin’s emotional life.” According to Sebestyen, the Soviet leader was “not a monster” but, in personal relationships, “invariably kind.” He could even laugh at himself, “occasionally.” What’s more, he didn’t revel in “the details of his victims’ deaths” as did Hitler or Mao, because, for Lenin, “the deaths were theoretical, mere numbers.” I’m afraid Sebestyen may have succumbed to the temptation every biographer faces of getting too attached to his subject.

After he led the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 against the crumbling Czarist autocracy, Lenin’s socialist state quickly became a totalitarian hell of mass executions, forced collectivization, and slave labor. Newly revealed details about his personal life furnish no further insight into this vast project of institutionalized terrorism. Countless men display traits of loyalty in marriage as well as lapses from that loyalty; very few emerge as political murderers on such a grand scale. The most that these details can establish is the sickening contrast between someone capable of tenderness and affection in private life and capable at the same time of mobilizing the deaths of millions.

The same could be said of Hitler. His creepy dalliance with his niece Geli Raubal, ending in her suicide, his concealed relationship with vapid concubine Eva Braun, the rumors of kinky sexual perversions—all of these are grist for the biographer’s mill, but...
none of these personal details sheds any light on what drove the man to launch World War II and the Holocaust. Take any of them away, and he still would have done the same things.

Sebestyen’s biography comes closer to the mark in his exhaustive exploration of Lenin’s ideological writings before and after the Revolution, which have only become available in recent years. Nevertheless, I don’t think they add anything fundamental to what we already knew. Lenin was no more a “theorist” than was the Führer, his dreary tracts mainly vicious diatribes against rivals. Among his epithets for anyone who disagreed with him, Sebestyen observes, were “filthy scum,” “whores,” “class traitors,” and “scoundrels.” Ransacked bits of Karl Marx served his purpose of seizing absolute power and crushing society, just as Hitler would later invoke Friedrich Nietzsche.

In Lenin’s version of Marxism before the revolution, tactical compromise with other political groups was possible, but there could be no compromise on the strategic goal of a collectivized society without private property. Like Robespierre during the Jacobin Terror, Lenin aimed to impose a geometrical purity on corrupt human fodder. This cold-blooded lust for destruction was born primarily of his outrage over his brother Aleksandr’s execution in 1887 for treason and the family’s resulting disgrace, for which he sought revenge on the whole world. Decades after it happened, Sebestyen writes, Lenin confided to Nadya that he was still “bitter…about Sasha’s execution and how much he hated the regime that sentenced him to death.”

Lenin never believed that socialism could triumph in Russia alone and would never have been content with such small stakes. (“I spit on Russia,” he once said. “This is merely one phase through which we must pass on the way to a world revolution.”) He thought the Russian Revolution would spur a proletarian uprising in Europe, which would then, with its far more advanced industrial means of production, help Russia’s backward agrarian society.

When World War I shook Czarist Russia to its foundations—millions of casualties in the trenches and a collapsing economy sparking unrest at home—Leon Trotsky egged Lenin on to seize control amidst the chaos. Despite his later pose in exile in the West as a sensitive intellectual, Trotsky was another revolutionary nihilist and mass murderer, an armed bohemian seeking revenge against his exclusion from prominence. “Whatever moral eunuuchs and Pharisees might say,” he enthused, “the feeling of revenge has its right.... We [must] direct all our strengths toward a collective struggle against this class structure. That is the method by which the burning desire for revenge can achieve its greatest moral satisfaction.”

Seizing power in a coup d’état, the Bolsheviks used the empty husk of the Czars’ now vacant absolute state to impose Communism by force. It was a one-party state from the start: the “first freely elected government” in 1917, Sebestyen observes, “survived for about twelve hours. There would not be another for nearly seventy-five years.”

From the outset, Bolshevik savagery surpassed the Czars at their most autocratic. During the final years of Czarism in Russia, 1,144 political prisoners were executed following the failed 1905 revolution. Immediately following the 1917 coup, Lenin had upwards of 100,000 “enemies of the revolution” liquidated, and by the time of his incapacitation in 1922 from a stroke, an estimated 5 million had lost their lives due to starvation. As Lenin put it, “a revolution without firing squads is meaningless.... The purpose of terror is to terrorize.”

Although he claimed to be an orthodox Marxist (and may even have believed it), he was really a purist and would-be dictator. The Bolsheviks’ real predecessors in Russia included a Nietzschean sect called the “God-builders,” who envisioned creating a new world on the rubble of the old, as well as the “People’s Will” movement, driven by Rousseaouisian nostalgia for an allegedly lost golden age of peasant wholeness. As the late Robert Conquest observed, the Communist Party leadership contained no genuine economists. They were pledged to a millenarian doctrine, and their justification for holding power was to create by force a new, superior society in which the individual was submerged in the collective. As Sebestyen correctly observes, ‘the first major deviationist’ from Marxist theory was Lenin himself. He set about to create a socialist state by force, despite the absence of the socio-economic conditions Marx had decreed as necessary for its success according to the laws of “scientific socialism.”

Lenin and his henchmen were devoid of patriotism, since their revolution was but the first stage in a coming international Communist order. Any illusions people might have had that Lenin stood for electoral democracy were dashed when the 1921 Kronstadt rebellion against emerging Soviet dictatorship was ruthlessly put down.

Whatever affection he may have displayed toward Inessa and Nadya, Lenin was generally as cold as ice, and intolerant of all debate.
On the centenary of his birth, discover the American philosopher-poet whose work forever transformed our understanding of America.


A lifetime later, in his riveting sequel, *A New Birth of Freedom*—now in paperback with a new introduction by two-time Lincoln Prize-winner Allen C. Guelzo—he perfected what he had created.

Now, in *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics*, Jaffa’s final essays on America and the American idea are collected together in one volume for the first time.

No one has done more than Harry Jaffa to demonstrate why and how the American idea can and must guide American politics today and always.

Every intelligent patriot will want to read his other essential works, too, including *Equality and Liberty*, *The Conditions of Freedom*, *American Conservatism*, and *Storm over the Constitution*, with penetrating insights on everything from Aristotle and William Shakespeare to Thomas Jefferson and Tom Sawyer.

Available on Amazon

**The Claremont Institute**
It was Lenin’s old comrade Georgy Pyatakov who left the image favored by the Bolsheviks of their leader as an earthshaking, monumental figure—one who, as Mussolini admiringly remarked, was a sculptor of human souls. His actions were not guided by analyzing social and economic conditions, as Marxism taught. Instead, he created those conditions, like Rousseau’s Legislator or Nietzsche’s Superman. “The real Lenin,” Pyatakov wrote, “was the man who had the courage to make a proletarian revolution first, and then to set about creating the objective conditions theoretically necessary as a preliminary to such a revolution. What was the October revolution, what indeed is the Communist Party, but a miracle?” It was the complete identification of political action with an omnipotence formerly reserved for God: “A real communist…becomes himself in a way a miracle man.” Bolshevism’s central idea was “boundless coercion” and “the absence of any limitation whatsoever—moral, political, and even physical.”

The passion for a kind of justice born of righteous rage, with its call for the wholesale destruction and reconstruction of existence, is at the psychological core of revolutionary politics. Anger over the feeling that one has been treated unjustly is common to all people. But few act violently on that sense of righteous indignation, content instead to seethe inwardly, and fewer still carry that vengeance through to the attempted destruction of the world around them and its replacement with a new order that will enshrine their own supremacy.

In just about every case of a millenarian tyrant, we find a shattering experience in early life that drove these young men to bring everything down in flames in order to avenge themselves for these injustices and insults, a vengeance now extended from the original cruel or neglectful authority figure who treated them so slightingly (sometimes without being aware of it) to entire social forces, classes, and races—“the bourgeoisie,” “the reactionaries,” “the aristos,” “the kulaks,” “the Jews.”

If Lenin’s brother had not been executed for being a subversive, if Hitler had succeeded in getting into art school, if Mao had not felt looked down on for his peasant origins, Russia, Germany, and China might well have been spared the million-fold suffering brought about by their rise to power. The ideological visions of Bolshevism, Nazism, and Maoism are, to be sure, indispensable for understanding their success and appeal. But the Leader’s righteous anger and aggression are the crucial in which those totalitarian fantasies are forged and imposed on reality with indomitable will power.

This is the Lenin we need to keep uppermost in our minds when reading Victor Sebestyen’s comprehensive biography.

Waller R. Newell is professor of political science and philosophy at Carleton University, and the author, most recently, of Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror (Cambridge University Press).
Subscribe to the Claremont Review of Books

“The Claremont Review of Books is an outstanding literary publication written by leading scholars and critics. It covers a wide range of topics in trenchant and decisive language, combining learning with wit, elegance, and judgment.”

— Paul Johnson

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25% off the newsstand price. A one-year subscription is only $19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier conservative book review, visit www.claremont.org/crb or call (909) 981-2200.