

THE EARLY YEARS OF LENIN. By *Nikolai Valentinov (N. V. Volski)*.

Translated and edited by *Rolf H. W. Theen*. Introduction by *Bertram D. Wolfe*.

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In a lively introductory biographical note, Bertram Wolfe details the remarkable life and acquaintances of Nikolai Valentinov (Volsky), the Russian revolutionary who knew Lenin briefly but closely in 1904 in exile. Twice Wolfe credits him with "total recall," a gift more important for his *Encounters with Lenin*, where after some fifty years Valentinov reproduces verbatim conversations, than for the volume under review, where he draws for the most part upon memoirs written by Lenin's family and his party associates. Only two brief personal reminiscences are identified: Lenin's conversation about the merit of Chernyshevsky's style and Plekhanov's statement regarding his rejection of Lenin's argument that Russia had already entered its bourgeois phase of development.

The major portion of the biography is devoted to speculative analyses of how Lenin's family, homes, and literary favorites must have affected him. Verification of such speculation would be impossible, unless, of course, Valentinov had conducted an intensive study of his subject's attitudes through direct questioning, which unfortunately he does not present here. Rather his method consists of the following: "Not confining ourselves to the simple and dry facts, we have taken the liberty to present the facts together with some interpretative comments and additions of a psychological nature" (p. 115). Central to Valentinov's probing of Lenin's formative influences are discussions of Russian provincial life and of the works of Turgenev and Chernyshevsky. Valentinov's descriptions of Lenin's birthplace, Simbirsk, and especially of Kokushkino, the country home to which he was exiled, are beautifully written evocations of the soft, still warmth of Russian nature. His ground is far less sure, however, when he assumes that Lenin must have perceived his environment identically. In fact, we are told that Lenin saw his father "always busy, constantly hurrying, always going somewhere, working feverishly, almost without rest" (p. 10). Obviously that crucial link that connects the environment to the individual's psyche, and governs his interaction with it, is missing, and the observer cannot supply it.

Similarly, Valentinov attempts to assert what Lenin must have seen in the works of Turgenev and Chernyshevsky. In the pursuit of the formative influences, he presses, with increasingly shrill insistence, his conclusions on a clearly diverging reality. Like Nabokov's *Kinbote*, Valentinov accords Chernyshevsky decisive influence, even though Lenin never specifically dedicated any book or article to him ("One could think he did not want to speak about his 'first love,'" p. 213) and even though "having become a Marxist, Lenin valued the authority of Marx and Engels by far more highly than the authority of Chernyshevski" (but Marxism simply "toned down the views which Lenin had acquired from Chernyshevski," p. 282). Valentinov provides five pages of quotations from Chernyshevsky's revolutionary prescriptions, but they are all vague and unoriginal, and could hardly have enabled Lenin to bring about his coup.

Most of the events noted in this biography are well known, and Valentinov's speculations, although always interesting, are repetitious and cannot support the level of generality that is claimed.

ELLEN MICKIEWICZ
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