

Cultural thaw is *not* restoration of history

Theory/Practice

Russia's latest play is no freedom road

by Raya Dunayevskaya

In April in Moscow the journal *Novy Mir* (New World) published a new play by the well-known Russian playwright, Mikhail Shatrov, entitled "The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk," which captured some front-page publicity in the West, the U.S. especially. Because the great historic revolutionaries—Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin—appear in it as co-leaders of Lenin, when they have been exorcised from the officially re-written Stalinist and de-Stalinist histories, the play is receiving this extraordinary treatment.

The *New York Times* front-page report on this (April 30, 1987) was accompanied by a picture of Trotsky. The emphasis on the phenomenal nature of the play's publication is further stressed by the *New York Times* reporter in Moscow, Bill Keller, who reported that the play had been written in 1962 during the Khrushchev cultural thaw. But it was not then approved for publication, much less given a dramatic production, whereas in 1987 it is not only being published, but its author, Shatrov, announced in an interview that it would be staged in Moscow in November on the 70th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. This too made it sound as if it were a play rehabilitating the two great leaders of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky and Bukharin.

NOVY MIR (NEW WORLD) IS NOT ALL THAT NEW

Nothing could be further from the truth. Since the journal *Novy Mir* has not yet arrived in U.S. libraries, I am at a disadvantage in not having read the play itself and must depend mainly on reviews. It is not true, however, that either the author of the play, Shatrov, or the genre of his plays is a mystery. The English-speaking world can follow the official Russian views on Soviet culture in *Soviet Literature*, which is published in Moscow, in English, for that purpose. The one that is of special relevance to this event is the No. 4, 1983 issue of *Soviet Literature*, which ran an extensive interview with the author and an intellectualistic analysis of all his plays, especially the one then packing them in, "We're Bound to Win." The author himself subtitled the play "Publicistic Drama," which his interviewer, Elena Olkhovich, calls "mono-drama"; it is actually what Shatrov has been writing ever since the de-Stalinization period began in 1957 when he was 24 years old.

What is the new topic every time there is a slight thaw in cultural life, is just a topic, not a new subject—the forbidden history as well as the present direction of Russia. The ghosts from past history appear in this play

not only to prove that Lenin was a great revolutionary, a theoretician, a practitioner who won power against Czarism and capitalism; it as well hit out against all other tendencies, including those who had been considered the "general staff of the Revolution."

The chosen crises points in Shatrov's plays show all tendencies—be they Trotsky/Bukharin, or the Workers' Opposition, or the Social Revolutionaries, and so forth—to be wrong and Lenin right. In the play, Lenin is always right, and is the never-ending subject.

In the play at issue, Russia had been fighting a war that all of the people opposed, and enthusiastically followed Lenin to overthrow the Kerensky regime which continued the war; Russia was totally exhausted before it finally succeeded in achieving peace. The German army offered a very humiliating peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk in 1918.

Bukharin in 1918 was considered an ultra-leftist since he wished to go on with a revolutionary war, evidently thinking they could do so until it became a world revolution. He opposed signing the humiliating Brest-Litovsk Treaty which Germany offered. Trotsky was the negotiator and disagreed with Bukharin that it was necessary to go on with the war, but also did not wish to sign the treaty. He had the slogan "No Peace, No War." Lenin pointed to the fact that not only was a pause needed for this newly born workers' state that had called for the end of the war, but that if they didn't sign it then, the conditions would even be worse later. This is exactly what happened, and later they all had to sign.

THE 'RESTORATION'

No one needs to be told that Gorbachev is the present ruler. And the reporter in the *New York Times* promptly linked the April thaw to Gorbachev's February speech to newspaper editors where he said, "there must be no forgotten names, no blank spaces, either in history or in literature."

It is not clear whether Shatrov actually referred to that speech, but the reporter followed his citing of it by quoting Shatrov that "it is only a matter of time" before Trotsky and Bukharin would be acknowledged as historical figures: "Hardly anyone knows these men except at the level of stereotype. We don't need myths. We don't need legends. We need to sort out everything as it really was."

They certainly need to do that. But they have been going in the exact opposite direction for a whole century. The truth about "The Peace of Brest-Litovsk," is that the very restoration of the names, Trotsky and Bukharin, is limited to just names. It is only because

history cannot be exorcised, no matter how administratively it is re-written that some in the audience may be under the illusion that Trotsky and Bukharin, as two great revolutionaries who with Lenin led the 1917 Revolution, will some day be restored. In truth, here are the words Shatrov, speaking to the audience, puts in Lenin's mouth concerning Trotsky's position: "Only time will tell if this is an act of genius, as you think, or adventure and betrayal, as I think." Now please tell me what the audience, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, will think after hearing those words.

DE-STALINIZED STATE-CAPITALISM

The point is that de-Stalinization, be it in the Khrushchev form or now in Gorbachev's trying to claim that he is restoring Leninism, has not changed anything fundamental. Though we did get rid of the gory Moscow frame-up murderous Trials of 1936-38, Russia still has the same fundamental class ground—state-capitalism and single party domination.

The so-called reforms, both those that were initiated by Khrushchev and now in another version by Gorbachev, cannot re-write history. It's for this reason that it's important also to recall the very first reaction of Trotsky's widow Natalia Sedova, after Khrushchev's "secret" speech of 1956, when she cabled him to say that she is ready to come to Russia to testify, and that in fact unless the rehabilitation is one of full restoration of Trotsky, it would mean nothing.

As I put it when Khrushchev suddenly and conveniently selected a few of the crimes of Stalin for criticism: "Khrushchev is the most ungrateful Stalinist that every lived. He is very brave in front of a corpse."

Natalia's statement was by no means just out of loyalty to Trotsky. The objective ground for opposition to Russian state-capitalism that continued to call itself Communism was seen again when the same topic resurfaced in 1961 as a French newspaper, *France-Soir*, brought up the question of Stalin in an interview with her.

Here is what she wrote the editor on Nov. 9, 1961: "The police terror and the calumnies of Stalin are only the political aspect of a death struggle conducted against the revolution by the entire bureaucracy. One cannot therefore expect the re-establishment of the whole working class except by the annihilation of this bureaucracy by the working class which it has reduced to slavery. I don't expect anything from the Russian party nor from its fundamentally anti-communist imita-

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tors. All de-Stalinization will prove to be a trap if it doesn't lead to the seizure of power by the proletariat and the dissolution of the police institutions, political, military and economic, based on the counter-revolution which established Stalinist state-capitalism."

The 1960s and the 1970s were very important in the flowering of the playwright Shatrov, as he continued with the single theme of Lenin. The reason I hark back to the 1983 review of his then-most-popular play, "We're Bound to Win," is because it too started with 1918 (we seem never to leave Brest-Litovsk). It goes all the way to October, 1923, the last time Lenin visited his study-office in the Kremlin.

It isn't that the concentration on a single great revolutionary in the many crises of such a crucial, objective, momentous period as 1917-23 is in itself wrong. It is that those great historic events appear as nothing but background, and I would say more for the present than for the past. The masses as well as the co-leaders are nothing but props, ideas; nothing but projection of a single theme of winning; mono-drama remains, not a poetic or philosophic phenomenon, but a publicistic, propagandistic projection.

—May 5, 1987

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May 6, 1987

The April 30, 1987 <sup>Times</sup> New York Times features on the front page by Bill Keller from Moscow under the title 'Top Bolshevik? Long Taboo, Re-emerge in Moscow Play' with a 1931 picture of Leon Trotsky. It turns out that the play, "The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk" by Mikhail Shatrov which was written in 1962 during the Khrushchev de-Stalinization, but was never approved to be published until this moment, under Gorbachev's glasnost.

The issue of Novy Mir (April 1987) has not yet come to the U.S., but we get ~~the~~ the reporter's ~~a~~ "analysis" in a little over 500 words about its contents and the fact that Mr. Shatrov said it is supposed to open in November on the 70th anniversary of the RR at the Vakhtangov Theatre.

We fail to get any reason, if the author gave such a reason, why this event from the past, 3/3/18, was chosen. The impression given, that it was to re-habilitate ~~the~~ Trotsky and Bukharin hardly tells the story, since, though it is certainly a first to have these revolutionaries mentioned, it is ~~not~~ an event on which they were ~~not~~ wrong and Lenin was right. Nothing is said about the fact that Trotsky and Bukharin did not have the same position,

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though both opposed the signing of the peace treaty. Bukharin was then considered ultra-leftist and wanted the war continued as a revolutionary war. Trotsky definitely considered ~~it~~ that utopian and saw the impossibility, and <sup>showed his ambivalence by</sup> ~~(issuing his own slogan,~~ "No War, No Peace." Lenin knew, and <sup>(later)</sup> everybody had to agree with him, that if they do not sign the offer of the imperial Germany now, they'll get even <sup>more</sup> overthrown.

By the time Lenin won a majority, that is exactly what happened, they had to sign it <sup>UNDER THE</sup> in worst conditions.

Instead of going on further with the content of the play, Shatrov expands the playwright from which it's clear that though he is writing on revolutionary themes and has brought out ~~some "undesirable qualities" of Stalin during the~~ some "undesirable qualities" of Stalin during ~~the~~ <sup>cracking them in now, as in</sup> Brezhnev period as well, the current play ~~is~~ <sup>all other</sup> plays, the popular, "The Dictatorship of Conscience" is a mock trial of Lenin

The reporter tries to connect all this with the February speech of Gorbachev who told news executives "there must be no forgotten names, no blank spaces, either in history or in literature."

In Moscow <sup>Apr 8</sup> the cultural journal's (Novy Mir) <sup>new work</sup>  
May 8, 1987

<sup>Novy Mir</sup>  
The publication of a Russian play ~~in the end~~ in the end of April has managed to capture some front-page publicity in ~~the~~ the West, in this <sup>U.S. esp.</sup> country especially, as an ~~important~~ <sup>It has been</sup> important objective event. ~~The~~ <sup>analysis</sup> ~~clear that~~ the reason for this is due to the fact that ~~two of the characters~~ <sup>in the play it is a</sup> two of the characters in the drama "The Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk" --Leon Trotsky and Nicolai Bukharin--were of course ~~cut out~~ cut out of the history books in Russia ever since Stalin's ~~rise to power~~ rise to power, and ~~it was heresy~~ it was heresy to mention it in any form whatsoever.

To further draw attention to how unusual, how very historic an act this was, the New York Times had it both on page one and was accompanied by a picture of Trotsky. To further stress on its unusual nature <sup>phenomenal</sup> of this <sup>play's</sup> ~~the~~ reporter <sup>in Moscow,</sup> Bill Keller, stressed the fact that the play appearing in the journal Novy Mir <sup>Novy Mir</sup> had actually <sup>(in 1962)</sup> been written during the first <sup>Khrushchev</sup> great cultural thaw in Khrushchev's <sup>still</sup> time, but was not approved for production, ~~even then.~~ ~~whereas~~ <sup>now</sup> it is not only being published, but the author, Mikhail Shatrov, ~~is not only being published~~

announced (at the interview) that it would be staged in (in November) Moscow on the 70th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

This too sounded as if it was really ~~was~~ a play for the rehabilitation of the two great co-leaders of Lenin in the November 1917 Russian Revolution.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

*It is true* I am disadvantaged because I have not read *the play* since *that issue* of Novy Mir has not yet\* arrived in U.S. libraries, but it is very clear even *from the brief reviews* from Moscow of those who have read it, and above of all from the history, *first of* ~~the play~~ all from the objective situation and from the history of the author, that the step forward in *LT & NB* *reveal* having them appear does speak of ~~the fact~~ there is a limited cultural thaw, and indeed the reporter ~~states~~ links the April ~~thaw~~ thaw directly to Gorbachev's February Speech to newspaper editors that "there must be no forgotten names, no blank spaces, either in history or in literature." And this is followed by Shatrov saying in the interview that "it's only a matter of time" before Trotsky and Bukharin are again recognized as historical figures;

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It is not clear whether Shatrov actually referred to that speech, but the reporter followed this up with the claim that it is

"only a matter of time before Trotsky and Bukharin" would be acknowledged as historical figures, ~~admitting~~ "Hardly anyone knows ~~these~~ these men except at the level of stereotype. We don't need myths. We don't need legends. We need to sort out everything as it really was."

~~That is exactly it. They still ~~have~~ haven't sorted everything out. And this play isn't going to do it. The truth is the very ~~restoration~~ restoration of the names is just as names and precisely~~

because, as names, they are so ~~well~~ recognizable because of what they really were <sup>creative</sup> great revolutionaries who <sup>with Lenin, left</sup> ~~were~~ were leaders in the 1917 Revolution, <sup>not</sup> that Stalin murdered and all <sup>it means the audience the illusion of</sup> ~~restoration~~

the de-stalinization has continued to be rooted in the same <sup>when</sup> ground of state-capitalism and single party state domination. <sup>in fact,</sup>

The so-called reforms, both those that were initiated by Khrushchev and now in a <sup>another</sup> paler version by Gorbachev, cannot re-write history. It's for this reason that it's important

also to recall the very first reaction of Trotsky's widow Natalia Sedova, after Khrushchev's "secret" when she cabled him to say that she is ready to come to testify and that in fact unless the rehabilitation is one of the full restoration of Trotsky, it would mean nothing. <sup>That this was by no means</sup> just out of loyalty to Trotsky, <sup>the same topic resurfaces</sup> was again revealed in 1961

what they are saying is of Lenin's words Shatrov said that his

I <sup>do</sup> remember my saying then, as I →  
It happens that

Lenin felt he must sign, so that they could catch their breath. ~~They were not~~ The ultra-left Bukharin wanted to continue the revolutionary war, as he felt sure they would succeed internationally. Trotsky wanted neither the war nor Bukharin's position, coming up with the slogan, "No War, No Peace." ~~They were not~~ Lenin insisted that if they did not sign it then, they would get a much worse one, ~~since after all they are not part of the allies anymore and Germany has plenty of strength; which is exactly what happened, and so they had to sign.~~

But Shatrov has Lenin say in this debate, "only <sup>when they let Trotsky</sup> Brest-Litovsk time will tell if this is an act of genius, as you think, or adventure and ~~betrayal~~ betrayal, as I think." Now please tell what the audience celebrating the 70th anniversary hearing those words, after restoring those magnificent revolutionary leaders to their supposedly rightful place think?

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