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Medvedev's Democratic Leninism

KNIGA O SOTSIALISTICHESKOI DEMOKRATII. By *Roy Medvedev*. Amsterdam: The Alexander Herzen Foundation. Paris: Grasset and Fasquelle, 1972. 401 pp. Paper.

Roy Medvedev is well known for his major study of the Stalin era, *Let History Judge*, written in the mid-1960s and published in the West in English in 1971. Between November 1971 and April 1972 he produced another remarkable book, the subject of this review, which is one of the most important *samizdat* works to come out of the USSR. The more recent study is significant above all as a systematic critique—a careful, sober evaluation of many of the policies and practices of the present Soviet political leadership, written from the point of view of a dedicated Marxist-Leninist. It is also an extraordinarily rich source of information on emerging trends in Soviet public life and public opinion. Although normative and didactic in spirit, like most Soviet dissent literature, Roy Medvedev's new study commands respect because of its objective tone and the author's effort to support his assertions with evidence. It is also a remarkably successful effort to identify the widest possible range of significant problems and to offer a challenging array of prescriptions for the ills it diagnoses. In this reviewer's opinion the book is on a level with and probably superior to such other notable *samizdat* documents as Academician Andrei Sakharov's famous *Memorandum* of 1968 or the major politically relevant statements of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and of Roy's twin brother, the biochemist Zhores Medvedev.

Roy Medvedev is clearly a reformist, "within-system" Soviet dissenter. He considers that socialism not only is not incompatible with "complete democracy" but in fact requires it for its realization. He derives this proposition from statements contained in various of Lenin's writings, and develops it at length, particularly in the second, third, and parts of the fifth and sixth of his sixteen chapters. In presenting his argument that democracy is inherent in Leninism, the author criticizes views widely held both in the USSR and the West, with respect, for example, to the famous prohibition of "fractions" in the Bolshevik party decreed by the Tenth Party Congress in 1921. In his opinion, Lenin intended this measure, which Medvedev considers justifiable in the emergency it was devised to deal with, to be temporary. In his view Stalin, in

elevating the prohibition of dissent—which Stalin justified by invoking Lenin's authority—was in fact violating the spirit and essence of Marxism and Leninism.

The author obviously believes that it is his duty, as a Leninist, to support fully the “tendency” within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that he terms “party-democratic” (p. 63). Whether this tendency, presently far weaker than the other main currents of opinion in the party (namely, the “neo-Stalinist” and the “moderate,” or “conservative,” tendencies), will, as it grows, be “chaotic, disorganized, lacking a clearly defined platform, confused, and hence extremely vulnerable to conservative-dogmatic criticism, as in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, or will be organized and clear about its objectives and resources, and hence invulnerable,” depends, says Medvedev, on the “theoretical work of the present day” (p. 67).

In terms of his interpretation of Leninism, Medvedev identifies and describes various opinion groups within the CPSU (chapter 3) and outside the party (chapter 4). Then, in chapters 6 through 15, he evaluates in detail the performance of the authorities now occupying the command posts of party, state, police, and courts, the communications media, cultural institutions, and the social system generally, and finds it seriously defective. His remedy, overall, is “democratization” of institutions and practices. His criticisms and prescriptions are so rich in detail, they are extremely difficult to summarize. We shall attempt to bring out the essential features of his analysis, with a few illustrations.

As a Communist reformer, though Medvedev was expelled from the CPSU in 1969 for “convictions incompatible with the title of party member,” he still refers to the CPSU as “our party.” He is critical of both “westernizers,” some of whom, in his opinion, view capitalism too favorably, and “nationalists” (especially among the dominant Great Russian sector of the population), some of whom have revived Slavophile and other nineteenth-century conservative or reactionary doctrines. However, he attributes the growth of such “non-Marxist” currents of opinion at least partly to the failure of “contemporary party propaganda” to “respond to the many complex problems of the present era,” with the result that the influence and authority of the party and its ideology are declining. This decline in influence, according to him, has been accelerated by persecution of dissenters (pp. 75–76). Medvedev's attitude toward the proponents of “ethical socialism,” and also toward the champions of legality (*zakonniki*) such as Chalidze (who of course had not yet left the USSR when he wrote), is positive but not uncritical (pp. 85–95). Thus he criticizes Peter Grigorenko and “his associates” for “exaggeration” and “extremism” which repelled the “larger part of the leftist intelligentsia,” but he also condemns the “unjust and illegal” imprisonment

or in some cases commitment to mental institutions of the "majority of the leaders" of this tendency (pp. 94–95).

In chapter 5 Medvedev argues, contrary to orthodox Soviet doctrine, that a measure of political diversity, even a multiparty structure, can develop in a socialist society. Medvedev supports this contention by reference to the existence of various (at present only "conspirational") "groups" and "clubs," composed of "extremists," representative of Russian and non-Russian nationalist tendencies, which might under certain circumstances take on the character of political parties. However, in view of what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968, he is not very optimistic regarding early prospects for political pluralism in the USSR (pp. 118–23). Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted in part to wide-ranging recommendations for converting "formal" into "actual" democracy in the functioning of both the executive-administrative and the representative-legislative institutions of Soviet political life. Medvedev urges, among other reforms, the dissemination to rank-and-file CPSU members of full information about the activities of party executive organs; guarantees of the right of all party members to criticize party leaders; reduction in the size of the CPSU apparatus; an end of party interference in the day-to-day operations of governmental and cultural organizations; the use of the secret ballot, as in Hungary, in party elections; limits on the term of office of party and government officials; an increase in the powers of the soviets, at all levels, especially in budgetary matters; and time off for the members of the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and of the constituent republics from their regular jobs in order to increase their effectiveness as legislators. Such a program would presumably result in a drastic change in the structure and process of politics in the USSR. Clearly it would lead to shrinking, or at least sharply altering, the traditional "leading role" of the CPSU apparatus.

In his discussion of "justice" and "state security" (chapter 8) the author reviews developments that are for the most part known to students of Soviet law, especially as applied to political nonconformists, although many details, such as the reported re-establishment of raion KGB departments and expansion of the network of "special sections," were new to this reviewer.

It is virtually impossible to summarize the data contained in chapters 9 and 10, dealing, respectively, with freedom of information and freedom of movement. Medvedev argues that the current restrictions in these spheres are both contrary to Marxist principles and extremely harmful to science, scholarship, and culture. He makes powerful cases against Soviet censorship and the internal passport system, as well as against the established system of strict controls on contacts between Soviet and foreign professionals and specialists.

In chapters 11, 12, and 13 Medvedev applies to the economy, internal nationality problems, and foreign policy, respectively, his characteristic blend

of critical description and reformist recommendations. He begins the chapter on economic problems (chapter 11) with a rebuttal to a reported statement by Academician Sakharov (to a member of the CPSU Central Committee) that extensive democratization must be postponed until the standard of living of Soviet workers had substantially risen. No, says Medvedev, without democratic reforms there can be no significant improvement in the performance of the economy (pp. 269–70). Problems of political democracy and economic reform, he argues, are inextricably related, and he proceeds to discuss several dimensions of this complex relationship, beginning with the problem of authority. Citing Engels, he affirms the need for firm authority in the economy, whether it be socialist or capitalist. However, in his opinion, clearly defined authority in administrative matters must be balanced by democracy in making decisions about changing the structure or *modus operandi* of the economy (pp. 273–75). He sharply criticizes the traditional dominance of “voluntarism” in Soviet economic policy. He praises Khrushchev’s “keen intuition” but criticizes his lack of deep knowledge of economic principles (p. 282).

One reason for difficulty in reforming the economy, according to Medvedev, is the lack of any “normally acting mechanism for the replacement and renewal of leading cadres” (p. 302). He finds both merits and defects in the Yugoslav system of self-management (p. 312), and urges the study of experiments in that country and in Poland, Hungary, and the GDR in combining elements of public and private enterprise (p. 317).

In a wide-ranging discussion of nationality problems Medvedev, among other points, asserts that it is absurd and unjust to prosecute non-Russian intellectuals for advocacy of secession from the USSR, though he himself is sharply opposed to secession, mainly on economic grounds (pp. 324–27). As for foreign affairs, he points to linkages between the Soviet internal struggle among “progressive” and “reactionary” forces and the image and influence of the USSR abroad.

Skipping chapters 14 and 15—concerned, respectively, with “bureaucracy,” which the author depicts as the worst enemy of “democracy,” and with “socialist democracy and the Soviet intelligentsia” (this chapter contains, *inter alia*, interesting remarks on the problem of defining the intelligentsia and on its changing role in society)—we come to the concluding sixteenth chapter. This is entitled “On Forms and Methods of Struggle for Socialist Democracy in Our Country.” Here Medvedev comes out strongly for legal, “constitutional” means of struggle, rejecting the use of illegal means, advocated, he asserts, by “some members of extreme groups” (pp. 376–77). He expresses faith in the dissemination of “truth,” and in research undertaken in a Marxist-Leninist framework but taking account of the “enormous changes that have occurred in the world in the last fifty years” (p. 379). Almost at the end, he

likens Soviet society to a building on which new stories are constantly being added, though the foundation is becoming increasingly unsteady (p. 398).

Roy Medvedev's book is like a breath of fresh air. What a contrast it is to most of the dull publications passed by the Soviet censor! It is encouraging to learn that a dedicated Communist—however unrealistic most non-Communists may find his effort to combine Leninism and democracy—shares so many values prized by men of good will and open mind in the “capitalist” world. Of course it is discouraging to ponder the all-too-limited probabilities that the Soviet authorities will in the foreseeable future take account of the perspectives and recommendations of men like Medvedev. However, he may be right in believing that the “liberal campaign of 1968” and other efforts to democratize Soviet public life helped to pave the way for greater success in the future (p. 395). The intelligence and courage of Medvedev and other participants in the Soviet “democratic movement,” and the steady accumulation of evidence (in this and other *samizdat* sources) that under the frozen surface of Soviet politics fresh and vital forces are stirring, are worthy of the closest attention. Certainly no student of Soviet and indeed of world politics can afford to ignore the rich data and the new thought so painstakingly and responsibly presented by Roy Medvedev and other aspiring architects of a polyarchy for the construction of which, in their opinion, “Leninist” principles, properly interpreted, provide the only authentic blueprint.