

# London Review of Books

## Lenin Shot at Finland Station

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*What Might Have Been: Imaginary History from 12 Leading Historians* edited by [Andrew Roberts](#)

Phoenix, 208 pp, £7.99, May 2005, ISBN 0 7538 1873 6

Why is the flourishing genre of 'what if?' histories the preserve of conservative historians? The introduction to such volumes typically begins with an attack on Marxists, who allegedly believe in historical determinism. Take this latest instalment, edited by Andrew Roberts, who has himself contributed an essay on the bright prospects that would have faced Russia in the 20th century had Lenin been shot on arriving at the Finland Station. One of Roberts's arguments in favour of this kind of history is that 'anything that has been condemned by Carr, Thompson and Hobsbawm must have something to recommend it.' He believes that the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* 'have time and again been shown to be completely mutually exclusive'. 'If,' he continues, 'we accept that there is no such thing as historical inevitability and that nothing is preordained, political lethargy – one of the scourges of our day – should be banished, since it means that in human affairs anything is possible.'

This is empirically not the case. Roberts ignores the central ideological paradox of modern history, as formulated by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In contrast to Catholicism, which conceived of human redemption as being dependent on good deeds, Protestantism insisted on predestination: why then did Protestantism function as the ideology of early capitalism? Why did people's belief that their redemption had been decided in advance not only not lead to lethargy, but sustain the most powerful mobilisation of human resources ever experienced?

The conservative sympathies of the 'what if?' volumes become clear as soon as you look at their contents pages. The topics tend to concern how much better history would have been if some revolutionary or 'radical' event had been avoided (if Charles I had won the Civil War; if the English had won the war against the American colonies; if the Confederacy had won the American Civil War; if Germany had won the Great War) or, less often, how much worse history would have been if it had taken a more progressive turn. There are two examples of

the latter in Roberts's volume: had Thatcher been killed in the Brighton bombing of 1984; had Gore been president on 9/11 (in this last essay, written by the neo-con David Frum, any pretence to serious history is abandoned in favour of political propaganda masked as satire). No wonder Roberts refers approvingly to Kingsley Amis's novel *Russian Hide-and-Seek*, which is set in a Soviet-occupied Britain.

So what should the Marxist's answer be? Definitely not to rehash Georgi Plekhanov's dreary thoughts about the 'role of the individual in history' (had Napoleon never been born, someone else would have had to play a similar role, because the deeper historical necessity called for a passage to Bonapartism). I would rather question the premise that Marxists (and leftists in general) are dumb determinists who can't entertain alternative scenarios.

The first thing to note is that 'what if?' history is part of a more general trend, one which takes issue with linear narrative and sees life as a multiform flow. The 'hard' sciences seem to be haunted by the randomness of life and possible alternative versions of reality: as Stephen Jay Gould put it, 'wind back the film of life and play it again. The history of evolution will be totally different.' This perception of our reality as only one of the possible outcomes of an 'open' situation, the notion that other possible outcomes continue to haunt our 'true' reality, conferring on it an extreme fragility and contingency, is by no means alien to Marxism. Indeed, the felt urgency of the revolutionary act relies on it.

Since the non-occurrence of the October Revolution is a favourite topic of 'what if?' historians, it's worth looking at how Lenin himself related to counterfactualty. He was as far as he could be from any reliance on 'historical necessity'. On the contrary, it was his Menshevik opponents who emphasised the impossibility of omitting one of the stages prescribed by historical determinism: first bourgeois-democratic, then proletarian revolution. When, in his 'April Theses' of 1917, Lenin claimed that this was the *Augenblick*, the unique opportunity to start a revolution, his proposal was at first met with stupefaction or contempt by a large majority of his party colleagues. But he had understood that the opportunity was provided by a unique combination of circumstances: if the moment wasn't seized, the chance would be forfeited, perhaps for decades. Lenin was entertaining an alternative scenario: what if we don't act now? It was precisely his awareness of the catastrophic consequences of not acting that impelled him to act.

There is a much deeper commitment to alternative histories in the radical Marxist view. For a radical Marxist, the actual history that we live is itself the realisation of an alternative history: we have to live in it because, in the past, we failed to seize the moment. In an outstanding reading of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (which Benjamin never published), Eric Santner elaborated the notion that a present revolutionary intervention repeats/redeems failed attempts in the past. These attempts count as 'symptoms', and can be

retroactively redeemed through the 'miracle' of the revolutionary act. They are 'not so much forgotten deeds, but rather forgotten *failures* to act, failures to *suspend* the force of social bonds inhibiting acts of solidarity with society's "others":

Symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but, more modestly, past *failures to respond* to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering in some sense belongs to the form of life of which one is a part. They hold the place of something that is *there*, that *insists* in our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of voids – or, perhaps better, defences against voids – that persist in historical experience.

For Santner, these symptoms can also take the form of perturbations of 'normal' social life: participation, for example, in the obscene rituals of a reigning ideology. In this way of thinking, Kristallnacht – a half-organised, half-spontaneous outburst of violent attacks on homes, synagogues, businesses and individuals – becomes a Bakhtinian carnival, a symptom whose fury and violence revealed it as an attempt at 'defence-formation', a covering up of a previous failure to intervene effectively in Germany's social crisis. In other words, the very violence of the pogroms was proof of the possibility of an authentic proletarian revolution, its excessive energy marking the reaction to an (unconscious) awareness of the missed opportunity. And is not the ultimate source of Ostalgie (nostalgia for the Communist past) among many intellectuals (and ordinary people) from the defunct German Democratic Republic also a longing not so much for the Communist past, but rather for what that past might have been, for the missed opportunity of creating an alternative Germany?

The post-Communist outbreaks of neo-Nazi violence can also be understood as symptomatic outbursts of rage, displaying an awareness of missed opportunities. A parallel can be drawn with the psychic life of the individual: in just the same way as the awareness of a missed private opportunity (of a fulfilling love affair, perhaps) often leaves its traces in the form of irrational anxieties, headaches and fits of rage, so the void of a missed revolutionary opportunity can result in irrational fits of destruction.

The 'what if?' dimension goes to the core of the Marxist revolutionary project. In his ironic comments on the French Revolution, Marx opposed revolutionary enthusiasm and the sobering 'morning after': the actual outcome of the sublime revolutionary explosion which promised *liberté, égalité, fraternité* is the miserable utilitarian/egotistical universe of market calculation. (This gap was even wider in the case of the October Revolution.) Marx's point, however, is not the commonsensical one, that the vulgar reality of commerce turns out to be the 'truth of the theatre of revolutionary enthusiasm' – what all the fuss was about. In the

revolutionary explosion, another utopian dimension shines through, that of universal emancipation, which is in fact the 'excess' betrayed by the market reality that takes over on the morning after. This excess is not simply abolished or dismissed as irrelevant, but is, as it were, transposed into the virtual state, as a dream waiting to be realised.

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