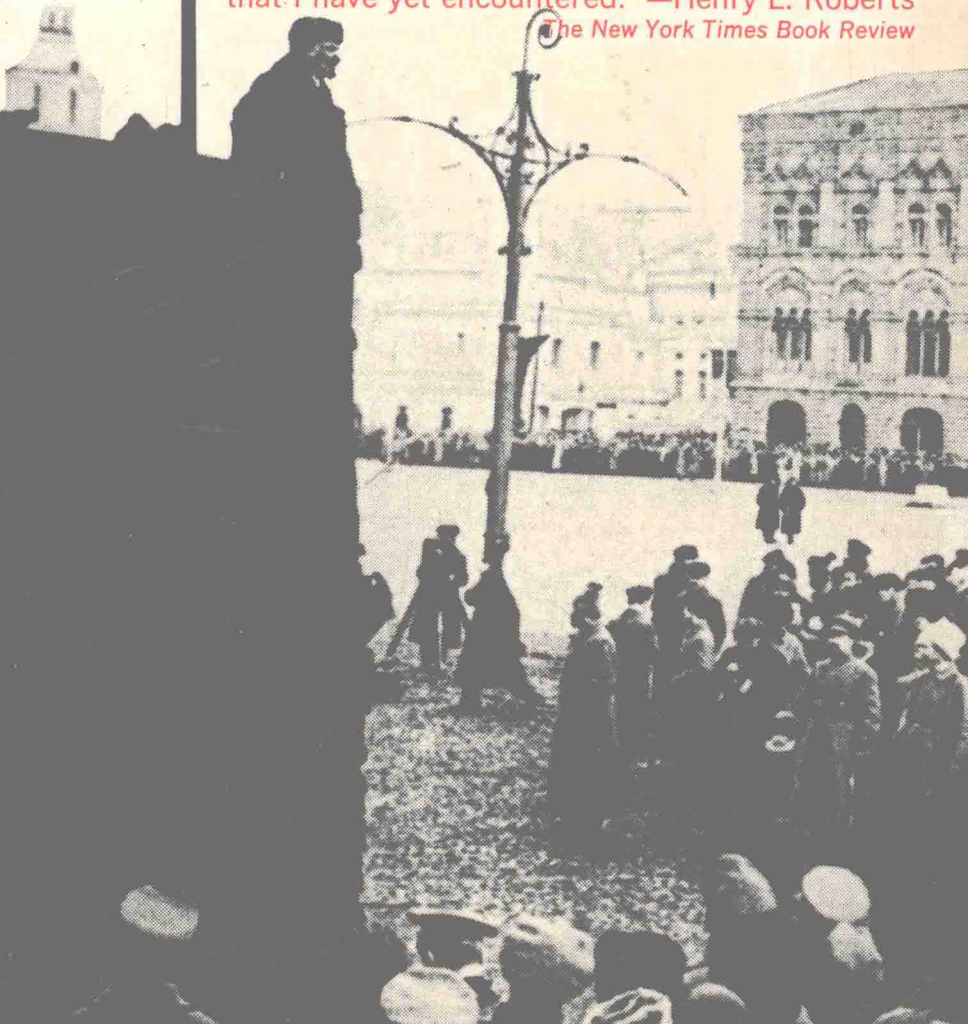
THE BOLSHEVIKS

Adam B. Ulam

The Intellectual, Personal and Political History of the Triumph of Communism in Russia

"The most rewarding single study of Lenin that I have yet encountered."—Henry L. Roberts
The New York Times Book Review



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THE BOLSHEVIKS

PREFACE

The story of the Bolsheviks, the creators of communism, is one of drama and success unparalleled in modern history. From the twenty-odd people who first called themselves by that name in 1903, they grew within fourteen years to a party that seized the government of Russia. Barely more than another generation was to pass before communism would rule over one-third of mankind and aspire to the mastery of the whole world.

Yet the story is not only one of triumph. It contains more than a hint of the great personal tragedies which were to beset the lives of the founders of communism. In the ideological splits and controversies which convulsed the Bolsheviks could be seen the seeds of future totalitarianism and of the present quarrel which has divided the Communist world into two camps.

The history of the Bolsheviks and of the Russian Revolution has to be focused around the life of one man: Vladimir Ulyanov—Lenin. Himself the heir of the long revolutionary tradition, Lenin imparted to Bolshevism and communism not only ideology and tactics but also many of his personal characteristics. The cult of Lenin has always united Communists of the most divergent views. Both Trotsky and Stalin claimed to be his legitimate heirs. Communist China as well as Soviet Russia invoke his authority on behalf of their respective positions. Yet this founder of a world movement was thoroughly Russian. He and the people he gathered around him cannot be understood except in terms of their contemporary Russia and the native revolutionary tradition which goes back at least to 1825. The Decembrists, those aristocratic rebels who rose against autocracy; the great revolutionaries of the century like Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, Herzen and the conspirators of the People's Will who finally tracked down and assassinated Alexander II—they all were in different ways ancestors of the Bolsheviks.

The main part of this book is concerned with the events and personalities of 1900 to 1924. By the time Lenin died the character of the Soviet state was determined. The Bolshevik old guard went on to its annihilation under Stalin, but the state Lenin established bears into our own days the imprint of his paradoxical personality. Even such typical elements of Stalin's Russia as the "cult of personality" and the purges

find their partial explanation and source in the events and moods of Lenin's leadership of the Bolshevik movement. The extraordinary events that took place during Lenin's fatal illness may throw some light on the mystery still surrounding Stalin's last days, or even that attending the dismissal of Nikita Khrushchev.

When it comes to telling the story, an author has to be both grateful for the vast evidence at his disposal and anguished at the unsatisfactory character of so much of it. Many Bolsheviks, as well as their rivals in Russia's other Socialist parties, were born historians and gossipmongers (Lenin himself was a notable exception on both counts). Having achieved power, they were eager to tell all (well, *almost* all) about their past exploits and conspiracies, and what they left out is often filled in by the memoirs of their defeated enemies. Soviet historical journals between 1920 and 1925 especially are a rich mine of information.

On the other hand, with Stalin in power the flow of reminiscences and reports of past indiscretions were quickly arrested. Only that which the despot deemed to be in his interest was allowed to be published about the history of the movement or the life of its founder. Lenin's own works were censored, and the memoirs of those close to him, including his wife's, had to be rewritten according to the new formula, emphasizing the dead leader's infallibility, his total lack of the usual human weaknesses, and his boundless trust in and admiration of Stalin. Nineteen fifty-three brought a considerable improvement to this picture. The Soviet archives have yielded documents such as the diary of the secretaries attending Lenin in his illness, released in 1963—presenting new evidence on the struggle for succession between Trotsky and Stalin.

There is still a severe limit to what can be revealed about the past. Nothing is allowed to mar the official image of Lenin and of the origins of communism. But one must be grateful to the Soviet historians and archivists for what, within their limited possibilities, they have been able to achieve within the last ten years.

I have used the fourth edition of Lenin's works. It began to appear in the 1940s, hence in some respects it is less satisfactory than the previous ones. But it contains an occasional document not found in the former editions, and its Stalinist character is corrected by the supplementary volumes published after 1953. All references in this book are in English, and the fact that the given work is in Russian is noted only if it appeared outside the U.S.S.R. For prerevolutionary Russia I have adhered to the calendar then in force, which in the nineteenth century was twelve days and in the twentieth century thirteen days behind the Western one. I have followed the Russian usage in identifying people by their given names and patronymics. Thus, Lev Davidovich Trotsky—Lev, son of David; Maria Ilinichna Ulyanov—Maria, daughter of Ilya.

My gratitude is due to the Russian Research Center at Harvard Uni-

versity, which shelters my researches, and to my many friends and associates there who have been very helpful. My special thanks go to Professor Richard Pipes, who has drawn my attention to some little-known facts in the Russian revolutionary history; to my research assistant, Susan Salser, who has valiantly struggled through mountains of Soviet books and periodicals; and to my former secretary, Mary Towle, who patiently lent her hand to this book—the third of mine for her.

ADAM B. ULAM

Harvard University,
January 19, 1965

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I

THE FAMILY

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who took the name Lenin, was always reticent about the origins and background of his family. It is not that there was anything in the history of the Ulyanovs that could have been embarrassing to the leader of world communism. Quite the contrary. Lenin's reticence was simply in line with his usual reserve and feeling for privacy where his personal affairs were concerned. In filling out his Party questionnaire in 1920 Lenin professed not to know the profession of his paternal grandfather.

The vast biographical literature that followed Lenin's death in 1924 and included the reminiscences of his surviving two sisters and brother did little to throw much light on the origins of the Ulyanovs or those of Lenin's mother's family. Such omissions cannot be ascribed simply to the conviction that the story of Lenin's ancestors was of little importance when compared to various incidents of the hero's revolutionary struggle. To the Soviet biographer it has always been a bit embarrassing that Lenin did not come "from the people." But, and this could not be obscured or omitted, in fact his father had been a loyal servant of the Tsarist state and a faithful son of the Orthodox Church, and his mother a daughter of a small landowner. With the cult of Russian nationalism introduced under Stalin it became even more embarrassing and risky to pry further into the family tree and discover the non-Russian ancestors of the founder of the Soviet state. Furthermore, if the relatively high social status of Lenin's father was already a bother to the biographer, then paradoxically the low station in life of the grandfather made the picture worse. If Tsarist Russia was literally "the prison of nationalities" and an oppressive class society, as Lenin himself had taught and Soviet historians have insistently repeated, how can one explain the career of his own father? Ilya Nikolayevich Ulyanov, born of a poor father and an illiterate mother, of a family with at least a strong admixture of non-Russian blood, died a high civil servant entitled to be addressed as "Your Excellency," and a hereditary noble. No wonder many Soviet writers overlooked the shadowy but inconvenient grandfather, or made him into a "petty official" or a "poor *intelligent*," hardly a correct description of the status of a man who was in actuality a tailor.

More scrupulous than most of the Lenin biographers, Soviet novelist

Marietta Shaginyan stumbled upon the data about Lenin's ancestry while working on her novel *The Family of Ulyanovs.*[1] Ilya Nikolayevich Ulyanov was born in 1831 in Astrakhan. The old town in the mouth of the Volga has long been a trade emporium with the East. Waves of Mongol and Turkic invasions and migrations swept through South Russia and left a lasting imprint on the composition of the population. In 1831 the town and the neighboring countryside were a veritable melting pot where the Tartars, Bashkirs, Kalmyks and other nationalities mixed with ethnic Russians. Ilya's mother, Anna, came without a doubt from a Kalmyk family and there is strong circumstantial evidence that his father Nikolay was also of the same racial origin.[2] To be sure, both the names and the membership in the Orthodox Church testify to the russification of the family, but the inheritance is unmistakable in the Mongolian cast of features of Ilya Nikolayevich and the often commented upon "hint of Tartar" in the appearance of his famous son.

Nikolay Ulyanov began the process of social ascent which was to conclude with his grandson the ruler of Russia. Born a serf and indentured to learn a craft in the city, he evidently managed to buy his freedom and to become inscribed as a burgess. The latter is a rather awkward translation of the Russian *meshchanin,* which carried none of the suggestion of opulence of the English term, nor of the (to a Marxist) opprobrious connotation of the French *bourgeois,* but was simply the legal definition of those townsmen who were neither peasants, nobles, nor inscribed in the guilds of merchants. A burgess could be a man on his way to becoming a millionaire entrepreneur or, as in this case, a poor tailor.

That the Ulyanovs were poor, a comforting thought to the Soviet biographer for whom even a tailor could be, God forbid, an "exploiter," that is, an employer of labor rather than a "petty bourgeois" who himself does cutting and sewing, is proved by the circumstances of the family on Nikolay's death. He had married late in life and on his death at the age of seventy-four his son Ilya was only seven years old. Ilya's brother Vasily, who was ten or thirteen years older (there are glaring discrepancies as to the dates and ages in Shaginyan's account) had to become the family's provider. From his teens until his death, Vasily worked in an office. In his later years Ilya would often refer with gratitude to his elder brother who himself would have liked to obtain an education, but who sacrificed his dreams to support his family. It was largely Vasily who enabled his younger brother to go through the high school and the university (he was also helped by his godfather who was an Orthodox clergyman).

It is all the more remarkable that Vasily, who remained a bachelor and did not die until 1878, seems never to have visited his brother's family.

[1] Moscow, 1959. The novel, appearing in 1937, incurred official wrath and was not reissued until after the denunciation of Stalinism in 1957.

[2] Kalmyks, a branch of the Mongol tribe, were settled in the region in the seventeenth century.

On his death a commemorative slab was put up on his tomb by his fellow employees. Ilya's mother and his two sisters hardly engaged the attention of the Soviet chronicler whose main preoccupation is to demonstrate that Lenin's ancestors were always among the "exploited" rather than the "exploiters." Once Lenin's father entered the university, his ties with the city of his childhood grew more and more remote. Was the State Councillor Ilya Ulyanov eventually to become embarrassed about his humble beginnings, especially in view of his wife's origins in a more cultured milieu? This would seem hardly consistent with what we know of the character of the man.

The story of the Ulyanovs serves as a useful corrective to many of the stereotypes of Tsarist Russia. The Astrakhan gymnasium (high school) in which Ilya Nikolayevich began his social ascent in 1843 could, in the variety of subjects and the quality of teaching, vie with similar institutions of contemporary France or Prussia. Here, in a semi-Asiatic city in backward Russia, the son of a one-time serf received a sound preparation for a university and a future pedagogical career. How many American students of today are put through a high school curriculum that demands the study of two modern foreign languages and Latin, and a fairly advanced acquaintance with mathematics and physics, as well as with a wide variety of other subjects? Since the university in Russia was and has remained the place for specialization, it was in the gymnasium that Ilya Nikolayevich had to acquire the foundations of general education that enabled the descendant of simple Kalmyk people to become a typically cultivated Russian gentleman.

On the other side of the ledger, there is the undeniable fact that this cramming of information plus harsh discipline made the gymnasium a somewhat oppressive institution. The Russian pedagogue of the nineteenth century, often a devoted and humane teacher, remained blissfully unaware of the future findings of Doctors Freud and Dewey. A student's failure in a subject, a common occurrence, was followed invariably by the repetition of a grade. No sports or other forms of student group activity were allowed to relax the atmosphere of intensive learning. It is not surprising that many a future Russian revolutionary would feel the first stirrings of radical protest while oppressed by Greek grammar or logarithms.

On Ilya Ulyanov's graduation in 1850 we encounter a more familiar aspect of the Tsarist regime. Having been an excellent student, Ilya was recommended for a scholarship to the university. But scholarships were then reserved for the children of impoverished nobility slated to enter the state service and not for people of his background, and Ilya Nikolayevich had again to enlist the help of his relatives and to give private lessons in order to support himself through the four years of the university.

Kazan, where he pursued his studies, and where his famous son was

to follow him one day, was like Astrakhan a former Tartar capital. Its university, while less fashionable than those of Moscow and Petersburg, could boast of a very good scientific faculty. Its former professor, and rector during much of the first half of the nineteenth century, had been Lobachevski, one of the great names in the history of mathematics. Though he felt some attraction to the law, Ilya Ulyanov decided finally to enroll under the faculty of mathematics and physics, from which he duly graduated in 1854 with the degree of candidate (equivalent to our master) of science. One year later, the great Lobachevski, then deputy curator of the Kazan school region, set his name to the nomination of Ilya Nikolayevich Ulyanov as teacher of physics and mathematics in the high school of Penza.

In Penza, a veritable Podunk of nineteenth century Russia, Ilya began his pedagogical and administrative career, which was to take place exclusively in the provinces. Penza, then the Volga towns of Nizhni-Novgorod (now Gorky) and then Simbirsk were to be his residences for the rest of his life. The capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, he was to visit only as a participant in a pedagogical congress or when reporting to the ministry of education. A man of Ilya Nikolayevich's eventual status would often take at least one trip abroad to see the "cultured" West. He never did. Lenin's father spent his life in the torpor of nineteenth century provincial Russia, the same Russia for which Lenin was to feel a strange mixture of affection and revulsion.

In 1863 Ilya Nikolayevich married Maria Blank, daughter of a retired doctor. The family of Lenin's mother is treated by the Soviet biographers even more gingerly than that of the father. The original Ulyanovs were at least incontestably poor, however troublesome their other characteristics. Dr. Alexander Blank on the other hand retired from practice, bought an estate, and was inscribed among the landed nobility of the Kazan province. According to the hideous classificatory scheme of Soviet historiography, he thus became an "exploiter." Nor is the ancestry of Lenin's mother entirely satisfactory from the national point of view. Blank is obviously not a common Russian name, and the doctor's wife was German. We should note that Blank moderated his class characteristics by frequently helping the peasants with medical advice, and concerning his personality we have the testimony of Lenin's sister that her grandfather was an "outstanding man . . . strong and self-reliant . . . Careerism of any kind and servility were alien to his nature." He was also evidently something of a domestic tyrant, with every detail of his five daughters' upbringing and behavior (including the proper position while going to sleep!) being subject to very precise rules.

Maria Alexandrovna thus came from a higher and more cultured environment than her husband, and while the marriage was evidently a very happy one, there are hints that she did not find the life of an offi-

cial's wife in the procession of grim provincial towns entirely to her liking. She was also more independent and less conformist. Ilya Nikolayevich was deeply religious; his wife "did not like to go to church." She must have been a remarkable person. Without approving, she understood her children's revolutionary activity. After her husband's death her oldest son was executed and a young daughter died of typhoid, but the mother continued to bring whatever comfort she could to her remaining four children through their repeated arrests and exiles.

From Penza, where the pedagogical and living conditions were deplorable, the Ulyanovs moved to Nizhni-Novgorod. There for six years Ilya was the senior science teacher in the gymnasium. In 1869 came an advancement to the post of inspector of the public schools in the province of Simbirsk.

The reforms of the 1860s brought new impetus to public education. The newly created organs of provincial and county government had as a primary task the sponsorship of public schools. The period of reaction and disillusionment was not to come until the late seventies; for the time being both the conservative and the liberal saw the future of the country dependent on the rapid spread of literacy and education among the people, and especially among the freshly liberated peasants. The school inspector and the director of schools (the post to which Ilya Nikolayevich advanced in 1874) became the keystone of the whole system. He was the liaison between the ministry of education and the local boards. Upon his shoulders lay the responsibility for the training, assignment, and discipline of the teachers, and for the organization and curricula of the elementary schools. In a province as backward and poor (even by the Russian standards of 1869) as Simbirsk the job was likely to be of back-breaking proportions. It took not only career considerations but real devotion to education on the part of Ulyanov to exchange the more congenial post of the high school teacher and the more pleasant atmosphere of Nizhni, which had at least some appurtenances of a major city, for the task of supervising elementary education in a bleak province of about one million inhabitants. The town of Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk) was a typical provincial hole like the ones immortalized in the tales of Gogol and of Saltykov (Shchedrin). A nineteenth century versifier writing about the town referred engagingly to its "pastoral" atmosphere, herds of cattle, and rivers of mud in the spring. In Simbirsk Ilya Ulyanov was to spend the remaining fifteen years of his life, and in it in 1870 was born his second son and third child, Vladimir Ilyich.

Lenin lived throughout his childhood and youth in the towns and villages of the Volga region. This period of life spent in the sleepy Central Russian towns and primitive villages was to leave a definite imprint on his personality. To a child the "lack of culture" of Simbirsk or

Samara was more than compensated by the proximity of the countryside, the river, and the closeness of the family or a student group. For a studious young man it offered none of the distractions one encounters in a great city. A great cosmopolitan center subjects all attitudes and values to a corrosive questioning. When Lenin emerged from the provinces at the age of twenty-three his philosophy and vocation were already determined. In his later life he was never to like the great cities. It was not only nostalgia that made him in England long for his native countryside and a boat ride on the Volga, but also a temperamental distaste for the very same forces and institutions of modern European life that he as a Marxist was fighting to bring about in his backward country. This basic ambivalence characteristic of so many of Lenin's feelings and arguments appears in his letters from Austrian Poland, where he settled shortly before World War I. Cracow and its environs were "a veritable backwater and uncivilized." "Here one cannot speak of culture—it is almost [as bad] as in Russia." At the same time Lenin professed himself healthier and more content than in Paris or Geneva. To be in an environment similar to that of his youth was soothing for Lenin's nerves and beneficial for his work.

The life of the Ulyanov family unrolled with Victorian orderliness and decorum. After Vladimir, the future Lenin, were born Olga (1871), Dimitri (1874), and Maria (1878) to join Anna (1864) and Alexander (1866). Of the sons, Vladimir was to grow up closest in appearance to his father, inheriting Ilya Nikolayevich's slanted eyes and high cheekbones, with red hair that he began to lose at a very early age.

Ulyanov's career moved meantime through promotions and decorations. The post of director of the public schools was equivalent in the table of ranks to that of a major general in the army. The order of St. Vladimir bestowed with it hereditary nobility. It is hardly necessary to add that whatever the official designation, Ilya Ulyanov's advancement brought him and his family into what was in Russia the equivalent of the middle class—the intelligentsia—the stratum occupied by the officials, members of the free professions, and the like. Social classifications must always remain imprecise. In the narrower sense of the term, membership in the intelligentsia came to denote a certain political attitude, one which, again inadequately, can be described as progressive or liberal. But in the wider sense intelligentsia stood for what in nineteenth century Russia was, in the absence of the Western-type business class, the middle station in life.[3]

As an official Ilya Ulyanov was quite different from the Tsarist

[3] The preceding sentences cry for warnings and qualifications. Was a police official or an army officer a member of the intelligentsia? No, but his son might be, in the broader sense of the word, if he became a lawyer, and in the narrower if he took to reading J. S. Mill and criticizing the autocracy. On the other hand, the Prince Tru-

bureaucrat made familiar to us by Russian satire: servile to his superiors, brutal and unfeeling to inferiors, venal, addicted to drinking and gambling. All the accounts, some of them contemporary, agree that he was an excellent and conscientious civil servant. His work was the harrowing everyday struggle to raise the level of instruction, to secure adequate school premises and textbooks, and to wrest from the ministry and the local authorities additional funds for the miserably paid teachers. Until 1874 he had to perform alone the work of inspection for the whole province of Simbirsk, which meant being on the road a great deal of the time, going mostly not by railway but on horseback on the horrible provincial Russian roads. After 1874 there were assistants, and he could indulge occasionally in his old profession by taking over classes from ailing teachers.

Primary education was the passion of contemporary Russia. Enlightened noblemen such as Leo Tolstoy and Baron Korff ran model schools on their estates. Ilya Ulyanov was attentive to every fresh pedagogical advance and experiment. His own background may account for his special solicitude for the children of the non-Russian inhabitants (a large proportion of the population of the province was composed of the Tartar and Finnish groups), the defense of their learning ability, and the insistence on instruction in their own language as well as in Russian. In his relations with the teachers he was a stern but fair superior. Nothing, in brief, mars the image of a devoted and humane administrator and pedagogue.

Many Russians of Ilya Nikolayevich's generation who like him advanced through education from simple beginnings became involved in the sixties and seventies in the revolutionary and radical movements. But whichever way a Soviet author may try (and many have), it is impossible to connect Ulyanov with any political protest. His daughter Anna remembers her father singing forbidden revolutionary songs. Marietta Shaginyan would tie him to the progressive circles of his student days. Most brazen of all, the *Soviet Encyclopedia* has Ilya Ulyanov employing the pedagogical methods recommended by the revolutionary thinkers Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky. But apart from the utter implausibility of this evidence, would a man under the slightest suspicion of disloyalty be appointed director of public schools in 1874, already a time of hunt for subversion? The very same sources feel constrained to testify to his loyality to the regime and the church. For Ilya Nikolayevich, Alexander II, who emancipated the peasants and who started his country upon belated reforms, remained to the end "Tsar-

betskoy who became a university professor and a leader of the Constitutional Democrats has to be classified as an *intelligent* despite his ancient title and his lands. The reader may come to share, though for different reasons, the sentiments of Nicholas II who wanted to eliminate "intelligentsia" from the Russian language.

Liberator," and his assassination in 1881 by the revolutionaries was a national calamity. A man of Ulyanov's background and temperament found it easy to be a moderate, and to believe that reforms from above and education would suffice to bring Russia out of her torpor and backwardness.

This attitude, which in time his famous son came to hate more than any out-and-out conservatism and reaction, was as a matter of fact shared by a large mass of the Russian intelligentsia in the 1860s and 1870s. Because we view 1917 as the culmination of Russian history, we have come to regard the preceding century as simply the scene of a struggle between reaction and revolution, and we have often come to disregard the numerous Ilya Ulyanovs who, in a less dramatic way, struggled for a third solution.

The years after 1881 must have been extremely trying to a liberal-minded official. The regime now entered upon a course of reaction that became especially pronounced in the field of education. The curriculum of the high schools became more classical, sciences being held to be particularly conducive to arousing subversive thoughts among the youth. The same obscurantist philosophy dictated general doubts about the desirability of widespread elementary education. A minister of education spoke of the folly and harm done by educating the "cooks' sons" beyond their station in life. (It would not have needed much reflection to realize that it had not been the "cooks' sons" who had been in the forefront of the revolutionary movement.) The stress was now on elementary education through the church schools, and the public schools were relatively neglected. The last four years of Ilya Nikolayevich's life were spent in struggling against the current, and in an atmosphere which no longer held the hopes and promise of the seventies. Official worries were accompanied by anxiety for his eldest son. Alexander had been pursuing since 1883 a scientific career at St. Petersburg University. His views and associations were the source of increasing anxiety to his father. Shortly before his death he asked Anna, then also in St. Petersburg, to implore Alexander to take care of himself "if only for our own sake." In January 1886 Ilya Nikolayevich Ulyanov died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage.

Among the remaining photographs of Ilya Nikolayevich, one shows him with his wife and children. The paterfamilias sits heavily amidst his brood, his right hand thrust in his coat, his two eldest sons in their uniforms of high school students. The severity of the father's expression is enhanced by his period beard and the baldness of his egg-shaped head. Another photograph of the director of the public schools, this time with his staff of five school inspectors, has the same pose and the same unsmiling earnestness.

The family life of the Ulyanovs is usually described in terms of cloying sweetness. The parents loved but did not spoil their children. The