

90. Publishing as Scaffolding

Sezgin Boynik

Publishing as a collective organiser was Lenin's idea. In "Where to Begin," written in 1901, he compared publishing to "scaffolding round a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organised labour."¹ Scaffolding would also create the possibility of "unit[ing] the activists not by a congress, which under those conditions would be too costly, but around a newspaper published abroad and out of reach of the police."²

Collective, democratic, common and inexpensive³ – the role of publishing as scaffolding was also to catalyse and unite the fragmented energy of impoverished and disorganised masses into a revolutionary political party. It should perform this not merely by reporting on the "economism" of workers' struggles, but by expanding the scope of publishing from the narrow understanding of daily injustices to a larger political force affecting "all the people."

Those who were frequent targets of Lenin's critique, especially those who denied the political primacy of workers' struggles, a group Lenin called opportunists and "economists," criticised as abstract the idea that publishing could be a collective organiser of the working class. For them, this was the fantasy of a political mastermind. They called Lenin an "armchair" revolutionary editor.

What is to Be Done? was Lenin's answer to them. "The scaffolding is not required at all for the dwelling; it is made of cheaper material, is put up only temporarily, and is scrapped for firewood as soon as the shell of the structure is completed."⁴ In other words, publishing was introduced as a provisional activity in permanent movement. After the breakup with the Mensheviks and *Iskra*, the Bolsheviks' publishing adventure was in constant flux; between 1905 and 1912 they published *Vperyod*, *Proletary*, *Novaya Zhizn*, *Volna*,

1 Saifulin, M. (ed.) (1972), *Lenin About the Press*. Prague: International Organisation of Journalists, 71.

2 See "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," in Georges Haupt and Jean-Jacques Marie (eds.) (1974), *Makers of the Russian Revolution: Biographies of Bolshevik Leaders*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 55.

3 The Bolsheviks' publications were 'inexpensive' compared to the bourgeois press, but every kopek was to be counted in order to print them. Lenin paid special attention to "the collection of funds for a workers' daily newspaper." In his remarkable statistical study on the funding of three legal Bolshevik papers published in St. Petersburg between January 1 and June 30 1912, *Zvezda*, *Novskaya Zvezda* and *Pravda*, Lenin insisted on the autonomy of the workers' press existing on "their own." His conclusion was that "a newspaper founded on the basis of five-kopek pieces collected by small factory circles of workers is a far more solid and serious undertaking (both financially and, most important of all, from the standpoint of the development of the workers' democratic movement) than a newspaper founded with tens and hundreds of rubles contributed by sympathising intellectuals" (Saifulin 1972: 36-7).

4 Ibid: 96.

Ekho, *Sotsial-Demokrat*, *Zvezda*, *Pravda*, *Mysl*, and *Prosveshcheniye* in different cities under very unfavourable conditions.⁵

Proletary was published in Helsinki (1906-07), Geneva (1908) and in Paris (1909). In all these cities, the printing workshops had to be established from scratch, as makeshift printworks. The Paris story is particularly interesting.

Based on the recent research by Antoine Perriol, we now have a better picture of the early years of the workshop printing *Proletary* and *Sotsial-Demokrat*.⁶ Lenin arrived in Paris with two Latvian typographers with whom he had worked in Geneva, Dimitry Snegaroff and Volf Chalit. They were immediately instructed to establish the press, which according to correspondence Lenin had with Zinoviev at the time, was not an easy task. Alexei Aline, who was coordinating the Bolshevik press, gave first-hand testimony about the importance of printing to Lenin and the special relationship he had with his typographers.⁷

During this time, and still with the support of Lenin, Snegaroff and Chalit established '*Kooperativna tipografiya soyuz*' (Cooperative Printing House Union), which they renamed '*L'Imprimerie Union*' (Union Printing House) in 1910.

Both printing houses published left periodicals by Russian emigres in Paris, as well as some art magazines. With the printing of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Soirées de Paris* in 1913, '*L'Imprimerie Union*' gradually shifted its activities into contemporary art. It was only Snegaroff and Chalit, Lenin's typographers, who could typeset Apollinaire's calligrammes (visual poems), which made them sought-after printers among avant-gardists.

After *Les Soirées de Paris*, '*L'Imprimerie Union*' continued to publish some of the most experimental artists' books – the surrealist magazines, Dadaist posters, pataphysical treatises, and Zaum poems. Then, at the end of 1921, Ilya Zdanevich-Iliazd, a Georgian Futurist, arrived in Paris, joined '*L'Imprimerie Union*' and helped turn it into a leading symbol of avant-garde art publishing.

The fact that from the shell of a Russian, Eastern, temporary, makeshift, militant, semi-illegal and revolutionary printing press, emerged one of the most refined, Parisian, advanced, beautiful, and experimental contemporary art printing houses of the West reveals much about the obscure histories of the Leninist underground.

The typographers and printers, and their 'technique,' were an important aspect of this subterranean revolutionary world. They formed the cosmos of socialism. As Régis Debray, in one of his more recent texts on the "typographic soul of socialism," claimed: "The professional typographer occupies a special niche within the ecosystem of socialism, the key link

5 Ibid: 19-20.

6 Antoine Perriol edited a dossier "Iliazd & L'Imprimerie Union," *Les Carnets de L'Iliazd Club*, No. 7, Paris, 2010, 11-86. See also the excellent website on L'Imprimerie Union: <https://imprimerie-union.org/>.

7 Aline, Alexei (1929), *Lénine à Paris: souvenirs inédits*. Paris: Les Revues, 16-23.

between proletarian theory and the working-class condition; herein lay the best technical means of intellectualizing the proletariat and proletarianizing the intellectual, the double movement that constituted the workers' parties."⁸ This 'technique' also required a knowledge of smuggling, evading censorship, hiding from the police, and constant improvising, especially under conditions of Tsarist repression, even when printed in exile.

There is thus no better metaphor against the Eurocentrist contemporary art culture than the Russian Bolsheviks' "scaffolding," which became a beacon of the Parisian avant-garde with the help of two Latvian and a Georgian typographer. History should be written from this point of view, not from delusions based on a missed encounter of Lenin and Tristan Tzara at Cabaret Voltaire.

Scaffolding was not only a reference to transitory, improvised and collective aspects of revolutionary print. It was also a philosophy refusing to accept the standing permanency of indissoluble legal capitalist reality. As Lenin wrote: "We know the fragile nature of 'legality,' we shall not forget the historic lessons of the importance of an illegal press."⁹

Sezgin Boynik runs Rab-Rab Press in Helsinki. He edited Coiled Verbal Spring: Devices of Lenin's Language in 2018 and published an artist's book On Lenin: Atlases, Herbariums, and Rituals in 2017.

8 Debray, Régis (2007), "Socialism: A Life-Cycle," *New Left Review*, 46, 5-28.

9 Saifulin 1972: 12.