On the One Hundredth Anniversary of Two Revolutions: Russia and Georgia, Bolshevism or Menshevism

Category: Left Politics
written by Dan La Botz | January 3, 2018

Eric Lee. *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution, 1918-1921.* London: Zed Books, 2017. 259 pages. Timeline. Notes. Index. (For further information see: http://www.ericlee.info/theexperiment/)

In his new book *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgtten Revolution, 1918-1921* the journalist and historian Eric Lee does two things. First, he tells the little known and complicated story of the Georgian Revolution and the short-lived independent state that it created.

Second, Lee uses the Georgian experience of those years to argue for the superiority of its Menshevik Social Democratic government over the Bolshevik or, later, Communist government of Soviet Russia. Lee argues that the Georgian Menshevik government was more both democratic and therefore more genuinely socialist than the Communist government of Russia. While Lee, who has been writing about this subject since 1987, does an admirable job of telling the story of the Georgian revolution, and does so in a highly readable and engaging fashion, I find his arguments for the superiority of Menshevism unconvincing and, in fact, the evidence he provides out of a scrupulous adherence to the facts often undermines the case he wishes to make.

The Background

Georgia, which had voluntarily become a Russian protectorate in 1783, had started by 1801 to become absorbed by the Tsarist Empire. Without a doubt Georgians became an oppressed national minority within the Russian "prison house of nations," as it was often called. The circumstances and events leading to the collapse of the Tsarist Russian empire are well known: the authoritarian government, the country's backwardness, the tremendous economic and social inequality, the country's failures in World War I, and then the February Revolution of 1917. All of that made possible the revolutions in both Russia and in what had been the imperial province of Georgia. In Russia, including Georgia, the elections to the Constituent Assembly were held and the Menshevik, or more moderate faction, of the Russian Social Democrats (for some years actually an independent party) was victorious in Georgia.

In Russia, however, the Bolshevik faction, also now an independent party, overthrew the provisional

government, thrust power on to the *soviets* or councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers, and then dispersed the new elected Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks would have been the second most important party (24 percent) in the Constituent Assembly after the Social Revolutionary Party (40 percent), while support for the Mensheviks throughout the former empire as a whole was quite small (less than 3 percent). But the Bolsheviks overthrew the Constituent Assembly arguing that the *soviets*, where they had a majority, represented a more democratic form of organization that empowered the laboring classes. Vladimir Lenin, head of the new government of *soviets* in which the Bolsheviks had won a majority, declared that Soviet Russia was beginning the construction of socialism. The Georgian Mensheviks rejected the Bolsheviks as usurpers who had carried out a coup d'état in Russia and established a dictatorship of their party. This view strengthened their determination to go on their own independent course.

As the Tsarist regime collapsed, the Ottoman Empire moved into Georgia, while at the same time the Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis formed the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic led by the Menshevik Nikolay Chkheidze. The federal state lasted only a few months and on May 26, 1918 Georgia declared independence; it held elections for a Constituent Assembly, in which the Mensheviks won the majority, with the party's leader Noe Zhordania becoming prime minister. It was in this context of war and revolution that, under the leadership of the Mensheviks, Georgia convoked its own Constituent Assembly, established its own military, and began to govern along the lines advocated historically by European Social Democracy.

The Georgian Ordeal

The Georgian project was fraught with difficulties and surrounded by dangers. First, Georgia was a small, backward, agricultural nation located between two much larger nations: the Ottoman Empire (later Turkey) and Imperial Russia (later Soviet Russia). Second, as World War I ended and Russia's control collapsed, the other great powers, first the Ottoman Empire, next Germany, and then Great Britain attempted to take control of Georgia. Third, Georgia was part of the Caucasus region that included the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as smaller groups of Ossetians and Abkhazians, each of which had their own national aspirations. Attempts to create a transcaucasian federation failed both because of ethnic rivalry and great power maneuvering, including by Soviet Russia. All of this meant that the Mensheviks, like the Bolsheviks, would attempt to create a nation in the midst of virtually continuous peasant rebellion, ethnic uprisings, and international warfare.

Who were these Mensheviks who aspired to lead a national revolution in Georgia? Who were their leaders? What was their social base? And what was their program? Unlike European Social Democratic Parties, which were almost always based on the labor unions, the Georgian Menshevik leaders, as Lee explains, were upper or middle class and mostly intellectuals. He quotes one historian who describes them as "former nobles, merchants, lawyers, graduates of Church seminaries and children of priests." The leading German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky, a friend of the Georgian Mensheviks, enumerated the occupations of the 102 Mensheviks in parliament: "thirty-two workers, the rest intellectuals: twenty teachers, fourteen journalists, thirteen lawyers, seven doctors, three engineers and thirteen officials." (p. 114) The Mensheviks' petty-bourgeois leadership had, however, established strong ties to the labor unions and to the peasantry, giving their party the power to shape the national political agenda.

Like other Social Democrats, the Mensheviks believed that a workers' socialist revolution could only take place once capitalism and bourgeois democracy had been established. That then was their program: the establishment of capitalism and democracy. But just as had happened in Russia, the revolution created both a parliament and a *soviet*, and consequently a contest between bourgeois democracy and workers power. While Lee suggests that no dual power existed in Georgia because the Mensheviks coordinated an alliance between the parliament and the *soviet*, other historians

disagree. Ronald Grigor Suny argues that the Bolsheviks had a following both among the soldiers and among the Russian workers in Georgia, and that the Bolshevik presence tended to grow and become more significant.[i] Be that as it may, the Georgian Constituent Assembly led by the Mensheviks did become dominant and stood as a bulwark against *soviet* power. The Menshevik leader Noe Zhordania stated at the time, "The present revolution in its content is not the affair of some class; the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are together directing the affairs of the revolution." (p. 35). As Lee writes, this was classic Menshevism, classic social democracy.

The Georgian Mensheviks' social democratic program included the establishment of a republic, the carrying out of an agrarian reform that would distribute land to the peasantry, recognition of the labor unions, and universal suffrage for both men and women. Under the circumstances much of this program was more aspirational than realizable, though they did briefly make good on a good deal of it. Land was taken from large landowners without compensation and then sold to peasants, but the nobility held on to much of its land and remained intact as a social class. Zhordania explained to Ethel Snowden of the British Labour Party (she was the wife of Philip Snowden, a Labour Party leader), that the agrarian reform "was for all alike, the rich as well as the poor, and those who had more must give to those who have none" (p. 179). The Mensheviks did not nationalize significant private property, but they encouraged the creation of cooperatives. The Mensheviks called on the unions to produce more in order develop the country economically and were largely successful in winning the workers' support, even though the coal and manganese mines and other industries remained in private hands.

The Georgians Mensheviks, while fighting against domination by Turkey or Soviet Russia, were nationalists who at the same time fought to dominate the other ethnic groups in the Caucasus, leading to wars or minor conflicts, not only with Armenia but also Abkhazia, Adjara, and Ossetia. They did better with the Jews who had no territorial ambitions, though they kept a Zionist party out of parliament. As the author concedes, the Georgians became a minor imperial power in their region, unwilling to concede independence to the national minorities and dealing violently with them when they rebelled. As Lee writes, the Georgians relations with the other ethnic groups in and around their republic constituted the Mensheviks' Achilles heel, making it impossible for them to establish the transcaucasian unity that might have provided the political basis for military resistance to their enemies.

More important, from the beginning, the Georgian Mensheviks faced a decision: support the Bolsheviks in Russia or to ally with one or another of the imperial powers that were striving to crush Bolshevism? Leading a national revolution in a small country and seeking to maintain their independence from Turkey and from Soviet Russia, they sought an arrangement first with the German Imperial government and then with the British Empire, both of which were interested in the resources of the Caucasus: the oil field of Baku (today the capital of Azerbaijan) located on the Caspian sea and in the manganese mines in Chiatura and other areas of western Georgia. First the Germans, whom the Mensheviks preferred, and then the British—both of which expressed a willingness to protect Georgia from foreign intervention—intervened, carrying out a military occupations of Georgia and other parts of the Caucasus as they took control of the mines and oil. In his conclusion, Lee writes, "By 1921 the Georgians had demonstrated an over-reliance on diplomacy, in particular regarding the great powers, as part of their survival strategy" (p. 234). This is understatement indeed. In allying with one and then another of other imperial powers, the Mensheviks were, of course, simply repeating the disastrous history of the complicity of Social Democracy in the World War. They stood with imperialism against the attempt in Russia to create a socialist society with the aid of European workers' revolutions.

Stalin and Georgia

While Lee generally takes the high road and writes his history and makes his argument for Menshevism from the facts, even facts that undermine his case, he does occasionally disappoint us. For example, he spends two and a half pages discussing whether or not Stalin had been a Tsarist police agent, an accusation which, he concedes, historians have rejected. This should have been a sentence and a footnote, not a textual discussion. Lee's prejudices, generally subdued, do nevertheless intrude at various points. When Mensheviks lead peasant revolts, they are providing leadership, but when Bolsheviks do so, they are manipulative. When the Bolsheviks organize the soldiers, they are preying upon their exhaustion and bitterness, which Mensheviks presumably did not do. When the Bolsheviks repress the Mensheviks, it is unjust; but when the Mensheviks repress the Bolsheviks it is not only acceptable but in fact right do to so, because the Bolsheviks represent a foreign power and—note that we are talking about the period from 1918 to 1921 here—a totalitarian system. While the Soviet Union did become a totalitarian state, it was not yet such a regime in the period of 1918-1921.

Lee has to be commended for quoting extensively from Trotsky's critiques of the Georgian Mensheviks, even though he disagrees with the politics. And while he condemns the Soviet invasion and conquest of Georgia in 1921 as an expression of Communist totalitarianism, Lee points out that Soviet attack on Georgia was not initiated and carried out by Soviet leaders; Lenin was by then "sick and inactive" while Leon Trotsky, the head of the Red Army, was on an inspection tour in the Urals. It was Joseph Stalin, himself a Georgian but utterly unsympathetic to both the Mensheviks and Georgian aspirations for independence, who decided to invade, organizing an internal uprising and calling it a civil war in order to justify the military invasion. Lee concedes that "[i]n Moscow, the Bolshevik leaders themselves were also late to learn about what was happening in Georgia" (p. 196). Lenin and Trotsky, presented with a fait accompli, were both surprised and angry, but because the intervention was being justified by Stalin as support for Communists in a civil war, they did not act to stop if. Following a five week war, Georgia had become a Soviet Republic led by the Georgian Communist Party and part of what would become the Soviet Union.

One wishes that Lee had continued his book through 1922 in order to deal with the "Georgian affair;" that is, the conflict between Stalin and Lenin over the relationship between Soviet Georgia and the Soviet Union. The Georgian affair, which is discussed in detail in Moshe Lewin's *Lenin's Last Struggle* (1968), refers to Stalin's attempt to thwart the Georgian Communist Party's aspirations for national autonomy within the new Soviet Union, established in 1922. Lenin, who was a genuine advocate of the right to self-determination, though he was quite ill, opposed Stalin. A discussion of the Georgian affair in Lee's book would have demonstrated the difference between Lenin and Stalin on the national question, and as Lewin makes clear would have shown that these moments of Lenin's "last struggle" represented the beginnings of Stalinism and the setting in place of the foundation what indeed became a totalitarian system. In my view, the Russian Revolution did eventually lead to a bureaucratic counter-revolution and totalitarianism, but that did not begin until the late 1920s and was not complete until a decade later.

Lee's *The Experiment* is both a good read and basically a good history, though in my view he fails at his defense of Menshevism. We should know more about the Georgian experiment. And at this moment, as we are watching the Kurdish and Catalan struggles for independence, thinking about the Georgian case might make us more sensitive to the many issues involved in the world's many questions of ethnic or national autonomy or independence.

Thanks to Eric Blanc for his suggestion that I read the Ronald Grigor Suny article. – DL

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[i] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Social Democrats in Power: Menshevik Georgia and the Russian Civil War,"

in: Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Girgor Suny, *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 324-48.