

# A Revolution is a Miracle: Lenin and the Translatability of Politics and Religion

Roland Boer

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Abstract: In certain respects, a revolution is a miracle<sup>2</sup>, wrote Lenin in 1921. Revolution = miracle; революция = чудо: the permutations of this equation are the concern of this paper. Although revolution is arguably the central theme of Lenin's extensive writings and political practice, my angle is different from the many others who have dealt with Lenin and revolution, for I am interested in the mutual translation between revolution and miracle. What does it mean for Lenin to say that revolution is a miracle? He was fond of calling revolutionary acts miracles, especially during the immense struggles of the ‘civil’ war and the social and economic reconstruction after October. But in the process of making that translation between revolution and miracle, he expands the semantic fields of those two terms to include elements beyond the initial overlap, all of which leads to a redefinition of miracle as an act of stupendous human effort. Into that redefinition are drawn a series of crucial items, especially the tension between spontaneity and organisation, which this paper explores in detail.

The history of our proletarian revolution is full of such miracles (Lenin 1919 [1965]-i, 73).

‘In certain respects, a revolution is a miracle’ (Lenin 1921 [1965]-c, 153). Revolution = miracle; революция = чудо: the permutations of this equation are the concern of this chapter. Although revolution is arguably the central theme of Lenin's extensive writings and political practice, my angle is different from the many others who have dealt with Lenin and revolution, for I am interested in its theological translation – hence miracle. What does it mean for Lenin to say that revolution is a miracle?

First, miracle is not so much a moment or an event that changes the very coordinates of existence (or in Hume-derived terms as an event that is inexplicable according to the ‘laws’ of nature), but rather a point of contact between two seemingly incommensurable worlds. In theological terms, a miracle is a touching between heaven and earth, or rather (to gloss Negri), the moment when transcendence is bent towards immanence (Negri and Fadini 2008, 666-8). In

Lenin's appropriation, the two worlds are no longer heaven and earth but those of spontaneity and organisation, between the unexpected the expected. Time and again, he emphasises and devotes immense energy to the need to organise in preparation for the revolution, whether in terms of party structure, publicity organs, propaganda, parliamentary involvement, agitation on the streets or military training. Yet the moment of revolution inevitably occurs without forewarning, a spark that turns instantaneously into a conflagration. Both January 1905 and February 1917 were precisely such events, let alone the myriad strikes that surrounded them. In the first part of the analysis below, I explore the various permutations of the terminology of miracle in Lenin's texts. The second part offers a study one specific instance of this reshaping of miracle, now in terms of the tension between organisation and spontaneity in the context of revolution.

## Miracles

Revolutions are not made to order (Lenin 1918 [1965]-c, 44).

The quotation with which I began – ‘a revolution is a miracle’ – is by no means an isolated occurrence in Lenin's texts.<sup>1</sup> So the first step is to trace the various usages of the term itself, which will enrich the definition of miracle. We may distinguish two broad usages of miracle, one concerning a magical occurrence that takes place entirely outside human agency, as with the apparent acts produced by the power of a saint's incorruptible remains. For this, often minor, event one waits expectantly but somewhat fatalistically. Another meaning focuses on stupendous human effort, which may come from an unexpected quarter but is closely linked with the need for human agency. In other words, a momentous event takes place at the intersection between spontaneity and organisation, between the unexpected and the expected. For Lenin, the first meaning is distinctly negative while the latter is positive.

In respect to these dimensions of miracle, a noticeable shift takes place in his usage after 1910. Before that time, miracle is generally although not universally a pejorative term in the sense outline above. But from 1910 Lenin appropriates the more positive sense of miracle, especially as he systematically assesses the aftermath of the 1905 revolution. Now he creatively refashions the term for his own purposes. We may identify the explicit shift to a more positive sense in an article written to commemorate the centenary of the birth of the ‘father of Russian socialism’, Alexander Herzen (illegitimate son of a Russian landowner). Lenin seeks to draw out the socialist

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<sup>1</sup> Lih occasionally mentions Lenin's use of ‘miracle’ but does not develop the idea in any systematic fashion (Lih 2011, 79, 118, 184; 2008 [2005], 4, 135, 287).

dimensions of Herzen's thought from their more liberal aspects and quotes from the famous work, *Kolokol* (The Bell): 'The dead bodies of your martyrs will not perform forty-eight miracles, and praying to them will not cure a tooth ache; but their living memory may produce one miracle – your emancipation' (Lenin 1912 [1963]-a, 30). Over against the popular belief in minor miracles caused by saints, miracle now becomes an explicitly emancipatory, revolutionary term. Lenin's mind was already moving in that direction, but Herzen's text provides him with the clarity of that shift. And in developing a positive meaning for miracle, Lenin presses heavily on his pen to emphasise both the unexpected moments of revolution and the extraordinary examples of almost superhuman effort, such as the efforts of the Red Army during the civil war, or of workers and peasants. Here they become miracles of daring, commitment, initiative, self-sacrifice and sheer grit against almost insuperable odds. Each of them provides a glimpse, a step on the way to the full realisation of communism. Yet even with this shift in Lenin's appreciation of the terminology of miracle, he does not abandon the earlier, negative sense. As I will show, it continues in a minor key in his writings and speeches until well after October. At times he points out that communists do not believe in miracles if one understands them as occurrences beyond human agency, or as the results of a magical talisman, or a fatalism that awaits the unfolding of history in one's favour. This persistent negative thread throws into relief his distinctly affirmative usage and may be seen as clarification of what he means by that usage.

Earlier, I defined a miracle as bending heaven to earth, or drawing transcendence to immanence. Lenin's exploration of the tension between spontaneous, unexpected revolution and the creative powers of human energy may be seen as another code for this intersection – given that neither code is an absolute that determines the other. In this light, I would also identify an analogy with the Orthodox approach to miracle. Rather than inexplicable occurrences that defy the 'laws' of nature, miracles reveal 'to nature a window that opens out onto its own most appropriate goal', providing 'exceptional anticipations of the eschatological state' (Stăniloae 2000, 61). Here one bends eschatological transcendence to the immanence of the present, when the two realm touch. The other side of orthodoxy was, of course, the veneration of the magical powers of saints for all manner of minor 'miracles' – curing a bad leg or a toothache, seeking a propitious day for sowing seed and so on. I would suggest that in Lenin's own terms or code he castigates the latter sense while developing a more sophisticated sense of the revolution itself as a miracle.

Let me trace Lenin's changing approach to miracle a little more detail. In his earlier texts, he was not so enthused by miracles. Most often, he attacks his fellow communists for belief in such occurrences as a sign of blind faith in events beyond their control, or a fatalism that

indicates weakness and futility. In these utterances, Lenin regards a miracle as too closely tied up with religious belief, which is itself a response to and ignorant of oppressive conditions. Marx is his guide on this matter, who wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ‘As ever, weakness had taken refuge in a belief in miracles’ (Lenin 1905 [1965]-d, 296). For instance, the Menshevik-controlled *Iskra* or the Bund suffers from such weakness, believing that a miracle will achieve communist aims without an uprising, that it is possible to scale the mountain without a ladder. Indeed, miracles are signals of deceit, falsity, insanity and utter ridiculousness (Lenin 1905 [1965]-d, 296-8; 1894 [1960]-a, 364; 1897 [1960], 531; 1907 [1964]-d, 222; 1905 [1962]-a, 310; 1894 [1960]-b, 331; 1902 [1961]-d, 493; 1901 [1961], 108; 1907 [1963]-a, 368). Tellingly, Lenin also castigates belief in the miracle of a spontaneous uprising, or in the anarchist belief in the miracle-working power of direct action, for it is assumed that it will take place without the laborious planning and organisation of which he was so keen (Lenin 1907 [1963]-c, 418; 1908 [1963]-b, 195; 1907 [1964]-h, 263). The catch is that it is precisely such a miraculous uprising that Lenin will come to evaluate more positively.

However, before exploring the various dimensions of that affirmation and reconfiguration of miracle, it should be noted that Lenin does not abandon its negative dimensions. He maintains his critique of the miracle as either a fatalism that simply waits for events to unfold in one’s favour (Lenin 1917 [1964]-b, 203) or a near-magical occurrence that may as well have been enacted by a dead saint or at the behest of the Virgin Mary (Lenin 1920 [1965]-a, 115).<sup>2</sup> For instance, in his gramophone address from 1919 – ‘What is Soviet Power?’ – he says: ‘Soviet power is not a miracle-working talisman. It does not, overnight, heal all the evils of the past – illiteracy, lack of culture, the consequences of a barbarous war, the aftermath of predatory capitalism. But it does pave the way to socialism’ (Lenin 1919 [1965]-m, 248-9). This continued critique of talismans and of the magical dimensions of the miracle makes sense of the Soviet campaign of exposing the relics of saints to show that they had indeed decayed, contrary to popular belief that they had not done so. That is not the miracle of which we are speaking, Lenin says implicitly. In that vein, he occasionally states directly that the victory of Soviet power against all odds is ‘not a miracle’, for ‘intelligent people don’t believe in miracles’, but then he proceeds to outline the reasons for that victory in terms of enthusiasm, energy and supreme

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<sup>2</sup> A very different response to the Soviet campaign, although in some ways analogous to Lenin’s approach, appears in the work of the erstwhile socialist, Bulgakov. He argues that earthly relics are not the relics per se, but rather an important signifying link with the transfigured body of the saint in heaven, thereby providing an avenue of grace, between the spiritual and physical realms, as also in the incarnation, eucharist and thereby miracles (Bulgakov 2011).

effort – precisely the alternative definition of miracle that he develops at the same time (Lenin 1921 [1965]-d, 108; 1921 [1966]-b, 118; 1918 [1965]-a, 154).<sup>3</sup>

As far as that positive sense is concerned, Lenin no longer dismisses the inexplicability of revolution. He already noted with the upsurge in worker unrest and strikes in the early 1910s that such events were taking place. Thus, a simple decision by the Executive Commission of the St. Petersburg Committee, its printing and distribution by a couple of hundred people is transformed: ‘And suddenly, a miracle occurs!’ 250,000 workers rise as one (Lenin 1913 [1963]-b, 225). Above all, if the February revolution of 1917, in which the tsar was overthrown, seemed inexplicable and unexpected to people in Petrograd and Russia more generally, then to Lenin in Switzerland it seemed even more so. So in his notes for a lecture in Zurich in March, 1917, he writes, ‘The world has changed in 3 days ... “a miracle”’ (Lenin 1916 [1966], 422). And in ‘Letters From Afar’ – the full version of these notes – he turns once again to the language of miracle, asking how such a miracle could have happened, how a monarchy that had maintained itself for centuries and that had endured the crisis of 1905-7 could now be overthrown. Here Lenin is a little cautious in his terminology, feeling his way and qualifying his usage. ‘There are no miracles in nature or history’, he writes, but abrupt turns like revolutions involve the conjunction of unexpected combinations of events, forms of struggle and the forces of the protagonists, that ‘to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous’ (Lenin 1917 [1964]-c, 297). In other words, should one be able to analyse all of these conjunctions, one would be able to identify patterns of cause and effect, the role of organisation and planning. Once again we are back with the tension between the unexpected and the foreseeable, between spontaneity and organisation that runs through Lenin’s reflections on the miracle in these later years.

Above all, Lenin’s overt usage of miracle lays its emphasis on human energy, effort and enthusiasm, thereby bending heaven to earth so that ‘the miracle did not come from heaven’ (Lenin 1921 [1965]-f, 220). Yet it requires stupendous moments for such miracles to occur, moments that evoke almost superhuman effort from those who did know they could do such – in revolution itself, tremendous hurdles to be overcome in the post-revolutionary situation, such as ‘civil’ war and economic reconstruction, which in many respects require even greater miracles. In a lyrical moment, he writes:

Revolutions are the locomotives of history, said Marx. Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are

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<sup>3</sup> Other references to this negative sense of miracle in different circumstances may also be identified (Lenin 1919 [1965]-c, 256; 1917 [1964]-h, 271; 1918 [1965]-a, 154; 1914 [1965]-c, 379-80; 1917 [1964]-e; 1918 [1965]-d, 357, 363; 1920 [1965]-g).

capable of performing miracles, if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual progress (Lenin 1905 [1965]-e, 113).

Once again note the qualifier, ‘if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual process’. Soon, however, Lenin’s qualifications fade away, particularly in his unbridled enthusiasm when calling on workers to even greater effort. Now we find references to the conviction that will multiply a hundred-fold the ‘revolutionary energy and revolutionary enthusiasm which can perform miracles’, references to ‘miracles of proletarian heroism’, to miracles of ‘daring, initiative and self-sacrifice’, and especially to ‘miracles of proletarian organisation’ (Lenin 1905 [1965]-e, 103; 1917 [1964]-c, 306-7, 323, 330; 1917 [1964]-i, 355, 360; 1917 [1964]-d, 43-4; 1921 [1965]-f, 220; 1917 [1965]-b, 429).<sup>4</sup> In each case, the call to perform miracles comes in the wake of a preliminary revolution, whether January 1905 or February 1917, which functions as both the proof that such miracles of human energy are possible and as a call to enact yet another miracle and bring about the communist revolution itself. The last example – miracles of proletarian organisation – was to become a key slogan in the heady days between February and October of 1917:

The slogan, the ‘task of the day’, at *this* moment must be: *Workers, you have performed miracles of proletarian heroism, the heroism of the people, in the civil war against tsarism. You must perform miracles of organisation, organisation of the proletariat and of the whole people, to prepare the way for your victory in the second stage of the revolution* (Lenin 1917 [1964]-c, 306-7).<sup>5</sup>

Both organisation and spontaneity, it seems, may be described as miraculous, perpetually in tension with one another and dialectically turning into one another.

The miracle of the October revolution was but the first and perhaps the easiest miracle. As Lenin was to emphasise many times after the revolution, the act of overthrowing and seizing state power is the easy part; the revolutionary task of building a new society is far more difficult (Lenin 1920 [1965]-a, 115). And so we find the bulk of Lenin’s recognition of and invocations to further miracles in his post-October writings. Miracles were occurring almost daily, it seems. Thus, the continued cheerfulness in and enthusiasm for Soviet power, in the face of economic ruin, hunger, cold, disease and devastation, is miraculous, as are the achievements of steering the ship of state despite the chronic inexperience in doing so. Indeed, every time a new difficulty arises, the miracle of its overcoming becomes a proof of the workers’ and peasants’ firmness,

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast to an earlier (1894) quotation from Engels that stresses the negative side of miracles (Lenin 1894 [1960]-b, 172-3), now Lenin is comfortable referring to the Engels who wrote: “‘Miracles are happening here in Elberfeld’” (Lenin 1913 [1964]-d, 556; Engels 1845 [1982], 23). Already in 1902, before any of the revolutions that evoked a flood of miraculous terminology from Lenin’s pen, is a reference to the miracles that even an individual may perform in a revolutionary situation (Lenin 1902 [1961]-d, 447).

<sup>5</sup> Given his pattern, Lenin would repeat the call on a number of occasions through 1917 (Lenin 1917 [1964]-i, 355, 360; 1917 [1964]-d, 43-4).

self-sacrifice and strength. That the Soviet state survived at all is a miracle (Lenin 1919 [1965]-k, 66; 1919 [1965]-i, 72-3; 1920 [1965]-i, 437; 1921 [1965]-b, 67). By far the most persistent ascription of miracle is to the impossible success in the ‘civil’ war. For four years the superior forces of international capital, in terms of troops, equipment, logistics and finance assisted the White Armies in their efforts to bring down the fledgling Soviet state, yet the under-armed and under-financed Red Army was victorious. Particularly in his public speeches, Lenin repeatedly describes that victory as a stunning miracle of human grit, determination, discipline and resourcefulness. Such miracles are not only tributes to the enthusiasm for and devotion to the new communist government, but also have the direct result of increasing tenfold their support among peasants and workers, let alone those in other countries and colonies who aspire to overthrow the oppressors (Lenin 1918 [1965]-d, 357, 363; 1919 [1965]-l, 83; 1919 [1965]-b, 152, 153-4; 1919 [1965]-d, 171; 1919 [1965]-j, 208, 214, 230-1; 1920 [1965]-e, 382, 385-7; 1920 [1965]-b, 446, 447, 457, 488; 1920 [1965]-d, 496; 1920 [1965]-c, 439; 1920 [1969]-b, 169; 1920 [1966], 325; 1921 [1965]-g, 487; 1919 [1965]-g, 411).<sup>6</sup> This was indeed ‘a miracle without parallel, in that a starving, weak and half-ruined country has defeated its enemies – the mighty capitalist countries’ (Lenin 1921 [1966]-a, 117).

With this example behind them, Lenin then turns to calling for yet more miracles like that of the Red Army, only greater. The focus is now on economic reconstruction, whether in relation to the labour front, transport, fuel, agriculture or industrial production (Lenin 1919 [1965]-d, 188; 1920 [1965]-h, 432; 1920 [1965]-f, 523, 525; 1920 [1969]-a, 164; 1921 [1965]-a, 291). He is not averse to designating an individual a ‘miracle worker’, such as Miron Konstantinovich Vladimirov, the Military Commissar Extraordinary of the Railways, who, if he can in the face of a chronic shortage of materials ‘perform a miracle’ by repairing both the Povorino-Tsaritsyn line in addition to the Liski-Likhaya line, ‘will indeed be a miracle worker’ (Lenin 1919 [1970], 198).<sup>7</sup> All of which may be summed up: ‘The history of our proletarian revolution is full of such miracles’ (Lenin 1919 [1965]-i, 73). No longer do the gods perform miracles, but human beings do so.

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<sup>6</sup> Conversely, without the people’s support – in the case of a peace with the capitalists – miracles are not possible (Lenin 1917 [1964]-k, 376). Already in 1915, he was writing of the army: ‘Today they perform miracles in sheltering from bullets and shrapnel; tomorrow they perform miracles in hand-to-hand-combat’ (Lenin 1915 [1964]-a, 253).

<sup>7</sup> So also with Trotsky, as Cliff reports on a conversation between Lenin and Gorky: ‘Show me any other man capable of organizing an almost model army in one year and moreover of winning the sympathy of professional soldiers. We have that man. We have everything. You will see miracles’ (Cliff 1987, 203).

## Organising for the Spontaneous

Such intricate and incalculable events as those of the Russian revolution (Lenin 1905 [1965]-a, 339).

The miracle, it seems, is a crucial dimension of Lenin's approach to revolution. Thus far I have argued that his appropriation of the terminology of miracles enacted a bending of transcendence to immanence, in which human beings become the prime agents of miracles. I would now like to explore in some detail other ramifications of that terminology, dealing here with the tension between the unexpected and the expected, or in Lenin's terminology, between spontaneity and organisation.<sup>8</sup> On this topic we now move to the enriching possibilities that the translation of miracle into revolution (and vice versa enables). Given that the semantic fields of the two terms do not manage a complete fit, but rather overlap and leave parts outside immediate contact, it becomes possible to expand the senses of both terms by means of the other. That is, the full reach of the semantic field of revolution is now able to enrich that of miracle. The following discussion should be seen in that light: as with revolution, miracle too operates in terms of a tension between the unexpected and spontaneous (the more usual sense of miracle) and preparation.

Lenin tries to weave a delicate interaction between these two terms, between spontaneity and organisation, an interaction that tends towards a dialectical approach in his more perceptive considerations. The basic problem to which Lenin returned time and again was the reality of spontaneous strikes, waves of unrest and insurrection. How does one respond to these occurrences? One may, as many fellow revolutionaries believed, allow such unplanned events to occur, indeed that the successful revolution would ultimately happen in such a way. Or one may seek to respond as best as possible to these moments of sheer unexpectedness. Or one may attempt to organise, organise and organise again in order to lay the groundwork for bursts of spontaneous insurrection. Lenin prefers both the second and third options, working himself into the ground to ensure that organisational structures are in place for agitation and that the party is placed as best as it could be to respond when a revolution spontaneously burst forth. In what follows, I begin with spontaneity in Lenin's texts, including both strikes and revolutions, before passing on to focus on his strategies of organisation (which includes military preparation) and closing with a reconsideration of the mediation between the two key terms.

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<sup>8</sup> Other topics that enrich the sense of miracle would include working within and outside the system, reform and revolution, and the tension between real and formal freedom. Space precludes a detailed analysis of these themes here.



*Stikhiinyi* (noun: *stikhiinos*) is the central term used in a text that has become a standard reference for spontaneity, *What Is To Be Done?* However, as Lih persuasively argues,<sup>9</sup> the translation as ‘spontaneity’ (first made in 1929) restricts and possibly shifts its meaning away from the Russian word. It means, argues Lih, an unstoppable natural force, and then in relation to revolution, a chaotic and disorganised struggle. Lenin would also make clear during the heady days of 1917 that *stikhiinyi* is ‘deeply rooted in the masses’ and for that reason is extremely tenacious (Lenin 1917 [1966]-c, 30-1). Spontaneity captures part of this sense, as does elemental in the biblical sense of the ‘formless chaos’ (*tobu wavobu*) of Genesis 1:1. Of course, we are faced with the standard problem of translation I mentioned a few moments ago, in which the semantic clusters of key terms in two languages overlap but do not match entirely. For that reason, I have used and will continue to use a variety of words to capture the sense of spontaneity, such as inexplicable, unexpected, unplanned, but also elemental and disorganised.

Contrary to the common position that Lenin despised unplanned spontaneity in *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin already explores the tension between both sides of the tension.<sup>10</sup> Lenin would emphasise now one, now the other side of this tension. At times, the inexplicable dimension comes to the fore, as with his assessments of the Paris commune, which ‘sprang up spontaneously’. One may identify all manner of factors that led to the uprising, such as the unsuccessful war with Germany, the desperate situation during the siege by the Germans, the devastation of the middle class and unemployment among the workers, moves of unrest and dissatisfaction among the masses who were dismayed by the incompetence of the ruling class and who sought for a different social system. Yet, ‘no one consciously prepared it in an organised way’, for it was an ‘event unprecedented in history’, a movement that sought ‘to destroy the very *foundations* of the contemporary social order’ (Lenin 1911 [1963]-d, 139-40). Or after Bloody Sunday, he is quite open in stating that the Social-Democrats were not sufficiently organised or prepared, so much so that through the general strike and uprising, history was being made by the working classes ‘without Social-Democracy’. And so he asks the question, ‘Will Social-Democracy be able to gain the lead of this spontaneous movement?’ (Lenin 1905 [1962]-b,

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<sup>9</sup> Given the importance of the term in the reception of Lenin’s arguments from *What Is To Be Done?*, Lih gives *stikhiinyi* extensive attention, tracing its various usages in the debates within which Lenin was engaged at the time (Lih 2008 [2005], 143, 145, 147, 183-4, 204, 273-4, 309-17, 322, 350-2, 359, 366-7, 376, 387, 389-98, 414-15, 418, 421, 423-8).

<sup>10</sup> ‘The spontaneity of the masses demands a high degree of consciousness from us Social-Democrats. The greater the spontaneous upsurge of the masses and the more widespread the movement, the more rapid, incomparably so, the demand for greater consciousness in the theoretical, political, and organisational work of Social-Democracy’ (Lenin 1902 [1961]-d, 396). The text appears at the close of the section, ‘The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats’ (Lenin 1902 [1961]-d, 373-97). Note also Walling’s observation: ‘They know that no revolution can be planned beforehand ; but they propose to be as ready as possible when the psychological moment has arrived’ (Walling 1908, 363).

113).<sup>11</sup> Twelve years later he was still examining this question, especially in the famous lecture of 1917, in which he seeks to analyse the ‘awakening of tremendous masses’, of the ‘widespread ferment’ that snowballed beyond anyone’s imagination (Lenin 1917 [1964]-a, 238). Of course, with the February Revolution in 1917 and the abdication of the tsar (a month after Lenin had given the aforesaid lecture) the question became even more urgent. As Cliff observes, ‘The revolution was completely spontaneous and unplanned’ (Cliff 2004 [1976], 89). Throughout those bewildering months between February and October, the Bolsheviks worked themselves to the bone to organise and gain the leadership, agitating in factories and the armies, pushing their agenda ever more energetically. And yet, moments would arise that they had not anticipated, such as the strike and protests against the war policy of the government on 20-21 April, the Kronstadt mutiny in May, and the protest and attempted seizure of power at the beginning on 3-4 July (Lenin 1917 [1965]-c, 236, 241-2; 1917 [1964]-j, 1917 [1965]-a). By 1918, with rich revolutionary experience, he simply told an audience, ‘Revolution can never be forecast; it cannot be foretold; it comes of itself’ (Lenin 1918 [1965]-e, 83).

At other times, he would emphasise the need for meticulous preparation. Organising for the spontaneous requires, as we have already seen, consistent agitation and organisation, both politically and militarily, with Lenin pointing out to people that such organisation is absolutely necessary since struggle is inevitable. But the deep desire for organisation runs deeply indeed in Lenin’s work, as any reader soon notices. ‘I advocate the ABC of organisation’ (Lenin 1919 [1965]-e, 373), he writes, and we see it in endless documents concerning congresses that sit snugly alongside long studies that delight in presenting and analysing complex tables of statistical data. The congresses, initially of the RSDLP itself, but then also meetings of the Central Committee and of editorial boards, evince preparatory documents, reports on discussions and resolutions, post-congress analyses and, especially after October 1917, myriad matters relating to the ‘civil’ war and then social and economic reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> In terms of his own research, Lenin would insist on ‘facts, facts, facts’ (Lenin 1917 [1964]-g, 272; 1917 [1964]-b, 197; 1906 [1962]-a, 377), no matter how ‘dry’ or apparently trivial they may be, keeping card systems for all this data,

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<sup>11</sup> Note also on the general strike of 1905: ‘The spontaneous growth of this strike, unexampled in point of magnitude, was far, far in advance of the planned participation in the movement on the part of the organised Social-Democrats’ (Lenin 1905 [1962]-b, 117).

<sup>12</sup> Only a sample of this extensive literature may be cited (Lenin 1902 [1961]-c, 1903 [1961]-b, 1903 [1961]-a, 1904 [1961]-b, 1904 [1961]-a, 1904 [1961]-d, 1905 [1963]-a, 1905 [1963]-c, 1905 [1963]-b, 1905 [1963]-d, 1905 [1964]-b, 1905 [1963]-f, 1907 [1963]-f, 1907 [1963]-d, 1907 [1964]-f, 1907 [1964]-g, 1909 [1963], 1911 [1963]-f, 1911 [1963]-e, 1912 [1963]-b, 1913 [1964]-g, 1906 [1964]-c, 1906 [1964]-b, 1906 [1964]-a, 1907 [1964]-b, 1907 [1964]-a, 1908 [1963]-c, 1917 [1965]-d; 1917 [1966]-a, 105-8; 1917 [1966]-b, 1918 [1965]-b; 1919 [1965]-h, 425-7; 1919 [1965]-f). The revolutionary reconstruction after October 1917 ranges from emergency matters relating to food, fuel and transport, through appropriating the best of capitalist practices such as banking, production methods and accounting, to the constant urging for disciplined effort in organisation in reconstructing everything from libraries to industry. Myriad references may be found in volumes 26-33 of the *Collected Works*.

compiling detailed, hand-written tables, and then offering extended explication of the tables – whether of agricultural matters, the development of capitalism, strike statistics, distribution statistics for rival socialist newspapers, electoral results, the production rates of post-revolutionary industry, or even the comparative weight of cows and horses, long and detailed treatments of butter, cream and cheese, and the measurement of horse-shit in ‘poods’ (Lenin 1898 [1960], 44; 1907 [1963]-b, 1907 [1963]-a, 1908 [1963]-a, 1913 [1964]-a, 1913 [1964]-f, 1914 [1964], 1913 [1964]-c, 1913 [1964]-b, 1913 [1964]-e, 1913 [1964]-h, 1914 [1965]-d, 1914 [1965]-b, 1914 [1965]-a, 1915 [1964]-b, 1916 [1964]; 1917 [1964]-a, 239; 1917 [1964]-g, 1915-1916 [1968]). He was enthused and fascinated by what he called the ‘language’ of figures (Lenin 1913 [1963]-a). So meticulous was Lenin that he actually sent instructions to presses indicating what type-faces should be used in different parts of his texts. Liberally interspersed between and overlapping with these texts are those concerning party organisation, especially in the situation of exile for many among the Social-Democratic leadership. That organisation had myriad facets: relations between intellectuals and workers; internal struggles and drives to unity; party discipline and authority of its decisions and structures; writing for, publishing and distributing (from exile) the party organs, using for that purpose whatever means were available, from false-bottomed suitcases to Lithuanian religious groups who were also distributing contraband literature; parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities; and the all-important development of a military wing.<sup>13</sup>

On the matter of military organisation, Lenin found himself digging deep into Engels’s insightful and oft-neglected texts from the 1850s and 1860s, especially after the *Potemkin* revolt. In his texts, Engels showed extraordinary skill in reporting on campaigns, battles and wars (especially the Crimean War and then the Hungarian Revolution), offered assessments of the history of military items such as uniform, the rifle, cavalry and infantry, and argued that the structure of the army was an excellent insight into social relations (Lenin 1906 [1963]-b, 176-7).<sup>14</sup> As for Lenin, he realised that the army and the navy were not neutral, so he urged a consistent

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<sup>13</sup> A sample of such material may be cited here (Lenin 1899 [1960]-b, 1899 [1960]-a, 1902 [1961]-d, 1902 [1961]-a, 1902 [1961]-b, 1904 [1961]-c; 1905 [1962]-b, 125-31; 1905 [1965]-e, 1905 [1964]-a, 1905 [1964]-c, 1906 [1962]-b, 1906 [1962]-c, 1908 [1963]-d; 1906 [1963]-a, 125-6; 1907 [1962]-c, 1907 [1962]-f, 1907 [1962]-b, 1907 [1962]-e, 1907 [1962]-a, 1907 [1962]-d, 1907 [1964]-m, 1907 [1964]-e, 1907 [1964]-i, 1907 [1964]-k, 1907 [1964]-l, 1907 [1964]-c, 1907 [1964]-j, 1911 [1963]-b, 1911 [1963]-a, 1911 [1963]-c, 1907 [1963]-e).

<sup>14</sup> Engels’s works, gathered in volume 11 of MECW onwards (with less in MEW 11), cover the European revolutions of 1848–9, the Crimean War, the Franco–German war, the Indian uprising against the British and so on. Many also appear MECW 18, including articles on topics such as ‘Attack’, ‘Bayonet’, ‘Army’, ‘Bivouac’ and many more for *The New American Cyclopaedia*. Most importantly for Lenin, Engels also wrote extensively on the relations between social relations and the nature of the army, especially how the nature of the military is a good indicator of the nature of social relations. He argued for a militia as the best form for communist society, argued for the vital role of guerrilla warfare and even saw the value of the clergy becoming involved in such militias (Engels 1870 [1986], 198-200).

campaign to build up the Red detachments, which would then stand over against the ‘Black’ detachments in the crucial moment of revolution (Lenin 1905 [1966]-a, 465).<sup>15</sup> Further, the role of the Red Army after the revolution was to support a revolutionary government, which Lenin saw as the other side of the same coin: both revolutionary government and Red Army would ensure the continuity of the communist government and thereby the freedom of the masses (Lenin 1905 [1962]-b, 99; 1905 [1963]-e, 568; 1905 [1966]-b, 26).

But let us return to those militant cells within the socialist movement, in order to make two pertinent points. First, they provided the seeds of what would become the full, post-revolutionary Red Army, specifically in terms of its basic structure. This was drawn from Engels’s argument concerning the relation between the nature of the army and social relations: a properly communist society would have a militia rather than a professional standing army, in which citizens themselves would participate. Thus, for Lenin, the key to building up a military wing of the socialist movement was to train ordinary members in military techniques, tactics and the handling of arms, a wing that would develop into the arming of the proletariat, merge with the Red units in the regular army and then, after the seizure of power, absorb all the institutions of state power.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the process was a smooth one, for at times a chasm opened up between theory and practice. Theoretically, ‘The bomb has ceased to be the weapon of the solitary ‘bomb thrower’, and is becoming an essential weapon of the people (Lenin 1905 [1965]-b, 284). Practically, however, Lenin occasionally found the military preparations hopelessly disorganised: ‘It horrifies me – I give you my word – it horrifies me to find that there has been talk about bombs for over six months, yet not one has been made!’ (Lenin 1905 [1965]-g, 344).

Eventually, the military wing of the movement did grow, especially after the *Potemkin* revolt. But that brings me to the second point, for now Lenin urges the utmost flexibility, mobility and absence of bureaucratic procedures for such groups. But how were such units to work? They may be as few of three or four, but no more than ten, thoroughly mobile, trained in

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<sup>15</sup> The army, especially the St. Petersburg garrison, would become crucial to the success of the October Revolution, as Wade and Cliff make clear (Wade 2005, 231-2; Cliff 2002 [1975], 162-5). And this experience would imprint itself on subsequent communist revolutions. Not only is the army vital for the initial success of the seizure of power, but it is needed for the defence of the new order against the onslaught of those who would seek to bring the new order undone.

<sup>16</sup> What is needed, therefore, are: ‘1) the armed proletariat and peasantry, 2) organised advance detachments of representatives of these classes, and 3) sections of the army that are prepared to come over to the side of the people. It is all this taken together that constitutes a *revolutionary army*’ (Lenin 1905 [1965]-c, , pp. 366-7). See the mature statements in *Letters from Afar* and other works from 1917 (Lenin 1917 [1964]-c, 320-32; 1917 [1965]-e).

the arts of guerrilla warfare, able to respond immediately to a situation, rising on the eve of the struggle, even on the spot where combat is to take place.<sup>17</sup>

They must arrange matters so as to be able to get together at the *most critical moments*, when things may take the *most unexpected turns* ... It must not be forgotten that the chances are 100 to 1 that *events will take us unawares*, and that it will be necessary to come together under terribly difficult conditions ... attacking, *whenever a favourable opportunity* presents itself, policemen, stray Cossacks (as was the case in Moscow), etc., and seizing their arms (Lenin 1905 [1966]-c, 120-1).

In other words, the spontaneous and the unexpected are the key to these units. Here we face the dialectic I have been tracing at a new level, for what he seeks is disciplined training for the unexpected; or, organising for the spontaneous. Even those formulations separate the two elements too much, for the very nature of that organisation is geared towards spontaneity.

And so we return to the realisation on Lenin's part of the necessary tension, for organisation embodies a dialectic of both directing and emerging from an uprising, of both gradual and spontaneous processes. Or, as Lukács observes, organisation should foster rather than restrict the spontaneous revolutionary creativity of the masses (Lukács 1970 [1924], 27). While such direction entails the spread of information, preparation for political action and a revolutionary army, the response that emerges from an uprising requires that one is constantly on the move, perpetually studying and enacting new methods and forms of struggle in light of new conditions and their potential dangers (Lenin 1905 [1965]-f, 250-1; 1917 [1964]-f, 467-8).<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

It is more pleasant and useful to go through the 'experience of revolution' than to write about it (Lenin 1917 [1964]-f, 497).

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<sup>17</sup> 'The nuclei of such organisations should be very small, voluntary units of ten, five, perhaps even three persons ... Less formality, less red tape, more simplicity in organisation, which must be as mobile and as flexible as possible ... No Party organisation will "arm" the masses. On the contrary, the organisation of the masses into light, mobile, small fighting units will, when things begin to move, render a very great service in regard to procuring arms ... People who are well known to each other will form them in advance. People who do not know each other will form squads of five and ten on the day of the fight, or on the eve of the fight, on the spot where fighting takes place, if the idea of forming such units is spread widely among the masses and actually adopted by them' (Lenin 1906 [1963]-a, 126-7; see also Lenin 1906 [1962]-b, 153-4).

<sup>18</sup> Shandro offers an excellent analysis of the workings of this dialectic of spontaneity and organisation in the developments of the soviet during the 1905 revolution (Shandro 2007). While I have gained much from Cliff's study of Lenin, on this matter I disagree with him to some extent. He argues that Lenin 'bent the stick' as far as would go, moving sequentially from a spontaneous, 'economist' position in the 1890s to an absolute emphasis on organisation thereafter (Cliff 2002 [1975], pp. 43-68). The problem with this narrative is that Lenin expresses full awareness of the spontaneous, elemental aspect of revolution after the time Cliff claims that he bent the other way towards organisation. This awareness grew stronger after actual revolutionary experience, especially in 1905 and 1917.

By now it should be clear that miracle is far more than a metaphor for revolution. I have of course deliberately focused on miracle as an alternative approach to the question of revolution, an approach that has sought to listen and engage with a theological ear. And that has enabled me to identify a detailed and intricate range of what it means to call a revolution a miracle. We may sum the results of that listening briefly: in bending transcendence to immanence and emphasising human agency, the miracle becomes the site of a dialectical tension between spontaneity and organisation, so much so that one seeks to organise for the spontaneous, enabling the unexpected, unplanned revolution to be integral to that organisation.

I close with a three points that arise from this recasting of miracle. To begin with, revolutions raise the question of the relation between old and new. On one side, the revolution is seen as a clean break with the past and all that represents that past must be destroyed, the 'evil' must be 'rooted out' so that the new may be constructed (compare the story of the Flood in Genesis 6-9). Thus, the institutions of the old world come down in a thundering crash, the bourgeois dictatorship of the state must be smashed, the Red Army is a development never before seen in its full extent, the soviets are a form of the state never seen before in history, the 'filth' of the old world must be cleansed and the new must be built from scratch. On the other side, the new is never constructed on a tabula rasa, so one must construct the new with the various pieces of preserved and salvaged pieces of the old, thoroughly transforming them in the process. After October, debates raged on precisely this matter, with some arguing strenuously that the revolution exercised an *Aufhebung* on the past, abolishing, preserving and transforming all that was best of the past. Here again we have the interaction characteristic of the miracle in Lenin's thought: is it an absolute and unexpected break, or does it emerge within the known? He moved between both options, at times arguing for a clean revolutionary break with the past (Lenin 1897 [1960], 491-534; 1917 [1964]-f). Yet after October Lenin came out strongly on the other side, reiterating time and again that the new state needed to make the most of the past, even if it seemed counter to common sense: old generals for the sake building the Red Army, bourgeois specialists for constructing industry and modernising technology, even the New Economic Policy with its limited and controlled patterns of market exchange. As Lenin says on one of the many occasions when he addressed this issue: 'We are not utopians who think that socialist Russia must be built up by men of a new type; we must utilise the material we have inherited from the old capitalist world' (Lenin 1919 [1965]-a, 24).<sup>19</sup> In terms of culture and education he was almost too much of a traditionalist, tolerating but looking askance at the futurists and

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<sup>19</sup> Or: 'Socialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalist engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science. It is inconceivable without planned state organisation which keeps tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a unified standard in production and distribution' (Lenin 1921 [1965]-e, 334).

Proletcult. All of which is perhaps best summed up in his comment after listening to Beethoven: 'It makes you proud to be a human being when you hear what human genius can do ... Beauty is necessary' (Lunacharsky 1980, 147, 150).

Further, the outcome of this exploration of revolution-as-miracle is a distinct relativisation of both the political and theological languages that may be deployed. I have not argued that Lenin derives his approach from the absolute source of theology, nor indeed that theology is a poor second to Lenin's politics. Instead, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Boer in press), they should both be seen as languages or codes in which both are relativised, movable from code to code and thereby gaining in richness. In that light, it is possible to say that miracle is one possible theological term for revolution, just as revolution is the political translation of miracle.

Finally, I have indicated at various points throughout my argument that in the mutual translation of revolution and miracle, both terms are enriched in a way that is not restricted to the point of overlap between the theological and political semantic clusters. That is, the elements beyond that initial overlap are now drawn into what is really an enlarged semantic cluster designated by revolution-miracle. At the same time, it must be asked whether any item drops out of this large field, whether something is lost as well as gained. I would suggest that what risks being lost is what may be called the ontological reserve, which is provided by the religious code of the miracle. In that code, 'God' designates what human beings cannot attain, that we always fall short and should not aspire to claim too much for ourselves. However, in dragging transcendence to immanence and locating miracle in the domain of human effort, the risk is that human beings may seek to become gods. And rather than seeking the best for one another, too often human beings, while claiming to be gods, visit pure bastardry on one another. In other words, miracle-as-revolution also needs a robust materialist notion of evil.

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