THE FAMILY BACKGROUND OF V. I. UL’IANOV’S PSEUDONYM, "LENIN"

We are indebted to Leopold Haimson for one of the earliest and best studies of the connections between personality and theory. In his pioneering book, *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*, he showed how individuals of different temperament, social and cultural background, and generational experience contributed to the formation of the doctrinal spectrum of Russian Marxism. Other students of biography, intellectual history, and revolutionary politics have strengthened this tradition, studying the early formation of personality with an eye to later developments.

Psychobiographers scrutinize a variety of data often slighted by others in their search for insight into the growth of the identity or sense of self of their subjects. The study of pseudonyms sometimes yields rich rewards. Robert C. Tucker’s investigation of Stalin’s pseudonym, "Koba," for example, led him to Aleksandr Kazbegi’s novel, *The Parricide*, an important datum for anyone studying Stalin’s revolutionary career and style of political behavior.1 The student of Lenin’s psychology, however, finds only speculation around the origins of the pseudonym, "Lenin." V. I. Ul’ianov first used the pseudonym "lenin" in 1901 for his voluminous article in the December issue of *Zarya* defending the Marxian position on agrarian issues. No one has put forth any reason for his use of the pseudonym at that particular moment in his career, or any cogent speculation about its significance. The authors of the eighth edition of the official biography of Lenin offer only this unsatisfying comment: "From the end of 1901 Vladimir Il’ich began to sign several of his works with the pseudonym Lenin. It is often asked, why did he take that pseudonym. To this question those close to Vladimir Il’ich answered, evidently, it was chosen accidentally, just like the others."2 N. I. Krupskaia’s speculation of 1924 is the likely source of the above position. "Respected comrades! I don’t know why Vladimir Il’ich took the pseudonym "Lenin." I

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never asked him. . . . He wasn't in exile on the Lena River. Probably, he chose the pseudonym accidentally, the way Plekhanov did when he at one point wrote under the pseudonym Volgin. 3

The hypothesis that Lenin followed a common Russian literary practice, one used by his mentor, is perhaps the most durable and oft repeated speculation, but only because no one has presented an attractive alternative. Bertram Wolfe’s effort to find the answer in Lenin’s earlier pseudonym, “Il’in” and the first part of the family name (“Ul’ian”) has little to commend it. 4 Lenin had employed “il’in” for his most important early work on agrarian economics, The Development of Capitalism in Russia (1899). "Il’in" is so obviously derived from his patronymic that we need not, at least for the moment, trouble ourselves with its origin or meaning, but it stretches one’s credulity, and taxes one’s ear, to drive Lenin from some combination of Il’in and Ul’ian. However, The Development of Capitalism in Russia may contain the answer. Oddly enough, in his first major treatise the young exile cited the agronomist S. N. Lenin, a member of the Free Economic Society and an expert on farm machinery. This fact did not escape the notice of I. N. Vol’per, a Soviet author of a study of Lenin’s pseudonyms, 5 yet somehow the idea that Lenin simply borrowed the surname of one of his sources seemed unsatisfying.

One need not dismiss the idea, as Lenin’s biographers have. Perhaps after encountering the surname Lenin filed it away in his mind, just as Trotsky did with his revolutionary pseudonym, which was the surname of the chief warden of the Odessa prison. Like Lev Bronstein, who probably responded to "Trotsky" because it contained the German word, Trotz, meaning defiance or stubbornness, Vladimir Ul’ianov, for reasons that will be examined below, might have noticed that "lenin" contained the word len’, meaning laziness. In each case, the borrower probably found the name appealing because it intersected, in some fashion, with his self-identity. If Lenin had merely borrowed someone else’s surname without investing it with special meaning, it is difficult to explain his reticence about his pseudonym—indeed his active resistance to inquiries about it. 6 Perhaps this is why no biographer has seriously pursued the idea that he simply borrowed the surname of S. N. Lenin, rather than invented "Lenin."

If we believe N. Valentinov, an excellent source on Lenin during 1903-04, Lenin fended off questions about his pseudonym. Valentinov quotes S. I. Gusev, one of Lenin’s earliest followers who tried, but failed to solve the mystery. Gusev allegedly said to Valentinov early in 1904: "... Have you ever thought where Lenin’s pseudonym comes from? Perhaps there was some Lena or Elena? I once asked him why he chose this name and what it meant.

5. Vol’per, Pseudonimy V. I. Lenina, 56.