

The story of Nikolai Bukharin

By Edwin Madunagu

TO study the political career of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin is to study the Russian Socialist Revolution of 1917. Of course, one can say this of at least five other personages, including Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. But the story of Bukharin stands out in tragic and ironic profundity. The recent publication, in English, of an extended philosophical essay which Bukharin wrote in 1937 in his prison cell in Moscow's Lubyanka Prison while awaiting trial and certain execution has, once again, made his story a relevant subject of reflection. This is not only for historical reasons, to set the records straight (as the saying goes), but also for the contemporary political lessons it offers. I would not have embarked on this piece had I not known a similar stories in the political history of Nigeria and Africa, right and left, published and unpublished.

In his last *Political Testament* written between 1922 and early 1923, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution and of the Bolshevik (Communist) Party which led that revolution, the man whom non-Marxist historians, with some justification refer to as the "founder of the Soviet Union", described Nikolai Bukharin as the most brilliant theoretician of the Party. But Lenin added that he did not think that Bukharin understood dialectics and doubted if he ever would. We may ask: How would a man who did not understand dialectics in a Marxist-inspired socialist revolution be considered the most brilliant theoretician by a world-historic genius like Lenin? The apprehension of that contradiction may help contemporaries understand much better, the Russian Revolution, the idealism and passion that inspired it, the movement that led it, and the tragic end of most of its makers, including Bukharin.

Again, Bukharin's father, a teacher of mathematics, while acknowledging the brilliance of his son and his undivided devotion to a popular revolution, described him as "a very unpractical person in daily life". Yet, again, a lady who

met Bukharin in exile around 1913 when he was only 25, testified in an unpublished memoir: "There was in his appearance something of a saint, rather than a rebel or a thinker. The image of Count Myshkin of Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* involuntarily sprang to mind, at least the way the Russian actors tried to portray him. Perhaps this made me detect at once the mainly humanitarian aspect of that unusual man".

Nikolai Bukharin was born in Moscow in the last quarter of 1888. He was thus 18 years younger than Lenin, his "political godfather", and Rosa Luxembourg, with whom he crossed swords in 1924, five years after Luxembourg's martyrdom, on the question of Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital. He was nine years younger than both Joseph Stalin who liquidated him in 1937, and Leon Trotsky who, for reasons that will appear below, held Bukharin in contempt, despite the latter's brilliance. Bukharin was the youngest in the leadership of the Russian Revolution. He had his tertiary education at the University of Moscow and, while still a student, joined the Bolshevik (Communist) faction of the revolutionary movement at the age of 18. He was very active as a youth and was frequently arrested and jailed by the Czarist authorities. In 1911 he went into exile.

Bukharin met Lenin for the first time in Cracow, Poland in 1912. This was the beginning, according to a biographer, "of a long and fruitful collaboration between the two men, even if it was not always without friction". Lenin felt that Bukharin's philosophy was not dialectical enough. After suffering several arrests and deportations in Western Europe, Bukharin finally arrived in New York City where, in collaboration with Leon Trotsky, he edited *Novy Mir* (*New World*), a radical newspaper. He returned to Russia via Japan in March 1917 when the first skirmishes of the revolution

broke out. He was elected a member of the party's Central Committee and candidate member (that is, alternate member) of the Politburo, which was the de facto Executive Committee (or Standing Committee) of the Central Committee. Between 1917 and 1929, Bukharin was editor of the official party newspaper, *Pravda* (*Truth*). He never held a government post throughout his political career. It is important to take note of this.

Lenin died in January 1924 after suffering his third stroke. The struggle for succession, which had been summering since 1922 when Joseph Stalin was made the General Secretary of the party, came violently to the open. A similar thing happened - with similar results - in China in 1976 when Mao Tse-Tung died. Bukharin, the detached theoretician and writer, the "prophet without arms", first allied with the troika of Stalin, Kamanev and Zinoviev against Trotsky.

The troika became avictorious and Bukharin became a full member of the Politburo. When Kamanev and Zinoviev broke with Stalin in 1926, Bukharin continued to support the victorious Stalin. Preoccupied with the task of analysing a gigantic development, a massive social transformation, an over-turning of everything that had existed before, an event that had no parallel or model in history, Bukharin did not see the "practical" and, perhaps, "mundane" battle going on to control and direct this movement of which he was the "most able theoretician".

The main question before the Soviet regime after it had won the long and bitter post-revolution civil war and consolidated its power was the direction in which the economy should move. Bukharin took the position that "the Soviet economy could only advance at the pace dictated by the predominantly peasant sector". As the peas-

ants grew more prosperous, he said, "they would encourage the growth of light industry; this, in turn, would stimulate the development of heavy industry". A counter-position advocated by the defeated faction was based on the theory of "primitive socialist accumulation." This "implied that the non-state sectors of the economy would have to contribute to the development of heavy industry over and above what they would do through the working of the market". Bukharin was quoted as saying that the country would "ride to socialism drawn by the peasants' nag".

The ruling faction led by Stalin supported the "snail's speed" theory of Bukharin and crushed the opposition. But when the theory failed to "deliver the goods", when peasants refused to deliver agricultural products to the market because there were few industrial goods to exchange for them at acceptable prices, Stalin's ruling group abandoned the policy and moved straight to the opposite policy, namely, forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation: a grotesque distortion of the opposition's platform. Stalin then turned against Bukharin, his ally in earlier stages of the battle to control party and state. He was accused of "rightist deviationism". Bukharin, the theoretician, was at that time, that is, about 1929, at the "zenith of his power and influence" occupying the positions of Chairman of the Communist International and Chairman of the Moscow Regional Party Committee.

Bukharin and other members of the "Right Opposition" chose not to fight Stalin's faction openly. They preferred to seek compromises, admitting "mistakes" and "errors" they did not commit. But this did not satisfy his adversaries. He was stripped of most of his positions and in 1929, expelled from the party. He capitulated, and was re-admitted into the party. He was briefly made editor of *Izvestia* (*News*), the

official government newspaper. Bukharin did not see the handwriting on the wall.

The fateful 17th Party Congress was held in 1934. Shortly after this, Stalin embarked on the liquidation of the remaining leaders of the 1917 revolution. In three "spectacular open trials" or "show trials", as many historians call it, in Moscow, "the whole original nucleus of the party, with the exception of Lenin and Stalin, were represented as involved in a fantastic conspiracy to assassinate party leaders (including Lenin who died in 1924), to sabotage industry, to foment peasant uprisings, to spy for foreign powers, to overthrow socialism and to restore capitalism!" On February 27, 1937, Bukharin proceeded to a meeting of the Central Committee. There, he was first ritualistically expelled from the party - for the second time. He was then arrested and charged with treason in the language detailed above.

He was in prison for 13 months, before his "trial" and execution. In prison, he wrote four books. He negotiated to admit to "lesser" crimes, which he did not commit, on the promise by his executioners that these books, as well as his letters from prison, would be published. He also considered the fate of his family. Of course, his executioners did not honour the "agreement". The manuscripts were released 54 years later, in 1991, by Mikhail Gorbachev who, three years earlier, had rehabilitated Bukharin and restored his party membership. But the party and the Soviet Union itself died shortly after.

On March 2, 1938, Bukharin was put on trial, together with two prominent Bolsheviks, Yagoda and Krestinky. After an 11 day "trial", during which Bukharin resolutely denied plotting to assassinate Lenin and conspiring to restore capitalism, the three defendants were found guilty and executed. Bukharin - the able theoretician, the non-dialectical thinker, the saint, the unpractical man - embarked on the tragic "road of no return" not when he reconciled himself with being a "prophet without arms", but when he used his intellect to distort the ideas of Stalin's opponents, thus paving the way for their liquidation. The lesson is a contemporary one.