

## **WEEK 13 INTRODUCTION TO READINGS**

### **V. I. Lenin, excerpts from "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government"**

Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov was born in 1870 in Sembirsk. His father was a successful physics and mathematics teacher who was descended from serfs; his mother was descended from German bourgeois. He took the pen name of Lenin in 1901. From the late 1880s, while a law student at the University of Kazan, Lenin became involved in illegal student groups (in fact, all student groups at the time were illegal) that engaged in revolutionary politics based on Russian radical traditions. From about 1892, he became interested in Marxism. Lenin spent two periods in prison, then lived in exile in Switzerland until 1917.

In February 1917, the Tsar was deposed during the first phase of the Russian Revolution, which emerged from broad-based opposition to the hardships of the First World War in Russia as well as older grievances. In April 1917, Lenin returned to Russia, traveling in a sealed train across Germany (Russia's opponent in the First World War) by special agreement with the German army high command. He immediately became involved in the ongoing revolution, and in November (October by eastern calendar used in Russia) 1917, his party, the Bolsheviks, seized control of the revolution and established the Soviet ("council") state. Lenin withdrew Soviet Russia (which was renamed the "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," USSR, in the 1920s) from the First World War, but the country was soon embroiled in a civil war, which the Bolsheviks won within a couple of years. Lenin was disabled by a series of strokes and died in 1924.

### **Miklós Haraszti, excerpts from A Worker in a Worker's State and "The Culture of Censorship"**

Miklós Haraszti was born in 1945 in Jerusalem, where his parents lived as refugees from Nazism. His parents were Communists who returned to Hungary in 1948. The next year, a state socialist government was established in Hungary and

remained until 1988/1989. As a student in the 1960s, Haraszti organized a group in support of North Vietnam in the Vietnam War. This led to his expulsion from the university at Budapest. He began a series of odd jobs while writing poems and short pieces. In 1968, he was placed under police surveillance on suspicion of Maoist sympathies. He continued to write satirical and other critical pieces, and he was arrested in 1970 and placed again under police surveillance. During this time he took a job at the Red Star Tractor Factory, which he describes in A Worker in a Worker's State. He argued that, while capitalism did not exist in Hungary, neither did socialism. When he and colleagues petitioned against their police surveillance, he was arrested again in 1971 and went on a hunger strike. After his release, he finished the manuscript to A Worker and obtained its acceptance at a leading social science journal in Hungary. The editor of the journal lost his job, and Haraszti was arrested in 1973 for incitement against the state. He was jailed, went again on a hunger strike, and given a suspended sentence and fine. He remained a dissident, publishing his writings and editing Beszélő, an opposition journal, as samizdat ("self-publication," or underground press).

## **WEEK 13 QUESTIONS**

### **V. I. Lenin, excerpts from "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government" (1918)**

1. What is the problem or problem(s) facing the new state of Soviet Russia, according to Lenin?
2. What solutions does he propose?
3. How would these solutions seem to violate socialist and communist principles?
4. How does Lenin argue that his solutions are consonant with the principles of Soviet communism?

**Miklós Haraszti, excerpts from A Worker in a Worker's State (first published in German 1975; this English translation 1977)**

5. What is a "piece rate"?

6. On the basis of Haraszti's text, describe how decisions are made about how high the rates should be and what supplementary wages should be paid.

7. According to Haraszti, how does the piece rate system cheat the worker?

8. Last spring, the New York Times reported about a factory in Ohio that operates on piece rates and merit pay.<sup>1</sup> The article profiled a worker there who has worked weekends, holidays, and overtime at an exceptionally high pace and high quality for years. His annual salary exceeds \$100,000. Do you think that the Ohio factory and the experience of that worker would convince Haraszti that the piece rate system is not necessarily bad? Why or why not?

**Miklós Haraszti, "The Culture of Censorship," in The Velvet Prison (first published in French 1983; this English translation 1987)**

9. What is the role of the arts under state socialism, according to Haraszti?

10. How is censorship exercised under state socialism, according to Haraszti?

11. How does the situation of artists and censorship differ under capitalism, according to Haraszti?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Passell, "Earning It: Royal Blue Collars," New York Times, 22 March 1998. This article can be retrieved at no cost from the Lexis-Nexis database on the MIT Libraries website (Resources -> Databases -> Lexis-Nexis).

