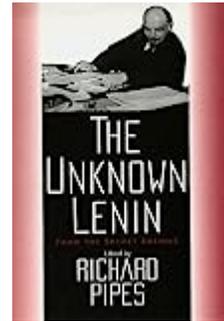




Richard Pipes. *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. xx + 204 pp.p. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06919-8.



Reviewed by Henry Reichman

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 1997)

R. Pipes (Hg.): *The Unknown Lenin*

'The Unknown Lenin' might better be titled "the well-known Richard Pipes." The book contains 113 previously unpublished documents attributed to Lenin, mostly brief memoranda and telegrams, or on which the Soviet leader penned marginal jottings, or, in a few cases (e.g., Lenin's 1886 Patent of Nobility), simply materials, largely ephemeral, concerning Lenin. Nine additional documents, mostly telegrams to Lenin by other Bolsheviks, are included in an appendix. Only a handful of the materials, encompassing altogether perhaps thirty or thirty-five pages of the text, can reasonably be considered substantive. In a significant number of items Lenin's only contributions are often cryptic marginalia, sometimes simply the notation "into the archive." A few documents are merely trivial, including an order for medications from the Kremlin pharmacy. With the major exception of one important and revealing text of a speech on the 1920 Polish war, virtually the entire substance of the book lies in editor Richard Pipes's tendentious introduction and interpretive commentary and notes, which imply if not argue that these newly released materials must alter previously indulgent (if not favorable) views of Lenin. Since Pipes has spent nearly half a century berat-

ing the Soviet founder as the evil genius of our century, the book is hardly a surprise.

It is hard to imagine that much documentary material by or about Lenin had not already been published by his Soviet successors, if not in the five editions of his 'Collected Works', the last of which numbered 55 volumes and included more than 3,000 publications and documents, then in the long run of 'Leninskii Sbornik', a pedantic and largely inconsequential journal of Leninitiana. Nonetheless, some Lenin materials (although apparently no true "works") were withheld from publication because either in tone or substance they tended to show the founding Communist in a harsh light or, apparently, because they were deemed too revealing of foreign policy formation. Whether these brief materials, which in English translation here cover in toto just slightly more than half the book's 204 pages, are adequate to prompt even a minor reassessment is, at the least, problematic. Pipes acknowledges that "it would be naive, of course, to expect [these documents] to alter in some fundamental way our perception of Lenin's personality or his politics." However, they do, he continues, "cast fresh light on Lenin's

motives, attitudes, and expectations” (6). Pipes claims that these materials reveal Lenin to be “a heartless cynic, who in many ways provided a model for Stalin” (1), and “a thoroughgoing misanthrope” (11) with a “policeman’s mentality” (12), who “for humankind at large . . . had nothing but scorn” (10).

Taken as a whole, the documents show no such thing. The brutal rhetoric found here, especially in some Civil War-era telegrams, certainly reconfirms Lenin’s ruthlessness, but this has hardly been hidden, even by Soviet censors. Even when read in isolation the documents do not prove, nor sometimes simply suggest, all that Pipes implies they do. A few cases of inflated and blood-thirsty rhetoric in the midst of an extraordinarily brutal civil war, some anti-clerical rantings by a professed and passionate atheist, and pompous self-deluding declarations of faith in world revolution do not prove that Lenin pursued violence for its own sake, sought to annihilate believers, or, in Pipes’s most outrageous charge, plotted “the invasion of Germany and England” (7). Taken out of the context of Lenin’s enormous oeuvre and divorced from his life and work, these materials do little more than provide additional illustrations (and by no means the most interesting or revealing ones) of the Soviet founder’s distinctive and remarkable combination of stubborn dogmatism with tactical flexibility verging on opportunism, cemented, to be sure, by a certain cold-blooded utilitarian idealism. Pipes, it seems, confronts these hitherto secret materials like a Vichy policeman who finds gambling at Rick’s Place. He is “shocked!”

Here and there, of course, the documents do add to our knowledge of Lenin’s career and early Soviet history. Two documents suggest that Allied landings in Murmansk in early 1918, which began over foreign military involvement in the Russian Civil War, were approved by Lenin and Stalin. That the Bolsheviks received German money even after 1917 is apparently confirmed in a note from August 1918: “The Berliners will send some more money: if the scum delay, complain to me formally” (53). Several documents shed additional light on Soviet intentions and plans for the 1922 Genoa Conference, although it is by no means clear that these show how “Lenin deliberately set himself to ‘wreck’ Genoa even before the conference had even convened” (6), as Pipes overconfidently declares.

Additional materials add support to interpretations already held by most historians on the basis of other, and often better, evidence. Transfer of the legacy of the Bolshevik sympathizer N. P. Shmit through the false mar-

riages of his sisters to Bolshevik activists, which stirred a ruckus with the Mensheviks and in the International, is documented, although nothing new is added to our knowledge of this affair. Lenin’s intimate relationship with Inessa Armand is hinted at in four letters from 1914 and four others from late 1916 and 1917. His peculiar tolerance of the tsarist agent and Bolshevik Duma deputy Roman Malinovsky is shown to have continued well into 1917. Several notes, letters and telegrams to other Bolshevik leaders suggest that Lenin did not hold many of his comrades in the highest regard, although these are far from indicating even signals of the kind of paranoid megalomania associated with the behavior toward subordinates of Stalin and Mao in their later years. Indeed, one genuinely interesting revelation is how much Lenin concerned himself with the health of his fellow revolutionaries, often ordering scrupulous obedience to doctors’ orders as well as rest stays in dachas and spas. Other documents suggest that, as most historians have already come to see, Stalin played a greater role and was closer politically to Lenin than early historians and most contemporaries acknowledged.

Pipes’s commentary occasionally misinterprets or often unjustifiably infers too much from specific documents. Lenin begins a letter to Armand in July 1914: “Best greetings for the commencing revolution in Russia.” According to Pipes, this “reveals that Lenin saw the outbreak of the First World War as inevitably leading to a revolution in Russia” (27). Perhaps. It is equally if not more likely, however, that Lenin’s confidence stemmed from that month’s general strike and street fighting in St. Petersburg and accompanying Bolshevik gains in the trade union movement, if it was not simply a formal declaration of standard revolutionary optimism. Pipes produces a four-page memorandum by Trotsky from October 1919 criticizing a Central Committee decision on military operations against the White general Denikin. Lenin’s sole contribution to this document, one of the longer ones in the book, is a brief appendage: “Received 1 October. Lenin: (nothing but bad nerves; [the issue] was not raised at the plenum; it is strange to raise it now.”(73) From this notation alone Pipes somehow concludes that “Lenin’s cavalier dismissal of his advice indicates that he did not hold Trotsky’s military abilities in high esteem” (70), a possibility, to be sure, but certainly a highly exaggerated and unjustified inference from such spare evidence.

And then there is the letter to foreign commissar Chicherin of August 1921 in which Lenin urges collaboration with “those Germans who want to overturn the Ver-

sailles peace" (132). Here is Pipes's interpretation: "The letter makes explicit Soviet Russia's policy of secretly collaborating with those elements in Germany which wanted to 'overturn the Versailles treaty,' that is, the Nazis and other nationalists" (131). The document, of course, makes no mention at all of the Nazis, who were then an infant sect probably unknown to Soviet diplomats, much less to Lenin. Indeed, no mention is made of any extragovernmental nationalist grouping, including not only the Nazis but the then far more numerous and influential Freikorps. What is articulated here is an example of Lenin's well-known strategy, given full implementation at Rapallo in 1922, of playing the imperialist blocs against each other. Elsewhere Pipes writes that "the Soviet strategy of destroying the Versailles treaty by forming an alliance with right-wing German elements . . . was consummated two decades later in the Hitler-Stalin pact" (95). This crude attempt to lay responsibility for 1939 on Lenin would be laughable if it were not such a clear example of biased scholarship.

Perhaps the most egregious example of how Pipes reads into documents conclusions that they do not necessarily support, is his contention that Lenin denied requests to intervene against anti-Semitic pogroms perpetrated by the Red Army on its retreat from Poland. On October 1, 1920, the Jewish Section (Evseksiia) of the Central Committee reported such attacks by units of the First Cavalry Army. The report, included by Pipes (116-17), was forwarded to the Central Committee eighteen days later and to Lenin in mid-November. Lenin's only contribution to this document was to scrawl on it "into the archive," which Pipes construes to mean "that no action was to be taken" (10). One wonders, however, what action Lenin could have taken six weeks after the fact. Moreover, the significance of the notation "into the archive" is hardly clear. Indeed, elsewhere Pipes reproduces a note from Trotsky with Lenin's "into the archive" annotation (136) as evidence of action that WAS taken by Lenin. There are several other examples as well of documents marked "into the archive" by Lenin which Pipes uses to illustrate how Lenin concerned himself with the issues they addressed. [Lenin's November 1919 draft theses concerning policy in the Ukraine, however, are another matter. Here Lenin proposes to "treat the Jews and urban inhabitants in the Ukraine with an iron rod, transferring them to the front, not letting them into government agencies. . ." (77). This certainly evidences at least a pandering to the presumed anti-Semitism of the Ukraininian masses, although not necessarily blatant anti-Semitism of Lenin's own.]

One document in the collection surely does highlight the calculating brutality that emerged in Lenin, especially in the wake of the Civil War. In a March 1922 letter to Molotov on policy toward the church, Lenin writes: "It is precisely now and only now, when in the starving regions people are eating human flesh, and hundreds if not thousands of corpses are littering the roads, that we can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of church valuables with the most savage and merciless energy, not stopping [short of] crushing any resistance. It is precisely now and only now that the enorous majority of the peasant mass will be for us or at any rate will not be in a condition to support in any decisive way that handful of Black Hundred clergy and reactionary urban petty bourgeoisie who can and want to attempt a policy of violent resistance to the Soviet clergy. We must, come what may, carry out the confiscation of church valuables in the most decisive and rapid manner, so as to secure for ourselves a fund of several hundred million gold rubles (one must recall the gigantic wealth of some of the monasteries and abbeys). Without this fund, no government work in general, no economic construction in particular, and no defense of our position in Genoa especially is even conceivable. . . . All considerations indicate that later we will be unable to do this, because no other moment except that of desperate hunger will give us a mood among the broad peasant masses that will guarantee us the sympathy of these masses or at least their neutrality." (152-53)

This document, with its chilling rhetoric, is not new, however. As Pipes acknowledges, it was smuggled out of the Central Party Archive in the late 1960s and published in 1970 in Paris. Its republication in the official 'Izvestiia TsK' in 1990, however, dispelled skepticism about its authenticity. More important, it cannot stand on its own as evidence of Bolshevik policy toward the church or even of Lenin's own views. These were much more complex than this collection or Pipes's explanatory material will admit. Moreover, it certainly cannot be said to evidence a POLICY of callous disregard for famine victims, since it is contemporaneous with Soviet efforts to involve both Russians and foreigners in relief efforts.

Surely the most useful materials concern the 1920 war with Poland, although Pipes's contention that some documents indicate that the Soviets planned an invasion even before they were attacked by Pilsudski's forces cannot be supported by the extremely thin and murky references offered as evidence. In particular, the stenographic record of a speech delivered by Lenin to the Ninth Conference of the Communist Party in September 1920, which as the longest document in the collection

occupies twenty pages, is of special interest. It provides crucial insights into Soviet foreign policy and the attitudes toward world revolution of the Bolshevik leadership; both diplomatic historians and students of Leninism will find it indispensable. Again, however, Pipes draws unfounded and extreme conclusions.

To be sure, several documents show that Lenin's optimism about the potential for revolution in the West was stronger and lasted longer than many have believed. But Pipes's contention that Lenin's speech "indicates that the invasion of Poland had as its objective not only the sovietization of that country but also an immediate advance on Germany and possibly England" (94) is totally unsupported by the text. Certainly Lenin tells his listeners that the advance on Warsaw was linked to rising hopes of proletarian upheaval in Europe, including Germany and England as well as Poland, but that is quite a different matter from planning an invasion, and certainly not of England, to which there is absolutely no conceivable reference. Lenin was undoubtedly a fanatic, but there is no evidence here or elsewhere that he was a madman. Indeed, he was very much the realist; the thrust of the speech was to acknowledge "the main and dismal point," which was "that a mistake has undoubtedly been committed" (106).

The speech also includes a valuable discussion of the Communist attitude toward the Versailles system. As previously noted, Pipes emphasizes Lenin's recognition that German nationalists and Soviet Communists could

make common cause against the peace treaty, and he contends that this portended future developments in Soviet policy, not simply Rapallo but 1939 as well. Lenin's discussion of the "unnatural characteristic bloc" (102) between right-wing German patriots (he calls them German Kornilovites) and Bolsheviks emphasized, however, the temporary and strictly informal nature of the alliance, warning clearly: "If you form a bloc with the German Kornilovites, they will dupe you" (103).

One could cite numerous additional examples of largely irrelevant documents and tendentious editing, but I have already spilled too much (cyber)ink on a book about which one wonders why it needed to be published. Those few documents, such as the speech to the Ninth Conference, that genuinely reveal new information could well have appeared in journals, since they will mainly be of use to scholars. The remaining materials simply reinforce common interpretations and impressions of Lenin's politics and character. Clearly, the book's editor had a purpose of his own. In an acknowledgement at the opening of the volume, Yury A. Buranov of the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History, which furnished Pipes with the documents, emphasizes: "The interpretation of the materials is a matter of the creative and scholarly assessment on the part of the American editor." It is this interpretation that in the end holds the book together – and it is this interpretation that makes the book a one-sided example of how NOT to read documents.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Henry Reichman. Review of Pipes, Richard, *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=16127>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.