

from Richard Pipes, *Reflections on the Russian Revolution*

(Richard Pipes is the dean of Western historians of the Russian Revolution. and is currently professor emeritus of History. He was born in Poland of a Jewish family, and escaped to the United States in 1939 following the invasion of Poland by the Nazis. He served in World War II before earning his doctorate at Harvard. During the 1970s, he acted as an adviser to President Ronald Reagan.)

- I. “The historian’s problem, rather, is that the Russian Revolution, being part of our own time, is difficult to deal with dispassionately. The Soviet Government, which controls the bulk of the source materials and dominates the historiography, derives its legitimacy from the Revolution and wants it treated in a manner supportive of its claims. By single-handedly shaping the image of the Revolution over decades it has succeeded in determining not only how the events are treated but which of them are treated. Among the many subjects that it has confined to historiographic limbo are the role of the liberals in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions; the conspiratorial manner in which the Bolsheviks seized power in October; the overwhelming rejection of Bolshevik rule half a year after it had come into being, by all classes, including the workers; Communist relations with Imperial Germany in 1917-1918; the military campaign of 1918 against the Russian village; and the famine of 1921, which claimed the lives of over five million people. . . . (Xxiii)
- II. “. . . the history of modern revolutions cannot be value-free The reason is not far to seek. Post-1789 revolutions have raised the most fundamental ethical questions: whether it is proper to destroy institutions built over centuries by trial and error, for the sake of ideal systems; whether one has the right to sacrifice the well-being and even the lives of one’s own generation for the sake of generations yet unborn; whether man can be refashioned into a perfectly virtuous being. . . . (Xxiii)
- III. “This being the case, scholarship requires the historian to treat critically his sources and to render honestly the information he obtains from them. It does not call for ethical nihilism, that is, accepting that whatever happened had to happen and hence is beyond good and evil. . . . (Xxiii)
- IV. “The Russian Revolution was made neither by the forces of nature nor by anonymous masses but by identifiable men pursuing their own advantages. Although it had spontaneous effects, in the main it was the result of deliberate action. As such it is very properly subject to value judgement.” (xxiv)
- V. “The failure of Communism, which since 1991 is no longer in dispute, having been conceded even by the leaders of the former Soviet Union, is often blamed on human beings’ falling short of its lofty ideals. Even if the endeavor failed, apologists say, its aspirations were noble and the attempt worthwhile. . . . But how great was an endeavor so at odds with ordinary human desires that to pursue it, recourse had to be had to the most inhuman of methods? (500)
- VI. “The Communist experiment is often labeled ‘utopian.’ . . . Lenin himself was forced to admit toward the end of this life that the Bolsheviks, too, were guilty of ignoring the

- cultural realities of Russia and its unpreparedness for the economic and social order that they tried to impose on it. The Bolsheviks ceased to be utopians when, once it had become obvious the ideal was unattainable, they persisted in the attempt with resort to unrestrained violence. Utopian communities always postulated the concurrence of their members in the task of creating a 'cooperative commonwealth.' The Bolsheviks, by contrast, not only did not care to obtain such concurrence, but dismissed as 'counterrevolutionary' every manifestation of individual or group initiative. . . . they should be regarded not as utopians but as fanatics: since they refused to admit defeat even after it stared them in the face, they satisfied Santayana's definition of fanaticism as redoubling one's efforts after forgetting one's aim. (500)
- VII. ". . . The Darwinian theory of natural selection was promptly translated into a social philosophy in which uncompromising conflict occupied a central place. No one embraced this philosophy more enthusiastically than the Bolsheviks: 'Merciless' violence, violence that strove for the destruction of every actual and potential opponent, was for Lenin not only the most effective, but the only way of dealing with problems. (500)
- VIII. "Russian nationalists depict Communism as alien to Russian culture and tradition. . . . The notion . . . cannot withstand the slightest examination. . . . Undeniably, the *theories* underpinning Bolshevism, notably those of Karl Marx, were of Western origin. But it is equally undeniable that Bolshevik *practices* were indigenous, for nowhere in the West has Marxism led to the totalitarian excesses of Leninism-Stalinism. In Russia, and subsequently in Third World countries with similar traditions, Marxism fell on a soil devoid of traditions of self-rule, observance of law, and respect for private property. (501)
- IX. "Important as ideology was, however, its role in the shaping of Communist Russia must not be exaggerated. . . . When . . . ideas are used not so much to direct one's personal conduct as to justify one's domination over others, . . . it is not possible to determine whether such persuasion or force serves ideas or, on the contrary, ideas serve to secure or legitimize such domination. In the case of the Bolsheviks, there are strong grounds for maintaining the latter to be the case, because they distorted Marxism in every conceivable way, first to gain political power and then to hold on to it. If Marxism means anything, it means two propositions: that as capitalist society matures it is doomed to collapse from inner contradictions, and that this collapse ('revolution') is effected by industrial labor ('the proletariat'). A regime motivated by Marxist theory would at a minimum adhere to these two principles. What do we see in Soviet Russia? A "socialist revolution" carried out in an economically underdeveloped country in which capitalism was still in its infancy, and power taken by a party committed to the view that the working class left to its own devices is unrevolutionary. Subsequently, at every stage of its history, the Communist regime in Russia did whatever it had to do to beat off challengers, without regard to Marxist doctrine, even as it cloaked its actions with Marxist slogans. Lenin succeeded precisely because he was free of the Marxist scruples that inhibited the Mensheviks. . . . As a rule, the less one knows about the actual course of the Russian Revolution the more inclined one is to attribute a dominant influence of Marxist ideas.

- (501-2)
- X. “. . . contemporary Russian nationalists and many liberals are at one in denying links between tsarist and Communist Russia. The former refuse to acknowledge the connection because it would make Russia responsible for her own misfortunes, which they prefer to blame on foreigners, especially Jews. In this they resemble German conservatives who depict Nazism as a general European phenomenon. (502)
- XI. “. . . Liberal and radical intellectuals--not so much in Russia as abroad--similarly deny affinities between Communism and tsarism because that would make the whole Revolution a costly and meaningless blunder. (502)
- XII. “. . . The affinities between the regime of Lenin and traditional Russia were noticed by more than one contemporary. . . . To analyze the continuities between the two systems we shall have reference to the concept of patrimonialism, . . . Tsarist patrimonialism rested on four pillars: one, autocracy, that is, personal rule unconstrained by either constitution or representative bodies; two, the autocrat's ownership of the country's resources, which is to say, the virtual absence of private property; three, the autocrat's right to demand unlimited services from his subjects, resulting in the lack of either collective or individual rights; and four, state control of information. A comparison of tsarist rule at its zenith with the Communists regime as it looked by the time of Lenin's death reveals unmistakable affinities. . . . Lenin from the first day in office instinctively followed this model (502-4)
- XIII. “. . . the Soviet ruler claimed title to the country's productive and income-producing wealth. (504)
- XIV. “. . . He also owned its people. The Bolsheviks reinstated obligatory state service, one of the distinguishing features of Muscovite absolutism. . . . The Bolsheviks promptly revived the Muscovite practice, unknown in any other country, of requiring every citizen to work for the state: the so-called 'universal labor obligation' introduced in January 1918 and enforced, according to Lenin's instructions, by the threat of execution, would have been perfectly understandable to a seventeenth-century Russian. In regard to peasants, the Bolsheviks revived also the practice of *tiaglo*, or forced labor, such as lumbering and carting, for which they received no compensation. As in seventeenth Russia, no inhabitant was allowed to leave the country without permission. (504)
- XV. The Communist bureaucracy, both that employed by the party and that by the state, quite naturally slipped into the ways of its tsarist predecessor. A service class with duties and privileges but no inherent rights, it constituted a closed and minutely graded caste accountable exclusively to its superiors. Like the tsarist bureaucracy, it stood above the law. It also operated without *glasnost*, that is outside public scrutiny. For Communist officials, advancement to the highest rank was rewarded with inclusion in the rolls of the *nomenklatura*, which carried entitlements beyond the reach of ordinary servitors, not to speak of the common people--the Communist equivalent of a service nobility. (504-5)
- XVI. “. . . The security police was another important organization that the Bolsheviks adopted from tsarism, since they had no other prototype for what became a central institution of totalitarianism. . . . The Cheka and its successors assimilated the practices of the tsarist

- state police to such an extent that as late as the 1980s, the KGB distributed to its staff manuals prepared by the Okhrana nearly a century earlier. (505)
- XVII. “. . . Finally, as concerns censorship. . . .The Bolsheviks reinstituted the most oppressive tsarist practices, shutting down every publication that did not support the regime, and subjecting all forms of intellectual and artistic expression to preventive censorship. They also nationalized all publishing enterprises. (505-6)
- XVIII. “. . . Once [the Bolsheviks] rejected democracy--and this they did conclusively in January 1918 by dispersing the Constituent Assembly--they had no choice but to govern autocratically. (506)
- XIX. “. . . One of the most controversial issues arising from the Russian Revolution is the relationship of Leninism to Stalinism--in other words, Lenin's responsibility for Stalin. Western Communists, fellow-travelers, and sympathizers deny any link between the two Communist leaders, insisting that Stalin not only did not continue Lenin's work but subverted it. . . . Curiously, the same people who depict Lenin's rise to power as inevitable abandon their philosophy of history when they came to Stalin, whom they represent as a historic aberration. They have been unable to explain how and why history should have taken a thirty-year detour from its allegedly predetermined course. An examination of Stalin's career reveals that he did not seize power after Lenin's death, but ascended to it, step by step. . . . There is no indication that [Lenin] saw Stalin as a traitor to his brand of Communism. (506-7)
- XX. But even the one difference between the two men--that Lenin did not kill fellow-Communists and Stalin did so on a massive scale--is not as significant as may appear at first sight. Toward outsiders, people not belonging to his order of the elect . . . Lenin showed no human feelings whatever. . . . A high Cheka official, I. S. Unshlikht, in his tender recollections of Lenin written in 1934, stressed with unconcealed pride how Lenin 'mercilessly made short shrift of philistine party members who complained of the mercilessness of the Cheka, how he laughed at and mocked the "humanness" of the capitalist world.' The difference in the two men lay in the conception of the 'outsider.' Lenin's insiders were to Stalin outsiders, people who owed loyalty not to him but to the Party's founder and who competed with him for power; and toward them, he showed the same inhuman cruelty that Lenin had employed against his enemies. ((507-8)
- XXI. “. . . Every ingredient of what has come to be known as Stalinism save one--murdering fellow Communists--he had learned from Lenin, and that includes the two actions for which he is most severely condemned: collectivization and mass terror. (508)
- XXII. “. . . By throttling democratic impulses in the Party in order to protect his dictatorship, and by imposing on the Party a top-heavy command structure, Lenin ensured that the man who controlled the central party apparatus controlled the Party, and through it, the state. And that man was Stalin. (508)
- XXIII. “The Revolution inflicted on Russia staggering human losses. The statistics are so shocking that they inevitably give rise to doubts. But . . . the historian is compelled to accept them, the more so that they are shared alike by Communist and non-Communist demographers. The following table indicates the population of the Soviet Union within

the borders of 1926 (in millions)

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|------------|-------|
| Fall 1917 | 147.6 |
| Early 1920 | 140.6 |
| Early 1921 | 136.8 |
| Early 1922 | 134.9 |

- XXIV. “The decrease--12.7 million--was due to deaths from combat and epidemics (approximately 2 million each); emigration (about 2 million); and famine (over 5 million). But these figures tell only half the story, since, obviously, the population would not have remained stationary but grown. Projections by Russian statisticians indicate that in 1922 the population should have numbered more than 160 million rather than 135 million. If this figure is taken into account, and the number of émigrés is deducted, the human casualties of the Revolution in Russia--actual and due to the deficit in births--rise to over 23 million. (508-9)
- XXV. Can one--should one--view such an unprecedented calamity with dispassion? So great is the prestige of science in our time that not a few contemporary scholars have adopted, along with scientific methods of investigation, the scientists’ habit of moral and emotional detachment, the habit of treating all phenomena as ‘natural’ and therefore ethically neutral. They are loath to allow for human volition in historical events because free will, being unpredictable, eludes scientific analysis. Historical ‘inevitability’ is for them what the laws of nature are to the scientist. But it has long been known that the objects of science and the object of history are vastly different. . . . for the historian the decisions have already been made by others, and detachment adds nothing to understanding. (509)
- XXVI. “. . . Aristotle said . . . ‘For those who are not angry at things they should be angry at are deemed fools.’ The assembling of the relevant facts must certainly be carried out dispassionately, without either anger or enthusiasm: this aspect of the historian’s craft is no different from the scientist’s. But this is only the beginning of the historian’s task, because the sorting of these facts--the decision as to which are ‘relevant’--requires judgement, and judgment rests on values. Facts as such are meaningless, since they furnish no guide to their selection, ordering and emphasis: to ‘make sense’ of the past, the historian must follow some principle. He usually does have it: even the most ‘scientific’ historians, consciously or not, operate from preconceptions. As a rule, these are rooted in economic determinism because economic and social data lend themselves to statistical demonstration, which creates the illusion of impartiality. The refusal to pass judgment on historical events rests on moral values, too, namely the silent premise that whatever occurs is natural and therefore right: it amounts to an apology of those who happen to win out. (509-10)
- XXVII. “Judged in terms of its own aspirations, the Communist regime was a monumental failure: it succeeded in one thing only--staying in power. . . . The Bolsheviks made

no secret of their aims: toppling everywhere regimes based on private property and replacing them with a worldwide union of socialist societies. They succeeded nowhere outside the boundaries of what had been the Russian Empire in spreading their regime until the end of World War II. (510)

XXVIII. “. . . Once it had proven impossible to export Communism, the Bolsheviks in the 1920s dedicated themselves to constructing a socialist society at home. This endeavor failed as well. Lenin had expected through a combination of expropriations and terror to transform his country in a matter of months into the world’s leading economic power: instead he ruined the economy he had inherited. He had expected the Communist Party to provide disciplined leadership to the nation: instead, he saw political dissent, which he had muzzled in the country at large, resurface in his own party. As the workers turned their backs on the Communists and the peasants rebelled, staying in power required unremitting resort to police measures. The regimes freedom of action was increasingly impeded by a bloated and corrupt bureaucracy. The voluntary union of nations turned into an oppressive empire. (510)

XXIX. “. . . Failure was inevitable and imbedded in the very premises of the Communist regime. Bolshevism was the most audacious attempt in history to subject the entire life of a country to a master plan, to rationalize everybody and everything. It sought to sweep aside as useless rubbish the wisdom that mankind had accumulated over millennia. In that sense, it was a unique effort to apply science to human affairs; and it was pursued with the zeal characteristic of that breed of intellectuals who regard resistance to their ideas as proof that they are sound. Communism failed because it proceeded from the erroneous doctrine of the Enlightenment, perhaps the most pernicious idea in the history of thought, that man is merely a material compound, devoid of either soul or innate ideas, and as such a passive product of an infinitely malleable social environment. This doctrine made it possible for people with personal frustrations to project them onto society and attempt to resolve them there rather than in themselves. As experience has confirmed time and again, man is not an inanimate object but a creature with his own aspirations and will--not a mechanical but a biological entity. (511)

XXX. “. . . In addition to demonstrating the inapplicability of scientific methods to the conduct of human affairs, the Russian Revolution has raised the profoundest moral questions about the nature of politics, namely the right of governments to try to remake human beings and refashion society without their mandate and even against their will: the legitimacy of the early Communist slogan, ‘We will drive mankind to happiness by force!’ . . . It runs contrary to the morally superior as well as more realistic principle of Kant’s that man must never be used as merely means for the ends of others, but must always be regarded also as an end in himself. Seen from this vantage point, the excesses of the Bolsheviks, their readiness to sacrifice countless lives for their own purposes, were a monstrous violation of both ethics and common sense. They ignored that the means--the well-being and even the lives of people--are very real, whereas the ends are always nebulous and often unattainable. The moral principle that applies in this case has been

formulated by Karl Popper: 'Everyone has the right to sacrifice himself for a cause he deems deserving. No one has the right to sacrifice others or to incite others to sacrifice themselves for an ideal.' “ (512)

XXXI. “. . . The tragic and sordid history of the Russian Revolution --such as it really was, not as it appears to the imagination of those foreign intellectuals for whom it was a noble attempt to elevate mankind--teaches that political authority must never be employed for ideological ends. It is best to let people be.” (512)