

On the trail of Lenin

Catherine Merridale, author of *Lenin on the Train*, describes how she re-enacted his momentous journey of 1917



Catherine Merridale has held a series of posts at British universities, including Cambridge, Bristol and London, before becoming a full-time writer in 2014; she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2016.

'You are on the trail of Lenin?' The uniformed concierge looked puzzled as she scanned my notepad and the pile of cameras. 'You mean John Lennon?' It was an answer that I had learned to anticipate, but coming from the lips of a woman with a Russian accent it was still a bit of a surprise. The Russia that I used to know was piled with Lenins. When I first went there in the 1980s, every schoolroom had its Lenin bust, every office its portrait and every town its massive, dowdy looking statue. But Lenins like those are firmly out of fashion now. The leader's corpse may still be on display inside the mausoleum under Mr Putin's office window, but Stalin is the man for Russians now. They like their heroes glamorous and dressed in shiny boots. That dreary Uncle Lenin

never led his country in a war, and these days his beloved ideology is not even a joke.

I've grown quite used to Lenin dead. But all the same I'd like to find out more about the version who was very much alive. What's more, I'd like to put him back in our collective history. There is a tendency to think of Russia as a place apart, but its story is bound to all of ours; Lenin's revolution was itself designed and planned in Europe's heart.

With those priorities in mind, I set off on an eight-day dash on continental railways. The idea was to recreate the journey Lenin made in April 1917 when he returned to Russia on his famous sealed train. I planned to follow his exact schedule, to track his route, and like an old-world spy I would look for his spoor. I set out on 9 April from his narrow street in the old quarter of Zurich. From there, my walk took me past the Public Library where Lenin liked to work, a grand stone palace that proclaims the virtues of meticulous research. A little further on, across the river, Zurich's central station is a relic of the same

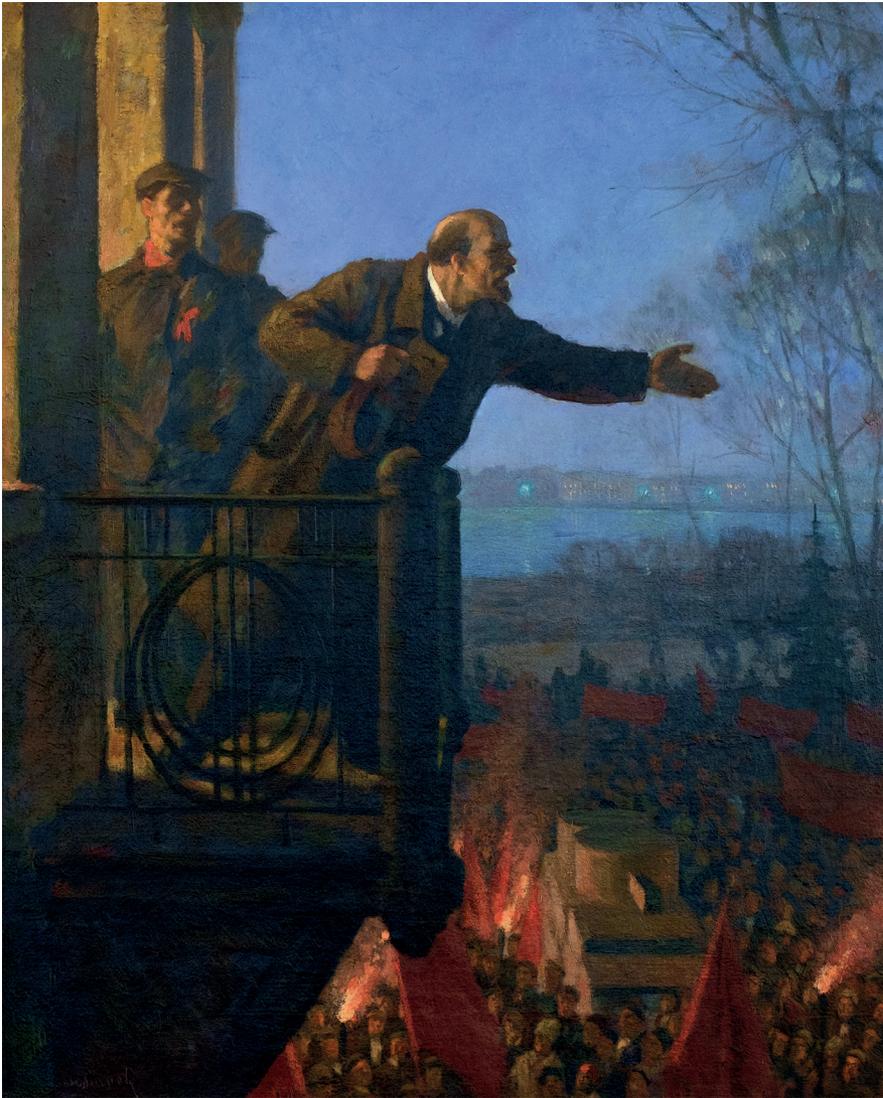
great *belle époque*, the age of steam and watch-chains, bankers, science and shameful international diplomacy. As I produced my ticket for the short ride to the German border, I could imagine Lenin on the platform next to me, enjoying bourgeois Switzerland for one last time and simultaneously hating it.

But placing him in Germany was different. As my train slid north-east to Frankfurt, I could see nothing of the scenes that Lenin knew, no ghosts left over from the First World War. Instead, concrete and glass proclaimed the victory of high-tech industry and engineering, the rejection of Marxism in favour of prosperity. No city demonstrated that more strikingly than Berlin, where there is no trace of the station where Lenin's train was parked for one uncomfortable April night. With its out-sized advertising and gleaming shops, the 10-year-old Hauptbahnhof could be a cathedral to capitalist enterprise, while that monument to Soviet power, the Berlin wall, would have vanished completely if someone hadn't thought to rebuild a short stretch of it a few years ago for the tourists to photograph.

I had more luck, of course, when I got to St Petersburg. There is a Lenin right outside the Finland Station, after all. He stands high on an armoured car, his arm outstretched for emphasis, and he is calling the world to rise in revolution. That statue was one of the first – the man who made it had seen the living leader for himself – and for a moment I thought I felt a brief jolt of vitality. But when I started visiting the Lenin shrines, those tiny sparks were soon snuffed out. I spent an afternoon in the

apartment where the Lenins lived for three months after their return, but saw more lace and fancy needlework than traces of conspiracy. I had prepared myself for red flags, weapons, secret ink, but what I found was an upright piano and a collection of antimacassars. Lenin may have said that Communism was Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, but his sisters deemed that occult rays from naked lightbulbs harmed his health, and veiled them all with heavy shades and hand-





Lenin addressing the Petrograd crowd on the night of 4/17 April 1917. Painting by A.M. Lyubimov (1879–1955), in Museum of Political History, St Petersburg. PHOTO: FRANK PAYNE.

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sewn beaded fringes. Meanwhile, his wife passed idle moments sketching in a little book, and what she drew were round-eyed children, kittens and dear little puppies with their hair in curls.

Within a decade of the leader's death, Stalin had latched on to every dull, repressive scrap of Lenin to create a dismal cult. Each lampshade and embroidered pillowcase was treated as a holy relic and thus safely, permanently dead. These days the clock in Lenin's parlour does not work, but no-one dares to send it out to be repaired. They can't afford to call a specialist to fix it, either, so it just stands there, as lifeless as the idea of Leninism itself.

As Putin's government prepares for the Revolution's centenary in 2017, its members hope that Lenin will remain forgotten in the dust. Their spotlight will not shine on him but rather on Nicholas II – tsar, saint and martyr – and also on the other victims of the Revolution (never precisely defined). That way, the message will be patriotic, proud, a further affirmation of the quasi-holy qualities of the strong new Russian state.

But I set out to track the other Lenin, the live one, and I think I found him. He was there in his writings,

he was present in the memories of everyone whose path he crossed. Most vividly of all, after eight tense days on slow-moving trains, he was the man who didn't sit down with a beer, easing boots off weary feet, but launched into tub-thumping speeches, disdaining the ideas of rest or food. It was this Lenin who changed Russia and the world, coaxing belief from disappointed citizens, launching a carnivorous class war, building his Soviet Union on the ruins of the late empire. He is still out there somewhere in the bloodstained past – relentless, single-minded, violent – and one day even Russians must make peace with him. ■

This article is the text of Catherine Merridale's contribution to the January 2017 edition of 'From Our Fellows', a regular podcast in which Fellows of the British Academy offer brief reflections on what is currently interesting them (www.britishacademy.ac.uk/from-our-fellows).

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