Professor Sean McMeekin revives discredited anti-Lenin slanders

By David North
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As part of a series of Op Ed essays marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution, the *New York Times* published in its edition of June 19 a piece by Professor Sean McMeekin of Bard College. There is not one essay in this series, which oscillates between denunciations of the Revolution and timid apologies on its behalf, that contributes to an understanding of the events of 1917. But McMeekin's piece, which bears the title "Was Lenin a German Agent?," is undoubtedly the most vicious, and certainly the stupidest, of the lot.

The article is based on McMeekin's recently published book, *The Russian Revolution: A New History*. It can best be described as the type of book Spain's Franco, Chile's Pinochet or America's own J. Edgar Hoover might have produced about the Russian Revolution had they dabbled in "history writing" in their spare time. The book cannot be described as a work of history because McMeekin lacks the necessary level of knowledge, professional competence and respect for facts. McMeekin's book is simply an exercise in anti-communist propaganda from which no one will learn anything.

Why did he write the book? Aside from the lure of easy money (anti-communist works are usually launched with substantial publicity and guaranteed positive reviews in the *New York* Times and many other publications), McMeekin has a political motive. At the start of this year, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: "A specter is haunting world capitalism: the specter of the Russian Revolution." McMeekin is among the haunted. He writes in the book's epilogue, titled "The Specter of Communism," that capitalism is threatened by growing popular discontent, and the appeal of Bolshevism is again on the rise. "Like the nuclear weapons born of the ideological age inaugurated in 1917, the sad fact about Leninism is that, once invented, it cannot be uninvented. Social inequality will always be with us, along with the well-intentioned impulse of socialists to eradicate it." Therefore, "the Leninist inclination is always lurking among the ambitious and ruthless, especially in desperate times of depression or war that seem to call for more radical solutions." McMeekin continues: "If the last hundred years teaches us anything, it is that we should stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets promising social perfection." [1]

What McMeekin means with his call to "stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets" is elaborated in his book. The necessary response to the threat of revolution is to murder the revolutionaries. The great political mistake of 1917, McMeekin argues, was Kerensky's failure to physically exterminate the Bolsheviks when an opportunity to do so presented itself in July 1917. The opportunity was provided when information was "discovered," supposedly proving that the Bolshevik Party had received funds from Germany, and that Lenin was, therefore, acting as an agent of the Imperial High Command.

In reviving this century-old slander, McMeekin mimics the style of the right-wing liberal, monarchist or "Black Hundred" (Russian fascist) journalists who were writing for the anti-communist yellow press of 1917.

Before proceeding to an examination of McMeekin's revival of this lie, something must be said about the author's professional competence. As is typical of many widely publicized contemporary "authorities" on Russian revolutionary history, McMeekin lacks any serious knowledge or understanding of the field. An example of his ignorance is provided in McMeekin's account of the 1903 split at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), which gave rise to the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. This is, arguably, the single most important event in the pre-1917 history of the Russian revolutionary movement, which, one must add, had far-reaching international political consequences. McMeekin provides the following account:

> Contrary to the common belief, expounded in most history books, that the famous Bolshevik-Menshevik split of July 1903 occurred because Lenin's advocacy of a professional cadre of elites (sometimes called vanguardism), outlined in his 1902 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*, was opposed by Mensheviks who wanted mass worker participation in the party, the real fireworks at the Brussels Congress surrounded the Jewish question. Party organization was not even discussed until the fourteenth plenary session. Lenin's main goal in Brussels was to defeat the Bund—that is, Jewish—autonomy inside the party. His winning argument was that Jews were not really a nation, as they shared neither a common language nor a common national territory. Martov, *the founder of the Bund*, took great umbrage at this, and walked out to form the new Menshevik (minority) faction. He was followed by nearly all Jewish socialists, including, notably, Lev Bronstein (Trotsky), a young intellectual from Kherson, in southern Ukraine, who had studied at a German school in cosmopolitan Odessa, which helped prime him for the appeal of European Marxism. *With Lenin all but mirroring the arguments of Russian anti-Semites, it is not hard to see why Martov, Trotsky, and other Jews joined the opposition*. [2]

The problem with this account is that it is completely false, both in terms of facts and political interpretation. Putting aside his incorrect dating of the split (it occurred in August, not July), McMeekin concocts, with the intention of slandering Lenin as an anti-Semite, an account of the break between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks that has nothing to do with historical and political reality. The RSDLP did not split over the issue of the Jewish Bund. Far from being the "founder" of the Bund, let alone walking out of the Congress to protest Lenin's opposition to the Bund's autonomy within the party, Martov wrote the RSDLP resolution that provoked the Bund's walkout. Martov's opposition to Jewish autonomy within the revolutionary workers' party was far more strident than Lenin's. As the late Leopold Haimson, the leading authority on the history of Menshevism, wrote in his important scholarly work *The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism*, "Martov clashed

violently with the Bund representatives when this issue arose at the Second Party Congress. There was greater acerbity in his polemical tone during these discussions than that of any other members of his camp." [3] As for McMeekin's claim that Trotsky also walked out of the 1903 Congress in support of the Bund's demand for autonomy, this is another incredible display of ignorance. Trotsky was an intransigent opponent of the Bund, and the transcript of the debates (which are available in English) show that Trotsky intervened repeatedly in support of Martov's resolution.

This is not a minor error. Bragging that he is refuting "common belief" about the origins of the 1903 split, McMeekin demonstrates that he lacks even an elementary knowledge of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. One can safely assume that McMeekin has not read Haimson's vital work (it is not listed in the book's bibliography), or Lenin's own detailed account of the Second Congress in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. Unable to properly identify and explain the issues that provoked the Bolshevik-Menshevik split, McMeekin disqualifies himself from being taken seriously as a specialist in Russian socialist history.

McMeekin's treatment of the slanders hurled against Lenin and the Bolsheviks during the counter-revolutionary wave of July–August 1917 is in keeping with his own debased intellectual level. There is nothing new in McMeekin's account of "German gold." The eminent historian of the Russian Revolution, Alexander Rabinowitch, explained the political background of the attacks on Lenin in *Prelude to Revolution*, published in 1968.

The German government may have attempted to divert money toward the Bolsheviks in 1917. But it did so for reasons of its own, calculating that socialist opposition to Russian participation in the imperialist war would weaken one of its enemies. These efforts—in no way different from similar efforts made by the British and French governments to influence the direction of Russian events—were taken without Lenin's participation in the German government's schemes.

"But nowhere in the vast literature on the subject," writes Rabinowitch in *Prelude to Revolution*, "does there appear to be any evidence to support the thesis that Lenin's policies or tactics were in any way directed or even influenced by the Germans." [4]

It is hardly surprising that McMeekin does not list Rabinowitch's book, among the most important studies of the events of July 1917, in his bibliography. But Rabinowitch's judgment represents the consensus among scholars. There is not a single serious historian who has treated the allegations against Lenin as anything other than a slander.

From the moment of Lenin's return to Russia via Germany, aboard the "sealed train," the anti-revolutionary right attempted to portray the Bolshevik leader as an agent of the Kaiser. In the initial months of the revolution, this libel gained no support outside liberal and fascistic circles. It was well understood that the possibility of a speedy return by a man who was widely recognized by the Russian workers as one of their most courageous and brilliant leaders required that he find the fastest route to revolutionary Petrograd. One month later, Martov, after much dithering, also made use of the German route. Moreover, Trotsky's experience in March–April 1917 provided further validation for Lenin's decision. Trotsky, traveling across the Atlantic from New York City, was forcibly removed from his ship off the coast of Halifax by British authorities. Attempting to prevent the return of the much-feared revolutionary to Russia, who many believed to be "worse than Lenin," the British interned Trotsky in a prisoner of war camp for one month. In the face of protests by the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government's reluctant demand that he be released, Trotsky was finally allowed to continue his journey back to Russia. He arrived one month later than Lenin.

The allegation that Lenin was a German agent was revived at the height of the July Days (July 3–4) as a terrified response by Alexander Kerensky, the Provisional Government and the fascist right to the threat of a working class insurrection. Even though the Bolshevik Party, which believed that an insurrection was premature, sought to restrain the working class, the Provisional Government and its allies counter-attacked savagely against Lenin. The right-wing gutter press used the allegation to create a pogrom-like atmosphere in Petrograd. The filthy character of the slander against Lenin was recognized. As Nikolai Sukhanov recalled in his memoirs:

> It goes without saying that not one of the people really connected with the revolution doubted for a moment the absurdities of these rumours [against Lenin]. But—my God!—what talk began amongst the minority, the hangers-on, and the average ignoramuses from town and country. [5]

Sukhanov poignantly described the environment of lies and violence within which the slander against Lenin acquired astonishing force. He wrote with disgust of "the level of baseness of our liberal press," which spared no effort to discredit Lenin. He recalled that no one bothered to study with any particular care the documents that supposedly incriminated Lenin.

> No further material at all was published during the days that followed. But for the period [of political reaction] that was beginning, even this proved sufficient. No quotations are needed for one to imagine the war-dance that began in the bourgeois press, based on the proof of Lenin's corruption. The Tsarist Secret Police and real agents of the German General Staff were undoubtedly trying to play on the July disorders. All sorts of riff-raff in the capital were trying to exploit the confusion, muddle, brawls, and shifts in mood of the day before. But of course it was the Bolsheviks who were unanimously declared to be the culprits for all crimes. And on July 5th, the first day of the reaction, the "big press" was filled with the campaign of Bolshevik-baiting. [6]

In his recently published, well-researched and lively account of the revolution, titled *October*, China Miéville sums up the case against Lenin:

> The Byzantine details of the calumny were based on the say-so of one Lieutenant Yermolenko and a merchant, Z. Burstein. The latter alleged that a German spy network in Stockholm, headed by the Marxist theoretician-turned German patriot Parvus, maintained Bolshevik connections. Yermolenko, for his part, claimed to have been told of Lenin's role by the German General Staff, while he, Yermolenko, was a prisoner of war whom those Germans (according, possibly, to a convoluted chain of mistaken identity) had attempted to recruit—which, said he, he ultimately gave them the impression they had successfully done.
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> These claims were a tangle of mendacity, invention and tendentiousness. Yermolenko was a strange character, at best a fantasist, while even his own government handlers described Burstein as wholly untrustworthy. The dossier had been prepared by an embittered ex-Bolshevik, Alexinsky, with a reputation for shit-stirring and malice so great he had been denied entry to the Soviet. Few serious people, even on the right, believed any of this stuff for a moment, which explains why some of the less dishonorable or more cautious right were furious with *Zhivoe slovo* [

> *Living Word*, the right-wing gutter paper that launched the slander campaign] for publishing. [7]

McMeekin's book and the *New York Times* essay are nothing other than an up-dated exercise in, to use Miéville's pungent expression, "shit-stirring." His essay includes in this smelly brew a mass of fraudulent claims.

> After a second attempted putsch, known as the July Days, Lenin and 10 other Bolsheviks were charged with "treason and organized armed rebellion." Scores of witnesses came forward to testify about wire transfers from Stockholm, money-laundering via a German import business, the German financing of the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* (including editions aimed at front-line troops), the going rates for holding up Bolshevik placards in street protests (10 rubles) or for fighting in the Red Guards (40 rubles per day). While Lenin fled to Finland, most of his comrades were arrested. The stage was set for a spectacular show trial.

In fact, the Provisional Government was not preparing for a "spectacular show trial." It was using the slander campaign to manufacture an environment in which Lenin, if he fell into the hands of the military and fascist thugs who were hunting him, would be murdered before he even made it to a police station. In the orgy of reaction that followed the July Days, the entire political left was under attack.

"Nor was it only Bolsheviks who had reason to be afraid," writes Miéville. The "sadistic vigilantes" of the fascist Black Hundreds "roamed the streets, smashing their way into houses on the hunt for 'traitors' and 'troublemakers.'" [8] Jews were in particular danger. "Most ominous across the country was a certain rise of ultra-right, antisemitic pogromists. A group called Holy Russia put out *Groza* —Thunderstorm—with repeated calls to violence. Street-corner agitators fulminated against the Jews." [9]

In his book, McMeekin offers this approving summation of the political situation in the aftermath of the July Days: "A far-left uprising had just been crushed owing to a rallying of patriotic sentiment against Bolshevik treason." [10]

The basic fraud at the heart of McMeekin's book and essay is his identification of Lenin's principled socialist opposition to the imperialist war—which was based on the pre-1914 political positions of the Second International—with anti-Russian treason carried out by the work of a German agent.

Writing like a Russian fascist nationalist, he declares: "What singled Lenin out from fellow Russian socialists was his fanatical opposition to the war and his support for Ukrainian independence, a key aim of the Central Powers." So here we have it: Lenin's adherence to the anti-war resolutions passed by the Second International at Stuttgart in 1907, Copenhagen in 1910 and Basel in 1912 makes him an accomplice of the Central Powers! Similarly, Lenin's defense of the right of nations to self-determination, which was a key element of the Bolshevik's pre-war program, implicates him as a German agent!

McMeekin cites Lenin's 1915 statement "Socialism and War," which advanced the program of revolutionary defeatism, as another example of his treachery. McMeekin fails to note that this pamphlet, as many other major documents written by Lenin between 1914 and 1917, condemned above all the treachery of the German Social Democratic Party for supporting their government in the war. Lenin's position was that all socialists should oppose the war aims of their imperialist government and work for its defeat—but not through sabotage, as implied by McMeekin, but through the development of anti-war propaganda among soldiers and the working class.

In yet another alleged example of Lenin's role as a German agent, McMeekin writes: "Nor did Lenin conceal his antiwar views after returning to Russia." No, he certainly did not. Lenin, upon returning to Russia, fought for the internationalist anti-war program that he had advanced at the Zimmerwald conference of September 1915.

Following the line of his book, McMeekin's essay presents the "July Days" as a missed opportunity. During the "Month of the Great Slander," as Trotsky appropriately described July 1917, Kerensky ordered the arrest of the Bolsheviks. But he failed to finish them off. When the tsarist General Kornilov launched his fascist coup in August, Kerensky turned to the left for support. "In a shortsighted move, Kerensky allowed the Bolshevik military organization to rearm, thus acquiring the weapons they would use to oust him two months later."

Thus, due to Kerensky's "shortsighted move," Kornilov was not given the chance to occupy Petrograd and slaughter tens of thousands of workers. In his book, McMeekin does not conceal his disappointment with Kerensky's error. "What on earth was Kerensky thinking?," he declaims. [11]

The conclusion of McMeekin's essay betrays a certain political nervousness. He writes:

> Unlike Russia in 1917, the great power governments of today, whether in Washington, Paris, Berlin or Moscow, are too strongly entrenched to fall prey to a Lenin. Or so we must hope.

The lesson of the Russian Revolution, as far as McMeekin is concerned, is clear: the revolutionaries must be eliminated. The "mistake" of July 1917 must not be repeated. But long before McMeekin, the bourgeoisie learned the lesson of 1917. In January 1919, fascist paramilitary forces, acting with the support of the Social Democratic government, murdered the two outstanding leaders of the German revolution, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

Despite the slanders of July 1917 and the ensuing counter-revolutionary violence, the Bolsheviks quickly recovered. During the months of August and September, the Bolshevik Party experienced an explosive growth. The allegations against Lenin were repudiated by the masses as lies. This is, as well, the verdict of history, and this will not be changed by Professor McMeekin's effort to stir the shit.

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[1] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 351–52

[2] Ibid, pp. 22–23, Emphasis added

[3] Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, p. 64

[4] Indiana University Press, 1968, p. 286

[5] *The Russian Revolution 1917*, by N. N. Sukhanov, edited by Joel Carmichael (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962), pp. 453–54

[6] Ibid, p. 459

[7] *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*, by China Miéville (Verso, 2017), pp. 185–86

[8] Ibid, p. 186

[9] Ibid, p. 192

[10] *The Russian Revolution*, p. 179

[11] Ibid, p. 198