



Revolutionary Russia

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/frvr20>

Lenin's Jewish Question

Simon Rabinovitch ^a

^a Boston University, USA

To cite this article: Simon Rabinovitch (2012): Lenin's Jewish Question, *Revolutionary Russia*, 25:2, 223-225

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2012.726778>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

extend a hand to the liberals (confusing them with the regime's true enemies, the revolutionaries), and the liberals' failure to grasp the hand occasionally extended (confusing the regime with the far right and disregarding the far left's threat to liberalism). To a reader well steeped in Maklakov's analysis, Part 3 offers fewer new insights than the other sections, but of course performs the useful service of making a succinct version of those arguments available in English.

Leontovitsch's staunch classical liberal viewpoint will likely find few supporters in today's academy. To win new converts, it would help if it were reinforced by scholarship that was loosely contemporaneous with Leontovitsch's initial publication – the fields of analysis opened up by Friedrich Hayek ('The Use of Knowledge in Society', *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 [1945]: 519–30) and Ronald Coase ('The Theory of Social Cost', *Journal of Law and Economics* 3, no. 1 [1960]: 1–44), and the entirety of public choice theory. But Leontovitsch's work stands on its own as a distinctive outlook on a persistent dilemma of Russian history.

Stephen F. Williams

Washington, DC

Email: Stephen_F._Williams@cadc.uscourts.gov

© 2012, Stephen F. Williams

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2012.726782>

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Lenin's Jewish Question*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 198; illustrations; notes; index. £28.00 (hardback). ISBN 9-780-300152-104

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern sets out in his book, *Lenin's Jewish Question*, to answer what he calls an irrelevant question with relevant answers. The irrelevant question is whether Lenin was partly of Jewish ancestry. Petrovsky-Shtern considers the question irrelevant for a number of reasons, not least because he presumes on the basis of Lenin's behaviour that the question would have been irrelevant to Lenin himself. Lenin believed Jews had no future as a nation, but he treated both individual Jews and Jews as a group according to his own utilitarian purposes related to attaining and consolidating power. The question becomes relevant only when one considers how and why the issue of Lenin's possible Jewish ancestry is an issue at all.

Petrovsky-Shtern begins by examining what can be documented about Lenin's maternal great-grandfather, Moshko Blank, and his grandfather, Alexander Blank. The elder Blank had nothing but disdain for his Jewish surroundings in Starokonstantinov and after a series of business disputes and scandals he removed himself and his family to the provincial capital of Zhitomir. Moshko gave his sons a Russian education and took the highly unusual step of arranging for their conversion to Russian Orthodoxy so that they could attend medical school in St Petersburg. When in the summer of 1870 Alexander Blank held his new-born grandson Vladimir Ulianov, he did so as a Russian medical doctor with Russian children and grandchildren. Blank, born Jewish as Yisroel, died as the Russian Orthodox Alexander (just a few weeks after the visit by his grandson) and was remembered as such by his family.

Lenin had virtually no interaction with Jews growing up. He eventually became close friends with a fellow Marxist revolutionary, Yulii Tsederbaum, who became Yulii Martov. Lenin and Martov's falling out, though it split the Russian social democratic movement into two factions, Menshevik and Bolshevik, had nothing to do with Martov's background. According to Petrovsky-Shtern, Lenin looked to West European Jews as a model for East European Jews, and though he desired the Jews to play an important role in the Russian revolutionary movement, he also expected them to assimilate out of existence. Lenin was an internationalist and he had many harsh words for the Lithuanian and Polish social democratic movements. If Lenin treated the Jewish social democrats' organisation the Bund more severely it was due to strategic not personal reasoning.

Only in 1924 did Lenin's sister, Anna Elizarova-Ulianova, discover their grandfather had been born Jewish in the town of Starokonstantinov and later converted to Russian Orthodoxy. She made the find while compiling sources on Lenin's biography for the newly established Institute of Lenin. However when Lev Kamenev, the director of the Institute of Party History, saw the documents confirming Elizarova-Ulianova's discovery, he ordered her to keep the discovery quiet and actively suppressed the secret. All significant party figures confronted with this information thereafter followed Kamenev's lead. Petrovsky-Shtern offers a few explanations for Kamenev's initial decision to hide Elizarova-Ulianova's discovery from the public. Kamenev, himself an assimilated Jew, knew that Trotsky was already identified in the West as Jewish and he had little incentive to bring attention to Lenin's Jewish lineage, let alone his own. Petrovsky-Shtern makes the argument that from Kamenev down to Gorbachev the most significant motivation for covering up the Jewish aspect of Lenin's genealogy was the desire to preserve the Russian purity of the new state's founder. Elizarova-Ulianova directly and repeatedly appealed to Stalin to make the documents public in order to combat anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Stalin believed that Jews were not a nation and should dissolve themselves, and as such Lenin's family history bolstered his theory. Nonetheless, according to Petrovsky-Shtern, 'Stalin's vision of the communist party and the Soviet power had no room for a Jewish Lenin, the father-founder of the state and the party' (p. 112). Furthermore, after expending considerable energy constructing his own Russian identity, Stalin had little interest in his own Georgian roots. Petrovsky-Shtern's argument is supported by the party's denunciation of Marietta Shaginian's novel about Lenin's childhood that exposed his father's side as part Kalmyk.

In the 1960s, documents about Lenin began to leak out of the archives but the party quickly tightened access, considering the information a threat to national security. According to Petrovsky-Shtern, 'he was the Russian Lenin. Any assault on his faultless Russian image and pure blood was an assault on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union' (p. 125). In 1965, all of the relevant records relating to the Blanks from six different archives were collected into a single file and sealed in a vault in the Central Archival Administration. Those who knew about the file thereafter kept it a secret; even Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 suppressed knowledge of the Blanks.

It is Petrovsky-Shtern's final chapter, about the uses and misuses of Lenin's Jewish question since it became public in the 1990s, that is in many ways the most insightful in an already very insightful book. Since then right-wing intellectuals have evoked the Blanks – arguing that Alexander Blank's wife was Jewish, and even intimating that Lenin's paternal side might have been Jewish as well – in order to paint Lenin as alien to Russia. While Petrovsky-Shtern does not see anti-Semitism in the Soviet regime's motivation to cover up the Blanks, he does believe the origins of today's misuse of

Lenin's genealogy to stem from the Soviet regime's xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Stalinist anti-Semitism solidified many typical right-wing anti-Semitic ideas in the public mind, the regime under Brezhnev allowed the public and conservatives to take out their frustrations on Jews, and the late Soviet Union was extraordinarily lenient of xenophobic and anti-Semitic dissidents. Among the post-Soviet Russian nationalists, Jews are ironically blamed for both the evils of communism and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. In the process, evoking a Jewish Lenin has become a convenient means, according to Petrovsky-Shtern, 'to disassociate Russian historical achievements from Lenin and the Bolsheviks' (p. 167). Petrovsky-Shtern's achievement in turning a so-called irrelevant question into an insightful look into contemporary Russian anti-Semitism is a product of impressive archival research and artful analytical synthesis. That he managed to do so through such a readable and compelling book is all the more impressive.

Simon Rabinovitch

Boston University, USA

Email: srabinov@bu.edu

© 2012, Simon Rabinovitch

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2012.726778>

A. A. Ivanov, Vladimir Purishkevich: *Opyt biografii pravogo politika (1870–1920)*. Moscow–St Petersburg: Al'ians-Arkheo, 2011. Pp. 448. ISBN 9-785-988740-551

The history of the Russian right has been attracting increasing attention from scholars – most of all in Russia itself – over the past couple of decades. Aleksandr Ivanov's detailed biography of Vladimir Purishkevich is the latest in a spate of recent studies to focus attention on the most extreme faction among the assembled forces for conservatism: right-wing radicalism. As with the author's 2006 monograph (*Poslednie zashchitniki monarkhii: fraktsiia pravykh IV Gosudarstvennoi dумы v gody Pervoi mirovoi voyny (1914–fevral 1917)* [St Petersburg, 2006]), the volume is extensively researched, drawing on a wide variety of material from many different archival collections, published and unpublished primary material, such as journals, newspapers, diaries, and memoir literature, and also a judicious and wide-ranging selection of secondary literature – much of it recent Russian scholarship.

The book is a very thorough piece of work, performing two important purposes for the Western reader. One concerns the question of the intentions and influence of the radical right movement. When assessing the question of how the radical right, despite its contribution to the political scene of late Imperial Russia, was unable to win an eventually decisive mass following, the role played by its leaders is particularly crucial to consider. Several historians in both Western and Russian historiography have previously suggested that the movement's inability to produce an outstanding leader (as contrasted with, say, the Nazi Party in Germany later on) contributed to the inability of the movement to make a wider impact. Vladimir Purishkevich is arguably as close as the movement came to producing such a figure. His ability to cause widespread disruption in the Duma with his lengthy, virulent speeches, covert activity in helping to