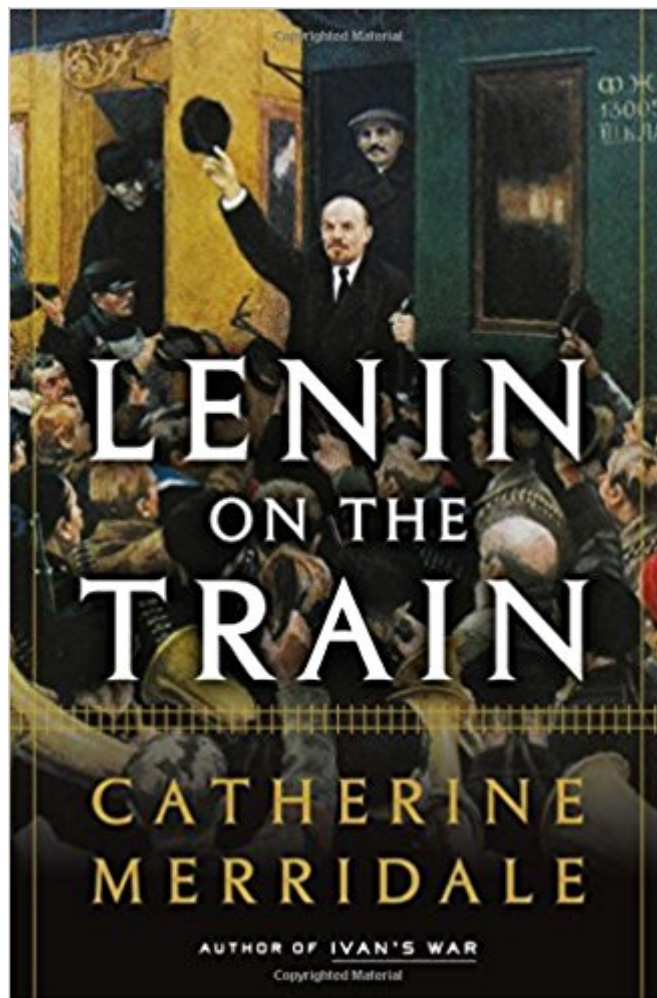


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# Lenin On The Train



## Synopsis

One of The Economist's Best Books of the Year A gripping, meticulously researched account of Lenin's fateful 1917 rail journey from Zurich to Petrograd, where he ignited the Russian Revolution and forever changed the world In April 1917, as the Russian Tsar Nicholas II's abdication sent shockwaves across war-torn Europe, the future leader of the Bolshevik revolution Vladimir Lenin was far away, exiled in Zurich. When the news reached him, Lenin immediately resolved to return to Petrograd and lead the revolt. But to get there, he would have to cross Germany, which meant accepting help from the deadliest of Russia's adversaries. Millions of Russians at home were suffering as a result of German aggression, and to accept German aid or even safe passage would be to betray his homeland. Germany, for its part, saw an opportunity to further destabilize Russia by allowing Lenin and his small group of revolutionaries to return. Now, in *Lenin on the Train*, drawing on a dazzling array of sources and never-before-seen archival material, renowned historian Catherine Merridale provides a riveting, nuanced account of this enormously consequential journey—the train ride that changed the world—as well as the underground conspiracy and subterfuge that went into making it happen. Writing with the same insight and formidable intelligence that distinguished her earlier works, she brings to life a world of counter-espionage and intrigue, wartime desperation, illicit finance, and misguided utopianism. When Lenin arrived in Petrograd's now-famous Finland Station, he delivered an explosive address to the impassioned crowds. Simple and extreme, the text of this speech has been compared to such momentous documents as Constantine's edict of Milan and Martin Luther's ninety-five theses. It was the moment when the Russian revolution became Soviet, the genesis of a system of tyranny and faith that changed the course of Russia's history forever and transformed the international political climate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Absorbing.” Washington Post “Catherine Merridale is one of the foremost foreign historians of Russia, combining wry insights with deep sympathy for the human beings suffering the tragedies she writes about . . . Lenin on the Train combines diplomatic intrigue, spycraft, towering personalities, bureaucratic bungling, military history and ideology.” The Economist “Merridale’s account benefits from her thorough research . . . and vividly reminds us of how the fateful events of 1917 depended on a seemingly small episode.” The New York Times Book Review “Catherine Merridale, a distinguished historian of Russia and the Soviet Union . . . uses [Lenin’s] journey as the centerpiece of a broader account of the fall of czarism and the mounting Bolshevik pressure on the government that replaced it.” Wall Street Journal “Merridale’s excellent book . . . does an exemplary job of covering the complex history of the denials, evasions and cover-ups perpetrated by the Bolshevik leader and his successors.” Dallas Morning News “Memorable . . . a richly detailed book that turns familiar material into an intense adventure.” Minneapolis Star Tribune “Merridale tells the extraordinary story of Lenin’s history-making journey. Drenched in atmosphere, [her] account has all the stuff of a spy thriller.” Newsday “In vivid prose, [Merridale] recounts the whole engine of revolution . . . A superbly written narrative history that draws together and makes sense of scattered data, anecdotes, and minor episodes, affording us a bigger picture of events that we now understand to be transformative.” Kirkus Reviews “History recovered as living drama . . . Merridale smuggles readers onto a train leaving Zurich in April 1917 that is carrying explosive freight: Vladimir Lenin, the firebrand who will kindle a revolutionary conflagration in Russia.” Booklist “A colorful, suspenseful, and well-documented narrative.” Publishers Weekly “The superb, funny, fascinating story of Lenin’s trans-European rail journey to power and how it shook the world.” Simon Sebag Montefiore, Evening Standard (Best Books of

2016)“Twice I missed my stop on the Tube reading this book . . . this is a jewel among histories, taking a single episode from the penultimate year of the Great War, illuminating a continent, a revolution and a series of psychological events in a moment of cataclysm and doing it with wit, judgment and an eye for telling detail. . . . Catherine Merridale is one of those historians whose work allows you to understand something more about the world we inhabit now.”

David Aaronovitch, *The Times*“Catherine Merridale, an experienced and enthusiastic historian of Russia, has chosen the pivotal moment of Lenin’s slow and halting odyssey to hang her history of how this ruthless fanatic hijacked a revolution.”

*The Observer*“A sharply written, authoritative account of Lenin’s train journey.”

*Financial Times*“Merridale brings to her subject a scholar’s deep knowledge and a lively narrative style. It is a work that enlightens as well as it entertains.”

*Literary Review*

Catherine Merridale is the author of *Red Fortress*, which won the Wolfson History Prize; and the critically acclaimed books, *Ivan*, *War* and *Night of Stone*. A celebrated scholar of Russian history, she has also written for *The Guardian*, *The Literary Review*, and *The London Review of Books*, and contributes regularly to broadcasts on BBC radio. She lives in Oxfordshire, England.

Having read the review in *The Economist* when this book was first published in the UK, I was eagerly anticipating the US edition. I had expected a lengthy description of the notorious 1917 rail trip, presumably with portraits of all the various characters who made the journey with Lenin. In fact, the journey occupies just 20 pages (pp. 147-168) out of nearly 300. In her introduction the author notes that, commendably, she made the effort to travel the exact same route as had Lenin, in order to experience it at first hand. Yet precious little of this is reflected in the text beyond a phrase or two to describe a few of the towns passed through. Actually, the book is a recap of Lenin’s role in the Russian revolution from the eve of the First World War, through and immediately after his return to Russia. Yet there is little new that is added to this well-worn tale, and little insight offered into Lenin’s psyche other than repeated references to his intractability and ferocious energy. Of insights into the circle of people around him there is even less. Perhaps the US edition cut some corners? In the acknowledgments the author rhapsodizes over the contributions of the person who produced the included photos and maps. Yet the maps are a very basic two (route of the journey, and street plan of Petrograd), and the photos are, alas, nothing special. The quality of the paper (often a bellwether of the degree of publisher interest) is poor as well. Well written, surely, but a bit of a disappointment nonetheless.

Interesting and gives a fascinating account of a momentous event

a gripping read -- very realistic.

Excellent

One hundred years ago, Lenin was living in Zurich, apparently happily. Using the city's public library, he read prodigiously and drafted *Imperialism: The highest stage of capitalism*. In February 1917, revolution rocked Petrograd, the Russian capital, and Tsar Nicholas abdicated. A Provisional Government was set up as an alliance between liberals and socialists. Lenin did not approve of the new governmental arrangements and was greatly frustrated by not being able to travel to Russia to take his part. The First World War was continuing and crossing German territory to reach Russia would be seen in Russia as a betrayal, a sign that he was secretly in league with the enemy. Britain would not provide him with safe passage as it was well known that he was strongly opposed to Russia's continued participation in the imperialist war. It was, however, his opposition to Russia's involvement in the war that provided the key to his escape from Switzerland. Tentative enquiries and suggestions led to his acceptance of an offer of travel through Germany in the now-famous sealed railway carriage. Germany hoped that Lenin's influence in Petrograd would result in Russia abandoning the war, enabling Germany to transfer men and munitions from its Eastern Front to the West. The carriage was sealed on Lenin's insistence, not the Germans'. He was desperately anxious that he should not be compromised by any contact with Germans. The carriage was given extra-territorial status. Two German guards travelled at the rear of the carriage, but a chalk line was drawn across the floor to separate them from Lenin and his fellow exiles. The chalk line was not the only farcical aspect. Another was the consequence of Lenin's ban on smoking other than in the toilet. Long queues meant he had to issue first and second class passes to the toilet. Unfortunately, the intended ferry from Germany's Baltic coast to Sweden was missed and a whole extra day was spent in Germany before the party could leave. Once clear of German territory, the party no longer needed to travel in isolation and they took an overnight express from Malmö to Stockholm. In Stockholm,

they were able to wash, relax and eat in a good hotel. Lenin shopped for shoes and a suit in which he was much photographed over the following year or so. Catherine Merridale has taken great care in tracing Lenin's precise route to Russia and in researching this book made the full journey herself. We have yet to see a map that shows the route that Lenin really took, she writes. (That, presumably, was written before the creation of the excellent map included in her book.) Most experts send him north along a line that was not even built in 1917, and at least one book is a classic that has been reprinted many times and gets the journey wrong by well over 1,000 miles. Her route extends north in Sweden almost to the Arctic Circle, crossing the frozen River Torne to enter Finland. The railway did not cross the river, so Lenin crossed by sledge and on the other side commenced a new train journey through Finland. Lenin expected problems on reaching the Russian border, but instead was surprised by an enthusiastic reception party. It was a foretaste of the enormous welcome to come when the train finally reached Petrograd's Finland Station. Merridale shatters more myths and in particular, the locomotive pulling that train was not number 293, preserved and displayed to this day at the Finland Station. Lenin travelled on a train hauled by 293 when he returned to Finland for a renewed exile from July to October 1917 but it is true that the crowds at the Finland Station on that (Orthodox) Easter Monday numbered in the thousands. The reception and speeches continued far into the night. Besides detailing the journey, Merridale sketches-in developments between the February and October Revolutions and at times looks as far forward as the Brest-Litovsk agreement of March 1918, Russia's exit from the war. She is much interested in Lenin's political philosophy and almost all chapters are headed by a Lenin quotation and from time to time quotes Trotsky and others. She also tackles the subject of finance provided by Germany. She thinks it was needlessly dishonest of Lenin to consistently deny the existence of German funding. Quite how it reached Petrograd is still shrouded in mystery; a contemporary German source indicates various channels and under different labels. In all, the book is an enlightening and not too taxing romp through the material.

One hundred years ago this month V.I. Lenin boarded a train in Zurich that would take him through Germany, Sweden and Finland to ultimately arrive at Finland Station, Saint Petersburg, Russia. As history professor Catherine Merridale describes, Lenin arrives in city racked by three years of war and rapt in the chaos of a new revolutionary government struggling to govern and a Bolshevik Party

torn between participating in governing and advocating another revolution. Merridale vividly describes the collapse of the Czarist regime at home and on the war front and Lenin's life in exile in Switzerland. It is the German government who seizes upon the idea of transporting Lenin into Russia with the goal of fomenting a revolution that would take that country out of the war. The plot succeeds brilliantly. The go between was a Bolshevik/ speculator Alexander Helphand also known as Parvus, who is quite a character. With the deal orchestrated Lenin and his entourage occupy three rail cars as they travel through Germany and beyond. Although it was known as a "sealed train" it was far from sealed and passengers actually disembarked on occasion. It was quite a menagerie and the passengers included such luminaries as Karl Radek, Grigory Sokolnikov and Grigory Zinoviev. All three would later die in the Stalin purges of the 1930s. The interesting thing is that it was no secret. The Russian government knew, the British knew and the Bolsheviks knew that Lenin was coming. With his boisterous arrival he grabs the Bolshevik Party by the throat and with the force of his will he sets them on a revolutionary course. Lenin truly was the "plague bacillus" that Churchill described him as, because in his wake you can count the deaths in the tens of millions. Although the book is slow going at times, Merridale tells the story with great verve and you get a sense of the drama building as the locomotive of history goes on its journey through northern Europe.

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