



Lenin: A Biography

By Robert Service

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Lenin is a colossal figure whose influence on twentieth-century history cannot be underestimated. Robert Service has written a calmly authoritative biography on this seemingly unknowable figure. Making use of recently opened archives, he has been able to piece together the private as well as the public life, giving the first complete picture of Lenin.

This biography simultaneously provides an account of one of the greatest turning points in modern history. Through the prism of Lenin's career, Service examines events such as the October Revolution and the ideas of Marxism-Leninism, the one-party state, economic modernisation, dictatorship, and the politics of inter-war Europe. In discovering the origins of the USSR, he casts light on the nature of the state and society which Lenin left behind and which have not entirely disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991.

'Immensely scholarly but also vivid and readable. This is a splendid book, much the best that I have ever read about Lenin ...I was overwhelmed by the power and vividness of this portrait.' Dominic Lieven, *Sunday Telegraph*

'He has managed skilfully to depict the surreal life of an obsessive, brilliant and stubborn individual' *Guardian*

'Lenin's life was politics, but Service has succeeded in keeping Lenin the man in focus throughout . . . This book deserves a place among the best studies of one of the most fascinating figures in modern history' Harold Shukman, *The Times*

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Editorial Review

From Booklist

From the Soviet archives that were opened, briefly, after the disintegration of the Leninist state, spilled documents that confirmed impressions of Lenin's fanatical hatreds, such as his orders to hang, shoot, and imprison assorted class enemies. A respected historian of the Soviet period (*A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, 1998), Service has incorporated the unflattering revelations into this significant addition to the train of biographies that have been produced ever since the revolutionary burst into world historical prominence in 1917. Without doubt, Service's life-of should answer all curiosities about Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin)--about his personality, attitudes, intellect, ruthlessness, and significance. Most successfully of all, Service comprehensively conveys the utter self-confidence the man had, which underlay his contempt for all opponents--and his absolute indifference, when in power, to killings (including that of his own cousin) "necessary" to force Russia, and ideally the entire world, to conform with the communist vision he carried in his head. As Service notes, but for contingencies that pushed history his way, Lenin might have remained an anonymous exile; why it was otherwise is adroitly argued throughout this superb biography. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Review

With the help of previously unpublished documents recently released from central party archives, [Service] has managed to skillfully depict the surreal life of an obsessive, brilliant and stubborn individual who usually found himself the champion of the minority opinion within a minority of just a small number of revolutionaries--who, for most of their lives, did not have a revolution in sight. (*The Guardian*)

In this thorough biography, Robert Service uses the abundant new archival evidence to describe Lenin's personal idiosyncrasies, and also to underline, once again, his many ideological contradictions...Service then goes on to show how Lenin betrayed, in practice, virtually all of his paper principles, which had themselves changed several times in any case: far from creating a state in which ordinary workers took decisions about the running of society, Lenin created a totalitarian dictatorship. (Anne Applebaum *Sunday Herald*)

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The wonder of this particular account is that Service succeeds in explaining how Lenin came to [his] determined confidence and the complex and ultimately tragic circumstances that led to the triumph of his ambitions...The most significant contribution of this book is the wealth of personal information that makes Lenin a far more accessible, if not appealing, individual...Such details make Lenin all the more human and so all the more vivid and frightening...Service never allows his narrative to slip into sentimentality or forgets whom he is dealing with. (Joshua Rubenstein *Wall Street Journal*)

The most authoritative and well-rounded biography of Lenin yet written--and the one that is, in its quiet way, the most horrifying. Oxford historian Service (*A History of Twentieth Century Russia*) makes good use of Party and Presidential archives that were previously closed to historians. The portrait that emerges therefore has many elements that were either altogether unknown or have only recently emerged...An important study that goes far in tracing the roots of the dire legacy Communism bequeathed to the third of mankind unfortunate enough to have suffered its rule. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

A comprehensive and intimate biography of the Russian revolutionary. (*Washington Post* 2000-09-10)

In *Lenin: A Biography*, Robert Service argues that Lenin's importance evolved from three major achievements: He led the October Revolution, he founded the Soviet Union, and he laid out the rudiments of Marxism-Leninism...This is a fascinating and engaging book, not the least because it is the first comprehensive Lenin biography to appear since crucial Soviet archives have been opened. (Amos Perlmutter *Washington Times* 2000-10-30)

Throughout this massive and exhaustive biography of Lenin, British historian Robert Service does not lose sight of his subject's stature as the father of the twentieth century's feast of horrors. What interests Service more, however, is an exploration of the person behind the political persona...Service has diligently incorporated his archival findings into this work, which has enabled him to take issue with the many biographies that tend to portray Lenin as either a sociopath or savior...This lucidly written, insightful biography will no doubt come to be regarded as a definitive interpretation of Lenin. (Rob Stout *Central Europe Review* 2001-01-14)

Lenin was the one essential personality of the communist movement that shook the world for most of the twentieth century. In this marvelous synthesis of previously known history and information newly available since the dissolution of the Soviet Union that Lenin founded, Robert Service lays out how that came to be...Service is able to humanize Lenin without suggesting that in that humanity lies any explanation of or excuse for the excesses of the revolution he led. (Charles Radin *Boston Globe* 2001-01-11)

In his massive, all-encompassing biography, British historian Robert Service does not lose track of his subject's stature...but what interests Service more is the person as opposed to the persona...The reader is left with a personality rooted in paradox: a coldly calculating individual capable of deep emotion; a man who possessed little empathy yet became outraged by the slightest injustice...This lucidly written, sharply observed biography will no doubt come to be regarded as a definitive portrait of Lenin for some time. (Rob Stout *Houston Chronicle* 2001-01-21)

The demise of the country and the ideology its elite professed (at least externally) to the very end requires a new evaluation of the founder of the Soviet state. The opening of the Russian archives provided an additional incentive for such work. In a new biography, Robert Service...provides fresh material as well as an original vision of Lenin. Readers will enjoy his information and observations, even if they do not share his views...Readers will find a lot of details about Lenin's Jewish ancestral links, his supportive family, his love affairs, and the last hours of his life. At the same time, Service presents him as a calculating yet compulsive politician obsessed to the point of mania with his vision of history and the future...One should read Service's excellent book not so much to ponder the problems of the past but of the present and future. (Dmitri Shlapentokh *World and I* 2001-03-01)

The best place to begin assessing Bolshevism's founder is the work of the British historian Robert Service. The present volume, *Lenin: A Biography*, is the fourth the author has devoted to his lifelong subject, its three predecessors, published between 1985 and 1995, being a meticulous chronicle of Lenin's political life. Yet the past decade has produced sufficient archival material to make possible a biography of Lenin the man, and this is the new volume's task. It may also serve as a summary of the preceding trilogy, to which readers can refer back for fuller details at any point...Even in Russia, historians prefer Service's nuanced and judicious account to the more sensational work of the late Dmitri Volkogonov, as well as to the standard Western treatments. Indeed, Service is consciously writing against the predominant Lenin canon in both East and West...[He] seeks to reconstruct Lenin's motives historically, decision by decision, as the settings of his action changed. Moreover, his analysis has been refined by the vicissitudes of time. (Martin Malia *New York*

Review

Service knows as much about Lenin's life as anybody around. What he has done is to write a more personal biography of Lenin than has ever been written before. A great deal of new material has come out since 1991 or even a bit earlier, especially on Lenin's personal life--on his health, physical and psychic. The book enriches Lenin's life with detail and should be made widely available. (Abbott Gleason, author of *Totalitarianism*)

Users Review

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