

Professor Sean McMeekin and the construction of a historical lie (Part II)

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On June 30, 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted “Professor McMeekin revives discredited anti-Lenin slanders.” My essay was a reply to an article by McMeekin, published in the *New York Times* on June 19, in which the Bard College professor of history alleged that Lenin returned to Russia in April 1917 as an agent of the German imperial government. As I stated in the June 30 essay:

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.

During the past week, I have continued to study the issue of “German Gold,” which has been for many decades the subject of a significant amount of historical research. I was particularly interested in comparing McMeekin’s allegations to what has been established by serious historians.

As I reviewed McMeekin’s book, my attention was drawn to the following passage, in chapter eight, which summed up the professor’s case against the Bolshevik leader:

Colonel B.V. Nikitin, who worked in counterespionage for the Provisional Government, reproduced several incriminating telegrams in his memoirs, in which he also claimed that a Bolshevik agent, Evgeniya Sumenson, confessed under interrogation to passing on money (which she laundered from a German import business) to a Polish lawyer, Miecyslaw Kozlovsky, who was a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee. After leaving Russia later in 1917, Kerensky debriefed Allied intelligence (and later wrote in memoir accounts) about documents he claimed to have seen, including a famous withdrawal of 750,000 rubles from Sumenson’s account at Siberian Bank. Until now, most historians believed that these contentious matters, owing to the lack of corroborative evidence from the Russian archives, must remain obscure. [1]

McMeekin adds footnote number 21 to this passage, which takes the

reader to a note on page 372. The note states: “Such was the conclusion of Semion Lyandres, in *The Bolsheviks’ ‘German Gold’ Revisited* (1995).” So here we have McMeekin citing another historian, Semion Lyandres, in support of his argument that telegraphic evidence of transfers of money from German government sources into Bolshevik coffers “must remain obscure.”

Having dealt with such skilled falsifiers of history as Robert Service and Ian Thatcher, I knew that it was necessary to examine the work by Semion Lyandres referenced by McMeekin. The acrid smell of a rat wafted up from page 372. I simply could not assume that McMeekin was providing an accurate summation of Lyandres’ research.

Semion Lyandres is a professor of history at Notre Dame University. The Department of History provides this profile of his professional career:

Semion Lyandres is the founder and North American editor of the international series *Modern and Contemporary Russian History: Monographs and Documents* and is also a joint founding editor of the *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography*. His publications include: *The Bolsheviks’ ‘German Gold’ Revisited: An Inquiry into the 1917 Accusations* (1995); *The Memoirs of Alexander Guchkov, President of the State Duma and a Minister of War in the Provisional Government* (1993), with A. V. Smolin; *A Chronicle of the Civil War in Siberia and Exile in China: The Diaries of Petr Vasil’evich Vologodskii, 1918-1925* (2002), in 2 volumes (with Dietmar Wulff), and most recently, *The Fall of Tsarism: Untold Stories of the February 1917 Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013, revised, pbk edn, 2014). He has held major fellowships from the German-American Academic Council Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, the NEH, and the Earhart Foundation; and has published articles and essays in *The Slavic Review*, *Kritika*, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, *Russian History*, *Berliner Jahrbuch für osteuropäische Geschichte*, *Zmanim*, *The Journal of Modern Russian History* and *Historiography*, and *Otechestvennaia istoriia*. [2]

The work that is relevant to this inquiry, *The Bolsheviks’ ‘German Gold’ Revisited*, is a 132-page monograph, published in 1995 by the Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies. It is the most detailed examination ever undertaken of the documents upon which the Provisional Government based its allegations against Lenin. Lyandres translated and studied the 66 telegrams, intercepted by the French government and passed on to the Russian Provisional Government, which supposedly documented the transfer of money between the German state and the Bolsheviks.

In the introduction to this historical examination, Lyandres provided essential background information:

On the evening of 4 July 1917, at the height of the anti-government uprising [the “July Days”], the Provisional Government’s Minister of Justice, Pavel N. Pereverzev, authorized a press release accusing the Bolshevik leaders of treasonable activities. The report published the next day alleged that Lenin had been sent to Russia by the German government to rally support for a separate peace with Germany and “to undermine the confidence of the Russian people in the Provisional Government.” The money for his activity was allegedly channeled from Berlin to Petrograd, by way of Stockholm. In Stockholm the transfer was carried out by the Bolshevik Jakob Fürstenberg (Hanecki) and the Russo-German Social Democrat Alexander Israel Helphand (Parvus). The main recipients in Petrograd were the Bolshevik lawyer Mieczyslaw Kozlowski and Evgeniia M. Sumenson, a relative of Fürstenberg-Hanecki. She and Kozlowski ran a trading business as a cover for financial dealings with Fürstenberg, thus making the transfer of German funds look like a legitimate business transaction.

The published report referred to two different types of evidence for the charges. The first accusation—that Lenin was working for the Germans—rested on the rather shaky testimony of Ensign Dmitrii S. Ermolenko, who alleged that he had been told about it by German intelligence officers while a prisoner of war in a German camp. The second charge—that the Bolsheviks were receiving German money—was better documented by intercepted telegraphic communications between those involved in the money transactions between Petrograd and Stockholm. To look into the accusations, the Provisional Government appointed a Special Investigative Commission, headed by the Procurator of the Petrograd Judiciary Chamber, Nikolai S. Karinskii. The Commission used the exchange of telegrams as its main evidence, and after two weeks, on 21 July, formally charged the Bolshevik leaders with high treason. [3]

In the introduction, Lyandres made several critical points about the evidence upon which McMeekin, 22 years later, bases his allegations against Lenin. With reference to the telegrams cited originally by Nikitin, Professor Lyandres wrote:

These materials must be treated with caution, however, given both their origin and the fact that they were not properly analyzed. First, Nikitin reproduced them from notes he had taken almost two decades earlier, in 1917, when he received the 29 copies from French intelligence. Second, the French had intercepted them during their transmission, making it impossible to check the accuracy of the reproduction. And, finally, Nikitin had insufficient time to examine the documents to the extent they required, for he received them only shortly before he was removed from the Bolshevik case. All this may explain the absence of the numbers, the dates and the times of dispatch in Nikitin’s 29 telegrams. Moreover, the numerous mistakes, inaccuracies and misspellings of names and addresses mentioned in them inevitably led to erroneous conclusions by those attempting to explain the telegrams’ meaning. [4]

Lyandres continued:

The only concentrated attempt to date to interpret and

systematize the 29 telegrams was made by the émigré historian Sergei P. Mel’gunov in 1940. Yet considering the aforementioned deficiencies of Nikitin’s telegrams, and the limited sources available to Mel’gunov at the time, the historian could not have adequately explained the telegrams’ contents. In fact, he did not reach specific conclusions as to whether the telegrams confirmed the transfer of German money to the Bolsheviks, determining only that they represent some kind of coded correspondence that could have served as a cover for suspicious activities. [5]

Lyandres clearly contradicts the basic argument of McMeekin. The Notre Dame professor called attention to the highly questionable reliability of Nikitin’s version of the telegraphic evidence. But what follows is even more damning of McMeekin’s presentation, because it exposes his highly conscious and deliberate falsification of his source material. Lyandres wrote:

Neither Nikitin’s memoirs nor Mel’gunov’s study resolved the controversy over the telegrams’ meaning. Instead, they created the impression among subsequent historians that the Provisional Government considered only those telegrams reproduced by Nikitin. [6]

I realize that I am demanding a great deal of concentration from the reader. But the forensic study of the process of historical falsification requires careful attention to detail. McMeekin is skilled at twisting evidence into a shape that enables him to cover his deliberate distortions with a thin veneer of plausibility. The reader should recall McMeekin’s statement that the telegraphic evidence “must remain obscure,” supported with a footnoted reference, which claims that “Such was the conclusion of Semion Lyandres, in *The Bolsheviks’ “German Gold” Revisited* (1995).”

This is a deliberate falsification of Lyandres’ research. Lyandres did not state that the evidence “must remain obscure,” in the sense implied by McMeekin, i.e., that the extent of Lenin’s reliance on “German Gold” was not clearly understood until McMeekin published his *New History* in 2017. Rather, Lyandres, writing in 1995, clearly explained that the presentations of Nikitin in his 1937 memoir and Mel’gunov in 1940 were unreliable and misleading. Historians who relied upon their work were unable to arrive at an authoritative evaluation of the allegations against the Bolsheviks. The most important reason for the confusion that persisted among historians was that the works of Nikitin and Mel’gunov dealt with only 29 telegrams, which were, in any event, poorly reproduced, full of mistakes, and improperly analyzed. Lyandres explained that this was an incomplete and misleading record. The real basis of the Provisional Government’s charge that Lenin was a German agent rested on a set of 66 telegrams.

Professor Lyandres, in the mid-1990s, was the first historian to examine the complete collection of the 66 intercepted telegrams. Rather than substantiating the allegations of the Provisional Government, the analysis of the complete set of documents demolishes the official case against the Bolsheviks. Lyandres wrote:

The present work provides an analysis of each individual telegram as well as of the entire group of 66, and finds no support in them for the July accusations. In fact, the telegrams contain no evidence that there were any funds transferred from Stockholm to Petrograd, let alone funds that wound up in Bolshevik coffers. It is true that the transfer of huge sums of money, at times up to

100,000 roubles, occupied a prominent place in the telegraphic correspondence. *But these sums represent payments for goods exported by the Parvus-Fürstenberg firm from Scandinavia to Petrograd. Goods were sent to Petrograd, and payments traveled back to Stockholm—but never in the opposite direction. Although Sumenson managed these financial transactions, she was the sender, not the recipient, as was claimed by the Provisional Government.* This conclusion, incidentally, finds additional support in the newly released records of the July investigation. Notwithstanding a persistent search for proof that the Bolsheviks received German funds through the Parvus-Fürstenberg-Kozlowski-Sumenson network (the Provisional Government thoroughly examined not only the records of Sumenson's commercial activities but also all foreign monetary transactions into Russia between late 1914 and July 1917), the investigation concluded that there was no evidence of the "German connection." [7]

Lyandres' 1995 analysis of the telegrams could not be clearer. The nature of the transactions was no longer obscure. Money flowed not from Stockholm to Petrograd, but from Petrograd to Stockholm, as "*payments for goods exported by the Parvus-Fürstenberg firm from Scandinavia to Petrograd. Goods were sent to Petrograd, and payments traveled back to Stockholm—but never in the opposite direction.*"

Lyandres also found that there "is likewise no evidence that the telegraphic correspondence maintained between Petrograd and Stockholm was coded." [8] This fatally undermined the claim by the Provisional Government that the Bolsheviks sought to conceal their receipt of illicit funds from Stockholm through the use of encryption. McMeekin simply ignores these key findings by Lyandres.

Major scholars recognized Lyandres' monograph as a milestone in the study of the "German Gold" controversy. In his biography of Lenin, published in 2005, historian Christopher Read wrote: "The myths [of German Gold] have been most successfully rebutted in S. Lyandres, 'The Bolsheviks' 'German Gold' Revisited'..." [9] Professor Rex Wade stated in a review of Lyandres' work in *Slavic Review*, published in 1996:

Lyandres has done an excellent job of studying the documents and preparing them for publication. Both the Russian originals and the English translations are included, accompanied by extensive notes and commentary that make their context and content clear. This was not easy. They are telegrams, which means not only that they are cryptic in form, but that those written in Russian—most of them—were transliterated into Latin script and then back into Russian, distorting names. Russian and Western calendar dating (13 days different at the time) introduced further misunderstandings. Lyandres has worked through these and other problems with great care. He also provides excellent brief accounts of the history of the controversy, of the origins of the telegrams and their issuance in 1917, and a fine concluding interpretation of the telegrams' content and significance...

Lyandres, judiciously, does not claim more than his documents show: no German money via the presumed Helphand route in 1917. That, however, is a major contribution to our understanding of the Russian revolution. It will affect the interpretation of all serious historians and should influence a broader readership that has tended lightly to assume a proven connection between "German Gold" and Bolshevik successes in 1917. [10]

historians." Sean McMeekin is not a "serious" historian. He is not a historian at all. He has no respect for facts. In the manner of an unscrupulous prosecutor concocting a frame-up, McMeekin misrepresents citations, ignores exculpatory evidence and falsifies the record. He knows that Lyandres' study had discredited the case leveled by the Provisional Government against Lenin. But, as he could not simply ignore Lyandres' well-known and influential monograph, McMeekin sought, with suitably ambiguous phrasing, to give the impression that the conclusions of the 1995 work did not contradict his frame-up of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

One final point: When contacted by the World Socialist Web Site, Professor Lyandres stated that he has seen no new information that would lead him to change the conclusions he arrived at in 1995.

Sean McMeekin stands exposed as a falsifier of history.

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[1] *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. 133.

[2] Accessible online at <https://history.nd.edu/faculty/directory/semion-lyandres/>

[3] Lyandres, p. 1.

[4] Ibid, p. 4.

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid, pp. 94-95, Italics in the original.

[8] Ibid, p. 95.

[9] *Lenin* by Christopher Read (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 295.

[10] Rex A. Wade, Review of *The Bolsheviks' "German Gold" Revisited: An Inquiry into the 1917 Accusations*, by Semion Lyandres, in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), pp. 486-487.



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The critical phrase in Professor Wade's review is "all serious