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## Interview with Richard Pipes

May 14, 2015

Jane Burbank

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10064>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.10064

ISSN: 1777-5388

### Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2017

Number of pages: 43-56

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2696-0

ISSN: 1252-6576

### Electronic reference

Jane Burbank, « Interview with Richard Pipes », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 58/1-2 | 2017, Online since 01 January 2019, Connection on 15 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10064>

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# INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD PIPES

May 14, 2015<sup>1</sup>

**Jane Burbank (JB):** *So Professor Pipes – I find it difficult to call you “Dick” even after all these years!*

**Richard Pipes (RP):** I have no objections.

**JB:** *We’d like to begin with your book *The Russian Revolution*. It came out in 1990. You, of course, had already worked for many years on many aspects of Russian history. So why did you decide to focus on the revolution itself at this time?*

**RP:** I think it was a suggestion of Isaiah Berlin. I remember talking to him about this and at that time the principal English version of the history of the Russian Revolution was E.H. Carr’s. Not only very biased but also very dull. It really did not have a chronology, it didn’t have any conflict and so on. So, I decided to do it. And I worked on it for a good ten years. It came out ultimately in three volumes. Although the first two volumes were published by Knopf as one volume, there were really two volumes, followed by a third volume, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*<sup>2</sup>.

**JB:** *When did those ten years start? Did you begin in the 1980s? With perestroika?*

**RP:** I began in the 1970s. And then the project was interrupted because I went to Washington for two years. I was on the National Security Council<sup>3</sup>. During these two years I didn’t work on it at all. So, I began it in the late seventies. Then I resumed in the early 1980s and it took a good part of the decade.

**JB:** *Remember your earlier course in the history of Imperial Russia: it would end with the revolution of 1905-1906 and with the liberation movement.*

**RP:** Right.

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1. This interview was conducted on May 12, 2015 by Jane Burbank, professor of history, Russian and Slavic studies, Department of History, New York University.

2. Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, 944 p., *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 587 p.

3. Richard Pipes was a member of the National Security Council under President Reagan (1981-1982) as the Director of East European and Soviet Affairs.



Richard E. Pipes, Polish-American academic,  
Baird Professor Emeritus of history at Harvard University.  
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**JB:** *But then you later started to teach a course on the Russian Revolution.*

**RP:** Right.

**JB:** *You mentioned Berlin and E.H. Carr and your time in Washington. What about the events around the period of the mid 1980s? Did that shape what you were writing or not?*

**RP:** Well, yes and no. I mean, basically, Russia was stable and I did not expect a revolution to occur. I was very skeptical about the continuation of the Soviet regime and I thought that something would happen to it, but I didn't expect the collapse such as it occurred in 1991. I thought there would be profound change. And, of course, it started changing profoundly in '85 with the coming of Gorbachev. But this did not influence my historical work.

**JB:** *Let's leap ahead. We're in 2015 and there have been since last year celebrations and memorials about the beginning of World War One. What do you think about the revolution of 1917, as we look ahead to 2017? And particularly with European societies in mind. Why should societies in Europe and elsewhere remember Russia's year of 1917 and what do you think they should remember?*

**RP:** It's not as important an event as World War One. I mean, the Russian Revolution in a sense was a result of the outbreak of World War One. Still it was a very important event and it shaped the rest of the century. I don't know if there will be many—I wouldn't say celebrations—but occasions to remember 1917 in Europe. But in Russia, of course, this will be a very important event. And if Putin is still in power, it will probably lead to a lot of hoopla. Because he basically sympathizes with the Bolshevik regime. He said, not long ago, that the collapse of the Soviet regime was the most catastrophic event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A century that saw World War One, World War Two, the Holocaust and so on. So I think there will be a lot of celebrations and glorification of the Revolution. They will say, yes, the regime no longer exists but it made profound changes in the Russian mentality, in Russian culture, and so on.

**JB:** *From your own perspective, what would you say about those very issues? Profound changes in Russian mentality and so on, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What were the effects that you would want to mark, yourself?*

**RP:** Well, for Russia and for the rest of Europe?

**JB:** Yes.

**RP:** For Russia it was a catastrophic event. Millions and millions of people lost their lives. Millions and millions were prevented from speaking their minds. The political culture was totally subverted. If you look at today's public opinion polls, and I've done quite a lot of research on them, you will find that the Soviet regime had a profound affect on the Russian mentality; instilling a feeling of alienation from the rest of the world. Most Russians don't feel that they belong either to the East or the West. They feel they are unique. You have 140 million people in a world

of six and a half billion and they are alienated from everybody. Profoundly. They don't respect democracy. They don't respect private property. And all this had roots in Russia before the revolution but it was solidified by the Bolshevik regime. For the rest of the world, well I think, there very well may not have been a World War Two if it weren't for the Soviet regime. Because after all it was Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union — I mean there was a war before, Poland and so on, but the real war began with the attack on the Soviet Union. I think if not for communism, Germany might not have elected Hitler. I mean Hitler played on communism and posed as the main enemy of a communist regime.

**JB:** *There is an interesting new book about Russia's frontier policy by a French historian Sabine Dullin. She calls the book "La Frontière épaisse," The Thick Frontier. She deals very explicitly—and very well I think—with these issues of how new the Soviet regime was and how they developed a policy of recovery [of imperial terrain]. She describes the deal with Hitler as a way to recover the imperial terrain...*

**RP:** Yes, I mean Hitler's program was partially anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic. But the anti-Semitism was justified by his claim that the Jews were behind communism. Communism was essentially "a Jewish invention."

**JB:** *Let's talk about why we could describe, as you have done, the Russian Revolution as the major event of 20<sup>th</sup> century history for the world.*

**RP:** Well, by the Russian Revolution you mean the Bolshevik Revolution—not the March Revolution but the October Revolution. 1917.

**JB:** *Yes, the Bolshevik revolution.*

**RP:** October 1917 or November. Since the Bolshevik Revolution the world has been very unstable. The Bolsheviks, after all, under Lenin, intended to conquer all of Europe. When they attacked Poland in 1920, they were marching toward Berlin and if they succeeded Bolshevizing Germany—who knows what would have happened to the rest of Europe. Then they expanded eastward—China and all of that. So the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much influenced by the Bolsheviks, and much of the turmoil and so on was due to the Bolsheviks.

**JB:** *You asked if I meant February or October 1917, but I could have meant 1905 as well. In your books, if we put them together, you have treated the Russian Revolution of 1917 in a much longer timeframe. In fact, in your book The Russian Revolution you discuss where we should begin [the history of the 1917 revolution] and why. Would you like to say something about that? Where do you see the critical points of production of what would happen in 1917?*

**RP:** You begin with the revolutionary movement, which starts in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the populist movement, the Going to the People movement, the People's Will (*Narodnaia volia*), terrorism, the assassination of Alexander the II. From then on you have a constant revolutionary movement in Russia. It was slightly

suppressed in the 1880s but then again it revived in the 1890s and it exploded in 1905. Then it's slightly suppressed by the concessions which the regime made and by the outbreak of the war, but by the spring of 1917 it broke out again. It has a long history—a very long history.

**JB:** *So let's talk about two aspects of this. One is the role of the autocracy itself. In my reading of your work, you've always put a strong emphasis on the autocracy's policies. It's not just the revolution, it's the autocracy. And your argument in *Russia Under The Old Regime*, if I have it correctly...*

**RP:** Which by the way, I just got a letter that it's coming out in China—in Chinese! I'm amazed.

**JB:** *That's very interesting! But there you're arguing that 1881 with the emergency regulations and so on is the moment in which the autocracy was really turning toward the police state of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Do you still see this time as a critical turning point?*

**RP:** You mean, under Alexander the Third?

**JB:** Yes.

**RP:** Well, yes, the state under Alexander the Third begins to use police measures and is almost a police state. Not anywhere near as bad as under the Soviets, but it was a police state and it was incompatible with Russian culture. I mean, Russia was moving toward Western culture both in literature and economy and in everything else, had an intelligentsia that thought in Western terms, and the regime reverted to some kind of autocratic system that was incompatible with the culture of—certainly of—the elites. I think the peasants didn't much care about it but there was a powerful elite. So, the introduction of these measures undoubtedly led to the explosion—both in 1905 and 1917.

**JB:** *Let's go back again, though, to your remark about World War One. In my own first book, *the Russian intellectuals*—by the way, you encouraged me to write that book—the *Russian intellectuals* at the time, 1917-1922, whether on the left or on the right or in the middle, they all seemed to point at World War One as critical to the revolution of 1917. How do you feel about that? You have presented the opposition between the state, the police state, and the intelligentsia. Do you feel that without World War One—I know it's a counterfactual—but do you think that without World War One the revolution still could have happened? And produced this kind of change?*

**RP:** Well, the revolution of March (February) 1917, was to a large extent due to the fact that Russia was performing very poorly in the war. People were giving up. It was originally an anti-war, not an anti-tsarist, but an anti-war revolution. Russian had had enough of it. They were getting nowhere, they were suffering, people were getting killed. There were shortages of everything. And I think, if it weren't for the war, I think the chances are there would have been no revolution in February.

I think the tsarist regime would have gradually evolved toward a more constitutional and democratic regime. But the war did it. Just as Nazism wouldn't have occurred if it weren't for World War One.

**JB:** *We've noticed that in the last decade or so that 1917 and the revolution are far less popular as topics for historical research than they were earlier. (This is asking you about historiography, about other scholars' work.) Do you think that the topic is over—historiographically finished? Maybe you want to say something about how scholarship has developed since your book, since 1990.*

**RP:** I think there are enough books on the Russian Revolution for no one to try to write another one. The sources have been exploited. I'm just reading a new Polish book by a Polish scholar about the origins of appeasement. And he argues that the origins of appeasement occurred in 1920 during the Russo-Polish war when Lloyd George and other Western leaders were willing to sacrifice Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe to stop the Soviet advance into Western Europe. He uses new sources. But on the Russian Revolution, I wouldn't encourage anyone to write on that. I think, it's been done.

**JB:** *That's interesting. From your perspective, what has the opening of the archives in Russia changed? And thinking about your oeuvre as a whole, is there anything from the opening of the archives in Russia that has fundamentally changed or altered your views?*

**RP:** Well, the Lenin archive was opened—the secret archive. I've published some of these documents. But I must say, it didn't change my view on anything. I mean, I suspected all of these things. It's nice to have it in black and white, in Lenin's own words, but it did not change my mind on any aspect of the Bolshevik Revolution.

**JB:** *Our editors—the board that came up with questions for this interview—asked this question somewhat differently. They said, "Let's revive a Soviet ritual: auto-criticism!" So when you look back at your research, now, and this is not about the archives per se, but over the last 20 years or so, are there some things that you see differently? From when you produced your books? Are there some areas of change in your view?*

**RP:** No, I wouldn't change. I may have added more on the Comintern if I were writing again; I didn't write quite enough on that. And the Comintern was very important. But it's not because of new materials; I just concentrated very much on internal policies and not on foreign policies so much. So I think if I were to write [on the Russian revolution] today I would have had a whole chapter on the Comintern.

**JB:** *What about people, I mean real people from the past. Are there figures in Russian history that profoundly influenced your work? I'll give you one example: Struve. You spent a lot of your life writing about this figure and produced two fantastic volumes. Did he have a major impact on the way you thought?*

**RP:** His liberal-conservative point of view affected me very much. I think he would have approved of my history of the Russian Revolution, if he were alive. It's hard to say how I would have written if I had not known him or written about him, but he certainly influenced me very much. Of all the Russian intellectuals I found him the most compatible with my point of view.

**JB:** *Yes. And what about figures in the state? People have a tendency, historians anyway, to develop either an antipathy or an affection—an understanding of a sort—for certain political actors. Were there any ministers in the government that you felt a particular sympathy for?*

**RP:** Well, I did like Stolypin. I had a certain sympathy for Nicholas II. He was incompetent in many ways and really didn't care for politics, but he was a sympathetic figure—not a bad figure. Limited intelligence, but not evil. I found the Octobrists sympathetic. I found some of the White leaders sympathetic. I felt sorry for Denikin that he lost the Civil War. Mostly, White leaders I had sympathy for. That's probably it.

**JB:** *What about the other side? The socialists of various kinds and so on. Were there any for whom you felt, well, that you could empathize with?*

**RP:** No, I think the socialists did not understand how explosive Russia was. If I were alive then, I would not have been a socialist, I would have been—I don't know—an Octobrist or something like that, one who criticized the socialists very harshly, particularly the left-wing socialists. There were some socialists I sympathize with, though. For example, Mark Vishniak who was my teacher of Russian, he understood.

**JB:** *Mark Vishniak was your teacher of Russian?*

**RP:** Yes, at Cornell.

**JB:** *Oh, interesting.*

**RP:** I got to know him quite well in 1943-1944. I knew him also afterwards when he worked for *Time*. I've now read his books. I'm working on Milyukov. And I've read some more of Vishniak's work, I sympathize with him. [As for] Milyukov, I do not sympathize with him, because strangely enough although he was very anti-Soviet to begin with, he changed completely toward the end of his life. He approved of the Hitler-Stalin pact, do you know that?

**JB:** Yes.

**RP:** And other such things. And at the end of his life, he thought that the Soviet regime was supported by the population.

**JB:** *He was a populist even in the 20s when I wrote about him. He always believed that the people were behind him. Of course we could say that was a characteristic of most Russian intelligentsy.*

**RP:** He felt that they were behind Stalin.



**JB:** Yes.

**JB:** *Both of us have lived a life in history. As you mentioned earlier, you didn't expect the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Neither did I. But both of us have lived through—well not through but in—another transitional period. What has surprised you or confirmed your views in the last 20 years or so? And how does the experience of these last 20 years relate to the earlier period you wrote about?*

**RP:** As you know, from my books, I see a connection between the Soviet Regime and Tsarist Regime. When the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991, I had hoped that this experience of seventy some years of totalitarianism would cure them and that Russia will move towards a Western-type democracy. And I was very surprised to see that this did not happen. And that the regime is, in some ways, trying to get back to the Soviet regime. Not in economics—I mean there is private property and so on. But in politics and so on. Putin, at heart, I think, sympathizes with the Soviet regime and with Stalin. And that deeply disappointed me. I'm really discouraged by it. I don't know maybe in 50 or 100 years Russia will move in another direction—but for the next decade or two I think we are going to see more repression and more nationalism and more expansionism. I find this very discouraging.

**JB:** *When you think back on your historical works, has this experience of the last 20 years confirmed aspects of them?*

**RP:** It confirms that there is this tradition in Russia of people wanting a very strong government which is lawless but protects them from their neighbors; which is expansionist, which is a great power (*velikaia derzhava*). So it confirms my historical views but not my hopes.

**JB:** *Yes, it's a matter of mind or heart, right?*

**RP:** Yes, I was hoping they would move away from that.

**JB:** *And when did you begin to lose that hope?*

**RP:** It was gradual. But certainly under Putin. The more I observe Putin, the more I am convinced of this. For example, I was associated with [Elena] Nemirovskaya and the Moscow School of Political Studies, which tried to develop among Russians a civic spirit. I used to go there and lecture to them and so on. Because they received money from foreign sources they are declared a foreign agent and can't work any longer. And that enormously discouraged me. That, in fact, if you take money from foreign sources, which meant well for Russia, that you are declared to be partly a spy for foreign powers.

**JB:** *Let's return to revolutionary times for a moment and think about this question. Do you see this suspicion of foreigners and the casting of blame for subversion upon foreigners as something that derives from the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet experience or does it also have any pre-revolutionary roots?*

**RP:** You know, suspicion of foreigners is very deeply ingrained in Russia. They don't have the values of Western civilization. When they are asked in public

opinion polls, do you identify with the West, I think it is something like 15% say yes. They are mostly intellectuals. 50-some percent say never. They have their own traditions which are deeply embedded in their society; whether it is tsarism, the Soviet regime, the post-Soviet regime.

**JB:** *Well, it's too bad we don't have opinion polls from, say, 1910. What you do you think the answers would have been then?*

**RP:** I think it would be very similar to what they are today. Culture changes very slowly, in any civilization. Our American civilization is very much rooted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Russian one is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. I think the public opinion polls of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be very similar to what they are today.

**JB:** *That does bring me back to a question we talked about earlier, which is possible break points or critical shifts in Russian history. After all we could go much further back. We could go back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and start talking about Russian culture, and Russian politics, and even Russian law. But when you look toward 1917—and of course we are always looking in hindsight—do you see some critical moment in which the culture could be pushed in a different direction and did change or didn't change?*

**RP:** No, I don't think so. I mean, the people did not elect Lenin, they voted heavily for the Bolsheviks in the constituent assembly but that has to do with the war. Because the Bolsheviks were against the war and people were fed up with the war. So they got something like 25% of the vote, but not for the regime to be established. No, I think there is a tremendous continuity in Russian history-tsarist, Soviet, post-Soviet.

**JB:** *You mentioned Mark Vishniak. He's a favorite of mine too. I wrote about him and I think perhaps you suggested it. I read his marvelous books from the 1920s. But you've had the fortune to live in a time where you spoke with and got to know many people who were actual participants in the Russian Revolution.*

**RP:** Beginning with Kerensky.

**JB:** *Could you say something about these figures and their impact on the way you did history of the revolution.*

**RP:** I knew, say, Kerensky. I knew Tsereteli. I knew quite a few of these people. They were all anti-communists of course and they influenced me, but because I wanted to be influenced. If I didn't want to be influenced then they would have had no influence. Those colleagues of mine who were sympathetic to the Bolshevik Revolution were not influenced by them. So you are influenced by people who express views that you like. So I was influenced by them and I talked a lot to them. In Cornell, we had not only Vishniak, we had Gavronskii, we had Prince and Mrs. Meshcherskii and so on. That's really the first time I got interested in Russia because until I went into the army and the ASTP program sent me to Cornell, I wasn't particularly

interested in Russia. My cultures were Polish and German. As a child I spoke mainly German until I was 6 or 7 years old because my parents wanted me to know German and then at the age of 6 we moved to Warsaw and I began to speak Polish. My interests in my teens were art—I was going to be an art historian—I started writing a biography of Giotto the renaissance painter. Music—I was terribly interested in music, I played the piano at home to be a conductor or something and my cultural roots were mostly German. It was purely an accident that I became a Russian historian because when I joined the army they had a program called the Army Specialist Training Program—the ASTP—where they taught languages and because I spoke Polish which is of course very close to Russian I was sent to Cornell to learn Russian. When I came from Cornell to Harvard in 1946, to the history department, I wasn't sure what I was going to study and I remember I took courses in philosophy. I took courses in all kinds of other things and on the first day that we had registration I was assigned to Crane Brinton because of my broad interest and he said, "Well, what do you want to specialize in?" and I told him. And he told me, "You can't do that! You have to pick a nation." And I said, "What nation should I pick?" And he said, "What interests you?" And I said, "Maybe Russia?" And he said "Well then go to Professor Karpovich, he's sitting in the chair there." And I went over to Karpovich and I became a Russian historian. But that was not my intention.

**JB:** *I love these accidental stories. It's true for me too. I had no idea. When I was young I wanted to be an opera star!*

**RP:** We had very few Russian historians of Western origin. All of the professors, with minor exceptions, of Russian history in America at that time were Russians and émigrés. So it was an open field.

**JB:** *Let's talk a little bit about the impact of American politics on your scholarship or others' scholarship on Russia. You participated in an American president's administration for some years, you might want to speak about that. But more generally, what about the American context of doing Russian history.*

**RP:** Americans did not really understand Russia. Americans, in general, feel that all cultures are the same. And that everybody is like an American, fundamentally. That given the chance they'll be like Americans. Which, to me, as someone born in Poland, is just totally wrong. When I came to Harvard, there was very broad sympathy for the Soviet Union, I had some of it too. Because they saved us from the Germans and the Japanese. But American politics was not very influential to me. The more I studied Russian history the more I became convinced it was a very separate culture. Very different from ours. And it took me many many years to understand it. I think I understand it now. But I've been working on it, literally, 70 years now. And I think I understand it but it is very different from ours, and American politics don't play much of a role in my view of Russia.

**JB:** *In your view—no. But do you want to comment about other historians writing about Russia?*

**RP:** There is a certain tendency to think of Russia as just another America—given the chance—and I disagree with this. I quote in one of my books Jerry Hough—what did he say? Remember? Yes, that Russian cities were administered the way New Haven was administered or something like that; it's absurd. Russian politics and American politics have nothing in common. Nothing.

**JB:** *Well that's a very clear answer! I was a graduate student of yours and I'll never forget some of the things that you said in your research seminar. Dan Orlovsky was in that seminar. He was ahead of me. He was a PhD student; I was just a Master's student. At the very beginning of that seminar you got us all together and you asked, "Why do we do history?" All of us tried to come up with very intellectual answers. Politics and all kinds of explanations—scholarship and so on. And at the end you said, "Well that's interesting but I think we do history because we love it!"*

**RP:** That's a good answer but it's not the only reason. When I was in college I had this wide interest in art and music and so on and I didn't know which to study. And I heard a casual remark made by a friend who said, "What you should do is study history because in history you can study all of these things, as long as they are in the past!" "So you mean I can study history of music, history of art and so on?" He said, "Yes!" I became a historian for that reason.

**JB:** *And Russian history gives us...*

**RP:** Well Russian history came from the fact that I learned Russian and Russians played such a huge role in winning the war and there were so few Americans who knew anything about Russia.

**JB:** *And of course there are also great opportunities for doing the history of Russian art and Russian music!*

**RP:** I have written a book about Russian art. You probably don't know it. It's about the *peredvizhniki*. The itinerants.

**JB:** *So you fulfilled your dream!*

**JB:** *One other big lesson I remember from your seminar was that you made us aware that historians had the right to interpret their material. That history was about interpretation. And you didn't hesitate to praise books that we thought, at the time, were not along the line of your political thought. For example, I think I remember you saying that Deutscher's biography of Stalin was a great book.*

**RP:** Really?

**JB:** *Yes! And that was very impressive for students. So how do you feel about that—about history as interpretation?*

**RP:** Well it is. That's what it is. It's not facts. I mean the facts can be a subject but what they mean is very important and I find it fascinating to deal with cultures and civilizations of the past and interpret them.

**JB:** *Even today. Are there other topics that you would like to talk about? Our journal—Cahiers du Mondes russe—... is speaking primarily to European audiences... What would you want to include in a special issue about the revolution of 1917?*

**RP:** I would include interpretations. Why some people, some historians, see it as a positive event and others see it as a very negative event. I don't understand the mentality of people who see it as a positive event. The cultural effects of the revolution—what the revolution has done to Russians—I have some notions about but I'm not entirely clear. How Russian culture, how Russian psyche has changed as a result of the revolution and the 70 years that followed. Those would be some of the topics I'd want to include.

**JB:** *One of the questions the editors were interested in, is what are the tasks for future research on 1917? A question for you would be which subjects, methods, other considerations should be part of future research. You've already said you don't think we need another history of the revolution but this emphasis on the impact of culture, would you see this as important?*

**RP:** Yes, the effects of the revolution. Not the revolution itself. I think the revolution has been studied enough. But the effects of the revolution on the psyche and everything else are important and that's not exhausted.

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