

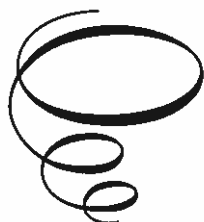
# Centenary of the Russian Revolution (1917-2017)

Edited by

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and Antoni Segura i Mas

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1917 IN RUSSIA

JULIÁN CASANOVA

Revolutions are extraordinary events that have a huge impact on the histories of nations and the world. Theda Skocpol, the author of a now classic study in comparative history on the three “major” revolutions in France, Russia and China, has defined them as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures (...) accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below”.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the accounts of militants and activists, Skocpol argues that revolutionary processes, apart from their egalitarian dreams, entail the construction of new state forms and that “successful” revolutions end with the consolidation of a new state power. In short, revolutions may change a host of things, including the class hierarchy and social values and institutions, but above all, they create states that are more bureaucratic, centralised and repressive than the ones they replace.

No better setting exists to examine all of these profound changes than the Russia of 1917. Not a single aspect of its society, economy, politics or culture remained intact. The rule of the Romanov dynasty, which had begun three hundred years earlier with the coronation of Michael I (1613-1645), disappeared overnight. At a stroke, the entire edifice of the Russian state came down. Some months later, the Bolsheviks seized power in the most abrupt and momentous change in the history of the twentieth century. Therein lies the importance of Russia’s double revolution, the first in February and the second in October of 1917, which in turn toppled the Tsarist regime and the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky.

The state that emerged from the Bolsheviks’ revolution and their victory in the Civil War that followed challenged a world then under the domination of Western empires, defied capitalism, and very soon faced off

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<sup>1</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 4.

against the other new actor on the scene, Fascism. It inspired communist movements and other major revolutions like the one in China. After the Second World War, it also exerted a strong influence on anti-colonial movements and on the design and construction of the Cold War world.<sup>2</sup>

Given the magnitude of events, it is no wonder that historians offered a variety of interpretations, with points of agreement and points of contention, giving rise to what Edward Acton identified in 1990 as consolidated views of the revolution or “schools of thought”.<sup>3</sup>

While some defined the revolution from the outset as a “popular revolution” led by the Bolshevik party or a revolution of the united proletariat according to its description in Soviet propaganda, anti-Soviet and anti-Marxist historiography always identified it as a “coup d’état” that triumphed through violence and terror.

Apart from these liberal and Soviet interpretations, a new historiographical school emerged in the 1970s. It was represented basically by young British and US historians who, despite their numbers and diversity, were given the label of “revisionists”. Through their research, they set out what could be called a “social interpretation of the Russian Revolution”, which ran in parallel to some of the basic guideposts then orienting a swath of Western historians, from the *Annales* school to British Marxists, and which consisted in sidestepping ideological generalisations, writing the history of social groups, and applying perspectives and methods from the social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The international dimension of the Bolshevik revolution and the importance of the phenomenon of power, of groups and movements competing for power, and of the conflicts unleashed by possessing or seeking power, have been the highlight of a large amount of research conducted in recent years. A fine example is the latest book by S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (London: Arnold, 1990). Although Acton cautioned that none of the schools was “homogeneous” because there had been a number of significant shifts over the past seven decades (p. 3), the British historian conceptualised them as “orthodox Soviet”, “liberal” and “libertarian”. In addition, since the end of the 1960s, a new generation of “Western” historians, the “revisionists”, had emerged with a willingness to re-examine the schools critically and to demonstrate “their commitment to social history and quantitative methods, and their use of sources hitherto barely tapped” (p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> It is this new generation of “revisionists” that has substantially modified our understanding of twentieth-century Russia. A good number of its members, representatives of various national historiographies including Russia’s, contributed writings to an excellent volume compiled by Edward Acton, Vladimir Cherniaev

With a shift of focus from leaders and high politics to social movements and groups, the revisionist historiography downplayed interpretations focused on the manipulation of the working classes by radical intellectuals. Following on from the research of E.P. Thompson, they brought to light the experiences of the lower classes, peasants and workers, as well as the crucial role of soldiers and sailors, and redefined the role of the Bolshevik party and its connections to popular aspirations.

The class character of these revolutions became more finely nuanced from the 1990s onwards, thanks to a new historiography on social and culture identities that looked at gender, religion, symbols and images. There was a shift in direction from the material and political domain toward the cultural and anthropological. Because the revolutions also occurred over the length and breadth of a vast multi-ethnic empire, a history began to be written “from the margins”. As opposed to “Russocentrism”, it acknowledged the cultural and social complexity of national and ethnic identities.<sup>5</sup>

A large number of the historians who published their works after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent opening of the archives stressed the constant state of crisis that existed between 1914 and 1921. Their accounts begin with the First World War and end with the closing battles of the Russian Civil War and the establishment of the Soviet Union. What many knew and studied as the Russian Revolution was, in reality, a series of simultaneous and overlapping revolutions of the intellectual elites, the middle classes, the workers, women, soldiers and peasants against the Tsarist autocracy, against the social order, against the war and the military’s hierarchical system, against the landowners, and in favour of land redistribution.<sup>6</sup>

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and William G. Rosenberg, *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution* (London: Arnold, 1997). It is interesting and significant to compare Acton’s approach in *Rethinking* to the one in his introduction to the new volume, entitled “The Revolution and Its Historians: The *Critical Companion* in Context” (3-17), which discusses the impact of postmodernism and the new cultural history.

<sup>5</sup> When following this evolution, it proves highly illuminating to contrast the papers of other new historians of the recent historiography, such as Ronald Grigor Suny from the US, who wrote “Toward a Social History of the October Revolution”, *American Historical Review*, 88 (February 1983): 31-52; and particularly, “Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics”, *The Russian Review*, vol. 53, April 1994: 165-182.

<sup>6</sup> Good examples of the new research appear in the compilation of papers previously published in different places which were brought together by Martin A. Miller in *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); in E.R. Frankel et al (eds.), *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917*

The chief tendency in recent historiography, which has been enriched by dozens of local studies, microhistory and the opening of archives, is to stress that the events in Russia were part of what the US historian Peter Holquist has called a “continuum of crisis”, a constant state of crisis, which passed through various stages between 1914 and 1921—world war, revolutions and Civil Wars—that lacked any clear-cut dividing lines.<sup>7</sup> Various authors who began to publish their works after 1991, the year in which the state that had arisen from the Bolshevik seizure of power disappeared, speak of a “kaleidoscope of revolutions” —a kaleidoscope or diverse and changing combination of causes, events and results, with flesh-and-blood people at the centre of the story.<sup>8</sup>

The latest accounts put an emphasis first of all on the importance of the First World War as a catalyst for revolution. The deep rift between a changing society and the Tsarist autocracy, which began to appear decades earlier in violent demonstrations from above and below, created enormous potential for the development of the conflict. However, it was the Great War, a consequence of the imperial rivalry maintained by Russia with Germany and Austria-Hungary, that led to the mobilisation of roughly fifteen-and-a-half million men between August 1914 and early 1918, with total losses of over seven million including the dead, disappeared, wounded and maimed. The war’s tragedy, according to most specialists, lay at the root of the revolutions of 1917.

In this way, the war exacerbated the deep divisions in Russian society, and the army in wartime turned into an enormous group of revolutionaries, whose own unease and turmoil could not be separated from the violent unrest that shook society as a whole. The crisis devolved from rebellion into revolution when the soldiers sided with the workers and especially

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and in the cited *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914-1921*.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For more information on the impact of opening the archives, see the analysis and numerous autobiographical notes of the Australian Sheila Fitzpatrick, one of the pioneering figures in social history since the end of the nineteen-sixties: “Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History”, *The Russian Review*, 74 (July 2015): 377-400. See also Donald J. Raleigh, “Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution”, *The Russian Review*, 61 (January 2002): 16-24.

<sup>8</sup> For a defence of the concept of a “kaleidoscope of revolutions”, see Christopher Read, *War and Revolution in Russia, 1914-22* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 220, in which Read also supports Peter Holquist’s chronological proposal of a “continuum of crisis”.

with the women who were protesting against food shortages, and when the members of the moderate opposition abandoned the autocracy to form new bodies of power.

The key contributions on this period of the war address the decline of the imperial army; the breakdown of the food supply system at a time when there were shortages of staple goods for millions of soldiers at the front and for the general populace back in the rear-guard; the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing areas under German occupation; the role of women protesting the food shortages, and especially the soldiers' wives, the so-called *Soldatki*.<sup>9</sup>

Women, soldiers/sailors, peasants and industrial workers were the main actors in the strikes and demonstrations that took place in the third winter of the war, the coldest and most complicated one, in the face of a crisis of authority and lost confidence in the regime. Their actions would lead to severe disturbances of public order, desertions from the front, and ultimately a profound transformation in the power structure that had dominated Russia for centuries.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A key source on the fundamental issue of the Russian imperial army and its collapse during the First World War is Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980-1987); the provision of food, as Peter Holquist shows in detail in his study on how the war led to revolution (*Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921*), became one of the most important issues of state intervention and public debate. Peter Gatrell, whose research puts the figure of refugees at six million at the beginning of 1917, draws on a phrase from F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel *Tender Is the Night* to refer to "a whole empire walking": *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). For more on the *Soldatki*, see the innovative research of Sarah Badcock, "Women, Protest, and Revolution: Soldiers' Wives in Russia during 1917", *International Review of Social History*, 49 (2004): 47-70.

<sup>10</sup> Some years ago, Barbara Evans Clements began to comb through the world of women—women peasants and workers—and the world of the intelligentsia in order to produce biographies [*Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979)] and innovative studies ("Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917-1923", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 8, 2, 1982: 215-35), which she later synthesised in her book *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a more wide-ranging book with much more biographical material, see Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia 1870-1917: A Study in Collective Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). For many years, the subject of the peasantry was neglected in most studies of the revolutions of 1917, with the historiography generally taking greater interest in the role of the intelligentsia and industrial workers. In recent decades,

With the fall of the Tsar and the February revolution, all legal and ethical controls and restrictions toppled. From then on, in a context of growing anarchy, Civil War and economic meltdown, a highly unstable period witnessed the search for a new political and social order. From February 1917, Russia hurtled at breakneck speed through a liberal phase, then a socialist phase that was initially moderate but turned more radical, and then Lenin and the Bolsheviks took what had been a revolution for the power of the Soviets, which had enjoyed broad popular support, and turned it into a one-party dictatorship.<sup>11</sup>

The two revolutions also had an enormous impact among the non-Russian peoples of the empire, approximately half of its total population. While nationalist movements had started to challenge the autocracy in 1905, they became radicalised over the course of the war as some of the empire's peripheral regions, such as Poland and the Baltic area, fell under German occupation and a portion of their populations were evacuated. The end of the authoritarian system, the abolition of censorship and a wave of political and social changes emanating from Petrograd and other major Russian cities gave the nationalists a golden opportunity to organise themselves and mobilise their fellow citizens through their bonds of national identity.

As the works of Ronald Grigor Suny effectively show, stark distinctions existed between ethnic identity, based on differing customs and languages, national consciousness, which found greater expression in the political arena, and a nationalism that sought to establish some type of state based on national homogeneity. Among eighteen million Muslims, nationalism was a very weak force, especially in Turkestan, where the majority of Muslims lived, whereas in the Baltic region, the predominance of Germans

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however, historians have put the peasantry at the centre of the narrative. The previously cited works of Holquist, Read and Smith are clear examples, as are those of Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin, 1998) and Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Many avenues were opened up by the work of Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of the Peasantry in a Developing Society, Russia, 1900-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). The monograph that best reflects some of the new approaches is one by Aaron B. Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> The stages of the revolution and the speed with which it hurtled from one stage to the next are underscored by Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 287.



and the Tsarist state's periodic campaigns of Russification had spurred the emergence of powerful nationalist movements.<sup>12</sup>

The Bolsheviks' seizure of power is the other key occurrence in which the latest studies rise above the old quarrels between Soviet and anti-Soviet historiography, instead underscoring the importance of the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" and how the popular support for these grassroots institutions paved the way for the Bolsheviks.

In Wade's view, the revolution of October 1917 was a "popular struggle" for this very reason and it only later became a "Bolshevik revolution". According to Read, the Bolsheviks carried out a political coup, but it was only possible because of massive popular support for the power of the soviets, the growing movement of land seizures, war-weariness and terrible economic hardship. A coup d'état in its purest form, Read argues, is a change of personnel at the highest echelons of political power, a state that is seized by conspirators and coup perpetrators. By contrast, in October 1917, in Russia, "there was precious little state to seize".<sup>13</sup>

The idea that power was seized as a result of a coup against a democratic government is challenged by Smith as well: "It had all the elements of a coup (...) except for the fact that a coup implies the seizure of a functioning state machine. Arguably, Russia had not had this since February". The provisional government lacked legitimacy from the start. Since the summer, it had become bogged down in a series of successive crises—at the front, in the countryside, in the factories and on the non-Russian periphery. Few governments could have coped with such a situation, much less one lacking a reliable army.<sup>14</sup>

By adopting this line of research, it is possible to discard myths and misconceptions that have long clouded our understanding of such a violent transformation. Against the myths and clashing views, Wade argues that "it was neither a simple manipulation by cynical Bolsheviks of ignorant masses nor the carefully planned and executed seizure of power under Lenin's omniscient direction". Ultimately, the backing of the workers,

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "Nationality and Class in the Russian Revolutions of 1917: A Reexamination of Social Categories", in Nick Lampert and Gabor Rittersporn (eds.), *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath – Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1992: 211-241.

<sup>13</sup> The Wade quote is from *The Russian Revolution*, from which the subsequent quote on myths comes as well; the quote from Christopher Read comes from *War and Revolution in Russia*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> S.A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

soldiers and peasants for the soviets, the institution dedicated to promoting social revolution, combined with the fateful decision of the provisional governments to carry on with the war. Meanwhile, the fiasco of the Kornilov putsch had already demonstrated that the right was in disarray and that counter-revolution had no prospect of victory at the time.

The Civil War helped the Bolsheviks to hold onto power because it posed a clear choice between supporting them and the revolution or siding with the Whites and counter-revolution. Many of their opponents were forced to abandon resistance and assist in the Bolshevik victory as the lesser of two evils. The war against the Whites was, thus, the perfect excuse for the Bolsheviks to crush many popular aspirations and freedoms in the name of the military imperative.

In the process of the Civil War, everything that had characterised the October revolution—active participation in a popular movement driven by a programme of peace, land and all power to the soviets—came to an end. The Bolsheviks attained absolute and uncontested power between 1920 and 1922 because, in a situation of disorganisation, the strongest was the one who was the least weak—and this was their great accomplishment and advantage.

Since 1989, it has become more difficult to look at these revolutions, particularly the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, without an awareness of the appalling violence that accompanied them. Many people today, influenced by a substantial proportion of the historical accounts and by the political uses of history in a world in which the struggles for equality and a fairer distribution of wealth have been marginalised, reduce the revolutions to violence. On that line of reasoning, the revolutions in Russia, especially the Bolshevik one, mark the beginning of a cycle of violence that leads inexorably to the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, identified after 1945 as the chief paradigms of totalitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

Without forgetting the terrible social costs of these transformations, however, we historians cannot and must not avoid analysing why the revolutions took place, particularly in Russia, and why the different forms of socialism, moderate or radical, held so much appeal and promise for millions of workers, soldiers and peasants. The differing moral evaluations of communism, its utopia, the dreams and nightmares that it spawned, are of little use in explaining how and why revolution broke out in Russia in

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<sup>15</sup> The notion that the revolution is no longer regarded with “sympathy” today, along with the implications that this idea has for the study of its history, is addressed by S.A. Smith in “The Historiography of the Russian Revolution 100 Years On”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 16, n. 4, Fall 2015: 733, 748-749.

February 1917 or in understanding the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and the effects that all these events were to have on the shape of the world in the twentieth century.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible to investigate and interpret with greater perspective the spiral of conflicts, changes, dreams, deceptions and violence set in motion by the First World War and persisting afterwards in years of revolution and civil wars. To understand the complex social and cultural situation in the Russian empire, a good number of historians have added new views on class, gender, national, ethnic and religious identities, which have been incorporated into the political and social history of the revolutions since the late 1960s.

The historiographical reckoning is diverse, exceptional, at the stature of the major debates over the French Revolution. The present collective volume is a fine example of the advancement of knowledge about this turbulent period and a good sign of the attention that has been given to the subject by a number of leading Spanish historians for some time now. Only through rigorous research of this sort, with critically minded and widely disseminated readings of the past, do we increase our understanding and strengthen the task of the historian.