

## More Advance Praise for *The Russian Revolution*

“This is a book that we have been waiting for. *The Russian Revolution* is an enormous subject, and to write a short and authoritative book on it is very difficult indeed. Sean McMeekin brings many gifts to the task, not the least of which is that he can describe crowd scenes with immediacy. It should count as a classic.”

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“In vivid colors, Sean McMeekin presents a provocative narrative of the 1917 Russian revolutions with an emphasis on the conspiracies, mutinies, and acts of treason behind the scenes of both revolutions. He shows how the revolutions were a direct result of Russia’s involvement in World War I in new ways. It is a book that will generate much debate.”

—ERIC LOHR, Susan Carmel Lehrman Chair of  
Russian History and Culture, American University

# THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

*A New History*



SEAN McMEEKIN

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# A NOTE ON DATES, NAMES, TRANSLATION, AND TRANSLITERATION

The Russian Revolution, like both of the twentieth-century world wars, wrought havoc with place names as cities and entire regions changed hands between empires, from empires to nation states, and sometimes back to empires again. Moscow, mysteriously, escaped the nomenclature revolution, but this is one mercy among endless headaches. Because St. Petersburg was Petrograd (and not yet Leningrad) from 1914 to 1924, that is what it is for most of the book. With other cities I have used the contemporary form with modern usage in parentheses, thus Reval (Tallinn). In more politically sensitive cases, I have offered three versions on first usage, as in Lemberg (Lvov/Lviv). Today's Istanbul was called Constantinople in the period covered in the book, even by Ottoman government officials, and so that is the name we use. Although the Republic of Turkey did not come into formal existence until 1923, I refer to Turkey and the Ottoman Empire interchangeably before that date, as many Turks and most Russians and Europeans did at the time.

Dates provide an especially vexing problem in modern Russian history, in that the Julian calendar the empire used was first twelve, then thirteen days, behind the Gregorian one used in the West, to which the Bolsheviks switched in January 1918, right in the middle of the Russian revolutionary drama. For dates prior to this important in both Russian and European history I have tried to give both dates with a slash, as in November 1/14, 1916, where 1 is the Julian and 14

the Gregorian date. In 1917, when dates start coming fast and furious and the specifically Russian context becomes paramount, I switch over to the Julian calendar owing to the importance of months in revolutionary terminology (*February* Revolution, *April* and *July* days, *October* Revolution), before following the Bolsheviks in switching to the Gregorian in mid-January 1918. To guide readers, signposts will be offered when these switches are made.

For Russian-language words, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system, with a somewhat modified version for names. It has been my customary practice in the past to make exceptions only for standard spellings of famous surnames (e.g., Milyukov, not Miliukov). And yet this seems unfair to others. With apologies to Russian specialists, I have applied these changes broadly in the main text, starting Russian names with *Yu*, not *Iu* (Yusupov, not Iusopov) and *Ya*, not *Ia* (Yakov, not Iakov), which rule also eliminates double initials for first names and patronymics (*Iu* and *Ia* are two letters in Latin, one letter in Cyrillic). I have also ended names with *-y*, not *-ii* (Trotsky, not Trotskii) and *-x*, not *-ks* (Felix, not Feliks). I have done likewise with names where a close English rendering is common, such as Alexander (not Aleksandr) and Peter (not Petr/Pyotr). Mikhail and Nikolai are spelled and pronounced differently enough in Russian that I have left these alone, unless affixed to an Anglicized title, such as “Grand Duke Michael” or “Grand Duke Nicholas.” In accordance with convention, I have also used *Izvestiya* not *Izvestiia* and *Novoe Vremya* not *Vremia* in the main text, although following Library of Congress spellings in the source notes. “Soft” and “hard” signs are left out of the main text, so as not to burden the reader. The goal is to make it as easy as possible to read Russian names, and to remember them. It is impossible to be consistent in all these things; may common sense prevail.

All translations from the French, German, Russian, and Turkish, unless I am citing another translated work or note otherwise, are my own.

# INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Like 1789, when the French Revolution erupted, 1917 has entered the lexicon of world-historical dates all educated citizens are expected to know and remember. The meaning of 1917, however, remains much contested, not least because two very different revolutions took place in Russia that fateful year. The February Revolution toppled the Russian monarchy and ushered in a brief era of mixed liberal and socialist governance, only to be superseded by the more radical October Revolution, which saw Lenin's Bolshevik Party impose a Communist dictatorship and proclaim an open-ended world revolution against "capitalism" and "imperialism." Each of these developments was significant enough to merit serious historical study. Together they constitute one of the seminal events of modern history, which introduced Communism to the world and paved the way for decades of ideological conflict, culminating in the Cold War of 1945–1991.

Because the Bolsheviks were avowed Marxists, our understanding of the Russian Revolution has long been colored by Marxist language, from the idea of a class struggle between "proletarians" and the "capitalist" ruling classes, to the dialectical progression from a "bourgeois" to a socialist revolution. Even many non-Marxist historians tended, in the Cold War years, to accept the basic Marxist framework of discussion about the Russian Revolution, concentrating on such matters as Russia's economic backwardness vis-à-vis more



advanced Western capitalist countries, the stages of her emergence from feudalism and her “belated” industrial development, inequality and Russia’s lopsided social structure, and so on. As late as 1982, Sheila Fitzpatrick, in an influential college textbook titled *The Russian Revolution*, described Lenin’s aim in the October Revolution unambiguously as “the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat.”<sup>1</sup>

This relatively uncritical approach to the Russian Revolution proved surprisingly resistant to revision over the decades, in part because the great anti-Communist writers of the Cold War years, from George Orwell to Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Robert Conquest, focused on Communism in its period of Stalinist “maturity” in the 1930s and 1940s, not on its origins in the Revolution. Serious new studies of the February Revolution did appear, such as George Katkov’s *Russia 1917* (1967) and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s *February Revolution* (1981). Not until Richard Pipes’s *The Russian Revolution* (1990) however, was there a serious reappraisal of the revolutions of 1917 as a whole. What happened in Red October, Pipes asserted, was not a revolution, not a mass movement from below, but a top-down coup d’état, the “capture of governmental power by a small minority.” Far from being a product of social evolution, class struggle, economic development, or other inexorable historical forces foreseen in Marxist theory, the Russian Revolution was made “by identifiable men pursuing their own advantages,” and was therefore “properly subject to value judgment.” Pipes’s judgment of these men was withering.<sup>2</sup>

Coming out at a time when the Soviet Union was in the process of collapsing, Pipes’s thoroughly revisionist study acted like a wrecking ball, demolishing any last claim the Russian Communist Party had to democratic, popular, or moral legitimacy. Pipes was even called as an expert witness in the Nuremberg-style trial of the party’s crimes convened in 1992 (and then quickly abandoned) by Russian president Boris Yeltsin’s post-Communist government. Although many Soviet specialists scoffed at Pipes’s revisionist history as irretrievably biased (Pipes had worked as an adviser to the Reagan administration in 1981–1982), no one could ignore it. In the long-running debates about Communism between sympathizers and “Cold Warriors,” it

seemed that the sympathizers had been placed squarely on the defensive, if not routed for good.

A quarter-century later, there are signs that the political worm is turning again. Works such as Thomas Piketty's 2013 international best seller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, along with the popularity of openly avowed socialists, such as Bernie Sanders, with young voters in previously socialism-unfriendly America, suggest that Marx may be poised for a surprising comeback. For "millennial Marxists," as the *Nation* magazine has described the wave of young activists motivated by the "scourge of inequality," the financial crash of 2008 has more resonance than the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which marked the end of Communism in eastern Europe, or the collapse of the USSR in 1991. By many measures (such as the "Gini coefficient"), social inequality is indeed rising sharply in Western countries, which lends ammunition to ever-broader indictments of capitalism. We can surely now expect counterrevisionist books on the history of Communism, as younger historians revive the old dream of social revolution.<sup>3</sup>

An event as consequential as the Russian Revolution will always be used and abused in political argument, as an epochal transformation that brought the oppressed workers and peasants of Russia either liberation ("peace, land, and bread") or enslavement, depending on one's political sympathies. Edifying as these parables may be, they bear only passing resemblance to the actual events of 1917, which historians, granted access to original documentary material only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of Russian archives, are still struggling to reconstruct.

Now that the Cold War is mercifully over, it is possible to treat the revolution more dispassionately, as a concrete historical event—controversial and significant in its lasting impact on world politics, but also worth understanding on its own terms, unmediated by our current prejudices. Half-true anecdotes and stories about the revolution, smoothed into well-worn grooves as they were told and retold according to historians' evolving preoccupations over the decades, have come to replace the crooked timber of events in our memory. It is time to descend from the airy heights of ideological argument about 1917 and return to the solid ground of fact. By going back to the original sources, we can rediscover the revolution as it transpired

in real time, from the perspective of key actors who did not know, as they acted, how the story would turn out.

The most important revelation from the Russian archives has been a simple one. The salient fact about Russia in 1917, judging from virtually all documentary sources of the time, is that it was a country at war. Somehow, in all the historical arguments about Russia's autocratic political tradition; about "Russian economic backwardness"; about peasants and the land question; about factory statistics, strikes, and labor; about Marxism, about Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and their competing doctrines, this simple circumstance was obscured, pushed so far into the background that it had to be discovered anew.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately for historians of the revolution, the years since 1991 have seen an explosion of research into Russia's military performance in World War I from 1914 to 1917—a subject that, owing to Lenin's ties to Germany and his controversial decision to solicit a separate peace from Berlin in November 1917, had been almost taboo in Soviet times. It turns out that the Russian armies were not as hopelessly outclassed by the Germans on the eastern front as we have been told. Military censors' reports, only now rediscovered, show that the idea of creeping dissatisfaction in the ranks in winter 1916–1917, which one encounters in nearly all histories of the revolution, are erroneous: morale was trending up, not least because Russian peasant soldiers were much better fed than their German opponents.

Economic data tell a similar story. Far from there being a generalized collapse culminating in the February Revolution, the evidence points instead to a stupendous (if inflationary) wartime boom. There was a crisis during Russia's "Great Retreat" of 1915, when it seemed that shell shortage would doom the Russian war effort, but this was brilliantly overcome in 1916, a year that saw all war-industrial production indices shoot ahead—and the Russian armies advancing on every front. The world-famous bread shortages of Petrograd in winter 1917 likewise turn out, on closer inspection, to be mostly mythical.

Even the names are changing, as political actors recede from the story of the revolution or reemerge, center stage. Many historians have pooh-poohed the importance of the legendary Rasputin, but

it now appears that lurid rumors had some truth to them after all: plots to sideline or murder the tsar's influential peasant faith healer engaged not only scions of Russian high society and liberal politicians but Allied spies and senior officials. Mikhail Rodzianko, the president of the State Duma (parliament) who was the most famous politician in Russia at the dawn of 1917, saw his celebrity dwindle over the decades into a small bit part in the February Revolution, a mere mention in most history textbooks; it now appears that he was the key player in the drama after all. Trotsky and Stalin really were in the middle of the action during the revolutions of both 1905 and 1917, and deserve their renown. The exiled founder of the Bolshevik Party, Lenin, by contrast, was an afterthought in 1905 and barely worth the attention of tsarist police agents until his return to Russia in April 1917, after an absence of nearly two decades. Even then, an out-of-touch Lenin would have had little impact on the political scene had he not been furnished with German funds to propagandize the Russian army at a time when Russia was at war on fronts stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Caspian, with more than 7 million men under arms.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks played no role worth mentioning in the fall of the tsar, an unexpected gift of fate that, in mockery of Marxist pretensions of historical determinism, took them entirely by surprise. But they were the ultimate beneficiaries. Lenin's "Zimmerwald Left" program, worked out at wartime congresses of socialist exiles in Switzerland, which proposed to "turn the armies red" by infiltrating them with radical agitators, was a minority doctrine much mocked by Europe's mainstream socialist leaders, who preferred to focus on draft resistance and organizing antiwar demonstrations. After Lenin was given the chance to put his program into practice after the February Revolution, few were laughing anymore. It was Lenin's opportunistic exploitation of Russia's vulnerable strategic position in 1917, his conscious efforts to change the "imperialist war" into civil war by promoting mutinies and mass desertions of soldiers with their arms, which furnished the Bolshevik Party with the muscle it needed to triumph in the October Revolution and impose Communist rule on Russia.

The Bolsheviks' hostile takeover of the Russian army in 1917 was an audacious, chancy, and close-run affair that was nearly thwarted

at many critical moments. Had the statesmen thrown up by the February Revolution, above all Socialist Revolutionary orator and would-be strongman Alexander Kerensky, shown more competence and fortitude in suppressing Leninist agitation in the armies, the Bolsheviks would be no more remembered today than Europe's other socialist minority parties. Lenin would merit, at most, a footnote in the history of Russia, and of socialism.

This is not to take anything away from Lenin's breathtaking accomplishments, although these were very different from the "proletarian overthrowing of the bourgeoisie" he is credited with in traditional accounts. Fueled by German subsidies and his own indomitable will to power, Lenin succeeded in breaking the Russian Imperial Army in 1917 and then reassembled its shards in 1918, with Trotsky's help, into a formidable Red Army. Just as Lenin had foretold in his Zimmerwald Left prophesy, the resulting civil war of 1918–1920, which the Bolsheviks fought against a world of foreign and domestic enemies, both real and imagined, turned out to be even bloodier than the "imperialist war" with the Central Powers had been, requiring ever-mounting levels of mass mobilization, state control, and secret-police surveillance and repression.

After the departure of the last foreign and foreign-supplied armies from Russia in 1920, the Russian Civil War devolved into an internal struggle against recalcitrant peasant "class enemies" who had been reduced to poverty and famine by the Communist regime's forcible grain requisitions and its suppression of market and all moneyed transactions, as the full-on Marxist program of abolishing private property was put into practice. In a tacit concession that the Communist future would take longer to arrive than Lenin hoped, he abandoned the draconian measures of War Communism (as the abolition of private economic activity was retroactively labeled) in 1921–1922, to revive the grain trade, unleash market forces, and bring goods back into the stores. But Lenin's climbdown in this "New Economic Policy" was never meant to be more than a tactical retreat. After fighting and winning one final battle against the Orthodox Church in 1922, the Bolsheviks succeeded in subduing all resistance across the territories of the former tsarist empire, erecting a new empire in its place known as the Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics (USSR). Lenin and his successors could then set their sights on world revolution, exporting Communism to every corner of the globe.

After a quarter-century of exhilarating discoveries from the archives, it is time to take stock of what we have learned. Russia in the last days of the tsars was a land of contradictions, of great wealth and extreme poverty and the myriad social and ethnic tensions of a vast multiethnic empire; but there was nothing inevitable about the collapse of the regime in 1917. Nearly torn asunder by the revolution of 1905, which came in the wake of a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Empire made a remarkable recovery over the following decade, owing to the tsar's concessions that allowed the creation of the Duma, the formation of labor unions, and the far-sighted land reforms of Peter Stolypin. The tragedy of Russian liberalism is that it was the country's most dedicated reformers and constitutionalists who, by embracing the fashionable ideas of pan-Slavism, convinced Nicholas II that he needed to mobilize in July 1914 to appease public opinion—and then spent the war plotting against him anyway, in spite of his foolish decision to follow their advice. It was the tsar's fateful decision to go to war, despite the pointed warnings of Rasputin and other conservative monarchist advisers he usually trusted more than the liberals, which brought an end to an era of great economic and social progress in Russia, and ultimately cost him his throne. In this way an empire founded on the autocratic principle foundered on the feeble will to power of its last autocrat, who lacked the courage of his own convictions. Once he had the upper hand, Lenin would not make the same mistake.



**The Russian Empire  
Circa 1900**









