



*The Russian Revolution: A New History* by Sean McMeekin.

New York: Basic Books, 2017. Pp. xxxi, 445. ISBN 978-0-465-03990-6.

Review by Arthur I. Cyr, Carthage College (acyr@carthage.edu).

---

Winston Churchill famously described Russia as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” This neatly sums up the challenge outsiders faced in trying to come to terms with a sprawling country rich in natural resources but culturally and politically alien to Western nations. The Russian Revolution, captured by the Bolshevik communists led by Lenin,<sup>1</sup> further separated Russia and the successor Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from the rest of Europe. Karl Marx’s ideology first succeeded in a particularly backward, still overwhelmingly agrarian economy.

Historian Sean McMeekin (Bard College) has produced a substantial, readable, and thorough history of the Russian Revolution. It is especially welcome for his effective use of archives in Europe, Turkey, the United States, and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The list of the specific collections the author has used runs eight and a half pages, grouped as Archives, Principal Collections, and Document Collections. There are also forty pages of explanatory notes. In a word, this is serious work of meticulous scholarship.

The author clarifies and often contests conventional wisdom on his subject. He accepts the standard view that the government of Germany, in the third year of a devastating total war, brilliantly altered the situation in Russia by facilitating the travel of dedicated communist revolutionary Lenin. McMeekin stresses that the German operatives also continued to underwrite communist efforts in order to disrupt the status quo and seize the initiative in Russia.

Another strength of McMeekin’s account is his emphasis on promising trends in Russia’s economy and wider political system, despite the enormous ongoing material and human costs of the First World War. He argues that the overall national situation in Russia was improving somewhat when revolution began. After significant military reversals in 1914–16, Russia’s conscription and recruiting efforts, as well as production and supply capacities, had recovered sufficiently to ensure a steadier flow of resources to the front. Government documents show that many observers reported that both overall morale at the front and public optimism were increasing. That said, McMeekin rightly stresses the years of turbulence that preceded the revolutions of 1917. The revolt of 1905 had set the stage for what was to come.

The author assesses, too, the effects that the February 1917 Revolution had on Pres. Woodrow Wilson and the general public of the United States. The democratic aspects of the initially successful revolutionary movement allowed him to confirm in his own mind, and persuade others, that the death struggle in Europe essentially pitted the forces of democracy against those of dictatorship; his pursuit of direct US involvement in the European war was a moral and philosophical crusade to “make the world safe for democracy.” Germany’s declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare as a means to counter the Allied blockade of shipping to the Continent and directly

---

1. Born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, but better known by his alias, “Lenin,” which McMeekin, with one exception, uses exclusively.

threaten supplies of Great Britain was a useful immediate spur for the Wilson Administration to seek a declaration of war from Congress.

The more subtle, longer-term effects of the brief democratic turn of revolution in Russia were profound: Wilson was inspired to transform the pursuit of victory in a ghastly military struggle into a struggle to institutionalize world peace and cooperation after the war. The powerful moralistic aspects of his personality help explain the rigidity with which he pursued his vision of the League of Nations. In the end, he failed to convince the US Senate to support the new world body.

Meanwhile, developments in Russia redefined European and wider international relations for the next seven decades. The ambitions of Lenin and associates to infiltrate the armies of both sides in the war and “turn them red” went nowhere; in fact they isolated them in the wider international socialist movement, which espoused more modest actions like resisting conscription and demonstrating against the war.

However, Lenin’s organizational genius, tactical skills, and ruthlessness ultimately brought political successes. Public disruption and encouragement of violence became communist trademarks. The Russian military over time proved a particularly fertile field for the communists. Ultimately, democratic forces were overcome and Russia withdrew from the war—the principal goal of the Germans in supporting communist efforts. Communism became the triumphant secular political religion in Russia and surrounding regions; its grip lasted for decades.

In his new study, Sean McMeekin presents his important research results in a lucid and satisfying narrative that will enlighten all serious students of the Russian Revolution.