



## *Readings on the Russian Revolution: Debates, Aspirations, Outcomes*

Ed. Melissa K. Stockdale.

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Over a century on, there is a voluminous and diverse literature on the Russian Revolution, as befits one of the most significant global events in the twentieth century. It is not surprising, therefore, that there have been several attempts to gather essential readings to introduce the most important approaches and arguments. This latest effort is edited by historian Melissa Stockdale (Univ. of Oklahoma), who has studied and written on the revolutionary period for several decades.<sup>1</sup> She assembles here excerpts from post-Cold War writings by fifteen historians using different methodologies and approaches, and expressing a variety of views.

After Stockdale's introduction surveying the historiography and central issues, the readings are grouped into four sections concerning: the actors, language and symbols of 1917; war, revolution and the state; revolutionary dreams and identities; and outcomes and impacts. The book includes a chronology, glossary of key terms, and helpful bibliographical guide to further reading.

Part I begins with the late Richard Pipes surveying the revolutionary period. For Pipes, who stresses political over social factors, February was not caused by a social revolution but prompted one: Lenin effectively rode to power on a wave of anarchy he helped create, leading a classic coup d'état in October. The Soviet state was "totalitarian" from the start, with an omnipotent party, militarized politics, and an obsession with enemies. Pipes was a Cold War "warrior," staunchly critical of the Soviet Union. Other readings in Part I challenge aspects of this interpretation.

Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii stress the social and cultural alongside the political and give greater agency to workers. They contest the idea of a manipulated, homogenous working class, in light of the diversity of workers' backgrounds, views, and identities. Yet several consistent grievances ran through this diversity: a sense of injustice and exclusion; a desire for economic and social justice; and a growing belief that "democracy" was exclusively for the lower social groups. This helps explain why, briefly in late summer-autumn 1917, workers supported the Bolsheviks.

Sarah Badcock takes a similar approach to the peasantry. Though there was conflict, peasants were rational and creative, not anarchic, in their responses to the revolution. They sought practical means to satisfy their desire for more land. Their thirst for social justice opened a rift between the center and the local as national progress on the land issue was too slow and local politicians searched for ways to maintain authority and order.

This complication of revolutionary politics is further examined by Boris Kolonitskii, who stresses that politics concerns language and symbols as well as leaders, parties, and programs. As the only socialist minister initially after February, Alexander Kerenskii was hailed as the leader of the popular revolution in hagiographic pamphlets and postcards, and people hung his portrait in their homes. But, his image eroded amid a disastrous military offensive and a lack of reforms; sa-

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1. See, e.g., her *Paul Miliukov and the Quest for a Liberal Russia, 1880-1918* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1996) and *Mobilizing the Russian Nation: Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2016).

tirical attacks appeared in the press and people ripped up their postcards. Here, too, people were more rational and proactive than passively anarchic in striving to realize their ambitions for the revolution.

Part II of the anthology shifts to a consideration of the broader relations between war and revolution. Joshua Sanborn's essay frames Russia's First World War as a process of decolonization that culminated in 1917 and the ensuing civil war, as various regions pressed for greater independence. The collapse of the imperial state bred charismatic warlords in specific locales and fueled conflict in Russia's borderlands. All this, Sanborn argues, had effects beyond Russia, inspiring the postwar Wilsonian promotion of national self-determination.

Similarly, Peter Holquist argues that practices usually associated with the Bolsheviks—surveillance, agitation, and enlightenment—originated in the wartime activities of the Tsarist state and reflected pan-European trends. October radicalized and extended these practices. Indeed, all sides in the civil war used surveillance to observe and shape attitudes as such practices moved from military into civilian realms.

The Bolsheviks were interested in why people felt as they did. As Igor Narskii maintains, the people had little to be happy about—society had collapsed. Russia lost a third of its anticipated population during the years of war, revolution, and civil strife. A sharp deterioration of living conditions and the breakdown of state structures spawned epidemics that killed millions. In the struggle for survival, many turned to crime and some even resorted to cannibalism as societal norms disintegrated.

In time, the Bolsheviks slowly managed to restore some semblance of central state authority. Adeeb Khalid discusses this process through the lens of Turkestan, which was essentially independent after March 1917. The Bolsheviks re-established control through trial and error from late 1919 onward. By accepting that race and nationalism trumped class in colonial situations, as the Bolsheviks saw it, they were able to reframe October as an anti-colonial revolution, forge temporary alliances with Muslim reformers, and take advantage of local conflicts to curtail Turkestan's autonomy.

Part III, on revolutionary ideas, opens with Richard Stites's investigation of the Bolsheviks' creation of "revolutionary" rituals into the 1920s, specifically socialist holidays and new marriage and funeral ceremonies. There were tensions, however, between these innovations and older traditions, as well as between urban enthusiasm and rural reluctance.

The 1920s emerge, nonetheless, as a dynamic period: the revolution may have "finished" politically, but growing stability fostered social and cultural experimentation. Emma Widdis examines how another 1920s project—electrification—spearheaded enlightenment and modernization and helped reconceptualize Soviet space, connecting and equalizing center and locality, balancing centripetal (central economic planning) and centrifugal (large local projects). The reclamation of rural space continued with collectivization; Widdis demonstrates how film became a weapon to promote good practices and shame offenders.

The stability afforded by the 1920s revitalized debate about everyday life, the role of women and families being particularly prominent. Again, however, as Elizabeth Wood highlights, there were tensions, this time over gender roles and behavior, lack of state support, limited female party membership, and the patent disparity between ideals and the everyday reality. None of this necessarily implies, as historians once assumed, that people were inherently opposed to Communism.

Jochen Hellbeck uses diaries to argue that people engaged with the values of the revolution, reflected on them, struggled with them, and sometimes tried to transform themselves into new Soviet people. Some wrote about their dissatisfaction with the regime, but others expressed discontent with themselves and their inability to meet revolutionary ideals.

Part IV concerns outcomes. Sheila Fitzpatrick examines the re-emergence of revolutionary mentalities during the first Five Year Plan and the terror of 1937–38. Few historians view the 1930s as part of the revolution, but Fitzpatrick argues that it would have taken contemporaries until the 1930s to notice substantial differences from the pre-revolutionary period. The regime also marked the official end of the revolution with a party congress (1934) and a new constitution (1936), announcing the eradication of class enemies. But critics characterized the 1930s as a retreat from social and cultural experimentation, while the terror simply revealed new enemies. In any case, October itself remained the source of legitimacy for the regime.

As Fred Corney points out, the significance of controlling the narrative of October intensified amid growing party divisions and social unrest at the end of the civil war; so, too, did the need to engage people in the achievements and future of the revolution. Mass spectacles culminated in a huge re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in 1920 when people were encouraged to become revolutionaries once more. Such events, though, had only fleeting effects and the Bolsheviks struggled to use October to mobilize people in the longer term.

The legacy of October globally was far from ephemeral, however, as Steven Marks reminds us. In part, this was an ideological influence, particularly the anti-colonial, anti-capitalist (often Western) thrust of Marxism. But, more commonly, countries across the globe took inspiration from what could be achieved by a one-party dictatorship and a command economy in organizing revolutionary movements, eliminating political opponents, and modernizing economies, particularly when infused with anti-colonialism and nationalism.

As should be clear by now, this compilation covers a vast amount of ground. No doubt many specialists will quibble over the choice of essays: readers will have their own ideas about what is important (or not). For me, the odd choice is Pipes's essay—a trenchant restatement of traditional Cold War views that clashes with the more complex accounts that follow. It hardly reflects post-Cold War scholarship even if it does provoke debate. The difficulties of choosing suitable excerpts are clear in some cases; the selections by Sanborn and Corney, in particular, concern topics that are only covered satisfactorily in their own books. Such inevitable quibbles aside, it is worth stressing that overwhelmingly the readings are carefully selected and edited and work very effectively.

The concentration on recent studies means the volume remains distinct from existing compilations. The essays by Miller and Wade were originally published after an explosion of innovative work in the 1980s and 90s, especially on lower social groups. They still serve as good introductions to this research. None of their choices have been replicated by Stockdale, although there is different work by three of the same authors—Figes, Fitzpatrick, and Kolonitskii. Stockdale's book, then, could usefully work in tandem with these earlier compilations for readers interested in the longer historiography of the revolution. In that regard, the volume's essays are welcome introductions to the most influential recent analyses and debates for anyone eager to learn or teach about the Russian Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Excerpt sources as follows: Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (1995); Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution* (1999); Badcock, *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia* (2007); Kolonitskii, "Comrade Kerenskii" (2017; tr. 2020); Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse* (2014); Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution* (2002); Nar-skii, *Life in Catastrophe* (2001); Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan* (2015); Stites, *Russia in the Era of NEP* (1991); Widdis, *Visions of a New Land* (2003); Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade* (1995); Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind* (2006); Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (2008); Corney, *Telling October* (2004); Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World* (2002); Miller, *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings* (2001); Wade, *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches to the Russian Revolution of 1917* (2004).