

A long look at the Russian Revolution

Steve Smith talks to the *British Academy Review* about his new book, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890–1928*

Your new book on *Russia in Revolution* is obviously well timed for the 1917 centenary. When did you start plotting it?

I was approached by Oxford University Press trade books back in 2013 and I signed a contract in June 2014, with a submission date of February 2016. So by my standards, I wrote the book, which runs to 450 pages, fairly quickly.

Who is the book written for?

For many years I taught a Special Subject on the Russian Revolution at the University of Essex. I had in mind a book that would serve as a comprehensive but challenging introduction to the subject for my former third-year undergraduates, and also for the large public that exists in the UK that has an appetite for history. That means keeping historiographical debate to a minimum, yet signalling issues that are historically contentious. I confess, too, that I was writing in the hope that – by virtue of the fact that I cover political, economic, military, social, cultural history, offer some bold arguments, and choose some little-known examples – I would have something of interest to say to my academic colleagues.

What are the challenges for a historian in writing about a subject that still evokes political passions?

Well, writing about the Russian Revolution is political in a way that writing about the Anglo-Saxons is not (which is not to deny that all history writing is implicated to some extent in the politics of the present). Even so, since the collapse of Communism – and the decline of the left internationally – the Russian Revolution has ceased to be relevant to contemporary politics in the way it was during the Cold War. It's hard to find anyone – and I include myself – who would want to write about the Russian Revolution with a view to affording the

Soviet Union a kind of legitimacy as did, for example, E.H. Carr (which doesn't invalidate the work he did). We can all agree that it led to one of the worst tyrannies in the 20th century. At the same time, I reckon it's become harder for us to *understand* the Russian Revolution than it was in the 1970s (or in 1945, when many on the right conceded that for all its faults, the Soviet Union with its strong state, planned economy and patriotic citizenry had made an outstanding contribution to the defeat of fascism). I'd argue that although our knowledge of the Russian Revolution has increased, it has become harder for

us to understand the ideals and passions that galvanised revolutionaries to believe that a violent transformation of the existing social order was necessary to bring about an advance in the human condition. We live in a world in which the (historically very recent) discourse of human rights, admirable in all kinds of ways, has served, on the one hand, to sensitise us to the flagrant violations by states of the innate dignity of the human person and, on the other, to marginalise collective values such as those of distributive justice, socio-economic equality, or the common good. So long as the Cold War lasted, these were values that continued to

resonate in the political mainstream, at least in Europe, and to chime, however distantly, with those of 1917. Today we see very clearly the millions of victims, and yet our intellectual and imaginative understanding of what made the ideal of socialist society so attractive to millions is constrained. We shall not understand the Bolsheviks unless we see that, for all their contempt for the 'bourgeoisie' and their willingness to use terror to sustain their power, they were fired by outrage at the exploitation that lay at the heart of capitalism and at the raging nationalism that had led Europe into the carnage of the First World War.



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What new source material has become available in recent years for the study of this subject?

The breakthrough came after 1991 when the archives of the Soviet Union – with some exceptions, such as those of the KGB – became open to scholars. One consequence was that scholars moved away from researching the history of the Revolution and civil war towards researching the Stalin and post-Stalin eras about which we knew much less. Nevertheless historians did begin to work on topics in the early history of the Soviet Union that had been taboo while the Soviet Union lasted, such as the history of the Whites, the history of the Church, the history of working-class and especially peasant resistance to the Bolsheviks, and the history of the socialist opposition parties. But we need to remember that historians do not just respond to the sources at their disposal, they respond to wider trends in their discipline. One example is the interest in empires across the historical profession, which has inspired historians to investigate the impact of the Russian Revolution on the non-Russian peoples of the empire, and to understand why in the Russian case it was possible for the Bolsheviks to reconstitute an empire of sorts.

You say that the man who doomed the imperial regime to extinction was Tsar Nicholas II himself. How?

It is beyond question that the roots of the Russian Revolution go deep. The collapse of the tsarist regime in February 1917 was ultimately rooted in a systemic crisis brought about by economic and social modernisation, a crisis that was massively exacerbated by the First World War. From the 1860s, and especially from the 1890s, the autocracy strove to keep its place among the major European powers by industrialising the country and by modernising its armed forces, but this unleashed new social and political forces, notably industrial workers, capitalists and the professional middle classes, which eroded the social base of the autocracy. It led to increasing demands that the autocracy grant its subjects civil and political rights and, in the case of the peasantry and working class, radical improvement in their living and working conditions. It was these demands, raised in the context of a war with Japan, which led to the outbreak of a massive revolution in 1905. In October 1905 Nicholas II was compelled to make significant political

concessions in the shape of a parliament and civil and political rights. During the years from 1905 to 1914 a civil society expanded, evident in the expansion of the press, the proliferation of voluntary societies, and in a new consumer culture. There was some reason to think that the country was moving away from revolution, as the countryside quietened, as industry revived after 1910, and as the armed forces were strengthened. Yet efforts to enact reform legislation were scuppered by the stalemate that set in in relation between

the parliament and government. Many in the political elite hoped that the outbreak of war might revitalise the constitutional settlement promised in the 1905 October Manifesto, but Nicholas's determination to maintain his divinely ordained position as all-powerful autocrat alienated the parliament, the middle-class public and many in high-ranking positions in government and the army. In September 1915 he assumed the full control of the armed forces, leaving the conduct of government largely to his wife, Alexandra, with the support of the peasant holy man, Grigori Rasputin. For people at all levels of society, Rasputin became a symbol of the 'dark forces' that they believed were undermining Russia. The autocracy came to a humiliating end in February 1917 for many reasons, but in a political system where ultimate authority rested in the figure of one man, Nicholas must bear prime responsibility for the failure of political reform after 1905.

You say that Russia's involvement in the First World War ultimately proved fatal both to the imperial regime and to the possibility of a democratic alternative. Why?

The demands of 'total war' strained the Russian economy. The needs of the armed forces were met, but the civilian population increasingly suffered as a result of inflation and shortages of subsistence items. In 1913 Russia had been the world's largest exporter of grain and the blockade imposed by Germany put an end to exports. This ought to have meant that there was plenty of grain to feed the people in the cities and the provinces that relied on grain imports. But the upset in the grain market caused by the need to feed the army – not least, fixed prices on the sale of grain – together with the decline in production of consumer goods and a snarl-up in the transport system discouraged peasants from marketing grain.

In all, about 16 million Russians were mobilised into the armed forces, though most were not active in the field. Russia's military performance improved after a disastrous first year (when half the casualties of the war were suffered). By winter 1916 there was growing war weariness, but the army remained intact as a fighting force. The February Revolution in 1917 came about not as a result of military defeat, but as a result of the combination of utter frustration with the tsar on the part of the elites and mounting dissatisfaction with food shortages and the burdens of war on the part of the common people.

Following the February Revolution, the problems in the economy went from bad to worse, with rocketing inflation, severe shortages of grain and consumer goods, gridlock in transportation, along with lay-offs of workers in the war industries. As far as the war itself was concerned, the hope of the new Provisional Government was that the overthrow of the autocracy would inspire the army and navy to fight with renewed vigour. For their part, soldiers and sailors expected the new government to do all in its power to bring about a democratic peace. The role of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, who dominated the Petrograd Soviet of Workers'



and Soldiers' Deputies and who enjoyed the support of a majority of the population, proved critical. They devised a plan for a peace settlement but failed to get the Provisional Government to back it, not least because they were afraid of a backlash on the part of the generals. Worse, they ended up joining the Provisional Government, and Alexander Kerensky assumed responsibility for a new offensive on the Eastern Front. This rapidly turned into a rout and shifted mass opinion away from the moderate socialists towards the Bolsheviks who had been steadfast in their denunciation of the war as an imperialist war and of the Provisional Government as a government of 'capitalists and landlords'.

You talk about 'the deeper structuring forces' that assert themselves on Russian history.

What are these?

The great 19th-century historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii once remarked that the fundamental characteristic of Russia's history was 'colonisation on a boundless and inhospitable plain'. Lacking natural frontiers, Russia's landlocked plains, backward economy, and poverty-stricken peasantry left it vulnerable to invasion, on the one hand, and to severe winters and drought, on the other. When the Bolsheviks seized power, bent on creating socialism in an economically backward society, they were optimistic that the problems of economic backwardness and vulnerability to invasion would be overcome by the spread of the revolution to the more advanced countries of western Europe. As the Bolshevik regime stabilised in a hostile international environment in the 1920s, it found itself facing the deeper structuring forces of geography, geopolitics, climate, a limited market and an absence of capital, traditions of bureaucratic government, and the ingrained patterns of a religious and patriarchal peasant culture. The Bolsheviks did not become captive to these forces, as Stalin's 'revolution from above' demonstrated, but in many areas a new 'realism' swamped many of the more utopian ideals of the early years of the revolution, and a new synthesis of revolutionary and traditional culture gradually crystallised.

This is an area of history where counterfactual speculation is too tempting a pursuit. What might have happened if Lenin had been followed by Bukharin or Trotsky rather than Stalin?

Economic backwardness and international isolation were major constraints on the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s. We may doubt whether Bukharin's vision of socialism at a snail's pace could have narrowed the economic and military gap between the Soviet Union and the capitalist powers, or whether Trotsky could have furthered the revolution in the advanced capitalist countries that he saw as necessary for the ultimate victory of socialism in Russia. Both Trotsky and Bukharin stood for a greater degree of democracy within the Bolshevik party than Stalin was prepared to tolerate, yet it is doubtful that either would have broken with the authoritarian system bequeathed

by Lenin. Indeed Lenin must bear some responsibility for the institutions and culture that allowed Stalin to rise to power. Nevertheless one crucial feature of the system he bequeathed was the primacy of the party leader. Had Bukharin been Lenin's successor it is inconceivable that he would have unleashed mass violence on the peasantry, as Stalin did; and while Trotsky shared Stalin's determination to smash the fetters of socio-economic backwardness, it is hard to credit that he would have ordered the elimination of the kulaks as a class or crash industrialisation at the expense of the working class. These policies were reflective of Stalin's personality, his utter indifference to the human cost of what he called the 'Great Break'. If continuities between Leninism and Stalinism were real, the 'revolution from above' launched by Stalin also introduced real *dis*-continuity, in wreaking havoc upon Soviet society. The institutions of rule may not have changed, but the unrestrained use of force, the cult of personality, paranoia about encirclement and internal wreckers, and spiralling terror across an entire society, all underlined the qualitative differences between Stalin and his two main rivals.

Is it too early to say what might be the achievements of the Russian Revolution?

I doubt we'll ever speak of the 'achievements' of the Russian Revolution. It failed according to its own lights, and as we look back through the Second World War, the Stalinist terror and the violence of civil war, it's hard to see much that is positive. The Soviet contribution to the defeat of fascism was certainly an achievement, but it is one clouded by the repressive character of the Soviet regime. In addition, after the Second World War the Soviet Union did improve the education and health of its population, more so, say, than Latin American regimes at comparable level of development. But the human cost had been enormous.

That said, if we may not speak of achievements, the Russian Revolution did raise fundamental questions about how justice, equality, and freedom can be reconciled, questions that remain relevant today. We have lost belief in politics, in the capacity of governments, parties and ideologies to remake economic, social and political relations in any radical fashion. We are content to leave that to markets and multinational corporations. Yet the Russian Revolution sought to establish an international order purged of exploitation and oppression, and if its achievements in this respect were limited and its methods certainly suspect, the political ambition that it released may prove to be an inspiration as we in the 21st century struggle to tackle massive problems of global inequality and planetary destruction. ■

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