

October of 1917 Revisited – Revolution or Coup d'état? A Brief Historiography

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Russia's 1917 October Revolution will celebrate its centennial this year and scholars, as well as publishers, have taken note. The journal *Kritika*, for example, published a number of articles in its Fall 2015 issue dedicated to a discussion of the changing historiography of the Russian Revolution. A seminal event for scholars studying the subject was, of course, the opening of Soviet archives in 1986. It is ironic that this brief interim of openness to scholarly research, which stretched into the post-Soviet period and which accompanied one of the few periods in Russian history when societal democratization in that nation seemed a possibility, appears in the last several years to have vanished almost without a trace. In a certain sense, such a raising of barricades against outsiders recalls previous periods of Russian history, including that selfsame post-1917 era. The initial spirit of revolution, somewhat tempered by the subsequent vicious and destructive Civil War (1918-1922), quickly waned and finally disappeared completely under the weight of dogma, oppression and terror – leading a number of scholars and historians to conclude that the Bolsheviks' celebrated Red October was simply a coup d'état in revolutionary clothing.

Western scholars, whether Marxist, liberal, or politically conservative, are generally unanimous about the issue of the Bolshevik seizure of power in October of 1917 – it was a revolution. The quibbling begins in the analysis of its occurrence – was it inevitable? When did it begin? When did it end? Is it still continuing? Many Soviet and post-Soviet scholars, on the other hand, ask an even more fundamental question – was the Bolshevik Revolution, in fact, a revolution? Or was it simply a seizure of power by a group that had no interest in sharing power and authority with other political parties and, with this seizure, hijacked the “real” revolution of February 1917? In other words: did the Russian Revolution in effect end in October 1917? These questions, in turn, speak to the very legitimacy of the Soviet regime, which lasted for a relatively short time in the entirety of Russian history – seventy years versus the three hundred years of Romanov rule versus the more than one thousand years since 862, the generally-accepted date of the founding of Rus', the precursor to the Russian state and empire.

To assess this historiographical question, this paper examines the perspectives and conclusions of six Western and Soviet historians about the Russian Revolution published in the hundred-year span since 1917. The temporal aspect is particularly significant given how different time frames may influence interpretations of seminal events and given the continuing scholarly debate on periodization of revolutionary eras: Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, for example, in response to a question in 1972 as to how the French Revolution may have impacted western civilization, purportedly mused that it was, as yet, too soon to tell. The six historians examined here published their work within the time period encompassing the latter years of Joseph Stalin's rule through the first decade of the twenty-first century, when Vladimir Putin was consolidating his power.¹ Two of the Western historians focused on aspects of historical or cultural determinism and all three inserted voluntarist aspects (i.e., individuals who played important roles) into the process, whereas Russian scholars highlighted the issue of culpability (individual or group) in terms of revolutionary outcomes, as, whether or not they suffered personally as a result of Bolshevism, the sheer human cost of the Soviet experiment acutely informs their

¹ Joseph Stalin (born Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili) consolidated power after 1924, the year Vladimir Lenin (born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) died, and was virtual dictator of the Soviet Union from 1929 until his death in 1953.

writing. All of the Western historians viewed October 1917 as the single most important event in the process of the Russian Revolution while Russian scholars saw it as the critical moment of betrayal. In making October 1917 central to the discussion of Russia's revolutionary period, however, they were all forced into the Bolshevik/anti-Bolshevik binary.

The Bolshevik/anti-Bolshevik binary mirrors the Red/White dichotomy, both of which have dominated discourse about Russian history even into the post-Soviet era, given that the descendants of people who suffered under the Soviet regime live alongside the descendants of those complicit in the abuses.² A binary or a dichotomy necessarily focuses on the differences of opposing coalitions and frames the argument in terms of who was "right" or "wrong" rather than allowing an examination of common goals across the temporal and political spectrum – in the case of Russia, a desire to depart from autocracy and a development of political and social institutions that both enable social justice and serve the needs of a modern state. I argue that neither the binary nor the dichotomy remain useful to gain an understanding of the history of modern Russia or even of the Revolution itself. Perhaps a way to avoid the trap of October 1917 is to reassess the timeline and take the *longue durée* view of Russia's revolutionary period as did scholar Jaroslav Krejčí, who, in his chronology of the Russian Revolution, noted its foreshadowing in 1825: the attempted overthrow of Czar Nicholas I by a group of young military officers, the Decembrists.³ In taking the long view, historians can take into consideration both the complexity of Russian society in the nineteenth century, when the need for political and social change was already apparent (one of the Decembrists' goals was to establish a non-autocratic form of government) as well as other developments apart from October of 1917 in the critical revolutionary period, rather than minimizing all events in favor of the Bolshevik Revolution as the most relevant and seminal. In other words, the passage of time and the collapse of the Soviet state have forced a new perspective of the events of 1917 in a broader context of Russian history, necessitating recognition that Red October may not have been a crossing of a Rubicon.

Brief Overview of Historians

The perspectives of the Western authors (two British and one American) were those of outsiders looking in. All three were or are historians of Russia and the Soviet Union, with varying opinions on the outcomes of the Russian Revolution but who all unequivocally referred to the Bolshevik-led event as a "revolution." E. H. Carr was alive in 1917; he not only viewed events in Russia from a contemporary's perspective but, as a socialist, saw them in a very positive light, including events in the Stalin era. Given the timing of the publication of his book during the Stalinist period, however, he had no access to Soviet sources. Orlando Figes has written extensively on Russian and Soviet history and had a less positive perspective both about the outcome of the Revolution or about Russian (both pre- and post-revolutionary) history in general. His work, *A People's Tragedy*, published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was informed somewhat by the events of the early 1990s, a period of intense economic and political

² Military factions opposing the Red Army during the Russian Civil War from 1918-1922 adopted the "White" appellation. Historically, red was the color adopted by revolutionaries while white was the color of monarchists (Russian czarist military officers, for example, often wore white uniforms). This created the "Red" (communist) and "White" (anti-communist) dichotomy on the ground, in the post-Revolutionary period, and in historical and political analysis of Russian/Soviet history.

³ Jaroslav Krejčí, *Great Revolutions Compared: The Outline of a Theory* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 200.

upheaval in post-Soviet Russia. Rex A. Wade's work was the most recent of the three and part of a series that promised "New Approaches to European History."⁴ The two latter historians did have access to Soviet sources, both secondary and primary, but only Figes made liberal use of Russian archives. Wade's work, a textbook published fifteen years after the Soviet collapse, summed up the causes and outcomes of the Russian Revolution from a perspective that encompassed not only the immediate post-Soviet era but the initial rise to power of President Vladimir Putin in 1999, and depended heavily on secondary sources.

The Soviet authors were all involved in that regime at some level (thus, the characterization of them as "Soviet," rather than "Russian") and became disillusioned in different eras of the Soviet period, paying the price for their opposition: Melgunov, an active member of the People's Socialist Party in 1917, opposed the Bolsheviks, was imprisoned, and condemned to death. The death sentence was commuted and he was offered the options of exile in northern Russia or abroad. He chose to go abroad.⁵ Frenkin was a senior lecturer in Moscow who was arrested during the Great Purges in the 1930s and spent almost two decades in the Gulag. Rehabilitated in 1957, he attempted to resume his career but left the Soviet Union in the 1970s among Jewish *refuseniks* who were allowed to emigrate at that time. He settled in Jerusalem and continued his writing on Soviet history.⁶ Dmitri Volkogonov was a Colonel-General in the Soviet Army and a historian who became disillusioned with the regime. He published biographies of many of the Soviet leaders, Stalin in 1988 and Lenin in 1991, using documents not available to the general public at the time. Despite the period of *glasnost* and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet regime, many in military and government circles condemned his negative portrayal of the Soviet leadership. Volkogonov became a military adviser to President Boris Yeltsin but opposed the war in Chechnya. He died in Moscow, of stomach cancer, in 1995.⁷

None of the Soviet historians selected were writing as supporters of the Soviet regime. As Russian historian Boris Kolonitskii pointed out, educated people in the Soviet Union espoused a simplistic myth of the 1917 Revolution, even considering John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* as counter to official dogma, thus limiting real discourse.⁸ Conversely, none of the selected historians were Russian émigrés, who were by and large uniformly anti-Bolshevik, anti-Marxist, and anti-Communist. The selected Soviet historians experienced the Bolshevik/Soviet regime first-hand as its citizens in different periods and, to one extent or another, were ardent believers in the idea of revolution (Melgunov) or the Bolshevik Revolution specifically (Frenkin and Volkogonov). All subsequently came to the conclusion that the Bolsheviks seized power, by implication illegitimately, referring to the event in October of 1917 as a "seizure of power,"

⁴ General Editors of "New Approaches to European History": T. C. W. Blanning, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and Brendan Simms, Peterhouse, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Sergei P. Melgunov, *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power* (Santa Barbara: American Bibliographical Center-Clio Press, Inc. 1972), x.

⁶ Nancy Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party: Communist Believers Return from the Gulag* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 138.

⁷ Alessandra Stanley, "Dmitri Volkogonov, 67, Historian Who Debunked Heroes Dies," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/07/world/dmitri-volkogonov-67-historian-who-debunked-heroes-dies.html> (accessed 11/29/15). Here I point out Volkogonov's cause of death due to the fact that the 1990s was a period characterized by many violently untimely deaths in Russia. Given the unpopularity of Volkogonov's portrayal of Lenin (and Stalin), he could certainly have been targeted for his publication of these books.

⁸ Boris I. Kolonitskii "On Studying the 1917 Revolution: Autobiographical Confessions and Historiographical Predictions," trans. Joy Neumeyer, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2015), 752.

“coup d’état,” “mutiny,” or “take-over.” It is indicative that Volkogonov titled the section in his book covering the event as “The Stain of October” and made references to this “stain” on the “carpet” of Russian history within his text.⁹

The Western Perspective

Although on different sides of the spectrum with respect to Russian history and the consequences of the Revolution, both Carr and Figes subscribed to determinism to explain the “inevitability” of the Bolshevik Revolution. As such, their interpretations were largely based on structural theories of revolution, though, interestingly, both insert the role of personality. Carr subscribed to historical determinism and his approach was, by and large, Marxist but included an almost involuntary glorification of Lenin. Of course, Lenin cannot be excluded from any history of the revolution in Russia, but Carr’s use of language in his discussion of Lenin’s personality and actions betrayed a sort of hero worship. Figes’s approach was broader, both in his causation explanations and in the highlighting of a multitude of personalities and their roles in the events leading up to and during the Revolution, from Czar Nicholas II, to Grigori Rasputin, the writer Maxim Gorky, and General Alexei Brusilov, to name just a few, as well as heretofore unknown figures such as Commissar Dmitry Oskin, who morphed from a private in the Czarist Army to a commander in the Red Army. The irony here is that Figes was illustrating the roles of well-known and obscure figures in his history of the Revolution but, in the end, his conclusion was that nothing really mattered with respect to the outcome except Russia’s cultural history of violence.

Carr acknowledged that the “revolutionary parties” (including the Bolsheviks) had no part in the February Revolution of 1917, pointing to the spontaneity of both the outbreak that led to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and the creation of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ Deputies.¹⁰ The creation of this Soviet, he asserted, led to the structure of “dual power” – the Provisional Government, “the *legal* successor of the Tsarist government,” which represented the bourgeois class, and the “revolutionary soviets of Workers’ Deputies.”¹¹ Using somewhat circular logic, Carr also asserted that the disintegration of the February Revolution (and therefore the power structure created), must have been inevitable because, it, in fact, happened. According to Carr, “bourgeois democracy and bourgeois capitalism . . . could not be rooted in Russian soil,” leading to the inevitable victory of the October Revolution.¹²

In a review of Carr’s book, Richard Pipes, a famously anti-Soviet American historian of Russia, accused him of “historical determinism of an extreme kind” as well as cherry-picking facts to support the inevitability (and by implication, rightness) of Bolshevik victory.¹³ Carr certainly focused his attention on the Bolshevik leadership and its dynamic actions to carry on the revolution as reactionary or bourgeois groups faltered and were defeated while other political parties (both the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Kadets) played, in Carr’s view, minor roles and were of little or no consequence, leaving the Bolsheviks as the vanguard of revolution. He

⁹ Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin. Politicheskii Portret: Dvukh Knigakh* [Lenin: A Political Portrait in Two Volumes], vol. 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1994): see Part 3, titled “The Stain of October,” 181; In reference to the October event, Volkogonov wrote of the “profound and eternal stain on the carpet of Russian history,” 324.

¹⁰ Edward Hallet Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 70.

¹¹ Carr, 71. Emphasis mine.

¹² Carr, 100-1.

¹³ Richard E. Pipes, review of *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, by Edward Hallett Carr, *The Russian Review* 10, no. 3 (July 1951), 226.

conveniently ignored the clear intention of the Bolsheviks (and Lenin in particular) to undermine the Provisional Government from the very beginning – in other words, the Provisional Government was certainly unsuccessful in bringing order to chaos or answering the needs of the masses but, realistically, what chance did it have if almost immediately Bolshevik leaders sought to undermine it? The Bolshevik leadership had no intention of sharing power as a coalition – if this necessitated tweaking dogma (e.g., bourgeois capitalism cannot take root in Russian soil) and artificially creating a proletarian revolution or a reasonable facsimile of one, then this became the goal no matter the social or human cost.

Although Carr's underscoring of the inevitability of a proletarian revolution emphasized its structuralist causes, he did pay great homage to Lenin. Carr wrote of Lenin's "clear-headed genius, confident persistence and polemical temperament"; it was Lenin who "smash[ed] the [accepted] framework" that the Russian Revolution had to be a bourgeois revolution; "every move on the political chessboard" in the fateful months prior to the Bolshevik take-over justified "Lenin's boldest calculation"; and the central committee was "won over by Lenin's magnetism" when he spoke for the seizure of power in October.¹⁴ Not only was Lenin the driving force behind the Revolution (which therefore puts its inevitability into question – what if there had been no Lenin?), but Carr, often quoting Lenin's speeches and writings, ignored those statements that clearly indicated Lenin's contempt both for the masses, which included both the peasantry and the workers (e.g., "we cannot be guided by the mood of the masses"¹⁵), and the fact that Lenin advocated violence of the most extreme kind against anyone and everyone who opposed him.

Carr's view, then, was somewhat contradictory: though emphasizing the inevitability of revolution, both a Marxist as well as a generally structuralist view,¹⁶ he focused on the power of Lenin's personality – what Theda Skocpol, an advocate of structuralist causality, firmly rejected in her theory of revolution: "Willful individuals and acting groups may well abound in revolutions . . . but no single group, or organization, or individual creates a revolutionary crisis, or shapes revolutionary outcomes, through purposive action."¹⁷ Skocpol's "structuralism thoroughly deromanticized" revolution.¹⁸ Carr's Marxist approach should have logically done the same but he was apparently unable to resist Lenin's "magnetism."

Orlando Figes's sweeping saga about the Russian Revolution, *A People's Tragedy*, spanned 1891-1924. His thesis of the causes of the revolution encompassed some of the common threads of many theorists: the weakness of the state, the revolution of 1905 as a spur to reform from the top, a country in the throes of industrialization with all the upheaval that entails, and widespread anger and discontent among the populace as expectations for improvement and/or liberalization were not met.¹⁹ Figes set up arguments for alternatives to revolution (the reforms

¹⁴ Carr, 7, 77, 87, and 95.

¹⁵ Carr, 95.

¹⁶ On structuralist approaches, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 14-19.

¹⁷ See Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8. Theorists such as Noel Parker give more credence to human will, but the tendency is to focus on collective human action rather than on individuals; see Noel Parker, *Revolutions and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 56-61.

¹⁸ Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, 9.

¹⁹ See James DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011) and Jack A. Goldstone's *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for certain critical factors and causes that fit into Figes's general thesis (mass frustration, elite divisions, and a severe political crisis according to DeFronzo [12-13]; economic strain, elite opposition, and widespread popular anger according to Goldstone [15-19]). For a debate between Samuel P. Huntington and Charles Tilly on modernization as a cause of

of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin, for example) only to dismiss them as unrealistic or false (Stolypin's reforms made little headway according to Figes).²⁰ Furthermore, Figes pointed out, "[t]he nature of the tsarist regime was the single biggest guarantee of its own political irreformability."²¹ All of these factors, combined with the external pressures of World War I, led again, "inevitably" to revolution. In his review of Figes's work, Anatol Shmelev rightly pointed to his "cultural determinism": Figes saw the success of the Bolsheviks (a violent and repressive regime) as a direct result of the "violent and brutish nature of life in Russia."²² The inevitability here, then, was not that of historical determinism but lay within Russian culture, similar to the popular trope that the Russian people are by their very nature serfs and therefore, despite possible positive intentions, any regime in Russia will inevitably transform into a tyranny to rule over them.

In the end, Figes's approach to the Bolshevik seizure of power was rather simplistic – the most brutal and violent group won the power struggle because the history and culture of the country allowed for no other outcome. He concluded that by 1921 "the revolution had come full circle" with an autocratic regime that "in many ways resembled the old one."²³ He, like many other Western historians, accepted that the October event was a legitimate stage of the revolutionary process and that its outcome in totalitarianism and autocracy rather than democracy was a result of Russian history, rather than the actions of a group that had no legitimate claim to power and was therefore forced to eliminate anyone who might reasonably challenge its position.

Rex A. Wade's *The Russian Revolution, 1917* was an attempt to both explain and simplify the events of 1917 in view of "the increasing complexity of the revolution" as noted by Henry Abramson in his review of Wade's work.²⁴ Abramson correctly highlighted an interesting conundrum: the further we travel historically from a revolutionary event, the more complex it becomes. This certainly is the case with the Russian Revolution, given the collapse of the Soviet regime in such an abrupt and generally unexpected manner. Wade noted that, with the collapse of the regime, writing about the Revolution "no longer involves an implied judgment on an existing government and system."²⁵ His broad approach to how the revolution developed in Russia included topics downplayed in the past or even ignored – the roles of national minorities, women, and social groups. Nevertheless, despite Wade's purported "recasting" of the "political history of the revolution," and new focus on various political blocs and realignments, as well as

revolution, see Jack A. Goldstone's *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers), 1994, Chapter 2, "The Debate on Modernization," 37-54. There are aspects of both arguments that apply to the situation in Russia, as Figes viewed it, particularly if the 1905 revolution is accepted as a starting point: groups in Russia were demanding increased participation in politics, a factor in Huntington's argument (37); as the country industrialized, new coalitions of contenders for power appeared, a factor in Tilly's argument (51).

²⁰ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 231.

²¹ Figes, 231.

²² Anatol Shmelev, "The Revolution Turns Eighty: New Literature on the Russian Revolution and Its Aftermath," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999), 130.

²³ Figes, 808.

²⁴ Henry Abramson, review of *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, by Rex A. Wade, *Slavic Review* 60, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001), 650.

²⁵ Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ix.

what he considered the revolution's "complexity," the October Revolution was the key event and occurred because the Bolsheviks simply picked up "power from where it lay."²⁶

Wade blamed the Provisional Government's head, Alexander Kerensky, for "mistakes" leading to the Bolshevik victory and pointed to the "good luck" of the Bolsheviks that the moderates walked out of the meeting of the Congress of Soviets on October 26, leaving the new government made up entirely of Bolsheviks.²⁷ The revolution of October, as described by Wade, took place rather quietly with no street demonstrations and most people in Petrograd going on about their business as the Bolsheviks and the Red Guard soldiers "filtered" into the Winter Palace where Provisional Government members were sitting, rather than "storming" it as is popularly believed.²⁸ In his view, then, the disorganization, lack of direction, and failure of leadership of the Provisional Government allowed the Bolsheviks to take power. This inevitably leads to the question: if the main purpose of the revolution was to bring social justice, a democratic and egalitarian structure, and the rule of law to the people of Russia, then why was it necessary for the Bolsheviks to seize power? Such aims could certainly have been met in the interim period following the February Revolution if there had been a concerted effort among factions to put their differences aside until the war was won and to provide a basic functioning infrastructure and a preliminary re-distribution of wealth.

According to Wade, the Provisional Government was unable to "meet the aspirations of the population" by April 1917.²⁹ In April, however, the government had been in power a mere two months and had already "introduced sweeping reforms" particularly in the realm of "civil rights and freedoms."³⁰ Instead of celebrating these reforms, opposing groups were deliberately fomenting further discontent among an already discontented populace. The Bolsheviks (and other radical leftist groups) made no effort to assist in organization or forming policy; from the outset, there was no cooperation and, indeed, the Bolsheviks turned their efforts to undermining the functioning of the military by promoting the politicization of rank and file troops while, in July of that year, Lenin made what amounted to a declaration of war against the Provisional Government.³¹

Wade's arguments did not speak to inevitability, but rather to the Bolsheviks taking advantage of a constellation of events – they were in the right time and place and therefore "picked up" power because they had the wherewithal to do so. Not only did "chance and individual human action" play major roles in the direction the revolution took, according to Wade, the Bolsheviks had "widespread popular support" in 1917, though he clarified that the majority of this support was

²⁶ Graeme Gill, review of *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, by Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Review* 6, no. 2 (Apr., 2002), 314.

²⁷ Wade, 246-7.

²⁸ Wade, 241. The popular culture depiction of the October event is similar in Soviet and Western films, generally showing masses of people demonstrating in support of the Bolsheviks.

²⁹ Wade, 172.

³⁰ Wade, 299.

³¹ Wade, 294-5; Carr, 90. Such a development fits neatly into the theory of the process of revolution espoused by, Goldstone, for example, of radicals displacing moderates through a coup (*Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction*, 31) and the fact that these radicals were intellectuals rather than representatives of the masses – intellectuals who claimed to be the "true voice" of the people (See Goldstone, *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* [Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994], 97-8 and *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction*, 31). With the benefit of hindsight, of course, and in view of what the masses (these very same oppressed "people") endured under the Soviet regime (collectivization, dekulakization, purges, forced labor, deportation, and so on) in the name of progress toward communism, it seems questionable that intellectuals who are disengaged from worker or peasant societies have any right to refer to themselves as the "true voice" of the people.

in the urban areas and the army.³² To consolidate their hold on power, Lenin dispersed the Constituent Assembly in January of 1918, the results of which “were of a significance almost impossible to exaggerate” – to wit, the end of any hope for democratic government.³³ Therefore, despite the attempt to bring complexity to the discussion of the revolution, Wade ended on a note similar to many previous accounts: the Bolsheviks were successful because they were simply better at the game of revolution and, once in power, the Bolshevik Party “would cling to power at any price,” in the end negating the roles of other players by quashing real or perceived opposition.³⁴

Carr and Figes utilize historical and cultural determinism to “explain” Russian history, simultaneously centering accounts on the Bolshevik Revolution as a critical and inevitable point, while Wade, despite an effort to examine the Revolution in a new light, also sees October 1917 as a Rubicon: there was the period prior to the Bolsheviks in power, and the period after. In either case the event marked the crossing of a temporal boundary which changed everything for the better or for the worse, and/or from a traditional society to a modern one. According to this perspective, the nineteenth century is simply a lengthy period of preparation for the Bolshevik Revolution with both the actors and the structures of the Russian state props in a pre-determined course (Carr and Figes) or woefully inept and unprepared to counter superior Bolshevik tactics and strategies (Carr, Figes, and Wade).

The Russian Perspective

Sergei P. Melgunov’s account, *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power*, like Wade’s, lies on the opposite side of the spectrum of determinism. Melgunov focused on the mistakes of both Alexander Kerensky as well as non-Bolshevik socialists as the main cause of Bolshevik success, frankly challenging the concept of historical determinism: “not every revolution must unavoidably follow a definite path... ‘October’ was not the realization of ‘February.’ Only the mistakes of those who were able to prevent the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks made it ‘inevitable.’”³⁵ Kerensky, for example, failed to draw up any plan to defend the government despite the experience of July when the Bolsheviks had attempted to seize power.³⁶ The moderate socialists were far too idealistic in Melgunov’s view and easily deceived by the far more politically adept and manipulative Bolshevik leadership.³⁷

Unlike Wade, who discounted the myth of “German gold” aiding the Bolsheviks,³⁸ Melgunov stated bluntly that the Bolsheviks were not only financed by the Germans but that fraternization between Russian and German troops on the front “was performed by specially trained propaganda and intelligence units, which were sent over to the Russian trenches.”³⁹ Oddly, neither Wade nor Melgunov addressed this issue in-depth, but rather both based their stance on previously published accounts. In direct contradiction to Wade’s assertion of “widespread support” for the Bolsheviks, Melgunov posited that the Bolshevik Party had a maximum of 200,000 members in October of 1917 but that its control of the Petrograd and

³² Wade, 302.

³³ Wade, 305.

³⁴ Wade, 305.

³⁵ Melgunov, 3.

³⁶ Melgunov, 55.

³⁷ Melgunov, ch. 2, “The Deceived.”

³⁸ Wade, 194.

³⁹ Melgunov, xvii-xviii.

Moscow soviets gave it “power far out of proportion” to the membership.⁴⁰ Melgunov’s description of the Bolshevik seizure of power on October 25 depicted a more violence-ridden account than Wade’s with intensive machine-gun fire exchanged and shelling of the Winter Palace.⁴¹ Melgunov, like Carr, focused on Lenin as a seminal figure, though his characterization of Lenin was distinctly unflattering, with allusions to his cowardice (Lenin remained hidden in Smolny, Bolshevik headquarters, in disguise during most of the October events), and his unpleasant demeanor (while staying hidden, he was wont to “furious and impotent snarling.”)⁴² Melgunov was no less critical of other Bolshevik party leaders, stressing their use and encouragement of physical violence to attain their objective of sole power while, at the same time the moderate socialists were reluctant to use violent means to stop the Bolsheviks in the fear that such action would strengthen counter-revolutionary forces. His tally of actual party members refuted the view that the Bolsheviks enjoyed widespread peasant support, and though Melgunov did concede that “[t]he Bolsheviks were victorious because they had a powerful backing in the capital cities” where “the political fate of nations [is decided] to a considerable degree,” he also pointed to the disbanding of the Constituent Assembly by the Bolsheviks in January as the logical conclusion to their seizure of power when the vote did not go their way.⁴³

Historian Arthur E. Adams criticized Melgunov’s work for anti-Bolshevik bias, but this “bias” should be distinguished from Cold Warrior bias of scholars such as Richard Pipes.⁴⁴ Melgunov was a participant in the events and therefore may have been too close to them to be completely objective, but, as noted, he was a socialist who supported the revolution, he was in Russia at the time, and his work was based largely on documentary evidence and newspaper accounts. Perhaps there was a vague sense of “sour grapes” in Melgunov’s criticism of the Bolshevik leadership given his membership in an opposing socialist party, but, in view of the subsequent crushing of the peasantry in particular, his criticism of the Bolshevik leadership is fairly well-directed. Alexander Rabinowitch pointed to the very limited scope of Melgunov’s account (particularly the redacted English translation, which omits an account of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Moscow), which is relevant criticism, but it is this very close examination of the events in Petrograd during the months of October and November of 1917 that make this work invaluable to understanding what was happening on the ground in this critical period.⁴⁵

October of 1917 Revisited

In his book, *The Seizure of Power by the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Role of the Army’s Rear Garrisons*, Mikhail Frenkin stressed causations of Bolshevik victory that were very similar to Melgunov’s – the weakness of their opponents, the mistakes of the leadership of the Provisional Government, and Lenin’s determination to gain power. Like Melgunov, Frenkin pointed to the violent and outright thuggish behavior of the Red Guard, the Bolsheviks’ military vanguard. Frenkin went a step further than Melgunov by focusing on Lenin’s deception of the peasantry to get their support in April 1917: cloaking the Bolshevik plan to nationalize all land,

⁴⁰ Melgunov, xxiii.

⁴¹ Melgunov, 80-1.

⁴² Melgunov, 81, 83.

⁴³ Melgunov, 193.

⁴⁴ Arthur E. Adams, review of *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power* by Sergei P. Melgunov, *The Russian Review* 32, no. 4 (Oct., 1973), 441.

⁴⁵ Alexander Rabinowitch, review of *The Bolshevik Seizure of Power* by Sergey P. Melgunov, *Slavic Review* 34, no. 2 (Jun., 1975), 396.

he encouraged peasants to immediately seize lands and estates.⁴⁶ Frenkin also noted something that is critical to understanding Bolshevik success: the workers, soldiers, and particularly the peasantry were unable to critically interpret what they were told. Lenin and his followers used the simple slogan of “Bread, Peace, and Liberty” to engage the masses but even his own fellow party member Anatoly Lunacharsky bluntly stated that the Bolsheviks were not capable of providing them with either bread or peace, much less liberty as future developments demonstrated.⁴⁷ It is important to note in this regard that approximately three quarters of Russia’s rural population was illiterate at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ Even among those who were literate, there were probably few at that time who actually read anything that Lenin had written. This undergirds Melgunov’s and Frenkin’s arguments with respect to the type of support the Bolsheviks enjoyed. The peasantry, the overwhelming majority of the population, responded to simplistic slogans assuring them that they would finally get access to the land they craved.

Melgunov focused on the fact that the Bolsheviks expended great efforts in propagandizing the soldiers in the garrisons in Petrograd as soon as the February Revolution occurred, and discouraged them from returning to the front so that, by October, it was the soldiers who were in the forefront to lead any military actions in support of the Bolsheviks, not the workers.⁴⁹ It is in this sense that the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 resembles a coup d’état – a small political group backed by the military taking action in the capital city, rather than a revolution – a broad country-wide uprising of workers and peasants.

Donald Raleigh, an American historian who focuses on twentieth-century Russian history, chided Frenkin for his polemics and the “emotional tone” in this book. Raleigh himself, however, put the word *great* in quotes when citing Frenkin’s description of the February Revolution.⁵⁰ Although there is no doubt which side Frenkin took in this debate and his personal experiences with the Soviet regime certainly colored his writing, it was perhaps inappropriate for Raleigh to imply that the February Revolution was not great. Although “great” may not be the standard manner of describing this event in Western historiography, Raleigh’s evident condescension certainly showcases his own bias.

Dmitry Volkogonov wrote perhaps the best biography of Vladimir Ulyanov (i.e., Lenin). It was groundbreaking given Volkogonov’s access to previously restricted Soviet archives and the fact that he published it quite soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Volkogonov’s disillusionment was already taking place prior to *perestroika* and *glasnost* and the fact that he published this frank and openly critical account of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1991 indicated that he was researching the topic prior to the actual collapse. Volkogonov argued that there was no ideological or political break between Lenin and Stalin: Lenin was both the driving

⁴⁶ Mikhail Frenkin, *Zakhvat vlasti Bol'shevikami v Rossii i rol' tylovykh garnizonov armii: podgotovka i proveniye oktyabrskovo myatezha 1917-1918 g.* [The Seizure of Power by the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Role of the Army’s Rear Garrisons: The Preparation and Progress of the Oktober [sic] Revolt, 1917-1918] (Jerusalem: STAV Publishing House, 1982), 193-4.

⁴⁷ Frenkin, 192-194.

⁴⁸ Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6; Service noted as well that only “two in five males between the ages of nine and forth-nine years” were literate in 1897 and that in the early 1920s, after the Civil War ended, Bolshevik authorities acknowledged that “most Soviet citizens had scant knowledge of Marxism Leninism,” leading to the beginning of an intensive literacy drive [140-1].

⁴⁹ Frenkin, 201.

⁵⁰ Donald J. Raleigh, review of *Zakhvat vlasti Bol'shevikami v Rossii i rol' tylovykh garnizonov armii: podgotovka i proveniye oktyabrskovo myatezha 1917-1918 gg.* by Mikhail Frenkin, *The Russian Review* 43, no. 1 (Jan., 1984), 77-8.

force and intellectual power behind the Bolshevik seizure of power as well as the initiator of the violence-based policies carried on by Stalin.

As a military man, Volkogonov seemed most incensed about the fact that Lenin was a physical coward who sat out the war in comfort in Western Europe and had no hesitation in accepting German financial support or assistance whenever it was offered. Volkogonov's overall interpretation of Lenin was of a man who had little or no connection to the masses he sought to lead -- pointing not only to his intellectual highhandedness but also to the fact that Lenin had not been in Russia for ten years when the February Revolution occurred.⁵¹ Volkogonov's Lenin viewed Russia as a giant laboratory where he, after the coup, had the freedom to experiment on society as he willed, the more so that what the public (i.e. the workers and peasants) was told did not generally coincide with reality. Volkogonov, like Frenkin, viewed the February Revolution as legitimate and the October event as a seizure of power after a July "rehearsal," which failed.⁵² His reasoning as to why the Bolshevik seizure of power was illegitimate included Lenin's calculating and detached actions, given that his Marxist views had little application to the situation in Russia as well as the extensive German support (discussed in great detail).⁵³ Volkogonov also noted the factor of the Bolsheviks' murder of the Czar (and his family) to support the thesis of illegitimacy. Alexander Kerensky, who headed the Provisional Government prior to its overthrow, had no intention of executing the Czar, in part because he had no wish to make him a martyr. Most importantly, as tenuous as the Provisional Government's hold on power was, Kerensky did not fear an accusation of illegitimacy.⁵⁴ The Bolsheviks on the other hand wasted no time in removing the Czar and even his heir, which would indicate that they were quite aware that their seizure of power was open to challenge.

Socialists uniformly pan Volkogonov's book. Samuel Farber scoffed that Volkogonov's "understanding of issues verge on political illiteracy."⁵⁵ Socialist historian Paul Flewers wrote that Volkogonov was an "orthodox Stalinist" for claiming that Stalin was Lenin's political and ideological heir and the book an "unimaginative rehash of right-wing Western biographies of Lenin."⁵⁶ In a more scholarly criticism, Morris Slavin (a Trotskyite) compared the biography unfavorably with Louis Fischer's *The Life of Lenin* (1964), writing, for example, that the Bolshevik violence against the peasantry when seizing their grain should be viewed separately from later such excesses by Stalin during collectivization given that the Bolsheviks were fighting the Civil War.⁵⁷ As Slavin noted, Volkogonov did not distinguish between the two epochs. Of course, there is a certain moral relativism to this argument. Some might argue that Stalin's acts were also justifiable as he was continuing his revolution from above against a recalcitrant and reactionary peasantry -- what makes one act of violence excusable and the other not?

Notwithstanding Volkogonov's disillusionment, which -- as often happens amongst those disillusioned -- may have skewed his viewpoint in some instances, his depiction of Lenin was even-handed. His portrayal was that of a clear-headed and dedicated revolutionary, who was able

⁵¹ Volkogonov, 190.

⁵² Volkogonov, 267.

⁵³ Volkogonov, 197-232.

⁵⁴ Volkogonov, 242.

⁵⁵ Samuel Farber, "The Uses of Dmitri Volkogonov," *Against the Current* (July-August 1996). Available online through Solidarity at <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2360> (accessed 12/10/15).

⁵⁶ Paul Flewers review of *Lenin: Life and Legacy*, by Dmitri Volkogonov, *New Interventions* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1996).

⁵⁷ Morris Slavin, "Comparing 'Old' and 'New' on Lenin: A Review Article," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48 (Nov. 1996), 1226-7.

to take advantage of events by keeping his eyes on the prize, and for whom everything for the cause of revolution was moral. This last point is quite significant because it explained Lenin's actions – violence may have been repugnant to Lenin personally (as noted, he stayed away from scenes of conflict as much as possible), but he had no hesitation in advocating and approving the most extreme violence and terror if it meant that it served the purposes of the revolution (or, in Volkogonov's parlance, the seizure of power).⁵⁸ In Volkogonov's view, it was this single-minded unwavering dedication that was a major factor in the Bolshevik victory.

All three Russian authors -- Melgunov, Frenkin, and Volkogonov -- focus on the Bolsheviks, and Lenin as their undisputed leader, as both capable but also brutal and immoral in their seizure of power. Although these authors view the seizure of power as illegitimate, by placing October 1917 in the center of discussion they also negate the significance of progressive or revolutionary thought and movement in nineteenth-century Russia. This is understandable in the cases of both Melgunov and Frenkin, who wrote prior to the collapse of the Soviet state. Volkogonov's work, written in a later period, was a biography of Lenin intended to explain the Revolution. Therefore his emphasis on the events of 1917 is understandable, though given his access to Soviet archives he may have missed an opportunity to delve into the complexity of historical processes in the context of the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras rather than the prevalent "before and after October 1917" paradigm.

Conclusion

The February Revolution of 1917 bore most of the hallmarks of a social revolution in the making and removed a regime that had held power for three hundred years. Subsequently, the Bolsheviks were indisputably among the forces that undermined the new Provisional government, staging a seizure of power (i.e., the Bolshevik Revolution), with the Bolshevik government coming full circle by 1921.⁵⁹ Specifically, the regime became autocratic with decision-making ever more centralized, culminating in Stalin's complete autocracy; society quickly became hierarchal with the Bolsheviks establishing their *nomenklatura*, or elite, reminiscent of the aristocratic elite at the top of the social estate system in the Czarist era, holding all power and privilege, including material wealth, and limiting social mobility; the peasantry soon became virtually enslaved in collective farms in conditions that rivaled the worst aspects of serfdom in the Czarist era; the Gulag prison camp mimicked the Czarist punishment of internal exile. In virtually all of these circumstances, the Soviet version was overwhelmingly harsher – the number of people sent to the Soviet Gulag was astronomically higher than imprisonment in the pre-revolutionary era and the circumstances of imprisonment were on a scale of brutal dehumanization never before seen in human history.⁶⁰ In short, what revolution? If a revolution there was, it ended in January of 1918 when Lenin shut down the Constituent Assembly after the Bolsheviks failed to receive a majority of votes.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did change the discourse about the events of 1917, particularly on the part of the post-Soviet Russian governmental authorities, who no longer need

⁵⁸ According to Volkogonov, Lenin himself, and his immediate circle including Leon Trotsky, referred to their seizure of power in just that way for several years afterwards – using the Russian word "*perevorot*," which could be translated as "overthrow" or "coup." See Volkogonov, 269.

⁵⁹ Figes, 808.

⁶⁰ Discussion of the continuities in the Soviet v. Czarist regimes in Professor Douglas Weiner's colloquium in the Fall of 2015, particularly with respect to Stalinist autocracy and the new elite class mimicking the old, guided my thinking on this question.

to defend October on ideological grounds. Instead, however, the Red/White dichotomy became a political football, leading first to wholehearted embracing of western capitalist and supposed “democratic” ideals in the 1990s (as supported by the United States) to later disillusionment, devolving into the current binary of antagonism towards foreign influences versus Russian nationalism, with Stalin and Stalinism remaining a lynchpin of this new nationalism. Kolonitskii pointed out that in comparison to discussion of the French Revolution, which “has ceased to be a relevant political problem” in France, “the revolution of 1917...remains subject to political use, and opinions of the revolution continue to serve as an indicator of political views [in Russia].”⁶¹ Given the current political atmosphere in Russia, references to the Revolution tend to center on an unproductive search of “who is to blame?” whether in reference to the failure to fulfill revolutionary ideals, the abuses of Stalinism, or the failure of the Soviet state (and Kolonitskii did note that conspiracy theories about the revolution abound in Russia today).⁶² Nevertheless, scholars are attempting to explore new perspectives, and though these may lead to discussions regarding the legitimacy of leadership (a somewhat dangerous activity in today’s Russia), they may also fulfill the task of placing 1917 in the larger context of modern Russian history.

In the renewed debate about the 1917 events, for example, historian Liudmila Novikova discusses aspects of the Russian Revolution “from a provincial perspective,” raising fascinating questions about the environment outside the capital cities (then Petrograd and Moscow) during the period in question. She notes in her research that newer regional studies have revealed “a diversity of revolutionary experiences.”⁶³ Specifically, Novikova emphasizes the importance of exploring the diversity of “power relations at the grassroots level.”⁶⁴ Local and regional organizations collaborated and cooperated in the critical years of 1917-1921, forming new coalitions to resolve local issues, rather than separating into warring camps. Examining these relationships outside the Bolshevik/anti-Bolshevik binary is an important step in getting past the “who is to blame” question that is often prevalent in such discussions.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, new dialogue with respect to Russian history and the processes involved in the formulation of the post-Soviet state became politically possible, but after a short period of openness, the freedom of ideas was hijacked by the new binaries: from a rejection of all things Soviet or “communist” in favor of capitalism to, as Vladimir Putin consolidated his hold on power, a rejection of “foreignness” or perceived foreign control in favor of an inorganic Russian nationalism. Putin’s virtual dictatorship promotes this Russian nationalism and increasing chauvinism to unify the country – a tried and true tactic of authoritarian regimes.⁶⁵ Once again, someone is to blame for the deteriorating standard of living (in terms of both economic prosperity and political freedoms) of the Russian people: currently, amorphous and insidious foreign powers that seek to undermine the Russian state and its role in the world. As a result, the freedom of intellectual exploration remains under threat. Scholars such as Novikova, however, are attempting to change the direction of discourse by studying the revolutionary period from alternate perspectives and by examining the varying experiences of

⁶¹ Kolonitskii, 763.

⁶² Kolonitskii, 764.

⁶³ Liudmila Novikova, “The Russian Revolution from a Provincial Perspective,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2015), 770.

⁶⁴ Novikova, 771.

⁶⁵ Jessica Desvarieux, interview of Aleksandr Buzgalin, “Putin and Russian Nationalism on the Rise,” *The Real News*, 14 August 2014. Transcript available at http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=12247 (accessed 12/12/15).

Nina Bogdan

people throughout the nation in a time of upheaval and uncertainty as they attempted to cooperate and build coalitions despite the chaotic and divisive atmosphere. Perhaps such scholarship will serve as an impetus to move beyond blame, to real liberation from the chains of the past.

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Nina Bogdan

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