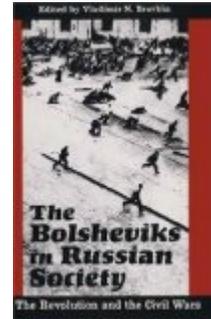


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vladimir N. Brovkin, ed. *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. 333 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06706-4.

Reviewed by Susan Z. Rupp (Wake Forest University)
Published on H-Russia (September, 1997)



The Russian Revolution and Civil War—The New Revisionism?

In the introduction to *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*, Vladimir Brovkin points out that the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union has revived interest in the revolutionary period, which has now become “not just a matter of the past but a matter of the present and future” (p. 2). Historians are posing new questions about the revolution and the civil war, especially with respect to the forces of opposition and possible alternatives to the Bolshevik regime. The opening of the Russian archives also has encouraged scholars to search for a variety of “smoking guns.” The introductory remarks, however, make clear some of the problems with a collection that Brovkin argues will establish “a new scholarly agenda” for the revolutionary period (p. 4). A rather tendentious survey of the historiography follows. While certainly marred by political constraints, the enormous Soviet historical literature on the revolutionary period cannot be described as “worthless” (p. 1). Brovkin is equally if not more dismissive of the revisionist historians of the 1970s and 1980s, whom he characterizes as apologists for the Soviet regime. The politics of this collection, or at least that of several contributors, profoundly compromises its value. In this context, one might speak of a “Pipes school,” as Pipes himself is a contributor; Brovkin and Anna Geifman are obviously intellectually indebted to him, and Jonathon Daly, Leonid Heretz and Scott Smith were all his graduate students (this accounts for nearly half of the contributors). The reader has the impression that, for some of the writers at least, the newly opened archives are simply a cudgel to be wielded against the revisionists rather than an opportunity to increase our knowledge of the revolution-

ary period.

The best of the articles do contribute to a serious, scholarly reassessment of the revolution and civil war by addressing a number of previously neglected subjects. This is exemplified in Michael Melancon’s piece, “The Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Uprising.” Through extensive and painstaking archival research, the author persuasively overturns the traditional image of the Left SRs as naive dupes of the Bolsheviks. Instead, as the majority voice within the Party, they reflected the sentiments of an increasingly radicalized populace in the summer and fall of 1917. Their decision to ally with the Bolsheviks was based on a shared demand for an end to the war, the timely redressing of popular grievances, and the creation of an all-socialist government. Despite the strength of Melancon’s analysis of the Left SRs, however, the question of political determinacy remains obscure, as the leadership of the various parties, rather than their rank-and-file constituencies, decided the final outcome of events in 1917 and beyond.

Taisia Osipova, in “Peasant Rebellions: Origin, Scope, Dynamics, and Consequences,” presents similarly careful and provocative work on a little-studied topic—in this case, the peasant response to the policies of the Bolshevik regime. She employs an impressive array of archival materials to construct an overview of peasant attitudes and actions after October. Having obtained land and peace, Osipova maintains, peasants initially adopted an essentially neutral posture toward the regime. Opposition arose in response to grain requisitioning and mili-

tary conscription, and the Bolsheviks in turn employed massive force against the peasantry. While widespread by late 1918, peasant revolts were still localized and uncoordinated. By 1920, however, peasant insurrections had become better organized and more explicitly political (evinced in support for the SRs). Osipova states that "this effort can be defined as nothing but systematic struggle against Communist rule in the countryside" (p. 171). Delano DuGarm's examination of peasant insurrection in Tambov provides a nice companion piece to Osipova's more general survey. DuGarm delineates how an inefficient and corrupt Bolshevik administration produced increasingly organized and effective peasant resistance in Tambov. Although forced to make some concessions to the peasants, the Antonovshchina was defeated ultimately through the use of brute force by the Bolsheviks.

Several other interesting but less satisfying articles appear in the volume. In these instances, the authors have done solid research on often neglected topics, but their analysis falls short. A good example is Scott Smith's "The Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of the Civil War." Beyond Radkey's work, few have studied the SRs despite the fact that they were arguably the most popular party in Russia in 1917. According to Smith, the SRs, like the Mensheviks, initially limited their activities to propaganda and participation in the soviets, hoping to win back the populace and fearing that more forceful opposition to the Bolsheviks would provoke a counterrevolution. The author's consideration of SR policy and activity gets lost amidst details of elections to the soviets in the spring of 1918 (territory already covered by Brovkin in his earlier work, although Smith provides substantial supporting evidence from the Russian archives). While the SRs and Mensheviks won many of these elections, the vote seemed to be an expression of hostility toward the Bolsheviks rather than any strong identification with the opposition parties. While Smith refers to Brovkin's "ground breaking work" (p. 101, note 18) on this subject, his evidence undermines Brovkin's argument for the viability of an alternative to the Bolsheviks. Smith himself describes the SRs as weak and disorganized (concluding that "one should not be too sanguine" about the prospects for the SRs and Mensheviks," p. 99). The author's reach here is too broad, and the piece is fractured between a consideration of party politics and election results; perhaps in a forthcoming monograph Smith will provide answers to the questions raised in this piece.

Ultimate responsibility for this sort of problem lies with the editor, who should have cautioned Smith against attempting to cover too much in a short article. At the

same time, Heretz and Christopher Read, who examine the psychology of the Whites and Reds respectively, should have been advised to develop their arguments further. In "The Psychology of the White Movement," Heretz uses memoirs and fiction to explore the mind set of the most dedicated of the Whites, who conceived of the civil war as an apocalyptic struggle in which one must be willing to sacrifice oneself to save the nation. Heretz proposes a new, cultural approach to the White movement, which could in turn help to illuminate a number of political issues. For example, the Whites' ambiguous attitude toward the narod, who are alternately seen as innately good but misguided and fundamentally base and therefore in need of strict control (pp. 112-13) must have shaped their policy decisions, yet Heretz does not address this question.

The reader is similarly frustrated by Read's "Values, Substitutes, and Institutions: The Cultural Dimension of the Bolshevik Dictatorship." In a very brief piece, Read proposes nothing less than a complete overturning of the traditional understanding of Lenin and the Bolsheviks as pragmatists concerned only with power. Instead, Read argues that Lenin and others were concerned above all with issues of culture, and that their emphasis on power and control only resulted from a failure to transform popular consciousness. As with the contributions from Smith and Heretz, the reader is left unconvinced by the author's argument in the absence of further elaboration and clarification.

The same cannot be said of several other articles, which at times cross the line from scholarship to polemic. While perhaps the study of the revolution has never been free of political biases, the collapse of Communism in Russia should have helped matters somewhat. Instead, for some of the contributors, it seems to have provoked a smug triumphalism. This is especially evident in the articles by Pipes and Brovkin. In less than ten pages of text, Pipes cites several archival documents from RTsKhIDNI, all of which are intended to confirm his long-standing depiction of Lenin as evil incarnate. A number of the most debated questions about the Bolsheviks and the revolution are resolved in a paragraph or less, from the proximate causes of the Red Terror, to Lenin's relationship with Stalin and Trotsky's importance in the victory of the Red Army (on the last of these points, Pipes cites one document in which Trotsky erroneously predicted reverses against Denikin's forces in order to claim that his role was negligible). Such a scatter shot, unfocused approach stands in sharp contrast to the careful research of those contributors discussed above. Any linger-

ing doubts about Pipes' intentions are dispelled when he identifies the Bolsheviks with the Nazis at both the start and close of the article (a similar comparison is drawn by both Daly and Shlapentokh and is equally unconvincing).

Brovkin's own contribution, "Mobilization, Utilization, and the Rhetoric of Liberation: Bolshevik Policy Toward Women," is little more than a diatribe against the Bolshevik regime. Brovkin's criticism that much of the scholarship on women in the early Soviet period has focused on the Zhenotdel' and figures like Kollontai rather than the reality of women's lives is justified, but his claim that he has listened to women's own voices is unsubstantiated. Instead, this disjointed piece references questions of politics, class and power rather than gender. Issues specific to women, such as the incidence of rape and the use of gendered language in political discourse, are alluded to only in passing and single instances are cited as proof of general phenomena. Brovkin depicts women as

essentially apolitical (the same might be said of much of the male populace), and interested in dresses and makeup more than anything else (p. 218). Brovkin's piece borders on the outrageous, and is far from persuasive scholarship.

Unfortunately, the more combative and sloppy contributions undermine the collection's value. The time for a serious reappraisal of the revolutionary period has arrived, but this volume will not set a new scholarly agenda. The strongest pieces point the way to new approaches, and several others hold the promise of doing so. Others, however, distort rather than improve our understanding of the revolution and civil war. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that nothing is to be gained by continuing to politicize study of this period.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Susan Z. Rupp. Review of Brovkin, Vladimir N., ed., *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1326>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.