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Orlando Figes. *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution.* New York: Viking, 1997. xxiv + 923 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-024364-2; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-85916-0.

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In the preface to this massive tome, Orlando Figes states that *A People's Tragedy* is "the first attempt at a comprehensive history of the entire revolutionary period in a single volume" (p. xv). In general, he has been as successful as anyone could be setting oneself such a herculean task. While there is much to argue with, Figes has done an admirable job of providing narrative force to a convoluted tale without obscuring the complex interactions of society, ideology, and nationality operating at every stage of the revolutionary process. His greatest achievement is a humanistic one: giving social forces, political change, and cultural ferment flesh and bones by focusing on the people who made and experienced the far too interesting times he describes.

Figes explicitly positions himself between the "politicized 'top-down' histories" of the Cold War era and "the 'bottom-up' approach so fashionable these days among the 'revisionist' historians of Soviet Russia," whom, he suggests, would state that "a people gets the rulers it deserves." While that creates a straw man out of "revisionists" (unfortunately, the other end of the spectrum needs no caricaturists, as one major figure's reactions to this very volume attest), Figes heavily relies on the "rich and growing literature" by recent historians of Russian society who "have given us a much more complex and convincing picture of the relationship between the party and the people" in a revolution that "was as often shaped by local passions and interests" as by a centrally prescribed ideology. This book "is an attempt to synthesize this reappraisal and to push the argument one stage further [,] to show…that what began as a people's revolution contained the seeds of its own degeneration into violence and dictatorship. The same social forces which brought about the triumph of the Bolshevik regime became its main victims" (p. xvi).

This does not fit perfectly with his conclusion that the Russian people "were not the victims of the revolution but protagonists in its tragedy…a tragedy which they helped to make. The Russian people were trapped by the tyranny of their own history." Constrained by the "legacies of their own cultural backwardness…the people could destroy the old system, they could not rebuild a new one of their own.…By 1921, if not earlier, the revolution had come full circle, and a new autocracy had been imposed on Russia which in many ways resembled the old one" (p. 808).

The Road to Revolution

The first section of this book examines Russian state and society in the years leading up to 1905. In these chapters, three traits present throughout the book first manifest themselves (and which will be discussed at greater length below): despair at the cultural backwardness of the Russian people, a deep sympathy with those working to reform Russia along liberal lines, and a profound irritation, verging on anger, with those who ruled Russia.

The following three chapters trace the growth of a revolutionary movement from the famine crisis of 1891 through the revolution of 1905, the Stolypin regime and Duma system, and the years of the First World War. It is telling that Figes begins his account in 1891, when for the first time the autocracy admitted its inability, without the aid of civil society, to cope with the famine disaster. Russians across the political spectrum responded; this was "the moment when Russian society first became politically aware of itself and its powers…and of the potential it had to govern itself" (p. 162). However, once the crisis was over, the regime refused to accommodate these civic strivings; it is a leitmotif of this section that, as with the zemstvo movement, "as so often during its political downfall, the old regime chose repression instead of compromise and thus *created* the political hostility of the zemstvos" (p. 164). The promises of the October Manifesto would be reneged on, Stolypin's attempts to create the social and constitutional bases for a liberal state would be doomed by royal opposition, and autocratic military incompetence, coupled with a reluctance to marshal the forces of society, so crippled the war effort

that by the beginning of 1917 even the military leadership would welcome a change of regime.

This is a familiar story, but Figes tells it well. He is particularly good on what Stolypin set out to do, and why this was almost certainly a sisyphean task; his one-paragraph comparison of Stolypin and Gorbachev (p. 222) is as concise and persuasive as this reader has seen. Figes is adamant that by 1914 there was no hope that the tsarist system would ever reform itself and that the liberal solution was already largely discredited in the people's eyes, and he seems to side with those who see Russia already on the eve of revolution in the summer of 1914.

Most of the third section, on 1917, concentrates on how the liberals who assumed state responsibility in February, and the moderate socialists who had real authority through the soviet executive, were both just as trapped by ideological straitjackets as the tsar had been. The liberals' belief in a nonintrusive and decentralized state prevented them from either violently repressing opposition or reining in the centrifugal flight of authority from Petrograd. The moderate socialists' fear of counterrevolution, fear of violence, and dogmatic insistence on the necessity of a "bourgeois" phase prevented them at several moments–February, the April Crisis, the July Days, and following the Kornilov debacle–from taking power despite demands by their constituents that they do so. "In this way," insists Figes, "they missed their chance to resolve the revolution in a democratic and socialist form" (p. 331). And both groups were suicidally disinclined to make a separate peace with the Central Powers and remove the single most important cause of unrest and instability. One must still ask, however, even if the moderate socialist parties had been able to meet the challenge of the April Theses and had given their support to soviet power, a quick and necessarily disadvantageous peace, and a radical and immediate land settlement, could they have avoided a civil war, with its inevitable brutalities and polarization, and preserved the "revolution in a democratic and socialist form"? One might only glance at Mexico during this same time period, where a revolution being fought by almost all sides in terms of liberalism produced a polity that could only begin to be called democratic at about the same time as Russia (i.e., in the 1990s).

In discussing how the Bolsheviks came to power, Figes recognizes that the Bolsheviks were the most popular party in the soviet movement, that the Second Congress of Soviets would certainly have voted for a transfer of power from the Provisional Government and replaced it with a government in which the Bolsheviks were the most important party, and that Lenin faced a great deal of opposition among Bolsheviks to his demand for an armed insurrection. Figes speculates that Lenin was adamant about seizing power *before* the soviet congress because he was afraid that he personally would be politically marginalized: the congress "would almost certainly" result in a coalition government, "a resounding political victory for Kamenev, Lenin's archrival within the Bolshevik party, who would no doubt emerge as the central figure in such a coalition" (p. 471). While not beyond the realm of possibility, in order to take seriously a scenario in which Lenin is politically outmaneuvered by Kamenev–even if we are only talking about Lenin's own fears, which the author does not make clear–one would have to see a lot more evidence and discussion than is presented here.

It is from this point on that many assertions become questionable and many arguments confusing, often contradicting evidence put forth elsewhere. For example, Figes presents the October 10 Central Committee meeting as a victory for Lenin, who "[o]nce again…had managed to impose his will on the rest of its leaders" (pp. 472-73); however, as his own evidence shows, no date was set for the insurrection, and the seizure of power took place pretty much according to the desires of those who felt that it should be carried out in the name of the soviets and timed to coincide with the congress, a plan which Figes indicates would have had widespread support on October 10 (p. 471). Given this, can it really be said that Lenin imposed his will on what Figes himself recognizes was a fractious party, or did he rather have to settle for an ambiguous resolution that only clearly rejected the position of that supposed political threat, Kamenev?

Humanizing History, Demonizing Leaders

To understand what in many ways is disappointing about Figes's account after October 1917, one must go back and look at what is perhaps the most successful aspect of this book. Along with a fine eye for the telling detail and illuminative anecdote, Figes is able to give the reader a sense of how the revolutionary era felt and what it meant to those who experienced it by following throughout the course of the book the lifepaths of a handful of Russians from various walks of life. These include important figures such as Maxim Gorky, Prince Georgii L'vov, and General Aleksei Brusilov, as well as the peasant-turned-worker-activist Semen Kanatchikov, the peasant-activist Sergei Semenov, and the peasant-turned-soldier-turned-red-commissar, Dmitrii Os'kin. In addition to these more in-depth accounts, there are innumerable short sketches that much more often than not

create three-dimensional, understandable characters that easily become flesh-and-blood realities in the reader's eyes.

Of course, some of these characterizations are more successful than others. Figes clearly empathizes most with those who overcame backgrounds of either poverty or privilege to espouse humanistic or pluralistic values that if not liberal were at least liberalizing, especially Gorky, L'vov, Brusilov, and Semenov. These four are the real heroes of this book (L'vov appears on 70 pages, Gorky on 118); it is largely through their eyes that the revolution is perceived. On the other hand, Kanatchikov, probably because of meager sources, barely exists between the introductory section on workers and the epilogue, while Os'kin's personality never really takes shape, again probably due to the rote nature of Soviet-era autobiographies.

On the other hand, those who led Russia are in many ways the villains of the piece. Compared to Kerensky and Lenin, Figes gives a much fuller and more convincing portrayal of Nicholas II that is not, for all that it is rounded, any less scathing. Blinkered by an ideology that refused to countenance any diminution of his divinely ordained authority, Nicholas time and again ignored the need to reform as an alternative to revolution: "If there was a vacuum at the centre of the ruling system, then he was the empty space" (p. 23). Figes's Kerensky is Hamlet as played by Rosencrantz or Guildenstern: a vainglorious buffoon strutting and fretting his hour upon a stage that was dissolving beneath his feet, unable to decide whether to exit stage left or stage right, and completely unaware that the audience was not laughing with him, but at him. The author clearly has too little patience with him to sufficiently explore his aims and motivations, and as a result many of his actions, especially from August through October, are not rendered fully comprehensible.

The weakest, least persuasive characterization in this book, however, is also the most important: Lenin. Figes sets this up with the statement that "[a]s a private man there was nothing much to Lenin: he gave himself entirely to politics. There was no 'private Lenin' behind the politician" (p. 389). There is only a "puritanical" ascetic with "philistine" attitudes given to intense "rages" directed at all who disagreed with him. He was monomaniacally devoted the cause of revolution and obtaining power, with a fine but, in Chernov's phrase, "unilinear mind." He also had no understanding of the Russian people, having lived abroad for most of the previous two decades; Figes's views of Lenin are encapsulated in a passage in which he quotes his favorite character in the morality play of revolution: "According to Gorky, it was this ignorance of everyday work, and the human suffering which it entailed, which had bred in Lenin a 'pitiless contempt, worthy of a nobleman, for the lives of the ordinary people…Life in all its complexity is unknown to Lenin. He does not know the ordinary people. He has never lived among them"' (p. 386).

How then to explain his ability, more than any other politician, to gauge, in his April Theses, which platform the common people would most likely embrace? How does a man with a unilinear mind dance so deftly between October and Brest-Litovsk, between *prodrazverstka* and NEP? Why does this Savonarola of the left tolerate a Gorky in his midst for so long? How can a man whose only drive was for power find time during war and revolution for a fling with Inessa Armand?

There is no room for ambiguity in Figes's Lenin, but ambiguity there is. Figes himself recognizes that the "idea that the Bolshevik Party in 1917 was a monolithic organization tightly controlled by Lenin is a myth–a myth which used to be propagated by the Soviet establishment, and one which is still believed (for quite different motives) by right-wing historians in the West." Lenin was often in the minority, and "if in the end he always got his way, it was not just due to his domination of the party but also to his many political skills, including persuasion, tactful retreat and compromise, threats of resignation and ultimatums, demagogy and appeals to the rank and file" (pp. 392-93). But these skills do not seem to fit in with the Lenin we are given elsewhere: how can a monomaniac compromise so well, or a man separate from the people so often successfully appeal to the rank and file?

It is testimony to Figes's achievement in this book that the lack of dimension to the most important person in it is so jarring. It is as if an Ian Fleming villain had walked in and taken over a John Le Carre novel, a black-and-white stick figure dominating a historical canvas otherwise marked by breathtaking chiaroscuro. Figes is correct to reject the monolithic party of Soviet myth, taken whole into Western historiography, with the moral valuation changed from good to evil, at a time when we had few other sources. He has not, however, overcome the simplistic portrait of the revolution's leader, taken from the same sources with the same toggling of moral assessment, from hero to demon; it remains just as iconic a representation, lacking depth and perspective. As a result, the last half of this book is permeated with a disconcerting and unresolved tension between what Figes the historian sees, and what Figes the moralist feels.

Tensions and Contradictions

This tension is in many ways most apparent in the discussion of the period between October 1917 and mid-1918. To return to the events of October, while Figes is correct that the seizure of power was not a genuine revolution, he also shows that it was far from organized and had a sizeable social component that did not follow orders from the top. As in July, it was only after being pushed by popular actions–"Despite Trotsky's calls for discipline, it was hard to stop the defensive actions of the MRC [Military Revolutionary Committee] from spilling into a general offensive" (p. 482)–that Lenin persuaded the party's leadership to take control of a process already underway (what does that say about the October 10 resolution?). Then, when the Mensheviks and SRs walk out of the soviet congress, Figes states that "Lenin's planned provocation–the pre-emptive seizure of power–had worked....The path was now clear for the Bolshevik dictatorship, based on the Soviet, which Lenin had no doubt intended all along" (p. 490). How could Lenin be sure that the other parties *would* walk out? Here, as elsewhere, Figes ascribes to Lenin an omniscience more reminiscent of the Soviet icon than of even a very good politician. And while Lenin almost certainly did want a Bolshevik dictatorship, here as–yet again–elsewhere, one can only wish Figes had provided the evidence that would have relieved him of the pressure of inserting a blustery "no doubt."

On the whole, Figes builds Lenin into the determining factor of Soviet history. Speaking of the October revolution, he writes that "few historical events in the modern era better illustrate the decisive effect of an individual on the course of history. Without Lenin's intervention it would probably never have happened at all" (p. 456). It cannot be denied that Lenin was the most important figure in Russian history in this century, but were his efforts more decisive in October than in April 1917 or March 1921? Was the October seizure of power in many ways just harvesting in the fall what had been sown in the spring when he persuaded his party to adopt what would become the only political platform enjoying any sympathy among the populace? Figes does not prove that the Bolsheviks would not have been able to take control through the soviet apparatus. Would the moderate parties have been likely to stay in the congress even without the coup? If they had, would they have stayed after the Left SR land decree was passed, as it undoubtedly would have been? Once they left, would a Bolshevik-Left SR-Left Menshevik coalition have suffered any different a fate than the Bolshevik-Left SR coalition?

Figes seems to believe that a broad coalition would have diluted Lenin's power by allowing Kamenev and other moderate Bolsheviks to unite with other moderates to marginalize Lenin. Yet at the same time, Figes portrays a Bolshevik party with an apparently institutional inability to oppose Lenin's mercurial will: the Central Committee was "bullied" into censoring Kamenev (p. 499) and the great leader's resolutions "were usually passed without discussion, since few dared Lenin's judgement" (p. 504). If the party was so browbeaten, why does Figes think that Kamenev could have brought enough Bolsheviks with him to construct an effective moderate coalition?

These contradictions abound in Figes's discussion of early 1918. Referring to Brest-Litovsk, the author avers that "[i]n his struggle over the treaty, as in his struggle for power itself, Lenin had always been uncompromising. There was no sacrifice he was not prepared to make for the consolidation of the revolution on his own terms" (p. 550). Yet was not Brest-Litovsk itself a compromise of epic proportions, in which land was traded for the practical political necessity of peace? Did not Lenin himself later recognize it as a retreat when he used the term "a peasant Brest-Litovsk" to refer to NEP, another occasion when he certainly turned away from consolidating the revolution on his own terms? Earlier in the negotiating process, did Lenin not retreat from his own positions and back Trotsky's "neither peace nor war" stance until it proved itself useless? Again, even though his evidence portrays a thoroughly flexible and adaptive politician, Figes's thesis statements continue to posit the iconic "uncompromising" Lenin.

Neither does Figes discard the "omniscient" Lenin. According to Figes, Lenin allowed the social revolution to run its course, with peasants seizing land, workers taking control of factories, soldiers refusing to fight, and non-Russians declaring independence not because he sympathized with its aims, or even because as a better-than-average politician he realized that there was no way he could stand its path, but because "*[n]o doubt* Lenin viewed all these movements as a means to destroy the old political system and thus clear the way for the establishment of his own party's dictatorship. There is of course no proof of this–only the evidence of what actually took place and virtually everything else which we know of his previous thoughts and actions." Lenin tolerated the continued social revolution because it was destroying the structures of the old regime, and thus of any possible opposition. He supported workers' control but "*no doubt* did so in the knowledge that it would lead to chaos and thus strengthen the need to return to central-

ized management methods under the party's control" and "*arguably* always intended to construct the Red Army on conventional lines" (pp. 503-4, emphases added). Here is the great, all-seeing Il'ich cast in the granite of Soviet myth, but would it not be more accurate–if admittedly incongruous–to imagine Lenin in these months as a surfer, the only one on the beach skilled, reactive, and supple enough to ride out a wave that was not going to dissipate until it had come all the way into shore?

Figes is superb in discussing the Whites, clearly, gracefully, and empathetically delineating their aims, motives, actions, strengths, weaknesses, and idiocies, persuasively locating the ultimate cause of their defeat in a political failure to address peasant concerns over land. For the Reds, there is no such empathy, and without empathy–*not* the same thing as sympathy, mind you–it is very difficult to write good history.

As mentioned above, Figes sees Lenin determined from the beginning to perfect a dictatorship. He makes straw men of those who believe that the exigencies of civil war helped determine the authoritarian evolution of the Soviet state by implying that they feel Lenin was "a libertarian at heart" (p. 503). But can one not believe the former without the latter? Figes himself recognizes that in early 1918 there was no blueprint for dictatorship, that it was "[o]nly during the civil war, when they stressed the need for strict centralized control to mobilize the resources of the country, did the Bolsheviks plan the general structure of the party-state" (p. 685). He well describes how the egalitarian ethos of military organization lasted in the Red Army until well after it had proven its military ineffectiveness (p. 590). Although doubting Lenin's commitment to the rights of nationalities, Figes recognizes that there was an unresolved issue, but that "[d]uring the civil war this question became lost in the exigencies of military struggle" (p. 704). Could this not have also happened with other aspects of Soviet rule?- And would any other regime that might have resulted from the Second Congress of Soviets have been able to deal with those exigencies in a less centralized manner? Could a Martov or Kamenev regime have emerged from revolution and civil war if it had been any less authoritarian than, say, Carranza or Obregon? Figes himself recognizes when discussing the briefly democratic White regimes in Samara and Omsk that in conditions of war and polarization, it was very difficult for a fragile democracy to survive, especially with need to recruit the best people for the bureaucracy, with the most dedicated activists dying at the front, and the urban base on which such a regime would depend shrinking in a demographic implosion.

Figes the historian and Figes the moralist clash most discordantly on the question of terror. "Lenin had always accepted the need to use terror in order to 'defend the revolution,"' and the order to arrest all SRs and take "bourgeois" hostages in September 1918 was "the signal for the start of the Red Terror"; however, it "did not come out of the blue but was implict in the regime from the start." And the "Bolsheviks were forced to turn increasingly to terror to silence their political critics and subjugate a society they could not control by other means" (p. 630). Lenin wanted terror, but they were "forced" to use it. The Red Terror began in September, but two "landmarks…in the progress of the Terror" (p. 632) were the Left SR uprising and the murder of the Romanovs, both of which occurred in July. He is very understanding of why the Volunteer army resorted to terror as early as the Ice March in February and March, where he calls the White Terror "a mirror image of the class resentment and hatred that drove the Red Terror" (p. 563). He seems to agree with Shulgin that the horrible pogroms of 1919-1920 "were a White revenge for the Red Terror" (p. 677).

On the other hand, while presenting the Red Terror as a tool of the Bolshevik leadership in creating its dictatorship, a tool which he says (without citation) resulted in the deaths of "certainly several hundred thousand" (p. 649), he is masterful in demonstrating how terror actually first erupted from below in a "mass terror" or "plebeian war on privilege" (pp. 520-36); even the Cheka, which like much else was highly decentralized until late 1918, seems more often to have taken its lead from local popular sentiment and not central fiat. This again raises the question of what was different under the Bolsheviks than any other regime resulting from 1917; if a regime had tried to control this terror, what measures could they have used other than a terror of their own? And, given the disintegration of the army, what means would they have had to exert this terror? As Figes notes, one reason the Bolsheviks won was because "they were more systematic than the Whites in their use of terror and coercion to extract the necessary military resources" (p. 668). This leads to the question of whether any regime could have survived without the use of terror.

Figes's feelings of moral revulsion toward the Bolshevik regime lead him time and again to ascribe the blackest motives to the Soviet leaders' actions, even when his own evidence and, on more minor issues, arguments might suggest a greater admixture of gray. His very questionable assertion that the Soviet Union was an autocracy by 1923 and that the autocrat was already Stalin strikes one as almost designed to lend weight to his judgments

against the Bolsheviks of 1917-24 by tarring them with the responsibility for the horrors of the 1930s.[1]

Agents or Victims?

This is not, however, the only systemic weakness in this volume, nor is it the only one that colors its discussion of terror. There is a tension throughout this book between Figes's belief in the agency of the people, on one hand, and the determining role played by cultural and historical constraints. This seems very much the argument of someone who is both a populist and a liberal; Figes assumes that the people must of course play a role, but, without the civic maturity that only participation in meaningful self-government within a system in whose stability they have a stake and which has provided them with education sufficient to act wisely on behalf of their own enlightened self-interest, "they could not rebuild a new [system] of their own." While Figes himself recognizes that the Russian revolution was probably unprecedented in bringing common people to positions of power, for him this was one of the revolution's major weaknesses: the Russian people, generally poorly educated, were prone to violence, resentful of all those more privileged or more intellectual than they, and willing to use the former to wreak revenge against the latter even if it served no constructive purpose, yet simultaneously were incapable of marshalling this energy on their own behalf and were easily cowed by those in power. Figes describes a "hysterical" Putilov worker who was stared down by Chkheidze during the July Days as "powerless to resist, not because he lacked the guns, but because he lacked the will. Centuries of serfdom and subservience had not prepared him to stand up to his political masters–and in that lay the tragedy of the Russian people as a whole" (p. 432). Later, Figes contends that those from the lower classes who acquired authority under the Soviet regime "were not sufficiently educated to think freely for themselves or indeed to question the party leaders on abstract policy issues"; such a person was a "good comrade [who] did what he was told [and] was content to leave all critical thinking to the Central Committee" (pp. 692-93).

In short, the Russian people lacked that delicate balance of emotional restraint and informed assertiveness produced by a civic education and an economically founded interest in stability characteristic of liberal societies, and were thus incapable of constructing a liberal polity for themselves. The ultimate tragedy of the Russian revolution for Figes lay not so much in how it turned out as in that it occurred in the first place; it is certainly for this reason that over a third of the book is devoted to the factors that produced the February revolution and which rendered an illiberal outcome prohibitively probable. And high on the list of those factors is the peasant's inclination to violence.

As one might expect from someone whose previous monograph was a very important study of the peasantry in the Volga region during the Civil War [2], Figes is generally very comfortable and persuasive discussing the peasantry. He understands that peasants were not an undifferentiated gray mass but neither were they riven by class stratification; the real divide tended to be generational. They were willing to change, but only after they had concrete proof of change's efficacy. He insists on the existence of a peasant ideology; rather than being only suited to play a destructive role in revolution, "during 1917-18 the peasants proved themselves quite capable of restructuring the whole of rural society, from the system of land relations and local trade to education and justice, and in so doing they often revealed a remarkable political sophistication, which did not well up from a moral vacuum" (p. 98). He also shows that violence played an important role in lower-class Russian life, and that it was this violence that welled up into terror in early 1918. However, while he goes to great pains to demonstrate how various peasant practices reflected peasant beliefs and how peasant beliefs were often rational responses to the realities of peasant life–and here the reader of this review may detect the distinct whine of an axe being ground–he does not really recognize that violence could also have a rational or instrumental basis.

Relating some of the more gruesome punishments inflicted on horse thieves, Figes states that "[i]t is difficult to say where this barbarism came from–whether it was the culture of the Russian peasants, or the harsh environment in which they lived," but decides that it "was a cruelty made by history," a response to the violence inflicted on the peasantry both by serfowners and by the state (p. 96). Thus, when this quotidian violence was freed from restraints in 1917 and 1918, it was directed against the privileged as retribution.

However, was this solely revenge? In an agrarian society where the margin of existence was usually very narrow, and which was, despite all its rulers' pretentions, very undergoverned, peasants could not count on the state to protect them from those whose crimes could economically ruin an entire village. Thus, while minor crimes within the village were punished more leniently than the state would, crimes that threatened the community were punished with extravagant cruelty precisely because the aim was not to make the punishment fit the crime but to provide an example spectacular enough to

give any other potential wrongdoers pause before trying something similar. While a spike up the rectum might seem barbarous to urbane city dwellers, it made perfectly good sense in the underpoliced countryside.

Figes recognizes this when discussing aspects of the mass terror: when the police and justice systems disappeared in 1917 and early 1918, popular innovations, including urban *samosud*, took their place. But Figes sees this evolving after October, as popular justice became less concerned with actual criminals than class warfare; in people's courts, cases were not decided on the legal merits but on whether defendants had uncalloused hands. Figes implies that this was merely retribution, but in placing this discussion in the chapter *before* he begins the civil war, he blurs the continued existence of dangers to a revolution that seemed to have very real enemies. Was this "looting the looters," or assuring that the looters would not loot again? Later, in the Civil War, were well-publicized tortures and policies of taking no prisoners–on all sides–merely gratuitous violence, or, in a struggle decided as much by desertion rates as anything else, good sense? Figes assumes that violence is senseless; he thus does not see the sense in it.

While Figes has a very good theoretical understanding of the ideological tenets and moral beliefs of the majority of the Russian population, he is horrified himself at the illiberal implications of these tenets and beliefs. When discussing peasants in the abstract, as quoted above, he was able to praise the "remarkable political sophistication" with which peasant would put their belief system into practice in 1917. On the other hand, by the time he reaches 1917, this turns instead into the "anarchy and chaos" that occurs whenever Russian central state authority is removed (p. 360). He recognizes that while there is, as far as the people were concerned, an order within this anarchy and chaos, it is not the order that leads to the building of a mature Western, liberal state. Discussing both the prerevolutionary and post-Communist dumas, Figes suggests that Russians are "by nature especially ill-prepared for the disciplines of parliamentary practice….Russian democracy can be rather like the Russians themselves: chaotic and disorganized" (p. 218).

Throughout this book, Figes deplores the cultural and political "backwardness" of Russians; yet what this backwardness consisted of is very protean, changing shape according to the discussion. Russians are prone to violence; that is backward. Yet, as related above, part of their backwardness is a servile subservience that allows the Bolshevik leadership to control their flock. Figes knows that what he describes as backwardness is not a lack of culture; he describes Russian peasant culture quite well. It is rather a lack of civic-minded, nation-oriented liberal culture: "Russia was too polarized, and the mass of its people too poorly educated, to sustain democratic institutions against enemies on both extremes….The tragedy of the Russian Revolution was that the people were too weak politically to determine its outcome" (p. 588). It is no accident that the dominant voice of this volume is Maxim Gorky: a peasant that had made himself into a talented writer and intellectual force who very well understand the culture from which he had sprung but who hated it with the loathing of a second-generation immigrant. Figes despises the leaders who he feels betrayed their people for the purposes of their own ideological or personal agendas; but he is also deeply disappointed by the people themselves, uninterested in fighting for the liberal values that were ultimately their only hope.

It may be that contemporary concerns have shaped Figes's account; his last lines are an admonition against "liberal-democratic triumphalism" in the wake of 1989 and 1991: "we must try to strengthen our democracy, both as a source of freedom and of social justice, lest the disadvantaged and the disillusioned reject it again. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the emerging civil societies of the former Soviet bloc will seek to emulate the democratic model" (p. 824), especially with communists-turned-nationalists able to condemn the inequalities caused by post-Soviet capitalism. Perhaps it is this fear that the Reds (or worse) might come back that causes Figes to so often one-dimensionally portray Lenin and the Bolshevik regime; such apprehension for the future of the Russian people, however, would certainly be in keeping with the humanistic concerns that permeate this volume.

Mention must be made of one of the best things about this book, namely the 107 photographs grouped in eight clusters throughout. These wonderfully depict the revolutionary era in all its glory, its joy, its horror, and its humanity. Many are unforgettable, but to my mind the most remarkable is the last one: a wheelchair-bound Lenin in the summer of 1923, his face, beard, and cap familiar from thousands of photographs and paintings, but his eyes wide with a searing but complicated pain. I find myself coming back to it time and again, and each time a different emotion seems prevalent: first the paralyzed fear of a deer caught in headlights, then the fury of a powerful man rendered impotent, at times a mute raging against the dying of the light. Whichever it is, if not all or more, one can only wish that the Lenin in Figes's text had had a fraction of the complex humanity of the Lenin in this

photograph. It is a testimony to the talents of Orlando Figes as a historian and a writer that most of the Russians he describes do.

Despite many weaknesses,[3] in this well-written and generally well-edited book the author has written what is, without doubt, the best one-volume work covering the entire revolutionary era; it does not diminish that accomplishment to note that this is not a field with a surfeit of competition. Figes does this through force of narrative, his skill in elucidating the complexities of the revolution clearly and (mostly) without caricature, and his ability through judicious anecdote and superb character studies in presenting history as something real that happens to–and is made by–real people. Unfortunately, the niche for this book is a rather limited one, since it assumes a great deal of previous knowledge and is far too long for at least undergraduate classroom use. It does not answer the two most glaring needs in the field, a one-volume book on 1917 suitable for lecture courses (hopefully Rex Wade's forthcoming work will fill this gap) or a two-volume scholarly synthesis, discussing key issues of historiographical contention in a balanced and judicious manner, such as Abraham Ascher has provided for 1905, or Alan Knight for Mexico; in both of these categories, Chamberlin still probably reigns supreme after more than sixty years.[4] Nonetheless, the educated reader will find much enjoyment and illumination, and the specialist will find it both rich with intellectual stimulation and a veritable cornucopia of lecture fodder.

Notes

[1]. See p. 743 and note, where reference is made to what Stalin said in order to support an assertion about what Lenin believed.

[2]. *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution (1917-1921)* (Oxford, 1989).

[3]. A major shortcoming is Figes's treatment of workers whom, in short, he just does not get. For example, he discusses Kanatchikov as typical of peasants who moved to the city, which "on the whole" made them more secular, more humanistic, and closer to the socialist intelligentsia, and led them to reject peasant culture (p. 110), while elsewhere he recognizes him as atypical, as a member of a "labour elite" (p. 114), who assimilated to the mores of a labor aristocracy that formed "this new working-class culture" (p. 112). Thus, once again, the iconic skilled metalworker stands in for workers in general. After this introductory section, there is little sustained discussion of workers, and that is often contradictory. One brief example: citing Steve Smith, he presents workers' control as an innovation of 1917 (despite its force as a demand as early as 1905) that did not in any way imply rejection of state authority or of central planning (369); however, after October, he describes it as one of those forces of chaos and anarchy–implicitly, one would assume, a rejection of state control–that Lenin was supposedly allowing to operate unchecked until the old regime was destroyed. Figes's great empathy for peasants does not seem to extend through the factory gates. One other weakness of note: there is very little on the non-Bolshevik socialist parties; for example, there is no citation of Hildermeier, Melancon, or Rice on the SRs.

[4]. Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905*, 2 vols. (Stanford, Calif., 1988-92); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1986); William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1935).

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