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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald J Raleigh. *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov 1917-1922*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. xvii + 438 pp.

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## A Welcome Addition to the Literature

Donald Raleigh has been a pioneer among Western scholars in studying the Russian revolution at the provincial level. Eighteen years ago he published *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986), and this new book carries the story forward into the civil war and subsequent famine. Since *Experiencing Russia's Civil War* is very much a sequel to the earlier book, it is instructive to compare the two works.

Like his earlier work, this new book has been meticulously researched and judiciously constructed, with copious annotations. It is in the footnotes that we see the first great contrast between the earlier work and this latest volume. In 1986 Saratov was still a closed city to Westerners. Its archives and libraries were quite inaccessible to Raleigh, who had to make do with secondary studies, published primary sources, and materials available in Moscow, Leningrad, and the West. Since 1990, he has been able to visit Saratov and research in its archives, and the fruits of this research are well represented in *Experiencing Russia's Civil War*.

It has been debated how far the opening of formerly closed Soviet archives has added to our understanding of the past, but there can be little doubt that in the area of local studies it has made a massive difference. Throughout Russia, provincial archives and the local history sections of central provincial libraries contain huge quantities of

material quite unavailable elsewhere.

Access to the archives has enabled Raleigh to explore a whole new area—the contrast between the public pronouncements of the Saratov Soviet authorities as represented in the press, and the private comments and assessments of the Soviet leaders in their own internal correspondence. This is a major theme to which we shall return below. Thanks to the archives, he has also been able to unearth the histories of certain short-lived, but not unimportant, political forces active in Saratov province during the civil war. Above all, archives can furnish detail, and there is a wealth of detail throughout this book.

Whereas *Revolution on the Volga* was organized more or less chronologically, in *Experiencing Russia's Civil War* Raleigh has adopted a thematic approach. The book is arranged into themed chapters within two main sections, one dealing with politics, the other with society and revolutionary culture. Throughout the book, as its title suggests, his concern is to examine how the civilians who lived through the civil war experienced it. He does not deal in any detail with the military aspects of the war or the experiences of the actual combatants. In addition to the standard archival sources, which mainly illuminate the politics of the time, Raleigh uses diaries and memoirs to explore how people perceived and responded to their situation.

The first chapter provides the background to the civil war, tracing the development of the revolution in Saratov up to the point in early 1918 when the armed counterrevolution really began to become organized. This is followed by a chapter on “Languages of Power,” in which Raleigh examines how the Saratov Bolsheviks presented their political and class opponents, both in their public statements and privately among themselves. In this he draws heavily not only on the archives, but on various theoretical writings on discourse. There are some valuable insights here on the way the Bolsheviks manipulated language to fit reality to their own ideological schemas but, in this reviewer’s opinion, theory detracts from, rather than enhances, Raleigh’s analysis. He periodically lapses into the kind of obscure academese so beloved of discourse theorists. This is a great pity, because, as his earlier book amply demonstrates, he can be a first-rate stylist and a master of clear prose.

A chapter on the “Saratov republic” examines the tensions between the local leaders with their immediate, local concerns, and the government in Moscow with its urge towards centralization. Raleigh explores the relationship between local power struggles and factional politics within the all-Russia Bolshevik organisation. In 1919, for example, many Saratov Bolshevik leaders supported the Democratic Centralist faction in a struggle which had as much to do with defending their local prerogatives as with ideology.

One novel theme in *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War* is the story of the Revolutionary Communists, a splinter group of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, who enjoyed significant support in Saratov province from late 1918 to 1920. Hitherto, the semilegal minor parties that functioned in Soviet Russia during the civil war have tended to be seen as interesting but irrelevant, given their purely token representation in the central Soviet bodies. Raleigh reveals that the Revolutionary Communists, who supported Soviet power but sought to defend peasant interests, played a crucial part in ensuring the survival of Soviet power in Saratov when it was most threatened. He traces the origins and development of this party and its complex relationship with the Bolsheviks, who finally incorporated the rump of its membership in late 1920. The Bolsheviks swallowed up numerous all-Russian and local pro-Soviet forces in the course of establishing their political monopoly, and Raleigh’s account provides a valuable case study of this process.

The second part of the book, on social and cultural questions, deals in particular with the way the civil war

affected ordinary people: peasants, workers, and those considered “bourgeois.” Chapter six explores the demographic and social consequences of war, revolution, and civil war on the community. Countless refugees from fighting and famine were continually entering, moving around within, and leaving Saratov province, and hordes of abandoned or orphaned children roamed the area living on their wits. By examining the breakdown and reconstitution of community in Saratov, Raleigh helps us understand a process that was taking place across the Russian empire.

Other chapters explore the different experiences of various social classes and castes. To illustrate the fates of those labeled “bourgeois” by the new regime, Raleigh has unearthed several diaries from the archives, which he quotes extensively. The authors of these diaries include a passionately anti-Bolshevik youth, a self-absorbed schoolgirl, local public figures, a university lecturer and a former moderate Social Democrat. Raleigh draws attention to the common features in their experiences and reactions, their sudden and drastic loss of status, their identification of the revolution with backwardness and barbarism, and the tendency of most of them to blame Jews in one way or another for their misfortunes. A chapter on the workers examines their changing relationship to a party that claimed to rule in their name while systematically depriving them of any real power. The chapter on the peasantry considers the tensions and contradictions in the peasants’ status under a regime that could treat them simultaneously as allies and enemies. Raleigh follows this by examining the resistance movements—the “Green” peasant bands that formed in the villages to fight the Soviet authorities, and Menshevik and anarchist influences in the factories—which emerged as the immediate military threat from the Whites receded.

For Russia as a whole, the end of the civil war and the introduction of NEP in 1921 are often seen as a turning point in the fortunes of the regime, which was able to consolidate itself, and of the economy, which was able to halt and reverse its collapse. The case of Saratov provides a sobering corrective to that view. Saratov province was ravaged by famine from 1921 and remained unable to feed itself until 1925. Raleigh suggests that starvation, rather than the successes of NEP, may have been the key reason for the failure of the anti-Bolshevik resistance after 1921.

Overall, this book is a very welcome addition to the literature. It contains extensive empirical detail—always

good in a historical work—and some thought-provoking insights on the ways ideological and linguistic factors helped shape the political and social behaviour both of the Bolsheviks and of their political and “class” enemies. Moreover, the meticulous editing and indexing of this volume admirably complements Raleigh’s thorough research.

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