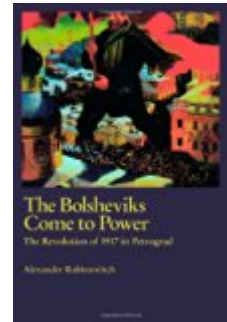


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Setting the Standard for the Study of the Russian Revolution

Contemporary politics always have figured prominently in framing the way historians approach the Russian Revolution. The social movements of the 1960s inspired a generation of historians to study history “from below,” in which they attempted to reconstruct the actions and aspirations of those previously written out of history. In no area did this new social history produce a more thorough revision than in the contested field of Russian studies. Over a course of a decade, a small but extremely talented group of historians proved beyond doubt what many on the Left had long argued—that a massive popular uprising had ushered in the transfer of power to the soviets in 1917.

To gain an appreciation of this seismic shift it is necessary to recall the extent to which the totalitarian school had dominated the field from its inception. Russian studies had emerged in the United States as a stepchild of the Cold War and shared much in common with its Soviet state-sponsored counterpart. The OSS (the precursor to the CIA) helped set up the main academic research institutions, and historians moved easily between academic posts and government positions. To construct a usable past scholars simply redeployed the totalitarian paradigm, which had been popularized in confrontation with the Nazi regime, against their former ally and new adversary, the Soviet Union. During the 1950s, ideological conformity and fear dominated the profession. As the president of the AHA reminded historians, “Total war, whether it be hot or cold, enlists everyone and calls upon everyone to assume his part,” and hundreds of dis-

sident professors in many disciplines were purged from academia.[1] The audacious scholarship of social historians of the Russian Revolution not only challenged but ultimately dislodged the totalitarian school. With renewed interest in the political history of 1917, the republication of the single most important social history of the Russian Revolution offers a useful barometer to gauge how far the field has come.[2]

Rather than trivializing the influence of Bolshevism during 1917, as had even much of the best social history of the Revolution, Alexander Rabinowitch’s *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* seeks to explain their ascendancy in Petrograd meticulously.[3] Rabinowitch traces the radicalization of the mass movement by studying “the aspirations of factory workers, soldiers, and sailors as expressed in contemporary documents.” Rejecting the view that depicts cunning Bolsheviks manipulating a brief, shallow shift to the left in the wake of Kornilov’s failed military coup, he argues that even as early as the late spring “rapidly growing numbers of Petrograd workers and soldiers and Baltic Fleet sailors viewed the Provisional Government increasingly as an organ of propertied classes, opposed to fundamental political change and uninterested in the needs of ordinary people.” According to Rabinowitch, it was the Bolshevik connection with this mass radicalization, and not some unique capacity for scheming, that won them political ascendancy. Popular aspirations closely corresponded to the Bolshevik program, while other major political parties were “widely discredited because of their failure to press hard enough

for meaningful internal changes,” including ending Russia’s participation in the war (pp. xvi-xxvi).

Although Rabinowitch acknowledges Lenin’s strategic brilliance and “the sometimes decisive role of an individual in historical events,” (p. 208) he also recounts in vivid detail the plethora of party disagreements, showing that on many occasions Lenin found himself in a distinct minority. Rabinowitch demonstrates that “within the Bolshevik Petrograd organization at all levels in 1917 there was continuing and lively discussion and debate over the most basic theoretical and tactical issues.” He draws a startling conclusion about the party’s rise to power: “the phenomenal success of the Bolsheviks can be attributed in no small measure to the nature of the party in 1917,” and above all to “the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralized structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character—in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model” (p. 311).

This assessment of Bolshevik democracy as the lifeblood for the party’s integration with the mass movement certainly is at odds with the Cold War caricature. Almost thirty years after the first publication of Rabinowitch’s seminal work, most conservative and some liberal historians continue to assert that Bolshevik ascendancy was based on their manipulative and conspiratorial practices.[4]

Rabinowitch’s appraisal of popular power and Bolshevik practice can be read as a powerful critique of the later failures by both conservative and liberal historians of 1917. It shows how social history is so much more than merely weighing prevalent attitudes: crucially, Rabinowitch demonstrates, the radicalized mass movement set the parameters for various political solutions to the crisis. For example, it was this mass radicalization that rendered it impossible for Kerensky to enact Kornilov’s measures that (some argue) could have enabled the military leaders to wage total war by smashing the soviets, extending the death penalty in the rear, instituting martial law in war industries, and taking “resolute measures” against the Bolsheviks.[5] In his chapter on “The Ineffectiveness of Repression,” Rabinowitch shows that even during the aftermath of the July Days, district soviets resisted government attempts to disarm workers and transfer radicalized soldiers from the capital. Similarly, Kornilov’s repression solution failed precisely because the military forces loyal to the ruling classes were so much weaker than those of the militant workers, soldiers, and sailors (chapter 8). When Kerensky attempted to use the

German military advances as an excuse to rid the capital of unruly elements, garrison troops responded “with predictable vehemence” and by early October, units “in unison” proclaimed their lack of confidence in the Provisional Government, demanding the transfer of power to the soviets (pp. 226-227).

While conservative historians have recognized the chasm between the left and right (and end up siding with the latter), some liberal historians continue to try to patch up the mutual class hostility and blame the ostensibly intransigent Bolsheviks for failing to compromise with the moderates.[6] Yet Rabinowitch shows that the Bolsheviks repeatedly attempted conciliation with the Mensheviks and SRs. In early September, Lenin proposed a peaceful transfer of power to the Soviets—if the moderate socialists were willing to draw the lessons of the previous six months and break with the discredited Kadets and other ruling class parties (pp. 169-173). A few weeks later (25 October), the Second Congress of Soviets unanimously voted to form a coalition government of parties represented in the soviets. The minority moderates then immediately chose to ignore the resolution that they had just voted for, denounced the Bolsheviks for overthrowing the Provisional Government, and stormed out of Smolny (pp. 292-293). Even in the days after the congress, when “the Bolshevik leadership was inclined toward compromise, the Mensheviks and SRs displayed little interest in coming to terms with the Bolshevik regime” by refusing to accept the general program of the soviets and a coalition government without representatives from the propertied classes (pp. 308-309).

Many historians are much closer to Rabinowitch’s assessment of Bolshevik practice and their integration with the mass movement. For example, Rex Wade argues in his history of 1917 that Bolshevik “politics of sweeping change, of a revolutionary restructuring of society, aligned them with popular aspirations as the population turned toward more radical solutions to the mounting problems of Russia.” Wade is more qualified in his appraisal of Bolshevik democracy, stating that lower party members “sometimes challenged or ignored the policies of the top leaders.”[7] Peter Kenez also rejects the Cold War notion that Bolshevik support was merely ephemeral, noting that except for a brief period after the July days, popular backing for their positions “grew steadily during 1917.” The key factor leading to the Bolshevik seizure of power, according to Kenez, was “the complete disintegration of governmental authority.”[8] Ronald Suny argues that by mid-summer the country was “irreconcilably divided” and that the Bolsheviks “shaped

the frustration in the factories and garrison, explaining in their own way the causes of the crisis.” Significantly, Suny notes Lenin’s attempt to compromise with the moderates in early September but quickly became disillusioned “by the refusal of the moderate socialists to push for a soviet government,” resulting in the Bolsheviks moving toward a more exclusive stance.[9] Additionally, Ronald Kowalski’s outstanding primary source collection includes a detailed historiography on the Russian Revolution with wide-ranging citations from Richard Pipes to Alexander Rabinowitch, encouraging students to make their own assessments.[10]

But such diversity in summaries of 1917 should not mask a discernible shift to the right in new archival research on the Russian Revolution. While Rabinowitch tactfully alludes to “current political considerations” (p. 242) in noting the shortcomings of 1970s Soviet historiography, much the same can be said of the current state of U.S. scholarship on 1917. Several studies have supported the “continuity thesis” by emphasizing the supposed natural progression from the early Soviet regime to later Stalinism.[11] Some historians even have reverted to a “prosecutorial” approach to the Russian Revolution by grossly exaggerating early Bolshevik repression while sanitizing the White terror. As U.S. politics have shifted to the right, one would be hard pressed to find either recent references to Rabinowitch’s notion of Bolshevik “democracy” as central to understanding the Revolution or citations on what is now known about U.S.-funded mass violence against Soviet citizens.[12]

Rabinowitch has the confidence to integrate and assess all of his sources. If there is a weakness to *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, however, it is that he occasionally fails to draw the larger interpretive conclusions from his own findings, choosing instead “to let the facts speak for themselves” (p. xxi). Convincingly documenting the escalating popular indignation against the ruling classes and the unelected Provisional Government, Rabinowitch avoids indulging in the mythology of a missed opportunity for a supraclass “democracy.” He does, however, blame the uprising of October 24-25 for the failure to establish “a broadly representative socialist government by the Congress of Soviets” (p. 314). But it was precisely such an anticapitalist “socialist government” that the Right SRs and Mensheviks feared most of all. The moderates’ persistent pandering to the liberals and their steadfast refusal to support soviet power—which Rabinowitch describes so clearly but does not adequately analyze—were driven by their class collaborationist premise that the masses were unfit to rule. In this

sense, the study lacks the theoretical depth of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, a work which manages to situate the deep social crisis of late summer and early fall within the context of an epochal class confrontation, a standoff that could only have ended in the forceful rule by either the men of property or the soviets.

Nevertheless, the strength of Rabinowitch’s work is his unparalleled tenacity in incorporating and explaining conflicting data, rather than parsing it out for polemical convenience. Those who disagree with Rabinowitch’s findings have yet to offer a frontal challenge to his work. Evidence of errors has not been provided, nor have new, conflicting data been introduced. Rather, the impressively detailed scholarship underpinning the arguments advanced in *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* simply has been ignored. This groundbreaking work has stood the test of time and will continue to set the standard for the study of the most important social movement in world history.

Notes

[1]. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 281-319.

[2]. On the new political history, see *Kritika* 5 no. 1 (2004).

[3]. On social historians’ propensity to trivialize Bolshevik influence in 1917, see John Marot, “Class Conflict, Political Competition and Social Transformation,” *Revolutionary Russia* 7, no. 2 (1994): pp. 111-163.

[4]. On the Bolsheviks as conniving conspirators, see chapters 9, 10, and 11 of Richard Pipes’s *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1990). Similarly, Mark Steinberg, in *Voices of Revolution, 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 258, claims that Bolshevik ideology “was little known or understood outside a small circle of activists.”

[5]. Richard Pipes blames Kerensky for not instituting these “resolute measures.” See his *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 441-445.

[6]. For an example of the liberal interpretation, see Mark Steinberg’s, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*.

[7]. Rex Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 207-208.

[8]. Peter Kenez, *The History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-

sity Press, 1999), pp. 27-28.

[9]. Ronald Suny, *The Soviet Experiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 50-52.

[10]. Ronald Kowalski, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1921* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[11]. For a critique of the “continuity thesis” see Stephen Cohen’s *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). In *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Donald Raleigh argues in favor of such a continuity perspective because “[m]any of the features of the Soviet system we associate with the Stalin era and afterward were already clearly adumbrated, practiced, and even embedded during the 1914-1922 period” (p. 416). Peter Holquist in *Making War, Forging Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) shares this assessment.

[12]. On the prosecutorial approach to the Russian Revolution, see Peter Kenez, “The Prosecution of Soviet History: A Critique of Richard Pipes’ *The Russian Revolution*,” *The Russian Review*, 50 (1991): pp. 345-352. Kenez takes Pipes to task for several wild assertions, including his absurd claim that the Red Terror was worse than the White Terror. Peter Holquist concludes his *Making War, Forging Revolution* by echoing Pipes’s claim about Red Terror without providing a semblance of proof (p. 288). On U.S. secret funding of Cossack terror, see David Foglesong’s *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), a work that has gone largely ignored. On the recent resurgence of the “prosecutorial” methodology, see Kevin Murphy, “Liberal Historians in the Age of Neoliberalism: A ‘Postmodern’ Return to Prosecuting the Russian Revolution?,” *Historical Materialism* (forthcoming).

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