Hunting For True October:
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, August 1914 The Red Wheel 1:
‘Pavel Ivanovich’, Kotya trumpeted, ‘am I allowed to ask you what you are studying? We were trying to guess just now…’
‘Well what can I tell you? I read certain books and write others…I read thick ones and write thin ones.’
‘That’s a bit vague.’
‘When things are too clear they cease to be interesting.’

Introducing Historiography
Put simply, historiography is the analysis of trends in historical interpretation; it is the ‘history of History’. On a deeper level historiography involves an examination of more complex questions:
- Why have historians disagreed over various issues and put forward differing interpretations of events?
- What are the areas of debate?
- Which historians have been at the forefront of debate?
- What evidence and new approaches have led to reappraisals of the past?
- How have changes in world events and politics influenced trends in historical writing?
These questions are an important starting point in understanding the nature of historiography. The contribution of pioneering and influential historians is acknowledged. Those who have challenged established understandings of the past or made particularly useful contributions to the study of a historical period are also recognized. Knowing the ‘who’s who’ of historians is therefore important. In many cases groups of historians have come to similar conclusions, shared an ideological outlook or used a common framework for inquiry. ‘Schools of thought’ have emerged and are outlined when studying historiographical trends. The strengths and limitations of these differing perspectives is often the basis of controversial dispute. This sense of debate is the essence of historiography. The problematic nature of History is one more aspect of historiography. That there is always a degree of bias or differing perspective in historical analysis is taken into account. Russian writer Victor Serge, himself a proclaimed ‘proletarian historian’, has noted:

‘The impartiality of the historian is no more than a myth, designed to prop up certain convenient opinions…The historian is always a ‘man of his time’: of his social class, of his nation, of his political habitat.’

Historians are unavoidably products of their own cultural background. Their work is shaped by their own selection of evidence, the personal perspective they bring to their reading of sources and, as is the case with the Russian Revolution, limited by their degree of access to archival information.

Historians often refer to previous research as an assessment of different perspectives, the essence of historiography, gives balance and perspective to their analyses. Historiography is an essential element of historians’ work. Yet it also requires higher level thinking skills. It is going beyond the ‘when’ and ‘what’ of the past to the debates over ‘why’, and even the comparison of multiple ‘whys’. Understanding historiography is certainly an intellectually demanding task, but it is a surmountable and rewarding one. A mountain of books need not be read before assessments of historians’ perspectives can be made. With a selection of good quotes and a reasonable understanding of their significance, all students can make meaningful contributions to historiographical discussions. The perceived infallibility of historians’ views should also be discouraged. Historians are not gods – they are human – and their interpretations are not without fault or limitations. They can, and should, be challenged. Different perspectives might lead to

uncertainty in the search for ‘what really happened’. The fact that historians often disagree can be confusing. But History is not just about facts and getting the story ‘right’. It involves different explanations and different ‘stories’. Historiography is the study of why historians disagree over the ‘story’ and the factors influencing their perspectives. It is a debate. The telling of the story is therefore often as controversial as the story itself. Students of History might consider the problematic notion of finding an all-encompassing ‘right’ answer or ‘absolute truth’. People perceive events around them in different ways. Different historians will view the same sources differently or use different sources to offer contrasting explanations of the same event. As historians uncover new evidence and approach the old in new ways, perspectives on the past are continually revised and extended. There is arguably no ‘final word’. The task of the historian then is to explain what might be multiple truths and offer what current research suggests is the most accurate story of the past. History was never nice and neat, but that is what makes it so interesting.

Introducing the Historiography of the Russian Revolution

All historians agree that the Russian Revolution was undoubtedly one of the most momentous developments of modern times. It gave rise to an ideology that inspired both hatred and hope across the globe and profoundly shaped international politics for over seventy years. The history of the 20th century would have been quite different without Soviet communism as a catalyst for change and conflict. Whilst historians agree that the revolution was important, they are deeply divided in their assessment of its impact and outcomes. Some have argued that it was a story of great triumph; for others it was a terrible tragedy. There are also historians who see both positive and negative aspects implicit in an event of such complexity and significance.

From the outset, and by its very nature, making sense of the Russian Revolution was controversial. A great many scholarly texts, memoirs and collections of documents have been written. Those studying the period have the observations of Western journalists who were witness to the revolution, such as John Reed. Other writers, such as W.H. Chamberlin, spent considerable time in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and had access to sources that became unavailable once Stalin came to power. Trotsky, Kerensky, Sukhanov, Miliukov and many other leading political figures were prolific in writing histories of the revolution. Soon after October 1917, the Bolsheviks sponsored historians loyal to the Soviet regime to document their version of the ‘story’, a narrative supplemented by the memoirs of leading figures within the Party (duly edited and revised according to the political trends of the time). This official ‘Soviet’ account was confronted by the memoirs of those vanquished by the October Revolution: former ministers of the Tsarist and Provisional Governments; émigré Mensheviks and SRs; White Guards; foreign diplomats who had served in Russia; Anarchists sympathetic to the libertarian ideals of the revolution…all had a perspective to voice.

In the midst of the Cold War the study of ‘Sovietology’ and interest in the Russian Revolution amongst Western historians grew. Most were hostile in their appraisals of USSR – the so-called ‘evil empire’. The work of Soviet historians, which celebrated the triumphs of the revolution, was derided and an understanding of the Soviet regime as ‘totalitarian’ prevailed. E.H. Carr was one prominent writer who sought a greater degree of impartiality in his writing. There were others too, such as Isaac Deutscher and Christopher Hill, who were more sympathetic to the idealistic nature of the revolution and Marxist analysis.

In the 1960s, writers of the New Left movement challenged both the Western ‘liberal’ totalitarian and official Soviet accounts. The ‘libertarian’ view of earlier anarchist writers was reconsidered. The spirit of questioning traditional understandings continued on into the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of the ‘revisionist’ approach. Considerably diverse in their opinions and areas of investigation, revisionist or ‘social’ historians focussed much of their research into history ‘from below’. The aspirations and influence of the working classes was

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investigated in an attempt to redress the limitations of earlier histories which tended to focus more on key political figures.

By end of the 1980s four schools of thought or broad traditions had emerged: Soviet, liberal, libertarian and revisionist. The interpretations of many writers fit neatly into these trends. Richard Pipes is a liberal, Sheila Fitzpatrick a revisionist and the History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks) short-course articulates the Soviet view developed under Stalin. However, students should be wary of lumping historians together and giving them a clearly defined label merely for the sake of it. Professor Edward Acton, who has spent considerable effort explaining the key features of different ‘traditions’, rightly warns of the temptation to treat historians in a ‘reductionist’ fashion by simplifying their views down to neat categories. It is important to realise that it is not possible to categorise every historian. There are often areas of disagreement amongst those who offer similar overall interpretations. There are also perspectives that combine aspects of different approaches, especially more recent writers. The problematic nature of finding a ‘label’ will become apparent in the discussion of current works which have yet to coalesce into a uniform narrative. What follows is a summary of the different schools of thought within the historiography of the Russian Revolution. I have outlined the four main traditions – Soviet, liberal, libertarian, and revisionist – as well as overview more recent trends. A list of the historians associated with these traditions has been included at the end of each summary. This should assist in introducing the ‘who’s who’ of historians and act as a guide to the second part of the text.

**Different Historiographical Traditions**

**The Soviet View**

The ‘Soviet’ interpretation was established and fostered by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Soviet historians put forward a Marxist analysis of the revolution, adhering to a largely orthodox narrative that legitimised the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 and celebrated the achievements and heroic struggles of the Communist new society. For Soviet historians, the Marxist-Leninist notion of class struggle was the primary tool for understanding and explaining the past.

By the end of the 19th century the ‘contradictions’ of capitalist development, coupled with the repressive and imperialist nature of the Tsarist regime, had made Russia ripe for revolution. Schmidt, Tarnovsky and Berkhin offer a typical example of this perspective:

> ‘Russia was subject to all the socio-economic contradictions typical of the world at that time: between labour and capital, between capitalism and the survivals of feudalism and serfdom, and between the highly developed industrial areas and the backward outskirts. These contradictions were made particularly acute by the system of political, national and

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intellectual oppression by the tsarist autocracy... The struggle against capitalism and for the socialist transformation of society was on the agenda. For the first time in world history, there existed a real opportunity for the struggle for democracy to be combined with the struggle for socialism. Russia’s specific experience of the second half of the 19th and early 20th century showed that such a combination could be implemented and could lead to success only under the leadership of the proletariat.  

As Lenin explained, the ‘highest stage’ of capitalism was evident as the great nations of the world fiercely competed over their imperialist ambitions. It was at this time that the class struggle between the bourgeois owners of capital and the proletariat – under the economic and social strains of ‘imperialist’ wars – would climax and result in revolutionary conflict.

As the ‘weakest link’ in the ‘imperialist chain’, Russia’s Tsarist regime offered the best chance for the proletariat, with the support of the poorest of the peasantry, to forge a socialist revolution. But as Lenin also argued, the working class required a vanguard to organise and lead them. If left to themselves workers would only develop ‘trade union consciousness’ and be satisfied merely with improvements in their material conditions. True ‘revolutionary consciousness’ had to come from without: it would be imparted to the masses by a political organisation armed with the correct revolutionary theory. According to Lenin, ‘Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.’ Soviet historians are adamant that the ultimate success of the Russian Revolution was due to the brilliant leadership of Lenin who ‘creatively developed’ Marxist theory and correctly applied a new Marxist-Leninist analysis to the developing revolutionary conditions. The great Comrade Lenin went on to forged the Bolsheviks into a party ‘of a new type’: a professional nucleus of resolute, disciplined activists, who provided timely leadership to the masses. Without the guidance of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Russia would not have undergone a successful socialist revolution.

Lenin’s correct analysis of Russia’s revolutionary potential was first brought to attention in 1905. Deteriorating economic conditions in the midst of the disastrous Russo-Japanese War (a ‘predatory, imperialist war’) was coupled with on-going political repression, made apparent to all by ‘Bloody Sunday’. Urged on by Bolshevik activists, the Russian proletariat rose up against their Tsarist oppressors. The subsequent ‘revolutionary mass strikes’ of the workers inspired wider opposition toward the Tsar in a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolutionary movement. In the face of peasant unrest, workers’ protests and escalating ferment in sections of the armed forces, Tsar Nicholas II was compelled to grant civic freedoms and the promise of democratic representation in his October Manifesto. This was nothing more than, ‘...a fraud on the people, a trick of the tsar to gain some sort of respite in which to lull the credulous and to win time to rally his forces and then to strike at the revolution.’ Lenin rightly warned against accepting such a ‘trick’ and urged the proletariat to continue their struggle, the ultimate aim being the overthrow of Tsarism. By their ‘revolutionary creative initiative’ the proletariat went on to form their own councils – the soviets – which the Bolsheviks considered a viable basis for revolutionary power and socialism (as they proved correct in the later October Revolution).

A united revolutionary movement was not forthcoming. Fearing the onset of a mass revolutionary upheaval the bourgeoisie and landed gentry, represented by the Kadets and Octobrists, backed the Tsar’s reforms and withdrew their support from the working-class. With the announcement of elections for a parliamentary Duma, liberal groups abandoned the revolutionary struggle and focused on organising political parties to represent their own interests. As ‘Bloody’ Nicholas rallied his forces, so did the Bolsheviks and the proletariat ready themselves for armed struggle. Lenin remained in exile abroad until November so leadership of the St. Petersburg Soviet was taken up by Mensheviks who neither realised the revolutionary potential.”

10 Ibid, p. 25.
11 Commission of the Central Committee, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1942), p. 78.
potential of the soviets nor agitated for a workers’ uprising. The highpoint of the 1905 Revolution came in December with a revolt of Bolshevik led workers in Moscow (St. Petersburg failed to rise up in support). Typical of its essentially despotic nature, the Tsarist government responded with overwhelming force and crushed the uprising. The soviets were dispersed and reprisals against continued worker and peasant militancy were swift and brutal. Hopes that the Duma would herald an era of democracy, even if limited, were dashed by the continued dispersals of the parliament and Stolypin’s restrictions on franchise laws. The ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution of 1905 remained unfulfilled. Trotsky observed, ‘Although with a few broken ribs, Tsarism came out of the experience of 1905 alive and strong enough.’

Following Lenin’s analysis, Soviet historians see 1905 as a ‘dress rehearsal’ for the later Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917. The Party suffered serious setbacks during the reactionary years immediately after 1905; however, important lessons were learnt. Firstly, it was clear that no cooperation could be made with the liberal Kadets and Octobrists who were proven staunch advocates of their own class interests. The Mensheviks were likewise to be distrusted as their revolutionary leadership lacked the discipline and fortitude of that offered by Lenin. The proletariat and the Bolsheviks would in all likelihood have to go it alone. According to Boris Ponomarev and others,

‘The December armed uprising of the Russian workers has entered the chronicle of the liberation struggle of mankind as a major action after the Paris Commune. The experience gained in it was used to train new fighters for the freedom and happiness of the people.’

Workers came to realise their potential for revolutionary action and Bolshevik activists gained experience in agitation and armed insurrection. An important form of revolutionary government was found in the soviets. Furthermore, Lenin’s tactics of an armed revolt of workers and poor peasants was proven basically correct, although the uprising lacked sufficient strength and coordinated direction. Ponomarev argues,

‘The Bolsheviks were the first to engage in struggle, rallied the masses and led them with superb courage. The struggle of the masses did not end in victory because the revolutionary onslaught had not been strong enough. The blow that had been dealt to tsarism had not been powerful enough to bring it down.’

A harder punch was needed to deliver more than a few broken ribs.

The Bolsheviks continued to increase their influence amongst Russia’s working classes in the years prior to the First World War, although many of the Party’s leading figures, including Lenin, were forced by the efforts of the Okhrana to remain in exile. Lower-level Party activists and illegally published newspapers, notably Pravda, maintained an effective underground revolutionary movement. It was also during this period that the Bolsheviks, in the midst of fierce debate amongst the factions of the Social Democratic Party, formally drew together as a distinct political party and participated in the Duma. More importantly, the societal and economic ‘contradictions’ of Tsarist Russia remained unresolved; a second revolutionary outburst was inevitable.

The fundamental cause of the revolution was not the inept leadership of Nicholas II and his Ministers, but rather the nature of Russian society at that point in its historical development. According to Pyotr Golub, ‘The essence of the matter lay not in the separate errors and personal weaknesses of those who ruled the country, but in the social paralysis of the ruling class.’ Soviet historians note the correctness of Lenin’s theories when the Tsarist regime found itself embroiled in the First World War. Russia’s involvement in this conflict was no accident, but rather the inevitable result of its on-going capitalist development and imperialist expansion.

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15 Cited in Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, p. 113-114.
Unlike many Western liberal historians, Soviet writers argue that the revolutionary movement that emerged in February 1917 was the continuation of that in 1905. The war weakened the regime, but it also inﬂamed its inherent ﬂaws that were bound to lead to a revolutionary crisis.

As they did in 1905, it was the Bolshevik party who played a central role in shaping the workers’ protests and developed their ‘class consciousness’. Far from being removed from developments, Lenin maintained close correspondence with his lower-level cadres in Russia, providing them with a deﬁnitive programme: the ‘imperialist war’ should be turned into a ‘civil war’. ‘In the years of the war,’ according to Schmidt, Tarnovsky and Berkhin, ‘the Bolsheviks showed that they were consistent international revolutionaries. The world war had been brought about by capitalism at the highest, imperialist stage of its development. It followed then from this that it was possible to do away with the war by overthrowing the imperialist bourgeoisie.’ With this proper guidance, it was the revolutionary proletariat, drawing inspiration and experience from their efforts in 1905, who led the successful assault on the Tsarist government.

Although the spontaneous protest to mark International Women’s Day provided the spark that lit the February Revolution, as the protest movement escalated the Party quickly took the initiative in releasing inﬂuential proclamations. Workers and soldiers were urged to continue the revolutionary struggle, whilst Bolshevik worker-activists were prominent in leading armed attacks against police stations and jails. The efforts of the militant workers subsequently brought about the collapse of the Tsarist regime. The outcome of the February Revolution was a ‘bourgeois democratic revolution’, yet the true aspirations of the toiling classes and the ‘vanguard’ Bolshevik party remained unfulﬁlled. Tsarism was overthrown but a socialist workers’ government did not eventuate. Busy consolidating and maintaining revolutionary fervour on the streets, the initiatives of Bolshevik activists were usurped by the bourgeois politicians of the Duma who sought to limit the extent of the revolutionary movement through the formation of the Provisional Government.

Furthermore, the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries of the Menshevik and SR parties formed a Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet at the Tauride Palace. Bolshevik workers had set in motion plans for a soviet in the militant working-class Vyborg District; however, the Mensheviks and SRs were quicker off the mark and more politically experienced than the Bolsheviks present in Petrograd. Plans for a Vyborg Soviet were not brought to their full potential as inexperienced workers and soldiers, rejoicing in the downfall of the Tsar, sent delegates to the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies established at the Tauride Palace. As orthodox Marxists, the SRs and Mensheviks felt that the tasks of ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution were complete; a period of continued capitalist development and bourgeois rule should proceed. Russia was not yet ripe for socialism and power should not pass to the soviets.

This stood in stark contrast to the determined leadership of Lenin who saw that it was necessary for the revolutionary process to continue through to its logical conclusion: the socialist phase. According to an oﬃcial Soviet biography,

‘The revolution needed an unusually powerful mind to grasp quickly the extremely intricate situation, and unerringly to indicate to the masses of the working people their immediate objective. It required an unusually strong will to lead the masses towards this objective and achieve victory. Lenin, who had assimilated the experience of the revolutionary struggle of the working people of all countries and had a thoroughly scientiﬁc conception of the tasks of the proletariat, was the incarnation of this mind and will. The leader of the revolution took his place at the helm.’

Arriving to a triumphant welcome at the Finland Station in April 1917, Comrade Lenin set the Party on the right course and delivered a brilliant programme of action: his April Theses. Guided by the creative genius of Lenin, who grasped the exact nature of Russia’s correct revolutionary path, the Bolshevik vanguard went about carefully explaining to the working classes why the

16 Schmidt, Tarnovsky and Berkhin, A Short History of the USSR, p. 123.
Provisional Government must be overthrown and replaced by a government of the Soviets. The bourgeois Ministers of the Provisional Government and their moderate socialist allies, the traitorous and capitulationist Mensheviks and Right SRs, were no better than the Tsarist regime. The ‘imperialist’ war dragged on, land reform was not forthcoming and Russia’s corrupt managerial elite continued to exploit the labour of the workers. As class tensions and perceived exploitation increased, the Bolshevik party were instrumental in raising the ‘revolutionary consciousness’ of the masses; providing the slogans that would lead to a triumphant socialist revolution: ‘Peace! Bread! Land!’ and ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ It was the Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks alone, who convinced the toiling people of their own revolutionary strength and that the only viable solution to their problems lay in socialist revolution.

An important aspect of the Soviet view is the stress on continuity between the revolutions of 1905, February and October 1917. In Trotsky’s words, ‘The events of 1905 were a prologue to the two revolutions of 1917, that of February and that of October. In the prologue all the elements of the drama were included, but not carried through.’ The Great October Socialist Revolution was not an illegitimate deviation in Russia’s historical development, but rather the culmination of 1905 and February. October marked the foundation of the first ever socialist state and heralded the transition from one phase of historical development to another as governed by Karl Marx’s scientific laws of history. Given that the aspirations of Russia’s radicalised working classes remained unfulfilled by February Revolution, the defeat of the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘imperialist’ Provisional Government was inevitable.

Despite setbacks in the July Days and repeated threats of arrest which forced Lenin into hiding, the Bolsheviks continued to win over the support of the masses, eventually gaining majorities in the Moscow and Petrograd Soviets. The time to herald in a new socialist future based on the Bolshevik led soviets had arrived. Lenin devised a thoroughly ingenious plan for armed insurrection for his disciplined Party comrades, heroic Red Guards and class conscious soldiers to follow. The insurrection enjoyed such wide support among the masses, and had been so thoroughly planned, that it was carried out with rare speed and success,’ according to Ponomarev. The glorious ‘storming’ of the Winter Palace indicated the mass support for the Bolsheviks amongst the working-class, as well as the decisive leadership of the true Party of the proletariat. The Great Socialist October Revolution, ‘in which huge masses of people participated’, was accomplished by the working-class in alliance with the poor peasantry who recognised the judicious leadership of the vanguard Bolshevik party. The effectiveness of Lenin’s theory of a disciplined, professional revolutionary organisation as expounded in What Is To Be Done? was proven irrefutably correct.

The achievements of the brilliant Comrade Lenin loom large in all Soviet accounts. G.D. Obichkin offers a typical assessment of Lenin’s role in October: ‘In his guidance of the uprising, Lenin’s genius as a leader of the masses, a wise and fearless strategist, who clearly saw what direction the revolution would take, was strikingly revealed.’

Red October heralded the end of imperialist capitalism and the dawn of the age of Communism where the end of all exploitation of man by man was achieved: ‘The Great October Socialist Revolution overthrew the anti-popular regime, smashed the obsolete system, established the dictatorship of the proletariat and created the Soviet socialist state.’ As he did during the

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18 Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution, p. 34.
19 This was despite the ‘traitorous misgivings’ of Zinoviev and Kamenev. A Menshevik who never really believed in Bolshevism Trotsky played no role in the success of the October Revolution, according to orthodox Soviet accounts.
22 The one prominent exception was E.N. Burdzhalov. Unlike fellow Soviet commentators, Burdzhalov questioned the infallibility of Bolshevik leadership in regards to every situation. His views created considerable controversy within the Soviet scholarly establishment and were subject to intense public denunciation in the Soviet journal Voprosy Istori.ii.
October Revolution, Lenin continued to play a central role in forging the new society. According to one Soviet biography,

‘Never before had the world seen a head of state in whom the power of theoretical, political wisdom and foresight, indomitable will and boundless courage were so combined with such profound knowledge of the people, of its life, its cherished dreams and immediate needs. Not a single statesmen before Lenin was ever so closely connected with the people and had such confidence in them. And the people in turn had boundless faith in him.’

The task that lay before the new government, the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), was undoubtedly a considerable one. The aim was the creation of a new society free of exploitation of man by man; the realisation of communism. Forging such a society would not be easy. The fundamental economic, political and social structures of the former Russian empire had to be reorganised. Having come to power, the Bolsheviks ensured that initial steps were taken to fulfil the promises of ‘Peace! Bread! Land!’ that had been neglected by the bourgeois Provisional Government. Numerous decrees which offered previously unimaginable freedoms and benefits were introduced: women’s rights, workers’ control in industry and autonomy for national minorities.

Many difficulties remained. The economy was in ruins and there was a shortage of loyal and sufficiently trained cadres to administer industry. Furthermore, Russia was surrounded by hostile capitalist nations. The counter-revolutionary forces of the bourgeoisie were rallying against the will of ‘the people’. Having refused to recognise and confirm the gains of the October Revolution, Soviet power was ‘obliged’ to disperse the Constituent Assembly. The new Soviet state was plunged soon after into a desperate battle for survival. It was a war against both the internal enemies of the working class – the corrupt, privileged ‘white guardist’ bourgeoisie – and the ‘imperialist interventionist invaders’ of the capitalist West.

According to Soviet writers, the increasingly authoritarian measures taken during the Civil War were necessary responses to political and military crises. The Cheka, ‘that stern weapon of the proletarian dictatorship’, was not an organisation of callous murderers but rather the brave ‘sword and shield’ of revolutionary defence on ‘the internal front’. Political repression did eventuate, but ‘Soviet power used force only when it was compelled to do so by counter-revolutionaries.’ When attempts to build socialism in the countryside were hampered by the resistance of the kulaks, who ‘hated Soviet rule for protecting the interests of the poor and middle peasants,’ authoritarian measures were applied. Economic breakdown and the demands of the Red Army therefore justified and necessitated the harsh policies of War Communism. Soviet historians admit that whilst warranted given the context of the Civil War and foreign intervention, socialism would not immediately eventuate through the policies of War Communism. Soviet accounts follow Lenin’s assessment: ‘We were forced to resort to ‘War Communism’ by war and ruin. It was not, nor could it be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat. It was a temporary measure.’

Through revolutionary determination a victory against the White Guards, foreign interventionist forces and counter-revolutionary Kronstadt mutiny was achieved. In the 1920s Soviet Russia entered a period of peaceful economic restoration with the adoption of the New Economic Policy. The subsequent, ‘energetic work by the Party soon yielded results,’ according to

25 Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute Moscow, Lenin, p. 129.
26 Ibid, p. 132.
28 Ibid, p. 146.
30 According to the History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks) Short Course, p. 250: ‘A glaring instance of the new tactics of the class enemy was the counter-revolutionary mutiny in Kronstadt. It began in March 1921, a week before the Tenth Party Congress. Whiteguards, in complicity with Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and representatives of foreign states, assumed leadership of the mutiny. The mutineers at first used a “Soviet” signboard to camouflage their purpose of restoring the power of the capitalists and landlords. They raised the cry: “Soviets without Communists!” The counter-revolutionaries tried to exploit the discontent of the petty bourgeois masses in order to overthrow the power of the Soviets under a pseudo-Soviet slogan.’
On the basis of the NEP, industrial and agricultural output was restored and the living standards of the working classes improved. Bold plans for the electrification of the whole nation were set in place. Yet according to the *History of the CPSU (b.) short-course*,

> ‘War Communism had been an attempt to take the fortress of the capitalist elements in town and countryside by assault, by a frontal attack... Now Lenin proposed to retire a little, to retreat for a while nearer to the base, to change from an assault of the fortress to the slower method of siege, so as to gather strength and resume the offensive.’

The ‘offensive’ on the economic front was bound to be waged again.

Following the tragic death of Comrade Lenin in January 1924, the Communist party continued carrying out the construction of socialism. Yet the development of industry needed to be accelerated and the agricultural sector modernised. It was Stalin with his Five Year Plans that launched and succeeded in this new offensive on the economic front. Stalinist histories claim that the Five Year Plans were a complete success. They ‘...completely emancipated the workers and peasants from exploitation and had opened the way to a prosperous and cultured life for ALL working people in the U.S.S.R.’ Comrade Stalin purged the Party of corrupt and opportunist elements personified by Trotsky and his allies. Through the collectivisation of agriculture the countryside was rid of kulak exploitation, thereby raising Russia’s poor peasants to the level of successful middling peasants. More importantly, the USSR was transformed into a proud and mighty industrial super-power able to stand up to the threat of Western capitalist aggressors and Fascist military invasion.

Written by a panel of historians under the personal direction of Stalin and the Central Committee, the *History of the CPSU (b.) short-course* is the most absurdly biased of Soviet accounts. Not only does it paint a glowing and inaccurate account of Stalin’s contribution to the revolution, the role of other key leaders removed from power during the purges of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Trotsky and Kamenev, are grossly distorted. Later Soviet accounts, such as Ponomarev’s *A Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1970), still celebrate the triumphs of the Five Year Plans but are notably subdued in their references to Stalin: the triumph of socialist development in the USSR was due to ‘the Party’ and ‘the Soviet people’.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev’s shock denunciation of Stalin’s leadership at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, the scope of opinion amongst Soviet writers widened. Further revisions came with increased contact between younger scholars of the West and Soviet historians during the period of Mikhail Gorbachev’s ‘glasnost’ (‘openness’) in the mid-1980s. The scholarly quality of Soviet works and the subtlety of their argument increased significantly. Later Soviet historians produced many insightful studies and provided collections of valuable documents. Edward Acton notes, “Soviet historiography has long ceased to be the laughing stock it became under Stalin.” Despite the re-evaluation of Stalinism in the 1950s and the widening of views in the 1980s, Soviet writers (with a few exceptions) generally maintained the basic Party line until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The tenets of the Soviet view remained unaltered. Essentially writing propaganda served up as History, Soviet historians believed that it was their duty to educate their audience on the correctness of Marxist-Leninist analysis. Lenin remained the basis of authority and the font of all wisdom in political matters; the right of the Communist party to rule as the sole governmental authority in the USSR was never questioned. Historians continued to conform their assessments to the current political line as the principle of *partiinost* (‘party-mindedness’) prevailed. Even under Gorbachev’s era of perestroika and glasnost more forthright historians, such as P. V. Volobuev, admitted, ‘we still do not have a genuinely scientific, truthful history of the revolution.’

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32 *History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks) Short Course*, p. 257.
33 Ibid, p. 320.
There have been a small number of Russian writers who more openly dissented from the official Soviet perspective. Leon Trotsky is particularly notable. Written during the negotiations over the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, Trotsky’s brief book *The Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* was the first work of Soviet history – a fact often overlooked. Published between 1931 and 1933, Trotsky’s monumental classic, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, was also the first comprehensive analysis of 1917. Considered a landmark in historical writing, it remains an influential text predominantly amongst socialist scholars. Parts of Trotsky’s History are in line with other Communist writers, it is a Marxist account by a leading Bolshevik; however, Trotsky differs from the orthodox perspective. He rightly places himself back into the narrative and dismisses the inflated importance given to Stalin by later Soviet historians. Radical American journalist Max Eastman, who translated History into English, argues that Trotsky does not dwell to excess on his own actions, referring to himself mostly in third person and giving emphasis to the importance Lenin’s leadership. On the respective importance of his own and Lenin’s contributions to October, Trotsky writes,

‘Had I not been present in 1917 in Petersburg, the October Revolution would still have taken place – on the condition that Lenin was present and in command. If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution: the leadership of the Bolshevik party would have prevented it from occurring.’

An ardent critic of the falsifications presented by Stalinist historians, Trotsky was renowned for his scathing assessments of General Secretary Stalin, the so-called ‘gravedigger of the revolution’. Unlike Eastman, Professor James White sees Trotsky’s History as a ‘polemical work’. The former Commissar of War certainly went to great lengths to portray himself as the one, true Leninist.

A contemporary of Trotsky, Nikolai Sukhanov was an influential writer who was sympathetic to the popular ideals of the October Revolution but critical of Lenin and elements of later Communist policies. Sukhanov served on the first Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. He was an editor of Maxim Gorky’s independent socialist newspaper *Novaya Zhizn* and was later part of Yuri Martov’s Internationalist faction of the Menshevik SDs. In his detailed eyewitness account Sukhanov recognised the genuine mass following of the Bolshevik party, but despaired of the increasing folly of other socialist groups whose political wavering and factionalism lost them popular support. For Sukhanov, the Leninist programme was irresponsible, inherently dictatorial and more anarchist than Marxist.

Sukhanov was a fervent critic of the Terror and repression of non-Bolshevik press. After the Civil War he reconciled himself to the new regime and worked as an economist in various Soviet institutions, though he never joined the Communist Party. When published in 1922, Sukhanov’s account was considered essential reading for all Communists seeking to understand the events of 1917. It is to Sukhanov that we owe the description of Stalin as ‘a grey blur, looming up now and then dimly and not leaving any trace’.

By the late 1920s his work was considered far too divergent from the official line and was withdrawn from public access. As a suspect ex-Menshevik, he was arrested and tried for treason in 1931 and sent to the labour camps. His subsequent fate remains unclear.

Viktor Serge, a former anarchist who later joined the Communist party, saw October as an authentic mass revolutionary movement. He was more favourable in his assessment of the

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41 See Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*. 

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Bolsheviks than Sukhanov. The revolution did evolve into a dictatorship of the Party, but this came about after mid-1918 in the midst of the Civil War. Economic breakdown eroded the revolution’s proletarian social base and counter-revolutionary pressure, as opposed to predetermined dictatorial mindset, justified authoritarian policies. It was measures improvised in the face of emergency, rather than ideology, which led to repression under the new regime.

Serge offers an interesting insight as a socialist writer grappling with the moral dilemmas of revolutionary conflict. The Red Terror of the Civil War period was ‘not only a necessary and decisive weapon in the class war but also a terrible instrument for the inner purification on the proletarian dictatorship itself.’ In his assessment of the Kronstadt Revolt, Serge sees the ‘beginning of a ghastly fratricide...a senseless and criminal agony,’ although if the Bolshevik’s had not repressed the uprising, ‘it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the émigrés...another dictatorship, this time anti proletarian.’

Serge expressed his unease with the violent aspects of the dictatorship of the proletariat on a number of occasions, although his support of the Communist regime remained. Fluent in a number of European languages, Serge worked for the Comintern but was expelled from the Party in 1928 for his support of the Left Opposition. He was imprisoned for a time but was allowed to leave for France in 1936.

A more recent Marxist historian, Roy Medvedev disapproved of the authoritarian nature of the later Communist state and the shortcomings of ‘dogmatic’ Leninism. Like Trotsky, he too sees a fundamental discontinuity between the leadership of Lenin and Stalin. As in other Soviet accounts, the Bolsheviks held the support of the proletariat and the measures taken by Lenin during the early years of Soviet power were justified. Medvedev argues, ‘Only the dictatorship of the proletariat could have staved off total ruin for the country and its economy.’ Medvedev was an essentially loyal Marxist, although one quite willing to voice his opposition to the policies of the contemporary Soviet government.

Others have been more critical in their views. ‘Dissident’ Soviet writers include Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko. A world renowned author, Solzhenitsyn produced both investigative studies and literary accounts of the repression he and millions of other Russians suffered under the Soviet regime. His The Gulag Archipelago did much to expose the horrors of the labour camp system to Western readers. He was eventually exiled from the USSR for his continued opposition to Communist rule. The son of a prominent Bolshevik commissar, Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko wrote a scathing attack on Stalin’s leadership. His father, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, led the storming of the Winter Palace and was a high ranking military official during the Civil War. Like many of his contemporaries, he was arrested and eventually killed during Stalin’s purges. Anton too was sent to the labour camps. For Antonov-Ovseyenko (the historian), Stalin’s rule was a fundamental betrayal of the revolution, in fact a counterrevolution. ‘This was not Stalinism but Stalinshchina – an entire historical epoch during which the vilest and bloodiest kind of evil doing flourished upon this earth. It was gangsterism enthroned...Truly the crime of the century.’

Antonov-Ovseyenko holds Stalin personally responsible for the purges and the degeneration of revolutionary ideals. Though they had their faults, the vision of ‘true’ Communists like Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko lost out after Lenin’s death to the immoral, self-seeking career bureaucrats led by ‘Gensek’ Stalin.


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42 Ibid, p. 305.
44 The Comintern, or Communist Internationale, was the Bolshevik sponsored organisation which encouraged revolutionary movements and the formation of Communist groups outside Soviet Russia.
Dissident Soviet historians: Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, Nikolai Sukhanov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Leon Trotsky, Victor Serge and Roy Medvedev may also be considered more ‘dissident’ Soviet writers, though they stand more accurately outside the Soviet perspective as individual scholars. Trotsky’s later work, which challenges Stalinist account, does not fit well with the orthodox Soviet view.

Western Marxists

Outside the Soviet tradition a number of Western historians have also presented a Marxist view of the revolution. Such writers accept the inevitability of revolutionary class conflict and dialectical materialism in shaping historical development. Many hold a positive view of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the influence of Lenin. The degree of this support varies from writer to writer. John Reed’s Ten Days That Shook the World was described by Lenin as ‘…a truthful and most vivid exposition of the events so significant to the comprehension of what really is the Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.’ Reed was an American journalist who witnessed the events of 1917. He was able to walk through the Winter Palace in the midst of the ‘storming’ and interviewed leading figures of the period. A socialist activist who went on to work for the Comintern, Reed’s approval of the Bolsheviks is evident. The working class impelled the Bolsheviks to topple the Provisional Government and introduce the policies that were so desperately needed. The Bolsheviks, according to Reed, were ‘the only people in Russia who had a definite programme of action while the others talked for eight long months.’

For many Western Marxists, it was not a desire for personal power which motivated Lenin, but instead a genuine concern to improve the nature of human relations through a liberating and egalitarian revolution. In assessing the significance of Lenin as a revolutionary leader, British historian Christopher Hill argues,

‘First and foremost Lenin symbolizes the Russian Revolution as a movement of the poor and oppressed of the earth who have successfully risen against the great and powerful. That was and is the most important single fact about the revolution.’

The ideals of the revolution and the new society it brought about were well intentioned and visionary. Furthermore, ‘In its feeling for the ordinary man Lenin’s thought was fundamentally democratic.’ More conservative Western historians strongly disagree with Reed and Hill’s perspectives.

Isaac Deutscher was a leading Western Marxist whose subtle analyses continue to be influential. His biographies of Stalin and Trotsky are recognized as insightful works of scholarship. A former Polish Communist and avowed Marxist, Deutscher’s affinity for Trotsky is apparent, although he is certainly not uncritical in his assessments. Russian ‘backwardness’ and the harrowing experience of the Civil War profoundly influenced the nature of the new regime, according to Deutscher. The circumstances of economic breakdown and counter-revolutionary threat brought on increased authoritarian policies. ‘Besieged fortresses are hardly ever ruled in a

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49 Reed, Ten Days That Shook the World, p. 137.
51 Ibid, p. 156.
democratic manner.’54 A one-party dictatorship was required to ensure the survival of the revolution. For Deutscher, what emerged from the Civil War was neither premeditated nor malevolent but rather driven by this ‘inescapable necessity’. The ‘temporary expedient’ of arbitrary violence and centralized control thereby became the norm.55 Herein lay the seeds of Stalinism in all its brutality.

While the Soviet view, especially the Stalinist variety, has been largely discredited, Marxist interpretations are still applied by some historians. Steve Wright’s pamphlet, Russia: The Making of the Revolution, is readily handed out the radical street-corner scene by groups such as Socialist Alternative.56 More scholarly works are offered by Mike Haynes and Kevin Murphy.57 Winner of the 2006 Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, Murphy’s Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory represents the modern face of well researched Marxist history.58 An outspoken socialist and critic of conservative historians, Professor Murphy is adamant that ‘Marx and Frederick Engels were correct – even more so in regard to periods of mass social upheaval. The history of the Russian Revolution is the history of class struggle…There is no doubt in my mind that the Marxists got it right.’59 The radicalised working-class carrying out profound revolutionary change and the limitations of liberal politics in 1917 remain at the forefront of contemporary Marxist history.

Western Marxists: Christopher Hill, John Reed, Isaac Deutscher, A.J.P. Taylor, Eric Hobsbawm, Max Eastman, Marcel Liebman, Mike Haynes, Steve Wright, Kevin Murphy.

The Liberal View

From the late 1940s until the early 1960s most Western historians of the Russian Revolution adhered to the ‘liberal’ or ‘totalitarian’ perspective. A number of modern writers continue to champion this interpretation, which remains influential in the popular media and many school text books. The politics of the Cold War and the ideals of American political science played a fundamental role in shaping the liberal view.60 It is politically conservative and fundamentally hostile to Marxist theory.61 Western liberal historians have been the most ardent critics of the Russian Revolution and reject much of the Soviet perspective outright.

Politics, rather than class conflict, is the key to understanding the past, according to liberal historians. For better or worse it was ‘…identifiable men pursuing their own advantages’ who made the Russian Revolution.62 The liberal view has been described as history ‘from above’. The flawed decisions of Tsar Nicholas II and Kerensky, alongside the determination of Lenin, ultimately shaped the revolution rather than Marxist notions of class and social conflict.63 Richard Pipes argues,

‘…the ‘masses’ neither needed nor desired a revolution; the only group interested in it was the intelligentsia. Stress on alleged popular discontent and class conflict derives more from ideological preconceptions than from the facts at hand – namely from the

54 Deutscher, The Unfinished Revolution, p. 31.
55 Ibid.
56 Steve Wright, Russia: The Making of the Revolution, (Bookmarks, London, 1984) is readily available as a ‘socialist alternative pamphlet’.
58 Kevin Murphy, Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory (Berghahn Books, New York, 2005).
59 Ibid, pp. 22 and x.
60 The memoirs of Russian émigrés were a further influence on the early exponents of the liberal view. Having fled Soviet Russia as political refugees, these writers professed an understandably negative view of the October Revolution and the Bolshevik dictatorship.
61 A number of leading historians of the liberal school were outspoken supporters of conservative governments during the later years of the Cold War. Richard Pipes was an adviser to US President Ronald Reagan; Robert Conquest served British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.
63 For liberal historians the concepts of ‘revolutionary consciousness’ and ‘class conflict’ are essentially myths perpetuated by both Soviet historians and ‘revisionist apologists’ for the Bolshevik regime.
discredited Marxist theory that political developments are always and everywhere driven by class conflict.\(^\text{64}\)

Ordinary people were largely irrational in their actions and demands. They were passively ignorant of the true nature of the revolution. This naïve mass was deceived and directed by the Bolsheviks. As John Keep argued, the October ‘Revolution’ was essentially the skilful exploitation of anarchy by the Bolsheviks for their own ends. Though Keep offers more examination of lower class aspirations than more traditional liberal accounts, the masses were in effect ‘caught up in great events over which they had no control.’\(^\text{65}\)

Contrary to the Soviet view, the downfall of the Tsarist Regime was not the result of economic and social ‘contradictions’, as expounded by Marxist ideology, but rather the outcome of Russia’s calamitous involvement in the First World War. The war exposed the autocracy to pressures it could not endure. It thwarted reformist tendencies that had emerged post-1905, such as the Duma, whilst Stolypin’s efforts to alleviate problems in the countryside, though not without their shortcomings, further indicate the positive changes emerging. George Kennan argues, ‘The fact is that the revolution came precisely at the moment when the prospects for the development of Russian agriculture, the war aside, had never looked more hopeful.’\(^\text{66}\)

Strains and structural weaknesses already apparent in the regime were exasperated by Tsar Nicholas II. Neither congenial to resolute leadership nor dynamic reform, that Nicholas was given the responsibility of guiding Russia through its darkest hour proved disastrous. Nicholas’ inadequacies as a war-time sovereign were another unfortunate aspect in what need not have occurred. Without the war and with more able leadership the Romanov dynasty might very well have emerged as a liberal constitutional monarchy.\(^\text{67}\) This is known as an ‘optimist’ view of Tsarist Russia. Such an argument essentially amounts to ‘no First World War, no Russian Revolution’. According to Kennan,

‘...what occurred in Russia in February-March 1917 was, precisely, a breakdown of the autocracy under a fortuitous combination of momentary strains – not the overthrow of the existing order by revolutionary forces. In essence, the regime may be said to have collapsed because it was not able to muster sufficient support to enable it to withstand this sudden combination of strains.’\(^\text{68}\)

Not all liberal historians are inclined toward the optimist view. Richard Pipes, for example, argues that while ‘the collapse of tsarism was not inevitable, it made likely by deep-seated cultural and political flaws’ that were put to unsustainable pressure by World War I.\(^\text{69}\) Both Kennan and Pipes emphasize the dilemma which came from the lack of parliamentary freedoms amidst an economically expanding empire.

Kennan’s reference to ‘revolutionary forces’ indicates another aspect of the liberal perspective: revolutionary agitators, headed by the Bolsheviks, played little if any role in the February Revolution. Lenin and other prominent revolutionary leaders had no real idea of what was developing. They had, at best, sporadic contact with their followers in Russia. In the weeks prior to February 1917 Lenin had famously told a group of young supporters that he did not expect to see a revolution in his lifetime. When he did, it took him totally by surprise. Without leadership from the socialist intelligentsia, the workers’ demonstrations of February were essentially unorganised protests directed against economic deprivation unleashed by the war. But it was not these protests that brought down the Tsar. Sir Bernard Pares argues,

\(^{68}\) Kennan, ‘The Breakdown of the Tsarist Authority’, p. 3.
The collapse of the Tsarist regime came not from the militant workers’ movement, but rather the withdrawal of support from the politicians of the Duma and the army High Command. It was a revolution ‘from above’, not ‘from below’. The workers’ protests could have been dispersed and the monarchy saved had the generals been willing to bring up troops from the Front to galvanise the unreliable Petrograd garrison. The fact remained that there were no groups or individuals who wished to see Nicholas II remain in power. No support was forthcoming. According to Pipes,

‘The record leaves no doubt that the myth of the Tsar being forced from the throne by rebellious workers and peasants is just that. The Tsar yielded not to a rebellious populace but to generals and politicians, and he did so from a sense of patriotic duty.’

It was the desire to see the war through to a victorious end, not a mass revolutionary movement, which proved the decisive factor in the downfall of the Romanov dynasty.

The liberal Provisional Government that stepped into the power vacuum left by the Tsarist regime did so with the best intentions. The question of political authority; however, remained peculiarly unresolved. Russia found itself ruled by two authorities: the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. This was an unstable situation made all the worse by the socialist leaders of the Soviet who undermined the authority of the ‘bourgeois’ Provisional Government. The Soviet issued proclamations that were both contradictory and irresponsible, in particular Soviet Order No. 1. The subsequent loss of discipline amongst the soldiers was a considerable problem. Adam Ulam notes, ‘It is very doubtful whether any army could have preserved for long its fighting capacity following an order of this kind.’ The SR and Menshevik delegates of the Soviet, whilst calling for the defence of the revolution against German imperialism, effectively set in motion the collapse of Russia’s armed forces. Without a reliable and apolitical army at its disposal, Russia’s nascent ‘democracy’ was left susceptible to political challenges from both the extreme political Left and Right.

Land reform and the extent of Russia’s involvement in the war were put off until the future convocation of a Constituent Assembly. Yet these issues were of critical importance to the peasantry and increasingly belligerent workers. The Provisional Government lacked the confidence to take decisive measures in policy and was naïvely tolerant toward radical socialists who sought to undermine it. The failing and unpopular war effort, the rampages of the peasants, and the unrealistic demands of the workers created a situation in which the system of ‘dual power’ struggled to maintain effective governance. All up, successive cabinets of the Provisional Government found themselves in the midst of an ever more precarious political environment. It was a situation exploited and thrived on by the Bolsheviks.

Liberal historians argue that the success of the Bolsheviks in seizing power from the Provisional Government stem chiefly from their superior organisation and ruthlessness. It was nothing less than Lenin’s theory of a professional, conspiratorial revolutionary party put to its ultimate use. In his 1953 work How Russia Is Ruled, Merle Fainsod offered the classic totalitarian view of the Bolshevik seizure of power: ‘In 1902 in What Is To Be Done? Lenin had written, “Give us an organisation of revolutionaries, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!”’ On November 7,
1917, the wish was fulfilled and the deed accomplished.74 By armed force and clandestine means, the Bolsheviks usurped power from Russia’s rightful, admittedly incompetent, governmental authority. Richard Pipes argues,

‘The events that led to the overthrow of the Provisional Government were not spontaneous but carefully plotted and staged by a tightly organised conspiracy...October was a classic coup d’état, the capture of governmental authority by a small band, carried out, in deference to the democratic professions of the age, with a show of mass participation, but with hardly any mass involvement.’75

Under the command of Lenin and Trotsky, the Bolsheviks came to power not on the tide of a mass movement, but rather ‘like thieves in the night, they stole it.’76 It was quite simply ‘a model putch...Conceived and carried out in the strictest secrecy, it eschewed barricades and mob actions in favour of surgical strikes against the organ of the state.’77 Indeed, the ‘classic’ definition of a coup d’état.

Lenin played a central role in bringing about and shaping the Russian Revolution. He was not, though, the courageous and wise leader of the masses as portrayed by Soviet accounts. The real Lenin was instead driven by a Machiavellian hunger for power and a malign desire to bend Russian society, and ultimately the world, to his ideological vision. He was a cruel cynic for whom the welfare of the oppressed was entirely subordinated to the ultimate goal of power.78 To come to power, Lenin was prepared to offer anything to anyone. His reckless slogans inflamed social and economic anarchy; a wave of chaos that the Bolsheviks used to undermine the stability of Kerensky’s government. Any appearance of support for the Bolsheviks amidst this upheaval, such as majorities in the Soviets, was gained through subterfuge and infiltration – not through any genuine broad popularity.

When the moment came to topple the enfeebled Provisional Government, Lenin bullied his hesitant subordinates into action and concealed from the Bolshevik rank-and-file his true aim: a one-Party dictatorship. The Bolsheviks were not a vanguard of the proletariat. They were a militaristic organization dominated by members of the radical intelligentsia without real links to the working-class. Such a Party, an ‘organizational weapon’,79 readily obeyed the orders given by Lenin and the Central Committee. The October ‘Revolution’ was therefore neither popular nor democratic. The ‘storming’ of the Winter Palace, alongside the notion of mass support for the Bolshevik revolution, was a myth. Adam Ulam argues, ‘there was no pro-Bolshevik enthusiasm in the population, only apathy.’80 In fact, October wasn’t a ‘revolution’ at all. October was a military coup brought about by a professional clique of fanatical revolutionaries dedicated to the seizure and retention of power for their own ends. Pipes is adamant in his assessment:

‘It was a surreptitious seizure of the nerve centres of the modern state, carried out under false slogans in order to neutralize the population at large, the true purpose of which was revealed only after the new claimants to power were firmly in the saddle.’81

Developments following the 1917 coup proved the undemocratic and authoritarian inclination of the October revolutionaries. It was in the nature of the new regime to assert totalitarian...
tendencies from the out-set. Lenin’s aim was a one-party, one-ideology state and that’s what came about. As a minority regime headed by ruthless zealots, the same methods that propelled the Bolsheviks to power were logically employed to keep them in power: force of arms and organizational muscle. All opposition was ruthlessly suppressed and ever-more increasing aspects of society were subordinated to the will of the Party. At Lenin’s behest, Yakov Sverdlov had the Soviets purged of all non-Bolshevik delegates. The Cheka launched a Red Terror in which the arrest and execution of all perceived political ‘enemies of the people’ amounted to nothing more than a policy of social extermination. Free speech and all critical press were suppressed. Like the usurpation of power in October 1917, the Bolshevik regime ran roughshod over all political freedoms and democratic ideals.

The truly unpopular nature of the Bolsheviks was revealed by their defeat in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The results of Assembly were duly ignored and its delegates dispersed at gun-point. ‘The machine gun became for them the principle instrument of political persuasion,’ Pipes argues, ‘The unrestrained brutality with which they henceforth ruled Russia stemmed in large measure from the knowledge, gained on January 5, that they could use it with impunity.’82 Violence was the Bolsheviks’ preferred method for achieving political hegemony and the ease in which it brought results reinforced its application.

Complete disregard for the will of the people and the well-being of Russia’s national interests plunged the Bolsheviks into Civil War. Far from being unwelcome, this fierce conflict allowed the revolutionary regime to impose more ideologically extreme policies. Martin Malia argues, ‘War Communism was no aberration,’ Martin Malia argues, ‘but the crucial episode that first revealed to the Bolsheviks who they in fact were.’ The nationalization of industry, militarization of the workforce, and the elimination of money was an attempt to realise ‘true Communism’.83 That ideology underpinned War Communism was made clear by the fact that the ‘war measures’ were reaffirmed after the defeat of the White Armies. The economics of the Civil War period proved to be an irresponsible attempt by the Communists to realise their utopian vision of a society free from private property. This willingness of Bolsheviks to experiment with the Russian economy was an act of criminal negligence. According to Richard Pipes,

‘The theorists and architects of War Communism had only a nodding acquaintance with the discipline of economics and none whatever with business management…That such rank amateurs would undertake to turn upside down the economy of tens of millions, subjecting it to innovations never attempted anywhere even on a small scale, says something of the judgement of the people who in October 1917 seized power in Russia.’84

The horrors of War Communism ruined Russia’s industrial and agricultural output. The failure of such policies, ‘not merely war Communism, such as is appropriate to a besieged city, but militant Communism or rather pure Communism,’ were without any doubt ‘self-evident.’85 Millions suffered horrendously from the famine brought by forced grain requisitioning and the collapse of consumer production. Resentment over these deprivations and on-going repression by ruthless Commissars provoked widespread peasant rebellions and the 1921 Kronstadt uprising. That the ‘reddest of the red’ would turn on the Bolsheviks was indicative of just how far Lenin and his cohorts had drifted from the perceived popular ideal of ‘Soviet’ October.

This crisis was resolved by the carrot and the stick. Military force crushed the Kronstadt rebels and peasant insurgents; the economic concessions of the New Economic Policy appeased the remainder of the population and stabilized the economy. Like their Soviet counterparts, liberal historians see the NEP as strategic retreat. It was not the preferred path the Communists wished

to follow but instead a deceitful attempt at buying political breathing space via economic handouts. There was no real moderate ‘Bukharin alternative’.  

Josef Stalin invariably snatched back the concessions granted by the NEP and embarked the Soviet Union on a crash course of mass industrialization and agricultural collectivization. A gradualist approach was not in the nature militantly revolutionary Communist party. Malia argues,

‘The problem was not with the driver but with the vehicle. The Party was not a machine to be harnessed to some peasant nag and drawn for decades through the backward countryside before reaching socialism. The Party had been made to lead and to fight, to charge the class enemy and to force the hand of history. A Brest-Litovsk, whether diplomatic or economic, was only a stratagem to gather strength for a new offensive. And by the end of the twenties the Party had this strength. The great “social” fact of the NEP years was the maturation of Lenin’s Party into an organization of a still newer type: an authentic war machine to complete the conquest of the Russia interrupted by the retreat of 1921.’

Liberal historians have emphasized the elements of continuity between Russia’s Tsarist past with the dictatorship of the Communist ‘Parthocracy’.  

‘1917 did not mark a complete break with the past,’ Lynch argues, ‘Rather it was the replacement of one form of state-authoritarianism with another.’

The Bolshevik regime made use of violent repression on a scale far greater than that employed by the Tsars. Although economic reforms were granted under the NEP, political freedoms were not forthcoming. By the 1920s it appeared that the revolution had come full circle, and a new intolerant autocracy had been imposed on Russia. The foundations of the totalitarian regime that would become synonymous with Stalin had been laid.

Liberal historians also point to the continuity of leadership between Lenin and Stalin. Stalin was not an ‘aberration’, but the true heir to the Leninist regime. According to Leonard Shapiro, ‘The purpose of the new cult was clear to all: if Lenin was Allah, then Stalin was his prophet.’

The means chosen by any other Communist leader to bring about socialist development would have been nothing more than ‘a difference in tempo more than in substance.’

Lenin might not have approved of Stalin’s exact programme, but its outcome and general approach were in line with his vision.

From the ‘original sin’ of October 1917 onwards the Bolsheviks unleashed a perverse experiment permeated from the outset by authoritarian violence and shaped by a flawed political outlook. It was bound to end in disaster. The inherently totalitarian nature of Leninism inevitably led to an intolerant dictatorship; the Marxist notion of a classless society hopelessly unfulfilled. That a monster such as Stalin would emerge and the Communist regime eventually collapse was likewise inevitable. According to Malia,

‘If the Soviet regime originated in a genuinely popular revolution, then Stalin is an ‘aberration’ from the Leninist norm, and the system has the capacity, despite a temporary detour into horror, to return to a democratic and humane socialism. But if the system was born in a conspiratorial coup, then Stalin is Lenin writ large, and there is no democratic source to return to: Communism therefore cannot be reformed, but must be abolished…What went wrong? When did it go wrong? How can it be set right? But this historiography ignores the possibility that these might be false questions: that nothing went wrong with the Revolution, but that the whole enterprise, quite simply, was wrong from its inception.’

86 This argument is disputed by revisionist historian Stephen Cohen.
88 Malia describes the new regime as an ‘ideocracy’.
91 Malia, The Soviet Tragedy, p. 166.
Even once the Bolsheviks themselves realised the futility of their vision, as revolutionary fanatics they persisted in their endeavour...primarily by the use of brute force. Like Stalin, Lenin was not idealist, but a callous mass murderer. His regime ranks amongst the worst of the 20th century in its crimes against humanity. In a passionate indictment of the revolutionary regime, Martin Amis writes, ‘The enemy of the people was the regime. The dictatorship of the proletariat was a lie; Union was a lie, and Soviet was a lie, and Republics was a lie. Comrade was lie. The Revolution was lie.’ 93 Stalin’s forced collectivisation of agriculture and vast gulag labour camp system were the terrible outcomes of this dictatorship. British historian Robert Conquest has done much work in exposing the sheer scale of suffering perpetrated under Stalin. For Conquest, collectivization was a ‘Terror-Famine’ purposefully and willingly inflicted on the countryside. The Ukraine in particular ‘…was like one vast Belsen.’ 94 There was no triumph or hope implicit in the Revolution Russian, only needless suffering. Pipes offers the following assessment of the new regime:

‘So unnatural were the new conditions, they so outraged common sense and decency, that the vast majority of the population viewed the regime responsible for them as some terrible and inexplicable cataclysm which could not be resisted but had to be endured until it disappeared as suddenly as it had come.’95

Judged by the degree of upheaval and misfortune that it caused, the revolution was an unparalleled calamity. The awful legacy of criminal October continues to haunt the Russian people today.


The ‘Classics’

A small number of important works on the Russian Revolution were written by Western journalists and historians before the consensus of the totalitarian liberal school emerged in the 1950s. The category of ‘liberal’ does not readily apply to such historians – they were either writing before the time of the Cold War (despite whether or not their conclusions are in line with later historians)96 or their views are different from the traditional liberal account. They do not constitute a ‘school of thought’ as such, for their perspectives differ considerably. These writers framed the inquiries that many later historians followed, which has earned their work the status of ‘classics’. 97 Trotsky’s The History of the Russian Revolution, which first appeared in 1931, has been equally influential and is certainly a ‘classic’; however, as a Russian Communist I have placed the analysis of his work with the Soviet school.98 Of note, it was only after the publication of Trotsky’s History that major works on the Russian Revolution were produced by Western writers. The influence of Trotsky’s writing was, and continues to be, considerable.

Besides Trotsky’s monumental work, William Henry Chamberlin’s two-volume 1935 The Russian Revolution is considered one of the most authoritative histories of the period. It has stood the test of time remarkably well. Chamberlin’s account is detailed, sophisticated and, for the most part, politically neutral. He provides a considerably more complex narrative than the

93 Amis, p. 258.
95 Pipes, The Russian Revolution, p. 842.
96 Sir Bernard Pares, author of The Fall of the Russian Monarchy (first published in 1939), is a writer whose work foreshadowed the liberal school.
usual focus on ‘high politics’. Although he weaves amongst his political history the occasional discussion of the aspirations and influence of ordinary workers and peasants, Chamberlin nevertheless employed a largely ‘Lenin-centric’ approach (drawing heavily on much of Trotsky’s assessments). As a journalist for The Christian Science Monitor, Chamberlin spent time in Russia from 1922-34 and was able to make use of sources that became unavailable under Stalin. He also witnessed life under the Bolshevist regime for himself.

Like Chamberlin, Sir Bernard Pares also gathered impressions of revolutionary Russia first hand. From 1914 to 1917 he was attached to the Russian Army as a British observer and in 1917 served under the British Ambassador. He was later appointed Professor of Russian History at Liverpool University and then London University. Pares was personally acquainted with many leading figures, such as Count Witte, and was present at a number of significant events. Unlike Chamberlin, much of the arguments presented by Pares reinforce the Western liberal interpretation.

Writing a series of lengthy volumes on the Russian Revolution in the 1950s, E.H. Carr was an influential historian whose views differed from those of most other Western writers of the era. He shares Deutscher’s emphasis on the circumstances in which the Bolshevik regime adopted increasing authoritarian practices: ‘Harsh necessity forced the Soviet administration into the traditional State mould which Lenin had never intended for it.’ Carr was willing to admit some of the positive elements of the Soviet regime. He was influential in exploring the relation of the revolution to Russia’s early political, economic and cultural history; ideas that foreshadowed later revisionist research. An appreciation of Lenin’s ideological world view and the sincerity of his revolutionary outlook were also important to Carr:

‘The vision of a new world – in which men, freed from the oppression of the bourgeois State, would learn to govern themselves and to organize the processes of production and distribution for the common good – was necessary to fire the revolutionary imagination. Lenin inherited the splendid vision from a long line of nineteenth-century socialists. He accepted it, sincerely believed in it, and justified his policies by the prospect of its realization. If, after the first few months of power, the prospect seemed to recede into a remote future and the difficulties of its realization became increasingly apparent, there is no evidence that Lenin ever abandoned his faith in it.’

Though his anti-Cold War sentiment and self-professed objectivity were a welcome change from the more polemical views of other Western historians, some recent writers have been critical of Carr’s ‘selective periodization and choice of facts’. His conclusion that Stalinism was the only feasible outcome of the October Revolution is also disputed.


The Libertarian View

During the Vietnam War radical political thought influenced a movement that came to be described as the New Left. Encouraged to question all forms of authority and established wisdom, the ideals of the New Left led to a view of the revolution that rejected the arguments of both liberal and Soviet historians. This ‘libertarian’ interpretation was inspired by the ideology of anarchism. Alexander Berkman, a Russian anarchist and witness to the revolution, is one of

99 Christopher Read writes of Chamberlin’s The Russian Revolution: ‘This superb old-timer sprawls complacently across the topic leaving upstart newcomers to decide whether to offer a head on challenge and rewrite the central political narrative or tiptoe carefully around and assume everyone has already read it.’ Christopher Read, ‘Writing the History of the Russian Revolution’, review article for Institute of Historical Research: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/articles/russia.html


103 Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience, p. 34.
the better known and earliest of these writers. His assessments were revived and expanded by writers of the New Left in the 1960s.

For libertarian historians, the Russian Revolution was a story of ordinary men and women striving to overthrow oppression by their own means. It was the workers, soldiers and peasants who strove to ‘liberate’ themselves from the tyranny of economic and political exploitation that made the revolution – they were the central element of causation rather than ‘principle characters’ of ‘high politics’. Whereas Soviet historians have seen the actions of the masses as ‘spontaneous’, and liberal historians as ‘anarchic’ or ‘naively ignorant’, libertarian writers claim that the working-classes were politically conscious and significant actors in the revolutionary drama. They were neither brainwashed nor led by the Bolsheviks. Summarising the libertarian view, Edward Acton notes that the ideals that inspired the masses ‘…were their own’.104

Libertarian historians paid particular attention to grass-roots organisations, such as workers’ factory committees. Ordinary people acted to better their lives and institute egalitarian controls over the means of production; initiatives that were taken regardless of the rhetoric of professional revolutionary leaders. According to Berkman,

‘Anticipating the measures of the revolutionary government, often even in defiance of the latter, the revolutionary masses by their own initiative began, long before the October days, to put in practice their Social ideals.’105

That the Bolsheviks represented not the interests of the toilers, but rather the intelligentsia, is the second key argument of libertarian writers. Masquerading behind a facade of revolutionary slogans that appeared to support the ideals the masses, the Bolsheviks really sought power for themselves. The February and October Revolutions of 1917 were genuine mass movements that were hijacked by coercion and deception. 1917 was a revolution ‘unfinished’ and ‘betrayed’.

Having come to power by falsely claiming to be the ‘vanguard of the proletariat’, the Bolsheviks jettisoned the most cherished ideals of the popular revolution and imposed an authoritarian regime. Workers’ committees were subject to increasing control from the central state authorities and, as with the soviets, trade unions were purged of all non-Bolshevik delegates. Maurice Brinton argues, ‘The Decree on Workers’ Control was not worth the paper it was written on.’106 Based on circumstantial evidence and tending to be more ‘impressionistic’ rather than scholarly, the work of libertarian historians was dismissed by liberal and Soviet historians alike. It has tended to be considered ‘…academically not wholly respectable.’107 The assumptions of the libertarian school; however, would be proven not entirely unfounded by the work of revisionist historians.

**Libertarian historians:** Maurice Brinton, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman.

### The Revisionist View

In the late 1960s and 1970s scholars began to again question both Soviet and liberal perspectives. That the history of the Russian Revolution had tended to be ‘written backwards’ by projecting eventual outcomes on October 1917 was seen as excluding an examination of the development of the revolution. Like libertarian writers, these ‘revisionist’ historians were wary of a narrative that marginalized ordinary people. It was felt that an understanding of the revolution based on its chief ‘actors’ was not a full account of such a complex series of events. ‘For too long Russian history has been written not only from the top down, but with the bottom left out completely.’108 Efforts were made to read history ‘from below’. Recognition of how the

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104 Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, p. 177.


masses influenced key events and political leaders was emphasised, as was the diversity of experience during the revolution.

The whole notion of a revisionist viewpoint is to revisit or re-think previous historical explanations. New questions were asked; areas previously neglected were examined; a more diverse range of evidence was considered. Regional differences, issues of gender, and the impact of social polarization on governments and political parties were a few areas of this new research. Revisionist historians set out to go beyond ‘…prevailing wisdom on gray stereotypes, concepts of an immutable Soviet system, consensual political answers, and simplistic historical interpretation’ in favour of ‘…multicoloured Soviet realities, change, the need for critical-minded questions, and the necessity for complex explanations.’ A history of the revolution where political developments are considered within their complex social contexts was the essential aim of revisionist historians. The revisionist school is also known as ‘social’ history.

Revisionist scholars have given credence to some of the ideas raised by the libertarian tradition and challenged many stereotypes previously applied to the Russian masses. Edward Acton argues,

‘Russia’s workers were not one uniform, grey mass but flesh-and-blood individuals, highly differentiated in terms of level of skill, cultural development, nationality and outlook. Rather than responding en masse to events, their reactions depended closely upon their own particular experience.’

Workers and peasantry were endowed with very real political agency. They articulated and took deliberate actions to address their aspirations. The influence of trade unions, Red Guards, peasant committees, factory organisations and soldiers’ committees has been investigated. Rather than a naïve and anarchic ‘rabble’, the masses were fundamental in shaping the course of the revolution. Ordinary people were influenced by revolutionary rhetoric and responded to the policies of political leaders; however, the masses too influenced ‘high politics’. The success and failures of revolutionary leaders was a complex process of interaction from ‘above’ and ‘below’.

The all pervading factor underpinning political outcomes prior to and during 1917 was the deepening sense of social polarisation. It was this profound social conflict that proved to be the decisive element in the collapse of the Tsarist regime, the downfall of the Provisional Government, the rise of the Bolsheviks and, to an extent, the nature of the new Soviet society.

In analysing the cause of the February Revolution, revisionist historians have challenged the ‘optimist’ perspective and generally taken a ‘pessimist’ view. They have questioned whether a western-style democracy could have emerged from the Romanov autocracy. Russia was suffering from a long-term institutional crisis from which some form of revolutionary situation looked to be an unavoidable outcome. It was an affliction described by Steve Smith as ‘a crisis of modernisation’. Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II sought to transform their Empire into an industrialised nation but were unwilling to grant any of the civic freedoms that accompany such a society. Nor was the Tsarist government adept at dealing with the economic and social backwardness that plagued the lower classes. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, a Japanese-American historian, argues, ‘…the tsarist regime was pregnant with irreconcilable internal contradictions.

110 Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience, p. ix.
111 Acton, Rethinking the Russian Revolution, p. 186.
112 Influential pioneers of the history ‘from below’ approach were Marc Ferro, Alexander Rabinowitch, Steve Smith, Diane Koenker, William Rosenberg, Ronald Suny, Allan Wildman, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, Evan Mawdsley, Rex Wade, Don Raleigh and Leopold Haimson (to name just a few…the list could go on).
that it had no capacity to resolve.'

The potential for the peasantry to revolt against the landed gentry remained; the middle classes lacked cohesion and were numerically insignificant; the workers were increasingly disaffected. Above all, the Tsar’s intransient adherence to the principle of absolute monarchy was unshaken.

The First World War exposed the inherently unstable Tsarist regime to economic, military and political crises that it was unable to withstand. Yet Russia had been headed toward turmoil regardless of its involvement in the war. The political deficiencies and social tensions that brought down the autocracy predated the conflict. The war accelerated the inevitable and was the catalyst, not the cause of the revolution. For all his shortcomings, Tsar Nicholas II was therefore of lesser consequence. He was the wrong man for the job, but it was overwhelmingly the circumstances in which he ruled that proved his undoing. Robert Service argues,

‘...although Nicholas II may not have been an outstanding emperor, it was the general situation and not his personality that enfeebled the regime’s reaction to the assaults made upon it. The overthrow of the Romanovs grew likelier as the year succeeded year.’

Contrary to the liberal argument, during the February Revolution the radicalized workers’ movement ‘from below’, coupled with the revolt of the Petrograd garrison, proved just as pivotal as the collapse of confidence ‘from above’ amongst the High Command and Duma politicians.116 Without the strikes, mass protests and mutiny of the workers and soldiers, which were all conscious and deliberate actions, the Tsar would not have been forced from power. Similarly, without pressure and support from the militant workers, the Petrograd Soviet would not have emerged as a serious partner in the ‘dual authority’.

Revisionist historians have undertaken much research into the relationship between the Bolshevik seizure of power and the social polarisation and political radicalization of the Russian masses in 1917. Their work has offered a different and more complex perspective than that of liberal, Soviet and libertarian accounts. One of the most groundbreaking works on the October Revolution was Alexander Rabinowitch’s 1976 The Bolsheviks Come to Power. Rabinowitch challenged the notion that the success of the Bolsheviks stemmed from their unique capacity for conspiratorial intrigue. Instead, Rabinowitch convincingly revealed how the aspirations of the Petrograd workers came to be reflected in the programme of the Bolshevik party; consequently ‘...the goals of the Bolsheviks, as the masses understood them, had strong popular support.’

The slogans and agenda of the Bolsheviks were successful because they reflected the radical demands put forward by the masses. An angry rejection of supposed bourgeois government; a call for a more class-exclusionary conception of power brought about by a Soviet-based authority; ‘freedom’ and ‘bread’ for workers; ‘peace’ for soldiers; ‘land’ for the peasantry…all were genuinely popular amongst the lower classes. The Bolsheviks swelled from a small underground party to a mass party by October because they were the political group most readily identified with these ideals.

According to William G. Rosenberg,

'Bolshevik strength grew not only because of the party’s relative organizational strength, but also because of the explanatory content of party views and programs...The
The workers and soldiers felt it was the Bolsheviks, not the ‘bourgeois’ Provisional Government or ‘discredited’ moderate socialists, who best explained and championed their cause. These revolutionary aspirations were not, though, imposed or inspired ‘from above’ as both liberal and Soviet historians claim. Robert Service has noted,

‘The masses had not taken leave of their senses. War economic dislocation and administrative breakdown meant that their everyday needs were not being met. The sole alternative was for people to preside over their own affairs; and as the situation worsened, so the workers, soldiers, sailors and peasants took to direct political action. The Bolshevik party had the slogans that most nearly corresponded to their wishes.’

The essence of Lenin’s agitational propaganda, although simplistic, offered a viable alternative to the current state of affairs.

While the economic and social context in which the politics of 1917 developed is of interest to revisionist historians, the leadership of Lenin is by no means of secondary importance. He was a key figure in shaping the course of the revolution. Lenin’s ideas helped articulate the views of disillusioned soldiers and worker-activists, but he too was inspired by the revolutionary demands of the radicalised masses and Party rank-and-file. There was both a degree of influence from above and below upon events and ideologies. It was a sense of urgency to ensure that it was his Party that kept pace with the groundswell of popular sentiment which drove Lenin to push the Bolsheviks onto a more radical footing. Alexander Rabinowitch argues, ‘Tailoring the Bolshevik programme so that it would reflect popular aspirations was one of Lenin’s most important contributions to the development of the revolution.’ Without Lenin’s unshakable determination to see the Bolsheviks come to power, October would have certainly turned out quite differently than it did.

Contrary to the traditional liberal and Soviet accounts, Lenin’s Bolsheviks of 1917 were far from the disciplined political weapon outlined in What Is to be Done? Democratic debate and a tolerance of divergent views was commonplace. Orders given by the Central Committee were often ignored, adjusted or simply disobeyed by the rank-and-file. Problems with communication sometimes left decision making in the hands of local cadres; administrative procedures were often rudimentary. Yet it was by its somewhat decentralised nature that the Bolshevik party was able to respond so effectively to pressures from below. Rabinowitch emphasises ‘…the party’s internally democratic, tolerant, and decentralized structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character.’ This does not discount the considerable degree of authority Lenin and the Central Committee had over the Party apparatus. The Bolsheviks were more disciplined and adhered to a more uniform sense of ideology than other revolutionary parties. That Lenin was able to eventually impose his will on the Party at key times, as in the weeks after his April Theses and during the October seizure of power, is evidence of this. The public objections of Zinoviev and Kamenev show too the prevalence of disagreement. Further examples of internal Party dissent were shown in September when Lenin’s calls for an immediate seizure of power were ignored and during the July Days when rank-and-file Bolsheviks agitated for ‘All Power to the Soviets’ against the wishes of the Central Committee. Rex Wade describes the Bolsheviks in 1917 as, ‘a unique combination of centralization and decentralization.’ Rather than their cunning, aptitude for manipulation or

123 Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks Come to Power, p. 311.
unquestioning obedience to Lenin, it was the Bolsheviks’ ability to respond quickly to mass pressures and fall into line when the Party leadership most needed it which explains their success. They were simultaneously disciplined and democratic in nature.

Although the Bolsheviks were the largest and most important party that championed the slogans of ‘Soviet Power’ and ‘Peace! Bread! Land!’; research by Michael Melancon has shown that the swing in favour of the Bolsheviks was part of a broader surge in support for the radical socialist Left as a whole. The Menshevik-Internationalists, Left SRs and Mezhraiontsy grew in influence and played important roles in the events of 1917. Understanding revolutionary parties as ‘bloc’ politics has been a significant recent insight.

Having reconsidered traditional perceptions of the Bolshevik party, revisionist historians questioned the notion of October 1917 as a ‘classic coup d’état’. Whilst not a mass uprising as Soviet historians would claim, the October Revolution was not a professional, disciplined affair. The ‘classic coup d’état’ theory implies that the actions of the Bolsheviks were well organised and systematically planned. Yet as Alan Wood argues, ‘It would…be incorrect to consider that the Bolsheviks’ planning for revolution was efficient, co-coordinated or thoroughly considered. It succeeded by default rather than design.’ Far from a precision military putsch or a grand mass storming, when analysed in detail the real October emerges as a series of bungled operations which read like a comedy of errors. Furthermore, the first stages of the seizure of power were set in motion not by the orders of Lenin’s Central Committee, but by Kerensky’s assault on the Bolshevik newspapers Soldat and Rabochi Put. Without this ill-conceived attempt at goading the Bolsheviks into action, the Military Revolutionary Committee would not have been given a supposed ‘counter-revolutionary’ threat to ‘Soviet power’ from which to strike out at the Provisional Government in defence of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Sheer luck and the ‘random play of contingency’ played a role in October.

That the Bolshevik ‘coup’ was an overthrow of a working, legitimate authority is contested by many revisionist historians. Steve Smith argues that October looks like a coup, and a well-advertised one at that, ‘…except for the fact that a coup implies the seizure of a functioning state machine. Arguably, Russia had not had this since February.’ The Provisional Government was, by October, neither acting as an effective ruling body nor considered legitimate by much of the population. Its control over the armed forces in Petrograd had already been lost to the Soviet Military Revolutionary Committee a week before the October Revolution. The peasantry paid no heed to calls by government officials to cease the redistribution of land. Workers’ committees had taken measures to ensure that at least a semblance of production output was maintained in their factories, an ‘eminently practical effort to stem the tide of economic disorder’. Many felt that Kerensky’s coalition government had moved closer toward defending the interests of the propertied classes who were doing their utmost to preserve their profits with little regard for the well-being of the workers. Factories were being temporarily closed in an effort to control popular demands for higher wages, reduced hours and employment security. For the working-class, a government that could not supply bread or maintain law and order; continually ignored calls for an immediate withdrawal from the war; and appeared to corroborate with the malignant ‘burzhooi’ was not worthy of staying in power. Class analysis seemed to ‘work’ in 1917 and much of ‘the conflicts of the year could be seen in terms of class struggle’.

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It was in this context of acute social animosity, economic distress and political crisis that the Bolshevik platform of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ appeared as a way forward. Endorsed by the Second All-Russian Congress and understood by the working-classes, as well many Bolsheviks, as the foundation a soviet government, the October seizure of power had popular backing. It cannot be divorced from the profound social revolution being carried out on the factory floors, soldiers’ barracks and the villages. That the Bolshevik proclamation of ‘Soviet Power’ endorsed the measures being carried out by ordinary people ensured it support. Taking into account these revisionist insights, Professor Acton argues,

‘...the October revolution emerges as very much more than a conspiratorial coup d’etat. By then the central political issue was that of soviet power. It was popular support for this cause which doomed Kerensky and the Provisional Government and explains the ease with which armed resistance to the new order was overcome.’

‘All Power to the Soviets’ did not necessarily entail, nor was it understood by many who supported and carried out the October Revolution to mean ‘All Power to the Bolsheviks’. The broad slogans of the radical Left and the toppling of Kerensky’s government might have been popular; an exclusively Bolshevik dictatorship was not.

Whether an authoritarian Bolshevik dictatorship was implicit from the outset remains a contentious issue. There is no clear consensus on the legitimacy of Bolshevik actions in October amongst historians who have contributed to or been influenced by the revisionist tradition. In his critically acclaimed 1996 epic A People’s Tragedy, Orlando Figes revived the ‘coup’ argument, but paid lip service to the insights offered by Rabinowitch and others:

‘The October insurrection was a coup d’etat, actively supported by a small minority of the population...But it took place amidst a social revolution, which was centred on the popular realization of Soviet power...The slogan ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ was a useful tool, a banner of popular legitimation covering the nakedness of Lenin’s ambition.’

The political ruthlessness of Lenin, prominent in liberal accounts, remains a key element in the Bolshevik seizure of power for Figes.

The arguments over October as a coup d’etat are important as they centre on the degree to which the revolution was an illegitimate grab for power by a small party of the intelligentsia or a genuine mass revolutionary movement brought about by long term crises. An important trend in revisionist work that sheds light on these arguments is the study of the Bolshevik influence within workers’ soviets and soldiers’ committees across the breadth of Russia. Robert Service argues,

‘Popular uprisings have never been organised by a people as a whole. Only a minority directly participates. And, by mid-October, Lenin could also argue that soviets in city after city throughout Russia were following the example of Petrograd and Moscow in acquiring Bolshevik majorities.”

The implication of October as either a coup d’etat or a popular revolution is explained by William Rosenberg:

133 Acton, Rethinking the Russian Revolution, p. 203.
134 A lively exchange on the H-Russia online discussion log between Michael Melancon, Kevin Murphy, John Marot, Mike Haynes and others in October-November 2003 is testament to the fact that the nature of October 1917 remains a contentious topic. The initial starting point was a review by Michael Hickey of Mark Steinberg’s Voices of Revolution. The review can be found at http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=236691067805760 and online exchange (most posts were titled either *Re: Hickey on Steinberg Voices of Revolution, 1917*’ or ‘Re: 1917-18’ at http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lx&list=H-Russia&user=&pw=&month=0310
'If ‘coup’ is used conceptually to emphasize the sudden, swift and forceful manner in which Bolshevik leaders seized state institutions on 25 October, clearly October was a coup d’etat whether or not it had popular support. But in so far as ‘coup’ connotes the ‘usurpation’ of power by a narrow band of dedicated revolutionaries socially rooted in the radical intelligentsia, who artificially cloaked their own political ambitions with a self-styled defence of popular interests...the essential linkages between Russia’s revolution and October are lost, along with its world historical meaning...the notion of the party as a disciplined conspiratorial block determined from the start to seize power is and has always been a distorting caricature.\textsuperscript{137}

Russia’s long-term social upheaval reached a crisis point in late 1917. What emerged was a yearning for radical political alternatives, hence the groundswell of support for the basic Bolshevik programme of ‘Peace! Bread! Land!’ and the growth in Bolshevik influence within the Soviets. ‘By successfully relating to the popular movements,’ Steve Smith argues, ‘the Bolsheviks had, in a sense, already ‘come to power’ even before the overthrow of the Provisional Government.’\textsuperscript{138}

October was not an aberration forced by the superior organisation of small radical clique, but instead the outcome of acute social animosity and the breakdown of the then current governmental authority. The Provisional Government was in rapid decline and a soviet government of some sort was likely to emerge; be it brought about by Bolsheviks via the Milrevcom or through a coalition of socialist parties at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. As events had it, the Bolshevik seizure of power and the intransigence of the Right SRs and moderate Mensheviks at the Soviet Congress precluded the immediate formation of a coalition government. That is not to say that a coalition government was an impossibility. A number of leading Bolsheviks maintained talks with the Mensheviks and SRs after October. Kamenev, Rykov and three of their comrades resigned from the Central Committee on 4 November 1917 in protest over Lenin’s unwillingness to engage in serious negotiations with the other radical socialist parties.\textsuperscript{139} Vladimir Illich Ulyanov was clearly not the one and only representative Bolshevik. ‘True’ October is a complex, multi-faceted issue for revisionist historians.

On a wave of support for a soviet government, the Bolsheviks came to power with considerable backing in the key urban centres of the Russian Empire. As Ron Suny notes, ‘What might still be disputed is the degree, consistency, durability and meaning of that support.’\textsuperscript{140} Many revisionist historians, but not all, have proposed a ‘discontinuity’ view of the revolution. There were popular and positive aspects to October, but these were lost as crisis after crisis was faced as 1918 unfolded. It is beyond dispute that the revolution which the workers and peasantry had wanted failed to materialize. What emerged was not a soviet socialist coalition, but a Communist party dictatorship. The question, though, is whether this was the product of Bolshevik actions in late 1917 or the outcome of the Russian Civil War.

In examining the nature of the new society, revisionist historians have stressed the interaction of Bolshevik ideology with the cold, hard reality of potential military defeat and economic breakdown. More than anything, the experience of the Civil War shaped the nature of the Communist party. The Bolsheviks had come to power with a predisposition towards violence, authoritarianism and a centralized economy, but their predispositions were accentuated by developments during 1918-21.\textsuperscript{141} Revisionist scholars feel that it would be incorrect to assume that the nature of the new regime was entirely dictated by Bolshevik ideology, as liberal historians such as Martin Malia claim. Alec Nove argues, ‘There was a process of interaction

between circumstance and ideas. The choices made by Lenin and his comrades were limited by the circumstances in which they ruled. Bolshevik policies were, ‘…frequently the outcome of improvisation and pragmatism as much as of the hallowed tenets of ideology. In other words, the relationship between belief and action was complex, influenced by a far larger range of factors.’ Ideology was nonetheless the prism through which the Bolsheviks understood their world. Yet the interaction of ‘circumstance and ideas’ also affected the nature of Bolshevik ideology. The outlook of the Party changed over time; in many respects quite profoundly. It is worth considering whether the Bolsheviks of 1917 were the Bolsheviks of 1921, or even 1918.

The Party and its leaders had convinced themselves that the creation of their new Communist society would be infinitely easier than it turned out to be. Things did not unfold as expected, most notably the failure of worldwide socialist revolution. Utopianism was a powerful trend in Bolshevik thought; ‘…motive force of the Russian Revolution, a major voice of the revolutionary epoch.’ The Bolsheviks really believed that a new world would shortly come about and that the Party was the historical agent that would hasten this outcome. As Lenin argued in his *State and Revolution*, the rest of the world was to follow Russia into socialist revolution. After the temporary imposition of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ which would rid society of all class exploitation, the coercive organs of the ‘state’ would simply fade away. ‘Communism’, a society free of ‘exploitation of man by man’, would be the result. It was not to be. International revolution did not follow October and harsh measures were put in place in response to the myriad of problems that emerged thereafter. Such issues were barely considered by leading Bolsheviks before they came to power. Their ideology gave little practical guidance in the day-to-day running of the state. There was an outline of their end goal, a communist new society, but no set plan for its implementation. What followed October was not a pre-rehearsed script.

Popular support for the Bolsheviks fell away in 1918 as disenchantment with the policies of the new regime grew. Greater numbers of SR and Menshevik delegates were voted into the soviets. Under the direction of Yakov Sverdlov, chairman of the Soviet CEC, these opposition groups were duly ejected for voicing their criticisms. The Bolsheviks were undoubtedly responsible for making a number of decisions that set Soviet Russia on the path toward a one-party state. Prominent in such measures was the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly. Whether the Constituent Assembly was an ideal held dear by ordinary people has been an issue of debate for social historians. Orlando Figes has argued that the apparent apathy of the workers toward the Assembly’s closure stemmed from an indifference to politics amidst the greater concern of finding adequate food and fuel. Mark Steinberg emphasises more the concern of ordinary people with carrying out political actions that directly affected their everyday lives in the village, factory, barracks and trenches. It would seem that the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly became irrelevant once important gains, such as the Decree on Land and Workers’ Control, were not under immediate threat.

The most revealing research into the Constituent Assembly has been offered by Oliver Radkey. His *Russia Goes to the Polls* has long been an influential text amongst revisionist historians. Radkey reveals the complexity of popular support and political preferences in the voting patterns during the Constituent Assembly. A close and critical examination of the voting lists suggests that ‘…the backing of Bolshevism was anything but ephemeral’. Lenin and his comrades had real popular support. The Red victory of the Civil War further supports this. The results show too that support for the Bolsheviks ‘was strong, but not strong enough to govern by than dictatorial means.’ The mood of the country was of a ‘thoroughly revolutionary character’,

149 Ibid, p. 135.
though this did not translate to a Bolshevik electoral majority. Nationalist sentiments, a confusing array of Socialist Revolutionary voting platforms, anarchist ideals, and missing and unreliable data make an assessment of the Constituent Assembly a far more difficult task than often thought.

Other developments traditionally considered evidence of Bolshevik tyranny have been shown to have elements of mass participation by revisionist historians. Pressure ‘from below’ for the instigation of class terror during the Civil War has been one area of interest. According to Figes, local denunciations and popular participation urged on the Cheka in its war on class enemies; it was not simply imposed from above:

‘The Bolshevik Terror came up from the depths. It started as a social revolution, a means for the lower classes to exact their own bloody revenge on their former masters and class enemies.’

Similarly, the rapid nationalisation of industry stemmed in part from calls by worker-activists for a more centralised, planned economy. This stood in contrast to the wishes of leading Bolsheviks who initially proposed a policy of State Capitalism, whereby ownership and management of many industries remained in private hands but under government supervision. The continued decline of the economy and a wave of nationalisations ‘from below’ encouraged a more authoritarian approach. The scope of workers’ control was also a cause of much confusion amongst factory committee delegates and Party officials. Some lamented its demise, others approved of the more resolute policies taken to maintain production and economic security. These measures, which later came to be called War Communism, are best understood as both a pragmatic response to crisis and an imposition of Communist ideology. It was Communism in response to war. Alec Nove sees War Communism as,

‘A siege economy with a communist ideology. A partly organised chaos. Sleepless, leather-jacketed commissars working around the clock in a vain effort to replace the free market.’

The dire conditions of civil war and the ideological predispositions toward a planned, moneyless economy were mutually reinforcing. The more extreme elements of Communist economic theory were driven and justified by ideology and circumstances. This was not, though, implicit in the programme of October 1917. The Bolsheviks came to power with no clear outline of their future economic policies.

It was in the midst of bloody civil war that the Bolsheviks learned to rule. For the first four years of its existence the Council of People’s Commissars was not a peace-time government. The desperate struggle to maintain the economy and conquer the forces of White counter-revolution and foreign intervention had a profound impact of the culture of the Communist party. It became ‘a fighting brotherhood in the most literal sense,’ militarised both in outlook and operation. Orders given were expected to be obeyed; reaching for a Mauser pistol when a quick result was needed was an accepted necessity. The recruits and practices of the Red Army filtered up though the ranks of the Party, further strengthening this siege-barracks mentality.

The excesses of the Cheka, the militarisation of the workplace and appalling living conditions were all bitterly resented by workers, as was forced grain requisitioning (prodrazverstka) by the peasantry. Little had changed for the better; in fact, many aspects of day-to-day life were considerably worse in the new society. But for all their outrage, most workers and peasants still adhered to the basic ideals of the revolution and were willing to support the Bolsheviks against their enemies. A Soviet regime, even if a Bolshevik dominated one, was preferable to rule by the

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150 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, p. 812.
153 Nove, An Economic History of the USSR, p. 68.
Whites. Steve Smith outlines the nature of this complex relationship between the Party and the workers during the Civil War:

‘Doubtless a minority believed that the regime had comprehensively betrayed the revolution; but the attitudes of the majority were more contradictory. Many of the ideals of the revolution had bitten deep: workers evinced fierce hostility to burzhooi, a strong belief in equality, hatred of privilege – not least when enjoyed by communists – and broad support for the soviet idea. When judged by these ideals, the Bolsheviks were found wanting; yet most workers were not convinced that the opposition provided a credible alternative.’155

The defeat of the White forces in 1920 did not lead to a relaxation of War Communist measures, but rather their more stringent application. The result was widespread peasant uprisings and the Kronstadt revolt, ‘…a symbolic parting of the ways between the working class and the Bolshevik party,’ according to Fitzpatrick. 156 Adamant that they should appear resolute in the face of all opposition, the Communists mercilessly crushed the former ‘pride and glory’ of the revolution and the more intransigent peasant insurgents. Having taught a lesson on how armed opposition would be treated, the Communists also demonstrated that they too had learnt a lesson. As Lenin put it, Russia was like a man ‘beaten within an inch of his life’; a respite on the economic front was imperative. Thus the New Economic Policy was born.

Revisionist assessments of the NEP, its on-going viability, and the development of Stalin’s policies are more complex and diverse than liberal and Soviet accounts. Stephen Cohen has been prominent in questioning the inevitability of Stalin’s brutal crash course in industrialisation and collectivisation as the unavoidable means of achieving a modernized economy. Cohen has argued that Bukharin’s more moderate outlook and advocacy of a NEP-style economic policy offered a viable alternative to the path taken by Stalin. 157 There were real choices open to the Communist leadership and Stalinism was not the inescapable outcome of the regime founded by Lenin in October 1917. According to Cohen, the ‘Bukharin alternative’ would have been the direction favoured by Lenin had he lived on into the 1920s-30s. Cohen also notes that while the ‘seeds’ of Stalinism can be found in the regime of 1917-28,

‘Bolshevism contained other important, non-Stalinist, “seeds”; and, equally, that the “seeds” of Stalinism are also to be found elsewhere – in Russian historical and cultural tradition, in social events such as the civil war, the international setting, and so on.’158

While rejecting a deterministic account of the emergence of Stalin’s regime, other revisionist scholars have disagreed with Cohen’s assessment of the NEP. R.W. Davies argues that while a moderate expansion of agriculture and industry could have been achieved under the NEP, higher rates of industrialization could not. 159 The implications of this are important given that the leaders of the Soviet Union were well aware of how underdeveloped their nation’s industrial output was in comparison to the rest of Western Europe.

A lively exchange between Alec Nove and J.R. Miller on the ‘necessity’ of collectivization is a good example of the contentious nature of such issues. 160 Millar argues that far from being necessary (as he puts it ‘optimal, given the development objectives of the Soviet leadership’), forced collectivization contributed little to the industrialisation drive and, in fact, proved a drain on valuable resources. 161 The grain procurement crisis, itself the product of poor pricing policy, could have been resolved though an adjustment of market prices, thereby avoiding the tragic

156 Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution, p. 95.
158 Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience, p. 47.
outcomes of the 1930s. Nove in turn points to the ideological outlook of the Bolsheviks and how this affected their perceived ‘alternatives’. They could have kept the mixed economy of the NEP with its steady rate of growth and incentives that encouraged a more commercially minded peasant farmer to produce more grain. This was not, though, an outcome the Bolsheviks would have tolerated given their politics. According to Nove, ‘If there is a genuine alternative for me to eat either cheese sandwich or a ham sandwich, this is not an alternative for a rabbi.’\textsuperscript{162}

Collectivization was a shocking tragedy. A more moderate ‘alternative’ was morally and, given our hindsight, economically preferable. But the Communists did not see this. Its coercive and imperative application thus becomes understandable given their political leanings, Stalin’s personality and the impatience of the Party rank-and-file. Ordinary Communists had never felt comfortable with the NEP and longed for a return to the heroic and militant culture of the Civil War years. Further encroachments of capitalism were not favoured by the more militant Party leaders. An increase in ‘the tempo’ and a more determined ‘assault’ were the means by which to ‘storm the fortress’. In reviewing these issues, Nove argues,

\begin{quote}
‘One can say that the events which occurred have a pretty powerful explanation, given the nature of the Bolsheviks, the extent to which other alternatives seemed closed to them, and the extent to which they were ideologically predisposed in certain directions. The survival of the regime, given the Bolsheviks’ aims and their rapid industrialization program, required a harsh, autocratic type of regime.’\textsuperscript{163}
\end{quote}

In examining Stalin’s Russia, revisionist historians have challenged many aspects of the ‘totalitarian’ paradigm. Important insights into the chaotic, contradictory and popular nature of Stalinism calls into question an understanding of the USSR as a society entirely dominated ‘from above’. Sheila Fitzpatrick has explored the phenomenon of ‘Cultural Revolution’, whereby the younger and ‘belligerently revolutionary’ rank-and-file members of the Communist party embraced the utopian notion that the Party could accomplish any and everything.\textsuperscript{164} Elements of Stalinist policies were pushed beyond the levels set by the Party leadership. Initiatives were undertaken, with clear indications of popular agency, which were independent of Stalin’s control.\textsuperscript{165}

For the Communists of working-class background who found themselves with access to new privileges and opportunities for advancement as managerial or Party administrators under Stalin, the revolution had ‘indeed fulfilled its promises to give power to the proletariat and turn workers into the masters of the state.’\textsuperscript{166} For most people, though, working and living conditions remained far below what was promised by the glorious rhetoric of Communist propaganda. Those who laboured under trying conditions in collective farms, remote industrial projects and the Gulags suffered undeniable hardships. Yet features of Stalin’s Russia which appear as classic examples of what constitute a ‘totalitarian’ regime, for instance the purges and mass arrests of the Great Terror, have appeared more complex under revisionist investigation. Stalin played a key role in instigating the terror, but mass involvement drove the process on into wider Soviet society. Fitzpatrick argues, ‘The Great Purges could not have snowballed as they did without popular participation. Self-interested denunciations played a part, as did complaints against bosses that were based on real grievances.’\textsuperscript{167}

Stalin’s terror was fitful, ad hoc, sometimes hesitant, and driven by mixed agendas – both Stalin’s and his leading cronies. Stalin was a pitiless organizer of mass murder and imprisonment. But to explain Stalinism as simply the will of a megalomaniac monster reduces our capacity to grasp the complexity of the man and the system and circumstances in which he operated. A leading proponent of this view, J. Arch Getty, argues,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{163}Ibid, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{164}Fitzpatrick,\textit{ The Russian Revolution}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{165}For discussion of ‘Cultural Revolution’, see Ibid, pp. 141-145.
\textsuperscript{166}Ibid, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{167}Fitzpatrick,\textit{ The Russian Revolution}, p. 168.
\end{flushright}
‘We need not turn Stalin into an omniscient and omnipotent demon in order to comprehend his evil. Indeed, making him into a superman diminishes the real horror of the period. Stalin was a cruel but ordinary mortal unable to see the future and with a limited ability to create and control it. He was not a master planner, and studies of all his other major policies before and after the 1930s have shown that he stumbled into everything from collectivization to foreign policy. Stalin’s colossal felonies, like most evil crimes everywhere, were of the unplanned erratic kind. His evil, like Eichmann’s, was ordinary and of this world; it was banally human and is more horrifying for being so.’

Such insights have been a feature of one of the more recent and critically acclaimed biographies of Stalin by British author Simon Sebag Montefiore. Stalin was malicious and directly responsible for countless deaths, but he was a very human man. In fact, a key reason underpinning his success as a politician was not his capacity to instil fear, but rather his charm. He was a ‘people person’ whose programme, and company, was ‘congenial’ to his supporters.

Not all historians who accept the insights of social history reject the totalitarian model outright. Robert Service argues that while the Soviet state was totalitarian in its aims, the reality of its rule was not. The dictatorship of the Party left much room for popular resistance and opposition via falsification of information, slack work habits and the continued strength of family and kinship ties. According to Service, ‘Totalitarianism as a term fails to encapsulate the contradictions with this extremely nasty and orderly but also extremely chaotic reality.’ That is not to say that the Soviet regime did not strive to be totalitarian, for ‘…the goal was so ambitious that even its half-completion was a dreadful achievement.’ Stalinism was totalitarian in intent, but not in practice.

In offering final assessments of the meaning and nature of the Russian Revolution, revisionist historians have put forward conclusions that are even more diverse than their areas of investigation. Few favour a deterministic account of the Soviet regime. Events did not inevitably have to unfold they way they did simply because of Bolshevik ideology and Lenin’s forceful seizure of power in October 1917. To draw on an insight from a much earlier writer often cited by revisionists, Victor Serge, ‘To judge a living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse – and which he may have carried in him since birth – is that very sensible?’ A concern to include everyday people’s experiences within the historical narrative and not cast them aside as passive victims continues throughout contemporary social history. The revolution was not just about political struggles, but, as Orlando Figes argues, ‘…a human event of complicated individual tragedies.’ Historians of less conservative inclination than Figes would wish to balance this with an understanding of the revolution as personal and human triumph. To quote William Henry Chamberlin, another early commentator whose balanced assessments served as a model for later revisionists,

‘Every revolution has its inevitable combination of tragedy and triumph as it destroys, displaces, uproots individuals and whole classes and simultaneously pushes up others which were previously submerged. Whether measured by the misery which it caused some, or by the opportunity which it created for others, or by the fundamental character of the social reorganization which it brought about, the Russian Revolution is the greatest event of its kind in history.’

An understanding of the ideals that inspired both the Bolsheviks and ordinary people to participate in the revolutionary drama is considered. Many truly believed that they were building

170 Service, A History of 20th Century Russia, pp. 252.
172 Cited in Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience, p. 47.
173 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, p. xix.
a new world for the better and that the moment when mankind would enter a higher stage of cultural, economic, social and political development was just around the corner, or at worst, a few decades distant. As a leading social historian, Steve Smith offers a good overview of these insights:

‘The Bolshevik revolution wrought calamity on a scale commensurate with the transformation in the human condition it sought to achieve. Measured by the benchmarks of contemporary politics, Bolshevik ambition leaves us reeling. But it is easier for us today to appreciate the illusions under which they laboured than the ideals they sought to achieve. Yet we shall never understand the Russian Revolution unless we appreciate that the Bolsheviks were fundamentally driven by outrage against the exploitation at the heart of capitalism and the aggressive nationalism that had led Europe into the carnage of the First World War. The hideous inhumanities that resulted from the revolution, culminating in Stalinism, should not obscure that fact that millions welcomed the revolution as the harbinger of social justice and freedom.’

Although tragic, the revolution was not simply a tale that ranks amongst the great crimes of modern European history. For whereas liberal historians have frequently drawn comparisons between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, such linkages are largely rejected by revisionist scholars. The ideologies and leaders of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and Nazi parties in 1933 were very different and are not neatly interchangeable. In the case of the Nazis, Hitler’s most perverse and immoral visions were put into practice, but under Stalin (and arguably Lenin as well), the revolution’s finest ideals were betrayed. The importance of these original ideals, the enthusiasm they inspired and the circumstance in which people came to embrace them should not be forgotten and condemned to the ‘dust bin of history’, nor should their eventual tragic outcome. Appreciating such concerns is important for revisionist historians.


Note: ‘revisionist’ is a problematic term. Some of the historians listed here, such as Fitzpatrick and Suny, are influential social historians who easily fit with the ‘revisionist’ tradition of the 1970s-1980s. Others are influenced by social history but do not entirely agree with some of the conclusions often attributed to the ‘revisionist’ school, such as Figes, Sebagg Montefiore and Melancon. The breadth of social history is also considerable. Whilst shared approaches and insights have been outlined, caution should be used when generalising what a ‘revisionist’ perspective entails. It remains important to examine historians’ perspectives individually.

Spontaneity and Organisation in the February Revolution

The debate on the question of spontaneity and leadership in the February Revolution cuts across traditional schools of thought and is best treated by considering the insights of individual historians. William Henry Chamberlin offered the view that has dominated understandings of the February days: ‘The collapse of the Romanov autocracy in March 1917 was one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time.’ Trotsky gives a similar assessment, although he credits ‘anonymous’ Bolshevik-worker activists as playing an important role inspiring the masses to action. For both Trotsky and Chamberlin, the events of February-March were fundamentally different from the organized and planned nature of the October Revolution. There was clearly a spontaneous aspect to the International Women’s Day protests, the ‘spark’ of discontent that eventually escalated into a mass revolutionary movement, and leading revolutionaries were notably absent and caught by surprise by the rapid collapse of the revolution.

377 Chamberlin, The Russian Revolution, p. 73.
Tsarist regime. Chamberlin’s perspective has its merits and continues to be accepted by many historians. Yet there have been other views that are worth considering which offer an alternative interpretation. Perhaps there is a case for arguing that a degree of planning went into the February Revolution. Moreover, some historians have offered compelling research into the roles of various revolutionary groups, calling into question whether the terms ‘leaderless’ and ‘anonymous’ should be applied so readily to the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II.

Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the revolution in 1967, Russian émigré and professor of history at Oxford University, George Katkov, offered one of the more controversial, some say dubious, interpretations of the revolutions of 1917. For Katkov, ‘The assumption that there was a particular quality of “spontaneity” which explains the scope and strength of the February demonstrations in Petrograd is wholly gratuitous.’ Indeed, far from ‘spontaneous’, Russia’s revolution was engineered from without by the German High Command. From the outset of the First World War, the German government pursued a policy of Revolutionierungspolitik, whereby funds were made available for distribution to Russian revolutionary groups seeking to ferment industrial unrest. One example was the work of Aleksandr Helphand, more commonly known by his pseudonym Axlerod, who assisted in channelling considerable sums of money into the coffers of the Bolshevik party. A revolutionary uprising that would topple the Tsarist government and throw into question Russia’s involvement in the war was the best possible outcome for Germans. It was through the cooperation of the German government that Lenin was able to return to Russia. Within eight months he had organised a revolutionary movement that had brought down the Provisional Government and shortly thereafter formed a radical socialist government that actively sought a peace agreement with Germany. Katkov’s theory would suggest that in this regard, February was the precursor to October and that the conspiratorial influence of German Revolutionierungspolitik was a factor in both.

Less fanciful analyses of the degree of organisation and leadership in the February Revolution have been made by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and James D. White. Hasegawa has argued that the escalation of the strike movement could not have been entirely spontaneous. According to Hasegawa,

‘Strikes required organizers who planned strategy, agitators who appealed to the workers, orators who spoke at factory rallies, and a network of communication that coordinated activities with other factories. Amorphous grievances of the workers had to be defined in simple slogans.’

There were no Trostskys or Lenins present in February, but lower-level activists must have played a part in the organisation of the popular revolutionary movement. Hasegawa and White have also pointed out that in his praise of Bolshevik-worker activists, Trotsky failed to mention that there was a group who were particularly active during the February Revolution and they are not anonymous.

According to White, the Vyborg District Committee of the Bolshevik party – headed by Vasili Kayurov, Dmitri Pavlov and Ivan Chugarin – had agitated for workers to come out on strike to mark the celebration of International Women’s Day on 23 February. Plans had also been laid for a larger protest on May Day (18 April according to the Russian calendar) to encourage further anti-government sentiment amongst the working-class. That the protest on the 23rd continued to develop into a mass revolutionary movement took the Vyborg Bolsheviks by surprise. But seeking to harness the upsurge of revolutionary fervour they had hoped might come about through their mass protest in April, Kayurov and his comrades decided to press forward

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182 White, The Russian Revolution 1917-1921: A Short History, pp. 66-7. A concise and accessible overview of White’s perspective on the issues of organisation and spontaneity during February was published by British History teachers’ journal new perspective and can be found online at http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/%7Es semp/revolution.htm
their more militant strategies during the February days. On 24 February the Vyborg Bolsheviks called on the most senior Bolshevik leader in Petrograd, Aleksandr Shlyapnikov, to publish a manifesto declaring the avowed anti-war and anti-government intentions of the escalating protests. Reluctant to issue such a statement, as he believed the current protest to be premature, Shlyapnikov also refused requests to issue the Party’s cache of firearms so that the Bolshevik worker-activists could form ‘fighting squads’. Shlyapnikov was concerned that clashes between workers and soldiers would provoke a decidedly hostile reaction to the revolution amongst the army rank-and-file. He felt that if Bloody Nicholas was to be toppled from the throne then the support of the soldiers was essential. 183

But the Vyborg District Bolsheviks were not to be swayed from their convictions that the Tsarist regime should be resisted by force. The leading members of the Vyborg Committee were all veterans of the 1905 Revolution. In 1905 they had organised detachments of armed workers in the city of Nizhny Novgorod amongst the employees of the Sormovo engineering works. These fighting detachments experienced some success against the troops sent to quell the workers’ protests. Well aware of their talents as agitators and confident that they could again take on the forces of the government, the Vyborg Bolsheviks acted without regard to orders given by higher Party officials. 184 According to Kayurov, they ignored Shlyapnikov’s advice and on 27 February carried out raids on arsenals, attacked police stations, and liberated fellow revolutionaries from prisons in the working-class districts. 185

Fraternisation between soldiers and the Bolshevik led workers won many over to their side. Shlyapnikov recalled the immense importance of this development:

‘...Comrade Chugarin, rather vexed, hurried away to his waiting comrades in the district. I do not know how the other comrades reacted to my reply and suggestions. I only remember that some two hours later there reappeared the indefatigable Comrade Chugarin with a rifle in his hand and bandolier of cartridges over his shoulder, all dirty from head to foot, but beaming triumphantly. We won! He was the first to inform us that the soldiers in whole units, with weapons in their hands, were coming over to us. In some places the workers managed to unite with the soldiers, enter the barracks and get hold of rifles and ammunition.’ 186

27 February was a turning point in the revolution. The loyalty of the troops toward the government had begun to noticeably waver. Yet not all developments were proving favourable to the Bolsheviks. Having been freed from prison by revolutionary workers and soldiers, a number of leading SRs and Mensheviks made their way to the Tauride Palace and set about organising an Executive Committee for the formation of a Soviet of Workers’ Deputies. This was of immense importance for both the Vyborg Bolsheviks and for how the history of the February Revolution would later be written. Kayurov, Chugarin and Pavlov were indignant that the leadership of the revolutionary movement was being usurped by the more moderate socialist intelligentsia who hadn’t even participated in the revolution until the 27th. Efforts were made to form a workers’ Soviet in the Vyborg district, but it was to no avail. The socialists gathered at the Tauride Palace managed to attract a greater number of worker and soldier delegates to their

183 Ibid, p. 69.
184 White has examined a further element that united the Vyborg Bolsheviks: Having moved from Nizhni Novgorod to Petrograd, Kayurov and his fellows remained part of the Sormovo zemlyachestva. Russian workers were known to have formed self-help and social organisations of men and women who originated from the same village. Members of these zemlyachestvo often worked in the same factory. Many continued this tradition when they moved with groups of workers to new cities, except they now based their zemlyachestva on the factory or suburb they had come from. According to White, Western writers find it difficult to grasp the significance of institutions that have no parallel in their own society. The cohesion amongst the Vyborg Bolsheviks provided by Sormovo zemlyachestva is most often overlooked, despite the fact that members of this organisation formed the nucleus of the Vyborg District Bolshevik Committee and were some of the most experienced revolutionaries in Petrograd at the time. James D. White, ‘The Sormovo-Nikolaev Zemlyachestvo in the February Revolution’, in Soviet Studies, Vol. 31., No. 4 (Oct., 1979), pp. 477-81, 495.
Petrograd Soviet, and although a Vyborg Soviet was established, it had to co-exist with the more prominent Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies with its Menshevik-SR Executive Committee.\textsuperscript{187}

In his memoirs, Vasili Kayurov directed his anger at this toward the higher level Bolshevik leaders, specifically Aleksandr Shlyapnikov, who had failed to give adequate guidance and delayed the publication of calls for the formation of a Soviet. According to Kayurov, ‘Absolutely no guiding initiative made itself felt from the Party centres…Comrade Shlyapnikov was unable to give any directives for the coming day.’\textsuperscript{188} A similar account of the lack of leadership from revolutionary groups was highlighted in the chronicles of Menshevik-Internationalist Nikolai Sukhanov, also a leading figure of the Central Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet established at the Tauride Palace:

‘...it is necessary to recall and underline right now the very peculiarity of the conditions of the parties at that time and what distinguished the St. Petersburg party centres from those which arose during the Revolution: to wit, there were no authoritative leaders on the spot in any of the parties, almost without exception. They were in exile, in prison or abroad. In the positions of the responsible leaders of the great movement, at its most critical moments, were people who were absolutely second rate, perhaps clever organisers but nevertheless routine party hacks...It was impossible to expect of them, in the majority of cases, a proper political perspective on the new situation or any real political direction of events, in a word, to expect them in reality to rise to the occasion. In the ranks of such leaders...I felt competent and useful.’\textsuperscript{189}

That Sukhanov would claim that the revolutionary movement lacked leadership is understandable given that he, as a ‘competent and useful’ figure, did not participate until 27 February. Kerensky, who likewise sat on the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet, made a similar claim. The memoirs of both these men were influential sources for later historians, despite the fact that the nature of their participation in February clearly influenced their accounts of the time.

With the exception of E.N. Burdzhalov, who admitted that the Bolsheviks focused their attention on active agitation on the streets and therefore neglected to decisively organize the election of their deputies to the Soviet Executive Committee,\textsuperscript{190} Soviet historians typically underplayed the leadership of the individual Bolsheviks. The work of anonymous worker-activists was important, but it lacked the determination to push the movement through to a full socialist revolution of the proletariat. This end was only achieved following decisive guidance of Lenin in the October Revolution.\textsuperscript{191} Western historians have generally believed that if there was an element of Bolshevik leadership in February then Soviet historians would have given it a good deal of attention. What needs to be considered is the political climate in which Bolshevik memoirs and early Soviet accounts of the February Revolution were written.

By the 1920s Vasili Kayurov was a high ranking employee of \textit{Istpart}, the Central Committee’s department for overseeing the publication of the official history of the Communist party. No longer the militant Vyborg worker-activist of his February days, Kayurov was instead, ‘...a bastion of Party orthodoxy.’\textsuperscript{192} By contrast, Aleksandr Shlyapnikov was a leading figure of the Workers’ Opposition whose criticisms of the Communist establishment, although dampened following the ban on factions imposed during the Tenth Party Congress of March 1921, were not to be ignored. When Shlyapnikov published his memoirs of the February Revolution in 1923, he deviated from the then accepted view that the Bolsheviks played little role in the immediate

\textsuperscript{187} White, \textit{The Russian Revolution}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{189} Cited in Kowalski, \textit{The Russian Revolution}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{191} Trotsky put himself back into the story, but like Lenin, he played no role in February and was therefore not inclined to give much credence to others who were.
events that resulted in the downfall of the Tsar. Rather, the Bolsheviks had maintained an effective network of underground activists whose agitation throughout the First World War had played a significant role in fostering revolutionary sentiment amongst the working-class. Furthermore, Shlyapnikov’s own cautionary tactics in the early days of the February Revolution kept Bolshevik hot-heads from provoking soldiers into retaliatory gunfights. By winning over the soldiers through fraternisation and agitation, the proletariat instead gained a valuable ally. The leadership of the Vyborg Bolsheviks should be credited for providing a good degree of leadership to the popular movement, whilst the lack of Bolshevik representation on the Soviet Executive Committee stemmed from the involvement of the Menshevik and SR socialist intelligentsia after 27 February; a development that was deplorable for Shlyapnikov, but difficult to oppose given the widening of the revolutionary movement. According Shlyapnikov,

‘The masses went on to the streets under our slogans; they fought and crushed tsarism to a significant if not overwhelming degree under the direction of our organisation. However, the very first days of legality after the revolution deprived us of the leading role in the movement. There was nothing unexpected in this. It must be recalled that the very character of the movement changed after 27 February.’

Given Kayurov’s background as a former worker-activist and his position as Party functionary in the 1920s, it is understandable that he would actively discredit Shlyapnikov’s account and enforce the then Party-line on the nature of leadership during the February Revolution. A figure whose own actions suggest an important role for Bolshevik activists during February, somewhat paradoxically became an influential source on the lack of leadership for Western historians.

Under Stalin the Soviet perspective of the February Revolution changed and it was claimed that the Bolshevik party both led and inspired the revolutionary movement. Shlyapnikov’s memoirs were ironically denounced for underestimating the leadership of the Bolsheviks. Given that a good deal of the Bolsheviks who might be seen as leaders during February had since fallen from grace and been purged from official histories, Stalinist Soviet historians were left with the ludicrous task of arguing that the Bolsheviks had made an important contribution to the February Revolution, but no individual Bolsheviks could be named. An anonymous revolution indeed!

Whilst criticising Trotsky for ignoring the contribution of worker-activists (who were not nameless), Hasegawa has pointed out that the Bolsheviks were just one group amongst many who also had very militant activists at the factory level. Ensuring that labour unrest amongst the proletariat developed into a full revolutionary movement against the Tsarist regime was an outcome, despite ideological differences, shared by Left SR, Anarchist, Bolshevik and Mezhraionka activists. As members of various local SD and SR groups often knew each other personally, shared a common revolutionary heritage and all sought the overthrow of the Tsarism, cooperation between revolutionary groups was commonplace. Michael Melancon has provided research into the nature of collaboration amongst the parties who formed a tangible ‘left bloc’ in the revolutionary movement. On many occasions SRs and SDs sat together on joint committees, cooperated in strike organisation and worked together in coordinating public demonstrations. Ties between the Bolsheviks, SRs, Mezhraionka SDs and Menshevik-Internationalists were particularly close. According to Melancon,

‘Local SDs routinely ignored the top-level animadversions and pyrotechnics that have so mesmerized commentators ever since and serenely cooperated (rather than split) not only with each other, but also with the SRs and anarchists, who themselves promoted a united front. Because of their shared dedication to political agitation and because of the similarity of their views on the role of the workers and peasants in the revolution, the

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When the socialist left bloc combined their talents a formidable revolutionary front was achieved. This force played a substantial role in the 1905 Revolution (in alliance with liberal groups) and during the February Revolution. Calling for further re-thinking of the traditional account of revolutionary activity in February 1917, Melancon has paid particular attention to the role of the Mezhraionka SDs. Whereas a good deal of debate has centred on what the Bolsheviks either did or didn’t do, Melancon claims that the Mezhraionka were by far the most prolific group in producing revolutionary proclamations during the February Revolution, including the only organisation to do so on International Women’s Day. A number of other proclamations were produced on the subsequent days of the February Revolution by a joint SR-Mezhraionka endeavour and distributed in sizable quantities amongst workers and soldiers. With access to their own printing press the Mezhraionka were more readily able to produce pamphlets than other groups, such as the Bolsheviks, who according to Melancon were restricted to verbal agitation until 27 February when the first Bolshevik pamphlet was released. Melancon also claims that a key document previously attributed the Vyborg Committee of the Bolsheviks, the ‘Finland Station leaflet’, which called for the formation of a soviet in the Vyborg district was, in fact, produced by the combined efforts of Bolsheviks, anarchists and Mezhraiontsy.

James White disputes Melancon’s claim, citing inconsistencies within Soviet sources that only hint at whom the authors of the ‘Finland Station leaflet’ might be and the fact that the proclamation was anonymous. Responding to the same article, David Longley remains wary of attributing leadership or direction of the February Revolution to either the Mezhraiontsy or the Bolsheviks. The activists of all socialist groups saw any mass movement emerging from International Women’s Day as premature. Many were initially reluctant to get involved. For Longley, the argument that the revolution originated and developed in a largely spontaneous manner is still the most convincing explanation.

The difficulty in resolving debates over the degree of spontaneity and leadership in the February Revolution lies in the problematic nature of the evidence used to substantiate the varied interpretations. In reply to White and Longley, Melancon outlined a number of issues that caution against a wholesale rejection of his research. He points to the gaps in archival evidence currently available, such as revolutionary proclamations mentioned in Tsarist police reports of which no copies have survived. There is a very real possibility that materials from the time were later altered by those who preserved them (Aleksandr Shlyapnikov being one possible candidate; many documents were reprinted for the first time in his memoirs) and the difficulty of relying on early Soviet historians and memoirists whose work, although useful, must be approached with discretion. The differences of their individual perspectives aside, Melancon and

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201 The Mezhraiontsy or Mezhraionka, whose name comes from the Russian for ‘Inter-District Group’, were a numerically small but influential faction of the Social Democrats. Described by Figes as ‘a collection of brilliant generals without an army’ (A People’s Tragedy, p. 460) members of the Mezhraionka included Leon Trotsky, Anatolii Lunacharsky (the future Bolshevik Commissar of Enlightenment) and Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko (who led the ‘storming’ of the Winter Palace). Independent of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the Mezhraionka held similar views to the Bolsheviks in regards to the war and the further development of a socialist revolution after February. They also lobbied for the warring factions of the SDs to put aside their differences and join together. In July 1917 they gave up their calls for unity and merged with the Bolsheviks. See John Biggart, ‘The Mezhrayonka’, in Shukman (ed.), The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution, pp. 83-84.
204 Ibid, pp. 489-93.
White share with Hasegawa a conviction that once a mass movement began to unfold revolutionary activists did seek to impart a degree of leadership and initiative to its development. Gauging the exact contribution of different groups and the impact of their activities requires further research. It may be that such debates remain unresolved with the evidence required having been lost. Nevertheless, an unconditional interpretation of February as ‘one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time’ is still worthy of reconsideration.


Revisionism in Retreat and Integrated Approaches

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 held significant repercussions for those analysing the history of the Russian Revolution. The Soviet regime now had a beginning and, most importantly, an end. The revolution was over. It was a unique opportunity for the historiography of the period to move forward with greater objectivity and insight. British historian Christopher Read describes past historiographical debates as a case of ‘tell me what you think of the Russian Revolution and I’ll tell you what you are.’208 Liberal and Soviet interpretations had tended to judge history by the politics of the present. Russian Communism was either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, historians’ views were no longer applicable to an existing political system. Both Eric Hobsbawm and Steve Smith speculated that the time to write new histories of the Russian Revolution was nigh.209

There was a good deal of excitement at the possible emergence of new sources from the Soviet archives. Questions formerly based on conjecture or limited evidence could now be analysed in more depth. Amongst Russian writers, in particular those of more journalistic approach, there was a rush to get the ‘first scoop’ based on ‘explosive new evidence’ from the archives. The playwright Edvard Radzinsky is the most widely published of such authors in the West.210 The 1990s also witnessed an extraordinary revival of debate amongst academic historians over their approaches and the nature of how the history of the Russian Revolution should be written. Much of these debates were sadly lacking the objectivity that might have been a hallmark of the new ‘post-Soviet’ academic world.

The breakdown of the supposed ‘evil empire’ coincided with a renewed interest in authors who favoured a more conservative stance. Some former Soviet writers came to present a view that was, in many ways, a mirror image of the liberal-totalitarian perspective. Dmitri Volkogonov is the best example of this trend. Volkogonov wrote a trilogy of groundbreaking biographies on Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky in the late 1980s and 1990s.217 A former Soviet Army Colonel-General and defence advisor to President Boris Yeltsin, Volkogonov relied on his unprecedented access to unpublished documents to expose many of the ‘myths’ held by Soviet historians. There is a quality of outrage in Volkogonov’s writing. His former heroes, especially ‘comrade’ Lenin, are revealed as fallen idols; ultimately flawed and criminal personalities. Much like his conservative Western counterparts, Volkogonov is brutal in his condemnation of the outcomes of the October Revolution and the shortcomings of leading Bolsheviks. He offers some compelling arguments that draw strong links between the actions of Lenin and the development of Stalin’s ‘totalitarian’ regime.212 ‘None of us – the present author included – could begin to imagine that the father of domestic Russian terrorism, merciless and totalitarian, was Lenin.’213

The increasing sense of indignation is striking when one compares Volkogonov’s biography of Stalin with h

208 Read, ‘Writing the History of the Russian Revolution’.
212 Volkogonov, Lenin, p. xxxviii
Although of great value for its original research, Volkogonov’s work is arguably symptomatic of his own personal journey as a former Marxist-Leninist who came to question his fundamental beliefs. The need to expose the failings of the Communist party and the sufferings it caused was a process of catharsis for many Russians in the 1990s. They were driven by a need to explain what went wrong and to find identifiable culprits for the crimes committed by the Soviet regime. Indeed, every tragedy that befell the Russian people from 1917 onwards came to be the fault of Lenin, Stalin and the Communist demagogues. A ‘repudiation of all things Soviet’ was evident, often quite indicative of a new dogmatism of fiercely anti-Communist and right-wing nationalist rhetoric which replaced that of Marxist-Leninism. Some writers came to nostalgically idealize Russia’s Tsarist past, sentiments reflected in wider society through the canonisation of Nicholas II by the Orthodox Church. Coming to terms with the revolution remains a sensitive issue. It is often seen in terms of something that was done to ‘us’ by ‘them’. The remains of Tsar Nicholas and his family were given a rightful burial in 1998, but Russia’s past was not. In ‘a country where the scars of history are still too open to be healed’, a more objective acceptance of both the Tsarist and Soviet past struggled to emerge.

Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, ‘it would be premature to say that a coherent new story of the Russian past has so far emerged from post-Soviet historians. For one thing, they are still assimilating and correcting our (Western) stories.’ That Russian historians are playing a significant role in new research is clear. It would also be incorrect to assume that the work of post-Soviet Russian historians is limited in its usefulness. Former Soviet historians are continuing to offer their invaluable knowledge based on years of work with sources unavailable in the West. Vitaly Startsev has been interviewed in a number of BBC documentaries, including ‘Lenin’s Secret Files’. Far from complimentary, Startsev offers a forthright assessment of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. He scoffs at the earlier accounts that mythologized the ‘Great October Revolution’ and has little regard for fellow Russians who seek a blinkered account of their past:

‘People do not know their history. They look at Nicholas and see a charming man who loved his family and was kind to everyone. There were qualities which they never saw in their Soviet leaders – and so they conclude that the Tsarist government was, or must have been, more humane as well.’

Topics considered taboo by the Soviet establishment or previously relegated to orthodox analysis have been re-assessed by Russian scholars. A number of academics are working closely with Western historians. Boris Kollonitskii and Orlando Figes have collaborated to produce an innovative study on the importance of language in shaping revolutionary action and social identities. Even such Soviet stalwarts as Albert Nenarokov have moved beyond championing the triumphs of Marxist-Leninism to working with Western social historians on re-assessments of the Mensheviks. The ‘assimilation’ and ‘correction’ called for by Fitzpatrick continues.

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219 For example, see Lev G. Protasov, ‘The All-Russian Constituent Assembly and the Democratic Alternative, in Wade, Revolutionary Russia, pp. 243-266 and articles by Cherniaev, Litvin, Iarov, Shkarovskii and Smirnov in Acton, Cherniaev and Rosenberg, Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution.
The conservative swing evident amongst Russian writers was even more pronounced in the West. 222 In 1992 a series of articles in the *Times Literary Supplement* were published to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the October Revolution. Scholars including Richard Pipes, Adam Ulam, Robert Conquest and Martin Malia all celebrated the triumphalist collapse of the Soviet Union and reiterated the more traditional assessment of the revolution. Pipes not only argued the case for understanding October as a ‘classic coup d’etat…engineered by a band of conspirators’, but predicted the end of the revisionist school following the emergence of new sources from the Soviet archives:

‘The opening of the Soviet archives will inevitably compel “revisionist” historians to revise their views. The pressures from below, to which they attributed Communist actions during and after October, will be revealed for what they were, fictions invented to justify arbitrary deeds of leaders concerned above all with staying in power.’ 223

A leading Harvard Sovietologist since the 1950s, Pipes has been prominent in debates over historiographical approaches since the fall of the Soviet Union. His extensive two volume study of the revolution was the first Western account to emerge in the post-1991 period. An engaging and erudite author, both texts received considerable acclaim in the popular press and earned the praises of like-minded conservatives. That Pipes’ work also raised the ire of his fellow historians was evident in reviews published in scholarly journals.

Pipes’ passionate dislike of Communist revolutionaries (indeed all revolutionaries) is well known. He served on the National Security Council as an advisor to President Ronald Reagan, playing an important role in Cold War politics. Pipes is forthright in his hostility to Communism and how his work serves to expose the folly of such ‘evil ideas’:

‘I felt and feel to this day that I have been spared not to waste my life on self-indulgence or self-aggrandizement but to spread a moral message by showing, using examples from history, how evil ideas lead to evil consequences. Since scholars have written enough on the Holocaust, I thought it my mission to demonstrate this truth using the example of communism.’ 224

Pipes followed his two volume histories with two shorter abridged works in 1995 and edited a collection of ‘new’ sources on Lenin from the Soviet archives in 1996. 225 Throughout these works, Pipes remained hostile to Lenin, critical of any notion of popular support for the Bolsheviks, and adamant that at no point did the new regime offer any emancipatory, culturally progressive or modernising programme. Evil and tragic from the outset, the revolution was an entirely regressive event. Ordinary people, the focus of revisionist research, were not engaged in a profound social revolution, but rather duped by the cynical manipulations of professional revolutionaries. Politics and key historical figures remained the primary agent of cause and effect. Many critics were unimpressed. In one review, Peter Kenez wrote,

‘The reader closes this long, angry, and gloomy book with relief. It is a pity indeed that Pipes, blinded by a narrow, unattractive ideology, in spite of his erudition, intelligence, and talent, could not retell the great story of the Russian Revolution in a convincing fashion.’ 226

Reviews of The Unknown Lenin attracted observations that Pipes was not so much revealing new insights into the character of Vladimir Illich Ulyanov, but more presenting the ‘well-known Richard Pipes’. Few ‘revelations’ were offered while some interpretations of documents were open to question, if not idiosyncratic.

The most controversial element of Richard Pipes’ contribution to historiographical debate was not so much his championing of the totalitarian-liberal tradition, but his all out assault on the revisionist perspective. Pipes not only ignored the insights of social history, he vehemently attacked all who disagreed with his faith in the traditionalist account. Pipes’ critique of the revisionist approach grew increasingly personal and bitter, as evident in his 1993 article, 1917 and the Revisionists:

‘...like early Bolsheviks, the revisionists are broadminded toward their own kind but ferociously intolerant of outsiders. Their combativeness, their unwillingness to seek common ground with their predecessors and members of other schools, suggest a disturbing absence of a genuine scholarly spirit...the revisionists, viewing themselves as a community, like to ‘interact’...Their mutual admiration occasionally assumes mawkish forms as illustrated by the following passage, more appropriate to a high school yearbook than a scholarly monograph, from the introduction to a book jointly written by two prominent revisionists, Diane Koenker and William Rosenberg: ‘Diane thanks Bill for his remarkable generosity and unfailing good spirits...Diane will miss the interaction...Bill regrets very much the end of these rewarding interactions’. Of course there is nothing wrong with friendly collaboration, except that, once it becomes a habit, it has a tendency to promote ‘group think’...This may well account for the mediocrity of the revisionists’ product...Not only is there no humanity in their writings, but also no life, no sweep, nothing to excite the imagination. The style is plodding; the narrative (what little there is of it) flags. To someone who has spent many years in university teaching, this material conveys the unmistakable flavour of ‘B’, or even ‘C’, quality work.’

As well as lack of ‘scholarly spirit’, Pipes claimed that the revisionist perspective was ‘no more than a rehash of the interpretation inflicted on the Soviet historical profession by the Communist Party.’

Historians associated with the revisionist school were appalled. Having earlier reviewed the importance of social history, Professor Ronald Grigor Suny wrote an extensive rebuke of Pipes’ criticisms. Following an outline of the insights social history brought to the study of the revolution, Suny went on to question Pipes’ approach:

‘Rather than providing a synthesis of what we know about the revolutionary processes of 1917-18 or a reinterpretation that contends with the major contributions of recent historiography (almost none of which is even referred to in his notes or bibliography), Pipes has offered a personal political vision, an indictment, highly selective, and uneven in its treatment of significant events and processes. By setting out such a strong version of the view that the Bolshevik regime was unpopular and illegitimate, his account prevents an understanding of the complex relationship between the lower classes, which favoured Soviet power and a broadly democratic order, and the Bolsheviks.’

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229 Pipes, ‘1917 and the Revisionists’, p. 74. Hostility of apparent ‘conservative’ historians toward ‘revisionists’ extends beyond Richard Pipes. Russian-American historian Vladimir Brovkin once claimed that he had been ‘blackballed’ by Yale University Press and denied tenure at Harvard for his ‘excessively anti-Bolshevik tone’ which did not sit with the accepted ‘revisionist’ perspective that dominated Russian history.
Suny conceded that future studies needed to move beyond the framework of social history. He suggested that a ‘vital synthesis’ of social and political history with linguistic and cultural studies offered an exciting new way of conceptualizing how society in revolutionary Russia functioned. Social identity and what influenced political action cannot be reduced to class, economic conditions and political agitation alone, Suny argued.232

An important work that sought to bring together political and social history was Orlando Figes’ 1996 epic A People’s Tragedy. Sketching a vast panorama of how the revolution impacted both ordinary people and political elites, Figes claimed to avoid ‘…the ‘bottom-up’ approach so fashionable these days among the ‘revisionist’ historians of Soviet Russia,’ whilst recognizing that ‘…the sort of politicized ‘top-down’ histories of the Russian Revolution which used to be written in the Cold War era, in which the common people appeared as passive objects of the evil machinations of the Bolsheviks, are longer adequate.’ Figes’ earlier work on the Volga peasantry reflected his interest in ordinary people and how they were affected by the revolution.233 ‘Although politics are never far away, this is, I suppose, a social history in the sense that its main focus is the common people.’ 234 Figes has argued that modern historians need to assimilate the research undertaken by revisionists in the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that ‘…we are all social historians now.’235

A traditionalist in many of his assessments, Figes has been criticized for his conservatism by some Left-leaning historians. His Lenin is a power-hungry, obsessive fanatic and October a ‘coup de-tat’, albeit one carried out in the midst of a ‘social revolution.’236 The destructive elements of popular violence are given much attention, as are the more irresponsible and callous nature of the Bolsheviks. The narrow-minded and archaic leadership of Tsarist regime and counter-revolutionary White forces receive no less sympathy in A People’s Tragedy. For Figes, Russia’s lack of democratic tradition and cultural backwardness shaped the nature and outcomes of the ‘people’s tragedy’. Whilst his conclusions were not particularly groundbreaking, Figes’ skill in integrating the stories of very different individuals – from revolutionaries, workers, peasants and Tsarist generals – was praised as a ‘masterpiece’ in the press, winning the 1997 NCR Book Award. It was warmly received by his contemporaries as a valuable addition to the vast body of work on the revolution. Some did, however, suggest that the idealism of revolutionary leaders and the more constructive facets of the popular movement were overlooked.237

A more controversial critic was Richard Pipes. Noting Figes’ conservative assessments, of which he thoroughly approved, Pipes declared A People’s Tragedy evidence that ‘the pendulum is beginning to swing back toward the tradition position.’238 Pipes’ review was far from uncritical. Figes had given unnecessary attention to minor details, ‘graphic description and visual imagery’, at the expense of analysis. In an extraordinary public and direct manner, Pipes went on to accuse Figes of failing to give ‘proper credit to my own writings for factual detail, but no less often drawing on my opinions…without attribution.’ To illustrate ‘instances of this unwholesome practice’, extracts of Pipes’ work were contrasted with extracts from A People’s Tragedy. Whilst there were some similarities, Figes understandably took offence the aspersion against his professional integrity. A series of terse exchanges in The New Republic and The Times culminated in an open accusation of plagiarism.

Fellow historians were quick to defend A People’s Tragedy. Edward Acton was blunt in his assessment:

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232 Ibid, pp. 177-79.
234 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, p. xviii.
235 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, pp. 455-6.
236 Ibid, p. 460.
238 Richard Pipes, ‘Black Bread’, in New Republic (31st, March, 1997). The title, Black Bread, is reference to Figes’ discussion of the meals eaten by the protagonists of October 1917: the remaining ministers of the Provisional Government dined on steamed fish, borsch and artichokes, while the Bolsheviks ate cheese and black bread. It is a dig at Figes’ attention to apparent ‘minor’ details.
’Unlike the disappointing doorstoppers produced a few years earlier by Richard Pipes, which ignored much of the best work of recent decades on the social history of the revolution, Figes managed to synthesise political and social perspectives into a rich and vibrant narrative. Petty and tiresome carping over a handful of well-worn phrases in a book over 900 pages does not belong in a discussion of plagiarism.’

In his review article, ‘Black Bread and Sour Grapes’, Stephen Wheatcroft draws attention to a subtle element of unintentional farce in the Pipes/Figes controversy. Rather than plagiarism, Figes was perhaps drawing on Pipes as a ‘classic’. His views, like those of Trotsky and W.H. Chamberlin, are now so widely known they no longer require direct citation in every instance. ‘The irony of this situation,’ Wheatcroft argues, ‘is that Pipes is attacking the one historian who is likely to treat his work as a classic, simply because he is treating it as a classic.’ For whereas Pipes’ Russia Under the Old Regime is indeed considered a classic, his more recent efforts have not attracted similar accolades from contemporary historians. That Figes came to share some of the views held by his Harvard counterpart was arguably not worthy of defamatory rebuke. In the end, Figes sued The Times for publicising Pipes’ comments. The paper publicly apologized and Figes was awarded the cost of legal proceedings and damages.

Beyond the conservative vs. revisionist legacy, the insights and limitations of social history has resulted in rewarding debate. A subtle and thought provoking critic has been John Eric Marot. In a series of articles, Marot recognized that social historians rightfully corrected the earlier political histories which reduced Bolshevik success to mere conspiratorial manipulation and organisational discipline. The conscious radicalism of the working class and their support for Left-wing revolutionary programmes were quintessential aspects of the revolution. Marot argues that dire socio-economic conditions; however, were not the sole means by which workers and soldiers came to adopt revolutionary attitudes. By reducing the ‘logic of political struggle to the logic of economic struggle’ social historians imposed a far too deterministic analysis. In other words, poor economic conditions inevitably led to increased support for the Bolsheviks and other radicals. According to Marot, a ‘competitive party-political moment that was autonomous’ was given insufficient examination. Political competition between the Menshevik and Bolshevik parties went beyond mere identification with class antagonisms. It concerned real choices over complex political programmes. Fierce inter-party competition came from without the working-class, hence the notion of autonomy, but was also imbedded within worker’s everyday experience. Workers and soldiers consciously chose the solutions that made the most sense to them. Focus on socio-economic factors as the primary reason behind such awareness had led social historians ‘…to undermine the notion that the outcome of political conflict in 1917 was choice determining.’ Workers selected the revolutionary parties whom they would support and were aware of the significance of such action through their higher political representatives. The activist role of the Bolshevik party and the authentic popularity of their programme was an intrinsic part of how workers came to see the broader implications of their influence within Soviet elections, factory level committees and on the streets. Their choices were influenced in no small part by their awareness that their choices had ‘…the associated potential for the transition from one type of society to another, from capitalism to socialism.’

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239 Edward Acton, letter to Times Higher Education supplement (May 16th, 1997), p. 15.
240 Stephen Wheatcroft, ‘Black Bread and Sour Grapes’, in Australian Slavonic and East European Studies Vol. 11, no. 1-2, 1997. (p. 225). I am most grateful to Professor Wheatcroft for sharing his article and discussing his views. He offered another insight in pointing out that as Pipes was nearing retirement around the time of his ‘Black Bread’ review, a replacement for his position at Harvard was soon to be sought. Were very real personal jealousies at play? Wheatcroft likens it to a case aptly captured by the title to Figes’ chapter on the Kornilov Affair: ‘Two Generals, One White Horse’ (p. 227).
243 Ibid, p. 129.
244 Ibid, p. 117
For Marot, social history was not so much history with the politics left out, as Pipes would argue, but rather history without sufficient political analysis. The insights of revisionist work and older traditions were in need of greater synthesis, for in Marot’s opinion, the former had yet to offer a sufficient new analytical framework. The newer orthodoxy was an inadequate replacement for the old.

This provoked earnest debate. An influential social historian, Steve Smith took on the task of examining Marot’s critique. Smith was willing to grant that ‘the social history of the 1970s and 1980s had tended to downplay the autonomy of ideology and politics’ and had ‘failed to think the autonomy of politics with sufficient rigour.’ Smith argued that social history nevertheless offered a far more subtle treatment of politics than claimed. Marot’s insistence on the vanguard role of Bolshevik politics ‘simplifies the complexity and unevenness of the relationship between the Bolsheviks and their working-class followers in 1917.’ That the workers supported the Bolshevik party and Soviet power requires a ‘multi-causal account’ of ‘shifting economic, political and social circumstances.’ Smith also recognised that historians of the revisionist tradition are still grappling with many questions. How ‘state’ and ‘power’ were conceived in the new society remain areas in need of further discussion, as is the interplay between mass social movements and politics.

The post-modernist idea that texts are open to multiple ‘readings’ and that history itself is ‘constructed’ in the present has been given much thought by recent scholars. One subsequent development has been an increased attention to culture and an appreciation of language. This ‘linguistic turn’ and ‘new cultural history’ offers much potential for greater understanding of political and social identities. How language shaped events and influenced behaviour is an area that historians such as Figes, Kollonitskii and Mark Steinberg have begun to explore. Figes and Kollonitskii have examined how people used and understood words such as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘democracy’ in varied and different ways depending on the context and who used them. Everyday life in revolutionary Russia was embedded with cultural and linguistic practices that shaped how people made sense of the world around them. Songs, symbols, street names, forms of address, flags imparted meaning to how and why people acted. Rather than traditional class identities within economic structures, cultural constructions of political and social identities have been examined. This shift from class to the more complex exploration of social identity opens up great insight to how ordinary Russians acted within the revolutionary movement. The construction of identity ‘is very much about power…it is the task of politics…to persuade people to understand themselves, their interests, and their predicaments in particular ways…so that collective action can be built around them.’ Social labels, such as bourgeois and proletarian, could serve as volatile political weapons. Steve Smith has used the idea of ‘capitalist modernity’, and the conflicts and contradictions that this entailed, as a new way of exploring the forces which brought about and shaped the revolution. Envisaging the self and one’s place in relation to others was an intrinsically important, and complex, part of the Russian Revolution.

Reality is shaped by language, a notion that historians have come to appreciate. Research following the ‘linguistic turn’ has made considerable gains in ‘the pursuit of meaning, especially contemporary meaning, instead of mere causation.’ Historians of this approach recognise that ‘a key to understanding the past is to be found in understanding past understandings (how events and experiences were given cultural and personal meaning by historical actors)’, thereby

requiring 'close and detailed study of expressive voices and behaviour.' In meeting the challenge that social history presents an insufficient examination of politics, cultural and linguistic studies offer potential to 'fill the gaps' in understanding. Ron Suny argues, 'One way to bring politics and society back together is to discover the hidden ways in which people understand what they are doing and who they are.' A number of leading practitioners of social history, including Suny, Smith and Diane Koenker, have drawn on cultural theory in their recent work. Steinberg sees the importance of cultural history as not necessarily offering a new, superior model for historical analysis but rather improving 'our ability to ask better questions about the past and to listen more acutely and sensitively to the responses.'

An outright rejection of previous traditions is not the priority of most contemporary historians. Robert Service has noted the limits of debating the merits of either 'history from above' or 'history from below' as if they are incompatible approaches. 'High politics are not enough,' Service argues, 'we must have sociology and economic (and indeed low politics) as well.' These sentiments are by no means new. In 1985 Stephen Cohen, a historian of the revisionist school, reflected on the value of varied interpretations and historiographical debate:

'The real scholarly mission is the further development of Sovietology into a field of competing perspectives, approaches, and interpretations grappling with the changing, multi-colored complexity of the Soviet experience. There is no need for a new Sovietological consensus but ample room for all schools of thought, including the totalitarian school.'

Rather than a singular approach, a more integrated analytical approach has emerged amongst current leading historians. The work of Robert Service, Rex Wade, Christopher Read, Michael Melancon, Michael Hickey and Orlando Figes (to name a few) are demonstrative of this sophisticated amalgam of social, political and cultural history. Such writers might be considered scholars of 'integrated history.' It is arguably better to even avoid a label, as other than a concern for a balanced and insightful analysis, the complexity of contemporary research defies a neat category.

That there is no clear agreement on many critical issues is not a cause for acrimonious debate, as partisan scholars would have it, but rather testament to the richness of Russian revolutionary historiography. History is an argument without end; a discourse with the past amongst those who seek to understand it. Variety of opinion brings greater depth of understanding. In the most recent addition of her The Russian Revolution, Sheila Fitzpatrick reminds us that ‘There are no simple answers in history, but there are interesting questions.’

In examining the ‘foundation narrative’ of the Soviet state, Frederick Corney has shown the potential of new thinking and inter-disciplinary analysis. Corney argues that true October lies not in debunking myth, but rather understanding how rulers and ruled positioned themselves within the collective memory of the revolution. It was 'a story told in the telling.' The question of ‘legitimacy’, which centres on political analysis, is a debate that sheds little understanding on what it meant to experience the revolution. Rather than a description of events, the tale in the telling was a construction of a particular view of the revolution; a juxtaposition of narrative and counter-narrative:

254 Ibid.
255 Suny, ‘Revision and Retreat’, p. 182.
256 See Smith, Revolution and the People in Russia and China.
257 Steinberg, ‘Stories and Voices’, p. 354.
258 Service, Society and Politics in the Russian Revolution, p. 11.
259 Cohen, Rethinking the Soviet Experience, p. 37.
260 I would like to avoid the label ‘post-revisionist’ for its implication that revisionism, an on-going process, is over.
Both coup and revolution were ‘robust articulations of past events, internally coherent and eminently credible.” An inherently subjective construction, ‘true’ or ‘false’ October exists as memory project. In remembering and therefore experiencing October, Russians conceived themselves as apart or as one with the new regime. Re-enactments to mark the anniversaries of the revolution and evenings where reminiscences of the revolutionary period were recounted provided further opportunity for the creation of collective memory. The past functioned and was experienced as a part of the present. ‘The October Revolution did not first occur, only to be later written about…it was experienced (i.e. “understood”)…in the process of remembering.”

Whilst institutional expressions of Communist authoritarian power are well researched, the power of narrative is a more recent insight. The language of the new society, framed around its foundation story, was an essential part of identification or rejection of the revolution, with dynamic shades of in-between. Jochen Hellbeck’s study of diary writing under Stalin has shown how the values of the Soviet regime were internalized in the creation of a new ‘revolutionary self’, rather than rejected as nightmarish impingement on individual autonomy. Such insights have recast the totalitarian paradigm considerably.

Seen as premature ‘triumphalism’ by many in the 1990s, a wholesale return to the totalitarian perspective of the Cold War era seems unlikely. No profound ‘smoking guns’ have emerged from the Soviet archives. New documents have tended to reinforce prior assumptions and historians of all persuasions have been inclined to find what corroborates their previous research. With some foresight, Steve Smith raised concerns that “…a fetishisation of the archive will substitute for creative, innovative thinking.” What is been done with both new and old sources has proven more fruitful, such as the work of Corney and Hellbeck attests. Post-modernism has broadened the scope of study and inspired more diverse analyses of available evidence. Previously unheard ‘voices’ are being heard with more clarity. Historians are now far more aware that ‘all knowledge is implicated in the social and political practices of a specific historical and cultural moment.”

Declaring one’s personal perspective and intellectual ‘baggage’ is now more common. That my own leanings are toward an appreciation of social and cultural history should be apparent. I also feel that many insights of these approaches are misunderstood or unduly simplified. I hope that this text will encourage you to think more critically of your assumptions about the Russian Revolution and lead to a careful consideration of different views. Professor Acton reflects on the possible insights of recent research:

‘Ask a class of undergraduates studying the Revolution to close their eyes and conjure up a typical Bolshevik of 1917 and what appears is a gaunt, bearded, bespectacled intellectual diligently carrying out Lenin’s instructions with a fanatical, even manic, gleam in his eye. It is exactly the same image that would have come to the minds of their predecessors of twenty years ago. After being introduced to works such as those of Service and Rabinowitch, the vision they will summon up may with luck be a worker but

263 Ibid, p. 11.
264 Ibid, p. 44.
268 Smith, ‘Writing the History of the Revolution’, in Miller, p. 266.
269 ‘Figes’ research into the peasantry and Steinberg’s work on soldiers and workers comes most readily to mind.
he will surely appear just as gaunt, bearded and fanatical (even if not bespectacled) and will seem to hearken readily (if not uncritically) to Lenin.\textsuperscript{271}

In 1918 the poet Aleksandr Blok urged artists searching for inspiration and meaning in their work to ‘listen to the revolution’. It was their ‘obligation’ to do so with the whole of their being. It is the historian’s task, too, to listen to the past and divine meaning and causality. When studying the revolution and assessing its outcomes, the question of whose perspective to listen to and by what standards the past is to be judged becomes critical. This is your task or ‘obligation’; to listen to how the story of the Russian Revolution is told. Seek a deep understanding and critically engage with the complexity of historiographical debate. Leon Trotsky once said, ‘It is clear that the events of 1917, whatever you think of them, deserve study.’ This is equally true for the period beyond 1917 and for the historiography of the revolution.


**Historians of the ‘linguistic turn’ and Cultural History**: Orlando Figes, Boris Kollonitskii, Mark Steinberg.

**Integrated History**: Robert Service, Orlando Figes, Rex Wade, Christopher Read, Michael Melancon, Michael Hickey, Peter Kenez, Steve Smith, Frederick C. Corney, Jochen Hellbeck.

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\textsuperscript{271} Acton in Service (ed.), *Society and Politics in the Russian Revolution*, p. 183.