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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

Nicholas II. Emperor of all the Russias. By D. Lieven. London: Pimlico, 1995. Pp. 292. ISBN 0-719-54994-9. £10.00.

The Russian Revolution, 1917–1921: a short history. By J. D. White. London: Edward Arnold, 1994. Pp. 312. ISBN 0-340-53910-0. £12.99.

The origins of the Russian civil war. By G. Swain. London: Longman, 1995. Pp. 296. ISBN 0-582-05968-2. £13.99.

Behind the front lines of the civil war: political parties and social movements in Russia, 1918–1922. By V. N. Brovkin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. 455. ISBN 0-691-03278-5. £40.00.

America's secret war against Bolshevism: U.S. intervention in the Russian civil war, 1917–1920. By D. S. Foglesong. Chapel Hill and London: North Carolina University Press, 1995. Pp. 386. ISBN 0-807-82228-0. $45–00.

For three decades after 1945 the Russian revolution was mainly viewed in Western historiography as a stepping stone to disaster. In one of the major studies produced in that period John Keep wrote 'This book seeks to show how and why the Russian revolution of 1917, an elemental popular movement inspired by the most egalitarian and libertarian ideals, gave birth to the twentieth century's most durable dictatorship' (*The Russian Revolution: a study in mass mobilization*, p. vii.). While there is, of course, a perfectly valid question about the origins and development of Stalinism, this can only distort one's view of a revolution that was imbued with many possible outcomes. In the next decade and a half, from the mid-1970s to the collapse of the Soviet system, Western historiography was dominated by an intense debate between the 'cold warriors' or 'totalitarians', who up till then had reigned largely unchallenged, with the formidable exception of E. H. Carr, and a few others, and a rising school of 'revisionists', who attempted to break down the view that Bolshevik rule was nothing but illegitimate force imposed on an unwilling population. Many of the latter, inspired by new left versions of Marxism–Leninism, sought for an 'advanced' proletariat as the backbone of the Bolshevik party. They also tended to argue that, far from being 'tightly-disciplined' and even 'totalitarian', the Bolshevik party was ill-disciplined and rent by faction. They also suggested, though little regional research was conducted because of the inaccessibility of sources before the late 1980s, that the hold of the centre over the periphery was far from total. The collapse of the Soviet system left the remnants of the cold war school in triumphalist mood and caused confusion among many revisionists, even though this unforeseen turn of events fitted in better with the views of the latter. After all, if the Soviet system had been as closely controlled and dictatorial as the 'totalitarians' argued, how could the system have collapsed?

Today, two lines of interpretation dominate the subject. On the one hand, there is re-energized, straightforwardly political anti-Bolshevism, which eschews social history. This tendency is best exemplified by Richard Pipes, Martin Malia and Dmitri Volkogonov. Orlando Figes has provided the counter-revolutionary case with a very

different veneer derived from post-structuralist and post-modern pre-occupations with identity rather than class, politics rather than social history, narrative rather than analysis, and chaos rather than direction. On the other hand, a much more nuanced 'populist', interpretation, which gives more serious thought to democratic socialist alternatives to Bolshevism presented by Kerensky, the SRs and the Mensheviks and the prospects for a 'third way' in 1917, is also emerging, built on the social-historical insights of the revisionists and the best of the ex-Soviet historians such as Danilov, Maliavskii, Kabanov, Grunt, Startsev and Frenkin. In this line of thought, the stress is on the profoundly undemocratic nature of Bolshevism from the beginning and the immense, energetic, self-generating revolution of the masses so sadly misunderstood and contradicted by the Bolsheviks. In this it goes beyond the early 'revisionists' who, in their understandable desire to challenge the excesses of the 'totalitarian' and 'cold war' views of Bolshevism, seemed to go too far in claiming it was, at least potentially, democratic and widely supported. As such, proponents of this type of interpretation could lay claim to being genuine 'post-revisionists', where claims to that title by resuscitated cold warriors, who are saying little that goes beyond their original views, seem invalid. Incidentally, for the time being, Leninist interpretations, like Sleeping Beauty, lie deeply dormant awaiting the reviving kiss of a future Prince Charming.

How far do the books under review fit in with the emerging interpretations? Lieven's book grows out of a liberal branch of the 'cold war' school which in the mid-1960s began to develop an 'optimistic' interpretation of the last decade or so of tsarist rule. In place of the earlier assumptions of both left and right that Imperial Russia was doomed and the last tsar was, at best, a likeable political nincompoop, it was argued that Russia after 1905 was on a path of evolutionary development which would lead it towards a western, or perhaps more specifically German, model of authoritarian constitutional monarchism and liberal capitalism. Had the war not interrupted this process, it was argued, Russia might have avoided revolution altogether. In a series of works on topics from the emergence of democracy to civil rights and in economic studies that pointed to Russia's high industrial growth rates, the thesis was eagerly expounded. The fact that one can find almost no one who, at the time, believed that this was what was happening, was no deterrent. More moderate politicians of the right who were prepared to work with the post-1905 autocracy did not want further change, while extremists wanted the clock put back. Liberals and the left were united at least in the belief that only the overthrow of the monarchy would open the way to political and economic change. Even the few liberal monarchists like Miliukov and Struve envisaged a tsar without significant political power.

Strangely absent from recent historical debate was any detailed study of Nicholas II himself, a gap filled rather dramatically by the appearance in the last few years of biographies by Edvard Radzinsky, Marc Ferro and Dominic Lieven. Without doubt Lieven's is the most thorough. He traces the upbringing and personality of the tsar in respectful detail, stressing his decency, adherence to his aristocratic code of honour and his expectation that those around him would do the same. In particular, his imperial duty to God and his people stood above all else, depriving him of the freedom to make decisions in his own interests, whether it be the tearful parting from his mistress to his resolute refusal to compromise the powers of the traditional autocracy. He simply did not believe these last were his to bargain with. It would seem indecent to use the word 'despot' to describe the mild-mannered, family- and nature-loving, self-controlled, if politically-bewildered, English gentleman who was Nicholas II, according to Dominic Lieven's portrayal.

Lieven's aim is 'to attack the trivialization of Nicholas and his regime and to question the unthinking imposition of Western liberal or socialist assumptions and values on the history of late Imperial Russia' (pp. ix–x). Given the extensive recent historiography in defence of the Imperial regime it is hard to see who he has in mind here, not to mention the fact that there were many Russian liberals and socialists at the turn of the century. Easier to comprehend are his claims that his work is 'a study of the reign as well as the man' and that it attempts to show that 'there was more sense and logic behind' Nicholas's ideas and actions 'than is usually imagined' (p. x). One of the difficulties here is that, when the reign comes into focus, the man annoyingly recedes. The main political chapters focus on successive leading ministers – notably Witte, Svyatopolk-Mirsky, Durnovo, Stolypin, Kokovtsov, Krivoshein, Sukhomlinov – who quite rightly are presented as being in the policy-making driving seat. The role of Nicholas in exercising his 'autocratic' powers is presented in such a soft focus that he often disappears into the background. For example, a key example of Nicholas's own political initiative was his personal negotiation of the Treaty of Björkö with the kaiser which was speedily unpicked by his minions. Rather than reflect on the enormous implications this had for Nicholas's power, or even how he was persuaded to change his mind, we are simply told 'after some crafty manoeuvring and a little humiliation Petersburg succeeded in escaping' from the treaty' (p. 157). More characteristically, the chapters devoted to government provide illuminating sketches of elite politics. In particular the stresses and strains of belonging to the club of great powers, a club from which 'it was impossible to resign' (p. 8), are brought to the fore. Not only foreign policy but Witte's industrialization policies are shown to be focused on the need to raise government revenue for arms expenditure, which was necessary because 'in the wicked world of imperialism, great powers that weakened went to the wall' (p. 8). The difficulty was, and this is also true to some extent of Professor Lieven's account, that the catastrophic social, cultural and economic forces ripping traditional Russia apart were underrated. In this respect, what might be seen as Nicholas's virtues – notably his personal submission to what he saw as his duty, especially to preserve the autocracy intact – were, in fact, disastrous vices preventing flexible approaches and necessary minor retreats in order to gain the elite's greater goal of self-preservation. Lieven alludes to these requirements for example, mentioning that it would have been 'unequivocally positive' (p. 57) of Nicholas to follow the example of Wilhelm II and Edward VII in bringing together the aristocracy and the emerging capitalist plutocracy to forge a new ruling class. Lieven refuses to berate him for this obvious failure even down to the last chance when, in 1915, against the advice of most of his ministers, he refused to come to terms with the Progressive Bloc, once again because he believed autocratic powers were not his to give away. Instead, we are told 'in the nine months following the crisis Nicholas's firmness seemed to bear fruit' (p. 217). In other respects, too, Lieven seems to glide over the uglier side of Nicholas's politics. We are told he was enthusiastic about Durnovo's 'splendid work' (p. 154) in 1906, without it being spelled out that this included extensive armed repression in which many innocents were caught up. There are occasional references to pogroms and anti-semitism in the period, but Nicholas's views on Jews are nowhere discussed, nor is his support for the proto-fascist Union of Russian People as a 'healthy', counter-revolutionary force in late 1905 and early 1906. Any revisionist biographer should engage with these aspects especially if he or she deems them to be mistaken. In the end, the substantive passages dealing with Nicholas personally end up stressing his love of his family and nature (though not mentioning his devastating hunting practices, his diary recording one memorable day when his party

'killed 667 creatures for 1,596 gunshots'); his stubbornness and coldness with outsiders and officials; and, above all, his belief that the old, peasant, Orthodox Russia – exemplified in the Sarov pilgrimage of 1903 – was stronger than the new, so that, even in 1906 when most of the nation had been up in arms against his regime, he could say 'I am convinced that 80% of the Russian people will be with me' (p. 152). In the end, this is not very revisionist.

There are also one or two minor problems, including the absence of a bibliography (though the notes are very extensive); an inconsistency in handling first names so that Russian ones are anglicized but others are not; the use of 'English' on almost all occasions and of 'British' only once – to describe a Scot (p. 38) – and, strangely for an author dedicated to uprooting 'Western assumptions', the use of the terms 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' applied to Russia, Europe and even the world (pp. 249, 250, 259). Nonetheless, Lieven's book remains the one that any scholar will turn to for an up-to-date political narrative of the last Romanov reign.

Where Lieven's book is discursive, often colourful and at its best in dealing with personalities, James White's *The Russian Revolution* is spare, terse and structuralist. While the judgements presented are shrewd and soundly-based, they are often presented in an almost telegraphic style which gives little scope for illustration and substantiation through discussion of the information on which they are based. This comes out particularly strongly in the passages dealing with social groups. In only nine or so scattered pages on the pre-revolutionary peasantry, agrarian economy and Stolypin reform we are told the commune was fundamental to the whole of Russian society – 'to a large degree Russian society *was* the *mir*' (p. 4), that the peasants held to communal land holding 'for sound practical reasons' and that 'the idea that some might prosper while remaining indifferent to the misery of those around them was a repugnant one to Russian peasants' (p. 32). Less than two pages on pre-revolutionary workers tells us 'the collectivism of the *mir* was carried over into the factories' (p. 14). Three paragraphs on the intelligentsia tell us 'the intelligentsia's radicalism arose from the impulse to align the reality of Russian life with the concepts of Western civilization' (p. 16). And so it goes on: interesting and sometimes controversial judgements – sufficient to launch many a Ph.D. thesis – presented in cut-and-dried fashion. Even areas where considerably more detail is given, for instance the fifteen pages on the political revolution of February 1917 in Petrograd, remain descriptive without showing great interest in the underlying issues of, in this case, the role played by the tsarist elite in overthrowing Nicholas and the reason why he was almost universally abandoned. By comparison, February in the rest of the Russian Empire rates only five pages.

The balance of attention remains questionable in the key sections on 1917 and the civil war. For instance, there are twenty-three extremely stimulating pages covering the whole of the peasant, worker, soldiers' and sailors' movements in 1917 which conclude, challengingly and, in the view of the present reviewer, correctly, that 'the multitude of ties between peasants, workers and soldiers suggests that these were not three separate movements but different aspects of a single popular movement' (p. 125). However, the term 'popular movement' is not taken up elsewhere in the book nor does it appear in the index. By comparison, two-thirds as much space is devoted to the ins and outs of the Kornilov affair, which adds little to previous discussions and is unlikely to be of great interest to the general reader or elementary student at whom the book is aimed. For them the unequivocal impact of the affair, in undermining the provisional government and opening the road to the Bolshevik seizure of power, is more important than exactly what story the protagonists believed about each other. Throughout, the balance comes

down similarly in favour of political narrative over social and cultural analysis. This is not to say that there are not many stimulating comments and brilliantly pithy summaries, rather that the account is at its best when it broadens out a little into theory and analysis. For example, the sections on Bolshevik 'economic' policies in October – namely that there were none and none were deemed to be necessary – and on war communism – especially the opening page on A. A. Bogdanov's views and the closing pages on Bukharin and the *ABC of Communism* – will be new to many readers and leave them wishing more had been made of them at the expense of the sometimes over-detailed, unevenly spread, central political narrative.

Nonetheless, White's book does help to lay certain myths to rest in showing that it was Trotsky's rather than Lenin's plan which was implemented in October; that soldiers rather than workers were the Bolshevik vanguard in 1917; that Russian nationalism was important particularly in the backlash against the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk; that Russian workers were not 'proletarians' in the Marxist sense and that Bukharin, not Lenin (or in other versions, Trotsky) suggested that imperialism might break at its 'weakest link'. The book is written in a clear style and tells the story at a good pace. The inclusion of certain idiosyncrasies, such as asides pointing out numerous Scottish and even Glaswegian interventions in Russia's revolution, add to its appeal. Overall White's book has been very carefully produced and is very reliable. The only significant questions of disputed information related to the discussion of desertion (p. 130) which overlooks returnees and, contrary to other sources which show a not-unexpected correlation between heavy fighting and desertion, suggests reserves deserted more than front line troops. There is also a significant difference between White's more probable, though now out of date, figures of average peasant allotments falling from 2·52 hectares in 1860 to 1·43 hectares in 1900, and Lieven's rosy picture of the Russian peasant's farm being 'usually much bigger than that of his French or German counterpart' and of 'Russian peasants [having] more ample and healthy diets than a large proportion of the German population in 1900' and even that, according to 'the latest, immensely thorough, German study', their 'diet was roughly comparable to that of the West German population in the early to mid-1950s' (p. 17). In reality, both accounts are somewhat misleading given the wide regional and agricultural differences across the whole Russian empire.

A more substantial area of disquiet with White's book emerges from a comparison with the, in many ways, contrasting but in this respect similar, accounts of Swain and Brovkin, who both stress the Bolshevik struggle against the popular movement as at least as significant as the struggle against the Whites in the civil war. White barely touches on the endemic discontent of workers and peasants in these years, failing to mention not only major upheavals like the west Siberian uprising but also the crucial Tambov rebellion. Only a dozen or so pages are devoted to 'Oppositions' and, characteristically, they focus on the political aspects of the oppositions in the party around 1920 and their resolution at the tenth party congress, plus a relatively detailed, day-by-day account of the Kronstadt rebellion. These were only the tip of an iceberg. Even areas of opposition are passed over that, given his emphasis on the political, White might have been expected to prioritize. For instance, there is nothing on the fate of the democratic socialist forces, who dominated the soviets for most of the February–October period in 1917, and, in its last mutations, the provisional government and the ill-fated constituent assembly.

However, it is precisely here that Swain's curiously titled book is at its best. It is not so much an account of the origins of the Russian civil war as a careful and informative

reconstruction of the fate of democratic socialist forces, notably the SRs, in the aftermath of October. Setting aside one other possibly confusing piece of nomenclature, namely Swain's use of the term 'Greens' to apply to elite socialist politicians caught between Red and White rather than the more common usage which refers to active elements of the popular movement who were not committed to either camp, the book provides a very detailed account of the political intricacies of the period from the gestation of the Kornilov rebellion – rightly seen as the first step in the civil war – through the re-emergence of the remnants of the constituent assembly in the form of the Komuch in Samara and the union for the regeneration of Russia in Archangel (which were briefly united as a result of the Ufa state conference in September 1918) to the Omsk coup of November 1918 by which, as Swain says, 'the White generals hijacked the civil war' and changed it from a Red–Green to a Red–White struggle (p. 250). It also, incidentally, gave the constituent assembly the honour of having been suppressed by both Reds and Whites. Within these parameters Swain has produced a detailed, original and well-informed account of a badly-neglected topic. He includes a wealth of new information from Moscow archives on Red, White and Green activities and an illuminating discussion of British policy and intervention which, above all, restores seriousness to the 'faintly surreal' (p. 103) mission of Somerset Maugham. However, this is not matched by corresponding accounts of the role of other actors in the piece such as the French, Americans and Germans. Swain focuses unrelentingly on the elite politics of the period, sometimes including so much detail that major events, such as the 13 May decision of the Bolshevik central committee finally to reject Allied aid, do not always claim the foreground as much as they should. Nonetheless, this is a very well-informed, thoughtful and reliable book. Like any good piece of scholarship it raises questions in the reader's mind that it does not answer. In particular, there is very little on the social composition of Green support. For instance, who fought in their people's army and why? More analysis of Red ideology, particularly the evolution in Lenin's ideas about the interrelationship between 'class struggle', 'civil war' and 'revolutionary war', would have been welcome. However, these are minor issues which in no way detract from the great virtues of this valuable addition to the historiography of the revolution.

Two areas complementary to the themes of Swain's book, the social history of resistance to the Reds and the role of the United States, are the focus of two other new studies, one by Vladimir Brovkin, the other by David S. Foglesong. In the last decade or so Brovkin has done as much as anyone to draw attention to grass roots opposition to the Bolsheviks, initially in terms of political opposition in the form of the Mensheviks' political comeback, as he called it, and latterly in the broader social sense of peasant and worker activism through economic as well as political resistance. In *Behind the front lines of the civil war* Brovkin, like Swain, stresses the importance of the non-committed, the Greens, and the SRs. Unlike Swain, however, Brovkin is dismissive of the Komuch and does not mention the URR. His focus is less on political activists and elite politics, more on the relationship between them and worker and peasant generated protest. Here Brovkin has struck a rich seam. Incidents, such as the Astrakhan and Siberian uprisings, as well as many other lesser incidents come into focus. Increasingly familiar explanations for the phenomena are also given, with grain requisitioning, conscription, committees of poor peasants, one-person management, 'iron proletarian discipline', attempted militarization of labour, and declining pay and working conditions, in the forefront. Brovkin also argues that the first phase of the civil war, which he discusses rather briefly, involved the Bolshevik government and the remnants of the constituent assembly in the

period from October 1917 to November 1918, before turning into a tougher struggle between Bolsheviks and Whites. The Bolsheviks were forced to make some concessions to their former opponents in order to strengthen the anti-White forces, though even here, Brovkin surmises, the Bolsheviks were not above provocative 'toleration' intended to encourage their opponents to reveal themselves in order for the Soviet authorities to suppress them better. In particular the ten-day legalization of the remnant of the SRs served this purpose and exposed them to Cheka reprisals. He also points to continued division within the Communist leadership, with some on the right pressing for a return to a more democratic path as the only way forward for socialism. In any case, Brovkin argues, every attempted relaxation by the Bolsheviks opened up new opportunities for anti-Bolshevik protest. Peasants, workers and grass roots political activists were not slow to take advantage of altered conditions. The ensuing unrest showed, Brovkin argues, that the Bolsheviks could not hope to be more than an influential opposition party, if even the norms of class-based soviet democracy were to be restored. This led to an increase in the power of the dictatorship. Even apparent limitations of Cheka authority, like taking away their right to pass sentences and handing that over to revolutionary tribunals, could lead, unwittingly Brovkin thinks in this case, to an increase in their power, since they were given de facto control over the new tribunals as well.

The eventual defeat of the Whites did not lead to the collapse of all opposition, but rather to its continuation. Where many observers would argue that the new upsurge was a release of pent-up tension that had been held back while the Whites were a threat and the masses could be partially controlled by fear of the White bogeyman, Brovkin argues that it was rather a crisis of the Bolsheviks' first attempt at a post-war communism set of economic and political arrangements based on militarization of labour above all. At this point we begin to come up against the weaknesses of Brovkin's outlook. It seems, from his account, that almost everything that goes wrong has to be attributed to the Bolsheviks and nothing that goes right was their doing. It was not the Reds who won the civil war but the Whites who lost it, because 'they did not manage to unite the people on the basis of voluntary acceptance of their authority' (p. 235), a formulation that seems to imply that the Reds must have had some success in that respect in order to have won, though Brovkin does not admit it. In fact, the reader is given no insight into why anyone would have supported the Bolsheviks in these years and could be forgiven for forming the absurd impression that, apart from a few intelligentsia fanatics, no one did. Bolshevism itself, rather than its effects, lies completely unanalysed. As with many comparable violently anti-Bolshevik interpretations one is left with Bolshevism as an axiom of the argument, an unexplained force, and, what is more, a malevolent one. The challenge is to include Bolshevism *within* the analytical framework. This is by no means to excuse or justify Bolshevism, as Brovkin seems to think, judging by his comment that 'the main thrust of revisionist historiography on the Russian revolution and the civil war was to confer legitimacy on Bolshevik rule' (p. 6). Its main thrust, in fact, has been to show that the Bolsheviks did not rule solely by violence and duplicitous manipulation (though there was, of course, plenty of both) but also through mobilization of active support and some encouragement of passive acceptance without which they could not have survived. There are, of course, many other debatable judgements. It is not the case that in 1917 'peasants remained indifferent to … appeals to defend the nation' (p. 134). In fact, they accepted requisitioning and conscription without question and most soldiers continued to be prepared to fight defensively, if not offensively, before October. And how many would agree that as early as 1922 'Stalin had manipulated the state to reflect his own personal style of government'?(p. 49).

The question of outside intervention in the revolution – whether it be German money for the Bolsheviks, British and French involvement in the overthrow of the Romanovs, or the involvement of any number of powers in the civil war – has always been controversial. Foglesong's contribution is no exception. However, where, in the current climate, one might expect a paean of triumphalist praise for America's far-sightedness in trying to strangle Bolshevism at birth, we in fact have an, in many ways, refreshing throwback to the days of the early cold-war 'revisionism' (one of the first times the term was used – how long ago that seems) of William Appleman Williams. Like his predecessors, Foglesong sees American policy towards the Russian revolution as inept, blundering, hypocritical and counter-productive, characteristics derived above all, from ideological opposition to Bolshevism. Not that the Wilson administration had any clear idea about what Bolshevism was, let alone how to spell it, a factor with which Foglesong makes much amusing sideplay. In the minds of the anti-socialist crusaders Bolshevism was an amalgam of contradictory liberal, Anglo, upper-class, white, male nightmares of a movement of nationalized women, militant feminists, assertive blacks, devious Jews and centralized state dictatorship. The administration's perception was so coarse-grained that it was barely able to distinguish between the Bolsheviks and any other left faction in Russia, considering the democratic, constituent assembly-supporting SRs as being as bad as the Bolsheviks, and looking for well-disposed (that is, American-disposed, anti-socialist) strongmen to exterminate all radicals, thereby making nonsense of American claims to be supporting democracy and national self-determination. Unlike many previous scholars of US–Soviet relations, Foglesong is at home in the archives and sources of both parties. His picture of a paranoid, secretive, double-dealing White House trying to conceal its actions not only from its opponents in congress but also from its own supporters, a fringe of whom supported the Russian revolution from different but equally hazy and distorted perceptions, is a compelling one. What difference it all made to Russia, however, is not clear. His main thesis relates to American history and he argues that, in fact, the Wilson White House, whose experiences with Mexico had made it 'anti-Bolshevik' before Bolshevism, was the spiritual inspiration of the cold war and the pioneer of covert action (aimed to conceal policy from the congress and the electorate, not the enemy) taken up later by a generation of cold warriors proper, such as Allen Dulles, who had first cut their anti-revolutionary teeth in Wilson's service. American specialists will no doubt argue at length about this but it is, for this reader, a pleasure to find such a carefully researched and well-informed antidote to the mass of complacent triumphalism that has been flying about in recent years.

The conclusion to be drawn from the batch of books under review is that, while crude anti-Bolshevism seems likely to dominate public discourse for some time to come (not least because the present hegemonic group in Russia itself is determined to see no good whatsoever in the Soviet past), for the majority of scholars, more subtle interpretations continue to hold sway.

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