

Living the Revolution: Urban Communes and Soviet Socialism 1917-1932

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For those interested in learning more about, and reflecting upon, the iconic Russian revolutions of 1917 during this centenary year, there has been no shortage of recent publications. Notable works by academic specialists published already this year include excellent new introductory texts on the Revolution written by Geoff Swain, Steve Smith, and Mark Steinberg, the latter two published by Oxford University Press. Another Oxford publication, Andy Willimott's new book, the first comprehensive monograph on the urban commune phenomenon in early Soviet Russia, is perfectly timed. Based on a PhD dissertation, Willimott's book directly and explicitly addresses the meanings of 1917. The result is a brilliant, erudite, and elegant contribution to our understanding of the Russian Revolution, a social and cultural history that illustrates vividly what the October Revolution meant to young activists inspired by the establishment of Soviet power. Based on exhaustive original research and a comprehensive reading of relevant secondary literature, it is a history that builds on seminal work in the social, cultural, political and intellectual history of the Soviet state over the last two decades or so. It contributes a rich and nuanced understanding of popular engagement with the October Revolution, a portrayal of the complex relationship between state and society in early Soviet Russia, and valuable insights into the social and cultural origins, and the nature, of early Stalinism.

The book's protagonists are primarily young men and women: students, urban factory workers often newly arrived from the countryside, and returning Red Army soldiers. It is a story of their attempts to participate in the Revolution and to forge their identities as the new Soviet men and women that would inhabit the communist future. These young activists were anxious to see the promises of the Revolution realised, and they were not prepared to be mere bystanders. What they did was create domestic communes, some with just a few inhabitants in a single apartment, others taking the form of entire buildings, in which and through which the ideals of communism would be reified. Communards pooled their resources, putting their earnings into a 'common pot'; they sought to eradicate the realm of privacy and to live an ethic of openness and transparency in relationships; they sought to impose modern visions of discipline, order and cleanliness on themselves and each other; and they agitated to spread their example to others in the universities and factories in which they studied and worked.

Why do the urban communes matter, considering that this social phenomenon that had petered out during

the early 1930s? Well, at the height of their popularity in 1929–31, they counted between 100,000 and 300,000 members, a not insignificant number (p. 131). More important than numbers is the fact that the communards embodied what the October Revolution was really all about; namely, genuine and voluntary internalization of the norms of modern living with complete commitment to the interests of the collective, in line with the Bolshevik vision of a ‘cultural revolution’. The development of socialism and communism would depend on such a cultural revolution, on the development of ‘new people’. This task, ultimately, would be realised in the mind and in the home, in the realm of what is usually regarded as the private sphere. That explains why, even at the height of peril for the Revolution during the Civil War, Lenin wrote that what was happening away from the front lines was no less important than the military struggle. What would be even ‘more difficult, more tangible, more radical and more decisive’ than victory over the class enemy would be ‘victory over our own conservatism, indiscipline, petty-bourgeois egoism, a victory over the habits’ bequeathed to the people by the previous social structure.⁽¹⁾

The communards, then, gave expression to the revolutionary idea that a new way of life (*novyi byt* – novel everyday practices and habits) would lead not only to self-improvement but to enhanced social awareness. Operating on the Marxian notion that ways of social existence determine consciousness, they thought that by ‘regulating themselves and their surroundings’ they could ‘advance socialism’ (p. 47). What is crucial to understand, though, is that the commune movement was autonomous, an example of grassroots initiative that existed outside the structures of the nascent Soviet party-state apparatus. Indeed, the commune phenomenon rarely received attention from the upper echelons of the Communist Party leadership, and it was never fully endorsed by the party (p. 12). These young ‘aspiring revolutionaries,’ some of whom were Komsomol (Communist Youth League) members, and many of whom would later advance into the party-state apparatus, were zealously devoted to revolutionary change and supportive of the Bolsheviks’ aims. However, they were not ‘necessarily submissive’ to official authorities, and they never lost their sense of autonomy. Yet, Willimott is keen to stress that, *pace* Richard Stites’s classic work on revolutionary dreamers, the communes should not be seen in ‘isolation’ from the evolution of the Soviet state over its first decade and a half (pp. 4–5). Rather, they should be viewed as existing ‘in dialogue’ – both literally and more figuratively – with the Komsomol and the party. He makes clear that the communes do not simply represent a purer, more benign form of revolutionary utopianism, a ‘rosy alternative’ to the Revolution’s descent into Stalinism. Rather, they existed ‘between autonomy and authority’, and they fully embraced the historic role of the revolutionary state in bringing about socialism (pp. 2–7).

Central to the purpose and the significance of the book is Willimott’s stress on the ways in which ideology was appropriated – made meaningful and adapted – by activists at the grassroots, without party cards in their pockets. Indeed, the book makes a real advance in our understanding of the function of ideology in early Soviet history (Willimott refers to ‘socialist ideology,’ ‘revolutionary ideology,’ and ‘Bolshevik ideology’ in this regard). Whereas traditional examinations of Soviet ideology have focused on ideology as Leninist doctrine produced at the level of elite political discourse, recently scholars have become much more attuned to the importance of examining the reception, relevance, and interpretation of ideology at popular and low-level party levels.⁽²⁾ Willimott’s is one of the fullest contributions thus far to our ability to grasp and populate ‘the connection between ideas and reality, people and state, institutional power and social agency’ (p. 5). The book challenges any simplistic assumptions that we might have about the ‘totalitarian’ nature of Soviet state power. With its stress on the agency of the communards as revolutionary actors and producers/consumers of communist ideology, it belies the assertion that ‘the party was [simply] able to construct, monitor, and lead revolutionary expression at ground level’. Invoking the pathbreaking work on ‘Soviet subjectivity’ by Jochen Hellbeck, Igal Halfin and others, Willimott ‘supports the claim that [the October] revolution was not just coercive but expressive and participatory in nature’ (p. 52).

The book is superbly crafted, with Willimott’s turn of phrase often impressing nearly as much as his scholarship, which draws extensively on archives in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The three central chapters are concerned with the three main types of commune over the period of the study, and the book takes the form of a layered, or spiral, narrative that develops both thematically and chronologically. The first chapter, ‘Revolutionary beginnings’, provides an outline of the antecedents for collective living in Russia pre-1917.

Willimott's point here is that Soviet collectivism was not simply a function of Marxism; rather, it reflected Marxist ideals and the particular cultural resonance of collectivist notions in Russian modernity (p. 28). He goes so far as to state that the urban commune phenomenon was, in fact, 'quite specific to Russia in its form and culture' (p. 47).

The first type of commune that we learn about is the student commune, in chapter two, and the chronological focus here is the Civil War years (1918–20/21). The 'youthful optimism and openness to radical change' often encountered within a study body ensured that college dormitories were 'fertile soil' for communes (pp.50–1). Student communards were keen to present their homes as spaces within which 'private instinct' would be abolished. Many of them promoted the writing of 'open and frank letters' to be posted on noticeboards in the hallways of apartments, allowing for criticism of roommates (pp.68–9). Clearly, these were often 'self-righteous' groups of young men and women. In this chapter, we first encounter two significant and related themes in the book. First, the communards as embodiments of Soviet *obshchestvennost'* or civic responsibility, as they were concerned with campaigning for socialist ideals in the wider university community. Second, the potential darker side of communards' revolutionary zeal, namely, the ways in which they anticipated later purgings or *chistki* in universities and wider Soviet society through their vigilance in calling out fellow students or professors whom they considered to be insufficiently proletarian, or insufficiently revolutionary in their teaching (pp. 54; 73–6).

Readers familiar with the literature on the New Economic Policy (NEP), or the temporary restoration of a mixed economy in the Soviet 1920s, might expect the communards to be amongst those activists not particularly pleased by this 'retreat' to a more gradual route towards socialism. That is indeed the picture that emerges from chapter three, which focuses on the more general urban communes of the 1920s. NEP was a period of anxiety for the party and revolutionary activists, as the limited restoration of capitalism – and enforced encouragement of private entrepreneurship – was a step back from the type of cultural revolution that would accompany the triumph of socialism. We read that, 'in opposition to the revolutionary compromises associated with NEP, activists called for maximum initiative and energy in the revolution of life' (p. 85). As if to emphasise this, the term frequently used to describe the communes of that time included the prefix 'byt/bytovaia' (way of life).

What exactly this new way of life would consist of, however, could only be worked out in practice, and communards found themselves confronting several challenging issues. What would happen if two communards fell in love? What if a communard wanted to marry someone outside the commune? How might children be raised within the commune? Willimott's explanation of the complexity of communal gender relations is particularly insightful. Communards were committed to gender equality, and they sought to avoid traditional gendered norms in the home. Thus, however bad the men might be at ironing, they would need to learn! What complicated the ideal of gender equality, according to Willimott, is that the revolution more generally seemed to take place 'on male terms' (p. 100). The world of traditional peasant society that so many communards sought to renounce, with its superstitions and illiteracy, was typically associated with the stereotyped peasant woman, the *baba*. Early Soviet Russia, by contrast, appeared implicitly to encourage a 'masculine environment' that prized 'revolutionary "steeliness"' and 'firm resolve', and women were more likely than men to feel, or be made feel, that they needed to change their behaviour or their instincts (p. 101). Deeply-rooted gendered assumptions were easier to overcome in theory than in practice.

If the communes of NEP were associated with the particular concerns of the 1920s, then those of the period of the 'Great Break' with NEP – at the very end of the 1920s and early 1930s – also reflected the changing revolutionary mood. The topic of the penultimate chapter is the 'production' or 'shock' communes that reflected the ethos of furious industrial production and rapid advance towards socialism that characterised the initial years of Stalinism. The commune movement 'found new meaning' at that time, and the number of communes in existence rose significantly (pp. 112–27). The phenomenon also began to receive greater official attention (p. 127). However, Willimott qualifies our understanding of the end of NEP and the onset of early Stalinism as a 'revolution from above', under the complete control of the party-state and conducted

according to a preordained plan. It is, he suggests, more accurate to think of the onset of Stalinism as somewhat ‘messy’, ‘improvised’, and ‘cobbled together’, albeit ultimately under the party’s command. The communards were one group of activists for whom the more ‘militant ideological discourse’ of the first Five-Year Plan was more amenable than the message of NEP. More than that, though, the ‘operational culture’ of the Plan drew in part ‘on revolutionary practices and demands nurtured in activist circles’ such as the communes (pp.113–4).

The final chapter of the book explains the reasons for the decline of the commune movement. The autonomy and zealotry of the communards represented something of a potential problem for official authorities, but in fact the communes were not forcibly dissolved. In essence, they declined as a consequence of the social upheaval brought about by the first Five-Year Plan, and the turn in the ‘ideological tide’ upon its completion. The party sought greater stability in industry and society after 1931, and it elevated ‘professionalized structures above activist initiative’ (p. 133). In addition, the introduction of differential pay rates (and, we can imagine, the encouragement of individual heroism under the ‘Stakhanovite’ movement of the mid-1930s) was out-of-kilter with the fundamental egalitarianism of the communes. In fact, some seasoned communards themselves seemed increasingly to accept the notion of differentiation, prompted by the large influx of unskilled peasants into industry and wariness of their ‘backwardness’ (p. 154). Although not all communards were willing to accept that the communes had run their course, many others did and began to forge their careers through official channels.

It is difficult to find shortcomings with this book. There could perhaps be a little more emphasis on the full significance of ‘cultural revolution’ in the Soviet context. The Leninist vision of communism makes no sense without this; there could be no communist society, no withering away of the state, without the ‘new person’. The quotation from Lenin, above, provides quite a clear indication of the central importance of this notion. Although Willimott references the source, he does not discuss its content. The discussion of Soviet collectivism, and the relationship between the individual and the collective, might also have been a little more comprehensive, and a little more complex. The usual assumption, reiterated by Willimott, is that ‘the individual “I” would be replaced by the collective “We”’ (p. 26). However, in theory at least, Soviet communism posited that the individual would achieve full realisation as a person through the collective endeavours of society. The Soviet individual was conceived more as an ‘illiberal subject’ than a ‘replaced’ subject.⁽³⁾ Finally, although Willimott notes very clearly that the activism of the communards led to tensions with other students and other workers, there is little detail on how those tensions played out, which would have been interesting to read.

Those are small issues to raise. This is an excellent book that deserves to be read widely by all those interested in early Soviet history, the origins of Stalinism, revolutions, the nature of 20th-century dictatorships, and the functioning of political ideologies in authoritarian regimes.

Notes

1. V. I. Lenin, ‘A great beginning. Heroism of the workers in the rear: “Communist Subbotniks”’, 28 June 1919 <www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19/htm> [2] [accessed 28 June 2017]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for examples, Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2015), chapter three; and David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis. Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, CN, 2011). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Oleg Kharkhordin’s brilliant, full and rich account of this question, referenced by Willimott: *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study in Practices* (Berkeley, CA, 1999). This theme continues to be developed for the post-war period by Kharkhordin’s colleague at the European University at St. Petersburg, Anatolii Pinski. Note also the titles of the following ideological works from the Brezhnev era, wherein the stress is clearly on the development of the individual personality:

K. E. Tarasov, *Marksizm-leninizm o vsestoronnem razvitii cheloveka kak vyishei tseli kommunizma* (Moscow, 1981), and L. Z. Nemirovskaia, *Vospitanie Novogo Cheloveka, vsestoronnee razvitie lichnosti* (Moscow, 1980).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author would like to thank James Ryan for his thoughtful and generous comments, and has nothing further to add to his review.

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257326>

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