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Writing the History of the Russian Revolution

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Reviewer: Christopher Read

Eric Hobsbawm has recently raised the question 'Can we write the history of the Russian revolution?'. Coming from someone who has written a history of the twentieth century, of which the Russian revolution comprises a rather distant component, the question is somewhat unexpected. Hobsbawm, of course, used it as an example to test the value of historians dealing with 'what if' history. I would like to consider the same question from the point of view of someone who has attempted to write such a history, to look at some of the problems more or less specific to the exercise and take the opportunity of commenting on the contrasting approaches to these problems in the two most recently published histories of the Russian revolution, Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy* and my own *From Tsar to Soviets: the Russian People and their Revolution*.

Some of the problems are fairly obvious. Above all, the Russian revolution and its consequences remains a living topic, attitudes towards it being woven into the fabric of liberal capitalist self-justification and into socialist ideas of all varieties, not least the shrill polemics of radical groups which trace their lineage back to one form of Bolshevism or another. It has very much been a case of

'tell me what you think of the Russian revolution and I'll tell you who you are.' Although Russia's revolution is not as important as it was at the height of the cold war, the collapse of communism has only partially slackened the pace since Russia's post-1991 ills are still being blamed primarily on communist mismanagement. As a result, political assumptions have made it even more difficult than usual to reach the most objective possible level of historical analysis. Secondly, it has been a popular topic and it has perhaps required more than the usual vanity on the part of potential writers to think they have something worth saying in the face of so many predecessors. This is partly offset by the enormous breadth, significance and controversial nature of the topic which offers many different angles of approach, but, none the less, originality of information and/or interpretation is more difficult in a crowded field. Thirdly, the topic is unique in that one of the most widely-used political narratives of the subject, W.H.Chamberlin's *The Russian Revolution*, is more than sixty years old. 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. Speaking personally, these difficulties far outweighed the more frequently quoted lack of information and difficulties of using former Soviet archives. While easier access would have helped, such a vast mass of material is already available that it is unlikely that even the complete opening of the Russian archives (which is still far from having been achieved) would make much difference to the overall picture, though it would certainly illuminate more specific issues and local and regional events. Significantly, neither Figes' volume nor my own relies heavily on new archive material, though both, of course, incorporate it where appropriate.

The outcome of these difficulties is that there is never a perfect time to write the history of the Russian revolution. Speaking personally, the idea of attempting, none the less, to do so was firmly implanted in my mind by the mid-1970s. My hope was to resurrect what seemed a neglected area of this much-written about topic. Above all, I thought the revolution of the Russian masses had been underestimated. It had been seen as the peripheral action of the uncontrolled, leaderless *stikhiia* (spontaneous forces) or as the terrible revenge of the *temnye liudi* (the dark people) on their social betters. Instead, I wished to emphasise the purposefulness and moral economy of the 'crowd.' An important corollary of my argument was that the Bolsheviks, far from representing this force, had been instrumental in suppressing it. Conventionally enough, the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921 was the great symbol in which all these themes came together. However, at that time John Keep, Leonard Schapiro, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Service were all working on such histories.

Predictably, when the resulting volumes appeared they were all very different from the kind of account that I had in mind. Only Keep came close to my theme and his work, valuable though it was in pioneering the study of local worker and peasant soviets and village committees, ran out of steam when it came to what seemed to me the crucial group in understanding Bolshevik victory, the soldiers and sailors. As the 1980s unrolled and perestroika took hold in Russia it became increasingly clear that the harmful influence of soldiers and sailors on the original revolution, their imprint of violence and coercion, might help, in no small part, to explain its ultimate failure. For the time being, however, apart from Edward Acton's *Rethinking the Russian Revolution*, from which I learned that my interpretation could be considered part of the little-remembered libertarian school of thought, few other general books on the revolution, as opposed to an increasingly rich supply of monographs, came out. The chief exception was Bruce Lincoln's epic trilogy. By the end of the eighties, the outlook was little better in that various interpretations of the revolution were being prepared. Pipes was working on his blockbusting history and I heard of a number of friends, former teachers and colleagues who were also working on general accounts I, none the less, decided it was now or never, took the plunge and embarked on my own long-delayed project.

In due time my book, *From Tsar to Soviets*, finally appeared. It was preceded by Pipes' volumes,

which were much-lauded in the Sunday supplements and on TV and radio programmes rarely concerned with history, but described by Edward Acton as 'disappointing doorstoppers'. However, only a few months after the publication of *From Tsar to Soviets* in January 1996, the most heavily promoted volume on the revolution ever produced appeared in the form of Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy*. As if that were not enough the year ended with Hobsbawm's already mentioned question. What better confirmation could there be that there is never a perfect time to write a history of the Russian revolution!

Although our two books are very different, it was the similarities in approach that interested me when I first saw Orlando Figes' account. In fact, of all the volumes published in the last twenty years, our approaches perhaps bear a closer relationship to each other than to any of the others for two main reasons. Most predecessors were primarily political and usually rather narrative in structure. Orlando Figes and myself both wanted to get away from this and put an emphasis on the social history - so well illuminated in the monographs of the last twenty years - and particularly on the masses. This was summed up in the titles or subtitles of our respective books - the Russian revolution as people's tragedy or people's revolution. However, neither of us wanted the characteristically structuralist analysis of social history - which both of us had relied on in our previous monographs on Volga peasants and the intelligentsia - to obliterate the element of personal experience which both of us saw as a fascinating and essential part of the story of the revolution, even though one cannot write the life histories of 100 million people.

The second similarity is more curious. Both of us were heavily influenced in our interpretation of the revolution by members of one of the smallest and least effective revolutionary *groupuscules* of 1917, that which formed around the newspaper *Novaia zhizn'*. In Figes' case, Gorky was the main influence, in my own, the diarist Nikolai Sukhanov. Both were close to the Bolsheviks but not of them. Both shared Bolshevik aims but both vigorously denounced Bolshevik methods and particularly their ruthlessness, their cruelty, their manipulation of the masses and their hidden agenda. Crucial elements of Figes' interpretation and my own derive from these two writers. In particular, Figes' notion of 'people's tragedy' is heavily inspired by Gorky, whom Figes follows in arguing that the real failure of the revolution came about because of the deep scars in Russian history which left a semi-barbaric and democratically inexperienced population incapable of building a new society free of the faults of the old. Unlike classic cold warriors Figes does not blame the Bolsheviks for this state of affairs. For him, the complacent and cruel autocracy must also be put in the dock. It is at this point, however, that Figes' interpretation and my own begin to diverge. Sukhanov himself certainly shared Gorky's apprehension about the barbarism of the masses and the danger of the elimination of the 'culturally advanced' sectors of Russian society on whom, they thought, Russia's future rise above its gloomy past depended, but he was also very impressed by the self-organization of the urban workers. Like many Marxists of the period, he had less time for the peasants. My own view, however, was also heavily influenced by recent studies of peasants and their culture which have tended to show that, once examined in its own terms, peasant cultures tended to be much more rational and practical than they often appeared to the outsider. There was, of course, a long tradition of such argument in Russia, not only by populists who idealized the peasantry but by many others from Turgenev, via Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn to contemporary historians such as Danilov, Kabanov and Maliavskii.

It is on the issue of violence, especially its place in the popular movement, that Figes' interpretation and my own diverge widely. Following the trend started among historians of the French revolution in the eighties, Figes attacks the assumptions of those who had been arguing that revolutionary violence was often rational and political in its selection of targets. For Figes, common criminality, bloodlust, a desire to loot and pleasure in wanton destruction are at its heart, not the inarticulate, instinctive politics of an illiterate and uneducated society. In my own interpretation, I tried to

distinguish between 'revolutionary violence' directed at specific targets and sheer brutality embodied in the growing number of released prisoners, desperate armed deserters and other outlaws. In this view, revolutionary violence was distinct precisely because it was discriminate rather than indiscriminate so that, as many examples show, brutal landowners were treated worse than those who had treated the peasants better. Similarly, cruel army officers might be executed and replaced by other officers in whom the men had greater confidence. Criminals caught in the act might be subject to summary justice - often out of all proportion to the crime but often likely to bear some symbolic relationship to what they had done. While it would be foolish to romanticize popular violence, not least because the innocent could be caught up along with the less innocent, there did seem to me to be a distinction. Most examples of political riot from the US ghettos to the fall of Kinshasa bear this out with particular groups of property owners, for instance, having been targeted more than others because of their record of oppressing those who had become rioters and looters. The evidence suggests that the Russian revolution was no exception. Figes' interpretation and my own diverge thoroughly on this issue. For Figes, the revolutionary activity of early 1917 degenerated into a chaotic orgy of uncontrollable drunken violence by October, while for me, although a dangerous minority of misfits certainly behaved in the way Figes describes, there were far more workers and peasants trying to establish their own form of order, to replace that of the government and its police force, through the action of neighbourhood militias, Red Guards, local, factory and village committees and soldiers' and sailors' committees in the armed forces. The self-organizing activity of the masses attracted far more of my attention than of Figes who concentrates on its self-destructive tendencies.

Another point of similarity which led to profound differences lies in the desire of both of us to present something of the experience of the individual to balance the otherwise heavily structural argument required to analyse a vast revolution in a massive country. In my own case, two elements came to bear on this. First, I had been impressed with the work of my friend and former colleague Edward Countryman who, in his excellent history of the American revolution, had prefaced his account with thumbnail sketches of the lives of four very different individuals. I resolved to do the same though, in the event, pressure of space and time reduced the number to two. Secondly, I was dissatisfied with the way in which much social history compiled its facts in a sometimes traditional shoe-box fashion, that is diverse information from a wide range of places presented in quick succession and with little reference to the immediate context. Thus a point might be illustrated by a sailors resolution from Sebastopol', a peasant conference resolution in Kursk, a Soviet debate in Ivanovo-Voznesensk and somebody's memories of what they heard on a tram in Kiev. History is not an exact science so such a style of argument is inevitable but I wished to balance it by giving greater prominence to the sequence of revolution in a number of microcosms - emphatically not intended to be typical but to show the revolution in one place. In the end I was not as successful at this as I had wished. Only well-known examples - like the Putilov factory and the Kronstadt naval base - provided sufficient information to make it possible to return frequently to show the development of the revolution in one spot. In the end, only the Putilov factory was an ongoing reference point. I did, however, try to supplement this by using less well-known areas and episodes - the Romanian Front, the Caucasus, the Makhno movement - as minor narratives providing a counterpoint to the more established ones. However, the most difficult aspect here was, predictably, to find a village with a continuous chain of evidence. I did eventually find one but it fitted too awkwardly into the structure of the book and, rather than include it as an appendix to an already overlong book, it was excluded with a view to using it separately in some other context. Here, Orlando Figes was much more successful than I, not only in persuading his publisher to accept a much longer account, but in filling that extra space with extensive anecdotes. Perhaps the least familiar example he uses is the long feud between Grigorii Maliutin and Sergei Semenov, two peasants from the same village, one a traditionalist the other a modernizer, which he uses to excellent effect. However, here, too, an initial similarity between Figes and myself ended up in a vast difference, in this case in the balance

between structural argument and anecdote.. Figes' extremely stimulating structural arguments are almost unnoticed in the ocean of anecdote and narrative while the extended anecdotes in mine were ruthlessly shunted aside in order to make more space for the broad argument.

Incidentally, there is an amusing contrast in the related issue of eyewitness evidence. Figes tends to use characters from the revolution as 'masks', from behind which he can make his own points. The author does not always appear but favourite sources - Gorky, Dmitrii Os'kin, General Brusilov - speak on his behalf. A consequence of this is that, having carefully selected the voice for a given moment, Figes does not enter into criticism of his sources or present a variety of points of view. In contrast, my only extensive use of eyewitness evidence was intended to show how each 'witness' (in this case to events on the street in the February revolution) presented very different views of the same event - even when three of them were in the same building at the same time. Each saw what they wanted to see. In other words, eyewitness evidence needed as much careful criticism as any other. Incidentally, at this point, Figes and I even came to quite different conclusions about the weather at the time of the February revolution! Figes takes up the tsarina's argument that the revolution occurred during an unusually warm weekend which brought people out into the open for a change, while I referred to the fact that it had been one of the coldest periods for a decade and this had led to greater shortages and hardship which is what had brought the masses out rather than a chance for some midwinter sunbathing.

There are many other points of similarity and difference. One can say with some certainty that neither of us is a Leninist though our presentation of Lenin has little in common, Figes tending to see him as almost congenitally Machiavellian and cruel where, for me, he was naive, had a catastrophically unbreakable self-confidence and was fanatical in a well-meaning sort of way - notably his total devotion to his concept of popular liberation. We would, I think, both agree that love for humanity in the abstract obliterated his tenderness for actual individuals. In fact, Lenin thought this was a virtue. This might seem odd to many but one could compare it to war leaders who know defeat of an evil enemy and the achievement of peace can only come about through the sacrifice of their own soldiers lives and have to harden themselves towards the inevitable losses. Like many warriors, Lenin also certainly dehumanized the enemy although he never took pride or pleasure in human tragedy, seeing it as sometimes necessary but never desirable.

Other leading figures also appear differently. Where Figes presents Kerensky as histrionic and incompetent for me there was more of a case for a renewed respect at least for what he and the Provisional Government were trying to do - prevent a civil war within a world war. In this respect Figes and I have vastly different accounts of the Moscow State Conference of August 1917. Figes takes the view that it illustrated Kerensky's weakness whereas for me it showed that he was the only figure who retained a broad spectrum of support from moderate left to moderate right. In the end, it was Kornilov's lunatic venture which crystallized the incipient polarization of the country and undermined Kerensky much as Gorbachev was undermined by the equally idiotic coup attempt of August 1991.

Another interesting difference comes in the treatment of the central political narrative, that is, the ins and outs of national politics mainly in the capital. As already mentioned the topic is dominated by Chamberlin whose work has to be repeated or circumvented. Once one decides that, in the interest of total history, one has to include the narrative it tends to dominate the book. In the end, as some reviewers pointed out, Figes' book is structured more as a political narrative than as a piece of structural historical analysis. There is plenty of structural analysis but it is very much played down, as already mentioned, in favour of narrative and anecdote which is usually left to speak for itself. My own solution was to separate out the political narrative into two summary chapters on 'the contours of national politics' which, I intended, would map the wood rather than the trees since political narratives often lose the thread of the overall picture in a mass of what is, for all but the most

devoted specialist who often knows it anyway, confusing detail. Our different decisions here perhaps arise from the fact that Figes and I may have had contrasting views about who our readers would be. While the elusive 'general reader' is every historical writers dream target, and Figes has clearly hit it dead on and fired the imagination of such people, I assumed that, although my book is, I hope, a self-contained political and social history of the revolution, most readers would have some knowledge of the basics. The difficulty of judging how much of the elementary material to put in is no doubt something about which Orlando Figes also concerned himself.

Finally, on the issue of the appeal of the two books one might be tempted to speculate on the basis of publicly expressed reactions to them. Each book, as is usually the case, appeals to readers with a predisposition to see events in the same light as the author, the dividing line between us being that, at the end of the day, Figes speaks to centre-right pessimism about human nature or at least about Russians - while my book seems to attract liberal-left optimists about human nature and those who hope society, including Russian society, *can* be changed for the better. Much of the greatest support for Figes has come from what one might call educated non-specialists, many of the influential broadsheet reviews having been written by people with no obvious track record of knowledge of the topic (something non-academic review editors seem to deem unnecessary). In this respect Figes work has successfully struck the imagination of the educated establishment. By contrast, reviews of my book have been confined to specialist publications, not even the *Times Literary Supplement* or *Times Higher Education Supplement* carrying one, as they had of my previous, much more narrowly focused and therefore, I would have thought, less appealing, earlier books. It would be fascinating, though beyond our current brief, to speculate on exactly why the one book was slotted into one channel, the other into a quite different one.

What I have tried to point up here is that, although our interpretations are fundamentally different at the deepest level as well as in detail (and I have not tried to argue out the rights and wrongs of those interpretations, a task best left to readers of our respective books and to other arenas) the roots of our approach lie in certain striking similarities. Both of us see the mass movement as a driving force in the revolution rather than as passive material acted upon by politicians and the elite. Both of us distance ourselves from the established 'cold war' and 'revisionist' schools of analysis, though reviews suggest that readers tend to see Figes as closer to the former in his unrelenting anti-communism and myself closer to the latter with a somewhat idealized view of the worker - peasant - soldier masses. Finally, both of us would probably see ourselves as 'post-revisionists', as historians attempting to look at the revolution as 'the past', something which has gone, which has run its course, something which no longer has deadly importance for contemporary political stances. Although the significance of October will continue to be avidly discussed, it is less vital than it was at the height of the cold war. Only time will tell if these two books are seen as the last dinosaurs of an older style of writing about the revolution or the precursors of a new, more rounded and more dispassionate historiography.

Notes

1. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution' in *On History*, London, 1997, pp.241-52. The paper was first presented as the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture at the London School Of Economics on December 3, 1996.
2. Orlando Figes, *A People's tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, London, 1996. Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: the Russian People and their Revolution 1917-1921*, London 1996.
3. W.H.Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, (2 vols.), New York, 1965. The first edition was published in 1935. Perhaps significantly, it does not appear in Orlando Figes' bibliography. See below.

4. J.L.H.Keep, *The Russian Revolution a Study in Mass Mobilization*, London 1976; Leonard Schapiro, *1917: the Russian Revolutions and the origins of Present-day Communism*, London, 1984; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, Oxford, 1982; Robert Service, *The Russian Revolution 1900-1927*, London, 1986.
5. W.Bruce Lincoln, *In War's Dark Shadow: The Russians Before the Great War*, New York, 1983; *Passage Through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914-1918*, New York, 1986 and *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War*, New York, 1989. There were, also, some general accounts of part of the period, such as Norman Stone's *The Eastern Front 1914-17*, London, 1975 and Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, London, 1987, which, though very influential, fell short of being histories of the whole revolution
6. It probably influenced my account that I wrote much of the first draft in France in 1989, the bicentennial year of the French revolution and the *annus mirabilis* of communist transformation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It appeared that people's revolutions were once again on the agenda, although the debate about the French revolution was opening up bitter divisions between its defenders and its growing band of revisionist detractors led by François Furet and, for the English-speaking reader, Simon Schama. As a result, the then-dominant right-wing intellectual hegemony praised the action of the contemporary masses in eastern Europe as energetically as it condemned their predecessors in revolutionary France. As a result, although it was emerging from the cold war atmosphere which had so dogged it, the study of modern Russian history remained thoroughly tangled in ideological undergrowth which choked its free development.
7. R.Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, London, 1990 and *The Bolsheviks in Power*, London, 1993.
8. Edward Acton Letter to *Times Higher Education Supplement* May, 16 1997.
9. Extensive extracts from Gorky's writings in this newspaper can be found in M.Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture and the Bolsheviks 1917-1918*, London, 1968, translated and edited by Herman Ermolaev.

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10. Ironically, Orlando Figes' previous book is a fine example of such a study. See *Peasant Russia, Civil War: the Volga Countryside in Revolution (1917-1921)*, Oxford, 1989
11. See for instance V.P.Danilov, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime*, London, 1988; V.V.Kabanov, *Krest'ianskoe khoziastvo v usloviakh 'voennogo kommunizma'*, Moscow, 1988 and A.D.Maliavskii, *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v 1917g. mart-oktiabr'*, Moscow, 1981.
12. Edward Countryman *The American Revolution*, New York, 1985.

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