Sammelrez: The Centenary of the Russian Revolution


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1917 is still widely considered to be the symbolic centre of the Russian Revolution. After all, it was the year when the rule of the Romanovs came to an end, when the Bolsheviks seized power and began to create the first socialist state which was to have a profound impact on the history of the 20th century. That the events of 1917 played a paramount role in Soviet historiography is not surprising and does not need further explanation. That early Western historians likewise put heavy emphasis on 1917 was mainly due to the fact that most of them saw the revolution through the lens of classical political history. Since the 1960s, social history became more fashionable in Russian and Soviet studies and short- or mid-term explanations were increasingly replaced by long-term schemes. Consequently, the concept of the revolution underwent significant change: the event became seen more as a process, and the revolution began to grow in both directions of the timeline. Naturally, this also affected the status of 1917 and tended to deprive the events between February and October of its exclusive revolutionary character. Edward Carr’s history of the Russian Revolution already extended the narrative until the beginning of Stalin’s dictatorship, Richard Pipes looked back into the 1890s and included the civil war period in another account. However, in both cases there was strong emphasis on the year 1917 as it was the case in Orlando Figes’ ‘Tragedy’ and more recently Sean McMeekin’s ‘new history’ of the Russian Revolution which left some readers puzzled about the question what the word ‘new’ in the title could possibly mean. New, and in many respects innovative had been Peter Holquist’s thesis ‘continuum of crisis, 1914–1921’ one and a half decades ago which shifted the emphasis on the First World War and the Civil War respectively. The year 1917 appears here more like a symptom of crisis or a hinge point in its development than as the key moment.

Even earlier in the 1980s, Sheila Fitzpatrick had demoted the year 1917 almost to a mere starting point of a larger narrative of the Russian Revolution. The centenary saw the fourth edition of her textbook on the Rev-

olution which underwent only minor changes in comparison with the third one, and even no significant changes in comparison with the first edition. Civil War, the NEP period, Stalinism and the Great Terror literally pale the events of 1917 in this account. There are, of course, arguments for this, since only in the 1930s two long-term effects of the 1917 revolutions became visible: the social revolution with the consequent exchange of functional elites and the final cultural break with the Tsarist past. It is somehow curious that Fitzpatrick amended her ‘updated’ edition with a reference to her last publication but ignored the works of Stephen Kotkin or David Hoffmann who have a lot to say about the emergence of Stalinist civilisation and culture respectively.6

Most historians are rather reluctant to include Stalinism into accounts of the Russian Revolution because it seems too monstrous and too much a period of its own, both in terms of the topic but also in terms of the vastness of the historiography. What is possible in a textbook proves to be almost impossible in a study addressed to the scholarly community. Stalinism threatens 1917 to be swallowed like a star by a black hole. This is exactly what happens in Yuri Slezkine’s ‘saga’ of the Russian Revolution.7 On the surface Slezkine presents a rather classical collective biography of the revolutionaries who made the revolution, then became the ‘Old Bolsheviks’ who moved into the ‘House of Government’, and finally left it in significant numbers for prison, Gulag, and execution. The narrative begins in pre-revolutionary times, but by the mere nature of the perspective and the fact that the Old Bolsheviks’ real tragedy happened in the 1930s, the year 1917 appears rather as an episode or prelude to Stalinism. Taken as a book about the Russian Revolution, Slezkine’s saga changes the emphasis of the concept dramatically.

Other authors exclude Stalinism from their accounts of the Russian Revolution and they confirm the trend to put less emphasis on 1917, but they do so in different ways and they present a different periodisation. Laura Engelstein adheres more or less to Holquist’s scheme and Mark Steinberg includes the Revolution of 1905 in his account. However, both very much focus on the period of revolution and civil war and take the year 1921 as the end of the revolution. This classicism in terms of historical ontology may surprise in the case of two authors who are known for their susceptibility to more innovative approaches, but there are methodological, or even more practical reasons for this. Due to its very detailed fabric Engelstein’s 600-pages volume would have grown considerably and maybe out of limits, while Steinberg probably would have faced a break of narrative due to his methodological approach we will come back to later.

Martin Aust and Stephen Smith differ from the latter with including the NEP period into their accounts, if for different reasons. Aust stresses the Tsarist-Soviet continuities in terms of empire almost in a Pipesian way. Consequently, the 1920s which saw Soviet nationality policies and the emergence of Soviet statehood figure heavily in Aust’s narrative. Far from denying that the Soviet created something new, the author, nevertheless, interprets the process as ‘imperial metamorphosis’. Unsurprisingly for somebody who is very interested in global history, another important argument for Aust is the fact that the Soviet Union entered world politics in the 1920s and began to challenge colonial rule (Aust, pp. 17, 212, 229). Smith, on the other hand, puts emphasis on the 1920s rather for domestic reasons. After all, the NEP was the period when revolutionary society and culture emerged, and when the results of revolutionary upheaval became visible (Smith, p. 313ff.). For both, Aust and Smith, the revolutionary process continued beyond the year 1921; for both Stalin put an end to it, if once again for different reasons. For Aust the Soviet Empire was ready to play its global role. For Smith, who among all authors under review here is most ready to give at least parts of the Bolshevik party credit for initially hav-
ing had benevolent intentions, Stalin put an end to possible positive results of the Russian Revolution and turned it into a nightmare.

The simple but not trivial question what the Russian Revolution was is answered in a different way by all authors, but the year 1917 is not starring in any account. Overall, the revolutionary process appears to be the star of the narratives and the periodisations cover a spectrum from the late 1890s until the late 1930s. With regard to the reasons and causes of the revolution the authors contributing to the centenary, overall, follow the trend of the recent decades to put more emphasis on the First World War. For obvious reasons Fitzpatrick has little to add to this discussion, while Slezkine’s narrative for other reasons passes the question rather in silence. Smith takes a middle ground and opts for a combination of long- and short-term factors. In his interpretation there was not a straightforward road to revolution from the late 19th century to 1917 and there was no revolutionary situation in Russia on the eve of the First World War. However, the war and its burdens brought many elements of the empire’s structural crisis back to the fore. And the suspension of the imperial crisis’ suspension unleashed many destructive forces which had been tamed after the 1905 revolution (Smith, p. 64). This is a very elegant way to supersede the debate about the role of the First World War. Having said earlier that the events of 1917 do not play a paramount role in recent accounts of the Russian Revolution it is worth mentioning that there are some suggestions for conceptual changes regarding the February and October events. Smith revised his position of the ‘two revolutions’ in 1917 and like most authors subscribes to the interpretation of what happened in October 1917 as a ‘coup’. However, in Smith’s case it was slightly more than just a coup given the rising popular support for the Bolsheviks in the second half of 1917 (Smith, p. 148f.).

Engelstein seconds in this respect, but in a less favourable tone (Engelstein, p. 230). Aust however, surprises by reanimating the term ‘October Revolution’. This is not due to a sudden left turn of a ‘liberal’ historian, but due to the argument that in autumn 1917 there was simply not much left of a state which possibly could have been hijacked and taken over (Aust, p. 134). The weakness of the Provisional Government and the state structures in 1917 will hardly be questioned by anybody, but the argument rather seems to be one of default and one might wonder, whether there are alternatives to the fall back on a politically and ideologically rather tainted concept. It is improbable that this argument will lead to a renaissance of ‘October Revolution’.

More challenging is Engelstein’s suggestion to think about the February Revolution in terms of a coup (Engelstein, p. 216). One has to admit that this suggestion comes with much less pomp than in Aust’s case and that it carries much less weight for the overall argument. However, it stresses the fact that for all the popular revolution’s significance and powerful impact, it were the elites who sealed the fate of the Romanov dynasty, and they did so very much in the fashion of a coup d’état. These two reminders are part of the centenary’s harvest: to think about the February not only in terms of a popular revolution; and likewise, about the October not only as a coup, the latter being, of course, not completely original.

More original are two other suggestions of Smith thinking about the 1920s in more favourable ways than historians quite often do. While the Soviet Union did not become the promised workers’ paradise, there were nevertheless improvements of workers’ living conditions like free health care, social services for workers or basic education. According to Smith the emerging system qualifies to be called a ‘welfare state’ (Smith, pp. 278f., 319). This may almost sound cynical in some ears, but Smith has a point, if we compare the NEP period with the situation before. Similar contentious might be Smith’s thesis that the 1920s saw a revival of ‘civil society’ (Smith, p. 313). Once again this seems to ask for trouble in the discipline because it is hardly true for the political sphere and seems only to apply for the arts to a certain degree, but it is also true that there was some space for collective non-state activity in social and cultural live during the

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1920s. State and party control of the society were limited and overall the NEP was relatively liberal.

However, even more dust might be raised by Slezkine’s interpretation of Bolshevism as part of religious history. According to Slezkine the Bolsheviks were a millenarian sect like Christians, Muslims and others before. They believed into future redemption, had their prophets (Marx, Engels, Lenin etc.) and priests, formed a ‘church’ (the party), and finally created an ‘ideocracy’. Social practices and personal convictions resembled those of other religious groups so much that for Slezkine there is little question that the Bolsheviks belong to this category (Slezkine, pp. 73ff., 108f.). From the perspective of a descriptive logic Slezkine obviously has a point because there are structural similarities of Bolshevism with the practices of religious communities and their belief systems. However, there is one important difference. Quite obviously the systemic position of a benevolent and all-powerful creator is missing in the Bolshevik case. Slezkine’s theses probably will not be accepted fully by most historians, but they make an interesting point which is worth considering.

Less in terms of content and interpretation, but definitely in form and approach Steinberg’s history of the Russian Revolution stands out and presents something new. In some way the author follows the path of his earlier works; and his ‘history of experiences’ represents the most consequent attempt to interpret the Russian Revolution within the methodological framework of the cultural turn. Steinberg attempts to reconstruct what people heard and saw in the public of revolutionary Russia. Like Walter Benjamin’s flaneur he ‘walks’ the streets mainly with the help of the writings of the ‘historians of the present tense’ as he calls the journalists (Steinberg, pp. 6, 124–169). Steinberg’s account focuses on words and concepts floating around, since the revolution was a ‘bacchanalia of words’ and to a large degree happened in the minds of people. The author likewise draws attention to people’s emotions ranging from fear to hope. Gender and women’s place and role in the revolution, especially on the countryside is another refreshing element of the book (Steinberg, pp. pp. 13, 24, 33, 41, 170–222). The focus on experiences is one reason why his history ends in 1921 because in terms of experiences the end of the civil war, indeed, made a difference and opened a new chapter. Not all of Steinberg’s findings are new, especially with regard to the language of the revolution; but it is new for accounts on the Russian Revolution.

In other contributions to the centenary authors rather offer accounts which are informed, but not guided by patterns of cultural history. This might especially surprise in the case of Engelstein who has built up a reputation of being a cultural historian but presents a rather classical account focusing on political conflict. It would have been interesting to see how the author would have dealt with the revolution from a cultural perspective, but obviously Engelstein rather wanted to produce a classical example of core literature than an innovative or original history. One has to admit, however, that in terms of comprehensiveness and detail her book will probably stand as major point of reference in the genre. In the case of Smith we rather see it the other way around. Here, an author known for social and comparative history took many elements of cultural history on board and offers a combined approach. Smith’s book is significantly shorter and covers a longer time frame which goes at the cost of detail, however, this is matched by elegance of style and pointedness of argument. For different reasons other authors bother less with cultural history, but overall the centenary finally brought this element into the genre of accounts on the Russian Revolution.

This holds even more true for the impe-


rial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural dimension of the Russian Revolution, or better the different revolutions. While the revolutionary processes in the imperial periphery were studied quite intensively since the 1990s, until now they were hardly part of accounts on the Russian Revolution. The centenary probably had a delaying effect here because many historians waited for the right opportunity. Fitzpatrick’s book naturally still presents a Russo-centric perspective, while Slezkine’s saga about the House of Government at the Moskva river for other reasons leaves out the imperial dimension. Engelstein, Steinberg, Smith, and Aust, however, put heavy emphasis on this aspect. Recently, Jonathan Smele’s study about the Russian and non-Russian civil wars exemplified the difficulties to capture the imperial dimension of the civil war period. The issue is not only to balance centre and periphery because ‘the’ periphery is a multiple and very diverse one. An umbrella-like treatment obviously would not do justice to the many peripheric and non-Russian revolutions. At the same time, it seems clear that the revolution in the centre to a certain degree surpasses all other revolutions of the former empire in terms of significance. Every narrative obviously must take a decision here, whether to opt for significance or for difference. It might come to no surprise that all authors chose to separate the different revolutions and to give the centre and the Russian revolution more weight in their accounts.

Among the non-Russian revolutions once again some figure more prominently than others. The Ukrainian revolution, overall, is arguably best covered, the Muslim ones usually summarily or exemplary. To a certain degree this reflects the amount of available secondary literature about the different revolutions, but only to an extent. Engelstein presents the most detailed coverage of the non-Russian Revolutions, but it is telling that Finland gets one chapter as does Central Asia as a whole; Ukraine even gets two chapters. This distribution of narrative space is not explained or reflected by the author, and maybe we should not expect this. However, the implicit message is that obviously the more central revolutions mattered more, especially during the civil war period. Aust and Smith have a rather exemplary way to integrate the periphery into the overall narrative. Given the much more limited space in both cases this cannot surprise. The biggest problem, obviously, faces Steinberg because the sources for a history of experiences are much more numerous for the centre than for the periphery. Steinberg solves the problem pars pro toto at the example of the Jaddidist Mahmud Khoria Behbudi who represents and exemplifies the specifics and differences of the Muslim revolution. Volodymyr Vynnychenko serves as witness for Ukraine which also in Steinberg’s account gets a decent share of attention (Steinberg, pp. 223ff., 230–244, 244–260).

These remarks on the imperial dimension of the Russian Revolution should be read less as a critique, since the reviewer is not able to present viable alternatives, but rather as an observation of the challenge the diversity of the different imperial contexts presents for any account of the revolutionary process as a whole. On the positive side one has to say that we have now several publications which much more powerfully hint at the complexities of the revolution in the former Russian Empire. Diversity we see likewise in approaches and interpretations of the authors who undertook it to rewrite the history of the Russian Revolution hundred years after the collapse of Tsarist rule in Russia.

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