

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

ИСТОРИЯ ПОВТОРЯЕТСЯ
HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

*Большевики
должны
взять власть!*

В. И. ЛЕНИН,
1917 ГОДА

*The Bolsheviks
must take power!*

V. I. LENIN,
1917 SEPTEMBER

ОКТЕБРСЯЯ
РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ
THE OCTOBER
REVOLUTION



Historiography of the Russian Revolution



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Exhibition in the Winter Palace and Hermitage, St
Petersburg in 2017 to celebrate the 100th
anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

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INTRODUCTION

Historiography is the analysis of trends in the way historians write about and interpret historical evidence relating to significant events and developments. When we explore the historiography of a particular event or development we are usually seeking answers to these kinds of questions:

1. Why do historians dispute each other's interpretations even when they have access to the same body of evidence?
2. Regarding a particular topic, what are the main areas of controversy that divide historians?
3. Do these areas of controversy change over time?
4. What difference does it make when historians adopt different approaches e.g. with specific focuses on political, military, economic, social, cultural or ideological history?
5. How are these ongoing disagreements between historians affected, if at all, by new evidence?
6. Do these different historiographical trends reflect changing patterns in geopolitics and international relations?

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Revolutions lend themselves to historiographical controversies. More than most other topics in history revolutions tend to divide public opinion in both the countries experiencing the revolution and those countries which fear or support the spread of revolution. The factual information available is often contested and we often evaluate the available evidence according to our existing opinions and preconceptions. When it comes to revolutions, historians are prone to do the same and often tend to present value judgements as objective interpretations of the available evidence. The French historian, François Furet, said of historians of the French Revolution:

“He must show his colours. He must state from the outset where he comes from, what he thinks, and what he is looking for...the writing is taken as his opinion.....What he writes about the French Revolution is assigned a labelAs soon as the historian states that opinion, the matter is settled, he is labelled a royalist, a liberal or a Jacobin.”

[François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris 1978) translated into English as *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981)]

Furet goes on to observe that this positioning process by the historians of the French Revolution is not required of those writing about the Merovingians.

A similar point could also be made of historians writing about the Russian Revolution during the 20th century.

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The establishment of the first socialist republic following the October Revolution challenged the international status quo as did the Bolsheviks call for socialist revolutions in other countries. Now there were two radically different and opposed models of how to organise the state and the economy. Mutual distrust ensured that the two models were set on a collision course for most of the 20th century. The USA did not even establish diplomatic relations with the USSR until 1933.

The Third Reich's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 led the USSR to align itself with the Allied Powers until the Axis powers surrendered in 1945. Then tensions quickly re-emerged and the hot war of 1939-45 became the Cold War of 1945-1989.

While Soviet historians in the 1920s and '30s, following on from Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, presented a pro-Soviet account of events around the February and October Revolutions, these events did not generate a great deal of interest amongst Western historians and political scientists before the Second World War. The emergence of the Cold War era changed all that. Just as historians of the French Revolution were expected to '*position themselves*', so too were Soviet and Western historians regarding the Russian Revolution. While most Western historians simply assumed bias in Soviet historiography the debate over western interpretations of the Revolution and subsequent developments in the Soviet Union became highly contentious. Reviews of each other's books could become quite vicious and personal.

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In the Soviet Union the prescribed approach was Marxist. The first major Marxist account was by Leon Trotsky. But his book went out of favour after Trotsky repeatedly clashed with Stalin and was expelled from the Communist Party and forced into exile. After 1927 the historical accounts approved by the Politburo gave increasing emphasis to the role played by Stalin. The October 1917 revolution was presented as inevitable, following the laws of history as established by Karl Marx. The Bolshevik Party shaped the class consciousness of the urban proletariat, who then, led by Lenin and Stalin, rose up to overthrow a bourgeois dictatorship. Stalin was presented as Lenin's legitimate heir. Soviet histories of the Revolution and of the Soviet Union were often written by teams of historians led by trusted academicians such as V. Knorin, Pyotr Golub, Boris Ponomarev, Konstantin Tarnovskii and P.V. Volobuev.

In the West a few historians wrote about the Revolution before, during and shortly after the Second World War, e.g. E.H. Carr, Benard Pares, Isaac Deutscher and Bertram D. Wolfe. But the first western school of thought about the early history of the Soviet Union emerged in the USA in response to the Cold War. It is usually described as 'liberal'. Some of its leading voices include Richard Pipes, Adam Ulam, the former US diplomat George F. Kennan, Merle Fainsod and Martin Malia. In the United Kingdom the first exponents of the liberal perspective were Leonard Schapiro and Robert Conquest, who ran an intelligence gathering unit in the British Foreign Office from 1948-1956, then became a freelance historian specialising in the Soviet Union. He described himself as a "*Cold War Warrior*". The 'liberals' have adopted a top-down approach. Their focus is on ideology and the role of key political figures: the Tsar, Kerensky, Lenin and Stalin and they highlight a direct developmental line from Lenin's approach to Marxism to Stalin, the purges and totalitarianism. The October Revolution is presented as a coup rather than a mass uprising.

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Another school of thought that emerged in the 1980s has argued that the liberal historians have written recent Russian history “*not only from the top down but with the bottom left out completely*” [William Rosenberg, *Revising the old story* (Cambridge 1987)]. This group of historians have tended to be labelled ‘*revisionists*’, arguing that the prevailing interpretations of the ‘liberals’ ignored a lot of the complexity of the social context at that time. These are mainly social historians who have searched the archives for evidence of how different social groupings within the workers, peasants, soldiers, sailors, men and women not only perceived events at the time but also influenced the leadership of the revolution. The revisionists are a large group with significant differences of approach as well as common ground. But some of the leading exponents include: Sheila Fitzpatrick, Robert Service, Steven Smith, Marc Ferro, Orlando Figes, Geoffrey Swain, Rex Wade and Edward Acton.

After the break-up of Soviet communism in 1989-91 social historians were able to access Soviet archives and introduced new evidence into their interpretations of events and developments. Over the same period a number of Russian historians, free of academic constraints on their research, also made good use of their access to the newly-opened archives. These include Boris Kolonitskii, Lev Protasov, Vladimir Cherniaev, Alter Litvin, Sergei Iarov, Mikhail Shkarovskii and Nikolai Smirnov, most of whom have collaborated with Western historians in recent times. [See, for example, Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution* (New Haven 1999)].

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What follows is a collection of quotations from historians reflecting the interpretative diversity and the developments over time in the historiography of the Russian Revolution and the early years of the Soviet Union. It has not been possible to include every historian who has written about the Soviet Union and we acknowledge that there are some significant omissions, particularly from Russian and East European historians. But the collection can be extended if readers wish to send us examples from historians not included here.

As students compare and contrast these quotations they might like to consider the validity and appropriateness in this context of the following quote from American historian, Ronald Suny: “*Historians cannot stand outside history, free from time and place.*” [Ronald Grigor Suny, ‘Writing Russia: The Work of Sheila Fitzpatrick’ in Alexopoulos, Hessler and Tomoff, *Writing the Stalin Era* (New York 2011)]

When it comes to accounts of the history of the Russian Revolution there are good reasons why historians have been selective in their use of evidence and offered contrasting interpretations. Just as we ask critical questions about the evidence so we also need to ask similar questions of the historians who interpret it: Who are they? Why might they hold such a view? What sorts of evidence have they concentrated on and what have they left out? Where do they position themselves on the issues and questions which divide historians? We cannot always hope to find the ‘right answer’ to the question: ‘What happened and why?’ But we can make sure that we ask the right questions.

How the Russian Revolution and the Civil War were perceived at the time?

Today we are used to exhaustive television coverage of any major political or social event around the world. In addition we can usually find on social media a multitude of video clips taken on their mobile phones by people who happened to be on the scene and were eye witnesses to these events.

In Petrograd in 1917 there were many eye witnesses to both the February and October Revolutions but only a few of them recorded their observations and not all of those records have survived until today. Some of these observers were foreign journalists like the US radical John Reed and his wife Louise Bryant, Bessie Beatty, William Chamberlin and the British journalists Arthur Ransome and Harold Williams. Some like Bernard Pares were diplomats based in Petrograd at the time. Yet others, like Leon Trotsky, were actively involved and kept detailed records of everything they did or witnessed. And then there were revolutionaries in other countries, like Rosa Luxemburg and Ernst Däumig, who were in communication with fellow socialists in Petrograd and reflected on the possibility that events in Russia would spark off revolution in their own countries.

“The Bolsheviks were working stubbornly and without let-up. They were among the masses, at the factory-benches, every day without a pause. Tens of speakers, big and little, were speaking in Petersburg, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses they had become their own people, because they were always there, taking the lead in details as well as in the most important affairs of the factory or barracks. They had become the sole hope... The mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks.”

The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record by N.N. Sukhanov, (Oxford 1955) p.529

NOTE: Nikolai Sukhanov joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party in 1903, was active in the 1905 revolution and was a founding member of the Petrograd Soviet during the February Revolution. Although involved in setting up the Provisional Government he supported immediate peace negotiations which brought him into conflict with Kerensky. His book on the Russian Revolution was published in 1922. He became a critic of the Bolshevik government particularly after Stalin came to power and was arrested in 1930 for belonging to the counter-revolutionary Mensheviks. Sentenced to exile in Siberia he was executed under Stalin's orders in 1939.

“The peculiarities of the October revolution can best be understood by contrasting it with the February revolution.... The scene is Petrograd in both cases: the same arena, the same social groupings, the same proletariat, and the same garrison. The victory in both cases was attained by the going over of a majority of the reserve regiments to the side of the workers. But within the framework of these fundamental traits what an enormous difference! ...The February insurrection is called spontaneous. We have introduced in their due place all the necessary limitations to this description. But it is true in any case that in February nobody laid out the road in advance, nobody voted in the factories and barracks on the question of revolution, nobody summoned the masses from above to insurrection. The indignation accumulated for years broke to the surface unexpectedly, to a considerable degree, even to the masses themselves. It was quite otherwise in October. For eight months the masses had been living an intense political life. They had not only been creating events, but learning to understand their connections. After each action they had critically weighed its results. Soviet parliamentarism had become the daily mechanics of the political life of the people. When they were deciding by a vote questions of strikes, of street manifestations, of the transfer of regiments to the front, could the masses forgo an independent decision on the question of insurrection?”

Leon Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution Vol.3, Ch. 46: The October Insurrection (Michigan 1960)

NOTE: Trotsky as a leading Bolshevik may be regarded as a biased observer but as an activist in the revolutions of February and October 1917 his insider's knowledge provides unparalleled insights into events and Bolshevik thinking at the time.

“If the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have failed. The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the cast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterwards, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the framework of the new...”

John Reed, Ten Days That Shook the World, New York 1919

NOTE: Reed was an American journalist who, before the war, had joined the Socialist Party of America, which had been formed in 1901. He served as a war correspondent in Mexico after the Revolution broke out in 1910. He was then sent to Europe by the Bell Syndicate to cover the First World War and spent much time on the Eastern Front. He and his wife, Louise Bryant (also a journalist) were in Petrograd in 1917. He became very close to some of the leading Bolsheviks, including Lenin who called his book the best work on the Russian Revolution. Back in the USA he was not so popular. His newspaper articles were regarded as anti-war and he was prosecuted under the Espionage Act. He returned to Russia in 1920 where he died of Typhus in Moscow in October of the same year. He received a State funeral in Moscow and is buried in the wall of the Kremlin.

“The revolution which took place in Russia last February is not the revolution that will interest Time. That was a simple thing, beautifully logical, and conceived and executed with a directness and dispatch that seems incredible. The men behind it had no conception of the forces which they were releasing. It was a political revolution, freeing Russia from the tyranny of a czar and a bureaucracy.

It is about the present revolution in Russia that Time will have most to say. The revolt of the great Russian mass against being ignorant and inferior...Time will give to the great war, the political revolution and the social revolution their true value. We can not do it. We are too close to see the truth.”

Bessie Beatty, The Bulletin, San Francisco, Tuesday September 25, 1917.

NOTE: Bessie Beatty was a freelance American journalist who had a column in the San Francisco Bulletin called 'On the Margin'. In 1917 she and several other US journalists, including John Reed and Louise Bryant went to Petrograd to cover events there. Beatty approved of the revolution but was not as pro-Bolshevik as Reed. She covered the same events as John Reed, often standing next to him so historians have tended to compare her accounts with Reed's and note where they coincide and converge. In 1918 she wrote her own account entitled The Red Heart of Russia, (New York 1918)

“...the cause of ruin came not at all from below, but from above...The Tsar had many opportunities of putting things right, and several times he was on the point of taking them...far from a dictation of events from below, this passive people went on enduring long after it ought to have ceased to do so; and when the crash came, it had done so little to shape it in any way, that it was left to the last minute of a single regiment to determine the issue.”

Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* (Phoenix Press, London, 2001), p. 24.

NOTE: At the outbreak of the First World War Bernard Pares was professor of Russian History at Liverpool University. During the war he was sent to Russia by the Foreign Office where he was seconded to the staff at the British Embassy in Petrograd. After February 1917 he provided diplomatic support to the Provisional Government with the object of keeping Russia in the war. Then, after the October Revolution, he was sent to Siberia to liaise with the White army commanded by Admiral Kolchak. On his return to Britain he was appointed Professor of the Russian language, culture and history at London University.

“A Bolshevik Government might provide a very dramatic and exciting episode. It would probably effect a good deal of material damage and would certainly do great injury to the principle of democracy. But it would be short-lived and the wounds it might cause would soon be healed.”

Harold Williams, quoted by Harvey Pitcher, Witnesses of the Russian Revolution, (London 2001) pp.180-181.

NOTE: This piece was written in late September 1917 just after the failed Kornilov coup and, before that, the failed insurrection in Petrograd in July. Williams was a New Zealand-born journalist who was based in Russia from 1904-1918 and wrote for several British newspapers, including the Manchester Guardian, the Morning Post and, the Daily Chronicle. After the war he became Foreign Editor of The Times. While in Russia he married Ariadna Tyrkova, daughter of a landowner, who joined the Social Democratic Labour Party but became disillusioned with them and, with Paul Milyukov, became a founder member of the liberal Kadet Party.

“Public control is indispensably necessary. Otherwise the exchange of experiences remains only with the closed circle of the officials of the new regime. Corruption becomes inevitable. (Lenin’s words, Bulletin No.29) Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois rule. Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering, etc., etc. No one knows this better, describes it more penetratingly; repeats it more stubbornly than Lenin. But he is completely mistaken in the means he employs. Decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconian penalties, rule by terror - all these things are but palliatives. The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes....Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule...a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in the sense of the rule of the Jacobins.”

Rosa Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution, Ch. 6: The Problem of Dictatorship, pamphlet published in Berlin, 1921.

NOTE: Rosa Luxemburg, a member of the Social Democratic Party in Germany at the outbreak of the war in 1914, became very active in the anti-war movement and was a founder member of the Spartacus League. In 1915 she was imprisoned for her anti-war activities. Her pamphlet on The Russian Revolution was written while in prison. On her release in November 1918 she became active in the German Revolution. On 13 January 1919 she was captured and taken to Freikorps headquarters where she was assassinated.

“I think 90 per cent of my Bolshevik sympathy grew out of my bitterly hostile attitude toward the war. I had only a vague general idea of socialist theory, and my first serious study of Marx and Lenin came after I was living in Russia. The socialism I more or less took for granted; what made me a staunch partisan of the Soviet regime throughout the whole period of the Russian civil war was the feeling that here was the culmination of a triumphant revolt against a plot of the ruling classes in general and the capitalists in particular against the masses of soldiers of all nationalities who had been killed, wounded, gassed, maimed. The transition from anti-war feeling to social radicalism was easy and natural because almost all organized opposition to the war emanated from labor and socialist sources. And in America it was generally true, with a fair number of individual exceptions, that the more well-to-do classes were the more ardent proponents of the war.”

William Henry Chamberlin, *The Confessions of an Individualist* (New York 1940)

NOTE: William Henry Chamberlin was an American journalist who wrote for the Christian Science Monitor and was Moscow correspondent for the British newspaper, The Manchester Guardian. He also wrote articles for a number of US magazines and journals including The Atlantic Monthly, Foreign Affairs and Yale Review. He wrote about his seven years in Russia and the Soviet Union in Soviet Russia: A Living Record and a History, which was published in 1930 and The Confessions of an Individualist, which was published ten years later. Chamberlin went to Moscow with Communist sympathies but became an anti-communist during his stay there. On his return to the United States he became a professional historian specialising in US Foreign policy and the Cold War.

“The gulf between the working classes and the Government became suddenly deeper when it was realised that the future of the revolution depended on the possession of the army. If the army were not to be swept into the revolution, if it were allowed to remain apart from politics, it would be a passive weapon in the hands of the Government, which would thus be able to suppress the Soviets, and so the true expression of the people’s will, whenever it should think fit. If the Government had been able to retain possession of the army, then Miliukov might have had his way and the bourgeoisie would have secured the profits of the revolt of the masses.

This, however, was not to be, and immediately the contradiction between a revolution and war of the imperialistic kind became evident. The army, which at that time meant practically the whole of the younger peasantry, took the share in politics it had a right to take. From that moment the future of the Soviets was assured, and the bourgeois Government was doomed to be a government only by the good will of the Soviets, who, within a few days of the beginning of the revolution, were the only real power in the country.”

Arthur Ransome, The Truth About Russia, Workers Socialist Federation pamphlet, London 1918.

NOTE: Ransome had originally travelled to Russia to write a Guide to St Petersburg, which he completed by July 1914. He was still in Russia when the First World War began. He returned to London looking for employment and was sent back to Petrograd to report for the Daily News on the war on the eastern front. Initially a supporter of the Provisional Government he began to recognise that people were looking to the Bolsheviks to take power not because they were socialists but because they were disillusioned with Kerensky and the Provisional Government.

“I have always supported the Bolsheviks, and I still do. Opinions on the Bolsheviks might differ. But their courage and their dedication to socialism are genuine. They were the first who took the step from talking about peace to realising it. I know why the bourgeoisie and the bourgeois socialists portray the Bolsheviks as devils: they are afraid. It is understandable that the bourgeoisie bemoans the loss of so much they cherish, of all the comfort it has taken for granted. But - and I direct this question to the soldiers assembled here - has the bourgeoisie ever cared about you facing grenades for four years, about you crawling through the snow of Poland and Russia, about you receiving the injuries you are still carrying with you? No. it didn't. They fed you with nationalist phrases and promised you the gratitude of the fatherland. Most importantly, though, they protected the property of the rulers and made sure that their houses were warm. So, now that the German people have finally freed themselves of their chains and taken initiative, are we really to worry about a 'dictatorship'?

Speech given by Ernst Däumig at the first General Congress of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Germany, Berlin, 19 December 1918.

NOTE: A member of the Social Democratic Party and an editor of Vorwärts, the SPD newspaper. He was removed from his post for his opposition to the war. He joined the Independent Social Democratic Party - a break-away anti-war faction of the SPD in 1916. He became President of the General Congress of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Germany. Not long after this speech he joined the United Communist Party.

“In fact one of the greatest fears of the Bolsheviks seems to have been that the workers, having taken control of the factories; the peasants having taken over the land, might feel that they had already accomplished the revolution and would have no real need for the Bolshevik leadership.”
Alexander Berkman, The Bolshevik Myth: Diary 1920-1922, (New York 1925)

NOTE: Alexander Berkman was born in Vilnius in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire, his family moved to St. Petersburg when he was a child. He became interested in anarchism, nihilism and atheism. At the age of 18 he emigrated to the United States where he met the anarchist activist Emma Goldman and also became involved in anarchist activities. Arrested for planning the unsuccessful assassination of businessman, Henry Clay Frick, he was sentenced to 14 years in prison. Released in 1906 he continued his activities and in 1917 he and Goldman served to years imprisonment for conspiring against the state during wartime. On release, along with Goldman and other Russian emigré political activists, he was deported to Russia. At first very supportive of the Bolsheviks he grew disillusioned with their repressive measures against any critics, including other radical socialists. He and Goldman left Russia and went to France. Both wrote books about their experiences in Russia between 1920 and 1922.

Was the October Revolution a coup, a mass uprising or both?

In the 1920s and 1930s Soviet historians, often working in teams, created an official account of the history of the Russian Revolution, the civil war and the early years of the Soviet Union. A few Western historians also wrote histories of the newly-created Soviet Republic but it is not until 1945-90 that the historiography of the revolution clearly reflects the ideological faultlines of the Cold War. A group of US and European historians presented the October Revolution as a coup d'état against the Provisional Government by a small, unrepresentative but highly organised Bolshevik Party. Like the official Communist accounts they emphasised the role played by Lenin and then Stalin. An alternative school of historical thinking emerged in the 1980s which gave much more emphasis to the growing popular disillusion with the Provisional Government amongst workers, peasants, soldiers, women and the non-Russian nationalities within the former empire. The accounts of these 'revisionists' have tended to show how this disillusion was translated into political activism and mass support for the Bolsheviks as the only party prepared to overthrow the government.

“The revolution was victorious because its vanguard was the working class which headed the movement of millions of peasants clad in soldiers' uniform demanding "peace, bread and liberty." It was the hegemony of the proletariat that determined the success of the revolution...The First Revolution, that of 1905, had prepared the way for the swift success of the Second Revolution, that of 1917...The Revolution of 1905 had shown that the Soviets were organs of armed uprising and at the same time the embryo of a new, revolutionary power. The idea of Soviets lived in the minds of the working-class masses, and they put it into effect as soon as tsardom was overthrown, with this difference, however, that in 1905 it was Soviets only of Workers' Deputies that were formed, whereas in February 1917, on the initiative of the Bolsheviks, there arose Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies”.

V. Knorin et al, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course (New York 1939)

NOTE: The Russian version was the most widely disseminated educational textbook in the Soviet Union and remained in use until Stalin's death and the de-Stalinisation process initiated by Khrushchev in 1953. It was written by a team of Soviet historians and it is believed that Stalin wrote one of the Chapters. Over 40 million copies were printed in 50 different languages. The version translated into English was published in the United States and in the United Kingdom during the Second World War. Not long after its publication the lead author, Vilhelm Knorin was arrested and executed in the 'Great Purge' of 1938-39.

‘The revolution needed an unusually powerful mind to grasp quickly the extremely intricate situation, and unerringly to indicate to the masses of the working people their immediate objective. It required an unusually strong will to lead the masses towards this objective and achieve victory. Lenin, who had assimilated the experience of the revolutionary struggle of the working people of all countries and had a thoroughly scientific conception of the tasks of the proletariat, was the incarnation of this mind and will. The leader of the revolution took his place at the helm. Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute Moscow, *Lenin* (Hutchinson & Co., London, 1944), pp. 113-114

NOTE: The Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute was established in 1919 by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and survived until the end of Soviet communism in 1991. It was the official publisher of Marxist publications in the Soviet Union. It was not unusual to produce corporate books like this where the authors were not named. It has many of the characteristics of a hagiography (i.e. writing of Lenin almost as if he were a secular saint). The final two sentences are typical of much of the book: “Millions of loyal sons and daughters of their socialist motherland go out to perform immortal deeds, to perform feats of heroism in the Patriotic War with the image of Lenin in their hearts. Lenin’s cause is invincible!” Nevertheless, this work and The history of the CPSU [Short course] were influential works in promoting the Soviet account of the history of the Russian Revolution and the formation of the USSR.

“The events that led to the overthrow of the Provisional Government were not spontaneous but carefully plotted and staged by a tightly organised conspiracy...October was a classic coup d’etat, the capture of governmental authority by a small band, carried out, in deference to the democratic professions of the age, with a show of mass participation, but with hardly any mass involvement”. (p.113)

“...the ‘masses’ neither needed nor desired a revolution; the only group interested in it was the intelligentsia. Stress on alleged popular discontent and class conflict derives more from ideological preconceptions than from the facts at hand - namely from the discredited Marxist theory that political developments are always and everywhere driven by class conflict. (p.390)

Richard Pipes, A Concise History of the Russian Revolution (New York 1996)

"This is the story of how a group of determined men seized power for themselves in Russia in 1917, and kept others from sharing it; and of the consequences which ensued ... When it became evident that they enjoyed but little popular support.... The malignant figure of the General Secretary, Stalin, has become only too familiar in its portrayal by disappointed oppositionists, defeated by the apparatus which he controlled. But it was Lenin, with their support, who equipped him with the weapons, and started him upon his path."

**Leonard Schapiro, The Origin of the Communist Autocracy
(London 1955)**

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

Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (The Free Press, New York, 1996), p.10

“A revolutionary party and even more a revolutionary government could not afford the luxury of dissent, of endless discussions and compromises which a coalition government would require. For Lenin this was a test of political strength.”

Adam Ulam The Bolsheviks, (Cambridge Mass. 1976)

“Of course many features of authoritarian rule developed by Stalin first appeared under Lenin and in some cases he played a direct role in introducing them. The one party system, restrictions on democracy and later restrictions on discussion are all obvious example and features of Leninism.”

Roy Medvedev, On Soviet Dissent (Columbia 1979)

“The common perception of the Bolshevik uprising as an historic fight by the masses owes more to *October* - Sergei Eisenstein’s propaganda film of 1927 - than to historical fact. The great October socialist revolution as it became known in the Soviet Union, was in fact such a small scale action, that it passed unnoticed by the vast majority of the inhabitants of Petrograd.”

Orlando Figes, *Revolutionary Russia 1891-1991* (Milton Keynes 2014)

“Few people in the west at first imagined that the revolutionary regime in Russia could survive for more than a few days or weeks. The Bolshevik leaders themselves did not believe that they could hold out indefinitely, unless the workers of the capitalist countries came to their aid by rising in revolt against their own governments. This scepticism did not lack plausibility. The writ of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government scarcely extended beyond Petrograd and a few other large cities. Even in the Soviets the Bolsheviks did not yet command unanimous support, and it was quite uncertain how far the All-Russian Congress of Soviets - the one sovereign central authority - would be recognised by the local Soviets which had sprung up all over the country, by the factory committees exercising ‘workers’ control’ in the factories, and by the millions of peasants now flocking back to their homes from the front.”

E.H. Carr, The Russian Revolution (London 1979) p.8

“The July events, the Kornilov Affair, the October Insurrection - the Citizens’ Republic swept the Militants’ Republic aside. Their leaders adapted and reacted to circumstances, seizing the torch of the Revolution.”

M. Ferro, *La Révolution de 1917* (Paris 1967); reprinted in English as *October 1917: Social History of the Russian Revolution* (translated by Norman Stone, London 1980)

“...the revolutionary transformation was not monopolized by the political elites but also involved the masses acting in their own interests and through their own organisations...The masses had not taken leave of their senses. War, economic dislocation and administrative breakdown meant that their everyday needs were not being met. The sole alternative was for the people to preside over their own affairs; and as the situation worsened, so the workers, soldiers and peasants took to direct political action. The Bolshevik party had the slogans that most nearly corresponded to their wishes. And so the Leninist seizure of power was an easy task: the masses had already completed most of the job for the Bolsheviks”.

Robert Service, The Russian Revolution, 1900-1927 (London 2009 4th 4th edition)

“It would, however, be incorrect to consider that the Bolsheviks’ planning for revolution was efficient, co-ordinated or thoroughly considered. It succeeded by default rather than design...the events of 24-26 October were marked by confusion, apprehension, uncertainty and opportunism...After hours of indecision and ignored ultimatums punctuated by sporadic and innocuous shell-fire, the Palace was infiltrated (not stormed)”.

Chris Ward, Stalin’s Russia (Oxford, 1993)

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

**Edward Action, Rethinking the Russian Revolution,
(London 1990) p.203**

“...we shall never understand the Russian Revolution unless we appreciate that the Bolsheviks were fundamentally driven by outrage against the exploitation at the heart of capitalism and the aggressive nationalism that had led Europe into the carnage of the First World War. The hideous inhumanities that resulted from the revolution, culminating in Stalinism, should not obscure that fact that millions welcomed the revolution as the harbinger of social justice and freedom.”

S.A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford 2002) p. 167

“In light of the events of October 1917 it is hardly possible to over emphasise the plasticity of the unfolding political situation throughout the period of Lenin’s efforts to conquer and consolidate his political power.”

Leopold Haimson, Russia’s Revolutionary Experience 1905-1917 (Columbia 2015)

“...neither the party [the Bolsheviks] as a whole nor its leadership were united on the most basic policy questions in 1917. In October, for example, disagreements within the party leadership on the desirability of insurrection were so acute that the issue was publicly debated by Bolsheviks in the daily press. It may well be that the Bolsheviks’ greatest strength in 1917 was not strict party organisation and discipline (which scarcely existed at this time) but rather the party’s stance of intransigent radicalism on the extreme left of the political spectrum. While other socialist and liberal groups jostled for position in the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet, the Bolsheviks refused to be co-opted and denounced the politics of coalition and compromise. While other formerly radical politicians called for restraint and responsible, statesmanlike leadership, the Bolsheviks stayed out on the streets with the irresponsible and belligerent revolutionary crowd. As the ‘dual power’ structure disintegrated, discrediting the coalition parties...only the Bolsheviks were in a position to benefit... [They] caught the mood of the crowd, and declared their willingness to seize power in the name of the proletarian revolution.”

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford 2008) pp.42-43.

“If ‘coup’ is used conceptually to emphasize the sudden, swift and forceful manner in which Bolshevik leaders seized state institutions on 25 October, clearly October was a coup d’etat whether or not it had popular support. But in so far as ‘coup’ connotes the ‘usurpation’ of power by a narrow band of dedicated revolutionaries socially rooted in the radical intelligentsia, who artificially cloaked their own political ambitions with a self-styled defence of popular interests...the essential linkages between Russia’s revolution and October are lost, along with its world historical meaning...the notion of the party as a disciplined conspiratorial block determined from the start to seize power is and has always been a distorting caricature.”

William G. Rosenberg, ‘Interpreting Revolutionary Russia’ in Acton, Cherniaev and Rosenberg (eds.), *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution* (London 2001) p. 29

“The phenomenal Bolshevik success can be attributed in no small measure to the nature of the party in 1917. Here I have in mind neither Lenin’s bold and determined leadership, the immense historical significance of which cannot be denied, nor the Bolsheviks’ proverbial, though vastly exaggerated, organisational unity and discipline. Rather, I would emphasise the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character—in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.”

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (London 2017).

P.311

“Central to understanding the October Revolution is recognizing that it was carried out in the name of Soviet power, of “All Power to the Soviets.” Popular support for it was based on an assumption that such a change of government would allow fulfillment of aspirations for peace, workers’ supervision, land distribution, nationality autonomy and other demands. The extensive popular support for Soviet power and the Bolsheviks, Left SRs and other radicals in the fall of 1917 cannot be doubted. Ever since 1917, however, there have been repeated efforts to deny that, primarily for political reasons. Some Russian opponents simply were unwilling to acknowledge the erosion of their own support and its shift to the radicals, a view taken over into much Western writing on the revolution. Others later tried to deny that the Bolsheviks had widespread popular support in 1917, suggesting that to accept it is to legitimise the dictatorship and Stalin system that followed. Such arguments are transparently wrong. The Bolsheviks (and Left SRs) did have widespread popular support in the fall of 1917; that the Bolsheviks lost large portions of it in 1918 and that they soon became dictatorial does not negate the fact of support in October 1917. Nor does the fact that much of their support in 1917 was for a concept of Soviet power very different from what later developed in the Soviet Union nullify the reality of that support.”

Rex Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. (Cambridge 2005) pp 303-4.

Recent perspectives on the Russian Revolution

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the previously closed and classified official Soviet archives were opened up. This process was highly variable. Most of the archives in the Russian Federation were declassified in the early 1990s but then access was tightened up and some files were re-classified later in that decade. Each former Soviet Republic went through a similar process but de-classification was often highly bureaucratic and there was an unwillingness to declassify KGB files. Nevertheless, it did mean that Russian and Western historians were suddenly able to access archived material on the Soviet Union from the Revolution until 1990. The result was an important shift in the historiography of the Russian Revolution and of the Soviet Union. Source material was now more readily available not only on the involvement of different social groups but also a much fuller picture became available on what happened in each Soviet Republic. Even so, some of the historiographical disagreements of the Cold War era remained. Richard Pipes, for example, downgraded the relevance of the new material, calling it “innocuous”.

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

Richard Pipes, ‘Seventy-Five Years on: The Great October Revolution as a clandestine coup d’etat’, in Times Literary Supplement (November 6th, 1992), p. 3.

In the Introduction to his 'short history' of the Russian Revolution Geoffrey Swain responded to Pipes' criticism of 'revisionists', particularly the social historians who began working in the recently-opened Soviet archives after 1991:

“Pipes went on to criticise those social historians who had asserted after reading ‘*mountains of innocuous [archive] papers documenting social matters*’ that the Bolsheviks rose to power in the wake of an explosion of popular anger. The work of Steve Smith and William Rosenberg on workers, Rex Wade on Red Guards, Alan Wildman on soldiers, Graham Gill on peasants, Moira Donald and, later, Sarah Badcock on women all showed rising impatience with Kerensky’s Government as October and the Second Congress of Soviets approached. This Short History will not consign such scholars to the dustbin of history.”

Geoffrey Swain, A Short History of the Russian Revolution, (London 2017) p.2

“The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a series of concurrent and overlapping revolutions: the popular revolt against the old regime; the workers’ revolution against the hardships of the old industrial and social order; the revolt of the soldiers against the old system of military service and then against the war itself; the peasants’ revolution for land and for control of their own lives; the striving of middle-class elements and educated society for civil rights and a constitutional parliamentary system; the revolution of the non-Russian nationalities for rights and self-determination; the revolt of most of the population against the war and its seemingly endless slaughter.”

Rex Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge 2005) p.287

The absence of proper access to Russian archives was responsible for the fact that, of all the important parties of 1917, the Menshevik party was the last to get its “own” history.”

Ziva Galili y Garcia, *The Menshevik leaders in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, New Jersey, 2007)

“At each stage of the Revolutionary process, women goaded the Bolsheviks into action, while the activists who worked with the women learned from them and did not simply mould them. Kollantai wanted to create “new” women.”

J. McDermid and A. Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution* (1991)

NOTE: Alexandra Kollantai had been a Menshevik until she joined the Bolsheviks in 1915. Very active in the July Days uprising in Petrograd, she was one of the few Bolsheviks in the leadership to immediately support Lenin's call for an insurrection against the Provisional Government. On 26 October the Congress of Soviets elected her as People's Commissar for Welfare.

“The mobilisation of the Red Guard and its share in the confused struggle for control of the key points of the city [Petrograd] on 24-25 October seems to have come mostly from local initiative, from individual units or from factory, district or sub-district leaders reacting to news and events. There is very little evidence that either the Military Revolutionary Committee or the General Staff of the Red Guard played any significant role in mobilising or directing the actions of the Red Guard, even though the latter played a central, perhaps decisive, part in the struggle for ‘soviet power’ and the success of what came to be known as the October revolution.”

Rex Wade, ‘The Red Guards: spontaneity and the October revolution’ in E. Frankel et al (eds), *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917* (Cambridge 1992) pp.66-67

“[The] perspective of a single, gigantic revolutionary process engulfing the whole of the now defunct empire is close to the view of many Bolsheviks...On the other hand, nationalist parties, and most Western historians (E.H. Carr and Richard Pipes most particularly), have viewed the experiences of the borderlands as unique events, in many ways fulfilling a particularly national historical evolution.” (p.224)

“...In the great sweep of the Russian revolution and Civil War, nationalism was still largely a phenomenon centred in the ethnic intelligentsia, among students and the lower middle classes of the towns with, at best, a fleeting following among broader strata. Among Belorussians, Lithuanians and Azerbaijanis, rather than a sense of nationality the paramount identification was with people nearby with whom one shared social and religious communality...For several other nationalities, among them the Latvians and Georgians, class-based socialist movements were far more potent than political nationalism.”(pp.238-9)

Ronald Suny, ‘Nationalism and class in the Russian revolution: a comparative discussion’ in E. Frankel et al (eds), Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917 (Cambridge 1992).

“For almost half a century, the classic description and analysis of Communist treatment of the nationalities question over the early years of the Bolshevik regime has been Richard Pipes magisterial *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism*, 1917- 1923, published by Harvard University Press in 1954. To suggest that Pipes depicts the ideology-mandated suppression of the non-Russians drive for independence and their forcible incorporation into a Soviet Prison of Nations whose management is passing from the mistaken idealism of Lenin to the brutal megalomania of Stalin might caricature his interpretation but still conveys the essence of what has been seen by many as a sub-zero Cold Warrior work of history. With the end of the Cold War, the greater availability of primary sources from ex-Soviet archives is enabling historians to add documentary substance to their past misgivings about Pipes antagonistic interpretation. That the new preface to the third and latest edition of *The Formation of the Soviet Union* published as recently as 1997 makes no serious attempt to update a perception dating from the darkest days of the Cold War could be regarded as provocative. It is therefore no surprise that a new-generation researcher mining the archive collections of the Russian Federation has now challenged the long-established but arguably outmoded holy writ of Pipes and produced what could be taken for the first post-Cold War interpretation of the critical foundation years of the USSR.”

Raymond Pearson, review of Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question 1917-1923* (London 1999). In *Reviews in History*, <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/80>

“Wishful thinking on the part of liberal historians and ideologies has helped sustain the view that if it had not been for the Bolshevik ‘aberration’ that the course of Russian democracy would have flowed smoothly. This did not happen in 1991 any more than it would have in 1917.”

Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin*, (London 2017)

“...as we attain a deeper understanding of what is essential in our own history, it becomes still more evident that the October revolution was not a mistake - after all, the only real alternative was not (as some would seek to have us believe even today) a bourgeois democratic republic, but rather anarchist chaos and bloody military dictatorship, the establishment of a reactionary regime opposed to the people.”

Mikhail Gorbachev, interviewed in Izvestiia, 28 November 1989.

NOTE: Seven years later, and now a private citizen living in the Russian Federation - the Soviet Union having been dissolved - the former Soviet President was asked on British television if there was any moment in history he would like to have changed. Reversing his opinion of 1989, he answered that he would have liked to see the February Revolution continue its course, then there would have been no Stalin [Mikhail Gorbachev on Clive Anderson Talks Back, BBC1, 3rd November 1996].