

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: A NEW HISTORY

(SEAN MCMEEKIN)

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I am currently very focused on the ascent to power of Communism in Russia, not because it had anything to recommend it, but for the lessons it can teach us. Some of those lessons are ones the author of this book, Sean McMeekin, wants to impart—the dangers of left-wing ideology, primarily. Those are valuable lessons, certainly, but if we haven't learned them after many decades of left-wing horror shows, we're not going to learn them from this book. The lessons I am seeking, therefore, are more dynamic: how power can be grasped and used in fluid, chaotic situations, and by what kind of people. And those lessons are also on full display in this book, even if I did not learn any new ones.

By "A New History," McMeekin really means a somewhat revisionist history. Two main grounds of revision are relevant in twentieth-century Russian history. One is the flood of information that has poured out of Communist archives in the past few decades. The other, related but distinct, is the holes that have been punched in the wall of silence erected around the crimes of Communism by the Left for the past century. These slashes in the fabric of the academic popular front were first made by brave scholars such as Robert Conquest and by men such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The latter revisionism began before the fall of the Soviet Union, and the predictable response at the time was the excoriation of and attacks on the brave men who dared to question the fruits of Communism, and frenzied denial of the truths they revealed, by the global Left which for a century has traveled in lockstep with Communism, complicit in its crimes up to the present day. (True, Solzhenitsyn in the late 1970s did have some impact in getting leftists to think that Soviet Communism wasn't all it was cracked up to be, not that that reduced their faith in Communism itself.) The latter revisionism gained strength from the former revisionism after 1990, so now they work in tandem, producing works such as McMeekin's. Of course, he has been attacked for the same reasons as Conquest. Famously, when asked to submit a new title for his 1968 book *The Great Terror*, in 1991, Conquest is said to have suggested (though it was actually Kingsley Amis) *I Told You So, You F—ing Fools*. Funny, in a bitter way, but illustrative.

McMeekin offers restrained revisionism. He doesn't have to convince anyone that Communism was bad; those who still believe it wasn't aren't going to be convinced; they are ideologues in the James Burnham definition. It is in other matters that McMeekin pulls back the curtain. He sets the stage by showing to be false the idea we all have latently in our heads, that *fin de siècle* Imperial Russia was a backward and stagnant land, to which the Bolsheviks, whatever their faults, brought the modern age. Part of dispelling this illusion is statistics on industrialization and the like, but more powerful still is one simple fact: "Russia in the early twentieth century was a substantial net importer of both people and capital: a telling fact that, since the revolution, has never been true again." In many ways, the economic Russia of 1900 was like the China of 2010, and it was Communism, made possible by the war, that threw it into the abyss. Viewing Russia in this way resets our vision—we see that thinking of Tsarist Russia as a semi-barbarous land of black bread and serfs is the result of a century of deliberate philo-Communist propaganda in the West, meant to make us view Communism as at least bringing Russia up to date, when in fact it almost certainly would have done that all by itself, leading to a very different twentieth century (and, perhaps, a different vision of politics than that in which the West has enmired itself).

Along the same lines, McMeekin shows that the Tsarist regime was hardly one of terror. McMeekin points out that between 1825 and 1917, fewer than seventy people per year were executed in the entire country—not for political offenses, but for all offenses, including murder. This, when thousands of government officials were assassinated by the Left every year—3,600 in 1905, for example. The Bolsheviks executed hundreds of thousands, if not millions, within the early years of their power. Thus, not only did the Bolsheviks not cause the modernization of Russia, they did not relieve the country of terror, because in Imperial Russia there was no terror, or even substantial oppression (autocracy is not oppression), nor, for that matter, did they even ever provide "land and bread," in the words of the slogan they stole from the Social Revolutionaries. The Communists, that is, had absolutely nothing at all to recommend them, despite what we were instructed by their allies in the West through the entire past century (including, for example, my high school history teacher, who was an open fan of the

Soviet Union, and formally stole eight weeks of our American history course to indoctrinate us with a fictionalized Soviet history consisting mostly of Communist apologetics.)

McMeekin begins with the murder of Rasputin, at the end of 1916. This may seem like too melodramatic a way to begin, but McMeekin does a good job of tying Rasputin into all the threads of his book, not least the irony that Rasputin strongly opposed Russia entering the war, and that if his advice has been followed, the Tsar would doubtless have reigned for longer. The real meat of the book starts in 1905, though, with Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, resulting in unrest across Russia, including, crucially for later, among the armed forces. The Tsar, Nicholas II, conceded the convention of the Duma, an “Imperial Assembly” that would offer a form of parliament for the first time. Nicholas had been warned by Sergei Witte, a key advisor and architect of much of Russia’s economic growth, that he must either have some form of genuine constitutionalism, a backing away from autocracy, or crush the unrest with military dictatorship. He picked the former, although perhaps he should have picked the latter—but then, Nicholas was never able to choose that path. He was no Napoleon; he was a gentle man, tossed about by history and imprisoned by his own mind. A saint, perhaps, but not a man up to the job. In the short run, however, creating the Duma while shooting a few active rebels quelled the unrest.

Witte was succeeded as the Tsar’s premier advisor by Peter Stolypin, who crushed further unrest by using martial law in areas of revolt and executing hundreds of leftist rebels, while at the same time enacting reforms such as expanded rights against arbitrary arrest. He was no fan of socialist parliamentarians; McMeekin quotes him as saying “You want a great upheaval. We want a great Russia!” MRGA! He led and oversaw an even greater economic boom, not through free markets or globalism, but through state capitalism, the same way every great nation, including Britain and the United States, built their economies. Stolypin, and therefore the Tsar, gave everyone rising wages and a greater stake in society, including industrial workers through good jobs and peasants through land reform of converting communal holdings to private holdings, turning Russia into a massive exporter of grain. A large part of Stolypin’s efforts went to preserving peace, since he could see very

well that war would throw his plans off track—he said, “Give the state twenty years of peace, and you will not recognize present-day Russia.” Sounds like a foreshadowing of Trump, or what Trump could have been were he disciplined—but Stolypin didn’t get twenty years, he got five, assassinated in 1911.

Things went downhill from there. A significant percentage of the Russian upper classes were eager for war with Germany, which, of course, they got. McMeekin’s focus is, unsurprisingly, not the war in Flanders, but on the other side of the continent, which, while it was up and down, generally featured Russian success. And by January 1917, Russian military morale was extremely high, weapons stocks were also high, and the capture of Constantinople was eagerly awaited in the summer. Nor were civilians suffering unduly, contrary to myth—there were not actually bread shortages in Petrograd, and strikes were fewer than they had been (in large part because the Germans had stopped subsidizing strikers). There was nonetheless a great deal of political unrest, both among leftists opposed to the government’s mere existence, and among government factions opposed to each other, with some also opposing the Tsar and the conduct of the war—not that it should be ended, but objecting that the Tsar was unduly influenced by pro-German elements, starting with his wife. In part due to unseasonably warm weather, Socialist Revolutionary-led protests spiraled upwards, leading to a general strike and military mutinies among bored and propagandized rear echelon troops stationed in Petrograd (helped along, as McMeekin notes, “by the presence of pretty young women”). The Tsar was out of town, and either unwilling or unable to react decisively, so various unscrupulous and grasping politicians stepped into the gap (especially one Mikhail Rodzianko, forgotten today but on whom McMeekin focuses closely), further confusing the situation. Given dubious and conflicting advice, and faced with inadequate loyal military resources, the Tsar abdicated. The Socialist Revolutionary lawyer Alexander Kerensky quickly rose to the top of this flotsam, and he promptly, and fatally for later, engineered a reversal of military morale, releasing soldiers from many disciplinary obligations and subjecting them to the local soviets (the order, “Order No. 1,” technically applied only to the Petrograd garrison, but was treated as applicable to all soldiers).

Into this chaos stepped the Bolsheviks, in the person of Lenin, back from multi-year exile and funded with the equivalent of, today, more than a billion dollars in German gold. While the Bolsheviks had been relevant, though far from dominant, players on the leftist revolutionary scene, what made them was German funding. For example, when Lenin arrived in April, he immediately bought a giant printing press for the equivalent, today, of tens of millions of dollars, and promptly deluged the city with Bolshevik propaganda. Money was also used to fund demonstrators—a common daily payment per person was ten gold rubles in cash, roughly \$500 today. In fact, money was used for every purpose that money can be used for, and we would never have heard of the Bolsheviks if not for German money. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, this German funding was denied by the Communists, and by their fifth columns in the West, but today is heavily documented, though the records are still incomplete, as McMeekin notes. Still, shrill leftist denials are often heard of these basic facts, always without any counter-evidence, naturally.

Lenin, as always, had a plan, and it did not involve the continuation of Kerensky's Socialist Revolutionary-led Provisional Government. Kerensky was incompetent, in any case, and surrounded by a variety of other incompetents, even if McMeekin prefers the more delicate criticisms of "amateurism" and "little stomach for the exercise of power." While Kerensky toured front-line troops to rebuild morale he had undermined, hoping to bring the war to a successful end, the Bolsheviks spent hundreds of millions to turn the war into a civil war, a matter of deliberate Communist policy. This was done through propaganda, through paying agitators among troops, and by buying politicians, all with great success.

Kerensky's biggest failure in these months was not executing Lenin after a failed putsch by the Bolsheviks in July, 1917. In fact, a running theme of the book is that the Tsars, and later the liberals of the February Revolution, failed to be adequately harsh with their opponents, and paid the price. (By the same token, as has often been pointed out, Lenin was fortunate in his enemies.) McMeekin goes over in great detail Kerensky's disastrous decision to release, after their failed putsch, and instead to effectively ally himself with, the Bolsheviks, against a non-existent right-wing threat. (It was here that Kerensky announced his infamous dogma

of “no enemies to the Left,” which has ever since characterized all leftist thought.) And, as we all know, in October the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government, ensconcing themselves permanently in power (whereupon Kerensky fled, ultimately dying in New York in 1970, where he was denied Orthodox burial for the sins he had unleashed on Russia).

The rest of the book covers the Bolsheviks in power, which they began by executing more than fifteen thousand people in the first two months alone (as McMeekin points out, more than twice the number executed in the entire last century of tsarist rule). It covers the civil war (detailing what seems like the besetting sin of insurgency movements, the inability to cooperate adequately), the implosion of the Russian economy, and the Bolsheviks running out of weapons, and how the Swedes kept the Bolsheviks afloat with guns and railroad engines, so they could get their hands on the Tsar’s gold (the German gold all having been long spent). It covers the Kronstadt rebellion and the resulting final dropping of the Bolshevik mask of being a “worker’s party.” It covers the 1921 famine (caused accidentally by Communism, not deliberately like later famines), alleviated not by the Bolsheviks, who spent what money they had left to foment revolution in Europe, but by Herbert Hoover and American Christian organizations. Naturally Lenin, with his “ice-cold grasp of power relationships,” used the famine as an excuse to steal everything owned by the Orthodox Church, which was a lot less than he expected and none of which was spent on famine relief.

Lenin came through all this, lucky as usual and greatly helped by sympathizers in the West, as well as by opportunistic politicians like Lloyd George, and at the end of 1922 the Bolsheviks were firmly in power and able to continue their reign of terror without fear of overthrow. Here McMeekin concludes his book, noting that the lesson we should learn is that we should “stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets promising social perfection.” By this he explicitly means left-wing prophets, noting with distaste the rising Western “popularity of Marxist-style maximalist socialism,” and its lack of appeal anywhere it was actually in power. Unfortunately, none of the young people today crying out for “democratic socialism” are going to read this book, since few of those people read books at all, other than, perhaps, some Howard Zinn.

McMeekin characterizes Lenin’s seizure of power as a “hostile takeover.” By this he means that it succeeded without popular support,

but rather by machination, which is certainly true. Lenin did not have a magic formula; other than simple luck, what made him successful was a combination of an iron will, unblinking focus, and the Kaiser's money. Lenin grasped that history is a kaleidoscope, and when it turns, entirely new and unexpected combinations arise. And they arise not in some logical progression, but, as McMeekin notes of events in 1917, "at a bewildering pace." For some reason, most people have difficulty dealing with the reality that great changes are phase changes; step functions, not linear slopes. They imagine that the future will be much like the past, because that's their daily experience. Seeing beyond that, or more precisely, acting beyond that with consistency over time, is a rare talent.

I suppose I did not learn any new lessons from this book, despite that being my reason for reading it. I have elsewhere offered detailed thoughts on what we can learn from Lenin's career, which I will not repeat here, and this book merely reinforced those. Still, this is an excellent book, and for someone looking to learn more about 1917 in Russia, this is certainly the modern book to read.