

Polgehroneon

The 1917 revolutions in 2017 – 100 years on

Sarah Badcock

The interpretive and empirical frameworks utilised by scholars in their quest to understand the Russian revolutions have evolved and transformed over 100 years. The opening of archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled access to a swathe of new primary sources, some of which have had a transformative impact on our understanding of 1917. This article seeks to sketch out a series of themes that historians have emphasised in the most recent scholarship.

Scholars no longer study 1917 in a temporal wilderness. The chronology of the revolutions has been subject to intense scrutiny, and many scholars have adopted the rationale, presented by Peter Holquist, that Russia's revolutions can be better understood by integrating the First World War and the Russian civil wars into Russia's revolutionary experience.¹ This broader framework allows Russia to be placed in a comparative context with other European powers, by exploring the ways in which Russian state power was shaped and constructed in response to the requirements of total war. At the same time, however, a number of scholars recognise the importance of focusing on 1917 distinctly as well as placing it in a broader chronology.²

Emphasis on the lower classes in the revolutionary processes has a long and chequered tradition. Soviet historiography emphasised the working class, led by the Bolshevik party, as the central agent of the revolution. In the 1980s, our understandings of revolution were transformed by a great wave of social history that explored worker and soldier experiences in the revolutionary period.³ Most recent scholarship has challenged the binaries of class-based histories. Individuals' identities often transcend easy categorisation – was the peasant worker conscripted into the army a peasant, a worker, a soldier or an amalgam of all three? A number of scholars have emphasised 'ordinary people', a slippery term referring to non-elites, and to people on the peripheries of political power. Women have been marginalised in both the contemporary accounts and the historiography of the revolution. By looking for 'ordinary people', scholars have sought to reintegrate female experience

Russian Revolution, October 1917.
Vladimir Lenin addressing a crowd in Red Square, Moscow.



into the historical narrative. Soldiers' wives (*soldatki*) are a good example of a group that encompasses a wide range of different occupational and social groups, but who are united in their grievances, and who are marginalised in formal power structures.⁴

A series of regional studies of the revolution have sought to complicate and reconceptualise our understandings of the revolutionary period by moving their focus away from Russia's capital. These regional studies incorporate a range of approaches, including national, rural and lower-class emphases.⁵ What have these regional approaches taught us so far? First, they emphasise the Russian Empire's diversity of local experience, and the importance of local context and local actors. Second, they challenge the notion that political power was held in the capital, and that the course of the revolution was defined by a handful of elite actors. Local studies show us that the options open to Russia's political elites in 1917 were largely defined by the responses of local people in the peripheries. Finally, regional studies have rehabilitated Russia's rural population, for so long utterly marginalised in the scholarship as passive bystanders or irrational actors in the revolution. Local studies go some

way towards unravelling the diversity and complexity of rural dwellers, and demonstrate that rural people engaged with the state and were rational political actors.⁶

Assumptions about the primacy of party politics and political ideologies in understanding and interpreting revolutionary Russia have been widely challenged in recent scholarship. The mutability and uncertainty of party political labels has been emphasised. Away from the elites, politics was often conducted around cross-party labels. Ideology used to be ascendant when it came to explaining the revolution, but more recent scholarship has often been guarded about the place of ideology in revolution. Alex Rabinowitch's most recent book on Petrograd in 1918 ducks ideology altogether in its analysis, preferring to emphasise circumstance and contingency.⁷

What then, can all this tell our students about the October revolution? None of the significant developments of the last 30 years deliver any silver bullets – we cannot make any categorical explanations for the success of Lenin's Bolsheviks in securing and consolidating power. The answers to these questions remain embedded in a complex mesh of interacting factors. What we have done emphatically, though, is empower ordinary Russians as actors in their own narratives. Rather than the political elites manipulating the masses, or the working class 'shaping the revolution', we have a messy and discombobulating amalgam of individual, local, regional and national interests interacting to shape and decide Russia's revolutionary year.

Designing enquiries to help students to think about interpretations of the Russian revolutions of 1917

The story of Russia in 1917 might form an enquiry in its own right, it might form a backdrop to a study of twentieth-century ideological developments, or it might form part of the story of the First World War. It might be part of an examined unit – either the end of Russia, or the beginning of the USSR. You might focus on the issue Dr Badcock identifies in her conclusion by asking *Why does it matter that ordinary Russians should be empowered as actors in their own narratives?* You might 'zoom out' by asking (*Why does it matter that interpretations of revolutions emphasise the actions of ordinary people? (or the regional variations in the revolution, or the importance of political actors)*), perhaps linking your enquiry to prior study of the French Revolution, for example.

You might also ask a question about historical process: *What determines whether historians treat an event as a national*

event, or as event of its time? In other words, is 'Russia 1917' best seen as part of the history of Russia, or of the history of 1917, and what determines how historians choose to approach it? Again, this approach is transferable to other revolutions – 1776, 1789, or any number of revolutions of 1848.

You might choose to look at the issue of archives opening up: *How far have interpretations of 1917 depended on the primary sources available?* Finally you might choose to look at this event as a way into the history of the Soviet Union by examining Soviet (and then Russian) historians' reactions to it: *How far did contemporary politics determine the interpretations of 1917 produced by Russian and Soviet historians?*

The Editors

Further reading

Two recent collections of primary sources of 1917 both prioritise lower class voices: Hickey, M. (2010) *Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution (Fighting Words)*, Westport: Greenwood and Steinberg, M. (2001) *Voices of Revolution. 1917* New Haven: Yale University Press.

A recent work on the complexity of rural dwellers in 1917 is Badcock, S. (2007) *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: A provincial history*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Holquist, P. (2002), *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's continuum of crisis, 1914-1921*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- ² See for example this recent special issue: Lyandres, S. (ed.) (2016) *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography. Russia's Failed Democratic Revolution, February-October 1917: A centennial reappraisal*, Leiden.
- ³ Smith, S. (1983) *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the factories 1917-18*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Koenker, D. (1981) *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Koenker, D. and Rosenberg, W. (1989) *Strikes and Revolution in Russia 1917*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Wildman, A. (1987) *The end of the Russian Imperial Army: the road to Soviet power and peace*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- ⁴ Badcock, S. (2004) 'Women, protest, and revolution: soldiers' wives in Russia during 1917' in *International Review of Social History* 49 (01): pp. 47-70.
- ⁵ Badcock, S., Retish, A. and Novikova, L. (eds) (2015) *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914-22: Russia's revolution in regional perspective*, Bloomington: Slavica.
- ⁶ Retish, A. (2008) *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: citizenship, identity, and the Ccreation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁷ Rabinowitch, A. (2007) *The Bolsheviks in power: the first year of Soviet rule in Petrograd*, Bloomington: Slavica.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Dr Sarah Badcock, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.

