



The Russian Revolution 100 years on: a view from below

Sarah Badcock sheds light on how ordinary Russians responded to the revolutions of 1917 that sought to change their lot and bring them freedom.

Introduction

Russia experienced two great political revolutions during 1917. The first was in February 1917, when the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty was toppled by an unlikely alliance between lower-class residents and soldiers in Petrograd and the country's political and military elites. The second revolution was in October 1917, when the Bolshevik party, led by Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, seized political power in the capital. One hundred years on, is there anything more to know about Russia's revolutions?

This article argues that we can gain insight into some of the revolution's 'big questions' by considering the ways in which ordinary people experienced it. The rich historiography of the revolution has tended to focus upon urban and political elites, labour history and events in Petrograd and to a lesser extent Moscow. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened previously inaccessible archives and shifted the ideological battlegrounds ranged over by scholars of the Russian revolution. Some of the new archival research shifted its focus away from the capitals and political elites, and sought to draw together social and political approaches to the revolution. By investigating revolutionary events outside the capitals, we can interrogate the lived experiences of revolution for Russia's ordinary people, most of whom were rural, not urban dwellers. Focus on regional histories also allows us to see that all parts of the Russian Empire's vast and complex web were connected and related to one another. The stories of 1917 are as much about the dissolution of a great empire as they are about political transformation within one state.



Ordinary people made the revolution their own, and dictated the shape of the revolution to the political elites. The failure of democratic politics in Russia did not lie solely with the political choices made by the tsar Nicholas II, the Provisional Government's leading figure Alexander Kerensky, or with the leader of the Bolsheviks, Vladimir Il'ich Lenin. Instead, ordinary people, outside the capitals and in the countryside, played an important role in defining and determining the shape of Russia's revolutionary year.

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.¹ 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 into the historical narrative. Soldiers' wives (*soldatki*) are a good example of a group that encompass a wide range of different occupational and social groups, but who are united in their grievances, and who are marginalised in formal power structures.²

It is possible to present an overview of three defining challenges of 1917, which were famously identified by one of the Bolsheviks' best known slogans; bread, land and peace. I will argue that the options available to Russia's political elites in 1917 on these big issues were defined by the decisions and actions taken by ordinary lower-class Russians. By exploring the agency of ordinary people in 1917, we are able to reconsider the ways in which elites responded to these challenges.

Bread

One of the most profound challenges for the Provisional Government and for the subsequent Soviet administration

was supplying the country with grain. The overall crop yield for 1916 was not much down on former years, but problems arose because the yield increased in Siberia and the north, but decreased markedly in European Russia. Russia's transport system was unable to cope with the demands of 1917, which meant that the good crops in the north were not accessible to the major conurbations of Petersburg and Moscow. A major factor in the February revolution was grain shortages afflicting the urban areas. In 1917, Petrograd received only 44.1% of the grain it had received in 1913 by rail. These shortfalls became even more marked as 1917 progressed. The challenge was not restricted to the capital, but was manifested all over Russia. Some parts of the Empire, like Archangelsk in the north, and Nizhegorod province in the centre, always had to import grain to meet the food needs of its residents. Other regions, like Tambov and Kazan, had a grain surplus that they were able to sell.

The Provisional Government responded to the food crisis in two key ways, by intervening in the market, and by organising democratically-elected local committees to administer these interventions. A grain monopoly was established in an attempt



A family of Ukrainian peasants, June 1917.



to prevent grain merchants from driving prices up, and to assure the supply of grain to the cities and the army. All grain produced was to be at the disposal of the State. A fixed price was set for grain, and producers were obliged to surrender all grain that was not for their own needs. To ensure the effective local organisation of the monopoly, food supply committees were established. These had wide-ranging duties, from ensuring the appropriate use of land, and protecting the land from damage and destruction, to ensuring that the peasants were adhering to Provisional Government policy and surrendering all their grain. The food supply committees were difficult for the Provisional Government to monitor, let alone control. They were elected by local people, and accountable to them. If central policy was seen to be at odds with local needs, the committees responded to their constituents. If they did not, local communities ignored, assaulted or deselected them. The newspaper *Russkaia Vedomosti* published a lengthy and panic-stricken report about the food crisis on 24 August 1917:

The officials and food supply delegates report from everywhere about their helplessness to do anything. The population refuses to listen to them, throws them out, beats them unmercifully, and hides the grain.³

Reports came in from all over those regions that had food deficits of attacks on provisions administration. Ordinary people were frustrated by the apparent failings of the committees that they elected, and the councillors were often

accused of corruption. These attacks were characterised by collective action, as local people gathered, often on market day, and made various demands, usually focusing upon the immediate distribution of foodstuffs and the resignation of the administration, alongside threats of violence against administrators. In Gorbatov town, in Nizhegorod province, demonstrators gathered from all over the region to protest against the provisions administration for four consecutive days. The local newspaper *Narod* reported the kerfuffle:

The demands of the crowd were 'Give us grain. You will make us starve.' The crowd would not accept explanations from members of the administration. A voice was heard from the crowd, cursing foully, and threatening administration members with murder. At that moment several administration members ran away. The crowd, with the intention of lynching him, seized the president of the administration, but the commissar and armed soldiers persuaded the crowd to leave him untouched. He was then arrested by the militia, together with another administration member Sokolov, who had his beard pulled by the crowd on the way to the guardhouse, and the key of the provisions warehouse was taken.⁴

The government and the Petrograd Soviet tried to coax the rural population into meeting national expectations through appeals calling on them to protect freedom and the new Russia, and they blamed the crisis on the former administration. It became increasingly difficult to blame the former regime for the crisis as the year wore on, and the provisions crisis actually worsened. Both the Soviet and the Provisional Government imagined the rural population to be simple, untutored people who only needed to be told 'the truth' for them to conform to state expectations. Such naivety left the national government horribly exposed. Russia's ordinary people were not simple children, to be instructed on their futures, and the grain crisis was not the fault solely of a handful of speculators. The depth of the crisis was not easily resolved, and both Soviet and Provisional Government had their credibility gravely undermined by their inability to tackle this problem. In an attempt to stimulate the release of grain, the Provisional Government doubled the fixed price of grain in August. This failed to have a significant impact. The stark alternative to appeals was to forcibly seize grain reserves from producers. The Provisional Government threatened such measures but lacked both the will and the military force to implement forcible grain seizure. Lenin quickly resorted to these measures once in power, and much of the civil war was a conflict between competing ruling powers and local populations over who controlled food resources.

Land

'Water is yours, light is yours, the land is yours, the wood is yours.' (Declaration by Kronstadt sailor-agitator, Khalapsin, at Moshtaushsk village meeting, Kazan province, 14 June 1917.)⁵

The vast majority of Russia's population in 1917 made their living in agriculture as small farmers. For many rural dwellers, the 1917 revolution offered the opportunity to resolve perceived injustices in local land use and ownership. All over Russia, the norms of private ownership were transgressed, as the rural population took local power into their own hands. They grazed their cattle in privately-owned fields, took their carts and axes to the forests to harvest timber for building and fuel, seized arable land and in some places forcibly removed gentry landowners. Every locality across the great expanse of the Empire experienced its rural revolution differently. A



The First Regional Caucasian Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies, 31 May 1917.

broad range of locally-defined features determined land relations, including the types of agriculture that were practised there and personal antagonisms between local landowners and rural communities.

Both the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet appealed repeatedly to peasants to wait calmly for elections to be held for Russia's first fully democratic body, the Constituent Assembly, before the land question could be resolved. Ordinary rural people largely ignored these appeals. The norms of private ownership were repeatedly transgressed in the countryside during 1917, as peasants seized land and wood. The rural population was not a random and arbitrary violent force in 1917. Where local communities infringed on private owners, they often sought to couch their actions in the new revolutionary language and appealed to revolutionary justice. The rural revolution is not easily categorised – forms of action depended on local factors, including the historic relationship between landowner and peasants and the forms of agriculture in the region. In some regions, like Viatka, there was neither significant land hunger nor high levels of non-peasant land ownership, so there the land question was less prominent in national discourse. Much of the rural revolution concerned disputes among peasants. Wealthier individuals who had separated from communal landholding were reintegrated, sometimes forcibly, into communal structures. Neighbouring villages disputed the fair use of common and noble land. Violence was often threatened but less often deployed – rural people sought to validate their

actions with the support of the new revolutionary norms, and avoided actions that brought them into open conflict with authority. Then peasants of Seitova village in Kazan region for example, were involved in an incident of illicit woodcutting. When the regional authorities challenged them, they issued a detailed apology:

We the undersigned citizens of Seitova village acknowledge that we are guilty in the unauthorised theft of wood which formerly belonged to citizen Pauluchchi, and which is now NATIONAL property. And in order to wash this stain from ourselves, [which was made] THROUGH IGNORANCE, and which we cannot with honour leave on ourselves – we ask the provincial commissar to take from us this fine gathered voluntarily from those guilty of wood theft, and use the money for the needs of a school. We have gathered the fine at 50 kopeks for every one of us guilty of stealing wood. Altogether 280 roubles have been gathered. (SIGNED)

The peasants of Seitovo recognised that the new freedoms of 1917 were balanced against requirements to uphold the law and maintain the state. This example of peasants withdrawing from their initial cause is unusual. The pseudo-legal justifications used by peasants to support their claims showed that they engaged with the language of revolution, and used this language to support their own interpretations of the new order.

Regional administrators recognised that regulation rather than

unenforceable prohibition was the best way to deal with peasant actions, and they were forced by practical exigencies to negotiate a course between demands from peasants and demands from central government. In Kazan, the peasant Soviet decreed that all privately-held land in the region was transferred to the land committees in May 1917. Peasants all over the region used this decree to vindicate their seizure of land. Local government in Nizhegorod province waited until October 1917 to overrule national policy guidance and transgress norms of private ownership. The Nizhegorod provincial commissar, Sumgin, declared to the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 23 October 1917 that he had to take extraordinary measures:

The anarchy which exists in most of the province is manifested absolutely everywhere in the seizure of grain, cutting of wood continues along with arson of property. I am taking these measures, on the one hand actually transferring all land and woods to the keeping of the land committees to show the population the undoubted victories of the revolution, and on the other hand, using ranks of soldiers to cut short counter-revolutionary calls to burn and rob.

Local government had their options dictated to them by the actions of their constituents, as did the national government. After their seizure of power in October 1917, the Bolshevik government issued a land decree that authorised the transfer of all privately-held land into the hands of local land committees for the use of working



Striking Putilov workers on the first day of the February Revolution, St Petersburg, Russia, 1917
Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

people. This decree merely legitimised a process that had already gone on in the course of 1917, and shows how local actions could define national policy alternatives.

Peace?

Russia's involvement in the First World War was a crippling burden for the state. We need to exercise caution when discussing popular attitudes towards the war. Attitudes towards participation in the conflict varied over the year, and varied according to individual circumstance. What is apparent, however, is that over the course of the year the army became less and less effective as a fighting force, and that this incapacity was rooted in the unwillingness of many soldiers to obey orders. The creeping insubordination evident in 1916 gave way to open resistance and the democratisation of the army. Some regiments remained loyal to their commanders and maintained discipline, but they were in a minority. The Provisional Government's leading figure, Alexander Kerensky, believed that the Tsarist army would be transformed by the revolution into a great, free, Russian revolutionary army, with every man giving his all in the defence of Russia's newly-won liberty. Kerensky's optimism was misplaced. The revolution did indeed offer soldiers new freedoms, but these new freedoms eroded formal military discipline.

Many soldiers took advantage of the disorder initiated by the revolution, and voted with their feet by deserting. On average, of drafted reinforcements trained at the rear in April and the first

half of May, between 137 and 215 out of 250 deserted.⁶ The rate of desertion was much lower at the front than at the rear, but even there, based on General Lukomskii's estimate of five to seven men per day per division deserting, if extended to the whole army for March 1917 this would amount to 100–150,000 men out of a front army of 7,500,000.⁷

Alexander Kerensky spearheaded the so-called June offensive, which was used as an attempt to revitalise the army by engaging the enemy and ending the inactivity on the fronts. The offensive had also been promised to the allies, and was initially part of a plan for a joint offensive with the French. The big question was whether the disparate Russian troops would be capable of reforming and going on the attack. Kerensky himself is widely attributed with having made the offensive possible at all. He toured the front tirelessly, giving impassioned speeches to the troops, and often receiving rapturous responses from the listening crowds. The newly-revolutionary members of the army were being asked to sacrifice their lives not from a collective order, but as individuals choosing death of their own volition. Shklovsky described his own attempts to propagandise in favour of the June offensive among front-line troops:

One soldier said to me 'I don't want to die.' With desperate energy, I spoke to him about the right of the revolution to our lives. I didn't despise words then, as I do now. Comrade Anardovich told me that my impassioned speech had made

his hair stand on end. The audience was deciding the question of its own death, an immediate death, and the necessity of ordering men to renounce themselves. The silence of this sad crowd of thousands and the vague uneasiness caused by the proximity of the enemy stretched nerves to breaking point.⁸

The offensive began on 12 June, and after initial success was hailed as a great victory. This was premature, however, as reserves refused to relieve the men in new forward positions, and the endless meetings endemic on the front were renewed at every officer's order. Richard Boleslavskii, officer in a Polish cavalry regiment that fought with the Russians, recalled his experience of the June offensive, as those soldiers who obeyed orders and attacked were threatened from behind by their own comrades:

Along the front of the trench stood a line of shock troops, in perfect order, calmly firing their rifles. In the entrance to the dugouts back of them lounged soldiers of the Izmailovsky Guards. They were taking no part in the shooting. Right in front of me was a Sergeant with a grey beard on a young face. He had a whistle in his mouth. The end of his ear was shot off. From time to time he wiped the blood off his ear with a dirty handkerchief held in his left hand. In his right hand he was holding a big German ten-shell Mauser. The Mauser was pointed not towards the enemy but down his own trench. In front of him was a machine gun

propped up on two empty shell boxes and also pointed along the trench. I asked him what the trouble was. Almost hysterical, he exploded: 'These cowards! The sons of bitches! They won't move! They threaten they won't allow the shock troops over the top. I'm standing here and I've got to guard the backs of my men while they're fighting. Otherwise these dogs would shoot them in the back.'⁹

The June offensive was a turning point in the fortunes of the army. Soldiers were alienated from the committees that they had elected, who had supported the offensive and the Provisional Government initiatives. This contributed to the disenfranchisement of the soldiers, whose interests were no longer represented by the bodies that they had elected to represent them.

Lenin came to power in October 1917 partly on the promise of immediate peace. But as with bread and land, these promises were not determined and delivered as a result of ideology or strategy. Ordinary soldiers defined Lenin's attitudes to the peace talks with Germany and possible continuation of the war. Lenin commissioned reports from a welter of military representatives to establish the state of the army. These reports, which were delivered on 17 December 1917, delivered an emphatic response – the Russian army was absolutely unable to continue fighting, because most soldiers were unwilling to fight. Lenin's only alternative was to drag out peace negotiations for as long as possible, and in the final reckoning, to secure peace at any price.¹⁰ The Brest-Litovsk treaty with the Central Powers shows us what peace at any price looked like – Russia lost almost half of her European territories, much of her industrial capacity, and committed to paying massive reparations.

Conclusions

This article has sought to take a fresh look at the driving forces shaping the 1917 Russian revolution, and to 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. In practice, political freedom frayed the threads that connected the centre to the periphery in the Russian Empire, and by the end of 1917, these threads broke altogether in some places.

Further reading

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- ² Sarah Badcock, 'Women, protest, and revolution: soldiers' wives in Russia during 1917' in *International Review of Social History* (2004).

- ³ *Russkaia Vedomosti*, no. 193, 24 August 1917, p. 1, in *The Russian Provisional Government 1917: Documents*, vol. I, ed. Robert Browder and Alexander Kerensky (Stanford University Press, 1961), doc. 552, pp. 639-40.
- ⁴ *Narod*, no. 61, 3 September 1917, p. 4.
- ⁵ Cited in Sarah Badcock, *Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: a provincial history* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 181.
- ⁶ L. E. Heenan, *Russian democracy's Fatal Blunder: the Summer offensive of 1917* (New York, 1987), p. 72.
- ⁷ Wildman (1980), *op.cit.*, p. 235.
- ⁸ Victor Shklovsky, *Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* (Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 35.
- ⁹ Richard Boleslavskii, *Way of the Lancer* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1932), p. 202.
- ¹⁰ Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in power: the first year of Soviet rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington, Ind, 2007), p. 136.

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Peasants enjoying a general holiday, dancing and celebrating on the anniversary of the Revolution in Russia, 1918.
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