# REVIEW ESSAY: The Russian Revolution at 100: Four Voices

***Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914–1921***. By Laura Engelstein. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. xxiii, 807 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Maps. $34.95, paper.

***The Russian Revolution: A New History***. By Sean McMeekin. New York: Basic Books, 2017. xvii, 419 pp. Notes. Bibliography. $32.00, paper.

***Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928***. By S. A. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi, 435 pp. Notes. Photographs. Maps. $34.95, paper.

***The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921***. By Mark D. Steinberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. x, 388 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. $30.00, paper.

The Russian Revolution, which shaped the twentieth and even the early twenty-first centuries, holds our imagination but defies easy definition. It has been seen as the source of major movements of the 20th century from fascism to de-colonialization, as well as the origin of the Soviet experience in creating socialism, as well as many other socialist states globally. It gave rise to one of the two major forces in the Cold War. It has been a model of liberation as well as extreme violence. Given the post-Soviet decline of global socialism, interest in the Revolution faded in official Russia, as well as in the public imagination there and elsewhere, and certainly among academics.

Comparison of this centennial year to other recent anniversaries of 1917 only confirms this fact. After virtually ignoring the subject for decades, events are organized, panels and publications proliferate, we watch to see how the centennial is "celebrated" in Russia and by whom, we come to terms with the Revolution's afterlife in the history of global communism. Is this nostalgia or respect for new scholarship? Looking broadly and trying to sum up, we ask, what is there new to say, and how do we say it during the centennial year 2017? Four authors with different visions and degrees of expertise on the subject have bravely taken on this difficult and possibly unrewarding task.[1] Difficult because the subject is extremely complex and resists easy conclusions. Unrewarding because it would be all too easy to repeat or repackage older narratives and frameworks, even when deploying new research. There are many standard histories going back to William Henry Chamberlin and moving on through George Katkov, Richard Pipes, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Christopher Read, Orlando Figes, James D. White, and Rex Wade, to name several of the most prominent: some focus on 1917, others take longer views, and all are valuable but for different reasons. The first question to ask of these new books is do they add value? The answer is only a tentative yes.

1. Three of the books are published by Oxford University Press, as far as I can tell commissioned by either different branches of the press or in the case of Steinberg, for a unique series.

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A stronger yes would require serious attention to new historiography, primarily on 1917, but also on the larger questions of origins and the impact of the Revolution on subsequent Soviet and post-Soviet history, on Stalin and his successors, and on the rest of the world. We should look especially at how the authors consider 1917 itself; the violence, ideology, the role of Lenin, the narratives of both February and October, the role of the irrational, emotions, as well as what turns people into revolutionaries—conspiracy, rumors, the crowd/street, networks, communications, relations of the center to the provinces, and the center to the borderlands. Also important is the question of power and its relationship to the Provisional Government and the Soviets, to other institutions, corporate bodies, social forces, and ideologies. Much on these themes is now available, but is it reflected in these books? If not, why bother to write?

If we want to break out of and go beyond the Bolshevik, or indeed, party narratives of 1917, we must examine other possibilities—for example, the "endgame" of the Revolution. We've got to look at the actual words, deeds, and institutions of August–October 1917 to find the story hidden by one hundred years of Bolshevik-colored history. We need a new concept of Civil War that connects to theories of Revolution. And there should be full integration of culture, high and popular, the refashioning of language, symbols, and the human soul (these books, with the exception of Mark Steinberg's, come up surprisingly short on these themes).

When was the Revolution? There are different ways of looking at this. Do we focus on 1917 itself and the process bookended by the February and October Revolutions? Or do we take a longer view that buries the Revolution within a "continuum of crisis," 1914–1921 or 1922?[2] Or perhaps even a longer period of Civil Wars, 1916–26. Laura Engelstein adopts the 1914–21 time period, but astutely keeps the phases distinct, War, Revolution and Civil War, though this choice weakens the connection to social and economic processes surrounding the 1905 Revolution and its aftermath. Steve Smith takes a longer-term view that goes back to 1890 and forward to 1928. For Marc Steinberg, 1905–21 are the dates.[3] For me 1917 is the key, the moment when Revolution itself becomes an historical actor, the focal point of all discourses of the NEW and old, Revolution and Counter- Revolution, the source of what is developed later in tandem with outcomes and Civil Wars.

Smith's book, intelligent and clearly written, asks large questions. How did it happen? What was it and why study it now on its 100$^{th}$ anniversary? For Smith, the legacy was largely negative, but the final outcome is still open: an end to injustice, hierarchy, and inequality are still possible—just as the end of absolutism and aristocracy, goals of the English and French Revolutions, eventually came about despite lengthy and sometimes violent detours.

Smith uses some new material, in English mainly, but in the end the metanarrative is familiar. He avoids culture until the very end: a final chapter dealing largely with the 1920s but looking occasionally back in time, except for a minor bit on consumerism. Smith is thin on Duma

2. Peter Holquist's phrase now adopted by Russia's Great War and Revolution project.

3. Sheila Fitzpatrick in her recently reissued volume minimizes 1917 and takes the story to 1939.

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politics either before or during the Petr Stolypin years and is optimistic on Russia's prospects on the eve of World War I. He is skeptical about Leopold Haimson's classic theses about the dual processes of polarization in Russia on the eve of World War I, especially concerning the advanced degree of worker consciousness. He is good on wartime economics, but weaker on politics such as the Progressive Bloc and the pre-history of the Provisional Government's formation. Following A.B. Astashev and William Rosenberg, he argues that the February Revolution resulted from home front dissatisfaction more than military collapse. He largely ignores Boris Kolonitskii's contributions on rumor and loss of love for the monarchy.

Fifty pages of this long book cover 1917. February is dealt with swiftly with no attempt to integrate the M.A. Polievktov interviews or the substantial work of Semion Lyandres, or the revisions of Tsuyoshi Hasegawa. Smith recognizes the vital role of the lower middle strata and professionals, that is, the large "hidden" social force active alongside workers and peasants, but does little with the Revolution in the provinces or borderlands. The analysis favors class discourse over a detailed narrative of October. He zeroes in on the Civil War and the post-October nationality question, providing clear and reasonable summaries of the historiography. For Smith the Bolsheviks were not traditional imperialists. He emphasizes the logic of violence, but questions Lenin's responsibility, using the relationship of WWI and the Civil War to make violence abstract and remove Lenin from the causal chain.

Smith (and Engelstein) see the post-October Civil War years as something more like Revolution Phase II—supplying the answers to how the Revolution played out. The Revolution remains very much the historical actor in Revolution II. It is time to speculate/theorize about Civil War/s and how it/they relate to Revolution, but of this in Smith there is only a hint (207). He likes to hedge and claims that the one party "dictatorship" was "primarily" due to the Bolsheviks, but that their opponents were responsible in some measure for own fate: the syndrome of talk over action. Smith at least highlights state building, bureaucracy, and the preeminence of Bolshevik statism. Alas, he does not link the early Soviet institutions to either the Old Regime or the Provisional Government. His contention that the intelligentsia was the only social group to have survived intact is contradicted by the fact that so many were arrested and shot (259).

The following chapter on War Communism should end the book, but Smith goes on to offer one hundred pages on NEP, an extension that detracts from both Revolution phases I and II. Following Robert Service, he sees War Communism as first of all an attempt to meet the needs of war. Ideology is secondary, in addition to structural factors. There is very little on religion and familiar topics, such as the Trade Union Controversy. He misses the literature on Stalin (Andrea Graziozi) and peasant war, mentioning only the Greens and western Siberia, in fact he underplays the connection of War Communism to Stalin generally. As for violence, he is less than judgmental, arguing that the Bolsheviks were motivated by fear and real threats of counterrevolution (259–60), even in regard to Kronshtadt. He argues lucidly that the Civil War transformed the Revolution and shaped Bolshevik Culture.

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Smith writes an eloquent conclusion that sums up his view of the Revolution. He combines the long term structural and cultural factors with the contingent and ideological. So it is history (largely economics), and culture, together with World War I, that must be weighed against ideology and personality. Lenin gave rise to Stalin, but not in direct or absolute form. Stalin was much worse. I very much applaud his support of alternatives in 1917, his refusal to accept the Bolshevik narrative as final. That narrative must be picked apart and the alternatives taken seriously. That goes for the Provisional Government and Constituent Assembly as well as the programs and aspirations of the other socialists, populists, and liberals. Violence was key, but not in the way we have studied it before—that is, with an emphasis on ideology as cause—it occurred for a variety of reasons in many contexts and was surely to be found deeply rooted in the Old Regime. Smith makes a key point that the Bolsheviks opted for Civil War as politics, and here again he missed the chance to link theories of Revolution and Civil War. He is good throughout on the modernization school, but in the end takes up neo-traditionalism, which he ascribes mainly to Richard Pipes and not to the more recent work of Sheila Fitzpatrick or Arch Getty. So there is a tendency to soften his critique, to hold out as he does finally for the hope and idealism of the Revolution as valid and a source of meaning today.

Sean McMeekin's book reflects his interests in foreign policy and military affairs; there is almost nothing original here about the revolution, despite his claims. In his gloss over the year 1917, in which he sees military issues to be key ("The salient fact about 1917 is that Russia was at war"), he barely considers them. He stridently uses the Russian Revolution as an example to ward off and warn against the reemergence among millennials and possibly young historians, too, of "socialism," a threat exemplified in his own words by the popularity of Bernie Sanders and Thomas Piketty.

Despite such words as "breathtaking" (to describe Lenin's accomplishments), and "exhilarating" (to describe the new archival openings of the past twenty five years), his use of archives is restricted to a few files pertaining to conditions in the military and foreign trade during the early years of Bolshevik rule. Most of the book—its analytic framework and narrative—derive from older secondary accounts and document collections (Pipes, Katkov, Frank Golder, Figes). Pipes seems to be a model, but the comparison is certainly unflattering to Pipes.

Russian belligerence dominates his discussion of the diplomacy from 1907 to 1914. He believes Russian liberals to be responsible for the war and ultimately the Revolution, though Nicholas is assigned some blame for not listening to Rasputin and other "trusted" conservative advisers (Petr Durnovo). The liberals are imperialists and their role in this book is similar to his earlier works that assign primary blame for the outbreak of WWI to Russia and its long standing passion for Ottoman territory, as if there were no right-wing, pan-Slavic, religious publicists clamoring for Constantinople, Galicia, and other parts of historic Rus′. He misreads Stolypin's place in autocratic politics (his assassination as a real turning point, for example), and insofar as Stolypin and his brother in law Sergei Sazonov (who later joined the "war party") are presented as seeking diplomatic accommodation, McMeekin undercuts his

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own arguments about Russian responsibility. He does not engage the new literature on the causes of WWI (Christopher Clark, Margaret MacMillan, and Dominic Lieven), and labels Aleksandr Kerenskii an S-R throughout, a major misleading simplification. "Leninist agitation" in the armies is the driving force behind post-February events, though not February itself, and the same for October. Economic factors are dismissed. Bread shortages are "mythical," social causes ignored, army morale always high even in 1917, until Lenin did his work.

On the cusp of Revolution, McMeekin states remarkably that: "Decently fed and sexed, the life of the typical Russian frontline muzhik was far from ascetic" (74).[4] He defends Boris Shtiurmer and calls the opposition in 1916 a "political mob." Russia's problems were real on the eve of February, but they were made to seem worse than they actually were by ambitious politicians who claimed to have easy solutions for them (this after citing Okhrana autumn 1916 reports on imminent revolution). Even Pavel Miliukov, as did the others, speaks only to "increase their own power and influence" (79). There was no food supply issue in Petrograd in January and February, and although he notes February plots (making some use of the Polievktov interviews), he maintains that army morale was glorious; there was no strike momentum; Nicholas was a stable ruler who was ill served; there was no real reason for the Revolution at all.

McMeekin has no explanation therefore for the violence unleashed (except the release of criminals). The crucial history of the Duma Committee and two military commissions is garbled; the dynamic of Georgii L′vov, Mikhail Rodzianko, and Miliukov is missing and he ignores Andrei Nikolaev, revised Hasegawa, or Lyandres. His discussion of the July Days and the subsequent crisis of power and even of October itself (Lenin had a plan) is unreliable, based on weak research (nothing on the Aleksandrov Commission, for example). For McMeekin, it is all about the military and the spread of Bolshevik influence there. He writes a history of the Revolution without politics, society, or ideology. His account of the Civil War is ordinary with not much on social policy or state building (the discussion about Rabkrin, Commissariat for Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, is off-center), though he provides some new details on trade issues and arms procurements (Gokhran and Krasin's credit line), and the gathering of gold and other valuables to finance the Red Army, the Soviet state, and the Comintern. On the peasant war, he relies on Nicolas Werth and Pipes, but misses Graziosi, and Erik Landis. For the Famine in 1921 there is Harold H. Fisher, but not Bertrand Patenaude, and religion and the Orthodox Church are derived from John Shelton Curtis and not the many new works on these topics.

Rapallo provides the grand conclusion in which the Soviets fool Germany and secure their future, most immediately with NEP as a restoration of capitalism. Here a few good points somehow manage to emerge, that contingency was important, that Lenin understood power better than Kerenskii or other

4. Here he cites Astashev, 622–26, apparently citing a Special Conference called by Stavka to deal with women, pornography, etc.: A.B. Astashev, *Russkii front v 1914–nachale 1917 goda: Voennyi opyt i sovremennost′* (Moscow, 2014).

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rivals, that he was a brilliant propagandist, and that the Revolution globally was a polarizing event. Lenin's genius was seeing that one could turn Imperialist War into Civil War, and that vast mobilized armies could be turned to a domestic socialist agenda. He then reverts to polemics, arguing that Lenin probably would have agreed with the course of History—Stalin-Mao-Cambodia and so forth, and that the lesson of one hundred years is to resist armed prophets. Knowledge is resistance and today, unlike 1917, we have no excuse for socialism on the rise again.

Mark Steinberg aims to bring a "fresh" and "distinctive attitude" (the series publisher's mandate), offering general frameworks and then burrowing deeper into the people's world of the "street" (and later, the village). Journalists and the popular press are his alternative sources, as is an expanded use of documents from his Voices of Revolution collection. He also uses case studies of individuals to illuminate key moments or aspects of the Revolution: Lev Trotskii, Vladimir Maiakovskii, and Aleksandra Kollontai, for example, are placed together in a chapter titled "Utopians." Maksim Gor′kii appears recycled as the conscience of the Revolution. The book opens with some brilliant quotations from Andre Belyi that describe the essence of Revolution. The jadid, Mahmud Behbudi, Volodymyr Vynnychenko and Isaak Babel′ are grouped in the nationality/borderlands "Overcoming Empire" chapter." They stand in for ethnic participation and response to the Revolution.

The focus is on tropes or themes such as "freedom," and Steinberg aims at unfiltered (by professional historians at least) "lived historical experience." I would add, the need exists for a serious study of the "urban commoner," elsewhere the *obyvatel′* or "ordinary Russian," a featured component of 1917 discourse and the target audience of the popular press.

His first section is chronological, titled "Histories," with three chapters that divide the Revolution into 1905–17, 1917, and 1917–21 periods. There is an entire chapter on Women and Revolution in the Village, which makes clear the problems with our historiography of the Revolution and especially of 1917 (the same problems visible in Russia's Great War and Revolution project), namely the absence of sustained, deep work on certain topics that we desperately want to see highlighted. Unfortunately, we know little about either peasants or women in the Revolution, especially in 1917. Steinberg tries hard to overcome this, but the result is minimal. He too retains hope for the ideals of 1917.

Steinberg's book is a good read. The cast of characters draws the reader into the Revolutionary experience, and he opens the door to a truly understudied dimension of the Revolution and its sources—the unshaped masses and the popular press. His book relates well to the key question of how people become revolutionaries.

Laura Engelstein's magnificent volume provides a fresh and comprehensive, though weighted toward the political, vision of the Russian Revolution. Positives abound in this long book, most important is her powerful and metaphorical language. She is able to turn a phrase that captures the meaning of salient historical trends. For example, in summing up 1917, she sees both purposeful and senseless violence and new principles of order. She graphically describes the violence of February and states that the logic of 1917 left a legacy of collective militancy. This is matched every step of the way by a depth of

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detail that the subject deserves and by thoughtful reading in the most recent historiography. Violence and power are the key themes of the Revolution, with violence permeating throughout, including the February phase. This choice de-emphasizes to some degree social and economic factors in the revolutionary process. There is little on strikes or the more recent social history of the Revolution including the role of the lower middle strata. She has no patience for historians who blame Bolshevik violence on the Civil War and highlights the early incorporation of terror into the state, as well as the importance of symbols and language (232–33). She boldly takes on the entire notion of 1917 as a workers' revolution, claiming that workers were minor participants in October. She has the imagination and literary skill that the subject deserves.

Engelstein is able to riff off the work of other scholars, such as Boris Kolonitskii, to arrive at her own remarkable formulations. For example, on Kerenskii, she writes

> It was Alexander Kerensky who in the early days supplied both symbolism and charisma. A man of unity and compromise bridging the divide between the two uneasily allied institutions, he managed at the same time to represent the non-party face of socialism as a generic ideal while his oratory impressed the angry distrustful crowds. His volatile personality and theatrical bent suited the moment of constantly changing stage sets and continuously revised scripts, of fluid boundaries and shifting combinations, but he was vulnerable to the fluctuating mood of his fans, no less temperamental than he was. He was the matinee idol of the February Revolution. Offended by his vulgarity and disturbed by his success, liberals took their distance. Thus, Vladimir Nabokov later declared: "The idealization of Kerensky was a sign of some psychosis in Russian public opinion. This may be too mildly stated." He had neither the merits nor the intellectual or moral qualities that would justify such hysterical and ecstatic attitudes (134).

At the time however, Kerenskii was recognized by a range of figures as the epitome of the Revolution, the central personality, the oracle and emblem of the combined forces of change.

The book's sub-title, "War-Revolution-Civil War," makes a key point, focusing on one macro-process but distinct phases, and the Revolution is kept distinct, limited to 1917 rather than one long Revolutionary process. The fate of Jews is throughout a touchstone for ethnic violence, not just against Jews, but as a symptom of a cancer eating away at the Old Regime and the Revolution that followed. On the nationality question and ethnic revolutions in the borderlands, she argues that WWI created healthy and expected nationalisms, heightened consciousness, and brought new phases of identity, but that in the context of the Russian Empire/State this could only be destructive of unity and it worked against the development of a new and progressive Russian patriotic nationalism.

World War I reflects the immediate preconditions for the Revolution and what followed. Engelstein selects three themes instead of a narrative of the war, although the key story line is presented in diamond cut summaries worth as much or more than some longer narratives. These are an ongoing power crisis marked by violence, and an extreme exclusionary practice fueled by ideology, paranoia, fear, and prejudice that merged with and became state

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policy. There is a lyrical description of the July Days (157–58) and of the Soviets: "Both the mobs in the street and the loyal regiments considered the Soviets their own. This sense of possession would serve the Bolsheviks well in due course" (157–58). Another example is how the Bolsheviks simultaneously used and subverted the democratic process leading to October (171), or how Lenin's opponents in the Party (and outside) wanted to avert a Civil War, but he wanted to make one. Here again, a new theory of Civil War is required to build upon Revolution Theory.

The Civil War is decisive because it decided the power question. Perhaps we can say that understanding 1917 and the power question deeply is the first step toward integrating the Civil War into the Revolution. Engelstein contends that the Bolsheviks thrived on Civil War, which was their nourishment (410). She introduces a remarkable tableau of characters, feeling the contingencies and subjectivities that were entwined in the objective circumstances. The tragic stories of the Jews, the Cossacks, and innumerable ethnic groups are brought out against a backdrop of war lords, chieftains, commanders and other purveyors of violence, such Grigori Semenov, Aleksandr Kolchak, Nestor Makhno, Simon Petliura, Filipp Mironov, and Dronov Barin. Tambov, Kronshadt, the peasants, the Jews, the genocide of the Cossacks, ethnic violence—all reveal the new state turning against itself, devouring itself and shaping for the future to devour its own offspring.[5] On ritual outbursts of popular violence (517–18, 522: she does not hold back from descriptions of rape and butchery), what she sees as new is that whole armies were conducting terror with the practice of violence always justified in ideological terms. This violence and coercion came to permeate Soviet institutions. She uses Babel′'s own graphic descriptions of elemental Cossack brutality and repeats his judgement that the Revolution was a Cossack rebellion and not a Marxist Revolution.

Other Engelstein insights include the irony of the White demise in Crimea, the idea that in 1916 the specter of Revolution was haunting minds across the political spectrum, and that the right was obsessed with Revolution. The logic of 1917 provided both purposeful and senseless violence and new principles of order, a legacy of collective militancy. She sees the beginnings of extreme ethnic violence in World War I, the Galicia occupation, and the murder of Rasputin (a Tsar substitute) as the last palace coup. She repeats a point made by others that the extreme violence unleashed against Germans in cities during the war would later turn on the regime and its successors.

Foreign policy is not slighted (at one point Engelstein notes the bewilderment of foreign diplomats who were faced with congenital lying by their Russian/Soviet counterparts, a fact noted later by George Kennan), and nicely compares the Bolshevik publication of secret treaties to wiki leaks.

She is good on the creation of the Red Army, okay on the policies of War Communism and the transition to NEP, after a searing chapter titled "War against the Peasants." She writes: "The retreat came, however, only after millions had starved to death and the methods of state-driven violence and

5. See Yuri Slezkine's forthcoming study of the Bolsheviks as a millenarian movement.

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coercion, consistent with Bolshevik practices and justified in ideological terms, had permeated the character of the new regime and its institutions" (566).

Engelstein weakens her narrative by placing overly detailed summaries of the Revolutions of the borderlands before taking on domestic state and society building and the Civil War in Russia. Better editing might have helped. She digresses back in time on Central Asia to cover the revolt in 1916, and how the Revolution played out there in 1917. This would be an enormous task for anyone given the new material available, and she largely succeeds in maintaining coherence. Other caveats include thin treatment of the February 1917 triadic power struggle, Provisional Government domestic policies and institutions, 1917 in the provinces, the impact of strikes and other forms of social protest and movements, and insufficient integration/use of new publications that might have served as the foundation for a new synthesis of 1917.

The coverage of September and October 1917 cannot break away fully from the Bolshevik narrative of inevitability, and Engelstein relies too much on just a few sources (Alexander Rabinowitch, for example). She misses some things, for example, that the Bolsheviks did boycott the Council of the Republic (they departed from the opening session en masse, foreshadowing the moderate socialist departure from the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets just a few days later), and that the broad powers of the Military Revolutionary Committee ran parallel to the Duma Committee in February. She well understands that the key to power in October was the army (the weak connections to which were perhaps the greatest failing of the democratic alternative to Bolshevism). She is brilliant on Viktor Nogin and Soviet politics and offers a deft comparison of the post-Constituent Assembly Declaration to the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789.

Except for Engelstein, these works show little interest in the mechanisms of Revolution, how February and October actually happened. These authors sometimes refer to the color revolutions and especially to Putin and his fear of revolution and apparent lack of interest in commemorating 1917. But only Engelstein takes an even darker view and aims her message at western democracy, emphasizing its fragility in light of the Russian story.

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