

**“Tovarishch Kerenskii”: Antimonarkhicheskaia revoliutsiia i formirovaniia kul’ ta “vozhdianaroda,” mart–iun’ 1917 goda.** By Boris Kolonitskii. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017. 511 pp. Notes. Index. Plates. Photographs. \$26.00, hard bound.

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With the overthrow of tsarism in February 1917, the politicians of the Provisional Government scrambled to establish their legitimacy. In his outstanding new book, Boris Kolonitskii offers a profound yet colorful analysis of the political culture that emerged out of the February Revolution by focusing on the ways in which a cult was built up around the figure of Aleksandr Kerenskii. As Minister of Justice, he rapidly acquired enormous popularity, coming to be seen as a *vozhd’* (leader) who personified the ideals of a free and democratic Russia. Through exhaustive research in the contemporary press (examining political resolutions, petitions, letters, messages of congratulations, as well as general reportage) in scores of ephemeral brochures, archives, memoirs, poetry, and visual images (portraits, photographs, posters, postcards, caricatures, buttons, and busts), Kolonitskii reveals how words, visual images, gestures and rituals were disseminated by different groups and individuals that all served to promote the charismatic authority of the *vozhd’*. Although the author has more to say about the textual than the visual modes in which the cult was constructed, the book includes some rare and wonderful photographs and cartoons.

One of the many strengths of the book is that it demonstrates just how varied were the images through which Kerenskii was represented, and how rapidly they mutated as political circumstances shifted rapidly and unpredictably: from “people’s tribune” (55–81), to “revolutionary minister” (160–72), to “minister of revolutionary theatricality” (Lenin), (173–95), to revolutionary martyr, to military hero. This polyvalence was a major reason why the cult achieved such immense popularity, capable of appealing to different audiences at different times. Under Tsar Nicholas II, Kerenskii had already built up a reputation as a “tribune of the people” (55–81) on the strength of his brilliance as a defense counsel in some high-profile court cases and his oratory as a deputy in the Fourth Duma. It was only with the February Revolution, however, that he was able to channel his charisma to become the “hero of the revolution” (82–101). As Minister of Justice, he received plaudits for setting the “prisoners of tsarism” (146) free, and he deliberately cultivated a democratic image, indifferent to rank, demonstratively shaking hands with doormen. In contrast to the military style favored by many tsarist ministers, he espoused a plain style, with his neat crewcut and tightly buttoned civilian jacket. Later, as Minister for the Army and Navy, he would affect a semi-military image, dressed in a field jacket, officer’s breeches and knee-high leather boots. The adoption of a Napoleonic posture came only in May (and Lev Trotskii was critical in lampooning this as suggestive of dictatorial predilections). By May,

however, he faced the herculean task of winning the support of rank-and-file soldiers for a new military offensive. Kolonitskii shows that the promotion of his image as a leader at one with a patriotic army was successful for a time, notwithstanding his demand for “iron discipline” (264). The frenetic tours of the front elicited enthusiastic press reports, and it was only with the failure of the offensive that negative representations of the *vozhd'* began to predominate.

Kolonitskii offers a shrewd assessment of Kerenskii's qualities as a politician. Contrary to the image of him as a pompous windbag—retailed, for example, in Sergei Eisenstein's film, *October*—he sees him as able and energetic, tough and calculating, and adept in the darker arts of politics. Notwithstanding these real political skills, his great political resource lay in his popularity. His fans adored him, presenting him with bouquets, begging for his autograph, carrying him aloft on their shoulders. For his part, Kerenskii reciprocated with passionate speeches, heartfelt appeals to the women in his audience to donate their jewelry to the war effort, and the occasional musical offering (in his youth he had aspired to be an opera singer). One reason for his popularity lay in the fact that he stood above political parties, and those who led the soldiers' committees, themselves largely non-party, were among his most fervent admirers. In the spring, his “above party” (174) image served him well, since party affiliation at this stage was often equated with factionalism and squabbling. His contrived theatricality also allowed him to project a different persona to different audiences at different times. Inter alia, Kolonitskii has some perceptive comments to make about party politics in spring 1917 (not least about the Bolsheviks). Kerenskii formally belonged to the Socialist Revolutionary Party, but he poured his energies into being the bridge between the moderate socialists in the Petrograd Soviet and the liberals in the Provisional Government. Despite not enjoying solid support from any party leader, he succeeded in patching together a coalition government in May. Later, his lack of an apparatus for organized influence on the masses (compared with Stalin), together with a shortage of trustworthy colleagues, would fatally weaken his influence.

It is Kolonitskii's argument that the different avatars of the *vozhd'* were not just about form: they constituted the very stuff of politics in a country where the masses were being drawn into democratic politics for the first time. He mounts a sophisticated case to the effect that while Kerenskii was, to some extent, the architect of his own cult (he certainly manipulated the press effectively), it is simplistic to see the cult as being created either from above or from below. It was rather a “consequence of political conflicts at different levels and of different kinds” (495). Unschooled soldiers, peasants, and workers, unable to imagine a state without a tsar, played a part in constructing the cult. Although they were not hardened monarchists, they reasoned that “it would be good if they gave us a republic and an effective tsar” (9). For their part, different sections of educated society also made a vital contribution to the cult. Writers, such as Zinaida Gippius and Andrei Bely, adulated Kerenskii, whether out of political sympathy, ties of friendship, or a quasi-Nietzschean longing to find a superman. Even leading generals, such

as M. V. Alekseev or A. A. Brusilov, got in on the act. A somewhat paradoxical point made by the author is that those most virulently opposed to Kerenskii often unwittingly served his cult: for example, those who roundly attacked the order of May 11 “On the Rights of the Armed Forces,” with its restitution of the death penalty, served to beef up Kerenskii’s reputation as strong military leader. Finally, Kolonitskii shows that the cult was also a “brand” (463–82) that was shaped by the hidden hand of the market. Texts and trinkets relating to the *vozhd’* sold well, connecting the buyer to the symbol of revolution. Despite such commercialization, there was outrage when a theatre specializing in farce in the Eliseevskii trading house in Petrograd staged a play about Kerenskii and plastered his picture on advertising hoardings. This was a step too far: an assault on the sacred aura of the *vozhd’* for the purpose of making filthy lucre.

Relatedly, Kolonitskii argues that older traditions and new revolutionary impulses worked in tandem to energize the cult. In addition to the residual monarchism just mentioned, which provided a discourse in which ordinary people could imagine the relationship of a state to its people, the cult drew on a late-tsarist tradition that associated the *vozhd’* with military leaders. When Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces in 1914, styled himself *verkhovnyi vozhd’* (supreme leader), this was seen in some quarters as encroaching on the authority of the tsar, the *derzhavnyi vozhd’* (state leader). I would have liked the author to tell us more about the cultural resonances of the term *vozhd’* in the pre-revolutionary era, the better to understand how Kerenskii appropriated its aura and then reworked it. Certainly in May, he was awarded an unprecedented number of military medals as a civilian. Parallel to this drawing on official political culture, Kolonitskii shows how the cult drew on Russia’s revolutionary tradition, especially that of the *Narodniks*, with its valorization of heroism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom. Images of Kerenskii as a “fighter for freedom” (102–21) played well with the public, although some ageing revolutionaries, such as E. K. Breshko-Breshkovskaia and Vera Figner, were also hailed in the same register. If others were lauded as “fighters for freedom,” however, none could boast as many brochures celebrating their lives as Kerenskii. In analyzing the interplay of different elements that served to build the cult, Kolonitskii is masterfully subtle.

This is, then, a rich and thought-provoking book that will be required reading for students of 1917. It may seem churlish to ask for more. However, at the very end of the book, the author offers some tantalizing comparisons with the later cults of Lenin and Stalin. Rightly, he doubts that one may equate the cult of Kerenskii with those of Soviet leaders—as he points out, the cult of Stalin was created by a powerful party-state apparatus, backed up by well-resourced propaganda agencies and media. Yet the title of the book hints at something more: namely, that a model of authority developed in spring 1917 would have long-term repercussions for the history of the Soviet Union. I would have loved the author to have developed this theme.

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