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A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924 by Orlando Figes

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Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 49, No. 7 (Nov., 1997), pp. 1321-1323

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/154088>

Accessed: 04/06/2012 12:53

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Reviews

Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996, xx + 923 pp., £25.00

IT MUST BE SAID that by and large studying the Russian revolution is not what you would call an entertaining activity. Most of the materials on it tend to be on the dry side: bland minutes of meetings, sycophantic reminiscences of Lenin, pompous polemics and the like. But now and again, some of the sources will yield up something striking, something funny or even something shocking. Not many of these picturesque passages have found their way into the works of historians. Probably not many were thought to be relevant to the matter in hand.

Orlando Figes's history of the Russian revolution, *A People's Tragedy*, is a remarkable book, because it contrives to work in practically all of the most memorable and picturesque passages from existing literature on the subject, besides including some new ones he has found in the archives. These have been woven into a general history of the revolutionary period. *A People's Tragedy* must count as the most readable and entertaining book on the Russian revolution to date.

How has it been done? What kind of interpretation of the revolution do you need to have in order to include such a wealth of anecdotal material? Well, the answer must be that the Russian revolution was much more shocking and sensational, much more like a series of anecdotes, than people have given it credit for. Or, translated into the language of aims and objectives, the author says: 'My aim has been to convey the chaos of those years, as it must have been felt by ordinary men and women. I have tried to present the revolution not as a march of abstract social forces and ideologies but as a human event of complicated individual tragedies'.

This approach not only justifies an anecdotal treatment of the subject, but also frees the author from any obligation to come up with an interpretation of the revolution in the conventional sense. 'Chaos' and 'individual tragedy' are the interpretation. That there was chaos, horror, mindless cruelty and a great deal of suffering in the Russian revolution and the Civil War is beyond dispute, and to be reminded of the fact is of course salutary. But that knowledge can hardly count as a new and original interpretation of the revolution. It is only a starting point from which an interpretation might be constructed.

So what is new in Figes's treatment of the revolution? On the face of it there ought to be a great deal. The endnotes contain many references to archival sources, and it is clear that an impressive number of archival collections have been used; but, significantly, not to much effect. Most of the archival material falls into the 'individual tragedy' category. It is often Gorky's bleak commentaries on current events or Brusilov's reports on the misfortunes that have befallen him and his family. This is interesting enough, but it does not have much bearing on what one might call the structural elements of the revolution.

One might have expected that with such an amount of archival study the author would say that since it was based on published sources most existing writing on the revolution was severely flawed, and that he was taking the opportunity to point out where previous historians had been misled. That, however, is what Figes does not say. On the contrary, much of *A*

People's Tragedy is taken up with summarising the writings of previous historians, justifying this with an occasional reference to 'seminal works'. Of course, you only know if a work is really 'seminal' if you have gone over the same ground yourself. But if you have done that then you can refer directly to the primary sources. Only once in the course of the entire book is there an indication of how evidence now available undermines the contentions of some historians of the period. In that case, significantly, the new evidence comes not from an archival but a published source.

Despite the repeated references to archival sources, the fact is that in the major part of this book the author is dealing with topics on which he has not carried out original research. That leaves him with conventional interpretations which he has to subject to the 'chaos' and 'individual tragedy' treatment. This process is very obvious in the way the two revolutions of 1917 are handled. The starting point has been the widely accepted conception of a 'spontaneous' February revolution and a 'disciplined' Bolshevik 'seizure of power' in October. The February revolution has been severely pruned to remove the contribution of political activists and leave it 'spontaneous'. But the October revolution was apparently more of a challenge, because how could something 'disciplined' be 'chaotic'?

The author has two answers ready. The first is that many of those who took part in the seizure of power were instigators of drunken riots, and that some of them 'no doubt' had only taken part in the insurrection *because* of the prospect of loot (p. 495). In this way the author makes the overthrow of the Provisional Government dissolve into an amorphous piece of chaos.

But what is the philosophical proposition that underlies the author's case? Is it that to count as non-chaotic an event must demonstrate the absolute identity of intent and result in all parties to that event? It looks like it. But in that case all events throughout human existence must be classed as chaotic. The contrary situation, the complete congruity between human intentions and results, could only exist as a mental construct. But did we not know that already? And was the Provisional Government any less overthrown and state power any less seized because the perpetrators of the action did not will and only will that overthrow and that seizure?

The author's second line of argument is that the October uprising was 'bound to descend into chaos' because, being a violent act, it encouraged such actions from the crowd. Moreover, he states, it was not so much the culmination of a social revolution as 'the degeneration of the urban revolution'. The only proof offered for this sonorous pronouncement is a quotation from Gorky. The urban revolution and its reputed degeneration are not elaborated upon.

But wait a minute! This talk of social revolutions sounds a bit like 'the march of abstract social forces' in terms of which the author reassured his readers that *A People's Tragedy* would not be presented. Now we discover that there actually were social revolutions—several of them in fact—'in the towns and cities, in the countryside, in the armed forces and in the borderlands'. So when the author says that his book will not deal with these phenomena, it does not mean that they did not exist, just that he is not going to tell us about them. That suggests that somewhere out there not everything is chaos and individual tragedy, that rationality is lurking in the background. But why the book concentrates on the chaos rather than the social revolutions is not explained.

One tends to suspect that how mention of these social revolutions came to be carried into *A People's Tragedy* was on the boots of the 'seminal works', which tend to see things in these terms. But no doubt, if one had the inclination, even the interpretations contained in these secondary sources could be broken down and recast in the 'chaotic' and 'individual tragedy' mould. The snag is that an exercise of that type would take time, and as it is the book took fully six years to write.

A People's Tragedy treats ideology in the same way as it treats social forces. One can hardly deny that ideology existed in the Russian revolution and played some kind of role in what took place, but Figs ignores it for the most part. It does not conform with the overall 'chaotic' and

'tragic' conception of the book. Nevertheless, occasions do occur where ideological questions have to be discussed. A case in point is the question of whether War Communism arose from the military exigencies of the civil war or was derived from 'Leninist ideology'. It is symptomatic that the author flounders for two pages without saying anything very much. He could not possibly give a meaningful answer to this question because he has not laid the groundwork; he has not investigated what 'Leninist ideology' was in the period in question, and so he is not in a position to say what influence it had on the policies adopted.

Any historian writing a history of the Russian revolution after the break-up of the Soviet Union is bound to do so with the importance of the non-Russian peoples of the Russian Empire in mind. Figes tries to do this, but certainly as far as the Baltic peoples are concerned the result is haphazard and garbled. Why mention the Estonian epic poem *Kalevipoeg* if you do not mention the Latvian *Lāčplēšis*, or the Lithuanian *Metai* which preceded both? And why mention the Latvian newspaper *Balss* if you do not mention the path-breaking *Pēterburgas avīzes*? It suggests that the author has a very tenuous grasp of the subject.

Authors like to have their books described as 'brilliant'. This is without doubt a brilliant book. It sparkles in the way it presents its string of picturesque episodes, and it dazzles in the confidence and verve with which it presents even its erroneous erudition. But it is brilliant as a novel or a play is brilliant. As a work of history it has little point, because it does not give what a reader of a historical work normally demands. It does not set out and explain the various episodes of the revolution with any clarity. It does not even seek to do so because it holds that no such clarity exists, that all is confusion and chaos. The book consequently cannot be recommended as an introduction to the subject, although it is a general history of the Russian revolution. It does, however, provide a rich fund of stories, some of which might bear re-telling, if the selection is made with caution and the audience is not overly squeamish.

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Hafeez Malik (ed.), *The Roles of the United States, Russia and China in the New World Order*.

Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, xvi + 333 pp., £47.50.

Leszek Buszynski, *Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War*. Westport and London: Praeger, 1996, xiv + 243 pp., £46.95.

THESE TWO VOLUMES offer somewhat different pictures of the foreign policy of Russia and the place of that country in the post-Cold War international system. The first is the product of a conference held at Villanova University in April 1994. Focusing on the foreign policies of the United States and China as well as that of Russia, it is an unrelievedly downbeat assessment of the so-called new world order. The tone is set by the book's editor, Hafeez Malik. In the introductory chapter he outlines three well-known analytical approaches to the study of international relations: realism, liberalism and the world system model. All three are treated judiciously. It is clear, however, that Malik's intellectual sympathies lie with political realism. In the Preface he argues that the contemporary state system is beset by a struggle for power between Russia, China and the United States. This is a state of affairs that is 'almost preordained' (p. ix), for the world is a place where the national interests of states are naturally in conflict. Competition and a preoccupation with the high politics of national security are the inevitable consequences. Cooperation between the powers does exist but this is regarded as fragile; hostage in the Russian case to an historical tendency toward expansionism and the desire to preserve great power status.

While none of the book's other contributors are as analytically bald as Malik, virtually all share his realist predispositions. This is particularly so of Henry Trofimenko. His characterisa-