HISTORICALLY INEVITABLE?

TURNING POINTS OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

TONY BRENTON

I

We are approaching the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. If one had to pick the single event which has most shaped twentieth-century history, and so our world in the early years of the twenty-first, this must be it. The Revolution put in power the totalitarian communism that eventually ruled one third of the human race, stimulated the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, and thus the Second World War, and created the great antagonist the West faced for the forty years Cold War balance of terror. It is hard to think of another example where the events of a few years, concentrated in one country, and mostly in one city, have had such vast historical consequences.

The events of 1917 have themselves become a historical battlefield. For seventy years it was a core Soviet belief that the revolution was the triumphant product of ineluctable historical forces. That view may now look quaint but, in a softer version, it has held extensive sway among Western historians. In this view tsarism was rotten and doomed, socialism, even Bolshevism, offered Russia a bright new future, and it was Stalin who corrupted the dream. Others have taken a much less sympathetic standpoint. They argue that there was a liberal alternative to tsarism, which the Bolsheviks strangled at birth, that it was Lenin who created the dictatorship and the terror, and that Stalin was no more than his apt pupil. And there are lots of other variants. In one, tsarism was on the way to modernising Russia, and liberalism would inevitably have followed had the revolution not stopped it in its tracks. In another, Russia's whole historic tradition is of state-dominated tyranny, and the regime made by Lenin just the latest manifestation.

Where you come out on all these grand questions depends heavily on how you view what happened in Russia in the years surrounding 1917. Could things have gone differently? Were there moments when a single decision taken another way, a random accident, a shot going straight instead of crooked (or vice versa) could have altered the whole course of Russian, and so European, and world, history?

This book picks out those moments in the history of the revolution where that feeling of contingency is particularly intense. These are the forks in the road where one senses that there genuinely was a question over which way things would go. For each of these moments a distinguished historian has been invited to describe the background, significance and consequences of the event as it happened, and also to speculate a little as to how things might have gone otherwise. This is not a full narrative history of the revolution (there are plenty of excellent ones already) but rather a series of snapshots that catch a very tangled series of events at key moments and ask whether the story might have been radically different.

II

Before presenting our snapshots it may be helpful to put them in context.

The revolution did not come out of the blue. The problems of a backward-looking autocracy struggling to navigate a period of rapid social and economic change were not unique to Russia. They have produced revolutions before, notably in France in 1789 (an example constantly on the minds of the Russian revolutionaries). In Russia's case, the dress rehearsal for the events of 1917 took place in 1905. The year 1904 had seen a 'perfect storm': military defeat by the Japanese; impoverishment and discontent in the countryside; appalling living and working conditions in the cities; and the spread of socialist and democratic ideas (often in an extremely virulent form) among the intelligentsia. These came together on 'Bloody Sunday' (9 January 1905) when the Imperial Guard in St Petersburg gunned down hundreds of

unarmed demonstrators. The result was a mortal blow to the credibility of Nicholas II and his regime. Massive nationwide strikes and demonstrations forced the tsar to accept the first-ever representative assembly in Russian history, the Duma. This concession brought a few years of precarious stability. In our first snapshot, Dominic Lieven looks at how things might have gone if the 1905 revolution had turned into full-scale social collapse, as it in fact did twelve years later.

The next few years saw a bitter tug of war between a Tsar who (encouraged by his uncompromising wife and their resident 'holy man', Rasputin) was intent on maintaining his autocratic power, and a series of Dumas (regularly disbanded and reconstituted by Nicholas in what he hoped would be a more helpful way) demanding economic and political reform. The one statesman of the period who showed any capacity to master these conflicting forces was Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister 1906–11. Stolypin was an 'authoritarian moderniser' – admired in particular by Vladimir Putin – who tried to use the Tsar's authority to bring about the economic reforms which Russia so badly needed. These efforts ended with Stolypin's assassination in 1911. Simon Dixon in his chapter looks at Stolypin's impact, and asks how events might have evolved if he had not gone to the Kiev opera that night.

With the abandonment of serious efforts at reform, the one thing that temporarily allayed rising social disorder and discontent was Russia's entry into the First World War in 1914. As so often happened (and, indeed, still does today), Russian society pulled together in the face of a common enemy. Strikes stopped, agitators were jailed, there were huge patriotic demonstrations. But in the longer term the war, which brought military humiliation and rising economic dislocation, was the final nail in the coffin of the tsarist regime. Douglas Smith looks at the little-known role of Rasputin in talking Nicholas out of entering an earlier Balkan war, and his efforts to dissuade him in 1914 as well. Not only Russia but the world too would be a very different place if he had succeeded.

He of course didn't. The war took Nicholas far away from Petrograd (the new, patriotic, name of St Petersburg) to command his troops.

Government was left in the capricious and incompetent hands of the empress Alexandra and Rasputin, about whom all sorts of scandalous rumours circulated. The standing of the Tsar reached rock bottom; even members of his family were plotting to remove him. Rising popular discontent came to a head with bread riots in Petrograd in February 1917. After some attempts at suppression the army joined the rioters. Nicholas's attempt from his distant headquarters to send in relief forces failed. His generals now advised him that the only way to save the dynasty, and Russia, was for him to abdicate in favour of his son Alexis. Concerned about Alexis' health, Nicholas tried instead to pass the crown to his brother, Michael. But Michael was unacceptable to the civilian politicians in Petrograd who, as the Provisional Government, were to inherit real power. Thus through a chapter of accidents, as described by Donald Crawford, the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty came to an end.

The fall of the Romanovs precipitated the rise of the 'Soviets' (directly elected assemblies of soldiers, peasants and industrial workers) in Petrograd and other cities. As the economic and political situation deteriorated these assemblies were increasingly radicalised. The extremist Bolshevik faction in particular rapidly gained influence. The Provisional Government, drawn from traditional tsarist-era politicians, found itself having to work in uneasy deference to the Petrograd Soviet (which at any time could bring the city to a halt with strikes and demonstrations). In this atmosphere, the German Foreign Ministry, wanting Russia out of the war, arranged the return to Russia of the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, in his famous 'sealed train'. He swiftly overcame reluctance among his fellow Bolsheviks and electrified the political scene with his strident (but widely echoed) demands that the Provisional Government be overthrown and the war ended. With German financial help he was able to bolster Bolshevik support and build Bolshevik forces on the streets (the so-called 'Red Guards'). The Bolsheviks set about propagandising and weakening the Russian armed forces, so contributing to a series of Russian military defeats and mutinies. This activity culminated in an attempted Bolshevik

seizure of power in July, which failed. Many Bolsheviks were arrested and Lenin went back into exile. Sean McMeekin analyses Lenin's role in these months, and asks what course events might have taken if there had been no sealed train.

The failed Bolshevik coup exacerbated the mutual suspicions between the left (as represented in the Petrograd Soviet) and the right (as represented in the Provisional Government). Alexander Kerensky, a charismatic left-wing politician but with solid ministerial credentials, took over the Provisional Government in July as the only figure acceptable to the two sides. He chose as the new head of the armed forces the respected patriot General Kornilov who was charged with a mission of reimposing discipline and prosecuting the war. But, through a series of disastrous misunderstandings described in Richard Pipes's chapter, Kerensky came to see Kornilov as an aspiring military dictator. He accordingly swung left, engineered a surge of socialist support against the 'counter-revolution' (including having the recently arrested Bolsheviks released – but not readmitting Lenin), and at the end of August 1917 had Kornilov dismissed and arrested. The price he paid was the loss of army support for his government and a leap in the popularity of the Bolsheviks (who at this point became the majority party in the Petrograd Soviet). The way was now open for them to seize power.

The key moment was the evening of 24 October 1917. A congress of all the Soviets from around the country was due to meet in the Smolny Palace the next day. This would duly have thrown the Provisional Government out and replaced it with a coalition of all the socialist parties (not just the Bolsheviks). Lenin, now surreptitiously back in Petrograd, was determined to pre-empt this. He crossed the city in disguise. A police patrol stopped but did not recognise him. Once at the Smolny, he bullied the Bolshevik leadership (who up until this point had been actively engaged in the negotiations for a coalition) into launching an immediate takeover of power. That takeover (including the famous 'storming' of the Winter Palace) took place the following day. It was not a socialist coalition but the Bolsheviks alone who were to rule Russia.

Orlando Figes in his chapter looks at how different history would have been if that patrol had recognised and arrested Lenin.

So far the Bolsheviks only controlled Petrograd and (after a few days fighting) Moscow. But with single-minded brutality (including the establishment in December 1917 of the 'Cheka', the regime's fearsome secret police) they gradually extended their grip. In Moscow (now the capital of Russia) they squeezed rival parties out of the political process and arrested many of their leaders. In the provinces they rapidly found themselves fighting against the 'Whites', a disparate range of anti-Bolshevik forces, led by former tsarist generals and politicians, and enjoying some foreign support. At this point the Bolsheviks saw the danger of the tsar, now living in prison in Siberia with his family, becoming a 'living symbol' around which the counter-revolution could rally. Edvard Radzinsky looks at moments when the Tsar might indeed have escaped and played such a role. Fearing precisely this, the Bolsheviks had him and his family killed in Ekaterinburg in July 1918.

One of the key promises made in February by the Provisional Government, which of course had no electoral mandate, had been to proceed rapidly to the election of a 'Constituent Assembly'. Political hopes had long focused on this as the body that would create a constitution for post-Romanov Russia and install a government with proper democratic credentials. But preparations were slow. The widely anticipated elections (which even the Bolsheviks, although by now in power, could not stop) did not take place until November. The Bolsheviks got only about a quarter of the vote. Lenin condemned the results on the grounds that the interests of the revolution stood higher than 'bourgeois democracy'. The Assembly convened in Petrograd in January 1918, but within a day was closed down by Red Guards. It did not meet again. In my chapter I ask how things might have gone if the Provisional Government had been quicker.

Rising political repression, civil war and economic dislocation inevitably brought opposition to the Bolshevik regime. This received its most dramatic expression in the attempt on 30 August 1918 by a former

non-Bolshevik revolutionary, Fanny Kaplan, to assassinate Lenin. She seriously wounded but did not kill him. The attempt was used as the justification for the first 'Red Terror' under which the Cheka arrested and executed tens of thousands of the regime's opponents (and created a precedent for Stalin's 'Great Terror' thirty years later). Lenin's injury probably also contributed to his early death in 1924, clearing the way for Stalin to inherit power. Martin Sixsmith tells the story of the assassination attempt and asks what the consequences could have been if Fanny Kaplan had been more, or less, accurate.

It was by no means inevitable that the Bolsheviks would win the Civil War. While by early 1918 they had established control over most of central Russia, they faced chaos and resistance, including widespread peasant aversion to their rule, in the east and south. Their 'shameful' peace treaty with the Central Powers in March 1918, which handed Ukraine and most of west Russia over to German and Austro-Hungarian occupation, did not add to their standing. The opposition to the Bolsheviks was led by a number of White generals, with some foreign support, but also, importantly, in Siberia by the 'Komuch'. This was a group of politicians, including some who were left-wing, who claimed their legitimacy as the 'All Russian Provisional Government' as former members of the disbanded Constituent Assembly. The Komuch, however, foundered in splits and divisions between its left and right wings. In a coup on 17 November 1918 it was replaced by the dictatorship of Admiral Kolchak. The right wing now dominated all the anti-Bolshevik forces – but with its reactionary political programme it had essentially nothing to offer the peasants. They therefore largely swung behind the Bolsheviks and helped ensure their eventual victory. Evan Mawdsley examines these events and asks if there was any alternative.

One of the by-products of the Civil War was 'War Communism' – the brutal imposition by the Bolsheviks of total control over the Russian economy and population, enforced by mass killings and arrests, which in many ways pre-figured Stalinism. A key feature of this was the 'razverstka' – wholesale seizure of grain from the peasants, often resulting

in mass starvation. As the war drew to a close in 1919–20, this led to growing levels of peasant and provincial revolt (including the uprising in February 1921 of the Kronstadt naval garrison, formerly among the staunchest supporters of the revolution). The regime was accordingly forced to abandon the razverstka in 1921. This was the key first step towards the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP), a brief thaw and partial reversion to market economics, which brought the protests to an end and allowed the Russian economy to recover. But a significant proportion of the party detested the NEP on ideological grounds, and in 1928 Stalin as part of his ascent to power ended it and reintroduced grain seizures. Erik Landis asks if the route to Stalinism might have been altered if (as Trotsky proposed at the time) the razverstka had been ended twelve months earlier.

The Bolshevik movement was of course radically and aggressively atheist. A key test of their style of government was their handling of the Russian Orthodox Church (which enjoyed the support of the majority of Russians throughout the Communist period). In fact, while ideological hostility to the Church, and its maltreatment, was constant throughout the Communist years, there was only one real surge of active repression. This started with the confiscation of Church valuables in 1922. Catriona Kelly looks at this episode and asks what it tells us about other features of Bolshevik rule, as well as what might have been the implications of a different approach to church-state relations.

The eventual outcome of the revolution was of course totalitarian communism. Power was confined to a single ruling party: highly centralised; secretively and bureaucratically run; and dependent upon a vast repressive apparatus. Wider public debate, let alone opposition, was rigidly excluded and brutally punished. Many have argued that such an outcome was the inevitable result of the seizure of power by an extremist faction representing a small minority of the populace and driven by an eschatological ideology, which had then to retain power in the teeth of external hostility, domestic civil war and economic collapse. In the early days, however, there were hopes of an alternative under which, even if democracy outside the party was excluded,

democracy within it could be maintained. Richard Sakwa looks at these alternatives and asks if they really offered a way of avoiding the totalitarian outcome.

III

It is hard not to see the course of the Russian revolution as deeply tragic. A fitfully, but genuinely, developing country, confronted with forces inspired by the highest hopes for mankind, plunged to quite unprecedented levels of tyranny and mass murder. Even conventional Marxist historians (a vanishing breed) now admit that the road to Utopia went seriously astray. But how 'inevitable' was that tragedy?

Let me explain this book's approach to that question. There is something of a fracas going on in the historical profession on the issue of 'counterfactual history'. Partly in response to a well-received book of counterfactual historical essays edited by Professor Niall Ferguson, Professor Richard Evans has recently written a book dismissing counterfactuals as, mostly, right-wing wishful thinking, often fun, but with virtually nothing to contribute to any real understanding of the past. And indeed as I sought contributors for this book a couple of eminent names declined precisely because they did not wish to play the counterfactual game.

Which is all very well. But in pure logic I find it very hard to understand how the inevitability, or not, of a historical event can be assessed except on the basis of a close look at moments where the road might have taken another direction, and where it might then have led. Contributors to this volume have responded to the challenge in various ways. Some have taken us some way down a route very different from the course history actually did take. Some have focused on moments of extreme contingency when even a very slight change in circumstances might plausibly have led to a dramatically different historical outcome. Some have described the chapter of accidents and misunderstandings leading to a particular outcome, leaving the reader to reflect on how different that outcome might have been. And a significant number have

looked at widely touted alternatives to the way things actually went, only to conclude that in fact none of those alternatives was likely. All of these approaches seem to me to be valid. And taken together they ask, from a range of points of view, how unavoidable Russia's tragic twentieth century really was – in a way that a conventional narrative history would find it much harder to do.

It was Hegel who said that 'the one thing we learn from history is that no one learns anything from history'. I hope he was wrong. As a working diplomat I often had no other guide in analysing a particular challenge or situation than whatever relevant history I could lay my hands on. For Russia in particular (a country where I spent a lot of my career), with its famously opaque style of governance, knowledge of Russian history was often a key source of insight into current developments. The Russians, too, rely heavily on history in trying to understand where the world is going. For the revolutionaries of 1917 the key historical precedent, both positive and negative, was the French Revolution. A central aim of all the Russian revolutionaries was to avoid the emergence, as happened in France, of a military dictator – a 'Napoleon'. They succeeded. But they got Stalin instead. Was that inevitable? I leave the reader to judge.

1

FOREIGN INTERVENTION: THE LONG VIEW

1900–1920

DOMINIC LIEVEN

When I first became a historian of late imperial Russia in the 1970s, among Anglo-American historians the field was dominated by the debate between so-called optimists and pessimists. The optimists believed that the constitutional regime established in 1906–14 heralded Russia's move towards Western liberal democracy, a move which would have ended in success had not the First World War intervened and provided Lenin with the opportunity to stage what these historians saw as the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. The pessimists, on the other hand, believed that tsarism was doomed and that Bolshevism was always the likeliest victor in Russia's inevitable revolutionary crisis.

I believed even then that this conception of Russia's fate in 1914 as lying either with democracy or communism reflected much more the Cold War context in which the debate occurred than it did Russian realities in the early twentieth century. The debate was in many ways less Russian history than a battle between rival ideological positions within the Western intelligentsia, which was being fought out on Russian soil. The terms of the debate also illustrated the very powerful hold that the present and its concerns have on historians' thinking, above all in so highly 'relevant' and politically explosive a field as Russian history in the Cold War era.