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Sarah Badcock

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The catastrophic failure of the Provisional Government's attempts to govern Russia and to safely usher in a democratically elected national assembly overshadows any study of 1917. The democratic party political system that was used as a basis for the new regime failed to take root, and was swept away by the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. This book will look at the roots of Russian democracy's collapse after only eight brief months, by exploring the experiences of ordinary people in 1917. The evidence from Nizhegorod and Kazan suggests that localism overwhelmed national interests in 1917, and that, as Donald Raleigh put it, 'Russia was breaking into local economic units'.¹ This study argues that ordinary people displayed autonomy and direction in 1917, but that their motivations and short-term goals did not coincide with those of the state. For Nizhegorod and Kazan, February 1917 began the process of a complete collapse of central governmental power. The Provisional Government's faith in democratic government, and in the potential of Russia's people to govern themselves, proved to be incompatible with their other goals of maintaining domestic peace and order, and continuing Russia's involvement in the war effort.

There is a massive body of literature tackling the events of 1917, and a number of recent works have provided full and balanced accounts of the course of events.² Despite the rich historiography of the Russian revolution, however, the focus of historical study has been on the capitals, and the urban, organised population. There is a wealth of Russian experience still

¹ Raleigh used this phrase to describe the situation in Saratov by summer (Donald J. Raleigh, 'The revolution of 1917 and the establishment of Soviet power in Saratov', in Rex A. Wade and Scott J. Seregny (eds.), *Politics and society in provincial Russia: Saratov, 1590–1917* (Columbus, OH, 1989), pp. 277–306, p. 293).

² See, for example, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February revolution: Petrograd 1917* (Seattle, 1981); Orlando Figes, *A people's tragedy: the Russian revolution 1891–1924* (London, 1996); Christopher Read, *From tsar to soviets: the Russian people and their revolution* (London, 1996); Rex A. Wade, *The Russian revolution, 1917* (Cambridge, 2000); Steve A. Smith, *The Russian revolution: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2002).

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to be explored, away from the urban centres and political elites, that can alter our perceptions of Russia's revolutionary year. This book, by taking a regional perspective, and by concentrating on the political experiences of ordinary Russians, aims to provide a counterbalance to the many, and excellent, histories of Russia which have privileged events in the capital cities, and the experiences of the urban and the organised population.

Historians have focused on the activities of the organised and the 'conscious' within the population, namely political elites, workers and to some extent soldiers. These groups were important, and their activities undoubtedly had disproportionate impact on the course of revolutionary events. The focus of this work, however, will be on understanding the revolutionary experience of the elusive 'average Joe'. Much of this book is concerned with Russia's peasant population, which formed the vast majority of the population, but it does not deal exclusively with the experiences of rural Russia. I have tried to consider ordinary people together, men and women, urban and rural, and military and civilian, in order to get a more rounded picture of the revolution's implications. This approach brings its own problems, and necessitates a loss of the sharp focus and insights that have been drawn from more specific studies. It does, however, emphasise the loose and uncertain identities that were a feature of the late Imperial and especially the revolutionary period. By looking at urban and rural experiences of revolution alongside one another, a more holistic version of 1917's events emerges. Where the political elite is considered, it is in their attempts to communicate with ordinary people. These channels of communication help us understand that ordinary people participated in the political process in rational ways, but in ways that often did not correspond with the aspirations of Russia's political elite. Far from an elite few conducting the masses along their revolutionary path, the small group of intellectuals who dominated the high political scene of 1917 had their political alternatives circumscribed by the desires and demands of ordinary people.

With some notable exceptions, studies of 1917 have concentrated on events in Petrograd and to a lesser extent Moscow. When I started this project one senior authority in the field told me that study of the provinces was pointless, because 'when the bell tolls in Petersburg, the bell tolls all over Russia'. This common misperception of Russia, that events in the provinces simply followed the course set by the capitals, is one that recent historiography has been challenging, and that this work, with its focus on life in two of Russia's provinces, Kazan and Nizhegorod, seeks to further undermine. These provinces, despite their position as neighbours in central eastern European Russia, provide examples of Russia's tremendous

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geographic, ethnic and economic diversity. Kazan and Nizhegorod cannot be taken as exemplars for every Russian province, or even for the Volga region. If we are to understand revolutionary events at grass-roots level, we need to look at different provinces individually.

This work shows conclusively that local concerns, conditions and interests dominated the ways that the revolution was received and understood by ordinary people in Nizhegorod and Kazan. Few direct comparisons between the two provinces have been made, as the differences within *uezds* of each province were often greater than differences between the two provinces as a whole. Only in more specific cases, as between Kazan town and Nizhnii Novgorod town, can direct comparisons be drawn. Ordinary people's responses to revolution need to be understood in their local context, and these contexts defy straightforward comparisons and summaries. This is not grand history that comes to elegant and sweeping conclusions. It is small and messy, very much like ordinary people's lives.

This study focuses on an extremely narrow chronological window, from the February revolution up until the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. Recent works by, amongst others, Peter Holquist and Joshua Sanborn have stressed the importance of seeing 1917 in a 'continuum of crisis' with the years of the First World War that preceded it and with the civil war that followed it.³ Studying 1917 as part of a broader chronological picture has provided an important corrective to the tendency to see 1917 in isolated and exceptionalist terms. The narrow chronological focus of this study can, however, also contribute to our understanding of the revolution. The eight-month term of the Provisional Government did not occur in an historical vacuum, but it can be considered on its own terms, and as more than just a stepping stone to its ugly and historically significant postscript, the Bolshevik seizure of power and subsequent civil war. The Bolshevisation of revolutionary history, in which the history of the victors seems to dominate the whole historical process, is hard to avoid. By looking at ordinary people's responses to the exceptional circumstances of 1917, with its rapid formation of local governmental forms and unique opportunities for popular self-government and autonomy, we can make some progress in our attempts to understand ordinary people's responses to revolutionary events, and ultimately the failure of the Provisional Government on its own terms, rather than on the terms of the Bolshevik victors.⁴

³ Peter Holquist, *Making war, forging revolution: Russia's continuum of crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian nation: military conscription, total war, and mass politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb, IL 2003).

⁴ Michael Melancon expressed similar concerns about 'Bolshevised' history (Michael Melancon, 'The Neopopulist experience: default interpretations and new approaches', *Kritika* 5 (2004), 195–206).

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Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia

When studying Russia's revolution, it is often difficult to discern the perspectives of ordinary Russian people. We are drawn into revolutionary events by the grand narratives of revolution, but in doing so we sometimes lose individuals. A collection of documents edited by Mark Steinberg sought to find the individual in revolution by seeking out ordinary people's voices in their letters and proclamations.⁵ The quest for the ordinary person's perspective is a frustrating one. The vast majority of Russia's ordinary people did not express their views and feelings in the written word. The voices heard in Steinberg's collection, in letters to newspapers or ministers that expressed individuals' opinions, demands and desires, are not representative of Russia's whole population. In particular, the voices of male, urban and often armed Russians far outnumbered and overpowered female, rural and civilian voices. This study explores the environment in which ordinary men and women lived, and the challenges they faced in making political decisions and getting on with daily life. In this way we can gain an insight into the revolutionary year for ordinary people.

This book looks at the dialogues between political elites and ordinary people, and the confusions and contradictions these dialogues exposed. One of the problems we have in trying to understand ordinary people's experiences of 1917 is that most of the historical sources were constructed by the political elite. As James Scott commented, the peasantry often appeared in the historical records not as actors in their own right, but as contributors to statistics.⁶ The rich records of police surveillance that historians have mined for the Soviet period to uncover 'hidden transcripts', is not available for the revolutionary period, when the state was at its weakest ebb.⁷ What we know, especially of rural life in revolutionary Russia, is seen through a filter of the political elite's perceptions of events. This study has drawn on a wide range of sources but has relied particularly on local newspapers and on records of local government, grass-roots administration and soviet organisations. Many of these sources are dominated by the urban political elite, but by evaluating them carefully, we can challenge the assumptions and misconceptions inherent in the sources, and a subtly altered picture of the revolutionary year emerges. We need to start by challenging the tropes used to describe the countryside. Peasants and rural life are described

⁵ Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of revolution, 1917* (New Haven, CT, 2001).

⁶ James Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985), p. 29.

⁷ The work of Lynne Viola and Sheila Fitzpatrick used *svodki*, secret police reports, extensively in their attempts to penetrate the experience of daily rural life in Soviet Russia (Lynne Viola, *Peasant rebels under Stalin: collectivisation and the culture of peasant resistance* (New York, 1996); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's peasants: resistance and survival in the Russian village after collectivisation* (Oxford, 1994)).

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repeatedly in newspapers, literature and local government sources as ‘dark’, ‘ignorant’ and needing ‘enlightenment’. These value judgements are put to one side here and the perspectives of ordinary people themselves are considered. Ordinary people made rational and informed choices about their best interests in 1917, and they engaged in political life consciously and pragmatically.

Throughout this book reference is made to ‘ordinary people’ and the ‘political elite’. ‘Political elite’ refers both to the political elite at the centre of power in Petrograd, and to those individuals who were in positions of authority in regional politics. The term ‘ordinary people’ is used with reservations, but because it was the least judgemental and broadest way to describe those individuals who were not active in the formal political and administrative structures that developed in 1917. Stephen Frank and Mark Steinberg used the term ‘lower class’ in their collection of essays to try and embrace the same range of people, but I have avoided this because of its negative connotations.⁸ The Russian word most closely associated with my understanding of ordinary people is the difficult to translate *narod*. I have deliberately avoided using *narod*, because it is often used to refer only to rural people. The distinctions between peasant, worker and soldier were fluid and difficult to pinpoint with accuracy. A better Russian word to use is probably *trudiashchiesia*, or working people, but this might exclude the unemployed or other marginal groups. This broad term ‘ordinary people’ is not intended to place all those included in it in an easily lumped together mass. Ordinary people were in no way homogenous, and the term allows room for the huge range of different identities that were adopted by them. These terms are intended to be understood loosely, even amorphously, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some ‘ordinary people’ could also be described as members of the political elite, if, for example, they participated in local administration or leadership. These general groupings are, however, helpful in understanding grass-roots politics, and communication between political leaders and their constituents.

A SKETCH OF NIZHEGOROD AND KAZAN

Nizhegorod and Kazan as they were in 1917 shared some boundaries and were situated in the central eastern belt of European Russia, and both were bisected by the Volga river, Russia’s main artery. Both provinces occupied

⁸ Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg, *Cultures in flux: lower-class values, practices and resistance in late Imperial Russia* (Princeton, NJ, 1994).

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key geographical locations for transport and trade and were served by the Trans-Siberian railway and water transportation on the Volga and the Kama rivers. Both capital cities had reputations as the country's foremost trading centres, with Kazan being described as the gateway to Siberia, and Nizhnii Novgorod renowned for its annual fair. Both provinces were considered to be part of Russia's fertile 'black earth' belt and had correspondingly high levels of agricultural production, though Kazan was a net exporter of grain, whereas Nizhegorod imported grain. Nizhegorod province was split into 11 *uezds* and 249 *volosts*. The population of Nizhegorod province in 1917 was around 2 million,⁹ of which only 361,000 lived in the thirteen towns of the province. Of these, 204,000 lived in Nizhnii Novgorod itself, a large and highly industrialised city. There were some 70,000 workers based in Nizhegorod province in 1917, most of whom were active in heavy and metallurgical industries. The biggest industrial centres were situated in the suburbs of Nizhnii Novgorod, in Kanavin and Sormovo. Kazan province was split into twelve *uezds*, with a population of nearer 3 million. Kazan was home to one of Russia's oldest universities and had a large and active student population. Industry in Kazan was less developed than in Nizhnii Novgorod.

These profiles are useful in giving us a general impression of these provinces' economic output, but without more detailed consideration, they mask the diversity that was a feature of both provinces. Kazan's twelve *uezds*, and Nizhegorod's eleven, each had very distinct geographic features and economic development, which makes any generalisations about them difficult, as forms of agriculture and industry were often specific to their local geography. Another factor that makes straightforward comparisons and generalisations about these two provinces difficult was their diverse ethnic profiles. While Nizhegorod was predominantly Great Russian in make-up, Kazan was included in the mid-Volga region, which was home to large non-Russian communities. Non-Russians made up 35 per cent of the mid-Volga population in the 1897 census. Kazan had the highest proportion of non-Russians of all the mid-Volga provinces. It is worth outlining in more detail Kazan's ethnic diversity, since it played an important part in shaping her responses to 1917. Only around 40 per cent (887,000) of Kazan's population were Great Russian. Tatars made up 32 per cent of the population (721,000), Chuvash 22 per cent (507,000) and Cheremis

⁹ P. A. Golub, I. E. Korabl'ev, M. E. Kuznetsov and I. I. Fignater, *Velikaia Oktiabr' skaia Sotsialisticheskaia Revoliutsiia: entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 1987), p. 334, cites 2,081,200 population in 1917; N. P. Oganovskii (ed.), *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo Rossii v XX veke: sbornik statistiko-ekonomicheskikh svedenie za 1901–1922g.* (Moscow, 1923), pp. 20–1, cites 2,051,700 in 1916.

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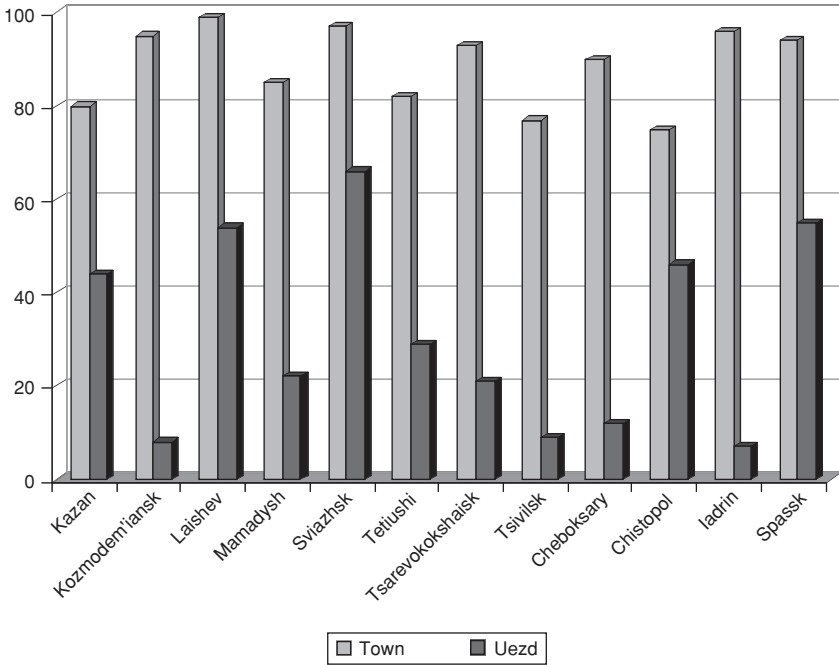


Figure 1.1. Great Russian population (%) in Kazan province, by *uezd*

Source: Iskandr M. Muliukov, 'Rukovodstvo sovetov kul'turno-prosvetitel'nymi uchrezhdeniami v pervye gody Sovetskoi vlasti, 1917–1920gg. po materialam Kazanskoi gubernii', unpublished PhD thesis, Institut iazyka, literatury i istorii imeni G. Ibragimova Kazanskogo filiala ANSSSR (Kazan, 1990), p. 227.

5 per cent (124,000). These different ethnic groups had diverse cultural and linguistic traditions that make any generalisations about popular feeling in Kazan difficult.

The ethnic composition of town and country and of different *uezds* differed significantly around Kazan, as we see in figure 1.1. Non-Russian groups were often scattered rather than concentrated in one particular region, and some villages were ethnically mixed.¹⁰ Communities' ethnic identities offer indications of their dominant occupations, social networks and responses to 1917's political processes. It is, however, difficult to make generalisations about particular regions because of the level of ethnic mixing, and the uneven patterns of ethnic distribution around the region. One point on

¹⁰ Robert Geraci, *Window on the east: national and Imperial identities in late tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), p. 33.

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which we can be confident is that non-Russians were not proportionately represented in the region's towns. In Kozmodem'iansk *uezd*, for example, though Great Russians made up only 8 per cent of the *uezd* population, they made up 95 per cent of the population in Kozmodem'iansk town, which meant that Great Russians dominated the administration of the *uezd*. This pattern is replicated in other *uezds* around Kazan province. Non-Russian communities' lack of connection to urban culture was to have important implications for them in 1917, when formal power structures crystallised around towns, leaving non-Russian groups effectively isolated from the political elite centred in the towns. We should also take note of the diversity of languages and letters seen among Kazan's non-Russian community, which greatly complicated communications in 1917. As the revolutionary tides swirled around Kazan, non-Russian communities were left to some extent isolated as a result of the difficulties the political elite faced in communicating with them.

Russia's largest Tatar community was based in Kazan. Their language was Turkic in origin, one of the oldest literary languages of the former Soviet Union, and used the Arabic script. Tatars practised Sunni Muslim religion. A distinct subdivision of the Tatar language, using the Cyrillic script, was developed in the eighteenth century by the small number of Tatars who formally converted to the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These converts were known as baptised Tatars (*Kreshchennyi tatar*), also referred to as Kryashen, and formed a distinct subdivision within Tatars who spoke Tatar but could not read Arabic script. Muslim Tatars were easy to distinguish by their clothing and grooming, and unlike other non-Russian groups, who were predominantly peasant, Tatars spanned the social spectrum, had a well-developed merchant class and were the most urbanised of Kazan's non-Russian groups.¹¹

The Chuvash people also spoke a Turkic-based language, though theirs included an admix of words from Persian, Arabic and Russian. Their literary language was not established until the 1870s and was written in the Cyrillic script. Tatars and Chuvash could understand one another's languages, but with difficulty. The vast majority of Chuvash were listed as practising the Orthodox religion, and those who were not Christians were more likely to practise Animist faith than Muslim faith. The Chuvash were considered to be highly skilled agriculturalists, and they enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. They were the most urbanised, after the Tatars, of Kazan's non-Russian community.

¹¹ Ronald Wixman, *The peoples of the USSR: an ethnographic handbook* (London, 1984), pp. 186–7; Geraci, *Window on the east*, pp. 36–44.

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The Cheremis, also referred to as the Marii, are a Finnic people, whose language belonged to the Finno-Ugric group and was established in a literary form by the Russian Orthodox Church in their attempts to convert the Marii. The Marii practised Shamanist-Animist religion, though some did convert to the Orthodox Church. They were divided into two subgroups that shared cultural practices but had mutually unintelligible dialects. The highland, or forest Marii, lived mostly on the right bank of the Volga, while the lowland, or meadow Marii, settled mainly on the left bank of the Volga. The meadow Marii were often forest dwellers and engaged in beekeeping, hunting and basic agriculture. They were often employed as barge haulers or fishermen. The highland Marii tended to practise more advanced agriculture than their meadow cousins and were considered to be more assimilated to the Great Russian population.¹² Kazan's ethnic diversity is not the main focus of the study, but the region's ethnic make-up was an important feature of its social and political responses to the revolutionary year and therefore forms an integral part of the analysis presented here.

CENTRAL POWER AND AUTHORITY IN 1917

This book will concentrate on events outside the capitals and is structured thematically rather than chronologically. This presents a real challenge to the book's structure, as the complex chronology of 1917 informed the events that unfolded in the provinces, and the climate of daily life. The following section offers a brief overview of central government and the challenges to it over the course of the Provisional Government's eight months in power. The February revolution occurred when workers' demonstrations and a mutiny in the garrison at the end of February caused the tsarist government to collapse.¹³ The events of 1917 can be framed around key chronological events; the February revolution and the abdication of the tsar; the April crisis over war aims that led to Miliukov's resignation and the formation of the first coalition government; the June offensive, Kerensky's attempt to galvanise the army; the July days, a series of demonstrations and disturbances on the streets of Petrograd between 3 and 5 July, characterised by their forceful demands for 'All power to the Soviet'; the Kornilov affair of August, when the army's supreme commander was implicated in a plot to take over government, and Kerensky's own credibility was severely damaged by his own involvement in the affair; September's Democratic

¹² Wixman, *The peoples of the USSR*, p. 132; Geraci, *Window on the east*, pp. 33–4.

¹³ The authoritative view of February is probably Hasegawa, *The February revolution*. For a masterful discussion of agency in the February revolution, see Michael Melancon, *Rethinking Russia's February revolution: anonymous spontaneity or socialist agency?* (Pittsburg, 2000).

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Conference, called at the initiative of the soviets as a last gasp attempt to unite democratic forces, and finally, of course, the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October 1917, in the name of the soviets. These events marked shifts in the elite political climate that had immediate ramifications on provincial political life. The chapters that follow will dwell repeatedly on two key themes that defined these crises and dogged Russia's administrators both at the centre and in the provinces. These two inextricably linked themes are Russia's participation in the First World War and economic crisis.

The First World War placed an unprecedented strain on Russia's economy and society. We can see the war as the Provisional Government's midwife, but also its executioner. Having contributed in no small part to the collapse of the tsarist regime, involvement in the war was too great a burden for the new Provisional Government. The war's implications for Russia were massive and profound. Mass warfare demanded total mobilisation, of men, of industry and of the economy at large. Peter Gatrell estimates that 12 per cent of Russia's population, or 17.5 million people, were displaced by the war.¹⁴ This population displacement placed unprecedented strain on the economy and society. The state was required to train, feed and equip the army, to provide subsidies for soldiers' families and to care for the wounded. On the home front, the loss of male workers placed pressure on agriculture and on the families who depended on their labour. Russia's transport system groaned under the strain of moving men, provisions and equipment across Russia's extensive front lines. The fighting drove large numbers of civilians away from their homes and into heartland Russia. These refugees placed further pressure on transport, on provisioning and on the state's infrastructure. Socially, the war was fundamentally politicising, causing ordinary workers, soldiers and peasants to redefine their relations with the state.¹⁵

Russia's economy moved towards meltdown in 1917. Exports of goods were virtually halted, both by the need to mobilise industry into military production, and by the disruption of trade routes. The balance of trade collapsed both on internal and external markets. By 1915–16, four-fifths of government expenditure was covered by deficit. This proportion actually worsened in 1917.¹⁶ It is easy to forget that the Provisional Government's

¹⁴ Peter Gatrell, *Russia's first world war: a social and economic history* (London, 2005), p. 222. Gatrell comes to these figures by estimating numbers of mobilised soldiers, prisoners of war and refugees.

¹⁵ See Sanborn's penetrating analysis of the social impact of war in Russia (Joshua A. Sanborn, 'Unsettling the empire: violent migrations and social disaster in Russia during World War I', *Journal of Modern History* 77 (2006), 290–324).

¹⁶ Gatrell, *Russia's first world war*, p. 134.