The Bolsheviks and the Russian Empire

This comparative historical sociology of the Bolshevik revolutionaries offers a reinterpretation of political radicalization in the last years of the Russian Empire. Finding that two-thirds of the Bolshevik leadership were ethnic minorities – Ukrainians, Latvians, Georgians, Jews, and others – this book examines the shared experiences of assimilation and socioethnic exclusion that underlay their class universalism. It suggests that imperial policies toward the Empire's diversity radicalized class and ethnicity as intersectional experiences, creating an assimilated but excluded elite: lower-class Russians and middle-class minorities universalized particular exclusions as they disproportionately sustained the economic and political burdens of maintaining the multiethnic Russian Empire. Political exclusions and quasi-assimilated social worlds enabled reinventions, as the Bolsheviks' social identities and routes to revolutionary radicalism show especially how a class-universalist politics was appealing to those seeking secularism in response to religious tensions, a universalist politics in which ethnic and geopolitical insecurities were exclusionary, and a tolerant "imperial" imaginary where Russification and illiberal repressions were most keenly felt.

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To my mother Carla, my father Giorgio, and my sister Roberta
and to Piccola, Devs, and Emma for love throughout

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Preface

This book is the work not of a historian, but of a comparative historical and political sociologist. So I note at the outset that there is no claim to have exhausted – or even extensively mined – the primary archival data on ninety-three Bolsheviks, or, to be sure, on the Russian Empire as a whole. Rather, this book is intended as a comparative historical sociology of a revolutionary elite, a collective biography of the emergence of "charisma" in the form of an excluded, but empire-oriented and multiethnic, intelligentsia. So I have made use of primary biographical sources as well as numerous political and historical studies of the Russian Empire and its many diverse constituent parts. I have drawn on these latter works quite shamelessly, in fact. But I have read both primary and secondary sources simply with a view to trying to understand lives and experiences, so my hope is that although there may be disagreement with an interpretation here or there, and although there may be errors or omissions here *and* there, in its totality I might have done justice to the cause of interpretive comparative historical sociology by getting right the essence of Bolshevism.

Guided by a broadly Weberian search for "elective affinities," much of my thinking in this book has been inspired by Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1967) and Ernest Gellner's *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (1998). Although there is little substantive or direct engagement with these two very different works, they suggested ways of organizing the material, and, taken together, they offered a way to combine very particular social worlds with a more general comparative social explanation – mindful that although there are no straight causal lines, it is still worth trying to discern those political alignments and social patterns that do seem sociologically powerful. More specifically, they prompted me to think about how to interpret individual internal landscapes against those external landscapes that can shape the contours of social thought as much as they can the possibilities of its political expression; that is, I thought to combine an account of the larger forces that impact individual radicalizations with

a deeper and richer elaboration of the diverse ways in which smaller and more intimate contexts might themselves seek to valorize those larger forces – especially in lives experienced along boundaries of assimilation and exclusion. I also came to appreciate that, in addition to the class dislocations inherent in the "making of the modern world," living in complex diversity could also produce relevant social experiences; so I took the idea that as important as its class analyses no doubt were, socialism's *political* implications might also be crucial to defining both internal and external landscapes.

In short, my aim has been to offer a substantive social explanation, and to extend a tradition of comparative historical sociology of revolutions by contextualizing – and indeed by re-embedding – revolutionary Bolshevism into the imperial context from which it emerged. Accordingly, I prefigure a methodological point made in Chapter 1: the biographical reconstructions that comprise this book are interpretive accounts, pieced together from autobiographies, biographies (official and non-official), census data, Tsarist police records, studies of specific political mobilizations, area studies, studies of nationality policies or specific ethnic groups, urban and rural studies of specific locations, studies of working classes, and the like. I have attempted as carefully and as plausibly as possible to reconstruct the intricate variety of social worlds that produced the Bolshevik revolutionary elite. My aim has been to ensure that the macro explanations offered are also sociologically true, in their most intimate and relevant implications, at the individual level. So while contextual biographical details obviously differed across the many individuals, to the extent that there was a universally shared dimension of experience in the particulars, that is where I began, and I built outward from there.

In doing so, it seemed to me that a particular sociology of political marginality – one often inflected by the failed promises of assimilation – constituted a very potent and defining social experience with considerable political implications. As individuals negotiated social worlds characterized by quasi-integration, ambiguous social statuses and dislocations, socioethnic marginalities, and political exclusions, they also marked out new boundaries around both cultural and class assimilations. And this, it seemed to me, produced its own quite distinctive kind of alienation and political aspiration. Or, to put it another way, the dislocations, exclusions, and rootlessness that paid the costs of empire also enabled considerable reinvention, assisted by underlying social and political crises that helped define the qualities of a generation.

More practically, some biographical reconstructions involve greater detail than others – partly because of the unevenness of the sources and partly because of the dictates of the data set itself: there were too many Russians, for instance, to treat each in detail even if the sources had allowed it; and some of the ninety-three Bolsheviks are treated briefly, or not discussed at all, if sources were too limited. So the chapters that comprise Part II are purposely uneven: Chapter 4 considers three Bolsheviks in some detail to provide a more textured and nuanced sense of distinct, but overlapping, individual worlds; Chapter 8, on the other hand, offers only brief, illustrative summaries of individuals to

allow the presentation of a more general finding. The remaining chapters are arrayed somewhere in between. Taken in their totality, however, my hope is that a sense of collective biography emerges through the accumulation of these variations in the presentation of the data.

Nevertheless, it may be that if for some readers there is too much biographical detail, for others there may not be enough. For the former reader, it is possible to simply ignore the "local detail" of the various biographical reconstructions and to extract the central claims of each chapter from its introduction and conclusion, and from the setup pages to Part II, mindful of their place in the wider claims of the book. The concerns of the latter reader are more difficult to satisfy, other than simply referring to the more extensive primary and secondary sources.

And finally, a comment on the *matryoshka* organization of the chapters in Part II and their relation to the wider argument: although this is a single case study – that is, a study of a single elite – there are six comparative ethnicity/nationality case studies within it, and within them still further nested comparisons. But the six chapters are each differently organized. For instance, Chapter 3 on the Jewish Bolsheviks is organized "ethnically," to examine comparatively Lithuanian Jewry, Ukrainian Jewry, and Russian Jewry; Chapter 9 contrasts three nationalities – Georgians, Azerbaijani Turks, and Armenians – but it does so against a view of the South Caucasus as a single imperial borderland; and whereas Chapters 6 (the Latvians) and 8 (the ethnic Russians) divide the Bolsheviks by their respective class compositions, Chapter 5 explores the diversity within Ukrainian Bolshevism geographically or regionally. In other words, different elective affinities within Bolshevism's constituent groups dictated the chapters' internal organizations – mirroring the general argument. Table 2.1 (Chapter 2) seeks to capture these analytical pieces, tying the politics of the empire's intricate socioethnic mosaic to the socioethnic composition of both leftist and rightist politics in revolutionary Russia; and the four strategies of empire, also outlined in Chapter 2, provide the frame on which the subsequent empirical material hangs. The chapters in Part I, then, present the broad context and the main contours of the argument, whereas those in Part II deconstruct it in case studies.

Several acknowledgments are due. Most immediately, I owe an enormous debt to John A. Hall. His early intellectual guidance, incredible knowledge, and consistent encouragement have meant everything. As importantly, John's own scholarly work – elegant and important sociology, articulated with clarity and substance – has been a North Star, an intellectual vision that has influenced me immensely.

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Note on Transliterations and Names

I have generally followed the Library of Congress system for transliteration, except where sources themselves differ substantially, or where the most common usage is otherwise. For the Bolsheviks' names, I adopt the form that is most commonly used in the general secondary literature: so I use Trotsky, not Trotskii. For some, the Russified form (Dzerzhinskii) is now less commonly used than their "ethnic" form (Dzierżyński), so in those cases I use the latter. But at the place where the Bolshevik is first introduced, and if I adopt a more common usage, I note both Jan Danishevskii (Julijs Daniševskis).

For cities and provinces in the Russian Empire, I generally follow the typical or most common usage in the primary sources or, if more common, in the secondary literature. So I refer to Tiflis, not Tiblisi, and Vilna, not Vilnius or Wilno.