The Russian Revolution: A New History

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In *The Russian Revolution*, historian Sean McMeekin traces the origins and events of the Russian Revolution, which ended Romanov rule, ushered the Bolsheviks into power, and changed the course of world history. Between 1900 and 1920, Russia underwent a complete and irreversible transformation: by the end of these two decades, a new regime was in place, the economy had collapsed, and over 20 million Russians had died during the revolution and what followed. Still, Bolshevik power remained intact due to a remarkable combination of military prowess, violent terror tactics, and the failures of their opposition. And as McMeekin shows, Russia's revolutionaries were aided at nearly every step by countries like Germany and Sweden who sought to benefit—politically and economically—from the chaotic changes overtaking the country.

The first comprehensive history of these momentous events in a decade, *The Russian Revolution* combines cutting-edge scholarship and a fast-paced narrative to shed new light on a great turning point of the twentieth century.

The Russian Revolution: A New History Details

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From Reader Review The Russian Revolution: A New History for online ebook

Christopher Shoup says

Communism is the worst. Lenin was terribly lucky in his enemies, which was unlucky for the 25 million Russians who died as a result of his coming to lower instead of a Constitutional Romanov monarchy.

Liviu says

shorter than I expected (there are 150 pages of notes, references etc) but captivating like a page turner novel; the main thrust (argued well) is how preparing for 1917, Russia was actually very well positioned to defeat the Central powers who were the ones on the verge of meltdown, but a weak Tsar with no inner circle worth mentioning and reeling from Rasputin's assassination in December 1916, talkative but ineffective politicians, able to stir trouble but ultimately not to control it, and generals who thought that staying out of "politics" is part of their job, led to the February Revolution and the provisional government and then the Germans made their move sending Lenin (and others) with a ton of money to disrupt it; with a clear eye on power at all costs and with a clear idea - transforming the "imperialist war" in civil war to destroy society and remake it in his vision, Lenin was unrelenting in the pursuit of power and despite missteps and internal opposition from most other Bolshevik leaders who actually living in Russia, thought Lenin's ideas crazy, the combination of self-destruction from various politicians that led the provisional government, Lenin's ability to pay agitators with German money to destabilize the front and the general war wariness of the peasant soldiers (obviously not knowing that Lenin would first send them back to fight an even more gruesome war against all opposition and then to destroy the villages and take the land and the food until he was forced to temporary retreat from maximalist socialism with the NEP) allowed him to eventually take power fairly easily in October 1917 and then by surrendering to the Germans at Brest Litovsk in early 1918 to insure the survival of his regime

Later in 1918, the Germans were getting fed up with the Bolsheviks - and preparing to march on Moscow and depose them but their defeat in the west and the British giving up on the blockade of the Soviet state allowed the regime to buy (with looted gold, precious stones and works of art) all the armament needed through Sweden and crush its opponents in late 1919, early 1920, only for that to be followed by the brutal war against the peasants, the workers who saw the realities of Bolshevism and rebelled (most notably at Kronstadt in 1921, the original bolshevik power center of 1917, turned into a mass grave by Trotsky) and basically anyone saying anything, so inaugurating a regime 100 times more oppressive and brutal than the tsarist one it replaced

Excellent overview of the beginning of the destruction of Russia by the most brutal regime of the 20th century who inaugurated mass murder on industrial scale (though sadly it won't be the last one)

Russell Pryor says

What I learned from McMeekin: Lenin and the Bolsheviks worked for the Germans. The tsar wasn't too bad (but he did get bad advice at critical junctures). Kornilov and Denikin were good, patriotic Russians who would've probably done a fine job running the country. The Bolshevik "coup" was easily avoidable.

If you're interested in a moderate, dispassionate presentation of a fairly reactionary, monarchist view of the Russian Revolution, McMeekin is the place to go. It's not so much a "new" history, but it does ignore most of the recent scholarship. Unless you're a graduate student reading for exams or just a glutton for pain, I suggest finding another, better book on the revolution. Shelia Fitzpatrick's "The Russian Revolution," one of the many books he swipes at in the introduction, is a good place to start.

Alex Moskalyuk says

Good insight and analysis of the events, plenty of historical references and overall great research. Gets dry occasionally, but overall covers a quite captivating storyline of the world's bloodiest regime.

Charles says

I am currently very focused on the ascent to power of Communism in Russia, not because it had anything to recommend it, but for the lessons it can teach us. Some of those lessons are ones the author of this book, Sean McMeekin, wants to impart—the dangers of left-wing ideology, primarily. Those are valuable lessons, certainly, but if we haven’t learned them after many decades of left-wing horror shows, we’re not going to learn them from this book. The lessons I am seeking, therefore, are more dynamic: how power can be grasped and used in fluid, chaotic situations, and by what kind of people. And those lessons are also on full display in this book, even if I did not learn any new ones.

By “A New History,” McMeekin really means a somewhat revisionist history. Two main grounds of revision are relevant in twentieth-century Russian history. One is the flood of information that has poured out of Communist archives in the past few decades. The other, related but distinct, is the holes that have been punched in the wall of silence erected around the crimes of Communism by the Left for the past century. These slashes in the fabric of the academic popular front were first made by brave scholars such as Robert Conquest and by men such as Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn. The latter revisionism began before the fall of the Soviet Union, and the predictable response at the time was the excoriation of and attacks on the brave men who dared to question the fruits of Communism, and frenzied denial of the truths they revealed, by the global Left which for a century has traveled in lockstep with Communism, complicit in its crimes up to the present day. (True, Solzhenitsyn in the late 1970s did have some impact in getting leftists to think that Soviet Communism wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, not that that reduced their faith in Communism itself.) The latter revisionism gained strength from the former revisionism after 1990, so now they work in tandem, producing works such as McMeekin’s. Of course, he has been attacked for the same reasons as Conquest. Famously, when asked to submit a new title for his 1968 book "The Great Terror," in 1991, Conquest is said to have suggested (though it was actually Kingsley Amis) "I Told You So, You F—-ing Fools." Funny, in a bitter way, but illustrative.

McMeekin offers restrained revisionism. He doesn’t have to convince anyone that Communism was bad; those who still believe it wasn’t aren’t going to be convinced; they are ideologues in the James Burnham definition. It is in other matters that McMeekin pulls back the curtain. He sets the stage by showing to be false the idea we all have latently in our heads, that fin de siècle Imperial Russia was a backward and stagnant land, to which the Bolsheviks, whatever their faults, brought the modern age. Part of dispelling this illusion is statistics on industrialization and the like, but more powerful still is one simple fact: “Russia in the early twentieth century was a substantial net importer of both people and capital: a telling fact that, since the revolution, has never been true again.” In many ways, the economic Russia of 1900 was like the China of 2010, and it was Communism, made possible by the war, that threw it into the abyss. Viewing Russia in this

way resets our vision—we see that thinking of Tsarist Russia as a semi-barbarous land of black bread and serfs is the result of a century of deliberate philo-Communist propaganda in the West, meant to make us view Communism as at least bringing Russia up to date, when in fact it almost certainly would have done that all by itself, leading to a very different twentieth century (and, perhaps, a different vision of politics than that in which the West has enmired itself).

Along the same lines, McMeekin shows that the Tsarist regime was hardly one of terror. McMeekin points out that between 1825 and 1917, fewer than seventy people per year were executed in the entire country—not for political offenses, but for all offenses, including murder. This, when thousands of government officials were assassinated by the Left every year—3,600 in 1905, for example. The Bolsheviks executed hundreds of thousands, if not millions, within the early years of their power. Thus, not only did the Bolsheviks not cause the modernization of Russia, they did not relieve the country of terror, because in Imperial Russia there was no terror, or even substantial oppression (autocracy is not oppression), nor, for that matter, did they even ever provide “land and bread,” in the words of the slogan they stole from the Social Revolutionaries. The Communists, that is, had absolutely nothing at all to recommend them, despite what we were instructed by their allies in the West through the entire past century (including, for example, my high school history teacher, who was an open fan of the Soviet Union, and formally stole eight weeks of our American history course to indoctrinate us with a fictionalized Soviet history consisting mostly of Communist apologetics.)

McMeekin begins with the murder of Rasputin, at the end of 1916. This may seem like too melodramatic a way to begin, but McMeekin does a good job of tying Rasputin into all the threads of his book, not least the irony that Rasputin strongly opposed Russia entering the war, and that if his advice has been followed, the Tsar would doubtless have reigned for longer. The real meat of the book starts in 1905, though, with Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, resulting in unrest across Russia, including, crucially for later, among the armed forces. The Tsar, Nicholas II, conceded the convention of the Duma, an “Imperial Assembly” that would offer a form of parliament for the first time. Nicholas had been warned by Sergei Witte, a key advisor and architect of much of Russia’s economic growth, that he must either have some form of genuine constitutionalism, a backing away from autocracy, or crush the unrest with by military dictatorship. He picked the former, although perhaps he should have picked the latter—but then, Nicholas was never able to choose that path. He was no Napoleon; he was a gentle man, tossed about by history and imprisoned by his own mind. A saint, perhaps, but not a man up to the job. In the short run, however, creating the Duma while shooting a few active rebels quelled the unrest.

Witte was succeeded as the Tsar’s premier advisor by Peter Stolypin, who crushed further unrest by using martial law in areas of revolt and executing hundreds of leftist rebels, while at the same time enacting reforms such as expanded rights against arbitrary arrest. He was no fan of socialist parliamentarians; McMeekin quotes him as saying “You want a great upheaval. We want a great Russia!” MRGA! He led and oversaw an even greater economic boom, not through free markets or globalism, but through state capitalism, the same way every great nation, including Britain and the United States, built their economies. Stolypin, and therefore the Tsar, gave everyone rising wages and a greater stake in society, including industrial workers through good jobs and peasants through land reform of converting communal holdings to private holdings, turning Russia into a massive exporter of grain. A large part of Stolypin’s efforts went to preserving peace, since he could see very well that war would throw his plans off track—he said, “Give the state twenty years of peace, and you will not recognize present-day Russia.” Sounds like a foreshadowing of Trump, or what Trump could have been were he disciplined—but Stolypin didn’t get twenty years, he got five, assassinated in 1911.

Things went downhill from there. A significant percentage of the Russian upper classes were eager for war with Germany, which, of course, they got. McMeekin’s focus is, unsurprisingly, not the war in Flanders, but on the other side of the continent, which, while it was up and down, generally featured Russian success. And by January 1917, Russian military morale was extremely high, weapons stocks were also high, and the

capture of Constantinople was eagerly awaited in the summer. Nor were civilians suffering unduly, contrary to myth—there were not actually bread shortages in Petrograd, and strikes were fewer than they had been (in large part because the Germans had stopped subsidizing strikers). There was nonetheless a great deal of political unrest, both among leftists opposed to the government's mere existence, and among government factions opposed to each other, with some also opposing the Tsar and the conduct of the war—not that it should be ended, but objecting that the Tsar was unduly influenced by pro-German elements, starting with his wife. In part due to unseasonably warm weather, Socialist Revolutionary-led protests spiraled upwards, leading to a general strike and military mutinies among bored and propagandized rear echelon troops stationed in Petrograd (helped along, as McMeekin notes, "by the presence of pretty young women."). The Tsar was out of town, and either unwilling or unable to react decisively, so various unscrupulous and grasping politicians stepped into the gap (especially one Mikhail Rodzianko, forgotten today but on whom McMeekin focuses closely), further confusing the situation. Given dubious and conflicting advice, and faced with inadequate loyal military resources, the Tsar abdicated. The Socialist Revolutionary lawyer Alexander Kerensky quickly rose to the top of this flotsam, and he promptly, and fatally for later, engineered a reversal of military morale, releasing soldiers from many disciplinary obligations and subjecting them to the local soviets (the order, "Order No. 1," technically applied only to the Petrograd garrison, but was treated as applicable to all soldiers).

Into this chaos stepped the Bolsheviks, in the person of Lenin, back from multi-year exile and funded with the equivalent of, today, more than a billion dollars in German gold. While the Bolsheviks had been relevant, though far from dominant, players on the leftist revolutionary scene, what made them was German funding. For example, when Lenin arrived in April, he immediately bought a giant printing press for the equivalent, today, of tens of millions of dollars, and promptly deluged the city with Bolshevik propaganda. Money was also used to fund demonstrators—a common daily payment per person was ten gold rubles in cash, roughly $500 today. In fact, money was used for every purpose that money can be used for, and we would never have heard of the Bolsheviks if not for German money. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, this German funding was denied by the Communists, and by their fifth columns in the West, but today is heavily documented, though the records are still incomplete, as McMeekin notes. Still, shrill leftist denials are often heard of these basic facts, always without any counter-evidence, naturally.

Lenin, as always, had a plan, and it did not involve the continuation of Kerensky's Socialist Revolutionary-led Provisional Government. Kerensky was incompetent, in any case, and surrounded by a variety of other incompetents, even if McMeekin prefers the more delicate criticisms of "amateurism" and "little stomach for the exercise of power." While Kerensky toured front-line troops to rebuild morale he had undermined, hoping to bring the war to a successful end, the Bolsheviks spent hundreds of millions to turn the war into a civil war, a matter of deliberate Communist policy. This was done through propaganda, through paying agitators among troops, and by buying politicians, all with great success.

Kerensky's biggest failure in these months was not executing Lenin after a failed putsch by the Bolsheviks in July, 2017. In fact, a running theme of the book is that the Tsars, and later the liberals of the February Revolution, failed to be adequately harsh with their opponents, and paid the price. (By the same token, as has often been pointed out, Lenin was fortunate in his enemies.) McMeekin goes over in great detail Kerensky's disastrous decision to release, after their failed putsch, and instead to effectively ally himself with, the Bolsheviks, against a non-existent right-wing threat. (It was here that Kerensky announced his infamous dogma of "no enemies to the Left," which has ever since characterized all leftist thought.) And, as we all know, in October the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government, ensconcing themselves permanently in power (whereupon Kerensky fled, ultimately dying in New York in 1970, where he was denied Orthodox burial for the sins he had unleashed on Russia).

The rest of the book covers the Bolsheviks in power, which they began by executing more than fifteen thousand people in the first two months alone (as McMeekin points out, more than twice the number executed in the entire last century of tsarist rule). It covers the civil war (detailing what seems like the

besetting sin of insurgency movements, the inability to cooperate adequately), the implosion of the Russian economy, and the Bolsheviks running out of weapons, and how the Swedes kept the Bolsheviks afloat with guns and railroad engines, so they could get their hands on the Tsar's gold (the German gold all having been long spent). It covers the Kronstadt rebellion and the resulting final dropping of the Bolshevik mask of being a "worker's party." It covers the 1921 famine (caused accidentally by Communism, not deliberately like later famines), alleviated not by the Bolsheviks, who spent what money they had left to foment revolution in Europe, but by Herbert Hoover and American Christian organizations. Naturally Lenin, with his "ice-cold grasp of power relationships," used the famine as an excuse to steal everything owned by the Orthodox Church, which was a lot less than he expected and none of which was spent on famine relief.

Lenin came through all this, lucky as usual and greatly helped by sympathizers in the West, as well as by opportunistic politicians like Lloyd George, and at the end of 1922 the Bolsheviks were firmly in power and able to continue their reign of terror without fear of overthrow. Here McMeekin concludes his book, noting that the lesson we should learn is that we should "stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets promising social perfection." By this he explicitly means left-wing prophets, noting with distaste the rising Western "popularity of Marxist-style maximalist socialism," and its lack of appeal anywhere it was actually in power. Unfortunately, none of the young people today crying out for "democratic socialism" are going to read this book, since few of those people read books at all, other than, perhaps, some Howard Zinn.

McMeekin characterizes Lenin's seizure of power as a "hostile takeover." By this he means that it succeeded without popular support, but rather by machination, which is certainly true. Lenin did not have a magic formula; other than simple luck, what made him successful was a combination of an iron will, unblinking focus, and the Kaiser's money. Lenin grasped that history is a kaleidoscope, and when it turns, entirely new and unexpected combinations arise. And they arise not in some logical progression, but, as McMeekin notes of events in 1917, "at a bewildering pace." For some reason, most people have difficulty dealing with the reality that great changes are phase changes; step functions, not linear slopes. They imagine that the future will be much like the past, because that's their daily experience. Seeing beyond that, or more precisely, acting beyond that with consistency over time, is a rare talent.

I suppose I did not learn any new lessons from this book, despite that being my reason for reading it. I have elsewhere offered detailed thoughts on what we can learn from Lenin's career, which I will not repeat here, and this book merely reinforced those. Still, this is an excellent book, and for someone looking to learn more about 1917 in Russia, this is certainly the modern book to read.

Jan Chlapowski Söderlund says

* * * * - *I really liked this account of the Russian Revolution.*

This book by Sean McMeekin is the first one on the topic of the Russian Revolution which I have read. I have previously read more than the average non-Russian person about Russian history, but I am in no way an expert on the subject.

"The Russian Revolution: A New History" portrays the Bolsheviks as ruthless semi-gangsters, who are mainly driven by a will to power. They disguise this power-hunger with a veneer of political jargon and Marxist phraseology. It was very enlightening to read about the very beginning of the Revolution, how favourable circumstances and luck can play such a large role in historical events.

I cannot vouch for this book's accuracy. But it struck me as reasonably accurate. At least it has spurred my interest and I plan to read more on the topic!

Barry says

A little dry, but very informative. The author does not try to minimize or justify the atrocities committed during this bloody revolution.

From the epilogue: "If the last hundred years teaches us anything, it is that we should stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets promising social perfection. The Russians who followed Lenin in 1917 had good grounds for resenting the tsarist government that had plunged them into a terrible war for which they were unprepared, and they had little reason to expect that the regime they were creating would unleash far greater terrors. They could not have known, then, what Communism truly meant. A century of well-catalogued disasters later, no one should have the excuse of ignorance."

Barry Smirnoff says

I can not recommend this book to the general reader. I seems that McMeekin has decided to go against the prevailing views about the Russian Revolution and conjure up his own interpretation of the events and their significance. His major theme is that the Bolsheviks won the revolution because they received the financial support of the Germans. The theory of "German Gold" goes back to the Right Wing Newspapers during the time of the revolution. He seems to have concentrated his study on the movement of large sums of money and gold during the course of 1917-1920. This is an interesting approach, but it fails to account for the actual meaning of the events that occurred. He describes the Lenin's theories of Proletarian Revolution as some kind of ploy to undermine the Russian Army and pave the way for a German victory. Toward this end, he concocts stories of the Bolsheviks being flush with cash to pay off peasants to do their bidding. Lenin concocted a hostile takeover of the Russian Army and Navy. This theory has no basis in fact and this book should be exposed for the fraud that it is. It is nothing but Trump "alternative facts" being applied to scholarship. McMeekin is a professor at Bard College and this author does not speak well for this school's level of scholarship. Nor does it speak well for its publisher, Basic Books. Everyone connected to this book should feel ashamed!

Tom says

An enlightening account of the Russian revolution, written succinctly but with enough detail to provide clear understanding of the events. Starting in the late 19th century, McMeekin lays out the seeds of discord already having been sowed. Moving into the early 20th century, we see a war-weary Russia and frustration among soldiers. With ww1, this was prime opportunity to capitalize on this discord for the orchestration of the coup against the Duma. Even though the Bolsheviks did not have the majority to rule, nor did they have peasantry support, from 1917-1920 they exercised the type of control, force, coercion, and terrorism for which they rebelled against the Tsar for using to finally gain control. The book ends recounting the multiple failures of the Lenin regime - massive starvation, hyper-inflation, establishment of totalitarianism, war against the church, etc. A good read for those who want something less doctrinaire than those works who either praise the revolution or which don't give adequate understanding for how and why it happened.

Marks54 says

Sean McMeekin is a wonderful historian. His recent books on the run up to WW1 and the end of the Ottoman Empire are really well done. In his most recent book, he presents a "new history" of the Russian Revolution to take advantage of the opening up of state archives following 1990. His intent is to relay what happened and try to avoid the meshing of history and ideology that has happened in either Soviet accounts of the events or in extraordinarily critical Western accounts (Pipes and others). The result is a revealing book that shows just how contingent the events of 1917-1918 were, raising issues of how the world might have developed differently has the reign of Nicholas taken different turns (with Rasputin among others) or had the socialists of the February revolution, especially Kerensky, made different choices when it was their turn to move. Most interesting of all is the light that McMeekin shines on the Bolsheviks based on contemporary documentary evidence rather than the rewriting of history that became the hallmark of the Soviet state that Stalin built up.

I suspect that most people who have read anything about it have strong opinions about the revolution. That is unavoidable, especially for those who remember the Cold War. It is not clear that McMeekin will change many preconceptions about the revolution, although he may well do so. He does provide an account that makes the participants seem to be real people, some of whom thought very hard about what they were doing. The book also highlights the chaos of the Civil War and presses the reader to look at decisions from the viewpoint of participants who were under quite a bit of pressure at the time.

The highlights of the book for me were in the arguments about why and how the Bolsheviks were able to succeed in the revolution and civil war that followed, given their relatively small size and the large number of opponents they faced. McMeekin argues that the ability of the Bolshekiks to radicalize the northern armies was crucial to success in the revolution and provided the basis for the construction of the Red Army on the ruins of the Tsarist armies. This was possible in part due to the greater resources that the Bolsheviks enjoyed for communicating with the masses and for propagandizing their efforts. This involved the significant funding they received from Germany, who sent Lenin to Russia after the first revolution and provided with funding to by printing facilities and other materials. The support of Germany for Lenin was not lost on his opponents and the development of this story around the Brest-Litovsk treaty until the end of the war was a strong point of McMeekin's account.

I was fortunate to be able to read this book at the same time as I visited the incredible exhibition of the Russian Revolution at the British Library. The book was complementary to the wonderful exhibition and I strongly recommend the exhibition to anyone who is able to see it. I also recommend McMeekin's new book strongly.

Erik Graff says

This is a revisionist history of the political convulsions wracking Russia from, roughly, 1905 until the twenties. It's conservative, politically speaking, reminiscent of Schama's 'Citizens' and its handling of the French revolution. Both go to great lengths to underscore how good the prospects were for the ancient regimes of Russia and France, if only they'd been allowed time to reform themselves gradually. The big mistake, in imperial Russia's case, was to become involved in WWI. The biggest bogeyman of the tale is Lenin, though the liberal elites come in for their share of criticism as well. The unexpected hero, surprisingly enough, is Rasputin, a consistent opponent of the war.

My own background has included a lot of reading about Russian history, beginning with Trotsky's writings while I was back in high school. My prejudices therefore run in directions opposite to McMeekin's. Still, it's

good to read all sides of such contentious matters and to keep current. Here the author serves, his book having the benefit of such Soviet archival materials as have become available since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, for instance, one learns much more about how dependent Lenin and the Bolsheviks were on German financial support during the critical days of 1917.

Geevee says

Although at times a little dry and challenging given the sheer cast of players and military units this is a well-structured and informative overview of the revolution.

It is perhaps a shorter book than one might expect for such a period of change and impact, but with substantial sources and references the author is able to wave his view of events and how these took a country from a regime of monarchical superiority to one of non-monarchical self-elected superiority.

Of interest to me was not only the wider story of how the revolution came about but also how the author almost demotes the Tsar to a key but not overwhelming participant. To my mind this serves the book well as the struggles between people, groups and indeed countries plays out without - as some books do - constantly placing the royal family at the story's centre; yes they were central but only to a point and it is this aspect that rewards the reader to my mind.

Also well described is the Russian army and navy and its battles, morale and indeed conduct fighting the war. It continued to do so from early to mid-revolution and into Brest-Litovsk and all the while showing a differing pace, intent and tactics to the war depending on the commander, location and immediate situation (militarily), ethnicity of its units, and the enemy being faced (for example Turkish or say German).

Post-war how the French, German, British, Japanese, Chinese and Americans all engaged, treated, communicated, funded, fought and supported the new soviet regime is also covered. Here I was intrigued not just by the Reds/Whites, Polish and Czech wars and operations, including various landings, seizing of territory and diplomatic contacts with Russian armed forces and political units, but of the sheer number of weapons and aid shipped into Russia (this last especially so by the US who helped alleviate starvation in many areas).

It is this last point (starvation) that brings me to the penultimate chapter, and for me the book's best writing. This chapter deals with the regime's challenge of starvation and in tandem its war on the church. Outside of the USA's assistance to feed the Russian peoples the regime and notably Lenin in the author's view deliberately let millions starve; in part because they had no grain but also because all monies and booty - tons and tons of gold, silver, diamonds etc., taken from citizens and banks - was used to buy armaments, and in some cases good and high living rich foodstuffs such as chocolate for the new red bourgeoisie. The church was ravaged and robbed of tons and tons of treasure and historical worth. True it [church] should have given its valuables to help feed the poor but the gold, silver, jewels never turned to red wine and bread as Lenin's GPU and other agencies appropriated these back to the government to buy more machine-guns, rifles, bullets and so on: not to kill external enemies but, alongside famine, to be used as weapons of war on the population within Russian borders.

With Lenin's death in 1924 the stage is then set, as the book ends, for Joseph Stalin to continue purging and murdering in ever greater numbers the Russian peoples, who had in reality influenced and knew little of the revolution as it happened and endured famine and treatment far worse and deaths in greater numbers than ever under the monarchy.

My copy (hardback first edition) benefited from many good quality black and white maps and photographs.

All in all a solid three star informative book from an author who I have read before.

Mark Mortensen says

The author, Bard College professor Sean McMeekin, is certainly an authority on the Russian Revolution surrounding World War I. I was not able to fully absorb the abundance of facts and material, which I found overwhelming and a bit dry at times, but I did comprehend an overview. The revolution had several factions and it appears that the one best at propaganda, as well as plundering gold and treasures, achieved control and authority. I'm most thankful that my reading was for pleasure and not a mid-term exam!

Matt says

"Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship…The object of power is power."
- George Orwell, *1984*

Russian history is a vast subject, and there have been written many vast books that attempt to capture the enormity of Russia's oft-convulsive drama. Accordingly, the first thing that struck me about Sean McMeekin's *The Russian Revolution* is its relative brevity. At 352 pages of text, it's not exactly a *Denny's* menu. But when compared to other similarly-themed entries, such as Richard Pipe's *The Russian Revolution*, at 842 pages, or Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy*, at 824 pages, it feels practically brief.

The reason is that McMeekin has something very particular to say, and he goes about saying it in an efficient and straightforward manner. In short, he wants to demolish any claim that the Russian Communist Party had "to democratic, popular, or moral legitimacy." Though he acknowledges other books have taken this tact before (and it has been the prevailing view for some time), McMeekin feels the moment is right to deal another blow to the lingering ghosts of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and the rest.

Why? It's a good question, one that McMeekin explains rather poorly. To him, events such as the popularity of Thomas Picketty and Bernie Sanders hint at a red resurgence. Empirically speaking, this is not much proof of anything, other than an acknowledgement that capitalism isn't infallible. Moreover, if you look at the world right now, the specter of Communism doesn't really register as a looming danger. Despite this hyperbole, I'm not one to pass up a new volume on one of the epochal events in human history. Besides, I have enjoyed McMeekin's work in the past, and was willing to give this a try, despite a shaky mission statement.

McMeekin's view of the Russian Revolution is that it was not a revolution at all, but a coup. He spends the early chapters reframing the last years of the Old Regime. Rather than a country brought low by the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, McMeekin argues that Russia had, in many respects, made a full recovery. His argument is a bit more nuanced, but can be summed up by this motto: *Autocracy: It's Not as Bad as it Sounds!*

The pivotal moment, of course, is World War I, a subject that McMeekin has covered before in *July 1914*

and *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Contra received wisdom, McMeekin has always placed much of the blame for the outbreak of a world war in Russia's hands. Here, he sticks to that position in blunt terms:

> The most critical mistake of the tsarist government was the decision to go to war in 1914, a decision warmly applauded by Russian liberals and pan-Slavists but lamented by conservative monarchists. For this reason, it is hard to fault Nicholas II for refusing to take liberal advice during the war, to surrender power to ambitious politicians who had already shown poor judgment. Strange as it may seem to modern sensibilities that the tsar preferred the counsel of the peasant faith healer [Grigory] Rasputin to that of elected Duma leaders such as [Mikhail] Rodzianko, the fact is that, had he listened to Rasputin instead of Rodzianko in 1914, he might have died peacefully on his throne instead of being butchered by the Bolsheviks in July 1918

Once the war began, McMeekin is pretty sanguine about Russia's performance. He argues that, all things considered, the Russian Armies were doing pretty well (all successes in World War I being quite relative). Russia's liberals, however, believed the military effort to be floundering, and staged their revolution to improve the military situation. Once the Provisional Government took over, McMeekin cites Alexander Kerensky – who served as minister of war, minister of justice, and as minister-chairman – for numerous blunders with regard to his handling of the insurgent Bolsheviks. Kerensky had a chance to end the Bolsheviks for good and all after the so-called "July Days" mini revolution; instead, he lost sight of the prize, picked a fight with a popular general, and allowed them to rise again. When the Bolsheviks did come to power, they did so as a minority party, without a popular mandate. As they demonstrated, however, a clear goal, an iron will, and utter ruthlessness more than makes up for majority support.

Of course, Kerensky was not acting in a vacuum. There were other players involved. One of the big ones was Germany. McMeekin spends a lot of time detailing the role the Germans played in smuggling Lenin into Russia as a kind of poison pill. Accusations of Lenin being a German agent began contemporaneously with the events of the Russian Revolution. To McMeekin, the money trail shows this to be literally true. According to him, the Germans contributed some 50 million gold marks ($1 billion today) to Lenin's party. If true, this was money well spent, for it was the Bolshevik influence on the armies – not a decisive battle – that ultimately caused it to collapse.

I haven't read a ton of books on the Russian Revolution, so part of *The Russian Revolution*'s value to me is that it easy to follow. He is judicious in deciding what details to put in, and what to leave out. There were times, for instance, when I got bogged down in *A People's Tragedy*. That didn't happen here. McMeekin keeps things moving along at a solid pace. Furthermore, by presenting his narrative as an argument, McMeekin provides a good framework for understanding a complex historical topic. I'm no Russian expert, though I do drink the occasional vodka drink, and I have a Soviet artilleryman's uniform my dad purchased when the USSR collapsed. This means I can't unqualifiedly endorse or discard McMeekin's interpretations. Nevertheless, by being direct, pithy, and opinionated, he delivers a book of refreshing clarity.

Of course, by pairing things down to their essence, you do lose a bit of "color." There are no rich biographical portraits of the many fascinating characters on this crowded stage. There are no in-depth set pieces that put you into the heart of the action, whether it's a rally on the streets of Petrograd, a futile assault on an Austro-Hungarian trench, or in the basement of the Ipatiev House as the Tsar's executioners gather.

Typically, I prefer more detail to less. Typically, I prefer a bigger, more generous type of history, one that is more immersive. But I also recognize that when it comes to the Russian Revolution, what I want in my reading life and what I need are separate things. For readers like me, *The Russian Revolution* is valuable as a

fresh, up-to-date, and readable account of a hugely complicated and important world-historical turning point. And for readers like future-me (the me that drinks less vodka and reads more Russian history books), it has interpretations and opinions that are well-earned, and must be considered, whether or not you agree with them.

James says

Sean McMeekin's book is interesting and readable - sometimes grippingly so. His fresh perspective on the Revolution stabs at the myths and legends of a seminal moment in modern history, and his take on the military situation for Russia in 1917 is extremely well-written. For the most part, his chronological narrative drives the reader very surely through the utter turmoil of the Tsarist-to-Leninist years, depositing them around Lenin's death in 1924.

So yes: it is worth a read. But this is despite McMeekin's determination to make it, at times, an unnecessarily agonising piece of work.

This is due to his fresh perspective, which comes from a place of deep hostility towards left-of-centre politics. His introduction and conclusion even carries a warning about Bernie Sanders and the left-wing renaissance in the West, which is not only absurd and insulting but actively depreciates the objective value of the narrative in between. This feeling is only heightened by the choices McMeekin makes in telling the story - such as his insinuations of Lenin's cowardice (his "mysterious illness" which rendered him unable to speak at a revolutionary meeting), or his emphasis on a single witness' deposition that the Bolsheviks handed out roubles to crowds. Despite initially explaining that there is conflicting testimony over whether Trotsky called for Kerensky's murder before October 1917, he later presents it as an accepted fact. Had McMeekin cooled his ideological urge to rebuke socialism, the book would be less susceptible to accusations of right-wing bias.

McMeekin's increasingly irritating narrative would be easier to escape from were we structurally chained to it; there is actually very little depth to his depiction of Russia after the excellent pre-war chapters. After 1917 there is civil war, war on the peasantry, famine, war on the church, and the ever-present threat of bankruptcy. Yet the psychological, cultural and social effect this must have had on the people of Russia (quite apart from the political leap from absolutism to communism in 9 months) must have been enormous: McMeekin never explores it. The lives of White Russians after their explusion from their homeland: never explored. For all that it is hailed as a 'geopolitical' history, the electrifying effect Bolshevism had on socialists world-wide: never explored.

Finally, McMeekin does a thorough job of describing the villainry of figures like Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin (his early career, at any rate). That is to be expected, even if it is not particularly original. But the critique feels distinctly lacking in intellectual substance. It is unreasonable to expect an Arendtian-style exposition of Russian totalitarianism, perhaps, but at no point does McMeekin really come to terms with political theory outside of a brief quote from Lenin or Marx. Kerensky's core beliefs, and the manner in which he felt he was achieving them, was one of my main reasons for picking up the book.

To conclude: enjoy the book, but revolt against it.
