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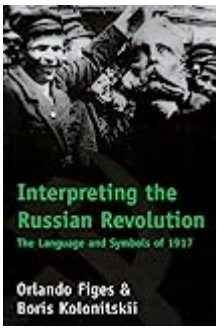

Orlando Figes, Boris Kolonitskii. *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 198 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08106-0.

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Meanings of the Revolution

Reviewers often refer to "gaps" in the literature, yet the gaps we perceive in nature range from the space between two front teeth to a breach in the mountains large enough for an interstate highway. Evidently, gaps in the literature are the size of one book, since that is what is said to fill them. However, the one thing certain is that a common word can bring to mind a variety of thoughts. The speaker or writer may try to use words in such a way as to minimize confusion, but there is a good chance that unintended associations will be made and some misinterpretation will take place. If proof be needed, try extolling "democracy" today in Novokuznetsk. We may hear the same word, but Americans and Russians are not on the same page. Ultimately it is not just a matter of differences between national political cultures. Because of our different paths through life each of us has worked out a language that is to some extent unique, despite the words we share with others. For my part, I cannot hear "gap" without thinking of "generation gap."

Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii indicate that *Interpreting the Russian Revolution* addresses a gap between the, still relatively few, studies in pre-revolutionary labor history that have taken language seriously and recent works on the social history of the thirties. The impact of the "new cultural history" on the study of the French Revolution is cited in support of this gap thesis. Figes' and Kolonitskii's study of the "language and symbols of 1917" does not fill the gap they have described. But the book does something more important than the usual filling of gaps. It opens up an expanse, more of a frontier than a gap, which can be studied productively for years to come. In this sense the book is exploratory, yet unlike many path-breaking efforts it is well-founded conceptually. It is also a pleasure to read the volume. Advanced students and most younger scholars of the period will take to this book readily. Senior scholars will miss an engaging intellectual challenge if they allow a whiff of the "linguistic turn" to hold them back.

Six interrelated themes are addressed in the book, five of them emerging primarily from interpretation of the written or spoken language, the other from life on the street. The latter theme, addressed in Chapter Two, "The Symbolic Revolution," opens up more new territory than the others, which deal with more familiar material, albeit

in a fresh way. "The Symbolic Revolution" delves into the texture of the revolution as it was experienced in daily life, as people attempted to remake their world. This was a true culture war, involving struggles over songs, placenames, flags, statuary, epaulettes, and forms of address. In part, the struggle to determine the trajectory of history and its meaning was structured by the symbolic geography of St. Petersburg. "The street generated its own leaders," who were not needed on a permanent basis but merely to embody the spirit of the moment (p. 36). The crowd could lead itself, moving in accordance with "long-established tradition, a spatial-cultural code of protest in the capital" (p. 38).

The authors effectively sketch St. Petersburg's revolutionary cultural landscape, although a more detailed treatment of the topic would be welcome. And there is no good reason why St. Petersburg should be the only center studied in this way. In other cities the general trend of Russian popular values and the recovered heritage of the French revolution may have come into unique combinations with local spatial-cultural traditions. However, these comments are in no way intended to detract from the authors' accomplishment in this chapter.

Chapter One introduces the first of several interwoven themes concerning language. "The Desacralization of the Monarchy" examines the Romanovs' fall from grace, as the prevailing popular attitude toward the Tsar changed from awe and worship to hatred and scorn. Especially important in this regard was "political pornography," which the figure of Rasputin particularly stimulated. Of course the actual policies of the Tsar and his government were vitally important. But the pervasive misperceptions of the royal family, which were fostered by lurid rumors and the tabloids' scandal-mongering, played no less a role in turning virtually everyone against the Tsar.

Two other themes in the book are especially closely related to the discussion of the "desacralization" of the Tsar: "The Cult of the Leader" (Chapter Three) and "Languages of Citizenship, Languages of Class" (Chapter Four). Figes and Kolonitskii argue that the collapse of the myth of the Tsar-as-demigod left a vacuum which could not be filled by democracy, because the latter, as it was embraced by most of the urban populace, was more of a "magic charm" (p. 71) than a form of government. In general terms, of course, this argument is not new. However, Figes and Kolonitskii convincingly depict how the liberal intelligentsia and the people in the street managed to use the same words while speaking different languages (p. 73). Perhaps they go too far when arguing that "there was no real cultural or social foundation for the liberal conception of democracy in Russia"(p. 123). Yet elsewhere the authors handle the issue more subtly, bringing the ambiguities of popular political culture to light. Whereas the workers' view of democracy was largely negative, insofar as it was defined by excluding the upper and middle classes, there was also a real concern for human rights. The workers had a "new moral vision of society" (p. 120) and a moral discourse to go along with it that were class-based and class-centered but which also aspired to universal justice.

Those who have read Figes's earlier works will not be surprised by the main conclusion of Chapter Five, "The Language of the Revolution in the Village." "The democratic revolution in the towns spoke a foreign language to the peasantry" (p. 152). This is not to say that the peasants were unable or entirely unwilling to learn another "language." It is well known now that peasants used official terminology when it was in their interest to do so. Moreover, the Provisional Government was eager to communicate with the peasants because, as Figes and Kolonitskii note, it was a "government of persuasion," which aimed to create "a new political nation" (p. 127) by peaceful means. Whether or not this project would have been viable under other circumstances is uncertain, but it does seem clear that there was hardly a chance of success in 1917. The type of nation-making that the government needed to pursue probably would have required several decades. It is difficult to imagine any such process without radical land reform. Then the government would have had to learn the peasants' language in a sense, perhaps by using agitators who could speak "peasant," such as the Communists later had in Kalinin. Finally, the government needed to build institutions in the countryside, such as courts, that the peasants would have found useful.[1] The Provisional Government was in no position to accomplish any of these tasks.

Some colleagues will take issue with Figes' and Kolonitskii's view of the peasantry. Specifically, it probably will be said that not all peasants were so ignorant and gullible as those described in this chapter as having misspelled and misconstrued such key words as "*respublika*" ("*rezh' publiku*") (p. 129). Not every village was a world to itself, it will be argued, nor were all peasants so backward and confused as they often appear in these pages. I am sure examples can be found to support this counter-argument, which may be as strong as the case presented by Figes and Kolonitskii. Both sides may be right, depending the places in rural Russia where evi-

dence is sought. The geographic patterns of social traits and relationships, such as literacy and familiarity with urban life, were distinctly uneven in the rural expanses of the former empire. Therefore, in my view, those who are interested in pursuing this debate should classify and map their data. It would be surprising if some regions were not more politically savvy than others. The peasant class, to the extent that such a concept makes sense, was not a sack of potatoes, as Marx once quipped. Peasants did not live in a sack or a category. They should be studied in their "natural" environments, the villages and regions that made up the real world of rural Russia.

Chapter Six, "Images of the Enemy," is the grimmest and probably the most crucial. The authors trace the roots of Russian political demonology back before the war, not just to the fanatical and pressurized world of the revolutionary underground but also to the Tsarist tradition of finding enemies on all sides and, most importantly, "within." During the war people of virtually all political outlooks cast blame on "dark forces" for the crises of the day. For the political right in 1917 the "dark forces" comprised the Bolsheviks, Jews, and other usual suspects. For their part, the Bolsheviks worked determinedly to inflame the masses' hatred of vaguely defined "burzhooi." In 1917 the political situation was intensely confusing, but the process of defining "the enemy" helped simplify matters for many. Later violence would simplify issues even more radically.

To this reviewer, it does not seem to have been predetermined that the exclusionary, vengeful side of the popular-socialist vision would win out. Nor was it simply a matter of Lenin manipulating the workers' language in order to manipulate the workers themselves, although that happened of course. Culture changes as life goes on – what the workers experienced in the 1917-1921 period played no small part in the shaping of their vision and discourse. I do not think that Figes and Kolonitskii would disagree in general terms with this view, but they do not offer suggestions about how we might go about "weighting" the contribution of Russian socialism's "fighting language" in the dreadful mixture of factors, such as hunger, disease, and homelessness, which also contributed to the process of coarsening, and the lethal simplifying, that turned "revolutionary culture" into "civil war mentality" (p. 173).

Authors should not be faulted for failing to address topics beyond the scope of their project. However, clearly the "civil war mentality" or, actually, mentalities, deserve much more attention. Peter Holquist's dissertation opened up the field and Don Raleigh has published a valuable study of Bolshevik "inside" and "outside" languages emerging in Saratov.[2] These are important beginnings, but a great deal more remains to be done to cover the formation of Soviet mentalities, with their variations through time and across space. The formation and diffusion of Soviet political culture, in the sense a process of colonization, needs much more attention. And then of course there were all the opponents, as well as groups caught between hostile forces, which inherited some elements from Russian political culture. Beyond the civil war a virtually unknown country awaits our attention in the form of NEP political culture, as well as its relationship to public culture generally.[3] For decades we have been interested in NEP's demise without exploring seriously what "it" actually was, especially as the period was experienced and conceptualized by those who lived there and then. This is a gap large enough for a number of studies to explore.

Figes's and Kolonitskii's work may serve as a bench mark for subsequent studies of Soviet political culture, as well as for studies of the revolution. Cultural turn or not, there is no "whimsy" in this very serious volume. The book is a path-breaking study of the role of systems of symbolic representation, especially language, in a vast, complex, and world-transforming struggle for power.[4] As in Figes's previous volume on the revolution, it seems to me that one particular theme serves as the lode star for the narrative – the defeat of the democratic project. In the present study, the authors appear to take another step toward the conclusion that liberal (or social) democracy in Russia was almost certain to fail because of fundamental elements in the political culture of workers and, even more so, of peasants.

At heart this is a gloomy view which some readers may ultimately find unpalatable. Probably the most disturbing aspect is implied rather than stated, but all the same it seems unavoidable. If workers and peasants embraced the cult of the leader and the demonization of "enemies," then these ordinary, long-suffering people must bear some of the blame for how things turned out. The alternative is to return to old views of the majority of the population as always being acted upon by historical forces, rather than as active interpreters and shapers of their culture and their world.

Notes

[1]. Jane Burbank, "Legal Culture, Citizenship, and Peasant Jurisprudence: Perspectives from the Early Twentieth Century," in Peter H. Solomon, Jr., ed., *Re-*

forming Justice in Russia, 1864-1996, Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997, pp. 82-106.

[2]. Peter Holquist, "A Russian Vendee: The Practice of Politics in the Don Countryside," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1996. Donald J. Raleigh, "Languages of Power: How the Saratov Bolsheviks Imagined Their Enemies," *Slavic Review* 57, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 320-349.

[3]. Jeffrey Brooks outlines official representation of public culture in the NEP period in his interesting new book, however most of the volume is devoted to the Stalinist period. See his *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[4]. My thanks to Susan McCaffray for reminding me about power in just the right terms.

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