

# LSE RB Feature Essay: The Centenary of the Russian Revolution by Geoffrey Swain

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2017-3-30

2017 marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution, which served as the inspiration for the recent LSE Literary Festival on the theme of 'Revolution'. Following the publication of his new book, **A Short History of the Russian Revolution (IB Tauris, 2017)**, **Geoffrey Swain** reflects on the events of October 2017, challenging the notion that the revolution was largely the result of a Bolshevik coup.

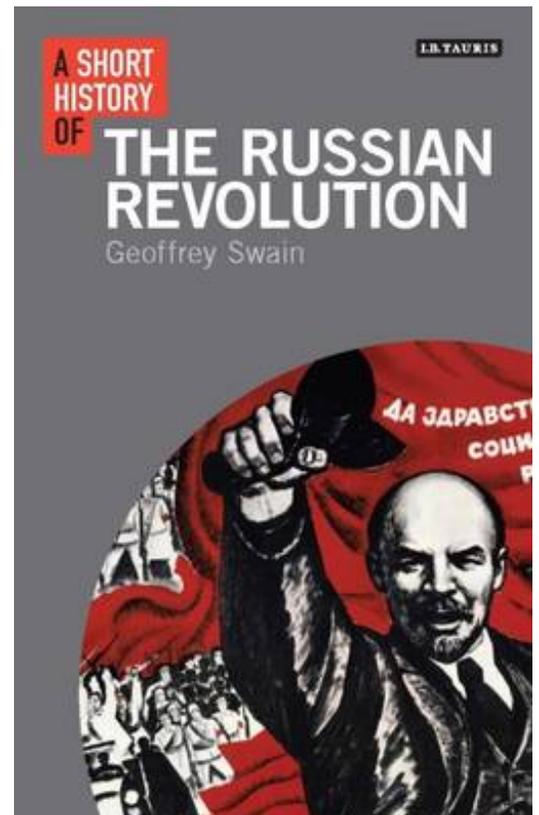
## The Centenary of the Russian Revolution

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It is 100 years since the twin February and October Revolutions of 1917, but Russia's President Putin is not celebrating. Putin does not like revolutions: the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolutions in Ukraine in 2004 and the Maidan Revolution in 2014 were for him the work of US agents and did not reflect widespread social unrest. Even the relatively minor demonstrations in Moscow in early 2012 Putin put down to the malignant intervention of Hilary Clinton, thus becoming part of his quixotic determination to stop her becoming US President.

A recent survey of Russian electors showed that the period 1917-23 – the years of revolution and civil war – were seen as Russia's worst: hardly any respondents considered that the social upheaval of this period had changed Russia for the better.\* Instead, the vast majority looked to the years before the revolution as the best era in Russian history, when the Russian Empire was strong but had introduced modest reforms to improve the lot of its citizens. And this is not accidental. Throughout his period in office, Putin has encouraged schools to teach history in this way. The Russian Tsar faced a shock in 1905 when popular unrest almost dethroned him. However, he listened: he established a popularly elected assembly, the Duma; he introduced modest social reforms for both workers and peasants; and in the years between 1905 and 1917, the Duma years, the Russian Empire blossomed.

This version of history is not new. It was propagated in the West in the 1960s when it was suggested that not only was Russia proceeding along a path towards modest and incremental reforms, but also that this process had undermined support for the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks had their moment during the upheaval of 1905, but thereafter the moderate Mensheviks grew in strength. Along with the Duma, the Tsar had allowed trade unions to start operating after 1905, and he had agreed that workers could benefit from a social insurance scheme. In this new climate, reformism, rather than revolution, was the order of the day. And when the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917, the Mensheviks were quick to further their reforming zeal by forming a coalition government with the liberals. That government dominated the Soviet and, loyal to the Allies, launched an offensive in the summer.





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From this perspective, the only logical explanation for how a popular reforming government was overthrown a few weeks later by the Bolsheviks is conspiracy. On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution, Richard Pipes wrote that the Bolshevik coup was 'so surreptitious' that Lenin refused 'to allow his plans to be committed to paper' (TLS, 6 Nov 1992). The trouble is that the Russian Empire was not a thriving, reformist state during the Duma years. In 1905 the Tsar restored order by force, making the bare minimum of concessions. The Duma was elected on a narrow franchise and was constantly threatened with dissolution. The trade unions could only operate under police surveillance and the social insurance legislation took five years of Duma debates to agree. In 1905 it was the workers who almost brought down the Tsar, and it was the workers who felt deceived when liberal politicians accepted the Tsar's derisory concessions. Between 1905 and 1917, there were relatively few occasions on which workers had the opportunity to choose between the Menshevik notion of joint action with the liberals for reform or the Bolshevik call for revolution, but when those occasions occurred, the workers consistently voted for the latter.

When the Tsar was overthrown in February 1917, it was again the result of action by revolutionary workers. There was no appetite for a deal with the liberals. It was, in fact, chance factors that led the Mensheviks to dominate revolution during the spring. When the First World War broke out, the Bolshevik deputies to the Duma were arrested, but the Mensheviks were not; so it was the Mensheviks who were in a position to make all the early moves. However, co-operation between the Mensheviks and the liberals was no more popular among the working class in 1917 than it had been during the Duma years, and as the economy began to nose-dive over the summer, workers turned increasingly to the Bolsheviks who encouraged them to take over their factories when the owners wanted to close them.

And it was not just the workers: peasants were equally frustrated that the coalition government's preference for reform rather than revolution meant delaying land reform. The coalition government was clear that only a democratically elected Constituent Assembly could decide on such an important issue, but since parts of the Russian Empire were under German occupation, the Constituent Assembly could only be summoned when victory came. The collapse of the summer offensive meant that victory was still a long way off, so by the autumn peasants had decided to seize the land themselves.

In October 1917 workers were taking over factories, peasants were seizing land: it was a social revolution aimed at completing the February Revolution and the failed revolution of 1905. And this social revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power. So is the story of a Bolshevik coup nonsense? Well, no. The Bolshevik leadership did stage a

coup in October 1917, but it was not a coup against the coalition government: it was a coup aimed at ensuring that the Bolsheviks, and only the Bolsheviks, benefited from the social revolution of October 1917. Lenin's coup was aimed against the party that by autumn 1917 had begun to speak for the majority of Russian peasants: the Left Socialist Revolutionaries or Left SRs. What took place in October 1917 was the establishment of a Soviet Government, a government responsible to the nationwide network of soviets that had sprung up throughout Russia since February 1917.

By October the workers' and soldiers' soviets were dominated by the Bolsheviks, but the peasant soviets were dominated by the Left SRs. Would the Soviet Government be a coalition between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs or a government of Bolsheviks alone? The Bolshevik coup of October 1917 was just Lenin's first shot in a struggle between the two parties which lasted until July 1918, the story of an on-off coalition brought to an end by Lenin's decision to gerrymander the elections of the Fifth Congress of Soviets in a way that Putin would surely have admired.

\* This survey was carried out in St Petersburg and Nizhnyi Novgorod in 2016 and the full results will form part of Matthew Blackburn's doctoral thesis for the University of Glasgow.

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*Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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