Orlando Figes A People's Tragedy Review

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Menshevism for the new Millennium

Peter Main reviews A People’s Tragedy The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924 by Orlando Figes. Jonathan Cape 1996 £20

This is a deceptive, if not a deceitful, book. Figes purports to be scornful of the cold war historians who wrote, “top-down histories” in which the common people appeared as the passive objects of the evil machinations of the Bolsheviks?. However, it becomes clear that his only real disagreement is with the idea that these “common people?” were passive objects. In what he calls a new synthesis, Figes sets out to show how and why the great mass of the Russian people were actually willing participants in the events of 1917.

When Figes says that, “what began as a people’s revolution contained the seeds of its own degeneration into violence and dictatorship?”, what he means is that it degenerated into violence and dictatorship because it was a people’s revolution. The people, you see, were barbaric.

Stripped down to the essentials, this is not a new synthesis at all. Like the Menshevik opponents of Lenin in 1917, Figes is well aware that Russia at the turn of the century was heading into a profound social crisis. Like them, he can see the futility of attempts to reform Russian and thus avoid catastrophe. Like them, because he views Russian in isolation from international events, he can see no real way out; the Russian people were doomed to their tragic fate.

Figes’ presentation of Russian development could prove deceptive to the unwary reader. Although the debt is not acknowledged, his account owes a great deal to Trotsky’s analysis of the law of combined and uneven development in Russia. What he adds is a wealth of detail to illustrate the general themes: the late development of Russian capitalism; the central role of the Tsarist state in industrialisation and the consequent weakness of the bourgeoisie; the impossibility of capitalist development maturing within a political regime inherited from feudalism; the explosiveness of the land question; the concentrated development of the modern proletariat and its openness to revolutionary politics; and, finally, the inevitability of revolution since mere reforms could not hold back the tidal wave of protest in both countryside and city.

Woven through the narrative are fascinating stories of a number of individuals, many of them peasants, who played significant roles in the revolutionary events and beyond. This device, whilst it does leaven the text, is nonetheless suspect. Chosen to illustrate the point Figes wants to make, they are neither random nor genuinely representative. Moreover, there is no figure to present the Bolshevik workers of 1917. That is no accident. Although tens of thousands joined the party in Petrograd alone, Figes regards the working class as essentially a section of the peasantry on leave from the countryside.
That notwithstanding, Figes does marshal his material to create a powerful and convincing picture of the march of Russian society towards the explosions of 1917. The fighting of 1905 showed that, “social divisions were far too deep for a merely liberal settlement.” (p195). Similarly, he rejects the idea that Stolypin’s reforms, aimed at creating a class of peasant proprietors who would support the regime, could have worked. Not only did the poverty of the peasants make collective protection essential, but the aristocracy itself would not tolerate reform in the villages.

Nor does Figes have any time for the Tsar, a man whose uncomprehending obstinacy, together with his naïve faith in Rasputin, his belief that the mass of Russians loved him and his vile anti-semitism, combined to make him the perfect last representative of medieval Russia.

The main conclusion drawn from this history is its impact on the great mass of the peasantry. Time and again he underlines how the brutal treatment of the peasants bred and nurtured barbarism throughout Russian society. When he describes the cruelty with which Stolypin and the aristocracy suppressed the revolution of 1905 he is also explaining the reservoir of hatred that will one day engulf them. He details the Tsar’s encouragement of the anti-semitic Black Hundreds to explain that it was the anti-semitism of the masses to which Stolypin was pandering. His cataloguing of the hundreds of thousands sent to their futile deaths in the trenches prepares the reader for the torture of prisoners with which the peasant militias amused themselves in the Civil War.

But a barbaric people do not create a state that can survive invasion and civil war, and the peasantry are only one part of Figes’ “new synthesis”. The other part is the Bolsheviks and, in particular, Lenin.

Figes’ handling of Lenin is unbalanced and on occasion unhinged. Take the following from his account of an episode in the famous “sealed train” that brought Lenin back to Russia in April 1917. Apparently smoking was only allowed in the toilets and Lenin insisted that non-smokers be given priority in the use of the toilets over smokers, Figes concludes, “the sealed train was an early model of Lenin’s state dictatorship.” (p386)

From the tone it would seem that a simple description is enough to condemn Lenin, “[h]is personal life was extraordinarily dull. He dressed and lived like a middle-aged provincial clerk, with precisely fixed hours for meals, sleep, work and leisure. He liked everything to be neat and orderly. He was punctilious about his financial accounts . . . Every morning he tidied his desk. His books were arranged alphabetically. He sewed buttons on his pinstripe suit, removed stains from it with petrol and kept his bicycle surgically clean. Clearly a very dangerous character!

Like the Mensheviks, Figes cannot accept that a socialist revolution was the only way out of the social impasse in Russia. Like them, he concludes that the October Revolution was carried out against the tide of history. He cannot deny that the Bolsheviks had popular support but to deny Bolshevik legitimacy he has to insist that they created this by demagogy and manipulation of the masses.

Figes thinks that the demand, “All power to the Soviets!”, was just a banner to cover, “the nakedness of Lenin’s ambition?” (p461) rather than the concentration into one slogan of the whole programme of revolution. He sees every move made by Lenin before, during or after the revolution as a combination of deception, demagogy or luck.

So Lenin’s insistence that the Provisional Government would never make peace only “seemed” to be confirmed by Miliukov’s note to the Allies confirming that Russia would honour its obligations. (p393) His call for Soviet power, even when the Bolsheviks were a minority, was merely a device to increase the pressure from the ignorant but enraged masses upon the socialist leaders. His insistence, against
Kamenev and Zinoviev, that power had to be seized as quickly as possible in October because the Soviet Congress might be postponed or delayed was either an over-estimation of or a more likely invention. This just happened to be lent credibility by the decision of the Menshevik and SR Soviet leadership to delay the start of Congress to give themselves more time to mobilise against the Bolsheviks.

Figes also repeats the central falsification of Stalinism by claiming that after the 1918 Brest-Litovsk peace agreement, in Lenin’s famous phrase, the aim of the regime would be limited to the consolidation of Socialism in One Country. (ibid)

Figes’ own weakness of judgement is brought out in two respects in his account of 1917. First, although he mentions in passing that the sections of workers and soldiers who were won over most quickly to the Bolsheviks were the most skilled and educated, he does not consider the implications of this for his general thesis that it was the backwardness of the Russian masses which explains the victory of the Bolsheviks.

Secondly, his suggestion that, after General Kornilov’s failed military putsch against the Provisional Government, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries could have formed a soviet government to pre-empt the Bolsheviks reveals an astounding blindness to the obvious. He acknowledges that the streets had begged the Soviet leaders to take power in July and argues that in September, there was a fleeting chance for the revolution to follow a different course from the one that it did. If this opportunity had been taken Russia might have become a socialist democracy rather than a Communist dictatorship; and, as a result, the bloody civil war which by the autumn of 1917 was probably inevitable might have lasted weeks instead of years. (p464)

His conclusion is that the Mensheviks did not take power because they were bound by dogma and fearful of counter-revolution. In reality, they did not take power because they knew what the masses would expect them to do with Soviet power; give the land to the peasants, end the war and take control of the economy.

The course of the Civil War naturally furnishes plenty of material to support both the characterisation of the Russian peasants and the dictatorial methods of the Reds. Once again, there is a great deal of useful historical material which shows how many of the measures taken by the Soviet government were, in effect, the formative experience of the Stalinist bureaucracy. At the same time Figes also records the cruelty and unbridled savagery of the Whites, such as the massacres of Jews in almost all conquered territory, which let a minimum of 150,000 dead.

Figes is right to see a connection between the dictatorial methods used to maintain the regime during War Communism and the low cultural level of the masses of the population. But this is a one-sided view. He does not give sufficient weight to the prolongation of the war by the imperialist powers. In the first six months of 1919, for example, General Kolchak received the equivalent of a whole year’s output of the Russian war industries. His advance from Siberia allowed Denikin to attack from the South and the two campaigns prolonged the war for the whole of 1919. Yet Figes draws no generalised conclusion from this. He will not place any blame of these imperialists from creating conditions and institutions which ten years later were to be used by Stalin to consolidate the bureaucratic dictatorship. Those he blames solely on the response of the embattled Reds.

Given what Figes has already said about Lenin’s insatiable drive for power, it is not surprising that he construes all the key features and actions of the Civil War, most especially the suppression of the Tambov and Kronstadt revolts of early 1921, as evidence of the Bolsheviks’ dictatorial ambitions. The fact that the peasants and the sailors raised the slogan Soviets without Communists! is accepted as proof that the Bolsheviks had betrayed the ideals they said they stood for in 1917.
There is no consideration of what fate would have befallen Russia if the Bolsheviks had been defeated and central power had broken down. Would the towns have been better provisioned as a result? Would provinces already suffering from the famine have been somehow restored to health? No. The remaining Whites in the East, still be supplied by Japan, would have renewed their campaigns, the White émigré groups in every European capital would have remobilised and Russia would have been a bloodbath from the Baltic to the Pacific.

Figes’ book will undoubtedly be widely read, despite its great size, and is likely to become seen as a standard authoritative work. Like Menshevism itself, although the general thrust of the book is counter-revolutionary, its Marxist ancestry might mean that it plays a part in introducing a new generation of students and militants to important aspects of Russian history. Thoughtful readers can hardly fail to see that in 1917 Figes’ analysis would have led to the same abject paralysis and confusion as the original Mensheviks.

It is to be hoped that this will persuade them to turn to Trotsky’s History of the Russian Revolution, where they will find not only the original analysis of Russian development but also an account of why the mass of workers shifted their loyalty away from the Mensheviks as it became clear that only the Bolsheviks had a solution to their crises.

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