FIRST THINGS

MOURNING THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

by
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A hundred years ago this month, the Russian Revolution commenced, producing some of the most terrifying crimes ever recorded. Given the attention now being focused on Russia, one would expect this anniversary to be significant news. Yet the Revolution's centenary is being widely ignored; and what has been said about it is often a mix of romantic myth and Orwellian revisionism—sending truth straight down the memory hole.

In London, for example, there is "Big on Bolshevism," a series of programs and exhibitions highlighting works of the early Communist era. Among its events is the Royal Academy's "Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932"—which art critic Olivia McEwan assures us is "monumental" and "rewards those who look beyond the Red Flags." Even those who acknowledge the darkest side of the Russian Revolution have praised the exhibition. The *Economist* commented: "The myth goes that in the years after the Bolshevik Revolution, bland socialist realism stomped on the *avant-garde*. In fact, after the Revolution but before Stalinism tightened its grip on culture, there was a frenzied gasp of creative brilliance."

Pushback was provided by the *Guardian's* Jonathan Jones, who pointed out: "The way we glibly admire Russian art from the age of Lenin sentimentalizes one of the most murderous chapters in human history." This comment raises a pressing question: Why are so many inclined to sentimentalize the Russian Revolution?

Many believe that the Romanov dynasty, then ruled by Tsar Nicholas II, deserved to be overthrown. Many also believe that the Revolution was a people's uprising, led by Lenin, and had democratic aspirations,

betrayed later by the totalitarian Stalin. And as long as a revolution is done in the name of progress, there will always be social justice warriors ready to defend it—no matter how bloody its outcome. From a moral and historical standpoint, however, none of these reasons carries weight.

One need not be blind to the abuses and failures of the Romanov dynasty to question its overthrow. Before the Revolution, Russia was ruled for centuries by capricious emperors and Tsars. The last of them, Nicholas II, led his country into the First World War, and had a wife, Alexandra, who elevated the pseudo-mystic madman Rasputin. Yet despite these realities, Alex Fiuza writes, "came the end of serfdom, the emergence of a middle class … and a stunningly swift industrialization in the 1890s that saw Russia become the fourth-greatest industrial power in just two decades." All that ended with the Revolution.

The disparate and dysfunctional forces that swept the Romanovs from power never had a chance of governing Russia successfully—and so they violated a key precept of just war teaching. The provisional government set up in the spring of 1917 was even weaker than the Romanov regime, and left itself wide open to the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. And unlike the February uprising—which was enthusiastically, if naively, backed by many ordinary Russians—the Bolshevik move was a classic *coup-d'etat*, orchestrated by Lenin. Its unpopularity led to a brutal civil war, which cost up to ten million lives and ended only because of Lenin's Red Terror, a campaign of mass killing, torture, and repression.

It was Vladimir Lenin, therefore, who erected the first totalitarian state in Russia, complete with secret police and concentration camps, a precursor to the Gulag Archipelago prison system. The only reason Lenin didn't slaughter more people is because he died in 1924, soon after the establishment of the Soviet Union. Stalin simply inherited and expanded the deadly instruments Lenin had put in place. Further, both Stalinism and Leninism repudiated Judeo-Christian morality and refused to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of anyone—especially religious and political opponents. The cost of that amoral vision was the deaths of tens of millions of human beings over two generations.

By the time the Soviet Union broke up, in 1991, it had traumatized every country under the Kremlin's

control. Russia still hasn't thrown off the entire legacy of Communism, as seen in the autocratic and often brutal rule of Vladimir Putin. He still can't decide whether to preserve or to bury the embalmed body of Lenin, which is still on display in Moscow, as a quasi-religious symbol of Soviet Communism. And the Russian people still haven't decided how to remember Nicholas II and his family—all of whom Lenin had executed during the Revolution, down to Nicholas's youngest daughter, Anastasia.

But if many Russians and intellectuals still haven't come to terms with the full consequences of the Russian Revolution, the rest of us shouldn't sit quietly as its evils are "nuanced" away. As the historian Max Hastings recently wrote, the Russian Revolution was an epic human tragedy, which deserves to be publicly mourned, not celebrated with lies, rationalizations or propagandistic art.

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