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**“A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION”**, By Ayse Dietrich\*, Published by: Pluto Press, London. Written by Neil Faulkner, Year of Publishing: 2017. Subject Area: Russian History. Book Type: History. Total Number of Pages: 272. ISBN: 978 0 7453 9904 1, \$20 Paperback.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution which began in February 1917 with the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II, ending the Romanov dynasty, and ending in October of the same year with the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. It was a major turning point in Russian history, establishing a regime which lasted 74 years. This was an effort to make a sudden change from autocracy to democracy, modernization, equality; it was a collective action of intellectuals, the driving force of the revolution at its start, who were later joined by millions of common people who had decided to rise against their oppressors.

The book is comprised of an Introduction, three chapters, epilogue, timeline, bibliography and index. In the Introduction the author claims that the revolution was an activity from below, although many argue that the very beginning of the revolutionary movement should be attributed to the literary intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who were the seedbed of revolutionary activities. Lenin relied on the literary intelligentsia to provide revolutionary impetus. The Bolshevik Party actually contained a strong contingent of genuine intellectuals, and the revolution evoked much sympathy among the literary intellectuals outside its ranks.<sup>[1]</sup>

Part one, “The Spark, 1825-1916” contains four subheadings: “The Regime”, “The Revolutionaries”, “Lenin and the Bolsheviks” and “The Great War”.

Chapter one, “The Regime” describes the last period of the Romanov dynasty when the country was left in the hands of Tsar Nicholas II, a weak man, an autocrat who brought his 300-year dynasty to an end by going to war and leaving the country to his wife and her favorite, Rasputin. At that time, Russia, as Georgi Plekhanov correctly stated, was a country which was “inadequately Europeanized in comparison with Europe”, and “an historical hybrid which entered the industrial age with an

absolute monarch and a state-feudal social structure inherited from the 16<sup>th</sup> century”. The autocratic rule of the Tsars and their militaristic manner were result of the backwardness of the economy; the weakness of civil society and competition with rival powers.

It was Ivan the Terrible who created a national state and a centralized dictatorship. His conquests turned Russia into a military camp. After killing his son and later with his own death, the Rurik dynasty came to an end; and a period of pretenders and troubles began. The watchwords of the new dynasty, the Romanovs, were “Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationalism”. While European countries were industrializing, the gap between the European countries and Russia was widening. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tsarist Russia was a mixture of the most advanced technology and extreme backwardness. Awakened by the news of defeat in the East, neglected problems at home, the revolutionary movements which began in 1905 became known for a peaceful protest carried out by the industrial workers led by a priest called Gapon to present a petition that included a list of demands to their “benevolent Tsar”. The peaceful protest turned into a massacre known as Bloody Sunday that was followed by mass strikes of workers, demonstrations by peasants, and military mutinies which spread across the Russian Empire, a “dress-rehearsal” in Lenin’s words. It failed, because it was not well planned; and lacked a strong leader to lead the movement; in addition, the army remained loyal to the regime.

In Chapter two, “The Revolutionaries”, the author introduces the participants in the revolutionary movements: the revolutionary peoples, radical intelligentsia, peasantry, Social Democrats and the proletariat. Revolutionary movements began with the Decembrist Revolt in 1825, when a group of army officers and a number of young nobles and civilians committed to Enlightenment values and frustrated by Russia’s inability to change, formed secret political societies to overthrow Alexandr I. After Alexandr I’s unexpected death, they took this opportunity to launch a revolt on December 14, the day Alexandr I’s brother Nicholas I was to ascend the throne. The revolt failed, because they lacked support from other classes, and they had ideological differences. But, it was a spark that would ignite a later flame.

This chapter also provides detailed information on the Russian intelligentsia, and discusses the icons of the radical intelligentsia, the *Narodniks* (Populists). The Narodniks believed that political propaganda among the peasantry would lead to the awakening of the masses and, through their influence, to the liberalization of the tsarist regime. They “went to the people”, going into the countryside and dressing like the peasants to gain their support. However, they they failed to find the expected support and were not well organized; as a result, their attempt failed. Next, a secret underground organization called ‘Land and Liberty’ (*Zemlya i volya*) appeared, which later split into ‘Black Partition’ (*Chernyj Peredel*) and ‘People’s Will’ (*Narodnaya Volya*). Most of the radical intelligentsia joined People’s Will, a group that favored terror and carried out a series of high-profile assassinations, including the one which killed Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Even the assassination of the tsar failed to ignite a revolution. Instead, it gave the government an excuse to hunt down the revolutionaries, and establish a police state.

Some Narodniks became the Social Democrats of the 1880s who all in agreement that the coming revolution would not led by the countryside, but by the towns. Russia’s backwardness would only allow a “bourgeois revolution” which would sweep away the autocracy, then the capitalism would develop, creating a further revolution to achieve socialism. Two factions emerged based on this

theory: the more moderate Mensheviks and the more radical Bolsheviks. The author discusses the problems of Vladimir Lenin's formulation of a revolution and introduces the differences between Lenin, who believed that the only force capable of gaining a decisive victory over Tsarism was the proletariat and the peasantry, and Leon Trotsky who held that only the proletariat had the potential to lead the revolution, only mass strikes in the cities could generate peasant revolt, at which point the army would mutiny and the Tsarist state disintegrate.

Chapter three, "Lenin and the Bolsheviks" begins with a short depiction of the prison life of Lenin's brother Alexander Ulyanov in Schlüsselburg Fortress on the Neva River Neva. He had been charged with committing terrorist activity and was later executed. His death deeply affected his younger brother Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov). Young Lenin greatly respected the old revolutionaries of Narodnaya Volya whose individual terrorism for the collective action of the masses had resulted in failure. This waste appalled Lenin. Next, the Author provides a detailed information about Lenin's politics. To avoid the mistakes made by the Narodniks, Lenin designed the essence of his politics on the basis of four principles: a vision of the world transformed by revolutionary action; an underground activist network to turn his vision into a framework political organization; the growth of this organization into a mass social movement through recruitment of the most militant people in every industrial center; and the eventual role of this essentially proletarian-urban movement in detonating a country-wide insurrection of the Russian *narod*. For Lenin, the only force capable of gaining a decisive victory over Tsarism was the people as a whole, i.e. the proletariat and the peasantry.

The fourth chapter, "The Great War", describes Russia's greatest victory of the war. It was the world's first modern industrialized war and Tsarist Russia was unequal to the challenge. Lenin viewed World War I as an imperialist war, caused by tensions that arose from the simultaneous expansion of several European empires. As the nations at the core of capitalism competed to expand their exploitative sphere, their interests intersected and conflicted with one another, producing the Great War. According to Lenin, a victory for Tsarism would strengthen the regime, and support for the Tsarist war-effort would undermine the class struggle. Therefore, Russia's defeat in an imperialist war was to be welcomed. The key task for Russian socialists was to continue the struggle against the Tsar. Therefore, the betrayal of German Social Democracy (SPD) shocked Lenin and the revolutionaries. The chapter also talks about the last period of the Romanov Dynasty, the social crisis, discontent, strikes, and the Bolshevik's anti-war politics.

Part two, "The Tempest, 1917" contains four chapters: "The February Revolution", "Dual Power", "Counter-Revolution", "The October Days".

Chapter five, "The February Revolution", describes the first five days of the revolution. On the first day nobody, including Lenin, expected this coming revolution, 23 February 1917 (in the old Russian calendar) was the day when tens of thousands of female textile workers from the Vyborg District of the city gathered on the Nevsky Prospekt, in Petrograd, and went on strike to protest shortages of bread; later they were joined by men from the factories. On the second day, 24 February, the number of the demonstrators doubled, and they marched under the slogans "Bread!", "Down with the autocracy!", and "Down with the war". By the third day, 24 February, the strike had spread, and factories and shops were closed. The workers formed a provisional revolutionary committee to lead the struggle against the police and the army. The police had been defeated, and the military had

failed to support them. On the fourth day, 26 February, the regime had decided to restore order through terror and Cossack squadrons fired on workers in different parts of the city, forcing the unarmed demonstrators to surrender. On the fifth day, 27 February, the soldiers, sickened by what they had done, refused to fire on the demonstrators again. This was the start of the military mutiny, and the soldiers began to help to hunt down the police and find arms for the workers. The strike was now general; workers left the factories, and soldiers joined them in the center of the city. The crowds waved red banners and hailed the revolution. The Tsar lost control of his garrison in the capital, and abandoned his headquarters, his generals and his subjects to settle in Tsarskoe Selo with his family.

Chapter six “Dual Power” describes how the battle had been waged through a mass action of the Narod, the common people of Russia from below, with the rest following their lead. Power now passed to the Provisional Government, composed of landlords, industrialist, and right-wing professors. Although the war was the most pressing issue, there were other issues that had been neglected for decades. The workers demanded higher wages, shorter working hours and control over production, while the peasants wanted debt-free land. The Provisional Government represented the opposite: war, empire, the restoration of order and the defense of private property. The Provisional Government could not restore order to a country suffering from such deep rooted problems like inflation, the collapse of food production, disease, and general social disorder. On the other hand, the Petrograd Soviet was very powerful and was regarded as a people’s parliament, forming a dual-power with the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government took no actions to limit the power of the Soviet. When Lenin arrived in Petrograd from Switzerland on 3 April, he presented his April Theses. In these he rejected any support for the Provisional Government, demanded an end to the dual-power arrangement and the transfer all power to the Soviets, and called for an immediate end to the imperialist war. The ‘April Days’ brought down the First Provisional Government of Cadets. Finally, the chapter provides information on a demonstration supported by the Bolsheviks which became known as the ‘July Days’ where thousands of soldiers and workers poured onto the streets of Petrograd to protest the Provisional Government. However, this demonstration failed and resulted in the arrest of numerous Bolshevik leaders.

The seventh chapter, “Counter-Revolution”, examines the Second Provisional Government, a coalition of Cadets and Reformists with Kerensky as Premier and a majority of Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries. After the July Days the Provisional government arrested the leaders, but allowed the Bolshevik Party to continue. The collapse of the July Days greatly demoralized proletarian Petrograd. The lie that Germany funded Lenin’s party created disarray, with some members abandoning the party. The chapter also discusses Kerensky’s attempt to benefit from this situation and his start of a counter-offensive against the Bolsheviks; the failure of his offensive on the Eastern Front; the failure of his attempt to destroy the revolutionary movement and the Bolsheviks with the help of general Kornilov; the rebirth of the Red Guards to fight against Kornilov and Kerensky, and the victory of the Committee for Struggle with Counter-Revolution.

Chapter eight, “The October Days”, examines the October Insurrection, the Bolshevik ‘coup’, the Provisional Government’s struggle to prevent the spread of the revolution to the countryside, and the failure to hinder the masses from supporting the Bolsheviks. It was a peasant movement in the countryside where authorities lacked the means to restore order, which eventually led to a peasant revolution carried out from below.

Chapters nine, ten and eleven form the third part, “The Darkness, 1918-1938”. Chapter nine “The World Revolution” describes the establishment the new government and the Council of People’s Commissars (the *Sovnarkom*) by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, as well as the decrees issued by the Sovnarkom which depended almost entirely on the initiative and creativity of the masses. It also describes the various crises that faced the revolution: shortages of food and fuel in the cities; the inability to produce the goods needed in rural regions or supply the industrial centers; the growing gap between town and country, proletarian and peasant; cold and disease. Long term survival would require the worker’s state to end its isolation, gain access to Europe’s reserves of industrial power, and make the working class an international class. In short, only world revolution could rescue the Bolshevik regime. Chapter nine also examines why the world revolution failed and Russian Revolution was isolated.

Chapter ten, “The Revolution Besieged”, begins with an examination of the Civil War and economic recovery strategies, War Communism and the New Economic Policy (NEP). It then moves on to look at the results of the election of the Constituent Assembly which met on 5 January 1918, the failure of the Bolsheviks and the abrupt closure of both the Assembly and the other parties. Finally, the authoritarianism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the reasons for the Whites’ failure and the Bolsheviks’ victory in the Civil War, the economic collapse and social transformation after the war, the introduction of the centralized state-controlled economy, the disastrous effects of War Communism and its subsequent abandonment, and the implementation of the new economic policy (NEP) and its consequences are all discussed.

The final chapter, chapter eleven, “Stalinism”, examines the negative effects of the NEP in the revolutionary traditions of the party, the rise of the NEP man and wealthy kulaks, Lenin’s last struggle, his Testament regarding Stalin, the destruction of opposition within the party, and the party-state bureaucracy that emerged under Stalin. In addition, the effects of the state-capitalist economy based on forced collectivization of agriculture, the state-driven investment in heavy industry and arms production, the destruction of what remained of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party and the Russian revolutionary tradition, the deportation of the kulaks, state terror, the persecutions of the slave-laborers in the Gulags, and Stalin’s use of Comintern to conduct counter-revolutionary activities instead of promoting world revolution are all discussed.

The book’s Epilogue, “A Century of War and Revolution”, makes a number of claims: that the political crisis unleashed by the Russian Revolution was global and protracted; that the century since 1917 has been a century of war and revolution; that this epoch continues to witness war and revolution; and, finally, that the Russian revolution of 1917 should be taken as a lesson regarding contemporary crises in the sense that waves of popular resistance are capable of acquiring the mass, energy and direction needed to sweep away a rotten system.

This book is a very important contribution to the numerous studies that have been written for the approaching centennial of the Russian Revolution. It is a very well-written, readable source which provides a comprehensive presentation of the preconditions and the core concepts that led to the Bolshevik Revolution and describes the positive and the negative effects of the state policies that its leaders imposed.

<sup>[1]</sup>Daniels, R.V., “Intellectuals and Russian Revolution”, The American Slavic and East European Review, Vol.20, No.2, 1961, pp.273.

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