

The Other Voices of October: The Russian Revolution of 1917

In the Fall of 2017, as we looked back a hundred years after the Russian Revolution, a clearer and more populated picture began to emerge; a different picture from the one that we have become accustomed to. With the ending of the Cold War, some of the political passions that have clouded and affected the interpretation of this global event have begun to fade. This has allowed scholars to think more deeply about what a revolution is, and more importantly, in what ways do they represent a historical rupture that allows us to imagine another future? To mark the centenary of the Russian Revolution in the fall of 2017, I created a graduate course entitled, "The Other Voices of October. The Russian Revolutions of 1917." Instead of assigning the usual books on Lenin and Trotsky that have dominated Russian history courses for many decades, I looked for works by individual thinkers who had been repressed after 1917, and about political parties that were defeated by the Bolsheviks. The assembled readings explicitly challenge the framing of 1917 as an exclusively Bolshevik revolution, and instead reprise the many political visions, and dreams that surfaced during the tumultuous years of 1917-1921!

The revolution of 1917 can be best described as waves of popular movements led by soldiers, sailors, workers, peasants, students, national minorities, and men and women of the intelligentsia: representing a broad spectrum of the Russian empire. Yet, for the most part, 1917 has been represented in historical scholarship both in Russia and in the West as at the time when the Bolshevik party came to power. We have many, many books about the Bolshevik party, about the

leaders, Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, and about the political theories of communism. But we know very little about the other political visions that were equally powerful during this liminal period of history. Ordinary people dreamed that a new world order of liberty, equality, and plenty would emerge from the wreckage of the mighty Romanov Empire.

My students spent the fall of 2017 wrestling with two main questions. First, why do authoritarian leaders always hijack the democratic aspirations of the many who actually make a revolution? Second, and more importantly, how does our understanding of the past change when rather than focus on the ideas and actions of a few dominant personalities, we consider the voices of the many who actually make change possible? In an attempt to unearth the other voices of the Russian Revolution, my graduate students have assembled sources for you to read, analyze, and reflect upon. Perhaps some of these ideas are still relevant today!

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When the American journalist, John Reed, journeyed to Russia in August of 1917, he observed the tumultuous conditions in a post-tsarist Russia with an excited and keen eye. However, he soon found himself at the front line of a second revolution, as the Bolshevik party seized power from the Provisional Government later that year. As an outsider, and not yet an ardent proponent of Bolshevism, Reed wrote a magnificent book that provides a personal and eyewitness account of the Russian Revolution.[1] His account was praised greatly by Vladimir Lenin, and it soon became one of the most popular works about the Bolshevik Revolution, even though its popularity dipped during the Stalin years.



John Reed *(1887-1920), American journalist and socialist activist, unaccountably wrote the best-known book about the Russian Revolution. Born into an upper-class family in Portland, Oregon, and educated at Harvard, Reed embraced socialism and became an ardent advocate of workers' rights and other progressive causes. After covering the Mexican Revolution and the First World War, Reed, along with his wife Louise Bryant, a feminist and journalist, journeyed to Russia. They witnessed the capture of the Winter Palace during the revolutionary days in Petrograd. He died in the Soviet Union and was one of the few foreigners to be buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis in the Red Square in Moscow.*

Most interestingly, as Reed was not directly involved in the Bolshevik revolution, his perspective gives the audience a way to understand the mindset of the average Russian citizen. Writings about the Bolshevik seizure of power are presented most commonly from the point of view of Lenin, Stalin, or Trotsky, leaders who were integral to the formation and success of the revolution and the Communist state. However, millions of ordinary people were active during the fateful year, and not all of them were Bolsheviks! As the Russian Revolution was one of the most influential events to shape twentieth-century history, most public memories recall Bolshevik attitudes, policies and their historical representations. However, we forget that the Bolsheviks were not the only political party contending for power, nor were all united in support of Lenin's platform. By understanding the various viewpoints that existed along the revolutionary spectrum, audiences can understand that a great diversity of political opinions existed in Russia. Reed sees Russia from the street level, a space that is inherently diverse and democratic, and he documents the various opinions of common Russian citizens. In his account there was no homogenized Russian mentality, but millions of people calling for freedom, equality, and peace. Reed gives his audience an exciting opportunity to consider these other opinions that have been either forgotten or silenced by the Bolsheviks: ideas that are in urgent need of reconsideration today.

Benjamin Baca

[1] *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007.)



Alexei Maximovich Peshkov *(1868-1936), better known as Maxim Gorky, was a well-known Russian and Soviet writer. He was nominated for the Noble Prize for literature, as he wrote unforgettable portraits of Russian life in the "Lower Depths." Gorky, who grew up in extreme poverty, was an autodidact who realized very early in his life the power of the written and the literary word. Although Gorky was an important member of the Russian Marxist movement, he was deeply critical of Lenin's desire for total power and state centralization. He was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1921 but returned unaccountably at the request of the dictator, Josef Stalin, in 1932. While Gorky's affiliation with Stalin is an undeniable stain on his reputation, his brilliant earlier works such as his three-volume autobiography (*My Childhood, My Youth, and My University Days*) are well worth reading today.*

Maxim Gorky is considered to be a creator of modern Russian fiction, but he also serves as a stepping-stone between two great eras of Russian civilization – Imperial and Soviet. In the maelstrom of violence that marked the advent of the early years of Bolshevik rule, Gorky voiced his fears about the epidemic of unfreedom that he witnessed through his many newspaper articles. Gorky's fine prose expressed a "revulsion and indignation against executions, arrests, slander, demagoguery, and the suppression of free speech, elections, and public demonstrations."[2] He believed that the great turmoil of political emotions that arose during the cataclysmic power struggle aroused dark social instincts that threatened to distort the individual human psyche, and in the long run, subvert civilization itself. Gorky said that we must all have the freedom to express the truth, not just our opinions, and to engage in rational dialogue.[3] He argued that the authoritarianism of the tsarist era bled into the Bolshevik regime and poisoned it with the venom of violence.[4]

Gorky believed the worst enemy of freedom and justice lay within us; it is our own stupidity and cruelty that manifests itself in the chaos of dark and anarchistic feelings. [5] He condemned the polemics of public discourse and argued it exacerbated our propensity for viciousness. During this revolutionary period, the truth was attacked and trampled upon by newspapers. In contrast to the truth of good literature, Gorky argued that the press engages in slander, wallows in filth, and uses the phrase, freedom of expression, as an excuse to distort the truth. [6] He validated the importance of culture as a means to develop and inculcate a social conscience and social morality among human beings. He believed that art and literature help us develop our personal abilities, and help us find deep reserves of moral strength within our souls. Russia would only be redeemed through culture and art. Gorky wrote, "everybody, my friend, everybody lives for something better to come. That's why we want to be considerate of every man – Who knows what's in him, why he was born and what he can achieve?" (*Lower Depths*, 1902).

Refugio Casillas

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[2] Maxim Gorky, *Untimely Thought: Essays on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks, 1917-1918*, transl. by Hernan Ernolaev (New York: Paul & Eriksson, Inc., 1968), vii.
[3] Ibid, 9.
[4] Ibid, 15.
[5] Ibid, 16.
[6] Ibid, 50.

Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* is one of those novels that must be read a few times and then read a few more times after that. It is the kind of novel that stays fresh, perhaps due to its fast narrative style, and because it is imbued with an almost cinematic, maybe even poetic cadence. Then there are the dynamic characters such as Yuri Andreevich, Larissa Antipova, Strelnikov and Komarovsky, metaphors for something larger than their fictional appearance. These characters lead us to dig deeper into the purposeful plot set in pre-1917 Russia, and which forms a bridge to the Stalinist era of the 1930s. Pasternak's imagery of the revolutions of 1917 is so powerful and evocative that it still resonates today, one hundred years later. The calamity juxtaposed with the elation; Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the war and the civil war, revolution and everyday life: all the contrasting images flicker on our temporal senses conveying images of those chaotic times. Of course, the Russian Revolution is not only about 1917 as it was followed by communism, and then by Stalinism. It is why we turn to a novel like *Dr. Zhivago:* it is set in exactly the period that led to the Russian Revolution. The grand sweeping tales of the lives and love affairs of the upper classes transformed by revolution may seem fascinating, but is this the real reason that Pasternak wrote this novel?

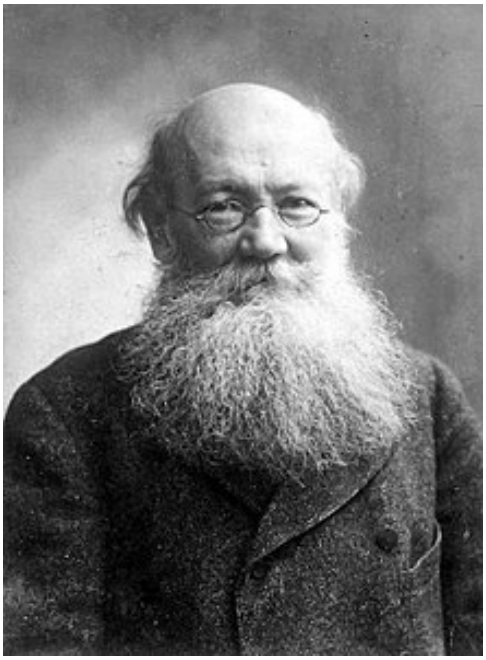


Boris Pasternak *(1890-1960) was a Soviet poet, novelist and literary translator, although outside of Russia he is best known as the author of* Doctor Zhivago *(1957), a novel set in the revolutionary period stretching from the Russia Revolution of 1905 to World War II. Pasternak submitted* Doctor Zhivago *for publication in the Soviet Union, but it was rejected on account of its anti-Soviet nature and the dissident leanings of its main characters. The novel was smuggled to the West, where it garnered much praise and popularity. Pasternak won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958 but was forced by the Soviet authorities to turn down the award. Critics have accused the CIA for having used Pasternak's novel, and the Soviet persecution of the author as an anti-Soviet propaganda tool worldwide.*

History tells us that much of pre-revolutionary Russia was actually inflected by deep utopianism and saturated with dreams for a better society. When the revolution arrived, there was elation everywhere that good times were just around the corner. One new Soviet edict that was intended to foster communal living mandated that the large mansions of the rich be opened to the poor and the homeless. Yuri Andreevich, a doctor, and a poet, first welcomes this principle of radical equality, but then finds it hard to sustain it in his everyday life. As Moscow becomes uninhabitable due to epidemics such as typhus, the Zhivago family must escape to the Urals. In the Urals, Yuri falls in love with Larissa Antipova—an extra-marital affair that we somehow approve of. But sadly, romance crashes on the shoals of the civil war. Will Yuri still support the revolution and Bolshevism after it has caused so much havoc, and has nearly destroyed his family? Is the novel an act of social criticism against the revolution itself, or is a more visceral discussion of the politics of equality and individuality and how difficult it is to sustain these ideals over the long term?

And then we re-read *Dr. Zhivago* yet again, but this time we become fascinated with the possibility that perhaps Pasternak cast Yuri as a vehicle to seek the meaning of life in revolutionary times. Is Pasternak really Yuri, the poet-author, who is searching for the meaning of life in conditions that include so much death?

Pedro de Macedo



Pyotr Alexeevich Kropotkin *(1842-1921) was born to an ancient family of Russian-Cossack aristocrats. His noble background provided many benefits and opportunities for the young Kropotkin, but he was appalled by the fact that his privileges came from the exploited labor of others. Kropotkin busied himself with education as well as social and political issues, eventually entering the Tsarist army in 1862. By 1864, Kropotkin was assigned to an important geographical survey expedition to Siberia and his scientific writings gained him a significant scholarly reputation in Europe. Alongside his scientific studies, Kropotkin took up a life of activism and revolution. He was arrested and imprisoned in 1872 but managed to escape in 1876 to Europe. After roughly forty years in exile during which he developed a major body of works on anarchist philosophy and literature, Kropotkin returned to Russia in 1917 in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. He was unhappy with the new and bureaucratic Soviet state and died of pneumonia in 1921.*

Anarchist voices are rarely heard when studying Russian history. But what if things had turned out differently, and what if the anarchists had a chance to implement the ideas of the great thinker, Peter Kropotkin? Although we will never know the answer to these burning questions, one can speculate about what the outcome might have been. Kropotkin argued that the ability to work together for the preservation of our communities was an inherent part of human nature. Unlike Lenin, Kropotkin argued that trade unions worked as a fraternity, where workers who specialized in a skill supported each other and sacrificed their individual interests for the common good. Too much state control made individuals selfish and individualistic, destroying their innate capacity for cooperation and creative labor. Would Russia have been able to avoid the atrocities committed under Lenin and Stalin if the Anarchists vision had been fulfilled? Unfortunately, the world will never know.

In his seminal book, *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin challenges the idea that competition is necessary for human survival and progress. Instead, he explores the politics of mutually beneficial cooperation and reciprocity, both within the animal kingdom and in human societies. He examines the principle of cooperation among animals, indigenous societies, medieval cities, and those in the modern era, and finds it to be widespread instead of the better-known Darwinian concept of competition. Kropotkin argues that the instances of mutual cooperation is often overlooked and underemphasized in history.

Drawing from the works of German-Russian zoologist Karl Kessler, Kropotkin demonstrates that along with the law of struggle and competition, the principle of mutual aid has played a larger and perhaps more influential role in the progression of evolution than considered previously. Kropotkin claims that mutual aid is driven by a feeling or instinct for human solidarity, an instinct that seems to be lacking in capitalistic societies. *Mutual Aid* is widely regarded as a central text in the study of anarchist communism, as well as in certain branches of biology. A radical visionary, explorer, aristocrat, and anarchist, he presented a scientific explanation for the development of species and societies, helping to contextualize human behavior in the natural environment from where it originates. Kropotkin presents an unforgettable picture of a society regulated by mutual cooperation.

Nathalie Fraire and Aline Tavlian

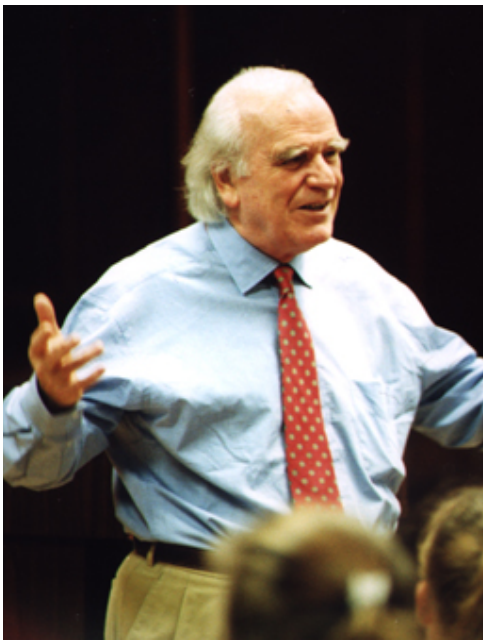
Alexandra Kollontai, feminist and Bolshevik, played a very important role in the social-democratic, labor, and feminist movements of the early twentieth century. She was a member of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, and late in her remarkable career in 1924, Kollontai was appointed as the Soviet Ambassador to Norway. In the Soviet Union, she found notoriety for her "glass of water theory" of sexual relations. Kollontai argued that both men and women should partake of sexual relations as consenting and responsible adults, based on their physical and emotional needs, but she was derided for expressing her views so honestly. During the October Revolution, the political visions of many women were overshadowed by the Bolsheviks' rise to power, as they repeatedly postponed addressing the social, cultural, and gender dimensions of Soviet society. It is important to consider Kollontai's political views as they represent the political voices and aspirations of many women who yearned for change and revolution.



Alexandra Kollontai *(1872-1952) was born into an upper-class family in 1872, but subsequently became a legendary revolutionary who played an essential role in the social and feminist movements of the early twentieth century. Throughout her career, Kollontai wrote many key feminist works including* Love of Worker Bees*,* A Great Love*, and* The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*. She was also one of the few high-ranking female members of the Bolshevik government and eventually became the Soviet Ambassador in Norway in 1924. Kollontai opposed Lenin immense centralization of power and became an important member of the Workers' Opposition in the early 1920's, but she was soon silenced. Kollontai's ideas of feminist freedom and responsibility are still extremely relevant today.*

In the West, Kollontai was seen as both an extremist and a radical activist who deserved little attention. In the 1960's perceptions of this socialist feminist began to change and feminists have started to acknowledge that Kollontai is an essential figure in the global feminist movement. Kollontai was not only a theorist and activist, but as a writer she translated her political ideas into fiction. In her important publication, *Love of Worker Bees,* Kollontai provides an evocative and in-depth image of people's day-to-day and private lives during the period of the Bolshevik revolution. She wrote her fiction in accessible prose so that the ordinary women could understand her ideas about gender inequality in the early days of the revolution. *Love of Worker Bees* consists of three stories that examine the personal and political lives of women, prior to, during, and after the revolution. The heroine of the first story, *Vasilia Malygina,* struggles to balance her inner revolutionary beliefs and maintain her romantic relationship with her partner, Volodya. Kollontai emphasizes that revolution demands many sacrifices; and that women should have the strength to overcome heartbreak and the pain caused by the infidelities of a partner. The book argues that a woman's happiness does not solely rely on romantic relationships, as these are ephemeral for the most part. In her work, Kollontai explores the different ways in which men and women express their desires and emotions. *Love of Worker Bees* is an essential piece of Russian revolutionary history as it expresses the aspirations and fears of women and considers the impact of the Russian Revolution on daily life.

Sean Van



Richard Stites *(December 2, 1931 – March 7, 2010) was a historian of Russian culture and history. He first graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1956 and, after receiving an MA in European history from George Washington University in 1959, Stites entered a doctoral program at Harvard where he began his dissertation on women in the time of Tsar Alexander II. This early work was one-of-a-kind, the first of many unique histories by Stites, who left an impressively long list of influential publications. He is perhaps best known for the attention he gave to mass entertainment in Russia (*Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia*,* Revolutionary Dreams*,* Russian Popular Culture*), his impulse always to shed light on neglected material and reintegrate it into the historical fold. A history faculty member at Georgetown University since 1977, Stites was known for his good humor and devotion to teaching.*

The utopianism of the Russian Revolution took shape in a bustling marketplace of competing voices, ideas, feelings, and dreams. Figures large and small, known and forgotten, threw their energies at reshaping and redefining what society and justice ought to look like. Some of these visions never left their embryonic stages but many others survived to maturity, put into practice by collectives of like-minded people in search of better lives. Here, among the most fanciful visions of the much-promised technological utopia and the many peasant dreams of anti-urban flight and agrarian withdrawal Russia and the future world were cast and reforged.

Yet the experimentalism of these years was soon overshadowed by Bolshevik orthodoxy, the Party vise crushing innumerable communes, artels, syndicates, and other alternative organizations. Richard Stites, a historian of Russian culture and social history, has recovered many of these lost visions and done much to shift our attention to the other voices of revolution, those of the unnamed hopeful many. His research is invaluable to understanding the revolution and the rift in thinking it produced among people of all classes, high and low, men and women. He reminds us that these utopian projects were important contributors to the "poetics" of revolution, giving it a needed sense of "justice and dignity," *pravda* and *volya*, without which the violence of those turbulent years would have been unbearable.

How and why Stalin brought an end to all utopian experiments except his own is one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century. Stalin certainly did not understand speculative minds, so intense was his hatred for spontaneity, individual expression, and free experimentation for its own sake. And so as authoritarian traditions were reintroduced into all walks of life and people correspondingly became more conservative and deferential to authority the other voices of October were soon silenced, turned over, or else went underground. Yet for every generation that discovers the voices collected here--those of Reed, Gorky, Pasternak, Kropotkin, and Kollontai--as well as those lesser known romantics recovered by Stites, the recurring vision of hope, love, and the "good place of tomorrow" known to all men is born again. History inspires those who read it to dream of the past and hope for a better future and we hope you, our reader, have been inspired to remember October 1917 not just as a victory of the few but one for all humankind.

Daniel Garcia