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Book Review

Sean McMeekin. *The Russian Revolution: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 2017.

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The Russian Revolution: A New History is a very detailed narrative of what can be regarded as one of the most influential events in the twentieth century that reflects on the political, social, and military history of Russia and World War One. Sean McMeekin meticulously re-evaluates each step the revolution took and the complex web of what was happening either at the same time or what the consequence of these steps were. The book is broken down into twenty-three chapters and organized in four major sections. The sections of the book are entitled: “Twilight of the Romanovs,” “1917: A False Dawn,” “Hostile Takeover,” and “The Bolsheviks in Power.” The author primarily focuses on introducing new theories on the Russian Revolution’s global impact in general and its impact on Eastern Europe in particular. Lastly, McMeekin’s book comes at the hundred-year anniversary of the Russian Revolution thus breathing new historical thought on the subject.

The first section of the book, “Twilight of the Romanovs,” addresses the geography of Eastern Europe and what the Russian Empire encompassed under the Romanov house. The decline of the Romanov house under the penultimate and ultimate leaders, Tsar Alexander III (1881-1894) and Nicholas II (1894-1917). In this section, McMeekin highlights a year of great turmoil for the Russian Empire: 1905. In this argument he breaks the impact of the Russo-Japanese War, Mutiny of the Potemkin, and the Revolution of 1905. Lastly, this section ends with a very detailed breakdown of the Russian perspective on WWI and the reforms done by the third Prime Minister under Tsar Nicholas II, Pyotr Stolypin (p. 47). This section provides an excellent starting point for the reader to really understand the problems that Nicholas II was facing and how these issues and humiliations would become the call sign of the 1917 revolutions.

The next section, “1917: A False Dawn,” starts off with three different political coups that took place in February within Russia. Even though they failed, the author juxtaposes this internal disorder to the situation on the Eastern Front showing that the internal strife did not really impact the war. Following the first chapter in this section, the author then uses these coups as a backdrop for protestors on Internal Women Workers day who were fired upon by soldiers in an attempt to stop the protest. This violence would start to affect the Eastern Front with a new surge of mutinies in the navy and the first realistic assumption that Nicholas II might abdicate the throne. With these

new mutinies, control was taken away from Nicholas II and lynching became more and more prevalent against military and governmental officers within the navy. Despite this, the Russian land forces were victorious against the Triple Alliance and not really influenced by the resurging mutinies. This section ends with the foreshadowing of Vladimir Lenin heading to Finland through Germany and establishing his base of operations e.g. buying out *Pravda* with what is suspected to be Germany financial backing (p.136). Meanwhile the Provisional Government felt the growing problems of conflicting aims on continuing the war despite losing public support. Lastly, the effort made by Alexander Kerensky, the second Minister-Chairmen of the new government, to gather support from soldiers to continue fighting the war despite the growing number of Bolsheviks within the ranks of the military, who wanted to end the war (p.148).

The third section entitled “Hostile Takeover,” starts off with a very intense political and military move by Kerensky, who was now facing a Bolshevik uprising in the ranks of the military, in releasing information tying the Bolsheviks to the German Empire and the Provisional Government arresting the Bolsheviks on the grounds of treason. Once this problem was dealt with, Kerensky then faced another possible coup and thus he was cornered to work with the Bolsheviks. The author then argues that the issues raised in the first two chapters in the section provided enough kindling to spark the October Revolution showing that even Kerensky’s efforts to mend the issues within the military were not effective when the Bolsheviks led their coup leaving the Kremlin on fire. The Bolsheviks seized the Russian Government but lacked public support that forced Lenin to take a huge step. Lenin would have to stop the war in order to gain public support back. The author does an excellent job breaking down the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the massive loss of territory under Lenin, and lastly Germany losing the war thereby releasing Lenin from any further obligation and starting to resolve the public support issue.

The final section of the book is entitled “The Bolsheviks in Power.” The first chapter is aptly named “War Communism” in which McMeekin breaks down the first actions of Lenin’s government to mobilize the public by abolishing private ownership and the state taking control in order to keep the economy afloat. With the economy in shambles the new government was not expecting the civil war that would take place between the Reds and Whites, hence the next two chapter have the titles of “Red on White” and “The Communist International.” In “Red on White” McMeekin provides an overview of the civil war highlighting changing elements in the war when the tide turned against the Whites. The next chapter addresses the international elements of the civil war such as the funding the Whites had and the spreading influence of the Bolsheviks in Italy and Germany. Another important part of this chapter was the bid by Lenin and Leon Trotsky for peace with Poland in order to reduce the issues the Bolsheviks were facing. The next three chapters in this section address the biggest issue that the new Bolsheviks were facing, the failing economy due to uprising, famine, and international debt. The use of chemical weapons and execution brought a prompt end to any threat from the people. With the peasants suppressed, famine started to take over and the peasants started to attack the churches for their wealth. Trotsky launched a church looting campaign as the answer to both angry peasants and the economy (p.328). Lastly, the only other economic burden was the international debt to Germany and the Triple Entente and thus the Rapallo Treaty (1922) was signed which settled Bolsheviks debt in Germany by selling the former tsarist gold bullion, though McMeekin points out that this debt was not paid in full (p.340). It is important to note that the epilogue, ominously entitled “The Specter of Communism,”

is a very well written summary bringing the entirety of McMeekins argument together and further connecting that with the impact of the Russian Revolution on the foundation of the the Cold War and the resurgence in the West of a anti-communist mindset against the spread of communism (p.352).

The book in its entirety is very well put together and very well detailed. The organization of the chapters and relevance of the events for the most part provides an excellent reinterpretation of the revolution. This really challenges the reader's thoughts on the impact the revolution actually had. A prime example of this comes in the chapter entitled "The German Gambit," where it starts off with a very short argument on how the news of the Russian Revolution influenced President Woodrow Wilson to go to war more so than did the Zimmerman Telegraph (p.126). This is a rather interesting point in as much as traditional thought has it that the Zimmerman Telegraph was the pretext used to join the war along with heavy propaganda surrounding German unrestricted submarine warfare and the sinking of the Lusitania. It is also very important to note that McMeekin does not address the assassination attempt on Nicholas II by a Japanese man as a motive for the Russo-Japanese War. As well as the underwhelming lack of military planning by the Russians during the Russo-Japanese War, which alludes to losing the war before it even started.

The thesis of the book does not seem to be present in each chapter compared to the epilogue where McMeekin connects them all together. This is rather interesting due to the fact that the book is more of a narrative rather than a completely new perspective on the Russian Revolution. For example, McMeekin makes new arguments that are very short and are not fully in line with the main point of the book or chapter. This is the case in the aforementioned discussion of the impact the Russian Revolution had on bringing the United States into World War One or the final points in the Epilogue which showcase the author's personal bias about the threat of communism to the Western world. After reviewing the final section, it casts doubts on the points made against communist leaders. The author's personal view skewing the events and reasoning for the actions communist leaders took. Another difficult aspect of the book is that not all of the chapters are smooth in their delivery of information and are rather erratic in the way the information is laid out for the reader. An example of this is the chapter "Full of Fight," which talks about the three different political coups and the lack of impact they had on the war without anything really tying all three of them together during or at the end of the chapter. This makes it very difficult to understand the significance these coups had on the Russian Revolution.

Despite this the author uses an extensive primary and secondary sources. Aside from the occasional erratic chapter or two and side arguments, *The Russian Revolution: A New History* provides an excellent narrative of the Russian Revolution. With this book coming at the centennial of the Russian Revolution it does breathe new life and new thought on the extent of the Russian Revolution thus spurring a new evaluation of that event and the true impact it had internationally.