

The Russian Revolution: A New History. By Sean McMeekin. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017. Pp. xxxi, 496. \$30.00.)

Perspective is part of the historian's craft--an interpretive point-of-view that serves as an organizing lens through which facts and events are given some order and sense. There is no history without selection and the author's own analysis, his or her own construction of an argument. But among the conventions with which a historical narrative is fashioned, there must be faithfulness to established facts, care in the discussion of existing historiography, and some restraint in allowing one's own biases and preferences to influence the story. In his avowed postrevisionist history of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Sean McMeekin thwarts many of these conventions.

McMeekin's area of expertise has been late Ottoman history with forays into World War I and the Russian role in its origins. In this breezy history he takes on the academic professionals who have written on 1917 with the aim to right the record, which he argues has been distorted by most practitioners, with notable exceptions like Harvard emeritus historian Richard Pipes. Like Pipes, whom he admires and cites hundreds of times, McMeekin sets out to reverse the social historical consensus of a generation of self-styled "revisionists," who had refocused the history of the Revolution from a tale of demonic conspirators like Vladimir Lenin to a broader panorama of social actors--women, workers, soldiers, and peasants--who through their own activities undermined the moderate Provisional Government, self-selected in February, and opened the way for the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. In his narrative, McMeekin

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/hisn.13056](https://doi.org/10.1111/hisn.13056)

begins with the intriguer Rasputin, who, it turns out, was wise enough to warn the hapless Nicholas II not to enter the Great War, and continues with Mikhail Rodzianko and Alexander Guchkov, who conspired with the military to drive the emperor to abdicate. McMeekin's point-of-view is legitimist, defending the legally constituted authority against treacherous usurpers from below or outside who undermined the organs of order, most particularly the army. He characterizes the February Revolution as a mutiny since legitimate authority belonged to the tsar, and the people in the streets were notoriously bloody-minded.

Unfortunately, this text is quite unreliable. There are factual errors--the Russian Social Democrats did not split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks because of Lenin's anti-Semitism; neither the April Crisis nor the "July Days" were attempts at a Bolshevik *putsch* (the selection of this redolent word is not accidental)--and unexplained omissions, primarily the whole social landscape in which Bolshevism grew into the most potent political force in Petrograd and other major cities. Like earlier conservative accounts of the Bolshevik victory, McMeekin subscribes to discredited theses that Lenin and his party were not only bought by German gold but were the principal reason (by their effective propagandizing) why workers and soldiers turned into irresponsible, even treasonous, subversives. There is no discussion of the economic collapse of the country, the social polarization of upper and lower classes that led to a protocivil war between the soviets and the government, or the independent aspirations of the lower classes that Lenin and his comrades articulated in their demands for land, peace, and a government of soviets. McMeekin's concentration on the military yields interesting insights, because, as Lenin

understood, revolution is not an election campaign but a war. The winner is the side that has men with guns at the right place at the right time.

But because the social, economic, and even discursive contexts are left out, in order to explain major turning points, the author repeatedly relies on accidents and coincidences: if only the tsarevitch's measles had broken out a day earlier, the tsar would not have left Petrograd for the front; what if Lenin had been arrested on the eve of October? He sets up Marxism as a straw man and ends up with bewildering contingencies: "Far from an eschatological 'class struggle' borne along inexorably by the Marxist dialectic, the events of 1917 were filled with might-have-beens and missed chances" (345). Ignoring what dozens of historians have contributed to our knowledge of 1917 does not advance understanding of extraordinary events that profoundly shaped the past one hundred years.

University of Michigan

Ronald Grigor Suny

The Russian Revolution: A New History. By Sean McMeekin. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017. Pp. xxxi, 496. \$30.00.)

Perspective is part of the historian's craft--an interpretive point-of-view that serves as an organizing lens through which facts and events are given some order and sense. There is no history without selection and the author's own analysis, his or her own construction of an argument. But among the conventions with which a historical narrative is fashioned, there must be faithfulness to established facts, care in the discussion of existing historiography, and some restraint in allowing one's own biases and preferences to influence the story. In his avowed postrevisionist history of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Sean McMeekin thwarts many of these conventions.

McMeekin's area of expertise has been late Ottoman history with forays into World War I and the Russian role in its origins. In this breezy history he takes on the academic professionals who have written on 1917 with the aim to right the record, which he argues has been distorted by most practitioners, with notable exceptions like Harvard emeritus historian Richard Pipes. Like Pipes, whom he admires and cites hundreds of times, McMeekin sets out to reverse the social historical consensus of a generation of self-styled "revisionists," who had refocused the history of the Revolution from a tale of demonic conspirators like Vladimir Lenin to a broader panorama of social actors--women, workers, soldiers, and peasants--who through their own activities undermined the moderate Provisional Government, self-selected in February, and opened the way for the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. In his narrative, McMeekin begins with the intriguer Rasputin, who, it turns out, was wise enough to warn the hapless Nicholas II not to enter the Great War, and continues with Mikhail Rodzianko and Alexander Guchkov, who conspired with the military to drive the emperor to abdicate. McMeekin's point-

of-view is legitimist, defending the legally constituted authority against treacherous usurpers from below or outside who undermined the organs of order, most particularly the army. He characterizes the February Revolution as a mutiny since legitimate authority belonged to the tsar, and the people in the streets were notoriously bloody-minded.

Unfortunately, this text is quite unreliable. There are factual errors--the Russian Social Democrats did not split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks because of Lenin's anti-Semitism; neither the April Crisis nor the "July Days" were attempts at a Bolshevik *putsch* (the selection of this redolent word is not accidental)--and unexplained omissions, primarily the whole social landscape in which Bolshevism grew into the most potent political force in Petrograd and other major cities. Like earlier conservative accounts of the Bolshevik victory, McMeekin subscribes to discredited theses that Lenin and his party were not only bought by German gold but were the principal reason (by their effective propagandizing) why workers and soldiers turned into irresponsible, even treasonous, subversives. There is no discussion of the economic collapse of the country, the social polarization of upper and lower classes that led to a protocivil war between the soviets and the government, or the independent aspirations of the lower classes that Lenin and his comrades articulated in their demands for land, peace, and a government of soviets. McMeekin's concentration on the military yields interesting insights, because, as Lenin understood, revolution is not an election campaign but a war. The winner is the side that has men with guns at the right place at the right time.

But because the social, economic, and even discursive contexts are left out, in order to explain major turning points, the author repeatedly relies on accidents and coincidences: if only the tsarevitch's measles had broken out a day earlier, the tsar would not have left Petrograd for the front; what if Lenin had been arrested on the eve of October? He sets up Marxism as a straw

man and ends up with bewildering contingencies: “Far from an eschatological ‘class struggle’ borne along inexorably by the Marxist dialectic, the events of 1917 were filled with might-have-beens and missed chances” (345). Ignoring what dozens of historians have contributed to our knowledge of 1917 does not advance understanding of extraordinary events that profoundly shaped the past one hundred years.

University of Michigan

Ronald Grigor Suny