

GENOCIDE

Edited by
A. Dirk Moses

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN
HISTORICAL STUDIES



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Critical Concepts in Historical Studies

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A. Dirk Moses

Volume IV
Twentieth Century Imperial Genocides:
The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany



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Part 8

RUSSIA AND THE
SOVIET UNION

VIOLENT RUSSIA, DEADLY MARXISM?

Russia in the epoch of violence, 1905–21*

Peter Holquist

Source: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4:3, (2003), 627–652.

But why did the storm that was gathering over the whole of Europe break in France and not elsewhere, and why did it acquire certain characteristics in France which were either absent in similar movements in other countries, or if present, assumed quite different forms?

Alexis de Toqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution*¹

The events of the [Russian] revolution present us with a twofold historical aspect. First, the crisis was one of the numerous European revolutions that emerged out of the Great War. . . . But it would be wrong to assume that the war, with all its enormous difficulties, could explain, in and of itself, the Russian catastrophe. . . .

At the same time, and to an even greater degree, the Russian Revolution was the product of a certain domestic condition. . . . In short, the two aspects of this concrete historical situation are but two different sides of one and the same sociological reality.

Boris Nol'de, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution russes*²

The Russian Revolution has become a preferred topic for discussing modern political violence. Given both the type and extent of violence during this period, such a focus is entirely justified. More than merely analyzing the sources and forms of this violence, studies of violence in the Russian Revolution often also seek to serve as object lessons – on the nature of Russia, or the effects of Marxism. Due to the way the debate has developed, scholars of the Russian Revolution argue either for a theory of “circumstances” or one of “ideology” to account for the widespread violence in this period. This terrain – a binary opposition between “context” and “intent” – has parallels in the debates on the Terror in the French Revolution and the

origins of the Final Solution in Holocaust studies.³ To be sure, to explain the widespread violence of the Russian Revolution one must account for both ideology and Russian specificities. But the binary model – *either* context *or* intent – fails to account for how these two factors interact. An emphasis either on the circumstances of Russia's past or the role of Bolshevik ideology risks de-historicizing the specific conjuncture in which these two components catalytically acted upon one another. Rather than siding with one or the other of these two schools, this article argues for the need to study the historical conditions in which circumstances and ideology intersected to produce the Bolshevik state and Soviet society – to trace “the complex dialectic of ideology and circumstance, consciousness and experience, reality and will.”⁴

The theory of “circumstances” in the Russian case presents Russia's revolutionary violence as a feature specific to Russia. This interpretation argues for a Russian *Sonderweg*, in which the Russian past and Russian backwardness made Russian society particularly prone to convulsions of violence. In *Krasnaia smuta*, a work overflowing with suggestive thoughts, Vladimir Buldakov focuses on violence as one of the crucial aspects of the Russian Revolution. In his view, the particular structure of the Russian empire (specifically, its patriarchal nature) produced a specifically Russian form of imperial mindset (what Buldakov terms “*imperstvo*”). This mindset constituted a type of collective psychology both towards and about authority. Deeply imbued with peasant traits, this mindset in turn gave rise to a specific *sotsium* – psycho-social type – that accounted for the Russian Revolution's spontaneous and chaotic violence. It was, thus, a specifically Russian *sotsium* that produced revolutionary violence. Indeed, Buldakov's very title – “The Red Time of Troubles” – evokes the heavy hand of Russian history on the revolutionary period.⁵ From a somewhat different perspective, Orlando Figes finds the “revolutionary tragedy in the legacies of [the people's] own cultural backwardness rather than the evil of some ‘alien’ Bolsheviks.” It was “the legacy of Russian history, of centuries of serfdom and autocratic rule” that caused the Russian people to be trapped “by the tyranny of their own history.”⁶ The arguments of both Buldakov and Figes contain much good sense and highlight Russia's specificity in the pan-European crisis of 1914–21. In doing so, however, they both stress the weight of Russian history over the contingencies at play in the period from 1905 to 1921.

The school of ideology posits much different reasons for Russian revolutionary violence. Rather than features distinct to Russia or its revolutionary conjuncture of 1905–21, proponents of the ideological approach point either to the culture of the Russian revolutionary movement in general or Marxism as ideology in particular as the font for the violence in the revolutionary period.⁷ From this perspective, Russia's history from 1917 represented not a Russian *Sonderweg*, but a revolutionary or Marxist one.

Due to the polemical nature of the debate, both schools remove the violence of the revolutionary period from its context: the violence is either timelessly Russian, or the product of an ideology that immediately and inexorably unfolds into violence and terror. Arno Mayer, reacting specifically to the latter ideological argument, has rightly insisted on reinserting Russia's revolution into its wartime and geo-political context.⁸ These "circumstances" – the geopolitical context and the violent opposition to the revolution's agenda – account, in his view, for the behavior of both the French revolutionary and Soviet regimes. Indeed, Mayer's book is thematically structured to highlight what he believes are the structural similarities between the two revolutions. This form of analysis, in which the French case serves as prototype and the Russian case then simply further illustrates these general processes, is productive in some respects. At the same time, it flattens out the specific revolutionary context in Russia and the particular chronological conjuncture at which the Russian Revolution occurred. Revolutionary Russia, in important ways, was different from revolutionary France. More broadly, for Europe as well as Russia, the geopolitical and ideological universe of 1917 was quite different from that of 1789. While Mayer provides a context, it is a structural one shorn of its specific historicity.

In this article I seek to provide a different geographic and chronological framework for the violence of the Russian Revolution. Russia's historical heritage *did* matter. But this historical heritage played out not as a set of eternal conditions, but as a set of factors within a specific time and space.⁹ The specific chronological conjuncture was the period from 1905 to 1921. In this period Russia's specific post-1905 domestic convulsions catalytically intersected with the overall European crisis of 1914–24. This "Europe" had its own historical specificity. Russia's own "Time of Troubles" unfolded within the eastern European shatter zone of dynastic land empires, at precisely the moment that these societies were imploding during World War I. Thus, rather than treating Russia's 1917 experience in isolation, both chronologically and geographically, I propose situating 1917 instead both as a fulcrum in Russia's 1905–21 "Time of Troubles" and within the overall European convulsion from 1914 to 1924.

Precedents

In resituating Russia's Revolution within the broader European context of World War I, there is no need to replace the 1917 watershed with a 1914 one. Many of the patterns and methods of violence commonly identified with the 20th century in fact were first employed over the 19th and early 20th century, both in the pursuit of domestic order and in the expanding colonial spaces. The Russian political and social order – Russia's "Old Regime" – had witnessed the rise of a new revolutionary situation from at least the 1890s. During this period the opposition to autocracy crystallized

into the almost universal form of modern political parties: the Revolutionary Armenian Federation (Dashnaktsutiun) (1890); the Polish Socialist Party (1892); the Jewish Bund (1897); the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (1898) and its subsequent split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (1903); the Jewish Social Democratic Workers' Party, Poalei-Tsion (1900); the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (1901); the journal *Liberation* (1902) and subsequent *Union of Liberation* [*Osvobozhdenie*] (1904); and then, emerging out of the Revolution of 1905, the Constitutional-Democrats (Kadets), the Union of 17 October (Octobrists) as well as the Popular Socialists.¹⁰ Many of the new Russian parties strove to emulate their counterparts in other countries, struggling to establish party press organs and to issue members with party cards. Unlike their foreign models, however, Russian political parties had no legal parliamentary forum until 1906. Without a legalized domestic forum for their activities, and granted few institutional assets by the autocracy, these parties had little stake in the existing political order, making them correspondingly more radical than their foreign prototypes.¹¹

These mounting domestic crises came to a crescendo in the 1905–7 Revolution, itself emerging in the midst of the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War. The resulting broad anti-regime coalition pressed for a minimal program, granted in October 1905 as the result of a near-universal general strike. This settlement produced a quasi-constitutional order, but did not immediately put an end to the revolution.

While liberals and moderates accepted the reforms, more radically-inclined parties and movements pressed on, culminating in the failed December 1905 insurrection in Moscow, suppressed by crack Guards regiments with the help of artillery. While not nearly as bloody as the 1871 suppression of the Paris Commune with its 20,000 dead, it was a quite violent event nonetheless.¹² (Indeed, one lesson Marxists had drawn from the Paris Commune was the need to conquer the state, in order to turn the state instruments of coercion which had been used against them in 1871 against their own foes.)¹³ In the aftermath of the December uprising in Moscow, revolutionaries on both the right and the left engaged in a widespread campaign of terrorism and assassination. Distinctive here was not simply the acts of terror by radicals, but equally the ambivalent acceptance of such acts even by Russia's "liberals," the Constitutional Democrats.¹⁴

In Stephen Wheatcroft's view, the violence of the 1905–7 period marked the first breaker of four great waves of violence in the first half of Russia's 20th century.¹⁵ Outside St. Petersburg and Moscow, "simultaneous if not coordinated risings in 1905–6...exhibited particular features in the borderlands. In the case of 1905–6 they were more violent and explicitly political on the periphery than in the ethnically Russian center."¹⁶ To be sure, the violence of the Revolution of 1905–7 was of a different order than that of the period to come. But the variety of intersecting axes along which it unfolded – the state's reliance on practices of repression (punitive detachments,

courts-martial), traditional agrarian conflict, incipient class warfare, ethnic strife, as well as along lines of party political divisions – was a precursor of the multifarious forms violent struggle would take in 1917 and afterwards.

In the aftermath of October 1905, the government moved from concessions to a policy of “pacification,” dispatching punitive detachments to Siberia, the Baltic, and the Caucasus. The imperial government granted military commanders in charge of such detachments *carte blanche* to operate against civilian populations. Intended to intimidate the population, they were “a form of state terror directed against its own citizens.”¹⁷ Their employment after 1905 was a major innovation in domestic violence. One Russian political commentator observed in 1907:

Over the past century, not one European government resorted to punitive expeditions against internal revolutionary and oppositionist movements within the boundaries of civilized states. . . . Harsh measures were sometimes employed in suppressing popular rebellions. [T]here were even mass executions of individuals seized with arms in hand, as for example during the Paris Commune of 1871. [B]ut once open armed conflict had ceased, military campaigns against the population of certain regions or against whole categories of civilians were never practiced. The punitive expeditions of 1905–1906 . . . were an entirely extraordinary innovation.¹⁸

While such detachments were especially active in the non-Russian periphery, they were also employed in the Russian core. Russia’s domestic “civil” rule was therefore more “colonialized” and “militarized” than most other European powers. As Alfred Rieber notes, “for Russia, there was no hard and fast distinction between colonial questions and the process of state building. This was not true of any other European state.”¹⁹ One Russian political observer noted in 1907 that, whereas the post of governor general in Western states existed “for the goals of colonial administration,” in Russia “their powers progressively expanded from the end of the 1870s, under the influence of disorders [*smuty*] and reaction, and reached their apogee in 1905. . . .’ [The governor generals] were first and foremost military men; and the main goal of their activities was to subdue the country [*pokorenie strany*].”²⁰

Agrarian and ethnic unrest and class violence in the prewar years were not the only precursors to the expansion of violence in the 1914–21 period. Hannah Arendt observed that 19th-century imperialism had served as “a preparatory phase” for the 20th century’s “coming catastrophes.”²¹ While in Europe government officials often found various limits placed upon their programs to assimilate and uplift the lower orders, James Scott notes that in the colonial setting they could often pursue fantastic plans with near impunity, ruling with “greater coercive power over an objectified and alien population.”²² The self-perception regarding its colonial holdings among the

educated public and government in the Russian empire differed greatly from that of other Western colonial powers. The Russian empire was a dynastic land empire, structurally more akin to the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, and its forms of imperial administration correspondingly differed from forms of trans-oceanic colonial rule.²³ Yet the colonial *practices* employed by the Russian imperial state and its military must be seen within the spectrum of other European colonial measures. Russian officers knew of, and sought to emulate, the practices of other European powers, devoting particular attention to the French experience in Algeria. This exchange was not entirely in one direction. French officers, such as France's leading theorist of colonial warfare, Hubert Lyautey, studied the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Indeed, Lyautey "frequently refers to various episodes of Russian Asiatic warfare as models for colonial officers in general."²⁴

It was in these imperial borderlands that the Russian imperial military first conceived and then implemented the practice of compulsory population transfers.²⁵ Most notably, in the early 1860s (the heyday of Russian progressive reforms) Dmitrii Miliutin – an "enlightened" bureaucrat and long-serving war minister – drew up the plans for the "definitive" subjugation of the Western Caucasus through demographic conquest by expelling the region's native inhabitants and settling Cossacks in their place. He himself described the aims of his policy:

resettling [the mountain tribespeople] is proposed not as a *means* towards clearing lands which allegedly are insufficient for new Cossack settlements; on the contrary, [resettling the tribespeople] is the *goal*, to which end the territories presently occupied by our foe will be settled by [Cossacks], and the numerical force of the hostile native population will thereby be reduced.²⁶

In campaigning to achieve this end, lasting from 1860–64, between 500,000 and 700,000 individuals were either deported or forced to emigrate in the face of purposely ruthless military operations. These policies remained in the imperial military repertoire. Half a century later, in the midst of World War I, Aleksei Kuropatkin – who early in his military career had actually toured French Algeria in an official capacity, before winning his spurs in the Russian conquest of Central Asia – proposed similar measures to secure Turkestan in the aftermath of the 1916 Central Asian Steppe uprising. He drew up plans for expelling the Kirghiz from certain districts of Semirech'e and placing Russian settlers on their lands, all in order to form districts "with a purely Russian population." Only the outbreak of the February Revolution in 1917 prevented him from putting his plans into effect.²⁷

The colonial setting saw the first systematic use of concentration camps for civilians. In their modern guise, they were initiated by General Valeriano

Weyler during the Spanish 1896–97 anti-insurgency campaign in Cuba. While not intentionally lethal, these camps were deadly nonetheless. Weyler's measures resulted in at least 100,000 civilian deaths. With the Boer War (1899–1902), concentration camps came to international prominence. While British policies were not unique, they became notorious because of extensive critical coverage by the British press and public. General Frederick Roberts and General Lord Horatio Kitchener, the British commanders in South Africa, both had extensive prior experience in colonial warfare. In South Africa, they pursued a twin policy of clearing the country and concentrating the entire non-combatant population in camps. By the end of the war, the British held 110,000 Boer civilians and more than 37,000 Africans in concentration camps, resulting in nearly 30,000 deaths among the Boers (five-sixths of whom were women and children) and over 13,000 among African detainees, a mortality rate for these detainees of over one in three.²⁸ Russian military men reported on these measures in great detail.²⁹ So too did the Russian press. The earliest reference I have found for the term “concentration camp” in Russian [*kontsentratsionnyi lager'*] refers to British measures in South Africa.³⁰

Yet Arendt, who incisively noted colonialism's role as incubator for forthcoming catastrophes, simultaneously insisted that the horrors of colonialism “were still marked by a certain moderation and controlled by respectability.”³¹ For most of Europe, the exercise of more or less unlimited violence was as yet geographically circumscribed to colonial territories, just as real class warfare (as in the 1871 Paris Commune or the 1905 Moscow uprising) was strictly confined to “dangerous” urban spaces. In Russia, however, the boundary between “colony” and “metropole” (as well as between the correspondingly different attitudes and methods of rule) was much less clear to begin with. Moreover, the 1905 Revolution had gone some way toward eroding this boundary between a colonial realm of militarized “extraordinary rule” and a domestic civil realm. This boundary was to collapse entirely with World War I and the Russian Revolution.

World War I

Speaking in November 1919 – almost exactly two years after the October Revolution and one year after the Armistice that ended the Great War – Petr Struve observed that “the world war formally ended with the conclusion of the armistice [on 11 November 1918]. ... In fact, however, from that time all that we have experienced, and that we continue to experience, is a continuation and transformation of the world war.”³² Pavel Miliukov, who disagreed with Struve on much else, concurred. Writing in 1921, he declared that “of course it is the war of 1914–18 which claims first place among the factors which determined the *specific physiognomy*” of the Russian Revolution.³³ These observations indicate that contemporaries viewed the Russian