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REVIEW ESSAYS

The Russian Revolution: A New History, by Sean McMeekin. New York: Basic Books, 2017, 496 pp., $30.00 hardbound.

Lenin on the Train, by Catherine Merridale. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017, 368 pp., $30.00 hardbound.

October: The Story of the Russian Revolution, by China Miéville. New York: Verso, 2017, 384 pp., $26.95 hardbound.

October's *Sumerki*

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Welcome to the centenary of the Russian Revolution! There's a popular history for every political persuasion—freedom of the press to make publishing companies rich and authors famous. The irony of profits being made on a revolution that eliminated profit underscores its failure: freedom, profit, and individual ambition could be suppressed by terror, but never eradicated. The revolution died, our desires survived—yet the revolution still attracts attention. It's a dream or a nightmare, an ambiguous twilight *sumerki* that could be a dawn or a dusk. The revolution offers us different lessons for the present day, depending on which light you see in its distant image.

Bard College history professor Sean McMeekin's *The Russian Revolution: A New History* provides a by-the-numbers conservative narrative. Russia had largely recovered from the heart attack of the 1905 revolution, and the pre-war Stolypin land reforms had a real chance to put Russia on a stable economic foundation—but then came the fatal catastrophe, World War I. McMeekin assigns central blame to the fecklessness of Russia's liberals, who first pushed Russia into war in 1914 from Pan-Slavist enthusiasm and then conspired to undermine the Tsarist government. At the crisis of the February Revolution of 1917 liberal politicians such as Mikhail Rodzianko pushed the tsar to abdicate—and immediately and irretrievably let slip their chance to rule Russia. The folly of the liberals subordinated the Provisional Government's evanescent power to veto by the anarchic socialist

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(and largely Marxist) coalition within the Soviets—mostly composed of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries in February, but with increasing numbers of Bolsheviks as the year unfolded. The liberals thus created the conditions that set Russia spinning toward the disaster of the Bolsheviks' October coup, which led by a short, straight road to a regime that was not liberal, nor even all-socialist, but rather a mass-murderous dictatorship by the most radical of the Socialist factions.

That disaster primarily involved the needless disintegration of the army. McMeekin describes the Russian army as relatively sound at the beginning of 1917, recovered in morale and supplies after its early disasters in 1914 and 1915. The February Revolution allowed the calamity of the Soviet's Order Number 1, which crippled military authority, opened the way for Bolshevik agitators to infect the army, created war-weariness, and incited desertion and mutiny. Alexander Kerensky's amateurish leadership made matters worse. First he authorized the needless Kerensky offensive into Galicia in the summer of 1917, hastening the disintegration of the army. Then in August he blundered into a confrontation with General Kornilov—commander-in-chief since June—thus alienating what remained of the army just when the Provisional Government needed its soldiers' support to put down the Bolsheviks.

As for the Bolsheviks, McMeekin mainly attributes their rise to canny German policy. First the Germans released Lenin from his Swiss bottle by means of the infamous, imperfectly sealed train through Germany, translating him in a world-changing eight days from Zurich to Petrograd, from powerless exile to leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Then they paid for the Bolshevik Party's printing press, its propaganda, and its stipends to its cadre of propagandists and bullyboys. Meanwhile, the German army carefully refrained from an eastern offensive for much of the year—so as to allow the Bolshevik rot to spread without provoking a patriotic resistance to German attack—and swept forward toward St. Petersburg when the Russian army was disintegrating, to destabilize what was left of the feckless Provisional Government, and to leave it helpless before the Bolsheviks' October insurrection.

McMeekin makes a fetish of contradicting the strictures of Marxist history. Against the Marxist emphasis on class conflict he provides a contingent political and military history, and emphasizes the importance of national identity. Against the Marxist hagiography of Bolshevik virtue and competence he presents the Bolsheviks as brutal fools who succeeded by German funding, happenstance, and terror—and because no other party had the brains to call straightforwardly for peace with Germany.

McMeekin's fetish unfortunately creates new puzzles. How does an

army he describes as in fine morale in January 1917 succumb overnight to war-weariness, desertion, and mutiny? How precisely did the Bolsheviks succeed if they were universally loathed incompetents? You need not be a Marxist to think that Tsarist Russia was fragile, and that the Bolsheviks had sufficient competence and strength of character to appeal to at least a crucial minority of Russians.

McMeekin gilds the lily, yet his account is superior to the Mitfordesque gush of Catherine Merridale's *Lenin on the Train*. Merridale, a British professor who has shifted to writing popular history, frames her account of 1917 around Lenin's journey by train from Switzerland to Petrograd. She alternates between a close evocation of the journey itself, a brief depiction of Russia and the Bolshevik party up to that date, and a narration of the events of the early revolution. Russia from the summer of 1917 onward is epilogue.

Merridale knows how terrible the Soviet regime was—although she minimizes the death toll to a few million. She even knows how terrible Lenin was, possessed by single-minded, murderous, revolutionary obsession. But much of the book reads as a peculiar extenuation of both Lenin and the revolution. Merridale's long account of the train ride is heavy on lyric description of the countryside that Lenin might have noticed if he had ever looked up from writing new polemics. She endeavors to make Lenin sympathetic by describing the beautiful landscape he traveled through, and rhapsodizes about his competence, which stood out against the cloud of ineffectual intellectuals ranging from the liberals through Lenin's fellow Bolsheviks. Merridale's breathlessly admiring power worship amounts to an almost erotic affection for Lenin as rough trade—the only man in Russia with balls.

Merridale is likewise gauzy about the revolution itself—which consisted, in her soft-focus portrayal, of the masses of the people in revolt, of their hunger and their need for land and peace, of their spontaneous destruction of the old Tsarist regime. In her account, the Bolsheviks are bystanders for much of the early going—and when they do act, it is the proletarian Bolsheviks rather than the over-intellectual Bolshevik Central Committee who make the revolution. Her sympathies are with the people on the streets and their genuine (and therefore holy) revolution, which she distinguishes sharply from the later Bolshevik takeover.

Merridale's account of Lenin's relations with the Germans overlaps considerably with McMeekin's, although she takes him to be too credulous in accepting the authenticity of several apparently damning documents. But though Merridale acknowledges that Lenin received German pay, her heart is in damning the motives of everyone who said he was receiving German

pay—and in the ostentatious revelation that the British and the French also tried to influence Russia with secret gold, just less effectively than the Germans. She then composes a lengthy "what Lenin should have said"—that it was perfectly justified to take German gold in service of the revolution. Merridale regrets that Lenin never actually said so himself, and cannot comprehend his reluctance to confess to committing treason in wartime.

Merridale is as dismissive as McMeekin of the Russian liberals, although from a vantage point farther left. She reserves her greatest contempt, however, for the British gentlemen and businessmen who dealt with Russia. They are all fools out for the main chance, whose blundering work to keep Russia in the war condemned it to the agonies of Bolshevism. However harsh the Bolsheviks were, at least they weren't the British establishment—a caste Merridale truly loathes.

Merridale agrees with McMeekin that the Bolsheviks cooperated with the Germans—she just doesn't think it mattered. She also agrees that individuals matter more than the Marxists would have it—Lenin is the Mohammed of the Revolution, *sine qua non*. Indeed, it is his singular louche potency that makes the revolution worth reading about. If McMeekin fails to illuminate the appeal of the revolution, Merridale unwittingly illustrates its continuing allure to liberals. Lenin isn't the Establishment they truly loathe, and his brutal insurrection, his mass murders, are what make him desirable—the true proof of his prowess.

China Miéville's *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*, has the virtue of straightforward Marxism. Miéville, a committed and politically active English Socialist, waves the red flag proudly, and makes no apologies for his love of the revolution. He is also a professional novelist, specializing in the fantasy genre, so his account is by far the best written of the three books—although Miéville's bag of tricks is limited. He follows up on each factual nugget. With short, dramatic sentences. Which are full of abstractions. That interpret history. But which amount to. Empty exhortation.

Yet Miéville's insider perspective provides nuance that McMeekin's condemnations and Merridale's effusions lack. The Bolshevik point of view is a less sour rendition than McMeekin's of the stumbling incoherence of much of the Bolshevik movement, whose leadership was usually overrun by events and the revolutionary impulses of the Petrograd street. Miéville is nicely acid on how most Bolsheviks were almost as trapped by the Marxist stages-of-revolution theory as the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries. Only Miéville's Lenin had a real eye for the main chance—and even he made mistakes. Miéville minimizes the conspiratorial nature of the Bolsheviks

during the long months from February until October—although he tacitly acknowledges that this was only from tactical considerations. The Bolsheviks only refrained from insurrection so long as the circumstances were not yet ripe.

Miéville idolizes the Russian people's spontaneous revolution even more than Merridale. He glories in the self-organization of the workers, the peasant expropriations of the land, the desertions and mutinies of the soldiers—and if he is open about the anarchic theft and murder that accompanied them, he is also indifferent. The "Hard Right," the bourgeoisie, the warmongers—they deserved what they got. And if the revolution metamorphosed into the Stalinist horrors—why, Miéville makes a hard break at the end of October, dividing the admirable revolutionary insurrection from the less admirable Bolshevik direction of the state thereafter. Here, too, Miéville extenuates. In his rendition, the Bolsheviks were driven toward murderous tyranny by the exigencies of civil war.

Miéville downplays the German dimension that McMeekin and Merridale explore at length. He mentions that Lenin was accused of being a German agent—but briefly, with the strong implication that the accusation was only rightist-Kerenskyist character assassination. Miéville comprehends as little as Merridale why the accusation of being German agents was so shattering to the Bolsheviks' reputation.

Miéville also narrates the folly of the intellectuals—but this time that of the Socialists. The socialist intellectuals are so constrained by their Marxist theory of historical stages that they are unwilling to take power for long months, as Russia falls apart. When Kerensky comes to lead the Provisional Government, that preening orator casts away what power he might have had by continuing the war. Where McMeekin scorns the liberal intellectuals for throwing away the chance of a liberal regime, Miéville scorns the socialist intellectuals for throwing away the chance of an all-socialist Soviet regime. Miéville is an optimist, and thinks that such an all-socialist regime might have channeled Bolshevik energies without ending up in Bolshevik dictatorship.

Even Miéville's account is a long cry from the old Marxist historiography. The Marxist theory of history is gone—Lenin is the man who made the revolution. The popular, revolutionary dissolution of old Russia is his ambiguous *sumerki*-light of liberty—not the Bolshevik rule that followed. But Miéville, for better and worse, retains a sympathetic sense of what the Bolshevik intellectuals, soldiers, and workers aimed to achieve with their overlapping revolutions. He likes these devils too much, but he gives them their due.

At times the three authors take different lessons from 1917. McMeekin's moral, presumably with an eye to

the current enthusiasts of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, is that the modern resurgence of Marxism promises nothing but a repetition of the Bolshevik horror show. Merridale's moral, tailor-made for Islingtonian Little Englanders, is that Great Powers shouldn't try to interfere in other people's revolutions. Miéville's is that we should still place our hope in the dim light of liberty that shines from 1917: "Twilight, even remembered twilight, is better than no light at all. It would be equally absurd to say that there is nothing we can learn from the revolution. To deny that the *sumerki* of October can be ours, and that it need not always be followed by night."[1] He is an eloquent tout, who almost makes you believe that next time the horror show will be *horosho*.

At other times the three authors teach the same lesson. They share a contempt for Russian intellectuals who didn't know how to play the game of politics, and agree that they should be derided for having lost. This is in some part justified bitterness at these intellectuals, liberal or socialist, for casting away the chance to make Russia better than the Bolshevik abattoir it became. Yet it is also in some part pure derision toward the losers of history, contempt bestowed as the just reward for powerlessness. Only Merridale openly admires Lenin's ruthlessness, but all three authors take the time to spit at the ball-less wonders, the intellectuals, the weaklings who lost out to the Bolsheviks. Power worship appears to be the coin of the histories of our day, in all political persuasions.

It would be nice to read a popular history that had a kind word for Rodzianko or Kerensky, that thought the decencies of the Russia they wanted to create worth mentioning alongside the fecklessness that let those ideals slip through their hands. It would be nice to read a history that acknowledged Russia's wartime agony, without rationalizing the Bolshevik takeover. It would be nice to read a history that acknowledged the depth of Russians' love of their country, which made them so unwilling, even in their agony, to make peace with Germany.

Perhaps we will have one in another hundred years.

[1]China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2017), 318.