

**ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES
IN THE STUDY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917***

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Abstract. In this analysis of domestic historiography of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the author highlights the importance of mass popular protests in understanding the causes of this crucial event, while noting that this factor has been unreasonably neglected by Russian historians since the early 1990s. She argues that both the character of the revolution and the chances for a peaceful settlement of conflicts in Russian society depended on the policy of top state authorities, especially from 1916 forward.

Keywords: Russian Revolution of 1917, historiography, mass protest movement, working class.

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**УСПЕХИ И ПРОСЧЁТЫ
В ИЗУЧЕНИИ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ 1917 ГОДА В РОССИИ**

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Аннотация. Анализируя особенности изучения революции 1917 г. в России в основном в отечественной историографии, автор акцентирует важность изучения массового протестного движения для понимания причин революционного взрыва. Данное направление исследований было необоснованно отодвинуто в тень с начала 1990-х гг. При этом

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подчеркивается, что как характер революции, так и возможность разрешить противоречия неревOLUTIONНЫМ путём были обусловлены политикой высшей государственной власти, особенно начиная с 1916 г.

Ключевые слова: революция 1917 г., Россия, историография, массовое протестное движение, рабочий класс.

The centenary of the revolution of 1917 naturally caused an increased interest in the event, as well as an avalanche of literature on the subject. Scholars have summarized the preliminary results of such studies, with special attention paid to the preconditions for the revolution. New works in domestic and foreign historiography make it possible to compare aspects of the internal situation that emerged during the First World War in Russia to other belligerent countries: the state of the public sector of the economy, the processes conditioned by socioeconomic government policies, and the polarization of government and society (see e.g. Petrov 2017). It should be noted here that there is a discrepancy in the interpretation of the concept of “society,” which cannot be ignored from the scholarly viewpoint in explaining the causes of the revolution. Sometimes the term refers solely to educated and wealthy people, including financial and banking tycoons. In this interpretation, “society” means “educated society.” However, early twentieth-century Russian encyclopedias indicate that the concept of “society” included ordinary people as well.

Unquestionably, it is necessary to look for the deep-seated causes of Russian revolutions in the success of Russian modernization, with the attendant difficulties of the transition from a traditional to an industrial society. Yet people as active participants in the social process tend to get lost in such conversations nowadays. Today many Russian historians believe that the “impetus” to the “fatal revolutionary explosion” was an “explosive mixture of militant nationalism, xenophobia and spy mania” (see e.g. Kolonitskii 2010). Without denying the widespread influence of these phenomena in Russian social life, it must be noted, however, that under the conditions of a protracted war, by 1917 it is hardly possible to confine oneself to these factors when speaking about the causes of the revolution.

The authors of recent works somehow overlook the fact that the driving force that led to the revolutionary explosion was the intensification of mass popular protest. Contemporaries, who were especially apprehensive of such an explosion, noted the growth of revolutionary sentiments among the masses, which fueled these protests. What form the revolution would take, whether social or political, and the question of whether it could be avoided altogether in February 1917, depended entirely on the top state leadership and its policies, particularly beginning in 1916. N. Berdyaev offers a wise comment on this situation: “The revolution always claims that the authorities did not fulfill their duties” (1990 [1923]).

The main driving force leading to a potential explosion under the prevailing circumstances was the proletariat, whose mass protests reached unprecedented proportions in this period. Between July 1914 and February 28, 1917, over 5,000 strikes took place in Russia, in which more than 3 million workers took part. Low wages fueled the 70 percent increase in economic strikes in 1916; their number increased 14 times in this year compared to 1915. The peak in political strikes occurred in 1916 and early 1917. Since the 1990s, these facts have been largely ignored in the literature on the 1917 Revolution.

The collapse of the USSR compromised the history of mass protest movements, along with the history of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party /Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This accelerated the relativization of analytical results achieved in this field by domestic social science research. The very principles of mass character, solidarity, and collectivity in history were rejected. The antiwar component of the protest movement and the unpopular policies of the imperial government were forgotten. Like a shrinking violet, the history of mass popular protest in Russia on the eve of 1917 not only gave way to other important problems of social history, but also to vague innuendos and sensationalism.

B. N. Mironov has pointed to the sufficient standard of living in the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century as part of this discussion, questioning the need to include this factor as one of the catalysts for the mass movement that led to the fall of the monarchy. He writes, “the fall of tsarism was not so much the result of a spontaneous movement from below, but rather the result of a revolution from above,” (Mironov 2010, 665); a lot of historians are inclined to think likewise. Scholars are right to argue that “‘simple’ conspiracy answers are not enough to explain the causes of the Great Russian Revolution, and perhaps we are still far from answering the question of how its trigger mechanism worked” (Petrov, 2017). Even so, when analyzing the revolution, it is necessary to consider the particular historical conditions of that period in Russian history, with all its characteristics, including the forgotten theme of wealth and poverty, without exception.

Historiography (still Soviet!) long ago overcame the Leninist thesis of the “pauperization of masses.” Nevertheless, in representing the revolution as a “triumph of the revolting masses,” is it accurate to discount the extreme level of labor exploitation in agriculture and industry that existed in Russia during the war in comparison to other warring countries? Fifteen million employable individuals were mobilized during the First World War, while the goals of the war were not understood by the broad masses of the people, especially in the face of a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Despite the considerable amount of capital invested in Russian industry in the early twentieth century before the war and the subsequent doubling of its value, the economic impact was negligible. For example, even contemporaries noted that grain, the main agricultural product, increased

by a mere 1.7 percent, even as the population increased by 21 percent. Capitalism in agriculture did not eliminate “oppression, exploitation, poverty of the masses,” but created “these same disasters in a new form.” Due to that fact, monopolist landowners made fortunes of billions of rubles. During the war, this sort of robbery gained an exceptional scope. The imperial government needed money to continue the war and developed contacts with wealthy individuals who could provide it. This was accompanied by the violent suppression of the interests of the broad popular masses. Was it not for this reason that before the war millions of people in Russia were deprived of their suffrage so that they could not influence the decisions of the State Duma, which, among other things, asserted the costs of war? Representatives of the Russian state were indifferent to the millions of victims and the suffering of their compatriots, for whom the war was an unmitigated disaster. Their only concern was the fulfillment of their obligations to the Allies and the continuation of the war.

The state sought to find effective ways to facilitate interaction with entrepreneurs to achieve a qualitative leap in weapons production. However, progress in this area was made due to the curtailment of civil production and the degradation of the private market that supplied goods to the urban and rural population. Wartime memoirs reveal the enormous profits that millionaires P. Riabushinskii, A. Kononov, and other monopolistic industrialists received from military orders. What we would now call “stealing from the state” was unprecedented in Russia. The highest dignitaries and even Duma deputies were implicated in such affairs. The scale of abuse was so overwhelming that General A. Manikovskii sarcastically described the situation as “a crusade against the treasury chest” (1937, 84).

The mass protest movement in Russia on the eve of 1917, as in 1905, was determined by such factors as the labor market, labor relations, and state policy, which, however archaic it may sound, spilled out into class conflict. Active mass popular protest had as its goal the protection of hired labor, a change in the balance of economic power between the protesters and the authorities, who were enriched at their expense. The huge social gap between the wealthy and the poor became especially noticeable during the period of the Provisional Government. Unlike a number of Western countries that managed to reach a compromise between labor and capital, it inherited from the tsarist government a bad system of military and economic regulation. As a result, it aroused distrust among the people, including among workers who belonged to non-revolutionary organizations. In conclusion, it should be noted that the unresolved relations between labor and capital are one of the key moments in the modernization of society.

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