

the turbulence of the Russian revolution that flight acquired particular resonance. So too did the concept of the “new person” (the gender-neutral *novyi chelovek*), which, according to Steinberg, stands for the persistent *intelligent* ideal of human dignity. How the individual personality (*lichnost'*) fit with the collective social body, however, became a pressing question after 1917. From here the book takes a spatial turn to consider the configuration of living space for the “new person.” “Architecture and utopia have long been allies” (53), Steinberg tells us, illustrated by the foundation of St. Petersburg as Peter’s Promethean, Europeanized imperial capital, and by the transformation of “New Moscow” under Stalin as the centered showpiece of socialism. The city also brings into relief the contradictions of modern life: possibility and liberation but also danger, disease, and disorder. It supplies the lived experience that “inspires and shapes” the utopian impulse to overcome these contradictions (53–56). Finally, the dynamic between utopia and dystopia necessarily embraces the state. Here Steinberg unpacks the “ideal Russian state” in its several iterations, “spiritually at one with the people and devoted to their happiness, but with no limits on coercive power” (79).

Written for Bloomsbury’s impressive “Russian Shorts” series, the challenge for the author is to combine breadth with depth in relatively few words. With his customary acute insight, erudition, and elegant prose, Steinberg succeeds with aplomb. Nonetheless, by his own admission he has chosen depth over breadth, focusing on a selection of individuals and episodes. This has been a judicious choice, allowing Steinberg to draw upon his own original research. At times, however, I wanted a wider lens that looked beyond the “revolutionary era” (c.1880–1930s). Was perestroika an era of utopian imagining? Is the Putin age one of conservative utopia? Then there is the question of Stalinism as utopia, which Steinberg intriguingly leaves somewhat open, hesitant about the lack of critical challenge to the existing state of things. Does this suggest that Stalinism was a calcified socio-political order? Socialism may have been fully welcomed in 1936, but this was still a society supposedly transitioning towards communist utopia.

However, the enduring significance of this sparkling and inspiring book will be beyond what Steinberg could have imagined when writing it. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the tendency to read Russian history “backward from outcomes,” by reducing it to pain and brutality, has been very great. But the history of Russian utopia reminds us that this too is a country that has been shaped by the pursuit of “liberty, justice, morality, community, and the dignity of the individual” (6). Let us hope it will be again.

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***Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics Across the Russian Empire (1882–1917)***. By Eric Blanc. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2021. xiv, 455 pp.

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Eric Blanc’s *Revolutionary Social Democracy* is an important book that everyone with an interest in Soviet history, Marxism, the political sociology of class, and prospects for working-class organization should read. It seeks to challenge “long-held assumptions about the Russian Revolution and the dynamics of political struggle in autocratic and parliamentary conditions,” (1) and succeeds brilliantly in fulfilling its ambitious agenda. It does so by extending the coverage of social democratic party history to

include Latvian, Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish, Georgian, and especially Finnish organizations; recasting Second International “orthodoxy” as “revolutionary;” and thereby stressing continuities between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions.

Over ten chapters ranging in length from twenty to sixty pages, Blanc addresses just about every issue that arose among the empire’s social democrats—from tensions between workers and intellectuals within respective party organizations, to disruptions caused by frequent arrests of leading cadres, the efficacy of various forms of protest and mass actions including the general strike, the Menshevik-Bolshevik split, class collaboration and attitudes towards liberals, the comparative advantages of pursuing a united front versus maintaining factional autonomy, reactions to the war, and the big one: whether in circumstances of state implosion to attempt to seize power and whether it was possible to eliminate capitalism in “backward” Russia.

“Ho hum,” the reader might say. Hasn’t this been thrashed out many times before? To be sure, Blanc summons much of the historiography produced over several generations. But as an historical sociologist whose target audiences are both scholars and activists, he infuses discussion of the issues with both fresh insight and some bold assertions. These include but are not limited to the paramountcy of leaflets as opposed to other forms by which socialists communicated with workers; Mensheviks (in November 1905) as the source of the concept of democratic centralism; Rosa Luxemburg’s intransigence and authoritarianism in dealing with rival Polish social democratic fractions; Vladimir Lenin’s early (pre-1905) support for a “bloc with the progressive bourgeoisie” (175); “the fact that [in 1917] Bolsheviks saw themselves—and *acted*—as an orthodox Marxist current seeking to unite all class-struggle SDs” (281); the revolution of 1905 as more advanced in the sense of worker hegemony than that of 1917; and, rather than a zero-sum game, class and national liberation as mutually reinforcing.

Many of these points are related to the author’s emphasis on the importance of Karl Kautsky to Russia’s social democrats and positive reassessment of his revolutionary credentials. Far from being a “revisionist” Marxist, Blanc’s Kautsky emerges as “the most influential theorist of a ruptural anti-capitalist approach” (285) within the Second International. Blanc also credits him with having overcome the tendency among social democrats (including Lenin and Lev Trotskii) before 1905 to treat workers’ revolution “as a discrete process occurring within the bounds of individual countries” (335) rather than as an interconnected whole. From this insight came the argument Kautsky made in 1904 that “proletarian revolution would likely break out in world capitalism’s weakest link” (336). Here and in some other respects, the author is (explicitly) indebted to the “iconoclastic research” (13) and perseverance of Lars Lih.

The other, perhaps even greater, contribution this book makes is that by including the borderlands as an essential part of the story, it recasts Bolshevism as less exceptional or, from another point of view, less aberrant. Drawing on sources in eight (!) different languages, Blanc amply demonstrates the variety and complexity of positions advanced by different party factions, thereby better situating among a broader range of possibilities those adopted by the center. Or rather, the impression one gets is that there really was no “center.” Within this panoply, the Finnish social democrats easily win the prize for exceptionality. Like several other parties in the Baltic and Caucasus regions, Finnish socialists sought to—and briefly did—set up an anti-capitalist government during 1917–18. But the Finns were the only ones to do so within what had been a parliamentary system of government that Blanc characterizes as similar to that of imperial Germany. Immersion in parliamentary and trade union politics moderated most German SDs, but for reasons Blanc discusses at some length, their Finnish counterparts went in the other direction.

*Revolutionary Social Democracy* concludes by arguing that the cry for “all power to the soviets” never meant a socialist revolution but at best could provide the impetus for one that would be international in scope. More than a century on, the world is paying an ever-bigger price for “the borderlands . . . constituting more of a barrier than a bridge” (393) to the revolution’s spread. The depredations of capitalism against which revolutionary social democrats fought in imperial Russia have only intensified and expanded, threatening nothing less than the survival of the species.

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***Esperanto and Languages of Internationalism in Revolutionary Russia.*** By Brigid O’Keeffe, London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. xii, 252 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$115.00, hard bound.  
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Today social media allows us to traverse borders with relative ease. In the early twentieth century, Soviet advocates of Esperanto did so as well by taking advantage of new technologies like radio and tried-and-true pen and paper. As Brigid O’Keeffe reminds us in her superbly researched book, such interactions promised them “a salve for their stunted wanderlusts,” but also “a means to a higher end—that is, effective cultural diplomacy from below” (122). The study masterfully displays the deep-seated commitment of Esperantists in the Russian empire and USSR to an adaptable vision of “cosmopolitan modernity” embodied by this language of their choosing.

One of the most compelling aspects of O’Keeffe’s account is her telling of the creation of Esperanto. It was formulated by Lazar Zamenhof, a Jewish doctor and native of Białystok, then in the Russian empire. The son of a self-taught teacher of German, Zamenhof was a polyglot by training and necessity. In a mixed, predominantly Jewish-Polish region, Zamenhof learned multiple languages to navigate relations with his neighbors and the Russian-faced state. Although O’Keeffe underscores that multilingualism was an advantageous skill for the residents of Białystok, Zamenhof came to believe that linguistic difference divided humankind and enabled internecine violence. Fascinated with languages at an early age, he developed an auxiliary international language in 1887 to secure communal harmony. Thus, Esperanto was born in the specific circumstances of “an empire in crisis” (16). Zamenhof found a receptive audience within the Russian Empire and beyond among those similarly devoted to solidarity between all peoples.

The construction of a real, if often epistolary, Esperantoland was primarily an elite or middle-class project. O’Keeffe stresses that Esperantists viewed themselves as patriots of their homelands who simultaneously embraced an ecumenical devotion to cooperative exchange. While this seems a little too ideal—tensions between these two attachments must have arisen—it is clear that many Esperantists around the globe believed this orientation to be valid. When the Bolshevik Party gained power in 1917, Esperantists in the former Russian empire were forced to abandon a commonly accepted pretense to political neutrality. A newly formed Union of Soviet Esperantists (SEU) now claimed that Esperanto was intrinsically a proletarian language because of the supposed ease by which it could be learned and placed in the service of the international working class. Attempts by SEU leaders to get the Comintern, a presumably natural supporter, to adopt the language for its conference proceedings were met with apathy or irritation.