

OTHER REVIEWS

A people's tragedy: the Russian revolution, 1891–1924. By Orlando Figes. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996. Pp. 923. £25.00. ISBN 0-224-04162-2

‘On a wet and windy morning in February 1913 St Petersburg celebrated three hundred years of Romanov rule over Russia.’ Orlando Figes begins his brilliantly comprehensive history of the Russian revolution with a story, and a flair for narrative lightens many of its nine hundred pages. The account of the Romanov pageant is characteristically gripping, glistening with colour and incident. Beyond the scarlet and the gilt, however, the dominant tone of Figes’s history here as elsewhere is dark, at times completely black. Most histories of the Russian revolution, even those that accept its violent human costs and also, possibly, its ultimate ‘betrayal’, attempt to identify at least one group of winners. Figes’s account provides no such relief. The whole weight of his book is directed towards describing an experiment which, as he concludes, ‘went horribly wrong’.

The book is ambitious, and has inevitably drawn criticism. Some of its claims are a little inflated. It is not the first single-volume history of the revolution to adopt a long-term view, for example. Readers have pointed out, not always disinterestedly, that Figes’s work shares a number of characteristics with the recent and equally ambitious two-volume account by Richard Pipes. The author has also clearly taken advantage of every opportunity which timing could have offered. He makes impressive use of material which would not have been available ten years ago. Inevitably, some of this comes second-hand, lifted bodily from recent monographs and articles. But these observations, and any others intended to diminish the author’s achievement, are hardly more than nit-picking. This book is in a class by itself.

The real strength of Figes’s writing lies in his mastery of Russian social history. It is also in this respect that his book differs from Pipes’s history, an account remarkable for the absence of society at every turn. Figes writes fluently about court politics, the revolutionary elite and the military blunders of seven years of war, but the core of the book is its understanding of Russia’s people. The sections that describe peasant society before and after 1917 make extensive use of the archival sources which Figes knows best. But his other accounts – of urban poverty, of petty trade and the new rich, of an intelligentsia torn between its conscience and its economic pretensions – are equally compelling, and vividly evoke the pre-war tension in the Tsarist system, the hopes and joy of February 1917, and the depth of the disaster which had overtaken almost all by 1921.

Another of Figes’s talents is his eye for detail. Like Pipes, but on a much wider scale, he is the master of the thumbnail sketch, delivering portraits of individuals and tracing their fortunes through the revolutionary years. The obvious candidates are all there – the statesmanlike Stolypin, the well-meaning Prince Lvov, the ladies’ idol Alexander Kerensky, a post-Soviet Lenin with all his warts on show. But there are commoners too, including the peasant, Dmitrii Os’kin, who rose to eminence in the Soviet army of the 1920s, and the worker Sergei Kanatchikov, who eventually became rector of the Communist University in Petrograd. The military is represented by the tragic General Brusilov, one of the few figures portrayed with consistent sympathy, as well as by lesser

figures such as Fedor Linde, murdered because of his faith in the very soldiers who shot and bayoneted him to death. Few other individuals receive a good press from Figes, the most prominent being Maxim Gorky, the writer who rose from poverty to become a thorn in the flesh of the Bolshevik elite.

The book's darkness, fluttered momentarily by sarcasm, punctured in places by genuine humour or brilliant observation, is at once its triumph and a major problem. The triumph is the extent to which Figes controls hundreds of pages of pain. The Russian people endured disasters of every kind. Famine and war were to some extent wished upon them, but the brutality with which they treated each other had deeper roots. Drawing on Mark Steinberg's work on peasant justice, Figes describes the cruelty of the peasants' pre-war kangaroo courts, where the guilty might be lynched, beaten to death, or bound and dropped from heights until their spines had shattered. The war itself brought further atrocities, especially as desperation led to mutiny. But cruellest of all were the earliest years of Bolshevik rule, which brought famine (ultimately resulting in widespread cannibalism), epidemic diseases from influenza to typhus, and vicious civil war. Some of the killings were military, others, possibly the majority, the work of the Cheka, Lenin's merciless secret police. But what good can be said of a civilian population who resorted to the public disembowelling of suspect traitors, to pogroms, to mass rape and murder? Members of the Bolshevik elite, cocooning themselves in venal luxury, come out of this book without honour, but little sympathy is created for many of the ordinary citizens and private soldiers who suffered under their rule.

Here, then, is also Figes's underlying problem. His book repeatedly insists on the brutality of the Russian peasants, a dumb viciousness which ran through village life. And yet he concludes with the idea that only a strengthened democracy could have saved Russia from the tragedy he chronicles. He also argues, in his preface, that his account will show how the option to create such a democracy was missed at crucial moments in the revolutionary decades. At various points, he indeed pauses to give brief and fairly unexceptional answers to such questions as the provisional government's failure, the collapse of the constituent assembly, until then Russia's only directly elected parliament, and the defeat of the Whites in the civil war. While he concludes on a liberal note, however, any reader who has managed not to suppress the appalling images of horror in earlier chapters will be left wondering, by the conclusion, what basis the democracy he advocates might have had in the Russia he has painted. The people's tragedy, it seems, goes deeper than their failure to achieve a more democratic form of rule. Although Figes describes as 'obscene' the notion that a people gets the government it deserves, his book in some respects is an essay on precisely that proposition. It is not an account that evokes nostalgia for any of Russia's missed opportunities. It is a brilliant essay on darkness by a master of narrative and complexity.

The Russian revolution has been coming alive ever since the archives began to open in 1986. Figes's book is the most vivid, thorough, and compelling account to date. Every student will have to read it, and most will be surprised to find that they enjoy the task. It is also, despite its prodigious length, a book for general readers, beautifully written and featuring some of the best photographs ever reproduced in such a context. But if you choose it for yourself, don't read it late at night. History like this will not soothe. It offers no escape. And, as Figes rightly concludes, 'the ghosts of 1917 have not been laid to rest'.

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Segregation and apartheid in twentieth-century South Africa. Edited by William Beinart and Saul Dubow. London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 288. £45.00 (hardback); £14.99 (paperback). ISBN 0-415-10356-8

Scientific racism in modern South Africa. By Saul Dubow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. 320. £40.00 (hardback). £15.95 (paperback). ISBN 0-521-47343-8

As past relationships forged in the pursuit of power across Africa are re-examined, the unwelcome yet compelling story of the history of racial thought and the practice of racism in South African history are being bravely re-assessed. Since the legacy of apartheid will long outlive its formal dismantling, the subject is too important to be discreetly forgotten. These two works – one a collection of essays, mostly already published, the other a monograph – are less about the experience and brutality of racism but rather the ideology, form, and institutional practice of segregation and apartheid, the two pillars of South African white rule. For both these reasons, they stand as important texts for students of the subject. Routledge's *Rewriting Histories* series can now boast a collection of eleven essays – all previously published apart from one – which contains much of the best scholarship on the history of apartheid and segregation to have emerged over the past two decades. As editors, Beinart and Dubow have produced a valuable introduction which sets out the issues and themes: the meaning and practice of segregation; the rise and demise of apartheid; local experience versus the over-arching ideology; and the great variety of explanations historians have offered. The collection includes micro-level studies such as Maynard Swanson's study of bubonic plague and health regulations in Cape Colony at the turn of the century, Shula Marks' essay on the Zulu royal family in Natal and Colin Murray's work on rural slums in Overwacht, Orange Free State. In addition to more wide-ranging topics – Beinart on the concept of African chieftaincy and Harold Wolpe on the impact of the need for cheap labour – issues of identity are thoroughly explored by Hermann Gilomee in relation to Afrikaners, and the general ideology of segregationism, by Dubow.

Meanwhile, Dubow's latest solo work on apartheid white South Africa focuses upon its intellectual history, particularly the professional canons of physical anthropology and hereditarian science, since, he argues, debates on the functional utility of race in relation to apartheid have ignored the 'content and internal logic of scientific racism'. The time-frame is South Africa between the end of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s; a period that straddles the dramatic impact of industrialization and urbanization, the formal institution of apartheid in 1948, growing black consciousness and increasing divisions within the white community. He modestly admits to 'following the footnotes' in order to explore the ideological context of political segregation and ideas of race rather than to suggest the points of causal connection between the two. Consequently Dubow has to navigate us through the copious amounts of material generated by academics. He narrates how the professional study of indigenous people in the region had served to cut the teeth of racial theorists such as Eugen Fischer, an activist in the Nazi race-hygiene movement whose final paper focused solely – somewhat suspiciously perhaps – upon 'bushmen' genitalia. By the early twentieth century, home-grown physical anthropologists happily argued that 'bushmen' were remnants of an earlier human form, whilst 'bantu' Africans were a little more advanced, apparently blessed by an infusion of 'hamitic' blood from the north. Eugenic theorizing did not subsequently take off. With the existence of 'poor whites', acknowledging the role of environmental factors in degeneracy and cretinism, rather than hereditary characteristics, became a political necessity by the 1920s, in the quest

for Afrikaner unity. Likewise, racist theories based on evolution could not be embraced by the architects of apartheid at the time of Hitler and the Aryan supremacists, since the former held dear their literal interpretations of the Bible. Rather, they chose what Dubow describes as a theory of 'cultural essentialism': the separation of distinct peoples for their own benefit. Since white South Africa assumed culture was determined by physical type, this was in fact racism by another name. As Dubow concludes, ideologies may well last longer if they are malleable and for that they may well have to be ambiguous, even contradictory.

Clearly the book contains a number of interesting revelations and stimulating arguments. Many hitherto obscure figures and their writings are brought to life, aided by photographic illustrations. Comparisons and connections with a transnational intelligentsia are usefully explored. The relationship between scientific ideas and the social construction of racism remains somewhat of a conundrum and as this pioneering work illustrates it is easier to show when scientific theory did not shape government policy or popular views on racial inferiority rather than when it had a direct effect. Since eugenics seemed to have had a minimal impact on the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1920s, it would appear that racial theories from the scientific experts were either not adhered to in moments of crisis, or simply were not needed for there were enough homespun views already floating around. And as Dubow suggests, if racial thought declined as an official policy when it was of no use to government, the social forces of anti-racism may not be as strong and pervasive as one might want to imagine. Ideas require people to give them potency and in that South Africa was no different; 'habits of mind' constructed from granted notions of superiority have infused generations of white encounters with black Africa. What continues to make the South African case fascinating in its historical particularity is the way in which ideologies of racial inferiority were shaped by an exceptionally self-conscious but deeply divided white minority who were preoccupied with their physicality in relation to a hostile environment. Both these works make invaluable inroads into this highly rich and difficult terrain.

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