

Alexander Rabinowitch Rewrites the Russian Revolution

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Alexander Rabinowitch has done more to rewrite the history of the Russian Revolution than any other historian, as testified to by his three aptly named studies of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd during 1917–18: *Prelude to Revolution*, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, and *The Bolsheviks in Power*.¹ Nothing better illustrates his exalted status among historians of the Russian Revolution than his being invited by the editors of the most ambitious encyclopedia project published in Russia since the demise of the Soviet state to write the entry on the October Revolution of 1917.² Who among historians knows more about the topic or has done more to shape how we understand it?

There are stories behind the research projects we select, and Alex shared part of his own on 14 October 2010, at Humboldt University in Berlin, where he was invited to speak on the occasion of the publication of the German translation of the third volume in his triptych, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*.³ To a packed audience, Alex acknowledged that his family background seriously influenced his thinking on the Russian Revolution before he studied to become a professional historian. Born in St. Petersburg in 1898, his father, chemist Eugene I. Rabinowitch, who later became a founding member of the Manhattan Project, fled St. Petersburg (Petrograd) just weeks before the launching of the Red Terror in 1918, the year Alex illuminates in his recent book. That Alex shared his family back-

¹ Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968; reissued in 1991); *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: Norton, 1976); and *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

² *Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia, 2004–), a thirty-seven-volume venture designed to replace *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*.

³ Alexander Rabinowitch, *Die Sowjetmacht: Das erste Jahr* (Frankfurt: Mehring Verlag, 2010). For a report on his presentation in Berlin, see <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/oct2010/rabi-o16.shtml> (accessed 2 August 2011). He also made a similar presentation at Vienna's Institute for Contemporary History on 6 June 2011. See <http://www.wsws.org/tools/index.php?page=print&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.wsws.org%2Farticles%2F2011%2Fjun2011%2Frobi-j15.shtml> (accessed 3 August 2011).

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ground at Humboldt University is not without significance, since his father studied there with such luminaries as Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Max von Laue. In 1932 he met his future bride, Anna Maiersohn, born in Kiev, an actress then performing with a Russian theater troupe touring Europe. Alex and his twin brother Victor were born in England in 1934. After holding temporary positions at several prominent European universities, Eugene Rabinowitch had to escape once again. This time the Nazi threat on the eve of World War II compelled him to accept a permanent appointment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston.

During Alex's formative childhood years, the Rabinowitch family became part of the lively East Coast Russian émigré community. Remembered Alex, "We spent summers in the lush Green Mountains of southern Vermont where my father bought a *dacha* not far from that of Michael Karpovich, a moderate socialist in 1917, an eminent Harvard historian, and the acknowledged founder of advanced Russian historical studies in the United States."⁴ The guests at the endless lunches and dinners included a who's who of Russian émigrés in the U.S.: Alexander Kerensky, Vladimir Nabokov, Menshevik leader and Russian Social Democracy activist Boris I. Nicolaevsky, and prominent Georgian Menshevik and Bolshevik opponent Irakli Tsereteli, among others. Despite the great diversity in their political views and in their understandings of Russian history, literature, and current developments in the Soviet Union, they agreed in their characterization of the October Revolution as a military coup d'état organized by Lenin's well-organized band of conspirators financed by German money. They cast everything associated with the revolution in the most negative light possible. The political climate in the United States in the early postwar years, colored by the madness of the Joseph McCarthy era and fears associated with the Korean War (1950–53), did nothing to challenge the Russian émigrés' understanding of the Revolution—and of Alex's.

After graduating from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, Alex enrolled in the graduate program in Russian history at the University of Chicago, where he studied with Leopold H. Haimson. When Haimson left Chicago for Columbia, Alex moved to Indiana University in Bloomington (IU) to work with John M. Thompson, a fateful decision in all regards, since Alex joined the History Department there after completing his dissertation and a brief stint teaching at the University of Southern California. He remained at IU for the duration of his professional career, where he trained all of the contributors to this volume as well as many others. "When the time came to pick a topic for my doctoral dissertation," recalled Alex, "my fundamental views about the Soviet Union and its birth remained unchanged." At first, he planned to write

⁴ "Reflections on the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and Early Soviet State Building in Petrograd," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/dec2010/rabi-d02.shtml> (accessed 2 August 2011). Quotations attributed to Alex in the next several pages come from this account.

a biography of Tsereteli, with whom he had become acquainted at the family dacha in Vermont. When it became clear he would need to learn Georgian in order to do so, Alex shifted his focus to the political crises in 1917 leading up to the so-called July Days. “My work with Haimson and Thompson had instilled in me a passion for gathering historical evidence as well as a commitment to being as honest as humanly possible in interpreting it,” observed Alex. As a result, his close scrutiny of contemporary newspapers, published documents, and memoirs forced him to reject Tsereteli’s conceptualization of the July Days as a failed Leninist coup. By the time Alex took part in the fall of 1963 in a nine-month appointment as an exchange scholar in Moscow, his interests had switched to the role of the Bolsheviks in the July uprising.

The realities of the historiography of Russia’s 1917 revolutions when *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* appeared in 1968 are hard to recapture given the vast subsequent changes to historical scholarship. Except for Oliver H. Radkey’s *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism: Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, February to October, 1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), a superb first study of the Socialist Revolutionaries, a scholar or layperson interested in the October Revolution had available only the classic multivolume histories authored by journalist W. H. Chamberlin (1935) and historian E. H. Carr (1951–53).⁵ Existing general histories of Russia portrayed major events of the revolution in Petrograd in broad terms (and those beyond Petrograd in even broader terms, if at all). Historical developments received accurate (or sometimes inaccurate) description and characterization, but without the sufficient depth necessary for deep insight or explanation. As Alex observes in his recollections about Tsereteli, much of the memoir literature and many general accounts portrayed the Bolsheviks as a unified single-minded entity headed by Lenin, who aimed, after his return to Russia in early April 1917, at launching a revolutionary coup d’état. Into this barren historiographical territory stepped Alexander Rabinowitch with his meticulously detailed study of the Petrograd Bolsheviks, *Prelude to Revolution*. One reviewer praised it for its “objectivity, judiciousness, and its sure handling of the evidence” (*Political Science Quarterly*); another asserted that it made the July Days “intelligible as the runaway climax of uncoordinated and contradictory Bolshevik policies and activities” (*Soviet Studies*); a third called it “an able and scholarly inquiry into the perplexing abortive Petrograd uprising of June and July 1917 ... a very interesting view of revolutionary action on the local level” (*Foreign Affairs*).⁶

Precisely what many Western reviewers applauded as a historiographical breakthrough—the book’s depiction of a Bolshevik organization in disarray

⁵ W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917–1921*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1935); and E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1953–55).

⁶ Quoted on back cover of Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, 1991 edition.

despite Lenin's efforts to assert discipline and restraint—dismayed Soviet reviewers, as Alex notes in the Preface to the 1991 edition of *Prelude*.⁷ In the Preface, Alex quotes his Soviet critics. According to N. V. Romanovsky, "in Rabinowich's depiction, the Bolshevik Party becomes a motley conglomerate ... [whereas] the correct approach to differences of opinion within the party should be based upon the fact that at no time did they disrupt the programmatic and organizational unity of the party, or deter it from following the course set by Lenin." G. L. Sobolev criticized the Western concept of a "divided party," which Rabinowich allegedly "creatively" applied to the Bolsheviks in the period he studied by identifying "three distinct Bolshevik organizations—the Central Committee, the All-Russian Military Organization, and the Petersburg Committee, each with its own responsibilities and interests," to which, Sobolev commented indignantly, he even "creatively" added the anarchists as an influential group close to the Bolsheviks. "Only an uninformed reader, unfamiliar with anarchist principles and with the Bolshevik program in 1917 would not find such a claim absurd." Alex replied with his accustomed calm self-assurance that "with the appearance of a Russian-language version of *Prelude to Revolution* in 1991, Soviet readers finally have a chance to judge for themselves the merits of such criticism."⁸

This first volume of what would become a three-volume tour de force subjects to intense scrutiny and thoroughly demythologizes the interactions among Lenin after his return to Petrograd, the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee, with its nationwide responsibilities, the party's Petrograd Committee, and even district (neighborhood) party committees and the Bolshevik Military Organization anchored in the city's garrison. Alex demonstrates that, although the party adopted Lenin's policy of opposition to the Provisional Government, Lenin's tactical positions were sufficiently nuanced that both moderate and radical Bolsheviks felt that they could comply with them without compromising their views. This resulted in a kind of low-level warfare among various levels of the Bolshevik organization and leadership, with, more often than not, Lenin acting as a moderating influence. Regardless, pressures from below in the workers' and soldiers' movements and from hot-headed young Bolshevik activists in the lower-level party organizations led to Bolshevik actions that won them a new prominence but also subjected them to criticism and, ultimately, repression. For example, the demonstration against the Provisional Government the Bolsheviks hoped to lead on 10 June had to be cancelled when the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, at the time in the hands of moderate socialists, passed a resolution critical of the Bolshevik plan. Several days later, the Congress of Soviets censured the Bolsheviks for the abortive demonstration and then set 18 June as the date for its own demonstration. On the day itself, however, an estimated 400,000 workers and sol-

⁷ Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, i-ii.

⁸ *Ibid.*

diers marched through the capital carrying banners with the slogans "Down with the ten capitalist ministers!" and "All power to the soviets!" associated not with the moderate socialists but with the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks' moral victory during June set the stage for the July Days, the backdrop for which was the Provisional Government's offensive at the front scheduled for that month. In the aftermath of the June demonstrations, Bolsheviks and other radicals intensified their agitation against both the government and the moderate socialists, who planned and widely publicized the new military initiative. On 4 July 1917, vast armed demonstrations broke out in Petrograd, a situation that culminated in large columns of workers and soldiers arriving at Bolshevik headquarters with the intention of seeking the party's leadership in overthrowing the Provisional Government. For several days, chaos prevailed in the capital as anarchists and other radicals from the nearby Kronstadt naval base and from the capital itself threatened an armed seizure of power in the name of the soviets. Although the Bolsheviks seemed to be on the verge of taking power, the Provisional Government and the All-Russian Executive Committee of Soviets launched a successful counterattack by portraying the Bolsheviks as having stepped out of line with the positions of the country's soviets and their existing moderate socialist leaders. Lenin had little choice but to call off the armed demonstrations that he had only belatedly approved. In the end, the very existence of the Bolshevik Party fell under threat when the Provisional Government, sensing an opportunity to eliminate its chief enemy, arrested many Bolshevik leaders and closed down Bolshevik newspapers. To escape arrest, Lenin fled Petrograd and eventually sought refuge in Finland, where he remained for several months, thereby giving credence to some of his opponents' insistence that he was a German agent. As Alex describes the situation, "Lenin appears to have honestly tried to control the rising mood of rebellion in Petrograd until it could be supported in the provinces and at the front." When he failed, "with his forces compromised and all hopes of immediate victory extinguished, Lenin was left with no choice but to sound the call for an ignominious, albeit temporary, retreat."⁹

Although *Prelude to Revolution* ends on a somber note, it also provides analytical tools for interpreting both the subsequent rapid revival of Bolshevik influence and the party's rise to power that are the focus of Alex's sequel, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*. As Alex forcefully argues in *Prelude to Revolution*, the Bolshevik Party responded to impulses from below, devoted unparalleled resources to propagandizing and leading soldiers and workers, and, far from imposing conformity, encouraged criticism and action from middle- and lower-level party activists. Lenin advocated patience, discipline, and organization but also encouraged genuine revolutionary impulses, all of which resulted in a surprisingly resilient and flexible organization. Needless to say,

⁹ Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution*, 234.

publication of *Prelude to Revolution* breathed new life into historical writing about the Russian Revolution and the nature of the Bolshevik Party. It generated healthy debate by raising vital issues with which subsequent Western and Soviet scholarship had to engage.

This is perhaps even more the case with his second volume, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, published in 1976. Following the formula laid out by its predecessor, in this study Alex diligently traces the interactions among top party leaders, including Lenin, and mid-level leaders, as they, in turn, interacted with Petrograd workers and soldiers. He also utilizes what, at the time, represented an innovative broadened perspective that appraised the Bolsheviks' relationships with their socialist allies, the Menshevik-Internationalists and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. In this and other ways, his approach has served as a model for almost everything published about the revolution thereafter. Alex's account does not neglect the high drama of the Bolsheviks' ascent to power. After the post-July Days debacle in which Bolshevik fortunes reached a low ebb, sending Lenin into hiding and many other party leaders to jail, the Bolsheviks experienced a remarkable comeback that soon provided them with sufficient support, influence, and strength to enable their rise to power. "While bitterness and hostility on the part of Petrograd workers and soldiers evaporated within a few weeks after the July uprising," Alex observes, "by early August there were numerous unmistakable signs that ... the Bolshevik Party had embarked on a new period of growth." Continued economic hardship, the Provisional Government's support of the war, and the attractiveness of the idea of Soviet power among broad social elements all contributed to the party's renewed strength.¹⁰

Alex's account of the struggle between Lenin, who by mid-September wanted the Bolsheviks to seize power, and much of the rest of the party's leaders, who were more cautious and wished to avoid precipitate actions which, they feared, would be premature and again expose the Bolsheviks to attack, is compelling for knowledgeable readers and accessible to nonspecialists. The volume painstakingly accounts for how a combination of caution and boldness produced the triumphal rise to power of the Bolshevik Party with a government headed by V. I. Lenin. By dint of extensive and intensive labor with primary sources, Alex achieved command of the intricacies of the revolutionary events and the workings of the Bolshevik Party. His peerless understanding of the high politics around the Provisional Government and the All-Russian Executive Committee of Soviets and of the dynamics within the Bolshevik Party and the revolutionary movement produced a synthesis that has fundamentally shaped the historiography of the October Revolution.

The Bolsheviks Come to Power extends the pathbreaking analytical categories of the first study. Far from being a monolithic party led by an autocrat,

¹⁰ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, 90, 311.

the Bolshevik Party organization in Petrograd (not to mention on a national scale) functioned with multiple sub-groups, varied approaches, and ongoing public and internal debate. As late as mid-September 1917, even so adamant a revolutionist as Lenin still offered the possibility of a peaceful agreement among socialists to replace the Provisional Government. As Alex notes, the Bolsheviks lacked a preconceived plan for coming to power and for what to do after they did. Moreover, Bolshevik leaders could not even agree upon whether to assume power at all: many of them preferred a coalition government of socialist parties that excluded the liberals. The volume's scrupulous narrative undermines both the long-entrenched Western depiction of the revolution as a coup masterminded by Lenin and his conspiratorial, tight-knit party and the oversimplified characterizations of the event found in Soviet scholarship. The October Revolution, maintained Alex, became possible because a broad coalition of workers, soldiers, and other radical political parties, within which the Bolsheviks wielded considerable influence, agreed that, at the very least, the Provisional Government must be overthrown in favor of all power to the soviets. Yet the situation remained fluid. Wrote Alex: "By totally repudiating the actions of the Bolsheviks and of the workers and soldiers who willingly followed them, and, even more, by pulling out of the [Second Congress of Soviets], the moderate socialists undercut efforts at compromise by the Menshevik-Internationalists, the Left SRs, and the moderate Bolsheviks. In so doing, they played directly into Lenin's hands, abruptly paving the way for the creation of a government that had never been publicly broached before—that is, an exclusively Bolshevik regime."¹¹

Prominent reviewers such as literary and social critic Irving Howe, historian Paul Avrich, and political scientist Stephen Cohen praised *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* for undoing "rigid stereotypes"; for "its soundness of judgment, clarity of expression, and wealth of illuminating detail"; and as "revisionist scholarship in the best and truest sense."¹² In a widely read article about the historiography of the revolution, historian Ronald G. Suny perhaps summed the matter up best: "Alexander Rabinowitch, a meticulous student of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 ... has attacked the cliché that the key element in Bolshevik success was the party's superior leadership and organization." The party's relatively open and democratic organizational methods, "made possible a flexible, dynamic relationship between the party hierarchy and its potential supporters." Suny then quotes Alex: "The Bolsheviks were doubtless more unified than any of their major rivals for power. Certainly this was a key factor in their effectiveness. Nonetheless, my research suggests that the relative flexibility of the party, as well as its responsiveness to the prevailing

¹¹ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, 294.

¹² Quoted on back cover of *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*.

mass mood, had at least as much to do with the ultimate Bolshevik victory as did revolutionary discipline, organizational unity, or obedience to Lenin.”¹³

Of course, Alex had detractors as well. By the time his second volume appeared, two new historiographical tendencies—social history and revisionism—began to shape scholarship on Russia’s revolutionary experience, including Alex’s. Social history, which challenged the heretofore prominence of political history across the historical discipline, deemphasized the story of governments, major political parties, famous leaders, and large-scale events in order to focus on society and the social groups that it comprises. Revisionism, related in part to social history as applied to the Russian Revolution, reevaluated the revolution as a reflection of social and economic realities under the late tsarist regime rather than as a phenomenon connected to individual leaders, high politics, and seizures of power.¹⁴ Harvard historian Richard Pipes, doyen of the “totalitarian” school of the Russian Revolution, paid Alex a backhanded compliment when he called him “the true revisionist expert on this subject.” In his two books, *Prelude to Revolution* and *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, argued Pipes, Rabinowitch asserted that “the events leading up to October were driven from below: far from manipulating the masses, as traditional historians would have it, the Bolsheviks were manipulated by them. The July 1917 riots ... are depicted as a spontaneous explosion of popular fury which the Bolsheviks did their best to restrain—the thesis mandatory since Stalin first formulated it immediately after the events.”¹⁵ Leaving aside the issue of whether Pipes accurately summarized Alex’s nuanced arguments, associating him with Stalinism seems to be the essence of the commentary.

For historians of Russia now accustomed to working in the country’s archives, a glance at the bibliography of *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* will surprisingly show that it has not a single archival reference. Until the end of the Soviet Union, even an historian as accomplished and known among Soviet historians as Alexander Rabinowitch had no access to archives. The detailed and compelling narrative that he wrought from published sources testifies to Alex’s perspicacity in raising original questions and providing convincing

¹³ Ronald G. Suny, “Toward a Social History of the October Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (1983): 41. For quoted passage, see *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, xxi.

¹⁴ During the mid-1960s, Leopold Haimson, with whom Alex worked at the University of Chicago, set off an interpretational earthquake with his two-part article “The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917,” *Slavic Review* 23, no. 4 (1964): 620–42, and 24, no. 1 (1965): 1–22. As a new way of understanding Russia’s revolutions, this approach came to be known as revisionism. For a summary of revisionism and its opponents, see Suny’s article cited in n. 13 above and Richard Pipes’s article cited in n. 15.

¹⁵ Richard Pipes, “1917 and the Revisionists,” *The National Interest*, no. 31 (Spring 1993): 72–73.

answers. It also reflects his careful use of the work of some prominent Soviet historians who, during the 1920s and again during the post-Stalinist era, published documents and even, within certain boundaries, empirically rich monographs. In sum, in *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Alex tempers his political history with essential forays into social history, accompanied by a dash of theory, scrupulous respect for his sources, and a large measure of wisdom about Russia and its people. It represents empirical history at its best.

Alex's probing interrogation of the evidence led to his revisionist arguments about the role of the Bolsheviks in 1917; however, he also saw the need to extend the chronological boundaries of his exploration to explain how and why the Bolshevik Revolution produced an ultra-authoritarian political system. As a result, he had spent more than a decade researching and drafting a book on the dynamics of Soviet rule in Petrograd in 1918 (*The Bolsheviks in Power*) when the M. S. Gorbachev era threw open the archives. This unexpected windfall made it necessary for him, in effect, to start his book over, but also allowed Alex to investigate intraparty debates over policy at all levels. It took another decade and then some for him to take full advantage of the 125 archival funds to which he was granted access in the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg, the Central State Archive of Historical-Political Documents of St. Petersburg, the Leningrad Oblast Archive in Vyborg, the Russian State Archive of the Navy, the Central State Archive of Literature and Art of St. Petersburg, the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service of St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast, and the Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library. "What I found," said Alex, "was that the Bolsheviks came to power not simply without an authoritarian legacy but also without a preconceived plan or concept of how they would govern." Deemphasizing the role of ideology in shaping outcomes, he instead weighed the impact of endless crises and emergencies in shaping the emerging Soviet party-state. "Indeed," he recalled, "this factor was so pervasive in the new story I had to tell that my original title for *The Bolsheviks in Power* was *Price of Survival*."¹⁶

Published by Indiana University Press in 2007, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* appeared almost simultaneously in a Russian-language edition,¹⁷ a fact that testifies to the tectonic shifts that have taken place in the political and historiographical landscapes since Alex began to research the book. This hefty volume offers readers what they came to expect from Rabinowitch: mastery of the rich source material; a stunning command of politics during a time of crisis, turmoil, and shifting allegiances;

¹⁶ "Reflections on the Bolsheviks," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/dec2010/rabi-d02.shtml> (accessed 2 August 2011).

¹⁷ *Bol'sheviki u vlasti: Pervyi god Sovetskoi epokhi v Petrograde*, trans. I. S. David'ian (Moscow: AIRO-XXI, Novyi khronograf, 2007).

confident, crystal-clear prose; originality; and profound appreciation of the circumstances in which his protagonists found themselves. This book could have been written only by a mature scholar who has devoted a lifetime to studying the most important event of the twentieth century. Moreover, *The Bolsheviks in Power* serves as a necessary antidote to some tendentious writing, both in Russia and abroad, on Bolshevism and the Soviet experience that appeared in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Rabinowitch and the "revisionist" historians of the pre-1991 period had not been in retreat as their opponents insisted: they were in the newly opened archives sifting through documentation that heretofore had been under lock and key.

Divided into four parts, the book that resulted from this painstaking research picks up with the October Revolution of 1917 and ends with the Bolsheviks' first anniversary celebration of the event in 1918. Alex details the conflict that raged over the establishment of a revolutionary government, the heated discussions and clashes over the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the controversy surrounding the humiliating Brest-Litovsk Peace in the spring of 1918 that concluded Russia's involvement in World War I, the turbulence of the spring of 1918, the dissolution of the Bolshevik-Left SR alliance that summer, the meaning of Red terror, and the first anniversary of the revolution. Maintaining that his earlier efforts raised as many questions as they answered, Alex addresses how the independence of the popular soviets was destroyed so quickly and how the egalitarian ideals of the revolution were subverted. The book's would-be title, *Price of Survival*, encapsulates the argument: the rise of a highly centralized, authoritarian state came about as a result of circumstances the Bolsheviks found themselves in once they made the decision to cling to power at whatever cost. "Neither revolutionary ideology nor an established pattern of dictatorial behavior are of much help in explaining fundamental changes in the character and political role of the Bolshevik Party, or of soviets in Petrograd, between November 1917 and November 1918, although the impact of both cannot be entirely discounted," concluded Alex. "The fact is that the Petrograd Bolsheviks had to transform themselves from rebels into rulers without benefit of an advance plan or even a concept." Most significant in shaping the emerging Soviet political system, he wrote, "were the realities the Bolsheviks faced in their often seemingly hopeless struggle for survival."¹⁸

The Bolsheviks in Power represents the most comprehensive study to date of the first year of Soviet power in any language. As such, the book is required reading for anyone interested in the fate of October. Depending upon the positions they occupy in the historiographical debates on the fate of the revolution and depending upon the type of history they write, reviewers have challenged or applauded Alex's interpretation of 1918. Virtually all of them, however, voiced appreciation for the impressive research that underpins its

¹⁸ Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, 390.

arguments. Historian of the revolution Rex A. Wade, for instance, wrote that “this masterful volume ... on the first year of the Bolshevik regime fills a gaping hole in the historiography of the Russian Revolution and Soviet Union.” Summed up Wade, “one can only be awed by the research and effort that have gone into the monumental work of historical scholarship. It answers fundamental questions about the emergence of the Bolshevik regime and should be required reading for everyone interested in that important issue.”¹⁹ Praising the author’s “thorough examination and close scrutiny of previously inaccessible archival records,” labor historian Gerald Surh called *The Bolsheviks in Power* “a work of outstanding merit that sets a standard rarely achieved in the genre of political history. A tragic tale of Promethean hopes and aspirations dashed by the realities of the European cataclysm of 1914–21, this work dissolves a number of textbook shibboleths about the origins and nature of early Soviet rule....” And, wrote Surh, “it is a history full of heroes, fools, and fanatics, yet recounted in a sober and nonjudgmental manner, a labor of love, over two decades in the making, the work of a skilled and devoted craftsman.”²⁰

Russian historians have also welcomed the book’s appearance. Professor of History at the European University in St. Petersburg and associate of the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences Boris I. Kolonitskii introduced Russian readers to the book on the pages of the country’s premier historical journal, *Rossiiskaia istoriia*.²¹ Appreciative of Alex’s earlier studies, Kolonitskii remarked that “it is not surprising that, during perestroika, they were among the first works of foreign scholarship on the history of twentieth-century Russia to be translated and published in the USSR.”²² Turning to *The Bolsheviks in Power*, Kolonitskii ended his review by attesting, “One can assume with confidence, that the wonderful book by the American scholar will inspire many young historians to study this puzzling period.”²³

After a first tumultuous year in power that confronted them and the Soviet Republic with unexpectedly harsh challenges, the Bolsheviks, Alex maintained, combined a steely determination to remain in power with a commitment to their goal of creating a better life for Russia’s workers and peasants. Circumstances, rather than Bolshevism itself, had contributed to the lurch toward authoritarianism. “At the end of the first year of Soviet power,” Alex argued, “this transforming process was far from complete and, to my

¹⁹ Rex A. Wade, *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 3 (2008): 944–45.

²⁰ Review published in *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 252–53.

²¹ *Rossiiskaia istoriia*, no. 4 (2009): 193–95.

²² *Ibid.*, 193.

²³ *Ibid.*, 195.

mind, not irreversible—which is why I am now continuing my research through 1919 and 1920.”²⁴

The editors and contributors to this volume, as well as those of Alex’s students unable to participate, look forward to Alex’s new study. We wish Alex robust health and boundless energy as he works through the voluminous documentation in St. Petersburg archives and libraries and crafts a fourth volume of his examination of the Bolshevik Party. We are confident that it will have the same commanding impact on the field as his previous studies.



The title of this volume, *Russia’s Century of Revolutions: Parties, People, Places*, characterizes the wide array of individual studies that it comprises. Many of Alex’s students wrote dissertations and books based upon the dissertations on various aspects of the early twentieth-century revolutions in Russia. Among those contributing to *Russia’s Century of Revolutions*, for example, John Bushnell illuminated the role of soldiers in the Revolution of 1905–07 and Robert Weinberg launched his investigation of the Revolution of 1905 in Odessa. Michael Melancon authored a study of the Socialist Revolutionaries during World War I and the February Revolution. Donald J. Raleigh examined the Revolution of 1917 in Saratov, while his follow-up study takes the story up through the end of the Civil War. Mauricio Borrero, who was unable to participate in this volume, examined the food supply crisis in Moscow during the Civil War. Somewhat later in Alex’s career, his students Sally Boniece and Barbara Allen produced dissertations and are working on books about major revolutionary figures, the Left Socialist Revolutionary Mariia Spiridonova and Bolshevik worker-intelligent Alexander Shliapnikov, respectively. Clayton Black crafted a dissertation on the Putilov workers and the politics of industrialization during the Soviet 1920s. Suzanne Ament explored popular song during the Great Patriotic War in her thesis and Richard Bidlack the siege of Leningrad in his dissertation and forthcoming book. Sudha Rajagopalan’s dissertation and book analyze Indian films in Soviet cinemas during the post-Stalin years. The focus of John Bushnell’s and Donald J. Raleigh’s more recent works shifted to the post-Stalin era. This brief overview reveals both the immense impact Alex Rabinowitch has had on the field by directing dissertations on Russia’s early twentieth-century revolutions and the contribution he has made supervising students (or continuing to inspire former ones) working on later chapters of the Soviet experience, all focusing on parties, people, and places in Russia’s century of revolutions.

²⁴ “Reflections on the Bolsheviks,” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/dec2010/rabi-d02.shtml> (accessed 2 August 2011).

Using evidence preserved in archives in Ukraine, Robert Weinberg's essay on the arrest and subsequent trial for blood libel of Mendel Beilis in 1911–13, Russia's "Dreyfus affair" that became something of an international sensation, opens the volume. In his judicious analysis of letters that the police, prosecution, and Beilis's defense team received from people eager to offer opinions regarding Beilis's guilt or innocence, Weinberg underscores the sad record of antisemitism in late Imperial Russia. Barbara Allen's study of the relationship between metalworker-revolutionary Alexander Shliapnikov and V. I. Lenin during World War I offers a close interrogation of the correspondence between the two men. She convincingly documents the tenuous communications between émigré leaders and the Bolshevik organization inside Russia and shows that Shliapnikov never embraced Lenin's authoritarianism, did not share all of Lenin's views about the revolutionary movement, and did not hesitate to make his differences known to Lenin. He and Lenin, Allen maintains, were fated to clash more decisively once the party's coercive methods impacted policies toward workers. Michael Melancon's essay sheds light on the background to Lenin's Decree on Land and the early 1918 Fundamental Law on the Socialization of the Land that confiscated and transferred vast tracts of land to the peasants. The passage of the laws represented Bolshevik-Left SR cooperation and Bolshevik compromises with peasant outlooks but, at the same time, set off discursive struggles that underlay future Soviet policies toward the peasantry. Clayton Black's contribution to this volume explores how workers at the Putilov plant, a bastion of proletarian revolutionism and symbol of revolutionary consciousness, parted ways with the Bolsheviks once the latter came to power. Black traces how, during the 1920s, both workers and the state drew on Putilov's symbolic power, but often at cross purposes. The Bolshevik-Putilov worker relationship had soured to such an extent that, when in 1933 the writer Maxim Gorky launched a series of histories of important Soviet factories, the volume on Putilov took the reader only as far as the October Revolution. Drawing on her larger book project, Sally Boniece expertly analyzes a letter to the NKVD that Left SR Mariia Spiridonova penned in 1937. In the process, Boniece characterizes Spiridonova's life before, during, and after the revolution. The letter, which seems to offer support for some of Stalin's programs, represented Spiridonova's attempt, Boniece concludes, to protect her Left SR colleagues from further persecution. All of these studies expand upon aspects of the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia and draw on heretofore underutilized archival and other appropriate sources.

Richard Bidlack uses a similar array of archival and other sources to explore the differences in beliefs and assumptions between Josef Stalin and Leningrad's leaders during the winter of 1941–42, when Nazi forces besieged the city and subjected its population to horrific mass starvation. Stalin differed sharply with local leaders about whether the city could or should be defended and, Bidlack makes clear, felt that its inhabitants were more dispen-

sable than the city's military personnel and war materiel. The next cluster of essays employs nontraditional methodologies or approaches. Drawing on oral interviews, Donald J. Raleigh addresses how well-educated members of Russia's Cold War generation understood the country's last revolution of the twentieth century, the Gorbachev revolution. In these articulate individuals' own words, Raleigh recaptures how they remembered and understood what they experienced. In demonstrating how glasnost amounted to a revolution in people's consciousness, he argues that by 1991 the population no longer viewed the system as legitimate. Regardless of their views about Communism, however, all but a handful of interviewees regretted the breakup of the Soviet Union. Updating his 1990 book on Moscow graffiti, John Bushnell imaginatively decodes the meanings of wall graffiti during the post-Soviet period of Russian history. Graffiti-writing, on the wane by the twenty-first century, belonged to a distinct subculture and constituted a "specialized linguistic community." Bushnell traces the evolution of graffiti argot among football or soccer fans, *fanaty*, during the 1990s and beyond, and underscores that unpredictable shifts in Russia's sociocultural environment may result in the appearance of new hooligan graffiti in the years to come. Sudha Rajagopalan breaks new ground by exploring questions of a usable past in her study of Soviet film and post-Soviet cultural memory on the Russian-language Internet (Runet). She offers a close reading of website discussions of Soviet-era films to interpret how Russians remember the past as a tool for understanding the present. The film websites are a space where Russians salvage elements of the country's past in order to help define who they are today. Suzanne Ament deploys her vast knowledge of Russian and Soviet folk and popular music and culture to seek out and comprehend the ways that the Soviet regime shaped revolutionary culture, how that culture evolved throughout the Soviet era, and what happened to the revolutionary tradition in popular music after the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism. She argues that today's Russians sing what they like, thereby reminding us that, as a form of artistic and political expression, song cannot be completely controlled by the state.

In one way or another, Alexander Rabinowitch helped shape these essays that investigate parties, people, and places in Russia's century of revolutions. The authors of these studies share Alex's respect for sources and for careful and detailed reconstructions of the past. In remarkably diverse ways, the chapters in this volume bear witness to a society whose revolutions have continued to the present. The Chinese saying goes, "May you not live in interesting times!" Citizens of pre-1917 Russia, of the Soviet Union, and of today's Russia and newly independent states of the former Soviet Union have been destined to live through interesting, indeed, revolutionary, times. They are responsible for these transformations, which did not occur in a social vacuum. Thus the essays published in this book, dedicated to a distinguished historian of the 1917 Revolution who insisted that events be understood in their full

social and political context, document and evaluate the political, social, and cultural revolutions of the Russian and Soviet people.



We, the editors, wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the contributors to this volume who, good naturedly, responded to our editorial suggestions, adhered to our production schedule throughout the evolution of this volume, and managed not to breathe a word of its preparation to Alex. We thank Alex and Janet Rabinowitch's children, Ellen Saul and Michael Rabinowitch, for raiding their parents' photo albums and picture frames to assemble the photographs published in this book, and also for not breathing a word of our plans to their parents. We likewise are indebted to the director of Slavica Publishers, Professor George Fowler, and to Slavica's managing editor, Vicki Polansky, for supporting this project since its inception. Vicki Polansky and her assistants carefully reviewed the manuscript and prepared it for publication, demonstrating a high degree of professionalism and collegiality along the way. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the financial support of Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute (REEI), Department of History, and Office of the Vice-President for International Affairs, all of which subsidized publication of this book. Our special thanks to Maria Bucur, professor of history and director of the REEI at Indiana when we launched this project, and to Professor Peter Guardino, chair of the History Department, for backing this initiative and for facilitating our access to funding that made it possible.



If it is not obvious by now, we, on behalf of the contributors to this volume, are honored to dedicate this book to Alexander Rabinowitch, teacher, mentor, and friend.