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## **Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-21**

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Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism?

Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-21\*

But why did the storm that was gathering over the whole of Europe break in France and not elsewhere, and why did it acquire certain characteristics in France which were either absent in similar movements in other countries, or if present, assumed quite different forms?

Alexis de Toqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution*<sup>1</sup>

The events of the [Russian] revolution present us with a twofold historical aspect. First, the crisis was one of the numerous European revolutions that emerged out of the Great War.... But it would be wrong to assume that the war, with all its enormous difficulties, could explain, in and of itself, the Russian catastrophe....

At the same time, and to an even greater degree, the Russian Revolution was the product of a certain domestic condition.... In short, the two aspects of this concrete historical situation are but two different sides of one and the same sociological reality.

Boris Nol'de, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution russes*<sup>2</sup>

The Russian Revolution has become a preferred topic for discussing modern political violence. Given both the type and extent of violence during this period, such a focus is entirely justified. More than merely analyzing the sources and forms of this violence, studies of violence in the Russian Revolution often also **[End Page 627]** seek to serve as object lessons—on the nature of Russia, or the effects of Marxism. Due to the way the debate has developed, scholars of the Russian Revolution argue either for a theory of "circumstances" or one of "ideology" to account for the widespread violence in this period. This terrain—a binary opposition between "context" and "intent"—has parallels in the debates on the Terror in the French Revolution and the origins of the Final Solution in Holocaust studies.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, to explain the widespread violence of the Russian Revolution one must account for both ideology and Russian specificities. But the binary model—*either context or intent*—fails to account for how these two factors interact. An emphasis either on the circumstances of Russia's past or the role of Bolshevik ideology risks de-historicizing the specific conjuncture in which these two components catalytically acted upon one another. Rather than siding with one or the other of these two schools, this article argues for the need to study the historical conditions in which circumstances and ideology intersected to produce the Bolshevik state and Soviet society—to trace "the complex dialectic of ideology and circumstance, consciousness and experience, reality and will."<sup>4</sup>

The theory of "circumstances" in the Russian case presents Russia's revolutionary violence as a feature specific to Russia. This interpretation argues for a Russian *Sonderweg*, in which the Russian past and Russian backwardness made Russian society particularly prone to convulsions of violence. In *Krasnaia smuta*, a work overflowing with suggestive thoughts, Vladimir Buldakov focuses on violence as one of the crucial aspects of the Russian Revolution. In his view, the particular structure of the Russian empire (specifically, its patriarchal nature) produced a specifically Russian form of imperial mindset (what Buldakov terms "*imperstvo*"). This mindset constituted a type of collective psychology both towards and about authority. Deeply imbued with peasant traits, this mindset in turn gave rise to a specific *sotsium*—psycho-social type—that accounted for the Russian Revolution's spontaneous and chaotic violence. It was, thus, a specifically **[End Page 628]** Russian *sotsium* that produced revolutionary violence. Indeed, Buldakov's very title—"The

Red Time of Troubles"—evokes the heavy hand of Russian history on the revolutionary period.<sup>5</sup> From a somewhat different perspective, Orlando Figes finds the "revolutionary tragedy in the legacies of [the people's] own cultural backwardness rather than the evil of some 'alien' Bolsheviks." It was "the legacy of Russian history, of centuries of serfdom and autocratic rule" that caused the Russian people to be trapped "by...



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\* This article is a significantly revised and modified version of a chapter originally published as "La question de la violence" in *Le Siècle des communistes*, ed. Michel Dreyfus et al. (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Aréopage, 2000), 123–43. This article benefited substantially from the suggestions of the two anonymous reviewers for *Kritika*. I wish to thank Donald Raleigh, Eric Loh, Michal David-Fox, Lynne Viola, and Amir Weiner, as well as all the participants at the Sixth Maryland Workshop on New Approaches to Russian and Soviet History, "Political Violence in Russia and the USSR," 3–4 May 2002, for stimulating comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Toqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1983; original, 1856), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Boris Nol'de (Nol'de), *L'Ancien régime et la révolution russe* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1948), 102–3. Nol'de, a leading Russian specialist on international law and prominent Constitutional Democrat, had served in the imperial Russian Foreign Ministry and then in the Provisional Government. In emigration he turned to history.

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