

A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924

By Orlando Figes

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On the brink of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, read the most vivid, moving, and comprehensive history of the events that changed the world

It is history on an epic yet human scale. Vast in scope, exhaustive in original research, written with passion, narrative skill, and human sympathy, *A People's Tragedy* is a profound account of the Russian Revolution for a new generation. Many consider the Russian Revolution to be the most significant event of the twentieth century. Distinguished scholar Orlando Figes presents a panorama of Russian society on the eve of that revolution, and then narrates the story of how these social forces were violently erased. Within the broad stokes of war and revolution are miniature histories of individuals, in which Figes follows the main players' fortunes as they saw their hopes die and their world crash into ruins. Unlike previous accounts that trace the origins of the revolution to overreaching political forces and ideals, Figes argues that the failure of democracy in 1917 was deeply rooted in Russian culture and social history and that what had started as a people's revolution contained the seeds of its degeneration into violence and dictatorship. *A People's Tragedy* is a masterful and original synthesis by a mature scholar, presented in a compelling and accessibly human narrative.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Written in a narrative style that captures both the scope and detail of the Russian revolution, Orlando Figes's history is certain to become one of the most important contemporary studies of Russia as it was at the beginning of the 20th century. With an almost cinematic eye, Figes captures the broad movements of war and revolution, never losing sight of the individuals whose lives make up his subject. He makes use of personal papers and personal histories to illustrate the effects the revolution wrought on a human scale, while providing a convincing and detailed understanding of the role of workers, peasants, and soldiers in the revolution. He moves deftly from topics such as the grand social forces and mass movements that made up the revolution to profiles of key personalities and representative characters.

Figes's themes of the Russian revolution as a tragedy for the Russian people as a whole and for the millions of individuals who lost their lives to the brutal forces it unleashed make sense of events for a new generation of students of Russian history. Sympathy for the charismatic leaders and ideological theorizing regarding Hegelian dialectics and Marxist economics--two hallmarks of much earlier writing on the Russian revolution--are banished from these clear-eyed, fair-minded pages of *A People's Tragedy*. The author's sympathy is squarely with the Russian people. That commitment, together with the benefit of historical hindsight, provides a standpoint Figes take full advantage of in this masterful history.

From Publishers Weekly
Packed with vivid human detail and incident, British historian Figes's monumental social and political history spans Russia's entire revolutionary period, from the czarist government's floundering during the famine of 1891 to Lenin's death in 1924, by which time all the basic institutions of the Soviet dictatorship?a privileged ruling elite, random terror, secret police, torture, mass executions, concentration camps?were in place. Figes dismantles any number of myths surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, a military coup rammed through at Lenin's insistence ("hardly any of the Bolshevik leaders had wanted it to happen until a few hours before it began"). Using diaries, letters, memoirs and archival documents, Cambridge don Figes provides masterful portraits of cynical, power-hungry Lenin, driven by an absolute faith in his mission; Alexander Kerensky, weak-willed, vain democratic leader, the self-styled savior of Russia; writer Maxim Gorky, plagued by the fear?and later by the terrible realization?that the "people's revolution" was a descent into barbarism; Tolstoyan peasant reformer Sergei Semenov; and dozens of lesser-known figures. In this vibrant magnum opus, Figes illumines the manifold sources of Russia's failure to take a democratic path. Illustrations not seen by PW.
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From Kirkus Reviews
A brilliant history of the Russian Revolution from the onset of the revolutionary crisis to the period when the basic institutions of the Stalinist regime were in place. Figes (History/Trinity College, Cambridge, England) provides an extraordinary and comprehensive explanation not only of why the revolution occurred, but why it turned out the way it did. His greatest contribution is to capture something of the sheer magnitude of the revolutionary impulse. Seventeen thousand people were killed or wounded by terrorists in the last 20 years of tsarist rule. In six months during the revolutionary period 19056 the regime arrested and executed 15,000 people, shot or wounded a further 20,000, and exiled 45,000. Figes breaks sharply from the view that a constitutional monarchy was evolving prior to the First World War. Such a development was consistently frustrated by Nicholas II, who viewed every change as infringing upon his personal rule and his mystical

union with the Russian people. Figes believes that the Bolsheviks won because, in their hatred of the gentry and the bourgeoisie, as well as in their willingness to make peace with the Germans, they expressed the deepest yearnings of the Russian people. Nonetheless, Figes makes it clear that the Bolsheviks came to power only by coup d',tat and that they retained power only by centralizing it and using terror ruthlessly to wipe out opposition parties. Such was their fanaticism, however, that they very nearly lost power again. Only the political ineptitude of the Whites enabled them to hold on. Finally, he argues that through his ruthlessness and cruelty, it was Lenin, not his successors, who created the country's Stalinist framework. In the detail that he gives to this vast canvas, in his insight into the Russian people, in the strength of his narrative, and in the human dimension that he gives to the story, with the lives of significant characters traced over lengthy periods of time, Figes has written an incomparable book. It is a masterpiece. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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