

A “Springtime of Freedom”: The Russian Revolution as “Improbable Miracle”

The revolution that ended centuries of monarchical absolutism in Russia in March 1917 astonished everyone with its suddenness and unexpectedness. It began on February 23—March 8 on the European calendar, which was International Women’s Day—when thousands of women textile workers in the capital walked out of their factories to protest shortages of bread and food, joining large numbers of men and women already on strike and feminists marching for women’s rights. By March 2(15), the tsar had abdicated and a new government of educated liberals were in power. A rather breathless, but typical, newspaper report gives some sense of the public mood of astonishment and delight:

The dazzling sun appeared. Foul mists were dispersed. Great Russia stirred! The long-suffering people arose. The nightmare yoke fell. Freedom and happiness—forward. “Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!”... People look about and gather in large crowds, share impressions of the new and the unexpected. Many embrace, kiss, congratulate one another, and throw themselves greedily at the distributed proclamations. They read loudly, abruptly, agitatedly. From mouth to mouth passes the long-awaited joyous news: “Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!” Tears glisten in the eyes of many. Uncontainable, wild joy. (*Ezhednevnaia gazeta-kopeika [The Daily Kopeck Gazette]*, 6 March 1917)

Other newspapers philosophized about this sudden “miracle,” as so many called it. “All revolutions come unexpectedly,” a columnist in the same popular newspaper wrote on March 11. “This is the real grandeur of their arrival. They are born spontaneously. They fly in, like a hurricane, and tear out freedom for the exhausted people. As it was, so it shall be.”

A half century later, in her essay “What is Freedom,” Hannah Arendt wrote of freedom as an “improbable miracle” in a world where “the scales are weighted in favor of disaster.” And yet, she advised, given everything we know about human nature and instincts, it is precisely this “infinite improbability” that we should expect in history. This, I would argue, is a key for understanding the Russian revolution, especially the time contemporaries dubbed Russia’s “springtime of freedom.”

This experience of the unexpected new is worth thinking about. A great deal of historiographic dust has settled on those events of a century ago. Looking back, we are often inclined to assume that the way things turned out is the most logical result of what came before. But there is much to be learned, I think, by setting aside our retrospective knowledge of what came to be and thinking about history as it was lived and experienced in unfolding time—and thus to see more clearly the unexpected turns and unrealized possibilities. Revolutions, of course, are especially disorderly, chaotic, and unpredictable, especially full of the unexpected and the possible.

We cannot experience the past as it was experienced a century ago, of course. But we can get close by immersing ourselves in its language and practices. One window into this world was all the talk of “freedom.” It seemed to most people, as the liberal feminist Maria Pokrovskaiia wrote in the magazine *Zhenskii vestnik* (Women’s Herald) on the day after the tsar’s abdication, that “Russia has suddenly turned a new page in her history and inscribed on it: Freedom!” Looking back through the century since 1917, we know that this page, as it were, would be later torn out of the book of Russian history or at least overwritten. But the deeper and more revealing

story is not this history of hope and disappointment, though very real, but the history of how people read and understood this vague, protean, and usable word.

For many, it was enough that the tsar was gone and the country granted freedom of the press, speech, assembly, and religion. But for many this was not enough. Freedom must be more than mere liberty. Freedom must be positive and transformative. Freedom must not only free individuals from constraints, it must create a society that is just and happy. For a great many, freedom meant ending the inequality that kept people hungry and poor and thus unable to enjoy the fruits of liberty, giving land to the those who worked it as a matter of both economic necessity and moral right, and immediately ending the war, for what freedom could there be when men were sent against their will to the killing fields to bleed and die.

Liberal political philosophers such as Isaiah Berlin would later warn against confusing “liberty with her sisters, equality and fraternity,” conflating the freedom that emancipates the individual from external interference, that allows an active life in the pursuit of happiness, with the freedom that promotes happiness directly by changing society. But most Russians would ask what sort of freedom could there be without prosperity for all, power for all, peace for all, happiness for all? If they were making a definitional mistake, this mattered little compared to the existential truth they found in this positive notion of freedom as richer than negative liberty.

This may be painfully “utopian,” though not exactly in the way we usually understand this word. If we define utopia not as an unrealistic fantasy of perfection but as a refusal to accept a reality that is impossible to accept, the Russian revolution, especially in its first months, was imbued with this utopian impulse. It is surely true, as Arendt said, the scales of history are tilted toward disaster. Or as her friend and fellow philosopher, Walter Benjamin, wrote during the darkest days of World War II (a disaster he would not survive), there are times when people dare to “leap in the open air of history.” (“On the Concept of History”)

This was the experience of 1917, including the ill-fated attempt by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 to leap out of Russia’s catastrophe of backwardness worsened by war: welcoming the unexpected new, embracing the infinitely improbable, leaping in the open air of historical possibility. History is not only disappointment, after all. Who can say that the Russian revolution could not have continued down different paths? At the very least, we can view the revolution as an attempt to disrupt a dark and catastrophic present with the force of what should be and therefore can be. Who are we, knowing only what turned out, to say it was all in vain. Of course, if we forget the hopes that once inspired people, dwelling only on failures, then perhaps it will be in vain. But that is our doing, not theirs.