
REVIEWS

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Rethinking on the eve of the century: Historians of the February Revolution

[Book Review: The February Revolution of 1917: Problems of History and Historiography: A Collection of Reports of the International Scientific Conference. SPb.: LETI, 2017. 380 p.]

On 3 March 2017, an international scientific conference took place in St Petersburg dedicated to the February Revolution and timed to the centenary of the Great Russian Revolution, with the publication of a comprehensive collection of materials. It should be noted that this conference was the fifth in a series of annual conferences held in St Petersburg since 2012 under the general title ‘Russia in the era of revolutions and reforms: The problems of history and historiography’. The most interesting part of the published materials was the text with the replies of 25 historians from the world (11 foreign and 14 Russian historians), experts on the revolutionary process of 1917 in Russia, to the questions on key issues of history and historiography of the February Revolution set out on almost 140 pages of the collection. The idea of creating such a project was expressed at the international colloquium ‘The Age of Wars and Revolutions (1914–22)’ in St Petersburg in 2016, and it was implemented in 1917 by the centenary of the Great Russian Revolution.

Let us name at least a number of names among the participants of this project, representatives of five countries well-known to specialists: American historians - A. Rabinovich, P. Kenez, R.G. Suni, C. Hasegawa and others; Japanese researchers H. Wada and E. Ikeda; British specialist A. Dickins, a former Russian historian who has lived and worked in Canada for more than 20 years, G.Z. Ioffe; Russian researchers – B.I. Kolonitsky, V.V. Shelokhaev, A.V. Ganin, I.V. Lukojanov, A.B. Nikolaev and others. Professor A. Rabinovich (Indiana University, USA) was the curator of the project.

The project participants were asked nine questions on the problems and processes that took place in pre-revolutionary Russia, on the role of World War I in the creation

of the February Revolution, its culprits, historical significance and the ability to stay within the framework of the liberal revolution. Following the publication of the project participants' answers, the responsible editor of the collection, Professor V.V. Kalashnikov placed almost 40-page express analysis under the heading 'The Newest Historiography of the February Revolution', which would be of great interest for specialists and all those interested in this topic. We note at once that the participants' responses and reflections were essentially or even fundamentally different, which allows us consider a wide range of judgments by contemporary researchers about the revolutionary process of 1917 in Russia.

On the first question regarding the focus and direction of the processes in Russia's socioeconomic development on the eve of World War I, in interrelation with the growth of socio-political stability or instability, most the respondents chose the option that the development processes were inconsistent, and the dominant trend was difficult or impossible to determine, where they refused to provide their definition. Ten historians spoke in favor of increasing instability, and only one claimed that the process of stabilization was in progress. Thus, the majority were concerned with the prospects of development in pre-revolutionary Russia, without optimism, and a significant part definitely referred themselves to 'pessimists'.

Answering the question on the most acute and dangerous problem regarding political stability of the country in prewar Russia, ten historians called the policy of autocratic power and the relationship between the government and the society, the authorities and intellectuals and the split of the elites. Four researchers believed that this was a working-class matter, three believed that it related to peasants, and seven people refused to name any problem and, as a rule, pointed to the interconnectedness of all existing problems. None of the project participants indicated the nationalities question as the most acute and dangerous problem, although it was noted that its importance increased during the revolution itself.

The next question concerned the role of World War I as a factor of the Russian Revolution. Most historians believed that it made it very likely or inevitable.

In the fourth question, the historians were asked to name the main culprit of the February Revolution and explain what their fault was. It seems that this question was formulated sharply and was not entirely correct, because it could be perceived differently. However, Professor V.V. Kalashnikov, as the person who prepared the questions, explained that such wording was chosen deliberately, because there was a long-standing dispute in the Russian society over the question of who is to blame. Yet, in another issue, it was supposed to clarify the problem of the driving forces or 'actors' of the revolution. It seems that after all, the original wording of the question of who bears the main responsibility for the February events or who played the main role in this revolution happening, would be more accurate and correct.

Most of those who answered this question named the tsar and his entourage (the government), their policies as the main culprit of the revolution. Three researchers mainly blamed the Duma, one spoke about revolutionary parties of a socialist type. Eight participants of the project preferred to talk about a combination of factors and people responsible for the revolutionary development of the events. Several historians considered this question incorrect, especially since in this case the ‘guilt’ was often associated with merit, driving forces and participants of the revolution.

The next question was related to the dates and beginning of the February revolution. Here, almost half of the respondents indicated 23 February, seven people linked it to 27 February as the beginning of soldier uprising, and five indicated the same day, noting the decision of the State Duma to create a Provisional Committee.

The sixth question was to find out which of the political forces played the main role in the downfall of the autocracy. Of the proposed options, four historians chose the left parties, based on the spontaneous movement of workers and soldiers, six people named the liberal leaders and Duma leaders as such, and four people mentioned the generals. But most respondents believed that the main force could not be named, however there were joint actions of various forces, or they pointed out a combination of factors, the role of the insurgent masses that contributed to the radicalization of liberals.

The seventh issue related to the assessment of historical significance of the February Revolution (downfall of the autocracy). Eleven participants rated it as an event necessary in historical sense. In this case, V.V. Shelokhaev called, for example, the revolution “a completely natural and historically significant event”. A few historians, recognizing the revolution as the logical one, at the same time, refused to recognize it as necessary, which raised the question of correlation of these concepts, and V.V. Kalashnikov in the final content analysis pointed to the correlation of these concepts (regularity and necessity) as an actual historiographic problem.

Only one participant in the Project called the revolution historically unnecessary, while the rest speculated in their answers about the complexity of the answer to this question and the contradictory nature of the phenomenon of the February Revolution. Pointing out that it was not accidental, they also noted its grave consequences: economic, social, political, geopolitical, disintegration of statehood and beginning of tragedy that turned into the consequent revolution and the Russian Civil War.

The last two questions were related to the post-February period. When asked, what mistakes were made by the liberals and moderate socialists, seven participants recalled the question of peace, one mentioned the agrarian question, whereas the others chose another option, pointing to another or, as a rule, a set of other mistakes, although seeing them all differently (inability to create a stable political and legal system, relations of the Provisional Government with the State Duma, delay in convening the All-Russia Constituent Assembly etc.)

The final question was whether the February Revolution could stay within the limits of the liberal revolution. Four historians answered that the liberals had good chances to retain power, while the other four believed that the moderate socialists had good chances to retain power and ensure the liberal character of the revolution. Ten people provided a response that the liberals and moderate socialists had no chance to keep the revolution within the liberal framework, whilst giving their own and often differing explanations.

Most historians believed that such chances existed, however they were too small. They connected this with the fact that the Provisional Government and its supporters could and should have done it, however they did not do it, or explained it by the general situation in the country, the growing radicalism of the masses, the dominant Russian socialist political culture, which required deepening the revolution, etc. Thus or otherwise, most of the project participants denied the fatal inevitability of the defeat on part of the liberals and moderate socialists but saw their chances limited and insignificant without solving the main issues that were on the agenda of the revolution – first, those of peace and land.

In conjunction with the bonus question, the respondents expressed various considerations related to the definition of nature of the February Revolution, vision of it as part of the revolutionary process of 1917, which later included the October Revolution, studying the variety of factors in the revolution, its comparison with European revolutions of the 18th – 19th centuries etc.

There is a grounded appeal voiced by V.V. Shelokhaev and supported by V.V. Kalashnikov, regarding the need to get rid of those ideological clichés that in the last quarter of a century began to fill the public space: after abandoning all sorts of ‘isms’ in Marxist historiography, researchers should not fall into the next string of myths about ‘insidious liberals’, ‘about masons’, ‘foreign cash injections into implementation of the Russian revolution’, etc.

The author of the review fully agrees with this position, especially since in modern explanations of the February Revolution in the media, publicist and popular publications, the term ‘conspiracy’ (or ‘conspiracies’) often prevails and thus, objectively speaking, its value is underestimated with regards to the important role of workers, soldiers and other layers of the population.

Summing up this part of the text in the collection, we must admit that it contains many interesting and profound judgments and reflections, although their authors hold widely differing views on one or another problem of the February Revolution. Let me emphasize once again that getting acquainted with these sections of the book allows specialists and interested readers to get an idea of the wide range of opinions and judgments that exist regarding this revolution in the modern historiography. It would be interesting to formulate a special question about the historical lessons of the Feb-

ruary Revolution and get expert opinions on this issue, although it is to some extent affected by several answers received from the project participants.

Underlining the importance of the materials of the project described in this collection, it should be noted that the third section contains articles, among which many are interesting. Let us note, for example, the article of D.V. Bazhanov, dedicated to the Baltic Fleet in the February Revolution, which gives an overview of historiography in the study of this problem and discloses the process of transition of marine units to the side of the revolution. This article to a certain extent reechoes the published material of K.B. Nazarenko ‘Sailors of the Russian Fleet and the February Revolution’.

We will add that two more articles are devoted to the role of the military forces in the February events in this peer-reviewed collection. The article of K.A. Tarasova is devoted to the officer corps of the Russian imperial army in the February Revolution during the uprising in Petrograd. A.V. Ganin in the most voluminous article in this edition revealed the role of the General Staff in the February Revolution. He concluded that the conspiracy (or conspiracies) of the group of generals and senior officers took place, which resulted in the Emperor Nicholas II being forced to abdicate from the throne. Whereby A.V. Ganin named the central role of the officers in the General Staff who contributed to this. Summing up the article, the author concluded that the generals who participated in the overthrow of the emperor miscalculated, believing that political changes would not affect the army, as well as the institution of the monarchy and, conversely, would have a beneficial effect on the situation on the front. “Politicians, as it often happens, outplayed the military,” - A.V. Ganin concluded his article.

There are some interesting thoughts about the Russian Revolution of 1917, more precisely about the February Revolution, expressed by I.V. Lukoyanov, who, assessing the state of power, the liberal opposition, the revolutionary parties and the labor movement, came to the conclusion that it looked like collapse of autocratic power that occurred spontaneously, with a random combination of reasons leading to it, although each of them would be characterized as more or less long and deep processes. The author pointed out that a serious change in the political structure seemed inevitable to the contemporaries even in the event of the victorious end of wars, and the question was only in dimensions and mode of transformation.

The monarchists’ attitude toward the February Revolution in the modern historiography became subject of the article by D.I. Stogov, whilst O.G. Nazarov dedicated his article to Bolsheviks on the eve and in the days of the revolution. A well-known specialist on national problems of the revolutionary era in Russia, R.G. Suni devoted his article to this topic in the collection. The topic of formation of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ Deputies is discussed in the article of V.A. Rachkovsky. The history of the pursuit of the tsar train by representatives of the new Revolutionary power

since 28 February until 1 March 1917 was examined in detail by the famous researcher of the role of the State Duma in the February Revolution A.B. Nikolayev.

In general, one should admit that the reviewed collection is interesting and informative. Upon reading the materials, specialists and all those interested in this problem, can familiarize themselves with a wide range of judgments and assessments of historians from different countries regarding the problems of the February Revolution and the whole revolutionary process of 1917 in Russia.