

The Russian Revolution (1917-1921), Vol. I
By William Henry Chamberlin. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1935

Book Review
By Daniel Kendie, Ph.D.

Chamberlin was the Moscow correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor* from 1922-1932. By taking advantage of his presence there, he produced two remarkable volumes on the Russian Revolution. It took him twelve years of study and research. The first volume is a narrative account of daily events in Russia from 1917 to 1921. It begins with the downfall of the Czar in March 1917, and ends with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921. The volume is fairly well documented. Newspapers, historical magazines, memoirs, and archival materials are utilized. Chamberlin's personal encounters with some of the leading actors in the historical drama have also given him an added advantage.

Journalists are often criticized for resorting to sensationalism in order to help increase the circulation of newspapers. Chamberlin, however, does not write like a journalist—but like a scholar. Although one can see where he stands (i.e. sympathy for the revolutionaries), on the whole, he does not get emotionally involved. He is reasonably detached and fairly objective.

In the introductory chapters, Chamberlin provides the historical background against which the Russian Revolution of 1917 took place. This section of the book is essential for those who do not know much about Russia. He describes the heavy hand of the Russian past, which left strong imprints on the psychology and character of the masses, and on the ultimate outcome of the Russian Revolution itself. Chamberlin explains why a leader like Peter the Great (1669-1725), was consumed with hatred for the backward and primitive conditions of Russia, and why the abolishing of serfdom by Alexander II in 1861, should be considered as the most important event in Russian social history of the nineteenth century.

Turning to the 1905 Revolution, Chamberlin analyzes the widespread peasant uprisings, the paralyzing strikes, and demonstrations, and how the unsuccessful war with Japan intensified deep resentment and mutiny in the army. As a result, Czar Nicholas II agreed to universal suffrage and to an elected national assembly—the Duma. Because the Mensheviks believed that capitalist democracy must run its normal course before conditions would be ripe for socialist revolution, they were willing, he says, to cooperate in the Duma. On the other hand, since the Bolsheviks were committed to the tactics of immediate revolution, they declared that they would have nothing to do with it.

To show that the Russian Revolution was not a windfall exploited by some crazy maniacs who called themselves “revolutionaries,” but rather the culmination of years of arduous struggle, he presents a brief historical sketch of the various political tendencies, including the Decemberists of 1825; Slavophiles, like Herzen, who argued that Russia would reach socialism without passing through the intermediate stages of capitalism; supreme anarchists, like Michael Bakunin, who advocated for the instant withering away of the state; Nihilists, like

Chernishevsky, who strongly believed that nothing exists that is knowable. This section is followed by an examination of the ideas of such revolutionary Marxist thinkers like Plekhanov, Martov, Lenin, and other pioneers of Russian revolutionary Marxism.

Karl Marx formulated his socialist ideology only for an advanced industrial society of proletarians, not for an agrarian state of peasants. Turning to the objective conditions in Russia, Chamberlin examines why Russia did not seem to fulfill Marx's specifications for successful socialist revolution. To prove his point, he contends that in 1913-1914, the Russian Empire had a population of 180 million. Out of this, while three million Russians were employed in industry, and another one million in transport, the great majority were illiterate peasants. Turning to the structure of the ownership of industry, he reports that 32.6% of the capital in Russian industry was French; 22.6% British, 19.7% German; and 14.3% Belgium.

Nevertheless, says the author, Russia had definite advantages over the other European countries where capitalism had developed and matured. It had a well-organized and revolutionary working class, a peasantry that would under all circumstances support the cause of the workers for revolution and, what is even more remarkable, a disciplined revolutionary party that could lead a revolution and take power.

The rest of the book describes the overthrow of the Czar, the disruption of the army, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in November 1917, and Leon Trotsky's role in the negotiations at Bret-Litovsk. Chamberlin distinguishes the October Revolution from the February Revolution of 1917 that had deposed the Czar. In fact, since March 1917, Russia had been ruled by a Provisional Government composed of moderate and liberal politicians in the Duma. In the midst of deepening chaos and military failures on the war front, Nicholas had dissolved the Duma in February, which led to the establishment of the Provisional Government headed by Alexander Kerensky. When the Petrograd Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies challenged the Provisional Government under the leadership of Trotsky, the regime simply collapsed and Kerensky fled. That is how the Bolsheviks took power.

Chamberlin presents Lenin as a great historical figure. He describes him as "single minded," a man "who found anything in the nature of luxury or ostentation alien to his character" because he was for simple living and high thinking. He describes Trotsky as "brilliant," "receptive to new ideas," "bitter," as a man with great oratorical abilities, and as a person "with boundless energy." In contrast, Stalin did not possess Trotsky's genius, but "had the grasp of party techniques" and "patience in organizational matters."

Kamenev and Zinoviev are not only obstructionists, but also wavering. They opposed the Bolshevik insurrection, as well as the ceding of a huge chunk of Russian territory to Germany in exchange for peace. Lenin was in favour of this strategy, not because he wanted to assist the expansion of the German Empire, but because he wanted a breathing space to stabilize the Revolution, and then to address the question of recovering territory later.

Biographical Sketch

Daniel Kendie graduated (M.Sc. honors, Economics), from the University of Prague, and then

from the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands, (M.A. Sociology & Political Science). Subsequently, he was awarded a three-year Fellowship by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, New York, where he completed a major study on the problems of peace and development in Africa. Having been granted a scholarship and a fellowship by Michigan State University, he completed his Ph.D. there, specializing on the modern history of the Middle East, Africa and Russia/the Soviet Union.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.