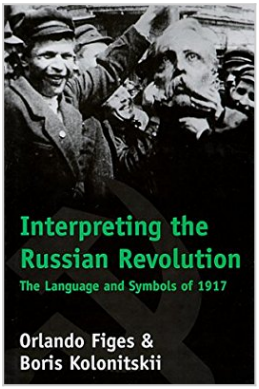

Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917

By Orlando Figes, Boris Kolonitsk II

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This is the first book in any language to offer a comprehensive analysis of the political culture of the Russian Revolution. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii examine the diverse ways that language and other symbols—including flags and emblems, public rituals, songs, and codes of dress—were used to identify competing sides and to create new meanings in the political struggles of 1917. The revolution was in many ways a battle to control these systems of symbolic meaning, the authors find. The party or faction that could master the complexities of the lexicon of the revolution was well on its way to mastering the revolution itself.

The book explores how key words and symbols took on different meanings in various social and political contexts. “Democracy,” “the people,” or “the working class,” for example, could define a wide range of identities and moral worlds in 1917. In addition to such ambiguities, cultural tensions further complicated the revolutionary struggles. Figes and Kolonitskii consider the fundamental clash between the Western political discourse of the socialist parties and the traditional political culture of the Russian masses. They show how the particular conditions and perceptions that colored Russian politics in 1917 led to the emergence of the cult of the revolutionary leader and the culture of terror.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
In this scholarly reduction of the Russian Revolution, Figes (A People's Tragedy, etc.), professor of history at Birbeck College, London, and Kolonitskii, senior researcher at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, examine the minutiae of political culture circa 1917, concluding that the often-neglected struggles played out in popular cultureAvia rumors, jokes, flag waving and singingAhad significant impacts on political events in Russia. "The demonization of the old regime was a vital means of legitimizing and enforcing unity around 'the revolution,'" the authors argue. They then offer extensive examples from letters, movies, postcards and newspapers that demonstrate the popular conclusion that the empress was a German spy and a woman of loose sexual morals and that her husband was a weak cuckold. Most interesting is an analysis of the use of the same symbols by opposing forcesAmany political parties opposing the Romanov monarchy, such as Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and anarchists, waved the same red flags and sang the same revolutionary anthems. After the Romanovs were deposed, a struggle began among the parties to appropriate the most effective symbols for themselves. While the book is certainly not, as the jacket claims, "the first book in any language to offer an analysis of the political culture of the Russian Revolution" (James von Geldern's 1993 Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920, Univ. of California, offers a good analysis of its own), it is a fine contribution to an understudied area of Russian history. (Oct.)

From Library Journal
Figes, already the author of a superb study of the Russian Revolution (A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924), and his Russian colleague Kolonitskii here examine the symbols and popular passions of revolutionary Russia in 1917. From the initial antitsarist iconoclasm through the endless singing of revolutionary anthems, the cult of the new leaders thrown up by tsarism's collapse, and the swelling hatred of the privileged "burzhooi," we get a fascinating picture of how deeply the people rejected the old order and how much they aspired to become something better in the new. The return of many of the old names and symbols so furiously rejected in 1917 in a post-Soviet Russia adds a final ironic note to Russia's violent century. This volume will greatly interest the specialists and historians of Russia and revolutions.ARobert H. Johnston, McMaster Univ., Hamilton, Ont.

From Kirkus Reviews
An original but not very successful attempt to illuminate the political culture of the Russian Revolution by looking at its language and symbols. The book purports to be about ``the ways in which language was used to define identities and create new meanings in the politics of 1917," but much of the text relates to subjects only peripherally connected with this definition. The initial chapter, for example, deals with the ways in which the tsar was undermined by the rumors that the tsarina was pro-German, or that Rasputin was running the government, or that Russian defeats were caused by treason in high places. Similarly, the semireligious cult of revolutionary leaders, first Kerensky, and then Lenin and Kornilov, seems only marginally a linguistic phenomenon. More relevant is the discussion of what was meant by class. Figes (History/Birkbeck Coll., England; A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 18911924, 1997) and Kolonitskii (a researcher at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg) argue that the concept of class didnt exist until it was defined by language. There was instead a strong sense of Russians as laboring people united by a common sense of injustice and exclusion from society. The authors argue convincingly that class was a term flexible enough to unite diverse groups in a common struggle for human rights. They also believe that the

terminology of revolution was foreign to most peasants but that they were not monarchists. The authors' most original argument may be that the peasantry shared a strong belief in socialism, and that hatred of the bourgeoisie had a strange mass appeal. They conclude that the symbolic language of revolution came from the socialists, and ``theirs was not a discourse of compromise." Perhaps that helps us explain, they suggest, why the Russian Revolution was so violent. Not a bad idea, but still a theme in search of evidence. --

Users Review

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