Revolutionary Russia

***The Challenge of Revolution: Contemporary Russia in Historical Perspective*, by Vladimir Mau and Irina Starodubrovskaya, New York: Oxford University Press, 369pp.**

By Daniel Treisman

They are the great stories of modern history. Oliver Cromwell in the House of Commons stamping his feet to call in the soldiers, and berating the members individually as they fled: "Thou art a whore master… Thou art a drunkard and a glutton…" Boston's patriots dressed up as Indians, hurling crates of tea into the harbor. The artisans of Paris swarming into the Bastille and parading through the streets with its governor's head upon a pike. Lenin's band overpowering the women's battalion to occupy the Winter Palace.

To this list, Vladimir Mau and Irina Starodubrovskaya would add the case of Boris Yeltsin clambering upon a tank to lecture the reactionary putschists of August 1991. Russia, they argue in their erudite and often fascinating book, underwent not just a transition or a transformation in the 1990s but a social revolution.

Mau, a junior minister in Putin's government and academic by training, and Starodubrovskaya, a former analyst in the World Bank's Moscow office, are among the most perceptive observers of contemporary Russian events. They are not the first to use the vocabulary of revolution to describe Russia's experiences. (Michael McFaul's recent book on Russian politics, for instance, includes the word in its title.) Unlike most others, however, their usage is not rhetorical but literal.

What happened in Russia after 1985, they argue, was similar in its causes and internal logic to the events that broke out in England after 1640, France after 1789, America from the 1770s, and Russia itself after 1917.

The book sets out to answer two questions. First, what light can the “classic” social revolutions of the past throw on Russia’s turbulent trajectory during the past two decades? Second, what insights into the nature of revolution do Russian events offer, and how can they be used to develop social science theory? To answer the first question, the authors begin by scouring the details of past revolutions for common causes and processes. Their method is inductive, and does not start out with a clear definition of revolution (one arrives near close of business on p. 292). Rather, like their predecessor on this terrain, Crane Brinton, they take it as given that the so-called English, French, American, and Russian revolutions are instances of a single phenomenon. They attempt to identify common patterns through close reading of the relevant histories.

Brinton, writing in the 1930s, noted certain similarities in the four classic revolutions (although he acknowledged the distinctiveness of the American case.) These revolutions began in states that were “on the whole prosperous” but in which the governments were “chronically short of money”. Despite trying to introduce reforms, governments found themselves confronted by an array of mutually hostile groups with incompatible economic grievances. At some point, an illegal act of protest prompts the rulers to attempt violent repression—but the armed forces either disintegrate or join the revolutionaries. The government, as Tocqueville wrote of 1848, falls “before rather than beneath the blows of the victors”. A “honeymoon phase” typically follows, in which all appear united against the defeated old regime. A government of “moderates” takes over, but soon finds itself caught in the crossfire between the “disgruntled but not yet silenced conservatives” and the “confident, aggressive extremists”. The extremists—“practical men unfettered by common sense, Machiavellians in the service of the Beautiful and the Good”—then

stage a coup and introduce what Brinton calls the "reigns of terror and virtue". The guillotine helps to cement their power, while an ascetic moralism often informs their policies. Eventually, the extremists are overthrown and a "convalescence from the fever of revolution" sets in, known as Thermidor after the date of Robespierre's fall. Thermidor is characterized by a partial restoration of old forms and elites, a consolidation of the new revolutionary distribution of property, and often the replacement of revolutionary ideology with aggressive nationalism. Finally, a dictator takes power, and brings the revolutionary era to an end.

Mau and Starodubrovskaya quarrel little with this stylization. Their main distinction is to emphasize the economic theme that Brinton left somewhat undeveloped. Like Brinton—and others before—they note how pre-revolutionary societies become divided into a honeycomb of mutually antagonistic and socially remote groups, the "watertight compartments" that Tocqueville observed in late *ancien régime* France. This social fragmentation, they argue, is caused by a prerevolutionary period of rapid economic growth. They contend that the familiar political dynamic of the classic revolutions reflects an underlying "economic cycle of revolution". The moderates fall, in large part, because of the economic disruptions the revolution generates as the old system of law-and-order breaks down. The political crisis undermines the payments system, and, if paper money exists, the currency. The radicals also prove unable to solve these problems. Economic conditions worsen still further during Thermidor, which brings a particularly severe budget crisis. But this does not undermine the political regime to the same extent. In part, the masses succumb to political fatigue. In part, the Thermidorians benefit from the political and military achievements of the radicals and from their strengthened apparatus of coercion. At the same time, economic beneficiaries of the revolutionary redivision of wealth support the new regime. And, eventually, the measures taken to address the economic crisis start to bear fruit. The post-revolutionary dictatorship consolidates the power of—and contains conflicts among—the

new elites empowered by revolution. However, the dictatoship does not succeed in restoring a strong state. Political instability continues for several decades.

Through careful analysis, along with interviews with four of the key participants—Gorbachev, Yakovlev, Burbulis, and Gaidar—Mau and Starodubrovskaya show that many of these features also characterized economic and political events in Russia in the 1980s and 1990s. They attribute the onset of crisis in the mid-1980s to the end of the oil boom that had boosted Soviet economic growth in the 1970s. This is not unreasonable, although it is not obvious that the oil boom caused the social fragmentation they note in the late Brezhnev era. Stability of local cadres, chronic entrenchment of sectoral bureaucracies, growing macroeconomic imbalance, détente, and other factors helped to stimulate the consolidation of local and sectoral interest groups as well the growth of underground counter-economies and counter-cultures. Gorbachev's first years are cast as the old regime's last attempt to reform itself. From 1987, genuine revolution begins, with Gorbachev leading the moderates. As the economy deteriorates, he finds himself attacked by—and dithering between—the communist conservatives and the economic radicals. Yeltsin and his band of Jacobins (Mau among them) take power after August 1991, but—since, for the most part, they eschew violence—they find themselves forced to maneuver between competing forces. Thermidor sets in by 1994, with new economic elites emerging to profit from the redistribution of property. The authors leave it to the last page of the book to announce the arrival of the "post-revolutionary dicator"—a dictator who does not read as far as p.338?—but consider it safe to assume that in Russia dictatorship "would take a fairly mild form and would soon come to nothing".

The exercise brings out some intriguing parallels. There was indeed something awfully Kerensky-like about Gorbachev in 1989-91, struggling against both "Bolsheviks of the Left and Bolsheviks of the Right," determined not to notice the ground crumbling around him. The fiscal crisis of the

Russian state in the 1990s was very much like that of the French two centuries earlier. The comparison also brings to light marked differences, which Mau and Starodubrovskaya point out. Unlike all previous revolutions, the Russian events occurred without major violence. Reform evolved into revolution without regime change: the two fought it out, in this case, not in the streets but in Gorbachev's head. The radicals and subsequent leaders were elected democratically. There were no reigns of terror and virtue (although the authors disagree with Brinton that these always occurred in previous cases.) The four "revolutionaries" that the authors interview are all reluctant to see these events as a revolution.

Another element missing from the Russian events that the authors do not note is what Hannah Arendt called the "pathos of novelty". In the classic revolutions, participants believed that a completely new stage in world history was opening—in Sieyès' phrase, that "night" was ceding to "day". This was combined with a belief in the malleability of the social and political realms, a confidence that even the nature of man could be changed. As Robespierre put it: "*Tout a changé dans l'ordre physique; et tout doit changer dans l'ordre moral et politique.*" Past revolutions unfolded as a frenzy of new beginnings—new calendars, place names, alphabets, weights and measures, legal codes, religious sects, constitutions, distributions of wealth. (This was least true in the American case, where the hope to reshape human nature was restrained by the Americans' "Christian pessimism," to use Louis Hartz's phrase, and where the revolutionary demands were actually conservative—to repeal "dangerous innovations" like the Stamp Act, and restore the liberties of self-government Americans had always enjoyed. More on this below.) In the Russian transition, there were no pretensions to originality: the "revolutionaries" hoped to introduce a system—democracy and free markets—already well-established in much of the world. The place-renaming that occurred was *counterrevolutionary*: Sverdlovsk became Ekaterinburg again, Ulitsa Gorkogo reverted to Tverskaya.

While the method of inductive comparison serves well to bring out key features of the Russian events, it has limitations as a means of constructing social science theory. To make valid inferences about the causes of revolutions—at least about sufficient conditions—one would need to consider not just revolutions themselves but cases in which revolutions did not occur. Some periods of socially disruptive economic growth and fiscal crisis have led to non-revoutionary outcomes (as the authors certainly acknowledge.) One cannot explain why revolutions occur in some cases without explaining why they do not in others. At the same time, without a precise definition of revolution, it is not clear what general implications the observed similarities between certain historical cases have. Mau and Starodubrovskaya's main theoretical contribution is to argue that "revolution" should be redefined to include non-violent cases, but since they base this on the claim that Russia recently underwent a revolution and that this revolution was non-violent, there is a circularity. The defining feature of revolutions, they argue, is spontaneity: they are moments when events, as Gorbachev says in his interview, "suck you in". This seems to me to exaggerate the extent to which in "normal" times events are under the control of political leaders. There may be more spontaneous change in revolutionary times, but there is plenty of spontaneous continuity in other periods. The most defensible approach is probably to define revolutions as abrupt, major changes in political and social structures. But such a definition—focusing on the consequences of the event rather than the event itself—probably precludes the identification of common causes, and begs the questions what is "major" and what is "abrupt".

Analogies are beguiling. The characters and scenery of the French Revolution travel all too well. Back in graduate school, I remember spending mirthful evenings with colleagues in John Harvard's Brewhouse, recasting our professors in the roles of Robespierre, St Just, Danton, and Babeuf. The "Thatcher" and "Reagan" revolutions had their radical phases and their Thermidors. Argentina after military rule might also fit the schema—Alfonsín as the outmaneuvered moderate, Menem as radical, retreating to Thermidor in his second term. (Is a post-revolutionary

dictator around the corner?) Revolutionaries themselves have been inveterate players of the analogy game. Lenin, in power, jotted down notes reminding himself to beware of Thermidor. Introducing the NEP, he wrote that the Bolsheviks had "Thermidorized themselves". The American revolutionaries looked back to the English revolution and read Harrington's *Oceana*. In 1848, Tocqueville observed the radicals "engaged in play-acting the French Revolution far more than continuing it."

The problem with analogies—like practical jokes—is knowing just how far to take them. If Gorbachev is Kerensky, does that make Yeltsin… Lenin? Robespierre? George Washington? None of these seems quite to fit. For that matter, should we be more struck by the similarities between the "classic" revolutions or by the differences? The American case was always more a war of decolonization than a social revolution, although property certainly changed hands. There was no domestic *ancien regime* that might be restored by force; no reign of terror; no postrevolutionary dictatorship. Unlike in the other cases, the revolutionaries' goals were not to create something new but to restore the unparalleled freedoms that they had already enjoyed. From the perspective of feudal Europe, revolution did not occur in America—it *was* America.

The Challenge of Revolution is bold and rich enough to raise questions that it cannot completely answer. Even if one does not sign on entirely to the theoretical claims of the authors, it is an intellectual pleasure of the highest order to navigate the historical details with them as they put together their case. The book offers fresh and insightful perspectives on the political struggles and economic travails of Russia in the 1990s—phenomena that seem puzzling if one compares them naively to the day-to-day life of developed, stable polities. As for the future, the authors' reading of history suggests we will see "continuing political instability with regular attempts to redistribute property… opposition between different elite groups and attempts by the authorities to manoeuvre between them; a gradual reconstruction of the economy; a lack of social consensus

on a basic system of values and a lack of a stable institutional structure." As a French observer of past revolutions once put it, *plus ça change*...