

*Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia: A Provincial History.* By Sarah Badcock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 280 pp. \$99.00 cloth

This welcome contribution to the history of the 1917 Russian revolution uses a comparative study of two Volga River provinces, Nizhnii Novgorod and Kazan, to explore the responses of “ordinary people” – workers, peasants, townspeople, rural intellectuals, soldiers, soldiers’ wives – to the political and economic challenges of the revolution. The study builds on a long history of scholarship; generously synthesizing the contributions of both western and Soviet historians, Badcock adds evidence from an impressive mining of local archival and newspaper sources.

Using the methods of political and social history, Badcock organizes her book thematically. Chapters on the dissemination of the narratives of the February revolution and on efforts to “enlighten” the ordinary people of the provinces show the process of the divergence between the interests of central revolutionary authorities and local populations. A case study of the populist Socialist Revolutionary Party in the two provinces indicates the shallowness of political identification and cautions historians to be wary of inferring “political opinion” from voting patterns in 1917. A chapter on soldiers emphasizes the violent potential of armed and disaffected reserves who answered to no authority and who contributed to the mounting breakdown of civic order in provincial towns and in the countryside. Finally, Badcock looks at two of the most central political problems of 1917: the redistribution of land and the shortage of food supply. The two provinces differed in their economic status, but Badcock importantly emphasizes that the differences *within* provinces were much greater than those *between*

provinces. Kazan province, in particular, was an ethnically more diverse region. She notes also that the difference between provincial towns – with their overwhelmingly Russian populations – and their rural hinterlands was also more significant in shaping local responses than the gap between center and “periphery.” Local heterogeneity makes generalizations sometimes difficult, and Badcock duly notes considerable (but not systematic) variations across the two provinces. Nonetheless, the evidence she presents makes it clear that in the realm of land and food supply, there was a huge gulf between the interests of the central government and those of the ordinary people in the provinces. With respect to land, there was a strong opposition to private property, both that held by big landowners and that held by “improving” peasants who had chosen to separate their farmsteads from the collective in the years before 1914. Through legal means, new democratic institutions, intimidation and occasionally violence, land in these two provinces was socialized, despite the opposition of the government. Similarly, local residents rejected central decrees on the grain monopoly and took the marketing and distribution of foodstuffs into their own hands.

Badcock emphasizes throughout that what appeared to central observers to be “dark” and “unconscious” behavior by ordinary folk was in fact rational and calculating. What drove a wedge between “elites” and “people” in 1917 was not the ignorance of the people, but the significant conflicts of interest between a strong central government and people where they lived, who sought local solutions to local problems. In this way, Badcock reinforces the prevailing wisdom that the revolutionary process of 1917 led to unbridgeable polarization between the parties of power and the people without power.

Her important contribution is to demonstrate how this process worked from the perspective of the powerless, who had their own logical agendas .

Badcock is careful not to stray beyond her carefully assembled evidence. Nonetheless her book suggests some interesting continuities with Soviet-era policies that are usually blamed on the Bolsheviks, but that can be seen to have grown out of the larger political and social conflict begun in 1917: a hostility to the market but also to forced grain requisitions; hostility to richer peasants (here labeled “separators” rather than “kulaks”); popular indifference to democratic institutions and processes; the marginalization of women from the class of political actors; and finally, the ungovernability of vast stretches of the Russian lands.

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