

Russia's First World War. A Social and Economic History

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The First World War is Russia's 'forgotten war'. After the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917, the memory of the war was subsumed into the history of the revolutionary process. The war was a difficult subject for the new rulers of Soviet Russia, since they viewed it as an expansionist conflict, embarked upon by Russia – and the other European Great Powers – as an inevitable consequence of their imperialist ambitions. Despite the death of some two million Russian soldiers during the war, the Bolshevik regime concentrated on the events of 1917 in their historical treatment of the period, seeing the war as almost incidental to the triumphal progress of the revolutionary movement. Western historians too have given relatively little treatment to Russia's war; the volumes published by the Carnegie Foundation in the late 1920s remain the most comprehensive treatment of Russia's First World War in all its aspects. The military side of the war was well covered in Norman Stone's *The Eastern Front* (1975), but until now there has been no satisfactory modern treatment of the social and economic aspect of Russia's First World War. Peter Gatrell's book is therefore especially welcome.

Gatrell draws on a very wide range of scholarship – both Russian and western – to provide the first single-volume history of the impact of the war on Russian economy and society. He is able to combine discussion of the national war economy with analysis of the war's impact on ordinary Russians and thus to give a well-rounded picture of Russia between 1914 and 1917. The book begins with an account of the military dimension of the war, analysing not just Tsarist military performance but also the direct impact of mobilisation on the population. Gatrell is well placed to appreciate the social impact of the military disasters that befell Russia in 1914 and 1915: he draws on his outstanding earlier book, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War One* (Bloomington, 1999) to discuss the enormous population displacement that accompanied the Russian retreats of the first two years of the war. More than one fifth of Russia's railway wagons were involved in evacuating people and equipment in the summer of 1915 and over half a million peasant households were displaced. Military reverses had a direct impact on the ordinary people of Russia and Gatrell gives a vivid depiction of the chaos and confusion that ensued from defeat, as peasant families had to abandon their farm machinery and other basic items of rural life. This ability to link

the wide and seemingly abstract elements of the war to the experience of ordinary Russians is one of the strengths of Gatrell's book and gives his narrative an immediacy that brings the experience of war to life. The book considers the ways in which the different sections of Russian society reacted to the war, laying particular stress on 'educated society' and the traditional elites. Gatrell suggests that the war again showed how far apart the government was from educated society, but he is careful not to labour the point. The Russian social elite remained committed to achieving victory in the war and made significant efforts to assist the national war effort. Urban and rural local government united around the Union of Towns and the Union of Zemstvos, while business established war industries committees to help in the mobilisation of the Russian economy. The civilian administration was much less inclined to cooperate with these efforts than the military, allowing the divisions between Russian elites to deepen. The government's attempts to mobilise public opinion in support of its conduct of the war had very mixed success. Gatrell suggests that the state's efforts merely concentrated the public's mind on the hardships and difficulties that they were enduring and that the tone of government propaganda was misjudged. Unofficial street literature helped to accentuate popular negative perceptions by focussing on issues such as Rasputin and on the Empress's German background, both of which proved difficult for the government to counter.

Gatrell provides close analysis of the economic elements of Russia's wartime problems. In some ways, Russia was in a strong position to withstand the stresses that war placed on its economy: it had rich reserves of raw materials and fuel that could have enabled it to provide the additional industrial output that was needed to sustain its military campaigns. Difficulties arose, however, in transporting raw materials to the main manufacturing centres: the Russian economy was dependent on the railway network and the railways proved unable to cope with the twin demands of transporting soldiers and materials to the front and keeping Russian manufacturing industry supplied. Labour supply was also a continuing problem for Russia's war industries. The army took many skilled workers and the stresses on those remaining in factories grew as the war progressed. The First World War was an expensive conflict, requiring sustained expenditure on arms and military equipment by the state. It cost Russia fifteen times more than the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5 and the government had to resort to financing the war by taking out loans and printing money. As a result, inflation roared ahead: Gatrell shows that retail prices in Moscow doubled in the first two years of the war and then accelerated dramatically in 1916 and early 1917, more than trebling in twelve months. Russia's indebtedness grew significantly as the government needed additional finance to keep its war effort going while the policy was also storing up problems for the post-war period. The Bolshevik repudiation of Russia's debts after 1917 had a financial, as well as an ideological motive. Russia was able to survive in spite of the problems it encountered with industrial production and the state's finances. Food supply, however, presented more severe difficulties. The agricultural labour force fell significantly during the war, and this drop also concealed important changes in the composition of the workforce. By 1916, women outnumbered men by more than two to one, with many of these men being those who were too old to be conscripted into the army. Gatrell shows that, despite this, the levels of agricultural production did not fall dramatically during the war. Food supply problems arose because government intervention to ensure the army was fed and to control prices disrupted a sophisticated system of grain distribution. The changes in the distribution of the population brought about by the concentration of the army in the west and the movements of refugees destabilised the distribution system for food. Local authorities attempted to prevent grain leaving their own regions, while government price controls meant that some peasant farmers were unwilling to market their grain. Even though, as Gatrell pointed out, there had been more severe food shortages in Russia in the previous twenty-five years, the problems experienced during the war were blamed firmly on the inadequacy of the government. The demonstrations in Petrograd that sparked the collapse of the Tsarist regime in February 1917 were by people protesting about the regime's inability to keep them fed. The revolution that overwhelmed Nicholas II appeared to offer the opportunity for Russian society to coalesce around the new Provisional Government. The political pressures that destroyed any consensus during 1917 have been exhaustively analysed elsewhere, and Gatrell shows how these strains were reflected in economic issues. Ordinary Russians turned on the state and the social elite as political and economic anarchy intensified across the empire. Their actions were reciprocated: Gatrell quotes Riabushinskii, a prominent industrialist, as arguing that only the 'bony hand of hunger' would quell popular discontent. The failure of the Provisional Government was comprehensive and opened the way for the Bolshevik seizure of power in

October 1917. Four months later, Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and its participation in the First World War ended, but civil war and foreign intervention meant that Bolshevik Russia continued to be at war until early 1921. Russia's withdrawal from the First World War did not give it any form of economic advantage. The Bolshevik regime was ostracised by the rest of the world and the links Russia had developed with Britain and France during the war were broken so that Russia's trade and finances were shattered. Gatrell shows how, overall, Russia's national income dropped by a third during the war years and how gross industrial production halved between 1913 and 1918, with the decrease occurring entirely in the final two years.

Halévy wrote that 'the world crisis of 1914 was not only a war – the war of 1914 – but a revolution – the revolution of 1917'⁽¹⁾ and Gatrell's book exemplifies the problems that this conjunction of events presents. The intertwining of revolution and Russia's exit from the war makes it very difficult to draw conclusions about the longer-term impact of the First World War on Russia's economy and society. The disruption that engulfed Russia after the February revolution and the toppling of the Tsar accelerated a process of economic and social collapse that had gathered pace during late 1916, but it is impossible to disentangle this from the effects of military uncertainty in the wake of the revolution. The 'dual power' of Provisional Government and Soviets helped to destabilise Russia's armed forces, but any judgement on how the Russian army and economy would have performed if revolution had not intervened is pure speculation. Gatrell recognises these difficulties in his penultimate chapter by concentrating on the issues that were affecting the Russian people as the war progressed: casualties and public health; overall economic performance and the nature of Russian memory of the First World War. His conclusion adopts a comparative perspective, and suggests that Russia's experience during the war was far from unique. Gatrell argues that most of the problems that Russia encountered during the war were common to the main combatant states. Each of them had difficulty in making the change to a war economy and shortages of equipment were not confined to Russia. Food supply was also a problem, especially in Germany and Italy, while violence and revolution were not confined to Russia at the end of the war. The German and Austro-Hungarian monarchies collapsed under the weight of military defeat; civil war engulfed Ireland and Finland in the aftermath of war while Hungary experienced a short-lived revolution. The First World War also exacerbated social tensions across Europe. Gatrell suggests that antagonism grew between social groups as ordinary people grew more and more resentful of the privations that they were enduring, while traditional elites prospered.

This comparative framework is in the tradition of writings that explained the war itself as the product of European-wide movements, but while Gatrell recognises that Russia was different from other combatant states in experiencing a successful revolution, a 'total transformation' (p. 274), his explanation for this uniqueness is all too brief. He suggests that the revolution of 1905 had left many problems unsolved for Russian society, but does not link this argument firmly enough to the effects of war. Gatrell's impressive range of evidence about the impact of the war on the economy and society of Russia between 1914 and 1918 suggests that, while other European states experienced some of the same difficulties as Russia, no other country endured such a range and intensity of problems. Russian industry found it difficult to transform itself to a war footing, the rural world was hit by the conscription of peasant men into the army and the transport system proved to be inadequate to cope with transporting millions of soldiers and all the equipment and material they needed to fight a prolonged war. Refugees streamed eastwards during 1914 and 1915 in their tens of thousands, further disrupting a society already strained by war itself. Price inflation intensified during 1916 and 1917, deepening the economic crisis for ordinary Russians. Gatrell is right that 1905 failed to resolve any of the questions that confronted the Russian state at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the First World War introduced a further set of political, economic and social issues that made it impossible for the Tsarist regime to survive. Russia was unique in both the range and the depth of problems that it faced during the war, so that the collapse of political authority after February 1917 was accompanied by economic meltdown and social atomisation. The Bolsheviks found it difficult to commemorate the war and the millions who died during it, not just because the October revolution superseded the war, but also because it was inconvenient to recognise that their own revolution had occurred through the suffering of ordinary Russians during the war. Bolshevik memorialisation of their revolution stressed the heroic actions of their supporters in October 1917, not the privations endured by Russians during years of war that Gatrell

describes so well.

Notes

1. E. Halévy, *The World Crisis of 1914–1918: An Interpretation* (Oxford, 1930), p. 7. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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