**Olga Semenova  
In sadness  
*1917: The Russian Revolution and the Origins of Present-Day Communism*  
by Leonard Schapiro, Temple Smith,£12.95**

1. Leonard Schapiro was exceptionally well-qualified to write a book on 1917. A leading academic authority on the Bolsheviks (Professor at the LSE, author of *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*etc.), he witnessed the Russian revolution as well. Schapiro completed *1917*in 1983, just before he died. His book is the distillation of a lifetime's teaching and reflection on the Russian revolution. It is both a concise and lucid narrative and a highly-charged piece of political analysis.
2. As narrative, *1917* fills a surprising gap in the literature on the subject. There are a large number of detailed studies of different aspects of the revolution, some of them brilliant works of scholarship. But no simple, comprehensive account of the two revolutions and the civil war exists. Schapiro's book is brief, but covers all the main points with absolute clarity. It also incorporates the conclusions of the most important recent research on the subject. The reader gets both an excellent introduction to the Russian revolution and an idea of how new material is causing thinking about it to change.
3. The value of Schapiro's analysis is more questionable. Schapiro was old and rigid, an adherent of the cold war/totalitarianism school. His interpretation of the Russian revolution is crude and unashamedly biased. He hates the Bolsheviks. He looks at the Russian revolution purely from the point of view of political power.
4. Schapiro's thesis goes roughly as follows. After the disintegration of the monarchy in February 1917, there was general support in the country for a broad-based socialist coalition. This quickly came to mean support for the Soviets, rather than for the Provisional Government. However, support for the Soviets did not mean support for the Bolsheviks, but for the 'traditional ideals of Russian socialism', represented by the SRs and, especially, the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks were a small band of disciplined fanatics. They were able to seize power in October because no one organised to stop them. They held on to it by annihilating their opponents, ruthlessly manipulating public opinion and militarising the economy. Right up to 1924, they were 'a largely unpopular party'. The first choice of a majority of the population would have been 'some form of moderate socialism'.
5. While it is undoubtedly true that the Bolsheviks were unscrupulous in their choice of methods and that they were not supported by a majority of the population when they seized power. Schapiro's thesis is prejudiced, one-sided and out-dated.
6. Schapiro's hostility to Leninism (which he sees as the precursor of Stalinism) leads him to maintain a position on the Bolsheviks which has been shown to be wrong. He presents them as an autocratically run and conspiratorial organization, staffed by a group of men whose opinions were (with rare exceptions) uniform. Recent research, however, including that of Rabinowitch (whom Schapiro himself quotes), has shown that the Bolshevik party was not a homogeneous body, but a collection of committees. Each of these tended to run its own affairs independently and take initiatives of its own, regardless of the opinions and instruction of the Central Committee.
7. Other problems with Schapiro's work stem from the fact that he was an old-fashioned political historian. *1917*is based on the premise that it is possible to understand the Russian revolution purely in terms of political power, without reference to social or economic questions.
8. This, firstly, leads Schapiro into errors of interpretation. He concentrates exclusively on the mechanics of the Bolshevik seizure of power. This approach allows him to avoid discussing the appeal which the Bolsheviks' programme held for industrial workers and peasants. He seriously underestimates the degree of popular support which the Bolsheviks enjoyed: the strong power base which, by October, they had in the cities; and the enthusiasm generated by their land policy in the countryside, which was probably the crucial factor in their victory in the civil war.
9. Secondly, Schapiro's purely political orientation affects his choice of period. He picks the dates 1917-1924 because they delimit the transfer of political power. But, for any real understanding of the Russian revolution, one needs to go both further back and further forward. 1917 is not the right point at which to start. The events of that year make sense only if viewed in the context of the rapid industrialisation of Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. 1924 is not a good place at which to stop, because the most dramatic changes resulting from the Bolshevik takeover - the social and economic transformation of Russia undertaken by Stalin didn't happen until 1928-1933. Schapiro doesn't consider these events part of the Russian revolution. Most younger historians, however, would argue that they were and that a revolution should he defined as the period of upheaval, social and economic as well as political, which intervenes between the fall of an old regime and the firm consolidation of a new one. This is the approach taken by Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her recent appraisal of the Russian revolution, a work which forms an interesting contrast to Schapiro's.
10. Schapiro's enduring advantage over more modern historians, however, is that he lived in Petrograd as a boy (from 19l7-l920). This has helped him to bring what is essentially just a well written text book to life. He has managed to breathe into it something of the feel of the time - the euphoria, excitement and suffering of revolutionary Russia.

*New Statesman,* 20 April 1984

The review contains both positive and negative comments on the book. Look at the 10 paragraphs and decide whether or not they are positive or negative. Mark the parts of the text which give you this information.

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