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The Images of the French Revolution in the February and Bolshevik Revolutions

To what extent have historical examples affected politicians? The answer cannot be definite in the sense that it depends on concrete situations. Historical analogies and sociological models, in general, can affect the politician's vision of the political life, but only in the case when he does not participate in it actively. This could be, for example, a case when he felt himself defeated and powerless to lead the political process in a chosen direction. In such a case he sees the historical process mostly run by impersonal social forces with their implacable laws. The situation is quite different when the politician is actively involved in politics. In such a case he has a sense that it is not an impersonal force, but one over which he has control and in which he can determine the course of history. In such a case the historical development loses its rigidity and becomes perceived as being, so to say, flexible, as having many alternatives. And these alternatives become dependent on political activity.

In such a case, the politician does not discard historical analogies or the pattern of historical development, but still appeals to them on various occasions mostly to support his political position. While being superficially under the influence of historical analogies, they actually pay little attention to them. The approach of various Russian politicians to the French Revolution at the time of February and the October Revolutions could serve as an example of appeal to historical analogies (to the French Revolution in this case) which often conceal actual disregard for the examples of the past.

Russian intellectuals were fascinated with the French Revolution since its beginning. Interest in the event became especially popular by the beginning of the twentieth century, when Russia entered a period of high political instability. The French Revolution's popularity reached its peak at the time of the February and October Revolutions. One topic in particular drew the attention of practically all the participants in the Russian revolution: the extent to which the Russian revolutionary process was similar to the French Revolution, and most specifically, whether the Reign of Terror was imminent.

The approach to these subjects often had nothing to do with the French Revolution's actual script, but with one's vision of the current Russian political reality. However, when the images of the French Revolution were in tune with one's vision of the Russian political reality, they apparently made one more convinced of the appropriateness of the chosen political position. In such a case they had an illusion that it was the historical analogy which gave them their direction.

This study focuses on the approach to the French Revolution by major Russian political parties such as liberals and leftists of various persuasions
and traces the evolution of the respective parties' approach to the relationship between the Russian and French Revolutions from the period of the downfall of tsardom to the end of the Russian Civil War.

After the fall of the monarchy in February 1917, the liberals became one of the leading Russian parties and they were to become delighted by the sudden change in their position. Despite the fact that the Russian entrance into "1792" implicitly increased their chances of a complete repetition of the French script, the majority of liberals were convinced that Russia had never been so far from a repetition of the French Revolution as it was at that point. Political optimism caused them to feel that they could lead the Russian revolution in any direction, thus inducing liberals to discard historical analogy. Consequently, emphasis was placed on the differences between the two revolutions, or at least on the many options which the Russian revolution, unlike the French, enjoyed. All of these arguments were to comfort Russian Girondists.

Just after the collapse of the Russian ancien régime, Miliukov's Rech' (Speech, the leading liberal newspaper) reassured its readers that, although there were indeed formal similarities between the Russian and French revolutions, as a "matter of fact, they are absolutely different phenomena." It would be only in the military victories that both revolutions were similar to each other. This was the reason why Miliukov's (the liberal leader) public speeches were accompanied by the Marseillaise.¹²

Such an opinion was widespread among those liberal intellectuals interested in the French Revolution.³ At the end of March 1917, James L. Houghteling, an American, visited his friend in Petrograd, a "G. S." who was apparently a liberal from Moscow. They discussed the current political situation and talked "at great length of the French Revolution, a favorite topic nowadays."⁴ Both Houghteling and his Russian friend found definite similarities between the two revolutions. "But the irritants of the French situation, the émigrés, the invading armies of restoration, the weak trickiness of the king, all causing panic among the people, do not exist here. Mme. G. says that the peasants are totally disillusioned about the sanctity of the tsar, and that a peasant uprising in favor of a monarchy is not likely."⁵

Nikolai I. Kareev, a well-known liberal intellectual, was not as optimistic as many Russian and foreign liberals and did not feel that the Russian Revolution was intrinsically entitled to be considered unique from its historical proto-type. He, however, did not make any dire predictions.

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1. Rech' 11 March 1917.
2. Tarasov-Rodionov, February 1917 (New York: Covici, Friede, 1931), 111.
5. Ibid.