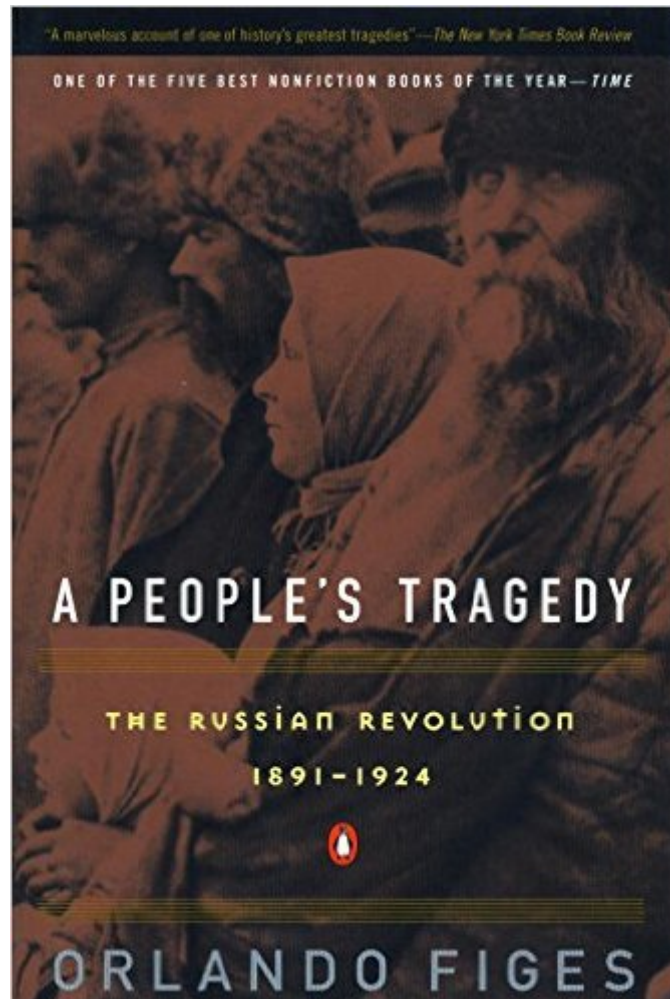


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# A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924



## Synopsis

It is history on an epic yet human scale. Vast in scope, exhaustive in original research, written with passion, narrative skill, and human sympathy, *A People's Tragedy* is a profound account of the Russian Revolution for a new generation. Many consider the Russian Revolution to be the most significant event of the twentieth century. Distinguished scholar Orlando Figes presents a panorama of Russian society on the eve of that revolution, and then narrates the story of how these social forces were violently erased. Within the broad strokes of war and revolution are miniature histories of individuals, in which Figes follows the main players' fortunes as they saw their hopes die and their world crash into ruins. Unlike previous accounts that trace the origins of the revolution to overreaching political forces and ideals, Figes argues that the failure of democracy in 1917 was deeply rooted in Russian culture and social history and that what had started as a people's revolution contained the seeds of its degeneration into violence and dictatorship. *A People's Tragedy* is a masterful and original synthesis by a mature scholar, presented in a compelling and accessibly human narrative.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rarely, one stumbles across a book that is of such surpassing excellence, and whose scholarship is worn so lightly, that you know, reading it, that you will never be able to forget it, and what you learn from it. Figes' *A People's Tragedy* is this rarity. I have read many books about the Russian

Revolution, but no book has the sweep, the clarity, the balance, and the heartbreak of this. I literally had to put it down every so often because the sheer tragedy of what I was reading was more than I could bear. First, Figes briskly deals with all those things you thought you knew about the Russian Revolution, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Kerensky - the liberals, the Bolsheviks, the Tsar. Again and again, I realized I had picked up myths either promoted by those who lost, or those who consolidated, the Revolution. The mythmaking machine was going full tilt from 1917 onwards (particularly during the Stalinist and Cold War Years) and this book would be irreplaceable if only for stripping away so much that you thought you knew - which was wrong. Second, by starting the book in 1891 (with a famine which revealed the incompetence of the Tsarist bureaucracy) and ending with the death of Lenin in 1924, Figes permits himself a sweep of events that makes what actually happened even more dramatic than it was. Again and again, you not only read about, but hear from the survivors of, mistakes, errors, misconceptions - indolence, arrogance, foolishness, well-meaning idiocy - in a way that, as a human being, is more than heartbreaking. Again and again, the Revolution might never have happened, a democracy might have developed, steps taken could have been taken back - but they weren't.

I live and work in Russia, and have been studying the place for 12 years or so. In all that time, because I focus on the here and now, I have always felt that I lacked a real grasp of the history, which I try to fill in from time to time. This book is brilliant on the forty years or so that lead up to 1917. Figes brings you into the two worlds of the revolutionaries and the aristocracy. He is not starry-eyed about any of the participants. He is very clear about how the monarchy failed to reform in time, failed to listen to good advice, and basically brought about its own downfall. He also describes how the Tsarist secret police was just as nasty as its Bolshevik equivalent. All of Russia's totalitarian machinery was in place long before the revolution. He also describes how Russia's peasant culture usurped the Marxist ideals of the revolutionaries. This was a crude egalitarian culture, that punished people who became rich, by stealing or confiscating their property, that tolerated drunken layabouts, and that was generally happy to see no improvement in its standard of living over the course of the 19th century. These Russian peasants deeply distrusted the Bolshevik Jews, especially those who came from the cities to "educate" them. The accounts of the revolution are breathtaking, and all those famous events, like the Cruiser *Avrora*, are put in their place, as well as descriptions of how the military was mobilised to the side of the Bolsheviks. Figes' history of the First World War, and how it fit into the revolution, was also first-rate. So I would recommend this as a starter to anyone looking to get a grasp of the detailed history of the Bolshevik revolution.

I picked up this book by Orlando Figes on a whim. The Russian Revolution is an interesting topic so I figured that one day I'd get around to reading this massive book. I finally read it over Christmas break, and I must say that this is an excellent history book. One of the best I've ever read, actually. It is a real page turner, something very rare for a scholarly book of this size and scope. Figes certainly has the education to pull off this type of history: he was educated at Oxford and has written other works concerning Russia. Figes goes against the grain with this book. In opposition to such scholars as Richard Pipes (author of another huge tome I own but have yet to read), Figes believes that the Russian Revolution was in fact a "bottom up" revolution. Figes proves that the peasantry in Russia were sick to high heaven of a system that degraded them to a status of barely human. To the peasant, the most important thing was land and freedom from the state. All government forms, from the tsarist state to the Bolsheviks, were judged by how much autonomy the peasants earned under them. Figes actually seems to measure the success and failure of each government according to how the peasants received them. Not surprisingly, the tsarist system was a dismal failure. It's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback with history, but the tsarist regime was pathetic. The list of the problems confronting Tsar Nicholas is too numerous to list here, but what is important to note is that this regime failed them all. Land reforms were desperately wanted, but the Tsar denied them. Nationalism in the peripheral states around Russia was not only denied, but a program of Russification was instituted that caused more problems than were necessary. The list could go on and on. The problem was power.

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