FOREWORD

OLIVER RADKEY'S *Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917*, published in 1950 and long out of print, is a classic whose reappearance would have been very welcome even without the new material he provides in *Russia Goes to the Polls*. The *Election*, which is reprinted as Part One of this volume, is a clear, scrupulous, and thorough analysis of the voting in Russia's only free national election, organized under the Provisional Government but actually held shortly after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Petrograd in October 1917. The Constituent Assembly itself was a short-lived body, forcibly dissolved by the Bolsheviks a few days after its first meeting, and of small historical significance. But the election is and will always remain an object of keen interest to students of the Russian Revolution.

The reason is that the voting is the best barometer we have of national popular opinion at the time the Bolsheviks took power. Historians are always going to argue about the extent of the Bolsheviks' popular support and the broader issue of the legitimacy of Bolshevik rule. But in recent years this has become a particularly charged issue in Western scholarship, since "revisionist" historians have challenged—and to a large extent successfully, as far as scholarly and student opinion is concerned—the earlier assumption of most Sovietologists that the Bolsheviks were without any real popular mandate at the time they took power. Many students now come into classes on the Russian Revolution accepting revisionist premises, whereas ten or fifteen years ago, most of them had the opposite assumption.

Actually, as Radkey's book very elegantly shows, the issue of popular support and political preference in 1917 is an enormously complex one. The Bolsheviks, who won 23.7 percent of the national vote, according to Radkey's revised calculations, but

carried the big industrial cities and large sections of the army vote, came in second to the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party, traditionally the “peasant” party. The SRs won 37.3 percent of the national vote, mainly because of heavy peasant support. But the SR party had split, though too late for its two factions to be distinguished at the polls, and the Left SR platform was almost indistinguishable from the Bolshevik one. Moreover, as Radkey demonstrates in the discussion of peasant voting that is one of the analytical and expository tours de force of this book, peasants in areas close to cities, railroads, and garrisons—those who were most likely to know what the Bolshevik party stood for—tended to split their vote between SRs and Bolsheviks.

Radkey's *Election* has always been a godsend for teaching purposes. In the 1970s, one of the best ways to prompt students to reexamine their assumption that the Bolsheviks lacked popular support in the autumn of 1917 was to introduce them to the book at an early stage of the course. The book serves a similar purpose today—but the assumption that it forces students to reexamine is often that the Bolsheviks had overwhelming popular support and an indisputable mandate. It is difficult for even the most partisan reader to reject Radkey's evidence and his balanced, fair-minded discussion of its significance.

This achievement is the more impressive because, as those who know Oliver Radkey will testify, he is a man of strong opinions and convictions, not by any means a natural nonpartisan. Bolsheviks stand very low in Radkey's personal estimation. Socialist intellectuals of all stripes (Russian and otherwise) stand not much higher. His admiration and sympathy are reserved for peasants, particularly such economically independent and/or rebellious ones as those who are the subject of his book *The Unknown Civil War in Russia: A Study of the Green Movement in the Tambov Region, 1920–1921* (Stanford, 1976).

In *Russia Goes to the Polls*, Radkey has meticulously incorporated all additional data on election returns that have appeared in Soviet publications or otherwise become accessible since *The Election* was published. These data broaden the picture consid-

erably, providing important insights on the political configurations in various parts of the empire. Indeed, Radkey's tables, which break the electorate down into 80 electoral districts (71 districts in 14 regions plus 2 metropolitan districts and 7 districts for the armies and fleets), can become almost compulsive reading for any historian who works in the imperial or Soviet period.

Consider the variety of political, social, and ethnic relations conveyed by the regional election returns. In Ufa electoral district, Moslem parties won 41 percent of the vote (32 percent to parties of the left, 9 percent to the right), and a local Bashkir party ("Turkic but not Tatar," in Radkey's designation) won 14 percent. In Kazan, another Volga region, the result was similar, except that it was a Chuvash rather than a Bashkir party that took almost a quarter of the vote. In the Amur-Maritime region, independent peasant parties, with 27 percent of the vote, topped both the SRs (23 percent) and the Bolsheviks (20 percent). In the Siberian region of Tobolsk, by contrast, the SRs walked away with 79 percent of the total votes, with one of only two undivided Social Democratic lists of this election managing less than 3 percent.

Consider also the portents for the future that can be read in these figures. In the Don Cossack electoral district of the Southeast, for example, Cossack parties received 45 percent of a total vote of 1.4 million, while the Bolsheviks received a mere 15 percent. Small wonder that the Soviet regime was to encounter severe difficulties in this region, not only during the Civil War but when it came to collectivization a decade later. At the same time, another kind of portent of the future, relevant even for far-flung provincial regions remote from Bolshevik influence in 1917, can be read in the electoral returns. Out of the 4.1 million votes recorded from the armed forces, 1.7 million went to the Bolsheviks. The soldiers and sailors who cast those votes were shortly to be dispersed throughout Russia, bringing home to Kazan, Ufa, and Khabarovsk the political attitudes and experience gained in their military service.

The electoral showing of the parties Radkey labels "religious

and/or rightist" was dismal. It is hard not to feel a twinge of sympathy for those 2,018 voters in the revolutionary Baltic Fleet who voted for an officers' party. Yet even here there is considerable interest in the regional spread of the votes. Monarchist parties made no significant showing anywhere but in an old Black Hundreds stronghold, the Kiev electoral district, where they won 48,758 votes (3 percent). (As a kind of dialectical antithesis, one notes that Zionist parties in Kiev, Volynia, and Minsk took 6 to 7 percent of the popular vote, with Kherson rising to 14 percent.) Both Orthodox and Old Believer parties made their best showing in Nizhni Novgorod (respectively 8 percent and 3 percent of total vote) and Perm electoral districts (4 percent and 3 percent). The Orthodox also made a showing in Kostroma (Central Industrial region), where there was no Old Believer electoral presence, and the Old Believer parties did the same in Altai, where they had no Orthodox competition. Landowners' parties (in Radkey's category of "special-interest groups") were strongest in Tambov, Saratov, and Chernigov, with a little over 1 percent of the vote in each.

The eye is caught by such curiosities as the 885 voters of the Taurida electoral district (including the Crimea) who gave their allegiance to a party of the Molokan sect. On the other end (one presumes) of the political spectrum, the League of Women Voters mustered a total of 7,676 votes, 2,366 of them in Pskov electoral district and 5,310 in the city of Petrograd.

Radkey collected these figures through years of patient, painstaking, even obsessive detective work. I can give some personal account of this process. I remember an urgent quest one Christmas Eve for an Austin resident fluent in Armenian, as Radkey had just acquired a book in Armenian and he suspected that one of its tables might possibly shed light on the elusive election returns of the Transcaucasus. (Alas, it was a false lead. The table turned out to be about damage to Armenian property inflicted by the Turks during World War I.) On another occasion, I made notes in the Academy of Sciences' library in

Leningrad from the last issue ever published of an obscure newspaper from Pskov, which Radkey knew to be the only extant source recording the vote for the League of Women Voters. When I returned to Texas with the Pskov data, Radkey informed me triumphantly that this was the conclusion of a search that had begun "on May 19, 1936" (or some such date)—more than half a century earlier!

In Part Two of this volume, Radkey has modified his earlier conclusions in two respects. In the first place, he feels more strongly than he did before that the large SR vote was "soft." He now attaches greater significance to the unofficial lists presented by peasants in competition with the official SR lists, which the SR-dominated electoral commissions usually ignored or refused to confirm on some technicality. Peasants, he concludes, were "becoming restive under SR domination." The SR intellectuals, for their part, were showing their "latent hostility . . . toward independent political activity on the part of peasants."

In the second place, Radkey feels that in *The Election* he may have been inclined to underplay the significance of the Bolshevik vote, making "certain concessions" (which he now regrets) to the argument made both on the Right and in SR circles that the Bolsheviks' strength was unimportant and ephemeral, destined to disappear with the self-demobilization of the army. He argues now that the support for the Bolsheviks was real, reflecting the "thoroughly revolutionary" temper of the country. Its non-ephemeral nature is confirmed by the outcome of the Civil War, which the Reds after all won and the Whites, despite Allied support, lost. He writes that the election "reflected no momentary aberration on the part of the population but rather the broadness, depth, and power of the revolution set off against the weakness of its foes." Then, in a summation that deserves to be pondered by all students of the revolution, he concludes that it showed two things: on the one hand, "that the Bolsheviks were strong"; on the other, that they were "not strong enough to govern democratically, even had they so desired."

It will be noted that Radkey describes the evolution of his study over the four decades since *The Election* appeared without reference to any historian but the unfortunate (in this context) Soviet researcher L. M. Spirin. That is characteristic of him, as Radkey is a scholar of deeply independent bent who does not pay a great deal of attention to the opinions of others. Yet, for all his Texan individualism, *Russia Goes to the Polls* must be read as an important contribution to contemporary scholarly debate. In the context of the work of such scholars as Alexander Rabinowitch, William G. Rosenberg, and, most recently, Vladimir Brovkin on popular support for the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the subsequent fluctuations of Russian political attitudes, *Russia Goes to the Polls* turns out to be in many respects *more* relevant to the preoccupations of American Soviet historians in 1990 than *The Election* was in 1950. At the same time, it is one of those rare scholarly works that strike us as the definitive account of a particular historical episode.

In 1987 the University of Texas, where Oliver Radkey taught from 1939 till his retirement forty years later, honored him by creating a professorship in his name, which it has been my privilege to hold for several years. This book may perhaps encourage a younger generation of American Soviet historians, sometimes accused of disrespect for their elders, to reassess the contribution of the postwar generation of scholars that established American Soviet studies. We sometimes write as if that cohort contained no historians. But Oliver Radkey, who belonged to it, is a historian *par excellence*. We will have a hard time matching his achievement.

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