# Bolshevism's New Believers

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***The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution***
by Yuri Slezkine
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Over the past one hundred years, some 20,000 books on the Russian Revolution have been published, roughly six thousand of them in English. It's as if, starting on October 25, 1917—or November 7, according to the Western calendar the Bolsheviks adopted soon after seizing power—a new book on that topic appeared without fail every weekday (with summers off). It could be worse: there are now over 70,000 books on the French Revolution. Which one are you going to read?

The Russian Revolution reshaped global time and space. The replacement of the House of Romanov by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics inaugurated what came to be known as the "short twentieth century"; the USSR's disintegration in 1991 signaled its finale, in all likelihood the last time events in Europe will serve as a century's bookends. The Soviet project precipitated the partition of the planet into first (capitalist), second (socialist), and third (developing) worlds. For much of its existence, the USSR haunted the West and beckoned developing societies to replicate Russia's leap into industrial and fully sovereign socialism.

The Russian Revolution, to borrow a phrase from Gershom Scholem, the historian of Jewish messianism, was one of

history's "plastic hours," when inherited institutions melt away, clearing a path for possibility. Having embarked on that path, the Bolsheviks set about turning capitalism into the world's ancien régime. Instead, at the centenary of its birth, the Soviet Union is an increasingly distant memory, a bizarre country that once had the audacity to try to abolish private property, markets, and, for a brief time, money itself.

Where did the USSR come from? Was it the offspring of Russia's peculiar development under the tsars, or did it arise from the inner contradictions of capitalism? Were its ambitions scripted by Marx and Engels, or did they emerge from broader currents of the Enlightenment—the same currents that, under different conditions, propelled the United States, France, and other countries to take their leave of monarchy? Throughout the many studies devoted to these questions runs an abiding tension between those that cast the USSR as an outlier in modern history and those that place it within a family of European or even universal phenomena. One of the first attempts at the latter approach focused on the fact that, notwithstanding their radically different political habits, in the end the Soviets and their capitalist rivals produced roughly the same kind of society: urban, industrial, educated, secular, consumerist, and science-friendly. A more recent version of the modernization-as-convergence argument, shaped by thinkers as diverse as Michel Foucault and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, puts the family resemblance in a decidedly darker light, stressing shared attributes of technocracy, state surveillance, mass mobilization, and urban anomie.

Yuri Slezkine's monumental new study, *The House of Government*, also situates the Russian Revolution within a much larger drama, but one that resists the modernization narrative and instead places the Bolsheviks among ancient Zoroastrians and Israelites, early Christians and Muslims, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Puritans, Old Believers, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarians, and other millenarian

sects. As sworn enemies of religion, the Bolsheviks would have hated this casting decision and demanded to be put in a different play, preferably with Jacobins, Saint-Simonians, Marxists, and Communards in supporting roles. Slezkine, however, has claimed these groups for his story as well, insisting that underneath their secular costumes they too dreamed of hastening the apocalypse and building the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The Bolsheviks, it seems, were condemned to repeat history—a history driven not by class struggle, as they thought, but by theology.

Slezkine was born in 1956 and raised in Moscow. The son of a historian and grandson of a fiction writer also named Yuri Slezkine, he graduated from Moscow State University before making his way to the United States, where he attended graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin and is now a professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley. He first achieved international notice in 1994 with an article entitled "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism."* The Soviet Union had just broken up into fifteen ethnically defined states, confirming for many its status as a "prison house of nations" (one of Lenin's many epithets for tsarist Russia) from which the inmates had finally staged their jailbreak.

Slezkine came to a very different conclusion: despite their insistence that class, not nationality, was the deepest source of human solidarity, the Bolsheviks had turned out to be nation-builders of the first order. Their "chronic ethnophilia" inspired "the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever financed," and was largely responsible for the formation of the very national-territorial units that burst forth as newly independent states in the 1990s. To capture the process of socialist nation-building, Slezkine deployed a perfectly Soviet metaphor: the communal apartment, the sprawling pre-revolutionary living space partitioned after 1917 into separate rooms, each housing an

entire family, with a single shared kitchen and bathroom per apartment. “Remarkably enough,” he wrote, “the communist landlords went on to reinforce many of the partitions and never stopped celebrating separateness along with communalism.”

Slezkine’s book *The Jewish Century* (2004) performed a similar volte-face, turning the story of Jewish assimilation on its head and moving Soviet Jewry from the margins to the center of the short twentieth century. Wide-ranging, witty, and provocative, it became the subject of academic symposia in the United States, France, Germany, Russia, and Israel. Modernization, Slezkine argued, is about “everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible,” and thus “about everyone becoming Jewish.” Different groups accomplished this metamorphosis at different rates, “but no one,” he noted, “is better at being Jewish than the Jews.”

For centuries, diaspora Jews (or at least some of them—Slezkine was not overly interested in such distinctions) belonged to a human type he dubbed “Mercurians,” familiar strangers wherever they lived, “service nomads” whose professional profile, food rituals, cosmologies, and, not least, endogamy kept them distinct from the rooted, agrarian, martial, and much more numerous “Apollonians” around them. Diaspora Armenians and Chinese were Mercurians too. Ukrainians, Russians, and other peasant-dominated populations, by contrast, were Apollonians. Slezkine’s most important point, however, was that Mercurianism and Apollonianism, rather than being innate qualities of this or that group, were strictly functional categories. Individuals and ethnic groups could move in and out of them over time, and since the modern world increasingly rewarded Mercurian qualities, modernization was the story of what happened when more and more Apollonians began to switch sides—as did a few quixotic Mercurians, aka Zionists.

*The Jewish Century*, it turns out, was a kind of prequel to an even grander project, *The House of Government*. A striking proportion of the latter's characters (and residents) were of Jewish background, reflecting the extraordinary presence of Jews in the early Soviet political, cultural, and administrative elite. By attending to the rise and fall of that presence in *The Jewish Century*, Slezkine in effect cleared space for exploring the Soviet experiment in its largest, world-historical dimensions. Readers will note cameo appearances by this or that figure in both books, but above all they will recognize the hallmarks of Slezkine's highly distinctive way of thinking and writing about history. Serious novels, the literary critic Robert Alter once wrote, are a way of knowing, and much the same can be said of Slezkine's work.

Constructed on what feels like a lifetime of research and reflection, *The House of Government* offers a virtuosic weaving of novelistic storytelling, social anthropology, intellectual history, and literary criticism. It moves effortlessly (though the copious sources cited in the endnotes suggest otherwise) across different historical scales, joining a millennia-spanning, pattern-seeking master narrative to acute readings of diaries, letters, novels, and other such documents, often quoted at luxurious length. More than most historians, Slezkine conveys a sense of knowing his Bolshevik subjects (and occasionally their spouses and children) from the inside out, inhabiting not just their thoughts but their emotions and their most intimate relationships as well. He himself is capable of many moods: ironic, elegiac, deadpan, tragic, analytical. His goal is to make readers feel at home in the House of Government, and he accomplishes this not least via a preternatural prose style in a language not his native tongue, calling to mind Nabokov and Conrad.

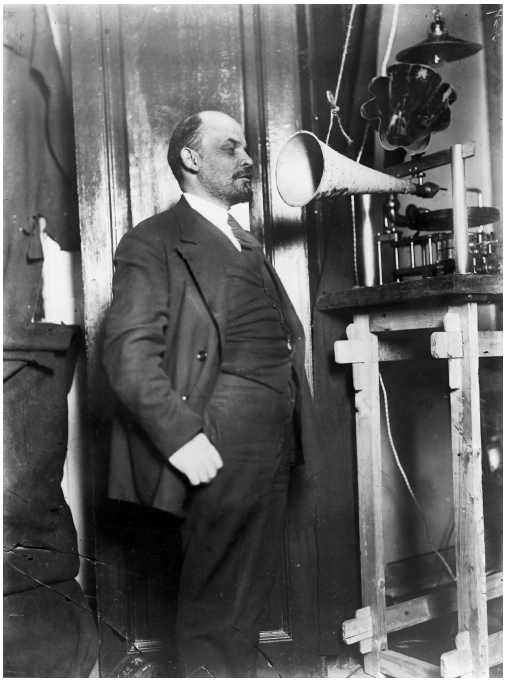
The House of Government was a fortress-like edifice constructed in the late 1920s on a swamp across the Moscow River from the Kremlin. The largest residential building in

Europe, its 507 fully furnished apartments were designed to house leading Soviet officials and their families, the pinnacle of what would come to be known as the *nomenklatura*. It may have been a bad idea to build such a structure on a swamp, but Russia had a history of pulling off such ventures. Peter the Great had founded a spectacular new capital, St. Petersburg, on the swamps off the Gulf of Finland. The Bolsheviks had launched the world's first Marxist revolution in a figurative swamp, an overwhelmingly agrarian, thinly industrialized country whose tiny proletariat had only begun to emerge from the sea of peasants spread across Russia's vast hinterland. Building socialism in backward Russia meant transforming the entire country into "a gigantic construction site." Unlike some other political figures, when the Bolsheviks promised to drain the swamp, they meant it.

If the communal apartment served as a metaphor for the USSR's multiethnic society, the House of Government, in Slezkine's telling, was the "place where revolutionaries came home and the revolution came to die." By the mid-1930s it was the dwelling place of some seven hundred top officials and more than twice that number of spouses, children, assorted relatives, and nannies—the last group mostly refugees from the famine caused by the disastrous collectivization of Soviet agriculture. The up-and-coming Nikita Khrushchev lived in Apt. 199 with his wife and three children. Maxim Litvinov, Stalin's foreign minister, lived in Apt. 14, just a few doors away from his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, the future dissident Pavel Litvinov. Matvei Berman, chief architect of the Gulag system, was in Apt. 141, while Boris Iofan, chief architect of the House of Government itself, settled into Apt. 426. The civil war hero Valentin Trifonov shared Apt. 137 with his second wife, Evgenia Lurye (sixteen years his junior), as well as his ex-wife, Tatiana Slovatinskaia (nine years his senior). Evgenia was Tatiana's daughter by a previous marriage. Evgenia and Valentin's children Yuri (the future Soviet writer) and Tatiana lived there too. Trifonov, Slezkine

archly notes, was a man “free of prejudices.” He wasn’t the only one. Nikolai Bukharin secured Apt. 470 for his aging father; his second wife, Anna Larina (twenty-six years his junior); their infant son; and his first wife, Nadezhda Lukina (who was also his cousin). Bukharin himself retained an apartment inside the Kremlin.

This being the Soviet Union, the apartments belonged to the state, as did the furniture and, in some sense, the inhabitants. Most of the fathers and some of the mothers were “Old Bolsheviks,” professional revolutionaries under the tsarist regime who had joined the party as young men and women, serving time in prison, Siberian exile, or abroad, where they had “courted each other, married each other (unofficially), and lectured each other.” All of them had pledged their lives to the party.



*Tate Gallery, London/David King Collection/Art Resource*

*Vladimir Lenin making a gramophone recording of a speech, Moscow, March 1919*

As Slezkine makes clear, however, the Bolsheviks were not a political party in the conventional sense of a group seeking, by vote gathering or other means, to elevate themselves into existing institutions of power. Nor, despite their fervent denunciation of religion and metaphysics in the name of science and materialism, were they immune to eschatological impulses. Writing of the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary parties of the early twentieth century, Slezkine observes:

> Their purpose was to…bring about [Russian] society’s replacement by a “kingdom of freedom” understood as

> life without politics. They were faith-based groups radically opposed to a corrupt world, dedicated to "the abandoned and the persecuted," and composed of voluntary members who had undergone a personal conversion and shared a strong sense of chosenness, exclusiveness, ethical austerity, and social egalitarianism.

In a word, the Bolsheviks were a sect.

Slezkine is by no means the first to argue that Bolshevism is best understood as a form of religious faith. In July 1917, two months before they overthrew the Provisional Government, the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev wrote that "Bolsheviks, as often happens, do not know the ultimate truth about themselves, do not grasp what spirit governs them." By laying claim to "the entire person" and seeking to provide answers to "all of a person's needs, all of humanity's sufferings," Bolshevism drew on "religious energies—if by religious energy we understand not just what is directed to God." The German political theorist Carl Schmitt's landmark study *Political Theology*, published in 1922, revealed modern European notions of law, sovereignty, and the state as thinly disguised transpositions of theological concepts, smuggling the sacred into what purported to be secular institutions.

Following Berdyaev and Schmitt, countless observers have linked Bolshevik practices to alleged Christian precedents. *Samokritika* (self-criticism) sessions have been likened to Christian confession, the project of building socialism to a crusade, communism's "radiant future" to the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Lenin cult to the veneration of saints. Herbert Marcuse claimed that in the USSR, Marxism stood in for Weber's Protestant ethic, cultivating forms of self-discipline essential for a modern industrial economy. Most of these analogies are merely associative, suggesting ways of thinking about Bolshevism without claiming (let alone demonstrating) lineal descent from Christianity. All of them face significant challenges. Wouldn't one have to posit an epidemic of false

consciousness to account for so much religiosity on the part of the militantly antireligious Bolsheviks? Why do some analogies refer to quintessentially Catholic practices and others to quintessentially Protestant or Russian Orthodox ones? How can any of them account for the motives of the many Jewish party members?

Bolsheviks are by no means the only moderns to be subjected to the secularization thesis. While the first Soviet officials were settling into their apartments in the House of Government, the American historian Carl Becker was completing his boldly contrarian *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, in which he argued that the Enlightenment had dethroned Christianity only to reinstate it "with more up-to-date materials." A generation later, M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* claimed much the same for Romanticism.

Slezkine's version of the secularization thesis is simultaneously more specific and much broader. In their thinking and their interactions with one another, on the one hand, Bolsheviks displayed the particular form of religious fervor associated with millenarian sects, namely the desire to eradicate "private property and the family as the most powerful and mutually reinforcing sources of inequality," thereby fashioning, once and for all, a "simple, fraternal society organized around common beliefs, possessions, and sexual partners (or sexual abstinence)." Millenarian sects with apocalyptic dreams, on the other hand, have appeared in many different religions and historical eras. Indeed, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism (to name a few) are, according to Slezkine, "institutionalized embodiments of unfulfilled millenarian prophecies," churches that sought to routinize the teachings, if not all the practices, of the rebellious sects that gave birth to them.

Not only is apocalyptic millenarianism a type of belief and a way of life found in all major religions, Slezkine claims, it is

also the template for all modern revolutions. Before the Bolsheviks there was the Russian intelligentsia, to be a member of which meant "being religious about being secular; asking 'the accursed questions' over lunch and dinner; falling deeper and deeper into doubt and confusion as a matter of principle; and feeling both chosen and damned." Before them were the Jacobins ("an Age of Reason revival") and before them the Puritans ("a Christian revival"):

> Both were defeated by the non-arrival of a New Jerusalem ("liberty") and the return of old regimes ("tyranny"), but both won in the long run by producing liberalism, the routinized version of godliness and virtue. The inquisitorial zeal and millenarian excitement were gone, but mutual surveillance, ostentatious self-control, universal participation, and ceaseless activism remained as virtues in their own right and essential prerequisites for democratic rule (the reduction of individual wills to a manageable uniformity of opinion)…. The expectation of imminent happiness was replaced by its endless pursuit.

In the nineteenth century, a new breed of prophets—foremost among them Marx—"left Jesus out altogether without feeling compelled to change the plot. Providence had become history, progress, evolution, revolution, transcendence, laws of nature, or positive change, but the outcome remained the same." Weber was wrong: the modern world is not disenchanted (even if secularists pretend otherwise) but a continuation of Christianity by other means. Whether liberal, communist, fascist, or authoritarian, every polity relies to one degree or another on the persistence of charismatic authority and the (usually disguised) theological legitimation of political power.

In the ongoing debate about secularization, as should be clear by now, Slezkine has staked out a maximalist position: politics is incapable of divorcing itself from the sacred, and history consists of endlessly recurring salvation projects. The Bolsheviks, following Marx's example, made sense of their

unfolding revolutionary drama via French archetypes: they were the new Jacobins, the Mensheviks were the hated Girondins, and everyone anxiously awaited a Russian Vendée and a Russian Thermidor.

Slezkine does them one better. Having concluded that millenarianism is the true interpretive key, he applies his own rebranding: capitalism is "Babylon," the Bolsheviks are "the preachers," Marxism-Leninism is "the faith," agitation and propaganda are called "missionary work," and the end of tsarist Russia becomes "the end of the world." The revolution is "the flood," enlightenment is renamed "conversion." The New Economic Policy, Lenin's tactical retreat following the civil war, is "The Great Disappointment," while Stalin's revolution from above is christened "the Second Coming" and his Great Terror, "the Last Judgment."

By rhetorically collapsing the distinction between Bolsheviks and their biblical predecessors, *The House of Government* signals its ultimate aim: to grasp the meaning of the Russian Revolution *sub specie aeternitatis*, to suggest an abiding element in human history, something very old of which we have not freed and may never free ourselves, precisely because we are human.

There is something undeniably intoxicating about such world-historical narratives, with their deep structure and eternal recurrences. But they have their frustrations too. "What man appears to be *sub specie aeternitatis*," Carl Jung wrote, "can only be expressed by way of myth." Slezkine's saga of apocalyptic millenarianism provides a powerful way of knowing the Bolsheviks, placing them in an almost mythic framework of significance. When it comes to actually explaining the October revolution, however, or Stalin's revolution from above, or the Great Terror (aka the Flood, the Second Coming, and the Last Judgment), the saga seems to

offer little beyond the claim that the Bolsheviks were millenarians, and this is what millenarians do.

Nor does it account for the radically different outcomes of various millenarian movements—why some died as sects, others managed to routinize themselves into churches, but the Bolsheviks alone "found themselves firmly in charge of Babylon while still expecting the millennium in their lifetimes." Not all instances of political fervor, even utopian fervor, qualify as millenarian, and there's an important difference between believing in the possibility of progress and believing in its inevitability or necessity. Liberalism, communism, and fascism may indeed have certain millenarian instincts in common, but like a haircut and a beheading, the outcome is hardly "the same."

One aspect of the Russian Revolution for which *The House of Government* does offer an explicit explanation is its demise. Most histories of the Soviet Union emphasize the failure of the command economy to keep up with its capitalist rivals. Slezkine, however, is not terribly interested in economics. In his account, the Soviet experiment failed, half a century before the country's actual collapse, because it neglected to drain the oldest, most persistent swamp of all—the family.

In between their epic labors at the great construction site of socialism, residents of the House of Government "were settling into their new apartments and setting up house in familiar ways," unable to transcend the "hen-and-rooster problems" of marriage and domestic life. Many of them expressed unease at the prospect of sinking into the traditional bonds of kinship and procreation. "I am afraid I might turn into a bourgeois," worried the writer Aleksandr Serafimovich (Apt. 82) to a friend. "In order to resist such a transformation, I have been spitting into all the corners and onto the floor, blowing my nose, and lying in bed with my shoes on and hair uncombed. It seems to be helping."

But it wasn't. No one really knew what a communist family should be, or how to transform relations between parents and children, or how to harness erotic attachments to the requirements of revolution. Bolsheviks were known to give their children names such as "Vladlen" (Vladimir Lenin), "Mezhenda" (International Women's Day), and "Vsemir" (worldwide revolution). But naming was easy compared to living. The Soviet state went to great lengths to inculcate revolutionary values in schools and workplaces, but not at home. It never devised resonant communist rituals to mark birth, marriage, and death. The party ideologist Aron Solts (Apt. 393) claimed that "the family of a Communist must be a prototype of a small Communist cell…, a collectivity of comrades in which one lives in the family the same way as outside the family."

In that case, why bother with families at all? Neither Solts nor anyone else had a convincing answer. Sects, Slezkine notes, "are about brotherhood (and, as an afterthought, sisterhood), not about parents and children. This is why most end-of-the-world scenarios promise 'all these things' within one generation…, and all millenarian sects, in their militant phase, attempt to reform marriage or abolish it altogether (by decreeing celibacy or promiscuity)."

Unable or unwilling to abolish the family, Bolsheviks proved incapable of reproducing themselves. For Slezkine, this is cause for celebrating the resilience of family ties under the onslaught of Stalin's social engineering. It's worth asking, though, why the same Bolsheviks who willingly deported or exterminated millions of class enemies as remnants of capitalism balked at similarly radical measures against the bourgeois institution of the family. Could it be that they, especially the men among them, realized that by doing so they stood to lose much more than their chains?

Whatever the case, the children they raised in the House of Government became loyal Soviet citizens but not

millenarians. Their deepest ties were to their parents (many of whom, as Slezkine shows with novelistic detail, were seized from their apartments and shot during the Great Terror) and to Pushkin and Tolstoy—not to Marx and Lenin. Instead of devouring its children, he concludes, the Russian Revolution was devoured by the children of the revolutionaries. As Tolstoy's friend Nikolai Strakhov wrote about the character Bazarov, the proto-Bolshevik at the heart of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (another work about family), "The love affair takes place against his iron will; life, which he had thought he would rule, catches him in its huge wave."

Yuri Slezkine, Mercurian par excellence, has caught an extraordinary set of lives in this book. Few historians, dead or alive, have managed to combine so spectacularly the gifts of storyteller and scholar.

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* *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer 1994). ↩

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