

History 344

Discussion of April 17

1. Figes writes that “most people wanted nothing to do with the civil war: they kept their heads down and tried to remain neutral” (680). But the reds still had the advantage in terms of “political organization and mass mobilization.” Explain.
2. The Bolshevik Party in power was a “ruling class,” says Figes, and “Joining the party after 1917 was like joining the nobility” (682). Is this an apt or simplistic comparison? What privileges did party members enjoy?
3. Figes writes successively about the ruling party’s problems of corruption, bureaucratization, cronyism, and new members who were “far more submissive than the old ones” (682-692). How are these problems of the new regime linked? How does Lenin try to solve them? (693)
4. Why does tsarist general Brusilov join the Bolsheviks? (696-697). What does his move symbolize and represent?
5. Explain the significance of “National Bolshevism” (699).
6. How do the Bolsheviks put together most of the territory of the former empire? How is red conquest combined with “relative cultural autonomy” for non-Russian regions? (708).
7. What are the main features of war communism? How much is created by Russian wartime conditions and how much by utopian goals and ideas? What is its legacy for the new regime?
8. What does the economic and social system created by the Bolsheviks during the civil war (“war communism”) have to do with Marxism, socialism, or pre-1917 Bolshevism?
9. In this week’s selection from *Red Cavalry* is the entry “Salt” (109-12). Interpret the meaning of the execution of the woman in this story and its formulation as a letter to “comrade editor.” Can it be read, along with other parts of *Babel*, of revealing attitudes and actions toward women on the part of the revolutionary soliders of the Red Army?
10. One of the main topics of *Babel*’s work is antisemitism and the Jews of the former Pale during the Civil War—for example, in the last assigned section, “The Rabbi’s Son” (pp. 167-169). Discuss what the book has to say about these topics, including in this last story.
11. What do we learn about the narrator in *Red Cavalry*? What role does he play in the book?
12. On pp. 307-313 of *Red Cavalry* there is a chronology of Isaac Babel’s life and career compiled by the literary scholar Gregory Freidin. Note that *Red Cavalry* was published in 1926. What can you deduce from the facts of his life about Babel’s relationship with Bolshevism and the Soviet regime?