Episode 1,467: The Evils of the Russian Revolution

Guest: Brion McClanahan

WOODS: All right, so it's the last day Brion McClanahan Week, so we decided to do something that no one's expecting. And no, we're not going to talk about music, because I don't want to embarrass you by having your musical tastes become known. So instead —

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing]

WOODS: How'd you like that? See, by the end of the week, I'm just ready to say hang it up and go relax for the weekend. But instead we're going to talk about a topic that I think will surprise people, because you were saying to me at one point, if I were to tell people my favorite period of history, let's say up until you came to decide that it was the founding period, they would probably be surprised. So I said, what was it?

MCCLANAHAN: And what was your answer? Well, my answer was the Russian Revolution. It's not something — now, people will say, well, it's probably the war. No, I mean, I like the war, but when I first got interested in history, I was a young, wee lad. Of course, I talked about Williamsburg in the first episode of this week, but then there was a teacher I had in eighth grade, and he showed us this film in class. And this is a time when you would go and get the film projector, so you have the big reels on there. You'd show up in class, and you're, "Yeah, we've got film today." And the film was *Nicholas and Alexandra*, and he showed the last part of the film, and that got me hooked on the Russian Revolution.

I just could not read enough about this thing, because the last part of the film, of course, is the assassination of the Tsar and his wife and his family. And it's such a great cinematography. It's so good. The film came out in 1971. And you know what's going to happen, but you're still cringing when it does, because it's so powerfully done. And I thought, wow, I mean, there's something to these commies out there. These guys are terrible.

And so of course, this is still in the period of the Cold War, it's right around the time when we had films like *Red Dawn* and *Rocky IV* and all that stuff. So I was into that, too. It's like, yeah, Rocky IV, go punch a commie. And so I thought this stuff was just great. I really wanted to learn more about the Russian Revolution, where it came from, why it's important. You have these last days of the Tsar, this last aristocracy, in so many ways, this real aristocracy in Russia. And I find it fascinating, and I think that if more people knew about that period, they would absolutely love — it's tragic. It's got everything. It's got every element you can think of in a really good story. It's all encompassed in that Russian Revolution. So I know you like it, too, and I just find it fascinating.

WOODS: I do. I've done an episode or two on it, and the details of it are fascinating to me. The person who most influenced the way I think about it — I guess there would be to. One is Richard Pipes, who was an advisor to Reagan, and the other — because he wrote a multi-volume series on the years leading up to the revolution and then the revolution itself and then the aftermath. And then he condensed that down into a single volume for people who just haven't got the time to do that, and I always recommend this one, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* is what it's called. I always recommend that book. In fact, let me jot that down to make sure I link to it at TomWoods.com/1467. So we'll link to that. It's great book> It reads like fiction, so you're really absorbed by it.

But the other person would be the person who taught it to me in college, and that was Vladimir Brovkin, who's not there anymore. But he was one of the Russian Jews who was allowed to emigrate to the US under the special deal that was reached in the 1970s, and he was a scholar of the Mensheviks, which were the other Marxists who were not in, let's say, Lenin's favor. And so he wrote a book called *The Mensheviks After October,* like what happened to these people after the Russian Revolution? Perfectly good question. But he was extremely anti-Soviet. I mean, extremely. He even said that at Yalta, the West sold out Eastern Europe to the communists. I mean, he was shouting this from the podium in the classroom. So he wasn't making any pretense at impartiality on that sort of stuff.

And then he came in one day and said, "Today, I am going to refute what I call the 'good Lenin, bad Stalin' myth that we have," that Lenin was good and idealistic and there were a lot of great things that happened, and then mysteriously, Stalin, whom he had known very well, took over this thing and everything became terrible. So it doesn't occur to them, first of all — I mean, the point that he wanted to make was that Lenin was a terrible person, too, but even if Lenin had been a great person, the fact that he presides over a system that could be so easily turned into what Stalin made it should say something about him, just even that.

MCCLANAHAN: Right.

WOODS: So what is it in particular that you love about this? Although if you want to comment on that, feel free.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, no, first of all, when you say Lenin, anybody that thinks that Lenin was a good — I mean, you have the Cheka, you have the Red Terror, which is going on during the civil war. I mean, there's all kinds of things to look at that Lenin was doing that were just despicable. I mean, even the fact that the family was assassinated on the order of the Politburo. I mean, this came from the top down. And now, for years, they tried to sell that off. *No, no, no, we didn't have any role*. But they did. I mean, everyone knows now that that came from the top. It came from Lenin to kill the family.

And I think it's the tragedy of the entire thing, the missteps. You can certainly have sympathy with people in the period leading up to the revolution and some of the things, Bloody Sunday and some of those activities that went on that were certainly awful. And of course, the Russo-Japanese War, fighting over Korea. I mean, how ridiculous is that? And people were wondering about it. *Where is where the heck is Korea?* I mean, you've got this peninsula, who cares about that if you're over in Moscow? Where the heck is Korea? Who cares? So you certainly have that part of it. I mean, you've got maybe this little antiwar undertone going there. Of course, you have the abuse of power from the central authority. So you can certainly sympathize with a powder keg brewing in Russia. And then of course, without the

safety valve in a legislature, though they were given one eventually, and then of course, Nicholas shut it down.

Then there's the period leading up to that. You have the other tsars before Nicholas, and I like that, too. You've got the slogan of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism," this whole thing that we're going to be Russians and good Russians, and we're going to have a strong central government. And you have the Montesquieu position: can a legislature work in a in a country like Russia?

The tragedy of everything, where you have the family simply whisked away and then eventually assassinated the way they were. I just find all of that so interesting. And the details of how that happened. I mentioned the film. In the film that I think everyone should see, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, the last part of the film, the family, as we know, was sent down to a room in the home that they were being sequestered in, and they were shot to death against a wall. And I'm sure a lot of people have seen the picture of that. But in the film, they do it perfectly, and they don't have everyone that was actually there at the time. They have it scaled down for the film. But while they're sitting there, there's no sound in the room except the clock ticking on the wall. That's it. They're looking at each other, the doors open and there's no sound when the doors open, there's no screams. It's just the clock ticking on the wall, like the last seconds of their life ticking away. It's so powerful. And I think that part of it too always attracted me to the revolution.

Of course, then the aftermath. I mean, what happened with the creation of the Soviet Union and how that affected foreign policy for decades in the United States in general and other parts of the world. You have the communist revolution spreading around the world and how important that was. So there's just so many things to like, as far as from a historical standpoint, and looking at cause and effect in modern politics and history.

WOODS: Also, just watching the steps by which the revolution goes from at least plausibly something that could benefit people, which is how they portrayed themselves — they did not say we're going to establish a one-party, totalitarian state that's going to do the — obviously, they didn't say that. But to watch that unfold, step by step, that there was a legislative assembly that was elected, that Lenin had accused the previous government of not ever intending to hold the elections. And of course, that's pretty rich of him to say that. So they do actually hold it, and the Bolsheviks don't win a majority, so it's allowed to meet for like ten minutes, and then they shut it down and that's the end of it.

And to watch the way it happened, the way it unfolded, the war on the churches that takes place. It's interesting; obviously, Catholics are in a minority in orthodox Russia, but there was a war on the Catholic Church, where the valuables like the chalices and other precious metal items in the churches were in the sights of Lenin, because he was saying that we need to take these things and melt them down and sell them to get money for famine relief, because the churches are enemies of the people and we need to take their valuables. And there were stories of priests trying to bar the door so that the valuables couldn't be taken, and you have photographs of Russian soldiers walking out, holding statues and stuff, taking them from the churches. But Lenin isn't going to spend this for famine relief. The famine relief will come from Herbert Hoover in the West. He's going to spend that on weapons and stuff. I mean, it's straight out of an Orwell novel.

My favorite thing, by the way, that's in the Richard Pipes book is they tried to really, really make the culture be a culture of the working man. And so instead of the old-fashioned orchestra with the wind instruments and the string instruments, instead, they would have orchestral productions of factory whistles and factory noises. And so they tried to do this, but the problem was, no one could tell what the hell music it was.

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing]

WOODS: I mean, it was that stupid. It was really that ideologically bizarre, what was going on.

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing] Yeah, I mean, you can't make this stuff up. But of course, it all fits, and I would say that if you look at Western civilization, it all goes back to the French Revolution. It all fits with that, because it was happening with the French Revolution. We're going to radically restructure everything. The church is going to be now, in France it was the church of reason, right? And then, of course, in Russia, the churches become the museum of atheism, so you've got to have that. But I think it all makes sense. We're going to restructure society entirely.

And the thing I love about it is that, when people talk about these things today, it's all, *Oh, that's just slippery slope analogy. It's never going to happen here. That can't happen in the United States, because we're just so against communism, none of that stuff would happen.* Are you sure? I mean, you look at what's going on in the arts and other things, you can see that there are strains of this in the United States, and it all ties back to that that revolutionary period.

But when you talk about Lenin marching off with these with gold, I mean, it was essentially a Roman policy: enrich the soldiers and scorn all others. I mean, that was the point of the Roman Empire by the time you get to the Severan dynasty. So it's all totalitarianism. I think that it's just a modern manifestation of it. And it's fascinating, as you said, to see how this stuff goes from incremental change, and then just — I mean, it's just overblown. Everything just gets blown up, and then you have this horrible government that nobody knows what to do with. And it takes 80 years or so for it to all fall apart.

WOODS: There are some really, really blood-curdling quotations from Lenin that you can find, where somebody says — I forget which person it was who was speaking to him, but there was some institution within the government or some agency, and it was like the Commissariat for — blah, blah, blah, blah. But basically, its purpose was to execute dissidents. And so an advisor of some sort said to Lenin, we should call it the Commissariat for Social Extermination. And Lenin said, yeah, we should, but obviously we can't [laughing]. I mean, just very, very blunt about all this.

And of course, the rage he has, he's like Marx in this respect, of anyone who disagrees with him, even marginally. Most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Lenin half his opponents, and he would denounce them just the way Marx did. I mean, Marx spent so much of his time, instead of spending his early years writing his systematic treatise, he spends it responding to complete nobodies. It's like he's so hypersensitive, he has to respond even to a complete nobody whose tract against Marxism nobody read or who was disagreeing with him 10%. And so he'll smash these things. Lenin was very much the same way. I mean, he cannot bear criticism. And it's not just that, well, we have an honorable disagreement; it's

that these are just our absolute enemies and they need to be wiped out. It's just blood-curdling.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, when you look at ideology — and I think this is something that's important too, and why I like the Russian Revolution: because of the interest in ideology and how dangerous ideology can actually be. And one of the things we were talking about this week was where do I fit politically, and one of the things that I've always thought was dangerous is ideology in general. I'm not an ideologue. I simply like tradition. I like the things that have come before, and we have examples. So you look at examples, and you say, okay, show me where — a lefty. You talk to the lefties, the progressives or the communists. Show me where this thing has actually ever worked out well. Is there any example, anywhere? And of course, they all say, "Well, what about Scandinavia?" Well, as you've pointed out many times, that doesn't even work there. But show me where this ideology that you have actually works, an example in practice, and we can talk about it. But they can't.

And so it always has to go to that point where you start really oppressing people or abusing people to get what you want. And I think that's one of the lasting effects of the Russian Revolution. And we should be looking at that, but we don't. So if we could get anything out of it, it would be the danger of ideology in politics and why tradition should be much more important when we're talking about things and ideas in society. I mean, this is what Patrick Henry said: "Experience is my only guide" — or I'm sorry, John Dickinson: "Experience is my only guide. Reason may mislead us." Or Patrick Henry in his *Illusion of Hope*, when he pointed out and he said, "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is experience." So we have experienced versus Russia, which is ideology, which is awful. And I mean, that's always been a draw to me, as well.

WOODS: You could say, though, that maybe the problems in Russia were just so entrenched that you couldn't have an evolutionary Burkean solution; you needed some kind of dramatic rupture. Maybe somebody could say that.

MCCLANAHAN: Possibly. But I mean, look, there was attempt at reform before Nicholas II, and the idiots blew them up. Nicholas' grandfather was trying to institute a duma, and he was trying to do things, and they blew him up on a bridge. I mean, so this is the ideologues working against themselves. Ultimately they're going to get what they want, but this is where you could have had a solution. It was there. But when you get ideology and you become so blinded by, well, you have to maybe have an incremental change here and there, it creates that kind of environment. So I think that Russia, maybe it took something like that, but are we going to — I find that to be hard to believe that something couldn't have been done to make it better .

Look, Nicholas was willing to advocate and have a constitutional system. We had that under the Mensheviks for a time. The Mensheviks made the mistake of keeping World War I going. If they didn't — this is where we get back to war again, too. If there is no World War I, the way it was working, then I think the Russian Revolution never happens. So war is a disaster. That's the other part of this thing that I like about it, too. And maybe that duma with the Mensheviks in charge would have be able to keep the Bolsheviks at bay and not allow them to take power. I don't know. I mean, it's a what-if that we'll never know.

WOODS: It's interesting that Edmund Burke talks about the problems with the French Revolution and having been a radical break instead of an organic evolution from the past, and

he contrasts that with the history of his own country. But it's like he — what, was there no English Civil War where the king was executed? There's a small detail [laughing].

MCCLANAHAN: Well, sure, but at the end of the day, what happens, though? That government only lasts for a very brief time, and then it's booted out again, because the people, they wanted to be able to dance —

WOODS: Yeah, that's true.

MCCLANAHAN: They wanted to be able to dance and listen to music, and they didn't like the no-fun Puritans now controlling everything in society. So I think that in that way, you had that reaction to it, that conservative reaction, and they got rid of those people, and you went back to what it was before. But of course, then you had the Bloodless Revolution in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which did change things. So it's possible. I don't know. I mean, this could be a big topic we could talk about: can you have very change without bloodshed?

WOODS: Very hard. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And bloodshed, you just never know where it's going to take you. Now, we're getting to the end of Brion McClanahan Week, and I haven't really asked you — even though we did do an episode about you, I haven't really asked you to just flat-out describe your politics, because you are not — you don't come out and say, I'm a libertarian, I'm a conservative, I'm a this-or-that. You seem like somebody who just believes in the system established by the framers, and you'll take that where it takes you. But I am curious, because apparently even some of your own listeners sometimes have trouble trying to pin you down on exactly what and who you are, so how would you describe your politics?

MCCLANAHAN: Well, I used to say — and actually this is something I try to do on purpose, because I don't want to be pigeonholed one way or another. I like to have some intellectual flexibility. It's not that I don't believe in things. It's just that I'm not someone who — I like to talk about ideas. But I have always said that I'm an American traditionalist, and I remember years ago, I said that and Gutzman piped in. "What the heck does that mean?" as Kevin Gutzman likes to [laughing].

WOODS: Yeah, that's Kevin right there.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, "What the heck does that mean?" So I believe, as you said, in the tradition that was established with federalism. I do believe in republicanism, with a lowercase R. And that would be how I would describe myself. I don't like the term paleoconservative, because I don't think it really fits me all the time. I don't like the term paleolibertarian, because I don't think it fits me all the time either. I do you think there is a necessity of state action at times, so I'm not an anarchist. But I'm someone who certainly believes in the founding tradition of decentralization, of federalism, and of the necessity of communities to be able to direct their own affairs. So I believe in, whatever tradition you have in your local area, you can go with that. As far as my area, I mean, I might want some things that people wouldn't want somewhere else. But that's for my local community to decide. And I'm not an imperialist, either culturally, politically, or militarily. I think that we should live and let live. I mean, if I had to put it — we should live and let live. And that way, I think that we would all get along so much better. It's just that it seems like people just can't do that.

WOODS: As we finish Brion McClanahan Week, let's take a little time for you to recommend for people the books you would be very happy if everybody read. Maybe three or four books that would thrill you if people actually read them.

MCCLANAHAN: Wow. If everybody read through them. Wow, that's a very good question.

WOODS: Now, just for the sake of it, let's leave aside McClanahan and Woods books.

MCCLANAHAN: Right. I wasn't going to —

WOODS: We'll take that for granted.

MCCLANAHAN: I mean, yeah, that's for granted, so I won't list that. Well, if we're going to different periods, let's say we're going to the middle American period, because people want to listen to me for that. So I would recommend they read Avery Craven's *The Coming of the Civil War*. Have you ever read Craven? Have you ever read that book, Tom?

WOODS: I'm sorry to say I haven't. I've always meant to.

MCCLANAHAN: Okay, well, that's okay. It's such a fantastic — well, first of all, Craven is from the Blundering Generation school, so he thought that all these people just — we could have avoided the war if just cooler heads had prevailed. There's actually a theory — I don't know if you've heard this — but if William Seward had been elected over Lincoln, we wouldn't have had the war. Have you ever heard this? I believe there's a book on this now. I can't remember the title of it. But Seward would have avoided the war, because he was a known quantity, and he would have been able to work with the South and maybe even gotten the Union back. So that's interesting.

But Craven is of this idea — first of all, he has one of my favorite lines in any history book I've ever read about the United States. It's "The 19th century was the era of sweaty people." I love that line, because you just think about it. I mean, we were talking about air conditioning. How hard these people worked and no matter where you were, how hard it was. And I think the book is fantastic. It gets into this idea of what really caused the war. He's not pro-South; he's not pro-North. He's very interested in a very objective look at what's going on. And I find that book great.

Albion's Seed by David Hackett Fischer, everyone should read that book.

WOODS: I did read that one.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, when you look at American history, colonial history, it's a cultural history, so again, it's not one of these that if you're into wars and politics, it's not that. But it describes how these four British folkways were so different from each other in British North America, and how you had the Puritans and the Quakers in the north, and you had these Cavaliers and Celts in the south, and how even then, they didn't see eye to eye on virtually anything. And so this is why federalism would have worked, because — and they all mentioned it. We can't have a central government because we have all these different cultures and things, and they talked about this incessantly. And so we don't need a central authority to tell

the Cavaliers telling the Puritans how to live, and vice versa. It just doesn't need to happen. So I find that book fascinating.

Gosh, let's see, another one, if I could just pick one.

WOODS: I can give you a minute to think.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, I think one that would be good if you're interested in the South, Bradford's *Remembering Who We Are*, which is a collection of essays, it's about Southern conservatism and just the South in general. Bradford is fantastic. If you can read anything by Mel Bradford, I would recommend it. We haven't talked about Mel Bradford, but it's very good. Richard Weaver's *A Southern Tradition at Bay* is very good.

WOODS: That's a great book.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, and the thing about Weaver: he's critical of the South at times. He's not necessarily someone who's saying the South is always right. He's critical when he needs to be, and I think that's good. That's four. Let's see —

WOODS: By the way, when I read that book, it made me feel bad about myself, because that was his PhD dissertation. It reads like a book that took 40 years of learning to put together.

MCCLANAHAN: Right.

WOODS: And I thought, geez, what hope is there for me? My dissertation is a piece of crap compared to this.

MCCLANAHAN: [laughing] Yeah, I know. Mine's a political biography of James Bayard, and I mean, it's just nowhere near as good. It's just citing letters and everything. And Richard Weaver writes this tremendous, almost a manifesto, for his dissertation. It's amazing.

WOODS: It's like he's read everything, yeah.

MCCLANAHAN: Yah, it's amazing. Well, those four would be very good, if you just wanted to read something and just go, okay, we're going to start there. Anything by Forrest McDonald. In fact, one of my favorite Forrest McDonald books is his book, it's very short, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*. Here's a Hamiltonian writing a book on Thomas Jefferson, and he does an awesome job with it. I mean, of course he's Forest McDonald, but he even says at the beginning: I'm a Hamiltonian; I don't really like Jefferson. But he wrote a very nice history of Jefferson's presidency. It's very good.

WOODS: Wow. I didn't know that. I knew he'd written the book, but I assumed it was critical.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, he's critical, but he's not overly critical. So it's good, and I find it a good just introduction to Jefferson's presidency. It's a quick read. It's not hard to get through, and it's fantastic. So that would be — we could talk about this for a while. You put me on the spot there.

WOODS: No, no, look, that's great. Look, you gave me five books. That's more than I asked for. That's fine.

MCCLANAHAN: Okay, yeah —

WOODS: No need to reproach yourself here.

MCCLANAHAN: Yeah, oh, one more, if you had to pick it from a mainstream historian, James McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades*. If you're interested in the war — and of course, again, I'm assuming, you know, the War for Southern Independence, as I like to call it. If you're interested in that war, then that book gets into what those men on both sides were fighting for, and you find that it's not necessarily what you think. And this is James McPherson, who is not by any means a pro-Southern historian mean. He really doesn't like the South. But he had to follow the evidence, and he said, look, I can't find — there are Southerners who fought for slavery, but most of them did not. They were fighting for the Founding Fathers; they were fighting for liberty; they were fighting for the Constitution. These are the things they talked about. So I can't find where you have this overarching thing where it's just slavery, slavery, and slavery. And this is James McPherson. It's not like it's somebody on the South writing about this. This is as mainstream as you can get when it comes to the war, who's coming to those conclusions. So I'd recommend that one, too.

WOODS: All right, we're going to have all these listed at TomWoods.com/1467. Remember, *The Brion McClanahan Show* and all things Brion McClanahan, you can find out about at BrionMcClanahan.com. That's Brion with an O. I'll link to all the Brion stuff at TomWoods.com/1467, including his outstanding McClanahan Academy, where you're going to learn an awful lot of stuff you were not going to learn otherwise, and you can take 25% off with coupon code WOODS. At this point, anything you see that has a coupon code window, you might as well try WOODS. You never know. Maybe I advertised for them at one time or another. You might as well try WOODS. It can't hurt. And it works for the McClanahan Academy, too.

Well, listen, Brion, you just spent five days with my listening audience and me, and I think it's been great, a lot of fun. But it's a major time commitment for you. Even during the summer, you're always at work and you're a busy guy, and we're all grateful to you for doing this. Thanks so much.

MCCLANAHAN: Well, Tom, I appreciate you having me on for the whole week. It's really been fun. So I hope your listeners got something out of it, and they can head on over to *The Brion McClanahan Show*. I'd love to see them over there.