The Orality of the Russian Revolution

During a revolution, communication becomes a matter of political life and death, as the contending forces struggle to gain legitimacy by putting across their versions of fast-moving and confusing events. By early 1917, the baleful consequences of communication failure had been laid bare by the fate of the Romanovs, whose authority had plummeted during the war due to scurrilous rumours and ineffectual PR. This lecture will investigate how the political actors of 1917 attempted to put their message across. It will focus on one particular aspect of the subject: public speaking. For a crucial period this may well have been the most important channel of revolutionary communication: oratory and spoken agitation were uniquely fitted for the demands of the moment, given the still weak literacy of the population, the breakdown of other communication networks, and the role of face-to-face communication in building trust. Finally, the lecture will inquire into the longer-term trajectory of political communication in Russia: what, by the end of the revolution and civil war, did it mean to ‘speak Bolshevik’?