

# The Russian Revolution Ninety Years After

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THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION of 1917 in Russia was the most influential political event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But since history is written by the victors, it is not well known that October was the opening shot of a vast and powerful challenge to capitalism that swept the industrial world and had strong echoes in colonial countries. Between 1918 and 1921 union membership and days lost in strikes everywhere reached new heights, while the ranks of the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement swelled.

Revolutions, in which the working class was the moving force, occurred in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Finland. Revolutionary situations (that is, the real, immediate potential of revolution) arose in Italy and parts of France and Poland. In a memorandum to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the British Prime Minister wrote: "The whole of Europe is in a revolutionary mood. The workers have a deep feeling of dissatisfaction with conditions of life as they existed before the war; they are full of anger and indignation. The whole of the existing social, political and economic order is being called into question by the mass of people from one end of Europe to the other." [1]

The United States also participated in the labor upsurge. In the years 1916-1920, union membership doubled to five million. Over four million workers, an incredible 20% of the labor force, struck in 1919. That same year 365,000 steelworkers staged the biggest strike the country had ever seen, and a general strike shut down Seattle. [2]

Canada also experienced a massive strike wave, with several city-wide general strikes. Most of the strikers went out in solidarity with other workers, a sure sign of radicalization.

The Prime Minister of the day later recalled: "In some cities there was a deliberate attempt to overthrow the existing organization of the Government and to supersede it by crude, fantastic methods founded upon absurd conceptions of what had been accomplished in Russia. It became necessary in some communities to repress revolutionary methods with a stern hand, and from this I did not shrink." [3] In Canada the Winnipeg general strike became a small-scale civil war, with the federal government arming a bourgeois militia after the police joined the strikers.

But everywhere, except in Russia, the revolutionary wave was beaten back. [4] This failure was at the root of the subsequent rise of fascism (an anti-worker, anti-socialist movement that everywhere enjoyed the sympathy of the bourgeoisie. [5] and often its material support) as well as of Stalinist totalitarianism. Rosa Luxemburg, leader of Germany's revolutionary socialists, assassinated in January 1919 by proto-fascist troops, correctly assessed the alternatives that faced humanity as "socialism or barbarism."

But if the relation between the failure of the revolutionary wave in the West and the rise of fascism

is quite clear, the link with the rise of Stalinism is less well understood.

## **Two Revolutions**

Russia had two revolutions in 1917, one in February and the other in October. In overthrowing the monarchy and its totalitarian regime [6] in February 1917, the popular masses had no intention of challenging capitalism. This explains why they allowed the liberals, the main party of the propertied classes (that is, the capitalists and nobility), to form the provisional government.

The workers' and peasants' goals were: a democratic republic, agrarian reform (confiscation of the aristocracy's land and its free distribution to the peasants), renunciation of Russia's imperialist war aims in favour of an active, democratic peace policy, and the eight-hour workday.

The various socialist parties, including a majority of Bolsheviks, supported the liberal government. However, Lenin's return to Russia at the start of April soon turned the Bolshevik party around. If he was able to do this so quickly, it was because the party's overwhelmingly working-class rank-and-file and middle-level leadership had long since concluded from past experience that the propertied classes were opposed to democracy and strongly supported Russian imperialism. According to this view, which the Bolshevik leadership temporarily abandoned in the joyful days of apparent national unity that followed the February revolution, the revolution could win only if it was led by a government of workers and peasants and in opposition to the propertied classes.

What really was new in Lenin's position in April 1917 (summarized in his famous "April Theses"), at least as far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, was that he now called for a socialist revolution in Russia. He had arrived at this position sometime in 1915, based on his analysis of the world war and the possibilities for revolution that it opened in the warring countries. But in fact, Trotsky, among others on the left wing of Russian socialism, [7] had even earlier concluded a revolution in Russia, whatever its initial goals, could only win if it overthrew capitalism.

From the end of April 1917, the Bolsheviks called for the formation of a government of soviets, councils which the workers and soldiers (the latter being overwhelmingly peasants) had elected in the course of the February Revolution. This would be an exclusively popular government that disenfranchised the propertied classes.

This position at first received little popular support. It was seen as unnecessarily alienating the propertied classes, who in February seemed to have rallied to the revolution. It would provoke a civil war that no one wanted. (Petrograd's metalworkers, the radical core of the labour movement, were a notable exception. Here, in Russia's capital, some district soviets demanded soviet power during the February Revolution itself.)

But after eight months of inaction and sabotage on the part of the liberal government and in face of the growing threat of a counterrevolutionary military coup aided by a lockout by the industrialists, the correctness of the Bolshevik position became evident to the popular masses. Everywhere they demanded the immediate transfer of power to the soviets. This was done on October 25, or November 7 by the Western Julian calendar, by armed insurrection but with a minimum of bloodshed.

From that point of view, the October Revolution should be seen as an act of defense of the democratic revolution of February against the immediate threat of counterrevolution. But since this second revolution was directed against the propertied classes, it necessarily unleashed an anti-capitalist dynamic. At the same time, October was more than merely an act of defense. The soviets

took power in the hope of inspiring the popular classes in the West to follow Russia's example. This was not simply an expression of internationalist idealism. It was seen as a fundamental condition of the revolution's survival.

## **Hope of World Revolution**

As Marxists, the Bolsheviks considered that Russia, a very poor, mostly peasant country, lacked the material and political conditions for socialism. Russia needed the support of developed socialist countries in the West to carry through a socialist transformation. But there were other, much more immediate problems that could not find their solution without the support of revolutions in the West.

To begin with, the capitalist states would never accept a socialist revolution in Russia. And, in fact, all the industrial countries (and some non-industrial) sent troops against the soviets and/or financed the indigenous counterrevolutionary forces. They also erected an economic and diplomatic blockade against the soviet state.

The other immediate problem was that the peasantry, about 85% of the population, would support the Bolsheviks insofar as they carried out the land reform and took Russia out of the imperialist war, but as a class the peasants were not spontaneously collectivist. Once the land was distributed, they would turn against the workers, who would be forced to adopt collectivist measures to defend the revolution and to ensure their own physical survival.

This analysis was not limited to the top Bolshevik leadership. It was broadly shared by the worker masses, who reacted strongly to the ups and downs of the class struggle in the West. The Mensheviks, who as "orthodox Marxists" had initially refused to support the October Revolution because Russia lacked the conditions for socialism, shared this analysis too. That is why the majority of the party finally rallied to soviet power once the German revolution broke out in December 1918: revolution in the West had made the October Revolution viable.

Against all expectation, Russia's revolution, which had to organize an army from scratch even as the economy collapsed, survived the onslaught of the capitalist world despite its isolation. This was made possible in large part by the labor upsurge in the West, which limited the imperialist states' capacity to intervene militarily.

As one historian explained, "The statesmen in Paris were sitting on a thin crust of solid ground, beneath which volcanic forces of social upheaval were seething... So there was one absolutely convincing reason why Allied powers could not fulfill the hopes of White Russians and intervene with large numbers of troops: no reliable troops were available. It was the general opinion of leading statesmen and soldiers alike that the attempt to send large numbers of soldiers to Russia would probably end in mutiny." [8]

In response to Winston Churchill's urging to send more troops, the British Prime Minister replied that "If Great Britain undertakes military action against the Bolsheviks, Great Britain herself will become Bolshevik and we will have soviets in London." This might have exaggerated the immediate threat, but the port workers' refusal to load arms, the mass demonstrations across the country, the immediate threat of a general strike, and the hint of even more decisive action — 350 local labour councils had been established and awaited only the signal — kept Britain from large-scale intervention alongside France on behalf of the invading Poles in August 1920.

This selfless action by the Labour Party, quite out of character for its generally reformist leadership, is a measure of the times. [9] And it made a direct contribution to the revolution's survival.

The revolution also withstood the hostility of the peasantry, alienated by the Soviet government's grain monopoly and its policy of requisitioning agricultural surpluses and much that was not surplus. But the peasants also understood that the Bolsheviks were the only force capable of organizing victory over the counterrevolution, which would have drowned the agrarian reform in a sea of peasant blood. [10]

For example, a major peasant uprising broke out in the central Volga region in the spring of 1919. A few months later White General Denikin launched a major offensive from the south, counting on the support of the peasants. For the Bolsheviks, this was one of the most desperate moments of the civil war. They tried everything, including repression, propaganda, tax breaks for middle peasants, amnesty for the participants in the revolt. Nothing worked.

But the shift came when Denikin's army drew close to Moscow and peasants realized that the landlords' return was a real possibility. At that moment, the insurrection simply died out on its own, and almost a million peasant deserters voluntarily rejoined the ranks of the Red Army. [11]

### **Tragic Aftermath**

But the Soviet victory, after three years of civil war and foreign intervention, came at a terrible price: millions dead, mostly from hunger and disease; a devastated economy; a working class, the moving force of the revolutionary movement, bled white and scattered. Along with the revolution's isolation, this was the socio-political terrain out of which the bureaucratic dictatorship grew and consolidated itself in subsequent years.

That is why Stalin, defying Marxist analysis, declared in 1924 that Russia could indeed build socialism in isolation. Among other things, this "theory" served as justification for the subordination of foreign Communist parties to the interests of the Russian bureaucratic elite, a policy that called on these parties to abandon the goal of socialist revolution.

The bureaucratic regime, which was about to crush its own working class under the wheels of its repressive machine and would keep it atomized for the next six decades, was not only not interested in revolutions abroad, especially in the developed capitalist countries, but felt directly threatened by them.

Explaining the demand of the factory committees in the spring of 1918 to nationalize the factories — a measure that had not been foreseen by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 [12] — an activist explained:

*"The conditions were such that the factory committees took full control of the enterprises. This was the result of the entire development of our revolution, the inevitable result of the unfolding class struggle. The proletariat did not advance toward it so much as circumstances led it. It simply had to do that which in the given situation it could not refuse to do." And as terrible as that may seem to many, it means the complete removal of the capitalists from running the economy. Yes, it means "socialist experiments," as our opponents mockingly say... Yes, we have to say it: that which the working class of Russia has to do is the removal of capitalism and the rebuilding of our economy on a new socialist basis. This is no "fantastic theory" nor "free will" — we simply have no choice. And since it is being done by the working class and the capitalists are pushed aside in the course of the revolutionary struggle, it must be socialist regulation....*

"Will it be another Paris Commune [13] or will it lead to world socialism — that depends on international circumstances. But we have absolutely no other alternative." [14]

Even 90 years later, it is too early to draw up a definitive balance sheet of the October Revolution

from a socialist perspective. But today, when nothing seems to remain of that revolution (only time will tell if that is an illusion), one can at least say: "With their backs to the wall, they dared." The Russian workers launched a bold counter-offensive that had a chance of victory, rather than opting for impotent defensive tactics and certain defeat. Today, when the very survival of humanity is at stake, this is surely something workers can learn from the October Revolution.

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## P.S.

\* From Against the Current (ATC) # 131, November/December 2007.

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## Footnotes

[1] Quoted in F. Nitti, *Peaceless Europe*, London , 1922, 94.

[2] D. Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1980, 44-45.

[3] B. Palmer, *The Working Class Experience*, Toronto, M&S, 1992, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 200.

[4] Depending on the country, this was the result of some combination of state repression, foreign intervention, economic depression, and confused, hesitant or outright treacherous leadership. (The latter, of course, has deeper roots that still await adequate analysis.) This is not to say that revolution was on the immediate agenda of every country that experienced the labour upsurge. But it is doubtful capitalism, at least in Europe, could long have withstood the effects of a victory in any major Western country alongside that of Russia.

[5] It is not widely known, for example, that FDR publicly expressed his admiration for Mussolini, (obviously before the Second World War).

[6] Until the revolution of 1905-07, Russia was the only major European state without any form of political representation, even purely consultative, and the regime tolerated no independent political or social organization. Once the revolution was defeated, the old regime was for all practical purposes reimposed.

[7] Trotsky provided the most cogent analysis, but he was far from alone in reaching this conclusion after the experience of 1905-07.

[8] W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution*, N.Y., Universal Library, 1962, vol. 2, 152.

[9] Branuthal, 188-89.

[10] The peasants had already lived through that after the failure of the 1905 revolution.

[11] T.V. Osipova, *Rossiiskoe krest'yanstvo v revolyutsii i grazhdanskoi voine*, Moscow, Strelets, 2001, 320.

[12] The party went into the October Revolution without a clear economic programme. This in part reflected the view that what was possible in Russia depended on what happened in the West. Lenin at the time spoke of "state capitalism", a concept that differed from the western war economies mainly in one major element: state power would be wielded by the popular classes.

[13] The Paris Commune of 1871, the first workers' government, lasted less than two months and was followed by bloody, mass repression organized by the bourgeois government.

[14] I. Stepanov, *Ot rabochego kontrolya do rabochego upravleniya v promyshlennosti i zemledelii*, Petrograd, 1918, 14.