From the Russian Revolution to Russia Today

written by Rohini Hensman | July 13, 2020

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels argued that the first step in the proletarian revolution was to "win the battle of democracy," by which they meant establishing a democratic republic under which an epochal "revolution in permanence" could be launched to carry out a socialist transformation of society.[1] Since they believed that the emancipation of the working class would be carried out by the class as a whole, it made sense to affirm that the proletariat needed freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; equality before the law and equal protection of the law; and the right to elect representatives in free and fair elections to prepare them to take over government and production.

Given the hostility to democracy on the part of the bourgeoisie as well as sections of the petty bourgeoisie, it would be more useful to see the bourgeois and democratic revolutions as two separate revolutions, with the bourgeois revolution being accomplished fairly quickly while the democratic revolution might drag on for decades. Indeed, even when a parliamentary democracy has been established, it can be demolished and replaced by a fascist state, as it was in Italy and Germany. Of course Marx and Engels envisaged a far more thoroughgoing democracy in a socialist society, but they saw the democratic republic as an essential step in that direction.

The Failure of the Democratic Revolution in Russia

Russia under the tsars was an absolute monarchy and imperial power. In 1861, Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs, but peasants received less land than they needed for survival and continued to live in poverty and squalor. The Narodniks and later the Socialist Revolutionaries fought for a peasant revolution. When the industrial working class expanded massively in the late nineteenth century, Marxist groups were formed. In 1898 Marxist groups formed the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, which in 1903 split between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, with Lenin in the latter. At this stage, all Marxists agreed that the proletariat must expand and a bourgeois revolution take place before there was a chance to move toward socialism.

In the 1905 revolution, workers' militancy produced a new form of organization, the soviets (Russian for "councils"), that spread to several cities, and there were widespread demands for a democratic republic. In the countryside, there were peasant revolts demanding agrarian reform. The tsar first offered token concessions then unleashed severe repression.

A wave of nationalism accompanied the start of World War I in 1914. But as it wore on and Russia lost swathes of territory, food ran short, inflation soared, a million soldiers were captured, and more than 1.4 million were killed, people turned against the war and the tsar. This was the backdrop to the 1917 revolution, which is commonly divided into the February and October revolutions, but is more usefully seen as a continuous process starting on International Women's Day (February 23 in Russia, which was still using the Julian calendar). Meetings and speeches on women's rights, the

devastation of the war, and the impossible cost of living were followed by 90,000 women and men pouring out of the factories demanding bread, peace, and an end to the monarchy. The next day almost half the city's workforce came onto the streets and fraternized with rank-and-file soldiers, who refused to attack them.

The Duma (legislative assembly) formed a provisional government; a Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was formed at the same time. The soviet agreed to support the provisional government provided it convened a Constituent Assembly to introduce a permanent democratic republic; abolished discrimination based on class, religion, and nationality; and introduced self-government in the army. As the tsar fled on February28, the soviet took over and sent messages around the country announcing the revolution. Effectively, the monarchy was overthrown.

The provisional government, led by Alexander Kerensky, implemented sweeping democratic measures but carried on with the war. Lenin, in exile in Zurich, sent "Letters from Afar," urging that Russia, an imperialist power, should pull out of the war and that the revolution should continue. Mass opposition to the war swelled support for the Bolsheviks, especially after Lenin returned from exile in April. By mid-June 1917 the bourgeois revolution in Russia had been completed and the democratic revolution was well underway. What was required from socialists, then, was full support for democracy and the establishment of a Constituent Assembly. Instead, from the latter part of June, Lenin wanted the Bolsheviks to take power by themselves, and this was more or less accomplished in the aftermath of the October Revolution.

Undermining Democracy, Putting Socialism in Jeopardy

Lenin's and Trotsky's reluctance to share power even with other socialist parties meant that the Bolsheviks constituted a minority government that could survive only by means of repression. The soviets became a mere rubber stamp for decisions made by the Bolshevik Party. A Constituent Assembly had been a key demand of all anti-tsarist parties, including the Bolsheviks, and was undoubtedly popular; yet three weeks after seizing power, when Lenin found that less than a quarter of its elected representatives were Bolsheviks, the Assembly was dissolved.[2] In Rosa Luxemburg's carefully nuanced assessment of the Russian revolution, she acknowledges that democratic institutions like the Constituent Assembly have their shortcomings but argues that "the remedy which Lenin and Trotsky have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure."[3]

One must take seriously the argument that winning the civil war of 1918 to 1921, against a variety of counter-revolutionary armed groups backed by Western imperialist powers, required centralization and iron discipline. However, this doesn't explain either authoritarian measures taken before and after the civil war or the crushing of dissenters who were clearly on the side of the revolution. After the civil war ended, the suppression of factions like the Workers Group and Workers' Opposition within the Bolshevik Party stifled debate on crucial issues and empowered the most authoritarian elements in the party as well as the secret police known as the Cheka. And the crushing of dissent in the country as a whole reached alarming levels. The best-known example is the rebellion in the naval town of Kronstadt in March 1921. The demands of the Kronstadt rebels were clearly democratic, including free elections to the soviets and freedom of speech, press, assembly, and organization for workers, peasants, anarchists, and left socialists; they raised the original slogan of the revolution, "All power to the soviets!" Yet, in an operation bitterly condemned by anarchist Emma Goldman,[4] their rebellion was crushed by the Red Army in a bloody battle, after which thousands of prisoners were shot or sent to forced-labor camps.

The argument of the Workers' Opposition—that heading the state in a country with a heterogeneous population had forced the Communist Party to abandon its consistent espousal of a working-class

program—makes sense. But the Workers' Opposition never acknowledged the elephant in the room: In that case, should a revolutionary socialist party have seized power in a country where the proletariat was vastly outnumbered by the peasantry? Is it possible to build socialism in a country surrounded by capitalist imperial powers?

In retrospect it should be clear to us that given the circumstances in which the Russian revolution took place, there was no chance of abolishing capitalism in the near future. At that point, the best chance of moving toward a socialist transformation of society lay in the Bolsheviks respecting elections to the Constituent Assembly and soviets, pushing for maximum democracy in a multiparty state, and continuing to represent working-class interests in it, rather than seizing power on their own. Their choice of the latter course of action was driven by the illusion that a vanguard party claiming to represent the working class could carry out a socialist revolution. But this was not the conception held by Marx and Engels, who insisted that the revolution would be carried out by the working class as a whole.

Stalin's Counter-revolution

In many ways, the Bolshevik seizure of power created the conditions for a counter-revolution, as Lenin recognized toward the end of his life, but it would be wrong to conclude that nothing changed between this early period and the period after Stalin took over state power. As the manifesto of Workers' Truth observed in 1921, a new technical organizing intelligentsia was merging with elements of the old bourgeoisie to form a new ruling class, and the Bolshevik Party was becoming their representative. Simon Pirani agrees that the gradual exclusion of the working class from all decision-making roles, followed by the consolidation of a privileged elite's control over the party in 1923-1924, initiated the formation of a new ruling class, but adds that it took some years longer before it consolidated itself under the Stalinist dictatorship, which ruled not through its ownership of private property but through its "ownership" of the state.[5] In other words, although some kind of capitalist ruling class would inevitably have emerged after the revolution given the circumstances in which it occurred, the association of the Communist Party with that ruling class and the consolidation of a totalitarian state power were by no means inevitable.

In the early post-revolutionary period, sweeping social-democratic changes were carried out, ranging from measures to strengthen women's rights to comprehensive provision of health care to all. It is true that nonparty dissidents like the Kronstadt rebels were crushed and the voices of inner-party dissidents were stifled under Lenin and Trotsky, but under Stalin, millions of opponents, rivals (including almost the entire Bolshevik leadership), and dissidents were eventually either exterminated—many after being tortured and blackmailed into making fake confessions in show trials—or banished to forced-labor camps, where many succumbed to hunger, exposure, disease, and ill-treatment. Stalin's control over the Communist International was used to murder socialists around the world and to propagate a completely fictitious account of the revolution and the doctrine of "socialism in one country," namely Russia.

Perhaps the most striking contrast was between Lenin's policies toward tsarist Russia's former colonies and those of Stalin. Influenced by Marxists in these colonies, Lenin supported bourgeois-democratic national liberation struggles in them. Although after Finland's independence was recognized in 1917 no other nation received the same treatment, the larger nations of Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan became independent Soviet republics, while smaller nations (including the central Asian ones) became autonomous republics and autonomous regions responsible for local government, education, culture, and agriculture. The government promoted the political, economic, and cultural development of non-Russian peoples by giving priority to the local language, staffing the local administration as far as possible with local nationals, and a host of other measures.

Shortly before his death in January 1924 and crippled by a series of debilitating strokes, Lenin, in what came to be known as his "last testament," expressed alarm about Stalin's "imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities," even describing him as a "vulgar Great-Russian bully." He was right to be apprehensive. Under Stalin, tsarist Russia's former colonies were once again oppressed, with some, like Ukraine and the Muslim nations (peopled by Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and so on), being subjected to what would soon be called genocide. The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939-1941 also contained an imperialist element: In its secret protocols, the Nazis agreed to concede Finland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and part of Poland to the Soviet Union in exchange for food products and raw materials. After the Yalta conference of February 1945, Moscow-dominated regimes were set up in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and later East Germany; in a pattern resembling U.S. imperialism, friendly dictators were installed and supported by the imperial power, with military interventions when the regimes were threatened. Stalin's "socialism in one country" was in fact a state-capitalist empire. The pattern persisted after Stalin's death and included the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and the 1968 Prague Spring and the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. And although the wholesale slaughter of dissidents and ethnic minorities ceased after Stalin died, the ultra-authoritarian imperialist state remained.[6]

Another Revolution … and Counter-revolution

Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, and at a Central Committee meeting in January 1987 he declared "glasnost" (openness) and democratization to be the foundation of his "perestroika" (restructuring) of Soviet society. This move reflected a deeper and broader movement of disgust with the prevailing culture of corruption, lies, and assaults on the dignity of the individual, but it had an unintended consequence: the revival of demands for independence in Russia's colonies. Gorbachev's aversion to violence prevented him from sending in tanks when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, but hoping to prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Union, he drew up a new treaty to create a truly voluntary federation. Before it could be signed, hardliners launched a coup in August 1991, putting him under house arrest and sending tanks onto the streets of Moscow. The public came out on the streets to defend their newly won freedoms, and Boris Yeltsin put himself at their head.

The hardliners were defeated and Yeltsin came to power, but unlike Gorbachev, he had no interest in preserving the Soviet Union and in fact hastened its demise by seceding from it. He presided over the transfer of Russia's public sector to a small number of oligarchs, while the bulk of the population suffered cruel austerity measures. The Soviet Union was succeeded by fifteen independent republics including the Russian Federation, but many of these continued to be dominated by Russia, and some of Russia's former colonies failed to win their independence. Chechnya, for example, declared independence in 1991 but was invaded by Russia in 1994. There followed two wars, and by 2000 the Chechen independence movement had been crushed with the utmost brutality, in which crimes against humanity played a decisive role.

Vladimir Putin was appointed prime minister by Yeltsin in 1999 and was elected president in 2000, riding on a wave of popularity gained by his "war on terror" against the people of Chechnya. His period in power, which still prevails in 2020, has witnessed a wholesale reversal of Gorbachev's democratization measures and a return to neo-Stalinist and neo-tsarist despotism. Critics and potential rivals like journalist Anna Politkovskaya, human rights defender Natalya Estemirova, anti-corruption whistle-blower Sergei Magnitsky, and opposition politician Boris Nemtsov have been killed, and their deaths have been a warning to others not to emulate them. Putin has encouraged racism against minority ethnic groups, resulting in a resurgence of neo-Nazism, and his alliance with the most right-wing section of the Orthodox Church has resulted in legislation facilitating domestic violence against women and the persecution of sexual minorities.

Putin's goal of making Russia great again includes nostalgia for both the original tsarist empire and its Stalinist version. Within the Russian Federation, this has entailed crushing independence movements, as in Chechnya. Dominating former colonies and invading or annexing parts of those that try to break free from such domination, as in Georgia and Ukraine, are also part of this agenda. Farther afield, it involves keeping far-right dictators such as Bashar al-Assad in power by bombing hospitals, schools, mosques, and markets in areas controlled by democracy activists in revolutionary rebellion against him.[7]

The global regime stemming from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been an obstacle in Putin's path, hence his attempts to undermine it in ways that are matched only by those of U.S. imperialism. Blocking UN Security Council resolutions that would restrain human rights violations by his own regime or the regimes of his protégés has been one way of doing this, but there are also less visible strategies. One way of simultaneously bolstering his own autocratic rule in Russia and supporting his despotic allies abroad is to create an impression that democracy doesn't work. This is especially important in neighboring countries, where the success of a democratic experiment could result in Russians trying to emulate it. Thus even where it has proved impossible, at least in the short term, to dominate a whole country like Ukraine, he has obstructed it from moving forward to democratizing and fighting corruption by annexing part of the country (Crimea) and creating a frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Elsewhere in the world too, support for authoritarian regimes helps to promote the narrative that democracy is not the answer. Where substantial sections of the population are sufficiently wedded to the ideals of democracy to be able to impose them on their governments, they have to be undermined by promoting the far right, as Putin does in the United States and Western Europe. This support has ranged from material contributions, through supporting anti-immigrant hate-speech by driving thousands of Syrian refugees toward Europe, to propaganda promoting far-right narratives on social media and the Russian media. The transformation of the TV news channel Russia Today to the propaganda channel RT illustrates this process perfectly.[7]

Conclusion

We have seen in Russia a trajectory that runs from a democratic revolution in 1917, through an undermining of democracy by the Bolsheviks, to a return to forms of absolutism and imperialism under Stalin—then a renewed attempt at democratization and decolonization under Gorbachev, which ends in renewed despotism and efforts to rebuild Russian imperialism under Putin.

There is ample evidence that Putin presides over a far-right imperialist regime, yet sections of the left still support him, either explicitly or by spreading his propaganda. Some of these supporters are old-style Stalinists, such as the World Peace Council set up by Stalin and its American section, the U.S. Peace Council.[8] As in Stalin's time, they influence members of the social-democratic left. Another section can be described as neo-Stalinists, who seem to think that resisting U.S. imperialism entails supporting Putin's Russian imperialism and all his despotic allies. Thus when Russia invaded Ukraine, John Pilger published a series of articles on the Stop the War Coalition website supporting the war and denouncing the Ukrainian uprising as a fascist coup;[9] Max Blumenthal, who had once supported the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime, did an abrupt U-turn after visiting Moscow in December 2015, and thenceforth parroted Assad's and Putin's propaganda, including the claim that the White Helmets—rescue workers who have all too often lost their lives in airstrikes—were agents of U.S. imperialism and al-Qaida. And the Putin regime's denial of the Bosnian genocide by Serb forces, despite overwhelming evidence that it took place, was echoed in The Politics of Genocide by Edward Herman and David Peterson (with a foreword by Noam Chomsky), which accused the Bosnian Muslim victims of lying and killing their own people.[11]

What is common to all these examples is the whitewashing of regimes engaged in mass crimes and the blanking out or demonization of their civilian victims and popular democratic uprisings. But what is confusing for those who may not be familiar with the situations that are being described is that this is being done by people who are seen to be on the left and who claim to be anti-imperialists. It may be true that they are opponents of U.S. imperialism, but in a situation of interimperial rivalry (in this case between U.S. and Russian imperialism), opposing one side and supporting the other is not genuine anti-imperialism but pseudo-anti-imperialism.

The argument that our task is to oppose only our own country's imperialism and the regimes it props up is also faulty. In an interconnected world, one imperialism can strengthen another, one authoritarian regime can bolster another. Because of his contempt for democratic institutions, Putin has helped the far right in many countries, including the United States, to put in power authoritarian strongmen who are equally contemptuous of democracy. On the other side, allowing another imperialist power to destroy a democratic uprising against its ally can help an ally of your own imperialist state destroy a democratic struggle that challenges it; thus Assad's demolition of the Syrian uprising has had devastating consequences for "the capital of the Palestinian diaspora" in Yarmouk.[12]

The failure of most mainstream Western media to debunk the false story of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction has resulted in a healthy skepticism toward their reports. But it doesn't follow that all their reports lie, nor that all reports contradicting them tell the truth; what follows is that reports by all sides have to be subjected to critical scrutiny. Distinguishing genuine from fake anti-imperialism requires extensive fact-checking, using multiple sources and especially relying on agencies like Doctors Without Borders and Amnesty International, which also criticize Western powers, and examining whether or not the accounts are internally consistent and consistent over time (for example, looking at the way Russian explanations for the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 changed over time). This is time-consuming and tiresome, but it is important. In such cases, the enemy of my enemy is often equally my enemy, and socialists must stand in solidarity with all victims of mass crimes and all struggles for democracy by working people in all countries. Any kind of support for authoritarian, murderous regimes belongs squarely in the realm of right-wing politics.

Notes

1. See Rohini Hensman, "Marx and Engels on Socialism and How to Achieve It: A Critical Evaluation," in Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson, eds., *An Inheritance for Our Times: Principles and Politics of Democratic Socialism* (OR Books, 2020), 131-147.

2. Paresh Chattopadhyay, "Did the Bolshevik Seizure of Power Inaugurate a Socialist Revolution? A Marxian Inquiry," *Economic Review* (Sept.-Oct., 1991),

3. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (1918), Chapter 4.

4. Emma Goldman, "Kronstadt," 1923.

5. Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (Routledge, 2008), 237-240.

6. More details and references in Rohini Hensman, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* (Haymarket, 2018), 6-10, 29-38, 53-61.

7. Amnesty International, "'Nowhere is safe for us': Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in

North-West Syria," 2020

7. More details and references in Hensman, *Indefensible*, 64-86, 232-242.

8. Rory Fanning and Brian Bean, "Opposing War Means Opposing Dictatorship," Oct. 24, 2016.

9. Paul Canning, "Stop the War and Kids Who Go to War," *The Real Stop the War*, Dec.14, 2014.

10. Sam Charles Hamad and Oz Katerji, "Did a Kremlin Pilgrimage Cause Alternet Blogger's Damscene Conversion?" *Pulse*, Aug. 22, 2017.

11. George Monbiot, "Naming the Genocide Deniers," June 13, 2011.

12. Budour Hassan, "A Late Obituary for the Capital of the Palestinian Diaspora," *OpenDemocracy*, June 22, 2018.