

One Hundred Years of the Russian Revolution: A Retrospective View



At a distance of one hundred years, the Russian Revolution, which truly shook the world, deserves to be remembered once more in terms of its emancipatory significance and its downfall and betrayal. This revolution would not have happened had it not been for the crucial role played by the Bolshevik party. It is true that the profound crisis affecting the Russian society, worsened by the country's disastrous participation in World War I, could have sooner or later led to a massive upheaval. But it is questionable that a socialist revolution would have taken place without the organizational skills of the Bolshevik party and the political, strategic, and tactical genius of V.I. Lenin.

Contrary to characterizations of the revolution as a Bolshevik coup d'état, the October Revolution came to power as a popular uprising led by the Russian industrial working class allied with the peasantry. The straightforward program put forward by the Bolshevik party advocated two policies that resonated very deeply in the Russian worker and peasant heartland: first, a quick end to Russia's participation on the side of the Allies in the imperialist World War I, a war that had bled the tsarist empire white and immiserated millions of its people; and second, a radical land reform—implementing the program of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR), a non-Marxist party

supported by the peasantry—nationalizing and distributing the land to the peasantry, who were freed to cultivate and sell its produce. The first promise turned out to be hard to keep for reasons beyond the will of the Bolshevik leaders: Germany took advantage of the revolutionary upheaval to refuse any peace agreement and to press its military gains until an agreement was finally reached, at great territorial cost to Russia, at Brest-Litovsk in the early spring of 1918. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the revolutionary government conducted the peace process in a transparent and open fashion, exposing before the people inside and outside Russia all imperialist treaties and annexationist claims and publishing the secret agreements that the tsar had made with the Allies to share in the territorial loot to be gained after victory. Regarding its land reform, the new government recognized that, in spite of its wishes, there was no objective possibility for large-scale collective agriculture beyond a small number of communal experiments that were entirely voluntary. At the same time, aware of the threat that agrarian capitalism represented to the Russian countryside, the new government did not include the right to sell and buy the land in the free usufruct rights over the land allotments that it gave to the peasantry; this prevented land from being converted into a commodity.

As soon as it came to power, the revolution implemented democratic and egalitarian policies, which included the extension and consolidation of workers' control over production. That process had begun to spread as part of the "dual power" that challenged the conservative and ineffectual Provisional Government which briefly ruled Russia after the earlier February Revolution that overthrew the tsar. But the democratic spirit of the October Revolution was expressed most of all in the rapid spread of the soviets (councils) as organs of grass-roots democracy. These institutions had their origin in the 1905 Revolution, when during that year's strike movement, deputies were elected in various factories,

eventually leading to the foundation of the St. Petersburg Soviet, which became the general political organ representing all workers and the revolutionary movement in the city. The soviets re-emerged after the February 1917 Revolution, with elected delegates (subject to immediate recall by their constituents) who in turn elected representatives to the higher soviet bodies. These early 1917 soviets spread from Petrograd to other large cities and industrial towns. Later they spread to nonproletarian locations, like those housing large garrisons, and to smaller and more remote places. A number of left political parties and currents became very active and indeed dominant in those soviets, including the Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Anarchists, and a number of smaller socialist groups. It was the radicalization of the soviets after the defeat of the attempted right-wing Kornilov Coup in August 1917 that produced a Bolshevik majority in those representative bodies and established the political basis and democratic legitimacy of the October Revolution that same year.

The profound and radical nature of the Russian Revolution had a great impact that went beyond the working class and the peasantry. The cause of women's liberation greatly advanced with the revolutionary government's recognition of the rights of divorce and abortion, among others. As the revolution advanced and consolidated itself, the cause of other oppressed groups, such as ethnic and national minorities, gays,¹ and the disabled,² made significant advances. Education was revolutionized with radical advances in popular access and the elimination of the backward and anti-scientific educational philosophy and methods that had governed the tsarist educational system only available to a minority of the population. The arts teemed with innovation, creativity, and controversy as conflicting schools of style and thought fought each other, with great passion and even ferocity. The worldwide international implications of the Russian Revolution

triggered movements and political upheavals in countries spanning from China to Latin America. The old social democracy, the cradle of the classical Marxist tradition in Europe from which the Bolsheviks had sprung, went into crisis, and a new international political movement emerged to the left of it, combining the revolutionary wing of that old social democracy with people emerging from other political traditions, such as syndicalism and anarchism, and with newly politicized people without previous organized political experience, to create the Communist International in 1919.

The Stalinist Counter-revolution

By the late twenties, however, as a result of the rise to power of Stalinism, all of the above-mentioned gains of the October Revolution were well on the way to extinction. Soviet democracy and workers' control had long disappeared, and a one-party totalitarian state had been established that was to be supported by a ruthless secret police and the infamous Gulag system of forced labor in concentration camps. In the late twenties and early thirties, the peasantry was forced into state collective farms in a bloody process that included the deliberate creation of a famine in the Ukraine. The industrial working class was subjected to compulsory unpaid labor and further exploited by the government's policy of *Stakhanovism* (incentive pay systems) with the support of the official unions, which had become mere conveyor belts of the government. Artistic freedom disappeared, and the Stalinist official philistine "socialist realist" aesthetic became dominant. Stalinism also abandoned the principled internationalism of the 1919 Third International, imposing in its stead a Russian chauvinist policy that subordinated the policies and practices of foreign Communist parties to Russian state interests. The regime adopted a cynical realpolitik foreign policy that included the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, leading to the partition of Poland, with Russia appropriating its eastern part and Germany, the western part. Reversing the

gains of the October Revolution, Stalin's regime also adopted a very conservative policy on gender and family matters. Official anti-Semitism reared its ugly head once again, leading to mendacious accusations—supposedly justifying ruthless punishment, including executions—leveled against Jewish doctors and writers during the last years of Stalin's rule. Millions of people were imprisoned and killed by Stalin's regime through executions, deliberately created famines, the Gulag, and genocidal policies against ethnic groups such as the Volga Germans.

Why Did the Russian Revolution Degenerate?

Many explanations have been given as to why the Russian Revolution degenerated into the Stalinist nightmare. According to the cultural determinism of early commentators on Soviet Russia, such as Nicholas Berdyaev, Bernard Pares, and Sir John Maynard, much of the post-revolutionary Russian degeneration was explained by the supposedly immutable authoritarian Slavic character and historical institutions. Far more important in terms of its vast political influence was the orthodox, so-called totalitarian, school, represented by the work of people like Zbigniew Brzezinski, Adam Ulam, and Leonard Shapiro, which was the hegemonic explanation for a considerable number of years and became closely linked to the political line of the United States and its Western allies during the Cold War. As their revisionist critic, historian Stephen F. Cohen summarized the totalitarian school's point of view, insofar as the early years of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet State are concerned:

In October 1917, the Bolsheviks (Communists), a small, unrepresentative, and already or embryonically totalitarian party, usurped power and thus betrayed the Russian Revolution. From that moment on, as in 1917, Soviet history was determined by the totalitarian political dynamics of the Communist Party, as determined by its original leader, Lenin—monopolistic

politics, ruthless tactics, ideological orthodoxy, programmatic dogmatism, disciplined leadership, and centralized bureaucratic organization. Having quickly monopolized the new Soviet government and created a rudimentary totalitarian party-state, the Communists won the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921 by discipline, organization, and ruthlessness.³

From there, the orthodox interpreters drew a straight line to the Stalinist denouement of the Russian Revolution as a fitting and logical conclusion to its supposedly totalitarian origins. Although Stalinists as well as Cold War apologists in the Western world held on to the myth that there was no difference between the Bolshevik and Stalinist parties, numerous historians, like Alexander Rabinowitch, William Rosenberg, and Stephen F. Cohen himself, found that before undergoing the process of bureaucratic degeneration that began with the Civil War of 1918-1920, the Bolshevik revolutionary party had been pluralist and democratic. For example, even though Bolshevik leaders such as L. Kamenev and G. Zinoviev had opposed the October Revolution, they continued being important party leaders after October 1917, and even though N. Bukharin publicly agitated for a political line radically opposed to Lenin's regarding the peace of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, he remained a party leader for many years afterwards. Lenin was considered the "first among equals" of the Bolshevik leaders and was actually on the losing side of many controversial party decisions, including the early decisions regarding how to bring peace with Germany, before he eventually prevailed. Meanwhile the controversies within the party concerning the issue of peace were being publicly aired and discussed by the press organs of contending Bolshevik factions. Far from the totalitarian character attributed to it by the orthodox school, the Bolshevik party was characterized not only by a plurality of political positions on the war and other matters, even including the seizure of power, but also by a chronic tendency to factionalism that nevertheless did

not generally prevent it from coming together in what is known as “unity in action.”

The Connection Between Leninism in Power and Stalinism

It is true that the “Leninism in Power” that emerged from the Civil War had become a one-party dictatorship. But it was still qualitatively different from the Stalinist totalitarian system that began to develop in the late twenties. Stalin’s system took over the complete control of the whole Soviet society including not only the political and economic life of the country, but also the whole direction and control of such diverse fields as the sciences, culture, and the arts. All criticism and opposition to this system was squelched in a long-lasting reign of terror and massive use of forced labor, the worst features of which were eliminated only after Stalin died in 1953.

Yet, to affirm that “Leninism in Power” was different from Stalinism does not mean that what happened under the former had no bearing on the development of the latter or that choices made under Lenin made no difference in facilitating the development of Stalinism. This issue is largely bypassed by many socialist authors including Chris Harman in his frequently cited article, “Russia: How the Revolution Was Lost.”⁴ For Harman, the die was cast once the working class was decimated in the Civil War. Soviet institutions

took on a life independently of the class they had arisen from. Those workers and peasants who fought the Civil War could not govern themselves collectively from their places in the factories. The socialist workers spread over the length and breadth of the war zones had to be organized and coordinated by a centralized government apparatus independent of their control—at least temporarily.

The Bolsheviks, Harman contends, had no alternative:

They could not give up power just because the class they represented had dissolved itself while fighting to defend that power. Nor could they tolerate the propagation of ideas that undermined the basis of its power—precisely because the working class itself no longer existed as an agency collectively organized so as to be able to determine its own interests.

For Harman, however, the many decisions made by the revolutionary leaders virtually disappear from the historical record. He ignores the most decisive choice that Lenin and his circle made: converting necessity into virtue by usually equating the undemocratic one-party institutional arrangement that emerged from the Civil War—justified by Harman as a temporary feature to deal with the inability of the socialist workers dispersed over the length and breadth of the war zones to exercise collective power—as coterminous with socialism. Harman's article makes several important and valuable points, but it refrains from a critical examination of Lenin's own record and whether and how it might have facilitated the rise of Stalinism.

In fact, the choices made by "Leninism in Power" were not limited to the issues of not giving up power or tolerating opposition parties, but to a whole range of other critical matters about which even Bolshevik groups and individuals differed from Lenin's Bolshevik mainstream. One was the issue of repression and terror before and during the Civil War. It was the source of continued criticism and debate *within* the revolutionary government and the Bolshevik camp. Those criticisms focused mostly on the policies and practices of the secret police—the Cheka—created at the end of 1917 to combat the counter-revolution, which were often abusive and corrupt (notwithstanding the rectitude of Felix Dzershinsky, the head of the Cheka) and which even deliberately violated government policy.⁵ As detailed in my book *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*,⁶ these critics included not only

revolutionaries such as Victor Serge, who became well-known in the West, but also old Bolsheviks such as Mikhail Stepanovich Olminsky (1863-1933), a member of the editorial staff of *Pravda* and a longtime personal friend of Lenin and Krupskaya, who repeatedly expressed his criticisms in the very pages of *Pravda*. In fact, in late 1918, *Pravda*, then under the editorship of N. Bukharin, was publishing more articles by detractors than by supporters of the Cheka. This kind of public criticism of the Cheka would not survive Lenin's rule.

It is true that Lenin did not stand for the worst stupidities and excesses of the Cheka. He frequently went to considerable lengths to stop some of those excesses in individual cases. (Maxim Gorky was one of the personalities who would desperately contact Lenin to stop one or another arrest or execution, often successfully.) But Lenin did nothing substantive, from a political and institutional point of view, to significantly control or reverse the unlimited powers of the Cheka. Instead, like in other areas of Soviet life, Lenin tended to see changes in leadership personnel as the solution to the political and structural-bureaucratic problems of the Cheka.

Red Terror and Collective Punishment

In one critically important matter Lenin not only sided with the worst Cheka excesses, but actually encouraged them: collective punishment, the officially sanctioned practice of punishing not only the specific people who actually committed counter-revolutionary crimes, but also the families, social class, and ethnic groups to which they belonged.

Lenin's approach was most dramatically expressed in his conflict with the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd when, in the summer of 1918, the latter refused the policy of collective and even random punishment, labeled and pushed by Lenin himself as "Red Terror," in response to the assassination of Bolshevik leaders. As detailed by the

historian Alexander Rabinowitch in his 2007 book *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*,⁷ the Petrograd Cheka, in contrast to the policies prevailing in Moscow during the Civil War, de-emphasized policies aimed at “restoring order” through terror and focused instead on concrete measures aimed at halting violence, economic crimes, and abuses of power. With respect to the latter, it developed guidelines to strictly regulate searches and to catch fake and corrupt Chekists. Citizens were given a couple of days to turn in unauthorized arms, bombs, grenades, and explosives without threatening them with executions. Judicial proceedings were speeded up for political figures lingering in jails waiting to be processed, a decision that was also influenced by the need to reduce Petrograd’s prison population.⁸

The conflict between the Moscow and Petrograd approaches came to a head when Petrograd Bolshevik leader V. Volodarskii was assassinated on June 20, 1918. Some district-level Bolsheviks and a stream of worker delegations demanded immediate repression as retaliation for Volodarskii’s killing. The Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet met in an emergency session to discuss the greatly inflamed mood and concluded that lynch justice should be opposed. Infuriated by this decision, Lenin immediately cabled a strong rebuke to Zinoviev, Lashevich, and other members of the top leadership bodies: “We heard only today that in Piter, workers wanted to respond to the killing of Volodarskii with mass terror and that you held them back. This is in-tol-er-able!”⁹

While undeclared Red Terror in all its forms had been going on in Moscow and other Russian cities for months, Lenin got his full way in Petrograd only after the Petrograd Bolshevik leader Uritskii was assassinated and an attempt on Lenin’s life was carried out in Moscow in late August. The Bolshevik party leadership in Petrograd ordered a full-scale Red Terror

including mass summary executions.¹⁰ But by mid-September, Rabinowitch relates, having become alarmed by the indiscriminate character of this Red Terror, the Bolshevik-led Petrograd Trade Union Council appealed to the Petrograd party leaders to institute strict controls and safeguards on shootings generally, on arrests and searches at trade union offices, and on arrests of trade union officials. Even Zinoviev, who had recently advocated giving free reign to the Red Terror, became concerned about the inadvertent arrests and shootings of Bolsheviks, Bolshevik sympathizers, and individuals who were playing important roles in running the government. He was also exasperated by the difficulty he encountered in getting information about prisoners held in the Cheka prison presumably because of their bourgeois class membership, including professionals, important figures in theater and music, technical specialists in the soviets and on the ships of the Baltic fleet, and physicians trying to deal with epidemic diseases in Petrograd and nationally. It was clear that the "lynch justice" feared by the Petrograd leadership had finally come to pass and that nobody felt safe.¹¹

It has been argued that although excessive, these were measures adopted during the Civil War and thus justifiable given the need to combat the even greater atrocities carried out by terrorist oppositionists and the White armies. One of the problems with this argument is that collective punishment became a controversial issue in government circles soon after the October Revolution and before the beginning of the Civil War. I.N. Steinberg, the Left Socialist-Revolutionary party leader who was Commissar of Justice during the Left SR-Bolshevik coalition at the very beginning of the Revolution, had strongly objected to this government policy during his ministry in late 1917 and early 1918. Pointing at the difference between counter-revolutionary opinions and actions, he advocated for punishing the latter and not the former. He

also vocally opposed the decision of the chairman of the soviet in the capital of Estonia, who, upon learning about a counter-revolutionary plot among the German Barons, outlawed the entire class of the Barons, except men below the age of 17 and women below the age of 20, instead of punishing the culprits involved in that plot. As it turned out, the order was not carried out because the Soviet leadership did not want to alienate the German government with whom they were negotiating an end to the war.¹² The same policy of collective punishment was applied to other armed conflicts, as in the decree of June 1921 ordering the punishment of the families of the peasants involved in the so-called "green" peasant rebellions in the Tambov area, a conflict that was substantially different from the earlier armed confrontation with the counter-revolutionary Civil War "Whites."¹³

As explored in my 1990 book, during that same period, other worrisome practices developed, including major violations of soviet and inner-party democracy, workers' control, freedom of the press, and socialist legality. As in the case of the Red Terror, these practices and the political justifications advanced by the government had a substantial impact on the political culture of Soviet Russia and a serious effect on norms for acceptable political behavior. This helped to undermine Russian society's political and organizational ability to resist the totalitarian thrust of Stalinism. The institutions and the political culture prevailing in the country disarmed Soviet citizens, including the remnants of the working class and the peasantry, of the means with which to resist the establishment of the Stalinist system.

Lenin's Politics on Terror

It is ironic that among socialist leaders of his time, Lenin had been uniquely insistent on the importance and necessity of democratic struggles to advance the revolutionary cause. Even in his much, and unjustly, criticized *What Is to Be Done?*, he

underscored the centrality of the struggle for political democracy in contrast to the indifference and hostility of the "Economists," who downplayed the political struggle against tsarism. His polemic against "Parabellum," a factional opponent, in the latter part of 1915, was even more powerful in its arguments for the centrality of political democracy for socialism:

We must *combine* the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary program and tactics on *all* democratic demands: a republic, a militia, the popular election of officials, equal rights for women, the self-determination of nations, etc. While capitalism exists, these demands—all of them—can only be accomplished as an exception, and even then in an incomplete and distorted form. Basing ourselves on the democracy already achieved, and exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we demand the overthrow of capitalism, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, as a necessary basis for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for the *complete* and *all-round* institution of *all* democratic reforms. ... It is ... quite inconceivable that the proletariat, as a historical class, will be able to defeat the bourgeoisie, unless it is prepared for it by being educated in the spirit of the most consistent and resolutely revolutionary democracy.¹⁴

There was an aspect of Lenin's politics, however, that may help explain his political shift during the Civil War: his "quasi-Jacobinism," that is, his positive view of the French Jacobin Terror and his emphasis on what the revolutionary dedication and consciousness of a party could accomplish. In contrast with Marx and Engels,¹⁵ Rosa Luxemburg,¹⁶ and the early Trotsky,¹⁷ all critical of Jacobinism, Lenin went as far as describing, in his pamphlet *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, the social democratic revolutionary as "the Jacobin indissolubly linked to the organization of the proletariat now conscious of its class interests." This was consistent with

his emphasis on what the revolutionary dedication and consciousness of a few groups such as parties could accomplish. This was distinct from an approach that, while recognizing the indispensability of political leadership, places the central emphasis on the development of class democratic institutions such as factory committees, unions, and soviets.¹⁸

Toward a Theory of Revolutionary Democracy

Thus, the defeat of the Russian Revolution did not only come from hostile outside forces, but also from inside the revolution. As the post-1917 degeneration of this revolution showed, the loss of working-class power was not an event that happened overnight but the result of a deterioration process that led to the emergence and consolidation of a bureaucratic class with its own interests. After the revolutionary overthrow of the old order, the absence of working-class democracy will strengthen the *hierarchical* aspect of the *division of labor*, which will become the bureaucratic Trojan horse inside the revolutionary ranks. As the anti-Stalinist Communist leader Christian Rakovsky noted in 1928:

When a class takes power, one of its parts becomes the agent of that power. Thus arises bureaucracy. In a socialist state, when capitalist accumulation is forbidden by members of the directing party, this differentiation begins as a functional one; it later becomes a social one. I am thinking here of the social position of a communist who has at his disposal a car, a nice apartment, regular holidays, and is receiving a maximum salary authorized by the party; a position which differs from that of the communist working in the coal mines and receiving a salary of fifty to sixty roubles per month. ... The function has modified the organism itself; that is to say, that the psychology of those who are charged with the diverse tasks of direction in the administration and the economy of the state,

has changed to such a point that not only objectively, but subjectively, not only materially, but morally, they have ceased to be a part of this very same working class.¹⁹

For socialists today, a re-examination of the Russian Revolution should be part of an effort to begin the construction of a theory of the politics of a post-revolutionary transition to socialism in the light of that experience.

Footnotes

1. Thomas Harrison, "Socialism and Homosexuality," *New Politics* (No. 46, Winter 2009), 19-21; and Sherry Wolf, "LGBT Political Cul-de-Sac: Make a U-Turn," *New Politics* (No. 46, Winter 2009), 34.

2. Keith Rosenthal, "Disability and the Russian Revolution," *International Socialist Review*, Parts I and II, (Issue 102, Fall 2016), 71-91; and (Issue 103, Winter 2016-2017), 89-109.

3. Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 5-6.

4. Chris Harman, "[Russia: How the Revolution Was Lost](#)," *International Socialism* (1st series, No. 30, Autumn 1967), 8-17.

5. Thus, when on January 17, 1920, the Bolshevik government abolished the death penalty except in districts where there were military operations still taking place, the Cheka issued a secret order instructing its officers to transfer prisoners to the zone of military operations so they could then be executed. See Lennard D. Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia* (Temple University Press, 1976), 161.

6. Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (Verso, 1990).
7. Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Indiana University Press, 2007). Professor Rabinowitch is also the author of *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1978; recently reissued by Haymarket Books).
8. Rabinowitch, 221.
9. Rabinowitch, 314-316.
10. Rabinowitch, 330-331.
11. Rabinowitch, 340-341.
12. Steinberg, I.N., *In the Workshop of the Revolution* (Rinehart and Company, 1953), 97, 105.
13. Farber, 122-23.
14. V.I. Lenin, *The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Rights of Nations to Self-Determination*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 21, August 1914 – December 1915 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 408-09. Lenin's emphases.
15. For a detailed account of Marx's and Engels' critical views of the Jacobins and the French Terror see Hal Draper, Special Note C, "The Meaning of 'Terror' and 'Terrorism'" in *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume III, The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"* (Monthly Review Press, 1986), 360-374.
16. Rosa Luxemburg saw Jacobinism as leading directly to the small-group putschist notions of the French Blanqui and the nihilistic terrorism of the Russian Nechaev. Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg, Abridged Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 195.

17. Leon Trotsky, "Part IV: Jacobinism and Social Democracy," in *Our Political Tasks*,

www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch.05.htm In this pamphlet, Trotsky astutely observes that the Jacobins were utopians and idealists who had "total distrust toward real men. 'Suspicion' was the inevitable method for serving the Truth," which stood in clear contrast to what Trotsky saw as the "revolutionary confidence" of social democracy.

18. For a fuller discussion of Lenin's "quasi-Jacobinism," see Farber, 208-215.

19. Christian Rakovsky, "The 'Professional Dangers' of Power," in Tariq Ali (ed.) *The Stalinist Legacy* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1984), 49, 53.