

# Marot's October Revolution

August 17, 2013

Review of John Eric Marot. *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect: Interventions in Russian and Soviet History*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2013. References. Index. 274 pages. \$28.00.

Since the October Revolution of 1917, a great deal of writing about socialism has revolved around questions about the nature of that experience, some of the most important of which are: What was Lenin's conception of the Bolshevik party and of the workers' role in it and of their role in the making of the revolution? Was October 1917 a genuine workers' revolution or a Bolshevik coup? How did Stalin rise to power? and Why did Trotsky fail to stop him?

The nine essays by John Eric Marot collected in his book *The October Revolution in Prospect and Retrospect: Interventions in Russian and Soviet History*, now available for the first time in paperback, may be said to attempt to answer these questions. A Marxist historian of the Russian Revolution, Marot's "interventions" as he calls them, tackle the issues by debating other historians who have addressed them and, in Marot's view, failed to answer them. The first two essays that discuss Trotsky's theory of the peasantry and Tony Cliff's views of Trotsky—making up about 100 pages—will be most accessible to those general readers who come to the book as leftists; the other essays, were written for specialists in the field, and, though they are not without interest and importance for leftists, they will be hard going for some readers. Still, anyone who takes the time to read this book will learn a great deal about the historiography of the Russian Revolution and about the ideas and politics of its major figures.

Rather than proceeding through the chapters in sequence, let me take up in order the questions I raised above, which have to be answered by moving almost backwards through the book, from the end to the front. Marot's essays are detailed, precise, carefully argued, and based on the original sources in Russian and on the work of historians, most of whose writing is available in translation in English. My summaries of Marot's essays here simply tries to capture the gist of his positions and present it clearly, recognizing that I fail to do justice the author's carefully crafted arguments.

First, Lenin. Marot (in Chapters six, seven, eight and nine) deals with Lenin principally in a series of essays about the Russian revolutionary leader's differences of opinion with Alexander Bogdanov, another Bolshevik, the leader for a few years of a group called Vpered (Forward). Marot argues against other historians who he believes mistakenly have written that Lenin's and Bogdanov's differences arose either over the question of participating in elections to the Duma, the Russian parliament, or that they fell out over differences principally about philosophy. Conceding that there is reason for confusion about the former and some truth to the latter argument, Marot, however, argues that the two revolutionary's differences were principally over politics, over the question of how workers come to be socialists fit to make a revolution.

Bogdanov believed that workers were victims of the dominance of bourgeois culture that undermined their understanding and ability to act. To change that, Bogdanov believed, they would have to be educated in proletarian universities by socialist intellectuals. That is, for Bogdanov, socialist education and propaganda were all important and preceded action. Lenin on the other hand, after the Revolution of 1905, came to believe that through their own experience of the class struggle workers could arrive at a socialist consciousness. Socialist education and propaganda could help to clarify and solidify their evolving consciousness, but could not create it. What this debate makes clear is that for Lenin, workers should not operate under the tutelage of intellectuals, but rather could learn through their own experience and therefore become the agents of both the party

and of the soviets that formed the basis for the revolution.

I should note, since it forms such an important part of the Stalinist and capitalist characterization of Lenin, that Marot, following Alexander Rabinowitch, rejects the idea that Lenin created an authoritarian, undemocratic and conspiratorial party. In fact, he considers this question to have been resolved. As Marot writes in a footnote, "Thanks largely to Rabinowitch's scrupulous scholarship, the open and deliberative character of the Bolshevik party in 1917, so controversial when Rabinowitch first broadcast it, is now widely accepted; convention, perhaps." The Bolshevik Party (originally a tendency within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party) had controversies and tendencies, debates and disputes, and Lenin sometimes lost those, though he often won them. First among equals, Lenin was not a dictator in the often tumultuous Bolshevik Party.

Marot does not deal in this section with what happened to the party after Lenin, but I would argue that while Lenin may have had an authoritarian streak, that flaw did not determine the character of the Bolshevik Party. The idea of the monolithic Bolshevik Party was the creation of Zinoviev's "bolshevization" campaign launched at the Fifth Comintern Congress in July 1924, half a year after Lenin's death. Stalin's counter-revolution from roughly 1927-1937—with its purges of old Bolsheviks, its cohering of a new ruling elite, and its "Lenin levy" filling the party with new recruits—transformed that bolshevized workers' party into the party of the new bureaucratic ruling class. Stalin's Communist Party was an altogether different organization than Lenin's in terms of its class character, its ideals, its organization, and its program.

Second, on the question, October 1917: revolution or coup? (Marot takes this up in Chapters 4 and 5). The Cold War political historians of Russia, argued in the 1950s and 1960s, and John Keep argues today, that Lenin and the Bolshevik Party had manipulated the working class, carrying out a coup and then convincing or forcing the workers to accept it. Marot contends that the Russian social historians who began to write in the 1980s (such as Dianne Koenker, William Rosenberg, David Mandel, and Ronald Grigor Suny) have demonstrated beyond a doubt that the Russian workers had been fully involved in the labor and social movements and the upheavals that created the soviet and then made the revolution. He criticizes them, however, for creating a kind of teleological explanation, that is, for arguing that their lived conditions of exploitation and political oppression and their factory life experience led them to turn to Bolshevism almost automatically.

Marot argues that the social historians have to take a page from the political historians, showing how workers made a choice for revolution. That, he contends, can only be done by showing how at various points of the process workers chose between rival political organizations and their programs. The October Revolution of 1917 was not a coup, but a genuine revolution, the end process of a series of political choices by workers that led them to choose Bolshevik leadership.

On the third question of how Stalin came to power (taken up in Chapter 1), Marot makes an original argument, based on the methodology he learned, as he explains, from his teacher, Robert Brenner. His argument is based on the debate that took place over the nature of the post-revolutionary Russian peasantry.

After Lenin died in 1924 several of the Bolshevik Party's leaders—in a series of shifting relationships—contended for leadership, among them Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Trotsky. One can argue that Stalin won principally because the other failed to unite against him. And why was that? In particular, why couldn't the two most likely leaders, Trotsky and Bukharin, unite?

Marot's answer is that the roots of the problem lay in Trotsky's misunderstanding of the nature of the peasantry. (This is *not* the old Stalinist argument that Trotsky "underestimated" the peasantry.) Trotsky believed and feared that the peasantry was a proto-capitalist class, waiting only for

encouragement from government policies to lead a full-scale resurgence of capitalism in Russia. But no, says Marot—following Brenner—peasants such as those in Russia tended to create a self-sufficient and non-commercial peasant economy and society, inimical to capitalism (as it was to socialism).

So, because Trotsky failed to recognize this and believed the peasantry was proto-capitalist, he was extremely hostile to Bukharin whom he perceived as the representative of that proto-capitalist peasant class. Consequently, Trotsky disdained the idea of an alliance with Bukharin, the alliance that could potentially have blocked Stalin from coming to power. Unwilling to enter into that alliance, it was impossible for Trotsky to mobilize workers and peasants against Stalin's dictatorship and his counter-revolution.

Finally, why was Trotsky unable to lead a fight to unseat Stalin and remove him from power? (This is taken up in Chapter 2.) Here Marot debates Tony Cliff, founder and principal intellectual leader for many years of International Socialism (later the Socialist Workers Party of Great Britain) and author of a four volume biography of Trotsky. Marot begins by expressing his admiration for Cliff's attempt to carry out a sustained critique of Trotsky's "substitutionist" politics (that is, substituting the Communist Party for the workers), a critique says Marot that is absent from the work of Isaac Deutscher, Ernest Mandel, Pierre Broué, or Max Shachtman.

Marot agrees with Cliff that Trotsky had failed to recognize soon enough that the Russian Communist Party and the Third International were, in Cliff's words, "dead for the purposes of revolution." He also agrees with what Cliff describes as the central contradiction of Trotsky's thinking in this period: "On the one hand the party was strangled by the bureaucracy, but on the other Trotsky was unwilling to call on social forces outside the party to combat bureaucracy."

Marot believes, however, that Cliff doesn't take his analysis far enough. The real problem, says Marot, is that Trotsky failed to realize that the bureaucracy was "a social force with its own interests." Trotsky thought that Stalin and his followers represented a vacillating center caught between those in the party fighting socialism on the one hand and those who consciously or unconsciously were supporting capitalism on the other.

For Trotsky, socialism in Russia was embodied in nationalized property and its development. So when Stalin called for a state program of industrialization and for the collectivization of agriculture, Trotsky and his followers supported him; and when peasants and workers resisted those projects Trotsky refused to back them. Similarly, when Bukharin supported the continuation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that had allowed restricted markets and small business, Trotsky opposed him as representing the tendency to capitalist restoration. Trotsky's misunderstanding of the nature of Stalin's politics tended ironically to drive him and his followers to offer it cover and support, while driving them away from other Communists with whom they might have resisted Stalin.

These problems were compounded by Trotsky's belief in "unitary, single-party rule." He refused, for example, to support the early oppositions, such as the Workers' Group that arose in 1923, and when they were persecuted, declined to speak out on their behalf. Marot summarizes: "First, the Left Opposition could not organize a struggle against the bureaucracy, since it did not see the bureaucracy as a ruling class in its own right. Second, it could not organize against Stalin's program, since his program was to industrialize. Third, it could not organize on the issue of the Communist Party's monopoly of political power, since Trotskyists still acknowledged it to be the vanguard of the working class....In light of the foregoing, the Left Opposition put itself in a very poor position to organize workers' resistance to Stalin." It was these positions, says Marot, that explain why so many Trotskyists including many of the most prominent ones—such as Preobrazhensky and Christian Rakovsky—went over to Stalin.

Some Communists, such as V. Smirnov and T. Saprnov, leaders of the Democratic Centralists (Decists), had concluded that the Communist Party was not reformable because it represented the interests of a new ruling class. They called upon workers to resist Stalin's policies and some lower level Trotskyists supported them, though the Trotskyist leadership condemned them and urged the Left Opposition not to call for political strikes against a "workers' government." Trotskyist opposed an emerging working class opposition to Stalin because that suggested the creation of a new and separate workers' political party, an idea anathema to Trotsky and his followers at the time.

I have to confess that before reading this book I had already come to conclusions similar to those of John Marot on all of the major issues he takes up. So this book did not so much provide me with new ideas and arguments as confirm me in my existing views. On only one point do I differ with Marot, and that is not an essential one. In dealing with the arguments between Lenin and Bogdanov, Marot enters into long discussions of Lenin's book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The book is a response to the relatively new post-Newtonian physics which had introduced to the world notions such as "relativity" and generally shaken up earlier epistemological theories. Lenin responds to Ernst Mach and the Neo-Kantians with a defense of materialism that Marot defends as bending the stick in opposition to a resurgent idealism, but which I think—with its passive "photographic" theory of consciousness—is simply crude, unsophisticated, and utterly uninteresting and unconvincing. But that is a small point and not one essential to Marot's arguments in general.

In essence, this book is a defense of what is best in the Marxist tradition and in Lenin, and a powerful refutation of what is worst in Trotsky. I will keep it in my library.