

# CR

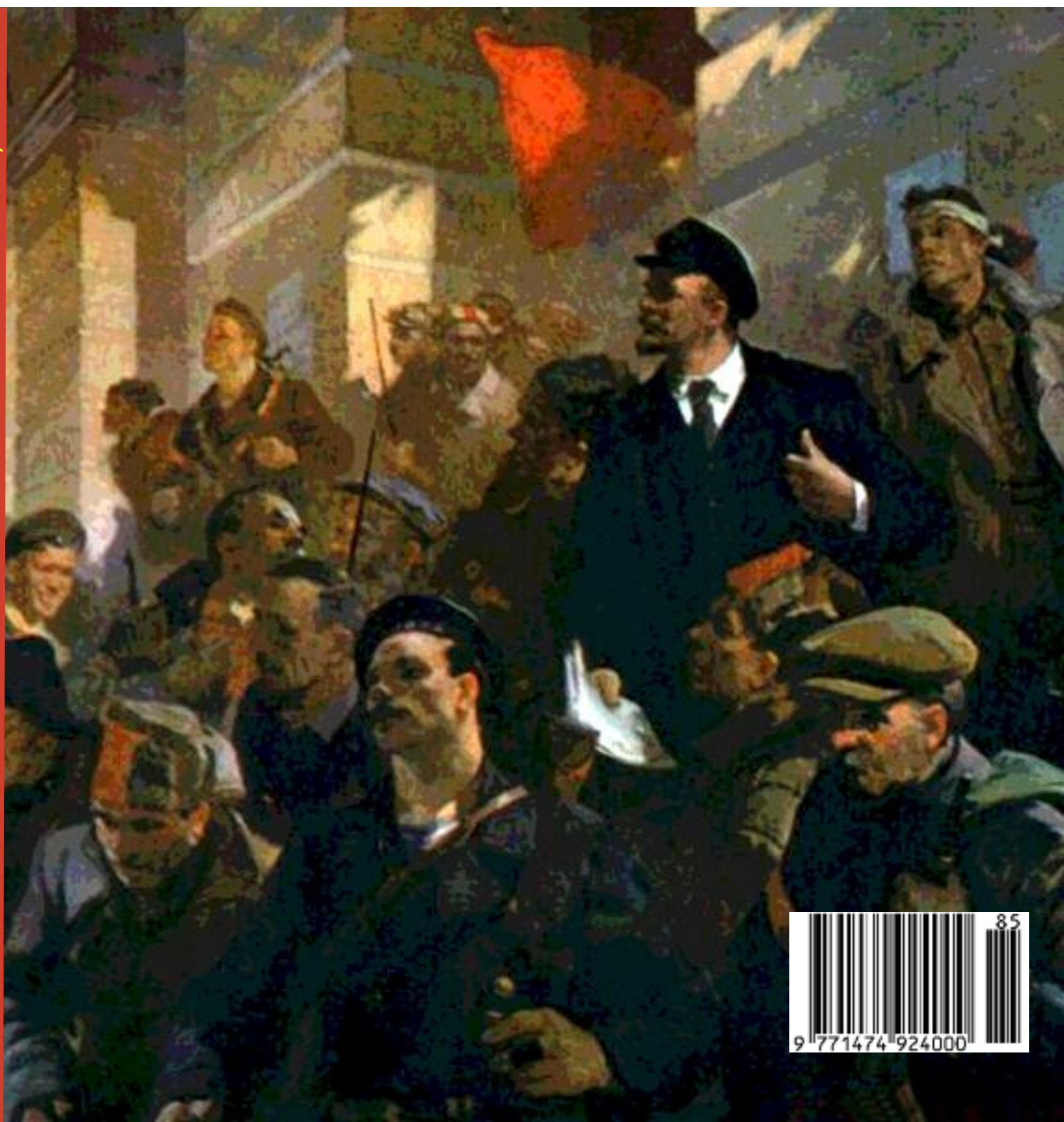
**1917: The Socialist Revolution** Andrew Rothstein  
**All Power to the Soviets!** Alexandra Kollontai  
**The Greatness and Fall of the USSR** Lars Ulrik Thomsen  
**Images of a Revolution** Nick Wright  
**The Wars of Intervention** Dennis Ogden  
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communist party theory and discussion journal

number 85 Autumn 2017 £3

1917 2017 Russian Revolution centenary





founded 1921

communist party theory and discussion journal  
new series number 85 • Autumn 2017  
ISSN 1474-9246

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Printed by APRINT

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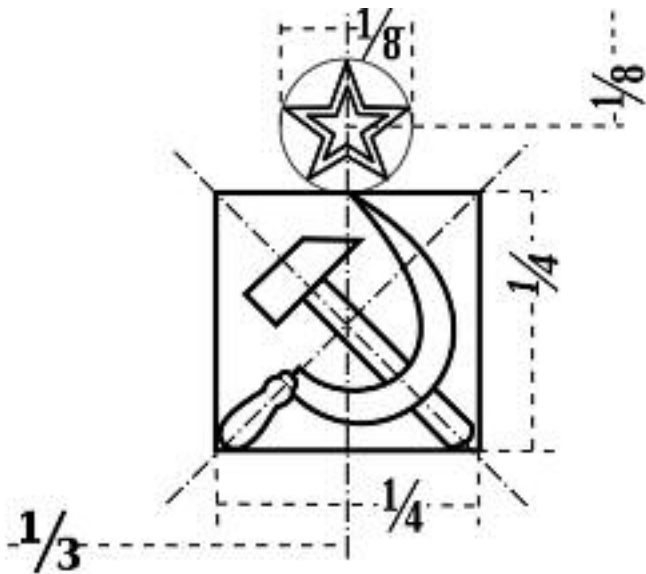
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members' section of the Communist Party web site  
[www.communist-party.org.uk](http://www.communist-party.org.uk).

Cover image: **Image from 1970 USSR stamp  
celebrating the centenary of Lenin's birth  
after Nikolai Babasyuk's painting:  
First Day of Soviet Power**

Above right: **Soviet national emblem**



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**O**CTOBER 25 OLD-STYLE, November 7 on the current calendar. Exactly 100 years ago this autumn the workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd overthrew the Russian Provisional Government in the name of the Petrograd Soviet. Following the capture of the Winter Palace, all state power was transferred to the Congress of Soviets.

Is it just a coincidence that the blank shot announcing the assault on the Winter Palace was fired by the cruiser *Aurora*? The name means dawn, and this was a new dawn, not just for Russia, but for the world. Within a few weeks the revolution had swept Russia, though in Moscow and a number of other places it required fierce fighting.

In this issue of *CR* we celebrate the significance of the Great October Socialist Revolution. Several articles are taken from communist publications 50 years ago, most of the authors having either directly experienced – like Alexandra Kollontai – or lived through that momentous event. We include some observations written in connection with the 90th anniversary. And then we also have images and poetry from the revolutionary period and some modern-day observations.

Andrew Rothstein, following up the previous two articles on *The Fall of Tsardom*, shows how the Russian workers, soldiers and peasants had to learn by practical experience that there was no alternative but to take power themselves. They wanted ‘peace, bread and land’ but this could only be delivered through the mass democratic organisations, the Soviets, which by October 1917 were led by the Bolsheviks.

Lenin had correctly assessed Russia as the weakest link in the imperialist chain, and his strategy was to work towards transforming the February Revolution into a socialist one. But there was no guarantee that events would follow such a course. The October Revolution was made possible by the Bolsheviks’ correct strategy and their painstaking efforts over many years. And there are lessons in Lenin’s *Letter to Comrades* of October 16-17 (29-30), 1917:<sup>1</sup> his precise spelling out of the conditions for insurrection – in particular leadership by a Marxist political party enjoying mass support – would apply also to a non-insurrectionary revolutionary situation today.

Lenin had hoped that the October Revolution would be followed by successful revolutions in the industrialised West. Not only did this not happen, but, as described in Dennis Ogden’s article, the young Soviet republic had to fight the wars of intervention led by Western, particularly British, imperialism. The then right-wing leaders of Western social democracy bear an enormous responsibility, not only for the imperialist intervention, but also for the betrayal of the opportunity for socialist revolution in their own countries. Ultimately, that led to fascism. The whole history of the world could have been very different.

But the Decree on Peace did give a boost to all those fighting against the imperialist war begun in 1914; the *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia* and the *Appeal to All Worker Moslems of Russia and the East* were inspirations to the subject peoples of the colonial empires – Ireland included, as Desmond Greaves’ article shows; and

the fact that the Russian people had thrown out their exploiters led to a strengthening of working class consciousness, the foundation of communist parties and the establishment of the Communist International. The Revolution started the process which ultimately led to national liberation and the revolutions in China, Cuba and Vietnam.

Devastated by the wars of intervention and surrounded by hostile capitalist powers, the USSR faced the enormous task of building socialism – and then had to start again after the German invasion and the enormous losses sustained. That they were able to defeat the Nazis is a testament to both the work of the Soviet Communist Party during the war, and to the tremendous advances which had been made before then – in socialist industry and agriculture, in the overcoming of poverty and illiteracy, in the flowering of socialist culture, in the rights of women and nationalities. The Soviet peoples knew what they were fighting for, and were prepared to lay down their lives for it.

There is not space in this introduction to deal with the full range of Soviet cultural achievements – art, sculpture, cinema, music, poetry, literature ... – which still resonate in the world today. The colour images in this *CR*, and the extracts from Blok’s poem *The Twelve* in the Soul Food column, give just a glimpse of the early revolutionary flowering; while Pierre Marshall’s interview with Mike Quille looks at how art should “help us understand the world, get to the heart of things, live richer and more satisfying lives.”

As we know, there were also mistakes and injustices in the Soviet Union. Hans Heinz Holz, in the extracts published here, regarded those as partly a consequence of the prolongation of the revolutionary process, due to hostile encirclement, and partly to “fronts of the class struggle inside the Party”, due to pre-socialist class antagonisms “which continued in the Party leadership after the Revolution”. And he states that in no socialist revolution yet “was the economic structure ready and prepared for socialist production relations.”

Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that the Soviet Union did not survive. Holz argues that there was a turn to revisionism in the Soviet Union with the idea that developed socialism had been achieved. Lars Ulrik Thomsen comments that the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Party in 1956 was a missed opportunity, and that the disastrous reforms of the mid-1980s were based on positivism and neokantianism.

But this does not mean that there is no reason to celebrate. Drawing parallels with the Paris Commune of 1871, Liz Payne comments that the enormous sacrifices of the Soviet people “demonstrated in concrete reality that another world is possible.” We do not know where the next socialist breakthrough will take place but we do know, as Steve Johnson writes, that the “guidance by Marx and Engels, later developed by Lenin ... can take us forward in the struggle for working-class power today.”

## Reference

- 1 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 26, pp 212-3.



FROM THE ARCHIVES: 50 YEARS AGO

# 1917: The Socialist Revolution

Andrew Rothstein

■ Originally published in *Marxism Today*, November 1967, pp 327-340.  
Reproduced here with minor editing and additional citations and endnotes.



“The Provisional Government has been deposed. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies – the Military Revolutionary Committee, which heads the Petrograd proletariat and the garrison.” V I Lenin

Scene  
from the  
film  
October

Sergei  
Eisenstein

ON 8 APRIL 1917, after a week in Russia, Lenin’s trusted comrade Alexandra Kollontai wrote to him and his wife:<sup>1</sup>

“The people are still intoxicated by the great act. I say the people, because it is not the working class which holds front place but a diffuse and motley mass dressed in soldiers’ greatcoats. At present it is the soldier who dictates the mood, the soldier too who is creating a peculiar atmosphere in which the greatness of the vividly expressed democratic liberties, the awakening of consciousness of equal rights for all citizens and complete failure to understand the complexity of the moment, are all mixed up together. Amidst the feverish activity and striving to build something new, different from the past, there is too loud a sound of triumph already attained, as though the cause has been won completely. Not only is the ‘internal enemy’ underestimated – biding his time, and of course far from finished off – but undoubtedly our people, and particularly the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, lack the *resolution* and *political judgement* for carrying on what has begun, consolidating power in the hands of democracy. ‘We are already in power’ – that is the complacently mistaken mood of the majority in the Soviet. And of course this intoxication with successes achieved is taken advantage of by the Guchkov<sup>2</sup> Government, bowing hypocritically before the will and decision of the Soviet in minor details, but naturally in the main – and particularly on the question of the war – keeping the ‘reins’ in its own hands.”

#### “We want an End to this War”

“Particularly on the question of the war”: yet on this very question there lurked a deep and decisive division between the vast majority of those in soldiers’ greatcoats and the representatives of capitalism who dominated the first Provisional Government. The soldiers were determined that the slaughter in the war with Germany should end. That they had suffered, in all probability, well over 3 million killed already, was the British military attaché’s estimate: and he did not conceal the terrifying figures of the Russian Army’s lack of weapons, compared with that of their allies – one heavy gun to 984 yards, compared with the British 13 and the French 10 per 914 yards.<sup>3</sup> “When they came and told

us about the revolution, all the soldiers said, ‘Thank God, perhaps there will soon be peace’,” said a soldier delegate Ostromoukhov (not a Bolshevik) at the first conference of Soviets in April. He had always followed the speeches of the socialists in the Duma, because they had never talked about war to a victorious conclusion. “My comrades told me, when they were sending me to this conference, that I should tell comrade Chkheidze (the Menshevik leader) and everyone that we are ready to lay down our lives for this liberty; but all the same, comrades, we want an end to this war.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, British representatives with the Russian Army knew perfectly well that, on the showing of officers whom they knew, a Russian offensive was now “out of the question”!<sup>5</sup> This did not prevent them, and the ambassador under whom they worked, from exercising every kind of pressure on the ‘Guchkov’ Provisional Government to launch such an offensive.

#### Capitalists and Landlords

In the background for the moment, for the great mass of those demonstrating their joy in endless demonstrations to the Petrograd Soviet at the Taurida Palace – Kollontai in her letter speaks of “schoolboys and laundresses, caretakers and cab drivers” going there – was the fact that Russia was still in the hands of great capitalists and landowners.

The big banks still controlled 50% of the share capital of the iron and steel industry, 60% of coalmining, 80% of electrical engineering. When the workers introduced the 8-hour day on their own initiative, sanctioned later by the Soviets, and began pressing for wage increases, employers freely answered by lockouts: between March and October 1917, about 1,000 industrial establishments were closed down in this way. The cost of living went on rising; and, while evasion of tax obligations by the capitalists was well known, the workers were heavily burdened by indirect taxes and the constant fall in the purchasing power of the ruble.

A few tens of thousands of great landowners owned over 360 million acres, while more than 13½ million poor and middle peasants had under 330 million acres between them (a third of them with no implements and no horse).<sup>6</sup> French ambassador Paléologue noted in his diary on March 20, after tea with a group of nobles, that their one fear was “division of the land”: one of them alone possessed 700,000 acres in Volhynia, in the south-west. But they hoped that only Crown and Church lands – about 220 million acres – would be taken, and that this would satisfy the peasantry.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. THE FORCES OF 'ORDER'

At dinner the previous evening, with another group of nobles, the ambassador had been assured that the workers – at most, he was told, 1,200,000 out of 178 million – “won't always be our masters”, and that the Black Hundreds<sup>8</sup> would still have their part to play.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Professor S G Svatikov, who was sent round the Russian embassies abroad to see how the ending of espionage against political exiles was proceeding, reported that the Russian diplomats, “profoundly hating the revolution, use every effort to discredit not only democracy, but the Provisional Government itself.”<sup>10</sup> But for the time being these and similar supporters of the old order had to restrain themselves.

However, Prince Lvov's Provisional Government (in which there was only one professed socialist, Kerensky) only had to proclaim that it was acting on behalf of democracy, and in the name of liberty, for it to continue in all essentials upholding capitalism, whose representatives occupied nearly all its ministerial posts. The most influential among them were ‘Octobrists’ – bourgeois landowners in the main, or their spokesmen, with War Minister Guchkov as their leader – and ‘Cadets’ (Constitutional Democrats) – chiefly professors and lawyers who hoped for capitalism prosperous and expanding in Russia (and outside it, to Constantinople and Asia Minor).

Among the latter Milyukov, the Foreign Minister, was outstanding. He told Paléologue on March 17, “We are not responsible to the Duma.” “You hold your powers from the Revolution?” replied Paléologue. “No, we received them, we inherited them, from the Grand Duke Michael, who transferred them to us.”<sup>11</sup> And while Milyukov and his colleagues had enough sense to keep this ‘constitutional theory’ to themselves, in practice they acted as though it were in force.

### Old State Preserved

While dismissing from their public office the great landowners who held the post of Tsarist governors and vice-governors of provinces, they replaced them on March 17 with the corresponding officers of the provincial zemstvos – who, although now named “Commissars of the Provisional Government”, with extremely wide powers, did not thereby cease to be the “presidents of the nobility” of their province.<sup>12</sup>

All the Tsarist public prosecutors were maintained in office – and the archives of the gendarmerie and the secret police were transferred to their care.<sup>13</sup> The Law Committee of the Provisional Government refused to submit legislation which would (a) guarantee equal rights for women in the future Constituent Assembly, (b) allow children to be freed from religious instruction in schools, and (c) allow government employees leave of absence to attend provincial congresses of Soviets, trade unions, etc. It insisted (May 30) that the Tsar and his family would retain full electoral rights, and that (in its draft land decree of July 25-27) the landowners' estates must remain their private property.<sup>14</sup>

It is not surprising that by the summer the Provisional Government had begun sending punitive expeditions into the countryside to suppress peasant ‘disturbances’ (seizures of land and stock); or that it did not even proclaim Russia a Republic until September 14, after a rebellion by the would-be military dictator General Kornilov had been defeated by the workers, sailors and soldiers.

### Foreign Policy Continued

Most striking, however, was its stubborn effort to continue the Tsar's foreign policy. Morgan Philips Price, correspondent in

Russia of the *Manchester Guardian*, found no revolution in the Russian Foreign Office. He wrote:<sup>15</sup>

“The same old Tsarist plans of conquest were being run by officials who had exchanged the watchword ‘aristocratic privilege’ for ‘middle class efficiency’.”

The memoirs of the British and French ambassadors and their subordinates, and the apologies of Kerensky and his agents, give an unanswerable picture of this aspect of the Provisional Government's policy, of the unyielding pressure exerted on it by its Allies – and of the difficulties which this constantly produced, right up to the end.<sup>16</sup> Some account of the main stages in the struggle will be found later.

Without the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries who controlled the Petrograd Soviet, the bourgeoisie would have been powerless: of this both were convinced. On March 22 Guchkov had replied to General Alexeyev, Chief of the General Staff, who had complained of excessive concessions to the Petrograd Soviet:

“The Provisional Government does not dispose of any real authority. Its orders are carried out only to the extent permitted by the Soviet, which controls the most important elements of real power, as the troops, railways, posts and telegraphs are in its hands. One can say frankly that the Provisional Government exists only so long as this is tolerated by the Soviet.”<sup>17</sup>

Alexeyev accordingly, two days later, sent a confidential circular to all commanders of fronts and armies, instructing them that any orders from the government could come only by agreement with the Soviet, which alone had “real power”.<sup>18</sup>

## 3. THE SOVIETS, MARCH-APRIL

In the Petrograd Soviet the overwhelming majority of deputies were non-Bolsheviks (the Bolsheviks numbered 65 out of over 2,500 at the end of March and 100 a month later); it should not be supposed, however, that most of those who called themselves Mensheviks or Socialist-Revolutionaries really had any knowledge of socialism. At first, writes Philips Price, only active revolutionaries from among the workers and soldiers could be found there:

“Gradually however other grades of the proletariat began to be drawn into the Soviet system: the small handicraft worker, the half-proletarian peasant, the shop-assistant, the bank clerk type etc. These imperfectly organised and politically undeveloped proletarian groups allowed themselves to be dominated by persons not strictly of their class .... These social elements, from the first days of the March Revolution, began to cluster round the Menshevik wing.”

Earlier he had been struck by the even more marked process in the Moscow Soviet (where, by May, the Bolsheviks had 143 deputies out of 625). He commented on

“the large number of officers, advocates, middle-class politicians and even small Government officials who were elected .... Anyone of the free professions and anyone with a university education, who was not known to be a Monarchist, could get into the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. The Menshevik group and the Socialist-

Revolutionary Party were literally filled in those days with people who in reality had nothing in common with socialism and the Revolution, and these people acquired a great influence over the provincial Soviets.<sup>19</sup>

A recent fully-documented account, based on vast original research into provincial archives, newspapers, etc, confirms this situation.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the Soviets in their first months faithfully reflected that very mixed-up state of mind of the masses which Alexandra Kollontai described in the letter to Lenin. But of course their leaders, the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, had much more definite views of their own. The essence of these was that the job of the bourgeoisie was to govern, and to develop capitalism further, while the job of socialists was to ‘supervise’ the Government and prevent the people going to ‘extremes’.

### **Contradictory Policies**

The mixed-up condition of political immaturity in the classes which in reality had power at their command led, nevertheless, to problems for their leaders. Contradictory policies had to be adopted which sometimes played directly into the hands of the bourgeoisie, but sometimes forced the latter to make concessions.

Thus, at its very first meeting on March 15, the Provisional Government decided to allow Nicholas II and his family to leave Russia. Next day the EC of the Petrograd Soviet, on the contrary, demanded their arrest. On March 17 Nicholas decided he would go to England, and on March 19 the Government asked for British agreement. But when Kerensky announced the decision at the Moscow Soviet on the 20th, there was an uproar; and on the 21st, at the reiterated demand of the Petrograd Soviet, the ex-Tsar and his wife were arrested. That same day, the British War Cabinet resolved that it would be glad to see the Tsar out of Russia, “but they doubt if Great Britain is the right place”<sup>21</sup> – and Sir George Buchanan, the ambassador in Petrograd, was told of this.

Fearing direct defiance of the Soviet, Milyukov now informed Buchanan that the plan to send Nicholas abroad had only been postponed; but when the ambassador began pressing for the earliest possible departure of Nicholas and his family, the Provisional Government had to ask him (April 3) not to embarrass them, as rumours about plans to get the Romanovs away were still circulating.<sup>22</sup> Finally, on April 13, Lloyd George told the War Cabinet that there was strong hostility to Nicholas II here “in certain working class circles”, and the South of France would be “a better place” for him. The British ambassador was to be asked his opinion of this – and thereafter the question was dropped.<sup>23</sup> The workers and soldiers had won.

### **The War Continued**

When it came to the question of continuation of the war, however – and particularly of war aims – the majority in the Petrograd Soviet (and, after the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets in July, in the Central Executive Committee (CEC) elected there) played a more subtle game, constantly finishing up on the side of the Provisional Government. On March 19 the latter issued manifestos to the civil population and the Army, proclaiming its determination to carry on the war “to a victorious conclusion” (the previous day its representative in London Nabokov had been informed by Foreign Secretary Balfour that this was an essential condition for recognition;

and earlier still, on March 17, a group of British Labour leaders had cabled Kerensky and Chkheidze in the same sense).<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, on March 24 Milyukov as Foreign Minister informed the ambassadors of the Allies that Russia stood for firm observance of the treaties between them, *ie* of the undertakings to dismember the German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Empires in one another’s favour. The treaties were still secret, but an Allied Note to President Wilson in January had already been described by the British Socialist Party – like other revolutionary socialist parties – as “a programme of conquest” displaying “aggressive ends”. On March 27 the Petrograd Soviet also had its say: it issued a manifesto to the peoples of the world calling, on the one hand, for an international struggle of the peoples against the “annexationist strivings of the governments of all countries”, yet proclaiming, on the other hand, that “the Russian revolution would not retreat before the bayonets of conquerors and would not allow itself to be crushed by external military force.”

After the annexationist manifesto of the Provisional Government, this was merely a high-sounding acceptance of continuation of the war (Lenin called it, a month later, “nothing but idle, innocent and pious wishes of the petty bourgeois”<sup>25</sup>).

Taking the cue from this lead, the Provisional Government on April 9 published a new declaration of war aims, saying that it wanted no violent seizure of foreign territories, only “a stable peace on the basis of self-determination of peoples” and would “fully observe its obligation to its Allies”. Three days later a preliminary All-Russian Conference of Soviets, at which Bolshevik speakers had criticised the declaration, rejected their resolution, and once more endorsed the Provisional Government’s statement, by 325 votes to 57 with 20 abstentions.

### **The Mensheviks**

Thus in fact the Menshevik leaders of the Soviet tied the Russian people not only to the policy of the Provisional Government, but to the war aims of Britain, France and Italy.

Their peculiar services to the latter three were brought out most clearly by the contrast with the very cold reception given by the Soviets in Petrograd, Moscow and at the front to delegations sent to Russia by the French Socialist and British Labour leaders, when they spoke too brutally and openly of carrying on until the destruction of the enemy empires.

We learn from its minutes<sup>26</sup> that the British War Cabinet was at great pains to secure a suitably composed delegation with “a reliable Russian Socialist being attached as interpreter”, and even favoured “the addition of a more academic Socialist of the type of Mr Hyndman”. But the presence with the ultra-jingo delegates – O’Grady, Will Thorne and Sanders – of the renegade Alexinsky in the capacity of ‘reliable Socialist’ was too much even for the ‘moderates’ in the Soviet; the delegates were castigated everywhere by the rank and file for not demanding democratic peace aims of their own governments. And it must have been poor consolation for them to be described as “three fine fellows” by General Knox, and “simply admirable” by Professor Bernard Pares, attached to the Russian GHQ.<sup>27</sup>

## **4. THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY**

In earlier articles,<sup>28</sup> I showed how the Bolshevik groups in the largest Petrograd factories and in the armed forces had led the way in the great struggles from 1916 onwards and in the five historic days which brought down Tsardom – only to be

submerged, so it seemed, in the resultant great flood which Kollontai described in the letter quoted above, and which Lenin defined as the “gigantic petty-bourgeois wave”,<sup>29</sup> swamping even sections of the workers with petty-bourgeois ideas on politics. Yet from the first the Bolshevik Party had begun its distinctive struggle in the new conditions, swimming against the stream; and on April 16 it received a powerful reinforcement by the return of Lenin.

Everywhere the Bolsheviks began reconstituting their organisation as a legal party, directly Tsardom fell: Party groups in the factories, travelling organisers (‘agents’) of the Central Committee, the “Russian Bureau” of the Central Committee (A G Shlyapnikov, P A Zalutsky and V M Molotov) all emerged from illegality, soon reinforced by old members released from prison, Russian exile or emigration abroad. *Pravda* resumed publication on March 18, and other Bolshevik papers began to appear elsewhere. The Party membership was about 24,000: over 60% workers, just over 25% “office workers” – most of these professional revolutionaries who had been working underground – and over 7% peasants.

There were about 2,000 in Petrograd, 600 in Moscow, 500 in the Urals, the rest in other main industrial centres like the Volga towns, the Donetsk coalfield or Kharkov. A certain number of organisations formed in the first weeks of legality in remoter areas like the Caucasus, Siberia or Central Asia, totalling perhaps 14% of the Party, included Mensheviks as well – though a small minority of the latter, as a rule.<sup>30</sup>

### Lenin’s Line

Lenin, who had fought all through the war for a clean break with every kind of socialist grouping supporting it – or tolerating alliance with such ‘social-patriots’ – had foreseen its continuation. His first letter to Alexandra Kollontai in Stockholm, written in Zurich on March 16, underlined:

“Of course, we shall continue to be against defence of the fatherland, against the imperialist slaughter controlled by Shingaryov<sup>31</sup> + Kerensky and Co. ... Definitely ... agitation and struggle with the object of an *international* proletarian revolution and the conquest of power by the ‘Soviets of Workers’ Deputies’.”<sup>32</sup>

He immediately began working out with Zinoviev the draft of more extended points (they did not see the light until 1924); but in a letter to Kollontai, who had cabled asking for his “directives”, Lenin wrote on March 17 that

“In my opinion, the main thing now, is not to let oneself get entangled in stupid ‘unification’ attempts with the social-patriots (or, more dangerous still, with waverers like the Organising Committee,<sup>33</sup> Trotsky and Co).”<sup>34</sup>

Evidently fearing that the letter would not (in wartime conditions) reach Kollontai in time, Lenin on March 19 sent a third message – a cable “To Bolsheviks leaving for Russia”.<sup>35</sup> It ran:

“Our tactics: no trust in and no support for the new government; Kerensky is especially suspect; arming of the proletariat is the only guarantee, immediate elections to the Petrograd City Council, no rapprochement with other parties. Telegraph this to Petrograd.”

Then, in a series of *Letters from Afar* (March 20 – April

8),<sup>36</sup> Lenin developed these points in the shape of articles. Only the first of the letters was printed in *Pravda* (March 21, 22 [and abbreviated –*Ed*]); but it emphasised that against the new government, representing “the new class which has risen to political power in Russia, the class of capitalist landlords and bourgeoisie which has long been *ruling* our country economically”, the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies represented “the interests of all the entire mass of the poor section of the population, *ie* of nine-tenths of the population” – and was “the embryo of a workers’ government”.<sup>37</sup>

On March 17, the Russian Bureau of the CC, in its first public statement after the overthrow of Tsardom, called the Provisional Government “in essence counter-revolutionary”, and said there could be no agreements with it. But it put forward instead the idea of “a provisional revolutionary government of a democratic character (the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry)” – without reference to the role of the Soviets. This left unchallenged the possibility of the Soviets themselves becoming the mainstay of the government by majority decisions, as in fact they did – under cover of the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary plea that they were ‘exercising pressure’ on the government.

A number of Party meetings of workers went on record, indeed, demanding that the Soviets should take over power. But the insufficiently clear resolutions of the Russian Bureau for a time did make possible in turn the view that ‘pressure’ on the Provisional Government was a practicable policy, or that unity with at least Left Mensheviks was permissible; not to speak of some expressions of what Lenin called “revolutionary defencism”<sup>38</sup> – notably by Kamenev, who in an article in *Pravda* said Russian soldiers must “answer bullet with bullet, and shell with shell”.

### The April Theses

However, the great majority of the Party were obviously ill at ease in face of such views, and this became clear at once directly Lenin returned on April 16 and read his famous *April Theses* the following day (published in *Pravda* on the 20th). It should be said that the Bolsheviks had issued the call for organising legal trade unions on a national scale, and hundreds of thousands were being enrolled by the end of March. They had also called for the election of all-in factory committees, which began at great speed, outstripping at first the formation of trade unions – principally in connection with the struggle for an 8-hour day. With this went the formation (mainly on the Bolsheviks’ initiative) of armed workers’ militias,<sup>39</sup> soon numbering tens of thousands in all industrial centres. Thus the Bolshevik Party was well able to judge what at any rate the most active sections of the working class were thinking, by the time Lenin returned.

The details of his *April Theses*, and of the article which accompanied them, must be studied elsewhere. The outstanding features were that:<sup>40</sup>

- (i) the war remained capitalist and predatory until power had been taken by the proletariat and poorest peasantry;
- (ii) power was in the hands of the capitalists because of the insufficient class-consciousness of the proletariat, which trusted the capitalist Provisional Government;
- (iii) there should be no support of the latter, only exposure;
- (iv) the Party, recognising that it was in a minority in most Soviets, should patiently explain to the workers the need for all power to be transferred to those bodies;
- (v) Russia should become a republic of Soviets; and
- (vi) though a number of sweeping political, administrative and



economic measures ought to be taken – including confiscation of all landowners’ estates and nationalisation of all land – the aim for the present must be, not the introduction of socialism, but “only to bring social production and the distribution of products under the control of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.”

This programme of theory and practice for the immediate future was treated as madness, if not worse, by the Bolsheviks’ rivals in the Soviets. But within three weeks it had won practical unanimity in the Party. After a series of meetings in the wards of Petrograd, a Petrograd City Conference – now representing 15,000 members – approved it by 33 to 6 with 2 abstentions. Other regional organisations did the same by even bigger majorities. At Kiev the district committee had rejected the theses, but a city aggregate meeting reversed the decision.<sup>41</sup> The 7th All-Russian Party Conference on 7-12 May 1917 (the 6th Conference had had to be held abroad, in Prague, in January 1912) adopted by immense majorities the main resolutions based on Lenin’s theses – on the war and “revolutionary defencism”, by 126 to 0 with 7 abstentions; on the Provisional Government, by 122 to 3 with 8 abstentions; and on the agrarian question, by 122 to 0 with 11 abstentions.<sup>42</sup>

By this time the Party had grown to 80,000 members – 16,000 in Petrograd, 7,000 in Moscow, nearly 15,000 in the Urals, 5,000 in the Donetsk coalfield. Moreover, there were about 6,000 members in the armed forces.<sup>43</sup>

## 5. THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MASSES

By this time, too, the working class and the mass of the peasants and soldiers had begun the long process of testing out in real life the pledges of the two sides. What was unique in history was the reflection of the tests, and their results, in the Soviets, by far the most sensitive and representative organ of opinion which the mass of the people have ever possessed anywhere in modern times. It is quite impossible to give more than a summary in this article. Mr Philips Price’s *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution*, together with the new [1966 –Ed] *History of the October Revolution* from the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, are still the best general accounts in English, although there is much valuable material in the *History of the Civil War in the USSR* published in the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> When A M Andreyev’s book, *The Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies on the Eve of the October Revolution*, appears in English [1971 –Ed], it will be a valuable addition to basic knowledge for the British working class public.

The succession of crises which involved the Provisional Government and the classes supporting it, the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leadership of the Soviets and the classes supporting them, and the Bolshevik Party with its growing backing from the most class-conscious elements among the industrial workers, the soldiers and the poor peasantry, makes the most convenient framework of events.

### The April Crisis and its Consequences

In the second half of March and the first fortnight of April large forces regarded as reliable – two corps and seven separate divisions – were quietly transferred to the Northern front nearest to Petrograd. The forces of reaction were becoming anxious at the fraternisation at the front and growing peace moods in the rear. Paléologue noted in his diary on April 1 that when Kornilov (commanding the Petrograd garrison) held a review that day on the square before the Winter Palace, the soldiers marched under banners calling for “Land and Liberty!”, “The Land for the People!”, “Hail the Socialist

Republic!” – and very few marked “War to Victory!”<sup>45</sup>

On May Day, while the workers and soldiers of Petrograd were marching in a huge demonstration at the call of the Petrograd Soviet, with banners calling for “peace and brotherhood of the peoples”, “no annexations or indemnities”, Foreign Minister Milyukov, protesting loyalty to “existing obligations”, sent a Note to the Allies reaffirming the aim of “war to decisive victory”, and insisting on a peace with “guarantees and sanctions”.

Publication of the Note on May 3 brought out soldiers and sailors in big protest demonstrations, later supported by thousands of workers at the call of the Bolshevik Party, demanding Milyukov’s resignation. There were scuffles in the city centre, with students, military cadets and businessmen shouting support for the Provisional Government. At a private meeting with leaders of the Provisional Government in Guchkov’s house, Kornilov offered to disperse the demonstrations by military force – but the ministers hesitated, wisely as it turned out.

Strikes and demonstrations continued the whole of the next day, in the course of which several people were shot; and Kornilov telephoned an artillery school ordering two batteries to be brought out on the Palace Square. The soldiers and officers there unanimously refused to carry out the order, and sent to the Soviet to discover whether Kornilov had its approval. Two hours later the general cancelled his order. There were also great demonstrations in Moscow, Kharkov, Minsk and other cities.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile the Petrograd Soviet leaders, while exhorting revolutionary and military and naval units to keep calm and refrain from sending units to Petrograd unless requested by the Soviet, extracted from the government an “explanation” to the effect that the Note did not mean annexations when it talked of obligations and guarantees. By 34 votes to 19 the EC of the Petrograd Soviet decided to accept the “explanation” – and this decision was endorsed by the full Soviet the same evening.

Kornilov resigned, and a government crisis began, with a proposal by Kerensky on May 9, that a coalition be formed. After several days of negotiation – it was during these days that the 7th Conference of the Bolshevik Party was held – the EC of the Petrograd Soviet on May 14 decided by 44 to 19, with 2 abstentions, to take part in a coalition (the minority demanded that the Soviets should take power). Guchkov had already resigned on the 12th, now Milyukov too resigned. Finally, at midnight on May 17, after prolonged haggling over posts, a coalition of 10 capitalist and 6 socialist ministers was formed, with Prince Lvov still as President. The full meeting of the Soviet on May 18 endorsed the decision – as did most Soviets throughout the country.

It was only logical that the British War Cabinet decided on May 23 to recall Sir George Buchanan and to send its Labour member Arthur Henderson to Petrograd – temporarily at first, permanently if he wished – so that he could “exercise a powerful influence on the democratic elements which now predominate in Russia”.<sup>47</sup>

### The Conflict Sharpens

At the beginning of May the Bolsheviks had won majorities in the Soviets of the principal working class districts of Petrograd. In the next few weeks, they substantially increased their representation in both the Petrograd and the Moscow Soviets. On June 13 the workers’ section of the Petrograd Soviet voted a Bolshevik resolution for the first time: it called for power to be transferred to the Soviets. By June 1 the Bolshevik

representation in the Moscow Soviet had gone up from 143 to 205 members out of 625. In the textile centres of Ivanovo-Voznesensk and Kostroma they won majorities. At Yekaterinburg, the main city of the Urals, they won 95 seats out of 160 in the workers' section of the Soviet; they became the largest party in the workers' section at Saratov and Syzran, the big Volga ports; and they won half the seats in the Tsaritsyn Soviet. In all the big cities, during these weeks, Bolshevik representation in the Soviets increased substantially. At the first Congress of Soviets in the Urals (June 22-27) they had an absolute majority. They also substantially increased their representation in the soldiers' sections of many Soviets.<sup>48</sup>

These changes were not isolated. The Party's concentration of its day-to-day work in the factories, stimulating the formation and activity of factory committees, began to produce great results. At the first Petrograd Conference of factory committees (June 12-16), where 367 factories were represented, the Bolsheviks won 75% of the votes on all main questions; and similar results were achieved in factory committees' conferences in Moscow and elsewhere. The Bolsheviks had been pioneers in calling for the massive formation of trade unions – and at the 3rd All-Russian Conference of Trade Unions, representing close on 1½ million workers (July 4-11), they had 73 delegates out of 211<sup>49</sup> – although on most questions they gathered 83 to 85 votes. Again, in local council (town Duma) elections – the first in Russian history – they won hundreds of thousands of votes.

An outstanding event was the great demonstration in Petrograd on July 1. Originally the Bolshevik Central Committee had called a demonstration for June 23, in order to give a peaceful outlet to rising anger among the soldiers at the open propaganda for 'war to victory' of all kinds of officers' organisations and of a Cossack Congress, while Kerensky, as the new War Minister, was restoring draconian powers to officers in the Army.

At the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which had opened on June 16 – and where the Bolsheviks had 107 delegates out of over 900 – the Menshevik leader Chkheidze on the 22nd raised a panic outcry about the Bolsheviks plotting to seize power, and secured first the prohibition of all demonstrations for three days, and then the holding of an 'official' demonstration on July 1. Half a million workers and soldiers took part – and the overwhelming majority of the banners bore such slogans as "Out with the 10 Capitalist Ministers!", "Down with Counter-Revolution!", "All Power to the Soviets!" Many similar demonstrations were held in other cities.

The counter-revolutionaries and their 'socialist' allies were now determined to cut short any further advances by the Bolsheviks. The Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leaders had been forced by mass distrust of the Provisional Government's war aims to call for an International Socialist Conference in Stockholm, which should discuss how to end the war by a democratic peace. But the opposition of the Allied Governments to any of their real socialists taking part, supported from behind the scenes by the Provisional Government, had soon demonstrated (as Lenin had publicly forecast) that the whole idea was only a diversion on the part of the opportunist Soviet leaders – although it had had the unexpected effect (for them) of incensing the Russian workers still more against the Allies.<sup>50</sup> More radical measures had to be sought – and they were found in a renewed offensive by the Russian Army on the south-western front (against the Austrians).

## Renewed War Offensive

For months Russian ministers and officials, both in Petrograd and in London, had been complaining of delays in contracted deliveries of guns and munitions by their Allies. It was well known that many divisions had refused to fight, and that, on the front selected for the attack, many divisions were short of artillery.<sup>51</sup> But there was a political advantage to be gained, and the ground for this was being thoroughly prepared.

On June 12 Buchanan had cabled home that the new Foreign Minister, Tereshchenko, had said that the "extremists" would again try to produce disorders, but that this time the government was thoroughly prepared. A few days before, the same minister had said that the government intended to "settle accounts" with the Petrograd garrison, using Cossacks for the purpose. In cables to Russian representatives abroad, during the third week of June, Tereshchenko indicated that the Provisional Government was now only waiting for "excesses" to have a pretext for suppressing the Bolsheviks.<sup>52</sup> It came without any excesses.

The offensive soon broke down – and Bolshevik propaganda was blamed, although in fact, at the cost of 60,000 soldiers killed or wounded in the attack, more prisoners were captured in one day than had been taken by the British Army in a whole month. The Germans transferred nine divisions from western fronts to stem the offensive. But in order to make certain of an atmosphere of crisis, the four Cadet ministers resigned (July 15), nominally because the Government had agreed to autonomy for Ukraine. Great demonstrations of soldiers and workers began in Petrograd immediately, the same day, and rapidly grew to such dimensions – calling for all power to the Soviets – that the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party itself was obliged to try to turn it into peaceful channels, fearing a premature rising. This was the opportunity the Provisional Government had been waiting for.

## 6. THE JULY DAYS AND AFTER

In the early morning of July 17 the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary majority of the CEC of the Soviets issued a manifesto denouncing the demonstrations as "treachery to the revolutionary army" and "undermining the power of the people". Later, Cossacks were sent to attack the demonstrators, who were also subjected to machine-gun fire. On July 18, units brought from the front surrounded the Peter and Paul Fortress and occupied the Bolshevik Party's headquarters. In all, 56 people were killed and 150 wounded during the day. On the 18th also, the *Pravda* printing office was raided and its machinery broken up by military cadets, while 'revelations' about Lenin being a German spy were published in the bourgeois press, and the Party leadership decided he must go into hiding.

With the endorsement of the Government's action by the opportunist leaders (July 19), repressions began on a large scale. Numbers of Bolsheviks were arrested, and warrants issued for the arrest of Lenin and others. The Bolshevik newspapers were suppressed, workers' and soldiers' meetings prohibited, whole military units disbanded and peasant leaders arrested. On July 21 Prince Lvov resigned and the Provisional Government appointed Kerensky Prime Minister;<sup>53</sup> the next day the Soviet CEC proclaimed his Cabinet a "Government of Salvation of the Revolution", and Kerensky in turn on the 24th conferred on Kornilov, now commander of the south-western front, unlimited power to use "whatever measures he may choose" to restore discipline – including the death penalty and field court-martial.

## Second Coalition Government

The bourgeoisie did not hesitate to take advantage of the situation. Approached by Kerensky to reenter the Government, the Cadets said they would only do so if all social and political reforms were postponed until the Constituent Assembly, organisations and committees deprived of the right to interfere in state and military affairs, and a struggle carried on against “anti-State” elements – as well, of course, as “full unity with the Allies”. Their demands were accepted – and as earnest, the Government began sending out punitive expeditions against peasants seizing the land, dissolved the Finnish Diet which had declared for sovereign independence, and appointed Kornilov Commander-in-Chief. On August 6 a new government – the second coalition, once again with a majority of bourgeois ministers – was announced. The CEC of the Soviets had approved its formation beforehand, though by a much smaller majority than before – 147 to 46, with 42 abstentions and a number of Bolsheviks absent, under arrest like Kamenev, Kollontai and Lunacharsky, or in hiding. The new Government at once announced that it would continue the war “to a worthy end” (August 7).

The bourgeoisie now had the bit between its teeth. Kornilov (August 14) ordered the disbanding of no fewer than 59 ‘unreliable’ infantry divisions – nearly one-third of the total – and the formation of 33 ‘reliable’ shock units. At a triumphant Congress of Industrialists and Merchants (August 16), the leading manufacturer Ryabushinsky said that, in order to put things right, “what is needed is the bony hand of hunger and poverty” – a remark echoed by Tereshchenko, as recorded by General Knox, when he explained that now the economic situation would right itself:

“The workmen, after starving a little and perhaps burning a factory or two, would consent to accept wages that their employers could afford to pay.”<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless the capitalists were now not content to leave this alluring prospect to chance. All their press and military spokesmen began pressing for a dictatorship. The Council of the Cossack League showed the way: in an ultimatum to Kerensky (August 19) it demanded that Kornilov’s appointment as Commander-in-Chief should be made permanent. Next day the Officers’ Union followed suit. The press was reporting mass arrests of members of soldiers’ committees, and prohibition of an All-Russian Army Congress. Elections to the Constituent Assembly, twice postponed, were on August 22 postponed once again for three months. As though to set the stage for the coming of a real ‘strong man’ at last, the Provisional Government on August 13 had called a “State Conference” in Moscow – far from the unruly Petrograd workers and soldiers – for the 25th. It was to be a huge affair, with at least half of its 2,500 participants from bourgeois organisations, and most of the rest reliably ‘moderate’.

## The Underground Movement

But unknown to businessmen, capitalist politicians and reactionary generals, the tide had already begun to turn – underground. At the 6th Congress of the Bolshevik Party, held in secret on August 8-16, Volodarsky was able to report on behalf of Petrograd that membership there had actually gone up since the ‘July Days’, from 33,500 to 36,000. Others could tell the same. Total Party membership was now about 240,000 – three times the figure in May. During the Congress – in which Lenin had to participate “from afar”, receiving daily reports,

seeing draft resolutions and sending notes – the Moscow Area Conference of Factory Committees declared for all power to the Soviets, and a general strike took place in Helsinki. Numerous Soviets, even if not a majority, had passed resolutions declaring their solidarity with the Petrograd workers.<sup>55</sup> The Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet (August 13), after temporary disorganisations by the arrests, had renewed its decision that no orders, other than operational, were to be obeyed without its endorsement.<sup>56</sup> During the Congress itself resolutions of greetings which had been adopted by mass meetings in factories were received. Most important, however, were the main political decisions arrived at.

These were that state power had now passed into the hands of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie, supported by the military clique, *ie* that the period of dual power was over. The Soviets were “decomposing because they had not taken power themselves in good time”. Hence the slogan of transfer of power to the Soviets, as a peaceful development of the revolution, was now out of date. Only the revolutionary liquidation of the bourgeois dictatorship by the proletariat, supported by the poorest peasantry, lay ahead – and for this the Party must prepare the proletariat, avoiding premature battle. In the course of discussion, the Congress rejected opinions that this prospect involved dependence on revolution in Western countries. Every other resolution of the Congress breathed, in one form or another, the spirit of these principal decisions.<sup>57</sup>

The Congress had, within a very few days, superb evidence that its profound optimism was justified. The Party’s Central Committee on August 21 denounced the State Conference as the organ of a counter-revolutionary plot, and on the 23rd one of the ward Soviets of Moscow – Zamoskvoretsky – decided by 186 to 89 to call for a general strike on the opening day. The trade unions of Moscow supported the call. In spite of a resolution condemning the strike adopted by a small majority at a joint meeting of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Soviets of Moscow, 150 factories with over 400,000 workers stopped on August 25. In spite of the subsequent bellicose speeches of the generals at the State Conference – Kornilov, Kaledin and Alexeyev – and the support given to them by the Menshevik leaders, the event had an immense repercussion throughout the country, expressed by innumerable resolutions of factory meetings and trade unions. In the Petrograd City Council elections on September 2, the Bolsheviks with 61 seats were second only to the Socialist-Revolutionaries (75), and had more than all the rest put together.

## 7. REACTION'S LAST BIG THROW

Cables from British military representatives in Russia gave the War Cabinet advance information that their Russian friends were preparing a big stroke. Kornilov believed the government too weak, “and he was contemplating vigorous political action” (August 20); the Cossack Union and the Officers’ League represented the views of “a large section of the best elements in the army” (August 21). General Knox, back in London, told the Cabinet on September 7:

“Kornilov was a strong character, an honest patriot, and the best man in sight. He had the support of the Cossacks. ... He [Knox] had no faith in Kerensky .... Kerensky was afraid of shedding blood. ... A force of 10,000 loyalists would be enough to subdue Petrograd – the main source of disorder – for the Russians were cowards.”<sup>58</sup>

Once again a reverse at the front – the entry of the Germans into Riga, in circumstances which suggested that the Russian High Command had planned the whole affair – and an outburst of abuse of the Bolsheviks in the capitalist press, were used as a pretext. Kerensky sent his deputy War Minister, Savinkov, to GHQ with a request that Kornilov should send reliable troops to Petrograd; at the same time, four of the most revolutionary regiments were ordered out of the capital (September 5 and 6), and *Proletarii* – substitute for *Pravda* – was closed down (September 7).

But Kornilov decided to act on his own. He decreed (September 8) the formation of a “Petrograd Army”, and ordered General Krymov to move on the city with the 3rd Corps, occupy it, disarm pro-Bolshevik units and the Red Guards and dissolve the Soviets. He sent orders to Kerensky to dissolve the Provisional Government and yield full power to himself. He issued a manifesto “to the Russian people” announcing that he was taking over supreme power. At the same time, measures similar to those in Petrograd were to be taken by a Cossack regiment, supported by military cadets, in Moscow. The Cadet ministers once more resigned. The ‘strong character’ had acted at last.

So far as Kerensky and the leaders of the Soviet CEC were concerned, Kornilov’s calculations were not far out. They spent the next 24 hours in discussing how to manage the situation – Kerensky was appointed head of a ‘Directory’ of five – without breaking with the bourgeoisie. But on the morning of September 9 the Bolshevik group in the Petrograd Soviet called a meeting of its own and the Socialist-Revolutionaries’ military organisations with delegates of the ward Soviets and factory committees, which led to the formation the same evening, with participation of the CEC and all Soviet parties – including the Bolsheviks and soldiers and sailors from the Kronstadt naval base – of a “People’s Committee for fighting Counter-Revolution”.

This included 7 or 8 Bolsheviks out of 30. But it gave an immense impetus from above to the furious preparations which had begun during the day, from below – on a direct appeal from the leading Bolshevik organisations. It also led to the formation of similar all-in committees in 100 towns and many provinces throughout Russia, in which a united front of the socialist organisations existed for the first time. Kerensky was now emboldened to proclaim Kornilov a traitor.

### **Kornilov Fiasco**

The real preparations in Petrograd, however, were at the factory, street and barracks level. Red Guards units were called out, and new units formed and armed in large numbers. Workers’ committees immediately took charge in arms and munitions works. Trenches were dug and barbed wire entanglements were put up all round the city. An inter-ward committee of the capital’s ward Soviets (controlled by the Bolsheviks since July) became the effective staff of all these and many other defensive measures. The trade unions played an active part. Within three days nearly 40,000 Red Guards, reinforced by over 20,000 sailors and soldiers, were at their posts, in and around Petrograd, supported by artillery.

But the measures taken were not only defensive – and the real weakness of the bourgeoisie’s ‘strong man’ was speedily revealed. Railwaymen at all the junctions round the capital had taken the necessary steps to halt the advance of Krymov’s troops – and this was followed up by the ‘agitators’ from Petrograd. And one after another, the

‘reliable’ Cossack units themselves, on hearing why they had been sent to Petrograd, refused to go any further; one division arrested its officers and handed them over to the local Soviet. Similar action stopped the movement of troops from other fronts at many big junctions, and numerous generals were arrested by local Soviets. Many officers at Helsinki who had declared for Kornilov were killed by the sailors, and Krymov committed suicide.

The fiasco was complete. Above all, it revealed to the masses, in a few days of concentrated political experience, what the policy of Kerensky and his colleagues in the Soviet CEC was leading to, and where the strength and hopes of the revolution really lay – in the working class led by the Bolsheviks. On September 14 the Provisional Government belatedly proclaimed that Russia was now a Republic – but this gesture could not save it from the lessons taught by the Kornilov rebellion.

These lessons bore fruit quite quickly. On September 13 the Petrograd Soviet – many of its anti-Bolshevik deputies recalled by their electors and replaced by Bolsheviks – for the first time adopted a Bolshevik motion calling for all power to the Soviets. On the 15th the Moscow Soviet decided to maintain the Red Guards at full strength, and on the 18th it followed the example of the Petrograd Soviet. Both in the next few days sacked their old Presidiums and elected Bolsheviks and Left Socialist-Revolutionaries. Kiev, Tver and many other Soviets took the same step. A West Siberian Congress of Soviets (September 19-23) produced a Bolshevik majority.<sup>59</sup> Army Committees and regimental committees on the Northern and Western Fronts, garrisons in the rear, brought the support of millions of soldiers for the Bolshevik demand. Scores of insurrections and other ‘disturbances’ in the country areas, and formal seizures of power by the Soviets in Central Asia, showed that the peasants, too, were catching up. Both the Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary Parties, on September 13 and 14, decided against further coalition with the Cadets – and on the 14th the Bolsheviks in the CEC offered to support a Soviet Government formed by those parties on a programme of immediate democratic reforms (but they refused).

### **The “Democratic Conference”**

Most significant events – though not widely noticed at that time – occurred at the “Democratic Conference”, another medley of all kinds of organisations, which had been engineered by the leaders of the Soviet CEC as a substitute for the 2nd Congress of Soviets due to assemble in September. It was really used by Kerensky as a screen for yet more bargaining with the bourgeoisie. At the Conference (September 27-October 5) there was for the first time a split in the Menshevik delegation, 75 opposing any new coalition and 65 supporting it; and there were also divisions among the Socialist-Revolutionary delegates.

But more significant still was what happened in the delegation from trade unions and trades councils at the Democratic Conference. At the Trade Union Conference in July, there had been a small anti-Bolshevik majority, and the Central Council elected there had been composed accordingly. It was under its auspices that the delegation was sent. But by 73 to 8 the union delegates – now representing nearly 1,900,000 workers – and by 139 to 32 the whole delegation, voted against a coalition and for the Soviets taking power. As a result, Grinevich, the Menshevik chairman of the Central Council, resigned.<sup>60</sup>

## 8. THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

From now on, the initiative was firmly in the hands of the revolutionary working class. Kerensky could still send punitive expeditions to Tashkent, Taganrog, Saratov and into the countryside to suppress what was becoming a peasant insurrection. Lenin was still in hiding, and several Bolsheviks were still in jail. On October 8 Kerensky formed his third – and last – coalition. He could still make speeches at the “Pre-Parliament”, or “Council of the Republic”, set up by the capitalist and opportunist majority of the Democratic Conference. The Provisional Government was still able to make political gestures, like issuing a writ for the Finnish Diet to assemble (October 13) – a fortnight after it had assembled without official permission – or dissolving the old Tsarist Duma and State Council (October 19) – months after even right-wing majorities in the Soviets had been demanding this.

But these events were not what the eyes of all Russia were fixed on.<sup>61</sup> On October 6, yielding at last to the pressure of the Soviets all over the country, the Soviet CEC decided to call the Congress of Soviets for November 2: it was symbolic that the decision was made on the day that a nationwide railway strike began, after Kerensky had prohibited it the day before. On October 8, the Petrograd Soviet elected a new Executive Committee with a Bolshevik majority, and Trotsky as chairman. In elections for the ward Soviets in Moscow, the Bolsheviks won more seats (350) than the Cadets, SRs and Mensheviks combined (319). At the end of September (25-27) Lenin had written his now famous letters to the leading Bolshevik Party organisations, *The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power*<sup>62</sup> and *Marxism and Insurrection*,<sup>63</sup> insisting that all the conditions now existed for organising the armed overthrow of the Provisional Government and the establishment of Soviet power. Then they were followed up by a letter *To the Central Committee, the Moscow and Petrograd Committees and the Bolshevik Members of the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets* (October 14)<sup>64</sup> and an article *Advice of an Onlooker* (October 21)<sup>65</sup> – driving in the same point.

### Ripe for Insurrection

Then, on October 23, came the historic meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee which voted by 10 to 2 to accept Lenin’s resolution that the time for insurrection was “fully ripe”, and that all Party organisations should begin to work accordingly, and which elected a Political Bureau to guide the work. On the 26th, the EC of the Petrograd Soviet decided (only two Mensheviks voting against) to set up a Military Revolutionary Committee, to safeguard the revolution against further Kornilov-type adventures. The soldiers’ section of the Soviet worked out the details; and on the 29th the full meeting of the Petrograd Soviet adopted the plan by an overwhelming majority.

Meanwhile, Congresses of Soviets all over the country were passing resolutions denouncing the Provisional Government and demanding the transfer of power to the Soviets. On October 29, Lenin reported on the situation at an extended meeting of the Central Committee, with representatives of the main Party organisations concerned present. By 19 votes to 2, with 4 abstentions, the resolution of the 23rd was endorsed, and a group of 5 leading Bolsheviks was chosen – all of them, in point of fact, either deputies of the Petrograd Soviet or members of the Soviet CEC – to be incorporated in the Military Revolutionary

Committee and thus strengthen its work.

Two days later Zinoviev and Kamenev, the dissenting members, published a notorious disclaimer in Maxim Gorky’s paper, provoking a vigorous denunciation of them by Lenin as “strikebreakers”. But even this unparalleled act could no longer affect the issue, as it turned out – so isolated was the counter-revolutionary camp by now. Members of the Bolshevik Central Committee were on mission in all the main centres organising the Party forces in the Soviets, the army, the factories, the Red Guards etc for the insurrection. In Petrograd, on November 2, the Military Revolutionary Committee held its first plenary meeting, appointed commissars to all military units and key organisations, sent out agitators and issued an appeal to the Cossacks. The next day it elected a Bureau, composed of three Bolsheviks – Podvoisky, Antonov and Sadovsky – and two Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, Lazimir and Sukharkov. It is their signatures, either as chairman (mostly Lazimir or Podvoisky) or as secretary (mostly Antonov), which figure most frequently in the hundreds of orders, credentials, passes etc collected and recently [1967 –*Ed*] published in three massive volumes.<sup>66</sup>

The Bureau worked out, in the greatest possible detail, the necessary plans for concentrating the Red Guards, soldiers and sailors, taking control of key buildings, bridges etc, securing arms and distributing them, and so forth – as well as calling up the cruiser Aurora and four destroyers from Kronstadt into the heart of the city.

The bourgeois press freely discussed the imminence of insurrection and the Provisional Government moved large numbers of troops, not only to the vicinity of Petrograd, but to a number of other cities. The Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leaders of the Soviet CEC did what they could, not only by denouncing the Bolsheviks, but also (on October 30) by postponing the Congress of Soviets to November 7, and by urging delegates who had arrived to go home. Trotsky, who had already given signs of pinning faith exclusively to the Congress, spoke at a private meeting of Bolshevik delegates on November 6 in favour of taking no decision about power until the Congress opened – but this had no effect, except to produce another vigorous blast from Lenin, in a letter the same evening, crying that “to delay the uprising would be fatal”.<sup>67</sup> He arrived in disguise the same night, immediately beginning to work in the MRC.

### The Die Cast

For the great die had been cast. Early on November 6, by government orders, military cadets had raided the Party print shop and broken up the type there; the government had ordered the arrest of the MRC and the raising of the bridges connecting the city centre with the working class districts; it had brought about 2,000 troops to the Winter Palace, and instructed all units of the garrison to be confined to barracks. But within an hour the MRC had sent soldiers who had cleared out the cadets, and thereafter sent out far and wide its orders to “stand to”. The revolutionary forces began taking action in the course of the day, and by the evening the whole city was in their hands – without any bloodshed. Neither Cossacks nor the specially summoned troops offered any resistance – nor could such forces as had been told to go to Petrograd get anywhere near the capital. By the morning of November 7 the Provisional Government was physically isolated in the Winter Palace – and the historic proclamation, in the name of the MRC and written by Lenin, “To the

Citizens of Russia” was being placarded all over the city, announcing that

“The Provisional Government has been deposed. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies – the Military Revolutionary Committee, which heads the Petrograd proletariat and the garrison.”<sup>68</sup>

The same afternoon, Lenin spoke at a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet, and in the evening he attended the opening of the 2nd Congress of Soviets. There was a preliminary attempt by the ‘old gang’ to hold up proceedings – during which the blank shot from the Aurora, heralding the storming of the Winter Palace was heard – but all in vain. The Congress elected a mainly Bolshevik and Left SR Presidium, and at 3 am on November 8 heard that the Winter Palace had been taken and the Provisional Government arrested. It proclaimed that all power was now in the hands of the Soviets.

On November 7 and 8 it adopted the *Decree on Peace*, the *Decree on the Land* and the list of a Provisional Workers’ and Peasants’ Government, headed by Lenin; and it elected a new Central Executive Committee of 62 Bolsheviks, 29 Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, and 10 members of other parties.

## 9. SOME CONCLUSIONS

No article can replace the full study of such a momentous subject, even in the books already available to the English-speaking reader; and therefore to attempt full conclusions would be pretentious. But some reflections seem to impose themselves – all the more after fifty years during which the grandeur of the events of 1917 has not been dimmed for those who study them (least of all for those who were their contemporaries).

1. The October Revolution was the work literally of millions of working people – unlike every previous transfer of power from one class to another.

2. The workers, soldiers, sailors and even peasants of Russia had experienced and tested out for themselves the pretensions and the falseness of all the parties on whom they had pinned their hopes when they overthrew the Tsar.

3. In gaining this experience and profiting by it, the industrial working class had been in the lead all the way – justifying the conclusions which Marx, Engels and Lenin had drawn from the insurrection of the Paris workers in 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871 and the first Russian Revolution of 1905.

4. It was in the changeover of the Soviets from opportunist class-collaborationist leadership to that of the revolutionary Social Democrats (Bolsheviks), in the freest possible conditions that any working class on earth has ever enjoyed (not excluding the British), that the truly popular nature of this gigantic upheaval manifested itself.

5. Far, therefore, from the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin being the small gang of fanatics and conspirators who fastened their will on the Russian masses (the legend which began to be spread by the lying hacks of the capitalist class

on 7 November 1917, and continues in this and all other capitalist countries to the present day) the Bolsheviks both voiced and led the people in a truly “open conspiracy”<sup>69</sup>.

6. Equally lying is the legend that the weakness of the other side lay in Kerensky’s ‘unwillingness to shed blood’; or his ‘weakness’, or that of the Russian capitalists whom he was backing; or his failure to have Lenin shot, as one egregious ignoramus proclaimed in the British press only recently. All concerned did their damndest to drown the revolution in torrents of blood – ‘strong men’ and ‘politicians’ alike – and they all failed because their own forces would not support them.

7. The revolution in this respect was particularly a defeat for capitalist Russia’s ‘glorious Allies’ – the ruling classes of Britain and France – as their own ambassadors and other representatives admitted afterwards, by showing how they were constantly egging on Kerensky and the generals to violence (only scant justice could be done in this article to the vivid material now available in War Cabinet records).

8. The revolution was a triumph for the resolute loyalty to Marxist principles, of the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin – both in their refusal to be diverted from their aim on finding themselves in a small minority, and in their determination at all times to find common language and aspirations with the widest mass of their fellow citizens (even including, when they could, those from whom they differed profoundly in politics).

In these respects, as in others, the great October Revolution is not something alien from the British working class or British history: it has invaluable lessons for all those who strive to learn from the class struggles of the British workers, from the fight against exploitation in our own history.

## Notes and References

- 1 Kollontai had just returned from Norway, one of the first revolutionary emigrants to get back. The letter, reproduced in the Soviet journal *Novy Mir* (*New World*) in April 1967, is [as of 1967 –Ed] in the Central Party Archives at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism.
- 2 Big businessman. War Minister in the first Provisional Government, led by Prince Lvov.
- 3 A Knox, *With the Russian Army 1914-1917*, Vol II, Hutchinson & Co, London, 1921, pp 542, 545, 547.
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- 5 General Knox reported thus to the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff (*War Cabinet Minutes*, 18 April 1917). He was supported by Lt Col Blair, assistant military attaché, on 20 April (*Cabinet papers*, GT760). The conflict over Order No 1 to the Petrograd garrison, from the Petrograd Soviet, establishing the rights of the Russian soldier, was mentioned in my article in the July 1967 *Marxism Today* [republished in *CR84* –Ed]. I am obliged to the Public Record Office for help in consulting these minutes and papers, which are Crown copyright, and indexed under numbers CAB 23/2, 23/3, and 23/4 and (the papers) GT...
- 6 V Nizhnikov, *Economic Background of the October Revolution* (in Russian), in *Voprosy Ekonomiki* (*Economic Questions*), No 5, 1957.
- 7 M Paléologue, *La Russie des Tsars pendant la Grande Guerre*, Vol 3, Plon-Nourrit et cie, Paris, 1922, p 257.
- 8 A Russian ultra-nationalist movement in the early 20th century, a staunch supporter of the Tsar –Ed.

- 9 Paléologue, *op cit*, p 255.
- 10 This extract, from Vol 5 of the archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published in 1918, is quoted by A V Ignatiev, *Russian-British Relations on the Eve of the October Revolution* (in Russian), 1966, p 152.
- 11 Paléologue, *op cit*, p 245.
- 12 *Russian Year Book*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1913, p 12.
- 13 Pokrovsky, *op cit*, p 130.
- 14 E A Skripylev, *An Institution Hostile to the October Revolution* (in Russian), in the journal *Sovetskoye Gosudarstvo i Pravo* (*Soviet Government and Law*), No 5, 1967.
- 15 M Philips Price, *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution*, G Allen & Unwin, 1921, p 19 – a book still of abiding value on its subject [reprinted by Hyperion, 1981 –Ed].
- 16 An extremely valuable and unjustly hushed-up study of this, in English, is by an American R D Warth, *The Allies and the Russian Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1954. The work by Ignatiev, *op cit*, uses additional material from the archives of the old Foreign Ministry.
- 17 Pokrovsky, *op cit*, p 134.
- 18 Quoted by A M Andreyev, *The Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies on the Eve of the October Revolution*, Progress, 1971, p 86 [actually, the passage is very similar to the quotation for which the preceding citation is given – Ed].
- 19 Philips Price, *op cit*, pp 17-18, 24-25.
- 20 Andreyev, *op cit*.
- 21 *War Cabinet Minute* 100.
- 22 Avdeyev, *op cit*, pp 72, 78-9; Ignatiev, *op cit*, pp 173-4.
- 23 *War Cabinet Minute* 118.
- 24 From *War Cabinet Minute* 98 we learn that (i) this had been proposed by the British ambassador in Petrograd, (ii) Arthur Henderson had submitted a draft, on behalf of the Labour leaders, and (iii) it was the War Cabinet which decided it should be sent.
- 25 V I Lenin, *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution* (*Draft Platform for the Proletarian Party*), in *Collected Works* (*LCW*), Vol 24, p 67.
- 26 *War Cabinet Minute* 107 of 28 March 1917.
- 27 Knox, *op cit*, p 616; and *War Cabinet Papers* GT749.
- 28 A Rothstein, 1917: *The Overthrow of Tsardom*. Part 1 in *CR83*, Spring 2017, pp 2-10; Part 2 in *CR84*, Summer 2017, pp 2-11.
- 29 Lenin, *op cit*, p 62.
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- 32 *LCW*, Vol 35, pp 295-6.
- 33 The internationalist wing of the Mensheviks.
- 34 *LCW*, Vol 35, p 298.
- 35 *LCW*, Vol 23, p 292.
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- 37 *Ibid*, pp 303-4.
- 38 V I Lenin, in *The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution*, in *LCW*, Vol 24, p 21.
- 39 Some details are given in P N Sobolev, ed, Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, *History of the October Revolution*, Progress, Moscow, 1966.
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- 41 S Knyazev and D Kukin, *V I Lenin's 'April Theses'*, in *Kommunist*, No 6, 1967.
- 42 *Petrograd City and All-Russian Conferences of the RSDLP (Bolsheviks) in April 1917* (in Russian), 1925.
- 43 *Minutes of the 6th Congress of the RSDLP (Bolsheviks)* (in Russian), 1919, p 56.
- 44 *History of the Civil War in the USSR. Vol 1: The Prelude to the Great Proletarian Revolution From the beginning of the War to the beginning of October 1917*, J Stalin, M Gorky, S Kirov, V Voroshilov and A Zhdanov, eds, Lawrence & Wishart, 1937.
- 45 Paléologue, *op cit*, p 280.
- 46 There is a very full account of the great upheaval which the events in Petrograd produced all over the country, as far away as the big cities of Central Siberia, in I I Mintz, *The First Government Crisis, April 1917*, in *Voprosy Istorii* (*Questions of History*), No 1, 1967.
- 47 *War Cabinet Minute* 144.
- 48 I owe these details to Andreyev's work, *op cit*, pp 154-168.
- 49 V Vladimirova, *The Revolution of 1917: Chronicle of Events*, Vol III, 1923, p 97.
- 50 The story has been told, with new [1967 –Ed] documents showing the British War Cabinet's manoeuvres in the matter, by R Page Arnot in his book *The Impact of the Russian Revolution in Britain*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1967 [to be republished by Manifesto Press –Ed].
- 51 *War Cabinet Minutes* 155, 160, 169 provide details.
- 52 *Krasny Arkhiv* (*Revolutionary Archive*), 1927, No 1, pp 22-3.
- 53 On this day the ex-Tsar entered in his diary, "This man is really in the right place at this moment: the more power he has, the better."
- 54 Knox, *op cit*, p 674.
- 55 Andreyev, *op cit*, p 194, has established that these numbered 32 out of 82 whose attitude was recorded.
- 56 *Ibid*, pp 198-9.
- 57 It was at this Congress that the small group of Social Democrats who had completely broken away from the Mensheviks (the 'Mezhraiontsy') were admitted to the Party. Among them was Trotsky, although as recently as May, at the Conference of this group, he had rejected unconditional entry into the Bolshevik Party (which he had combated for many years). He was nevertheless elected to the new Central Committee.
- 58 *War Cabinet Minutes* 221, 223, 229.
- 59 Y V Ivanov, *Building Soviets in Siberia, 1917*, in *Sovetskoye Gosudarstvo i Pravo*, No 7, 1967.
- 60 D Antoshkin, *The Trade Union Movement in Russia* (in Russian), 1925, p 253; A M Pankratova, ed, *History of the Trade Union Movement in the USSR* (in Russian), 1955, p 31; *Izvestia*, 20 September, 1917.
- 61 Here John Reed's immortal *Ten Days That Shook the World* begins to add its vivid picture to the accounts of Philips Price, *op cit*, and Sobolev, ed, *op cit*.
- 62 *LCW*, Vol 26, pp 19-21.
- 63 *Ibid*, pp 22-27.
- 64 *Ibid*, pp 140-1.
- 65 *Ibid*, pp 179-181.
- 66 In view of subsequent legends, it should be noted that Trotsky, although chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, was only one of 82 members of the MRC, was not a member of the Bureau, and never was its chairman. The MRC functioned as a working committee, all its members carrying out what jobs were necessary as they were available. This also included Trotsky.
- 67 V I Lenin, *Letter to Central Committee Members*, 24 October (6 November) 1917, in *LCW*, Vol 26, pp 234-5. Lenin does not refer specifically to Trotsky –Ed.
- 68 *LCW*, Vol 26, p 236.
- 69 The title of a book by H G Wells –Ed.



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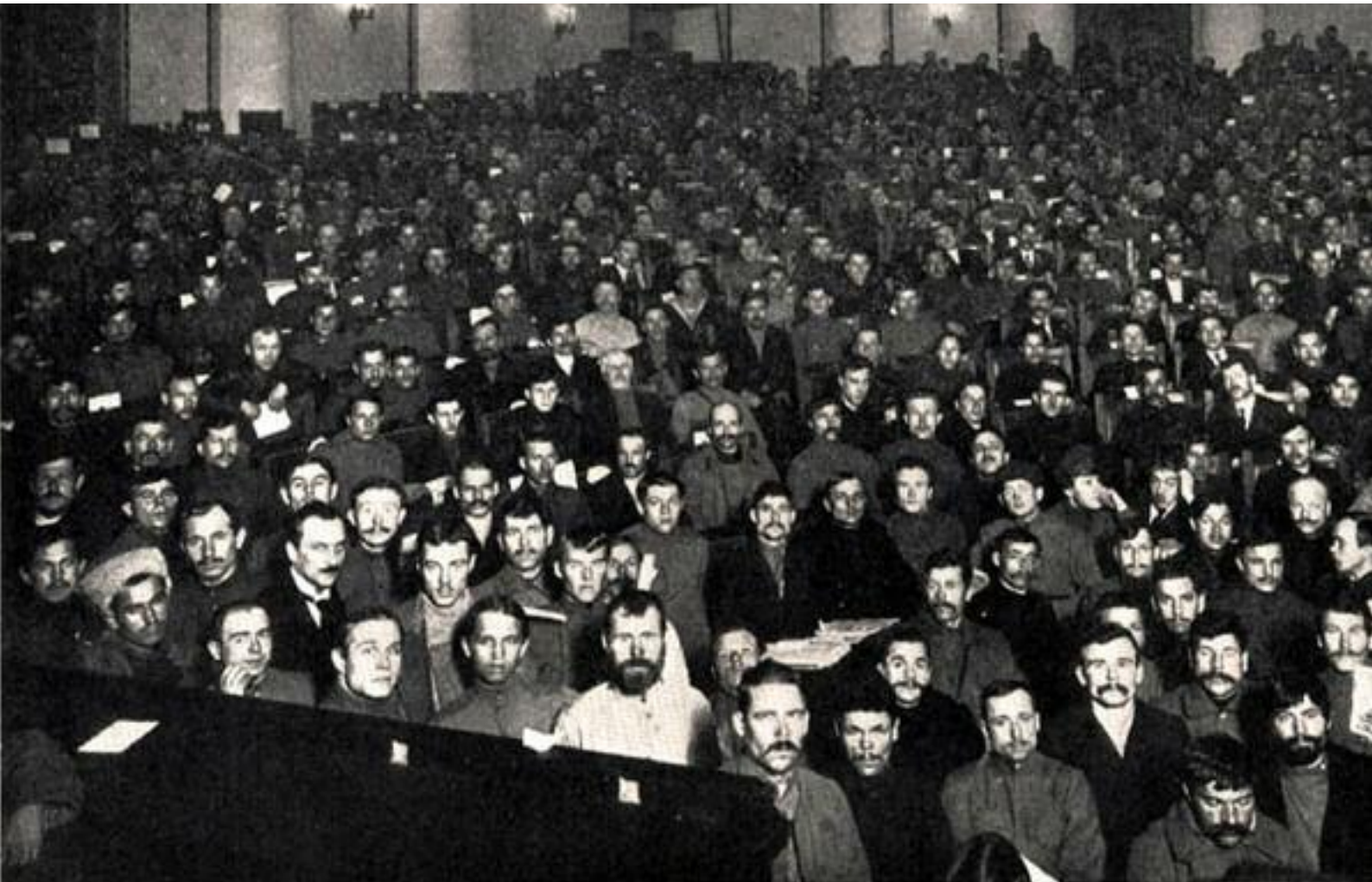
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# All Power to the Soviets!

Alexandra Kollontai



**T**HE SMOLNY. Dusk is falling. Night swiftly approaches, the historic night of October, when the workers and peasants of Russia took over the power and proclaimed the first Soviet Republic in the world.

Feverishly, I hurry through the autumn slush down the endless avenue towards the familiar building where the fate of the workers' revolution is being decided.

The Congress has begun.

He who with indomitable persistence, iron will and the vision of genius has led the revolution to its inevitable historical consummation has unexpectedly appeared openly at the meeting.

Only yesterday he was forced to hide from Kerensky's sleuths: today waves of rapturous enthusiasm greet him as he enters the white hall of the Congress.

The turning point has come.

The Congress will be ours!

The Smolny ablaze with lights, tense, absorbed, seething with activity. Sailors, rifles, Red Guards, machine guns. A new Smolny! Wearing an air of military preparedness, alert, efficient.

And everywhere familiar faces, friends, comrades. All "Bolsheviks".

Where is Chkeidze? Tsereteli? Their followers? In the other camp, openly on the other side of the

revolutionary barricades. With those who have entrenched themselves in the Winter Palace.

Their envoy, Gotz, arrives. He appeals for "reasonableness", offers a compromise, argues, exhorts, pleads for an understanding. And leaves in high dudgeon – his proposals rejected.

"You Bolsheviks are madmen! You are courting disaster!

"Can't you see that this is sheer insanity? That what you are undertaking spells certain death for Bolsheviks and Bolshevism?"

The gleam of scorn and amusement in our eyes is his best answer. Gotz himself feels that the power is behind us. Their hour has receded into history, their deeds inscribed on the pages of yesterday. Today history has opened the book of destiny to the Bolsheviks.

"One could hardly have expected anything from you," he remarks bitterly, turning to me. "But that Comrade Kamenev should support this childish foolishness no-one could have foreseen. We considered him a far more sensible statesman."

And Gotz departs, without so much as a glance into the hall where only a month ago the Gotzes and Liber-Dans<sup>2</sup> held sway.

An air of solemn gravity envelops the hall. It is tense with expectancy. Tidings brought by new arrivals from

Delegates to the Second Congress of the Soviets 1917



the city spread quickly among the delegates in this second, historic Congress.

Who are these delegates? There are a great many grey soldiers' coats, but no less in evidence are the principals of the maturing upheaval – the workers. There are some peasants too.

The Left SRs crowd around them, collecting them in small groups, haranguing them in an efforts to win them over to the Left SR way of thinking.

"No, if the Soviets are going to take over the power, why wait? The longer we delay the longer the war will drag out. And you know yourselves how sick and tired the people are of the war," a bearded deputy from the village points out reasonably, countering the SR arguments with peasant-like persistence.

"What's all this talk about 'agreements'? We'll take the land and the Soviets will endorse our action. And that's that," a young soldier, another peasant deputy, puts in gaily in a tone of finality.

The idea of "Soviet power" has taken deep root in the minds of the soil tillers; the triple slogan, "Soviet power, peace and land", has caught on.

What will today's meeting bring? Will it witness the 'decisive battle'? Will the great Rubicon be crossed?

The meeting opens. Candidates for the presidium are called for. All the Bolsheviks and Left SRs nominated are elected. No more Mensheviks and Right SRs. The conciliators' hour has struck.

We take our places at the presidium table. Hurriedly, at the last minute, we correct the draft of an appeal to the nations on peace, to emphasise not so much its message to the governments as to the people. For this appeal is the fraternal hand of a revolutionary people reaching out for the powerful responsive handclasp of the workers of other countries. It is not an appeal of oppressed to oppressed, it is the first action of its kind in history – the victorious proletariat proclaiming their great victory to the world. Couched in the language of those who have succeeded in taking the power into their own hands. Who have stepped out boldly on the path of working-class dictatorship.

The sword, the fiery sword of the workers' revolution, is poised over the god of war. A solemn hush falls over the Congress.

It waits in tense expectancy. As if hearkening to the call of the first workers' revolution in the world. And the clarion rings forth, powerfully, imperiously.

It sounds in the voice of the leader as he announces the greatest historic event of all time – the establishment of Soviet power.

The hour of working-class dictatorship has arrived. A wave of irrepressible joy sweeps over us all, mists our eyes .... "All power to the Soviets!"

What a compelling slogan! Can this really be happening before our eyes? Will we be strong enough to encompass it, to cross that cherished threshold?

Our hearts tremble with joy, but uncertainty is still there.

What will the Congress say?

Dull, lifeless unconvincing, like the voice of the moribund past, sound the words of caution and warning on the lips of the Mensheviks and Right SRs who have already been relegated to the limbo of history. Their voices are drowned out by the loud, ringing, watchword

of the future that can be heard in response from the army, from the peasantry, from the representatives of the nationalities, from the fleet. These are all with us! The Congress is ours, it does not belong to those who shrink from the steep, stony climb into the kingdom of the future, through the thorny, blood-soaked path of civil war ....

The phantoms of the past have vanished, the Mensheviks and the Right SRs are gone. Only we who are ready to cross the cherished threshold remain.

A silent paean of triumph swells in hundreds of hearts united by a single resolve: to take over the power, to establish the world's first government of yesterday's slaves .... Higher and higher mounts the feeling of solemn triumph, faster and faster the joyous, intoxicating beating of our hearts ....

His head resting on his hand, Comrade Lenin sits lost in thought. Perhaps the eyes of the visionary are piercing the historic tomorrow, scanning the road ahead ....

The decisive hour has come: having taken the power into their hands, the worker and the soldier, the peasant and the sailor proceed to translate into action the call echoed by the millions all over Russia: "Down with the imperialist war!"

The appeal to the peoples for immediate peace.

Clear, powerful and compelling sound the words of the appeal.

With bated breath the Congress listens in reverence, in faith, in growing excitement. The bloody, senseless nightmare is ended. Ended the trenches, the suffering, the misery!

We have taken over the power. That all-powerful idol, the god of imperialist war, has been deposed.

Glory to the Soviet power!

Glory to the proletarian revolution!

Glory to those who are carrying it out!

The appeal has been read out. In a single impulse the whole Congress rises to its feet. And the hymn of victory thunders forth. "Arise, ye starvelings ...." It seems as if it is being sung not by a few hundred deputies of Russian's historic Congress but the entire world of 'workers and slaves'.

Louder and louder rise the strains of the familiar song, scattering the frightened, pallid, dying shadows of yesterday's narrow nationalism.

That never-to-be-forgotten moment!

The grandeur of the sacrament performed by history. Here it is, that cherished threshold!

We have crossed it.

Our hearts are near bursting, with a feeling of indescribable joy. But the will of the revolution is already urging us onward to consolidate the great victory, onward to action, to the new, long and difficult path of struggle ahead.

● First published, in Russian, in 1924. Translation published in *New Times*, 7 November 1967, pp 3-4.

## Notes and References

- 1 Nikolai Chkheidze and Irakli Tsereteli, both Georgian Mensheviks and leading figures in the Petrograd Soviet; Chkheidze was its president until September 1917, while Tsereteli was a minister in the Provisional Government until August 1917 –Ed.
- 2 Mikhail Liber and Fyodor Dan, leading Mensheviks in 1917, and their followers –Ed.



# The Greatness and Fall of the USSR

Lars Ulrik Thomsen

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

A MAJORITY OF people on the Left disagree with the concept of the Soviet Union, seeing it as a parenthesis in history.<sup>1</sup> It is essential to defend the truth about what actually happened, and to provide a more balanced picture. Otherwise the labour movement will end up in *utopian socialism*, which is the dominant trend among the ‘New Left’.

We need to get away from stereotypes and a person-fixed story, and instead use *Marxism and dialectical materialism*. Have we completely forgotten Marx’s and Engels’ analysis of the class struggles in France and other countries? The goal of any research must be to reveal the truth, treating the subject matter in a scientific and sober manner.

This form of analysis is the prerequisite for creating the basis for a transition to socialism. We must learn from the mistakes made during the history of the socialist countries, but we should not do that on the basis of what is found in the bourgeois media. We must also see those countries’ strengths, and the results of the Soviet people’s massive sacrifices. It is essential to promote historical accuracy, so that the working class is able to act and intervene in cases of misunderstanding and abuse of power in the future.

Mention of the Soviet Union produces strong emotions, making it very difficult to conduct a fair debate, despite the facts about the country’s development and importance. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was of huge extent, covering more than a quarter of the Earth’s surface, and stretching from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the east. This means that major cultural differences existed and needed to be brought together, in a common union of many nations.

What is more important than anything else about Soviet history is the war unleashed by Hitler Germany on 22 June 1941. It cost the lives of up to 30 million Soviet soldiers and citizens, exceeding by far the losses of any other nation in World War II. The Soviet Union contributed decisively to the defeat of fascism, not only in Europe but also in Asia.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, today this effort is ignored or minimised by the selective approach of bourgeois historians, and the country is equated with the woes of Nazism.

We can thank the USSR for the outcome that bourgeois democracy was able to prevail over fascism. Without that enormous sacrifice and demanding effort, the Europe we know

today would look completely different. Of course, the Soviet Union did not do it alone, but in an alliance with others, eg Britain, United States, Canada, and the resistance movements that fought fascism in the occupied countries.

One might think that historians and journalists would be interested in seeking the truth about events in history, but that is not the case with regard to the Soviet Union. The publishing and media monopolies demand a specific narrative, and those who do not want to work inside their framework can’t find employment. This is our ‘democracy’ in essence.

*Why is it so important to get an accurate picture of the history of the Soviet Union?*

Above all, the labour movement needs such a picture, so that it is prepared for what may be involved in a future transition to socialism.

But it is also important because there is no guarantee that fascism will not rise again. Looking at the activities of *right-wing nationalist movements* in Europe and the United States, there is every reason to fear a repeat of fascism or something like it. The fascist mindset is far from dead and gone, but is reasserting itself. It is expressed through a distorted outlook on human history, in education, entertainment and the media. The lies created about the history of the Soviet Union are creating the conditions for fascism to promote itself.

*What is our view to counter these positions? Was it one long road of victory for the Soviet Union, from start to the finish in 1991?*

No, as the title of this article indicates, it was far from that. Starting from almost feudal conditions in large parts of the country, the Soviet Union had to undergo a great deal of suffering before it managed to create the sort of industry that we know in modern societies. But this initial level of underdevelopment, together with the suppression of democracy and civil rights under the Tsar, the hunger and illiteracy in the pre-revolutionary period, and the 14-nation military intervention after the First World War, are barely mentioned in the bourgeois media when Soviet history is discussed. Theirs is a one-sided and religious rejection of the truth.

*Did the dissolution of the Soviet Union create peace and prosperity for its peoples?*

No, it did not. Even now, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine – backed by aggressive forces in NATO – risks triggering a local war or a *Third World War*. Elsewhere, there

have been terrorist attacks in parts of the Caucasus, and despotic repression in some of the Asian former Soviet republics. Peace and prosperity have not been created, nor have the rights of the working class been protected, as was promised when capitalism was restored.

The Soviet Union's history can be divided into four clearly defined epochs:<sup>3</sup>

**1. From the October Revolution in 1917 to the first 5-year plan in 1928 and from then to the end of World War II.** This was the time of construction, the electrification of the whole country and the mechanisation of agriculture. The Soviet government knew that it had to create, in the shortest possible time, a modern industry that could compete with the best in the 'old world'.

The Soviet Red Army proved successful in 1941-45 despite major difficulties. Hitler's Germany had been praised as having the world's most modern and well-equipped army and navy; but it was defeated by a nation where, 30 years earlier, the wooden plough literally dominated agriculture.

**2. From 1945 until the launch of the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, in 1962.** This was a time of triumph after the many years of suffering and setback during the war. It was also a time of reconstruction, because large parts of the country, especially the European part of USSR, had been ruined. However, the very large loss of human lives caused major problems in many sectors of the economy. Among those who had perished were many communists, because they were at the forefront of the battles.

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 was a time of procrastination, where all that was won was verified, and errors were supposed to be corrected. The question is, however: were the adopted reforms profound enough, and was the old bureaucracy replaced with more modern forms of leadership? It can be argued that, with Khrushchev's later resignation in 1964, the reform policy was halted and old habits returned. If Khrushchev was making mistakes, then why didn't the collective leadership correct them?<sup>4</sup>

**3. From 1962 to 1985.** This was a contradictory time, with both positive results and the beginning of stagnation in the economy. The fact that the Soviet Union had been able to send a man into space caused astonishment in many parts of the world, and created a space race that lasted until 1991; but there were major deficiencies in using the results of scientific development in industry, for the benefit of the people.

The positive features of this period included the Soviet Union's support for national liberation movements, particularly in Vietnam, its decisive contribution towards peace and its proposals for disarmament. These led, for example, to the Helsinki Accords, the final act of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Unfortunately, the United States and its allies resisted implementation of the agreements. On the part of the West, some aspects of the treaty were emphasised to the detriment of others, and this created distrust which in turn led to a new arms race, with sophisticated nuclear weapons installed in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

**4. From 1985 to 1991.** The scientific-technical revolution now seriously broke through in the Western world's economy. This led to the rise of a new middle class, and a wider increase in wealth than had previously been seen. The peaceful cooperation between the two systems also contributed to this process.

In the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union initiated a reform policy, which was intended to modernise the economy and

bring about renewed progress. However, the reforms, *perestroika* and *glasnost*, were not well thought out. The ideological foundations were built on positivism and neokantianism – not Marxism!<sup>6</sup> Much was left to the initiatives of the individual Union republics, and therefore most experiments failed. There was a lack of overall management and concrete plans for implementing the renewal. This was the ultimate price for the inconsistency in the reforms of 1956. Had the necessary courage and foresight in the reforms at that time been present, the collapse in 1991 would probably have been avoided.

All this emphasises the great importance of *Marxist theory*, and the ability to use materialist dialectics in all aspects of life. The history of the Soviet Union contains a wealth of experiences that we should learn from – not, as happens now, denying that the country existed, but studying both the positive and negative aspects of its history. This would mean giving the public an accurate, more balanced, image than what is disseminated by the media today.

Throughout the entire life of the Soviet Union, the Western labour movements were divided between revolutionary defenders of the USSR, and reformists who attacked it. This division between reformism and revolution continues today, and comes up countless times in different contexts. The long lasting debate about the history, greatness and fall of the Soviet Union is an essential part of the battle which must be fought.

It is therefore essential to define the basis on which any discussion of Soviet history should be conducted – the principles of *dialectical logic*, which are as follows:<sup>7</sup>

*Firstly*, we must be versatile in our analysis and avoid simplifications. We should not consider the history from just one angle, but from many angles on a class basis.

*Secondly*, history must be seen in its development, in its changes. This means that one must not deal with Soviet history in isolation, but as a process in relation to other countries, ie to capitalism.

*Thirdly*, the whole history of humanity's practice must be included as a criterion of truth. What is actually needed in the current stage of development.

*Fourth*, we must see the history, not as a collection of abstract truths, but as concrete ones. The laws of development that are uncovered at each step will in some form occur again in other contexts.

Those of us who have experienced the hysterical anti-communism in the 1950s and 1980s know what the media are capable of. The style of reporting in the media is often detached from the real circumstances. A single event or phenomenon is seized upon and inflated to be synonymous with communism. The bourgeois media do not want a 'better communism' that would be immune to mistakes – *they do not want communism at all!*

Here it may be appropriate to mention German philosopher Hans Heinz Holz's writing on developments in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In his article on the role of Stalin, *The Embodiment of Contradictions*, he makes an important point:

"Historical explanations for injustices do not after all dispose of the question of political ethics; they only allow us to recognise the conditions for them to occur. Out of the recognition of historical conditions – not out of moralistic calls to arms – grows the political ability to be able to avoid the development of such blemishes in the future."<sup>8</sup>

Holz puts the whole question into the correct historical context, because it is the only way we can understand the mistakes and crimes of those days. The counter-revolution, wars of intervention and encirclement and subversion of the first socialist state were a contributing factor to the constraints on the development of *socialist democracy*.

In Britain and other highly developed capitalist countries, the transition to socialism will be different. Basically, we would start from a much higher educational level among the population than did Russia in 1917, and we have long bourgeois-democratic traditions. Together these factors would make socialism possible in other forms than was developed in the Soviet Union.

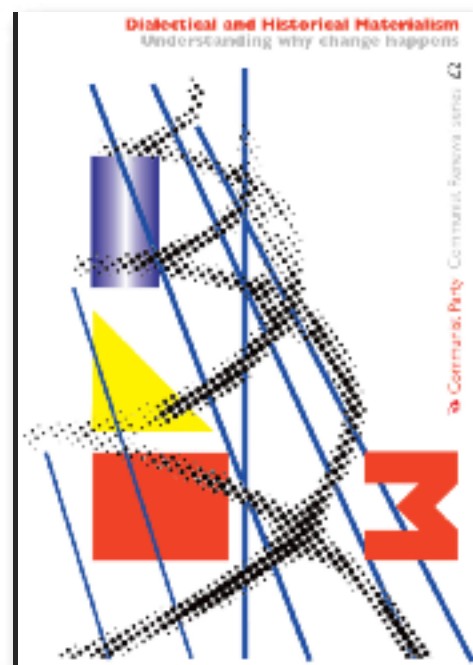
The Norwegian poet Rudolf Nilsen (1901-1929) expressed some of the thoughts and feelings associated with the history the Soviet Union in his poem *The Voice of the Revolution*:<sup>9</sup>

Give me the burning hearts, who are never lost through  
doubt,  
Who are never oppressed by discouragement, nor threatened  
through sorrow to rest,  
But meet every victory, every defeat, with the same  
invulnerable smile.

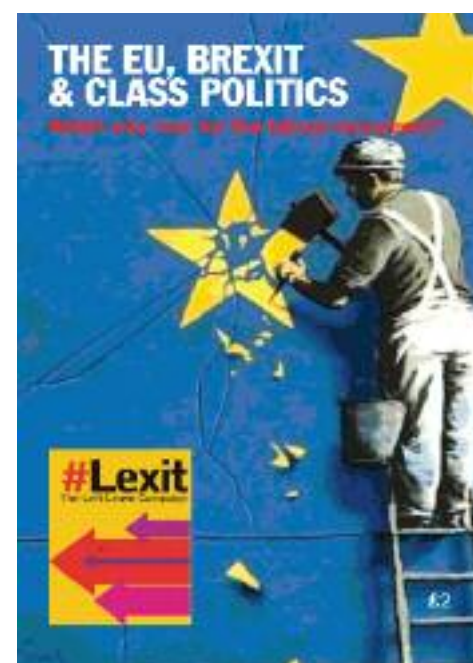
■ This is an edited version of an article originally published (in Danish) in September 2016, in the Communist Party of Denmark newspaper *Arbejderen (The Worker)*. It generated a debate that lasted for nearly two months.

#### Notes and references

- 1 An example in the *Daily Mail*, 15 May 2017: “Corbyn hires a Stalin apologist – his new man is a privately educated class warrior who hides his blue blooded heritage by dropping his double-barrelled surname and NEVER mentions his entry in Debrett’s.”
- 2 See the books and diaries of Konstantin Simonov, eg the trilogy, *The Living and the Dead*, of which the first volume (of the same title) was published in English by Progress, Moscow, 1975.
- 3 See L U Thomsen, *The Anniversary of Lenin’s ‘Imperialism’*, in *CR82*, Winter 2016/17, pp 20-23, for a full explanation on the epoch definition.
- 4 The whole matter of electing the leadership and the practice of party democracy needs to be seen in the context of Lenin’s *What is to be Done?*, especially chapter IV. section E; “‘Conspirative’ Organisation and ‘Democracy’”, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 5, pp 473-482..
- 5 The efforts of the peace movements in this era are of lasting importance and an inspiration for our time.
- 6 H H Holz, *The Revisionist Turning-Point*, in *CR52*, Spring 2009, pp 38-41.
- 7 There is a short exposition of dialectical logic in V I Lenin, *Once Again On The Trade Unions*, in *Collected Works*, 1965, Vol 32, pp 70-107.
- 8 H H Holz, *CR52*, Spring 2009, pp 42-44
- 9 R Nilsen, *Hilsen og håndslag (Greetings and handshake)*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1974.



This pamphlet is based on an introductory course on Marxism produced by the Communist Party in 1949 - edited and updated for today by Robert Griffiths, David Grove and Graham Stevenson. It is dedicated to the memory of Kevin Halpin (1927-2017), the outstanding workers' leader, chair of the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. £2



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# Images of a revolution



## Storming the Winter Palace

Top: Scene from *October: ten days that shook the world* directed by Sergei Eisenstein  
Above: 1954 Soviet stamp depicting the painting by Pavel Sokolov-Skalya *The Storming of the Winter Palace* 1947  
Left: Vladimir Serov, *The Winter Palace Seized* 1954

КЛИНОМ

КРАСНЫМ



△△



**'The revolution does not mean the end of tradition'** Vladimir Mayakovsky 1927

The Russian Revolution turned the world upside down. Britain's communist leader Harry Pollitt wrote: "The thing that mattered was that lads like me had whacked the bosses and the landlords, had taken their factories, their lands and their banks ...."

This revolution – in its making – was reflected in remarkable experiments in the visual and plastic arts, in film and photography, in painting and in the graphic arts. We are accustomed to understanding revolutionary art of the period as a revolution in style, in iconography and in language, visual, filmic and poetic. And this is undoubtedly true.

The conventional understanding – in essence bourgeois – sees the great figures of Russian revolutionary art, Vertov, Eisenstein, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Popova, Malevich, Mayakovsky, El Lissitzky and Annenkov, as creative geniuses, their work of timeless aesthetic significance. But this tendency to separate creator and content from context impedes our understanding not only of the political significance of such work but also its function in shaping a new visual language.

It diverts attention from a broader range of work which served the same revolutionary goals but which employed more conventional representational styles.

Mayakovsky gives us a flavour of the way in which visual imagery, didactic language and revolutionary style connected to a new mass audience: "The ROSTA windows are fantastic. A handful of painters are working flat out catering for the needs of a population of 150,000,000; as soon as news comes in by telegraph it is written up on posters; decrees are immediately communicated via the lyrics of popular songs and spread around that way ...

"It is a new art form, springing directly from everyday necessity, huge posters stuck up in stations, hoardings and empty shop windows." *Novy Lef* 1927

Soviet painting was exceptionally diverse both stylistically and in terms of its content. While the sheer didacticism of these times is most clearly expressed in the graphic poster pedagogics of V Mayakovsky, I Malyutin and M Chermnykh, for the largely illiterate mass of people the dramatic visual language of Soviet film, or the nominally abstract but instantly understood symbolic language of El Lissitzky, is no less accessible than the work of accomplished painters like Isaak Brodsky, whose depictions of revolutionary events, great leaders and momentous times fits into a long established tradition.

**Nick Wright**

*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*  
Lithograph poster El Lissitzky 1919



**Poster art of the revolution**

Above: Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Comrades, have you read the Council of People's Commissars mandate* 1920

Top: Sergei Chekhonin, *Cover to John Reed's Ten Days that Shook the World* 1923

Middle: Dmitry, Moor, *Have You Volunteered?* 1920,

Right: A Radakov, *Knowledge will Break up the Chains of Slavery* 1920





# CR

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# The Wars of Intervention

Dennis Ogden

**T**HE STORY of the wars of intervention that followed the victory of the October Revolution and the birth of the world's first working-class state is an object lesson in the malevolence and hypocrisy of the British Establishment.

Angered by Soviet Russia's withdrawal from the war against Kaiser Germany and its demand for a just peace without annexations or indemnities, alarmed for the fate of its profitable investments in Russian industry and fearful above all that the British workers might follow the Russian example, the British ruling class set out to "crush Bolshevism in its cradle". With Winston Churchill as the guiding spirit, Britain was the main organiser of an "anti-Bolshevik crusade" which sent the armies of 14 nations to Russia in an attempt to overthrow Soviet rule, restore capitalism and dismember the Soviet Union.

Without foreign support and intervention, without the aid of foreign benefits and gold, Russia's counter-revolutionary generals and politicians could never have waged a protracted civil war.

The years of war which wrought death and devastation throughout Russia and left a legacy of disease, famine and economic disruption, were the direct consequence of foreign – above all British – intervention. The Soviet people showed unparalleled heroism, fighting against seemingly overwhelming odds. During the bitter battles of the civil war and the wars of intervention the Red Army was born, led by men whose names became legends – men like Budyonny, Voroshilov, Tukhachevsky, Blukher and Chapayev.

The October Revolution in Petrograd (as Leningrad was then called) was followed by revolutionary uprisings throughout the Russian Empire in which workers of all nationalities fought side by side. Local Soviet governments were set up, for example, in the oil city of Baku on the shores of the Caspian Sea, in Tashkent in the heart of Central Asia, and in Siberia. In the weeks and months following the October Revolution Soviet Republics were also set up in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, hitherto provinces of the Russian Empire, while the new government recognised the independence of Finland and Poland.

Other areas remained in the hands of counter-revolutionary generals who were gathering their forces in an attempt to overthrow Soviet rule, while in the Baltic area and Ukraine the Germans and Austrians sought to take advantage of the situation to extend their domination. These efforts did not cease even after the signature of the brutal Brest Peace at the beginning of March 1918. This was used as the pretext for the launching of British intervention, with the landing of British forces, followed by those of France and America, at the North Russian port of Murmansk.

They were sent, official British spokesmen claimed, to prevent the establishment of a German U-boat base at Murmansk, and to safeguard supplies sent for use by the Russians in the war against Germany. But there were no

Germans anywhere near Murmansk and the real purpose of the British landing was to prepare the way for an offensive southward towards Petrograd and Moscow in collaboration with counter-revolutionary generals to overthrow the Soviet government, whose leaders the British Tory press described as "Russian Jews of German extraction".

The real purpose became clear during subsequent weeks and months as more British, American and French troops poured in, securing control not only over Murmansk but also over the White Sea port of Arkhangelsk. At first the invaders claimed to seek cooperation with the local Soviet administrations, but as their position became stronger Soviet officials were arrested, jailed and in many cases shot, and puppet administrations set up.

In May 1918 Western agents succeeded in inciting clashes between Soviet forces and the Czecho-Slovak corps. What became Czechoslovakia was at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Western allies had pledged that their victory would mean an independent Czechoslovakia. The Czecho-Slovak corps had been formed in Russia by Czechs and Slovaks who had deserted from the Austro-Hungarian forces fighting on the Russian front and who wanted to aid the fight to free their homeland. After the signing of the Brest Peace, the Soviet government agreed that the Corps should leave Russia to go to France. The only route open was via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok and then by sea, the Western Allies agreeing to provide ships.

But when the first Czecho-Slovak units reached Vladivostok, where in April British and Japanese forces, later joined by Americans, had landed, there were no ships. Western spokesmen intimated to the leaders of the Czechoslovak national movement that they would view their aspirations more favourably if they allowed the Czecho-Slovak Corps to be used not in France against Germany but in Soviet Russia against the Soviet government. Czecho-Slovak units strung out all along the Trans-Siberian Railway seized control of towns and cities right across Siberia. British, Japanese and American forces thrust deep into the heart of this vast territory, linking up with warlords like the Ataman Semyonov.

In the south a joint force of British troops and White Guard Cossacks formed in Persia entered Baku in July 1918. They stayed till September, when they were in turn ousted by the Turks, still Germany's allies in the continuing First World War.

British forces also invaded Transcaspia and Central Asia, arming and financing a succession of warlords and puppet regimes. In September, in the desert near the eastern shores of the Caspian, forces armed and financed by the British summarily shot 26 leading Bolsheviks, who had been members of the Soviet Government of Baku. Apologists for British intervention ever since have been at pains to disclaim responsibility for the shooting of the "26 Baku Commissars".

▲ The Execution of the Twenty Six Baku Commissars  
Isaak Brodsky  
1925



“No British officer was in the vicinity, nor was any British officer aware of what was happening to the prisoners,” says Colonel C H Ellis in his book *The Transcasian Episode, 1918-1919*, published by Hutchinson in 1963. But even from his account it is clear that the puppet regime which committed this atrocity was entirely dependent on British gold and British bayonets.

Thus by mid-1918 the young Soviet republic was beset on all sides. More than three-quarters of its territory was in the hands of the interventionists and counter-revolutionaries. It was cut off from its main source of food and raw materials. Even in the areas still held by the Soviets, foreign-backed subversion was rife, with British agents like Sidney Reilly and Paul Dukes at work. In August British agents were implicated in an attempt on the life of Lenin himself.

Although the young Red Army secured its first victories in the autumn of that year, the conclusion of the armistice in the West on November 11 enabled the Western powers to step up their intervention. More British troops were sent to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk; British forces re-entered Baku and stepped up their operations in Central Asia. More French troops and supplies were poured into southern Russia. And, in the Far East, British, American and Japanese men and arms flowed in to prop up the arch-reactionary Admiral Kolchak.

While the defeated German troops in the West were being disarmed and disbanded, in the East they were ordered to continue fighting against the Soviet Republic. British warships were sent into the Baltic, and cooperated with both Germans and counter-revolutionary Russian generals in attempts to capture Petrograd. The British helped to set up puppet regimes in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania to replace the Soviet Republics created following the October Revolution and overthrown by the combined efforts of the British Navy, the tsarist general Yudenich and the German general von der Goltz.

On the coast of ‘neutral’ Finland, a few miles from the Soviet frontier, the British Secret Service established a clandestine speedboat base, from which contact was maintained with the British agent Paul Dukes, then operating in Petrograd. Craft from this base also cooperated with British warships and aircraft in raids on the Soviet naval base of Kronstadt. But 1919 saw the turning point. Waging a skilful war of manoeuvre, the Red

Army pushed back first one then another of the counter-revolutionary fronts. For the counter-revolutionary forces, defeat soon became rout. Lacking popular support (they had been guilty of hideous atrocities in the areas they occupied), harried by partisans, and the realities of the situation becoming increasingly apparent to their rank and file, they crumbled.

The foreign backers too were faced with the mounting solidarity movements in their own countries, demanding an end to intervention and the withdrawal of support from the counter-revolutionary warlords – a theme outside the scope of the present article but of great importance.

By the first months of 1920 Arkhangelsk and then Murmansk (from which British troops had been withdrawn in October 1919) were liberated, and Kolchak, self-styled “Supreme Ruler” of Siberia, had been defeated, captured, tried and executed. By March 1920 another Western-backed warlord, Denikin, had been defeated in the south.

The last major attempt to overthrow Soviet rule by force of arms came in Spring 1920, when Poland, egged on by Britain and France, launched an invasion and captured Kiev. When the Soviet counter-offensive drove them back to the gates of Warsaw, the British and French stepped in and threatened war in support of their Polish puppets, but were stopped short by the “Hands off Russia” movement.

October found Poland ready to conclude an armistice; the same month saw the armies of the White general Wrangel finally driven from the Crimea and southern Russia, his remnants and hangers-on fleeing in British and French ships. The concluding months of 1920 saw the final liberation of Central Asia, the Transcaucasian republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia and (in early 1921) Georgia.

Fighting in the Far East dragged on: British, French and American forces withdrew only in April 1920, while the Japanese stayed till October 1922, when they and their White Guard puppets were defeated and driven from Soviet soil. Only then were the Soviet people able to resume the task they had begun five years before – the building of the world’s first socialist state

● First published in *Comment*, weekly journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol 5, No 44, 4 November 1967, pp 699-700.

# Paris Commune and October Revolution

Liz Payne

IT IS ALREADY clear that the 100th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 will be accompanied by a media barrage of blatantly anti-revolutionary and anti-communist coverage, as well as subtle distortions of the events and their significance, all the more dangerous for their subtlety. This will be aimed at convincing the working class and progressive people everywhere that there is nothing to be gained either from the revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism or from working together to build a different world of peace and socialism. In the face of this, we can learn much from past commemorations and celebrations of events through which the working class has changed the course of history. Past anniversary activities to mark such events have played an integral part in the ideological battle – countering distortions, dispelling myths, promoting class understanding and values, building confidence and providing inspiration for the bitter struggles that lie ahead. We must ensure that our celebrations of the Great October Revolution do likewise.

Karl Marx, in his penetrating contemporary analysis, *The Civil War in France*, explained the significance of the Paris Commune (18 March–28 May 1871) as a world-transforming event. Then, for the first time in history, the working class seized power and revealed the potential for organised workers to defeat the capitalist state. Marx concluded his address to the International Working Men’s Association, only two days after the final violent defeat of the Commune, with the assertion that it would “be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society” and its martyrs “enshrined in the great heart of the working class”.<sup>1</sup>

Across Europe the ruling classes were terrified, and not without reason, that workers would develop the very notions that Marx suggested. In France, the bourgeoisie was every bit as determined to stamp out any remaining vestige of revolutionary consciousness arising from the events in Paris, as it had been ruthlessly to bring down the Commune, in the worst bloodbath of those times. In Britain, support for the Commune had been immediate. A meeting took place at Clerkenwell Green on 9 April, followed by a massive march and rally in Hyde Park on 16 April 1871. The notice of the event urged people to “attend in your thousands and show your sympathy with your French brethren, who are now struggling to emancipate labour and found a real republic”.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset, the ruling classes applied the full ideological force of the media at their disposal towards suppressing the awareness of the nature and significance of the Commune and ensuring that the working class was turned against the Communards and everything they had achieved. Significant numbers of refugees from Paris had already arrived in London by mid-summer 1871 and the hostile media was already at full throttle. As Marx wrote to Ludwig Kugelmann

on 27 July, more myths were propagated in the daily press and telegraph in twenty-four hours than could have been hatched prior to the advent of modern media communications in a hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the whipped-up prejudice created in London that, on the first anniversary, when Karl Marx and others joined refugees to celebrate the memory of the Commune, the landlord barred them from entering their pre-arranged and hired venue, St George’s Hall on Upper Regent Street.<sup>4</sup> Undeterred, they marked the anniversary that year and in every subsequent one.

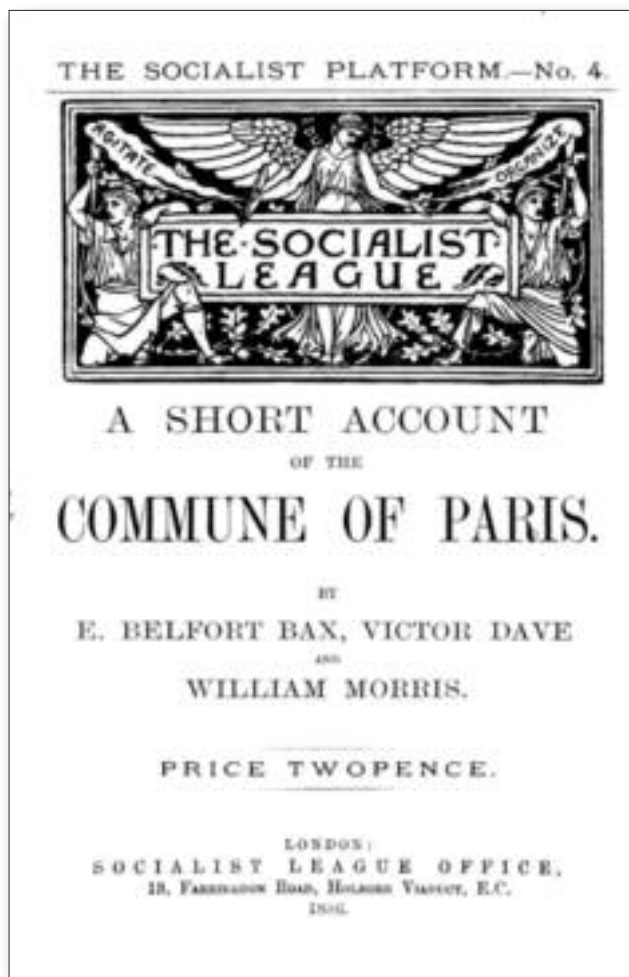
In Paris, in the years that followed the Commune, the Establishment was so fearful that organised workers would retain awareness of their power and potential, and it was so lacking in confidence that the horrors, to which it had subjected those who supported the Commune, would be sufficient to stem the tide of revolutionary consciousness, that it attempted what a recent study described as “state obliteration of the memory” of the event.<sup>5</sup>

The state was unable to succeed. On 18 March 1880, despite every effort to prevent it, the anniversary of the Commune was openly marked – a victory for the people of Paris in their long struggle to preserve and pass on the legacy of this momentous event and their freedom to mark it.

After Marx died, on 14 March 1883, the annual commemoration of his death became bound, by closeness of date and a shared theme – the prefiguring of the end of capitalist exploitation and its replacement with a workers’ state – with the annual celebration of the Commune. Rachel Holmes, in her biography of Eleanor Marx, tells how, to mark the first anniversary of his passing and the 18 March proclamation of the Commune, thousands came together at the entrance to Highgate Cemetery. Hundreds of police turned them away and even Eleanor was not allowed in to place flowers on her father’s grave. Undeterred they held a huge commemoration in a nearby park.<sup>6</sup>

Within a decade and a half, the coming together of the Left in London every March had become a truly international gathering. In 1886, the Commune anniversary at the South Place Institute was attended by representatives of the movement from France, Germany, Italy and Russia.<sup>7</sup> On this occasion Eleanor Marx made one of her finest speeches<sup>8</sup> on the crucial role played by the women of the Commune.

But not everyone on the Left was convinced of the merits of celebrating ‘a defeat’. In response to these critics, William Morris published *Why We Celebrate the Commune* in 1887.<sup>9</sup> In this short tract he set out why it was the unquestionable duty of socialists to celebrate the events in Paris in spring 1871 “enthusiastically and intelligently”. The Commune had been subject to “slander, lies, hypocritical concealments, and false deductions” and, he asserted, it was a matter of duty to “raise



the whole story out of this poisonous gloom and bring it to the light of day". As time separated people from the original event, deeply rooted superstition had been created in the minds of those who had just enough information to have heard of the Commune but not sufficient to prevent them from accepting as historical fact the falsities promoted by the capitalist class. Through celebration, Morris argued, such people, and others who had not previously been touched by socialism, might learn. And Morris was clear that, although the Communards may have failed at enormous cost in their immediate aims, they nonetheless "quicken and strengthened the ideas of freedom by their courageous action and made our hope of today possible."

Only three years after the Commune, Engels in his *Preface* to the second edition of *The Peasant War in Germany* asked "Where would we be now without the precedent of ... the gigantic impulse of the Paris Commune?"<sup>10</sup> We must ask ourselves that same question of the events in Russia in Autumn 1917. In an event to launch celebrations of the 100th anniversary, the Great October Revolution was recently defined as a "pivotal event in the long journey of struggle of generations of exploited and oppressed people", which heralded a new era, that of transition from capitalism to socialism.<sup>11</sup> Through the Revolution, the working class and its allies, building on the knowledge made available by Marx and Engels and its application to struggle and revolution by Lenin, took and held onto state power and began the work of creating a society free from oppression and exploitation.

We are about to celebrate the centenary of the creation of the workers' state – to which the Commune pointed – and everything it achieved, in the face of a legacy of tsarist dictatorship and war and the concerted efforts of imperialist powers and internal reactionary forces to bring it down. We are

about to commemorate the enormous sacrifice of workers, soldiers, peasants and their allies, millions of whom gave everything they had, including their lives, to build and defend the new state. What they did demonstrated in concrete reality that another world is possible.

This was exemplified on 26 October 1917, when one of the first acts of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was to issue its *Decree on Peace*.<sup>12</sup> It included a call to the class-conscious workers of the most advanced capitalist belligerent nations to understand

"... the duty that now faces them of saving humanity from the horrors of war and its consequences, that these workers, by comprehensive, determined and supremely vigorous action, will help us to conclude peace successfully, and at the same time emancipate the labouring and exploited masses of our population from all forms of slavery and exploitation."

Through our marking in Britain of the Great October Revolution we, as conscious members of the working class of a leading imperialist power, are reminded of our self-same, internationalist responsibilities to working people everywhere. We are inheritors of the struggle and in our hands lies the power to secure a just, democratic and socialist future

In December 1917, the chair of a local soviet received a telegram from Lenin. "You are answerable for the safety of the people's heritage", it said.<sup>13</sup> And, as we celebrate the anniversary, so are we.

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# Leninism in the struggle to take power

Steve Johnson

**Based on the contribution from the Communist Party of Britain to the International Ideological Seminar held by the Communist Party of Venezuela on 21 June 2017 in Caracas, in connection with the CPV's 15th National Congress.**

**O**N BEHALF of the Communist Party of Britain I would like to send our warmest comradely greetings to the Communist Party of Venezuela in the struggles you are currently facing. The advances made by Venezuelan workers as part of the Bolivarian revolution, along with progressive developments elsewhere in Latin America have been an inspiration to us in Britain. But we are also seeing the desperate attempts by right-wing forces in alliance with US imperialism to roll back these gains.

In this context, it is appropriate that we are meeting prior to your Congress to consider the question of the validity of Leninism in the current challenges we face, 100 years after the Great October Socialist Revolution. As our programme *Britain's Road to Socialism* points out:

“During its near 70-year existence, the Soviet Union showed how socialist state power, planning and public ownership could transform society in the interests of the mass of the population ... [being] transformed from [a] semi-feudal, semi-capitalist monarchist dictatorship into [a] society with near-full employment, free education and healthcare, affordable housing for all, extensive and cheap public transport, impressive scientific and cultural facilities, rights for women and degrees of self-government for formerly oppressed nationalities.”<sup>1</sup>

The programme also highlights the Soviet Union's key role in the defeat of fascism and in showing solidarity with national liberation movements.

That all this was achieved in conditions of great adversity shows the relevance of Lenin's contributions (a) to the development of Marxism in his characterisation of imperialism as the highest form of capitalism, (b) to the understanding of state power in *State and Revolution*, and (c) to the development, in *What is to be Done*, of the role of the Communist Party as the vanguard of the working class. Although it has long been fashionable for elements of the so-called 'New Left' to deny the relevance of Lenin in

today's conditions, any reading of his classic texts shows the continued relevance of his theories, not to be interpreted in a dogmatic way, but as a guide to action in the circumstances in which communists find themselves today. Lenin's criticisms of the belief that trade union struggles alone could spontaneously develop a class and revolutionary consciousness is surely just as relevant today in guiding the work of communists working in trade unions under capitalism.

It is perhaps apposite in this contribution from our party to remember that Lenin spent some considerable time in Britain and wrote extensively on issues facing the British labour movement and the tasks of Marxists, engaging in polemics which helped inform his later work. Writing on differences in the European labour movement in 1910, Lenin attacked two major trends:

“The revisionists regard as phrase-mongering all arguments about ‘leaps’ and about the working-class movement being antagonistic in principle to the whole of the old society. They regard reforms as a partial realisation of socialism. The anarcho-syndicalists reject ‘petty work’, especially the utilisation of the parliamentary platform. In practice, these latter tactics simply amount to waiting for ‘great days’ along with an inability to muster the forces which create great events. Both of them hinder the thing that is most important and most urgent, namely to unite the workers in big, powerful and properly functioning organisations, capable of functioning well under all circumstances, permeated with the spirit of the class struggle, clearly realising their aims and trained in the true Marxist world outlook.”<sup>2</sup>

Lenin consistently therefore opposed both reformist and right-opportunist trends, and various petty-bourgeois leftist trends who substituted revolutionary phrase-mongering for engagement and guidance in the mass movement. In his *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*, he wrote:

“We have only to say, as the German and British ‘Left’ Communists do, that we recognise only one road, only the direct road, and that we will not permit tacking, conciliatory manoeuvres, or compromising – and it will be a mistake which may cause, and in part has already

caused and is causing, very grave prejudice to communism. Right doctrinairism persisted in recognising only the old forms and became utterly bankrupt, for it did not notice the new content. Left doctrinairism persists in the unconditional repudiation of certain old forms, failing to see that the new content is forcing its way through all and sundry forms, that it is our duty as communists to master all forms, to learn how, with the maximum rapidity, to supplement one form with another, to substitute one for another, and to adapt our tactics to any such change that does not come from our class or from our efforts.”<sup>3</sup>

The insightful approach by Lenin still has important lessons for communists today in grappling with the challenges posed by the current crisis of capitalism and the movements of opposition which have grown up as a response, with all their contradictions and both positive and negative aspects. This applies to the progressive movements in Latin America as it does to movements against austerity in European capitalist countries.

In Britain our 54th Congress in 2016 met in the context of a left turn in the Labour Party, with Jeremy Corbyn’s double victory in the two elections for that party’s leader. This happened with the backing of the rank and file of the Labour Party and a wide range of trade unions. This was a rejection of neoliberal pro-market and pro-imperialist policies of the formerly dominant ‘New Labour’ clique; but since his election Corbyn has faced the hostility of most Labour MPs and, relentlessly, of the ruling class and capitalist media, further demonstrating the class nature of the state as outlined by Lenin.

Despite this, however, the 2017 general election in

Britain resulted in a crisis for the Conservative Party, with a reduction in its seats, and an increase in Labour MPs. This showed the popularity of an election programme based on opposition to austerity and support for bringing back into public ownership sectors of industry which were privatised under both Tory and ‘New Labour’ governments. That this programme proved overwhelmingly popular with younger voters is of great concern to the ruling class.

We welcome these developments, for presenting the working class with new opportunities. But, as the Marxist party of the labour movement, and in line with our programme *Britain’s Road to Socialism*, we also recognise that winning a parliamentary majority is not enough, and that the election of a left-led government needs to be backed up by mass extra-parliamentary action, both to prevent any retreats and to resist sabotage from the class enemy. In a situation where there is growing support for left-wing policies, communists must avoid tendencies both to liquidation into the broader movement, and to sectarian ultra-left tactics which would lead to isolation. It is this guidance by Marx and Engels, later developed by Lenin, which can take us forward in the struggle for working-class power today.

Once again, we express our full solidarity with the Communist Party of Venezuela in your struggles ahead.

#### Notes and References

- 1 CPB, *Britain’s Road to Socialism*, 8th edition, July 2011.
- 2 V I Lenin, *Differences in the European Labour Movement*, in Lenin, *Collected Works (LCW)*, Vol 16, p 349.
- 3 *LCW*, Vol 31, pp 103-4.



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# October and the British Empire

C Desmond Greaves

NO ASPECT of the October Revolution aroused more fury in Western capitals than its total reversal of tsarist foreign policy, and the publication of the secret treaties in which it was embodied. The Entente powers had welcomed the February revolution, which the *New York Herald* (in a reference to the known pro-Germanism of certain court circles) proclaimed was undertaken to “purge Petrograd of traitorous Prussianism”. American big business counted the dollars lent England and France, and hustled into the war to keep the Russians fighting. Throughout the life of the Provisional Government, while military defeat and economic collapse to the point of famine stared it in the face, the British Ambassador concentrated his energies on one object. Russia must bleed on to fulfil the bond – the partition of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires among the mineral-hungry, oil-thirsty imperialists who were opposed to them. Subject nations were to be forcibly transferred from one prison to another.

From the outset the Bolsheviks counterposed the conception of a peoples’ peace, as envisaged by the *International* before it collapsed into contending chauvinisms, a peace “without annexations or indemnities”. Lord Landsdowne, appalled at the spectre in the East, might ring down 1917 with his letter to *The Times* suggesting “peace and hold what we have” lest “civilisation” collapse. That position was already pre-empted. The people's peace meant neither that, nor ‘back to the old frontiers’. Imperialism had sown the wind. Now for the whirlwind. The Bolshevik demand was formulated in mid-May and its terms in relation to the main belligerents make it one of the most remarkable documents:

“Germany, by the terms of such a peace, must not only relinquish *all* the territories she has seized since the beginning of the war, but also release the peoples she is keeping by force within the boundaries of Germany, namely, the Danes (Schleswig), the French (part of Alsace and Lorraine), the Poles (Poznan), etc. Germany must undertake immediately, and simultaneously with Russia, to withdraw her troops from all the regions she has seized, as well as from all the regions mentioned above, and allow each nation to decide freely, by a popular vote, whether it wishes to live as a separate state, or in union *with whomsoever it pleases*. Germany must unconditionally and unequivocally relinquish all her colonies, for colonies are oppressed peoples.

Britain, by the terms of such a peace, must relinquish, immediately and unconditionally, not only the territories she

has seized from others (the German colonies in Africa, etc, the Turkish lands, Mesopotamia, etc), but *all her own colonies as well*. Britain, like Russia and Germany, must immediately withdraw her troops from all the territories she has seized, from her colonies, and also from Ireland, and let each nation decide by a free vote whether it wants to live as a separate state, or in union with whomsoever it wishes.”<sup>1</sup>

Against uncertainty as to who might cite the principle, a democratic qualification was shortly added. “The theoretical definition of annexation”, Lenin wrote, “involves the conception of an ‘alien’ people, *ie* a people that has preserved its peculiarities and its will towards independent existence.”<sup>2</sup>

This policy was based on the profound reassessment of the movement of modern capitalism which Lenin had recently completed in his pamphlet *Imperialism*. It implied above all one thing: national liberation had become a part of the world socialist revolution. This was expressed in the *Decree on Peace* published on November 10.

“The government considers it the greatest of crimes against humanity to continue this war over the issue of how to divide among the strong and rich nations the weak nationalities they have conquered ....”<sup>3</sup>

And a few days later the *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples*<sup>4</sup> showed the world that the Bolsheviks intended to practice what they had preached.

The publication of the secret treaties not only showed what had paralysed the Provisional Government. It had stripped from the western powers their last poor pretence to be waging a just war. They were now driven to seek hypocritical shelter in the ambiguities of President Wilson’s fourteen points. Of the exequies of these, history records that at the Paris Peace Conference it was agreed that no delegate from a non-sovereign nation would be received without the unanimous consent of the main colonial powers; and when challenged with his apostasy Wilson replied “that is the supreme metaphysical tragedy of our age”. By this he is believed to have meant that he had aroused hopes that he could not satisfy.

The impact of Bolshevik policy on the peoples of the British Empire was naturally most immediate in the country with the most advanced national liberation movement, namely Ireland. After the unsuccessful uprising of Easter 1916, there ensued a period of rapid organisation of workers and small farmers in trade union, political and military fields. The Irish Republican



Brotherhood was reorganised and, as early as June 1917, judged that the Soviets would shortly assume sole power. The decision to send Dr Patrick McCartan as envoy to Russia seems to have followed the publication in the Nationalist weekly *New Ireland* of the reply of the 'Russian Council of Soldiers' and Workmen's Delegates<sup>55</sup> to a 'win the war' appeal from Cecil and Asquith. It contained the words:

"What about the historic injustices committed yourselves and your violent suppression of Ireland, India, Egypt, and innumerable people inhabiting all continents? If you are so anxious for 'justice' that you are prepared in its name to send millions of people to the grave, then, gentlemen, begin with yourselves."<sup>56</sup>

*Irish Opinion*, the deliberately innocuously named organ of the labour movement, was revived by L P Byrne. Its support for the revolution was enthusiastic, and no effort was spared to popularise it among the Irish people. The Irish TUC passed a resolution appreciating the Bolsheviks' insistence on universal self-determination of nations, and sent a delegate to England to present a congratulatory address to Mr Litvinov. Nor was solidarity confined to the working class. The Bolshevik example affected the outlook of the entire national movement, and undoubtedly encouraged alike the great movement against conscription in April 1918, and the Sinn Fein delegates who, meeting in Dublin on 21 January 1919, issued not a list of demands but a Declaration of Independence.

When, in protest against the imposition of a system of military permits by the British authorities, the workers seized Limerick and ran the town for a week, the event was called the Limerick Soviet. The following year the 'Soviet Creameries' were taken over by the workers, some gaily flaunting red flags and the banner, "we make butter not profits". They made contacts with the Belfast Cooperative Society and ultimately handed back the concerns in a better financial shape than when they took them. The Irish workers, so far from God and so near to Holyhead, with their best leaders in the grave or the United States, understood the substance of the October Revolution and tried to emulate it in their own way.

Military intervention against the Soviet Republic was answered in England by the 'Hands off Russia Movement'. Intervention in Ireland stimulated the 'Hands off Ireland Movement'. In the United States the campaign for the recognition of the two Republics went hand in hand, the Russian and Irish exiles forming two important national groupings in the prehistory and early days of the Communist Party of the United States. It was in the USA that the Irish-Soviet draft treaty was drawn up by McCartan and Soviet representative Ludwig Martens; and Irish republican funds were loaned to the Soviet Government against the security of part of the Tsar's crown jewels. The alliance broke down when Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins capitulated to Lloyd George's ultimatum and dissolved the Republic. What if it had been preserved?

The war in Ireland continued until the summer of 1921. Meanwhile other subject peoples were stirring. Almost simultaneously with the Irish, the French Canadians revolted against the conscription that was to facilitate intervention in Siberia. There was fierce street fighting in Quebec. When the Central Powers capitulated the meaning of an imperialist peace became clear. It was the continuation of the war by other means. No scheme was too grandiose, megalomaniac or fantastic for the victors to consider. Repeatedly they came to grief because the Soviet Republic survived and drove out its attackers. One

people had stormed heaven – and taken it.

The plan for the dismemberment of Turkey aroused fierce indignation in western Asia and India. The revolution which numbered the days of the Sublime Porte created equal enthusiasm. Despite efforts to seal it off, India was rapidly entering the international movement. The All-India TUC was founded in 1919. A wave of industrial unrest was sweeping the country, in which Moslem and Hindu forged their unity. British imperialism had replied with repression, which included the notorious massacre at Amritsar. The aim of independence was declared by the national movement and a campaign of non-cooperation was inaugurated with the object of winning it. The Communist Party of India was established. It is widely believed that, but for Gandhi's retreat at the crucial moment, freedom might have been won. Even imperialism was compelled to pay lip-service to it.

In Egypt there was an armed insurrection in 1919, with the Republic declared in March of that year. There, as in Ireland, the outcome was a form of neocolonialism.

Trans-Saharan Africa entered the world movement. The first Pan-African congress was held in 1919, as trade unionism surged forward in South Africa. The West African National Congress was established in 1920. Perhaps most spectacular was the great upheaval in Kenya in 1921, when Harry Thuku led a united nation in a struggle against land-seizures, wage reductions, poll tax and forced labour. That year the Communist Party of South Africa was founded. Tribute should be paid to the Irish, Chinese and other seamen who risked their liberty carrying dispatches for national liberation movements other than their own, and to the communist and socialist workers of Britain who adopted the slogan of world national self-determination and acted upon it.

Today imperialism must pursue its aims with new methods, but still seeks to destroy in the name of super-profits those internal relations which the peoples have established through ages and which constitute a community each with its own democracy. The best guarantee of its ultimate defeat is the development and intensification of the policy which was proclaimed with the October Revolution, the establishment of a world united front of workers and oppressed peoples against imperialism, knowing no other enemy. This is what the peoples demand, not the breaking up of the world into disconnected monads. Fifty years ago that new democracy was first placed on the order of the day.

First published in *Labour Monthly*, November 1967, pp 504-8. and slightly edited here.

## Notes and References

- 1 V I Lenin, *Mandate to the Deputies of the Soviet Elected at Factories and Regiments*, in *Collected Works (LCW)*, Vol 24, p 355.
- 2 V I Lenin, *Muddleheadedness: More on the subject of annexations*, in *LCW*, Vol 24, p 434.
- 3 V I Lenin, *LCW*, Vol 26, p 250.
- 4 *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia*, issued on 2(15) November 1917, and signed by Lenin, as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and Stalin as People's Commissar on Nationality Affairs. First published in English in *The Nation*, on 28 December 1919; reproduced in R V Daniels, ed, *a Documentary History of Communism in Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachov*, University Press of New England, Lebanon, New Hampshire, 1993, pp 66-7.
- 5 Presumably the Petrograd Soviet – *CDG*.
- 6 See, for example: *Boston Daily Globe*, 30 May 1917; *New York Times*, 31 May 1917; W W Pearson, *For India*, Forgotten Books, 2015 reprint, unnumbered page. – *Ed*.

# Notes written on the 90th Anniversary of the October Revolution

Hans Heinz Holz

AT THE time of writing, it is needless to say that the 90th anniversary of the October Revolution is being marked everywhere. However, while bourgeois journalists commented on the 80th anniversary with a feeling of victory over the socialist societies of Eastern Europe, those high spirits have evaporated over the following 10 years. The symptoms of the general crisis of capitalism are obvious and startling. Indeed, while unrest among people in the industrialised West is not yet politically trenchant, and is therefore directionless, it is already being expressed, on the one hand in transnational movements and on the other in focused selective activities. The developments in Latin America show that alternatives can be posed to the apparent supremacy of imperialism. The divergent interests of the imperialist powers are allowing cracks to appear in the walls within which the capitalist world is integrated. The conclusions drawn from the economic and historical-philosophical teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin, about assessing the historical process long-term and globally, have actually proved true in the defeat of socialism. Today it is clear that the existence of the powerful socialist camp, under the leadership of the Soviet Union, curbed the inhuman radicalism of imperialism and forced strategies upon capitalism in order to meet people's needs, at least partially and sectorally, thus mitigating and hiding the extent of the crisis.

That means: the October Revolution has actually, *by its negation*, proved itself as a world-historical decisive break and a promising perspective. At the moment of destruction of its social achievements and political power, it is still authenticated by these events as an epochal upheaval. The world is no longer as it was before 1917: the environment in which imperialism gives full bent to its aggressiveness has changed. Even massive military-technical superiority cannot overcome a people's resistance – something already shown in the Vietnam War, and repeated now in different political and ideological contexts, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The fiction of a global terror organisation, Al Qaeda, is the spawn of the theoretical helplessness of the ruling class in grasping the restructuring of social forces in the world.

If the ruling class is to conduct the fight against socio-critical tendencies, then it must build up a vision of terror about the most rigorous form of the criticism, that which questions the system as a whole. That is what bourgeois journalism and (pseudo)science does. Anti-communism is again in great demand. So, anyone who regards the world

changes begun with the October Revolution as necessary, and the capitalist order as pernicious and deserving of abolition, must not use the categories of bourgeois ideology to defend the Revolution. The leading principles of bourgeois society – freedom, human rights, rule of law etc – have for long since, in social practice under capitalist conditions, revealed themselves as self-contradictory and transformed into the opposite of what they were supposed to guarantee. Revolution is an overthrow not only of material relations, but also of the categories conceptually expressing them. In order to direct a revolution onto the correct path for reorganising society, we must use concepts correctly. They must gain their normative function<sup>1</sup> from their relation to the organising processes of social life.

That goes primarily for the concept of revolution itself. The positive idea, that in a revolution something quite new is forced through and is real, has become obscured through the degenerating transmission of the concept to any number of developments in everyday life. Every year a 'revolution' in fashion is announced; every technical innovation is praised as 'revolutionising' the relevant area of life; a director's gimmick in the theatre is regarded as a 'revolutionary' performance. 'Revolution', in these terms, simply means innovation.

No! We maintain that a revolution is the transformation of both the defining principles of formation of a society, and its forms of organisation, so that it is changed in its system structure, with those changes touching all forms of life – material as well as spiritual – *ie* it is a total social occurrence. The thought processes in which revolutionary consciousness develops must be defined if we want to assess an intention as revolutionary, and set goals accordingly. Revolutions in a proper sense can only be correctly spoken of in politics, since politics is the active organisation of the whole life according to certain general principles of satisfaction of needs, production, commerce, representation, security and risk prevention.

"Revolutions are the locomotives of history," wrote Marx in 1850.<sup>2</sup> That is a fine and heartening sentence, particularly if we consider that there were only a few revolutions in history which led immediately to a victory of the revolutionaries. Even the Great French Revolution of 1789, which we always list alongside the October Revolution as an example and model, ended with the Thermidorian Reaction, and with Robespierre on the scaffold.<sup>3</sup> The English Revolution of 1649 silted up in a

‘Because revolutions are the transition from one specific social formation to another specific formation, there cannot be two revolutions which resemble each other’

compromise between fractions of the ruling class. It went exactly the same way with the European bourgeois revolutions of 1848. And if we go further back, things appear still worse: the Gracchi in 2nd century Rome, who attempted an overthrow of the agrarian relations, were murdered; and the plebeian uprisings in the Middle Ages were cruelly put down. Frederick Engels wrote of the Peasant War in Germany:

“The most magnificent revolutionary effort of the German people ended in ignominious defeat and, for the time being, in redoubled oppression.”<sup>4</sup>

Are revolutions therefore locomotives without tractive power? Let us read Engels further on:

“Who profited from the Revolution of 1525? The *princes*. Who profited from the Revolution of 1848? The *big* princes, Austria and Prussia. Behind the minor princes of 1525 stood the petty burghers, who chained the princes to themselves by taxes. Behind the big princes of 1850, behind Austria and Prussia, there stand the modern big bourgeois, rapidly getting them under their yoke by means of the national debt. And behind the big bourgeoisie stand the proletarians.”<sup>5</sup>

Hegel called that “the cunning of reason”. The victory of the counter-revolution is only apparently the victory of the counter-revolutionaries. In reality it sharpens the contradictions in the ruling class as much as the contradictions between rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited. Also, a failed revolution opens breaches in the bastions of the existing order and brings forward the course of history. “*Geschlagen ziehen wir nach Haus, unsre Enkel fechten’s besser aus* – Defeated we return home, our grandchildren will fight it out better”: in this way the tormented peasants of 1525 looked to the future.

The October Revolution is to be seen in the same manner – 90 years after its victory, 20 years after the victory of the counter-revolution. Mark you: not everywhere, but in Europe. The liberation process of the oppressed countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa goes on, and leads to successes, as it also costs enormous sacrifices. The October Revolution opened the gate through which “the wretched of the Earth”<sup>6</sup> are pressing for freedom. With the storming of the Winter Palace, the

transition to a new social formation began.

There is still not socialism – to maintain that was revisionism arising from a petty-bourgeois mentality; but the stages on the road to socialism are laid, and the October Revolution has set up the signpost. It was the epochal decisive break, separating capitalism from socialism. Afterwards there began the long, contradictory phase of what was made possible in the revolutionary event – the continuation of the revolution as a process, in which there will also be repeated setbacks. But the construction of socialism was begun, and this symbol cannot be taken back. The commemoration of the Revolution is the mandate to consider its experiences and to carry on its impetus.

Because revolutions are the transition from one specific social formation to another specific formation, there cannot be two revolutions which resemble each other. The specifics of the formation determine the type of the revolution. Both an elaboration of the constants inherent in each revolutionary process, and an analysis of the specifics, are indispensable for a historically concrete revolutionary theory. This must also include the ideological forms in which revolutionary consciousness appears and intervenes in a directing manner in the course of the revolution. That the October Revolution introduced the overthrow of capitalist society, which exhibits an extraordinary concentration of power in the ruling class, and whose highly differentiated production method and complex economic cross-linking has brought forward a branching bureaucracy as an apparatus of control, implies certain peculiarities, whose essence must be recognised, in order to be able to assess their outward appearances.

If we are to continue discussion on these issues then the following questions, which involve the particularity of a socialist revolution, must be raised:

- What distinguishes it from earlier revolutions and in what ways is it genuinely new?
- What role falls to a revolutionary vanguard and what significance to the masses?
- To what extent, in socialist construction, is the counter-revolutionary tendency towards revisionism always inherent, and does it require a theoretically based class struggle in order to meet this danger of self-destruction?

If we not only commemorate the October Revolution as a historical date, but want to understand it as a historical force, we shall have to find answers to these questions.

**T**HE HISTORY Of the Soviet Union is a history of the success of the Soviet state. The solution of the class antagonism in the countryside (under the motto of collectivisation of agriculture) was a difficult task, because it signified a continuation of the revolutionary class struggle in extremely antagonistic forms (murder of Soviet functionaries; repressive to excessive force on the part of the state and Party institutions). A temporary decline in agricultural production and serious country-wide supply problems were connected with it. But ultimately the class struggle in the countryside was decided in favour of a socialist perspective, and the state farms and agricultural cooperatives became a stable factor in the socialist society.

There were certainly differences over the varying pathways towards socialist construction, which led to the formation of factions inside the Party – a process which is well-known from all revolutions. The factions were in the final analysis an expression of the consequences of the pre-socialist class antagonisms, which already existed and were fought out in the socialist movement before the October Revolution, and which continued in the Party leadership after the Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Thus there were also fronts of the class struggle inside the Party, and this led to conflicts which were definitely of a ‘revolutionary use of force’ type, but which – in the light of the prolongation of the revolution into the period of state organisation of society – do not appear as revolutionary force but as state injustice.<sup>8</sup> The 1936 Soviet Constitution was at least able to give a positive conclusion to this contradictory phase of construction,<sup>9</sup> but its further development was immediately interrupted by the Second World War.

If the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union – controversial in its strategies – and the heroic struggle for survival against the German invasion, are not grasped as phases of the revolution, then we always arrive at only a moralistic judgement of this period. In the struggle for implementing and securing the revolution, there were many unnecessary harshnesses<sup>10</sup>, and much injustice occurred, which from the viewpoint of ‘normal’ constitutional relations (which even allow plenty of injustice) would allow them to be characterised as ‘crimes’<sup>11</sup>. The moral duty to oppose a recognised injustice always exists. However, as long as history is the history of class struggles, changes in the social system do not proceed without exercise of force, and that means also with inclusion of illegal acts. The target horizon of social progress is the real possibility covering both morality and historicity, but the road to this horizon must first be won. The difference of morality and historicity, which expresses the difference of ways and aims, certainly becomes much more noticeable, the more the revolutionary process is protracted, because it is then superimposed by the daily appearance of normality and is no longer recognised as the moment of revolution. The clarification of the categorial determinations and the sociological contents of a ‘prolonged revolution’ is still a task to be tackled by the philosophy of history.

The process triggered by the October Revolution is also prolonged because it no longer – as in earlier times – remains limited to one geographical region (eg West and Central Europe, like the French Revolution). Under capitalism, a worldwide unified economic system of rule has been established – if also with differentiated development structures (uneven development of industrialised countries, colonial and then later neocolonial

exploitation and dependence, capitalisation of the agricultural sector etc), but everywhere subject to the laws of the capitalist world market. Revolutions followed regionally in stages, all logically and historically linked, as a unified process, to the October Revolution – China, Cuba, Vietnam; and they were connected with national liberation struggles, which have not yet led to changes of formation – India, Indonesia.

Also, inside a society organised as a state, the revolution can proceed intermittently. In China there was the political change of rule with the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, then the harsh phase of class struggle in the Cultural Revolution from 1968,<sup>12</sup> and we do not know what shocks on the way to socialism still stand before this giant realm full of contradictions.

If the classical revolutions of the modern era are to be defined as a political change of class rule, which sets the seal on the economic changes of the basis, then the transformation of the revolutionary event into the revolutionary process of upheaval follows from the political overthrow which anticipates it. Neither in Russia in 1917, nor after 1949 in China, Cuba and Vietnam, nor today in Venezuela and Bolivia, was the economic structure ready and prepared for socialist production relations. Here, the freeing of people from the slavery of wage-labour did not and does not take place at the highest level of social wealth and with technically highly developed means of production, but under conditions of shortage and of a massive backlog in the arrangement of productive forces. That changes the power situation – its persistence in the internal conflict with the still strong forces of bourgeois society and in the external conflict, with the necessity of defence against threats by the capitalist states.

The socialist revolution does not carry out the transition to socialism, but creates the conditions to build up socialism at first stepwise and thus in ever new individual revolutionary acts. The intermediate stages thus achieved are still not socialism, and will take different forms from case to case. Consequently they will be so much the more endangered by revisionism in the theory and practice of socialism and by the aggressiveness of the imperialist centres. There is no socialist revolution which has been allowed to consider its aims as secure after the first political victory, and to be swayed by the illusion that the historical process would be irreversible. Lenin and Mao, Castro and Ho Chi Minh were the locomotives of the revolution, but they did not know how the station would look into which the train would arrive. And neither do we know – the train is still running.

■ Extracted and translated, with additional notes, by Martin Levy, from H H Holz, *1989-1917: Zwei Revolutionen (Two Revolutions)*, in *Topos* Special Issue 2, 2008, pp 7-10 and 69-72.

## Notes and References

- 1 Philosophical term relating to what is good/bad, desirable/undesirable, permissible/impermissible etc –Ed.
- 2 K Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, Ch 3; in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Vol 10, p 122.
- 3 On 9 Thermidor Year II, French politician Maximilien Robespierre and other radicals came under concerted attack in the National Assembly, leading to their execution the following day. This was the end of the radical phase of the French Revolution –Ed.

- 4 F Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, in *MECW*, Vol 10, p 478.
- 5 *Ibid*, p 482. [However, in his Preface to the 2nd edition of the *Peasant War*, in *MECW*, Vol 21, p 94, Engels writes that “in this paragraph too much honour was done to the German bourgeoisie. Both in Austria and Germany it has indeed had the opportunity of ‘rapidly getting’ the monarchy ‘under its yoke by means of the national debt’, but nowhere did it ever make use of this opportunity.” – *Ed*]
- 6 After the title of the book by Frantz Fanon –*Ed*.
- 7 *Cf*, as an expression of the ideological fronts which existed in Soviet Marxism, the comments on Gramsci’s critique of Bukharin’s ‘*Popular Manual*’ in H H Holz, *Stalin’s Philosophical and Political Testament*, in *CR53*, Summer 2009, p 35.
- 8 On this see M Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An essay on the communist problem*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.
- 9 H H Holz, *Die Verfassung der Sowjetunion von 1936 (The Soviet Constitution of 1936)*, in W Gerns/H H Holz/H Kopp/T Metcher/W Seppmann, eds, *Philosophie und Politik*, commemorative publication on the 80th birthday of Robert Steigerwald, Essen, 2005, p 280 ff; online at [www.die-dkp-leipzig.de/Dokumente/Philosophie%20und%20Politik\\_Festschrift%20fuer%20Robert%20Steigerwald.pdf](http://www.die-dkp-leipzig.de/Dokumente/Philosophie%20und%20Politik_Festschrift%20fuer%20Robert%20Steigerwald.pdf).
- 10 With regard to Lenin’s criticism of Stalin’s harshness, the latter remarked on this in a speech on 23 October 1927: “That is quite true. Yes, comrades, I am rude (harsh) to those who grossly and perfidiously wreck and split the Party. I have never concealed this and do not conceal it now. Perhaps some mildness is needed in the treatment of splitters, but I am a bad hand at that.” J Stalin, *The Trotskyist Opposition Before and Now*, in *Works*, Vol 10, pp 180-1. I have studied the interlocking of moralist measures and political rigorism in the example of the French Revolution, in *Tugend und Terror: Zur sogenannten Schreckensherrschaft (Virtue and Terror: On the so-called ‘Reign of Terror’)*, in *Marxistische Studien, Jahrbuch des IMSF*, No 14, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, p 181ff.
- 11 I regard the term ‘crimes’ in times of violent revolutionary clashes (to which defence against counter-revolution also belongs) as inapplicable, because it can only be defined in relation to an existing state-social order of peace. Naturally, in every period there are individual crimes – eg the murder of an unloved spouse or a rich aunt, subject material for crime novels! – but not however in the collective political activity, in which however severe injustice can be committed.
- 12 At the start of the Cultural Revolution the Chinese People’s Army’s newspaper published an article by Chieh-fang-chun-Pao, *Never Forget the Class Enemy!* (4 May 1966). It included the following: “The anti-Party and anti-socialist elements will persistently show their bourgeois nature in hundreds of ways, and it is impossible to demand that they do not express them. ... US imperialism and the remaining class enemies at home and abroad are not only trying to overthrow us by force, but they they also want to conquer us through ‘peaceful evolution’. In hundreds of ways they are spreading reactionary political and ideological bacilli and the bourgeois way of life, in order to corrupt and demoralise the communists, the proletariat and the other popular revolutionary masses.” This is a quite precise description of the situation of the class struggle in a ‘prolonged’ revolution.

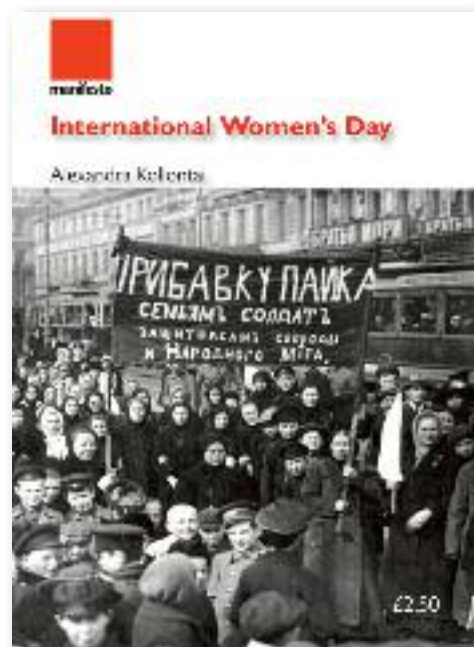


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# SOULFOOD

with Mike Quille



## Black Night, White Snow

**F**RAN LOCK wrote – in *On Fighting On*, the main poem in the last Soul Food column – “A better world is possible”, . It echoes the theme of the *Tomorrow May Not Be The Same* interviews which have been featured in *CR* over the last year or two.

The Russian Revolution was also fired by the belief that a better world was possible, and one of the first poetic responses to it – and poetic expressions of it – was Alexander Blok’s *The Twelve*. So to commemorate the centenary of the October Revolution in this special edition of *Communist Review*, I’m going to present briefly the first and last parts of the poem. Then I’m going to follow the spirit of the poem by marching on like one of ‘the Twelve’ into a discussion of the relationship of art and culture to revolutionary politics, which represents a contribution to the *Tomorrow May Not Be The Same* series.

### The Twelve

*The Twelve*, or simply *Twelve* (there is no definite article in Russian), is a great example of the power of poetry to express political events. Better than any prosaic history could achieve, the poem captures the aspirations, the idealism, the fears and uncertainties of the revolutionaries and of the Russian people generally, as well as the seismic political fragmentation and the psychological and social chaos which accompanied the Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Here are the first and last stanzas of *Twelve*, in a new translation by Maria Carlson at the University of Kansas.<sup>2</sup> She writes that the action takes place in January 1918, just after the Soviets had dissolved the Constituent Assembly, elected before the Revolution.

I  
Black night.  
White snow.  
The wind, the wind!  
Impossible to stay on your feet.  
The wind, the wind!  
Blowing across God’s world!

The wind swirls round  
The clean, white snow.  
Under the snow – there’s ice.  
It’s slick, it’s hard,  
Pedestrians  
Slip – oops! too bad!

From building to building  
Stretches a cable.  
On the cable’s a placard:  
“All Power to the Constituent Assembly!”  
An old woman keens and weeps beneath it.  
She just can’t understand what it means,  
Why such a huge scrap of cloth  
For such a placard?  
It would make so many foot wraps for the boys,  
So many are without clothes or shoes ....

The old woman, hen-like,  
Managed somehow to scramble over the snow bank.

“Oh, Holy Mother of God, our Protectress!  
“Oh, those Bolsheviks will put me in my grave!”

The wind is biting!  
The frost tenacious!  
The bourgeois standing at the  
Crossroads  
Has tucked his nose into his collar.

And who’s this? with long hair  
And muttering under his breath:  
“Traitors!  
“Russia has perished!”  
It must be a writer –  
An orator ....

And there’s a figure in a cassock –  
Sidling behind the snow bank ....  
So, not too happy these days,  
Eh, comrade priest?

You remember how once  
You walked, belly-first,  
And your cross-bedecked belly  
Shone on the common people? ...

There’s a young lady wrapped in karakul,  
Walking with another:  
“And we cried and cried ....”  
She slipped on the ice  
and – oof! – down she went!



Illustration  
to *The  
Twelve*  
Yuri  
Annenkov  
1918

Oh, my!  
Give me your hand, pull me up!

The wind is gleeful  
And mad and glad.  
It twists coat hems,  
Mows down passers-by,  
Tears at, mangles, and tosses  
The large placard:  
“All Power to the Constituent Assembly.”

The wind carries the words:

... And we, too, held an assembly ...  
... Here, in this building ...  
... We debated –  
We resolved:  
For an hour, ten rubles; for the whole night – twenty-five  
...  
... And don't take less from anyone ...  
... Let's go to bed ...

The evening's late.  
The street's deserted.  
Only a vagrant  
Stoops, round-shouldered,  
And the wind whistles ...

Hey, poor sweetie!  
Come on over –  
Give us a kiss . . .

Bread!  
What's ahead?  
Move along!

Black, black sky.

Spite, grievous spite,  
Boils in the breast ...  
Black spite, holy spite ...

Comrade! Keep  
Both eyes open!

## 12

... Off they go with martial pace ...  
“Who is it there? You come on out!”  
But it's just the wind that's playing  
With the red flag up ahead ...

Up ahead there's a frozen snow bank,  
“You, in the snow bank – come on out! ...”  
Only the dog, beggared and hungry,  
Hobbles along behind them still.

“Beat it, you mangy cur, or else  
My bayonet will tickle you!  
Vanish, old world – or else I'll stick you  
Like that mangy, lousy dog.”

... It shows its fangs – a hungry wolf –  
Tail tucked in, it sticks close by –  
The dog is cold – the dog's a mongrel ...  
“Hey, give answer, who goes there?”

“Who now waves the bright red flag?”  
“Oh just look, how dark it is!”  
“Who is walking with quickened pace,  
Hiding behind the buildings there?”

“All the same, I'm going to get you,  
Come on now – give yourself up!”  
“Listen, comrade, this won't end well,  
Come on out, before we shoot!”

Rat-a-tat-tat! Only the echo  
Bounces round the buildings there ...  
Only the blizzard, laughing, laughing,  
Roaring with laughter in the snows ...

Rat-a-tat-tat!  
Rat-a-tat-tat ...

... And so they keep a martial pace,  
Behind them follows the hungry dog,  
Ahead of them – with bloody banner,  
Unseen within the blizzard's swirl,  
Safe from any bullet's harm,  
With gentle step, above the storm,  
In the scattered, pearl-like snow,  
Crowned with a wreath of roses white,  
Ahead of them – goes Jesus Christ.

Controversy has surrounded these final lines, which have been interpreted by some as signalling Blok's fundamentally reactionary Old Russian religiosity. But Blok is actually turning the tables on traditional, institutionalised religion, by summoning the historically more truthful interpretation of Jesus Christ as a political revolutionary, crucified by the Romans for challenging the authority and justice both of the Roman Empire and the local religious and business elites who colluded with the Romans.<sup>3</sup>

# Tomorrow, art and culture may not be the same

**T**HE FOLLOWING piece is an edited transcript of an interview, on the subject of art and culture, given by me to Pierre Marshall from the Young Communist League.

The full piece is rather long, because there is a lot to say about art and culture, and it is important to establish a sound philosophical basis before considering what concrete policies need to be developed on that foundation. So this is Part 1 – Part 2 will feature in the next Soul Food column.

## **PM: Do you want to make a few general comments to start?**

**MQ:** I'd like to start by making the point that what I'm going to say isn't worth anywhere near as much as the art and culture I'm commenting on. It is just comment, a few words in a kind of prosaic discursive discourse, about things – poetry, theatre, paintings etc – which are far more powerful, longer lasting, pleasurable, even almost magical in their ability to move us and change us.

So treat what I say as a few provisional notes, and measure it against how you feel after reading the poetry and reviews and listening to the music and looking at the artworks on the **Culture Matters** website and elsewhere.

I'd also like to say that I learned most of what I'm going to say as a result of experiencing the power of art, not primarily as an intellectual commitment to political theory. What I have come to think, however, is that a Marxist and historical materialist approach is by far the most powerful and insightful way of understanding and appreciating art and culture, and their links to history, economics and politics generally.

There's a lot I'd like to say about art and culture generally, as a bit of background for the **Culture Matters** project, because otherwise it's easy to misunderstand what we're trying to do. Some people on the political Right, for instance, probably think we're just interested in propaganda, in art that is made for specific political purposes, to advance left-wing politics. Others might take a more liberal approach politically, but still think we're being reductionist, taking away the wonder and power of art by reducing it to political statements. And of course they might take the common, superficial look at the history of art in countries that have attempted socialism, such as the Soviet Union and China, and conclude that we're all about censorship and state direction.

But it's not like that. Political parties on the Left don't have a 'line' on art which tells you what's good art and what's not so good, what you should and shouldn't like. Leftist political groups don't have a central committee or politburo or leader trying to tell everyone what to think and feel about poetry or paintings or music.

A Marxist approach suggests that it's important to look at artworks in their historical, social and political context, in order to understand and appreciate them fully, rather than just their aesthetic attractiveness. It's common sense, actually, and it's not unlike a lot of other things.

## **PM: What do you mean? What other things is it like?**

**MQ:** If you like clothes and fashion, for example, you can choose when you're out shopping just to focus on the look of clothes, the quality of the material, and their cost. Or you can choose to widen your outlook and consider who made them, the conditions they worked in, how much they got paid, etc.

A T-shirt might be very good quality, well made, well designed and very cheap. It might have the iconic Che Guevara image on it, or a very interesting or amusing or provocative message. But it also has other meanings, to do with how and why and by whom it was made. If we know or find out it's been made by child labour in a sweat shop in Bangladesh, doesn't that affect what we think about the T-shirt? We might also reflect on how capitalism commodifies culture and appropriates radical images for profit-making ends.

Similarly, with art, you can choose just to focus on the aesthetic qualities of a painting or poem or song and the emotions it evokes: how pleasing the combination of colours is in a painting, how striking the images in a poem are, how memorable the melody is in a song. Or you can also look – and I stress also – at what the painting or poem or song is about, how and why it was made, what it was meant to achieve at the time and what it means now, all the meanings of the artwork which potentially have strong social and political dimensions.

Marxism doesn't see art as pure ideology or propaganda, a bit of fluffy superstructure designed to fool us or distract us or just entertain us. It can be corrupted into just those things, as we all know from looking at what's on the television most nights. But that's just like other cultural activities like science and sport and religion, which also have their oppressive and escapist side, precisely because we live in a class-divided society and those class divisions are reflected in, expressed by and sometimes legitimised by artistic and cultural activities. But it ain't necessarily so!

Marxists like to ask how does this piece of art – this bit of work from an individual or group, part of a humanity which is socially organised – how does it help us understand the world, get to the heart of things, live richer and more satisfying lives? How does it help us live in and cope with the world, and change it and our perceptions of it? A Marxist approach understands and explains how great artists are capable of perceiving and communicating deep and wonderful insights into truths which reach our sense of universality, thereby reminding us of and strengthening our essentially common and social nature.

The political Left tends to take this kind of rounded, deep approach to art, and tends to interpret, appreciate and evaluate works in this wider, more realistic way.

## **PM: OK, so if the economic and political background is so important to your approach, do you want to sketch out your thinking on those issues?**

**MQ:** Yes, OK, it's just ordinary leftist thinking really, but I'll start out by sketching out the way we look at the world today, because that lies behind our approach to the arts and to other cultural activities.

We know that we're living in one of the richest countries on earth, due to several hundred years' worth of



exploitation of labour in England, in the British Isles, in the colonies of the British Empire, and nowadays through other mechanisms of global exploitation. We know it's a society divided into classes. There are lots of different definitions of class but objectively, the most powerful conditioner certainly of our economic lives is the division between the very small minority who own, control and manage material wealth, and those who don't, who work for a wage for others. There are those who live off rents from property, interest on loans, or profits from enterprises, and determine the way we provision ourselves as a society, and have a lot of control of the social and political institutions. The 1%, you might say.

Then there are those who have to sell their labour power to survive and prosper and who have much less of a say about how things are run. They are the 99%, and that's a big and fundamental difference, even though there are lots of people in the 99% who fiercely defend the right of the 1% to exploit everybody else, and even though there are lots of divisions and disagreements amongst the 99% about who exactly is getting exploited and oppressed and discriminated against, and how bad it is.

We also know that there are continuing struggles, accommodations, compromises and conflicts between the classes, with the owners – mostly the capitalist class in modern times – trying all the time to appropriate wealth, to transfer value, the product of labour, and maximise profits and the accumulation of capital, and gain and exercise political power. The working class, that is working people who have to sell or give away their labour power, try to minimise that profit-taking, that transfer of value. They try to retain as much ownership and control of their labour as possible, get as much remuneration for their labour as possible, and also try and gain and exercise political power. This is why trade unions are so important, as an expression of working class solidarity, and why unions and socialists formed the Labour Party in 1900.

We also know that this process has happened throughout history, at least ever since there was a surplus of food and other goods. Society has been divided into classes for a very long time, and in lots of different ways – for example slaves and slave-owners in ancient Greece and Rome, peasants and lords in medieval Europe, workers and capitalists across the globe nowadays. These forces, driven by ownership and control, also drive other important interlocking distinctions, discriminations and oppressions around gender, ethnic background, sexuality etc. As John Lennon and Yoko Ono sang “Woman is the nigger of the world”,<sup>4</sup> but she is also the worker of the world.

These struggles and conflicts and accommodations, voluntary and forced compromise and cooperation, are expressed in various ways. They're expressed in political life in struggles over who has power in society to make the laws which determine how we live. They're expressed economically in negotiations, disputes, struggles between workers and employers over what gets produced, and how, and for how much.

And – wait for it – you'll be delighted that I'm finally getting round to mentioning culture! Because these struggles and conflicts and accommodations are also expressed in artistic and cultural forms.

**PM: Can you just clarify what you mean by culture, as it's used in many different ways, isn't it?**

**MQ:** Yes, indeed it is. By culture I mean not only the arts, like poetry, theatre, music, painting etc, but culture in its widest sense, including most learned human activities. “Culture is ordinary”, said Raymond Williams, it is “everything we do”. So included in culture are things like sport, philosophy, religion, scientific and technological research, watching TV, reading newspapers, using the internet and social media, fashion and clothing, and shopping, eating and drinking. There are articles on all those things on **Culture Matters**.

All of those human activities are embedded in certain historically specific economic and political arrangements, and they all to a greater or lesser extent have the capacity to express, reimagine and affect those arrangements. And I stress affect because this isn't a simple causal or mechanical relationship whereby economic arrangements determine culture and art. It's a two-way, dialectical relationship. Why? Because we can imagine different things through cultural activities like art, and that can inspire us and motivate us to change material reality, which then, in turn, affects the art and culture of that society.

I should also say that the distinction often made between ‘high’ culture and ‘low’ culture is a false one, designed to denigrate popular culture and exclude ordinary people from enjoyment and understanding of much culture. The real divide is between ruling class culture and working class culture. The one is exclusive, individualistic and inevitably reflective of the power/money nexus. The other is inclusive, collective and based on the understanding that we are social beings who enjoy culture in social contexts.

For example: as Gabriel Egan says in his series on Shakespeare on **Culture Matters**, the powerful art of Shakespeare is rooted in his amazingly vivid and powerful evocation and expression of lots of different choices; writing at a time when feudalism was being challenged by a nascent capitalism, generating significant change in social and economic relations. Many of them are political choices, about such things as male and female identity and relationships, about forms of power and government, about how wealth should be distributed. Watching a Shakespeare play is watching lots of options for how things might be. Of how tomorrow may not be the same!

That doesn't mean art directly changes the world we live in. As John Berger says, an artwork or poem doesn't itself change the material world we live in, but it can change how we think and feel and how we then choose to act, and in that way help change the world.

So that's why and how art can be said to have political meanings and political power. It's always a part of the cultural struggle against class division, and for a more liberated humanity. It's part of the “mental fight” as Blake – our website hero, as you might guess – calls it in the poem *Jerusalem*.

I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In England's green and pleasant land.

**PM: Can you say a bit more about the relationship between art and politics?**

**MQ:** OK, I'll try, but unfortunately there isn't a precise, easily defined relationship, there are issues of creativity and imagination and subjectivity involved which mean there isn't a straightforward causal relationship. We need to think about the links between art and politics in broad terms. We mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that a work of art is nothing more than a simple expression of the class forces of its time, although it often is precisely that. Nor must we think of art as being simply an instrument of struggle to change things, although it can be very good at that too.

Art is much more than those things. Although all art is necessarily located in a specific set of political and historical circumstances, and necessarily has a relation to its time and place, not all of it is directly about politics, economics and class struggle.

For example, there is a fine article on *Culture Matters* about a music group called Snarky Puppy. Snarky Puppy do not sing directly about politics, but Nick Grant, the author, argues quite brilliantly that there are still political meanings to be unearthed. They're in the radical and deep humanism of the music, in its nature as live collective performance and creativity. It represents a kind of temporary utopia, as one of the band members calls it, of uplifting and pleasurable co-operation.

So it doesn't matter that it isn't straightforward protest music with a message, like early Bob Dylan, Ewan MacColl, Billie Holiday or Billy Bragg. It's still a kind of cultural activism, and making, listening to and enjoying this kind of music is part of the cultural struggle against capitalism. Just as going on strike is part of the economic struggle, and electing a socialist leader of the Labour Party is part of the political struggle.

**PM: How would you sum up, in theoretical terms, the points you're making about art, culture and capitalism?**

**MQ:** OK, yes, let's get a bit more generalist and theoretical, whilst remembering what I said at the start that all of this is just a few notes. So, I'd say that art and culture generally relate to the struggle against capitalism in several ways.

Firstly, there's the economics of it. Artistic activity is creative, unalienated labour, aimed purely at expression, communication and enhancing understanding and pleasure, between human beings. As such it is naturally opposed to the capitalist project of commodification and commercialisation. Anyone who has ever picked up a paintbrush, composed a poem or a piece of music, or made up a story, knows that. And anyone who has ever had that rush of pleasure and vision and understanding that you get from a great work of art, from looking at a Rembrandt self-portrait or listening to Beethoven or the Beatles, knows it too.

Secondly, there's the politics of it. Art and culture can convey social criticism, and progressive, liberating political ideas, in a powerful, attractive way. Think of paintings like Guernica, or the poetry of Blake or Shelley or Brecht, or a lot of black music in the Sixties like Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*, or films like *Battleship Potemkin* or *Battle of Algiers* – or *I, Daniel Blake*, by Ken Loach, who, at 79 years old, is still fiercely protesting about the way things are.

Thirdly, there's the psychology of it. I think works of art

socialise the psyche, they organise and reorganise our minds. They are works of organised, shared emotional and intellectual meaning, which not only act to communicate shared values, including the possibility of new and better values and a new and better world, but at the same time enhance and deepen communication and consciousness itself. Art and cultural activities generally are liberating, progressive forces, both to produce and to consume. They help develop the human capacity to think, to feel, to dream and to play, help develop the psychic infrastructure to enable us to envision and implement socialism and communism. Again, stare at one of Rembrandt's self portraits – look at him watching you watch him! – and you'll see what I mean.

And, fourthly, there's the philosophy of it. There's something about art and cultural activities which links them naturally to socialist political philosophies, and that is to do with their inherently social character. Art springs from social settings and all the arts involve the primary social act of communication of some kind – communicating emotion, ideas, giving pleasure and sometimes pain, conveying messages and truths. In a society of identity politics, individualistic distinctions, class divisions and nationalistic boundaries, this potentially gives art a vitally important liberating and unifying character.

Let's look briefly at just one of the arts, music, to illustrate this point. Evolutionary psychologists say that music is an expression of the human urge to seek (and create) patterns in the environment in order to make sense of it, work on it and with it, and change it. It comes before language, it's more basic and universal. It is a kind of social and emotional regulation – it soothes infants, it aids work and learning, it motivates people for action, eg military struggles, and it calms them down again. It's best experienced live, in company, and why is that? It's because it's essentially social, it helps develop sociality and co-operation and collective effort, enhancing communication between individuals.

Music works as a kind of a transformative technology of the mind. It's somehow able to reach parts of the mind and change them. It's a kind of emotional gymnasium – like a novel or play, music helps us develop and rehearse our emotions. It is cathartic, so if you listen to sad music, it rehearses and relives it in a kind of virtual, safe environment, so has a vital evolutionary benefit.

All of these characteristics of the art of music – which could with very little modification also be applied to poetry, drama, films etc – show how relevant art is to social and political issues, and how humanly developmental and liberating it can be.

**Notes and References**

- 1 For further background on the poem, and on Blok himself, see John Ellison's article this year in *Culture Matters*, at <http://tinyurl.com/yaq7qeee>.
- 2 [http://russiasgreatwar.org/docs/twelve\\_notes.pdf](http://russiasgreatwar.org/docs/twelve_notes.pdf).
- 3 See forthcoming *Culture Matters* pamphlet, *The Insurrection of Jesus Christ*.
- 4 Phrase coined by Yoko Ono in an interview with *Nova* magazine in 1969; later the title of a song by Yoko Ono and John Lennon, on the 1972 album *New York City*. The use of the N-word was controversial, with Lennon explaining it as referring to any oppressed person – see <http://tinyurl.com/yctzyqpw>.

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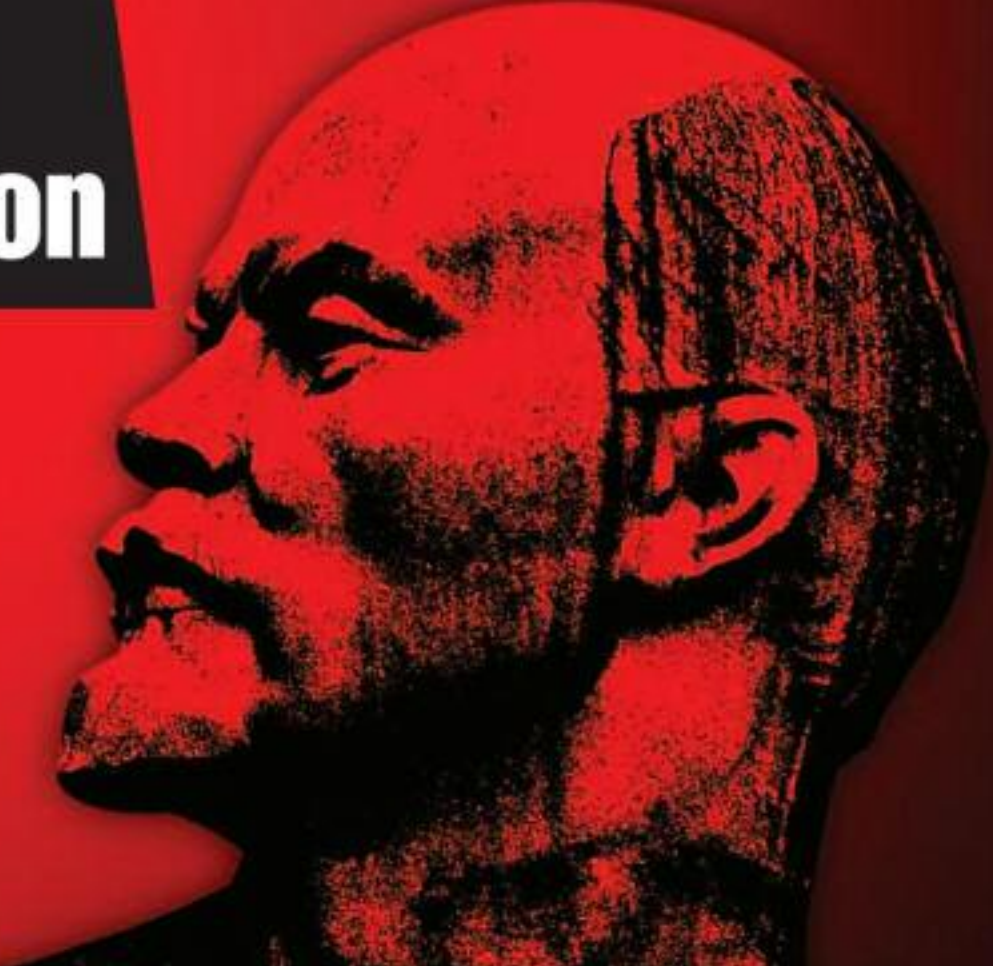
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