

# On the occasion of its 100th anniversary

Explorations in the Russian Revolution, Part I

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# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	3
A personal note . . . . .	4

## Introduction

Two thousand seventeen is the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The revolution was one of the most significant events of the 20th century, a cosmic explosion whose influence, both for good and for bad, was felt throughout the world at the time and for the rest of the century, and which we are still feeling today. It was also one of the seminal chapters in the long story of the struggle of humanity to free itself from brutal socio-economic systems, hierarchical social arrangements that subject the vast majority of people to lives of poverty and oppression in the interests of maintaining the wealth and power of tiny elites. Although the Russian Revolution occurred in a society that had only recently entered its period of capitalist development, while today we suffer under the injustices of a much more mature system, the revolution still has a lot to teach us.

The Russian Revolution has bequeathed a mixed legacy, especially for the left. Precisely what this legacy is depends on one's outlook, particularly, how one views the revolution's ultimate outcome. For some authoritarian revolutionaries, such as Stalinists, Maoists, and Castroists/Guevarists, the revolution, whose climax was the October Revolution and the triumph of the Bolshevik Party in the ensuing civil war, was a great victory, resulting in the establishment of socialism/communism. Even though the Soviet Union no longer exists, it remains, for those who share this viewpoint, a beacon for future revolutionaries and a model to be emulated. Even for Trotskyists, who consider the Soviet Union and the East European "socialist" regimes to have been either "degenerated" or "deformed workers states" and who believe that those that remain, in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, still are "workers states," the legacy of the Russian Revolution remains overwhelmingly positive, since they view Lenin, the Bolshevik Party, and the October Revolution as ideals that deserve to be emulated despite the problematic results. In contrast, for libertarians and anti-authoritarians, the outcome of the Russian Revolution was a disaster, or as anarchist Alexander Berkman put it, a tragedy. At the end of the civil war (roughly the middle of 1921), this tragedy involved: (1) the consolidation of a brutal, dishonest, and corrupt one-party dictatorship that was to evolve into one of the vilest regimes the world has ever seen; (2) the smothering of the tremendous libertarian potential that had burst into flames during various stages of the revolution, both before the seizure of state power by the Bolsheviks and afterward, in the mass popular resistance to the consolidation of Bolshevik rule; (3) the slaughter of millions of workers, soldiers, and peasants, along with tens of thousands of revolutionary fighters of all classes; (4) the transformation of the soviets, factory committees, and other organizations of popular democracy into the bureaucratic apparatus of the "Soviet" state; and (5) the besmirching of the name and the corruption of the ideal of revolutionary socialism for decades afterward.

Crucial to evaluating the Russian Revolution as a whole is an accurate understanding of the nature of the October Revolution, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks under the slogan, "All Power to the Soviets." At the moment it occurred, the insurrection appeared to represent the triumph of the popular forces. But rather than representing the victory of the people, the uprising heralded the beginning of the end, the onset of a long and bloody denouement that led to the tragic conclusion.

This article will (I hope) be the first of several pieces devoted to the Russian Revolution. The series is not intended to be a complete history. Nor is it meant as an elaborate analysis of the revolution and a detailed critique of the theory and practice of the Bolshevik Party. Instead, it is offered as a collection of essays devoted to exploring various facets of the event that have

been of concern to me over the years. Hopefully, they will be of interest to potential readers, especially radicals and revolutionaries who share a similar goal as mine, the establishment of truly democratic, egalitarian, and cooperative societies, revolutionary democratic social arrangements that have been variously described as "revolutionary socialism", "libertarian socialism", or "anarchism." (Note: I use these terms interchangeably throughout the discussion.)

## A personal note

I have been intrigued (if not obsessed) by the Russian Revolution since I was a teenager. My parents had been sympathizers of the Communist Party for many years and remained, in their different ways, supporters of the "socialist countries" up to and even after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-1991. I was especially an admirer of Lenin and avidly read his works. I was greatly impressed with the strategy and tactics he utilized in leading the Bolshevik Party during 1917, climaxing in its seizure of state power in October. I believed that, in doing so, he and the rest of the Bolsheviks had carried out a true proletarian revolution and that this insurrection had led to the establishment of an actual "dictatorship of the proletariat," based on the soviets and the factory committees that the workers, soldiers, and peasants had created during and after the initial uprising in February. I also accepted that the Bolsheviks' goal was to spark a world revolution that would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism and then communism.

Even as I read more, particularly about the aftermath of the October Insurrection, e.g., the establishment of the Cheka (the government's secret police), the negotiations over and the eventual signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the civil war (characterized by a wholesale assault on the peasants) that followed, I continued to accept that the Bolshevik strategy was the only correct one to achieve the revolutionary goal. Specifically, I justified the Bolsheviks' brutal tactics as (unfortunately) necessary to hold on to state power and to defend the revolution in the context of economic crisis, internal counterrevolution, and imperialist invasion, until "backward" Russia could be rescued by successful revolutions in Europe, particularly in Germany. The Bolsheviks were, I felt, the only political force in Russia both truly committed to the idea of a revolutionary working class government based on the soviets and organizationally capable of defending what the Bolsheviks considered the "conquests of October." Even though I came to recognize that the outcome of the revolution and the civil war was not a "soviet democracy" but a one-party dictatorship that had gutted the soviets of their democratic content and had turned them into an enormous apparatus of administration and control, I believed that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to act as they did, and that this was the only feasible alternative to the victory of the (internal and external) counterrevolutionary forces.

Yet, as my investigations continued, I began to see the events in a much different light. Based on my reading, especially the writings of the anarchist participants, eyewitnesses, and historians of the revolution and civil war, I began to recognize that the Bolshevik dictatorship did not represent the victory of the revolution but its death. I eventually understood that, in their concern to seize state power and to hold onto it at all costs, no matter how brutal and dishonest their tactics, no matter how much they had alienated the Russian (and non-Russian) workers and peasants, the Bolsheviks had crushed the actual revolution, that is, the millions of mobilized workers, peasants, and members of oppressed nationalities and religious minorities; the vast complex of democratic

organizations of self-management they had created during and after the February Revolution; and their hopes and dreams of a better world after so many centuries of Tsarist tyranny. In other words, I came to believe that the Bolsheviks had crushed the revolution as completely and as thoroughly as (or even better than) the explicitly counterrevolutionary forces could ever have done.

This understanding raised several questions in my mind. What motivated the Bolsheviks? What was it that impelled them, people who had dedicated their lives to the liberation of the working class and all of humanity, to utilize the strategy and the tactics they did, that led them to carry out acts that, viewed with any degree of objectivity, cannot rationally be justified on any basis even vaguely grounded in a sense of humanity, let alone the libertarian ideals of socialism? Were the Bolsheviks truly compelled to act as they did? Were there no other alternatives? What does it mean to "win" when victory destroys the very thing one claims to be, and believes oneself to be, fighting for? What, in fact, were the Bolsheviks fighting for? Was it worth fighting to hold on to power no matter what the cost, both in terms of lives lost, certainly, but also in terms of the sacrifice of honesty, integrity, and a sense of humanity. Might it not have been better to remain loyal to revolutionary socialist ideals and go down to defeat, but, while doing so, at least leave an unsullied memory, such as that of the Paris Commune?

After further study and consideration, I came to the conclusion that the answers to these questions lay in the political and mental outlook of the Bolshevik Party. At the risk of simplifying, I would summarize this ideology/psychology as consisting of the following ten, logically interconnected, tenets:

Marxism embodies the (scientifically determined) Truth; all other outlooks/ideologies are false and hence counterrevolutionary.

Marxism represents the True (Essential/ontologically grounded) consciousness of the working class; all other viewpoints represent "false consciousness", that is, ways of thinking that reflect the influence of bourgeois classes on the workers.

Only the Bolsheviks (and especially its leader, V.I. Lenin) truly understand Marxism; the programs of all other political tendencies, including other individuals and groups that call themselves Marxist, are bourgeois, that is, pro-capitalist.

The Bolshevik Party is therefore the embodiment of the True consciousness of the working class.

Socialism (and hence the liberation of humanity) can only be achieved through the conquest of state power and the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat."

To achieve socialism therefore requires the establishment of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.

The answers to all political questions, even those concerning strategy and tactics, can be discerned theoretically, by the application of Marxism to concrete circumstances through the "unity of theory and practice."

Political debate with non-Bolshevik political parties and tendencies has, at best, an instrumental value. It is good only insofar as it enables the Bolsheviks to seize state power and consolidate their ideological and organizational hegemony/control over the working class.

Once state power has been seized, democracy in the soviets, factory committees, and other mass organizations, that is, free discussion and debate among rival (even pro-socialist) organizations and tendencies, is not an essential feature of the proletarian dictatorship. Such pluralism

is, at bottom, a luxury that can and must be sacrificed if necessary to maintain the Bolsheviks' control of the state.

Given the high stakes involved (the liberation of humanity), the establishment and maintenance of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party justifies the use of any means, including (as we know) arbitrary arrest, torture, and imprisonment; internment in labor camps; deportation to internal and external exile; executions, including mass shootings of (alleged) counterrevolutionaries, deserters, and all others who resist; lies and slander.

A small digression: I know there are people, both Marxists and anarchists, who accept that the logic entailed in my list of Bolshevik tenets - that is, the logic that connects the Bolsheviks' actions to their ideology - applies to Leninism/Bolshevism but do not believe that it holds for Marxism. In contrast, I consider that it was the same logic that motivated Marx and Engels' campaign against Michael Bakunin and his followers in the First International and that led to their use of comparable [although much less brutal] tactics, that is, an attempt to seize organizational control of the International, not through honest discussion and debate, but through the use of bureaucratic maneuvers and dishonest rhetoric. For those who wish to pursue this question, I highly recommend consulting Wolfgang Eckhardt's masterful and thorough study, *The First Socialist Schism*, recently published (2016) by PM Press.)

The conclusion I outlined above is developed in two of my books: (1) *A Look at Leninism*, published in 1988, and (2) *The Tyranny of Theory*, published in 2013. Although I have since moved on to other intellectual concerns, the Russian Revolution still haunts me, and I continue to ponder various issues related to that astounding event. The articles that follow are my attempts to come to grips with them.

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