

A reply on globalisation and the significance of the Russian Revolution

18 May 2001

The following is a reply by Nick Beams to a reader on the issues of globalisation and their relationship to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The original email included a draft article entitled "History has not ended, or retreated".

Dear SS,

While your article correctly identifies globalised production as the fundamental driving force for the development of the world socialist revolution, and therefore concludes that the struggle for socialism has far from ended, it is, however, fundamentally flawed by an incorrect assessment of the significance of the Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution was not carried forward on the perspective of nationalisation of the means of production in Russia because of "national production demanding national ownership" as you maintain. Quite the contrary. It was carried forward on the basis of the perspective, first elaborated by Trotsky, which demonstrated that the productive forces having undergone a tremendous expansion in the latter part of the 19th century had now come into conflict with the nation-state system of the bourgeoisie.

If the Russian Revolution was to be viewed within a national framework then there was no foundation for a perspective aimed at the conquest of political power by the working class. This was because the economy was far too backward and underdeveloped for the construction of socialism.

But, as Trotsky was the first to recognise, to view the Russian Revolution in this way was fundamentally incorrect. It had to be placed within the context of the world capitalist economy as a whole.

In June 1905 Trotsky wrote: "Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce, capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism. Just as modern credit binds thousands of undertakings by invisible ties and gives to capital an incredible mobility which prevents many small bankruptcies, but at the same time is the cause of the unprecedented sweep of general economic crises, so the whole economic and political effort of capitalism, its world trade, its system of monstrous state debts, and the political groupings of nations which draw all the forces of reaction into a kind of world-wide joint-stock company, has not only resisted all individual political crises, but also prepared the basis for a social crisis of unheard-of dimensions."

This development of world economy and consequently world politics, Trotsky continued, "gives the events now unfolding [the Russian Revolution of 1905] an international character and opens up a wide horizon. The political emancipation of Russia by the working class will raise that class to a height as yet unknown in history, will transfer to it colossal power and resources, will make it the initiator of the liquidation of world capitalism, for which history has created all the objective conditions."

This perspective was at variance with those of both the Mensheviks and Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

The Menshevik perspective was placed squarely within a national framework. The objective conditions for socialism had not developed within Russia, and therefore to pose the question of the working class taking power was "adventurism," or worse, "anarchism." The task of the working class, according to this view, was to overturn czarism, place the bourgeoisie in power and open the way for the development of capitalism and bourgeois democracy in Russia, which would lay the foundations for the socialist revolution at some indefinite point in the future.

Trotsky's perspective, of course, recognised that the conditions for socialism had not ripened in Russia. But they had developed on an international scale. The contradictory development of capitalism in the latter part of the 19th century—the penetration of the highest forms of capitalist production into backward Russia—meant that the opportunity for the working class to come to power had presented itself first, not in the most advanced capitalist nation in Europe but the most backward. The task confronting the working class, however, was not to establish "national production" through "national ownership" but to open the way for the European revolution and the struggle for socialism on a global scale.

Lenin's perspective differed from that of the Mensheviks in that he recognised that the overthrow of czarism could only be carried out in a political struggle against the Russian bourgeoisie. But what would be the nature of the regime that followed the overthrow of the czarist autocracy? Lenin advanced the perspective of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry." This would be the most radical form of bourgeois democracy—but it would, nonetheless, be a bourgeois regime.

The basic flaw in Lenin's outlook, as Trotsky explained, was that it did not answer the question of which class would play the leading role. The role of the peasantry would be decisive in the Russian Revolution. But the peasantry could not, by its very nature as a heterogeneous class—reaching into the bourgeoisie at its upper levels and into the landless proletariat at its lower levels—play an independent political role. It would either form a bloc with the bourgeoisie, thereby preventing the working class taking power, or it would form an alliance with the proletariat in the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

If the working class came to power it could not do so under some kind of “self-denying ordinance”, that is, by taking power into its hands but acting as a bourgeois government. As Trotsky pointed out, the 1905 revolution itself had made clear that even the achievement of the most basic democratic demands such as the 8-hour day posed the necessity for the overthrow of bourgeois rule. Having come to power, the working class, with the support of the peasantry, would be compelled to go beyond the framework of bourgeois rule.

But would such a perspective amount to an adventure, given that the conditions for socialism did not exist within Russia? Only if the situation was considered from the standpoint of Russia in isolation. The political and economic interconnectedness of world capitalism meant, however, that the coming to power of the working class in Russia could be the opening shot in the European and world revolution.

It is not possible here to go over all the issues involved in the struggle over political perspectives in the Russian social democracy prior to 1917. Suffice it to say that the experience of the war, his analysis of the world economy undertaken in his work on the pamphlet *Imperialism*, and the February Revolution itself had brought about a shift in Lenin's perspective. The struggle for power was launched by Lenin's *April Theses*, delivered on his return to Russia following the February Revolution. They were a bombshell to the Bolshevik Party and Lenin was denounced by some “old Bolsheviks” for going over to “Trotskyism”.

With the overturn of the old Bolshevik perspective, the Revolution was able to go forward because an alternative strategy had already been developed in the form of the theory of permanent revolution fought for by Trotsky since 1905.

The widespread nationalisation of the means of production, which was carried out by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution, was not undertaken in accordance with their doctrine or program, but, in a real sense, in contradistinction to it. These were measures that were, to a large extent, *forced* upon the revolutionary government by the conditions of civil war.

Trotsky explained this in his report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November 1922.

“It is perfectly obvious,” he stated, “that from the economic standpoint the expropriation of the bourgeoisie is justified to the extent that the workers' state is able to organise the

exploitation of enterprises on new beginnings. The wholesale, overall nationalisation which we carried through in 1917-18 was completely out of harmony with the condition I have just now outlined. The organisational potentialities of the workers' state lagged far behind total nationalisation. But the whole point is that under the pressure of Civil War we had to carry this nationalisation through.” [Trotsky, *First Five Years of the Comintern*, Volume 2, p. 226].

If the revolution had extended to Europe, things would have proceeded very differently in Russia. The nationalisation of the means of production would have been undertaken more gradually and rationally. But political conditions made that impossible.

“How else was it possible,” Trotsky explained, “to teach our bourgeoisie and its flunkies to respect the new power, except by confiscating its property? There was no other way” [Trotsky, *op cit*, p. 227].

To sum up: the Russian Revolution was not a turning point in world history because it set in motion the nationalisation of the means of production.

It was an historical turning point because it was the first conquest of political power by the working class—the prerequisite for the reorganisation of the world economy on socialist foundations. Ultimately the first attempt by the working class to establish socialism failed. The isolation of the revolution gave rise to the emergence of a monstrous bureaucracy in the form of Stalinism, which eventually carried out the restoration of capitalism.

But just as the Russian Revolution was prepared by the vast changes in global economy at the end of the 19th century, so the emergence of socialist revolution in the coming period has been prepared by the even more sweeping changes in world economy at the end of the 20th to which you point.

But in preparing for this, it is vital to have a clear understanding of the experiences of the last 100 years. I think you get off on the wrong foot here with an incorrect appraisal of the most decisive of those experiences, the Russian Revolution.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Beams



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