

# British students respond to ISSE showing of *From Tsar to Lenin*

Paul Stuart

19 December 2007

Dozens of students attended film showings at Glasgow, Manchester and Sussex of Herman Axelbank's *From Tsar to Lenin*, organised by the International Students for Social Equality to mark the 90th anniversary of the October 1917 Russian Revolution.

In all meetings, a wide-ranging discussion followed, expressing the powerful impact of the events themselves portrayed truthfully in Axelbank's work.

Axelbank was with Goldwyn Pictures when the Russian Revolution erupted. So inspired was he by the unfolding events that he decided to produce a film about it. The project took him 20 years. The result is a unique collection of original material, including home movies from the archive of the Tsar, rare World War I shots from behind German lines, and footage of the tumultuous events of 1917 and the years following the revolution.

For decades, *From Tsar to Lenin* was steeped in controversy. In the 1930s and 1940s, it was denounced and boycotted by much of the Stalinist-dominated American Left because it provided a factually accurate depiction of the major role played by Leon Trotsky in the Russian Revolution. During the McCarthyite era, Axelbank was reduced to near bankruptcy as he fought various court actions that barred him from showing the film. Not until the 1970s was it possible to see *From Tsar to Lenin* as Axelbank had originally conceived it.

Introducing the film, speakers from the Socialist Equality Party explained that Axelbank's film is a major accomplishment and stands as one of the classic documentaries of the twentieth century. On October 25 (November 7 by the Western calendar), for the first time in history, the working class, supported by the peasant masses, took power. The revolution not only shook the world, it defined it. Indeed it is a testament to the magnificent achievement of the Bolsheviks that, despite the subsequent degeneration of the Soviet Union, it was to survive until 1991, when those whom Trotsky so accurately denounced as the "gravediggers of the revolution"—the Stalinist bureaucracy—restored capitalism, inaugurating the greatest social disaster ever to be inflicted on a population during peacetime.

We are now in a period very similar to that which saw the build-up to World War I in 1914. The conflict between the world economy developed under capitalism and its division into antagonistic nation states has taken on malignant forms. The global contest for control of strategic markets and raw materials has acted as the driving force for colonial-style wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq and threatens to do the same in the case of Iran. The self-enrichment of a tiny elite, at the expense of the broad mass of the world's population, now threatens an economic collapse that will plunge millions into destitution.

The fundamental lesson that must be drawn from October 1917 is the crucial significance of the fight waged by the Bolshevik Party for a socialist and internationalist culture within the working class. It was clear that, for the majority of the audiences, it was the first time they had experienced an objective portrayal of the events that led to the Bolshevik revolution. A number of students in Sussex spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the documentary and how they saw the significance of the Russian Revolution today.

Josh explained, "I didn't know that much about the Russian Revolution. I was intrigued to find out more about it. I never knew about the provisional government and the Bolshevik revolution. I always thought it was one thing. I had a lot of different conceptions from a lot of different socialist websites trying to distance themselves from the revolution, presenting it as a fake—that it wasn't communist at all and Stalin was the natural outcome. But Stalin came out of particular circumstances. In the face of strong and numerous efforts to discredit the Russian Revolution and claims that its degeneration is evidence that communism can not work, I believe many on the left have put aside these arguments by saying the revolution had nothing to do with communism without giving a proper analysis of the revolution in the context in which it occurred.

"The film offers new information about the reality of the Russian Revolution, which was very different from everything I've known from a general knowledge standpoint. I never knew anything about the civil war and the invasion of Russia after the revolution and the very big effect it had on the revolution's development, which completely changes your outlook. I knew after the Russian Revolution, they had a famine, and this was said to prove communism didn't work, but now considering the fact that other countries were invading and burning their crops puts the revolution into a different perspective—one which has been completely put aside, whether as a result of poor analysis or a deliberate attempt to nullify the legitimacy of communism.

"The main thing for me is it rekindles hope in such a movement, in the face of strong pessimism and opposition to a communist revolution, which has existed throughout the twentieth century to today. I see similar conditions before the Russian Revolution

throughout the world today and that a revolution is possible again—not just possible, but could happen and would be successful as well.

“We’re in the possible lead-up to a similar world war as the First World War before the Russian Revolution, coupled with the dismantling of the welfare state and once again the building up of big superpowers. Everyone I speak to has a negative view of the Russian Revolution. They are unhappy with the situation, but see no alternative.

“In one lecture on Marxism and Alienation I attended, it was said that communism, the alternative to capitalism, was discredited by the failure of the Russian Revolution. My own view is that any political movement within the boundaries set by the state cannot develop beyond its limits, and due to the nature of our political system would be isolated in many ways from society, as politics appears to be today. It can only represent the interests of that state, or at best, interests which conflict with other parts of society but can only result in reform, with no real change to economics or society, and certainly no change to international relations.

“There would still exist unnecessary conflict within and between societies and a division in world production. It requires a movement independent of the state to overcome the concept of the nation, just as small tribes gave way to a nation. Everyone needs to take a direct involvement. I saw that in the Russian Revolution, everyone taking to the streets, not just a small minority doing it for everyone else.”

Richard explained why he attended the film:

“I came to the film to learn about the Russian Revolution, this period of history I’m interested in. Lenin is a bit of an idol of mine and footage of him and hearing what he had to say. I have a fascination with Russia. I’ve already read a number of books on Russian history. I came along to reinforce my beliefs really. When I was in the Militant tendency, I read the Transitional Programme and on the events that led up to the revolution. I read John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*. I tried to read Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, but because of the sheer length of it, I switched off.

“The film described the events that led to 1917, the White armies and Britain and France’s intervention. My understanding of these events was limited before I read Reed’s book, which recorded the events as they happened on a day-to-day basis. He identified with the class struggle. The only parallel revolution before that was the French Revolution. There were a few snaps of Reed in the film. He’s the only American to be buried in Red Square. The film was a good portrayal of the revolution in general and how the Bolsheviks took power. It portrayed the part played by the Mensheviks in going against the Bolsheviks that led to the civil war and the terrible situation in the 1920s. Was it necessary for the revolution to go through two revolutions? That’s an area I need to get my head around. I need to read around.

“It portrayed the Tsar’s part in the war, the events that led up to the Tsar’s abdication and the election of the provisional government. Russians thought they were getting more democracy and free speech, but what they got was a continuation of the Tsar’s policies. It was a generally popular revolution and not a coup. The events before the revolution show it was a mass popular

revolution. The film showed soldiers giving up their arms and leaving the war and going over to the side of the Bolsheviks. Before that, they probably didn’t belong to any political group or faction.

“I once visited the town where Lenin was born. A guide proclaimed like it was a fact that Lenin wanted to get his own back on the Romanovs because his brother was locked up in St. Peter’s Fortress prison. It is a belief that is there, but I don’t give it any credence. Lenin did a lot of good. Marxism wanted to help the average Russian out of poverty and chains—those who didn’t have freedom and were born into debt just like before the Chinese revolution. Lenin’s writings revealed he wanted to change the system, to change the suffering of the Russian people. They wanted to bring about a better system.”

JM explained, “When I heard that the ISSE was showing this documentary, I immediately planned to attend it. I was keen on seeing live footage of the Russian Revolution and its leading revolutionaries. Also, I hoped that the film would bring the events that I have only read about to life. I thought that showing live footage about one of the greatest events in the twentieth century is something that cannot be missed.

“A few months ago, I read John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, from which I learned a lot about the revolution. It is a very important book, written by someone who witnessed the revolution firsthand. It is a shame that I did not learn about the revolution in school. It is an event that people do not learn about anymore. All that I know about the Russian Revolution comes from movies and books. Yes, the movie definitely brought the events to life. I was really impressed by the footage of Trotsky and Lenin; it was really interesting to see them speak and gesticulate.

“The Russian Revolution is one of the most important events of the twentieth century. It symbolises that another world *is* possible; that the working class *can* stand up and seize power. The Russian Revolution must be understood as the empirical realisation of Marxist theory—it exemplified that the proletariat is the revolutionary force under capitalism. Thus, it legitimises and emphasises Marx’s thoughts and writings. The revolution is a remarkable event. The Russian nation was led by revolutionaries who knew how to respond to the oppression of the capitalist system.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**