

Andrew Marr's History of the World: A slur against revolution

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The targeted slurs of the everyday media against socialism—often via history—are commonplace but rarely are they as pointed and mired in historical distortions as those advanced in the recent BBC series *Andrew Marr's History of the World*.

Marr is a high-profile political journalist in the UK, becoming editor of the *Independent* and BBC political editor and now hosting his own radio and TV show. A self-described “raving leftie” at university in the late 1970s, he was a member of the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, but he insists he never went as far as selling the newspaper of the Socialist Organiser, the group most closely associated with it, which falsely claimed to be Trotskyist.

Marr provides a prime example of the trajectory of a whole layer of left/liberal intellectuals who have junked their youthful opposition to capitalism and made a profitable peace with the establishment. Like many of his contemporaries, he made the journey rightwards supporting the Western intervention in Kosovo.

In 2007, Marr produced under his own name, *Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain*. Some idea of his current political perspective can be gained by his declaration that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's “Privatisation and deregulation amounted to a cultural, economic and political revolution” and not a counterrevolution.

Having dealt superficially with Modern Britain, Marr decided it was time to take on the World. The first five episodes of his new series cover the history of humanity from the earliest humans to the rise of piracy and first seeds of private enterprise. In the last three, we see what he says about “Revolution”, “Industry” and “Extremes”.

Marr's general view is epitomised by his summary of the French Revolution (which he abstracts into musings about revolutions in general). We are told that, “With the crowning of Napoleon, the revolution was over.” That is all. While ample time is given to the “Terror”, there is no discussion of the fundamental changes to the constitution, to property rights or the way in which society developed thereafter. His explanation is akin to describing the finished product of the Mona Lisa as “paint on canvas”.

Following this, we hear that “The world's seen many

revolutions since then and they've often followed the same pattern: idealism, extremism and finally the fall of power into the hands of a military strongman.” Such is his depiction of the events that went a long way to establishing the system funding him and the BBC today. While Marxists have studied and analysed the development of the French Revolution, appreciating it and its leaders for the historically progressive force it was, the bourgeoisie continue to distort their own rise and history. As Trotsky noted in *Results and Prospects*, “The bourgeoisie has shamefully betrayed all the traditions of its historical youth, and its present hirelings dishonour the graves of its ancestors and scoff at the ashes of its ideals.”

It has become the staple diet of right-wing commentators to rehash the idea that revolution leads to dictatorship and trace what they regard as the evils of the twentieth century to the French Revolution. Rarely do they set the Terror beside the death toll from the war that resulted from the invasion of France, or the potential death toll if the Terror had not enabled the Jacobins to mobilise the resistance against this invasion. Nothing is said about the vicious reactionary White Terror conducted after the Paris Commune of 1871 or during the civil war in Russia.

Marr's aim is to slander the “idea” of revolution. The very assertion that revolutions are driven purely by ideas is, in itself, a distortion and has a clear political agenda. More than anything, the bourgeoisie and their representatives wish to abstract revolution away from its concrete social causes and historical context. The intention is evident in Marr's phraseology, “Despite this, the revolutions keep coming, often driven by the same ideals.”

Finally arriving at the Russian Revolution, Marr dedicates all of two minutes to the most monumental event of the twentieth century. There is no excuse for the omission of such a formative piece of history. And even if we accept that certain events must be dealt with briefly when dealing with such a wide timescale, we could at least hope the programme would stick to the facts. Instead, we are treated to the old hoary slander, delivered with perverse relish by Marr, that the transportation of Lenin and other Bolsheviks by the German authorities to Russia was “like a syringe of poison being squirted halfway across a continent.”

Marr ignores Trotsky's monumental *History of the Russian Revolution* in which he dedicates an entire chapter to such claims and explains their origins in attempts by the Tsarist secret police to incite soldiers at the front to turn against Lenin and encourage a pogrom-like mood against the Bolsheviks.

Marr then strongly suggests that Bolshevik calls for an end to the World War were based on the plans of a German civil servant: State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Arthur Zimmermann. It is impossible to give an innocent explanation to either Marr's or the BBC's apparent ignorance of the Bolsheviks' position against imperialist war. Even a cursory study of the writings of the time would have revealed that the Bolsheviks had been campaigning for peace since the start of the war. Once more, the intention is clear: to portray the Russian Revolution as the by-product of the machinations of German imperialism so as to conceal the role of the Russian masses and the Bolsheviks as the real driving forces of the revolution.

The events of 1917 were triggered by the breakdown of world capitalism, which led to the outbreak of World War I and the unparalleled carnage that followed, as each of the great powers of the day sought to carve out for themselves markets, resources and spheres of influence against their rivals.

The contradictory development of capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth 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”, nor to continue imperialist wars, but to open the way for the European revolution and the struggle for socialism on a global scale. The Russian revolution had its roots in and was directed by the social relations in Europe at the time. It is from these, not the conspiracies of a German civil servant, that the revolutionary people and party took their directives.

The episode finishes with the conclusion that Zimmermann was responsible for the creation of the two new world superpowers: the USSR and the US. One can only wonder why posterity never applauded him for such a monumental feat or erected statues of him in the public squares of the great world powers...in the Lincoln Memorial or Lenin Mausoleum.

Marr's view that history is made by great individuals is also shown in his treatment of Edward Jenner, an undoubtedly notable scientist, who is proclaimed to have done more for the world and saved more lives than all of the politicians and philosophers put together. Jenner is made out to be solely responsible for the eradication of smallpox. How he managed to distribute his vaccine to every corner of the globe without the aid of governments and others is not imparted to viewers.

This glorification of individuals embodies the journalistic and sensationalist presentation of history that is so common today.

History ~~for~~ the sake of ~~entertainment~~ within a set political sphere, not of truth. More than that, it seeks to undermine the role of the masses in historical development.

Despite one's justifiable expectation that the final episode would elaborate on the course of events in Russia from 1917 to 1929, the programme jumped forward in the next episode, to the rule of Stalin. The first mention of the activity of the Soviet Union is linked with the Nazi purge of Jews in Kiev, which, we are told, “was made easier by what the Reds had done”—referring to the famine resulting from Stalin's agricultural policies.

How exactly did a famine make it easier for the Nazis to commit their atrocities? The answer is that there is no logical connection, the statement exists purely to justify the next: “Reds and Nazis..., Sadly, not ogres.... Human beings with a big idea.”

The equation of Nazism with Socialism (via the linking of Socialism and Stalinism) is a slander. Again, Marr ignores Trotsky's analysis of the degeneration into Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed* and how the Trotskyist opposition to the fascism represented by the Nazis was stronger and more perceptive than that of any other group at the time. Certainly stronger than the “opposition” of imperial powers like Britain and France, who saw Nazi Germany as the best bulwark against revolutionary socialism. Once more, we are witness to a manipulation of historical truth to suit the ruling classes.

The bourgeoisie are now using the most blatant abuses of history to conduct an attack on revolutionary socialism. This programme must be seen in the context of increasingly numerous assaults in that area—most notably Robert Service's diatribe against Trotsky, which WSWS Chairman David North has replied to extensively.

With his *History of the World*, Marr seeks to identify all revolutions as essentially the same—removing them from their historical context—and links the concept of revolution to terror. He declares the Russian Revolution a negative force in the first place and raises Stalin as the unopposed continuation of Soviet policy. Trotsky is not mentioned once. The rising fear of revolution is present in every smear and distortion—against which the defence of historical truth becomes the most important weapon in the hands of the masses.



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