

# Why Study the Russian Revolution?

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This is the first of five lectures that are being presented by the International Committee of the Fourth International to commemorate the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The title of this lecture is “Why Study the Russian Revolution?” I will sacrifice the element of suspense by answering this question not at the conclusion, but at the beginning of this presentation.

## Ten reasons why the Russian Revolution must be studied

**Reason One:** The Russian Revolution was the most important, consequential and progressive political event of the twentieth century. Despite the ultimately tragic fate of the Soviet Union—which was destroyed by the betrayals and crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy—no other event in the past century had such a far-reaching impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people on every part of the planet.

**Reason Two:** The Russian Revolution, culminating in the conquest of political power by the Bolshevik Party in October 1917, marked a new stage in world history. The overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government proved that an alternative to capitalism was not a utopian dream, but rather a real possibility that could be achieved through the conscious political struggle of the working class.

**Reason Three:** The October Revolution substantiated, in practice, the materialist conception of history as formulated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. The establishment of Soviet power under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party verified an essential element of Marx’s historical theory: “that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat ...” [1]

**Reason Four:** The objective development of the Russian Revolution substantiated the strategic perspective first elaborated by Leon Trotsky between 1906 and 1907, known as the theory of permanent revolution. Trotsky foresaw that the democratic revolution in Russia—entailing the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy, the destruction of all vestiges of semi-feudal economic and political relations, the elimination of national oppression—could be achieved only through the conquest of state power by the working class. The democratic revolution, in which the working class played the leading role in opposition to the capitalist class, would develop rapidly into a socialist revolution.

**Reason Five:** The seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party in October 1917 and the establishment of the first workers’ state inspired an immense development in the class consciousness and political awareness of the working class and oppressed masses throughout the world. The Russian Revolution marked the beginning of the end of the old system of colonial rule established by imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It radicalized the international working class and set into motion a worldwide revolutionary movement of the oppressed masses. The major social gains won by the international working class, including the formation of industrial unions in the United States in the 1930s, the defeat

of Nazi Germany in World War II, the implementation of the social welfare policies of the post-World War II era, and the process of decolonization, were by-products of the Russian Revolution.

**Reason Six:** In its struggle against imperialist war, the Bolshevik Party proved, in theory and in practice, that *socialist internationalism* is the essential foundation of revolutionary strategy and the practical struggle for power. Arising out of the global contradictions of the capitalist system, the fate of the Russian Revolution depended on the development of the world socialist revolution. As Trotsky was to explain:

The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable. One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. From this follow, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe. The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word: it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet. [2]

It is difficult to believe that these words were written 88 years ago. Amidst mounting international geopolitical tensions and the chaos engulfing the European Union, one might believe that Trotsky’s reference to “imperialist wars” and “the utopia of the United States of Europe” had just been posted online in today’s edition of *Le Monde* or the *Financial Times*. The enduring relevance and freshness of Trotsky’s observation testifies to the fact that the historical problems with which he grappled in the first decades of the twentieth century remain unsolved in the first decades of the twenty-first.

**Reason Seven:** The Russian Revolution demands serious study as a critical episode in the development of scientific social thought. The historical achievement of the Bolsheviks in 1917 both demonstrated and actualized the essential relationship between scientific materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice.

The evolution of the Bolshevik Party vindicated Lenin’s statement in *What Is To Be Done?*: “Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” [3] As Lenin continuously insisted, Marxism is the most highly developed form of *philosophical materialism*, which critically reworked and assimilated the genuine achievements of classical German idealism, chiefly that of Hegel (that is, dialectical logic and the recognition of the active role of historically evolving social practice in the cognition of objective reality).

Lenin’s unflinching defense of philosophical materialism and the materialist conception of history, recorded in published works spanning a period of nearly 30 years (from 1895 to 1922), expressed his profound intellectual conviction that “The highest task of humanity is to

comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one's social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as possible." [4] The conquest of power by the working class in October 1917 was a historical high point, as yet unsurpassed, in mankind's adaptation of its consciousness, as expressed in the political action of the working class, to the "objective logic of economic evolution."

**Reason Eight:** The development of Bolshevism as a political tendency and the exceptional role that it played in the tumultuous events of 1917 vindicated the essential significance of the struggle waged by Marxists against opportunism and its political sibling, centrism. Lenin's fight against the political opportunism of Menshevism in Russia, and his struggle against the Second International's betrayal of socialist internationalism following the outbreak of the imperialist war in 1914, forged the political identity of the party that led the struggle for power in 1917.

Applying the materialist conception of history, Lenin sought to uncover the social and economic interests that found expression in the conflict of political tendencies. On this basis, Lenin identified opportunism—and especially that of the Second International—as the expression of the material interests of a privileged stratum of the working class and sections of the middle class allied with imperialism.

**Reason Nine:** The Bolsheviks provided the working class with an example of what a genuine revolutionary party is, and the irreplaceable role of such a party in securing the victory of the socialist revolution. A careful study of the revolutionary process in 1917 leaves no doubt that the presence of the Bolshevik Party, with Lenin and Trotsky in its leadership, was decisive in securing the victory of the socialist revolution. The movement of the Russian working class, supported by a revolutionary uprising of the peasantry, assumed gigantic dimensions in 1917. But no realistic reading of the events of that year permits the conclusion that the working class would have come to power without the leadership provided by the Bolshevik Party. Drawing the essential lesson of this experience, Trotsky later insisted: "The role and the responsibility of the leadership [of the working class] in a revolutionary epoch is colossal." [5] This conclusion remains as valid in the present historical situation as it was in 1917.

**Reason Ten:** The course of events between February/March and October/November 1917 is not merely of historical interest. The experience of those crucial months provides an invaluable and enduring insight into strategic and tactical problems that the working class will encounter during a new and inevitable upsurge of revolutionary struggle. As Trotsky wrote in 1924, "for the laws and methods of proletarian revolution there is, up to the present time, no more important and profound a source than our October experience." [6]

The crimes of Stalinism—a reactionary and anti-Marxist nationalist bureaucratic reaction against the program and principles of Bolshevism—do not invalidate the October Revolution and its genuine achievements, including those realized by the Soviet state during the 74 years of its existence. In this new period of global crisis of the capitalist system, a renewed study of the Russian Revolution and the assimilation of its lessons is the inescapable prerequisite for finding a way out of the present social, economic and political impasse.

## The catastrophe of World War I

This is the first of five lectures. It is my hope that over the next two

months, these lectures will expand upon and validate the reasons I have given for a careful study of the Russian Revolution.

Exactly one hundred years ago this week, on March 8, 1917, meetings and demonstrations took place in Petrograd, the capital of imperial Russia, in celebration of International Women's Day. As Russia still adhered to the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used virtually everywhere else, the date of this event in Petrograd was February 23, 1917. (For the rest of this lecture, when referring to events that transpired within Russia, I will use the date of the calendar then in use.)

By the time these protests began, the great powers of Europe—Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side; France, Britain and Russia on the other—had been at war for two years and seven months.

Between August 1914 and the beginning of March 1917, the governments of all the warring countries—regardless of whether they were ruled by parliaments or monarchs—squandered human life with criminal indifference. During the year 1916, the battlefields of Europe were drenched with blood. The Battle of Verdun, waged over 303 days, from February 21 to December 18, 1916, cost approximately 715,000 French and German casualties. This amounts to 70,000 casualties a month. The total number of soldiers killed at Verdun was 300,000.

Simultaneously, another ghastly battle was being fought in France in the vicinity of the Somme River. On the first day of the battle, July 1, 1916, the British army suffered more than 57,000 casualties. By the time the carnage ended on November 18, 1916, the number of British, French and German soldiers killed or wounded exceeded one million.

On the Eastern Front, Russian forces were arrayed against those of Germany and Austria-Hungary. In June 1916, the Tsarist regime launched an offensive commanded by General Brusilov. By the time the offensive was concluded in September, the Russian army had suffered between 500,000 and one million casualties. Over the past century, innumerable historians have condemned the violence of the Russian Revolution and the supposed inhumanity of the Bolsheviks. But the moralists of the academy breeze over the fact, if they take notice of it at all, that before the revolution had claimed a single victim, more than one and three-quarter million Russian soldiers had perished in the war launched by the Tsarist autocracy in 1914 with the enthusiastic support of the Russian bourgeoisie.

No one could have predicted that the specific protests planned for February 23 would mark the beginning of the revolution. But that the war would give rise to revolution had been foreseen. As early as 1915, Trotsky had written: "A working class that has been through the school of war will feel the need of using the language of force as soon as the first serious obstacle faces them within their own country." Lenin had based the anti-war policy of the Bolsheviks upon the conviction that the contradictions of imperialism as a world system, which had led to war, would also lead to socialist revolution.

In a lecture delivered in Zurich on January 22, 1917—the twelfth anniversary of the Bloody Sunday massacre in St. Petersburg that provided the spark that ignited the revolution of 1905—Lenin counseled his small audience: "We must not be deceived by the present grave-like stillness in Europe. Europe is pregnant with revolution. The monstrous horrors of imperialist war, the suffering caused by the high cost of living everywhere engender a revolutionary mood; and the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie, and its servitors, the governments, are more and more moving into a blind alley from which they can never extricate themselves without tremendous upheavals." [7]

And yet, as is so often the case at the start of great historic events, the anonymous demonstrators who assembled on February 23 did not foresee the consequences of their actions. How could they have imagined, on that Thursday morning, that they were about to change the course of history?

By that point in the war, the social crisis in Russia was so acute that

working class strikes and other forms of protest were hardly unusual. Petrograd had been shaken by a massive strike on January 9, involving 140,000 workers from more than 100 factories. Another major strike of 84,000 workers took place on February 14. But it was still not clear that tensions were building rapidly toward the eruption of full-scale revolution. Nicholas Sukhanov, the left Menshevik who authored an invaluable memoir of the events of 1917, recalled a discussion about the growing unrest between two young typists at his work place on February 21. He was taken aback when one of these young women said to the other: "D'you know, if you ask me, it's the beginning of the revolution." What do these silly girls know about revolution, Sukhanov thought to himself. "Revolution—highly improbable! Revolution!—everyone knew this was only a dream—a dream of generations and of long laborious decades. Without believing the girls, I repeated after them mechanically: 'Yes, the beginning of the revolution.'" [8]

### The February Revolution begins

As it turned out, these politically unschooled young women had a better sense of reality than the experienced but deeply skeptical Menshevik. On February 22, the management at the massive Putilov plant locked out 30,000 workers. The very next day, in a city boiling with class tensions, against the backdrop of a horrifying war, the Women's Day protests began.

These protests were not called in the name of Russia's "99 percent," as today's affluent middle-class pseudo-left defines its constituency, combining in one great social melting pot the totally impoverished with those whose net worth is calculated in the millions.

The Petrograd demonstrators of February 1917 were from, and represented the interests of, the working class of the imperial capital. Their political concerns were focused not on issues of individual lifestyle, but on those of social class. They shouted "Down with the war! Down with the high cost of living! Down with hunger! Bread for the workers!" [9] The women marched to the factories and appealed to the workers for support. By the end of the day, more than 100,000 workers were out on strike.

As the protests grew in scope over the next several days, it gradually became clear that the fate of the regime was at stake. Escalating violence by the police had been unable to stop the demonstrations. The working class noticed that the soldiers who had been summoned to restore order seemed increasingly sympathetic to the protests and reluctant to execute the orders of their commanders. By the fourth day, the working class had committed itself to the overthrow of the regime. The homicidal violence of the police, who deployed machine guns against the demonstrators and mowed down hundreds, met with implacable resistance.

The outcome of the struggle now depended on the regiments stationed in Petrograd. Contemporary historians have substantiated Trotsky's description of the growing fraternal interaction between workers and soldiers. Professor Rex Wade writes in his account of the February Revolution:

The soldiers of 1917 were not the same ones who had suppressed revolution in 1905. Most were new recruits, only partially accustomed to military discipline. Many were from the Petrograd region... During February 23-26 there had been hundreds of conversations between these soldiers and the crowds in which the former were reminded of their common interests with the latter, of the general injustice and hardships of the population (including the

soldiers' own families), and of the common desire to end the war. The experience of firing on the crowds seriously disturbed them. Heated discussions about the events were going on in many units. [10]

The process of fraternization took its toll on military discipline. To quote Max Eastman's brilliant narration of the documentary *From Tsar to Lenin*: "For the first time in history the tsar's soldiers failed him. Instead of using their rifles to restore order, they completed the disorder by joining the people in the streets."

### "Spontaneity," Marxism, and class consciousness

In later accounts of the Revolution, memoirists, journalists and historians have contrasted the mass uprising of February to the Bolshevik-led insurrection of October. All too frequently, the aim of this comparison has been to denigrate the role of conscious leadership, implying or asserting that the presence of a politically conscious leadership detracts from the moral purity of revolutionary action. The presence of a leadership is identified with political conspiracy, disrupting the normal and legitimate flow of events.

The use of the word "spontaneous" is intended to convey a blissful absence of political consciousness, with the masses acting on little more than vague democratic instincts. As a matter of historical fact, this conception of unconscious "spontaneity" mystifies, distorts and falsifies the revolution of February 1917. It is true that the Russian working class and the masses of soldiers, many of peasant origin, did not clearly foresee the consequences of their actions; nor were their actions guided by a worked out revolutionary strategy.

But the working masses did possess a sufficient level of social and political consciousness, formed over many decades of direct and inherited experience, which enabled them to assess the events of February, draw conclusions and make decisions.

Their thought was deeply influenced by a culture that had developed beneath the weight of terrible oppression, which had been scarred by social and personal tragedies, and inspired by astonishing examples of heroic self-sacrifice.

In 1920, reviewing the origins of Bolshevism, Lenin paid tribute to the long struggle to develop a socialist political culture and movement with deep roots in the working class and capable of influencing the broad mass of the oppressed population.

For about half a century—approximately from the forties to the nineties of the last century—progressive thought in Russia, oppressed by a most brutal and reactionary tsarism, sought eagerly for a correct revolutionary theory, and followed with the utmost diligence and thoroughness each and every "last word" in this sphere in Europe and America. Russia achieved Marxism—the only correct revolutionary theory—through the *agony* she experienced in the course of half a century of unparalleled torment and sacrifice, of unparalleled revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, practical trial, disappointment, verification, and comparison with European experience. Thanks to the political emigration caused by tsarism, revolutionary Russia, in the second half of the nineteenth century, acquired a wealth of international links and excellent information on the forms and theories of the world revolutionary movement, such as no other

country possessed. [11]

During the 35 years that preceded the February Revolution, the working class movement in Russia developed in close and continuous interaction with the socialist organizations. These organizations—with their leaflets, newspapers, lectures, schools, and legal and illegal activities—played an immense role in the social, cultural and intellectual life of the working class.

It is impossible to remove this ubiquitous socialist and Marxist presence from the life and experience of the Russian working class as it developed from the early 1880s, through the upheaval of 1905, and up to the outbreak of the February Revolution. The pioneering work of Plekhanov, Axelrod and Potresov had not been in vain. It was precisely the extraordinary interaction, over many decades, of the social experience of the working class and Marxist theory, actualized in the persistent efforts of the cadre of the revolutionary movement, that formed and nourished the high intellectual and political level of the so-called “spontaneous” consciousness of the masses in February 1917.

Serious historical research has proved the direct and critical role played by highly class conscious workers in organizing and directing the February movement and leading it to the overthrow of the autocracy. The answer given by Trotsky to the question, “Who led the February revolution?” is entirely correct: “Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin.” [12] But, as Trotsky hastened to add: “This leadership proved sufficient to guarantee the victory of the insurrection, but it was not adequate to transfer immediately into the hands of the proletarian vanguard the leadership of the revolution.” [13]

### **The emergence of “Dual Power”**

By the afternoon of Monday, February 27, the dynastic regime of the Romanovs, which had ruled Russia since 1613, had been swept away by the mass movement of workers and soldiers. With the destruction of the old regime, the political question of what would replace the autocracy immediately emerged. The confused and frightened political representatives of the Russian bourgeoisie assembled in the Tauride Palace. They established a Temporary Committee of the State Duma that, soon after, constituted itself as the Provisional Government. The main concern of the bourgeoisie, terrified by the mass movement, was to bring the revolution under control as quickly as it could, to limit as much as possible any injury to the material interests of the wealthy and the owners of private property, and to continue Russia’s participation in the imperialist war.

At the same time, within the same building, the elected representatives of the people assembled in a Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies to defend and advance the interests of the revolutionary masses. In the formation of this instrument of real and potential workers’ power, the Russian working class was drawing on the experience of the Revolution of 1905. But while in 1905 the St. Petersburg Soviet—chaired by Leon Trotsky—emerged only in the final climactic weeks of the mass movement of the working class, the Petrograd Soviet came to life in the first week of the 1917 Revolution.

The class divisions within Russian society, as yet unsolved by the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy, found expression in the regime of Dual Power. The existence of two rival governmental authorities, representing irreconcilably hostile class forces, was inherently unstable. Explaining the political meaning of this peculiar phenomenon, Trotsky wrote: “The

splitting of sovereignty foretells nothing less than a civil war.” [14]

For the next eight months, the development of the revolution proceeded through the conflict between the bourgeois Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies. If the outcome of this struggle could have been determined simply on the basis of some sort of mathematical calculation of the strength of the contending forces, eight months would not have been required to settle the matter.

From the start, the bourgeois Provisional Government was essentially powerless. Its authority depended almost entirely on the support it received from the political leaders of the Soviet—drawn principally from the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary parties. They insisted that Russia’s revolution was of an exclusively bourgeois democratic character, that a socialist overturn of capitalism was not on the agenda, and that, therefore, the Soviet—the representative of the working class and the mass of impoverished peasants—could not take power into its own hands.

During the first weeks that followed the victorious February Revolution, the acquiescence of the Executive Committee of the Soviet went unchallenged. Even the Bolshevik Party—with Lenin still outside Russia and its leadership in the hands of Kamenev and Stalin—bowed to the Executive Committee’s support for the Provisional Government and, therefore, the continuation of Russia’s participation in the war. This line of political adaptation was to continue until Lenin returned to Russia on April 4.

### **Lenin’s return to Petrograd**

Lenin’s return to Russia, and his arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd, ranks among the most dramatic episodes in world history. The outbreak of the Revolution had found him in Switzerland, living in a small second floor apartment on Spiegelgasse, in the old town section of Zurich. The circumstances of Lenin’s trip from Zurich’s *Hauptbahnhof*—central train station—to Petrograd were to emerge as a major political issue in the course of the revolution. Under conditions of war, the possibility of a rapid return to Russia from landlocked Switzerland required that he travel through Germany. Lenin understood very well that reactionary chauvinists would raise an outcry against his decision to travel through a country that was at war with Russia. But time was of the essence. In his absence, the Bolshevik Party was being drawn into the orbit of the Menshevik leaders of the Soviet, who were pursuing a line of compromise with the Provisional Government. Lenin negotiated the conditions under which he would travel through Germany, insisting on a “sealed train,” precluding the possibility of any contact between himself and representatives of the German state.

From the moment Lenin received news of the outbreak of revolution in Russia, he began formulating a policy of irreconcilable revolutionary opposition to the Provisional Government. His initial response to the revolution is recorded in a series of detailed commentaries known as the *Letters from Afar*.

The policies Lenin advanced in the first days of the revolution were based on his analysis of the imperialist war, and were a continuation of the revolutionary anti-war program for which he had fought at the Zimmerwald Conference in September 1915. There, Lenin had insisted that the imperialist war would lead to socialist revolution. The slogan he advanced, “Turn the imperialist war into a civil war,” was a programmatic concretization of this perspective. Lenin saw the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy as a confirmation of his analysis. The upheaval in Russia was not a self-contained national event, but the first stage of the uprising of the European working class against imperialist war, and, therefore, the

beginning of the world socialist revolution.

Lenin's analysis of Russian events within the international framework of the world war placed him in conflict with not only the Menshevik leaders of the Soviet, but also with substantial sections of the Bolshevik Party leadership in Petrograd. The Menshevik leaders argued that, with the overthrow of the tsar, the political character of Russia's participation in the war had changed. It had now become a legitimate democratic war of national self-defense.

The initial response of the Bolshevik Party, formulated by lower-level leaders of the Petrograd organization, was to reaffirm the intransigent anti-war stance for which Lenin had fought at Zimmerwald, reiterating his call to turn the imperialist war into a civil war. But as more senior leaders made their way from Siberian exile to Petrograd, the political line of the party changed.

The arrival of Kamenev and Stalin in Petrograd in mid-March led almost immediately to a dramatic shift in policy. Adopting a defensist position that justified the continuation of the war, Kamenev, with Stalin's support, published a statement in the Bolshevik organ *Pravda* on March 15 that declared: "When army stands against army, it would be the blindest of all policies which called upon one of them to lay down its arms and go home... A free people will staunchly remain at its post, answering bullet for bullet." [15]

### The "April Theses"

Sukhanov has left behind a vivid description of Lenin's return to Russia. The Bolshevik party organized a rousing welcome for their returning leader. The Soviet leaders, recognizing that Lenin's years of revolutionary activity had earned him immense prestige among the advanced workers of Petrograd, felt obligated to join the official welcoming party. Lenin descended from the train and was handed a magnificent bouquet of red roses, which contrasted somewhat oddly with his entirely conventional attire. Clearly delighted to have arrived in the capital of the revolution, Lenin rapidly made his way to the waiting room of the Finland Station. There he encountered a glum delegation of Soviet leaders, led by its chairman, the Georgian-born Menshevik, Nikolai Chkheidze. A smile frozen on his face, the nervous chairman's official welcome consisted of appealing to Lenin to avoid disrupting the unity of the left. Lenin, Sukhanov recalled, seemed to pay scant attention to the Soviet chairman's oration, as if it had nothing to do with him. Lenin gazed at the ceiling, surveyed the audience for familiar faces, and adjusted the flowers of the bouquet he was still holding in his hand. As soon as Chkheidze concluded his somber remarks, Lenin began hurling his thunderbolts:

Dear Comrades, soldiers, sailors and workers! I am happy to greet in your persons the victorious Russian revolution, and greet you as the vanguard of the worldwide proletarian army... The piratical imperialist war is the beginning of civil war throughout Europe... The hour is not far distant when at the call of our comrade, Karl Liebknecht, the peoples will turn their arms against their own capitalist exploiters... The worldwide Socialist revolution has already dawned... Germany is seething... Any date now the whole of European capitalism may crash. The Russian revolution accomplished by you has prepared the way and opened a new epoch. Long live the world-wide Socialist revolution! [16]

Sukhanov records the stunning impact of Lenin's words.

It was all very interesting! Suddenly, before the eyes of all of us, completely swallowed up by the routine drudgery of the revolution, there was presented a bright, blinding, exotic beacon, obliterating everything we "lived by." Lenin's voice, heard straight from the train, was a "voice from outside." There had broken in upon us in the revolution a note that was not, to be sure, a contradiction, but that was novel, harsh, and somewhat deafening. [17]

Recalling his own reaction to Lenin's words, Sukhanov acknowledged that he felt that "Lenin was right a thousand times over... in recognizing the beginning of the worldwide Socialist revolution and establishing an unbreakable connexion between the World War and the crash of the imperialist system..." [18] But Sukhanov, who epitomized the political ambivalence that characterized even the most leftwing elements among the Mensheviks, saw no possibility of translating Lenin's perspective, however correct, into practical revolutionary action.

Lenin proceeded from the reception at the Finland Station to a brief dinner with his old comrades, and then to a meeting where, in the course of an informal report that lasted about two hours, he provided an outline of what would, in its developed form, enter into history as the *April Theses*. Lenin explained that the democratic revolution could be defended and completed only on the basis of a socialist revolution, requiring the repudiation of the imperialist war, the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government, and the transfer of state power to the Soviets.

Sukhanov, who had managed to gain admission to the meeting even though he was not a member of the party, described the report:

I don't think Lenin, barely out of his sealed train, expected to expound in his answer his whole credo, and all his programme and tactics in the worldwide Socialist revolution. This speech was probably largely an improvisation, and so lacked any special density or worked-out plan. But each individual part of the speech, each element, each idea, was excellently worked out; it was clear that these ideas had long wholly occupied Lenin and been defended by him more than once. This was shown by the astonishing wealth of vocabulary, the whole dazzling cascade of definitions, nuances, and parallel (explanatory) ideas, which can be attained only through fundamental brain-work.

Lenin began, of course, with the worldwide Socialist revolution that was ready to explode as a result of the World War. The crisis of imperialism expressed in the war could be resolved only by Socialism. The imperialist war... could not help but turn into a civil war, and could indeed be ended only by a civil war, by a worldwide Socialist revolution. [19]

Lenin's political program—which signaled the alignment of his strategy with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution—was not based primarily on an appraisal of nationally determined circumstances and opportunities as they existed in Russia. The essential question confronting the working class was not whether Russia, as a national state, had achieved a sufficient level of capitalist development that would allow a transition to socialism. Rather, the Russian working class confronted a historical situation in which its own fate was inextricably bound up with the struggle of the

European working class against the imperialist war and the capitalist system from which it arose.

## Trotsky returns to Russia

Once Lenin had overcome resistance within his own party, the Bolsheviks were able to develop the struggle against the political influence of the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries. These efforts were vastly strengthened by Trotsky's return in May. His arrival in Petrograd had been delayed because the British authorities in Halifax, Canada had taken Trotsky off the boat traveling from New York to Russia, interning him in a prisoner of war camp for one month. Protests in Russia against Trotsky's illegal seizure compelled the Provisional Government to demand that the British release him.

But neither the Provisional Government nor the Soviet leaders were pleased to learn of Trotsky's arrival. Few harbored hopes that he would prove to be a restraining influence on the growing radicalization of the working class. Sukhanov recalled: "Indefinite rumors were circulating about him, while he was still outside the Bolshevik Party, to the effect that he was 'worse than Lenin.'" [20]

Now that the earlier differences with Lenin had been resolved, Trotsky entered the Bolshevik Party, where he immediately assumed a leading role, second only to Lenin. Many of Trotsky's closest political allies, active in the Petrograd Inter-district Group (*mezhrayontsi*) followed his lead, joined the Bolsheviks, and went on to play major roles in the October Revolution, the Civil War and the Soviet government. Of course, Stalin ultimately murdered most of those outstanding representatives of the *mezhrayontsi* who had survived into the 1930s.

The Provisional Government could fulfill none of the hopes aroused by the February Revolution. Unwilling to sacrifice its own imperialist ambitions and dependent upon the support of British, French and American imperialism, the Provisional Government refused to end the war. In defiance of the sentiments of the masses, the Kerensky government launched offensive operations in June that ended in disaster. The agitation of the Bolshevik Party, demanding that the Soviet leaders break with the Provisional Government and take power into their own hands, met with growing support. As the prestige of the Bolshevik Party grew, the efforts of the Provisional Government, the capitalist press and leading Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries to blackguard and discredit Lenin became ever more frenzied.

The suppression of mass anti-government demonstrations—the "July Days"—was followed by a ferocious campaign against the Bolshevik Party and, especially, against Lenin. The fact that he had travelled through Germany to return to Russia was seized upon to fuel a slander campaign aimed at preparing the necessary political conditions for Lenin's assassination.

## State and Revolution

The Provisional Government ordered Lenin's arrest on July 7. Understanding very well that his captors would murder him before he even made it to the prison, Lenin went into hiding. Over the next two months, during his enforced absence from Petrograd, he wrote *State and Revolution*. He prefaced the book with an explanation:

The question of the state is now acquiring particular importance both in theory and practical politics. The imperialist war has immensely accelerated and intensified the process of transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism... The unprecedented horrors and miseries of the protracted war are making the people's position unbearable and increasing their anger. The world proletarian revolution is clearly maturing. The question of its relation to the state is acquiring practical importance. [21]

In this remarkable work, Lenin carried out what he referred to as an exercise in "historical excavation," reestablishing the teachings of Marx and Engels on the nature of the state as an instrument of class rule, for the maintenance of the power and the domination of one class over another. The very existence of the state arises out of the existence and irreconcilability of class antagonisms. Lenin attacked bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologists who "'correct' Marx in such a way as to make it appear that the state is an organ "for the *reconciliation* of classes." [22]

Lenin considered *State and Revolution* to be of the greatest importance, and specifically instructed that, in the event of his untimely death, special attention was to be given to its publication.

But Lenin survived. By September, the political situation began to shift radically to the left. Confronted with the threat of a counterrevolutionary coup by General Kornilov, the Soviet leaders were compelled to mobilize and arm the masses. Trotsky, who had been in prison since July, was released. In the face of mass working class resistance, in whose organization the Bolsheviks played a critical role, Kornilov's soldiers deserted the general and the attempted coup collapsed.

## "All Power to the Soviets"

Kerensky—who had been secretly conspiring with Kornilov in advance of the coup—was politically discredited. With Lenin still in hiding, the Bolshevik Party—advancing the slogan of "All Power to the Soviets"—experienced a massive surge in popular support. Broad sections of the working class deserted the Mensheviks, who still refused to break with the Provisional Government and sanction the transfer of state power to the Soviets.

In September, with the economic and political crisis intensifying, and with a general uprising of the peasantry sweeping across Russia, Lenin called upon the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party to begin concrete preparations for the organization of an insurrection to seize power. On October 10, Lenin slipped into Petrograd to attend a meeting of the Central Committee, which passed a resolution in support of an insurrection. However, there remained substantial opposition within the party to actually attempting the overthrow of the Provisional Government, as well as disagreement over the formulation of a strategic plan for the insurrection.

A detailed review of the Bolshevik-led insurrection is not possible within the scope of this lecture. It would require a careful examination of the significant differences that arose within the Bolshevik leadership in the days leading up to the seizure of power. Trotsky's *Lessons of October* and, of course, his *History of the Russian Revolution* provide accounts of the conflicts within the Bolshevik Party, and their political and historical significance, which remain unsurpassed in their comprehension of the interaction of objective and subjective elements in the revolutionary

process.

However, there is one critical issue relating to the October Revolution that must be addressed. The claim that the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October was a conspiratorial *putsch*, undertaken without any substantial popular support, has been repeated endlessly and recycled in countless variations by political opponents of the Bolsheviks and reactionary historians for an entire century. None other than Kerensky, who lived until 1970, and thus, one might say, survived himself by more than a half-century, continued to insist, until his death at the age of 89, that his government had fallen victim to a nefarious and criminal conspiracy.

### **Why the Bolsheviks triumphed**

The denigration of the October Revolution as a coup lacking popular support has been refuted by numerous scholarly studies, of which the works of the American historian Alexander Rabinowitch are the most comprehensive and impressive. In his preface to *The Bolsheviks in Power*, published in 2007 as the third volume of his life-long study of the Russian Revolution, Professor Rabinowitch wrote:

*The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, together with *Prelude to Revolution*, challenged prevailing Western notions of the October revolution as no more than a military coup by a small, united band of revolutionary fanatics brilliantly led by Lenin. I found that, in 1917, the Bolshevik Party in Petrograd transformed itself into a mass political party and that, rather than being a monolithic movement marching in lock step behind Lenin, its leadership was divided into left, centrist, and moderate right wings, each of which helped shape revolutionary strategy and tactics. I also found that the party's success in the struggle for power after the overthrow of the tsar in February 1917 was due, in critically important ways, to its organizational flexibility, openness, and responsiveness to popular aspirations, as well as to its extensive, carefully nurtured connections to factory workers, soldiers of the Petrograd garrison, and Baltic Fleet sailors. The October revolution in Petrograd, I concluded, was less a military operation than a gradual process rooted in popular political culture, widespread disenchantment with the results of the February revolution, and, in that context, the magnetic attraction of the Bolsheviks' promises of immediate peace, bread, land for the peasantry, and grass-roots democracy exercised through multiparty soviets. [23]

Professor Rabinowitch grew up in a family that had close personal connections with Menshevik leaders. He was personally acquainted with Irakli Tsereteli, the leader of the Menshevik faction in the Petrograd Soviet. He heard the Menshevik side of the story many times. But his own scientific research led Professor Rabinowitch to conclusions that contradicted the explanations given by the Mensheviks for their defeat in 1917.

### **The capitalist-imperialist response to the October Revolution**

In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, neither the Russian nor international bourgeoisie clearly understood the political magnitude of the events in Petrograd. The ruling elites reacted as if the Bolshevik victory were a nightmare from which they would soon awaken. On November 9 (Washington time), less than 48 hours after the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the *New York Times* reported that "Washington and Embassy officials expect Bolshevik rule to be short." The *Times*' dispatch assured its readers:

The Russian situation is believed here to be not as dark as news dispatches from Petrograd would indicate. Officials of the State Department and the Russian Embassy agree in the opinion that the present control of the Petrograd Government by the Bolshevik Revolutionary Military Committee cannot last... One high official said today that he was of the view that the outcome might have a good effect rather than otherwise, because it afforded the opportunity of some strong man rising to take control of the situation.

But the strong man expected by the government of President Woodrow Wilson did not arise, and within a week the optimistic confidence that the revolution would be quickly drowned in blood gave way to rage. In an editorial published on November 16, entitled "The Bolsheviks," the *Times* denounced Kerensky for "paltering"—trifling—with the revolutionaries, and for backing away from the Kornilov coup. Seething with hatred, the editorial continued:

Yet, though Kerensky has failed, some one else may arise strong enough to take the Government out of the destructive hands of the Bolsheviks. Indeed, retain it permanently they cannot, for they are pathetically ignorant, shallow men, political children, without the slightest understanding of the vast forces they are playing with, men without a single qualification for prominence but the gift of gab; and if they could be let alone long enough their mere incompetence would destroy them, though perhaps only to replace them with others as bad. Such was the history of the French Revolution, a kaleidoscope of government by set after set of silver-tongued incompetents and ignoramuses, each worse than the other, until incompetence and ignorance destroyed themselves altogether.

And what had the Bolsheviks done during the hours and days following the overthrow of the Provisional Government to incite the wrath of *The New York Times* and the forces of international capitalist imperialism for which it spoke? First, the Bolsheviks issued a decree on peace, calling on all the warring parties to begin negotiations to end the war without annexations or indemnities. Second, the new Soviet government issued a decree on land, declaring that "Private ownership of land shall be abolished forever; land shall not be purchased, sold, leased, mortgaged or otherwise alienated." [24]

### **The place of the October Revolution in world history**

Thus began the greatest social revolution in world history. There had been other revolutions: the English Revolution of 1640-49, the American

Revolution of 1776-83, the French Revolution of 1789-94 and the Second American Revolution of 1861-65. That none of these realized—or even came close to realizing—the ideals they proclaimed does not detract from their significance as milestones in the historical development of mankind. There is nothing as intellectually repulsive as the efforts of the post-modernists to discredit the sacrifices of past generations in pursuit of a better world. With such exercises in petty-bourgeois cynicism, Marxian socialists have no sympathy whatsoever. While recognizing the historically determined limitations of the efforts of the revolutionists of earlier historical epochs, we pay them the tribute that is their due.

As an event in world history, the Russian Revolution represents the highest and as yet unsurpassed effort of humanity to identify the causes of injustice and human suffering, and put an end to them. The October Revolution achieved an unprecedented alignment of human consciousness with objective necessity. This found expression not only in the decisions and actions of its political leaders. To see the events of October only in terms of the actions of leaders, even the greatest of them, is to miss the significance of the Revolution. In a revolution, it is the masses who make history.

In overthrowing the Provisional Government, the working class acted with profound awareness of the laws of socio-economic development. “Thoughts are scientific,” wrote Trotsky, “if they correspond to an objective process and make it possible to influence that process and guide it.” [25] In this fundamental sense, the thoughts and practice of millions of people rose to the level of science. Scientific theory gripped the masses and was transformed into a material force. The working class set about to abolish an archaic system of socio-economic relations, end the anarchy of the capitalist market, and introduce conscious planning into the organization of economic life. In the 1920s and 1930s, when there still existed an American intelligentsia committed to democratic principles and capable of adopting a critical attitude toward capitalist society, the historical significance of what was then called “the Soviet experiment” was widely recognized.

In 1931, the American liberal philosopher John Dewey wrote a review for the *New Republic* of several books about the Soviet Union. Dewey noted that “Russia is a challenge to America, not because of this or that characteristic, but because we have no social machinery for controlling the technological machinery to which we have committed our fortunes,” and expressed sympathy for the Marxist proposition that “social phenomena are capable of being controlled so that the development of human society can be made subject to the human will.” Dewey proceeded to express sympathy with the following critique of capitalism presented in *The Soviet Challenge to America*, written by a prominent liberal of the day, George S. Counts:

Industrial society in its present form is a monster possessing neither soul nor inner significance. It has succeeded in destroying the simpler cultures of the past, but has failed to produce a culture of its own worthy of the name... Whether this state of moral chaos is the temporary maladjustment of a transition epoch or the inevitable product of a society organized for private gain is one of the most crucial questions of our time. [26]

The fate of the Russian Revolution—from the October Revolution of 1917 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union—is the most significant and complex historical experience of the twentieth century. But the problems with which it grappled not only persist, they are more acute than ever. One hundred years after the Russian Revolution of 1917, capitalism is spiraling toward disaster. The crisis of capitalist society is clearly not simply, as

Professor Counts put it, “the temporary maladjustment of a transition epoch.” The existence of this historically obsolete form of economic organization—based on private ownership of mankind’s productive forces and natural resources, brutally exploiting the great mass of humanity in the interest of corporate profit and private wealth—is not only the principal barrier to human progress. Its existence is rapidly becoming incompatible with the maintenance of human life. There is not a single significant social problem that can be solved within the framework of capitalism. Indeed, the logic of capitalism and the nation-state system, which forms the basis of imperialist geopolitics, is leading inexorably to yet another global war, this time fought with nuclear weapons. Nothing can stop the descent into disaster but the renewal of the conscious struggle for world socialism. This, above all, is why it is necessary to study the Russian Revolution.

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Notes:

1. Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 39 (New York: 1983), pp. 62-65
2. *The Permanent Revolution* (London: 1971), p. 155
3. Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 5 (Moscow: 1961), p. 369
4. Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 14 (Moscow: 1977), p. 325
5. “The Class, the Party, and the Leadership,” in *The Spanish Revolution 1931-39* (New York: 1973), p. 360
6. *The Lessons of October in The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (New York: 1975), p. 227
7. Lenin, *Collected Works* Volume 23, p.253
8. *The Russian Revolution 1917* by N.N. Sukhanov, edited, abridged and translated by Joel Carmichael (New York: 1962), Volume 1, p. 5
9. *The Russian Revolution, 1917* by Rex A. Wade (Cambridge: 2000), p. 31
10. *Ibid*, p. 39
11. Lenin *Collected Works*, Volume 23, pp. 25-26
12. *History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: MI, 1957), p. 152
13. *Ibid*
14. *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: 1961), p. 208
15. *War Against War* by R. Craig Nation (Durham and London: 1989), p. 175
16. Sukhanov, Volume 1, p. 273
17. *Ibid*, pp. 273-74
18. *Ibid* p. 274
19. *Ibid*, p. 281
20. Sukhanov, Volume II, p. 360
21. Lenin *Collected Works*, Volume 25 (Moscow: 1977), p. 388
22. *Ibid*, p. 392
23. *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*, by Alexander Rabinowitch (Bloomington and Indianapolis: 2007), pp. ix-x
24. Quoted in *The Russian Revolution in 1917*, p. 243
25. *History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 151
26. Cited in *John Dewey, Volume 6: 1931-1932, Essays, Reviews and Miscellany* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1989), p. 266



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