

Writings of Trotsky from 1917

# Lessons of the Great Year: 9 January 1905–9 January 1917

Leon Trotsky  
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*The article is translated by Fred Williams, who will be delivering an online lecture, "The Legacy of 1905 and the Strategy of the Russian Revolution" on Saturday, March 25, at 5:00 Eastern Daylight Time. For more information, [wsws.org/1917](http://wsws.org/1917).*

Revolutionary anniversaries are not so much days of reminiscences, as days of learning. Especially for us Russians. Our history is poor. What has been called our uniqueness, consisted to a significant degree in being backward, poverty-stricken, ignorant and unwashed. Only the revolution of 1905 led us onto the great highway of political development. On January Ninth, the Petersburg worker knocked strongly on the gates of the Winter Palace. But it could be said that this was the entire Russian people knocking for the first time on the gates of history. The crowned janitor did not respond to the knocking. But nine months later—on 17 October 1905—he was forced to open the heavy gates of autocracy, and, despite all the ensuing efforts of reaction, a small crack always remained. The revolution was not victorious. The same forces and almost the same figures remain in power who were there twelve years ago. But the revolution made Russia unrecognizable. The kingdom of immobility, servitude, Orthodoxy, vodka and submissiveness has become a kingdom of ferment, criticism and struggle. Where once there was only shapeless dough—the faceless, formless people, “Holy Russia”—new classes have consciously opposed each other, and political parties with their programs and methods of struggle have arisen. The Ninth of January opens a new Russian history; from this line of blood there is no turning back. There is no return to the accursed Asiatic backwardness of previous

centuries, and there will never be.

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It was not the liberal bourgeoisie, nor the petty-bourgeois democracy, nor the radical intelligentsia, nor the many-millioned peasantry, but the proletariat in Russia that opened the new period of history in Russia with its struggle. This is a basic fact. And on this, as a foundation, we Social-Democrats are drawing our conclusions and are forging our tactics. On the Ninth of January, a priest, Georgi Gapon, ended up leading the Petersburg workers. He was a fantastic figure, combining in his person adventurism, hysteria and charlatanism. His priest's robes were an umbilical cord still connecting the workers with the past, with “Holy Russia [Rus’].” But nine months later, during the October strike, the greatest political strike which history had ever known, the Petersburg workers were led by their own, elected, self-governing organization: the Council [Soviet] of Workers’ Deputies. Its members included many workers who earlier had been on Gapon’s staff, but in the few months of revolution they had grown considerably, just as the entire class which they represented had grown. Gapon, who had secretly returned by this time to Russia, tried to revive his organization and make it a weapon for Witte. “Faithful” Gaponov supporters gathered several times in *Solyanoi gorodok*, in the center of Petersburg, right next to the Council of Workers’ Deputies, and during our sessions, sounds of “Eternal Memory” frequently made their way to us: beyond funeral dirges for victims of January Ninth the Gaponovtsy did not go.

In the first period of the revolution, the activities of the proletariat met with sympathy and even support from liberal society. The Miliukovs figured that the workers would give tsarism a sound thrashing and make it inclined to compromise with the opposition bourgeoisie. But the tsarist bureaucracy, which had become accustomed over centuries to dominating the people, was by no means in a hurry to share their power with the liberals. Even in October 1905 the

bourgeoisie became convinced that they could only come to power by breaking the backbone of tsarism. Apparently, this noble cause could only be carried out by a victorious revolution.

But essentially, the revolution moved the working class to the forefront, united it and hardened it with irreconcilable hostility not only to tsarism, but also to capitalism. During October, November, and December 1905—in the epoch of the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies—we observe how every new, revolutionary step taken by the proletariat cast the liberals toward the monarchy. Hopes for revolutionary collaboration between the bourgeoisie and proletariat prove to be a hopeless utopia. Whoever failed to see this then, and did not understand it later, whoever still dreams about a “national” uprising against tsarism—for such people revolution and class struggle are a book behind seven seals.

At the end of 1905, the question had become urgent. The monarchy had already become convinced in practice that at a moment of decisive revolutionary battle, the bourgeoisie would not support the workers; the monarchy then decided to move against them with all its forces. The ominous December days began. The Council of Workers’ Deputies in Petersburg was arrested by the Izmailov Guards Regiment, which had remained loyal to the government. A magnificent response followed: the strike in Petersburg, the uprising in Moscow, the stormy revolutionary movements in all the industrial cities and centers, uprising in the Caucasus and in the Latvian areas. The revolutionary movement was crushed. And there were many a quasi-“socialist” who hastened to conclude from our December defeat that the revolution in Russia was impossible without the support of the liberal bourgeoisie. If this were true, it would mean that a revolution in Russia is generally impossible.

Our large industrial bourgeoisie—and only they have true power—is separated from the proletariat by insurmountable class hostility and needs the monarchy as a pillar of order. The Guchkovs, Krestovnikovs and Riabushinskys cannot fail to see the revolutionary proletariat as their mortal enemy. Our middle and petty commercial-industrial bourgeoisie has little significance in the economic life of our country, and is entangled from head to foot in the nets of dependence on big capital. The Miliukovs, the leaders of the lower middle class, only play a political role to the extent that they operate as clerks for the big bourgeoisie. Precisely for this reason the Cadet leader called the banner of the revolution “a red rag,” repeatedly renounced it, and very recently, during the war, declared that if revolution were necessary for victory over the Germans, then he would refuse victory.

The peasantry occupies an enormous place in Russian life. In 1905 it was shaken to its very deepest layers. The peasants were driving out the landlords, burning estates and

seizing the gentry’s lands. But the curse of the peasantry is that it is scattered, disconnected and backward. In addition, the interests of various layers of the peasantry differ greatly. Against their local landlords, they rose up bravely, but they stopped in reverential fear before the all-Russian master. Moreover, the peasant soldiers did not understand that the proletarians were shedding their blood not only for themselves, but for them, and as a blind weapon of tsarist power they crushed the workers’ uprising in December 1905.

Whoever thinks carefully about the experience of 1905, and draws the threads from it to the present day, will understand how lifeless and pitiful are the hopes of our social-patriots for the revolutionary collaboration of the proletariat with the liberal bourgeoisie. Over the last twelve years, big capital in Russia has made enormous conquests. The middle and petty bourgeoisie has fallen into even greater dependence on the banks and trusts. The proletariat, which has grown numerically, is separated from the bourgeois classes by an even greater abyss than in 1905. If a “national” revolution did not succeed twelve years ago, then there are less hopes for it now. During this time, it is true, the cultural and political level of the Russian peasantry has greatly risen. But once again there are incomparably fewer hopes for the revolutionary role of the peasantry, as a class, than in 1905. *The industrial proletariat can only find a truly reliable ally in the proletarian and semi-proletarian layers in the countryside.* “But in that case, are there any chances of a victory of the revolution in Russia?”—the skeptic may ask. This is a special question, and we will try to show on the pages of *Novy mir* [The New World] that such chances exist and that they are quite solid. But before approaching this question, we must clear the way of any superstitions regarding the possibility of revolutionary collaboration between labor and capital in the struggle against tsarism.

The experience of 1905 tells us that such collaboration is a pitiful Utopia. To become familiar with this experience, to study it, is the duty of every thinking worker who wants to avoid tragic mistakes. It is precisely in this sense that we said above that revolutionary anniversaries for us are not only days for reminiscences, but also days of great learning.

*Novy mir*, 20 January 1917.



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