

The Place of the October Revolution in World History and Contemporary Politics

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On the last day of 1917, Franz Mehring—the great socialist historian, journalist and theoretician, who had, along with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, opposed the German Social Democratic Party’s vote for war credits in August 1914—appraised the events in Petrograd, where only six weeks earlier the Bolsheviks had led the insurrection that overthrew the bourgeois Provisional Government. While recognizing the immense political implications of the Bolsheviks’ accession to power, Mehring emphasized that what had occurred in Petrograd would likely prove, in time, to have been only the beginning of a protracted and arduous struggle. He wrote:

Revolutions have a long breath, if they are real revolutions; the seventeenth-century English Revolution, the eighteenth-century French Revolution each took about forty years to work themselves out, and the challenges that confronted the English and even the French Revolution were almost child’s play compared to the tremendous problems that confront the Russian revolution. [1]

In fact, the seizure of power, which had been achieved almost bloodlessly in Petrograd, was immediately followed by an uninterrupted succession of political crises. First, there was the conflict over the formation of a government. This was followed soon after by the confrontation with the Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks decided to disperse. Then came the bitter controversy over the negotiations with the Germans, and the decision—amidst bitter divisions within the Bolshevik leadership—to accept the drastic concessions demanded by the German imperialists and to sign the peace treaty. By the spring of 1918, Soviet Russia was being engulfed by full-scale civil war. In July, Lenin was shot twice by a member of the Socialist Revolutionary party, an assassination attempt that he barely survived. Nevertheless, in countless historical narratives, the Bolsheviks are presented as bloodthirsty fanatics, indifferent to even the most reasonable appeals. Their opponents, on the other hand, especially among the Mensheviks, are portrayed as paragons of compromise. This has little to do with reality. Let us review the first of the post-insurrection crises.

The Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties demanded at once that the Bolsheviks end their “adventure” and relinquish power. They declared that they would not even negotiate with the Bolsheviks unless the Military Revolutionary Committee—which had organized the insurrection—was disarmed. Its leaders (such as Trotsky) would receive temporary guarantees for their personal safety until their fate was decided by a future session of the Constituent Assembly. [2] Judging from their insolent demands, it seems that they did not really understand the balance of power in Petrograd.

The intransigence of the so-called “moderate” socialist parties, who were supported by the right-wing leadership of the railway workers union

(known as *Vikzhel*), was encouraged by the presence within the Bolshevik Central Committee of a substantial faction, led by Lev Kamenev, who were prepared to make massive compromises in order to broaden the base of the government. In response to the demand by the “moderate” socialists and the City Duma that Lenin and Trotsky be excluded from leadership positions in a new coalition government, the Bolshevik Central Committee issued a statement (in the absence of the two principal leaders of the revolution) that “some reciprocal give and take on party nominations was permissible.” [3]

As explained by historian Alexander Rabinowitch, the position of the Central Committee, which was explicitly reiterated in a subsequent statement by Lev Kamenev, “was a signal that Lenin and Trotsky were not untouchable and that even a Bolshevik majority in a government which included all socialist parties might not be an absolute requirement.” [4] The Menshevik demand that Lenin and Trotsky be excluded from power was, in essence, a call for the political and physical decapitation of the working class. Theodore Dan, one of the main Menshevik party leaders, actually called for the disarming of Petrograd workers.

The anti-Bolshevik frenzy of the “moderate” socialists frightened a section of the more left-wing Menshevik-Internationalists, led by Martov. One representative of this faction, A. A. Blum, asked the right-wing “moderates:” “Have you given any thought to what the defeat of the Bolsheviks would mean? The action of the Bolsheviks is the action of workers and soldiers. Workers and soldiers will be crushed along with the party of the proletariat.” [5]

Despite the capitulatory sentiments within the Bolshevik Central Committee, there remained strong support for Soviet power among Petrograd workers. Lenin was unyielding in his defense of the insurrection and the establishment of a genuinely revolutionary government. In an explosive meeting of the Central Committee on November 1, 1917, Lenin unleashed a furious verbal assault against Kamenev and other capitulators in the Party leadership. He cited reports of the shooting by bourgeois Junker military officers of soldiers taken captive in Moscow, where bourgeois forces were bitterly resisting the revolution. Invoking the fate of defeated working-class uprisings, which had been drowned in blood, Lenin reminded the capitulators, “[I]f the bourgeoisie had triumphed, it would have acted as it did in 1848 and 1871.” [6] The historical references were to the massacre of Parisian workers by General Cavaignac in June 1848 and the shooting of at least 10,000 workers by the bourgeois army of the Versailles government during the suppression of the Paris Commune in May 1871.

Compromise and coalition with the very parties that had supported the Provisional Government was tantamount to renunciation of the October Revolution. Of all the members of the Central Committee, there was only one who unequivocally and forcefully defended Lenin’s refusal to accept a coalition with opponents of the insurrection: “As for conciliation, I cannot even speak about that seriously,” Lenin declared. “Trotsky long ago said that unification is impossible. Trotsky understood this, and from

that time on there has been no better Bolshevik.” [7]

Lenin insisted that the Party was obligated, as the leadership of the working class, to defend its interests. Answering Zinoviev, who once again was allied with Kamenev in demanding compromise with the right, Lenin stated:

Zinoviev says that we are not the Soviet power. We are, if you please, only the Bolsheviks, left alone since the departure of the Social Revolutionists and the Mensheviks, and so forth and so on. But we are not responsible for that. We have been elected by the Congress of the Soviets. This organization is something new. Whoever wants to struggle enters into it. It does not comprise the people; it comprises the vanguard whom the masses follow. We go with the masses—the active and not the weary masses. To refrain now from extending the insurrection [is to capitulate] to the weary masses, but we are with the vanguard. The Soviets take shape [in struggle]. The Soviets are the vanguard of the proletarian masses. [8]

In support of Lenin’s position, Trotsky presented a clear and unsentimental appraisal of political realities:

We are told that we are incapable of building up. In that case we should simply surrender power to those who were correct in struggling against us. But we have already performed a great labor. We are told that we cannot sit on bayonets. But neither can we manage without bayonets. We need bayonets there in order to be able to sit here. One should imagine that the experience we have already gone through has taught us something. There has been a battle in Moscow. Yes, there was a serious battle with the Junkers there. But these Junkers owe allegiance neither to the Mensheviks nor the *Vikzhel*. Conciliation with the *Vikzhel* will not do away with the conflict with the Junker detachments of the bourgeoisie. No. A cruel class struggle will continue to be waged against us in the future as well. When all these middle-class lice, who are now incapable of taking either side, discover that our Government is a strong one, they will come to our side, together with the *Vikzhel*. Owing to the fact that we crushed the Cossacks of [General] Krasnov beneath Petersburg, we were showered on the very next day with telegrams of congratulation. The petty-bourgeois masses are seeking that force to which they must submit themselves. Whoever fails to understand this cannot have the slightest comprehension of anything in the universe and, least of all, in the state apparatus. Back in 1871, Karl Marx said that a new class cannot simply make use of the old apparatus. This apparatus engenders its own interests and habits which we must run up against. It must be smashed and replaced; only then will we be able to work.

If that were not so, if the old Czarist apparatus suited our new purposes, then the entire revolution would not be worth an empty eggshell. We must create such an apparatus as would actually place the common interests of the popular masses above the proper interests of the apparatus itself.

There are many in our midst who have cultivated a purely bookish attitude towards the question of the classes and of the class struggle. The moment they got a whiff of the revolutionary reality, they began to talk a different language (i.e., of conciliation and not struggle).

We are now living through the most profound social crisis. At

present the proletariat is effecting the demolition and the replacement of the state apparatus. The resistance on their part reflects the processes of our growth. No words can moderate their hatred of us. We are told that their program is presumably similar to ours. Give them a few seats and that will settle everything... No. The bourgeoisie is aligned against us by virtue of all its class interests. And what will we achieve as against that by taking to the road of conciliation with the *Vikzhel*?... We are confronted with armed violence, which can be overcome only by means of violence on our own part. Lunacharsky says that blood is flowing. What to do? Evidently we should never have begun.

Then why don’t you openly admit that the biggest mistake was committed not so much in October but towards the end of February when we entered the arena of future civil war. [9]

The struggle within the Bolshevik leadership raged for more than a week. It required the greatest effort by Lenin, with Trotsky’s support, to overcome the demands for a coalition government with the Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and other opponents of the Bolshevik-led insurrection of October 24-25.

What underlay the conflict within the Bolshevik leadership—which once again brought the party to the verge of a split—was the extent to which a substantial section of the Central Committee remained opposed, not only to the October seizure of power, but to the entire political orientation that had been introduced by Lenin following his return to Russia in April 1917. Kamenev’s demand that the Bolshevik Party accede to a coalition, even if that meant barring Lenin and Trotsky from positions in the new government, recapitulated the positions that he had advanced, together with Stalin, in the immediate aftermath of the February Revolution.

Let us recall that prior to the return of Lenin, the Bolshevik Party—under the leadership of Kamenev and Stalin—had adapted itself to the political arrangements that had emerged in the immediate aftermath of the February Revolution. It accepted the authority of the bourgeois Provisional Government. The newly formed Soviet was to do no more than attempt to assert left-wing influence on the formulation of the policies of the democratically refurbished bourgeois state. The inescapable corollary of the acceptance of bourgeois rule was support for the continuation of Russia’s participation in the imperialist war, which was repackaged, since the overthrow of the tsarist regime, as a war in defense of democracy.

The political perspective that underlay this initial Bolshevik response to the February upheaval was that Russia was undergoing a bourgeois democratic revolution, whose goal was the establishment of a parliamentary democracy, akin to that existing in Great Britain or France. The fight for a workers government—i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat—was rejected as historically and economically premature. Russia—economically backward and with a population whose majority was comprised of peasants—was not ready for socialism. To be fair to Kamenev and other Bolshevik leaders who held this position, they could—and, in fact, did—legitimately claim that their response to the February Revolution was based on the long-established Bolshevik program of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.

This program was, at best, ambiguous as to the class nature of the regime that was to arise on the basis of the overthrow of the tsarist government. Moreover, the program of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry differed fundamentally from the perspective of permanent revolution, which had been formulated by Trotsky during and in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution of 1905. As is well known, Trotsky’s theory anticipated that the democratic revolution against tsarism would develop rapidly into a socialist revolution, requiring the working class to take power into its own hands, begin the implementation

of socialist policies, and make deep and even fatal encroachments on bourgeois-capitalist property.

Trotsky's prediction that the coming Russian Revolution would assume a socialist character was dismissed by virtually all his political contemporaries on the left, including the Bolsheviks, as an unrealistic, even utopian, appraisal of Russian conditions. It was simply not possible to advocate the direct seizure of power by the working class in a country whose economy was not sufficiently prepared for socialist measures.

However, Trotsky's critics paid insufficient attention to his underlying argument. Trotsky's anticipation of a socialist revolution was derived, not from a nationally based appraisal of Russian conditions, but, rather, from an analysis of the twentieth century development of the capitalist world economy and its impact on the political life of all countries. The global development of capitalism, Trotsky had argued in 1907, "has transformed the entire world into a single economic and political organism." The complex interlocking network of economic relations would inevitably draw all countries "into a social crisis of unprecedented dimensions." The eruption of the unavoidable crisis would lead to the "radical, worldwide liquidation" of bourgeois rule. Trotsky's analysis of the global crisis determined his strategic conception of the Russian Revolution. The "international character" of the capitalist crisis would open up "majestic prospects" for the Russian working class. "Political emancipation, led by the Russian working class," Trotsky wrote, "is raising the latter to heights that are historically unprecedented, providing it with colossal means and resources, and making it the initiator of capitalism's worldwide liquidation, for which history has prepared all the objective preconditions." [10]

Prior to 1914, Lenin had rejected the strategic orientation that flowed from Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. But the outbreak of World War I, and the immediate capitulation of the Second International to national chauvinism, had a profound impact on Lenin's conception of the Russian Revolution. To the extent that any one event could "change everything," the outbreak of the world war was such a development. From August 1914 on, Lenin's analysis of the causes of the world war and the betrayal of the Second International became the foundation of his understanding of all political developments. The war was not simply an event, after which, as Karl Kautsky hoped, everything would return, more or less, to what it was prior to August 1914. The world war signified, for Lenin, the beginning of a new epoch in world politics.

Just two years before the war, the delegates attending the 1912 Basel Congress of the Second International had passed a resolution in which they pledged to exploit the crisis created by the outbreak of war to carry out the worldwide liquidation of the capitalist system. One may safely assume that the vast majority of delegates viewed the resolution as nothing more than a politically meaningless rhetorical exercise. Lenin, however, viewed the resolution as a serious statement of policy, binding on all the sections of the Second International.

Moreover, as analyzed by Lenin, the war was not an accident, the outcome of the mistakes and miscalculations of one or another national government. The war represented nothing less than a devastating system-wide disruption of the economic and geopolitical equilibrium of the capitalist-imperialist world order. The outbreak of war, drawing millions of people into the vortex of horrific and unprecedented violence, was the response of the capitalist ruling classes of Europe to this system-wide failure. War was their method of a "system reset," requiring a new division of colonial possessions and spheres of influence, upon which a new economic and political equilibrium would be eventually established.

In opposition to the capitalist solution, the necessary and unavoidable response of the working class in all the imperialist countries was world socialist revolution. The systemic breakdown that assumed, in the objective practice of the imperialist ruling classes, the form of war, would assume, in the objective practice of the international working class, the

form of intensifying anti-capitalist class struggle and socialist revolution. The ending of the war required the overthrow of the capitalist classes, the abolition of the economic system based on capitalist property and the profit system, and the destruction of the nation state. It was to the conscious development of this objective tendency of social and economic development that the policy of the world socialist movement had to be oriented, both in program and practice.

From the standpoint of an understanding of the imperialist war from within this global framework, it was clear that those who argued that Russia—as an isolated "national" unit of world economy—was not "ready" for socialist revolution really missed the point. Lenin was not advocating a program of nationally based socialism. For Lenin (and, of course, Trotsky) Russia comprised a critical front in what was a worldwide struggle. A complex set of circumstances had placed before the Russian working class the task of opening up the first great front in the world socialist revolution.

Once Lenin returned to Russia, he was compelled to conduct an intense political struggle against all those tendencies within the Bolshevik Party who viewed the revolution in a national framework. Lenin opened the Seventh All-Russia Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, on April 24, 1917, with the following statement:

Comrades, we are assembled here as the first conference of the proletarian party in conditions of the Russian revolution and a developing world revolution as well. The time is approaching when the assertion of the founders of scientific socialism, and the unanimous forecast of the socialists who gathered at the Basel Congress, that world war would inevitably lead to revolution, is being everywhere proved correct...

The great honor of beginning the revolution has fallen to the Russian proletariat. But the Russian proletariat must not forget that its movement and revolution are only part of the world revolutionary proletarian movement, which in Germany, for example, is gaining momentum with every passing day. Only from this angle can we define our tasks. [11]

Lenin continued:

From the point of view of Marxism, in discussing imperialism it is absurd to restrict oneself to conditions in one country alone, since all capitalist countries are closely bound together. Now, in time of war, this bond has grown immeasurably stronger. All humanity is thrown into a tangled bloody heap from which no nation can extricate itself on its own. Though there are more and less advanced countries, this war has bound them all together by so many threads that escape from this tangle for any single country acting on its own is inconceivable. [12]

Even after Lenin had won the party to the perspective of the struggle for power, he continued relentlessly to stress the internationalist foundations of the party's strategy. He explained in articles, speeches at mass rallies and in scholarly lectures that the war and the revolution in Russia arose out of the crisis of world imperialism. In a lecture delivered on May 4, 1917 on the subject of "War and Revolution," Lenin declared:

The war which all capitalists are waging cannot be ended without a workers' revolution against these capitalists. So long as control remains a mere phrase instead of deed, so long as the

government of the capitalists has not been replaced by a government of the revolutionary proletariat, the government is doomed merely to reiterate: We are heading for disaster, disaster, disaster...

The only way to end this war is by a workers' revolution in several countries. In the meantime, we should make preparations for that revolution, we should assist it. [13]

The Bolshevik decision to take power was a demonstration of extraordinary political courage and, one must add, political "will," in the best sense of the term. In this historical situation, the Bolshevik "will to power" was not the expression of any sort of subjective voluntarism, but the necessary alignment of political practice with objective reality. Critics of the October Revolution, even those professing sympathy with its socialist aspirations, argued that the decision to take power involved too many risks. Given the fact that Lenin and Trotsky believed that the fate of Soviet Russia depended upon the extension of the socialist revolution into Central and Western Europe, and especially Germany, was it not dangerous, even reckless, to base Bolshevik policy on the conquest of power by the workers of another country? Were the Bolsheviks not placing too great a bet on the successful outcome of the German revolution? Would it not have been wiser to delay revolutionary action in Russia until the development of the revolutionary movement in Germany made the prospects for success less problematic?

This skeptical outlook betrays a poor understanding of both the historical process and the dynamic of the international revolutionary struggle. In a pamphlet written shortly before the October Revolution, titled *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*, Lenin mocked those who were prepared to sanction a social revolution only "if history were to lead to it in the peaceful, calm, smooth and precise manner of a German express train pulling into a station. A sedate conductor would open the carriage door and announce: 'Social Revolution Station! *Alle aussteigen!*'" [14] Everyone must leave the train.

Lenin also cited another argument that was often raised against the taking of power. The revolution would be a highly recommended course of action if the political situation were not so "exceptionally complicated." Barely restraining his sarcasm, Lenin replied to the "wise men" urging that the Bolsheviks wait for the emergence of an "uncomplicated" situation.

Such revolutions never occur, and sighs for such a revolution amount to nothing more than the reactionary wails of a bourgeois intellectual. Even if a revolution has started in a situation that seemed to be not very complicated, the development of the revolution *always* creates an *exceptionally* complicated situation. A revolution, a real, profound, a 'people's' revolution, to use Marx's expression, is the incredibly complicated and painful process of the death of the old and birth of the new social order, of the mode of life of tens of millions of people. Revolution is the most intense, furious, desperate class struggle and civil war...

If the situation were not exceptionally complicated there would be no revolution. If you are afraid of wolves don't go into the forest. [15]

History in general, and revolutions in particular, would be very simple affairs if they always offered clear-cut alternatives with absolutely predictable outcomes, and if the most farsighted and progressive courses of action were always the least dangerous and least demanding. In reality, great historical projects present themselves in the form of excruciating

problems, demanding painful decisions, involving great risks and requiring immense sacrifices.

The October revolution, establishing the first workers' state, was precisely such a great and, if I may use the word, *complicated* project. Let us keep in mind certain important conditions affecting the course of events in October 1917 and the months and years that followed. The revolution occurred in the midst of a global conflagration that accelerated the disintegration of a vast and archaic empire that sprawled across one-sixth of the land surface of the earth. The scale of the geopolitical, social and economic crisis that overwhelmed Russia in 1917 determined the astonishing pace of events between February and October. When Lenin warned of an "impending catastrophe" in the autumn of 1917, there was not a trace of exaggeration in his choice of words. The bourgeois Provisional Government and its allies among the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in the Soviet were unable to formulate, let alone implement, any coherent set of policies to deal with a crisis of such a monumental magnitude. In his only comment on the centenary of the October Revolution, Vladimir Putin voiced the regret that a more peaceful solution had not been found to the crisis of 1917:

We have to ask the question: was it really not possible to develop not through revolution but through evolution, without destroying statehood and mercilessly ruining the fate of millions, but through gradual, step-by-step progress? [16]

One can imagine Putin, had he been alive in 1917, as a functionary in some police-connected department of the Provisional Government, indignant over the popular repudiation of the old institutions of the state, horrified by the violence in the streets, disappointed by the failure of General Kornilov to restore order, and bitterly hostile to the Bolsheviks.

An evolutionary and peaceful solution to the crisis was simply not to be found in 1917. The failure of the Provisional Government and the entire reformist perspective of the "moderate" socialist leadership of the pre-October Soviets testified to the fact that the crisis could not be solved on a capitalist basis, or within the framework of Russian nationalism.

The program of world socialist revolution, advanced by Lenin and Trotsky, was the only viable strategic response to the systemic breakdown that began with the outbreak of the European war. Notwithstanding her own criticisms of certain aspects of Bolshevik policies, Rosa Luxemburg wrote: "That the Bolsheviks have based their policy entirely upon the world proletarian revolution is the clearest proof of their political farsightedness and firmness of principle and of the bold scope of their policies." [17]

Had history been kinder to the Bolsheviks, the conquest of power by the working class in Germany would have preceded, or, at least, occurred simultaneously with the October Revolution. But, as Trotsky was to write, history was not kind. It was a "wicked stepmother." The betrayal of the German Social Democratic Party foreclosed that possibility. That betrayal not only delayed the German revolution; it also introduced confusion and division into the German working class.

Particularly in the aftermath of the attempted counterrevolution by General Kornilov in the late summer of 1917, it had become clear that only by overthrowing the Provisional Government could the revolution be saved. Thus, the Bolsheviks were placed in the position of assuming state power under conditions of political isolation. They confronted the dual task of defending the revolution against counterrevolutionary forces within Russia (which received the backing of world imperialism) and, at the same time, doing all that was possible to advance the cause of the world socialist revolution. These two inseparably connected aspects of their revolutionary policy found expression in the creation of the Red

Army and the founding of the Communist (Third) International. The first congress of the Comintern was held in Moscow in March 1919. The next three congresses—whose debates and resolutions remain to this day essential elements of the theoretical and political education of revolutionary Marxists—were held on an annual basis, in 1920, 1921 and 1922.

The survival of the revolution—particularly under conditions of the defeats suffered by the working class beyond the borders of Soviet Russia—would not have been possible without the creation of the Red Army. And here it is necessary to refer, if only briefly, to the critical role of Trotsky as commissar of war and the Red Army's principal commander. Historian Jonathan D. Smele, the author of a valuable study of the Russian Civil Wars (he uses the plural), writes that "Trotsky's transformation from a propagandist, with a few month's experience as a war correspondent in the Balkans in 1912, to the organizer of a multimillion-strong army was remarkable." Smele calls attention to "Trotsky's ability to inspire loyalty" and his "ability to choose wise advisers" as important characteristics of his leadership. [18]

In another study, Colonel Harold W. Nelson (who taught at the United States War College) stresses Trotsky's exceptional skills as a military strategist and leader. "He had a more perfect understanding of the need for speed rather than tactical victories, and he sensed the importance of massing troops in the critical theater rather than detaching troops to take political objectives." His earlier writings on the Balkan Wars revealed an intense interest in the impact of war on those who were compelled to fight. Trotsky "wanted to know what men did in combat and he hoped he might discover what combat did to men. His was not the idle curiosity of the observer, but the passionate interest of the student... This passionate interest in vital social problems was Trotsky's nature, and he studied war with the same consuming desire that he had brought to his earlier contacts with economics, languages and revolutionary theory." [19]

Trotsky possessed extraordinary administrative and organizational abilities. But the key element of Trotsky's leadership of the Red Army was his unequalled historical and political comprehension of the complex interaction between social forces operating within Russia, the ever-shifting geopolitical and economic interests and antagonisms that were operative within the world imperialist system, and the influences of all these global processes upon the class struggle within different countries and the development of the world socialist revolution as a whole. Within this process, moreover, the struggle of the working class and, especially, the political initiatives of the Marxist vanguard played a significant and, under certain exceptional conditions, decisive role in determining the course of world history.

As he directed the struggle of the Red Army against multiple enemies and across numerous military fronts that spanned thousands of miles, Trotsky was continuously seeking to understand the place of the October Revolution within the global development of socialist revolution. Despite setbacks in one sector of the vast battlefield of world revolutions, strategic opportunities for a breakthrough might arise in another sector.

After the defeats of uprisings in Germany and Hungary, the Bolsheviks realized that the victory of socialist revolution in Europe would be a more protracted process than they had originally hoped. However, the stirring of the masses in the East, awakened to political life by the victory of the Bolsheviks, provided new possibilities for the development of the world revolution. In August 1919, Trotsky sent a lengthy memo from his military train to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (as the party had been renamed). He wrote:

There is no doubt at all that our Red Army constitutes an incomparably more powerful force in the Asian terrain of world politics than in the European terrain. Here there opens up before us

an undoubted possibility not merely of a lengthy wait to see how events develop in Europe, but of conducting activity in the Asian field. The road to India may prove at the given moment to be more readily passable and shorter for us than the road to Soviet Hungary. The sort of army which at the moment can be of no great significance in the European scales can upset the unstable balance of Asian relationships of colonial dependence, give a direct push to an uprising on the part of the oppressed masses and assure the triumph of such a rising in Asia...

Our military successes in the Urals and in Siberia should raise the prestige of the Soviet Revolution throughout the whole of oppressed Asia to an exceptionally high level. It is essential to exploit this factor and concentrate somewhere in the Urals or in Turkestan a Revolutionary Academy, the political and military headquarters of the Asian Revolution, which in the period immediately ahead may turn out to be far more effectual than the Executive Committee of the Third International. [20]

The setbacks suffered by the working class in Europe in the period between 1919 and 1921 made it clear that the development of the socialist revolution would be a more protracted process than the Bolsheviks had originally expected. This did not mean that the decision to take power in Russia was based on an incorrect appraisal of European conditions, as bourgeois historians generally claim. In fact, the October Revolution contributed to an immense radicalization of the working class in Europe, and there were uprisings (as in Germany and Hungary) and massive strikes (as in Italy). But the defeat of these movements required the reworking of certain elements of the revolutionary perspective.

Crucial lessons had certainly emerged from the October Revolution and its aftermath. First, that the victory of the socialist revolution is dependent, to a degree that could not have been appreciated prior to 1914, upon the existence of a revolutionary Marxist party capable of providing leadership to the working class. The fact that the fate of the revolution for an extended political period could be decided within just a few critical days imparted to the issue of leadership an extraordinary political and historical significance. Second, the experience of the October Revolution had made more acute the capitalists' fear of socialist revolution.

Once the ruling elites realized that the Bolshevik victory would not be overturned and recognized what it meant to lose power, they were determined to prevent at all costs a repetition of the experience. This heightened awareness of political danger led to an enormous mobilization of counterrevolutionary violence against the working class and its political vanguard. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered in Berlin in January 1919 during the bloody suppression of the revolutionary Spartacist uprising. Fascist movements were built up throughout Europe.

The bourgeoisie, Trotsky warned in July 1921, "attains its greatest concentration of forces and resources, of political and military means of deception, of coercion, and provocation, i.e., the flowering of its class strategy, at the moment when it is most immediately threatened by social ruin." The epoch of capitalist crisis and breakdown finds expression in the flowering within the bourgeoisie of its counterrevolutionary strategy, which Trotsky characterized as "the art of waging a combined struggle against the proletariat by every method from saccharine, professorial-clerical preachments to machine-gunning of strikers..." [21]

How was the working class to respond to the determination of the bourgeoisie, using all methods at its disposal, to destroy all threats to its rule? Trotsky answered: "The task of the working class—in Europe and throughout the world—consists in counterposing to the thoroughly thought-out counterrevolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie its own revolutionary strategy, likewise thought out to the end." [22]

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The years between 1921 and 1924 marked a critical period of political transition in the Soviet Union. During the previous seven years, from 1914 to 1921, Russia had experienced a staggering level of political and social upheaval. The defeats of the working class in Europe meant that the political and economic isolation of the Soviet Union would continue, though it was still hoped that the time frame would involve years, not decades. The introduction of the New Economic Policy in March 1921 involved substantial concessions to capitalist market forces, which were justified, and entirely legitimately, as a necessary retreat. However, the ensuing strengthening of capitalist forces, interacting with the growing bureaucratization of the Communist Party and the state apparatus and the temporary stabilization of capitalism in Western Europe, had significant political consequences. By late 1922, there were growing indications that the revolutionary spirit present in the early years of the Soviet state was ebbing. This found political expression in the resurgence of national chauvinist tendencies within the Party leadership.

Lenin had suffered a serious stroke in May 1922 and did not return to political activity until October 1922. He was shocked by the change in the political environment within the party leadership. Lenin vehemently objected to Stalin's disrespectful treatment of representatives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Georgian Republic, and described him as a "Great Russian chauvinist bully." In one of his last political acts, in March 1923, Lenin threatened to sever all personal relations with Stalin. But just a day later, he suffered a massive stroke that ended his political life. On January 21, 1924, Lenin died.

In October 1923, the Communist Party squandered another major revolutionary opportunity in Germany. Another major failure occurred in Bulgaria. These defeats were widely interpreted as the end of the period of revolutionary upheavals in Central and Western Europe that had begun six years earlier in Russia. Within the Russian Communist Party and broad sections of the working class, there was a loss of confidence in the possibility that a victorious revolution in a major capitalist country would end the isolation of Russia and provide resources for the development of a socialist economy.

With Lenin now removed from the scene, Leon Trotsky—who more than any other leader personified the link between October and the World Socialist Revolution—was increasingly isolated within the Russian Communist Party. The publication of *Lessons of October* in the autumn of 1924, in which the leader of the insurrection reviewed the political struggles within the Bolshevik Party that preceded the insurrection, unleashed a venomous political attack on Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution. Not only was Trotsky's central role in the organization and success of the insurrection and the subsequent victory of the Red Army over counterrevolutionary forces denied. His enemies in the Political Committee of the Communist Party—principally Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin—claimed that his theory of permanent revolution was a revision of what was now being referred to as "Leninism" and had nothing whatsoever to do with the strategy pursued by the Bolshevik Party in the preparation of the struggle for power.

Lenin's political struggle against the line of Kamenev and Stalin in April 1917 was dismissed as nothing more than a minor squabble. They claimed that the perspective introduced by Lenin's *April Theses* developed logically from the old Bolshevik program of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry and had nothing whatsoever to do with the conceptions of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

The era of the "Big Lie" had begun. A lengthy report given by Kamenev in November 1924, entitled *Trotskyism or Leninism*, initiated the unrestrained falsification of history, aimed at discrediting and demonizing Trotsky. This was to become the chief characteristic of Soviet political life. Trotsky, Kamenev asserted,

did not understand the basics about the Leninist theory of the relations between the working class and the peasantry in the Russian revolution. He did not understand this even after October, and he did not understand it at each turning point made by our party, when it maneuvered to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat without any separation from the peasantry. He had been prevented from understanding this by his own theory, which, in his opinion, had been 'confirmed entirely.' If Trotsky's theory had proven correct, this would have meant that any kind of Soviet power in Russia would have long since ceased to exist. [23]

The political and theoretical essence of Kamenev's assault on Trotsky and denunciation of the theory of permanent revolution was an attempt to restore, within the context of the New Economic Policy, the nationally oriented perspective that had been rejected in 1917. Kamenev's attack was directed, above all, against Trotsky's insistence on the primacy of the perspective of world socialist revolution in the determination of national policy. Kamenev objected to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution because it "would make the workers' government in Russia wholly dependent on the immediate proletarian revolution in the West." [24] What was particularly objectionable about Trotsky's theory, Kamenev asserted, was its insistence that there can be no solution to the problem of Russia's capitalist development "within the framework of a national revolution." [25]

Kamenev's denunciation of Trotsky in November 1924 cleared the way for Stalin's explicitly nationalist revision, in December 1924, of the perspective and program of the October Revolution. In an article titled "The October Revolution and the Tactics of Russian Communists," Stalin called attention to Trotsky's pamphlet, *Our Revolution*, published in 1906, in which Trotsky had written: "Without the direct State support of the European proletariat the working class in Russia cannot remain in power and convert its temporary domination into a lasting socialist dictatorship. Of this there cannot for one moment be any doubt." Stalin continued:

What does this quotation mean? It means that the victory of socialism in one country, in this case Russia, is impossible "without direct state support from the European proletariat," i.e., before the European proletariat has conquered power.

What is there in common between this "theory" and Lenin's thesis on the possibility of the victory of socialism "in one capitalist country taken separately?"

Clearly, there is nothing in common. [26]

Stalin's substitution of a form of national messianism in place of revolutionary internationalism was summed up with the following indictment of Trotsky's views:

Lack of faith in the strength and capacities of our revolution, lack of faith in the strength and capacity of the Russian proletariat—this is what lies at the root of the theory of "permanent revolution." [27]

The 1924 assault on Trotsky and the repudiation of the theory of permanent revolution signified the resurgence of the nationalist tendencies that Lenin had fought as he sought to break the party's adaptation to national defensism and direct attention toward the international revolutionary struggle against imperialist war. The promulgation of the

program of socialism in one country marked a decisive step in the alienation of the Soviet Union from the World Socialist Revolution, from which it had emerged. As Trotsky had warned, this nationalist regression—which found political support in a rapidly growing bureaucratic elite—separated the fate of the Soviet Union from the fight for world socialism. The Communist International, which had been founded in 1919 as the central strategic headquarters of the world socialist revolution, was degraded into an appendage of the Soviet Union’s counterrevolutionary foreign policy. Trotsky’s expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1929 symbolized the rupture between the bureaucratic regime and the World Socialist Revolution. Enconced in his Kremlin office, Stalin ruled a national state with the support of the secret police. But Leon Trotsky, in exile, led and inspired the continuing historical process of world socialist revolution with far more powerful weapons: his ideas and his pen.

* * * * *

Stalin’s treacherous and disorienting policies led to devastating defeats of the working class in Germany, France, Spain and many other countries during the 1930s.

Within the Soviet Union, the counterrevolutionary nationalist reaction assumed the form of the destruction of the entire generation of Marxist-educated workers, party activists and revolutionary intellectuals and artists who had been politically educated on the basis of socialist internationalism. The Moscow Trials and the Great Terror between 1936 and 1940 were a form of political genocide, specifically targeting for physical annihilation all those who had been identified with the internationalist program and intellectual culture upon which the founding of the Soviet state was based.

It is critical to understand the relationship between the October 1917 Revolution and the Soviet Union. The latter emerged out of the former. But the October Revolution and the Soviet state were not coequal phenomena. The October Revolution marked the beginning of the historical epoch of World Socialist Revolution. The history of the Soviet state was a major episode of that epoch. The recognition of the distinction between the October Revolution as the expression of an epoch and the creation of the Soviet state as a specific political episode was reflected in political language. Anticipating the future overthrow of the capitalist system in their own countries, revolutionaries would speak not of their future “Soviet Union,” but of their coming “October.”

Of course, the achievements of the revolution within the Soviet Union were immense. The October Revolution radically transformed what had been the Russian Empire. Prior to the revolution, approximately 80 percent of the population had been illiterate. Within substantially less than one generation, illiteracy had been virtually eradicated. The nationalization of the means of the production, a product of the October Revolution, made possible significant economic advances. The possibility of establishing an advanced society on a non-capitalist basis was demonstrated in the course of the 74-year history of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union was not a socialist society. As Trotsky explained in *The Revolution Betrayed*, it was a transitional regime, between capitalism and socialism, whose fate was still to be decided. The nationalist policies of Stalin, implemented on the basis of savage terror, were a mockery of socialist planning, which requires the workers’ democratic control over decision-making processes. What Trotsky described as the “irresponsible despotism of the bureaucracy over the people” resulted in a horrifying waste of human life, which was as needless as it was brutal, and the grotesque squandering of material resources.

The Stalinist bureaucracy, which had usurped political power and utilized its control of the organs of state repression to assure for itself a privileged position within society, violated the most basic principles of socialist egalitarianism. Stalin, who personally ordered and directed the torture and murder of former comrades and countless Marxist

revolutionists, ranks among the worst criminals in history.

The Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 defended all the social conquests that were achieved as a consequence of the October Revolution. But its defense of those achievements—that is, the elements of social and economic progress made possible by the Revolution—was carried out on the basis of implacable opposition to the Stalinist regime, by fighting for its political overthrow.

* * * * *

What we have celebrated this year is the centenary of World Socialist Revolution. It is within this historical context that we have examined and explained the momentous events that occurred in Russia between February and October 1917. These lectures have provided a vital political and intellectual antidote to the endless falsifications and slanders of the reactionary academics and the antisocialist mass media.

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 was hailed as a momentous victory for world capitalism. At long last the specter of communism and socialism had been eradicated. History had come to an end! The October Revolution had ended in ruins! Of course, such proclamations were not supported by a careful examination of what had occurred during the previous 74 years. No account was given of the enormous achievements of the Soviet Union, which included not only its central role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, but also the immense advances in the social and cultural conditions of the Soviet people.

But aside from the efforts to obliterate from collective memory all recollection of Soviet achievements, the essential falsification of twentieth-century history has been the effort to define the fate of socialism on the basis of a nationalist narrative of the October Revolution, in which the Bolshevik seizure of power is presented as an aberrant, illegitimate and even criminal event in *Russian* history. The original Bolshevik conception of October must, in turn, be either ridiculed or ignored. No enduring historical and political relevance can be attributed to the October Revolution.

This reactionary narrative, aimed at divesting the October Revolution of all legitimacy and relevance, depends, however, on one small thing: that the world capitalist system has resolved and transcended the contradictions and crises that gave rise to war and revolution in the twentieth century.

It is precisely here that the efforts to discredit the October Revolution and all future efforts to realize socialism fall apart. The quarter-century that has passed since the dissolution of the USSR has been marked by intensifying social, political and economic crisis. We live in an age of perpetual war. Since the initial US invasion of Iraq in 1991, the number of lives destroyed by American bombs and missiles easily surpasses one million. With geopolitical conflicts intensifying, the outbreak of a third world war is seen more and more as inevitable.

The economic crisis of 2008 exposed the fragility of the world capitalist system. Social tensions are mounting against the backdrop of levels of inequality that are the highest in a century. The three richest people in the United States, it has recently been reported, possess greater wealth than the bottom 50 percent of this country’s people. The rich are not merely “different.” They all but live on a different planet, utterly remote from the reality that the great mass of people lives every day.

They themselves know that this state of affairs cannot go on forever. The ideas and ideals of social equality and democratic rights are too deeply embedded in mass consciousness. As the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy are unable to bear the pressure of escalating social conflict, the ruling elites turn ever more openly to authoritarian forms of rule. The Trump administration is merely one disgusting manifestation of the universal breakdown of bourgeois democracy. The role of the military, police and intelligence agencies in the running of the capitalist state is becoming ever more open.

Throughout this centenary year, innumerable articles and books have

been published whose aim is to discredit the October Revolution. But the declarations of the “irrelevance” of October are belied by the tone of hysteria that pervades so many of these denunciations. The October Revolution is treated not as a historical event, but as an enduring and dangerous contemporary threat.

The fear that underlies the denunciations of the October Revolution found expression in a recently published book by a leading academic specialist in historical falsification, Professor Sean McMeekin. He has written:

Like the nuclear weapons born of the ideological age inaugurated in 1917, the sad fact about Leninism is that, once invented, it cannot be uninvented. Social inequality will always be with us, along with the well-intentioned impulse of socialists to eradicate it... If the last hundred years teaches us anything, it is that we should stiffen our defenses and resist armed prophets promising social perfection. [28]

In an essay published in the *New York Times* on October 27, columnist Bret Stephens warned:

Efforts to criminalize capitalism and financial services also have predictable results... A century on, the bacillus [of socialism] isn't eradicated, and our immunity to it is still in doubt.

On the centennial anniversary of the October Revolution, the anti-Marxist hysteria of the ruling elites acquired a distinctly homicidal character. Finally abandoning the post-1991 pretense of the irrelevance of socialism, the *New York Times* published a column by Simon Sebag Montefiore, the author of an admiring biography of Stalin. He wrote:

The October Revolution, organized by Vladimir Lenin exactly a century ago, is still relevant in ways that would have seemed unimaginable when the Soviet Union collapsed...

One hundred years later, as its events continue to reverberate and inspire, October 1917 looms epic, mythic, mesmerizing. Its effects were so enormous that it seems impossible that it might not have happened the way it did...

The [Provisional] government should have found and killed him [Lenin] but it failed to do so. He succeeded. [29]

With this statement, published in the most influential American newspaper, the difference between liberal anticommunism and fascism is all but obliterated. Lenin, who was the popular leader of a mass working-class movement, should have been murdered. He should have been dealt with, Montefiore writes, with the approval of the liberal editors of the *New York Times*, as the fascists dealt with Luxemburg and Liebknecht. What is the message? To the extent that socialism threatens capitalism, hunt down the leaders of socialist movements and kill them. So much for the “End of History” and the triumph of liberal democracy!

Statements such as that of Montefiore testify not only to the moral degeneracy of the intellectual defenders of bourgeois society, but also to their demoralization and desperation.

Despite all efforts to discredit Marxism, socialism and communism, working people still yearn for an alternative to capitalism. A newly published poll shows that among American “Millennials” (people below

the age of 28), a greater percentage would prefer to live in a socialist or communist society than in a capitalist one.

Franz Mehring was right. Revolutions have long breaths. The October Revolution lives not only in history, but in the present.

* * * * *

Throughout this centenary year, the International Committee of the Fourth International has celebrated the anniversary of the October Revolution by studying and explaining its origins and significance. It has conducted this important historical work as the only political tendency in the world that represents the program of international socialism upon which the October Revolution was based.

The Fourth International is the contemporary expression of the program of World Socialist Revolution. In the present period of insoluble capitalist crisis, this program once again is acquiring intense relevance.

We call on workers and youth throughout the world to join the fight for world socialism.

Long Live the Example of the October Revolution!

Long Live the International Committee of the Fourth International!

Forward to the victory of the World Socialist Revolution!

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Notes

[1] “Neujahr 1918,” in *Franz Mehring Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 15 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1977), p. 759.

[2] Quoted in Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomfield: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 28.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 27

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 29

[6] Session of the Petersburg Committee of the Social Democratic Labor Party of Russia (Bolshevik), November 1 (14), 1917, cited by Leon Trotsky in *The Stalinist School of Historical Falsification*, accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/ssf/sf08.htm>

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.* The bracketed extrapolations are in the transcript published in *The Stalin School of Falsification*.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Leon Trotsky, “Introduction to *Ferdinand Lassalle’s Speech to the Jury*,” in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 444-45

[11] Lenin, *Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress, 1977), Volume 24, p. 238

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 238

[13] Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1977), pp. 416-19

[14] Lenin *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1977), Vol. 26, p. 119

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19

[16] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/06/revolution-what-revolution-russians-show-little-interest-in-1917-centenary>

[17] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch01.htm>

[18] *The “Russian” Civil Wars 1916-1926: Ten Years That Shook the World* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), p. 131.

[19] *Leon Trotsky and the Art of Insurrection 1905-1917* (London: Frank Cass, 1988), pp. 63-64

[20] *The Trotsky Papers 1917-1922*, Volume I, edited and annotated by Jan M. Meijer (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1964), pp. 623-25

[21] *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume Two (London: New Park, 1974), pp. 2-4

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 7

[23] *Trotsky’s Challenge: The “Literary Discussion” of 1924 and the Fight for the Bolshevik Revolution*, edited, annotated and introduced by Frederick C. Corney (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), p. 244

[24] Ibid

[25] Ibid

[26] Ibid, p. 442

[27] Ibid, p. 447

[28] *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017)

[29] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/opinion/russian-revolution-october.html>



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