

Part 1: From 1917 to 1921

Lenin, Trotsky and the Origins of the Left Opposition

David North
20 October 2023

This is the first part of a lecture of that David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party (US), gave at the University of Michigan in November 1993 as part of the celebration by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), of the 70th anniversary of the Left Opposition. The lecture reviews the political origins of the Left Opposition, which was founded in October 1923, in the context of the objective situation confronting the Bolsheviks after the 1917 revolution and the different political tendencies within the Bolshevik Party. The second part was posted on October 23, 2023.

Why should we study the Left Opposition?

This evening we begin the first in a series of three lectures devoted to the origins of the Left Opposition, founded by Leon Trotsky and other leading figures in the Russian Communist Party 70 years ago. Some of you may be attending this lecture in the hope that you will learn more about the Russian Revolution. That is a perfectly valid reason for being here tonight; and I hope that you will find this and the next two lectures informative. However, I must say that the founding of the Left Opposition is an event of more than merely historical interest. The world in which we live has been shaped, to a far greater extent than most of you can even imagine, by the outcome of the political struggle that began some 70 years ago in Soviet Russia; and it is not possible to understand the present world political situation without understanding the issues that were raised by the Left Opposition.

To justify this evaluation of the contemporary significance of the Left Opposition we need only to point to the events that have transpired in what is now known as “the former USSR.” In the fall of 1987, I delivered four lectures here at the University of Michigan on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. At that time, I explained the view held by the International Committee of the Fourth International, with which the Workers League is affiliated, that the policies of Gorbachev would result in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

At that time, I should point out, Gorbachev was considered one of the titans of our time, acclaimed as the architect of a spectacular program of social, political and economic reform. “Perestroika” and “Glasnost” were terms that had obtained international currency, even if very few people—including Gorbachev himself—knew exactly what they meant. Gorbachev’s popularity was then at its peak, not only in bourgeois circles,

but also—I should say, especially—within the milieu of the middle-class radical left.

The Workers League and the International Committee maintained that Gorbachev represented the most powerful sections of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy; that he was attempting to deflect the growing opposition within the working class to the Stalinist regime while protecting the interests of the bureaucracy; that the economic content of his reforms were essentially pro-capitalist, and, as such, represented the climax of the decades-long Stalinist betrayal of the program, ideals and aspirations of the October Revolution.

All that has happened over the past six years has vindicated that assessment. Gorbachev was named “Man of the Decade” by *Time Magazine*, and, soon thereafter, was swept from the political scene. Gorbachev was replaced by Boris Yeltsin, who was himself a Stalinist bureaucrat who had spent some 30 years inside the Communist Party, and it was under his auspices that the Soviet Union was dissolved in December 1991.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is, it goes without saying, an event of enormous significance. But it is remarkable how poorly understood it really is. The breakdown was hardly foreseen, certainly not by the imperialist regimes who were supposedly the most irreconcilable enemies of the Soviet Union. To the extent that any explanation at all is offered for this spectacular collapse, it is that the fall of the USSR represents the “failure” of socialism in general, and of Marxism in particular.

But these declarations hardly rise to the level of a genuine explanation. They simply assume what remains to be proved. But here we come to the basic fallacy that has for decades served as the fundamental premise of that exercise in political propaganda that is known in the universities as “Sovietology.” The starting point of “Sovietology” is the crude identification of Stalinism with Marxism. Upon this foundation, the policies pursued by Soviet governments over a period of seven and a half decades are generally presented as if they formed a seamless whole. The history of Bolshevism supposedly begins with Lenin and ends with those who are referred in the capitalist media, even to this day, as “Communist hardliners.” Not too long ago the memoirs of [the high ranking Soviet official] Yegor Ligachev appeared under the title—no doubt recommended to him by his American publishers—*The Last Bolshevik*. One has only to glance through Mr. Ligachev’s book to convince oneself that this old bureaucratic timeserver has about as much in common with Bolshevism as a veteran official of the Internal Revenue Service. Ironically, the line of Cold War “Sovietology” coincides completely with that of the Stalinists themselves, who, until fairly recently, claimed to be the defenders of Leninism and what they claimed to be Marxist orthodoxy. Indeed, before 1985, Yeltsin, too, would have described himself as an irreconcilable Marxist. There are, it must be noted, a considerable number of works by

serious scholars which do not accept this view, but it is not their work that formed the basis of what passed for public discussion on the nature of the USSR.

Those views that conflict with the virulent anti-Communism of the political establishment have been kept, for the most part, from the attention of the public, and it's very difficult for a correct and scientific assessment of the Soviet Union and its leadership to be made known.

A letter that was not published

I'll just give you an example from our own experience. In July 1990, in response to an article in *The New York Times*, I wrote the following letter:

Recently, your editorial board belatedly condemned the dispatches of Walter Duranty, the Soviet correspondent of the *Times* during the hey-day of the Stalin era, as among the worst that ever appeared in your newspaper.

That may well be true (that is, that Duranty was the worst reporter they ever had), but it could be legitimately argued that the reports of your present-day correspondent, Bill Keller, hardly represent an improvement.

For example, Mr. Keller writes in the *Times* of July 13, 1990 that Gorbachev "could revel in the knowledge that he had neutralized the orthodox Marxists as a power within the party..."

It seems that Mr. Keller is poorly informed about the history of the Soviet Communist Party. The "orthodox Marxists" within it—i.e., the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky—were "neutralized" by the Stalinist apparatus, through mass expulsions carried out at the Fifteenth Party Congress of December 1927 and then through exile and imprisonment. Later, in the course of the Moscow show trials and accompanying blood purge of 1936-39, the "orthodox Marxists" were systematically murdered. Leon Trotsky, the co-founder of the Soviet Union, was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico in 1940.

Mr. Keller's identification of the Ligachev faction as "orthodox Marxists" and of Ligachev himself as a "doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist" is as politically ludicrous and intellectually dishonest as the late Duranty's depiction of the Moscow Trials as beyond legal reproach. Since the late 1920s, Marxism has played no role whatsoever in the formulation of Soviet policy. The Communist Party has been for more than 60 years the political instrument of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy.

Gorbachev, Ligachev and, for that matter, Yeltsin have served the Soviet bureaucracy for decades. The disputes between them are not over the finer points of Marxist theory, but over how to defend the privileges of different strata of the bureaucracy as the Stalinist regime moves—as Leon Trotsky foresaw long ago—toward the restoration of capitalism.

In the 1930s, the *Times*, through the dispatches of Duranty, helped mobilize American liberal opinion in support of Stalin's liquidation of his Marxist adversaries. Today, while excluding from its columns the views of those who oppose Stalinism from the Left, the *Times* persists in identifying Marxism with a bureaucracy which historically has been its most vicious enemy. This may serve the political agenda of the *Times'* publishers but it has little to do with objective truth.

This letter was not published—not merely because I had insulted the *Times'* editors, but rather because the letter raised issues of fact which simply cannot be reconciled with the ideological interests of the capitalist class. What becomes of the theory of the "seamless" continuity of Bolshevism, from Lenin to Gorbachev, or at least to Chernenko, if, in fact, the consolidation of power by Stalin and the bureaucracy he led was achieved not only by the murder of virtually every significant political figure in the Revolution and the Civil War, but also the physical annihilation of hundreds of thousands of writers, scientists and artists whose intellectual and cultural work was somehow linked to the heroic early years of the Bolshevik regime?

If it is true that the Stalinist regime emerged not as the necessary and inevitable product of the October Revolution, but rather as its antithesis, then this fact must have the most profound implications, not only for our understanding of the past, but also of the present.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the USSR, a mood of triumphalism prevailed within the bourgeoisie. The end of the USSR, we were told, signified the end of socialism and Marxism. A book called *The End of History* reflected the prevailing mood: mankind had, it was claimed, arrived at its final destination—the unfettered and unrestrained triumph of capitalism. This was given political meaning with the proclamation of a "New World Order," where the United States would impose, without serious challenge, its will all over the globe.

This madness, however, did not last all that long. It was easier for the editorial writers, media pundits and university think tanks to declare Marxism and socialism dead than to abolish the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, peacefully dissolve the antagonism between world economy and the nation state, and ban the class struggle. With or without the approval of the propagandists and ideologists of the ruling class, both the laws of world history and those of the capitalist mode of production operate much as they were analyzed by Karl Marx.

Little more than two years since the collapse of the USSR, world capitalism is mired in its greatest systemic crisis since the 1930s. The economies of all the major capitalist countries stagnate. The relations among the leading imperialist states are at their worst since the years before the Second World War. In fact, the internal coherence of these states has never been so fragile. It is a debatable whether Belgium, Italy, Britain, Spain or Canada will even exist in their present nation-state form by the end of the decade. Other nations, by the way, could be added to the list.

Within the framework of the severe political and economic crisis, the social questions are posed with an intensity not known throughout the entire post-war period. In the major European countries, the number of unemployed is approaching 20 million; and this is even before the full impact of the massive industrial closures that are now being announced on a daily basis is actually felt. The entire social welfare-state system, hailed for decades as the great peaceful alternative to violent social revolution, is in the process of being dismantled throughout Europe. And, in what is the most bitter commentary on the state of capitalist society, fascism is once again a significant political force in Europe.

Within the United States, the steady deterioration of social conditions—rising unemployment, rotting cities, mounting poverty—is taken for granted; and the capitalist parties do not even pretend that they have credible solutions. Neither in the United States nor in Europe do the existing organizations that claim to represent the working class even attempt to defend the basic interests of their traditional constituencies. Indeed, it is becoming apparent that these organizations—trade unions, social democratic parties—are the principal political mechanisms through which the capitalist state seeks to prevent, or at least obstruct, organized mass expression of dissent.

Nevertheless, the class struggle remains the motor force of history. It

was not invented by Marx; he only laid bare its fundamental role in the historical process. The editorial writers can compose their obituaries for Marx and the university professors can, from the comfort of their studies and with slippers on their feet, churn out their conformist refutations of the historical dialectic. But that did not stop French airline workers from defying the government and setting in motion during the past week the most serious political crisis since 1968. There have appeared reports in the French and international press that Prime Minister Balladur, sensing the social anger created by mass unemployment, has been talking obsessively to his closest associates of his fear that France is on the eve of a working class revolution. Mr. Balladur's fears are, at least at this moment, somewhat exaggerated, for the crucial intellectual and moral impulse for socialist revolution comes not from anger alone but from the reasoned confidence of the masses that their struggle against the existing social system will give rise to a better and more just society. It is precisely this expectation that is presently lacking despite all the indignation and disgust provoked by the social conditions produced by capitalism. In other words, what the working class lacks is a historical perspective. To the extent that the collapse of the Soviet Union is seen as the collapse of socialism itself, the working class is unable to find a way out of its present dilemma.

This brings us back to the place of the October Revolution in world history. Did this revolution, as its leaders believed, inaugurate a new epoch in the social development of man? Or was it a tragic and utopian exercise, a doomed project that led inevitably to Stalinism and all the horrors that followed?

How is one to answer these questions? On what basis can one argue that the Soviet Union might have developed quite differently than it actually did? Are such alternatives merely speculative exercises unrelated to historical and political realities? Fortunately, the answer to these questions is to be found within history itself. We are not merely looking back over decades of Soviet history and saying, "Alas, it should have been different." Rather, we are able to show that there did exist an alternative to Stalinism; that this alternative was advanced on the basis of Marxism by Leon Trotsky, who, next to Lenin himself, played the greatest role in the leadership of the October Revolution and the defense of the Soviet state during the Civil War; and that this alternative found expression in a program that was supported by most of the leading figures of the Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, an objective study of the programmatic legacy of the Left Opposition demonstrates the astonishing prescience of its analysis of Stalinism, all the way down to Trotsky's insistence that the totalitarian regime of the bureaucracy would, unless overthrown by the working class, result in the downfall of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

The Russian Revolution as an event of world history

What event are we recalling this evening? On October 8, 1923, Lev Davidovich Trotsky, the commissar of war of the Soviet Union, whose gifts as a political strategist, military leader, organizer, administrator, writer and orator were acknowledged even by irreconcilable opponents of the revolutionary government, addressed a letter to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the Russian Communist Party. He outlined his major differences with the manner in which the Party leadership was handling economic policy and the internal life of the Russian Communist Party.^[1]

This letter provoked an explosive reaction. Its criticisms of the growing bureaucracy and its effect upon the life of the party provided the political inspiration for the founding of the Left Opposition. At the same time, it provoked a vicious counterattack from those who were, directly or

indirectly, the object of its criticisms. Trotsky's warning of the danger of a political degeneration of the Bolshevik Party was soon substantiated. In the years that followed, the Left Opposition waged, under increasingly difficult conditions, a struggle against the growing social and political influence of the new Soviet bureaucracy, whose suffocating control over the state and the party was finally to find such a monstrous expression in the totalitarian dictatorship of Stalin.

In order to understand the origins of the Left Opposition and the issues which it raised, it is necessary to begin with an examination of the Russian Revolution and the first six years of the Soviet state. Let us begin with 1917. Never in human history had such a staggering political transformation been witnessed in just one year as the change that was wrought by the events of 1917 in Russia. Until the end of February 1917, Russia was ruled by an autocratic monarchical regime whose ruling dynasty went back to the year 1613. The Tsarist autocracy embodied the backward political and social relations of Russia, a vast land in which peasants, living in age-old ignorance, comprised some 90 percent of the population. The institution of serfdom had not been abolished until the year 1861, and, despite this reform, the vast majority of the peasantry continued to live in poverty.

Russia was, on the eve of 1917, the most backward country of the great European powers. But within this Empire, which was in so many ways still mired in semi-feudal conditions, there had also developed a highly developed industry—financed by British, French and German capital—in which there labored an extremely concentrated industrial working class. The concentration of masses of workers in gigantic industrial enterprises was greater in Russia than in the far more advanced United States. In 1914, enterprises employing one thousand or more workers comprised 17.8 percent of the total workforce. But in Russia, such businesses employed 41.1 percent. It was this highly concentrated proletariat that asserted itself as the dominant oppositional force to Tsarism and which provided the social base for the rapid development of Marxism. Thus, in the 1905 Revolution, which shook Tsarism to its foundation but which failed to overthrow it, the principal role was played, not by the bourgeoisie, but by the working class. And at the head of the working class stood the socialists, of whom one of the most outstanding was Leon Trotsky, the chairman of the St. Petersburg Soviet.

The autocracy weathered the storms of 1905. But 12 years later, the mass demonstrations which erupted in February 1917 rapidly forced the abdication of the Tsar and formal power passed into the hands of the Provisional Government. However, as in 1905, the bourgeoisie could not assert its leadership over the democratic revolution. The independent role and interests of the working class found expression in the emergence of mass workers councils, or soviets, throughout Russia. For a brief time, the Mensheviks—the conservative social democrats—dominated these soviets. But the Mensheviks refused to break with the bourgeois Provisional Government, and, therefore, would not end Russia's involvement in the hated imperialist world war or implement a revolutionary democratic transformation of social relations in the countryside. The Mensheviks were discredited by their policies. By the autumn of 1917, the Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky had established overwhelming support within the working class of the major industrial centers; and ever larger sections of the peasantry had come to view the Bolsheviks as the only party prepared to eradicate the remnants of serfdom and give them land. The Bolsheviks won a majority in the soviets, and it was with the support of these soviets that they seized power in October 1917.

October 1917: Coup or mass uprising?

It has long been an article of faith among anti-Communist historians that the October Revolution was merely a “coup d’etat,” a putsch, that was without popular support. The old Cold-War propagandist from Harvard University, Richard Pipes, has written: “Lenin, Trotsky, and their associates seized power by force, overthrowing an ineffective but democratic government. The government they founded, in other words, derives from a violent act carried out by a tiny minority.”^[2]

This version cannot withstand objective analysis, and it has been largely dismissed with contempt by more serious scholars. For example, Professor Suny of the University of Michigan has written: “The Bolsheviks came to power, not because they were superior manipulators or cynical opportunists, but because their policies, as formulated by Lenin in April and shaped by the events of the following months, placed them at the head of a genuinely popular movement.”^[3]

A British historian has written: “To be sure, Bolshevik agitation and organization played a crucial role in radicalizing the masses. But the Bolsheviks themselves did not create popular discontent or revolutionary feeling. This grew out of the masses’ own experience of complex economic and social upheavals and political events. The contribution of the Bolsheviks was rather to shape workers’ understanding of the social dynamics of the revolution and to foster an awareness of how the urgent problems of daily life related to the broader social and political order. The Bolsheviks won support because their analysis and proposed solutions seemed to make sense... When in October the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government of Kerensky, it appeared to the suffering masses to be less a lethal deathblow to the body politic than an act of euthanasia.”^[4]

But perhaps the most significant testimony to the popularity of Bolshevik ideas comes from the writings of Lenin’s most determined political opponent, Martov, who wrote in a letter dated November 19, 1917, just one month after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks:

This is the situation. It is tragic. Try to understand that what we face, after all, is a victorious uprising of the proletariat, that is to say that almost the entire proletariat is behind Lenin and expects social liberation from the coup. It has challenged all antiproletarian forces. In such conditions not to be in the ranks of the proletariat, at least in the role of opposition, is almost unendurable.^[5]

Martov was, at the very least, an honest man, and despite his opposition to the policies of Lenin, he had to acknowledge that the revolution led by the Bolsheviks had been carried out with the support of the working class.

The theory of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had been preceded by a long theoretical debate over its political and social dynamic. Among Marxists of all types it had been generally accepted that the coming revolution, given the social, economic and political backwardness of Russia, would be a democratic revolution. But it was here that agreement ended. The Mensheviks maintained that in keeping with the democratic tasks of the revolution, the overthrow of the Tsar would be followed by the establishment of a democratic bourgeois government. The political beneficiaries of the revolution into whose hands power would necessarily pass would be the representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie.

Lenin advanced another theory: that of the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.” The revolution, he maintained, would be of

an essentially democratic character and put an end to the principal political and social legacies of feudalism; but Lenin denied that the leadership of the revolution would, or could, be left to the bourgeoisie. Rather, he insisted that the leadership would be in the hands of the proletariat and advanced strata of the peasantry; and that the state power based on this alliance of the two exploited classes would be the “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.” This was an intermediate position between that advanced by the Mensheviks and, finally, the theory of Trotsky, that of the revolution in permanence.

Trotsky argued that in the 20th century—whose economic and social environment was, considered from the standpoint of the overall development of capitalism and the social power of the industrial proletariat, qualitatively different from that of the late 18th and 19th centuries—the democratic revolution in Russia would not simply reproduce the historical experiences of Western Europe and North America. He insisted that the proletariat, in assuming the leadership of the democratic revolution, would be compelled by the logic of its position to take political power and initiate socialist measures directed against the foundations of capitalist property. Thus Trotsky, as early as 1906-07, predicted that the democratic revolution would unfold in Russia in the form of a socialist revolution, ending in the conquest of political power by the working class.

In the super-charged atmosphere of pre-1917 Russian factionalism, Trotsky occupied a distinct position that separated him from both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Lenin directed many of his most glancing blows in the direction of Trotsky. On those issues which concerned matters of political organization, Lenin’s criticisms were justified. Trotsky’s efforts to reconcile the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were misguided. But Trotsky’s evaluation of the dynamics of the Russian revolution was vindicated. It is a measure of Lenin’s political objectivity that he did not permit old factional disputes to cloud his judgment. In this crucial attribute, Lenin was a far greater man than many of those who stood closest to him in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. Thus, upon his return to Russia in April 1917, Lenin, to the amazement of his old associates in the Bolshevik Party—Zinoviev, Kamenev and, for that matter, Stalin—embraced the central postulates of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, and set before the Bolsheviks the task of overthrowing the bourgeois Provisional Government and establishing a proletarian regime.

The change in Lenin’s thinking was undoubtedly the product of his analysis of the origins and historical significance of the First World War, which found its finished expression in his masterful pamphlet, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). For Lenin, the World War marked the beginning of a new stage in world history. The war represented an historical crisis of the entire world capitalist order, and that, he insisted, had to form the starting point of an understanding of the nature and tasks of the Russian Revolution.

Therefore, when the Revolution erupted in Russia in February 1917, it signified for Lenin not the start of the bourgeois democratic transformation of Russia, but, rather, the start of the world socialist revolution.

Contradictions of the Russian Revolution

Neither Lenin nor Trotsky believed that Russia, judged solely from the standpoint of its own level of economic development, was ripe for socialism. Indeed, it lagged far behind the capitalist states of Europe and North America. A socialist revolution was necessary in Russia because world conditions left no other possibilities for progressive national development. Had the Bolsheviks “abstained” from the seizure of power, on the grounds of the insufficient economic development of Russia, the

outcome of 1917 would not have been the emergence of a liberal democracy based on a thriving capitalism. Rather, Russia would have suffered the fate of other backward countries in the imperialist epoch: that is, the perpetuation of backwardness and semi-colonial dependency. The astuteness of this judgment was to be demonstrated, not only by the attempted coup of General Kornilov in August 1917, but by the entire course of the Civil War that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power.

What then was the perspective and strategy of the Bolsheviks? World conditions compelled them to seize power and initiate a socialist revolution in a backward country. But given the fact that Russia was far below the level of economic and cultural development necessary for the attainment of socialism, the survival of the proletarian dictatorship and the eventual realization of socialism depended upon the conquest of power by the working class in one or more of the advanced capitalist countries. Only then would Soviet Russia obtain access to the economic resources necessary for the socialist transformation of its economy.

Was the Bolshevik strategy valid?

The Bolshevik strategy implied great confidence in the political maturity of the working class and also in the advanced development of the social contradictions within European and world capitalism. One might ask today: To what extent was this justified? To answer this question, it is necessary to review the strategy of the Bolsheviks within its proper historical context. Rosa Luxemburg, who was by no means uncritical in her attitude toward the Bolshevik seizure of power, was unstinting in her praise of precisely this aspect of the policies of Lenin and Trotsky. From her prison cell in Germany she wrote:

The fate of the revolution in Russia depended fully on international events. 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.^[7]

Indeed, the October Revolution was an expression and catalyst of the greatest revolutionary movement in world history. Throughout Europe and even in the United States, bourgeois regimes felt themselves to be extraordinarily vulnerable to the passions that had been unleashed by the world war. Within one year of the October Revolution, Germany and much of Central Europe was in the throes of revolutionary upheaval, and it appeared as if the Bolshevik strategy was being vindicated.

If these revolutions did not succeed—the revolutions in Germany, the revolution in Hungary, the upheavals which took place throughout Central Europe—it demonstrated not the utopian character of the Bolshevik strategy, but the weakness of the political leadership of the working class outside Russia. There did not exist in Europe any party remotely comparable to the Bolsheviks in terms of its political quality and the capacity of its leadership. The causes of that are to be found in the opportunist degeneration of the European socialist parties, which had betrayed the working class at the very outbreak of the imperialist war in 1914.

The defeat of the German working class in 1918-19 and the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht had a devastating effect on the development of the German revolution, and was to have profound significance for the future fate of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks had hoped that the revolution in Russia would be soon followed by revolutionary movements

of the working class throughout Europe, and they based their policies on this.

The Civil War and War Communism

From the first moment, the government had to fight for its life. The Bolsheviks inherited, among other things, the First World War, in which Russia was still involved. The strategy pursued by the Bolsheviks in the negotiations with the German High Command to bring that war to a conclusion demonstrated very clearly their strategical orientation. In the winter of 1917-1918, Trotsky, at Brest Litovsk, engaged in a type of negotiations which had never been seen before in world history. He addressed himself not to the German government, nor to the German General Staff, but to the German and international proletariat. He hoped that the public exposures of the war, such as the publication of the secret treaties between the old Russian government and other imperialist governments, would demonstrate to the masses the utterly reactionary character of the war, and would serve to accelerate the revolutionary sentiments that were developing at the front. Trotsky, in his calculations, was not really far off. The agitation conducted by the Bolsheviks demoralized the German army. Mass demonstrations erupted in Germany, but the revolution which the Bolsheviks were hoping for did not break out. That was to happen some eight or nine months later. In the meantime, the Bolsheviks were compelled to sign a difficult peace in order to buy the revolutionary regime time until international events would provide support from the international working class to the embattled Soviet republic.

But the signing of the peace agreement at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 hardly ended the Bolsheviks' troubles. The decision to leave the war provoked the anger of all the imperialist governments which had been aligned with Tsarist Russia. Britain and France, now joined by the United States, arrogantly expected that the Russian government, even under the Bolsheviks, would meet the old obligations of the Tsar and continue to provide cannon fodder for the war. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk came as a shock. But as soon as they had recovered from this unwelcome surprise, the allies encouraged and provided direct military and financial support to a collection of old Tsarist officers for the purpose of overthrowing the Bolsheviks. Without this backing, the Civil War would never have assumed such tragic dimensions. In the end, the Bolsheviks were fighting a Civil War on 14 different fronts across a field of battle which extended some 5,000 miles.

The international working class was not able to overthrow its own bourgeoisie, but its sympathy for Soviet Russia—and this is especially true of the workers of France and England—was the decisive factor in the failure of the imperialist intervention on the side of the Whites. This also accounts for the weakness of the American intervention. President Woodrow Wilson sent troops to fight the Bolsheviks. The United States landed an expeditionary force in Archangel, north of Moscow. In fact, across the street from Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit there is a small exhibit dedicated to the memory of the ill-fated "Polar Bear" expedition, which was launched by Wilson against the Bolshevik government in 1918. It's one of the aspects of American history about which not very much is known, but the U.S. government played a major role in the attempt to overthrow the regime of Lenin and Trotsky in 1918. But the troops somehow got lost, had to be rescued, and the whole adventure ended as ignominiously as it had begun.

Although the Bolsheviks were able to persevere against the intervention of the imperialists, the Civil War devastated Soviet Russia. Moreover, it profoundly affected the course of revolutionary policy. To save the

revolutionary government, the Bolsheviks centralized economic and political power. In June 1918, the first decree was issued nationalizing every major branch of industry. It had not been the intention of the Bolsheviks to carry out such sweeping measures of a quasi-socialist character, for which the economy was hardly prepared, but they were imposed upon them by the necessity of supplying the Red Army, which was being built into a fighting force of some five million peasants under the leadership of Leon Trotsky. Not only did it have to build weapons and provide clothing for the Red Army, the Soviet government also had to feed the soldiers; and this was achieved to no small extent through the forced requisitioning of grain from the peasantry. This policy was certainly not popular, but it was sustainable as long as the peasantry understood that if the Bolsheviks were overthrown, the landlords would come back. So the peasants were prepared to tolerate this policy as long as the Bolsheviks were seen as that force which defended them from the tyranny of the landlords.

By 1920, the Red Army had defeated virtually all the counter-revolutionary forces, but the economy of Soviet Russia was in a state of virtual collapse. The scale of the devastation was staggering. It is estimated that by the end of the Civil War, in 1920-21, some 20 million people had died of starvation. Moreover, between 1917 and 1920, Moscow lost 44.5 percent of its population; Petrograd, the greatest industrial center, lost 57.5 percent. These figures are particularly significant in that they shed some light on the fate of the working class itself in the aftermath of the revolution. Many of the problems which would later confront the Bolshevik government stemmed from the social disintegration of the Russian working class in the aftermath of the revolution. By 1923-24, vast changes had taken place in the social structure of Russia. The revolutionary proletariat that supported the October Revolution had been shattered by the Civil War imposed upon the Russian masses by world imperialism. It is within this framework that one must begin to understand the chain of events which led to the formation of the Left Opposition in 1923.

To be continued.

Leon Trotsky, October 8, 1923 Letter to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the Russian Communist Party. URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/10/09/iwgy-o09.html>.

Richard Pipes, 'Why Russians Act like Russians,' *Air Force Magazine* (June 1970), 51-55.

Ronald G. Suny, "Revising the old story: the 1917 revolution in light of new sources", in: *The Workers' Revolution in Russia 1917: The View from Below*, ed. by Daniel H. Kaiser, Cambridge University Press 1987, 19.

Steve A. Smith, 'Petrograd in 1917,' in: *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917*, 52.

Vladimir Brovkin (ed.), *Dear Comrades. Menshevik Reports on the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War*, Hoover Institution Press 1991, 52.

Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch01.htm>.

[5] Vladimir Brovkin (ed.), *Dear Comrades. Menshevik Reports on the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War*, Hoover Institution Press 1991, 52.

[6] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*. URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch01.htm>.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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

[1] Leon Trotsky, October 8, 1923 Letter to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the Russian Communist Party. URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/10/09/iwgy-o09.html>.

[2] Richard Pipes, 'Why Russians Act like Russians,' *Air Force Magazine* (June 1970), 51-55.

[3] Ronald G. Suny, "Revising the old story: the 1917 revolution in light of new sources", in: *The Workers' Revolution in Russia 1917: The View from Below*, ed. by Daniel H. Kaiser, Cambridge University Press 1987, 19.

[4] Steve A. Smith, 'Petrograd in 1917,' in: *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917*, 52.