



RUSSIA 1917:

THE REVOLUTION THAT CREATED TODAY'S WORLD

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socialist action**

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Introduction

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was the pivotal event of the 20th century and of subsequent history until today.

As a result of the October Revolution, for the first time in history, the working class took and held power for a sustained period. In so doing, the October Revolution and its consequences pushed forward every progressive struggle in the world – entirely confirming in practice Marx's analysis that the advance of the working class would aid the struggle against every form of oppression, discrimination and exploitation.

The impact of the October Revolution immensely strengthened the struggle against the colonial and imperialist empires which had dominated the world for four centuries – and after the victory of the Soviet Union in World War II these colonial empires collapsed under the combined threat of the uprising of the colonial peoples and of the spread of socialist revolution from the USSR.

The USSR broke the back of Nazism in World War II in the largest military battles in human history – saving Europe from fascism.

All the successful socialist revolutions after 1917 – China, Vietnam, Cuba – were propelled and decisively influenced by the October Revolution.

Fear of the spread of socialist revolution after World War II played a decisive role in forcing the capitalist classes of Western Europe to concede the creation of the welfare state.

In 1917 the Bolsheviks introduced rights for women far in advance of those in any other country in the world, and the rise and fall of the struggle for the liberation of women internationally coincided with the rise and fall of the October Revolution.

The October Revolution inspired people of colour throughout the entire world to fight against every form of racism – from Nelson Mandela, who was a member of the South African Communist Party, to the civil rights movement in the United States, which was immensely aided by US fear that its official racism was becoming a critical weakness in the Cold War.

The October Revolution is therefore not merely an historical event, but created today's world. To analyse the October Revolution and its impact throughout the world is to study the most powerful forces that still operate in the world.

The title of John Reed's famous book said of October 1917 that these were '10 Days That Shook the World'. This pamphlet shows why they are still shaking it 100 years later.

The October Revolution created today's world

The 1917 October Revolution created today's world in both an objective and subjective sense. Objectively, the October Revolution delivered the decisive blow to the four-century old colonial and imperialist system from which it has never recovered. Subjectively, in no country has the working class taken power and held it for any prolonged period other than via a political party that originated in the Third International created by the October Revolution (Russia, Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam) or which fused with a party from the Third International and embraced Marxism-Leninism (Cuba).

It was the October Revolution, and Lenin's decisive role in the creation of the Bolshevik Party, which showed the sole means by which the working class could take and hold power. No other path has ever succeeded for precisely the reasons Lenin stated classically in *What is to Be Done* – in its struggle against capital the working class has no other material weapon except political organisation. Even in favourable circumstances, without such a Leninist political organisation the working class will suffer setbacks and defeats – as the recent lessons of the rise of the left and setbacks in mainland Latin America confirm. In Asia (China, Vietnam) and in Cuba the working class holds power due to a 'Leninist' organisation. In Latin America, without such organisation outside Cuba, despite the swing of an entire continent to the left, the working class suffered defeats and setbacks. Recent events in Europe, for example the debacle of Syriza in Greece, show the same lesson.

Surveying the consequences of the October Revolution is therefore not an act of an historian's study, it remains key to understanding today's reality.

The objective legacy of October

'*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*' – 'If you seek a monument look around you'. The famous epitaph of Christopher Wren in St Paul's Cathedral explains perfectly the relation of the modern world to Russia's October Revolution. It was the October Revolution that created the fundamental parameters of the modern world.

It was the October Revolution that made possible the Chinese Revolution and the rise of modern China, the Vietnamese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution and therefore the other successful struggles which smashed to pieces the vile colonial empires which had controlled the overwhelming majority of the world's peoples for three centuries.

It was fear of the spread of the overthrow of capitalism into Western Europe after World War II, itself the product of the October Revolution, which forced West European capitalism to grant the welfare state – a welfare state the population of Western Europe is now having to increasingly fight to defend given that the direct threat in Europe from the consequences of the October Revolution no longer exists.

It was the fear of the spread of the overthrow of capitalism internationally, of the consequences of the October Revolution, and of the international discrediting of the US, which was the decisive international pressure which aided the African-American population of the US in their struggle to destroy the US Jim Crow system and launch the modern struggle for civil rights.

It was the material aid from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, both products of the October Revolution, which allowed the defeat first of France and then the United States in Vietnam – events whose consequences in the US and internationally are felt to this day.

It was the state created by the October Revolution which, in the largest military battles in human history at Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk, broke the spine of Nazism and thereby saved Europe from fascism – not the small sideshow of D-Day which entirely falsely is portrayed as responsible for this.

Those, who attempt to portray the October Revolution as a past historical event, limited within Russia, merely show their intellectual limits in that they do not understand the most powerful forces that created the world in which we live.

The price paid by the Soviet people for these events, which contributed so much to the progress of others, was unequalled. Around forty million people died in the USSR in the Civil War following Western invasions to attempt to crush the Soviet Union, in Stalin's collectivisation and purges which followed the isolation of the revolution, and in World War II. This was an even higher proportion of the population than died in China in its long war against Japanese invasion. No struggle in history was greater than the ability of the Soviet people to withstand capitalist and imperialist opposition and attack for more than 70 years.

And, finally, the October Revolution was not overthrown by outside forces. It was the degeneration of the ruling stratum of the USSR, of its Communist Party, which finally achieved what outside capitalism and imperialism could not achieve directly. It was Yeltsin, who was hailed by some confused and disoriented 'leftists' in the West, who led the destruction of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism within it.

Consequences of the defeat of October

In the same way that the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 created a giant step forward throughout the world, its final defeat within the framework of the

Soviet Union, with the restoration of capitalism in the USSR in 1991, threw the world and humanity backwards.

- With the threat of the USSR removed, imperialism embarked on a series of new aggressive wars – including against Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Libya.
- A massive transfer of wealth from the working class to capital took place internationally, with a dramatic increase in the share of profits in the economy and radically increasing inequality.
- An assault began on the welfare state in Western Europe that is still continuing, which was followed by a wave of mass racist and far right parties epitomised by the Front National in France. Eastern Europe saw the introduction of increasingly racist and reactionary governments in Hungary, Poland and other countries.
- An attempt to roll back the gains of women, black people, and major religious groups including Islam began – in the US with attacks on reproductive rights, on black participation in elections, in even more overt police killing of black people and in numerous other forms, and internationally in particular in a wave of Islamophobia.
- A wave of intellectual reaction began with attempts to revive ideologies which had previously been pushed to the extreme fringes of politics and intellectual life – for example the supposedly ‘progressive role of colonialism’.

This wave of reaction totally refuted the idea that Western style democracy was the progressive force in the world – the overthrow of the USSR, and the introduction of Western style democracy into the former USSR and Eastern Europe, was accompanied by international reaction. Equally refuted was the idea that the USSR was a form of ‘state capitalism’, which made it irrelevant to the working class internationally whether it existed or not – the restoration of real capitalism in the USSR led to all the massive forms of reaction already outlined, with the overthrow of the USSR therefore being a huge setback for the working class internationally.

Degeneration in the USSR

The restoration of capitalism in the USSR was the final culmination of the development of a reactionary bureaucratic caste, the Nomenklatura, created in that country under Stalin. Trotsky was the first major Marxist theorist to analyse this – proposing the foundation of a Fourth International in 1933.

But the international class struggle took a different path to the one Trotsky had analysed, for dual reasons. He was correct that no party following the line of the Stalinised USSR ever led a successful popular revolution – despite the power and immensely progressive role of the USSR in crushing European fascism. But forces capable of successfully leading popular revolutions emerged from within the former Third International. In January 1935, at the Zunyi Conference, Mao Zedong

definitely took control of the Communist Part of China from the representatives of the Stalinist Comintern. The successful strategy of Mao Zedong led to the creation in 1949 of the People's Republic of China – the overthrow of capitalism in the most populous country in the world. During World War II, Tito led a successful revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism – in doing so forming 'proletarian brigades' and creating a socialist revolution in direct contradiction to Stalin's policies. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh led a struggle defeating first French and then US imperialism. In Cuba, Fidel Castro's struggle for national independence and socialism was led by a force outside the Cuban Communist Party but finally fused with it to form a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party in Cuba.

In China, alongside Russia the greatest revolution of the 20th century, Mao Zedong's strategy was proved correct; the Chinese Revolution established Mao Zedong – with Lenin – as the 20th century's greatest revolutionary strategist. Trotsky's strategy on the other hand was wrong in a dual sense. First, Mao Zedong's strategy of 'the countryside surrounds the cities' was proved correct in the successful more than twenty-year war to overthrow capitalism in China – Trotsky's call for the CPC to leave the countryside and enter the cities was proved false. Second, while Mao Zedong engaged in a long internal battle to gain leadership of the CPC, he never broke formally with the Third International or its successor formations as Trotsky anticipated.

Revival of struggle after 1991

Turning from the objective impact of the October Revolution to the subjective one, following the restoration of capitalism in the USSR in 1991 a wave of reaction inevitably unfolded internationally, with bourgeois ideologues proclaiming the total victory of capitalism and 'the end of history.' But the fate of the USSR was not repeated after 1991 in the countries in which capitalism had been overthrown in Asia and Latin America – in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Cuba. Then, in 1998, the first major step forward after the huge defeat and retreat of the working class following the overthrow of the USSR took place with Chávez's election as president in Venezuela – followed by the defeat of reactionary military coup against Chávez in 2002 which broke the capitalist state apparatus in Venezuela.

For a decade the left advanced across almost the whole continent of Latin America forming governments in most major countries including Brazil and Argentina. These progressive governments brought about a 'revolution in distribution', ensuring that the poorest sections of their countries, as well as the mass of the population, instead of merely the rich and the imperialists, benefitted from the economic growth accompanying the huge increase in commodity prices in the first decade of the 21st century.

But the lessons of the October Revolution were then confirmed 'from the negative' in Latin America. When commodity prices began to fall from 2014 the left across

most of Latin America was shown to have been able to carry out a 'revolution in distribution', but not a 'revolution in production', i.e. an ability to create economic growth and development when faced with a global international downturn – despite the fact that China and Vietnam were already a model showing the most dramatic economic growth of any major developing countries. Chávez showed as great as personal heroism as any revolutionary leader, literally facing death in 2002 to defend the revolution, and he was an inspired leader of the masses – one of the great figures in revolutionary history. But the lessons of Lenin and October were shown to be correct. Without a Leninist political organisation in Latin America, outside Cuba, the Latin American left was not able to work out a solution to the economic crises that began to unfold in Latin America from 2014 onwards. The left lost the elections in Argentina and was overthrown in a de facto coup in Brazil. Once more it was shown that the working class could not take and hold power relatively 'spontaneously' or without a Leninist political organisation. In Venezuela the left continues to hold power, and it is enormously to be hoped that it will defeat the problems it has encountered, but it is battling against deep difficulties.

These lessons of Latin America are also vital for the new upsurge of struggle in Europe. The type of left which emerged in Latin America after the turn of the century, that is, a real left totally opposed not only in words but actions to capitalism, is now beginning to appear in Europe – in Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, in forces around Mélenchon in France, in supporters of Podemos in Spain and in other countries. This left in Europe, of course, does not dominate a continent as in Latin America, but it is a significant force with a base among the mass of the population which can seriously grow given the period of very slow growth Western capitalism has entered into.

A long period of struggle

The building of a working-class political organisation, of the type Lenin played the decisive role in creating in Russia and the USSR, and which model was then followed in the overthrow of capitalism in China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and Cuba cannot be established without immense class struggles. As Lenin explained clearly in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*:

For about half a century – approximately from the forties to the nineties of the last century – progressive thought in Russia, oppressed by a most brutal and reactionary tsarism, sought eagerly for a correct revolutionary theory, and followed with the utmost diligence and thoroughness each and every 'last word' in this sphere in Europe and America. Russia achieved Marxism – the only correct revolutionary theory – through the agony she experienced in the course of half a century of unparalleled torment and sacrifice, of unparalleled revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, practical trial, disappointment, verification, and comparison with

European experience. Thanks to the political emigration caused by tsarism, revolutionary Russia, in the second half of the nineteenth century, acquired a wealth of international links and excellent information on the forms and theories of the world revolutionary movement, such as no other country possessed.

On the other hand, Bolshevism, which had arisen on this granite foundation of theory, went through fifteen years of practical history (1903-17) unequalled anywhere in the world in its wealth of experience. During those fifteen years, no other country knew anything even approximating to that revolutionary experience, that rapid and varied succession of different forms of the movement—legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, underground and open, local circles and mass movements, and parliamentary and terrorist forms. In no other country has there been concentrated, in so brief a period, such a wealth of forms, shades, and methods of struggle of all classes of modern society, a struggle which, owing to the backwardness of the country and the severity of the tsarist yoke, matured with exceptional rapidity, and assimilated most eagerly and successfully the appropriate 'last word' of American and European political experience.

Similarly, in China around 100 million people died in the class struggles between the British assault on China in the Opium War of 1842 and the final creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In this process, as Xi Jinping summarised:

In 1911, the revolution led by Sun Yat-sen overthrew the autocratic monarchy that had ruled China for several thousand years. But once the old system was gone, where China would go became the question. The Chinese people then started exploring long and hard for a path that would suit China's national conditions. They experimented with constitutional monarchy, imperial restoration, parliamentarism, multi-party system and presidential government, yet nothing really worked. Finally, China took the path of socialism.

Vietnam similarly had to fight bitter revolutionary wars for three decades, against both French and then US imperialism, to achieve national independence and the overthrow of capitalism.

Fidel Castro's successful revolution of 1959 stood on the shoulders of José Martí's struggle for Cuban independence and his own 1953 unsuccessful Moncada Barracks uprising.

Given the extreme ruthlessness, including the violence, of the capitalist class the working class will necessarily initially seek easier solutions to its problems than socialist revolution, and therefore not see the necessity of the type of organisation

which Lenin showed how to create. Those who urge the working class to take more radical measures when less radical ones will suffice are merely 'romantics' who have no real idea of the costs of a serious class struggle. Only when the course of the struggle itself makes clear no solution short of those Lenin outlined will suffice will the majority of the population rally to support a Leninist political organisation. This therefore determines for a prolonged period the strategy and tactics of those who have absorbed the lessons of the October Revolution.

During the prolonged initial struggles that will inevitably occur before the majority of the working class becomes convinced only a socialist revolution will solve its problems, those who have absorbed the lessons of Marx and Lenin will inevitably be a minority. They must therefore push forward the class struggle under those circumstances. In the words of Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

Marxism and understanding of the class struggle

The fact Marxists have the most accurate understanding of the line of advance of the working class means that Marxists can play a role much greater than their numbers during the partial advances of the working class and long before Marxists become a majority among the working class. Lenin famously outlined the framework to do this in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

It is extremely useful to understand this situation in the terms Mao Zedong stated in a famous essay in China, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, clearly distinguishing 'contradictions between the people and the enemy' and 'contradictions among the people':

To understand these two different types of contradictions correctly, we must first be clear on what is meant by 'the people' and what is meant by 'the enemy'. The concept of 'the people' varies in content in different countries

and in different periods of history in a given country. Take our own country for example. During the War of Resistance Against Japan, all those classes, strata and social groups opposing Japanese aggression came within the category of the people, while the Japanese imperialists, their Chinese collaborators and the pro-Japanese elements were all enemies of the people. During the War of Liberation, the U.S. imperialists and their running dogs – the bureaucrat-capitalists, the landlords and the Kuomintang reactionaries who represented these two classes – were the enemies of the people, while the other classes, strata and social groups, which opposed them, all came within the category of the people...

Since they are different in nature, the contradictions between ourselves and the enemy and the contradictions among the people must be resolved by different methods.

Contradictions between the people and the enemy were to be resolved by acute struggle, including violence. Contradictions among the people must be resolved through discussion.

This distinction entirely applies in all countries, including developed ones. It is objectively impossible to solve all the problems facing humanity at once. Therefore, numerous groups within 'the people', that is those oppressed by capitalism and imperialism, have entirely legitimate and different needs and demands. The situation of male and female workers is not at all identical, the situation of those subject to racism and the 'white' population differs, the situation of skilled and unskilled workers differs, the situation of those in imperialist states and countries dominated by imperialism is not the same, it is necessary to work out the correct solution to the problems of immediate economic development to remove the poorest sections of the world's population from poverty while dealing with the threat to the whole of humanity from climate change, and numerous other issues. The task of Marxists is to synthesise these legitimate demands of the different sections of 'the people' to arrive at the greatest step forward that can be taken at any point in time – which also requires maintaining the unity in action of 'the people' against 'the enemy'.

The current international situation

This situation is clear in present trends now unfolding internationally. First, an international recomposition is taking place of those who explicitly support the October Revolution – of the 'international communist movement'. The two largest groups of these in the world, the followers of Mao Zedong in China and of Fidel Castro in Latin America, previously had insufficient discussion and contact despite mutual support and admiration at the highest levels. This is symbolised in Fidel Castro saluting at the mausoleum of Mao Zedong in Beijing and Xi Jinping

bowing three times, the highest form of Chinese honour, when signing the book of condolences at the Cuban Embassy in China on the death of Fidel Castro. Xi stated of Castro:

He is a great figure of our times, and his immortal historic contributions to the world's socialist development and support for the cause of justice for all countries will be forever remembered... the Chinese party, government and people stand together with the Cuban party, government and people at this special moment.

Xi said the Chinese people have lost a 'close comrade and sincere friend' Fidel Castro, in addition to his open admiration of Mao Zedong, stated: 'Xi Jinping is one of the strongest and most capable revolutionary leaders I have met in my life.' The high mutual regard of the leaderships of Cuba and China is totally clear from these and numerous other statements.

But if these relations between the two largest revolutionary socialist currents on the planet were previously primarily only at the top levels, this is changing significantly following the setbacks in Latin America after 2014. In Latin America, analysis of why China was able to maintain huge economic growth and improvement of the living conditions of its population, despite the aftermath of the international financial crisis, while the Latin American left in government was not able to achieve this, is leading to much wider discussion of China's policies in Latin America. Simultaneously China is now taking a much more active role in the promotion of Marxism internationally – calling two Congresses on the world study of Marxism in 2017 and 2018.

In addition to the largest international Marxist dialogue, between supporters of Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong, this international recomposition of the international communist movement is now also felt in Russia, birthplace of the October Revolution, itself. After a period in which Russian communists failed to understand sufficiently the significance of China's development, Gennady Zyuganov, general secretary of the Russian Communist Party, in his speech to the conference of communist organisations convened to celebrate the centenary of the October Revolution in 2017, stated clearly that the 'economic miracle' of China was today proving the correctness of Marxism. The Chinese Revolution, which the October Revolution made possible, was now reacting back on the country of Lenin.

Europe

In countries dominated by imperialism, the class struggle is more intense than in imperialist states themselves. Therefore, the dialogue between Latin America and Asian communists is naturally developing faster and at a higher level than

discussions within the imperialist countries. But in Europe admiration of the struggle in Latin America, and of Castro and Chávez, is widespread in the left and has become a significant factor among substantial left forces in several countries. Also, regarding China, former Greek Finance Minister Varoufakis' recent revelation that in 2015 Greece and China had arrived at a broad agreement on economic cooperation, which was then blocked by Germany. The successful recent negotiations between Greece and China, including Greece blocking EU attacks on China, illustrates the beginning of a more correct understanding of China's situation in Europe. Therefore, while the recomposition of the international communist movement, primarily under the impact of the discussion of pro-China and pro-Cuban currents, is naturally more advanced at present in countries dominated by imperialism than in the imperialist centres themselves, nevertheless its influence for the first time is beginning to reach into Europe and the US.

It will, of course, take time for these subjective lessons first demonstrated by the October Revolution to be understood and integrated into thinking of the left internationally – particularly in the imperialist states. It took massive class struggles for the Russian Bolshevik Party, and for the Chinese, Vietnamese and Cuban parties to achieve and maintain working power. Equally there is no possibility for this understanding to be fully achieved in the very first waves of the new struggles in Latin America and Europe. But equally, without these lessons of the October being understood, socialist revolution will not be successfully achieved. As Latin America showed, even in favourable conditions across an entire continent, without a Leninist type of political organisation, a key subjective legacy of the October Revolution, the working class has not been able to consolidate and stably sustain state power.

Britain

Naturally in a different form these conditions also determine the situation in Britain – as they did earlier across Latin America.

To adopt Chinese Marxist terminology, the 'main contradiction' in Britain in economic and social terms is the drive by the ruling class to attack the working class and the general population via austerity, attacks on the welfare state, support for imperialist wars, and the promotion of racism to attempt to gain support for these reactionary projects. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party opposes all these, and therefore the main political contraction in Britain is between supporters and opponents of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party.

Around this main contradiction, between the people and the enemy, only intense class struggle can determine the outcome. Within the ranks of 'the people', that

is, the supporters of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, inevitably some differences will emerge. These contradictions 'among the people' must however be dealt with in an entirely different way to contradictions between the people and the enemy – they must be dealt with by dialogue and not by breaking up unity in action against the enemy. Through such dialogue and the test of the unfolding class struggle it will become clear which analysis of the situation among those put forward among the ranks of the people is most accurate.

The historical experience of Russia, Asia, Latin America, and Europe of course applies to Britain and again confirms the lessons of the October Revolution. Marxists, those who have learned the lessons of October, can play a role far greater than their numbers long before they achieve majority support among the working class because they have the most accurate understanding of how the class struggle will unfold.

Lenin's understanding, in the creation of the type of political organisation which history has demonstrated was indispensable for the working class to achieve and maintain state power, was not only of the discipline in action needed to wage such a struggle but in it being the sole means by which it could arrive at an accurate understanding of that struggle. Marx and Engels had already noted in theoretical terms that: 'the real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections'. But from this, of course, it follows that the real intellectual wealth of any actual individual is limited because of the limits of a single individual. It was the Leninist political organisation that instead alone was able to arrive at an understanding of the fundamental development of the class struggle. As Lenin put it in *What is to be Done*:

Class political consciousness can be brought... only from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes... To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social Democrats [pre-1917 name for Marxists] must go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions.

Lenin thereby created, in the type of political organisation that bears his name, the means by which the class struggle could not only be waged but understood. It was this which history has confirmed is the indispensable condition for the victory of the working class. It is for that reason that the theory the October Revolution created is legitimately known as Marxism-Leninism. Lenin did not contradict but he built on Marx, and adding Lenin to Marx's name did not reflect 'faith in an individual' but merely that in the enormous class struggle in

Russia waged for over half a century, every theory and every leader was tested in practice until one succeeded – the Bolshevik Party. And every case in which the working class has succeeded in sustaining power since has only confirmed that lesson of October.

It is for this reason that the October Revolution is the great break between the past and our present not only objectively but subjectively. October created the modern world. This remains the great difference to 'If you seek a monument look around you'. The October Revolution is not dead, it is still living. Its footprint can still be seen to be shaping the situation in every part of our planet.

October 1917 – Why the Bolsheviks won

Introduction

The October Revolution of 1917 was the single most important event of the 20th century. For the first time in human history, a state was established, and stabilised, that represented the interests of the labouring majority in society. Society's resources were to be utilised to advance the welfare, living standards and ambitions of the workers and peasants. The old exploiting classes – the nobility, landlords and capitalists – were stripped of the privileges which they possessed through robbery, deceit, arbitrary violence and grinding exploitation.

The course of the 20th century was in large part shaped by the attempts of all the major imperialist powers to overthrow the Soviet state. Two periods of direct military action were undertaken; from 1917–1920 involving the US, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and lesser allies totalling 14 states in all; and from 1941–1945 by Nazi Germany and its fascist allies. Economic and diplomatic blockades were undertaken, with greater or lesser sanctions, throughout the existence of the Soviet state from 1917–1991. The anti-Soviet military alliance assumed permanent form with the establishment of NATO in 1949, allowing the US to orchestrate the imposition of a crippling military burden upon the USSR. The imperialist powers also waged a continuous ideological offensive to create a distorted and repulsive image of the workers' state for their own domestic population. Large-scale resources were diverted from productive use in order to guarantee a continuing class war against the Soviet state. This war may have run hot or cold, overt or covert, brutal or subtle, yet it ran without interruption.

The battle followed from the material threat to the bourgeois order that the October Revolution created. It explains why the bourgeoisie today retains a hostile course towards other states founded upon the principles of socialism, such as China, Vietnam, Cuba and Venezuela. The imperialists believe their continued domination rests not simply on the reproduction of capitalism, but also on the destruction of any viable alternative. In this manner, their defeat from October continues to haunt them. Just so it offers inspiration today, to those in the world opposing all forms of exploitation and oppression.

A change in the balance of forces

The establishment of the Soviet state represented a fundamental change in the balance of forces between the two international classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This was not simply, or even mostly, by the power of a good example.



Much more, it was the establishment of an institution which would support the struggles of the oppressed and working class throughout the world.

The working class had received a tremendous blow when the majority of its leadership supported their own governments' participation in the inter-imperialist war in 1914. Prior to this the socialist movement had grown gradually, but apparently irresistibly.

Inside the imperialist societies powerful socialist parties and trade unions had emerged. The bourgeoisie had been forced to adapt to the weight of these movements. Indeed it attempted to incorporate them – thus in Britain 'One Nation Toryism' and 'Lib-Labism', in Germany Bismarck's welfare policies, and in France the entry of Millerand into government. For the most part the domestic concessions offered were paid for by the workers' organisations deferring to colonial and imperial projects abroad. Nonetheless, however qualified, it appeared that the movements were advancing, and the capitalist class was being forced to tuck to avoid being overturned.

1914 changed that. The majority of the existing leaderships of the workers' organisations drew them into direct and unequivocal alliance with 'their' national bourgeoisie. The mobilisation of the working class for a numerically unprecedented common slaughter could not have been effectively achieved without the direct participation of these opportunist leaders. In exchange for surrendering their political independence, they reassured themselves with the anticipation they would receive the gratitude of the capitalist class after victory was secured.

Instead, as was evident by 1919, every one of the major powers witnessed a post war assault upon the working class by the bourgeoisie. Gratitude was never in shorter supply.

Given that the working class internationally had been divided into supporting the different powers in contention, it was evident that the working class could not participate, as a class, in victory. Only as subordinate allies to one or other national section of the bourgeoisie could victory be envisaged. This is the sense in Kautsky's dictum that the International was an instrument for peacetime, not during war.

In these conditions the victory of the Bolsheviks, with their demand for an immediate peace with no annexations or territorial gains, amounted to a reassertion of the independent movement of the workers and oppressed. Across the belligerent nations, sections of the troops and sections of the organised workers rallied to the Bolshevik call. In France and Britain there were mutinies, and dissolution of troop morale. In Germany there was a rising of revolutionary forces leading to the overthrow of the Kaiser, and the re-emergence of mass anti-capitalist currents. Even in the US, the biggest beneficiary of the war, a serious minority in the workers' movement aligned itself to the October Revolution.

Suddenly all the belligerent powers were faced with an enemy of a much more permanent and common threat than the apparently endless rivalry between them. Hence it was no surprise that, despite the supposed 'principled' conflict between the Entente and Central Powers, both sides invaded Russian territory in an attempt to overthrow the Soviet state.

This had nothing to do with defending or restoring democracy. For the Entente, both the British Empire and the French Empire had been happy to cooperate with the autocracy of Tsarism. The Central Powers were themselves made up of the semi-autocracy of the German state, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. After the February revolution overthrew Tsarism, the British and French governments were directly involved in the attempt to establish a military dictatorship under Kornilov.

Whatever the outcome of the 1914–18 war, the international bourgeoisie, across the nation states, recognised that the acquisition of political power by tens of millions of Soviet workers and peasants was the first herald of the final defeat of the bourgeois order.

Why did the revolution occur?

The Russian state in 1917 combined a feudal governing structure upon a developing capitalist mode of production. Landlordism continued to dominate agriculture which itself accounted for nearly 80% of the population. The capitalist sectors of the economy were dominated by foreign capital, particularly foreign banks.

Heavy industry (metal, coal, oil) was almost wholly under the control of foreign finance capital, which had created for itself an auxiliary and

intermediate system of banks in Russia. Light industry was following the same road. Foreigners owned in general about 40 per cent of all the stock capital of Russia, but in the leading branches of industry that percentage was still higher. We can say without exaggeration that the controlling stock in the Russian banks, plants and factories were to be found abroad, the amount held in England, France and Belgium being almost double that in Germany.¹

It was integrated into the imperialist world system, despite and through the backwardness of the political structure. In an unequal alliance with British and French imperialism it suffered greater casualties in the inter-imperialist conflict. Russian military deaths being 2,250,000 compared to Britain losing 880,000 and France 1,390,000. At once the victim of exploitation by the more developed imperialist powers, the Russian state and bourgeoisie was at the same time the beneficiary of the process. These powers defended the Great Russian domination of minority nationalities, for example in Poland and Finland. The Russian state also stood to benefit with territorial gains from the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, albeit on a modest scale in comparison with the anticipated seizure of much of the Middle East by Britain and France.

The Russian state was then an imperialist power, although a backward one, whose international position made it the weakest link in the imperialist chain that dominated the world.

The superficially paradoxical fact that the first victim to suffer for the sins of the world system was the bourgeoisie of a backward country, is in reality quite according to the law of things. Marx had already indicated its explanation for his epoch: 'Violent outbursts take place sooner in the extremities of the bourgeois organism than the heart, because here regulation is more possible'. Under the monstrous burdens of imperialism that state must necessarily fall first which had not yet accumulated a large national capital, but to which world competition offers no special privileges. The collapse of Russian capitalism was a local avalanche in a universal social formation. 'A correct appraisal of our revolution,' said Lenin 'is possible only from an international point of view.'²

This revolution broke the order that many socialists in the Second International had anticipated. Marx and Engels' writings had generally predicated the revolution would occur first in the most developed countries. The assumption being that the class conflict was clearest where the bourgeoisie had elaborated capitalism to its fullest extent, hence facing the largest presence of the working class. Towards the end of Marx's life the first qualifications of this appear. Marx and Engels agreed that the bourgeoisie in Britain had successfully integrated the workers' movement and leadership, British monopoly in the world market making this possible. Equally, Marx in correspondence with the Russian revolutionary, Vera Zasulich,

in 1881, noted exceptional features in Russian society and economic development meaning that its development may not simply reproduce the course of the major capitalist powers to its west.

In the case of Britain, the conclusions about the corruption of the movement, drawn by Marx and Engels would not have been palatable to leaders of the International who believed, along with Bernstein, that 'the movement was everything and the final goal nothing.' In the case of Russia, the correspondence with Zasulich was unknown outside a handful of people. According to David Ryzanov, the great Marxist scholar, it was not finally widely published until 1924³.

The general assumption among socialists therefore was that Russia's backwardness meant that a revolution in Russia first had to solve problems associated with the uncompleted bourgeois revolution. The revolution that began in February 1917 would therefore, this argument went, be bourgeois in class character, and result in placing the bourgeoisie in power, while the proletariat would thereby have the opportunity to learn how to struggle for socialism in the context of having bourgeois-democratic rights. For socialists with such a perspective the Bolsheviks, who were for a new, socialist revolution, and their leadership of the October Revolution, represented an adventure outside the path of national development. Inside and outside Russia, activists who held this dogmatised version of socialism drew the conclusion that the attempt to go beyond a bourgeois revolution was an objective impossibility, would lead to disaster and meant it was better to support the bourgeoisie against the October Revolution.

Bewilderment at the turn of events in Russia was not confined to the opportunists. Even as gifted a revolutionary as Antonio Gramsci wrote an article in December 1917 titled 'The Revolution Against Capital'. He interpreted Marx's *Capital* to mean that 'in Russia a bourgeoisie had to develop, and a capitalist era had to open, with the setting up of a Western-type civilization, before the proletariat could even think in terms of its own revolt, its own class demands, its own revolution... The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit actions and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as might have been thought'⁴. Of course, being Gramsci, he supported the October Revolution, even if he was unable to theorise its continuity with classical Marxism. But the danger in his suggestion that the Bolsheviks had broken with Marx was that this was exactly the cover Kautsky and other opportunists used to denounce the Bolsheviks.

Even inside the Bolsheviks Lenin had had to wage an all-out struggle to ensure that the party grasped the dynamics of the revolution opened in February. Upon his return to Russia he issued the *April Theses* which insisted that the task after February was not to consolidate a bourgeois regime, but to continue to extend the revolution uninterrupted towards the seizure of power by the working class and

peasantry. This meant complete separation from the bourgeoisie, landlords and remnants of Tsarism. The seriousness of this fight is evident by the fact that he encountered opposition from inside the Central Committee, from the editors of the main Bolshevik paper Pravda, and from inside the Petrograd District Committee, a city where there was the largest concentration of the working class. Lenin's success was down to his arguments connecting with aspirations of the workers themselves. His position was also validated by the unfolding demonstration that the bourgeois led Provisional Government issuing from February was unable to solve any of the problems posed by the revolution.

Reflecting on this in 1923, Lenin analysed the dogmatists, still wishing to claim a socialist heritage despite their failure to support the October Revolution:

Up to now they have seen capitalism and bourgeois democracy in Western Europe follow a definite path of development, and cannot conceive that this path can be taken as a model only *mutatis mutandi*, only with certain amendments... It does not occur to any of them to ask: but what about a people that found itself in a revolutionary situation such as that created during the first imperialist war? Might it not, influenced by the hopelessness of its situation, fling itself into a struggle that would offer it at least some chance of securing conditions for the further development of civilisation that were somewhat unusual?... If a definite level of culture is required for the building of socialism (although nobody can say just what that definite "level of culture" is, for it differs in every West European country), why cannot we begin by first achieving the prerequisites for that definite level of culture in a revolutionary way, and then, with the aid of the workers' and peasants' government and the Soviet system, proceed to overtake the other nations?⁵

Rather than allow the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed to be headed off by the bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks won the right to lead by outlining the course of action needed to address the most crucial problems facing society in the Russian empire. Their political alternative to the destruction wrought by the bourgeoisie secured the overwhelming support of the workers and peasants, allowing the revolution to enter the 'construction of the socialist order'.

Two strategies – relying on the working class or the bourgeoisie?

Lenin's strategy was successful because he understood that the working class's interests could only be achieved if it addressed the problems of society as a whole. Capitalism subordinated all other oppressed classes and groups to the domination of the bourgeoisie. Socialism must therefore draw together all the social forces which experienced oppression under capitalism and in class society in general. Only by a counter-hegemonic strategy could the domination of the bourgeoisie be overturned.

The bourgeoisie did not simply unite all the class forces which were exploiters under capitalism – capitalists, landlords and financiers/bankers. It also organised its support amongst the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Amongst the petty bourgeoisie, it offered careers in state and governance for the intelligentsia, economic encouragement for small businesses and the promise of land reform for the peasantry. Within the proletariat, it drew in the labour aristocracy, and bureaucracy inside the workers organisations, promising concessions and work based on the functioning of imperialism, and the resources gained from defeated rivals and the colonies.

Lenin grasped that political strategy had to include promoting divisions within the bourgeoisie and exploiters, win over the largest possible part of the petty bourgeoisie, in particular the peasantry, and secure an absolute majority within the working class. Hence it was necessary to support the rights of self-determination, including the right to separation, even when many of the oppressed nations were dominated by their national bourgeoisie. It was necessary to support the abolition of landlordism, even at the risk of the strengthening of the richest sections of the peasantry (kulaks). And it was necessary to guarantee the interests of the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class, even at the risk of opposition from the most economically comfortable and well organised sections of the working class.

The essential point being that Lenin's strategy ensured that an active majority could thus be established. For inside the Tsarist Empire, the revolution in February and every major conflict leading up to October demonstrated that there was a majority that wanted national freedom, land to those who would work it, and that industry should be developed to meet the needs of society as a whole. Linking all these demands was the need to end the war which was destroying the population and its resources. Lenin's hegemonic strategy was to save the country from the depredations of the bourgeoisie. That could be understood and supported by the majority of the population.

What the majority of the population could not tolerate in 1917 was the bourgeoisie's continued postponement of solving every serious question that was raised to the forefront by the February Revolution. The Russian bourgeoisie refused to respect the demands of the minority nationalities. The inter-imperialist war was about carving up the colonies and subject nations across the world. To allow for the elementary freedom of self-determination would damage Russia's acquisitive allies in Britain and France.

The Russian bourgeoisie would not meet the peasant demands for a radical land reform. It relied upon the landlords to maintain stability in the countryside. To divide up the estates would remove its staunchest allies. Further, changing property relations in the countryside would inevitably encourage the urban working class to seek a change in the exploitative relations of production in industry.

The Russian bourgeoisie could not meet the working class demands for a new order inside the factories, shops and offices. It needed to maintain super-exploitative relations with its domestic working class because its own relative weakness in the world market meant it could not otherwise compete with the other imperialist powers. This, plus, its financial domination by the stronger powers, absolutely reduced its room for manoeuvre.

And finally, the Russian bourgeoisie could not extract itself from the desperately unpopular war. The attempt to break the military impasse by the June 1917 Russian offensive against Germany was instrumental in discrediting the bourgeois parties, Cadets and Octobrists, and the compromisers in the Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and Mensheviks.

Although the autocracy had been ousted, the post-February governments could not carry out the type of reforms that the other imperialist powers had substantially addressed in their national history. Unable to carry through a bourgeois revolution these governments promised to 'examine' all claims, but met none.

The Bolsheviks strategy was successful because it above all promoted the alliance of the working class and peasantry over every other social force. All of the other left parties, the SRs, Mensheviks and Left Mensheviks insisted that the bourgeoisie had to be part of the national government. The SRs and Mensheviks tolerated both bourgeois parties, and individual bourgeois politicians inside government. The Left Mensheviks were prepared to support the idea of a government solely of left parties. But when the SRs and Mensheviks refused to accept a coalition without the bourgeoisie, the Left Mensheviks capitulated. Instead of breaking with the 'compromisers', Martov, Sukhanov and the other Left Menshevik leaders broke with the Bolsheviks, becoming a sorry, protesting, tail of the bourgeoisie. All of these forces assumed a left government in Russia without the bourgeoisie must end in disaster. To this end, not only did the SRs and Mensheviks support the continuation of the war, they also allied themselves with the armies of counter-revolutionaries that the landlords and bourgeoisie sent against the Soviet workers and peasants.

Similar parties have made this same choice internationally ever since 1917. On not one occasion has this led to a socialist state. This so-called practical choice against supposed 'utopian' or 'sectarian' choices has been systematically unsuccessful.

Reducing the struggle for socialism to only 'feasible' reforms and measures which are acceptable to the capitalism did not avoid a reckoning with the bourgeoisie when it no longer tolerated the feasibility of reformism. In Europe during the 1920s and 1930s the reformists were unable to prevent the bourgeoisie supporting fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain, or utilising depression economics against the working class in Britain and France.

A coup d'état?

The suggestion that the insurrection of October was simply a *coup d'état* organised by the Bolsheviks does not survive serious scrutiny, although it is a smear with a century-long pedigree. In a country of 160 million people it is no small matter to take state power. It is even more difficult if you intend not merely to take control of the existing state institutions, but to replace these with new institutions to promote different property and economic relations. A party of 240,000 revolutionaries, as was the Bolsheviks in October 1917, could not achieve this behind the backs of the huge population.

All the reports of the seizure of power affirm that the old state apparatus and bureaucracy actively sabotaged the Bolsheviks assumption of power. Ministerial staff went on strike (paid for by bourgeois sources), hid finance and assets, refused to hand over state documents, international treaties and agreements. In no case was the introduction of the People's Commissars to the old ministry apparatus accepted by the majority of the existing staff. From the beginning, cooperation was only achieved through the threat of coercion. This completely contrasts with most coups, where the plotters, once successful, can usually count upon the support from the state bureaucracy.

Coercion can be applied for short periods to guarantee the cooperation of recalcitrant bureaucrats. But what cannot be done is to coerce the majority of society into accepting a fundamental change of direction. The overturning of landlordism in the countryside required the active participation of the majority of the peasantry. A party the size of Lenin's could not intimidate tens of millions of peasants. But it could lead them.

Much of the civil war from 1917 to 1920 revolved around the issue of landlordism. The experience of the peasantry was that the Bolsheviks supported those who worked the land keeping it. Their experience of the White armies was that their generals returned the landlords to the countryside. Both sides of the civil war took the terrible measures that war necessitates, though the Bolsheviks resorted to the Red Terror only in response to the White. Arms were used to maintain peasant holdings, or to return them to the former owners. The peasants made a rational and progressive choice, to throw their lot in with the workers organisations, party and state. If the Bolsheviks had not secured the support of the peasantry they would not have survived weeks, let alone over three years of intensive war over vast geographic fronts. Unlike the Whites, the Bolsheviks had no external state support, only domestic resources.

Not by compromise with the propertied classes, or with the other political leaders; not by conciliating the old Government mechanism, did the Bolsheviks conquer the power. Nor by the violence of a small clique. If the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have

failed. The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old, and afterwards, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the framework of the new.⁶

Soviet state power – the issue of the proletarian dictatorship

The October Revolution created a new type of state. The Bolsheviks recognised the soviets as the organisations which articulated the struggle of the oppressed. The working class in the factories, shops and offices created factory committees and sent their elected representatives to the soviets. The workers and peasants in uniforms – soldiers and sailors – created their own battalion committees and sent their representatives to the soviets. The peasants in the countryside created their land committees to divide the estates, and sent their representatives to the soviets. In the oppressed nations, soviets were established which sought coalition with the Russian soviets.

In even the most democratic, bourgeois republic the elected officials are detached from their electorate by the infrequency of elections. The rewards and privileges of elected representatives also create a significantly higher standard of living than that experienced by their electorate. Further, the separation of powers between the elected legislature, and the unelected executive forces of the state, means that the policy is implemented by different people to those who formulated it. This creates inevitable opportunities to change, distort or overturn the policy agreed by the legislature. This is not so important if there is harmony of intention between a bourgeois government and its civil service, but is clearly a problem should radical politicians have to deal with an unreformed bureaucracy.

The soviets solved all these problems. Soviet delegates were instantly recallable, and elections were frequent. The remuneration for those who served full time in the soviets was those of the electorate who sent them, or those of an average skilled worker. These measures made the soviets sensitive to change and developments amongst the electorate, and limited the avenues for outright careerists.

Equally important, the soviets organised the executive of their own decisions, through the unmediated action of the delegates and the organisations that comprised the electoral base of the soviet. The workers took control of the factories, the peasants took control of the lands, the soldiers organised the defence militias.

Parties were not dissolved in this process. They were directly involved in all the functions of the soviets and the mass organisations. They fought for their policies, but shouldered the burden of the decisions. This meant that the soviets were also

an expression of the united front of the masses against the landlords, bourgeoisie and other oppressive class forces.

Marxism rightly analyses that every state power is an organised expression of the domination of a particular class over others. Under capitalism the power of the bourgeoisie has been asserted in a wide variety of political forms – from the democratic republic to fascism. All of these forms maintain private property in the means of production, albeit with different degrees of limits on the prerogative of property owners.

But in all conditions, the political framework sustains the reproduction of capital for capitalists. In this sense, Nazi Germany and contemporary France are both expressions of the social dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. From the point of view of socialists, there is no question of which is most desirable in allowing the workers and oppressed the freest development of their powers. Yet both of them are an obstacle to the achievement of socialism – even the most democratic republic will be integral to the international system that reproduces exploitation and oppression.

What applies to the bourgeois state also applies to the proletarian state. It can be expressed in a wide variety of political forms which will make a big difference to the development of the class struggle, and the chances of continued survival and success. The base committees of the state, soviets or similar, can operate with a good deal, or very little democracy. In times of war – civil or between states – the prerogatives of the working class can be much reduced. But if the political function of the state is to act as a transitional form in the struggle for a classless society (socialism), then that is an expression of the social dictatorship of the proletariat.

The political functioning of the soviet state throughout its existence varied from the multi-party periods in 1917-18 and 1920, to the rigid and repressive regime of the late 1930s. There is no doubt which was preferable for those who lived through it. But despite the unnecessary overheads – expensive at times of the material wealth and population – the continued existence of the workers state was preferable to the restoration of a bourgeois state.

The social policy of October

The social policy of the Bolsheviks was enacted through a series of decrees carried at soviet congresses, and the council of People's Commissars. Unlike bourgeois politicians, the Bolsheviks turned word into deed, enacting the most radical social programme the world had yet seen.

On the land question, the decree abolished private ownership of the land. The private estates were 'placed at the disposition of the workers who cultivate them'. The riches beneath the earth – oil, coal, minerals, etc. – became the exclusive property of the state. The right to use the land was granted to all citizens, without distinction of gender. Pensions were offered to aged farmers unable to work the

land. Land allocation was equalised. The gross inequalities and burdens suffered by the working farmers and labourers remaining from the land reforms of 1861, and the Stolypin reforms at the start of the 20th century, were thus overcome, in line with the demands of the rural population. The takeover was carried through and maintained through the local elected land committees of that population.

Since the 1905 revolution, Russia has been governed by 130,000 landowners, who have perpetrated endless violence against 150,000,000 people, heaped unconstructed abuse upon them, and condemned the vast majority to inhuman toil and semi-starvation.⁷

On the issue of the war, an immediate armistice and democratic peace was offered without loss to any nation. The offer was peace without annexation and without indemnities. Armistice was concluded on the Russian Front. This was backed up with the consistent application of the policy of self-determination, including the right to separation by the minority nations of the Russian empire. 'Every nation must decide its own fate. There must be no oppressing of one nation by another.' Ending the war had an impact upon the entire population. The nationalities policy affected the majority of the population in the Russian empire, 57 per cent of the population having a nationality other than Russian. In contrast, a century later the major imperialist powers have military forces currently based, or engaged, in dozens of less powerful nations.

On the economy, the banks were immediately nationalised, while guaranteeing the interests of small depositors. The immediate policy on industry was to implement workers control through the medium of factory committees. In practice the campaign of sabotage and closures by the capitalists meant that much of industry had to be taken into state hands. This was further accelerated by the needs of the civil war. Once the opportunity allowed a radical new economic policy (NEP) was introduced which allowed for some private markets and enterprises whilst maintaining state control of major economic decisions. This policy allowed the losses of the war years to be overcome, the economy grew larger than its pre-revolutionary size, and the rural population received the benefits of electrification.

The essential shift in the economy was to promote the welfare and interests of the workers and peasants over the former owners. This is well illustrated by the decree on social insurance. This was introduced for all wage earners, and the urban and rural poor. This covered loss of capacity through illness, childbirth, old age, orphanage, etc. Such a comprehensive programme was not introduced in the imperialist powers until after 1945, under the pressure of soviet social advances. 'If you do not give the people reform they are going to give you social revolution' – Lord Hailsham.

On the position of women, the most thoroughgoing process to liberate women was initiated (see the next chapter). After a further century of women's struggles, most of the imperialist powers have yet to complete all the aims of the Bolsheviks.

On the army, a systematic reform was implemented whereby all ranks and grades were abolished. All soldiers were to be recognised as 'free and equal citizens'. All privileges of rank were abolished, along with marks of distinction, and address by title. All separate officers' organisations were abolished. The soldiers committees of soviets had full authority within the limits of military units and combinations. Election of commanding staff and officers was introduced. Up to 12 million had been under arms in the Russian empire, and these armed forces were now disintegrating. These immediate reforms were later supplemented by the establishment of a new Red Army, which was organised on the above principles. The elementary rights of soldiers are not recognised in the imperialist powers today.

A decree abolished all privileges arising from classes and titles. The property and institutions of the nobility, merchants and bourgeois organisations were transferred to local municipalities and soviets. Formal titles, classes and denomination of civil rank were abolished. Considering that a number of major imperialist powers are yet to become republics, it is evident how thoroughgoing the repudiation of feudal and bourgeois hierarchies was in the soviet republic.

On education the first aim was the conquest of universal literacy, in a country where illiteracy was a major issue. Although not immediately possible, the soviet regime allowed the introduction, eventually, of equal and higher education for all citizens. The immediate reforms meant that the pupil's transition to a higher education was no longer dependent upon family resources, but upon aptitude. Support was extended to the widespread diffusion of culture and art, resulting in a hugely creative development of soviet society.

The extent and achievements of the post October social programme cannot be fully examined in a single article. But this was the most liberating programme that the world had yet seen. Little wonder that the international bourgeoisie was so repelled by the revolution.

Answering the national question

The classical heritage of Marx and Engels still had to be completed on the national question. Marx and Engels had supported the unification of the major European states, such as Germany and Italy. They had demonstrated their support for specific struggles against national oppression in Europe, notably in the cases of Ireland and Poland. They had supported the struggle against slavery and Confederate secession in the United States. But they had not completed a full study of colonialism.

The Second International had a programmatic ambiguity. The opportunist forces assumed that there would continue to be a colonial policy even after the socialists achieved governmental power. Matters came to a head at the 1907 Stuttgart Congress. A resolution was proposed which included the premise that Social

Democrats 'do not reject all colonial policies in all circumstances, such as those which, under a socialist regime, could serve a civilising purpose.' This was defeated by only 127 votes to 108. Delegations supporting the resolution included the Germans, Dutch, Danes and Belgians. The French, British and Italian delegations votes were split. The majority was composed of the most consistent revolutionaries, together with the forces aligned around Kautsky who also opposed the resolution. The alternative resolution that was carried condemned the barbarous methods of capitalist colonialism, and stated 'Only Socialism will offer all nations the possibility of developing freely their own forms of culture.' But the debate had not yet clarified the position, for no mention was made of either self-government or independence.

Thus the supporters of Kautsky had no difficulty in supporting the bourgeoisie's war for colonies in 1914. Despite apparent agreement in 1907 there was a difference between the forces around Kautsky and the consistent revolutionaries, which played no small part in the different stances adopted in 1914. In a 1907 pamphlet, Kautsky wrote:

The native uprisings to throw off foreign domination will always be certain of the sympathies of the fighting proletariat. But the armed might of the capitalist nations is so immense that it is not to be expected that any of these uprisings could come anywhere near their aim. As much as we understand such rebellions, and as deeply as we sympathise with the rebels, social democracy cannot encourage them, just as it does not support pointless proletarian putsches in Europe.⁸

Kautsky regarded the victory of the proletariat as a precondition for colonial freedom.

Lenin's genius was demonstrated on this question. Prompted by the catastrophe of 1914, he embarked upon a profound study of imperialism as a political and economic system, and deepened his analysis of the issue of national oppression and the socialist programme. His major work *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* and his writings on the rights of nations to self-determination theoretically clarified the ambiguities outstanding after the collapse of the Second International.

He maintained complete opposition to imperialism and its colonial policy. He demonstrated unambiguously that there remained nothing progressive in the imperialist powers maintaining hundreds of millions of people in national enslavement. Socialists must support the struggle of the colonies, regardless of the difference between 'advanced' capitalist relations, and pre-capitalist economic formations. It is a matter of elementary democratic and human rights which the proletariat must support. Every oppressed nation has the right to self-determination, including the right to secede and gain independence. The imposition of colonial chains upon nations such as China, India and Iran was a

total attack on these peoples and under no circumstances could it be tolerated by socialists.

He made a further distinction from the viewpoint of socialist strategy. Socialists in countries suffering national oppression may or may not advocate separation. This was entirely tactical. A concrete analysis would reveal whether separation would best develop the struggle of the oppressed and working class, or not. Defending national rights were part of the programme but did not supersede the need to defend the international position of the working class.

Lenin had long recognised the need for adapting education and cultural provision where different nationalities lived together with in a single state:

A consistently and thoroughly democratic republican system of government which guarantees full equality of all nations and languages, which provides the people with schools where instruction is given in all the native languages, and the constitution of which contains a fundamental law that prohibits any privileges whatsoever to any one nation and any encroachment whatsoever upon the rights of a national minority.⁹

Overall this meant that in 1917, with the victory of October, the Bolsheviks implemented a programme which distinguished them from every previous government in the world. A series of nations, including Finland and Poland, were allowed to secede from the Russian state. At the same time the Bolsheviks began a programme of supporting the anti-colonial struggle in societies dominated by imperialism, and among developing nations wishing to maintain independence from imperialism, such as Turkey under Atatürk. The chapter on the black struggle (p41) examines the international significance of the Bolsheviks' policy.

Lenin's policy did not prevent the bourgeoisie in the newly independent nations from aligning with imperialism, and hence surrendering their 'independence'. Even that helped to demonstrate that the workers movement in these nations was the sole guarantor of their national freedom. Where separation did not occur the policy demonstrated a respect for the national culture and social aspirations of the smaller nations who chose to remain in the federation, and later USSR.

Of course, Lenin grasped that the prejudices of the Tsarist Empire, including Great Russian chauvinism and anti-Semitism, were not simply overcome by the establishment of the Soviet republic. His last writings amply testify to his determination unto death to practically confront and overcome institutional and non-institutional discrimination against minority nationalities. The subsequent reduction of national rights within the USSR was a by-product of the conservative bureaucracy that overturned much of his policy.

One thing is clear, that his writings on the national question remain the best guide for socialists to this day. Trotsky, writing in 1930, put it aptly:

Whatever may be the further destiny of the Soviet Union – and it is still far from a quiet haven – the national policy of Lenin finds its place among the eternal treasures of mankind.¹⁰

The comparison between the Soviet state and the imperialist powers

The contrast between imperialism and the Soviet state are stark. All the imperialist countries held colonies which they intended to hold onto. The Versailles peace conference whilst allegedly supporting self-determination did not recognise most of the countries struggling for national freedom, whether they were as small as Ireland, or as populous as India. In the case of the Ottoman territories, with the assignment of mandatory powers to Britain and France, and in the distribution of former German colonies, there was no trace of the populations concerned deciding anything.

Equally, the claims to represent democracy were fragile in every instance. In no major imperialist power was there universal adult suffrage – restrictions by gender, age and property qualification were still being tackled. Focusing on the Bolsheviks' removal of the franchise from the exploiters to claim they were anti-democratic was credible only by overlooking the domestic practices of the 'free' nations.

The Bolsheviks' policy remained consistent, despite having to oversee a society crippled by interstate and civil wars between 1914 and 1920. At every point the Soviet government promoted the liberation of the colonies; the enfranchisement of the oppressed; and the struggle of workers and toilers for rising standards of living and culture. In contrast, the imperialist powers waged horrifying wars upon the colonial peoples; retained repressive domestic legislation – yielding the extension of the franchise grudgingly; and waged unremitting struggles against the unions, organisations of the unemployed and those opposing economic stagnation and austerity in the domestic economy.

In contemporary bourgeois ideology the horrors of the inter-war years are forgotten. Instead the difficulties and tragedies of the Stalin period are singled out. Apparently the only possible comparison is with Hitler's Nazi regime. The revolutionary significance of the Soviet state had to be buried beneath a mountain of calumny and amnesia.

Yet any clear examination of the past overturns this. The major fascist powers, Germany and Italy, retained the capitalist economic formation, massively increasing the rate of profit through a devastating defeat of the workers' organisations. Italy, during the 1920s, and Germany from 1933 to the late 1930s were regarded sympathetically in ruling circles in the US, Britain and France. The non-intervention of these powers while the fascist states intervened in the Spanish civil war was an expression of their preference for a fascist victory over a possible revolution inside Spain.

When it became evident that the momentum of the Nazis was towards a reversal of Versailles, and a new challenge for colonies, alarm bells rang in ruling circles in Britain and France. But co-existence with fascism had been envisaged, and even practiced by the dominant section of the British ruling class up to Munich.

Supporters of the USSR, along with other socialists, had fought against Italian fascism before it came to power, and ever since. The same was true of the experience of the Nazis. The senselessness of the equation of the soviet state with the Nazis is the fact that the largest number of those who died fighting fascism, and their Japanese militarist allies, came from the USSR, and the international communist and socialist movement. 27 million Soviet citizens died to bring down Hitler. The post-war inclusion of Japan amongst the democracies ignores the fact that for the first half of the 20th century it was a monarchical military dictatorship. Around 30 million Chinese died opposing this regime from 1931 to 1945. In comparison total deaths for Britain were 450,900, for France 600,000 and for US 419,000.

Even this record understates the difference. The bourgeoisie's favourite method is to count the victims of socialist regimes, both real and mythical. Yet only a full historical context allows for a true measure.

Much of the initial capital accumulation in the 'take-off' of European capital came from gold and silver arriving in Europe from the genocide practiced upon the original peoples of the Americas. Capitalism developed as an international market through the triangular trade in slaves, between Africa, the Americas and Caribbean and Europe. European colonisation developed through massacres of the indigenous populations. The adaption of the colonial economies to the metropolitan capitalist system involved terrible destruction to the traditional subsistence economies, the long term losses were suffered solely by the colonised peoples. Racism was theorised, and entrenched, decade after decade, as proof that such practices were necessary and justified.

In the metropolitan centres capitalism meant generations of workers, and their communities, suffering relentless toil and hardship. Every protection or regulation achieved in making labour less brutal and dangerous had numberless antecedents in bodies damaged and limbs severed by machinery or process. Every one of the regular economic crises saw millions made workless, homeless, hungry, destitute and desperate. Every war plucked out the youth, drove them to take and lose lives with people they couldn't understand, for purposes other than those they were given. And every generation had to fight for its few rights from an every resisting ruling class.

Whatever the failings of the first Soviet power, they fall far short of the record of imperialism before, during and after the 20th century – especially if we use their measure of the body count.

Conclusion

The restoration of capitalism in the countries of the former USSR created a social catastrophe. By 1998 the Russian Federation's GDP was 57.7 per cent of its 1990 total. In the Ukraine the figure was 41.1 per cent. In the Baltic States the percentage of the population in poverty rose from 1 per cent in 1987-88 to an average of 29 per cent in 1993-95. Per capita annual average growth rate in the former USSR taken as a whole, fell from +3.36 per cent in the period 1950-73 to -6.86 per cent in the period 1990-98¹¹.

The collapse of the economy, along with the rise of a social crisis, was the price of restoring capitalism. However one understood the weaknesses of the Soviet state the answer was not the impoverishment of large sections of the population to fund a new bourgeoisie, and a new system of exploitation.

The successes of the industrialisation of the USSR in the 1930s were sufficient to save it, and in the process the rest of the world, from the Nazi onslaught. From 1913-50, 12 western European countries, including France, Germany, Italy and Britain, grew by on average by 2.14 per cent. The countries of the former USSR grew by 2.40 per cent in the same period. From 1950-73, the same 12 countries grew by an average 4.65 per cent, while the USSR grew by 4.84 per cent¹². This was nowhere near enough to "catch up and surpass" the capitalist west, but it demonstrates that the USSR was a relatively economically successful state.

Average life expectancy in Western Europe in 1900 was 46; by 1950 it had risen to 67. Average life expectancy in Russia in 1900 was 32, by 1950 it had risen to 65¹³. There is no clearer measure of social progress and social welfare than life expectancy. The revolution unleashed a burst of social progress that doubled the life expectancy of Soviet citizens, while in the West it grew by less than 50 per cent. The living standards of the population could be so raised because the bourgeoisie no longer existed to sequester much of the social product.

It is interesting to consider what would have happened if a less autarkic economic policy had been pursued in the 1930s in the USSR. The industrialisation demonstrated the superiority of the soviet led economy over the preceding Russian capitalism, and a lead was set in social provision and technological development. But the economy could not be fully developed in isolation from the world market, and the most developed economies.

The lessons of Lenin's NEP were not remembered. Not only did he propose to retain some market mechanisms, and private markets, to adjust and develop the state sector. He also proposed in his writings on 'Concessions' to allow private capital from abroad to help develop the economy of the USSR. Stalin's course eliminated all market mechanisms and suppressed not only bourgeois but even petty-bourgeois property. The USSR continued this policy fundamentally from 1929 until

its end. Lenin's dynamic view of the future of the Soviet economy would have allowed a different course of growth to that promoted by Stalin and supporters. The Chinese experience since 1978, hugely successful and lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, is much closer to Lenin's policy than Stalin's.

Writing of her experience of watching the newly formed Red Guard go into battle in 1917, Louise Bryant wrote:

The city workers are smaller than the peasants: they are stunted and pale, but they fight like demons. Lately they have put up the most desperate resistance to the Germans in Finland and the Ukraine. In this particular battle with the Cossacks they were so unused to warfare that they forgot to fire off their guns. But they did not know the meaning of defeat. When one line was mowed down another took its place. Women ran straight into the fire without any weapons at all. It was terrifying to see them; they were like animals protecting their young. The Cossacks seemed to be superstitious about it. They began to retreat. The retreat grew into a rout. They abandoned their artillery, their fine horses, they ran back miles...

and

For the first time I visualised Washington and his starving, ragged army at Valley Forge... I felt suddenly that the revolution must live in spite of temporary military defeat, in spite of internal strife, in spite of everything.¹⁴

Those workers, those women made history as certainly as George Washington and his fighters. 1917 changed the world forever. For socialists today, there is nothing to apologise for, nothing to decry. The correct stance is to study and celebrate the October Revolution – the birth of our power.

Notes

1. L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol.1, pp.27-28
2. L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol.3, pp.349-350
3. In Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, pp.127-133
4. A. Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, p.34
5. V. Lenin, *Our Revolution*, CW Vol.33, pp.477-479
6. J. Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, p.254
7. V. Lenin, *Can the Bolsheviks retain state power?*, CW Vol.26 p.111
8. K. Kautsky, *Socialism and Colonial Policy*, Athol Books edition p.57
9. V. Lenin, *Resolution on the national question*, CW Vol.19, p.427
10. L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol.3, p.62
11. A. Maddison, *The World Economy*, p.157
12. *Ibid.*, p.187
13. *Ibid.*, p.32
14. L. Bryant, *Six Red Months in Russia*, pp.122-123

Women and October: women's lives mirrored the arc of the Revolution

The inequality of the two before the law, which is a legacy of previous social conditions, is not the cause but the effect of the economic oppression of women.

– Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*

Such was the significance of the October Revolution for women's lives – most directly in Russia but also internationally (think, for example, of Sylvia Pankhurst – invited to Russia by Lenin in 1918 – and the inspiration the Bolshevik victory lent to her work with working class women in London's East End, her involvement in the early Communist Party and in the anti-colonial struggle) that it cannot be entirely obliterated from officially permitted history. Hence an exhibition at the British Library records something of the role of women in Russian progressive politics and directly in the Bolshevik struggle. Most importantly, it hints at how women's social, political and economic position improved or declined along with the arc of the revolutionary process itself.

One thing that is somewhat misrepresented in this record is the critique that, it is said, the Bolsheviks had of bourgeois women's groups. This is, of course, true – but another way of making the point could be to describe the vibrant and long-standing argument running through the late 19th century into the early decades of the 20th century over strategy, tactics and alliances that could improve the position of women in fundamental ways. Could this be done through political rights alone? was the key question posed.

In an age when women were denied basic political equality such as the right to vote, access to higher education and professions, divorce and so on, of course there was a focus on these rights. Socialist women argued – over decades and in diverse ways – that, however essential, these political rights were not sufficient for working class women experiencing both dire economic exploitation and oppression in the family.

Linked to this was the issue of where the roots of women's oppression lay. Political debates on these issues shaped the currents in Britain's suffrage movement (with Emmeline Pankhurst, who ultimately supported World War I and joined the Conservative Party on one side, and, on the other, women like Sylvia Pankhurst, who responded to the sharpening national and international class struggles in the early part of the 20th century by moving further to the left). Differences over whether political rights alone were sufficient – leaving the essential economic

and social system intact – also ran through Germany's huge women's movements (represented by women like Clara Zetkin) and in Russia (led by Alexandra Kollontai and others).

The socialist currents responded to the feminist movements by their own divisions and errors. In the period before World War One many men in Britain, for example, were disenfranchised as the vote was based on ownership of property. All women were disenfranchised, regardless of class position. The labour movement, and growing Labour Party, was divided in response to the mass movement demanding votes for women. The right argued against supporting women's suffrage in favour of adult suffrage, a position that Sylvia Pankhurst summed up perfectly:

Adult Suffrage was the main refuge of those who did not care for Votes for Women and disliked the militant tactics. The active and advanced minority of the Party, which did the main share of the Party's work throughout the country, was virtually united behind Kier Hardie for Votes for Women at any price. (*The Suffragette Movement*, Virago, 1988)

Similar errors occurred in all the socialist movement. Those such as Hardie, Pankhurst, Zetkin, Kollontai and many others were engaged, over many years, in struggles to win an alliance between the women's and socialist movements by establishing the understanding that only by a fundamental change in society could women's oppression be fully addressed, and, equally, only by supporting women's demands in reality could the socialist movements have a hope of winning that social change. It was in this context that the Irish Marxist revolutionary James Connolly, in 1915, would write of the position of women that: 'The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave.' (*Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1973)

The Russian revolution was the most advanced point of the mass revolutionary wave which peaked towards the end of World War I. The actions taken by the Bolsheviks followed these years of debate and struggle in the socialist international and international women's movements. Lenin's *State and Revolution* reflected – as did most of Lenin's writings – an intervention into these international debates over analysis and strategy. Its vision of the 'withering away' of the state – as its role in upholding the position of a minority over a majority would no longer be necessary – encompassed the withering away of the family. The family, as had been argued by Engels in the 1880s, was understood as a crucial part of the state apparatus in class, and specifically capitalist, society:

The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman... In the family, he is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat.' (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Pathfinder, 1979)

The contradiction created by capitalism was that women were drawn into mass, industrialised paid employment through the demands of capitalism but were still required to play a traditional caring role in the family. Capitalism, argued the Bolsheviks, relied on this contradiction and would not resolve it. Today we see the sense of this in, for example, the ebbs and flows in support for and attacks on the post-World War II welfare state: these involving less or more intensification of women's domestic labour. The expectation – and the pressure – is that, when care services are cut, hospital services reduced, nurseries closed, after school classes cancelled, women (in the main) will somehow be able to cover the gap.

It was in this framework of viewing women's oppression as rooted in the family system that the Bolsheviks not only introduced revolutionary changes in women's rights but set their sights strategically on the replacement of the family as a location of the reproduction of the sexual division of labour and the oppression of women. The tasks fulfilled by women in the family were to be socialised. As Wendy Goldman writes in *Women, the State and Revolution*, unlike (one should say some – Goldman suggests all) 'modern feminists, who argue for a re-division of household tasks within the family, increasing men's share of domestic responsibilities, Bolshevik theorists sought to transfer housework to the public sphere.' (Cambridge University Press, 1993) The success of the former approach can be assessed in the finding by the Office for National Statistics in 2016 that women (in male-female couple households) were doing almost 40 per cent more unpaid chores in the household than men on average: that is to say, the strategy of reliance on a gender re-division of domestic labour alone continues to be a failure.

The Bolsheviks' vision – all the more astonishing given the scale of the oppression, isolation and drudgery of women's lives in pre-revolutionary Russia, where women were virtual slaves in a patriarchal family system – was therefore for the economic independence of women and ending of extreme isolation in the family through integrating women into all layers of the labour force and for the socialisation of domestic labour.

The first legal actions in this area, in December 1917, substituted civil for religious marriage and established divorce at the request of either spouse: prior to this, under state law a wife owed complete obedience to her husband, was compelled to live with him, take his name and social status. Divorce was extremely difficult to obtain. By comparison with the Bolsheviks'



action, only in 1969 did divorce law in Britain begin to move towards divorce by consent rather than having to prove grounds such as cruelty. At the time the Bolsheviks were making these radical changes, no woman in Britain, for example, even had the right to vote.

A more developed Code on Marriage, the Family and Guardianship was ratified in October 1918. This incorporated the two earlier decrees and also abolished the juridical concept of 'illegitimacy' and entitled all children to parental support. It forbade adoption of orphans by individual families in favour of state guardianship: the fear was that, in a largely agrarian society, individual adoption would allow peasants to exploit children as unpaid labour. The Code also sharply restricted the duties and obligations of the marital bond. Women retained full control of their earnings after marriage, and neither spouse had any claim on the property of the other. These changes radically improved the political rights of both women and children in relation to the family and constituted the most progressive family legislation then in existence.

The First Four Congresses of the Third International – that is, the international congresses that took place in the Lenin-era of the international – saw attempts to entrench this understanding within all sections of the Communist Party and parties affiliated internationally. Thus, Alexandra Kollontai – the commissar for social welfare and a veteran socialist and feminist – submitted a resolution stating that the international recognised that its success could only be ensured by a struggle equally involving women and noting that 'at least half of all the wealth in the world is produced by female labour'.

Theses on women at the Third Congress in 1921 argued for the centrality of work on women's equality and involvement of women by parties and movements affiliated to the Third International. While there is no doubt the Bolsheviks supported equal political rights – as demonstrated in the 1918 Code – the theses declared 'the most radical feminist demand – the extension of the suffrage to women in the framework of bourgeois parliamentarianism – does not solve the question of real equality for women'.

Special structures were to be established in all parties and at all levels to develop work among women, raise awareness and develop activity on specific issues. A resolution at the Fourth Congress in 1922 strongly criticised those parties in the International that had failed to implement the priority agreed to political work among women. Again, such resolutions reflected the Bolshevik understanding that the support of women was essential for the success of the communist movements, and that support would only grow from the communists' active support for women's demands for equality.

The fate of this vision was inexorably tied to the success or retreat of the revolutionary process – an awareness of which runs through the resolutions and

policies adopted by the socialist movement in the years up to and immediately after 1917. The defeat of revolutionary movements outside of Russia and in more powerful capitalist economies – in Germany in particular – isolated the Russian revolution. Taking power in a mainly agrarian economy, and beset by the impact of war, the dislocation of millions of people, blockade by the imperialist powers, civil war, famine and mass epidemics of influenza, cholera and typhus, the survival of the revolution was in question. The focus and investment required in the new policies of socialised domestic labour and political emancipation of women were weakened under such conditions; at the same time necessary economic concessions such as the New Economic Policy stimulated political forces, particularly among the better off peasantry, most hostile to women's equality. Contradictions between women's independence and demands of peasant households for control of women's labour deepened, for example.

Trotsky subsequently put it thus:

The real resources of the state did not correspond to the plans and intentions of the Communist Party. You cannot 'abolish' the family; you have to replace it. The actual liberation of women is unrealisable on a basis of 'generalised want'. Experience soon proved this austere truth which Marx had formulated eighty years before.

This material reality placed great pressures on the Bolshevik commitment to ending the oppression of women, but the rise of Stalin resulted in concessions and retreats that were greater than necessary – such as on abortion, divorce and domestic labour – and moreover these were presented as desirable rather than regrettable.

Thus, by 1930 the Zhenotdel – established in 1919, supported by Kollontai and Inessa Armand, as a department of government in 1919 to promote women's interests – was abolished in 1930. In 1936 abortion was outlawed (reversing the legalisation of abortion – the first country to do so – in 1920) and monetary incentives were offered for childbearing. The Family Code of 1936 also made divorce more difficult and made changes on alimony and child support that were consistent with a campaign to promote 'family responsibility'. The ideas that had inspired social policy after the revolution were discredited and the earlier laws condemned as 'legal nihilism'. Legal theorists associated with these views of the 1920s were arrested and shot. The author of the 1918 Code was committed to a mental institution. These reversals of rights took place alongside radical reductions in real wages in these years. The Family Edict of 1944 reversed the remnants of the early legislation: recognition of *de facto* marriage was withdrawn; paternity suits were banned; the category of illegitimacy was reintroduced; divorce was transferred back to the courts. Further, limited, liberalisation only took place following the Stalin era.

Despite the isolation of the Soviet Union and restrictions in women's lives as a result, plus the defeats imposed by Stalin, the position of women remained in advance of that of the masses of working class women in the Western capitalist countries in key economic respects. Even at time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 women's employment, pensions, literacy and childcare were more advanced than in the West. What the Soviet Union, even with a conservative and limited programme compared to the ideals of the revolution, represented for women can be seen in the contrast with what happened after 1991. The impact of capitalism, rise of unemployment – hitherto unknown – and lengthy delays in wage payments together with the disappearance of a social safety net hit women much harder than men. The rise of global human trafficking involved the sexual and other forms of enslavement of untold numbers of Russian women. One 2011 analysis of research estimates that 'no less than 500,000 have been trafficked from the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union' and that 'Russia has become one of the largest exporters of women for the sex industry'. That last sentence says so much: the writer of the article – who is hostile to what has happened to women in Russia – still cannot avoid using the notion of 'exports' to refer to the enforced movement of (at least) hundreds of thousands of not products but human beings – women – into the sex trade and other forms of virtual or actual slavery, post-1991.

The Russian Revolution was a beacon of an alternative possibility for women. The position that women leaders such as Kollontai and Armand occupied at the centre of revolutionary change reverberated across decades as an example to generations of feminists and socialists. The Bolshevik insistence that the liberation of women was inexorably tied to the creation of a new society and vice versa is demonstrated in what happened around 1917, in Soviet society and in Russia after 1991.

The Russian Revolution and the black struggle

1. The lock-step of socialist advance and black struggle

Marx identified the class struggle as the locomotive of history. Yet, the struggle between classes as defined by Marx is fundamental but it far from exhausts the types of conflict typical of the modern era. In particular, the struggle of black people for liberation is one of the primary metrics by which it is possible to characterise the 20th century. How does this titanic struggle relate to the class struggle as defined by Marx, and how should communists understand and relate to the black movement and black consciousness?

The black struggle – that is the struggle against racism plus the struggle for liberation and self-determination – and the class struggle are clearly linked. Indeed it is possible to clearly correlate periods of upsurge in class struggle with periods of upsurge in the black struggle. For instance between the formation of the Second International, through the revolutionary wave at the turn of the 20th century, to the isolation and encirclement of the fledgling Soviet state it is possible to trace a simultaneous rising and then descending arc of black struggle. For instance:

- The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 – the first modern nationalist movement to emerge in the British Empire in Africa and Asia, which became a pivotal participant in the Indian independence movement, with over 15 million members and over 70 million participants in its struggle against British colonial rule.
- The Furen Literary Society (Hong Kong, 1890), Revive China Society (Honolulu, 1894), etc formed mainly outside of China by Sun Yat-sen and came together in the Revolutionary Alliance, the predecessor of the KMT (Kuomintang), to force the Xinhai revolution overthrowing rule by the Emperor in 1911.
- The Philippine Revolution began in August 1896.
- The First Pan-African Conference was held in London from 23 to 25 July 1900¹.
- The Indonesian independence movement began in 1908.
- The ANC (African National Congress) was founded in South Africa 1912.
- The UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) was founded in Jamaica, 1914 by Marcus Garvey.

Then after a period of downturn there is simultaneously an expansion of revolutionary struggle during and following World War II together with a renewal of the black struggle in the form of the colonial revolution and the struggle against

racism and for civil rights. In fact there was significant overlap between the colonial revolution and the socialist revolution in a number of important theatres including China, Vietnam, and Cuba. Also notable were:

- The Vietminh was founded in 1941.
- The Arab Ba'ath Party founded in Syria on 7 April 1947.
- The non-aligned movement was founded at the Bandung (Indonesian) conference in 1950.
- 5th Pan-African Conference held 1945 in Manchester.
- The Algerian NLF (National Liberation Front) was founded in 1954.
- Broadening of the strategy of the civil rights movement (US) to embrace direct action².
- TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) was founded in 1954.
- MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) was founded in 1956.
- ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) was founded in 1961.
- FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) was founded in 1962.
- ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) was founded in 1963.
- The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) was founded in 1964.
- UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) was founded in 1966.
- Founding of the Black Panther Party (US) in 1966.

Also the fact that in this period the Soviet Union was able to break out of its pre-war isolation and emerged immeasurably stronger meant that the US had to give large concessions to the population both at home and abroad in order to contain the socialist advance. This created further openings for the advance of the colonial revolution and the struggle against racism and in turn bolstered the prestige of the Soviet State.

It is therefore clear that there is an intimate relationship between the class struggle and the black struggle. However, in order to appreciate the exact nature of the relationship it is necessary to understand precisely what the black struggle is historically.

2. The national character of the black struggle

Any struggle against racism and oppression of non-white peoples has the character of a national struggle. Therefore, in order to understand how communists approach the relation between the class struggle and the black struggle one has to start with the approach of the Bolsheviks prior to the Russian Revolution, and the revolutionary regime in the early Soviet Union, to the national question.

Firstly, it is necessary to understand that the material basis for the oppression of non-white nations lies in the 'historic defeat of non-white nations' during the era of the construction of the European nation states. Thus the expulsion of the Moors

from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella, which marked the beginning of the change in the relationship between the white nations of Europe and the non-white nations of the middle east and North Africa, was accompanied by Columbus' first voyage to the Americas, which led directly to the subjugation and eventual colonisation of the continent. As early as 1494, Pope Alexander VI was instrumental in brokering the Treaty of Tordesillas, whereby a first division of the non-European world between the Crown of Castile and Portugal was defined along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. The division of the other side of the world between these two powers was agreed at the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529 specifying the demarcation as the anti-meridian of the earlier treaty. In this way, Spain and Portugal became the first modern colonial powers and Spain became the first great power of Renaissance Europe, and its conquest of the New World gave it access to an abundance of precious metals and hence a treasury beyond any of its competitors. This was the first and most spectacular act of primitive accumulation of capital in modern history.

Similarly, the Tudor dynasty is associated with the foundation and establishment of the modern centralised state in England and Wales. However, in 1600 Elizabeth I granted a Royal Charter to the British East India Company. It eventually came to rule large areas of India with its own private armies, and finally led to the establishment of the Raj in the Victorian era.

The Dutch Revolt of 1566 against Spanish rule led to the formation of the independent Dutch republic under William of Orange – one of the first independent European republics. The Dutch East India Company was granted a Royal Charter in 1602 as a monopoly on the spice trade. It established trading ports by taking over territory and was the instrument by which the establishment of the Dutch empire came about. In 1621, the Dutch government granted a charter to the Dutch West India Company, and gave it jurisdiction over the slave trade in Brazil, the Caribbean and North America.

The establishment of East India Companies and West India Companies became fashionable during the era of the construction of the European centralised nation state. So what we have in the late medieval period is a relationship between European 'white' nations and north African/Middle Eastern 'non-white' nations made fractious during the medieval crusades; a historic victory of the nascent Spanish state over the Moors; the discovery of the new world including new 'non-white' peoples at an earlier stage of development; and the establishment of European trading companies operating in the name of the European crown nations gaining favourable footholds in both the far East and West. So the creation of the European nation state during the transition from feudalism to capitalism is accompanied by both the beginnings of primitive accumulation and the historic defeat of 'non-white' nations. In fact, primitive accumulation occurs because of the historic defeat of non-white nations. This process is deepened at each successive

stage of the development of capitalism by the scale of the transatlantic slave trade; the establishment of the Raj in India; the penetration of China via the opium wars; and driven to its conclusion in the partition of Africa at the conference of Berlin in 1885. It is fair to say that the historic defeat of non-white nations is woven into the fabric of the European nation state.

Moreover, the overwhelming experience of the last four hundred years of history, and hence the consciousness that emerges from it, which consists of the integration into and subordination of the historical development of predominantly non-white nations into the emergent capitalist system by predominantly white imperial nations. Furthermore, this subordination of the historical development of predominantly non-white oppressed nations to the needs of the predominantly white oppressor nations is the objective material basis for the consciousness of white superiority and the persistence of imperialist national consciousness among the peoples of the oppressor nations.

The black struggle therefore appears as the struggle of non-white oppressed nations against white oppressor nations and therefore in all respects takes on the character of a national struggle of liberation. The question is then, what is the relation if any between the struggle between classes and the black struggle? Certainly the black struggle is an anti-imperialist struggle since it appears as a struggle against national oppression – which itself is perpetuated in the modern era by imperialism.

3. General questions concerning the building of a revolutionary party

It is instructive to consider how the Bolsheviks approached the question of how a revolutionary proletarian organisation should be built, and what they considered the relation between the party and the class should be.

3.1 Party and class – debates on spontaneity

The first appearance of Russian Social Democracy consisted of an alliance between revolutionaries and bourgeois intellectuals (the legal Marxists) in order to defeat Narodism and popularise Marxist ideas. The Narodniks were anti-capitalists who identified the peasantry as the revolutionary class, and who hoped that by 'going among the peasants' they could radicalise them and spontaneously spur them on to revolution. When the conditions under which the Russian Social Democracy had to operate changed, the legal Marxists then attempted to retreat from revolutionary politics and reduce Marxism to narrow trade unionism. They thought that by 'going among the workers' that they could spontaneously spur them on to strike action, and that this was all that revolutionaries could achieve in the conditions of the 1890s.

This amounted to just another variant of the reliance on spontaneity that characterised the Narodniks. This produced a defining debate between the younger

legal Marxists and the older Lenin, Plekhanov and Axelrod around the character of the party and the relation between the party and the class.

During the strike wave of the 1890s the Russian Social Democracy saw it as its role to unite the strike movement with the revolutionary movement against Tsarist autocracy, ie. to bring the working class to bear on the most pressing political questions – to make it the vanguard fighter for democracy. In other words it had to champion the interests of all the oppressed, not just its own interests.

Importantly, the state is the arena where the competing interests between the classes and fractions of classes are ultimately played out. On the training of revolutionary cadres, Lenin wrote:

Working class consciousness cannot be genuinely political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases, without exception, of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter what class is affected... The consciousness of the masses of the workers cannot be genuine class consciousness, unless the workers learn to observe from concrete, and above all from topical (current), political facts and events, every other social class and all the manifestations of the intellectual, ethical and political life of these classes; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist estimate of all aspects of life and activity of all classes, strata and groups of the population... Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships between all classes... To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social Democrats must go among all classes of the population.

By referring to political consciousness, Lenin is identifying that there is a difference between the working class's knowledge of itself as a class, and its knowledge of itself as the leader of the nation. To illustrate this it is useful to contrast such knowledge with national consciousness which is a product of mother tongue, community, culture and accumulated social experience. National consciousness springs spontaneously from the given circumstances. In the same way working class consciousness is determined by position in the relations of production, exposure to working class culture and experience of class antagonism and struggle.

However, to acquire revolutionary consciousness the working must possess a knowledge of the position and circumstances of all social forces and their interrelations – which is scientific knowledge – and which comes about through a distillation of the lessons of the class struggle both historically and conjecturally. This form of consciousness cannot come about spontaneously, but requires an organisation dedicated to determining it and imbuing the working class with it.

Differently to any other previous class, the working class must become class conscious before it can assume the leadership of the nation. Moreover, in the context of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, the working class was a tiny proportion of the population. The country was overwhelmingly agrarian, and was also a multinational country possessing within its borders many national minorities.

For this reason, the questions of land reform and the national and colonial questions assumed primary importance for revolutionary strategy. The task of the working class in these circumstances was to take all the grievances of the peasantry and the oppressed national minorities, combine them with its own struggle against the imperialist bourgeoisies and focus them onto the Tsarist autocracy.

3.2 The communist approach to the national and colonial question and self-determination

National movements arise as a necessary condition for the complete victory of commodity production, for the triumph of politically united territories, typically whose population speak a single language or dominant language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and its consolidation in literature eliminated.

Thus, at the turn of the 20th century in Asia, only Japan possessed the most complete development of commodity production and the freest, widest and speediest growth of capitalism, and Japan was the only independent national state. Also, because capitalism had awakened Asia, it called forth national movements everywhere on that continent.

The national state is the rule and the norm of capitalism, whereas the multinational state (like Russia then was) was an exception, a product of its backwardness. When discussing these questions in practice it must be emphasised that a historically concrete appreciation must be the basis. There is a difference between emergent capitalism where the population is drawn into the national movement, and developed capitalism where class antagonism comes to the fore.

The right of a particular nation to self-determination depends crucially on these assessments. The bourgeoisie invariably almost invariably initially assumes the leadership of the National movements. Support for self-determination therefore assumes support for demands put forward by a section of the bourgeoisie, albeit and importantly, the bourgeoisies of an oppressed nation. However, in doing so the working class supports these demands of bourgeoisie on a conditional basis, the primary motivator being to secure national peace, equal rights, democracy, and the conditions for the development of the class struggle. In other words the working class maintains its independence as a class, while advancing towards socialism along all possible paths.

The argument that was addressed by Lenin in the pamphlet *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* was that the position taken by Rosa Luxemburg that the slogan supporting the right of Russia's oppressed nations to political independence and the right to secession amounted to prostration before the national bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations in effect put her in the same camp as the Constitutional Democratic Party, i.e. the party of the national bourgeoisie of the oppressor nation.

Similarly, following the Russian revolution the most fundamental point in the attitude of the Comintern to the national and colonial question is the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. In reality, the recognition of the right of all nations to self-determination implies the maximum of democracy and the minimum of nationalism, and not the other way around as is often argued by its detractors. Political self-determination of oppressed nations is analogous to political democracy within advanced capitalist states. Political reforms won do not end class oppression but their conquest expresses a changed relation between classes. Similarly, political independence does not end national oppression but its conquest expresses changes in class relations on an international scale. An example is the Algerian civil war of 1954–1962 which following the defeat of the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 at which the French were expelled from Indochina; Algeria rose in open rebellion and forced the Fourth Republic into a terminal crisis.

3.3 Application of the position to the oppressed black minority in the USA

Initially, the CPUSA prior to the discussion in the Comintern held that the oppression of blacks in the US was purely an economic problem, part of the struggle between Labour and capital, and that nothing could be done about discrimination and equality this side of socialism. This is a classic example of an argument where everything is considered to be directly derivative from the opposition between labour and capital. Rather, in reality this opposition does condition all other factors, but only in the last analysis.

This position was finally reversed following protracted discussions within the Comintern. Also, after the split in the communist movement there was reluctance on the part of the CLA (Communist League of America) to adhere to the slogan of self-determination citing the fact that blacks had become fully assimilated and did not have their own language, special culture or religion.

However, this is to raise to the level of decisiveness those questions that are not decisive. Belgium and Switzerland would have problems arguing for nationhood on these bases. The decisive factors are the historical consciousness and impulses of the group, and the adoption and support for nationalist slogans by the masses are the only proof required as to whether American blacks are a national minority.

The Comintern's line was presented at the second congress in 1920 after substantial discussion in the Colonial Commission in the congress. Based on a 1910 US census, Lenin viewed the question of blacks in the US South as one of an uncompleted agrarian and bourgeois democratic revolution.

Essentially, following the betrayal of Reconstruction and the instituting of Jim Crow, it became impossible for blacks to be assimilated in the same way as Irish, Italians, Poles, etc. American blacks came from various parts of Africa and spoke a variety of languages. Their birth as an oppressed nation was forged on their transportation to and enslavement in the US, and was matured in the post-Reconstruction betrayal which left the agrarian question unaddressed and freed blacks landless. Moreover, the condition of Southern blacks was imprinted on the entire nation, so that even Northern blacks were defined as an unassimilable minority.

4. Lessons for contemporary revolutionary strategy

Today, for revolutionary strategy in the imperialist countries, the working class faces an adversary which is incomparably stronger than the adversary faced by the Bolsheviks. Moreover, Russia was an exceptional case where all the contradictions reinforced to produce a deep crisis of the Tsarist regime. Today, there are no comparable weak links in imperialism and no situations purely within an imperialist country where the contradictions are reinforcing to such a positively overdetermined extent.

The imperialist bourgeoisie are possessed of an awe-inspiring concentration of wealth and power, with state machines and military alliances to back it up. However, as power becomes ever more concentrated, it is the case that the overwhelming majority of humanity is oppressed by imperialism. Combined with this, is the fact that the overwhelming majority of this overwhelming majority are comprised of non-white nations.

Moreover, imperialism is comprised of nation states with overwhelmingly white national majorities³, and so imperialist domination assumes the form of a colour divide.

National oppression of non-white nations comes about as the result of a prolonged period of conquest, plunder, colonisation and subjugation of non-white nations by the proto-imperialists beginning in the medieval period – the discovery of the Americas by Columbus, the expulsion of the Moors from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella, the conquest of South America by Pizzaro and Cortez, and culminating and reaching its apogee at the Conference of Berlin, 1884–5, with the partition of Africa.

This four-hundred year process can be viewed in its historic totality as comprising a 'historic defeat of non-white nations', and is the objective material basis for the

oppression of black people and for racism. In this sense, it can be said that racism is the ideology of imperialism. Therefore, the struggle for the liberation of black people from super-exploitation assumes the character of a national struggle for self-determination.

Following Lenin, it is therefore the task of the working class in the imperialist countries to take the struggle of the overwhelming majority of humanity against imperialist domination and focus it onto and combine it with its struggle against its own bourgeoisies. When viewed purely on a national basis the struggle against the imperialist bourgeoisies appears to be a hopelessly uphill struggle. However, when viewed on a world wide scale it can be seen that small victories are possible that by themselves incrementally change the overall balance of forces, but when taken as a whole can be seen to comprise a process of the continual weakening of the stranglehold of imperialism.

Notes

1. It was subsequently followed up by conferences in 1919 in Paris, 1921 in London, 1923 in London, 1927 in New York. Another such event did not take place until 1945 in Manchester, 1974 in Dar es Salaam and 1994 in Kampala.
2. Following the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) with the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955) culminating with the Selma to Montgomery marches (1964).
3. The exception to this rule is Japan, which is the only non-white imperialist nation. However, it is instructive to know that even in this non-white imperialist nation, they have developed ideologies of racial superiority with respect to the other peoples of South-East Asia, in spite of the fact that Japan's historical span of imperialist dominion over the peoples of South-East Asia is narrow in comparison to that of Europe.

The economic legacy of October 1917

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was an event of world-historic importance. It was the first time in history that the working class and its allies seized political power and held onto it for long enough to impact the entire world in a sustained way.

The defeat of Nazism, the post-World War II decolonisation, the overturning of capitalism in Eastern Europe and the establishment of the 'welfare state' social safety net in Western Europe as well as the victorious socialist revolutions in Yugoslavia, China, Cuba and Vietnam were all made possible by October.

However, most commentary and assessments of the Russian Revolution take as their narrow focus the events in Russia and then the USSR alone. Within these confines, the 'damning' claim is made that ultimate economic failure must be laid at the door of the Revolution itself. This is both faulty logic and faulty economics.

Logically, all new human endeavours present new challenges and unknown risks. But no one suggests that the high death toll involved in early human flight, or the environmental damage created by the internal combustion engine means that they should never have been attempted. These were the negative consequences of scientific revolutions, where those negative consequences have to be overcome even as the new productive capacity is harnessed.

Similarly, human beings are still coming to understand the science of socialist revolution and socialist construction. An important and potentially decisive factor is that socialism like all new social formations begins within the body of its predecessor and is obliged to live alongside it until the latter is finally forced to disappear.

Yet even on the strictest national economic grounds the eventual overthrow of the Soviet Union does not all negate its great contribution to the economic development of Russia.

Soviet Union's economic balance sheet

The ultimate verdict on any economic system is whether it is able to provide a lasting improvement in the living standards of the population as a whole. On this count, the Soviet Union was a significant success.

Contrary to widespread propaganda and myth-making from the bourgeois economists and red-baiters, the Soviet Union made greater economic advances than most contemporary advanced capitalist countries. Even now, after it has been overthrown, its legacy has raised Russia and the former Soviet republics up to a much higher relative level than most of their counterparts.

The relative performance of the former republics of the USSR is shown in Chart 1 below, alongside the UK and US for reference.

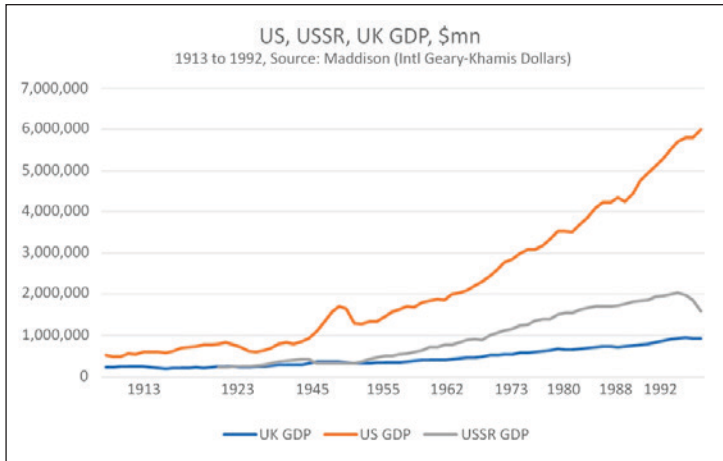


Chart 1. US, USSR, UK GDP 1913 to 1992

For significant periods the USSR performed more strongly even than the US, even though the US benefited from being the leading capitalist power which ensured its dominance of the world markets. Separately, for the entire period from 1913 to 1992 the USSR outperformed the UK economy and even now remains significantly larger than the UK.

Selected key data from Angus Maddison, the leading authority on global GDP growth rates, is reproduced in the table below. The Maddison data uses an international US\$ measure of Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs).

Selected dates for GDP of the USSR, UK and USA, US\$ (Int'l Geary-Khamis), millions

| | 1913 | 1928 | 1945 | 1955 | 1962 | 1973 | 1980 | 1988 |
|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| USSR | 232 | 232 | 334 | 648 | 916 | 1,513 | 1,709 | 2,007 |
| UK | 225 | 244 | 347 | 406 | 472 | 676 | 728 | 921 |
| USA | 517 | 795 | 1,305 | 1,843 | 2,221 | 3,537 | 4,231 | 5,513 |

Source: Maddison

As the table shows, the devastation of World War I, civil war and invasion by a multitude of foreign armies meant that it was 1928 before the USSR regained its pre-War GDP level. From 1928 onwards, until 1980 the USSR grew more strongly than the USA. The USSR grew more than six times over that period while the US grew more than five times. In 1928 the economy of the USSR was equivalent to 29 per cent of the USA economy. By 1980 the USSR's economy was 40 per cent of the size of the US economy.

However, the USSR economy effectively stagnated in the 1980s and so grew much more slowly than US economy, even though the US itself was slowing. There are a number of factors behind this decline and eventual collapse, discussed below.

Even so, the relative performance of the USSR and UK economies is striking. In the pre-World War I period the UK and what became the USSR economies were broadly similar in size, \$225mn and \$232mn respectively in the Maddison data. Despite the far greater devastation of both World Wars on the Russian/Soviet Union economy, they were still broadly similar in size in 1945. The outperformance of the economy of the USSR thereafter was exceptionally strong, so that by 1988, a period of little more than 40 years, the economy of the USSR was more than twice the size of the UK economy.

Now, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, the Russian economy is still greater than that of the UK, measured on a PPP basis. This is an indicator of the enduring positive economic legacy of October 1917.

Stagnation and collapse

The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union is not the final word on the legacy of the Russian Revolution. As shown above, that legacy was a startling outperformance compared to the UK economy which began the period in 1913 as one of the world's great economic powers.

The same is true of the relative performance versus Germany rightly regarded as one of the world's most productive capitalist economies (as well as France, not shown). The relative performance of the German and USSR economies is shown in Chart 2 below, and includes the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and up to the Great Financial Crash of 2008.

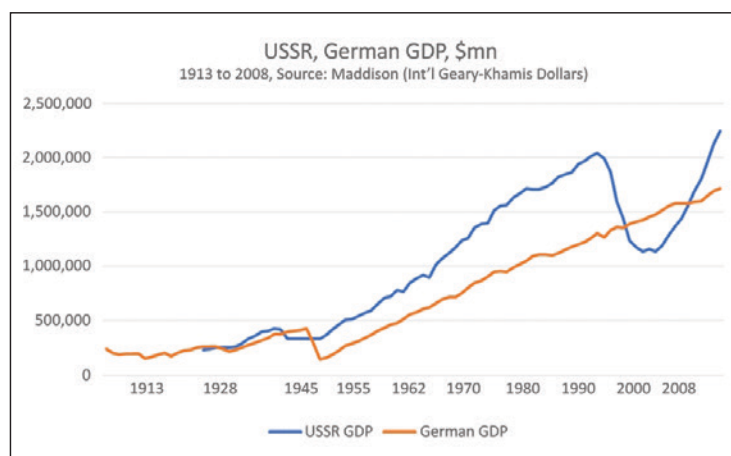


Chart 2 USSR, German GDP 1913 to 2008

It is clear that the USSR performed at least as well as some of the main capitalist powers, and substantially better than fading ones like the British economy. Even so, the entire system was overthrown after 1991, leading to the largest peacetime collapse in GDP and living standards in modern history. The Russian and other economies have only recently recovered their pre-1992 level.

Of course, the German economy was also utterly devastated by the outcome of World War II. But throughout the whole period Germany remained a capitalist country. Hitler presided over a capitalist country. The economic collapse of the Soviet Union only occurred after its overthrow as an economy overwhelmingly in state hands, where the private sector was an insignificant part of the economy. It would be better to argue that Nazi devastation was a part of Germany's capitalist development than economic collapse was a part of Soviet socialism.

Planning and the socialisation of production

Economic planning has the potential to be vastly superior to the anarchy of capitalist production for profit, with its recurrent booms, busts, shortages and bubbles.

But the most powerful force in developing productive capacity is what Adam Smith identified as the division of labour and was later refined and developed by Marx as the socialisation of production (the development centred on the inclusion of productive capital, or 'dead labour' as a decisive factor in the socialisation of production along with living labour power).

This can be seen in the capitalist world. If one producer is able to purchase the most up-to-date and efficient machinery and a competitor relies on squeezing their own profit margins to compensate for the lack of top quality machinery, the less efficient producer cannot survive for long.

The USSR was obliged to live alongside capitalism, and in world markets dominated by it. Capitalism still dominated world markets then, and is likely to continue to do so for a period even when, as can be confidently expected, further socialist countries arise alongside those that already exist. The economies where the working class is in power will still have to exist in the hostile environment of a world dominated by US imperialism, and where the US has a huge productivity advantage. In general, for each new attempt at socialist construction, the accommodation with capitalism domestically is necessarily in proportion to the capitalists' dominance of world markets.

One of the great myths that has arisen on Soviet economic policy making was that the elimination of the private sector was either necessary or desirable in the early stages of socialist construction. This myth arose only because it later became policy under Stalin. The first five year plan under Stalin explicitly refers to production in mixed ownership, joint ventures (between the state and the private

sector), concessions (to foreign capitalists) and privately-owned Russian firms. The elimination of the private sector was a later policy, not pursued by the Bolsheviks, or even central to Stalin's initial plans.

The emerging policy of Socialism in One Country was essentially a politically motivated measure, driven by Stalin's desire to eliminate hostile forces, perceived or otherwise. This entailed the removal of all forces depending on or linked to the private sector, in the countryside, in industry and in foreign trade. It was an attempt to skip over a historical process of economic development, as analysed by Marx, by decree.

This administrative measure did not and could not eliminate the world market dominated by imperialism. But for a period between the wars this deviation from Marx's analysis in the development of the Soviet economy did not obviously damage it on a relative basis, to the contrary, as the capitalist powers themselves slipped into disastrous protectionism. It became apparent that, in these circumstances, Socialism in One Country was indeed superior to 'capitalism in one country'.

Yet in the post-World War II period, the capitalist world was reorganised and reintegrated under the leadership and dominance of the US. With many intervening twists and turns, that dominance later meant that in the 1980s the US was able to call on the surplus resources of the other capitalist powers in order to directly compete with the USSR – primarily using the savings of Japan. The chosen terrain of that competition was an arms race. The USSR lost the arms race in the way it would have lost almost any direct struggle with the US based on resources and technology, when the US integration in and dominance of the world market meant it was able to command vastly greater resources.

Socialism in One Country was not the policy of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Lenin had earlier argued that new soviet republic must take advantage of the both the capital and expertise of the capitalists in order to consolidate its own power. Lenin put it this way: 'We produce only 100bbl of oil and are facing disaster. If we provide a concession to a capitalist who produces another 100bbl of oil, and even if we keep only 2bbl of that, this strengthens Soviet power'. Or, in theoretical terms, the emerging socialist society must participate in the international division of labour in order to survive and then prosper.

It was this failure to adopt an appropriate international economic policy that was a key factor in allow the imperialists to throttle the Soviet Union. The actions of the imperialists must be expected; the leopard cannot change its spots. What Hitler failed to do by force of arms, Reagan and Bush achieved with an arms race (with the help of all the imperialist powers, primarily Japan).

The Soviet Union could compete with the most advanced capitalist powers individually. But it could not compete when it cut itself off from world markets

and they collaborated within world markets. Socialism in One Country provided the self-destructive economic policy which curtailed the economic development of the Soviet Union and led to it losing the arms race with the US. But this was a negation of October 1917, which had always been conceived by its leading architects as the first stage of the international socialist revolution, leading to a new international socialisation of production at a higher, more integrated level.

The actual legacy of October is not economic disaster at all. The outright disaster came with the *overthrow* of October. That legacy includes an economic growth rate which frequently outstripped the leading capitalist economies. And even now, after the disaster of 1992, the Russian Revolution leaves the combined Russian and other former Soviet republics as a larger economy than many of its leading capitalist rivals.

The economic disaster for Russia was not the revolution, but its overthrow. The Revolution raised up the productive forces of the former Tsarist empire so that its citizens even now enjoy a much higher standard of living than they otherwise would.

