

**MEMORIES OF
THE FUTURE:
100 YEARS FROM THE
RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

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**LEFT
VOICE**

**A REVOLUTION IN SEARCH OF HEIRS
THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE MUSLIMS
PERMANENT REVOLUTION IN 1917
RUSSIA AND TODAY**

**MARXISM AND THE BLACK STRUGGLE
INTERVIEW WITH TAMÁS KRAUSZ
JOSÉ CARLOS MARIÁTEGUI:
FROM EXILE TO ANTI-STALIN
REVOLUTIONARY**

LEFT VOICE

The cover illustration was created by Argentine artist, Natalia Rizzo. It is inspired by the “flying bicycle” design of Vladimir Tatlin, one of the most important figures in the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s. He named his machine Letatlin (a combination of his own name and the Russian verb “to fly”). Letatlin became a symbol of avant-garde art and the idea that, because of the Russian Revolution, a new world was on the horizon.

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EDITORIAL

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE REAL MOVEMENT OF HISTORY

SONJA KRIEGER

The familiar story we are told about the Russian Revolution is that 1917 was an extremely violent takeover of a fledgling democracy by a small group of men bent on setting up a totalitarian regime. Barely a word of this is true, but it is what the apologists of capitalism would have us believe. Another ubiquitous notion, one just as spurious but far less often unmasked as such, is that the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union were just a giant, failed “experiment.” This idea conjures sinister associations and serves as confirmation of age-old bourgeois constructs about human nature as capitalist, immutable, and separate from society. In actuality, however, the Revolution of 1917 was a monumental victory in the struggle of the workers and oppressed against capitalism and class society.

Based on Hegel’s notion of history as movement, Marx understood that the dialectic of history is a material process and that “the history of all hitherto existing class society is the history of class struggle.” Revolution, according to historical materialism, is necessary as long as there is class conflict. What the Russian Revolution has taught us is that the abolition of the existing order is not only historically necessary but possible under the most adverse

circumstances. The Bolsheviks could not have known that their revolution would remain isolated in one country, or that the workers’ organizations in the developed countries would be defeated. This is the tragedy of the Revolution, but the consequences of this predicament and the disastrous ascent of Stalinism must not be used to discredit the immense achievements of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the years that followed.

The course of history was changed forever when, on Leon Trotsky’s 38th birthday one hundred years ago, the Cruiser Aurora gave the signal for the storming of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. It marked the start of what is now known as the October Revolution. Over the next few years, the working people and oppressed masses of Russia, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, successfully swept away the old feudal society, completing what had been set in motion during the February Revolution and leaving a deep imprint on the collective experience of communists and workers everywhere. This was a major step forward, accomplished by what Marx called the “real movement which abolishes the present state of things.”

The slogan “Peace, Bread, Land” reverberated throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Freedom from imperialist war, plunder, and tyranny was no longer a utopian dream but an attainable reality. Led by Lenin and Trotsky, the communists initiated the fundamental transformation of Russian society. Within a very short time span, after pulling the country out of WWI, they turned the Soviet Union into a planned economy with modern industry and advanced science and technology. The remarkable economic growth was matched by social progress: Illiteracy and unemployment became a thing of the past. Basic goods and cultural activities were made affordable for all. New laws guaranteed the political and legal equality of women, as well as their social and economic independence through the right to an abortion, civil marriage and divorce, paid maternity leave, and childcare, and the replacement of individual domestic labor with communal labor.

One hundred years later, the legacy of the Russian Revolution still looms large. In the U.S., mainstream media outlets report that today’s youth no longer balk at the idea of socialism and are actively discussing how to end capitalism. More than 25 years after the end of the Cold War, left-wing phenomena have sprung up in the U.S. and other imperialist countries – from Occupy Wall Street, Standing Rock, and Black Lives Matter

in the U.S. to Momentum in the U.K. and the “Battle of Hamburg” at the G20 summit in Germany. These movements, composed largely of young people, are asking once again “What is to be done?” Given the rise of a xenophobic and nationalist far right, the task at hand is an urgent one.

When President Trump named November 7 “National Day for the Victims of Communism,” he was issuing the latest iteration of the ruling class’s triumphalist rhetoric aimed to distract from the increasingly obvious fact that the victims of capitalism are once more raising their voices against exploitation and oppression. As it turns out, 1989 did not usher in the “end of history”; in fact, the current moment may be the beginning of a new historical period.

We cannot look to the ruling class parties for solutions. We can, however, draw on the lessons of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union in order to respond to the challenges of the present conjuncture. If the mass movements of workers and oppressed people are to continue to gain strength and become a truly viable historical force, we need to build a revolutionary party with a revolutionary strategy. This is the challenge today.



MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

BY CHRISTIAN CASTILLO

One hundred years ago, the Bolsheviks did something that few believed possible. The insurrection, meticulously planned by Trotsky in Petrograd, was approved by a majority vote of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. The Congress's composition had changed drastically from a few months earlier, when it had been dominated by the conciliationists – Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. In the weeks prior to the insurrection, in every factory, barrack, village, and across the entire front, millions discussed and deliberated. They came to the conclusion that power should be transferred from an increasingly decrepit provisional government to the soviets (councils) of workers, peasants' and soldiers' deputies. Lenin, who had to overcome dogged resistance from even within his own party, was vindicated. He had precisely advanced this orientation in his speech "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution," (also known as the "April Theses"), upon his return from exile. It states:

"No support for the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear, particularly of those relating to the renunciation of annexations. Exposure in place of the impermissible, illusion-breeding 'demand' that *this* government, a government of capitalists, should *cease* to be an imperialist government... The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government, and that therefore our task is, as long as *this government* yields to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics, an *explanation* especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses."

This is a very different orientation than what was expressed in Pravda throughout the month of March when it was under the leadership of Stalin and Kamenev – summarized by the slogan "to support the good and criticize the bad" of the provisional government.

From April until October, the Bolsheviks demonstrated tactical superiority and quickly went from being a "small minority" in the Soviets, as Lenin recognized in his thesis, to the majority. They employed different versions of the united front tactic, at one point even calling on the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries to break with the bourgeoisie and hand all power over to the Soviets. In this case, the Bolsheviks pledged to be a peaceful opposition. To take power, the Bolsheviks made an alliance with the left wing of the Socialist-Revolutionaries, a party which had

split in the course of the tumultuous events of the October Revolution.

Lenin and his followers articulated the deepest aspirations of the masses. The soldiers didn't want to keep dying in the trenches and the workers didn't want to keep starving for a war that made no sense to them. The peasants wanted land, their motivation for ending czarism. The liberal bourgeoisie, on the other hand, wanted to continue the imperialist war – following the dictates of the British and French foreign ministries. The Mensheviks and the majority of the Socialist-Revolutionaries supported the Provisional Government and its war. "Peace, Land and Bread!" and "All Power to the Soviets!" were the demands of Bolshevik agitators, finding growing support among the broad masses. By mid-June, they were the majority of the Petrograd proletariat, but they still had to win over the majority of workers and peasants in the country, which they soon accomplished.

Objective and Subjective Causes of the Revolution

For years, liberal historians presented the Russian Revolution as a Bolshevik coup; Italian writer Curzio Malaparte describes this in "Coup D'Etat: The Technique of Revolution." More recently, liberal historians have argued that a series of coincidences explain the victory of the October Revolution and the subsequent consolidation of the workers' state. Contrary to these superficial views, Trotsky had already analyzed the combination of objective and subjective factors that explain how, in backwards czarist Russia, the workers and peasants were able to seize power and finish what the Paris Commune had begun in 1871.

Trotsky explained that the victorious insurrection of October 25, 1917 (November 7 according to the Gregorian calendar which was not yet in use in Russia) did not simply fall from the sky. In 1905, as the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, he provided a list of eight historical circumstances that made it possible. Trotsky saw the first five as the objective or structural groundwork on which the possibility of a socialist revolution in Russia was built.

- The rotting away of the czarist bureaucracy and old ruling classes – the nobility, and the monarchy.
- The political weakness of the bourgeoisie, which had no roots in the masses of the people.
- The revolutionary character of the agrarian question.

- The revolutionary character of the problem of the oppressed nationalities.
- The significant social burdens weighing on the proletariat.

An understanding of these elements formed the basis of Trotsky's bold approach to the revolution in Russia and was embodied in his concept of permanent revolution – a further elaboration of Marx's theorization about the 1848 revolutions. While the basic ideas of the permanent revolution had been outlined by Trotsky prior to the failed 1905 uprising, they were more clearly articulated in "Results and Prospects", which Trotsky wrote in prison in 1906 after the defeat of the "revolutionary dress rehearsal".

Capitalist development in Russia had created a particular situation in which the proletariat was relatively strong in comparison to the bourgeoisie, whose strength was restricted by the czarist regime. The proletariat, although a minority in relation to the peasantry, had developed together with industry as a product of foreign investment and was highly concentrated in the cities – the heart of the country's political and economic life. The 1905 revolution corroborated Trotsky's theory that the Russian proletariat could play the leading role in the struggle against czarism.

As Trotsky predicted, this dynamic was repeated in the 1917 revolution. The armed working class led the revolution and acted as the leadership of the peasants in the struggle for peace, land and bread. They did not, however, stop at the threshold of private property; in order to win their demands, they would have to advance despotically against it. Democratic demands, which in another era could have been resolved by a bourgeois revolution, were instead taken up by the proletariat in a socialist revolution. When the workers and peasants seized power, it gave impetus to revolutionary developments throughout Europe, especially in Germany. The theories Trotsky formulated in 1905 were made a reality little more than a decade later.

The founder of the Red Army added a few exceptionally important conjunctural elements to the five organic or structural premises outlined earlier.

6. The Revolution of 1905 was the great school or in Lenin's phrase, "the dress rehearsal" of the Revolution of 1917. The Soviets as the irreplaceable organisational form of the proletarian united front in the Revolution was established for the first time in the year 1905.

7. The imperialist war sharpened all the contradictions, tore the backward masses out of their immobility, and thus precipitated the grandiose scale of the catastrophe.

But while these conditions explain the outbreak of the revolution, they do not account for the victory of the proletariat. For this, another factor was necessary:

8. The Bolshevik Party.¹

Why Did the Bolsheviks Play Such a Decisive Role?

Lenin explained:

"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 czarist yoke, matured with exceptional rapidity, and assimilated most eagerly and successfully the appropriate "last word" of American and European political experience."²

The Bolsheviks maintained an internationalist position during the World War, unlike the significantly larger German Social Democratic Party. The Bolsheviks resisted all forms of reactionary patriotism.

Under Lenin's influence they preserved class independence. After the February Revolution that toppled the Czar and created a provisional government, the Bolsheviks remained independent from the government of the liberal bourgeoisie and later from the coalition government of the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries.

The Bolsheviks recognized the soviets as the form of a new power. It's important to pause for this point, because the soviets went from being instruments of the united front in the struggle for power to the base of a new type of state, the most advanced form of proletarian democracy that history has yet discovered. Lenin built on the lessons of the Paris Commune to explain the characteristics of the proletarian state in the magnificent unfinished work "State and Revolution." Here Lenin proposed a state different from all states that have ever existed

– a system in which no despotic minority imposes its domination over the majority as has been the case throughout history. Rather, the exploited majority would exercise its transitory power over the exploiting minority and support the spread of revolutions internationally. Drawing from the lessons of the barricades of revolutionary Paris in June 1848, Marx had called this type of state the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This term tells us which class will socially rule society, not the precise political forms this rule will take. The "democratic republic," in contrast, is nothing but a cover for the dictatorship of capital. This is why Marx and Engels saw the Paris Commune as a blueprint for this new kind of state; a dictatorship over the bourgeoisie in which armed workers would not ask for permission before expropriating factories, land, and banks. At the same time, it would greatly expand democracy for the working class and all oppressed and exploited people. A type of state in which the professional police and the army would be replaced by the people in arms; where political functionaries would not earn more than a skilled worker and would be recallable by their voters; where the executive and legislative powers would merge into a working body that would decide on the political and economic destinies of society.

The Bolsheviks had the audacity to begin to implement this model in a culturally and economically backward country that was devastated first by the World War and then by civil war. In spite of everything, they produced wonders. They set up the Third International. They defeated the invasions of fourteen armies. They revolutionized the arts, education, and science. They achieved greater equality for women – including full political rights, divorce, and the legalization of abortion – than in any other country at the time. They attempted diverse forms of socialization of domestic work. Russia became an industrial power at a pace that no other nation had achieved.

But the Soviet Union was left in isolation when the socialist revolution failed in other countries, particularly in Germany. As explained in Edison Urbano's article, "The Moscow Thermidor," this led to the bureaucratization of the soviets and the party, pushed forward by an internal counterrevolution. The Left Opposition was the main victim.

Yesterday and Today

We called these lines "Memories of the Future." Let us imagine. Given the scientific and technical advances of our day (which capitalism develops in connection with the military industry), we have infinitely more favorable conditions than the

Bolsheviks had; in the Russian Revolution, workers won the eight-hour work day. Today, reducing the work day to six hours and distributing the necessary work among the employed and the unemployed would be just a first step. Our free time could be used for general access to culture, science, and art, leaving behind alienating, compulsory work and replacing it with free, creative, and cooperative activity.

For us, commemorating 100 years of the October Revolution is the opposite of a religious ritual or the routine observance of an anniversary. Returning to the October Revolution is essential, above all because it allows us to prepare the future.

A long time has passed since that revolutionary victory, which was later "betrayed" by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Hand in hand with neoliberalism, capitalism was restored in the former Soviet Union and in most places in which capital had been expropriated in the 20th century, such as in Eastern Europe and China, even if rulers still refer to themselves as Communist. However, the capitalist triumphalism that dominated the last decade of the 20th century is a thing of the past. Since the explosion of the crisis that started the Great Recession in 2008, instability and social and political polarization have characterized global politics and economics. The parties of the "extreme center" are in crisis. Geopolitical tensions are on the rise. Political aberrations appear more and more frequently, from Brexit to Trump.

In the imperialist centers and in the periphery, retrograde and aberrant political phenomenon are appearing. But we also see stuttering attempts by broad sectors of the masses, especially the youth, to create an egalitarian society. It is true there has not been a social revolution in this century. Possibilities existed at the turn of the century in Latin America and to a greater extent in the beginning of the Arab Spring. However, in the first case, the eruption of the masses was contained and channeled by "Pink Tide" governments that did not challenge the limits of capitalism (even that of the most radical variety – the Chavism of Venezuela – promised but never delivered its "socialism of the 21st century"). In the second case, the counterrevolution prevailed, with coups and civil wars without progressive camps.

However, in a world in which the eight richest people have as much money as the 3.6 billion poorest (in other words, half of humanity), sooner or later new revolutionary uprisings will shake the planet, as they did in the previous century. Capitalist irrationality facilitates the profit of a handful of large monopolies, leaving hundreds of millions in the most abject misery, and it is not "sustainable". This is true even of the habitability

of the planet itself, given capitalism's fevered use of the natural resources of "our shared home". Revolution will be back on the agenda in the 21st century. It will be permanent – or it simply will not be.

The past century demonstrates that workers can seize power, despite all the mechanisms of domination in the hands of the capitalists. It also shows that the capitalists will not give up their privileges without resistance. If capital is not defeated in its imperialist epicenters, it can rebuild itself and return to the counter-offensive.

Inspired by permanent revolution, we hope to avoid barbarism and to overcome "the prehistory of humanity", as Marx used to describe capitalist society. None of this will happen automatically, if we do not manage to build a revolutionary political organization of the working class both nationally and internationally. Obviously, history never happens the same way twice. But without inspiration from "those who dared" 100 years ago, and without an understanding of the history and lessons of the most revolutionary party in the history of the working class, we cannot accomplish this task.

TRANSLATED BY TATIANA COZZARELLI

Notes

1 Leon Trotsky, "In Defense of October," Nov. 1932, Copenhagen, Denmark.

2 V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder," in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, trans. Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 17–118, previously published as pamphlet (June, 1920).



**A REVOLUTION
IN SEARCH
OF HEIRS**

BY CLAUDIA CINATTI

One hundred years later, the Russian Revolution has remained lodged in the throat of official storytellers, histories and calendars, that have failed to metabolize the Bolshevik experience. No neutrality is possible. To celebrate it, to condemn it, or to ignore it is a political act in itself. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, no official commemoration took place this year. According to Putin's narrative, there is room for nostalgia over Russia's czarist or Stalinist periods but not for a defense of the first victorious workers' revolution of the 20th century.

Capitalism's propagandists have taken the opportunity offered by the centennial to rehash tired rhetoric about "totalitarianism." An army of academics, historians, and experts persist in their efforts to delegitimize the Russian Revolution, and attempting to undermine the very idea of a social revolution.

Although this narrative is losing the hypnotic appeal it held right after the Cold War, conventional wisdom, which associates the Russian Revolution with the Stalinist gulags, still seems to limit the imagination of the political currents emerging to the left of traditional reformism. In the current context of a prolonged crisis of capitalism and its parties, as well as the emergence of new political phenomena, the question is raised once again: Shall we recreate illusions in reformism or prepare for the next revolution?

Coup or Revolution?

During the Cold War, the capitalist bloc led by the United States spread the idea that the Russian Revolution was a "coup," a conspiratorial action of the Bolshevik minority led by Lenin. They claimed the Bolsheviks had expropriated the "good revolution" of February 1917 – that is, they had destroyed the nascent bourgeois democracy and put the country on an inevitable path towards totalitarianism. Some even went so far as to argue that the seizure of power had interrupted a process of self-reform by the czarist autocracy. In short, they say that Russia's democratic future was transformed into a dictatorship by the October Revolution.

This interpretation has always lacked scientific rigor, regardless of its historiographic pretensions. The narrative of a "democratic Russia" was a partisan – and indeed quite crude – ideological operation. Had the counter-revolution triumphed, no democracy would have been possible. In fact, the very basis of the revolution was the fact that the liberal bourgeoisie had proven itself incapable

of fulfilling the democratic demands of the people such as granting land to the peasantry. That demand, together with one to end the war, had been the driving force behind the February Revolution and ultimately set the dynamic of the October Revolution in motion. As the Bolsheviks asserted (even when they considered the revolution to have a bourgeois-democratic character), only the power of the working class in alliance with the poor peasantry could carry out these democratic tasks.

The other act of intellectual dishonesty was to make the revolution disappear, claiming that the seizure of power hadn't been an act of the masses but rather of a bloodthirsty minority headed by Lenin.

The comparison between revolution and putsch was debated extensively in the years after the seizure of power, not only by liberals but also by social-democratic reformists who believed that the Russian Revolution had been premature. They repudiated the dictatorship of the proletariat, to which they counterposed "democracy."¹

In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky reflects on the specific difference between conspiracy and revolution. He maintains that revolutions and insurrections cannot be artificially generated, while coups, by definition, are planned behind the backs of the masses and are carried out by a minority. Above all, they have different results: putsches settle power struggles among cliques of the ruling class, but the emergence of a new social regime, that is the rule of another class (or alliance of classes), can only be the product of a mass insurrection. Trotsky referred to insurrection not as an explosive act of social forces (which occurred frequently during this period) but as a complex "art," with a leadership and a plan. It had elements of conspiracy as well, but these were of a technical and subordinate nature.²

Throughout the years, various historians have acknowledged this specific difference between a coup and a revolution. An entire volume of Edward H. Carr's classic work on the Russian Revolution is dedicated to the self-organization of the masses during 1917 and in the first phase of the Soviet government.³

Liberalism, Stalinism and Totalitarianism

The definition of Stalinism as a totalitarian regime and the comparison of Stalinism to Nazism was not an invention of the Cold War. Many years earlier, Trotsky had used the metaphor of "twin stars" to compare Hitler and Stalin, but he pointed

out the fundamental distinction between the two phenomena: the monstrous Stalinist dictatorship differed from that of Hitler because the former was still based on the control over the means of production established by the October Revolution.⁴

Although the Stalinization of the Soviet Union certainly enabled capitalist propaganda to gain footing, the description of the revolution as a coup, just like the supposedly unavoidable link between communism and totalitarianism, was called into question by liberal intellectuals at an early stage.

Perhaps the most notable of these theorists was Hannah Arendt. Arendt who, at the start of the Cold War, still believed in American "democracy," (an idea with which she eventually became disillusioned) developed a theory of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union (and in Nazi Germany). Among her important insights about the totalitarian phenomenon was the understanding that the pulverization of the classes and their transformation into masses of atomized individuals was a condition for the triumph of totalitarianism.⁵ She also recognized the formation of soviets as representative of a universal tendency in all revolutions: that of mass actions that aim to establish a new constituent power.⁶ This does not mean that Arendt was a partisan of the Russian Revolution (which she compared to the French Revolution because both were contaminated by the "social question"). According to her conception of politics, there was an irresolvable contradiction between liberation from necessity, i.e. the social question, and freedom which was exclusively political.⁷

Neoliberalism Reloaded in Times of Organic Crisis

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the equivalency between revolution and totalitarianism became generalized as "common sense," spreading beyond right wing and liberal historians into left-wing currents. Left groups, especially those into different variations of autonomism reject the perspective of seizing state power because they consider this to be the fundamental reason for bureaucratization.

Without any new insights, this right-wing common sense has forcefully returned, on the centennial of the Russian Revolution, in a book by Tony Brenton, former British ambassador to Moscow. It includes articles by renowned reactionaries like Orlando Figes and Richard Pipes, a former security advisor to President Ronald Reagan.

Suggestively titled "Was Revolution Inevitable? Turning Points of the Russian Revolution," it uses a method of counterfactual history to demonstrate that the Russian Revolution was a mere accident.⁸

Sheila Fitzpatrick, among the most prominent of the U.S. and English "revisionist" historians that emerged from the wave of radicalization in the 1960s and 1970s, points out the significant methodological weaknesses of this narrative. Besides the questionable validity of the historical facts, the logic is based on a completely arbitrary use of contingency and historical necessity.⁹ According to Brenton's book, Stalinism is a historical necessity – an inevitable outcome of the October Revolution. On the other hand, Brenton says that the revolution itself is a mere accident; it cannot be explained by the previous objective and subjective conditions (the war, the desperate situation of the peasants, and czarist oppression, to name the most obvious). It would be foolish to deny contingency in history. But even accidents, particularly those that lead to changes of historical magnitude, do not occur in a vacuum. Nor do the political and social forces that are able to capitalize on them fall from the sky.

This faulty analysis may now be reaching its own limits. A quarter of a century after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there are clear indications that this narrative is losing its appeal, especially for new generations who, for the first time since World War II, understand that they will have a standard of living that is worse than that of their parents. Their lived experience is not Stalinism but the capitalist crisis, Trump's Bonapartism, imperialist wars, and the re-emergence of reactionary nationalisms and the proto-fascist right. Even Brenton cannot avoid having to account for the capitalist crisis of 2008 and the decline of liberal democracy. Despite his calming tone, he recognizes that the Great Recession put Karl Marx on France's non-fiction bestseller list.

This concern is crudely expressed by Douglas Murray in *National Review*, who laments that "the virus of Communism – in every Marxist, socialist strain – remains alive and well" and that "it has become acceptable on the political left, including the parliamentary left, to open the whole socialist possibility up again."¹⁰

The crisis of 2008 has opened tendencies towards organic crisis in the central countries, and aberrant phenomena have emerged along with new ways of thinking. This explains both the massive influx of young people into the British Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and the more than 13 million Americans, mostly under 30,

who voted for Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed democratic socialist. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who have organized within this movement, have experienced meteoric growth in the months since Trump's inauguration, reaching 30,000 members. In Argentina, the rise of the Left and Workers' Front (FIT), although on a smaller scale, cannot be separated from these trends in the international situation. The FIT, however, distinguishes itself from these other phenomena in that it is a clearly anti-capitalist left formation that promotes the political independence of workers and the struggle for a workers' government that breaks with capitalism.

This is not yet a moment of political radicalization, but the exhaustion of neoliberalism has provided an opening for a war of ideas and strategies.

The Russian Revolution in the Current Strategic Debate

In an op-ed on the Russian Revolution in The New York Times, Bhaskar Sunkara, editor of Jacobin, summarizes the argument made by the left groups that emerged after the collapse of the old social democratic parties.¹¹

According to Sunkara, we should reject the caricature of Lenin and the Bolsheviks as "crazed demons" and see them as "well-intentioned people trying to build a better world." At the same time, he says, we must try to "avoid their failures" which – and this implication is clear despite the somewhat ambiguous language he uses – led from the revolution to Stalinism. Sunkara's proposal is to return to social democracy: "not the social democracy of François Hollande ... but that of the early days of the Second International. This social democracy would involve a commitment to a free civil society, especially for oppositional voices; the need for institutional checks and balances on power; and a vision of a transition to socialism that does not require a 'year zero' break with the present." In line with this proposal, he maintains

that "stripped down to its essence, and returned to its roots, socialism is an ideology of radical democracy."¹² Since he does not specify the date to which he wishes to return, we can assume he has chosen the Second International prior to its betrayal in 1914 when the Social Democratic Party of Germany voted for war credits, capitulating to its own bourgeoisie. That betrayal, however, did not come like a bolt from a clear blue sky. Before 1914, social democracy had already begun to harbor right-wing opportunist tendencies, particularly within the trade unions, whose leadership had discovered that speaking about "socialism" and "revolution" jeopardized the privileges they had obtained within the bourgeois regime. Broad sectors even supported colonialism, believing it to be a civilizing mission.¹³

The recent rise of Syriza, and its immediate capitulation to the Troika, demonstrates that the neo-reformist project of recycling social democracy's strategies – those of class conciliation and gradually advancing within the limits of the bourgeois state – is doomed to failure.

The goal is not to mechanically repeat the Russian experience in the 21st century, but rather to value its legacy for the inevitable upcoming revolutions. Its fundamental lessons are universal and have stood the tests of the previous century; there can be no peaceful transition toward a society free of exploitation without a "year zero" break from capitalism. This impossibility is due to the violence of the exploiters who, when their interests are threatened, don't hesitate to resort to the most brutal repression which is then carried out by the state on their behalf. In these decisive moments in which the fate of the revolution is at stake, we need a party like that of Lenin (and not of Kautsky) in order to triumph, and such a party cannot be built on the eve of the revolution. The construction of this revolutionary and internationalist workers' party is our central task today.

TRANSLATED BY MARISELA TREVIN

Notes

1 This is the core of the polemic that Trotsky develops against Kautsky in *Terrorism and Communism* (1920).

2 Leon Trotsky, "The Art of Insurrection," in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Ediciones IPS, 2017), 437-462.

3 Edward Hallett Carr, *History of Soviet Russia*, vol. 1, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985).

4 For a more in-depth look at the process that led from bureaucratization to capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, see: Claudia Cinatti, "La actualidad del análisis de Trotsky frente a las nuevas (y viejas) controversias sobre la transición al socialismo," *Revista Estrategia Internacional* 22 (25 November 2005).

5 "To change Lenin's revolutionary dictatorship into full totalitarian rule, Stalin had first to create artificially that atomized society which had been prepared for the Nazis in Germany by historical circumstances... In order to fabricate an atomized and structureless mass, he had first to liquidate the remnants of power in the Soviets which, as the chief organ of national representation, still played a certain role and prevented absolute rule by the party hierarchy." Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 318-319.

6 Arendt's work incorporates the form "council" (the Paris Commune, the soviets of the three Russian revolutions, the Räte of the German revolution, the councils of the Hungarian political revolution of 1956) in her liberal theory, comparing them to the system of districts proposed by Thomas Jefferson. She also argues that there is an insurmountable separation between "soviet" and "party". But the sheer fact that she sees soviets as a "lost treasure" of revolutionary tradition demonstrates the power of mass

self-determination bodies as the embryos of a new kind of state. See: Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

7 For a critique of this contradiction between "freedom" and "liberation" by Arendt, see: Claudia Cinatti y Emilio Albamonte, "Más allá de la democracia liberal y el totalitarismo," *Revista Estrategia Internacional* 21 (1 September 2004).

8 Tony Brenton, *Was Revolution Inevitable?: Turning Points of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

9 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "What's Left?" *London Review of Books* 39, no. 7 (30 March 2017): 13-15.

10 Douglas Murray, "The Russian Revolution, 100 Years On: Its Enduring Allure and Menace," *National Review*, October 30, 2017.

11 This is not only a political discussion. In recent years, historians in the Marxist tradition have developed new research on the history of the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik Party, and the role of Lenin. Although not the topic of this article, it is important to discuss Lars Lih's argument that Lenin's "April Theses" did not signify a strategic turn but rather maintains continuity between Lenin and the "old Bolsheviks." This calls into question Lenin and Trotsky's vision of the conciliatory policy of Stalin-Kamenev towards the Provisional Government, which continued to participate in the war. On this subject, see: Lars T. Lih, "The Lies We Tell About Lenin," *Jacobin*, July 23, 2014; "From February to October," *Jacobin*, May 11, 2017.

12 Bhaskar Sunkara, "Socialism's Future May Be Its Past," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2017.

13 This position was raised by Eduard Bernstein but became a broad agreement among German social democrats to the point that it led to a major crisis at the Congress of Stuttgart in 1907.

THE MOSCOW THERMIDOR

BY EDISON URBANO

Bourgeois propaganda about the supposed failure of socialism has convinced most people that revolution is impossible. But as a result of the capitalist crisis, we are witnessing an interesting ideological shift. Around the world, broad sectors of youth feel a growing attraction to socialist ideas. Even in the United States, the heart of imperialism, increasing numbers of young people are recognizing that capitalism can only provide a precarious future.

In the US, this attraction to socialism has grown the ranks of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) whose main leaders have a generally positive assessment of the October Revolution. However, they also argue that the revolutionary path taken by Lenin and Trotsky inevitably led to totalitarianism and the terrible results of the rise of Stalin.

Separating Lenin and Trotsky from Stalin is necessary, not only to correctly interpret the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, but also to reestablish their revolutionary role in history. It is necessary to understand that the strategy of the Soviet bureaucracy was radically opposed to the strategy of the main leaders of the 1917 revolution. Separating Lenin and Trotsky from Stalin is essential to understand communism as a coherent strategy capable of winning in the revolutions to come.

Separating Marxism from its Stalinism epigones is much more than a question of putting historical personalities in their proper places. It is impossible to reclaim communism as a revolutionary movement without both rejecting Stalinism and having a deep understanding of how the Soviet bureaucracy not only moved away from, but was a direct rejection of, the program, strategy, and values of revolutionary Marxists.

The Objective Conditions for Stalinist Degeneration

The Russian Revolution of 1917 triumphed after years of imperialist war. Russia was a backward country that had been devastated by the war against Germany, the most important European power.

The revolution that gave power to the soviets, led by the Bolshevik party, had two pillars on which revolutionary gains relied. In foreign affairs, in order to ensure an immediate withdrawal from the war, the Bolsheviks were forced to make enormous territorial and economic concessions to the German Empire. Domestically, the Bolsheviks

had to adopt a program of distributing land to the peasants. This is distinct from the socialist program of agrarian collectivization based on the expropriation of the large landowners. This compromise was made in order to cement the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry that brought the Soviets to power (symbolized by the hammer and sickle). With this programmatic concession, the workers built the class alliance that formed the foundation of the new state.

However, this introduced a conflict of interests. While the cities had ended private ownership of the means of production, in the countryside, the peasants owned the land on which they farmed. To advance socialist policies in the countryside, peasants would have to reach the conclusion that collectivized land was better than individual property.

The first years of Soviet power did not present a peaceful context in which to undertake economic development. On the contrary, the imperialist war was replaced by an even fiercer civil war. All the imperialist powers that had been rivals in the world war now united in a single block of support for the the White Terror and the counterrevolution against the Soviets.

Trotsky was both the creator and the military commander of the Red Army, as well as one of the most profound economic analysts of Soviet life in the 1920s. He noted that the civil war did not only paralyze the economy but also widely destroyed infrastructure and means of production. For example, both sides blew up bridges to prevent enemy access to new territories. Moreover, the civil war forced the Soviet Union to impose “war communism,” which was especially detrimental to the proletariat’s alliance with the peasants. Peasants were forced to produce food for the cities and the war front. Due to the dire conditions in the USSR, the peasants’ goods were taken without any economic compensation; it was a painful necessity imposed by the struggle against the counterrevolution. However, this produced a disastrous effect: without a material incentive, peasant production continuously declined. After all, if state compensation was not based on the volume of production, then why produce more?

The solution to the impasse created by the politics of “war communism” was Lenin’s bold political shift with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy consciously introduced market (i.e. capitalist) mechanisms to encourage a rise in production in general, and of foodstuffs in particular, and to revive trade in the cities.



The Rise of Stalinism

Lenin always made it clear that he believed that the NEP was a step backwards for the revolution -- a step towards capitalism. Yet he believed it was necessary to take a step back in order to take two steps forward in the future. For Lenin, the concessions of the NEP made it necessary to strengthen other elements of the Soviet state. He wanted to strengthen the proletarian element of the party and the government by reinforcing working class control over production and foreign trade. Furthermore, Lenin supported the international expansion of the revolution, which would break the Soviet Union's isolation and allow the struggling Soviet state to enjoy the solidarity of new workers' states. For Trotsky, the NEP was a temporary measure to buy time until the global revolution eliminated the need for such policies.

However, Lenin's statements on the temporary nature of the NEP were totally neglected by the party leadership after his death, particularly by the "triumvirate" -- Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, who formed a bloc united against Trotsky.

The triumvirate put forward a policy of even greater concessions to the nascent capitalist elements that had emerged under the NEP. Later, the Stalin-Bukharin bloc even formulated the slogan, "Peasants: enrich yourselves," in order to win peasants' support for the Soviet regime. This almost led to a rupture in the alliance between the peasantry and the working class, threatening the workers' state. By the late 1920s, the country was once again on the verge of civil war due to the right-wing policy pursued by the Stalin-Bukharin bloc.

Stalin's response was yet another zigzag, this time in the opposite direction. His new ultra-left position had two main elements: the forced expropriation and collectivization of peasant land and a shift of resources towards rapid industrialization. Forced collectivization meant massive repression against the peasants. To impose these policies despite dissident voices within the party, Stalinism strengthened its bureaucratic choke hold. In 1929, Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and the Left Opposition that he had founded was persecuted.

After Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR, Stalin doubled down on his violently repressive policies, not only against those deemed "Trotskyists" but also against potential opponents and any other socially transgressive group (artists, LGBT people, etc). The repression was so systematic that the bureaucracy built concentration camps and engaged in mass murder and genocide. This is

exemplified by the enormous farce of the Moscow Trials from 1936 to 1938 in which the whole old guard of the revolution was shot at the behest of Stalin, accused of being saboteurs and Nazi agents.

With constant zigzags to the right and to the left, the bureaucratic and conservative apparatus was trying to find an equilibrium, mediating the class conflict in the Soviet Union. The Stalinist bureaucracy usurped the social wealth created by the workers' state and became a privileged and commanding stratum.

Thermidor and the Historical Role of Stalinism

After Stalin's death in 1953, the bureaucratic apparatus he created attempted to brush aside the deep roots of his crimes by putting the blame on a Stalinist "cult of personality," criticizing his methods but divorcing the critique from his political program. What this fails to take into account is that the terrible methods of Stalinism are a direct consequence of its counter-revolutionary program which faced great opposition within the Bolshevik party as well as in the broader Soviet Union. In order to implement his program, Stalin massacred hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, and party militants, especially in the second half of the 1930s.

His policies were responsible for establishing a society based on fear, with privileges for a small bureaucratic layer. Stalinism revived nationalistic prejudices, oppressed national minorities, and persecuted Jews and other oppressed groups. A clear example of the reactionary nature of Stalinism is women's oppression; Stalin reversed the progressive reforms instituted by the Bolsheviks. While the Bolsheviks encouraged an end to the bourgeois family system, Stalin instituted the Order of Maternal Glory -- awards for women based on how many children they had.

The Revolution Betrayed, written by Trotsky in 1936, describes the process of Stalinization as "Thermidor." This comparison to the French Revolution requires further explanation. Thermidor was a coup that had interrupted the progressive course of the French Revolution under the Jacobins. It began a process of conservative stabilization of the country while reversing several social achievements of the early years, including the end of the colonial slave regime. Despite its reactionary elements, Thermidor did not represent an overall return to the previous social regime which was, in the case of the French Revolution, feudalism. The reactionary forces could not return to the old order, but they could act upon the groundwork laid by the previous revolution. This was the basis

for Trotsky's analogy regarding the historical triumph of Stalinism; it represented a fundamental break with the revolutionary tendencies of 1917 but did not return to the capitalist order. Trotsky warned that the interruption of the Russian Revolution at an intermediate stage between capitalism and socialism could not last forever. Unlike capitalism, blindly ruled by the laws of the market, socialism is a conscious product of human will. In this sense, the Stalinist Thermidor represented the greatest danger for the future development of the revolution and socialism, both within the Soviet Union and abroad. History has proven that Trotsky was right.

Internationalism is Not an Appendix

While it is necessary to understand Stalinism as the bureaucratic degeneration of the revolution, it is equally important to understand that this process was not predestined. This conception naturalizes the historical regression led by the Stalinist bureaucracy, as if it were the natural outcome of any revolution. Seeing Stalinism as inevitable can lead to apathy and complete skepticism about the possibility of human emancipation. It is based on the idea that a revolution will inevitably lead to new disasters. If all attempts to overcome capitalism are bound to the same fate as the Soviet Union, is it even worth trying?

Using scientific method of analysis, we can counter these misconceptions. Stalinist degeneration was a product of historical circumstance, not a fate written in the stars. This is a misunderstanding not only because it would have been possible to have a more coherent program with socialist objectives within the Soviet Union. There is another element that is even more decisive: Stalinism was a product of the isolation brought on by the immaturity of communist leadership in key countries such as Germany, and their failure to take advantage of key revolutionary moments.

The Russian Revolution demonstrates the need for an international strategy that finds expression in practical and everyday decisions. Thus, Lenin's

NEP would seem to be a unilateral shift towards capitalism -- if not for the context of Bolshevik internationalism. For Lenin, the NEP was a step back, but could be followed by two steps forward if a revolution was successful in another country. Thus, one of the Bolsheviks' central aims was to direct all forces to the international expansion of the Russian Revolution. They were particularly interested, although not exclusively, in a proletarian revolution in Germany, the most advanced capitalist country in Europe, as well as the country with the strongest Social Democratic party.

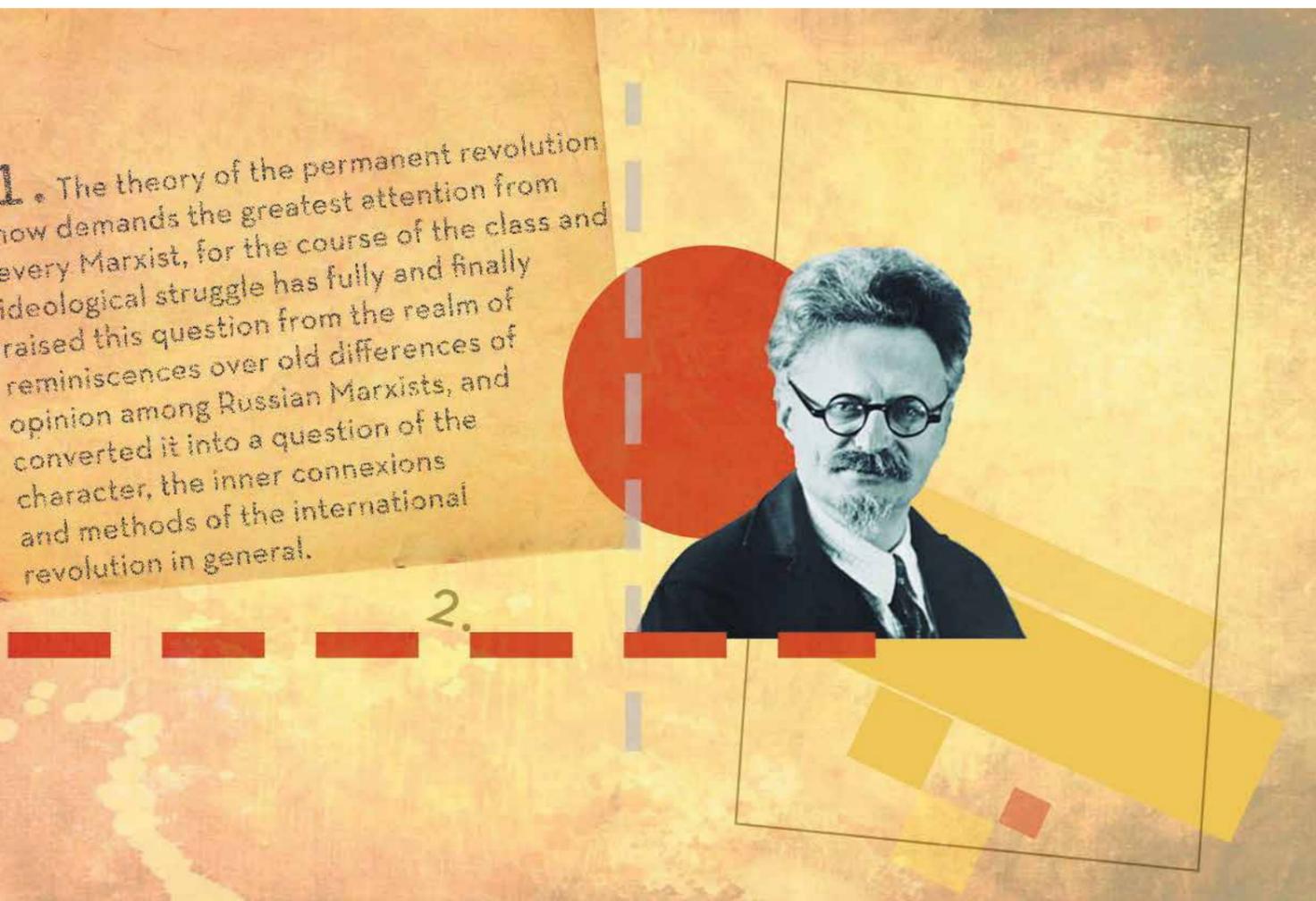
When Lenin famously said he would sacrifice the Russian Revolution for the benefit of the German revolution, it was not a metaphor or a catch phrase. It was a strategic conclusion he used to guide the Russian proletariat and the Third International during its first four congresses from 1919 to 1922. Marxist proletarian politics must be fully internationalist. They must be distinct from politics that focus exclusively on the national level accompanied by a well-intentioned desire that workers in other parts of the world also succeed. Internationalism is not mere solidarity with international struggles, although this aspect is an indisputable component.

Marx said that class struggle is national in form and international in content. It is on a global scale that we measure the success or failure of socialist revolution. Triumphs in partial battles -- even if these battles are revolutions in a particular country -- are merely ephemeral. A victory in only one country is unable to determine the overall process.

This is the central lesson of the revolutionary experience of the 20th century. It is on this basis that we construct a revolutionary strategy suited to the challenges of our time. A Grand Strategy must be developed in the same way Trotsky developed his theory of permanent revolution -- on the basis of the defeats and victories of the Russian, European, and Asian revolutions of the first decades of the last century.

TRANSLATED BY TATIANA COZZARELLI

PERMANENT REVOLUTION IN 1917 RUSSIA AND TODAY



The theory of the permanent revolution can serve as a guide for action for working-class politics, internationalism and strategy for socialism.

JUAN CRUZ FERRE

Marx and Engels predicted that a socialist revolution would first take place in the most industrialized countries, where the proletariat represented an already powerful force and played a major role in the economy. According to the interpretation of traditional Marxism, countries in which the feudal mode of production was still predominant would have to first pass through a bourgeois revolution and a phase of bourgeois development *before* a socialist revolution could become a possibility.¹

Leon Trotsky was the first theorist and political leader within the Marxist tradition who, at the beginning of the 20th century, envisioned the possibility that a socialist revolution could indeed take place in a peripheral country. However, it was from the writings of Marx and Engels that Trotsky adopted the notion of a “permanent” dynamic of revolution.

In 1906, a year after Russia’s first revolution, Trotsky penned *Results and Prospects* in which he described the main principles of the theory of permanent revolution. By the turn of the century, capitalism was no longer just the sum of multiple national economies – it had expanded beyond national borders, and the way social factors in economically backward countries related to (predominantly foreign) capital was substantially different from what was seen in industrialized countries.

Trotsky observed that foreign capital had penetrated the Russian economy and overtaken everything that got in its way in order to generate commodities and obtain profit. This caused an unusual type of development: a combination of feudal social-property relations with an incipient industry that incorporated technological innovations. Russia would not have to follow the same path as England or France in their transition to capitalism. Because of the competition in the global market, foreign capital was able to introduce the latest machinery and industrial innovations into still-feudal Russia. This phenomenon, famously theorized by Trotsky and termed the *law of uneven and combined development*, had strong implications not only in the context of economic and political analysis but also for the discussion of revolutionary strategy and its prospects in Russia.

The immediate consequence was that, although Russia was a backward, predominantly rural society, the proletariat was already a considerable force that could lead a revolutionary uprising. In fact, it was the *only* force that could take on this task.

Dogmatism vs. Dialectical Thought: Stagism vs. Permanent Revolution

The Mensheviks argued that Russia was still a feudal economy under the rule of an absolutist monarchy and therefore a bourgeois revolution was needed to topple the monarchy and eliminate all vestiges of feudalism. The character of the revolution was determined by the tasks it would accomplish: agrarian reform with the elimination of nobility rights to the land, the separation of the state and Church, national sovereignty and liberal democracy. However, in contrast with classical bourgeois or democratic revolutions (such as the French or the English Revolutions), Trotsky argued that the proletariat was the only class in Russia with the power and the will to overthrow the monarchy and open the path for winning these democratic demands.

This may have sounded ridiculous in the context of 1905 Russia where only 17 million people lived in the cities of a country of over 130 million people.

Trotsky asserted that the peasantry – despite its weight in the economy and its revolutionary potential – was intrinsically unable to hold a political position independent from both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This was partly because it was a very heterogeneous social class though it ranged from small-plot peasants to large landowners. In addition, the seat of political power was in the towns and not in the countryside, a fact that further limited the political leverage of the peasantry. In a similar vein, intellectuals and the urban petty bourgeoisie were unable to act independently from the national bourgeoisie; their higher strata were economically tied to the bourgeoisie while the lower strata shared, to a great extent, the life experience and interests of the proletariat and would thus follow their lead.

Why was the Russian bourgeoisie unable to lead the bourgeois revolution as it had ostensibly done in France or in England? The bourgeoisie had strong economic ties with the landowners, who were their partners in profit. Pushing for land reform meant going after the possessions of the landed aristocracy, breaking de facto this political alliance and putting their own business at risk. Similarly, it was not in the bourgeoisie’s own interest to challenge the absolutist government which was the ultimate guarantor of its profits.

A Closer Analysis

The French Revolution of 1789 was carried out by the Third Estate, a heterogeneous social sector made up of the bourgeoisie, the sans-culottes, and the petty bourgeoisie (artisans, merchants, shopkeepers, and peasants). From below, the Jacobins rallied a heterogeneous popular movement sprouting from both the countryside and the towns. Although mass support came mostly from urban wage workers, artisans, and the peasantry, the political leadership of the revolution was captured by a section of the bourgeoisie who provided the cadre (revolutionary army officials) that led the uprising against the feudal state.²

A relatively recent historiography calls into question the role played by the bourgeoisie in the English and French revolutions.³ In both cases, it is noted, it was only under enormous pressure from the popular masses that the bourgeoisie attached a platform of democratic demands to the quest for control of the state. We cannot, therefore, ascribe to the bourgeoisie any intrinsic desire for democratic rights. This reassessment only reinforces the tepid character of the bourgeoisie and its unwillingness to awaken popular forces to fight for the establishment or expansion of liberal democracy. In the case of the French Revolution, we are told that it was not the bourgeoisie who spearheaded the movement, but it was instead predominantly the petty-bourgeois elements and a small bourgeois sector who led the uprising. Granted, the most progressive aspects in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* were a direct product of the pressure of the peasants and the urban laborers, not the goodwill of the bourgeoisie. However, the transformation of the state and the democratic rights conquered with the overthrow of the monarchy were requisites for capitalist production to thrive.⁴

It is worthwhile mentioning, before we continue, that under the banner of democratic demands, we understand both the *formal* demands and the *structural* demands. The former are universal suffrage, freedom of press, and equality before the law, whereas the latter refer to the distribution of land, national independence, and self-determination.

In the 1848 revolutions in France, the proletariat took part wholeheartedly, pushing the revolutionary process to go beyond the moderate demands of the bourgeoisie. However, the working class was still too weak and it lacked an independent political program to take a leading position in the revolution. The bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie played a counter-revolutionary role, cutting short the thrust of the mass movement,

stripping off the most democratic demands – such as universal suffrage – and catapulting Louis Bonaparte to power.

In countries where capitalism developed later, the national bourgeoisie showed itself to be reluctant to upset the political landscape and shake off the nobility. In Germany and Italy, the bourgeoisie, in alliance with sections of the landed aristocracy, operated a “revolution from above” or, in Gramsci’s words, a “passive revolution.” The process accomplished national unification – a prominent requirement for capitalist development – and adapted the state to allow the spread of the market economy while compromising in other aspects with the representatives of feudal power.

The Russian bourgeoisie was unwilling to confront the *ancien regime* in the years from 1905 to 1917 and was frightened of setting into motion a social force that it could not control. The urban proletariat, composing the largest group of the inhabitants of Russian modern towns, was the only social class that could provide the political leadership necessary to strike a total break with the monarchic state. The democratic rights brought about by the French and English revolutions would only be achievable in Russia under the leadership of the proletariat.

“The nucleus of the population of a modern town, at least of a town possessing some economic and political significance, is the sharply differentiated class of wage-workers. It was this class, as yet substantially unknown during the period of the Great French Revolution, that was destined to play the decisive role in our [1905] revolution.”⁵

The main theoretical innovation here was that a class (the proletariat) would lead a transformation (a democratic revolution) that in theory did not correspond with its historical tasks. In fact, Trotsky argued that once the proletariat took the reins of the state, it would not content itself with obtaining these liberal democratic rights.

In the 1919 re-issue of *Results and Prospects*, he explains:

“Once in power, the proletariat not only will not want, but will not be able to limit itself to a bourgeois democratic program. It will be able to carry through the Revolution to the end [...] [T]he Russian working class will develop into a prolonged Socialist dictatorship.”⁶

This is one of the three theses of the theory of permanent revolution. Once in power, the proletariat would face staunch opposition and

boycott from the bourgeoisie and thus would be forced to expropriate. Therefore, “[t]he democratic revolution grows over directly into the socialist revolution and thereby becomes a *permanent* revolution.”⁷

Trotsky’s predictions were proven accurate in 1917 when, after a few months of the bourgeois provisional government, the demand for “all the power to the Soviets” became irresistible. Workers, organized as a class by the Bolsheviks, took power; the transition to socialism begun.

However, there are two more theses in the theory of the permanent revolution that are worth our attention. One of them is the need to extend the revolution internationally:

“The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”⁸

Trotsky and Lenin counted on the victory of the socialist revolution in the central countries – notably in Germany – not only as a requisite to further developing socialism internationally but also as the only way for the Russian revolution to survive.

Material Basis for Communism

The development of industry has been the material basis for the construction of a socialist society. It was only through technological innovation and the rise of productivity brought about by capitalism that European countries were able to escape the periodic Malthusian crises and match population growth with an increasing agrarian output.⁹

By the beginning of the 20th century, capitalism had spread across Europe and industrialized countries had been able to forcefully integrate other countries into the market, but left in place much of their feudal social relations. After the revolution, Soviet Russia was still an extremely backward country competing (and at war) with highly industrialized capitalist nations whose governments had a strong interest in seeing the socialist project sink. The prospects for the survival of the new nation were dire unless workers took power in an advanced country and used its resources to reinvigorate the soviet economy. A workers’ government in Germany or

in any other industrialized country would have had immeasurable consequences for the USSR and the evolution of socialism around the world.

These were the stakes in the debate between the theory of the permanent revolution and Stalin’s theory of socialism in one country (which was, in actuality, more of a doctrine than a theory). The bottom line is that instead of fostering the development of other revolutions around the world – which was the only way to secure the survival of workers’ states and move forward on the path to socialism – the Communist International (Comintern) under Stalin submitted all foreign communist parties to the main objective of preserving the USSR.

To this end, the Comintern focused on exerting pressure on other countries’ (bourgeois) governments – through strikes, mobilizations, and isolated actions – to allegedly prevent them from attacking the USSR and restoring capitalism. At the same time, communist parties in China, France, Great Britain, Spain were given orders to form alliances with the national bourgeoisies, writing off the possibility of (or actively boycotting) a revolution in those countries and providing the ground for a peaceful coexistence between the USSR and the capitalist European countries.

The policy of socialism in one country was taken to its final conclusions in China in the 1920s when Stalin and Bukharin ordered the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to enter (and dissolve the party into) the Kuomintang, a nationalist bourgeois party. First Chiang Kai-Shek, and later the leader of the left wing of the Kuomintang, Wan Tin-Wei, betrayed the Chinese communists and took up arms against them. The Shanghai Massacre, in which thousands of communists were slaughtered, was only a harbinger of the hundreds of thousands to be killed in the span of a year at the hands of the Kuomintang. This outcome was foreseeable, however, and could have been prevented if the Comintern had stuck to the principle of refusing alliance with bourgeois parties. It confirmed, as well, that the bourgeoisie cannot be an ally of the working class in the fight for national sovereignty.

During the Spanish Revolution, the Comintern embraced the tactic of the popular front and decided that the Spanish would stage a bourgeois revolution against fascism. George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* captures the persecution and the low-intensity, dirty war the Spanish CP waged against the POUM and other dissident forces in the revolutionary camp. The Spanish CP sought vehemently to halt both land expropriation in the countryside and workers’ self-activity organizations in the cities because the task of the

day was to stop fascism, not to fight for socialism. Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* depicts the moment at which CP-led brigades turn their arms against militias that refused to fold themselves onto the popular front with the bourgeois parties sponsored by the Spanish Communist Party.

The popular front policy was merely a new iteration of the Menshevik policy of class collaboration with the national bourgeoisie and the endorsement of the provisional government in Russia in 1917. Although fighting on the same side against absolutism (fascism in Spain) and foreign powers, workers needed to fight for their own program, maintaining complete political independence from the bourgeoisie. In the case of Spain, this meant fighting on the republican side with an independent program for a socialist workers' government.

The USSR under Stalin had chosen a different route. According to the permanent revolution perspective, the path to socialism was necessarily international, whereas in the framework of socialism in one country, the top priority became defense in the form of national security. This foreign policy responded to the goal of maintaining the USSR at any cost, but also to the fear of the Stalinist bureaucracy that a new leadership might rise at the head of revolutions in other countries.

Post WW2 Revolutions

The theory of the permanent revolution was put to the test by new revolutionary uprisings in the mid-20th century. Among them, revolutions of the post-World War II period, including the Chinese revolution of 1949 and the revolutions in Cuba and other semicolonial countries, pose a particular challenge. The question is how to reconcile Trotsky's prescription of a working-class leadership as a requisite to successfully achieve socialism with the experience of the peasant-led Chinese revolution of 1949, or the victorious Cuban revolution led by a petty-bourgeois political organization (for a discussion on the revolutionary party, see article by Christian Castillo in this edition). Many authors have found in these historic events enough reason to abandon the theory or to prove it wrong. This article argues that the theory-strategy connection remains strong in the face of these events once we analyze them closely.

After a resounding defeat in 1925-1927, Mao Tse-tung led a wing of the CCP to retreat to the countryside in a search for protection from the onslaught. The Long March demonstrated the prowess that allowed the CCP to survive the

crackdown by the Kuomintang. However, Mao's political strategy remained attached to building a coalition with the national bourgeoisie and only under immense pressure did he decide to break with it and take power in 1949. Immediately afterward, the CCP under Mao's leadership had to go beyond its own program and expropriate the bourgeoisie. The CCP's social base was overwhelmingly peasant-based and the leadership was petty bourgeois. Nevertheless, they were able (forced?) to take power to expropriate the means of production and implement a planned economy.

In the *Transitional Program*, Trotsky actually entertains the possibility that "under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie." He was wrong, however, when he asserted that "it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual dictatorship of the proletariat."¹⁰

In a similar vein, Fidel Castro's Movimiento 26 de Julio was a petty bourgeois organization that built a social base in the sierra (mountainous countryside) before marching onto the urban centers. Although the worker-led actions in the cities (mainly organized by Frank Pais) were of paramount importance for the final outcome, the Revolutionary Armed Forces were a top-down military organization with a petty-bourgeois leadership. Once in power, cornered by the bourgeoisie's boycott in response to sweeping radical-democratic measures, the revolutionary government with Fidel Castro at its head expropriated all major industries and declared the socialist character of the Cuban revolution – one year *after* taking power.

This *growing over* of the national liberation revolution into a socialist revolution can be taken, in a way, as a confirmation of the theory of the permanent revolution. At the same time, similar to the Chinese revolution of 1949, the social composition of the revolutionary organization, as well as its leadership, was petty bourgeois. It needs to be emphasized that the taking of power in both cases was not preceded by the rise of a dual power or a mushrooming of working class self-activity organizations. The vertical structure of the revolutionary party and the lack of workers' democratic bodies (in united front with other revolutionary forces), dramatically conditioned the structure of the fledgling state: a highly bureaucratized workers' state under the tight grip of the Communist Party.

These examples show that, under extremely exceptional circumstances such as the early post-World War II period in China and the 1950s in Cuba, a petty-bourgeois leadership can be successful in taking the power of the state. Following a permanent dynamic, a national liberation struggle can turn into social revolution that topples capitalism, but the germ of bureaucratization is written into the strategy. Sooner or later these governments become fetters for the advancement of international socialism.

The Theory Negated

The abandonment of the permanent revolution perspective led many Trotskyist parties around the world to lose their compass, support popular fronts, encourage and support guerrilla-type organizations, take part in bourgeois governments, or even, in probably the most absurd case, celebrate the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the suppression of rights to the Muslim brotherhood.

Nahuel Moreno revised the theory of permanent revolution in 1984. He declared it obsolete and proposed instead a new theory – one of the democratic revolution. Drawing a parallel to the program of political revolution for the Soviet Union under Stalin, he contended that a revolution against the political regime was needed to defeat fascism. In the same vein, in those Latin American countries under a military dictatorship, the change of the government to a constitutional (capitalist) democracy represented a triumphant democratic revolution. This has led the Morenoite International Workers' League (IWL) to contend that, since the 1980s, there have been a succession of triumphant revolutions, including the fall of Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua but also, notably, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Where everyone sees a continuous retreat of the left, they see victory after victory.

This same logic has led the organization to celebrate "yet another" triumphant revolution – the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt at the hands of the army.¹¹ The newly-constituted military government engaged in a vengeful witch hunt against the Muslim Brotherhood, but the IWL didn't condemn state terror against them and called for "no democratic rights for the Muslim Brotherhood."¹²

During its reactionary drift in 1983, the American SWP also rejected the relevancy of the permanent revolution. In *Their Trotsky and Ours*, Jack Barnes struck a belated turn towards full support to Latin American guerrillas and converted fully to Castroism. (The whole Fourth International under

the leadership of Ernest Mandel had adopted the guerrilla strategy for Latin America in 1969.¹³) In 1984, the SWP amended its party constitution to fight for a "workers and farmers" government – however surreal this slogan may sound for the U.S. in the 1980s.¹⁴

Its Relevance Today

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution is not a fixed dogma but a strategy for action – a roadmap to world socialism. Although there are, of course, no feudal countries in the world today, the main lessons drawn from the theory can be helpful when analyzing the struggle for socialism in semicolonial countries.

In the face of imperialist oppression, part of the left still feels compelled to support national bourgeois governments such as that of Evo Morales in Bolivia or that of the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. This support is based on the myth that the national bourgeoisie is in favor of national liberation against foreign powers (and is willing to fight foreign capital for it), and that the bourgeoisie is historically poised to bestow democratic rights on the whole of the population, an expectation that flies in the face of all historical experience. The fight for national sovereignty can and must be waged without giving political support to national bourgeois governments.

Furthermore, as this article argues, the fight for democratic rights – along with related struggles – is a task that falls squarely in the hands of the working class: the fight for national sovereignty and self-determination; the distribution of the land; and even the right to vote and participate freely in politics where those rights are suppressed. If the socialist left does not stand at the forefront of the fight for social liberties, then the workers, the most oppressed, the underclass, will look for a force that will champion their demands in parties of liberal democracy or in reformist organizations.

At the same time, when faced with military dictatorships or other authoritarian or bonapartist governments that suppress democratic rights, there is a tendency to present the fight to overthrow the government as an end in itself towards which it is worth coalescing with liberal democratic forces. An example of this is the call to support the rebels in Syria when, after six years of the initial uprising, all forces in the rebel camp are led by bourgeois or petty-bourgeois armed groups. The "Syrian revolution" has mutated to a constellation of armed groups – many religious, a few of them secular – loosely united by the common goal of toppling Assad. Lending political support to them

means settling for a program that advances a liberal capitalist state and forgoes (until a later stage) the fight for socialism.

After decades of retreat in the class struggle as well as in the realm of ideas, the theory of the permanent revolution can serve as a guide to action for working-class politics, internationalism, and strategy for socialism. The international left can only benefit from revisiting this classic theory and reassessing the question of revolutionary strategy in light of its main historical lessons.

Notes

1 This was not necessarily Marx's own view, as shown in his reply to Vera Zasulich. See: Karl Marx, "The 'Second' Draft," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

2 Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution: With a New Preface*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

3 See: George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*, (London: Verso, 1987); Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637-1642*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

4 Alex Callinicos, "Bourgeois Revolutions and Historical Materialism," *International Socialism* 43, no. 2 (1989): 113-171.

5 Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2010), 55.

6 Ibid, 35.

7 Ibid, 312.

8 Ibid, 313.

9 Robert Brenner, "Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong," in *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham (Oxford University Press, 2007), 49-111.

10 Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program & The Struggle for Socialism* (Sydney: Resistance Books, 1999), 44.

11 "¡Fuera Morsi! ¡Fuera Militares!" *Liga Internacional de los Trabajadores – Cuarta Internacional* (2 July 2013).

12 A statement published June 18, 2013 reads "¡Ningún derecho democrático ni de expresión para la Hermandad y sus líderes políticos mientras se movilizan por el retorno de Morsi!" ("No democratic rights for the Muslim Brotherhood and its political leaders as long as they rally for Morsi's return") See: "Los militares no atacan sólo a la reaccionaria Hermandad Musulmana sino a todo el pueblo," *Liga Internacional de los Trabajadores – Cuarta Internacional* (16 August 2013).

13 Socialist Workers Party, "Draft Resolution on Latin America," in *International Information Bulletin*, pt. 2 (January 1969).

14 Jack Barnes, *Their Trotsky and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002).



MENSHEVISM: THE GIRONDINS OF 1917



BY DOUG ENAA GREENE

Whatever their differences, Lenin, Plekhanov, Martov, and Trotsky all saw the Russian Revolution as following in the experience of the French Revolution of 1789. The Russian revolutionaries also modeled themselves on the different parties of the French Revolution, whether consciously or unconsciously, as guides for action. Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed they were modern-day Jacobins – stalwart revolutionaries who would organize the working class and take power. By contrast, the Mensheviks were moderate Girondins. Menshevism was committed to gradualism and opposed to the “historical impatience” of a socialist revolution. Like the Girondins, the Mensheviks were honorable, but like their predecessors, they lacked faith in the revolutionary abilities of the people. That was the root of their failure in 1917.

I. Split

Marxism had existed in Tsarist Russia since the 1880s, but it was confined to the margins of emigres and to scattered circles of students and workers. By the 1890s, there was an upsurge of strikes in the industrial centers to which the nascent Marxist movement provided leadership and organization. While the police arrested the organizers, both the labor movement and Russian Marxism continued to grow.

After its failed 1898 First Congress, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) held its Second Congress – its true founding convention – in 1903 in both Brussels and London. The main organizers were Julius Martov, Georgi Plekhanov, Pavel Axelrod, Vera Zasulich, Alexander Potresov, and Vladimir Lenin who were editors of *Iskra*, the party paper. The goal of the *Iskra* Group was to create a centralized all-Russian socialist party that would assume political leadership of the working class struggle against Tsarism.

During the initial proceedings at the Congress, the *Iskra* Group possessed a clear majority of 33 votes (out of a total of 51) and were able to swiftly pass their agenda. During the 22nd session of the Congress, which was devoted to the definition of membership, the *Iskra* Group split after Lenin and Martov put forward separate drafts. In somewhat simple terms, Lenin wanted a tightly-organized party of professional revolutionaries, while Martov was in favor of a broader and looser party. Martov’s draft won in the final vote.

Later the Congress approved Lenin’s motion that *Iskra* should be the sole representative of

the party abroad and serve as the main vehicle of ideological leadership. Instead of keeping the current editorial board, Lenin proposed creating a smaller editorial board of three people (Martov, Plekhanov and himself), who had written most of the paper’s articles. After a contentious debate, Lenin’s proposal passed. Martov, however, refused to participate, splitting *Iskra*. The vote on the editorial group was the initial split of the RSDLP into factions of Bolsheviks (majority) and Mensheviks (minority).¹

Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, initially supported Lenin on the *Iskra* question. However, Plekhanov later lamented his choice, since he was now arrayed against longtime friends and comrades: “I cannot fire against my own comrades. Better a bullet in the brain than a split... There are times when even the autocracy has to give in.”² Plekhanov had changed his mind and invited the removed editors to rejoin *Iskra*. Lenin resigned in anger.

To many RSDLP members active in Russia, the split was a shocking blow. One worker wrote: “Now, what I cannot understand at all is the fight that’s going on now between the majority and the minority, and to a great many of us it seems wrong.”³ In fact, many party branches within the Empire refused to split and they continued to operate as a unified organization.

Neither Bolshevism nor Menshevism emerged fully formed at the Second Congress. The two factions still clung to the same revolutionary program and hoped to heal the split. For many, the lines of demarcation were still confused. For instance, Trotsky found himself in the Menshevik camp until 1904. Part of the reason for the political confusion is that even moderate socialists in Tsarist Russia could not appear as open reformists since there did not exist even the illusion of a parliamentary democracy. This helped to obscure the true nature of the split.⁴

II. 1905

In 1905, Russia was humiliated after a short war with the Japanese, leading to greater calls for reform from liberals and workers. On January 22, 1905, a peaceful demonstration of workers petitioned the Tsar to improve their conditions. Soldiers fired on them, killing hundreds. The event sparked general strikes and peasant land seizures across the Empire. The whole autocracy appeared unstable and on the verge of collapse. The question for Marxists: What would take its place?

As faithful Marxists, both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks believed that Russia was on the verge of its own 1789. According to this orthodox outlook, Western Europe was ripe for socialism, but Russia still had to accomplish a bourgeois revolution by overthrowing Tsarism and clearing away its feudal backwardness to create a modern capitalist society. After a protracted period, the expansion of both capitalist productive forces and the working class would make Russia ripe for socialism.

However, the surface agreement between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on the tasks of the forthcoming bourgeois revolution concealed deeper disagreements over which class would lead it. Lenin argued that the working class allied with the peasantry would lead the revolution since the bourgeoisie was too weak and non-radical:

*Only the proletariat can be a consistent fighter for democracy. It can become a victorious fighter for democracy only if the peasant masses join its revolutionary struggle. If the proletariat is not strong enough for this the bourgeoisie will be at the head of the democratic revolution and will impart an inconsistent and self-seeking nature to it. Nothing but a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry can prevent this.*⁵

The Mensheviks believed the Russian bourgeoisie, like the French, had to be the revolution’s leading force. In 1905, Martov wrote: “We have the right to expect that sober political calculation will prompt our bourgeois democracy to act in the same way in which, in the past century, bourgeois democracy acted in Western Europe, under the inspiration of revolutionary romanticism.”⁶ In line with this conception, the Mensheviks said that the RSDLP should not fight for power but remain in opposition. Since the workers were not the leading class in this revolution, they needed to moderate their demands lest they frighten the bourgeois and overstep what was historically possible. Menshevik A.S. Martynov said:

That being the case, the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat, by simply frightening the majority of the bourgeois elements, can have but one result—the restoration of absolutism in its original form... The struggle to influence the course and outcome of the bourgeois revolution can find expression only in the exertion of revolutionary pressure by the proletariat on the will of the liberal and radical

*bourgeoisie, and in the compulsion on the part of the more democratic ‘lower strata’ of society to bring the ‘upper strata’ into agreement to carry through the bourgeois revolution to its logical conclusion.*⁷

Furthermore, the Mensheviks viewed the struggle of the peasantry with indifference. For the Mensheviks, the liberal bourgeoisie was the natural ally and leader of the working class in Russia while the peasantry remained mired in backwardness, prone to violent excesses and “irrationalism” that needed to be overcome through the “civilizing school of capitalism.” Plekhanov stated “The main bulwark of absolutism is precisely the political indifference and intellectual backwardness of the peasantry.”⁸

Still, the bourgeoisie was not willing to play the role allotted to it by Menshevism. Instead, the workers were leading the revolutionary struggle against Tsarism alongside both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. In May, the Mensheviks contemplated and accepted the opportunity of the RSDLP taking power: “If we should finally be swept into power against our will by the inner dialectics of the revolution at a time when the national conditions for the establishment of socialism are not yet mature, we would not hold back.”⁹

Trotsky, an independent socialist, was on the left edge of Menshevism and called for a similar line to Bolshevism. Trotsky said the workers must “assume the role of a leading class – if Russia is to be truly re-born as a democratic state...It goes without saying that the proletariat must fulfill its mission, just as the bourgeoisie did in its own time, with the help of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie.”¹⁰ Many Menshevik workers began to be infected with “Trotskyism” and lost faith in the bourgeois revolution, and, like the Bolsheviks, prepared for an armed insurrection. The leading lights of Menshevism – Martov, Axelrod and Plekhanov – were aghast at this turn and preached moderation.¹¹

The Mensheviks took the initiative to create the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers’ Delegates in October 1905. Trotsky himself served as its president. The Soviet was formed to coordinate strike action by the workers, but it also served as a democratic organ representing the interests of the working class. The St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were hostile to the Soviet, believing it should be under party control. Lenin objected to Bolshevik sectarianism towards the Soviet and believed the party should participate in it. For Lenin and

Trotsky, the Soviet should be the embryo of a future revolutionary state.

After the October strike of 1905, the Tsar granted a series of limited reforms including a representative body known as the Duma, and the revolution began to run out of energy. The Soviet was disbanded in December, and the Bolsheviks launched a failed uprising in Moscow. While there would be sporadic outbreaks of struggle until 1907, the high tide of the revolution had passed.

III. Retrenchment

During the revolution, the Mensheviks recruited a layer of dedicated activists. Their membership jumped to 18,000 in April 1906 and to 43,000 in October 1906. Even in 1907, of all 150,000 members of a Russian political party, the Mensheviks numbered 38,000 compared to the 46,000 Bolsheviks.¹² The revolution had drawn both factions together. At the 1906 party congress in Stockholm, a unified social democratic party was – seemingly – created.

However, the defeat of the 1905 caused most Mensheviks to return to their earlier positions. They believed that ultra-leftism and adventurism during the revolution had gone too far. Plekhanov condemned the Moscow Uprising: “They should not have taken to arms.” For the Mensheviks, these radicals acted contrary to the laws of history and terrified the bourgeoisie. The new Menshevik leadership of Theodor Dan, Martov, and Postresov turned away from militancy and focused on legal work and electing representatives to the Duma. To Lenin’s rage, the Mensheviks also tolerated those who wanted to liquidate the underground party apparatus. Despite sharing the common name of “social democrat,” the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had different and irreconcilable ideas on its meaning in both theory and practice. In 1912, the RSDLP formally split into the separate Bolshevik and Menshevik parties, representing the Jacobin and Girondin wings of social democracy.

When World War I broke out in 1914, in contrast to most socialist parties, both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks remained antiwar. Plekhanov supported the war effort, but he alienated himself from most other socialists. The Mensheviks objected when the Bolsheviks broadened their antiwar platform to demand splits with pro-war socialists, the creation of a new revolutionary international, and turning the World War into a civil war. Martov’s group believed it was necessary to work for peace but would not split the international or advocate civil war.

IV. 1917

After three years of war and misery, Russian workers had enough. In February 1917, a simple demonstration for bread in Petrograd took on a life of its own and toppled the Tsar. A new bourgeois-led Provisional Government was established to determine Russia’s future. On February 27, Mensheviks organized a new workers’ soviet in the capital. An untenable situation of dual power soon emerged across Russia. The Menshevik Soviet leaders, true to their Marxist orthodoxy, said that workers should support the bourgeois-led provisional government, believing that Russia was going through the same type of revolution as France in 1789: “We destroy the bastions of political authority, but the bases of capitalism remain in place. A battle on two fronts—against the Tsar and against capital is beyond the forces of the proletariat.”¹³

However, Russia in 1917 was not France in 1789. France was a society emerging from feudalism where the modern bourgeois society had matured; the revolution was needed to cast aside the dead weight of the ancien régime and facilitate the growth of capitalism. By contrast, Russia was not only feudal, but also capitalist with a combative working class that would not stop at a bourgeois revolution. Furthermore, the two revolutions showed the need for resolute parties and leadership to carry out their goals: the Jacobins and Bolsheviks. The Jacobins were the party of the radical bourgeoisie supported by the urban masses, who were determined and willing to defend the gains of the French Revolution with all the means at their disposal. The Bolsheviks showed similar determination to their revolutionary forebearers, but were the party of the working class and peasantry fighting for an international socialist revolution. The socialist revolution was now on the historical agenda.

Menshevik thinking remained confused and divided with no clear program to address the vast social and political crisis that gripped Russia. They believed a socialist revolution was destined to fail and be drowned in blood. The peasantry should wait for a Constituent Assembly and not take the land. While the Mensheviks called for peace, many members believed that with the Tsar gone they should support the war effort. The logic of the Menshevik position caused them to enter into a series of coalition governments with the liberals and take responsibility for the war. As in 1905, the bourgeoisie had no intention of playing a revolutionary role. Despite numbering 200,000 members by August 1917, the Mensheviks remained a loose collection of groups with no real

structure, discipline or unity.¹⁴ They ranged from defenders of the Provisional Government, such as Irakli Tsereteli and Nikolay Chkheidze, to anti-war internationalists opponents such as Martov. Martov passionately agitated for the Mensheviks to break with the liberals, but his efforts came to naught.

The Menshevik historian Nikolai Sukhanov explained the failure of the most principled of his comrades during the revolutionary moment of 1917 as follows:

*We did not fuse with [the revolutionary masses] because a number of features of the positive creative strength of Bolshevism, as well as its methods of agitation, revealed to us its future hateful countenance. It was based on an unbridled, anarchistic, petty-bourgeois elemental explosion, which was only smothered by Bolshevism when once again it was not followed by the masses. We were afraid of this elemental explosion.*¹⁵

In the honeymoon phase of the revolution, the differences between Bolshevism and Menshevism were blurred once again. In some parts of Russia, there was no split in the RSDLP until after the October Revolution. Bolshevism contained its own Girondins too. In March, the Bolshevik leaders of the Petrograd party, Joseph Stalin and Lev Kamenev, called for supporting the Provisional Government and were open to reuniting with the Mensheviks.

After Lenin returned to Russia in April, these attempts at unity ended. He called for a socialist revolution and the transfer of power to the soviets. Sukhanov described the reaction of the orthodox Mensheviks to Lenin’s ideas:

*Of how... his whole conception was to be reconciled with the elementary conceptions of Marxism (the only thing Lenin did not dissociate himself from in his speech)—not a syllable was said. Everything touching on what had hitherto been called scientific socialism Lenin ignored just as completely as he destroyed the foundations of the current Social-Democratic programme and tactics.*¹⁶

The Mensheviks saw Lenin’s April Theses not as Marxism, but Blanquism or anarchism. They expected him to fall into irrelevance with these “lunatic ideas.” Lenin managed to convince the Bolsheviks of his position and put them back on the revolutionary road. Within a short time, the people identified the Bolsheviks as champions for soviet power, “peace, land, and bread.” Sukhanov

describes the result: “Yes, the Bolsheviks were working stubbornly and without let-up. They were among the masses, at the factory benches, every day without pause. Tens of speakers, big and little, were speaking in Petersburg, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses they had become their own people, because they were always there, taking the lead in details as well as in the most important affairs of the factory or barracks...The mass lived and breathed together with the Bolsheviks. It was in the hands of the party of Lenin and Trotsky.”¹⁷ In contrast, the Mensheviks struggled to save the unpopular Provisional Government while their support melted away.

In October, after the Bolsheviks seized power, Martov condemned the revolution as a coup d’état and against the will of the people. Trotsky, now a leading Bolshevik, answered Martov’s charge:

*A rising of the masses of the people needs no justification... The masses of the people followed our banner and our insurrection was victorious. And now we are told: renounce your victory, make concessions, compromise. With whom? I ask: with whom ought we to compromise? With those wretched groups who have left us or who are making this proposal?... No, here no compromise is possible. To those who have left and to those who tell us to do this we must say: you are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out: go where you ought to be: into the dustbin of history!*¹⁸

Martov’s group walked away from the revolution. As they did so, a young Bolshevik said, “And we had thought that Martov at least would remain with us.”¹⁹ Martov believed that it was better for the Mensheviks to “wash their hands” of the whole revolution and oppose both the Bolsheviks and the bourgeoisie. It was a choice that confirmed that Martov had truly earned his nickname as “the Hamlet of democratic socialism.”

V. Defeat

After 1917, the Mensheviks remained out of step with the mood of the people, fairs poorly in elections for the Constituent Assembly in 1918. However, when the Civil War began, the Mensheviks were forced to pick sides. The right-wing Mensheviks opposed the Bolsheviks, mostly through bureaucratic maneuvering, but some joined the White Armies led by Kaledin or other anti-Bolshevik movements such as the Provisional Government of Autonomous Siberia. Martov’s Internationalists offered critical

support to the Red Army during the Civil War, but denounced the persecution of opponents of the Soviet government. In July 1918, the Mensheviks were excluded from the Soviets, but reinstated again, only to be banned after the end of the Civil War. The one place where Menshevism fared well was in Georgia where they administered a capitalist state with support from imperialism from 1918 to 1921 when they were overthrown by the Red Army. The surviving Mensheviks passed their days in exile, most of them decrying the revolution they had abandoned. Their intransigent fidelity to orthodoxy meant they had betrayed the revolutionary spirit of Marxism and were, in the end, fit only for the role of second-rate Girondins in 1917.

Notes

- 1 Bertram Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution: A Biographical History* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964), 240-8.
- 2 Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 246.
- 3 *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 7, "Postscript: Letter to a Comrade," (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 138. (henceforth LCW)
- 4 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* (New York: Verso, 2003), 82.
- 5 LCW, vol. 9, "The Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," 60.
- 6 Deutscher 2003, 119.
- 7 Quoted in LCW, vol. 8, "Social Democracy and the Provisional Revolutionary Government," 283-4.
- 8 Georgi Plekhanov, "Second Draft Programme of the Russian Social-Democrats," Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1887/xx/sdelg2.htm>.
- 9 Quoted in Esther Kingston-Mann, *Lenin and the Problem of Russian Peasant Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 83.
- 10 Leon Trotsky, "1905," Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch25.htm>
- 11 Israel Getzler, *Martov: A Political Biography of a Russian Social Democrat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 110.
- 12 Tony Cliff, "Lenin: Building the Party (1893-1914)," Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/chap20.htm>
- 13 Quoted in David Mandel, *The Petrograd Workers and the Fall of the Old Regime* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 86.
- 14 Leopold Haimson, ed., *The Mensheviks: From the Revolution of 1917 to the Second World War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 389.
- 15 N. N. Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 530.
- 16 *Ibid.* 284-5.
- 17 Quoted in *ibid.* 529.
- 18 Quoted in *ibid.* 639-640.
- 19 Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 491.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE BOLSHEVIKS' POLICY TOWARD MUSLIMS?



“Comrades, you who have for the first time assembled in a congress of peoples of the East, must here proclaim a real holy war, against the robbers, the Anglo-French capitalists. Now we must say that the hour has sounded when the workers of the whole world can arouse and raise up tens and hundreds of millions of peasants, can form a Red Army in the East as well, can arm and organise a revolt in the rear of the British, can hurl fire against the bandits, can poison the existence of every insolent British officer who is lording it in Turkey, Persia, India and China.”

**G. Zinoviev, Congress of the Peoples
of the East, Baku, 1920**

ROBERT BELANO

The Bolsheviks and Religion

Anti-communist historians have long maintained that the Bolsheviks restricted religious freedoms and persecuted believers after the October Revolution. Robert Service, for example, decries “a campaign of terror” waged by the Bolsheviks against the Orthodox Church, Islam, and Judaism. Richard Pipes declares that the Soviet campaign against the Church was “accompanied by a drive against religious beliefs and rituals.” Liberal historians, for their part, have more or less echoed these assertions for the past century.

It is indisputable that the Bolsheviks – rightfully – saw the Russian Orthodox Church as an agent of czarism and an enemy in the fight for socialism. On the eve of the Revolution, the church was the nation’s largest landowner, with 7.5 million acres. In 1918, the Bolsheviks’ Decree on the Separation of Church and State expropriated the land and assets of the church and put them under the administration of the soviets. The Church was also stripped of the tremendous political power that it had held for over five centuries. Priests and clergy members who resisted the seizure of their gold and silver were ordered imprisoned or executed.

The Bolshevik leaders were convinced atheists in the Marxist tradition. Yet, like Marx, they understood that religious beliefs would vanish once and for all only when the class oppression that gives rise to these beliefs was done away with. Marx’s quote that “religion is the opium of the people” is well-known. What is less known is what precedes it: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” In other words, religious devotion arose from material conditions, which, at the turn of the 20th century in Russia, meant the remnants of feudalism combined with capitalist exploitation, war, and famine.

Lenin, in particular, was careful to distinguish between the oppressive apparatus of the Orthodox Church and the oppressed masses who were still, by and large, believers. He declared that the communists must organize “the most extensive propaganda of scientific enlightenment and anti-religious conceptions. While doing this, we must carefully avoid anything that can wound the feelings of believers, for such a method can only lead to the strengthening of religious fanaticism.”

How prescient Lenin’s words appear today. Decades of the fierce repression of Muslims – first under Stalinism and later under capitalist “democracy” – have fanned the flames of Islamic

fundamentalism in Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Religious Minorities Under Czarism

After the February Revolution toppled Nicholas II, minorities, particularly Muslims, Jews, and smaller Christian sects, who had long suffered under the yoke of czarism, were anxious for a new regime. For these sectors, czarism had meant bloody pogroms against Jews and a “Russification” program that imposed Russian as the official language and mandated all education be conducted in Russian.

The Bolsheviks recognized the need to appeal to oppressed people throughout the former empire – from oppressed nationalities like the Ukrainians and Poles to the various religious minorities – in order to ensure the revolution’s success. They reversed Russification and encouraged schools to teach in their students’ native languages. This policy, like many other gains for Muslims and oppressed minorities, would be ended following Stalin’s consolidation of power. Stalin, who embodied the growing “Great Russian chauvinism” among the bureaucracy that had been denounced by Lenin, re-imposed Russian as the official language of the land and made education in Russian compulsory in 1938.

Unlike the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks offered oppressed nations full right to self-determination, including the right to separate from the Soviet Republic. The Poles and the Finns opted to separate. But this approach by the Bolsheviks earned them a confidence among many workers and peasants of oppressed nationalities that had eluded the Mensheviks and SRs. The support of the popular layers from these regions would be key in the Red Army’s victory in the civil war.

An Appeal to the Peoples of the East

At the time of the October Revolution, as many as one in ten residents of the new Soviet Republic was Muslim. In the Central Asian region, often referred to as simply “The East,” more than 90 percent of the population was Muslim. More than 120 languages were spoken throughout the new republic, and only around half of the population spoke Russian. Only 19 languages in these territories had a written form.

The anti-imperialism of the Bolsheviks, and in particular, Lenin and Trotsky, was central to their policy toward Muslim people. Lenin often quoted Marx and Engels in stating “no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations.” Following the insurrection, the Bolsheviks declared null and void the treaties with the Allies which had offered Russia the annexation of Constantinople and the partitioning of Turkey and Persia.

Further, the Bolsheviks recognized that defeating the imperialist offensive – which far outmatched it militarily and technologically – would require the unity of all workers, poor peasants, and oppressed people throughout the Soviet Republic. The Soviet leaders saw an ally in the Muslim people who had long be subjugated by the same forces the Red Army fought against: British imperialism, French imperialism and of course, the czarist counter-revolutionary forces.

However, winning over poor and working Muslims to Bolshevism would be no easy task. Historian E.H. Carr notes:

“[The Bolsheviks] had in their minds a vague picture of oppressed peoples awaiting emancipation from superstitious mullahs as eagerly as from Tsarist administrators; and they were astonished to discover that, while the hold of Islam over the nomadic peoples and in parts of Central Asia was little more than nominal, it remained elsewhere a tenacious and vigorous institution which offered far fiercer resistance than the Orthodox Church to new beliefs and new practices. In regions where it was strong – notably in the northern Caucasus – the Muslim religion was a social, legal and political as well as religious institution regulating the daily way of life of its members in almost every particular. The imams and mullahs were judges, law-givers, teachers and intellectuals, as well as political and sometimes military leaders.”

In 1920, the Bolsheviks convened the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, Azerbaijan. In attendance were two thousand delegates from throughout Central Asia as well as Soviet leaders such as Grigory Zinoviev and Karl Radek and communists from abroad like Bela Kun and John Reed. In his opening address, Zinoviev, a Bolshevik of Jewish and Ukrainian ancestry, urged a “holy war” against foreign imperialists. In this way, he sought to link the Red Army campaign against the Whites and their international backers

to the historic struggle of the peoples of the East against foreign occupiers.

The historian Stephen White notes that: “The Congress’s anti-imperialist purpose was not lost on the British authorities.” A British maritime patrol was set up, unsuccessfully, to block Turkish delegates from attending. Two Persian delegates en route were killed by a British aerial bombardment, and several others were wounded or arrested. The congress concluded with a major procession and the burning in effigy of Lloyd George, Alexandre Millerand, and Woodrow Wilson.

Islam After the Revolution

After the revolution, far from forcibly suppressing religion, the policies of the Bolsheviks allowed some religions to grow. The number of madrassas, for example, increased dramatically across the region, as Chris Bambery points out on Counterfire. In fact, in some Soviet states, these Islamic centers educated nearly ten times the number of students that state schools did. Further, the Bolsheviks promoted a policy of korenizatsiia or “indigenization,” by which “each nationality [would] be represented in the government and administration in proportion to their share of the population.” And while some distrust of the new Soviet regime still existed among the Eastern peoples, “[b]y the close of 1918, 45 percent of the members of the Turkestan Communist Party were Muslims.”

Writing for International Socialism, Dave Crouch notes that in Central Asia, “[a] parallel court system was created in 1921, with Islamic courts administering justice in accordance with sharia laws. The aim was for people to have a choice between religious and revolutionary justice.” However, “sharia sentences that contravened Soviet law, such as stoning or the cutting off of hands, were forbidden.” As many as half of all court cases in Central Asia during the early years of the Revolution were decided by sharia law. In cases in which a sharia trial refused to grant a woman divorce, the state allowed for retrials in revolutionary courts, if one party appealed the decision.

The Struggle of Muslim Women

While the revolution offered many new freedoms to women, such as the right to a divorce on demand

and the right to an abortion, the revolutionaries did not impose their morals by force on oppressed minorities. Muslim women were allowed to continue wearing their traditional dress, including the headscarf, if they so chose (a right that would later be rescinded by Stalin). Speaking at the congress, one delegate declared, “The women of the East are not merely fighting for the right to walk in the street without wearing the chadra (headscarf), as many people suppose. For the women of the East, with their high moral ideals, the question of the chadra, it can be said, is of the least importance.”

But there was no illusion that Muslim women did not suffer extreme oppression. Another delegate stated unequivocally, “We, the women of the East, are exploited ten times worse than the men.” For the women delegates, the urgent demands included complete equality of rights, equal access to education and employment, an end to polygamy, equal rights within marriage, and the creation of women’s committees in defense of their rights.

The Potential for Muslim Rebellion

While anti-imperialism guided Lenin’s approach to Muslims, Islam’s own anti-imperialist history made Muslims particularly receptive to the ideas of Bolshevism. The liberal historian John Sidel notes that in the first two decades of the 20th century, workers, peasants, sailors, and soldiers rebelled against the Dutch colonizers in Indonesia, a country which is home to the world’s largest Muslim population. In 1920, the Communist Union of the Indies was launched and became the first communist party in Asia to join the Comintern. The Indonesian labor organizer, Tan Malaka, called for an alliance between the growing Pan-Islamist movement and the communist movement. The former’s lack of clarity on the class question, along with the Soviet Union’s regression toward Russian chauvinism in the following years, meant that a unity of anti-imperialist forces did not materialize.

Today, we have the example of the Arab Spring which began in 2011. This phenomenon showed the enormous potential of the people of Muslim-majority nations to rebel against tyranny and oppression. Begun as a pro-democracy and anti-austerity movement in Tunisia, it quickly spread across the Middle East. In Tunisia, massive demonstrations and general strikes by the workers brought an end to the 23-year rule of the U.S.-backed President Ben Ali. In Egypt, the movement toppled the repressive Mubarak administration that had governed for three

decades with the full support of U.S. imperialism. These popular uprisings also confronted more “Islamist” governments such as the Morsi regime in Egypt, which was elected in 2012.

However, the Arab Spring’s lack of an independent, working-class political program ultimately led to the co-optation of the movement by bourgeois forces and, finally, to its defeat. Imperialism restored the police state in Egypt via a military coup. In Tunisia, as Gilbert Achcar notes in Jacobin, “The new dominant party [is] to a very large extent...refurbished version of the old regime’s ruling party.” But this massive movement demonstrated that it will be the workers, youth, and popular layers in the street that will achieve democratic reforms, not bourgeois forces or American interventions.

How Can We Apply the Bolsheviks’ Policy Today?

Clearly, the progressive attitudes of the Bolsheviks toward oppressed minorities and religions contrast sharply with the anti-Muslim laws and practices that exist across modern-day Europe and the U.S. Austria, France, and Belgium, as well as various states and cities in other European nations, have imposed bans on full-face veils. And it is not only the right-wing but also social democratic parties that have been responsible for these restrictions. France has attempted to go even further in repressing Muslim dress with a proposed “burkini” ban that would prohibit full-body swimsuits. Meanwhile, major newspapers mock the prophet Mohammed and paint Muslims as rabid terrorists. The profiling and harassment of Muslims is rampant at airports, universities, and elsewhere. In this regard, the tolerance achieved in the early years of the “godless” Soviet Republic far surpasses that which exists in the “enlightened countries” of the West.

Yet the lessons of the Bolsheviks go beyond the approach of socialists toward Muslims. In speaking at the Baku Congress, Zinoviev amended the famous slogan from the Communist Manifesto, declaring, “Workers of all lands and oppressed peoples of the whole world, unite!” The Bolsheviks saw the urgent need to link the causes of the workers and oppressed minorities, including those who were not, strictly speaking, part of the proletariat, but rather small peasants, artisans, or members of other sectors who were being increasingly squeezed by capitalism.

In the advanced capitalist countries today, the need to unite the working class with oppressed racial, ethnic, and religious minorities is as clear as ever.

Faced with a growing restlessness among workers and oppressed people after decades of austerity and the erosion of workers’ living standards, the capitalists have promoted xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia in order to prevent unity between white workers, workers of color, Muslims, and immigrants. Far from offering any material benefits to workers, the politicians who campaigned on this nationalist fervor – Donald Trump and Teresa May among them – will only bring about the further slashing of wages, more precarious jobs, and new cuts to social services.

In the face of this, the Left must give all support to these oppressed sectors, drawing from examples like the nationwide airport demonstrations in the U.S. after Trump’s Muslim Ban, if we are to win over these communities to revolutionary struggles. We must be fully aware that the State’s repressive forces, which today deport immigrants and arrest or harass people of color, will tomorrow be used to break up strikes and thwart workers’ rebellions. Furthermore, the Left and working classes of imperialist countries must show unwavering solidarity with the peoples of semi-colonial countries in their struggles against imperialism. We must reject all “humanitarian” invasions and bombing campaigns which are chiefly carried out against non-white and Muslim peoples around the world. These wars and acts of aggression, far from bringing democracy or improving the wellbeing of the people, only serve the interests of the imperialist countries and their 1 percent.

The spread of civil wars and hunger across the world as a direct result of imperialist policy has sparked a wave of migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, the U.S., and various petro-states, like Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates. This situation has created a new sector of immigrant workers, millions of whom are Muslims. These workers are among the most exploited and oppressed and are likely to lead new battles against capital. The solidarity shown by the Russian revolutionaries toward oppressed minorities should be an example for Western workers as they carry out struggles in common interest with Muslims, immigrants, people of color, LGBT people, and all those who suffer under the oppressive yoke of capitalism.

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WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTION, THE REVOLUTION IN WOMEN'S LIVES



Adolf Strakhov. The Emancipated Woman is Building Socialism.

BY ANDREA D'ATRI

There is broad consensus on the unprecedented strides that the proletarian revolution of 1917 made in the lives of Russian women. The right to divorce, abortion, access to wage labor, and steps towards socialized domestic work are only some of the reforms instituted by the Bolsheviks. The reverberations from the vast changes in women's rights in the Soviet Union were felt across the world. Suffragists, proponents for women's education and even liberal feminists and other progressive sectors applauded legislation that enshrined women's rights and other progressive public policies in law.

In the eyes of the world, the most curious aspect of these progressive advances is that they occurred in Russia – a country deemed economically and culturally anachronistic. Women rebelled in the land of orthodox patriarchs and czars, of Cossacks intoxicated by barrels of vodka, of illiterate peasants, and of kulaks who enriched themselves by the force of the lash. To make matters more complex, Russia was battered by the devastation of World War I and surrounded by imperialist armies. Its population was decimated by droughts, diseases and plagues.

In this terrain – predictably arid for the flourishing of cultural and political progress – legal equality between men and women was established. De facto unions were recognized; the right to divorce and abortion was established; nurseries, public laundromats and community kitchens were created; the criminalization of homosexuality and the persecution of women in prostitution were eliminated.

These innovations, which revolutionized the everyday life of women, as well as Russian homes and families, did not fall from the sky. Nor did they spontaneously emerge from the energy of the socialist revolution. The party led by Lenin was a hotbed of debates about women's emancipation: what would be the role of mothers once child rearing was socialized? Should a socialist state continue to issue marriage licenses if it wanted to remove the state from all romantic relationships? There was not a unified position within the Bolsheviks on these issues, but an open debate among various positions.

The Bolsheviks drew inspiration from a long history of slave insurrections, going as far back as antiquity. They were the heirs to the ideas of utopian socialism and were influenced by Marx and Engels's ruthless criticisms of bourgeois marriage and the family in their seminal text, *The Communist Manifesto*.

This relationship between an ideology – inherited from utopian socialism and historical materialism

– and the massive incorporation of women in the industrial concentrations of large European cities produced a profound political moment. The combination of this new female proletariat with a revolutionary leadership imbued with advanced ideas about emancipation was the bedrock of the audacious measures adopted by the Bolshevik Party, translated into legislation, government plans and social policies.

Free Love

Since the Middle Ages, people have reflected on how to love freely. There have been movements that rejected contractual systems, marriages arranged by third parties, or the interference of the Church and/or the State in romantic relationships. Since the 14th Century, collectives have put forth the idea of 'free love,' questioning not only marriage but also rules concerning adultery and the prohibition of contraception and abortion. That is why almost all the movements that supported free love have also questioned the subjugation of women to men. They have protested women's lack of freedom and therefore have often supported the emancipation of women.

Perhaps when we discuss the proletarian revolution in Russia, it is more accurate to refer to "free unions" rather than free love. A central concern of Bolshevik leaders and intellectuals was to emancipate romantic relationships from the yoke of the Orthodox Church. Prior to the revolution, children conceived outside of Orthodox marriages were not only denied property rights, but they were also shunned by society. The Bolsheviks fought this by recognizing all types of unions without the rules or approval of the church.

The new legislation that allowed divorce also opened the doors to free unions. However, in war-torn Russia, this also had negative effects on the lives of women who, for centuries, had depended on men financially. For many women, marriage was a form of survival in a patriarchal society. It was thus necessary to promote women's emancipation by incorporating women into productive work and winning economic independence and equality before the law in order to then establish the legitimacy of free unions.

Alexandra Kollontai, a Bolshevik leader, wrote about the need to build comradesly love, contrasting this ideal with the jealous and possessive relationships that characterize the bourgeois ideal of "romantic love". She argued

that this type of relationship emerged with the rise of the bourgeoisie and embodied the concept of private property which was in turn projected onto personal relationships. This reinforcement of an ingrained sense of possessiveness and entitlement in romantic relationships then became the source of multiple forms of violence. After taking power, Kollontai and other Bolsheviks had the chance to put into practice the ideas they had discussed as a revolutionary creed.

The Spark That Lit the Flame

For a decade under the czarist regime, women had staged huge struggles in the nascent Russian working class. They not only fought for bread and butter demands, but also for childcare at factories, paid maternity leave, work breaks to breastfeed newborns etc. In the police reports and factory logs, there are many examples of women's strikes that demand the right to use the same bathrooms as the owners of the company and an end to the abuse of foremen.

On August 26 and 27, 1910, the Second International Conference of Socialist Women was held in Copenhagen where the main debates included women's suffrage and improved conditions for mothers, including maternity leave and protections from firings based on pregnancy. The delegates Clara Zetkin and Kate Duncker of the German Social Democratic Party proposed the creation of International Women's Day which was celebrated in Russia for the first time in 1913. While the Mensheviks argued that only women should participate in Women's Day protests, the Bolsheviks argued that the day should be recognized by the entire working class because women's emancipation should be taken up by all exploited people.

World War I placed an additional burden on women. When almost 10 million men, mostly peasants, were mobilized and sent to the war front, women took up agricultural work and made up 72 percent of rural laborers. The same thing happened in the cities; between 1914 and 1917, the female workforce in the factories increased by almost 50 percent. This meant that more and more women took up the "double shift" – undertaking both domestic work in the home and wage labor. On the basis of these conditions, the Bolsheviks developed a bold policy for the recruitment of women workers. At the same time, the party educated the workers on the need to take up the struggle for the emancipation of women.

Meanwhile, the war was raging, causing extreme food shortages and massive numbers of deaths.

In 1915, women staged riots and organized desperate acts of sabotage against the war in major European cities. In St. Petersburg, women lashed out against the high prices of groceries by sacking stores and rioting. The same thing happened in Moscow that year, and the year afterwards. The czarist police wrote a report that warned about the danger that was building up in the empty stomachs of the Russian people and the cemeteries where the bodies piled up: "Mothers, exhausted by the endless lines at the shops, tormented by the hunger and sickness of their children, are now more open to revolution than Mr. Miliukov, Rodichev and company, and of course, they are more dangerous because they represent the spark that can ignite the flame."¹

This warning arrived too late: on International Women's Day of 1917, women textile workers went on strike. They marched to neighboring factories calling the other workers to join them, throwing snowballs and rocks through factory windows. More and more men joined the spontaneous demonstration for peace, bread, and an end to the autocracy. These demands had manifested themselves in each of the riots in the year prior, provoked by the hardships of war. Two days later, this spontaneous mobilization started by women workers grew into a general strike. "The 23rd of February was International Woman's Day. The social-democratic circles had intended to mark this day in a general manner: by meetings, speeches, leaflets. It had not occurred to anyone that it might become the first day of the revolution."²

Women's Emancipation, A Pillar of the Revolution

Such huge transformations in women's rights were only possible through the seizure of power because the revolution itself was sparked by women. However, they were also an effect of the Bolshevik imagination which was stronger and more transgressive than the adversities that loomed over the nascent workers' state: hunger, war and isolation.

In 1918, less than a year after the Revolution, the Family Code – which Wendy Goldman calls the "most progressive family legislation ever seen in the world" – was passed. It took the church out of the business of marriage, making it a civil matter. It allowed divorce to be not only legalized but streamlined and made accessible to anyone without need to provide a reason to the state. The law stopped centuries-old regulations that privileged the private property of men. It gave equal rights to all children – including children

born outside of a registered marriage. If a woman did not know who the father of her child was, all of her sexual partners would share child support responsibilities. Importantly, it made women legally equal to men, through an amendment that has not even been passed in the United States. Alexander Goikhbarg, who wrote the Family Code, saw this law as a transitory measure that was not meant to strengthen the state nor the family. Instead, this law was meant to take steps towards the extinction of the family.

But as Lenin argued, equality in law was only the beginning, a minimal step that the revolution could take for women's rights. He says, "Where there are no landlords, capitalists and merchants, where the government of the toilers is building a new life without these exploiters, there equality between women and men exists in law. But that is not enough. It is a far cry from equality in law to equality in life. We want women workers to achieve equality with men workers not only in law, but in life as well."³ The revolution had to take steps in order to advance towards true equality. Legal changes could only be effective if they were accompanied by large, state-led efforts to end "domestic slavery" – the second, unpaid shift that overburdened women. Through the workers' state, the Bolsheviks wanted to convert household chores into salaried, industrialized work to be carried out by both men and women. Long before the "Wages for Housework" campaign, the Bolsheviks saw the necessity, not only of turning wage labor into a paid job, but also, of collectivizing this labor as essential to women's liberation. This built the scaffolding for new kinds of relationships free from the economic coercion of traditional patriarchal relations.

As the Minister of Public Assistance, Alexandra Kollontai became one of the architects of many of the reforms regarding women and the family. Among the most important measures advocated by the new minister of the workers state was the ability of Soviet women to freely choose their profession, gain access to all state jobs, and receive equal pay for equal work. Moreover, it became illegal to fire pregnant women. Women were also granted the right to divorce and the right to enroll in co-educational schools.

Yet these progressive changes, unseen anywhere else in the world, were insufficient to guarantee true equality for women. Prior to the change in the Civil Code, there were long, deep, and interesting debates within the Bolshevik party and in broader society about women's liberation, the role of the family in socialism, and how to transition towards a society in which women are equal to men. Aware of the historical inequalities between men

and women, the Bolsheviks also sought to protect women from unintended consequences of these new laws that introduced greater freedoms in relation to the traditional family.

The historian Wendy Goldman says, "From a comparative perspective, the 1918 Code was remarkably ahead of its time. Similar legislation concerning gender equality, divorce, legitimacy, and property has yet to be enacted in America and in many European countries. Yet despite the Code's radical innovations, jurists were quick to point out that 'this is not socialist legislation, but legislation of the transitional time.' As such the Code preserved marriage registration, alimony, child support, and other provisions related to the continuing, even if temporary, need for the family unit. As Marxists, the jurists were in the odd position of creating legislation that they believed would soon become irrelevant."⁴

The new way of thinking exhibited by the Family Code demonstrates that for the Bolsheviks, the revolution itself was just one act; it was the beginning of a process of deep changes in values that had been reproduced for millennia. As Leon Trotsky points out in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, one of the essential aspects of a socialist revolution is precisely this metamorphosis of society through a constant internal struggle that engulfs and transforms all social relations. The emancipation of women from the yoke that had kept them subordinate and oppressed for centuries was one of the fundamental aspects of the social relationships that needed to be radically changed.

Far from a class reductionist perspective, the Bolsheviks saw women's emancipation as a central task for the proletarian revolution. Lenin said, "The proletariat cannot achieve complete freedom, unless it achieves complete freedom for women."⁵ The Bolsheviks saw the woman's role in a society as a measure of that society as a whole; it wouldn't be until women had achieved full equality that they could consider the socialist revolution a genuine success.

The Stalinist Counterrevolution

As explained in the article The Thermidor in Moscow, after the revolution and the civil war, the USSR was internationally isolated and the population of the young workers state was left decimated and hungry. This isolation allowed for the rise of a political caste within the Bolshevik party, as well as within the Soviet state, which administered scarcity. In the realm of women's rights, as in other realms, this meant

a counterrevolution in the measures taken by the Bolsheviks.

This transformation in politics was not imposed easily or without resistance. The Bolshevik Revolution was drowned out by Stalinism and the 1917 generation was annihilated. Those who did not die in the imperialist war or the civil war died from hunger and disease. Others were deported and incarcerated in forced work camps, and still others were shot.

Stalin managed to seize the leadership of the Bolshevik Party and the state with the support of new generations of careerists who entered the party after the revolution, and brought with them the most traditional and backwards ideas. Under Stalin's leadership, patriarchal interests and petty bourgeois morality was reproduced within the party.

Paradoxically, in the name of socialism, the socialization of services that replaced domestic work was limited. Only married couples were formally recognized by the state, and the women's section of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party was disbanded. Prostitution was criminalized, and LGBT people were persecuted and imprisoned. Abortion was prohibited, and all of the discussions about women's liberation that the Bolsheviks had debated so ardently in the first years after the revolution were entirely discredited.

The Stalinist counter-revolution meant a return to propping up the bourgeois family and old concepts of maternity. Under Stalinism, the State inculcated the idea that women should only be realized as such in motherhood or as wives and housewives. By 1944, Stalin had imposed designations of women based on how many children they had. The "Order of Maternal Glory" created categorizations for women and provided women with 10 or more children with the designation of "Mother Heroine." The traditional family, which fascist leaders in Germany and Italy considered the fundamental basis for social discipline, also played this role in the Stalinist Soviet Union. All of the liberatory ideas of free love and the end of the family that had reached their zenith in the first years of the revolution

were later labeled immoral, anarchist, and petty bourgeois propaganda.

As Wendy Goldman repeatedly argues in *Women, State and Revolution*, one of the most tragic of all the crimes committed by Stalinism was convincing the world that Stalinist bureaucracy was "real socialism." However, not even half a century of Stalin's existence at the forefront of the workers state could erase the heroic role that women played in the Russian Revolution and the great victory that the socialist revolution meant for them as the "proletariat of the proletariat".

Women have played an essential part in revolutions throughout history including the French Revolution of 1789, the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. In these enormous upheavals, women provided abundant examples of self-denial, courage, and heroism. Throughout the next 100 years, history has continued to demonstrate the protagonism of working class and poor women in revolutionary processes and great social transformations. This may be because, as Leon Trotsky points out, "Those who struggle with more energy and persistence for the new are those who have suffered most with the old."⁶

**TRANSLATION BY
TATIANA COZZARELLI**

Notes

1 Bárbara Funes, "Rojas," in *Luchadoras. Historias de Mujeres Que Hicieron Historia*, comp. Andrea D'Atri (Buenos Aires: IPS Editions, 2006).

2 Leon Trotsky, "Five Days," in *History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 1, trans. Max Eastman (1932), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch07.htm>.

3 V.I. Lenin, "To the Working Women," in *Lenin: Collected Works*, 4th English Ed., vol. 30, trans. George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 371-372, previously published in *Pravda* (February 22, 1920), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/feb/21.htm>.

4 Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

5 Lenin.

6 Translation: "Those who struggle with more energy and persistence for the new are those who have suffered most with the old." Leon Trotsky, Letter addressed to a meeting of working women in Moscow, *Pravda*, November 28, 1923.



**MARXISM OR
POPULISM?
A DEBATE ABOUT
PROLETARIAN CULTURE**

BY ARIANE DÍAZ

The young Soviet Republic was fertile ground for the development of art with the emergence of new trends, genres and styles. Revolutionary art drew from both traditional and new experimental styles. With the destruction of the old institutions that legitimized Russian culture and censored innovation, anything seemed possible.

Shortly before the Revolution, an artistic movement called “Prolekult” emerged. The organizations of the Prolekult, which quickly spread throughout Russia, were among the first to openly support the October Revolution. With the revolutionary upsurge, their projects were deployed rapidly and on a massive scale, making them protagonists of the cultural policies of the workers’ state during the Civil War years.

Many Bolsheviks participated in the Prolekult and supported the ideas that had been outlined out by Aleksandr Bogdanov. Their aim was to implement cultural activities among the working class. After the October Revolution, the Prolekult received state support to carry out activities ranging from literacy clubs to artistic training workshops. The People’s Commissary of Education of Russia, directed by Anatoly Lunacharsky, provided the Prolekult with a budget of about one-third of what was assigned to the adult education department. The Prolekult spread throughout the country and, according to its leaders, had a membership of 400,000 members in 1920. At the same time, an important debate emerged within the Bolshevik Party and the Prolekult about the role of art and proletarian culture in the particular conditions of the new Soviet state.

The Basis of Bogdanov

Aleksandr Bogdanov, one of the founders of the Prolekult, formulated his political perspective about the role of proletarian culture from the lessons he learned from the defeat of the Revolution of 1905. At this point, he was still a member of the Bolshevik faction within the Russian Social Democratic Party. He knew that, in 1905, the proletariat had not yet attained the tools necessary to lead the revolution; it did not have leadership over the oppressed masses. With this insight, Bogdanov developed an entire worldview from a proletarian perspective, arguing that this was an important missing element in the 1905 Revolution.

Bogdanov drew a parallel between the workers’ and the bourgeois revolution, observing that prior to seizing power, the latter had deployed its own worldview to all fields – from the economic

and scientific to the philosophical and artistic – what we know today as Enlightenment ideas. Bogdanov thought that the working class should play a similar role, elaborating a class perspective and developing a “proletarian culture.” He even spoke of a “workers’ encyclopedia”¹ similar to the monumental project of the Encyclopedia of Diderot and D’Alambert, and he wrote about the possibility of proletarian universities.

Bogdanov thought that it was necessary to build “a proletarian science.” He argued that:

*This means a science that is acceptable, understandable, and accountable to [the proletariat’s] life mission, a science that is organized from the proletariat’s point of view, one that is capable of leading [the proletariat’s] forces to struggle for, attain, and implement its social ideals.*²

The lack of a previously-developed proletarian perspective in all aspects of society and culture led Bogdanov to oppose the seizure of power in October, which he considered premature. However, after the revolution, he worked with the new state as leader of the Prolekult, an organization in which many Bolshevik party members would participate. The Prolekult, which means “cultural activity of the proletariat,” became a broad movement made up of artists and intellectuals in the newly-formed Soviet Republic.

Bogdanov’s ideas were echoed by some of the Bolsheviks, including Pletnev:

*The party, of necessity, included a coalition with the peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. By their very nature, these allies were “incapable of comprehending the new spiritual culture of the working class. In state organizations, they will always superimpose their petty bourgeois imprint. As Pletnev, the chairman of Prolekult, declared, it was the duty of Prolekult, as part of the “revolutionary army” to defend the interests of the new regime.*³

Bogdanov’s proposal was to break with the previous cultural traditions because he saw them as a vehicle of bourgeois ideology. However, unlike other members of the Prolekult, he was not part of the iconoclastic wing that suggested the destruction of the art and culture of the czarist era. Instead, Bogdanov proposed a working-class critique of the old art as a way to form a new proletarian society.

What would that proletarian culture look like? In Bogdanov’s text, “The Paths of Proletarian

Creation,” he argues that, “The methods of proletarian creation are founded on the methods of proletarian labor, i.e., the type of work that is characteristic for the workers in modern heavy industry.”

Bogdanov argued that this type of work has two characteristics:

1) the unification of elements in “physical” and “spiritual” labor; 2) the transparent, unconcealed, and unmasked collectivism of its actual form (...) The second characteristic depends on the concentration of working force in mass collaboration and on the association between specialized types of labor within mechanical production, and association that is transferring more and more direct physical, specialist’s work to machines. (Bogdanov 179-180)⁴

In this sense, Bogdanov supported proletarian creation based on proletarian production. He suggested that “Collectivism, initially an element process and then an increasingly conscious one, is making its mark on the content of works of art and even on the artistic form through which life is perceived.” (Bogdanov 220)⁵

This hypothesis poses a problem: the basis of work in modern industry is alienation. From the more specialized Fordist version to the Taylorist method of production, workers are subordinated to the time and rhythm of the production line with no say in what is produced or how it is produced. The objective is large-scale, cheap production of commodities. In this sense, modern industry is far from the Marxist notion of art as non-alienated production –the opposite of capitalist forms of production. Industrial production takes less time and would free us to pursue leisure activities. In fact, Fordism was attractive to many Marxists for that reason. However, this is not Bogdanov’s perspective, as he insists on that method of organization proletarian creation.

The 1924 Debate: Proletarian Culture, Bourgeois Culture

As previously mentioned, Bogdanov believed that proletarian culture should precede proletarian revolution, just as bourgeois ideas had preceeded great bourgeois revolutions.

However, the working class does not come to power as a possessing class but as a dispossessed class. Therefore, only after the seizure of power

can it begin to deploy and develop perspectives that identify it as a class and consolidate its authority over the other oppressed classes. This key difference was ignored by Bogdanov.

Although Bogdanov is usually identified with the ultra-left, his approach to culture was dangerously close to the illusions of European social democracy which focus on increasing representation within parliament and on the institutions of the bourgeois regime. The illusion on which this strategy was based was quickly exposed by the defeat of the German Revolution. In a backwards czarist country like Russia, the idea that a proletarian culture would precede bourgeois culture is even more illusory.

The debate was taken up at a 1924 meeting of top Bolshevik party members including Lunacharsky, Bukharin, Averbakh, Raskolnikov, Radek, Ryazanov, Pletnev, and Trotsky. The Soviet leaders discussed the politics of the party in the field of literary production, and in this meeting, they focused on the debate around the role of culture in the transitional period.

Those who defended the idea of “proletarian culture” at the meeting did not necessarily subscribe to all of Bogdanov’s ideas. Prior to the meeting, Trotsky polemicized on the issue in his work “Literature and Revolution” when he discussed the objectives of the socialist revolution. He argued that the goal of the socialist revolution was not the strengthening of a particular class, even if that class is the oppressed majority because building socialism is precisely the dissolution of all classes.

Discussions of culture were connected to the defeat of the German Revolution of 1923 as the USSR sought to preserve the gains of the socialist revolution in adverse conditions. Lunacharsky explains the differences he had with Trotsky:

We had an argument about whether proletarian culture is possible. Trotsky’s opinion was that it was not possible, because while the proletariat still has not won it has to master an alien culture and will not create its own; but when it wins there will be no class culture, no proletarian culture, but a common human culture. I denied that, and deny it now. Are our Soviet state, our unions, our Marxism really a common human culture? No, this is a purely proletarian culture; our science, our unification, our political structure have their own theory and practice. Why say that art is different? How do we know how seriously and how long NEP will last? Trotsky says that in time of revolution art is infected with revolutionary energy. For

*us, revolutionary art can only be proletarian revolutionary art. Separate cultures sometimes develop for hundreds of years, and perhaps our culture will occupy not decades but only years, but it is impossible to repudiate it altogether.*⁶

Bukharin makes a similar criticism, arguing that Trotsky had made a “theoretical mistake” in exaggerating the “rate of development of communist society, or expressed differently ... the speed of the withering away of the proletarian dictatorship.”⁷

But what meaning did art produced by the proletariat have for Trotsky in a context in which the Russian Revolution brought about a democratization of art allowing more workers to produce it? From one point of view, its value was enormous – it was as significant as the appearance of works by Shakespeare, Moliere or Pushkin. As Trotsky explained at the 1924 meeting, new proletarian art demonstrated the incorporation of huge social sectors (who had been hitherto banned from cultural production) into the creation of art. But this was still far from representing a new culture, especially if we define culture as a complete view of social life.

A parallel can be drawn between Trotsky’s concept of art and his ideas about women in a class society: even if the workers’ state guaranteed equality under the law, this did not mean equality in everyday life. That would be a task that future generations would have the opportunity to develop and enjoy. For this reason, the state would have to take transitory measures that might seem contrary to its program such as promoting civil marriage to combat the influence of the Church. These contradictions, when ignored in the name of abstract principles, do not just disappear. On the contrary, denying them hinders the formulation of a program to deal with them thoroughly.

The arguments of the Proletkult did not move the country toward a revolutionary policy: critical knowledge that could overcome the previous artistic tradition required a series of tools that the leaders of Proletkult might have had but that the working masses certainly did not have yet. Therefore, demagoguery could quickly turn into

condescension in lieu of a truly democratizing policy. Trotsky directed his disagreement against the ideas put forth by Proletkult leaders, which he characterizes as populist disguised as Marxist. He did not take the easy route in his argument against those who defended Proletkult; he did not highlight the non-proletarian upbringing and education of the leaders (who were far from being rank-and-file workers on the production line). Attacking them this way would have been fitting, as this was the basis of attacks by many leaders of the Proletkult against their opponents. Instead, Trotsky argued against the conception of Marxism that they put forward. In order to defend Marxism, surprisingly, Trotsky pointed out its limitations.

Trotsky insisted that we should not ask Marxism to provide answers to all artistic and scientific problems. It is one thing to highlight the origin of the novel as a genre within bourgeois society using Marxist characterizations. However, it is not the purview of Marxism to determine the “class character” of the first-person narrative or of the grammatical structure of a particular text.

So why did the Bolsheviks take up a discussion about art and culture in such a tumultuous moment in early Soviet history?

The debate about “proletarian culture” among the Bolshevik Party was not confined to the literary and artistic. Instead, the discussion required consideration of the most important problems of proletarian power in a society that had not ended class contradictions and had found itself in state of isolation.

The first years after the Russian Revolution opened up an era of unbridled development of art among the working class, despite the adverse conditions of USSR. This demonstrates that in a revolutionary state, art can finally be freed from the chains that constrain it in a capitalist society. Despite the advances of Bolsheviks in those first years following the revolution, the Stalinist counter-revolution not only reversed the gains of the working class in the realm of working class democracy, but also in the realm of culture and art.

**TRANSLATION BY
TATIANA COZZARELLI**

Notes

1 Alexander Bogdanov, “The Paths of Proletarian Creation,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 178-181.

2 Quoted in Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 162-163.

3 Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 141.

4 Bogdanov, “Paths of Proletarian Creation,” 178-181.

5 Ibid.

6 Quoted in Sheila Fitzpatrick, “A. V. Lunacharsky: Recent Soviet Interpretations and Republications,” *Soviet Studies* 18, no. 3 (January 1967), 269.

7 Quoted in Fitzpatrick, “A. V. Lunacharsky,” 271.

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REVOLUTION AND BLACK STRUGGLE: MARXISM AS A WEAPON AGAINST RACISM AND CAPITALISM

BY MARCELLO PABLITO

Racism, Capitalism, and Slavery

In his most important work, Marx states that “Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.”¹ Despite attempts by political and intellectual groups to deny Marx and Engels’ (and, by extension, revolutionary Marxism’s) uncompromising stance against racism, the founders of scientific socialism thoroughly understood that racist oppression served as a tool for the capitalist exploitation of all workers. The relationship between capitalism and racism has only grown stronger in subsequent generations. There have been cases in which the falsification of Marx and Engels’ positions and the conscious attempts to equate Marxism with Stalinism have led to generalized attacks on Marxism. This brief article will describe how the leadership of the Russian Revolution understood the fight against racism.

Marxism was developed on the foundations of a new worldview based in historical materialism and offering an explanation that was superior to idealism, religious beliefs, or a view of history as a mere succession of random events. Contrary to these views, Marxism explains the development of history and the division of society into classes as emerging from the material development of human society, and it describes class struggle as the driving force of history. It is from a scientific view of the development of capitalism, and from a critique of political economy and the origins of the bourgeois state, that Marxism explains racism as an ideology that emerged to justify and rationalize one of the greatest atrocities in the history of mankind and identifies it as one of the fundamental pillars of primitive capital accumulation: the enslavement and trade of more than 11 million human beings to work on the plantations of the Americas and the Caribbean. This is a counter-perspective to idealistic conceptions that view racism as an ideology that has always existed and is intrinsic to human nature or as an idea that emerged out of nowhere, dissociated from its material foundations.

Without recognition of this fundamental aspect, it is impossible to have a scientific view of either the development of racism or of capitalism itself. As Eric Williams writes in his classic work *Capitalism and Slavery*:

Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery ... The reason was economic, not racial ... The features of the man, his hair, color and dentifrice, his “subhuman” characteristics so widely pleaded,

were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro [sic] labor because it was cheapest and best.²

Throughout the book – whose theses continue to generate important debates – Williams describes the role slavery played in the process of primitive accumulation, focusing on the relationship between the slave trade and industrial development in England. In its imperialist phase, the era of “crises, wars and revolutions,” the relationship between racism and capitalism was reinforced. It is no coincidence that theories of scientific racism became more fully developed as nation-states played a decisive role in combining racism and capitalism to increase exploitation, precisely when the African continent was occupied and divided up among the European powers.

This is the basis of a scientific explanation of how racism develops as ideology. It is impossible to understand the development of capitalism without considering the relationship between slavery and racism. It is unquestionable that, to this day, racism serves to further capitalist exploitation. Countless statistics indicate that Black people have the most precarious, poorly paid jobs and receive far lower wages than white workers even if they do the same work. By increasing the levels of exploitation of the Black worker, and especially of Black women, capitalists are able to further undercut the wages and living conditions of the working class as a whole. For this reason, the fight against racism must necessarily be a struggle against capitalism.

Revolution and Slavery

The 1917 Russian Revolution showed the working class and the most oppressed sectors of society a glimpse of a future beyond the narrow limits of capitalist oppression. This did not only apply to the Russian workers; the peasants, who came from a history of serfdom in which they were branded like cattle, achieved their dream of agrarian reform; religious minorities obtained religious freedoms; women gained the right to abortion for the first time in history; and gay people were no longer persecuted.

Internationally, the Russian Revolution had a huge impact on class struggle and demonstrated that, even in underdeveloped capitalist countries like Russia or the countries of the African continent, the masses could lead a revolution.

The Third International, led by Lenin and Trotsky, was born out of the struggle against the social-chauvinists who supported the imperialist war in

the early 1900s. The international perspective of the socialist revolution was decisive to its founders. After the triumph in 1917, they aimed to transform the newly created Soviet Republic into a barricade for international and global revolution. The interests of the Soviet workers were intertwined with those of the global working class and of the multitudes of oppressed peoples worldwide. One of the most egregious aspects of the early imperialist era was the division and rule of the African continent by 15 European countries at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The expansion of the Russian Revolution, the defeat of the European bourgeoisies, and the victory of the working class in these imperialist countries – which included France, Germany and England – would have been a fatal blow to their colonial project in the African continent. At the same time, the weakening of the European bourgeoisie would have increased the chances of African workers and the oppressed of overthrowing imperialist rule in their regions.

Great revolutionary leaders like Lenin and Trotsky left various testimonies to their enormous enthusiasm for Black struggle against racist oppression and the role of all revolutionaries in merging with this struggle internationally. Even before the Russian Revolution, Lenin was already concerned about the situation of Black people worldwide, understanding how crucial it was for communists to connect with the most oppressed and exploited sectors of the working class. In 1920, John Reed wrote a report at Lenin's request, describing the situation of Black people in the U.S. to the Second Congress of the Third Communist International:

*The Communists must not stand aloof from the Negro [sic] movement which demands their social and political equality and at the moment, at a time of the rapid growth of racial consciousness, is spreading rapidly among Negroes. The Communists must use this movement to expose the lie of bourgeois equality and emphasize the necessity of the social revolution which will not only liberate all workers from servitude but is also the only way to free the enslaved Negro people.*³

In a society divided into social classes based on the relationship to the means of production and the bourgeoisie's private appropriation of the social labor produced by the working class, Marxists argue that the exploiters give birth to their own gravediggers. The working class, by virtue of its strategic role in the production of all that exists in society, is the only group capable of defeating capitalism, taking on the task of emancipating not only its own class but humanity as a whole. Black people are not only

a fundamental part of the working class; they also comprise its most precarious sectors.

The Fourth Congress of the Comintern held in 1922, before its Stalinization, ratified its theses on Black liberation, declaring that the revolutionary order of the day included the fight against racism and support for the struggles of Black people on an international scale. After stating that “the enemy of [the Black] race and of the white worker is identical: capitalism and imperialism,” the theses affirmed that:

*The Communist International should struggle for the equality of the white and black races, and for equal wages and equal political and social rights. The Communist International will use every means at its disposal to force the trade unions to admit black workers, or, where this right already exists on paper, to conduct special propaganda for their entry into unions. If this should prove impossible, the Communist International will organize black people into their own unions and then use the united front tactic to compel the general unions to admit them.*⁴

These historical examples show that Black struggle is worker struggle, a message that continues to have relevance today. Fighting for the working class means fighting against racism and defending, for example, wage equality between Blacks and whites, men and women, and the direct hire of outsourced workers. This fight calls for an end to police brutality, the right to decent housing, and comprehensive agrarian reform, as this is the only way to unite the working class. This is a decisive question since unity is impossible without fighting against racism, and without this unity, victory cannot be achieved in a revolutionary process.

The Black Struggle and the International Revolution

Lenin and Trotsky did not regard the Russian Revolution as an end in itself but rather as the first step in the international and global expansion of the revolution that would first reach other European countries like Germany. This would mean the end of colonial domination in Africa and Asia and a tremendous advance for the world revolution.

The reactionary policy of Stalinism in defense of “socialism in one country” promoted after 1924, along with the failures of the Chinese revolution in 1926 and the general strike in England in 1926, sealed the fate of the Black struggles and resistance in the African continent. It signalled for the global imperialist bourgeoisie the possibility of regaining its strength and maintaining its international

domination, thus delaying for decades the independence of African countries.

In Brazil, the Stalinism represented by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) played a deplorable role in racial politics. Among several examples until the 1960s, the PCB was opposed to discussing any demand for admitting black people into trade unions because they argued that it divided the working class, blatantly capitulating to the ideology of “racial democracy.”

Trotsky devoted all his energy to combating the bureaucratization of the USSR. The Left Opposition, and then the Fourth International, were the continuation of the Bolshevik tradition. The passion and aspirations of these revolutionaries were anchored in the solid theoretical-programmatic foundations of the theory of permanent revolution, which strongly encouraged the merging of revolutionary ideas with the most exploited and oppressed sectors of capitalist society such as Black people in the U.S., Latin America, and Africa. In Trotsky's words:

*We can and we must find a way to the consciousness of the Negro [sic] workers, the Chinese workers, the Indian workers, and all the oppressed in the human ocean of the colored races to whom belongs the decisive word in the development of mankind.*⁵

The revolutionary struggle against exploitation and oppression, particularly among Blacks, was decisive for the emergence of a generation of Black Trotskyists. The fight against Stalinism and the development of the theory of permanent revolution itself were driving forces for the revolutionary perspective of the fight against racism. Perhaps the individual who most stands out in this respect is CLR James, the author of *The Black Jacobins*. James is recognized in academic circles as the person who revealed to the world the depth of one of the most glorious Black achievements in world history: the Haitian Revolution. Few remember his Trotskyist past or the fact that when he examines Haiti, he does so through the lens of class struggle.

The power of this book is based, among other things, on the way James describes how the revolutionary conditions in France were intertwined with the weakening of Saint-Domingue's elite while highlighting the revolutionary and uncompromising audacity of the Black people of the island in search of their freedom. Only someone with a worldview guided by the perspective of the exploited and oppressed in class struggle would be capable of a work that revealed how the revolution transformed the former slaves of Saint-Domingue into heroes.

CLR James was not only a historian but also a Trotskyist militant who sought to link the struggle for Black liberation with the direct fight against the imperialist bourgeoisie and its cowardly counterparts in non-imperialist countries. He demonstrated how, in important moments of class struggle, the goals of the whole working class have more chances of being achieved with the unity of the laboring ranks, that is, between Blacks and whites.

The Russian Revolution was the highest point in the struggle for an end to exploitation and oppression. It was a demonstration of the audacity, revolutionary courage, and scientific preparation of the Bolsheviks. Notwithstanding the limits of analogy, the same determination in the struggle for freedom flowed through the veins of the Black people of Saint-Domingue in this decisive episode in the history of capitalism. The spirit of the Bolsheviks, the Left Opposition, and the Fourth International is reflected in these words:

*What we as Marxists have to see is the tremendous role played by Negroes [sic] in the transformation of Western civilization from feudalism to capitalism. It is only from this vantage-ground that we shall be able to appreciate (and prepare for) the still greater role they must of necessity play in the transition from capitalism to socialism.*⁶

From this perspective, the emancipation of both whites and nonwhites, to which Marx refers, acquires full meaning in the struggle for a society free from exploitation and any form of oppression: a communist society. Who, if not those who suffer the most under capitalism, will fight more vigorously for that future?

TRANSLATION BY MARISELA TREVIN

Notes

1 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowles (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 1:414.

2 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 20, previously published in 1944.

3 John Reed, “The Negro Question in America: Speech at the 2nd World Congress of the Communist International, Moscow – July 25, 1920,” in *Second Congress of the Communist International. Minutes of the Proceedings* (London: New Park Publications, 1977), previously published by Publishing House of the Communist International, 1921.

4 Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919 - 1943*, vol. 1, 1914 - 1922 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 401.

5 Leon Trotsky, “Closer to the Proletarians of the Colored Races,” *The Militant* 5, no. 27 (2 July 1932), 1, previously published in *Fourth International* 6, no. 8 (August 1945): 243.

6 CLR James, “The Revolution and the Negro,” *New International* 5 (December 1939): 339-343.



Portrait of José Carlos Mariátegui by Bruno Portuguese Nolasco.

JOSÉ CARLOS MARIÁTEGUI, LATIN AMERICAN COMMUNISM, AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

BY ARIELLE CONCILIO AND JIMENA VERGARA

The Russian Revolution had an enormous impact on Latin America, inspiring the formation of its first communist parties. Marxists faced the challenge of analyzing the complex realities of Latin American semicolonial countries and, on this basis, generated a theory of revolution that would address them. The discussions within the Russian Communist Party that later drew a bold line between Stalin's stagist theories and Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution also reached the nascent communist parties in Latin America. José Carlos Mariátegui, a Peruvian journalist and Marxist who studied the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, was one of the most important figures in the development of Latin American communism.

As the Argentine historian Juan Luis Hernández stated in his article *The Russian Revolution and its Influence on José Carlos Mariátegui*, “[his] Marxism was far from a dogmatic analysis of canonical text, and his method was based on the fusion of the universal and the specific.” Hernández explained that for Mariátegui, “Marxism was never a fixed itinerary but rather a compass for the journey. This made him an excellent theorist to apply the Marxist method to the distinct cultural and social reality of Peru and the rest of Latin America where there was the combination of old indigenous communal property and a society organized alongside imperialist penetration and capitalist development.”¹

Mariátegui and the Russian Revolution

As a young journalist in the early 1920s, Mariátegui was persecuted and exiled by the Peruvian government. It was after living in exile in Italy that he developed his Marxist world view. After returning from Europe to Peru, Mariátegui relayed what he had learned in Europe about the Russian Revolution in a course entitled “History of World Crisis.” His first lecture reconstructed the semiotic chain of the revolutionary process between the February and October Revolutions, concluding with the Peace of Brest-Litovsk. His explanation here centered the situation of dual power created by the February Revolution between the provisional government, presided over by Kerensky, and the soviets. The triumph of the October insurrection demonstrated that peace and land could only be won by a government of workers, a demand raised by the Bolsheviks through the slogans “All power to the Soviets” and “Peace, Land and Bread.”²

In a second lecture in October 1923, Mariátegui analyzed the institutions and the function, as

well as the structure, of soviet leadership. He laid out the organization of the soviets into district, provincial, and regional councils, in which representatives were elected by the people through direct democracy and were recallable – an electoral system unlike the bourgeois democratic parliament. As Hernández suggested, Mariátegui understood the most important lessons of the Russian Revolution – the socialist character of working class democracy that became paramount was the force that led the new workers state.

Mariátegui and Trotsky

In 1925, Mariátegui published *The Contemporary Scene*. He studied Trotsky, Lunacharsky, and Zinoviev, seeing each as revolutionary leaders and recognizing their intellectual capacities. According to Mariátegui, Trotsky “was not only a protagonist, but also a philosopher, historian and critic of the Revolution” who, in addition to organizing the Red Army, was interested in literature and art. He praises Lunacharsky for his reorganization of Soviet education and considers Zinoviev a disciple of Lenin, an excellent polemicist and agitator.³

In the same book, three articles explore the political struggles within the Russian Communist Party between 1923 and 1929. At that time, Trotsky had already initiated the struggle against the Stalin-led bureaucratization of the party. But Mariátegui's expectation was that the first internal political struggles would be resolved. By 1928, Mariátegui recognized that events had taken the party on a different course from the one he had expected; the fissures within the party were too profound to be reconciled.

In various texts, he addresses this schism between the Left Opposition led by Trotsky and the bureaucracy led by Stalin in the most important communist party in the world. For Mariátegui, Trotsky represented a truer and more orthodox Marxism – a continuity of Lenin's legacy. At the same time, Mariátegui argues that, due to the dire economic and political circumstances in the USSR, Trotsky's radical ideas were difficult to express in concrete terms while Stalin had a much more pragmatic sense of the opportunities.

Some historians read and interpreted these texts as a justification for Stalinism. Others, like Michel Löwy, argued that texts like Mariátegui's supported Trotsky's positions. For Hernández, however, these points of views are overstated; he argues that Mariátegui had a much more ambiguous opinion of the internal struggle of the Russian Communist

Party. What is certain is that Mariátegui was nearer to the theory of the permanent revolution in Latin America than he was to the aberrant theory of socialism in only one country.

The Creation of the Peruvian Socialist Party

Mariátegui's readings on the Russian Revolution and his affinity for the theory of the permanent revolution were closely linked to the politics he held towards Latin America and Latin American communism. Between the years of 1925 and 1928, Mariátegui channeled his energy into the construction of a network of Marxist militants and intellectuals to establish the publication *Amauta*, the name of which means "wise one" in Quechua.⁴ At the same time, he worked with Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, founder of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA). APRA was a broad movement against the imperialism of the United States. According to Mariátegui, communists could intervene beside APRA as an independent and anti-capitalist wing of a defensive united front against imperialism.

However, in 1928, Mariátegui broke ties with Haya de la Torre, who had taken the broad anti-imperialist APRA movement a step further—forming a political party. While Haya was exiled to Mexico, he began distancing himself from communist organizations and founded the Nationalist Peruvian Party (Partido Nacionalista Peruano) in 1928. The Nationalist Peruvian Party was an electoral iteration of the APRA movement that formed a political coalition with reformists and progressive bourgeois nationalists. At this point, Haya had broken with communism altogether, his politics a radical version of Stalinist stagism. He argued that, throughout Latin America, the central task was to achieve national independence, something he thought could only be brought about by a political alliance with the national bourgeoisie.

Mariátegui and his comrades rejected, in strong terms, Haya's conversion of the anti-imperialist front into a political party. In the "Collective Letter of the Lima Group," written on July 10, 1928, they declared that, as socialists, they could participate in an anti-imperialist united front with reformist, social democratic, and nationalist elements. They included, however, that they would not participate in APRA if it was converted into a party that assumed "an organic doctrinaire and homogenous faction." They instead saw the necessity of revolutionary socialists having their own political organization.⁵

In an editorial in the *Amauta*, Mariátegui reaffirmed the need for a socialist revolution that rejected two tenants of Stalinism: stagism and the idea of socialism in only one country. He wrote, "On our flag, we inscribe only one simple and great word: socialism," adding, "The Latin American Revolution will be nothing more and nothing less than a stage, a phase, in the world revolution. It will be simply and purely, the socialist revolution."⁶

By rallying the Marxist Left behind *Amauta*, Mariátegui and his comrades formed the Partido Socialista del Perú (Peruvian Socialist Party) in 1928. Adherents to the theses of the Communist International of 1921, when it was led by Lenin and Trotsky, the party had significant ideological disagreements with the South American Secretariat of the International, which followed Stalin's orders.

One of the central points of the party's program states that it is advantageous for socialists in Peru to organize in rural areas because of communal indigenous land, and another point calls on socialists to capitalize on the industrial and technological advances of large businesses. A socialist revolution, they argue, should dovetail capitalist technology with traditional communal land to advance the socialist organization of production.

Furthermore, the Peruvian Socialist Party argued that only the proletariat can fulfill the tasks of previous bourgeois revolutions, echoing one of the principal lessons of the Russian Revolution: "Only proletarian action can stimulate and later achieve the tasks of the bourgeois–democratic revolution, what the bourgeois regime is incompetent to develop and achieve." In solving the tasks of the democratic revolution, the proletariat goes further and initiates the socialist transformation of society.⁷

Stalinism in Latin America

The programmatic differences between Mariátegui and the Stalinist-influenced leadership of the South American Secretariat created important debates for Latin American communists. In 1929, because of the heightened repression of the Left Opposition, Stalinism sought to homogenize and subsume emerging communist parties under its leadership. In June of that year, the South American Secretariat of the Comintern organized the first Latin American Communist Conference in Buenos Aires with this goal.

Although Mariátegui couldn't attend the meeting for health reasons, the Peruvian delegation presented three documents at the conference. One of them, written by Mariátegui and entitled "An

Anti-imperialist Point of View," was contentious. The text recognized the semicolonial status of Latin American countries and the necessity to fight imperialism with a socialist and independent political force. It concludes, "We are anti-imperialist because we are Marxists, because we are revolutionaries, because we oppose capitalism. Socialism is a system antagonistic to capitalism, called to succeed it because, in the struggle against foreign imperialisms, we will fulfill our duties of solidarity with the revolutionary masses of Europe."⁸

Members of the South American Secretariat opposed the conclusions of the text, believing that the struggle against imperialism required the leadership of, or at least alliances with, bourgeois nationalism, and this belief separated the struggle for national independence from the struggle for socialism.

Another important disagreement came about because the South American Secretariat wanted to impose a specific form of organization mirroring the Russian Communist Party, but many political parties were resistant to this. Mariátegui and his comrades were an important part of the resistance that soon, after Mariátegui's death in 1930, fizzled out when the sector of the Peruvian Socialist Party nearest to Stalinism took up leadership and renamed it the Peruvian Communist Party.

Latin America's Organizers of Defeat

The Kremlin dictated to the communist parties from that point on as explained in "The Moscow Thermador." After years of putting forward a politics of unity with the national bourgeoisie in semicolonial countries, which the Latin American leaders defended tooth and nail against Mariátegui, the Stalinist leadership imposed a radical change in the Comintern. The shift was a reaction to the massive defeat of the communists in China (1927) who were murdered by their former allies, the Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist movement led by Chiang Kai-shek. From the late

1920s to the mid 1930s, the Stalinists imposed a tactic of class warfare characterized by a complete rejection of any united action with progressive national bourgeois or petty bourgeois forces. It was an ultra-leftist turn towards organizing for revolution in the immediate future regardless of how favorable (or unfavorable) the conditions for those revolutions were.

This sectarian political tactic of "class against class" also brought about a new defeat in Germany when the communists refused to engage in a defensive united front with the social democrats against Nazism. This divided workers and allowed the growth of the Nazism of the Third Reich. At the same time, this ultra-left turn did not abandon the ideas of a stagist revolution and socialism in just one country, ideas essential to Stalinism. In fact, the united front with sectors of the bourgeoisie was taken up again as the official politics of the party in the later half of the 1930s, leading Stalinists to act as a counter revolutionary force in Spain.

Conclusions

Mariátegui's interpretations of the Russian Revolution and his attempts to bring those lessons to Latin America are invaluable. He was one of the few Latin American socialist militants who rigorously applied Marxism to the complex situation of Latin America. Peru, like many South American countries in the early 20th century, actively opposed imperialism and the violence of capitalism. The fact that Mariátegui theorized a revolution in Latin America— one that would be led by the socialists and the working class — makes him one of the great Latin American thinkers of the 20th century.

This article was inspired by Argentine historian Juan Luis Hernández's article, "The Russian Revolution and its Influence on José Carlos Mariátegui," published in "Ideas de Izquierda," a special issue of *La Izquierda Diario* on the Russian Revolution.

Notes

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5 “Carta Colectiva del Grupo Lima,” in Mariátegui–Haya: *materiales de un debate*, ed. Ramón García Rodríguez (Lima: Perú Integral, 2002), 24–30.

6 José Carlos Mariátegui, *Obras*, ed. Francisco Baeza, (Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1982), 2:241.

7 *Ibid.*, 2:217–218.

8 *Ibid.*, 2:193.

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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

BY JOSEFINA L. MARTÍNEZ

In an attempt to delegitimize calls for Catalan independence, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy stated that no constitution in the world accepted the right to self-determination – except the Soviet Union.

For Rajoy, this comparison denigrates the Catalan independence movement. For socialists, it speaks volumes about the liberatory nature of the Russian Revolution.

The constitution born from that great revolution is the first and only one to accept the principle of national self-determination – an important democratic right that the majority of the Western capitalist democracies still deny 100 years later.

Lenin and the National Question

In his 1914 text, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” Lenin developed a Marxist position on the topic, making five central points:

1. The formation of nation-states came about in the period of bourgeois struggles against feudalism. A tendency developed from 1789-1870 to subsume regional particularities to the national market, based on a unified language and territory.

2. Self-determination includes the right to decide whether to separate from a nation and form an independent national state. Lenin takes on those who argue for a “culturalist” interpretation – cultural autonomy without the right to separation.

3. Lenin poses an important question: Does supporting the right to self-determination imply supporting bourgeois nationalism? Social-Democrats believed it did, taking a sectarian stance on the national question. But Lenin argues, “Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favor, for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against.”¹ In other words, the fight for self-determination is a fight against the bourgeois nationalism of the oppressor nation, but it does not imply support for the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation.

4. Lenin argues that denying nations the right to separation is not the same as fighting nationalism, but is equivalent to favoring the nationalism of the oppressor nation, which imposes unity by force.

5. Finally, as internationalists, we fight for the unity of the working class across nations. It is not our objective to create new borders, but in order to unite the working class, the workers of the oppressor

nations must fight against their own bourgeoisie that oppress other nations. Workers cannot be truly free if they are part of a country that oppresses others.

The National Question and the Russian Revolution

At the beginning of the 20th century, there had not yet been a bourgeois revolution in Russia. The czarist empire was made up of diverse nationalities with a population of approximately 150 million people, 43% were considered Russian, while 57% were part of nations oppressed by the autocracy. These oppressed nations, such as Ukraine, Poland, and Georgia, were forcefully annexed, stripped of their language, and banned from practicing their own religion. The oppression of these nations at the hands of the Russian state fueled national liberation movements that were an unprecedented revolutionary force in the February Revolution.

The provisional government that emerged from that revolution did not provide the right to self-determination and instead maintained Russian oppression over the other nationalities. Kerensky’s provisional government cloaked oppression with rhetoric about the defense of the revolution and justified coerced national integration as a war measure. Underneath these claims, the provisional government was actually defending the Russian bourgeoisie’s access to wealth; they were not willing to lose access to wheat, Ukrainian carbon, or the capitalists’ influence over other peoples.

The provisional government prohibited the independent institutions of Finnish and Ukrainian nationalists, demonstrating that the “democratic revolution” would not keep its promises. In order to reach liberation, oppressed nations had to “link their fate with that of the working class. And for this they had to free themselves from the leadership of their own bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties – they had to make a long spurt forward, that is, on the road of historic development.”²

In this sense, while not a revolutionary demand in and of itself, the question of self-determination could serve as a springboard to bring the working class to power. Given that the provisional government refused to grant this right to oppressed peoples, the demand could fuel a revolution if the working class were to take it up and fight for it.

Section 9 of the Bolshevik program guaranteed the right to self-determination which Lenin emphatically defended during the revolution. In the History of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky argues that: “Only in this way could the Russian

proletariat gradually win the confidence of the oppressed nationalities.”³

One of the first measures taken by the Soviet government after taking power in the October Revolution was a decree of self-determination. Furthermore, the measures taken in favor of peasants were also supported by many of those living in oppressed nations, as they were predominantly rural. These were key elements that allowed the Bolsheviks to gain the support of the working class and peasantry of oppressed nations, which had played a significant role in the defense of the revolution.

Stalinism and the National Question

The hardships of the Civil War and the isolation of the young Soviet state presented many problems for the USSR. Lenin was particularly worried about the growth of a bureaucracy within the state and the party. As expressed in the article in this magazine, “Thermidor in Moscow,” Lenin’s worries became reality.

After the revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks made the USSR a voluntary federation. He wrote, “We recognise ourselves to be the equals of the Ukrainian SSR and others...and together with them and on equal terms with them enter a new union, a new federation...”⁴

Lenin recommended caution and patience when dealing with oppressed nationalities. Stalin, who had been named Commissar for the Nationalities due to his Georgian roots, had a different set of politics. In 1921, despite Lenin’s objections, Stalin organized an invasion of Georgia, an independent predominantly peasant state government led by the Mensheviks. Lenin’s political method was one of conciliation in order to win over the confidence of the masses, so when Stalin proposed an invasion of Georgia to the Central Committee of the Party, Lenin strongly opposed the action. Without the backing of the Party, Stalin and his followers forcibly purged the Mensheviks from the Georgian government and confronted the Bolsheviks in Georgia, resorting to physical violence. These events occurred while Lenin was sick, but when he found out, “Lenin branded Stalin ‘a real and true national-socialist,’ and a vulgar ‘Great-Russian bully.’”⁵

Lenin saw Stalin’s invasion of Georgia as a marked departure from the principles and program of the revolutionary Bolsheviks and the expression of bureaucratic and nationalist tendencies.

After Lenin’s death, with the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the physical elimination

of the opposition, the Soviet state returned to rigid nationalist politics that denied other nations the right to secession, exposing the complete rupture of the Stalinist bureaucracy with Marx, who measured the caliber of socialists in oppressor nations by their attitude towards oppressed nations.

Trotsky and the Federation of Socialist Republics of Europe

In the midst of the first world war and only a few months before the outset of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky writes “The Programme of Peace.” In it, he explains that in the imperialist epoch the national bourgeoisies acts more and more as “inveterate gamblers being forced to divide the gold ‘justly’ among themselves in the middle of the game, in order to start the same game all over again with redoubled frenzy.” The feverish greed of the system requires imperialist nations to expand, acquire new markets and seize areas of influence from competing states. As Trotsky argues, this need to acquire new markets leads the system to its own bankruptcy with a never ending cycle of capitalist crisis.⁶

In Trotsky’s view, imperialism, which expresses itself through looting and expansion of the market, is the tendency towards the internationalization of the modern capitalist economy. The working class shouldn’t counterpose this tendency with a return to reactionary national “sovereign” states, but instead struggle towards internationalist socialism. Trotsky claims that the working class “cannot allow the ‘national principle’ to get in the way of the irresistible and deeply progressive tendency of modern economic life towards a planned organization throughout our continent, and further, all over the globe.”⁷

Thus, in imperialist capitalism, in order for the oppressed nations of Europe (and the world) to achieve self-determination, it is necessary to break the chains of the imperialist nations that are subjugating them. In 1917, this meant dealing a death blow to imperialist Europe which had been weakened and destroyed by World War I. Thus, self-determination and the free union of people can only be thought of as a part of the struggle towards a Federation of Socialist Republics of Europe; it can only be brought about through a unified struggle against the yoke of imperialist oppression. As Trotsky writes: “The United States of Europe – without monarchies, standing armies and secret diplomacy – is therefore the most important integral part of the proletarian peace programme.”⁸

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

As the fight for Catalan independence rages on, these discussions are anything but anachronistic. The countries of the European Union have been swept by xenophobic nationalist movements and neo-Nazi marches that are gaining strength. Brexit was a major blow to the European Union -- the project of capitalist unity. On the other hand, the Catalan struggle expresses “the national question” as a demand of the masses.

Sectors of the Spanish Left argue that one should not support “either camp” – Spanish nationalism or the Catalan independence movement – so as to avoid taking a nationalist position. However, as a reading of Trotsky and Lenin suggest, by not supporting the oppressed nation, one is supporting the privileges of the oppressor nation. In the case of Catalonia, refusing to support the independence movement means supporting Spanish nationalism and its repressive offensive.

In the midst of the capitalist crisis and the crisis of the European Union, the national question is not a topic exclusively for academics in an ivory tower. As this article is being written, the Catalan masses are debating whether to follow their mild petty bourgeois leadership or to forge an independent path towards self-determination. In this sense, the Bolsheviks’ politics towards oppressed nations is a guide for action.

**This article is based on the lecture “The Russian Revolution and Rights of Nations to Self-Determination” at ‘Cátedra Libre Karl Marx’ October 18th, 2017 in the Autonomous University of Madrid.*

**TRANSLATED BY
LEO ZINO AND SARA JAYNE**

Notes

1 V.I. Lenin, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” in Lenin: Collected Works, vol. 20, trans. Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 393-454, previously published in *Prosveshcheniye*, nos. 4, 5 and 6 (April-June 1914), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch04.htm>.

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LENIN'S LEGACY: A THREAT TO CAPITALISM AN INTERVIEW WITH TAMÁS KRAUSZ

Tamás Krausz is a Professor of Russian History at the Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences in Budapest, a leading Hungarian intellectual and political activist. He traveled to Brazil to participate in the seminar, "100 Years of the Russian Revolution," sponsored by Boitempo, and to launch the Portuguese translation of his book *Reconstructing Lenin*. Krausz was interviewed in São Paulo by Simone Ishibashi, editor of *Ideias de Esquerda* and PhD student at UFRJ, and Paula Vaz de Almeida, Doctor of Literature and Russian Culture at USP.

*Our first question is about your book, which has been recently released in Brazil. What does the title, *Reconstructing Lenin*, tell us about your goals as a historian and the effort to restore the importance of Lenin's legacy in the 21st century?*

Tamás Krausz: First, we need to understand that this book was originally written in Hungarian, and its original title was *Lenin – A Theoretical And Social Reconstruction*. Since the transitional regime in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR two years later, almost thirty years have passed. Throughout Eastern Europe, there is a falsification of the history of socialism, the history of the USSR, and the legacy of Lenin. This is due to mainstream capitalist propaganda which claims that we built a new authoritarian regime. This kind of falsification continues not only in Hungary, but also in Ukraine and the Baltic countries, Poland, and even Russia. I think we need to straighten things out. It is necessary to seriously look at what Lenin actually said. What did he do? What did he spend his time on? That is how this book came about.

It seeks to examine Lenin as a historical figure, without waging war on anyone because the old cult of Lenin no longer exists. Today, there is an anti-cult. Lenin became some kind of demon – a devil that scares children. I'm not saying that's the only analysis that exists or that this only happened in Eastern Europe. But the idea is that in the mainstream, the prevalent ideas are falsifications.

In the book, you address a series of methodological considerations in discussion with distinct interpretations of Lenin and the Russian Revolution. You affirm that history did not accomplish Lenin or Marx's ideas. Faced with this claim, there are several interpretations. As you indicate, one is characterized by a mechanistic determinism that sees historical processes as a series of logical events with no alternatives. This is the intellectual spirit of the times. In your opinion, what marks the spirit of the current epoch, and how does this influence the theoretical and political legacy of Lenin?

It is necessary to understand the political and theoretical tradition I come from and approach the subject from. As a Marxist, I think capitalism is not the last stage of historical development. That is a concept which was denied by the old system of state socialism [in the Stalinized USSR]. All of this influences my position.

I studied Georg Lukács, the great Hungarian Marxist philosopher during the 1960's, and fully understood, even at 20 years old, that history is a process with alternatives. As your question well states, we need to study these alternatives – and if we don't know these alternatives, then we cannot place Lenin in this historical process. That is to say that the Lenin represented in the book didn't even know what would happen after the October Revolution. Lenin and the other revolutionaries assumed that there would be an international revolution throughout Europe, and the Russian Revolution would be its spark. But history followed a different path. Lenin and the other revolutionaries found themselves in a place nobody imagined. Not even Lenin himself knew what would happen in the Soviet Union.

As the leader of the USSR, Lenin understood that socialism is a system that needs conscious direction, that socialism needs time, decades. The first falsification stems from this: Historians wanted to prove that Lenin was dogmatic, a utopian politician, but it is anti-scientific to write about history as if we are smarter than the people who lived in Lenin's time.

There are historians who think they are smarter and more left than Lenin. These historians are incorrect. What were the alternatives presented to Lenin? Bourgeois democracy was an alternative that simply did not exist in Soviet Russia at the time. There were two alternatives: the White Army or the Leninist Communist Party and the dictatorship of the proletariat from 1918 to the death of Lenin. Between these alternatives, there was no other serious alternative. You see what I mean? It's concrete.

After Lenin, Stalin is another issue. [In Stalin's time] there were alternatives, of course. But it is also necessary to find true alternatives that were really plausible. As we say in Budapest, if my grandma had wheels, she would have been a bus. We can't treat a historical process that way.

You say that Lenin foresaw that Russia would be a "revolution of a new type." What does that mean, and what are its general characteristics?

Many historians believe that the revolution was executed by Lenin and his colleagues. However, Lenin himself did not see it that way. In December of 1916, in Zurich, he didn't know if there would be a revolution or not. This is not an exact quote, but he said that only the old would live to see the revolution. What does that mean? Lenin, as a revolutionary leader and a founder of the Soviet State, was a product of those workers, peasants,

sailors and soldiers, all of whom organized the soviets – peasant soviets, soldier soviets, urban worker soviets, and factory committees. All of this made Lenin the leader whom we know. Do you understand what this is about? Not Lenin himself, but the movement.

Secondly, it is necessary to understand that it wasn't the Bolsheviks who made the Revolution. The Revolution made the Bolsheviks. This is our point of departure. That doesn't mean that they didn't influence a historic process. They did – and they did a lot! But we need to understand, and this goes back to our first question about the alternatives, just how the Bolsheviks took power and for what reason. Historical science is to study these historical reasons for and consequences of social phenomena. It's not the other way around, because that way begets falsification. Don't confuse motive and consequence.

And in this way, we return to the narrative of violence. This is what happens when they want to put Lenin in a narrative of violence, saying that he is some kind of devil. He is the result of a historic process, and this is very important.

And let me add one more thing. Why do these new regimes in Eastern Europe fear Lenin? It is very important to answer this question because these new regimes understand that if millions of people brought Lenin to power and followed him, he is a threat. This is why they hate him, and the reason they lie about him and persecute his legacy. They understand, much more than a common person that Lenin is an alternative to capitalism.

To close, you recently presented your book at a bookstore in Moscow, and you point to a disparagement of Lenin, the founder of the Soviet State. To you, the fundamental reason for this is the fact that Lenin is synonymous with an anti-capitalist alternative to the current regime and to the current system of capitalism in semi-peripheral Russia. Brazil, also a semi-peripheral country, is also experiencing a dynamic social and political moment. What lessons can we take from Lenin's life and legacy?

Today, Brazil is a good place to learn about Lenin. I am sure about that. It is different for us

in Hungary and Poland, the Baltic countries, as well as Ukraine, with pro-Nazi regimes financed by the United States. How can we even talk about Lenin? That's not a joke. He is the devil; he is illegal. It is different for you in Brazil because you have this miracle – young people, more than two thousand young people, who are interested in Lenin. He would certainly be very happy that he is not completely dead, contrary to what the propagandists in Eastern Europe would have us believe. It is clear that you can learn about him here.

I dare say that the most important lesson that Lenin has taught us is to ask: What is capital afraid of? What does the system fear, which workers' movements? Lenin knew that everything is resolved in the workplace. Capital isn't afraid of street occupations or even occupations of plazas in Manhattan. You see, the Occupy movement was a very important event, but capital, the state and the capitalists, were not afraid of it. They can just send in the police to shut it all down.

Capital knows that rank-and-file workers organized in factories and workplaces can take power and control every sphere of life. This happens, and it happened when millions joined factory committees, workers' soviets, peasants' soviets, etc. and organized to control the means of production.

Another lesson: At the beginning of World War I, Lenin wrote a book about imperialism, saying that capitalism of the 20th century had acquired other traits. Capitalism had become more of a looter and a parasite. Now, in the 21st century, these relations have become global. In these relations, the traces of what Lenin wrote about are still there. And to add one more thing: Capitalism has prostituted itself and prostitutes all of society. That is new.

Social democratic leaders [of Lenin's time] only looked at the so-called central countries in the capitalist system and believed it was better for workers there to stop [production]. If they stopped there, the rest of the world would be fine; the semi-periphery and colonial countries meant nothing. But here Lenin changed the direction and showed that there are those who are on the bottom rungs of the world hierarchy and that we must transform international capitalism from below.

THIS MAGAZINE WAS PRINTED IN A WORKER-CONTROLLED FACTORY.

The economic crisis of 2001 tore the fabric of Argentina's economy and left millions of workers jobless. Factories shut down, life savings were liquidated, and families were thrown into the streets. Some workers took matters into their own hands. They held assemblies and occupied factories, resuming production under worker control.

Today, about 13,000 workers operate over 300 facilities without bosses – including Chilavert factory, where this magazine was printed. These factories struggle to survive within a system that favors capitalist enterprises; for this reason, many workers demand their expropriation and nationalization while maintaining workers' control.

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