

On the Centenary of the October Revolution

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One hundred years ago today, on the morning of November 7, 1917, the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, chaired by Leon Trotsky, issued a proclamation to the citizens of Russia. It stated:

The Provisional Government has been overthrown. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, the Military Revolutionary Committee, which stands at the head of the Petrograd proletariat and garrison.

The cause for which the people have struggled—the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landlord ownership of land, workers' control over industry, the creation of a Soviet government—this has been assured!

Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants!

Later that afternoon, Lenin—who had been denounced just three months earlier as a state criminal by the bourgeois Provisional Government—received a thunderous ovation as he emerged from hiding and entered the hall where the Soviet delegates were assembled. Witnessing the extraordinary events of that day, the American socialist journalist John Reed left behind a memorable description of the Bolshevik leader, “loved and revered as perhaps few leaders in history have been.” Lenin, he wrote, was a “strange popular leader—a leader purely by virtue of intellect,” possessed “with the power of explaining profound ideas in simple terms, of analyzing a concrete situation. And combined with shrewdness, the greatest intellectual audacity.”

After he had made his way to the speaker's lectern, Lenin began his address to the delegates with the following words: “Comrades, the workers' and peasants' revolution, about the necessity of which the Bolsheviks have always spoken, has been accomplished.”

As Russia still adhered to the old Julian calendar, the overthrow of the Provisional government entered into history as the October Revolution. But though the Russian calendar lagged 13 days behind that of Western Europe and North America, the Bolshevik seizure of power catapulted Russia, in political terms, to the forefront of world history. The insurrection led by the Bolsheviks was the culmination of a political struggle that had begun eight months earlier, in February 1917, with the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy, which had ruled Russia for more than 300 years.

The uprising in February-March 1917 unleashed a protracted struggle over the political perspective and historical significance of the revolution that had erupted in Russia. The bourgeois Cadet party, the reformist Mensheviks, and the peasant-based Socialist Revolutionaries viewed the revolution in primarily national terms. The overthrow of the tsarist regime, they insisted, was no more than a national-democratic revolution. The tasks of the revolution were confined to replacing the tsarist regime with some sort of parliamentary republic, modeled on that of France or Britain, dedicated to promoting the development of the Russian economy on a capitalist basis.

In actual practice, the bourgeois Cadet party, fearful of the revolutionary upheaval and despising the masses, opposed any changes in the existing social structure that threatened their wealth. As for the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, their reformist programs excluded any significant encroachment on capitalist property. Russia, they insisted, was not ripe for a socialist revolution. Decades of capitalist development would be required before a transition to socialism could be considered a realistic possibility.

Within the framework of this perspective, the political overthrow of the capitalist class and the assumption of power by the working class were absolutely rejected. The political subordination of the working class to bourgeois rule meant continued support for Russia's participation in the bloodbath of the imperialist world war that had begun in 1914.

Prior to Lenin's return from exile in April 1917, the main Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd—Lev Kamenev and Joseph Stalin—had accepted the Menshevik subordination of the working-class soviet (council) to the Provisional Government. Flowing from this, Kamenev and Stalin accepted the Menshevik argument that, with the overthrow of the tsarist regime, Russia's participation in the imperialist war had been transformed into a democratic struggle against autocratic Germany, which should be supported by the working class. The blatantly imperialist interests of the Russian bourgeoisie were sugarcoated with hypocritical phrases about a “democratic peace.”

Lenin's return to Russia on April 16 led to a dramatic change in the orientation of the Bolshevik Party. In opposition to the allies of the Provisional Government in the Petrograd Soviet, as well as a substantial faction of the Bolshevik leadership, Lenin called for the transfer of power to the soviets. The basis of this revolutionary demand, which stunned not only the Mensheviks but also most of Lenin's comrades in the Bolshevik leadership, was a profoundly different conception of the historical significance of the Russian Revolution.

Since its very beginning in August 1914, Lenin had insisted that the imperialist world war marked a new stage in world history. The bloody carnage unleashed by the war arose from the global contradictions of capitalist imperialism. The contradictions of the imperialist system, which the capitalist regimes sought to resolve through war, would necessarily evoke a revolutionary response from the international working class.

This understanding of the world historical context of the Russian Revolution formed the basis of the policies that were to guide the Bolshevik Party following Lenin's return. Lenin insisted that the Russian Revolution had to be understood as the beginning of the world socialist revolution. Upon opening the Seventh Congress of the Bolshevik party in April 1917, he stated:

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

In the months between April and October, Lenin wrote scores of articles in which he imbued and elevated the consciousness of party members, and the tens of thousands of workers who read Bolshevik pamphlets, newspapers and leaflets, with an understanding of the international character of the revolution. Those who claim that the Bolshevik revolution was a “putsch” or coup d’état plotted in secret simply ignore the fact that Lenin’s appeals for a socialist revolution were being read, studied and debated in factories, in soldiers’ barracks and in the streets of all the major cities of Russia.

In September, just a month before the seizure of power, the Bolshevik Party published Lenin’s pamphlet, *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution*. There was nothing ambiguous, let alone surreptitious, in Lenin’s presentation of the Bolshevik Party’s program and intentions. With an astonishing level of historical consciousness, Lenin explained the objective necessity of which Bolshevik policies were an expression:

The war is not a product of the evil will of rapacious capitalists, although it is undoubtedly being fought *only* in their interests and they alone are being enriched by it. The war is a product of half a century of development of world capitalism and of its billions of threads and connections. It is *impossible* to slip out of the imperialist war and achieve a democratic non-coercive peace without overthrowing the power of capital and transferring state power to *another* class, the proletariat.

The Russian revolution of February-March 1917 was the beginning of the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war. This revolution took the *first* step towards ending the war; but it requires a *second* step, namely the transfer of state power to the proletariat, to make the end of the war a *certainty*. This will be the beginning of a “breakthrough” on a worldwide scale, a breakthrough in the front of capitalist interests; and only by breaking through *this* front *can* the proletariat save mankind from the horrors of war and endow it with the blessings of peace.

In the aftermath of the “July Days”—the brutal suppression of the working class by the Provisional Government—Lenin was forced into hiding. Leon Trotsky, who had returned to Russia in May and soon joined the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, had been imprisoned. But he was released in September, in the aftermath of the aborted counterrevolutionary coup of General Kornilov, and was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. In the weeks that followed, Trotsky emerged as the greatest mass leader and orator of the Revolution. He played the decisive role in the strategic planning and organization of the Bolshevik insurrection.

There was, without question, an element of genius in Trotsky’s leadership of the Bolshevik insurrection. But Trotsky’s role in the October Revolution was, no less than Lenin’s, prepared on the basis of his analysis of the place of the Russian Revolution in world history. In fact, Trotsky, in his elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution, had been the first to foresee, as far back as 1905, that the democratic revolution against tsarist autocracy in Russia would necessarily develop into a socialist revolution that would transfer power to the working class.

Trotsky’s analysis challenged claims that the political tasks of the working class were determined by the economic backwardness of Russia, which was supposedly “not ready” for a socialist revolution. “In an economically backward country,” he wrote in 1905, “the proletariat can come to power sooner than in a country of the most advanced capitalism.”

But how would the working class sustain its revolution? Trotsky, far in advance of the events of 1917, wrote that the working class

will have no alternative but to link the fate of its political rule, and, hence, the fate of the whole Russian revolution, with the fate of the socialist revolution in Europe. That colossal state-political power given it by a temporary conjuncture of circumstances in the Russian bourgeois revolution it will cast into the scales of the class struggle of the entire capitalist world. With state power in its hands, with counterrevolution behind it and European reaction in front of it, it will send forth to its comrades the world over the old rallying cry, which this time will be a call for the last attack: *Workers of all countries, unite!*

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Amidst the nightmarish reality of the First World War, which by October 1917 had already cost the lives of millions of soldiers, the news of the Bolshevik insurrection passed like an electric shock through the consciousness of the masses. The February Revolution was a Russian event. But the October Revolution was a world-changing event. What had been merely a “specter” in 1847 now existed as a revolutionary government, which had come to power on the basis of a working class insurrection.

Rosa Luxemburg, learning of the Revolution while still in prison, wrote to a friend of the impatience with which she awaited the morning newspapers in order to follow the developments in Russia. She expressed doubts as to whether the revolution could survive in the face of the armed opposition of world imperialism. But of the greatness of the revolutionary event she had no doubt, and she beheld with admiration what Lenin and Trotsky—comrades whom she had known for many years—had achieved. The Bolshevik-led insurrection, Luxemburg wrote, “is a world-historical act, whose example will live for eons.”

Many years later, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, the American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon recalled the impact of 1917 on socialists throughout the world:

For the first time, concentrated in revolutionary action, we had a demonstration of the real meaning of Marxism. For the first time, we learned from the example and teachings of Lenin and Trotsky and the leaders of the Russian revolution the real meaning of a revolutionary party. Those who remember that time, whose lives became welded to the Russian revolution, must think of it today as the greatest inspiring and educational force that the oppressed class of the world has ever known.

The October Revolution ranks among the greatest and most progressive events in world history. It is part of the chain of world-historical events—such as the Reformation, the American Revolution and the French Revolution—that rank as great milestones in the development of human civilization.

The global impact of the October Revolution was incalculable. It was an event that ignited a worldwide movement of the working class and the oppressed masses against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression. It is all but impossible to think of a significant political or social conquest of the working class in the twentieth century, anywhere in the world, which did not owe some substantial portion of its realization to the October Revolution. The establishment of the Soviet state was the first great achievement of the October Revolution. The victory of the Bolshevik Revolution demonstrated in practice the possibility of the working class conquering state power, ending the rule of the capitalist class, and organizing society on a non-capitalist and socialist basis.

However, while the establishment of the Soviet Union was the

immediate product of the Bolshevik-led insurrection, the creation of this state does not encompass the full historical significance of the October Revolution. The establishment of the Soviet state in October 1917 was only the first episode in the new epoch of World Socialist Revolution.

This distinction between *episode* and *epoch* is critical to an understanding of the fate of both the Soviet Union and the contemporary world. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the state founded in 1917. But it did not mark the end of the epoch of world socialist revolution. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the outcome of the abandonment, which began in the early 1920s, of the international socialist perspective upon which the October Revolution was based. The Stalinist program of socialism in one country, promulgated by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924, was a turning point in the nationalist degeneration of the Soviet Union. As Trotsky warned, Stalinist nationalism—which found political support in a rapidly growing bureaucratic elite—separated the fate of the Soviet Union from the fight for world socialism. The Communist International, which had been founded in 1919 as an instrument of world socialist revolution, was degraded into an appendage of the Soviet Union’s counterrevolutionary foreign policy. The treacherous and disorienting policies of Stalin led to devastating defeats of the working class in Germany, France, Spain and many other countries.

In 1936, Stalin launched the Great Terror, which during the next four years resulted in the physical extermination of virtually all of the leading representatives of revolutionary internationalism within the working class and socialist intelligentsia. Trotsky was assassinated in Mexico in 1940.

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The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 was hailed as a momentous victory for world capitalism. At long last the specter of communism and socialism had been eradicated. History had come to an end! The October Revolution had ended in ruins! Of course, such proclamations were not supported by a careful examination of what had occurred during the previous 74 years. No account was given of the enormous achievements of the Soviet Union, which included not only its central role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, but also the immense advances in the social and cultural conditions of the Soviet people. But aside from its efforts to obliterate from collective memory all recollection of Soviet achievements, the essential falsification of twentieth-century history has been the effort to define the fate of socialism on the basis of a nationalist narrative of the October Revolution, in which the Bolshevik seizure of power is presented as an aberrant, illegitimate and even criminal event in *Russian* history. The original Bolshevik conception of October must, in turn, be either ridiculed or ignored. No enduring historical and political relevance can be attributed to the October Revolution.

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

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

The economic crisis of 2008 exposed the fragility of the world capitalist system. Social tensions are mounting against the backdrop of levels of inequality that are the highest in a century. As the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy are unable to bear the pressure of escalating social conflict, the ruling elites turn ever more openly to authoritarian forms of rule. The Trump administration is merely one disgusting

manifestation of the universal breakdown of bourgeois democracy. The role of the military, police and intelligence agencies in the running of the capitalist state is becoming ever more open.

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

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

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

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

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

The anxiety expressed in these statements is not without foundation. A newly published poll shows that among American “Millennials” (people below the age of 28), a greater percentage would prefer to live in a socialist or communist society than in a capitalist one.

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Throughout this centenary year, the International Committee of the Fourth International has celebrated the anniversary of the October Revolution by studying and explaining its origins and significance. It conducted this important historical work as the only political tendency in the world that represents the program of international socialism upon which the October Revolution was based. The defense of this program is rooted historically in the struggle waged by Trotsky—first as the leader of the Left Opposition and later as the founder of the Fourth International—against the nationalist betrayal and perversion of the program and principles of the October Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy. While defending all that was achieved within the Soviet Union as a consequence of the October Revolution, this never assumed the form of an adaptation, let alone capitulation, to the reactionary policies of the bureaucratic regime.

Thus, the Fourth International is the contemporary expression of the program of World Socialist Revolution. In the present period of insoluble capitalist crisis, this program once again is acquiring intense relevance. The October Revolution lives not only in history, but in the present.

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

Long Live the Example of the October Revolution!
Build the International Committee of the Fourth International!
Forward to the World Socialist Revolution!



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