October 1917: Coup d'état or social revolution?

The legitimacy of the Russian Revolution

Ernest Mandel
The study which we publish in this Notebook is an interpretative, polemical and critical essay.

An interpretative essay because — although it is no longer very "fashionable" to refer to it — the Russian Revolution remains a major historical experience that must be analysed by those who want to understand the contemporary world, by those who want to shed some light on the problems posed by the fight for socialism.

It is a polemical essay because this revolution is today the subject of a real ideological campaign of denigration. It is increasingly identified with Stalinism and a bureaucratic dictatorship. To such an extent that Ernest Mandel, in doing the work of a historian and a political activist, must come back to the most basic (and thus essential) question: was October 1917 a totalitarian coup d'etat or a socially liberating uprising?

A critical essay because there is nothing less enriching than an apologetic reading of history, even revolutionary history. While vigorously asserting the profound legitimacy of the Russian Revolution and defending the general orientation of the Bolshevik party, Ernest Mandel particularly underlines the main mistakes which were made, especially during the period 1917-21.

This essay is thus an important contribution to the discussion on the lessons of the history of Bolshevism.

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We have slightly edited the original text, introducing a number of sub-headings and a greater number of explanatory footnotes. The author has also made a certain number of additions to the English edition.

As Ernest Mandel's work was organized according to themes and not chronology, we asked François Vercaemen to write a short historical introduction. Interesting in itself, it should be particularly useful to the readers who are not so familiar with the events of the period.

A complementary pedagogical apparatus has been added, particularly a guide to people, organizations and events mentioned to make this Notebook useful and accessible to all its readers.

P.D. & P.R.

The translation from the original French is by Penny Duggan and Steve Bloom. The illustrations used in this Notebook are taken from the work of Gerd Arntz, an artist of German origin who worked in Moscow for several years before coming to live in the Netherlands in 1934.

Abbreviations used
CC: Central Committee
CI: Communist International
CP: Communist Party
CPSU: Communist Party of the Soviet Union
Kadets: Constitutional Democrats
RSDLP: Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party
RSFSR: Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic
SPD: [German] Social-Democratic Party
SR: Social-Revolutionaries
SS: Nazi police
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
USPD: [German] Independent Social Democrat Party
The crisis of the regime

The 1917 revolution was the final climax to an endemic crisis that shook Russian society during the second half of the 19th century. A great military power in Europe but also an imposing force in Asia, it was a society trapped in economic backwardness whereas western countries had already become industrial powers. This historical contradiction, the persistence of autocratic Tsarist rule in the face of a steadily worsening economic situation, created a conflict in the social movement that led inexorably to the revolution.

Dual power

Between the end of February and the end of October 1917, Russia lived through a very specific kind of revolutionary situation: dual power. Sufficiently resolved to turn out the autocratic regime, in February, the working class was not immediately ready to take “total” power. But it covered the factories and cities with a dense network of councils which it quickly expanded to include the army, and, finally, the countryside. In essence a counter-power, these soviets — more and more numerous, better and better coordinated — threatened at any moment to overwhelm the bourgeoisie.

Two of these soviet structures played a decisive role: those which, elected on a territorial basis, exercised a political power “in society” from the outset, and the factory councils, which embodied the dynamic power of the working class.

These councils, resulting from the urgent needs of the masses, also reflected class consciousness and their political prejudices. In order for the task of taking power to become clearly posed it was necessary for a revolutionary situation to break out spontaneously: the organization capable of doing this was the Bolshevik Party. But that group remained a minority among the workers and in the soviets until September 1917. Thus, the history of dual power is also the history of a struggle between different political parties — representing the workers and popular movements — over this decisive question of the revolution: for or against the taking of power by the soviets.

The changing relationship of forces: February-June

At the outset, different reformist currents (Mensheviks, Social-Revolutionaries, workers’ parties) dominated these structures of self-organization. They led the soviets and, very quickly (by May 1917) they also took part in the provisional (bourgeois) government. Thenceforth, the attempts made by the triple alliance to put an end to the俄国革命, the most important were aimed at finding some means of restoring the former order with the help of the workers’ councils. The initiative had been taken with the demonstration of June 18. The proletariat in the capital interpreted this first victory as a beginning of the final offensive. Gone were the days when the masses, committed to the cause of Prince Lvov (demanding, however, to exercise control rather than control government). It supported continuing the military effort as the basis for an extension of the movement for workers’ councils into all countries.

At the end of April, the government again tried to promote a pro-war policy, provoking large demonstrations and a strong strike movement for immediate economic demands. The pendulum was swinging to the left. At the (first) congress of factory committees in Petrograd attempted to contain the pressure. But the soviets had already become a majority because of their support for the call for “an unconditional extension of dual power,” and “workers’ control” (by a vote of 421 to 335). Paradoxically, at the top echelons of the state and on the level of the national Soviet of deputies, the rightward shift was translated itself — to the detriment of the liberals — by reinforcing the position of the reformists (Mensheviks, Social-Revolutionaries). Initially, they entered into a coalition government “between the classes,” which they led from that point on.

At the beginning of June, the real congress of workers and soldiers began. With 10,000 elected delegates (of which 822 were properly members) and 1,000 non-workers, it represented some 20 million people. Elected on the basis of universal suffrage, the congress constituted the most representative and democratic body that Russia had ever known. Based on a deep-going political pluralism, it debated, over three weeks (June 3-30), all of the vital questions of the moment. The delegates included 283 SRs (Social-Revolutionaries), 248 Mensheviks, 105 Bolsheviks, and 73 unaffiliated individuals, with the rest divided between different small socialist groups. Its executive committee, which had the character of a virtual “counter-government,” was composed of 104 Mensheviks, 100 SRs, 35 Bolsheviks, and 18 socialists from other currents. After a short time it combined forces with the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Peasant Congress, which represented the countryside, and where the SRs held an absolute monopoly.

The coalition government, very popular at the outset, rapidly discredited itself. Similar causes bring the history of the Russian revolution: the hour for a radical counter-revolution had arrived: the military coup d’État of Kornilov turned his back on Kersenny and took his chances at the end of August. 1917 (communists remain silent). Allende and others. But the coup of November 4-9, 1917 in Chile, or Ebert-Noake and Kapp in Germany, 1920. In three days, the “army” with which Kersenny attacked the capital failed, and the armies of Petrograd had taken the lead in the revolution. In this way they recognized their place at the center of the workers’ counter-power.

The revolution of October 1917

At the start of September the pendulum swung to the left just as sharply as it had swung right at the beginning of the revolution.

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Within the workers’ councils, the Bolshevik Party became a majority — first in Petrograd and Moscow. Within the party, Lenin, still in exile in Finland, put the Bolsheviks in the vanguard of the revolution. The working class — supported by a popular uprising in the countryside — overthrew the government. A wave of popular movements — over this decisive question of the masses through the politics of class collaboration.

The evolution of the situation within the workers councils during this period of dual power is, from that time forward, tightly linked to an intensifying class struggle.

Revolution and counter-revolution: July-August

The new relationship of forces was tested during the "July days".
the seizure of power and the organization of the revolution of October the 29th. He posed the question: When? How?

Between April and September the party learned to struggle for a majority within the soviets using the majority, but not by force. From that point on it was through revolutionary initiative that these organizations of workers' democracy would become the new state apparatus.

Faced with this turning point, the Bolshevik Party suffered a grave internal crisis before a clear line could emerge. A "right" current, led by Zinoviev and Kamenev — constituting the majority at first in the central committee — hesitated, put off the moment for action, and accepted the idea of insurrection. Between Lenin and Trotsky, both partisans of immediate preparation for the uprising, the revolutionary debate focused on precisely the tactic that should be followed in pursuit of it. The left wing of the party finally gained the upper hand in the central committee on October 10.

The national congress of workers', soldiers', and peasants' councils was called for the end of the month. At the same time, the Military Revolutionary Committee, an organ of the Petrograd Soviet, with Trotsky at its head, responded to a provocation by the district military commandant, Polkovnikov (who wanted to dissolve the city council which was completely in the hands of the Bolsheviks). Thus the insurrection began as a measure of self-defense. In a few hours the bourgeoisapparatus of repression was dismembered and dispersed. Political power was within reach. It was up to the national congress of workers councils to seize it. Its political composition was now transformed from what it had been in June of 1917. Out of 850 delegates, the soviets were represented by Bolsheviks and SRs controlled less than 100. The Bolsheviks, for their part, represented 750 delegates and 390 deputies. They were joined by the left wing Menshevik and left SRS. The reformists, a minority, walked out of the congress.

A new executive committee of the workers' councils — a real legislative body for the new soviet power — was elected on a pluralist basis: 67 Bolsheviks, 32 SRs, 26, with 20 seats given to different revolutionary groups. The executive committee, in turn, elected the first government of the councils — a real legislative body for the new soviet congress. To the side of the reformist bloc wing Mensheviks and SRs) were the left wing Mensheviks and left SRS. The party recognized and supported by the popular mass, which was engaged in the struggle for power — a party organized and supported by the popular movement.

The parties of the revolution

The democratic self-organization of the popular masses is a fundamental and model aspect of the Russian revolution. But this did not determine, by itself, the question of what politics would actually be pursued. This self-organization encompassed a plurality of parties, with their specific programs, tactics, activities, etc. During the Russian revolution it was the interaction between these parties and the territorial councils which determined the outcome (the trade union movement was, in this case, extremely weak, and the activities of the political parties were more limited).

The political parties organized themselves very late and in a particular fashion (one which reflects the social reality of the moment, the anarcho-capitalist state, paternalism and totalitarianism at the same time, overwhelming, suffocating or absorbing "civilizing power.

The Kadets: In 1917, aside from various non-socialist groups which had been marginalized, the Kadets ("Constitutional Democrats"), controlled the main party of the dominant classes. This party formed the first provisional government, in the wake of the February revolution. Under Kerensky, it struggled with the precise tactic that should be followed in pursuit of it. The left wing of the party finally gained the upper hand in the central committee on October 10.

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The parties of the Second International: Three parties, all of which were represented in the Second International, contested for the allegiance of the workers and peasant masses: The Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, and the Social Revolutionaries (SRs). The Mensheviks were a large party — representing a significant portion of the Russian working class — and also between them. Kerensky himself became a figure on the scale of the entire country but important at times in the political life of the countryside. Kerensky was a strong politician: he would have to pass through terrible trials during the imperialist war. Therefore, the process of political clarification was complicated.

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The minority currents: The phenomenon of the "interrepublic" committees underlined the existence of many revolutionary currents and groups, marginal on the scale of the entire country but important at times in one city, one workplace, one sector. Among them were the anarchists, the revolutionary syndicalists, the "military" or "巴萨 " of the Kadets, the Menshevik Internationalists (Martov, Martynov), the United Social-Democratic Internationalists (small but influential, because of the journal Nvov Zhid — New Life — of Maxim Gorky).

The international counter-revolution

The victory of October 1917 had powerful international repercussions. The call for an immediate end to the slaughter of the working people and for the punishment of those responsible — the ruling classes of Europe — raised hopes in the trenches and combative ability in the worker masses.

The governments signed an armistice in November 1918. But many parts of the world were undergoing revolutionary crises: imperialism Germany first. Along with Tsarist Russia, Prussian militarism was the principal banner against the revolutionary momentum in the period which followed the defeat of the French revolution. The country was divided by the Bolshevik split. In 1918, a key revolutionary group was the Mensheviks (with Trotsky as their leader). This group was divided between the right-wing Mensheviks and left Mensheviks. In March and April 1917, the growth of a new group of Mensheviks was observed (Stalin, Kamenev-Zinoviev). Although they had no clear position on the question of power, they supported the liberal government, to accept the continuation of the war which was opposed by the radical forces of Lenin. In July 1917, the Bolsheviks were a struggle for power. They were a party which was sympathetic to the anti-imperialist current in favor of immediately ending the war and a fight against sectarianism on the part of another layer of cadre who were reluctant to fuse with other currents (including Trotsky's). In August there was a debate about revolutionary initiatives and shifting the foundation for workers democracy from the factory councils to the factory committees. Finally, in October, there was the debate with the right wing of the party over insurrection, a discussion which was continued against the many different keys, during subsequent years.

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**Chapter 1**

**October 1917: coup d'état or social revolution**

There is currently a real campaign of denigration of the October 1917 Revolution underway in both the West and in Eastern Europe. It is often very bitter. It is based on historical falsifications and myths that are just as great as Stalinist myths and falsifications. Fighting against it is not only indispensable from a scientific and political point of view. It is also a question of intellectual cleanliness. The fight for truth was a fight for a minimum of decency in public life.

In the first chapter we will deal with three of the myths that are the most frequently encountered in current polemical writing.

**The myth of a minority coup d'état**

The first mystification deals with the nature of the October Revolution. It was only a diabolical coup d'état organized by that master of manoeuvres, Lenin, and carried out by a small sector of professional revolutionaries. The comments which followed the attempted coup d'état in Moscow on 26, August 1917 are quite revealing from this point of view. Some went so far as to say that a second (failed) putsch made it possible to eliminate what a first (successful) putsch had created in 1917.

The truth is quite different. The October Revolution was the climaxing point of one of the most deep-rooted mass movements ever known. In Europe of the period only the rising of the German workers in 1920 in reaction to the Kapp-von Luitwitz putsch, and the Catalan insurrection, in reaction to the military-fascist taking of power by the Francoists, were of comparable scope, but nevertheless more limited and less long lasting.

Historical sources do not leave any doubt about the representativity of the Bolsheviks in October 1917. There is no need, to be convinced of this, to use the writing of those who were close to Lenin. The scope of the mass movement before, during and after the October Revolution, is today well-established. Here we will simply cite some of the many testimonies from the Bolsheviks' opponents.

... the Bolsheviks were working stubbornly and without let-up. They were among the masses, at factory offices, every day without a pause. From open speaking and logical logic, they were speaking in Pravda, at the factories and in the barracks, every blessed day. For the masses, they had become history and formality. They had become the sole hope, only because they were able to believe in them, and see in them the only hope, the only history and formality. They had become the sole hope, only because they were able to believe in them, and see in them the only hope, the only history and formality.

The German historian Oskar Anweiler, who was a severe critic of the Bolsheviks noted that:

... the Bolsheviks were in the majority in the councils of deputies in almost all the big industrial centers and also in most of the councils of soldiers' deputies in the various towns.

Marc Ferro, another ferocious critic of the Bolsheviks, could not stop himself from noting that:

...in the first place, Bolshevikization was the effect of the radicalization of the masses and was thus the expression of the democratic will.

The ratio of the deputies is sufficiently explained by the ineptness of governmental policy (with the participation of socialist since May) which, under cover of necessity, isolated consolidation problems between the ruling and popular classes. Negotiation, far from changing the established order, perpetuated...

From that time on, in the towns and at the army, there was a dictatorship. Also, those that from the beginning, had fallen under the very principle of class collaboration were grabbed, and among them the most insidious, that is to say the Bolsheviks of the Lenin tendency. The workers dammed less interesting working conditions. It was the brutal or cunning rejection of attacks by the possessing class factories, occupations, the sequestration of the owners and the army, and the central, vigorous, not to mention...

This movement had a popular basis whose forms of organization have been described. The fear of repression and...
proletariat in Russia than in any other country in the world).

Julius Braunthal has emphasized the importance of this question for Lenin:

“The whole future of the international workers’ revolution, of socialism, is at stake.” This argument assumed in practical terms far-reaching consequences in the daily work of the party. He replied, “the growing maturity and the inevitable character of the world socialist revolution can no longer be disputed. We are at the threshold of the world revolution. We would be real traitors to the International, if, in such a moment, in such favourable conditions, we did not respond to the appeal of the German revolution (for example the sons of the German army) by resolutions alone.”

Of course, it should not be assumed from what has been said that a socialist perspective was not an essential element in Bolshevik propaganda, that it had not influenced, even in only a marginal way, the concrete measures taken.

For Lenin and the Bolsheviks at that point — contrary to their positions before April 1917 — “soviet power,” “workers’ power” (or “workers and peasants’ power”) and socialist orientation were practically considered as synonyms.

But Lenin incessantly emphasized that this only meant that it was possible — and necessary — to begin following this path, nothing more. Lenin knew that a fully developed socialist society (in the traditional, Marxian sense of the term, a classless society) could only exist after the victory of the international revolution. He repeated this in January 1918 before the Third Congress of the Soviets:

“I have no illusions about our having just entered the period of transition to socialism. About not yet having reached socialism... We are far from even having completed the transitional phase from capitalism to socialism. We never cherished the hope we would finish it without the aid of the international proletariat.”

The myth of a party-sect of fanatics

Third mystification and historical falsification. The October 1917 “putsch” was perpetrated by a small sect of power-hungry, fanatical, highly-centralized professional revolutionaries manipulated by Lenin.

In reality, from the months of February to April 1917, the Bolshevik Party was at that time a party fully integrated into Russian society and its living forces.

In Petrograd, thanks to the agitation and organization masterfully led by Leon Trotsky, the regiments of the garrison decided in public assemblies to no longer recognize the orders of the military high command, the employers and the big landowners.

The legitimacy of the soviets and the factory councils outstripped that of the Provisional Government, the military high command, the employers and the big landowners.

This freedom of oppression did not only concern a particular group in the Petrograd garrison. The Bolsheviks and their allies, supporters of soviet power: the anarchists and the Left Social-Revolutionaries.

Two Bolshevik currents publicly disagreed during the conference of factory committees before the October Revolution. The first was represented by Miliutin and Latvin, supported by Ryazanov, Lolovszky and Shliapnikov. It wanted to combine workers’ control with the demand for central planning. The second, represented by Skrypnik and Chubar, insisted above all on decentralized initiatives at the base.

The Party (was) ... that living independent collectivity which thereby opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that many Western historians that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that many Western historians believe that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that many Western historians believe that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that many Western historians believe that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that many Western historians believe that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control.

21. A.S. Smith (op. cit. pp. 158-159) correctly opposes the thesis of many Western historians that the Bolsheviks were congenitally opposed to institutionalized workers’ control. But it is to be regretted that he himself makes concessions to this thesis on the basis of the “black years” (1920-1921). On this question he hardly mentions the later position of Lenin and Trotsky at the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Communist International and those of Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Fourth International in favour of workers’ control from 1923.
Chapter 2

The international significance

The victory of the October revolution cannot be understood outside the context of the First World War of 1914-1918. Of all the Bolshevists' slogans that of an immediate end to the war, "peace without annexations or indemnities" was the most popular. It became the main difference between the Bolshevists and the other parties claiming to be socialist or revolutionary. It was about all the soldiers of whom the great majority were peasants, who no longer wanted the war.

The falling apart of the army, which was mainly still Tsarist, disarmed the provisional government and then the first attempts at counter-revolution. This is what made possible the victory and then consolidation of the October revolution.

Perhaps the most significant fact about the revolution of 1917 is that between spring and autumn this great army, the largest ever put into the field by any country, was transformed into an "exhausted, exhausted, badly clothed, badly fed, embittered mob of people, united by thirst for peace and general disillusionment."

The most clear-sighted Mensheviks later admitted this. Their leader Dan stated bluntly that:

"The continuation of the war brought the Bolshevist victory in the Russian Revolution."

In addition, the attitude of the Bolshevists and the soviets after the taking of power in October 1917 made it possible to have a real evaluation of the policy of the new revolutionary state.

The right of the peoples to decide their own fate

Lenin's first speech to the Second Congress of Soviets to present the policy of the new regime brought into being in October was his report on the peace negotiations. In it he found a vigorous affirmation of the right to self-determination, whose democratic threat is very relevant today:

"If any country whatsoever is forcibly retained within the borders of a given state, if, in spite of its expressed desires — no matter whether expressed in the press, at public meetings, in the decisions of parties, or in protests and uprisings against national oppression — it is not accorded the right to decide its own fate, such incorporation is annexation, i.e., like India, China and Indonesia, as well as significant support to already important anti-imperialist movements such as that in Turkey."

In one of its very first statements during the peace negotiations with Germany at Brest-Litovsk, on December 30, 1917, the Soviet government proclaimed the extension of the right of nations to decide on their own fate, recognized by the American president Woodrow Wilson, to all colonial and semi-colonial countries. At the same time, this government abolished all unequal treaties with China, particularly those concerning the Chinese Eastern railway and the right to extra-territoriality of all Russian citizens in China, Mongolia and Iran. These principles were also incorporated into the first Soviet constitution, that of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) of 1918.

The reaction of anti-imperialist forces in Asia was immediate. In China, the Bolshevists were called the huang-l-tang, "the party of the greatest humanism", Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese national leader, sent a message of solidarity to Lenin. In Iran, the national-democratic movement identified with the October Revolution, once Trotsky withdrew all the tsarist troops and instructors from the country.

One of the effects of this policy was the famous congress of the Peoples of the East at Baku in 1920. The Soviet regime for the first time in history, even abolished secret diplomacy and decided to publish all diplomatic documents and secret treaties. Most importantly, it decided to immediately start peace negotiations with all the belligerent governments who were prepared to do so.

October 1917: a revolution for peace

This appeal was accompanied by an appeal to the workers of the major imperialist countries to take the path of peace and socialism:

"While addressing this proposal for peace to the governments,"

indicated, which are equally just for all nationalities without exceptions.

The Soviet government extended this principle of the peoples' right to decide their own fate to all the colonies and semi-colonies outside Europe. This was a revolutionary act which had incalculable historical repercussions. It gave a decisive impulse to the developing national liberation movements in countries like India, China and Indonesia, as well as significant support to already important anti-imperialist movements such as that in Turkey.

And in conclusion, in a still more striking fashion:

"In the Manifesto of March 24 (1917), we [the soviets] called for the overthrow of the bankers, but, before the October Revolution far from overthrowing our own bankers, we entered into an alliance with them. Now we have overthrown the government of the bankers. The bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie will make every effort to unite their forces and drive the workers and peasants' revolution in blood. But the three years of war have been a good lesson to the masses — [as is proved by] the Soviet movement in other countries and the mutiny in the German navy, which was crushed by the officer cadets of Wilhelm the humpback."

"We have been and will be on the way to peace and socialism!"

Trotsky, speaking to the peoples of Europe affected by the war, proclaimed:

"The workers and soldiers must wrest from the criminal hands of the bourgeoisie the causes of war, the right to decide its own fate and take it into their own hands."

In other words, in the eyes of the Bolshevists, the October revolution was a moral step in order to put an end to the war, in so doing it should encourage and speed up the development of the world socialist revolution. Is this borne out by history? Incontestably.

The world war was a decisive turning point in the history of capitalism. It was the beginning of the epoch in which the destructive, barbaric, regressive features of the system were going to develop significantly in comparison to its capacity to maintain a periodic development of productive forces.

The First World War was a ten million human beings massacred, including the flower of Europe's young men, in the pursuit of goals to which no one today lends any legitimacy at all. This was the first of a succession of disasters which led humanity 30 years later to the barbarity of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

The most clear sighted socialists — not only revolutionaries like Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg but also moderates like Jean Jaurès — had foreseen this before 1914.

The Soviet government fought for immediate peace with Germany and Austro-Hungary during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. A growing number of workers and soldiers from all countries already rejected the war, which explains the widespread opposition throughout the world for the Soviet position, particularly when it was expressed in Trotsky's exemplary use of the negotiation table as an agitational method.

The representatives of Germany and Austria-Hungary complained of violation of all diplomatic norms.

What is this? Speaking directly to soldiers over the heads of their officers? Calling on them to disobey orders if not to mutiny? Calling on the colonies to rise? Calling on workers to strike. From a Foreign Affairs minister is this not trampling on the elementary rules of civilization and of "friendship between nations?"

Very soon the French and British governments followed in the footsteps of their implacable enemies, the Central Powers, and denounced the Soviet revolutionaries in their turn.

On the other hand, for the peoples, the "civilization" and "norms of friendship between nations" that the belligerent nations claimed to stand for meant senseless massacre, destruction of entire towns, inhuman oppression and exploitation. It was the civilization of plague and death. Lenin and Trotsky incarnated the hope of a superior civilization, of life, liberty and equal rights for all women and men.

Imperialist propaganda — which right-social democracy also partly circulated — was much more virulent then than the anti communist propaganda of the Cold War period or today. It had however a lot less effect among the toiling masses. They saw the sincerity of the Soviet regime.

The Soviet regime: internationalism in action

They saw that the first Soviet Constitution, that of 1918, eliminated the distinction between "national citizens" and "foreigners. Anybody living in Soviet Russia and ready to work there would immediately
enjoy all political rights, including the right to vote. John MacLean, the shop stewards' leader from the munitions factory in Glasgow, Scotland was imprisoned by the British government for having gone on strike. He was named Consul General for the RSFSR and thus achieved diplomatic immunity; which forced London to release him.

The Bolsheviks thus showed that they were faithful to the best traditions of the socialist movement. The Socialist International addressed a solemn warning to all governments:

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This period after the First World War is a critical one in the history of the Russian Revolution. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which had swept away the Tsarist regime, was followed by a period of revolutionary uncertainty and political instability. The Bolsheviks faced not only the challenge of consolidating their power but also the international pressures to end the war.

Ernest Mandel, in his book "Russian Revolution..." (1973), describes the period after the First World War as a time of great uncertainty and political struggle. The Bolsheviks, in their efforts to strengthen their rule and to establish a new socialist order, had to grapple with the challenges of war, revolution, and international relations.

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The first phase of the German revolution was defeated in January 1919. The Austrian revolution was stopped in a deliberate way by the (centrist) Austrian Socialist Party which negotiated a compromise with the bourgeoisie.40

Defeats in Europe: the responsibility of the reformists

But this compromise was not a result of an objectively unfavourable relationship of forces. On this point we should note the terrible historic responsibility of the leaders of the Austrian SP. In fact, the taking of power by the Austrian socialists — which was perfectly possible at the time — would have fundamentally changed the situation in Europe in favour of the revolution. This would have assured a territorial junction with the soviet republics of Bavaria and Hungary which had been recently established and were situated on either side of Austria. By their refusal to take power, the Austrian socialists interrupted the chain of the social revolution: if they had acted otherwise the three proletarian republics would have mutually strengthened each other, provoking a revolutionary momentum which could have spread throughout the whole of Europe.41

The German revolution started in 1918 and then suffered a heavy blow. But it then went through another upward phase which culminated in the impressive general strike of March 1920 against the Kapp-putsch and was followed by a third wave in 1923 with the general strike against the Cuno government.42

And most importantly, if the Bolsheviks had “illusions” in the world revolution, these illusions were shared by millions of wage-workers throughout the world.

There were only a handful of small revolutionary groups representing some tens of thousands of people outside Russia at the first Congress of the Communist International in March 1919. But in the months which followed, the sympathy for Moscow would spread to such a point that the majority of organized workers in many countries (Spain, Italy, France, Norway, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia) and a strong minority in others asked to join the Communist International. In Austria, Poland, Switzerland, the leaders of the Socialist Parties could only stop this tidal wave by themselves breaking with reformist social-democracy and forming the so-called “Two-and-a-half International”, which made oaths in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It should be pointed out that the deep radicalization of the international proletariat after the October Revolution had its roots in the conditions in each country. It was not simply a product exported from Moscow. It profoundly changed the international relationship of forces between the classes. To try to hold back this revolutionary wave with the aid of the reformists, the bourgeoisie had to grant the proletariat important reforms for which it had been fighting for more than 25 years, particularly the eight hour day and simple universal suffrage. Trotsky recognized that there was even a general strike in Switzerland and a call by the social-democratic leader Tresch for a revolution in the Netherlands, two countries which had remained neutral during the war and which were a lot more stable than the rest of Europe.

The revolutionary wave even affected the faraway towns of Seattle in the United States where a general strike broke out which took semi-socialist forms of organization.43

The left Menshevik leader, Martov, tried after the event to give a “sociological” interpretation of the international workers’ radicalization which followed 1917. He stated (J. Martov, Bolsheviks mondialistes, Paris, 1963) the Russian original data from 1919 that this radicalization was essentially among the soldiers and unorganized workers, who took the standpoint of “consumers” opposed in the standpoint of the “producers”, traditional social-democratic skilled and semi-skilled workers.

This cannot be sustained to defend in the light of the facts. Not only in Russia and Italy but also in Germany, the wage-workers opining for the Communist International were all skilled and semi-skilled workers in the big factories, while the reformists reeived their mass support from more or less unskilled workers (small and medium enterprises and the less developed sectors of the economy. The division in Germany between the USSR and SPD first, and then between left and right in the USPD (up to March 1921), and then between 1923 between the CP and social-democracy, has exactly the same sociological basis. As For Italy, L.A. Roncione has shown that the Bolsheviks received all the support from the skilled workers of the big enterprises. See Karlis (ed), The Workers’ Revolutions in Russia in 1917 - The View from Rome, Cambridge 1987.

40. R. Radoszkowska, (Die revolutioane Situation on Osterreich im Jahre 1919, Die partei der sozialdemokaten - Der Einzelner und die Massen. Jänner 1919, Berlin, 1973) has drawn on the basis of archive material how the Austrian social-democratic leaders manoeuvred, in close cooperation with the imperial government, to first channel and (then suffice this strong general strike) in Vienna. Otto Bauer, leader of the left wing of the Austrian SP, recognizes that the end of the general strike before it became a revolution was massively assisted within the proletariat.

41. For a presentation of this question, see the Introduction by Y. Bondjout to a selection by B. Afshar, Demenents et opportunismes, Paris, 1963. This essentially justifies the refusal of the Austro-Marxists to accept power, under estimating both the international revolutionary potential of the period and the seriousness of the short-term consequences of the political choice (while emphasizing that the failure of the Austro-Marxists project of a “slow revolution” allowed the later rise of fascism).

42. During the general strike against the far-right pockets of Kappism in different parts of Germany, even the reformist trade unions called for the continuation of a “normal” workers’ government composed of the SPD, the USPD and the trade unions.

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45. On August 9, 1920, a Council of Action was organized by the Parliamentary Committee of the British trade unions, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the parliamentary group of the Labour Party with the goal of warning the government:

that a war is being prepared by the Allies against Soviet Russia on the Polish question. It states that such a war would be an intolerable crime against humanity. It then warns the government that all the industrial strength of the workers will be used to prevent this war, and that a Council of Action will be immediately formed to take all the measures necessary to implement this resolution.

More than 1,000 delegates on August 13 with the aim of forming local Councils of Action and preparing a general strike. Councils were formed in more than 350 towns.

47. Braithwaite, op. cit, p. 232.
The agrarian question

The abolition of serfdom in 1861 was accompanied by heavy charges on the peasants. It is estimated that the capitalized yield of the land that the peasants were to receive at that time was about 646 million gold rubles, but the total price the peasants were obliged to pay was 867 million rubles. The peasants had in addition to pay an agricultural tax of 1.56 rubles per desiatin (a desiatin is equivalent to 2.7 acres). This makes in all 170 million rubles, while the bourgeois and noble private owners only paid 0.23 rubles per desiatin.

According to a 1902 survey, the sums to be paid by the peasants varied between 50 and 100% of the net income per farm, according to size.

In addition, during the division of the land, the big landowners took the good land which had previously been available to the peasants, and too often only "gave" them the right to buy less fertile land.

The peasants got practically nothing from the Tsarist state in exchange for this heavy contribution. In the heartlands of central Russia, living and working conditions remained as they had been for the last thousand years. The yield by hectare was a quarter of what it was in Britain, and less than a fifth for the average peasant farm (that is to say without including the land worked by the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie).

In these conditions, the burden of the rent and taxes to be paid year after year made it impossible for the peasants to accumulate any reserves. This led on the one hand to a gradual exhaustion of the fertility of the land by over-cultivation (we see that ecological problems do not only date from the Stalinist period!) and also led to periodic famines at every bad harvest.

The poor therefore represented a third of the village populations.

The barbaric conditions and poverty in which the peasant lived under Tsarism was clearly expressed in their level of consumption. By head of the household, the average peasant farm, aside from expenses in food and housing, spent 5.5 rubles per year on clothing, 2.5 rubles for cultural-material needs, 1.4 rubles for other material needs. Two

The real wage of a Russian worker had fallen by 20%. And in a later enlarged edition of his work, this communist historian, who was much praised by Lenin, described the miserable living conditions of the Russian workers at the end of the 19th century:

63.9% of workers were illiterate... In the factories of Moscow, the textile workers were almost always obliged to sleep on the floor, with their heads resting in fact against these wooden poles, a half meter long and two meters wide. They had to tread on dirty floors with their clothes. The employers said to the doctors that the workers "look like this..."

The doctors who gave [this] information on textile workers became an inspector, which, let it be said in passing, immediately changed his attitude. Two years later, he described the textile workers as living conditions in most cases of the general run of the Vladimir gubernia: pollution, bad air, families with as many as two or three children... The Russian workers then were worse than the [German] soldiers of the imperial war, during the civil war and the blockade. To avoid food, they had salted meat, mush, salted fish. The only food was offal...

In those living and housing conditions, the workers were illiterate. In the Moscow textile factories, 134 women in 100 barrels of sugar. In addition there was an epidemic, which the doctors qualified as "traumatic" and entirely "prestidigitation"; it injured... In one [textile] factory in a working-class area, only one in three workers had not been injured. The super-exploitation of workers was particularly serious. In 1914, women workers' wages were half those of men. In 1916 they had fallen to less than 40%.

Can the idea that the October revolution did a useful and healthy job in radically eliminating these abominations really be challenged?

The Tsarist state

The oppressive role of the Tsarist state had a precise financial dimension: 80% of its budget was spent on the army and the repressive apparatuses. This parasite drain on the national income was essentially at the cost of the peasantry (but also at the cost of the workers, given the indirect taxes). Industry was financed above all through investment. Russian industry was not competitive in the world market, nor could the narrow base of the national market, given the poverty of the great majority of the population, give it sufficient outlets. In addition, imported products were cheaper and of better qualities than the products of Russian industry. Thus there was an aggressive state policy and a constant tendency to military expansionism towards the East and South-East. Countries like Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, China, Korea, as well as regions of the Caucasus were feared, by threats or bayonets, to buy Russian goods. The term "Cossack capitalism (imperialism)" has been correctly used to describe this. It ended badly with the Russo-Japanese war at Tsushima when the Western armies were defeated.

But the most oppressive and repressive aspect of Tsarism was expressed in all the institutions (or their absence), formed by the autocracy and what they represented for the peoples of the empire: lack of democratic rights and freedoms; extreme bureaucratic arbitrariness; accenuated national oppression:

With the emphasis on national intelligence among nearly all the minority peoples, the Tsarist state had either to reconcile the need for some local autonomy in the vulnerable borders or to seek to extract their own taxes from their own taxes. The solution was a rigorous policy of Russification. In the Ukraine, film titles in Russian, Lithuanian and Polish, the teaching of the vernacular was terminated or forbidden in schools and the use of Russian expanded. In the Baltic provinces, Livonia, Courland, Courland, and Estonia, the government strengthened anti-Semitism according to the terms...

In what is probably the most objective history of the Russian Revolution written by a non-socialist, William Henry Chamberlain wrote:

What were the outstanding characteristics of the first period of the duping of the revolution?:
1. Lenin's decision in the army, increasingly radical demands of the industrial workers.
2. The struggle for higher wages, then for control over production and distribution, arbitrary confiscation of housing in the towns, to a greater degree of land in the countryside, opposition to non-Russian parts of the country as Poland and Ukraine on the ground of the far reaching autonomy.

Far from acting under the influence of radical utopia or of extreme thirst for power, the intelligentsia in 1917 was characterized by growing moderation, hesitation and absence of any will to exercise power, in the last analysis determined by extreme class polarization in the countryside.

Is it surprising that at the time of the February 1917 revolution, the peasants, workers and oppressed nationalities emitted an almost unanimous cry: Enough is enough, Land, the right to self-determination, the 8-hour day and workers' control straightforwardly.

But the Provisional Government hesitated, dragged in its feet, postponed the decisions on these questions until after the Constituent Assembly, and the elections to the Constituent in turn were repeatedly postponed.

Is it surprising in these conditions that the masses increasingly took their fate into their own hands, that they sought to resolve their vital problems themselves, that they identified with Bolshevik policies and the power of the Soviets, when they resolved these problems from one day to the next?
The political significance

Chapter 4

Both East and West, the condemnation of the October Revolution is generally based on the idea that the Bolshevist “putsch” prevented the institutionalization and consolidation of democracy. Because of this it led to the establishment of a totalitarian regime. Democracy or dictatorship, this was the alternative in October 1917 and in the months that followed.

Once again this is a flagrant miscalculation or falsification of history.

In reality, the polarization of social and political forces had reached a paroxysm in Russia. This polarization was such that it did not leave any space for an experiment in institutionalized or indeed prolonged bourgeois democracy. From July 1917, days which were marked by a radicalization of popular demands, the bourgeois parties – and the military cliques to which they were linked – had adopted a much more repressive course.

Kornilov’s military coup d’état in August 1917 did not fail from the sky. It reflected the sharpening of the socio-political struggle. Its failure simply reinforced the thirst for revenge on the part of the possessing classes and their henchmen. This was seen on the eve of and immediately after the October insurrection.

This hate of the Russian property-owning classes compared to that of the French bourgeoisie at the time took on a rarely-seen force.

Jacques Sadoul noted pertinently that they:

... wanted to establish a regime which would bring the revolution in blood, and massacre and deport the Jews, Bolsheviks, socialists and Kadets.

Russian reaction and German imperialism

This class hatred was so deep that in the space of a few months, the nobility and the “patriotic” monarchists who were indignant about the soldiers’ lack of enthusiasm for Kerensky’s offensive on the Polish-Galician front in June 1917, called for the arrival of German troops in Petrograd in order to crush the revolutionary horde and become strongly Germanophile. Again it is Sadoul who points out:

... the arrival of the [German ambassador] Mirkh in Moscow, the monarchists feel at ease. The first visit of the German ambassador was to the Grand Duchess, sister-in-law of Nicholas II. He then saw other monarchical royalties. It is obviously a question of preparing a restoration of the Tsar. The absolute reactionaries are ready to accept everything without shame, and particularly a military alliance with Germany and Ukrainian independence.

A member of the German embassy, the Freiherr Karl von Bothmer, completely confirmed this:

For some time, monarchist circles have been feeling very active and are talking loudly to us... During these discussions, I have met a series of important personalities who are sympathetic to us. They all said the same sort of thing: ‘We can do nothing without you. You have to interfere directly, then we can act.’

Counter-revolutionary repression

This class hatred was not directed in the first place against the Bolshevists and their allies. It was directed above all at the popular masses, starting with the “white” peasants in their villages, demanding that the “plunderers” should be brought into line.

It was the bourgeoisie and the nobles, with the hesitant support of the reformist parties, particularly the Right Social Revolutionaries, who started the Civil War after the Russian Revolution. They showed proof of an unlimited cruelty in the period of 1918-21.

This line of cruelty based upon deep contempt for the masses was expressed most clearly by the Tsarina Alexandra herself. She wrote to her husband: “Be Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible, Tsar Paul – crush them all under your feet...”

And on the very eve of the revolution she wrote to the Tsar: “Dearest, show the power of your fist – that is what Russians need... They themselves ask for this – so many have said to me recently: ‘We need the knout.’

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As you know, the Bolshevists have changed the names of the old regiments. The Moscow troops have on their backs K.I., — Karl Liebknecht. We (the northern White Army) took one of these regiments prisoner. We took it before the war tribunal. The trials on the White front are very short. Each soldier is questioned and if he admits to being communist then he is immediately condemned to death by hanging or bullet. The facts are so perfectly clear.

Lieutenant K. stood before the tribunal and declared: “Those among you who are real communists, show your comradeship in action.” He ended his speech with a long and expressive pause after these words. Then more than half the regiment stepped forward in line. They were condemned to death by firing squad. But before the execution, each soldier had to dig his own grave...

The condemned men were ordered to undress in such a way that their uniforms would not be stained by their blood nor cut to pieces by the bullets. The condemned men tied their clothes in a bundle and tied them up in a bundle,... Then, asked, they dug their graves. A command, “In single file in the night, the shots rang out…” The condemned men stood in their graves, with the bullets just a few inches from their heads. The bullets went straight to their hearts, the blood gushed out...

To the smallest detail this description prefigures the methods used by the Nazi special forces, the SS, during the Second World War: massacre of political prisoners and Jews forced to dig their own graves. They were, what more, prisoners of war. This was the action of “defenders of democracy” against the Bolshevist dictatorship.

The Freiherr von Bothmer reported in his above-mentioned book:

... The Bolsheviks, socialists and Kadets.

Russian reaction and German imperialism

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The spectacle of the zones under his control was a unification of terror. It was under the salvos of the Czechoslovak rifles, behind the barricades of the Stadt’s, that the so-called “people’s army” (the Whites) was formed.

The German writer Alfons Paquet, the correspondent in Russia of the Frankfurter Zeitung, also noted that, after the temporary occupation of Odessa in July 1918, the Bolshevists of the soviet were executed by the counter-revolution with, on this occasion, the active participation of the SRs.

Does it need to be recalled that at the same time the terrorists of the left SRs killed some of the most important Bolshevik leaders, including Vodolotski and Uritsky. One left SR, Fanny Kaplan, made an attempt on Lenin which was nearly successful.

White dictatorship or Soviet power

The concreteness did not exist between bourgeois democracy and Bolshevist dictatorship. It was between counter-revolutionary dictatorship of Soviet power.

There is no doubt about the dictatorial character of the counter-revolution. John Rees gave a good description of the terror used by the reactionary forces:

... that it is more terrible to be a social-democrat, than to be a “White”... The capitalists and worker-leaders are real communists; the working class who expresses itself in the so-called “people’s army” (the Whites) is formed.

... that the counter-revolutionary army... was between 120,000 and 150,000. These massacres were accompanied by unbelievable cruelty.

Men were bent up to their necks and then killed by the hooves of horses driven over them, or were bludgeoned and killed by horses driven in opposite directions. Children were stuffed against walls in view of their parents; pregnant women were a favorite target, even their small children killed in their mothers’
The soviets were ferociously persecuted. The democratic rights of the workers were totally denied. This is what caused the defeat of the Whites. A major factor in Kolchak's defeat was the low morale of his forces: there were frequent desertions to the communist side in the course of the battle. Another was his failure to win over the population, which, although far from pro-communist, preferred Soviet rule the last move.

There were many reasons for the victory of the Red Army in the civil war, but most of them add up to one single fact: the people as a whole, in spite of the impotence of the communists, preferred the Soviet regime to the available alternatives. The peasants disliked both sides, and wished above all to be left alone; but when it came to the choice, they preferred the Communists not to land, to the Whites, who took, or threatened to take, a way.

Chamberlain states likewise:

On July 16 [1918], the Siberian government ordered the suppression of all existing Soviet institutions and the establishment of new ones. Throughout July and August the policy of the Siberian government was directed to the restoration of private property in every form.

When the Whites began to bring back the landlords, the peasants organized guerrilla bands and fell upon them.

This is why the Whites lost. They could not win or reconstitute a popular base. Their armies were, in general, officer armies, without the ability or even the desire to recruit conscripts. We see to what extent these officers feared the peasants.

A third way?

Conflicted with this diagnosis, which it is difficult to contest, opponents of October often react in two diametrically opposed directions. Some consider that there was no basis for a (bourgeois) democratic regime in Russia whether this was for social reasons (extreme instability, absence of middle classes, the traditional support of democracy) or for ethical-cultural reasons (lack of democratic traditions in the Russian empire, tendency of the masses to vacillate wildly between resigned passivity and chaotic and uncontrollable explosions).

In these conditions, for these people the "totalitarian deviation" of the Bolsheviks was not worse than was the needlessly worse than an authoritarian right-wing regime.

For others, there was nevertheless the possibility of a third way. In their opinion, if the Kerensky regime had not been overthrown by the "Bolshevik putch" it could have gradually stabilized, carrying out moderate repression against both the far right and the far left.

The social counter-revolution

The "political alternative" to the power of the soviets had, obviously, a precise socio-economic content as is the case during any social revolution. Where the Whites established their dictatorship, the gains of October were rapidly if not immediately eliminated. The landowners took back their estates. The rights of the national minorities were suppressed.

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Once the Constituent Assembly was convoked and the distribution of the land to the peasants carried out in an orderly and legal fashion, a bourgeois democracy comparable to that in Poland, although certainly with limitations that Western Europe did not experience, could have stabilized.

This is not a realistic view. It underestimates the explosive character of social contradictions. To think that the capitalists would have accepted social legislation which undermined the competitiveness of their factories, to think that the landowners would have accepted a division of their property, because these reforms had been carried out by a Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage, is to misunderstand the lessons of European history of the 1920s and 1930s.

During this period, bourgeois democracy was not only severely restricted or indeed suppressed — except to a very limited extent — in Poland and the Baltic countries, and strongly restricted in Finland. It was also eliminated in Italy, in Germany and in Spain, three countries that were a lot more developed that Russia in 1917.

The Menshevik leaders themselves recognized this. Dan wrote:

Having assessed the effective relationship of forces, it [the Menshevik CC] reached the conclusion that — independently of the subjective intentions of the elements marching on Petrograd — would have necessarily meant the victory of the worst of counter-revolution.

The price of October 1917

The choice was thus truly either victory of the socialist revolution or victory of a counter-revolution that would have been among the most bloody ever known, which would have brought to power a Russian Hitler still worse than the German Hitler we know.

It is in the light of this diagnosis and of everything that it implies that we can reply to the question whether, in the final analysis, the price paid by the October Revolution was too high or not. Our answer is a definite no. A defeat of the revolution in 1917. It would have cost the Russian people and Europe much too dear.

In order to distort the calculation, the opponents of the October revolution use the sort of magical disappearing trick that they use for the French Revolution. They deny, or trivialize the victims of the revolution and of the counter-revolution, the economic effects of the first and of the second and then say that all that is the cost of the October Revolution.

How can the French Revolution be held responsible for the victims of the Napoleon Wars?

How can the October Revolution be held responsible for the victims of the White terror and pogroms?

Soviets argue that the Civil War and the White Terror are only products of the revolution. The answer is in this question: was not the Revolution itself the product of the Ancien Régime? History was at work against a conception of history as a continuous flow without being attached anywhere in time or in space. This conception does not make it possible to ever draw any conclusion. While saying that it is an attempt to understand the movement of history as a whole, this method in facts hides the precise responsibility of given social and political forces, in relation to specific actions.

Revolutionaries are at present not very popular, to say the least. Unfortunately, even R.V. Daniels, author of two rather left books The Honor of the Revolution and Red Petrograd. is caught up by the "spirit of the time" and writes in the New York Times Review of Books of April 26,1992:

Mr Moynahan shows what a revolution really means. The normal bonds of society give way to mindless murder and mayhem.

This is nothing but anti-working-class and anti-peasant prejudice. Why is the revolutionary masses upsurge "mindless" and "mayhem" while the ruling state’s and private violence is supposed to be "normal"? The Tsarist-capitalist participation in the First World War cost between 5 and 6 million deaths. Was that not "mindless" murder? Why was the pre-war rule based on the knout, countless executions and deportations, barbaric oppression (pogroms!) and mass starvation "normal" and the masses revolts against these evils a dissolution of the "normal bonds of society"? Was slavery also "normal" and revolts against slavery "mindless murder and mayhem"?

Moral judgement and class prejudice

There is, moreover, an aspect of this question which we should not try to hide. In time of revolution, the toiling population is first of all carried towards general revolutions. But, faced with civil war, when it sees itself repeatedly provoked and subject to aggression from its class enemies, it also tends to use direct indeed sometimes "savagery" violence. Baboeuf already pointed out in his letter to his wife, commenting on the executions of the Princesse de Lamballe after the taking of Bastille, that these excesses were the largely inevitable product of years of confrontation by the people with the violence and cruelty of their oppressors. To hope, in these...
Russian Revolution...

Ernest Mandel

conditions, that the masses in all circumstances would show themselves to be scrupulously respectful of all the rights of women and men is really to demand a miracle.

In the final analysis, what is hidden by all these abstractions, pseudo-moral condemnations of revolutionary violence — without any consideration of the precise historic context — is open class prejudice. The traditional violence of those in power is "normal," it represents a "lesser evil" whatever its extent. The rebellious response of the risen people is by definition "worse," even if its scope is much less than that of the property owners. The hypocrisy hits us in the face.

This class prejudice often hides a fear of the masses whose social support is once again quite obvious. As a rather moderate French historian says:

After 1861, the intelligentsia and the state had the constant preoccupation of controlling the people through fear of their anarcho-destructive potential. The common fear (due to ignorance) prevents them from having an objective idea of the people, based on a concrete knowledge of the reality of the country. Thus both have succumbed to the populist nihilism (elementary faith) of the middle of the 19th century.

It is just as mistaken to want to add together the cost of the October 1917 revolution and that of the later Stalinist regime. Stalinism is in fact the product of a real bureaucratic counter-revolution. To confuse the two is an under-estimation, or indeed a negation of the scope of this later, or the radical break that the "Soviet Thermidor" — the bureaucratic counter-revolution — constituted in relation to October and the period which immediately followed.18

The cost of Stalinism was dramatic for the Soviet and international proletariat.

The scope of this Stalinist counter-revolution expresses the historic tragedy which occurred a lot better than any subtle analyses of the so-called responsibility of Lenin's ideas (or indeed those of Marx) for Stalin's crimes. During the 1920s and 1930s, Stalin assassinated a million communists. Can we seriously say that this is "a detail of history"? Is it not odious to throw butcher and victims into the same bag?19

In general the October Revolution was the product of objective social contradictions, which acquire an irrepressible explosive dynamic, as well as the evolution of the relationship of forces between the classes and the social layers operating in this framework. It also resulted from the activity of the Bolshevik Party in untangling these knots of contradictions in the interests of the toiling masses and the international proletariat.

This said, in the light of the later evolution of the Russia of soviets and of the USSR, we should ask whether some of the policies put into operation by the Bolshevik party, after the taking of power, did not encourage the process of bureaucratic degeneration of the first workers' state.

This bureaucratic degeneration, in the 1920s and 1930s, was certainly not initiated nor fundamentally caused by the orientation of this party. It also had its roots in the objective contradictions of Soviet society and the international situation which then prevailed. However, decisions like the concrete attitude to the Bolshevist party — or different components of its leadership — at precise moments also had an effect on the process of bureaucratisation of the regime. We should try to understand some of the mistakes which were made.

The banning of the Soviet parties

The most serious of these mistakes was the banning of the Soviet parties at the very moment that the revolutionary government had definitively won the civil war of 1918-20. Trotsky, although not very inclined to self-criticism of the decisions of the leadership and government of which he was the most influential member after Lenin, made two explicit judgements on this.

In 1936 he wrote:

"The prohibition of factions ended in a prohibition to think otherwise than the infallible leader. The police-manufactured monopolisation of the party resulted in a bureaucratic impotence which has become the source of all kinds of weaknesses and corruption."

Two years later, in the Transitional Programme that he wrote in 1938 for the founding conference of the Fourth International, he came out explicitly in favour of multi-partyism:

"Democratization of the soviets is impossible without legalization of soviet parties. The workers and peasants themselves by their own free vote will indicate which parties they recognize as soviet parties."

It is undeniable that the workers considered the Mensheviks in 1920 as a soviet party, because they had quite a number of elected representatives, particularly in Charkov and Moscow.

The same remark also applies to the anarchists.

The banning of the Soviet parties, as well as the banning of factions within the government party which was its logical follow-on (each faction is in fact another party in formation), were undoubtedly seen as temporary measures, related to particular circumstances, which would therefore be repealed when the objective situation improved. Obviously we should ask what were the precise consequences of these specific decisions, put into effect at a particular moment.

But we should also ask another question: what were the consequences of the theories which were put forward to justify such bannings, even if they were conjunctural? I think that the theoretical justifications caused a lot more harm in the more long term, than the measures themselves — and continue to do so today.

The danger of substitutionism

The banning of Soviet parties was based on a substitutionist conception of building socialism — and of socialist/communist policies in general. That is a conception which Trotsky had always vigorously denounced (except in the "black years" of 1920-21) and that Lenin also fought against during a good part of his life.

In this conception, the proletariat in its majority not conscious enough to rule a country (the social-democrats are of the same opinion and even add: to lead a trade union). Another argument was introduced later; that of losing its class character and its corruption (including through colonial superprofits).

This starting point very quickly leads to the conclusion that the party must rule instead of the actually existing working class. The party apparatus; or even its leadership, or even its "infallible leader," are then the decisive instruments for changing society. Stalin expressed the real content of substitutionism in a formula which leaves no room for misunderstanding:

88. I have dealt with these problems, including that of the specific name of the Soviet Thermidor, in my latest book Power and Money: A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy, London, Verso Press, 1992. The term "Thermidor" originally indicated a political counter revolution, during the French Revolution of 1789-1815. Starting in 1789 "Thermide" was the name of a month in the revolutionary calendar this counter revolution dismantled the democratic and popular forms of organization created in the rising against the Ancien régime, without challenging its bourgeois character. By analogy, the "Soviet Thermidor" refers to the Stalinist counter-revolution which eliminated socialist democracy and introduced a bureaucratic dictatorship without re-establishing capitalism in the USSR.
89. The historian Marc Ferro gives the following figures which illustrate the transformation of the CPSU: between the first half of 1924 and the second half of 1925, the number of workers among the candidates members of the party fell from 64.5 to 43.8%. In this not eloquent? (M. Ferro, op. cit., p. 246). This was only an indication of

"the cadres decide everything".

The substitutionist doctrine of the party feeds a verticalist, statist, paternalist and authoritarian conception of the regime, even when the worst excesses and crimes of Stalinism are avoided. It can certainly be hedged around with all sorts of restrictive clauses: the party (the party leadership) rules in place of the working class but it is based on it, mobilizes it, notes its reactions, corrects its own mistakes in the light of experience, etc.

But this does not in the least change the fundamental attitude. It is not the working class which rules, which democratically takes decisions. A small minority rules in its stead.

In these conditions the soviets are emptied of at least one essential component of their content. They can at the limit be an effective fighting instrument against the class enemy. But they no longer assure the direct exercise of power by the proletariat and (or) the toiling masses as a whole.

Without real multi-partyism, in practice, the soviets cannot experience real democracy. They cannot really choose between different alternatives in economic, social, cultural policies.

To the extent that the suppression ofsoviet democracy takes on a repressive aspect, this repression no longer targets simply the big, medium and petty bourgeoisie. It also hits the working class. We can even say that the more numerous the proletariat is, the more hegemonic it is from a social point of view, the more it is the target.

Self-emancipation

Such a conception and such political orientation are contrary to Marx's main contribution to socialist theory (contrary to the theory of revolution of organization): the idea of the self-liberation and the increasing self-organization of the proletariat. The emancipation of the workers will be the doing of the workers themselves, not that of the trade union, the parties, the governments or the state. These are indispensable instruments in the historical process. But they can never replace the activity of the wage-workers themselves and other layers of the exploited and oppressed. The fundamental emancipating role of their self-activity cannot be ignored.

It would be to misunderstand the driving role of material and social interests in history to think that the state apparatus created the hydra of bureaucratization. It was rather the existence of the workers' bureaucracy which produced the ideology of substitutionism. But once it existed, this ideology in its turn encouraged the objective process of bureaucratization.

The position of Rosa Luxemburg

This is what Rosa Luxemburg understood when she warned the Bolshevik leaders of the danger in her first comments on the Russian Revolution:

But with the repression of political life in the land as a whole; life in the soviet must also become more epiptic. Without general elections, without free press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life does not in ipublic opinion, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy is active element.

This quotation from Luxemburg does not correctly describe the state of public life in Russia in 1918. There was then a strong diversity and discussion of political ideas, and legal or quasi-legal activity of many organizations. Rosa wrote her pamphlet in prison and did not have sufficient information available.

But she offered a remarkable and critical diagnosis of the more long-term trends, particularly from 1920-21. To have formulated them already in the summer of 1919 - "only the bureaucracy will remain an active element" - shows an exceptional lucidity and capacity for theoretical analysis.

We consider that Rosa was also right when she wrote that:

...to spare the working class ... to create a socialist democracy in place of bourgeois democracy - not to eliminate democracy altogether.

But socialist democracy is something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist democracy are created. It is a process out of the hands of the workers who in the interim, have the right to apply a handful of socialist dictatorships. Socialist democracy begins with the beginnings of destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism. It begins at the very moment of the seizure of power by the socialist party. It is the same thing as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Yes, dictatorship! But this dictatorship consists in the sum of applying democracy, not in its elimination, in energetic, resolute attacks upon the well entrenched rights and economic relationships of bourgeois society, without which a socialist transformation cannot be accomplished. But this dictatorship must be the work of the class and not of a little talking minority in the name of the class - that is the most precise step by step out of the direct participation of the masses it must be under their direct influence, subjected to the control of complete public activity; it must arise out of the growing political training of the mass of the people.

RosaLuxemburg was much less lucid when, in the same pamphlet, she criticized the orientations of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet regime on the nationalities question and the peasant question. On these questions she adopted dogmatic positions which did not take into account the immediate or historic political and economic necessities (concerning the period of transition). She criticized the central slogans of the right to self-determination and the distribution of the land to the peasant who becomes the active element.

However, if the Bolsheviks had opposed the desire for self-determination of the peoples integrated by force into the Tsarist empire; if they had opposed the great desire for land from the majority of the peasants, they would have lost power. What happened in the USSR in 1928, and what is happening today are a tragicconfirmation of this.

In fact, if the leadership were wrong in this question - Lenin and Trotsky much less than the others - it was through leftist sectarianism and not by an excess of opportunism. We can moreover use the argument of "parallelism" with Kautsky's reasoning against Rosa. Kautsky also used the argument of opportunism to the peasants against Rosa.

The workers' and peasants' alliance and war communism

It is difficult to judge at what point the policy of requisition of wheat by the Soviet regime under siege, called "war communism" was inevitable, to a certain extent at least, in 1918-1920. But it is certain that it threatened more and more a serious separation between the workers' and peasants' alliance, that is the very basis of the Soviet regime.

It is no less certain that it led to a greater and greater decline of productive forces, particularly the productive forces which were the desired means of being about the collapse of the whole Russian economy.

Agricultural, essentially cereal production, fell by almost 30%, horse livestock by 25%, cattle livestock by 20%, swine livestock by 28%, and industrial production by almost 60%. In exchange for the same quantity of wheat, the peasants only received 5% of the same industrial products that they had received in 1917-18. Thus they refused to sell wheat for money that had practically no value. And thus it was necessary to requisition the wheat.

But this also led to an absolute fall in wheat production and not simply a retreat by the peasants to a subsistence economy. And as wheat production fell, there was in time less and less to requisition.

Then followed a general trend to speculation and the black market, which was particularly hard on the poorest layers of the population.

Trotsky, head of the Red Army during the Civil War, found himself at the head of a movement that was essentially composed of millions of peasants. He travelled constantly throughout this enormous country. Because of this he saw better than Lenin and the other leaders of the party the immediate concerns of the peasants. He thus proposed one year before Lenin abandoning "war communism" in favour of the early adoption of a more flexible policy, the "NEP" (New Economic Policy). At this point he ran into the resistance of Lenin and the majority of the leadership.

On this question we agree with the assessment of the Soviet historian Roy Medvedev who considers that the attempt to continue the policy of requisitioning wheat after the end of the Civil War provoked the social crisis of 1921, including the Kronstadt rising. This was a serious error which cost them dearly.

93. Kautsky was the best-known theorist and leader of German socialist democracy and the Second International. He became a fascist.
94. "War communism" is the same gong to the politico-economic policy applied during the Civil War (1918-1919), which was characterized by radical "statization" and exceptional measures such as forced requisition of food from the peasants.
95. Trotsky, after the failure of his premiership of the NEP for a while defended an alternative program of the "nationalization of labour". This was unanimously approved by the Ninth Party Congress. The NEP - or New Economic Policy - was introduced in 1921. It represented a profound break with the character of War Communism, introducing a liberalization of the market and peasant production, encouraging a certain development of small private industry and proposing to accept foreign investments.
96. Roy Medvedev, Le révolution d'octobre, Paris, 1978, p. 219. In March 1917, the garrison in Kronstadt, a port on the Baltic rebelled. The negotiations started with the regime having failed, the rebellion won in the winter of 1919 by the Red Army without the campaign but more importantly by the Kronstadt revolt and its repression by the Soviet regime. It is in my opinion, given that the Civil War had not yet ended, that we are facing here with a question of political judgement, of tactics and of principle. The difficulty in the discussion lies in the fact that most of those who criticize the decisions of the Bolsheviks have their judgements on specifically political assessments: the nature of the demands, the nature of the political forces present, etc. But, in our opinion, in a situation of civil war it is the nature of the social forces and their "logic" which is decisive.

But on this question, the information available does not make it possible to reach definitive conclusions. According to some people...
Moreover, during “war communism” the proletariat was weakened, not only numerically but also physically and morally. In 1921, an industrial producer during production only consumed 30% of the energy that used in 1913-14, and less than half of that used in 1916-17. This led to a severe fall in work productivity which Chamberlin estimated as having declined in 1920 to 20% of the 1913 level.

Some people have idealized the policy of “war communism”, emphasizing the passage to “direct communism” forms of production and distribution. Kritsman, whose statistics we have used in what has been said, talks about the “herculean years of the great Russian Revolution.” Many Bolshevik leaders have followed suit.

Making a law out of necessity, these latter thought that lack of luck and rationing. They idealized the return to a “natural” economy (more exactly to an economy of three sectors: a subsistence economy, an exchange economy and a monetary economy).

All Marxist tradition and the good sense of the proletarian argue against this “communism of poverty”, however sympathetic and stimulating — for the future! — were the very egalitarian “models” developed and applied at this time. This “model” did not reflect the dynamism able to bring the country out of growing famine. And it caused a confusion that the Stalin was cynically able to call on in 1928-34.

The question of peace negotiations

The Civil War and the intervention by the imperialist powers particularly German imperialism, against Soviet Russia, partly explains the origins and deviations of “war communism”.

But here we touch on another important mistake: that was made during negotiations by most of the Bolshevists leaders and cadres with the notable exception of Lenin, who at that point reached the summit of his political lucidity. This is the delay in reaching separate peace with each of the Central Powers.

There was an important difference between the peace conditions proposed by these empires during the first phase of the negotiations of Brest-Litovsk, opened in December 1917, and the conditions obtained from them after the interruption of the negotiations by the Soviets and the continuation of the advance by the German army.

The first were still acceptable to a large section of public opinion in the working class and the urban petty-bourgeoisie. The second were widely felt as a national humiliation and a betrayal of the interests of the proletariat of the Soviet Union and of the international proletariat. In addition, they meant the control of the Ukraine by imperial Germany and the suppression of the Ukrainian peasant movement. They provoked the break in the coalition between the Bolsheviks and the left SRs. They gave a strong stimulus to the Civil War.

The majority of the Central Committee and the Bolsheviks refused to sign the peace conditions resulting from the first phase of the Brest Litovsk negotiations. They used as an argument for their position — as did Trotsky for his intermediary position “neither war nor peace” — the fact that this position corresponded to the sentiments of the majority of the urban population. But it did not correspond to the sentiments of the majority of the peasant population, without mentioning those of the soldiers in the army which was in full flight of decomposition.

And above all it did not lead to any concrete alternative; immediate overthrow of the rule of the Hohenzollern and Habsburgs. What could guarantee this? Immediate organization of the “revolutionary war” with an non-extant army?

The only result of the refusal to sign the peace conditions immediately was to allow the German army to occupy new and very important territories, and in particular to take the immensely rich Ukraine away from the Soviet Republic. Lenin predicted this from the outset, in the book “Woe from War”, which he wrote while in exile in Switzerland, in May 1917.

The question of the Terror — and the creation of the Cheka (the secret political police) — are directly linked to the consequences of the Brest-Litovsk peace. Both can only be explained in the light of these events.

The question of the terror — independent of the question of its unacceptable excesses — is less clear than some claim. The experience of the Spanish Civil War 1936 is a helpful illustration of this fact. At that time not only the Stalinist but also the anarchists and the social-democrats of the right, centre and left without distinction, as well as many autonomous and unorganized groups of workers, applied wide ranged measures of “repression”. They had no choice.

Confronted with an implacable, murderous and torturing enemy, who takes the women and children of militants as hostages, who shoots prisoners of war and political opponents in mass, something has to be done to limit the losses. This is a question of common sense. To force the murderers to stop if they do not want to pay too high a price for their crimes.

We should note moreover that Lenin tried to avoid being forced to resort to the October revolution. In particular he said:

We are accused of making arrests. Indeed, we have made arrests; today we are ardently the State Bank. We are accused of resorting to terror; but we have not resorted, and I hope will not resort, to the terrorism of the French revolutionaries who guillotined thousands. I hope we shall not need to, because we have strength on our side. When we arrest a man, we ask ourselves, do we need to arrest him? or are we about to condemn him to death? But do we have a written promise not to engage in sabotage. Such written promises have been given.

But the counter-revolutionaries acted with total cynicism and lack of scruples. Despite the initial generosity of the Bolsheviks. The general Krasnov, Kalinin and others, the pupil-officers arrested during the October insurrection, were released on the promise that they would return to their army. And they did, and they did not. They immediately broke their word, took arms and caused the death of thousands of workers.

The people make these mistakes once, twice, and then reply harshly. Is this surprising? Among the particularly cynical actions of the future “victims of the Terror”, A.R. Williams points out the Whites’ use of Red Cross lines to cross the front lines and brings munitions to the White armies.

Williams even reports on a moving expression of the generous spirit of the revolution during the taking of the Winter Palace. The pupil-officers gave themselves without expectation of any advantage.

But the workers of the Cheka, and the Cheka, as well as those who supported it, discovered among other things the terror chambers in the depths of the palace. Antonov-Ovseyenko, who led the Red Army detachment, cried; “I’ll shoot the first one to touch a prisoner”. He ended by confessing the crowd.

Do you know where this madness leads? When you kill a White Guard prisoner it is the revolution you kill and not the counter-revolution. I have given twenty years of my life to exile and in prisons for this revolution... (It means something better, it creates life and liberty for all. You give your blood and your life for the revolution, but you should also give something else... your intelligence. You should put commitment to the revolution above satisfying your passions. You have the chance to be a true son of your country. The only thing I ask is you not to kill things you don’t understand.

But having suffered from the savage violence of the counter-revolutionaries the climate changed. Again, should we be surprised?

Moreover, we should be clear on the limits of the Terror. Up to May 1920, the total number of victims of the Red Terror was officially estimated at 8,620 people. Moriset estimates the number at a little more than 10,000. After the defeat of the White Armies of Denikine and Kolchak, the death penalty was abolished for several months by the Soviet government (it was only reintroduced from the time of the Polish offensive against the Ukraine in May 1920).

The atmosphere in Soviet Russia was far from the universal fear described by so many historians. We can see this point from reading what Maxim Moriset, a witness, said about the trial of a high ranking White officer, Galkin, by the Revolutionary Tribunal at Moscow on July 14, 1921.

I do not think I have ever seen a public or magistrate more sympathetic as the accused that on that day. The four hundred workers or soldiers who crowded around the three judges and the prosecutor, all four of them young, all looked with a sort of filiality on this little man of thirty-five, in his work clothes, that a deacon under guard, resolved in hand to obey the rules. There was no barrier between him and them. Few armed soldiers, interested in the trial. They were all vaguely covered the free space around the garden bench reserved for the accused, the sight of some more. Rather than a terrible audience of the Revolutionary Tribunal, one would have thought oneself watching an impassioned discourse between man who disagreed on the answer in a question of conscience.

Galkin was given a light sentence, then rapidly pardoned, although he had taken arms against the soviet regime. But he stated that he detested still more the counter revolutionary White dictators after the experience he had of them. The Tribunal believed him.

The Cheka

The question of the Cheka is very different from what we have just been talking about: temporary measures during a cruel civil war. The Cheka was the
creation of an institution, an apparatus, with the inevitable tendency of any institution and any apparatus to become permanent, and to escape any control.

A fascist torturer can be shot after a public trial, even a summary one. But a secret political police cannot be submitted to public control.

The archives of the Cheka, which have been published, thanks to glanssen (the policy of "transparency" under Gorbachev), showed that the worm was in the fruit from the very beginning, despite the personal honesty of Felix Dzierzhinsky, the first leader of the Cheka, who nobody suspects of improper intentions. The mention of just one fact is enough: the members and informers of the Cheka gave themselves a bonus (a part of the "spoils") for any goods seized from "speculators" or those who committed "economic crimes". There is no doubt of the dynamic to corruption this represents. Chamberlin fully confirms this judgment.

The same goes for the tendency of the Cheka to escape from all control. This dangerous dynamic was affirmed very early. One anecdote illustrates this. Lenin had the greatest admiration and friendship for the left Menshevik leader Martov. One day Lenin called him into the Kremlin, gave him a false passport and said: "Leave the country immediately. If not the Cheka will arrest you in a few days and I would not be able to stop them."

G. Leggett, a reactionary who was extremely hostile to the Bolshevik regime admits however that this independence was only conjunctural at first:

In the inevitable clash between the arbitrary violence of the Cheka and the system of Soviet law evolved by the People's Commissariat for Justice, the Cheka joined the upper hand whenever the regime came under threat: when the crises reached the (People's Commissariat) was the aggressor.

Lenin himself was resolutely favourable to the constitution of a state based on law and the need to make decisive steps in this direction. In a conflict which set Dzierzhinsky against Kamenev in 1921, concerning the reforms of the political police after the end of the Civil War, Lenin supported Kamenev who had proposed to limit the competence of the Cheka to questions of espionage, political crimes, the protection of the railways and food stores. All other repressive activity should be the responsibility of the People's Commissariat of Justice.

It should also be noted that the Cheka was hardly a creature of the Bolshevik Party or of Lenin. It was above all the left SRs who played a key role in its creation. But all that being said, it is none the less true that the tendency to become independent, less and less controllable, was present from the beginning of the Cheka. Victor Serge used the term "professional degeneration". This is why we think that the creation of the Cheka was undoubtedly a mistake.


Chapter 6

Lenin's organizational conceptions

Did the organizational conceptions of Lenin open the road to the excesses of the October Revolution and the Stalinist dictatorship?

One of these frequently put forward by the critics of Bolshevism is that the excesses which occurred after 1918 — the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Terror, the prolongation of war communism — were in the last analysis the result of Lenin's organizational conceptions. We can sum up the conceptions attributed to Lenin, the ultimate source of all evil, by these authors in the following way: revolutions are "made" by the revolutionary party and not by the masses; this party should be a highly-centralized, limited troop of professional revolutionaries; it — because of this — largely escapes the control of the working class; this class is unable to raise itself to the level of revolutionary political action, let alone reach a revolutionary political consciousness.

Other authors, such as Louis Fischer, go a step further and say that Lenin's organizational conceptions, as they were classically expressed in the pamphlet 'What is to be done?', were inspired by not very pleasant psychological traits of the person in question: blind hatred of Tsarism and the property-owning classes; a thirst for vengeance for the execution of his brother by the autocracy; the conviction that violence, terror, extrication was the basis of persecutions of the Bolsheviks after the revolutionary days of July 1917.

The myth of Lenin as cynical and unscrupulous in the "struggle for power" is based above all on a rather disgusting calumny, that he accepted "German gold" in 1917 to finance Bolshevik propaganda. This calumny was the basis of persecutions of the Bolsheviks after the revolutionary days of July 1917.

In what is one of the best biographies of Lenin, Ronald W. Clark demonstrates a certain agonism on this question, going almost so far as to say there is no smoke without fire. He then recounts, without totally discrediting it, the assertion by an employee of the German Foreign Affairs Ministry, that 50 million gold marks were "invested" in the Bolshevik movement.

But the same Ronald Clark cites in passing the most striking proof of the unfounded nature of this calumny: 'Pravda', the main journal of the Bolsheviks, was always short of money.

Urgent and constant appeals were launched for a few tens of thousands of roubles. How could a movement which had received millions of gold marks be so short of money?

107. Stephen F. Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism" (in Robert C. Tucker, Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation, Norton 1977) cites a large number of authors who have made this judgement. The sources are too numerous to be reproduced here. We can simply cite as examples: Merle Fainsod, Hannah Arendt, Robert V. Daniels, Michael Koperweis, Ulam, Hargreaves Moore, Arthur F. Mendel, Zdziebieski Bresinski, Robert J.H. Neil, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. One question is enough to sum up their thinking. It comes from Merle Fainsod: "Out of the totalitarian embryo would come totalitarian full-bloom."

Lenin a heartless man of iron, a producer only of political revolutions, completely indifferent and insensitive to the beauties of nature. He loved the fields, the meadows, the rivers, the mountains, the sea, the oceans.

The rather limited importance that Lenin gave to his personal role is revealed by his reaction when the Central Committee proposed to start publishing his Collected Works:

"Why? It's quite useless. Thirty years ago we wrote nothing. It's not worth reproducing all this."

Lenin's simplicity and honesty in rejecting all kinds of material privileges appears clearly from the following facts:

Lenin gave away the gifts of food and fuel which peasant admirers brought to the Kremlin... Commissars' salaries were fixed at two thirds of the rate for the highest category for industrial technicians.

War communism had not killed the theatres of Moscow or St Petersburg. The demand for theatre seats was so enormous that both Lenin and Bolshevists [then secretary of the Commissariat International - EM] — said at least in determination and not to accept preferential treatment — were turned away one evening from the Arts Theatre where a Stanislavsky production of Chekov's Three Sisters was playing.

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What is to be done? and the years 1905-07

Finally, it is impossible to use only the pamphlet What is to be done? — written in 1902 — to judge Lenin’s organizational conceptions. The theses put forward in this work, undoubtedly with a certain exaggeration that Lenin himself was to admit later, cannot be detached from the precise historical context: a small party working in the strictest clandestinity.

Lenin never raised these theses to the level of a general theory of organization valid for all countries (including Russia) in all periods, independently of the period and the concrete conditions in which the class struggle was developing.

The alternative conceptions then proposed by the Mensheviks underestimated the constraints of illegality, the threat that they represented for the continuity of class activity, the — necessary but difficult — role of political centralization of fragmented struggles and above all the key nature of the struggle for political independence and later for the hegemony of the working class in the revolution. The split during the Second Congress of the party, in 1903, already contained in a latent form the germ of the central political differentiation between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks concerning the role of the Russian bourgeoisie in the revolution (the division between these two currents of the RSDLP was formalized in 1912).  

Even in the 1902 pamphlet What is to be done?, we find passages that sound very much "Luxemburgist-Trotskysist":

The organization of professional revolutionaries has no meaning apart from its connection with the "genuine revolution—any class that is spontaneously rising to struggle.

Everyone will probably agree that the "broad democratic principle" presupposes the following two conditions: first, full publicity, and secondly, election to all offices. We call the German Social Democratic organization because all its functions are carried out publicly: even its party congresses are held publicly.

These quotes are already sufficient to reject the thesis defended by Ingerlin. 

That author believes that Lenin’s organizational conceptions were derived from a broad understanding — which he is supposed to have shared with all other leaders of the party — of the historical consequences of the absence of "civil society" in traditional Russia. Hence even the proletariat, contrary to what Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg thought, was unable to conquer class consciousness. Lenin is supposed to have thought that the party is prior to the class and the class struggle; it has to constitute the class, so to speak. All these affirmations do not hold in the light of the sum total of Lenin’s writings even prior to the 1905 revolution.

After the very important experience of the 1905 revolution, Lenin broadened this clarification still further, in a partially self-critical fashion, by using the image of having "bent the stick too far in one direction" (his opponents having "bent the stick" — that is the argument — "in one direction" he had to bend it in the other to re-establish the balance):

From 1905 to 1907 ... the Social Democratic Party, despite the split in its ranks, gave the public the fullest information on the inner party situation (minutes of the Second General Congress, the Third Bolshevik and the Fourth General, or Stockholm, congresses). Despite the split, the Social Democratic Party earlier than any of the other parties was able to take advantage of the temporary spell of freedom to build a legal organization with an ideal democratic structure, an electoral system, and representation at congresses according to the number of organized members.

Basically, of course, their success was due to the fact that the working class, whose best representatives built the Social-Democratic party, for objective economic reasons possesses a greater capacity for organization than any other class in capitalist society. Without this condition organization of professional revolutionaries would be nothing more than a playing, an adventure, a mere illusion.  

Lenin expressed himself in a still clearer way when he asserted that:

It seems to me that comrades Radin is wrong in raising the question — the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies or the Party? I think that ... the demarcation must certainly be: both the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies and the Party (...). It seems to me that the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, as an organization of the whole of society, should strive to include deputies from all industrial and professional and office workers, from the petty bourgeoisie, from small farmers, from the lower ranks of the intelligentsia, from all who want and are able to fight in common for a better life for the whole working people, from all who would have at least an elementary degree of political honesty, from all but the Black Hundreds.  

As the 1905 Unity Congress we were all agreed on the principle of democratic centralism, on guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition, on the autonomy of every Party organization, on recognition on the part of our Party functionaries that any correct criticism or opinions must be elected, accountable to the Party and subject to recall.

122. Lenin, "Preface to the Collection "Twelve Years"", Collected Works, Vol. 13, pp. 103-104. In 1905-1907, Russia experienced an important wave of revolutionary struggles. This was a major experience for all the organizations, a test for the validity of their programmes and the quality of their structures. The later evolution of these organizations — like that of the Tarasov regime — was deeply marked by these key years. See in particular T. Shein, The Roots of Opposition: Russia’s Turn of Century, Volume 2, Russia, 1905-07, Revolution as a Moment of Truth, London, 1985.

123. Lenin, "Our tasks and the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies", Collected Works, Vol. 10, pp. 20. "Black Hundreds" is the name usually given to the Association of Russian People, one of the many far-right organizations founded during the 1905-07 revolution to attack the revolutionary forces. These organizations also wanted to reverse the constitutional reforms made under the pressure of the events in October 1905.

An internal tension in Leninism

It is true that in the writings and practice of Lenin there are also different features of authoritarianism and substitutionism. In fact, the total organizational theory and practice of Lenin seems to be dominated by a balancing act, as explained in the works of Marcel Liebman, Paul Le Blanc, and above all, the excellent essay by Stephen Cohen already mentioned. In a first approximation this balancing act can be summed up as follows: in the phases of a revolutionary upsurge, the tumultuous rise of the mass movement, the democratic and even libertarian emphases predominate in Lenin's practice. In the periods of revolutionary slump, the decline of activity in the mass movement, the themes of centralization and replacement of the class by the party take predominance.
To explain this duality by Machiavellism is misplaced and unjust. The starting point for such an attitude is a psychological interpretation which can hardly be proved. At the limit this psychological interpretation could be replaced by a sociological one. The democratic and libertarian Lenin acted under the pressure of the workers' vanguard and masses. The hyper-centralist and subaltern Lenin sought a pragmatic solution in a situation where, in practice the masses were not active. 

But this sociological explanation is not fair to Lenin either. It does not take into account the whole of Russian history from 1918 to 1923. In particular it does not make it possible to understand the almost desperate violence which Lenin reacted from 1922, if not the end of 1921, faced with the growing bureaucratization of the state and of the party (a bureaucratization of which he then became aware). It does not explain "Lenin's last fight" against the tentacular bureaucracy, nor the violence of his final confrontation with Stalin, nor the truly pathetic tone he used on this occasion:

I suppose I have been very remiss with respect to the workers' [Russian] not having intervened energetically and decisively enough.

Any "sociological" explanation can only ignore a historical fact, that is nevertheless difficult, and that Paul Le Blanc correctly countered to the toomuch sociological view of the "balancing act" as it was formulated by Liebmann. It was in the years of reaction, in 1908-11, in the struggle against the "liquidating" tendency that Lenin to a large extent grouped together and trained the Bolshevik cadre which made it possible for his party to become hegemonic in the Russian workers' movement from 1912.

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Towards a coherent conception

Lenin never really presented a total, completely coherent conception of the party and its organizational principles. But it does seem, that in the light of historical events he moved in this direction. An element of this process of clarification was the gradual assertion of the dialectical unity between the selfactivity of the masses and the role of the vanguard party, except in the "black years" of 1920-21 (some would say 1919-21).

Authors like Leopold Haimson assert that the Russian intellectuals and Marxists have never been able to understand the problem of the contradiction between spontaneity and consciousness, between the action of the masses and the action inspired and organized by the vanguard. However, the October Revolution gave this answer, illustrated by the striking and classic formula given by Trotsky in his History of the Russian Revolution:

Without a guiding organization the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam, it would not be a giant force. But nevertheless what moves things is not the steam, the old engines, but the blacksmith and the fireman.

It remains the case that the organizational model of Lenin's was indeed applied in a limited period has produced problems: a certain type of leaders, "committeemen" un able to adapt to tumultuous mass movements. Lenin's companion Krupskaya wrote on this subject:

The "committeemen" were usually a rather self-assured person. He was used to a tremendous influence of the work of the committee on the masses and, as a result, recognized no inner-party democracy, inner-party democracy only leads to conflict with the workers. As far as the party's movement is its "sub-sub-elites" to direct committees and workers "sub-sub-elites" in the factories, party workers abroad, who, in their opinion, had nothing better than to organize. It was the moment the iron grip. 

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This honest description gives a much more faithful picture of the real functioning of the party than the different legends about "democratic centralism" under Lenin. It makes it possible to understand why Lenin had serious clashes with these "committeemen" at least four times; in 1905-16; at the beginning of the revolution in February 1917; on the eve of October; from 1921-22. The first three times the clash ended to the advantage, thanks to the support he won from the broad workers' vanguard, including outside the party. The fourth time he lacked this support, with the tragic consequences that we know.

Re-establishing Soviet Democracy immediately?

How was it possible to effectively oppose the bureaucratization process in the Russia of 1920? That is, in a country which was drained bloodless, hit by famine, whose transport system was totally disorganized, whose working class was reduced to less than half if not a third of what it was in 1917. A working class on a rapid road to demobilization, not because of the end of the Civil War but because of the absolute necessity of finding an individual supply of food. In such social and material conditions, the immediate re-establishment of Soviet democracy, indeed decisive steps to workers' management were a total utopia.

The leadership of the party and of the state were supposed to give the priority to an apathy in production, particularly agricultural production, a rise in work productivity and the re-establishment of employment.

Lenin and Trotsky's mistake was to generalize the exceptional conditions of the time. From the beginning of the NEP in 1921-22, the numerical weakening and the tendency to decomposition and social degeneration of the working class were halted.

It was at this point that a gradual broadening of Soviet democracy could have speeded up the socio-political re-establishment of the working class, making easier its slow re-politicization. But by limiting what remained of democracy in a draconian fashion at this very moment, the Soviet leaders on the contrary made worse the depoliticization of the proletariat and of the party.

It is impossible to judge to what point a "new course" would have met with success. But the tragic results of the policy followed in 1921 are too obvious not to conclude: what was utopian in 1920 was no longer so from 1922.

To explain this duality by Machiavellism is misplaced and unjust. The starting point for such an attitude is a psychological interpretation which can hardly be proved. At the limit this psychological interpretation could be replaced by a sociological one. The democratic and libertarian Lenin acted under the pressure of the workers' vanguard and masses. The hyper-centralist and subaltern Lenin sought a pragmatic solution in a situation where, in practice the masses were not active.

But this sociological explanation is not fair to Lenin either. It does not take into account the whole of Russian history from 1918 to 1923. In particular it does not make it possible to understand the almost desperate violence which Lenin reacted from 1922, if not the end of 1921, faced with the growing bureaucratization of the state and of the party (a bureaucratization of which he then became aware). It does not explain "Lenin's last fight" against the tentacular bureaucracy, nor the violence of his final confrontation with Stalin, nor the truly pathetic tone he used on this occasion:

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The October revolution raises the key strategic question which confronts the whole of the socialist workers’ movement: how should a party which identifies with the working class and socialism (or communism) behave in a revolutionary situation. This question refers back to another, broader, question, that of how to fight socialism (or communist) strategy: a question that we will not go into here. 144

Revolutions do not fall from the sky. They cannot be mechanically detached from the periods which precede them, the periods in which the conditions which lead to their explosion slowly mature. In the same way, what the parties identifying with the working class do and are depends to a large extent on their composition and their activity in pre-revolutionary or non-revolutionary phases (although we cannot deny that the revolution itself can noticeably modify some of these factors).

It is schematic but useful to sum up the two fundamentally counterposed strategies during a revolution by the formula: fatalism or voluntarism.

Fatalism or reasonable voluntarism

The fatalist approach is based on the idea that the “objective conditions” and the “balance of power” determine practically everything, that the course of events is largely independent of decisions of parties and their leaders, that the task of these latter is essentially to draw the boundaries between what is “objectively possible” and the rest (which would be adventurism and illusions).

We should therefore have the courage to say to the masses that a series of their aspirations are impossible.

The Mensheviks embodied this orientation during 1917. Their main contacts abroad were the Austro-Marxists whose leader and theorist Otto Bauer has gone down in history as the very prototype of the fatalist Menshevik.

The voluntarist approach to strategy in a revolutionary period is on the other hand based on the idea that, whatever the weight of objective factors (economic, social, historical and cultural tradition), which partially determine the course of events, this is not totally predetermined. The concrete actions of leaders can also have a decisive effect on the course of events.

“Parametric” determinism

It is not a question of countering a determinist approach (identified with “fatalism”) to an agnostic or teleological philosophy of history (which would then be identified with “voluntarism”). 145 We are discussing here voluntarism which respects the major historical-materialist constraints.

We must avoid mechanistic and linear determinism, which has done a lot of harm, replacing it with a richer determinism, based on the dialectic of objective and subjective factors. 146 We express this understanding of what is “possible” by the concept “parametric determinism”, an understanding of history which makes it possible to take into account what is “latent” and “virtual”. Such a concept was already used by Marx in Volume I of Capital.

The course of events is neither totally predetermined nor totally undetermined. The possible outcome of the revolution oscillates within predetermined limits.

In Russia in 1917, neither a return to a semi-feudal regime nor the rise of capitalism based on parliamentary democracy, nor the totally finished building of a classless socialist society were possible, in the mid-19th century.

The determinist conception leads to an understanding of history where the “objectively possible” is not in reality beyond what is apparent (a doctrine which declares the future predictable on the basis of the existing overall situation), where metaphysics are useless. Teleology is a set of speculations applied to an understanding of history (i.e. history itself).

Fatalism is based on the idea that the revolution itself can determine practically everything, that the course of events is largely independent of decisions of parties and their leaders. The fatalist approach was, for example, that the product of the “Marxist” of the Second International, inspired by Kautsky, is a conception strongly marked by a mechanistic determinism of semi-Darwinian inspiration. 147 It implied that, even when confronted with a revolutionary explosion, the socialists could not in the final analysis do otherwise than submit to the inexorable march of events: the voluntarist approach implied on the contrary that socialists were conscious of the possibility of influencing in a decisive fashion the historic outcome through their own action. This is the principal merit of the Bolshevists, who tried to do just that. And this is the main lesson that Rosa Luxemburg learnt from the October events: a lesson which led her to moderate her criticisms of Lenin and Trotsky and to support the Russian Revolution in an enthusiastic fashion: Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary farsightedness and consistency, Lenin, Trotsky and the others gave in good measure. All the revolutionary honour and capacity which Western social democracy lacked were exhibited by the Bolshevists. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution but was also the salvation of the honour of international socialism.

And again:
What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the fundamental and secondary essential tendencies in the policies of the Bolsheviks. In the present phase, when we face drastic final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism is not in the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity of the section of the proletariat who has arrived at the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. This, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the ones who were ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; we still the only ones up to now who can cry with Hamlet: “I have dined!” 148

This is the essential and the enduring in Bolshevist policy. In this sense that’s the immovable historical service of having arrived at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical realization of the plan of revolution of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labour in the entire world. In Russia the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved in Russia. And in this sense, the future Russian Revolution belongs to “Bolshevism”. 149

But in the predetermined framework, the action of the masses, of the parties and their leaders could lead to several possible variants: victory of an ultra-revolutionary bourgeois revolution (which could only be bloody, repressive, and destructive of the workers’ movement and all independent activity of the working and peasants masses); victory of the revolution through the workers taking power, making it possible to start building a new society (in fusion with or at least with the support of the international revolution).

The fatalist approach was, in our case, the product of the “Marxist” of the Second International, inspired by Kautsky, a conception strongly marked by a mechanistic determinism of semi-Darwinian inspiration. It implied that, even when confronted with a revolutionary explosion, the socialists could not in the final analysis do otherwise than submit to the inexorable march of events: the voluntarist approach implied on the contrary that socialists were conscious of the possibility of influencing in a decisive fashion the historic outcome through their own action. This is the principal merit of the Bolshevists, who tried to do just that. And this is the main lesson that Rosa Luxemburg learnt from the October events: a lesson which led her to moderate her criticisms of Lenin and Trotsky and to support the Russian Revolution in an enthusiastic fashion.

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Was it right to take power?

Of course the comparison between these two options, fatalism and opportunism, should not be exaggerated, even though they do remain two fundamentally different options. Too great a simplification of the problem can confuse things and make the choice more difficult.

There is, in this sense, the possibility of adventurist, putchist, “Blanquist” excesses in the “voluntarist” course: attempts to seize power by minorities who do not enjoy the support of the majority of wage-workers.

But the existence and the danger of such deviations can only be an excuse to avoid the real strategic choice which existed in Russia just before the October Revolution. The Bolshevists obviously enjoyed the support of the majority of the proletariat. The people obviously needed a radical, revolutionary change. We are right, in these precise circumstances, to take power?

The revolutionary Marxists of today, like those of 1917 and the following years, remain convinced that the answer is an unreserved “yes”.

Determinism, political choices, experience

Recently, the critical study of Bolshevist tactics in the years which followed the October Revolution has given rise to a confrontation on the nature of historical determinism between John Rees and Samuel Farber. The first accuses the second of having abandoned all materialist determinism, and presents a series of arguments for voluntarism. In his turn, Farber attacks the determinism of Rees, and presents a series of alternatives, analyses, other choices which could have been possible for revolutionary socialist policy in Russia in 1918–23.

Marxism does not suggest that in every circumstance, political will or ideology can play a key role. The degree in which workers can “make their own history” depends on the weight of objective factors bearing down on them. In Russia (after October 1921) the limits of action were reduced to an extent never known in history. It was impossible to make the choice more difficult. It could not be saved in Russia. And in this sense, the future Russian Revolution belongs to “Bolshevism”.


145. The January 1919 Spartakist uprising in Germany, the attempt led by Bernstein to take power in Vienna, Austria a little later, and above all the “March 1921 Action” in Germany as well as the Bulgarian CP’s coup against Stamboliysky, fall into this category.

146. Auguste Blanqui, a very important French 19th century conspiratorial methodist, already in 1870 had foreseen, and again:

147. Charles Darwin was an English naturalist and biologist of the 19th century, known for his work on the evolution of living species through the process of natural selection. His theories, “Darwinism”, is what is usually meant by a very simplistic approach to the “iron logic” of economic contradictions.
We are not talking here about generalities which is impossible largely explaining the behaviour of the Bolsheviks in this
fundamental weakness. That, precisely because of the victory in the Civil War, the banning of the Soviet parties?
abstract and general formula. The question was not to and mistaken character. Going to decline. This de-mobilisation, in the eyes of
the revolutionary mobilisation of the Civil War was going to decline. This demobilisation, in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, could threaten Soviet power still more than the White armies. John Rees does not mention this explanation. Thus he does not unmask its illegal and mistaken character.
Rees then dissolves these concrete problems in an abstract and general formula. The question was not to know whether it, in general, "all means necessary", should be used to defend Soviet power and prevent a White victory. The question is to know whether this or that concrete measure made easier or more difficult the victorious pursuit of the Civil War.
Was this the case in the creation of the Cheka? Was this the case in the continuation and stepping up of wheat requisitions in 1919-20 and in general the excesses of "war communism"? Was this the case with the banning of the Soviet parties?
The Soviet power, the leaders of the Bolshevik Party, has a real choice: to take or not to take these measures. Were they right? Were they wrong?
John Rees argues as if the question was not even posed. And, curiously, he does not mention the central argument which could, if not totally justified, at least largely explain the behaviour of the Bolsheviks in this regard. It was formulated by Rosa Luxemburg in her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution.
The socialist revolution, as well as the beginning of building a classless society, constituted a totally new experiment. There was absolutely no handbook of pre-established rules that could be referred to. The Russian Revolution was an immense historical laboratory, both exciting and dramatic. Advances could only be made by experimentation, in feeling the way.
Only practice can show if this or that concrete measure — we are not talking here about general orientation — is correct or false. Any deductive

Mistakes and socialist democracy
It is just because this is the case that the revolution has a vital need of pluralist socialist democracy, of an active political life, of the need for genuine criticism and to intervene. Because if the revolution as the beginning of building a classless society is an immense laboratory, then mistakes are inevitable: it is thus vital to have mechanisms which make it possible not so much to avoid mistakes — which is impossible — but to correct them as quickly as possible, and then to avoid them being repeated in the future. Lenin himself noted that the fashion in which a party behaved in relation to its own mistakes determined its future.
And it is in this context that Soviet democracy acquires all its value.

Democracy and social equality
Samuel Farber is thus, in my opinion, correct as opposed to John Rees for the general method of approach. But, once again, he is only right in a general and abstract fashion and not in a large number of the concrete judgments he makes. In fact he uses purely formal criteria of democracy excessively; criteria which turn out to be in practice much less democratic than they seem at first sight.
Farber insists strongly on the importance of a "state based on laws", the principle according to which the accused is presumed innocent until proven guilty, etc.152 Our movement incorporated most of these principles into the theses which it adopted during its 1975 and 1985 congresses, entitled "Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat". We did not wait for the upheavals in Eastern Europe or the publication of Farber’s book to assert and defend these.
But Farber does not deal with a series of other problems which although not "formal" are nevertheless very real: problems which could be an obstacle to the guarantee of human rights for women and men, as long as market and monetary phenomena exist (that is to say during the whole transitional period) the economy will need to limit the number of lawyers that an individual can use because if not those who have more money have greater possibilities of defending themselves or — under civil law — of accusations which may be possible. But the need for strict public control and thus elimination of the principle that a "closed case" cannot be reopened; substantial modifications of the procedural codes to make them more transparent to the mass of citizens; generalization of the principle of the revocability of judges (thus elimination of the principle that they appointed for life); and the maximum possible of jury trials.
There is no reason why these juridical changes would undermine or limit the rights of individuals or the "state based on law". They are in fact necessary conditions if we want all men and women, and not only privileged minorities (including bureaucrats and intellectuals) to enjoy their formal rights to the full! However, the severe criticism of "revolutionary justice" rejects them dogmatically, as if on principle.

Social inequality in the legal system is a well-known scandal in our countries. Three recent events provide a rather spectacular confirmation of this, if one is needed. Prince Victor-Emmanuel, claimant to the throne of Italy, has been acquitted of the murder of a young German after the legal process dragged on for eleven years. Would a citizen of average means be able to drag things out for so long? In Japan, after 24 years, the Hitachi corporation has won a case against one of its employees, sacked for having refused to work overtime. A lawyer who has established a workers’ advice centre, Mr Kawabou, said about this case:
Like many of Japan’s laws, this one is deliberately unclear. Today’s decision was wrong because Japanese workers will now no longer be able to refuse overtime work, and the incidence of suicide (death from overwork) will rise further... One in four white collar workers now work ten hours overtime every week, and this recently Tokyo survey by Nippon Kayaku, a medical manufacturer.
Clearly, the Supreme Court has favored big business and believes economic power comes from overtime. It has given priority to economy over human life.153
The Kennedy family spent one million dollars in less than six months to ensure the release of the member of the family accused of rape.154 Could an ordinary person do that?

The United States, Italy and Japan are of course capitalist countries and not post-capitalist societies. But this does not change anything in the fact that these three cases illustrate the ambiguity of the concept of the "state based on law". They show that the independence of the judicial power can enter into open conflict with equal opportunities, when there is an inequality of wealth, of income, of social status: phenomena which will survive during the period of transition which Farber refers to.

A coalition government
The problem of the choice of possible actions obviously has a much broader dimension than that of the undemocratic and limited possibilities of Bolshevik tactics. This choice is posed for all those from 1917 until today, from Plekhanov to Eric Hobsbawm, who say: definitely, they should not have been taken power, the October Revolution was "premature".
What should have been done? Wait passively for events to occur? Deliver the country to the rabble army of Wilhelm II? Russian and international reformists do not put forward anything coherent, except absurd illusions in an impossible bourgeois democracy.
Centrists like Martov and Otto Bauer/Hilferding defended an alternative solution in a hesitant and timid way. Martov called it "a unified revolutionary democratic government": a coalition of all the parties identifying with the revolution.
A whole wing of the Bolsheviks also looked to such project (as we saw in the previous chapter). It was however fundamentally impossible, not because of the supposed "separatism" of the Bolsheviks but for much deeper reasons.
In fact, the right SRs and the right Mensheviks did not want to give up at any price the policy of "revolutionary defence", that is to say the continuation of the war which had unavoidable implications. The centre-left Mensheviks, who was himself a more or more hesitating supporter of "revolutionary national defence", wrote on this:
The continuing defence of the country, while waiting to sign a democratic peace, required that an army of several million people be maintained, and that everything should be done to prevent it becoming disorganized. As a consequence the application of the special reform had to be put off until after the meeting of the Constituent Assembly. In fact, a revolutionary organisation of the big landowners and the distribution of land would have inevitably provoked the departure of millions of peasant soldiers who would not have stayed at the front for so long.
In other words, neither the majority of the Mensheviks nor the right SRs were ready to accept immediate peace, the immediate division of the big properties and workers’ control over industry. The Menshevik minister of labour, Skobelev, agreed to re-establish the authority of the manufacturers and managers in the enterprises, a demand of the

150. J. Rees, "In Defence of October" in International Socialism, No 52
152. The resolution "Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" was first presented at the 11th World Congress of the Fourth International in 1979. Adopted first by an indicative vote, it was unofficially adopted at the 12th World Congress in January 1985. For discussion see International Viewpoint, special issue, 1985.
Russian Revolution...

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Nobody made the slightest objection when I expressed the opinion that order should be re-established by the force of arms. The war minister, colonel Leibbrand, wrote an order naming General Hoffmann as the committee-in-chief, and the order was put into the hands of the workers. I insisted that a decision must be made! "Someone has said, "Can't you do something?" I replied indignantly, "I don't see any objection. Someone has to play the role of the mad dog, I'm not afraid of this responsibility.""

Nor did the same Noske hesitate to post this warning on the walls of Berlin a few months later:
"The bravery and the bestiality [sic] of the Spartacists who fight against us force one to give the following order: any one taking arms in hand in the struggle against the government will be summarily shot."

These massacres were justified in the name of hostility to "Bolshevism". It can be noted, not without a certain irony, that these same people were indignant about the Red Terror against "people taken arms in hand against the government" (165) (however, Trotsky never considered or practised execution of members of the White Army).

But the fundamental fact is elsewhere. Leaders of parties that call themselves socialist take on themselves the right to forbid the broad masses to organize strike or even to organize unarmed demonstrations, in the name of "principles", of political judgements which are very far from being shared by everyone, and which have cut out to be far from a papal infallibility. (166)

The Mensheviks, even the left wing, opposed initiatives for workers' control that emanated directly from the workplaces in Russia. They even took on themselves the right to repress the workers when they ignored their judgements. This pretentious and paternalist arrogance has the same substitutionism as underlies Stalinist behaviour. This parallel between reformist and Stalinist behaviour should be highlighted.

Let us repeat: all this is the absolute opposite of the doctrine and orientation of Marx, centred on the concept of the self-emancipation of the working class.

156. Pierre Broué, Révolution en Allemagne (1917-1918), Paris, 1971 publishes a very extensive bibliography of the German Revolution 1918-1919. Here we will only mention the memoirs of Richard Müller, leader of the "Older revolutionaries of Berlin"; the memoirs of Noske, of Philipp Scheidemann, of Seeling, of General Groener, the book of Boest, of Münch, of Richter, of Phis, of Fliekel, of Paul Levi, of Pierre Broué (see bibliography for titles).
the socialist taking of power during a revolutionary crisis, it is that democracy had to be defended, indeed defended at all costs, including against millions of workers — it does not matter here if they form a (slight) majority or a strong minority of the proletariat and the electorate.

To do this they have first to ignore or deny the reality of the counter-revolutionary threat. But by taking the path of repression, by using the old state apparatus of the property-owning classes for this purpose, they opened the road to a process of consolidation of ‘elites’ — thus also paving the way which led to the bloody regime of the Nazi dictatorship. The Weimar Republic gave birth to the Third Reich. It was in 1918-19, in 1920 and 1923 that all was decided, in the repression of the revolution and the German masses — the reformists not only playing a passive role but getting actively involved in the counter-revolutionary camp.

The Nazi dictatorship and the Second World War cost humanity 50 million deaths. That was the concrete alternative to the October Revolution. That is the most striking historical justification for this revolution.

International and Russian reaction attacked the October Revolution with extreme violence during the years which followed the Bolshevik revolution, stating that it only had purely destructive effects.

Great cultural wealth

The French newspapers, particularly Le Temps, had whole columns denouncing the “Asian barbarism” which had allegedly stamped out all artistic, scientific and literary life in Soviet Russia. In July 1920, the French Academy of Sciences suppressed a report by Monsieur Victor Henri, posted in Russia, on the scientific activity in the country. In 1925, The Times of London published a Note of the Admiralty stating that the Soviet government had brought nothing to Russia except blood, poverty and famine. The Russian country suigre Karl von Bothmer, summed up the central argument of this campaign of denigration when he wrote:

No constructive force has shown itself. Nowhere are any creative forces appearing. [The government] only maintains itself through criminal means, without being able to show it has achieved anything. At the same time as von Bothmer was writing this, Beryl Williams more honestly noted that the combination of artistic experimentation and intense intellectual debate over cultural matters was to give rise to a period of artistic vigour and cultural advances in the period of the revolution and the civil war.

She noted that in fact at the end of 1918, there were already three times more museums in Russia than before the Revolution.

In fact, the rise of the theatre and cinema in the USSR, and of painting, posters and avant-garde sculpture, of urbanism and architecture, or psychology and psychiatry, of analysis of the economic situation, of historiography, not to mention literature, impressed the whole world. This cultural flowering was greater than the famous “golden years” of the Weimar Republic, whose base and material wealth was nevertheless much broader.

The rise of education

The Education also undertook an immense effort of literacy and extension of education. The budget for public education which had been 195 million roubles in 1916 and which the February revolution increased to 940 million roubles, was increased to 2.9 billion roubles in 1918 and then to 10 billion in 1919. The number of primary schools was increased from 38,387 in 1917 to 52,274 in 1918 and to 62,238 in 1919. Pre-school teaching which was practically non-existent under Tsarism, already covered 200,000 children in 1921 and 561,000 in 1921.

Unfraid of making himself ridiculous, professor Norman Stone does not hesitate to assert that before 1917 Tsarism was already on the road to successful modernization of Russia. He cites its “rapid scientific and cultural development”.

But in Tsarist Russia there were at most a few thousand scientists. The great majority of the population was illiterate. Thanks to the work started by the October Revolution, there were, at the beginning of the 1930s, more than two million scientists; 125 million graduates of secondary education; 14.8 million citizens with post-secondary diplomas; and more than 80% of the workforce who had secondary education certificates.

As for the industrial leap forward, what ever its price the balance sheet is at least clear.

A humanist revolution

So much for the “non-achievements” of the Russian Revolution.

But let us leave the material domain for the moral and spiritual which the opponents of the revolution have talked so much about, not without a certain hypocrisy.

Even von Bothmer has to recognize that the Russian Revolution, in forbidding any sale of alcohol, made alcoholism practically disappear from the big towns. There were no drunks in Moscow and Petrograd.

When we know the extent to which the plague of alcoholism affected Russia before October, — and after the re-establishment of the state monopoly on alcohol, — we can understand the immense effort of the October Revolution.
selling alcohol under Stalin — and when we know its ravages in the Soviet Union of today, then we understand quite easily the importance of this question.

In the same way the publicist Alfons Goldschmidt felt himself in total security in Petrograd and Moscow. The streets were clear. In the midst of the famine lorry loads of flour passed. They were not attacked. There was no pillage of food shops. 173

The humanity of the revolution was also experienced in the generous culturo-pluralism, that was touching and also naive. The German writer Alfons Paquet was a slandering critic of the revolution who could not, despite himself, help sympathizing with it. 174

He describes how on the first anniversary of October, a long list of "freedom fighters" was inscribed on the white walls of the former military academy. The list included the names of Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Ibsen, Kipling, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Goncharov, Gorki, Ostrovsky, Ryleiev, Zola, Anatole France, Mremé, Walter Scott, Romain Rolland, Auriol, Louis Blanc, Jean Jaurès, Bebel, Plekhanov and Kautsky (these two firm opponents of the October Revolution), were published in printruns of between 25,000 and 100,000. 175

At the same time, the revolution stimulated a formidable participation by the masses in cultural life: Those audiences were solely proletarian, dressed in shabby clothes, happy to absorb the mass propaganda on all levels, from the simple theatre for the masses to the great events of the new world. 176

On May Day 1920, 20,000 people in Petrograd saw a spectacle entitled The Liberation of Work, which told the story of the historical fight for emancipation, from the slave revolts of Antiquity to the Russian Revolution. The celebrated film of Sergei Eisenstein, The Battleship Potemkin, was a remarkable contribution of the Russian Revolution to the world of culture. 177

Class spirit

Between this popular-proletarian spirit and the very nature of the revolution in the institutional domain there is an undeniable inter-connection. Let us cite once again Alfons Paquet who nevertheless recognized what was the essential in this spirit:

The first incomparable contribution of the Russian Revolution is to have taken up, in full radicalism and with an iron hand, the fight against the epigones of capitalism, whether in a private or state form. The spirit of Bolshevism is to have made that possible.

The collapse of Europe is happening before our eyes, but the basis of its reconstruction has already been established. Let us try to understand fully the ideas of the revolution and drive hope from them for the future.

And he made this conclusion of striking topicality:

One day, for example, the worker [of the town bordering the Rhine which are] Basle, Brabant, Mannheim, Mainzer, Rotterdam [is mining agglomerations], Kempten and Rotterdam could form a joint council of the Rhine basin and this could make their influence felt in the transformation of this area into a great European river route, going beyond country borders and international law. 178

There is here undeniably a class spirit. It is undoubtedly on that basis that supporters of the power of the proletariat were able to resist the attempt of the first incomparable contribution of the Russian Revolution to the world of culture. The humanism of the revolution was also expressed in the generous culturo-pluralism, that was touching and also naive. The German writer Alfons Paquet was a slandering critic of the revolution who could not, despite himself, help sympathizing with it. 174

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October 1917 and the women's movement

The mobilization of women was much more direct in the 1917 revolution than it had been in 1905. The Tsarist regime started the drastic task of securing legal, social and sexual equality for all. However, the specific potential represented by the autonomous women's liberation movement was never clearly recognized. This not only weakened the fight for women's emancipation but also the revolutionary dynamic for the whole of society.

Because the history of revolutions — even written by revolutionaries — has left women on the margins and only considered progress for women as a sub-product of general social progress, the explanation of the relationship between social transformation and women's liberation has often been simplistic. As far as the Russian Revolution is concerned, the impetus has often been given (before the bureaucratization), during the 1920s, it was a steady progression towards women's liberation, and then, impracticably towards the 1930s, with the consolidation of Stalin's power, a regression occurred, expressed by changes in the laws on abortion, divorce and homosexuality... Such a balance sheet ignores too many problems and implies a critical support for the Bolsheviks' policy.

We have to use the progress made in theoretical work on women's oppression by the women's movement in the last ten years... However, to be constructive, a critical approach has to take a historical viewpoint. It is not adequate... to judge the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution with today's criteria.

It is legitimate to ask if a better mastery of the policy concerning the relations between the sexes could have changed the course of events. When we ask this question, we have to consider the policy of the Bolsheviks concerning women's liberation in isolation, nor in countering it to an abstract conception of what it should be, but in placing it in the context of the development of the relationship between the party and the working class, the decline of democratic norms, the growing practice and ensuring that the revolution links the changes in production with a transformation of the family and the elimination of the scud division of labour.

Alia Holt "The Bolsheviks and women's oppression" in Femmes et mouvement ouvrier, La Bèche, Paris, 1979, pp 96-93, 130.

The ideas of the majority of the Bolsheviks on the question of women's oppression and the tasks that this implies for the party were in fact fairly clear: the fear that any activity or initiative taken by the women would be marked by bourgeois influences predominated up to 1917 and afterwards.

The men were not the only ones to be suspicious, far from it. This is clear from the discussions which ran through the Bolshevik leadership at the time of the October Revolution. After having decided in October 1917 to reconvene the "Pure" which had existed ten years earlier, the party leadership realized that a simple body for "agitation among the wives of peasants and soldiers" was not sufficient. The success of the first All-Russian Congress of Peasant and Working Women which was attended by more than one thousand delegates overcome the resistance of those men and women who like Smolova, were still more hostile in 1917 to the idea of creating special bodies for intervention among women. But it took more than a year before the commissions which had been formed after the Congress — then defined as simple technical bodies responsible for applying the decision of the Central Committee — were transformed into departments (Zhenotdel) whose task was to organize locally the women non-members of the party in order to inform them of their rights and win their collaboration in building the socialist state. While representatives of the Zhenotdel were integrated into all party committees, their functioning was far from being homogeneous. The importance and impact of their intervention depended to a large extent on the attitude of the local authorities towards them. In any case, the question of an autonomous women's organization outside the party was never raised. The root of the problem encountered to participate in these groups, the threat of the idiosyncrasy in setting their wives being "politically active", never seemed to shaken the conviction of most Bolsheviks that the involvement of women workers and peasants in social life was dependent on the economic changes that the Soviet state would be capable of achieving that specific organizational structures were quite secondary.

Jacqueline Heinlein, "Introduction" to the collection of Alexandra Kollontai Conférences sur la libération des femmes, La Bèche, Paris 1978, pp XVIII-XIX.
**Russian Revolution...**

**Ernest Mandel**

**Chopin, Frederic:** Polish pianist and composer. Considered to be one of the greatest composers of Western classical music.

**Cheka:** Political police of the Soviet regime.

**Chernov, Victor (1873-1952):** Principal leader and theoretician of the Social Revolutionaries active during the 1900s. Internationalist during the war. Returned to Russia after the February 1917 revolution. Minister of Agriculture under Kerensky, in the Provisional Government of the Central Powers (above all Germany), Begun in December 1917, concluded in March 1918 with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The Soviet regime was obliged to accept very harsh and very rich territories, including the Ukraine. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk annulled this treaty—made meaningless by the defeat of Germany and by the Russian civil war—in November 1918.

**Bolshevism:** Doctrine and practice of the Bolshevist current. Often utilized as a synonym for Leninism, but this is current and various trends of thought.

**Bolsheviks:** Russian word for "majority." Name of a current led by Lenin which divided the second congress of the RS (1903). Very much weakened by repression after the 1905 revolution. In 1912 constituted itself as an independent party. Gained a new mass base in 1913-1914. In October revolution. In 1918 took the name of Communist Party.

**Bracke, Wilhelm (1842-1900):** One of the founders of German social democracy. Correspondent of Marx. Led by Lenin which divided the second congress of the SPD (1917). Returned close to Lenin, although he clashed with him during the war on the national question and on the problem of the state. In 1918, he opposed 1.6 million soldiers were mobilized for the war. According to conservative estimates, it ended in the death of 18.5 million Russians. Capital Tiflin (formerly Reval).

**Bukharin, Nikolai (1888-1938):** Joined the Bolsheviks in 1906. In 1913, led the Bolsheviks in the Congress of Soviets. It was dissolved by the new government annulled this treaty-made power and the German bloc in 1917-1918.

**Brezhnev,尼古拉** (1909-1980): One of the founders of the Communist International: Communists. Disappeared during the Moscow Trials.

**Civil War:** Unless otherwise specified, the war began in October 1917, then generalized in 1918 by national and international counter-revolutionary forces trying to overthrow the Soviet power. The imperialist alliance included mainly Germany, France, Great Britain, the U.S., Canada, and Japan. It ended in 1920-21 with the defeat of the counter-revolution.

**Cold War:** "East-West" conflict between the imperialist powers and the Soviet bloc, begun in 1945. Treated "cold" because there was no world military conflict. But it was accompanied by many "local" and "regional" wars (such as the one, especially devastating, fought against the Vietnamese revolution by American imperialism).

**Communist International:** Third International.

**Concentration camps:** Unless otherwise specified, the camps built after 1933 by Hitler's Nazi regime. This system of camps aimed first to crush all resistance and then to impose the Hitler regime in Germany itself. It was already in place by 1936 after the outbreak of the Second World War. Therefore, its first inmates were German prisoners (common criminals, political prisoners, and Jews) who were expelled from the occupied European countries. Some of the camps: Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, Neuranen, Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, Treblinka. They were one of the most frightening experiences of the twentieth century. The survivors created army corps sent to the frontiers of the empire, a personal guard for the Tsar. They were a particular form of state-repressed force, specialists in individual combat on horseback. Furnished an important element of White armies in the civil war of 1918-1921. May poor camps also joined the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the revolution, and the anarchist armies (notably in the Ukraine).

**Councils of Deputies:** See Soviets.

**Czechoslavakia:** Czech prisoners of war, armed by imperialism (under French command), and participating in the USSR's civil war as part of the fight against Soviet power in Siberia during the summer of 1918. It was the revolt of the Czech Legion, May 25, 1918, which marked the beginning of the generalized civil war.

**Darwin, Charles (1809-1882):** English naturalist and biologist. His theories, Darwinism, are often presented in an overly-simplified way (as with neo-Darwinism) and wrongly simplified. His theories, Darwinism, are extremely rich but are sometimes presented in an overly-simplified way (as with neo-Darwinism) and wrongly applied ("local" and "regional") wars.

**Democratic-Centralist Opposition:** An opposition group which arose at the 9th congress of the CP (1920) including Smirnov, Osinsky, and Saparanov. It denounced extreme centralization and authoritarian methods.

**Denikin, Anton (1872-1947):** Russian general. Led one of the counter-revolutionary army corps during the civil war (notably in the Ukraine) in 1920 to Western Europe, then in 1945 to the United States.

**Dostoevsky, Feodor (1821-1881):** Russian writer of international acclaim. Son of a tyranical landowner, he involved himself in social politics which condemned him to death by Tsarism, pardoned and deported to Siberia. Often depicted the suffering and humiliation of most of his characters in his novels.

**Dreizinovsky, Felix (1877-1926):** Polish. Active in the Russian and Polish social democracy. Eleven years in prison. Exiled from prison by the revolution of February 1917. Member of the Central Committee from August 1917 until his death. Founder of the Cheka, known for his role in the conflict between the National Economic Council in 1924, alternate member of the Political Bureau in 1924-25. Died of a heart attack.

**Ebert, Friedrich (1871-1925):** German political figure. Social democrat, leader of the SPD from 1913. Pastor during the First World War. Contributed to the repression of the Spartacist insurrection (1919). Chancellor of the German Republic (1919-1923).

**Engels, Friedrich (1820-1895):** Principal collaborator of Karl Marx. Made his own contributions to the development of Marxism.

**Ernst Mandel**

**Enlightenment, Age of:** Eighteenth century Europe, marked by a profound revolution in philosophical and scientific ideas, parallel with the great bourgeois revolutions of the time.

**Erica:** Country on the Baltic. The northermost of the three Baltic republics of the USSR. Around 1.6 million inhabitants. Capital Tallinn (formerly Reval).

**First World War (1914-1918):** Called "The Great War"... until the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945). First great inter-imperialist military conflict over the division of the world. Saw the "Central Powers" (Germany and Austria-Hungary)—and their allies—opposed to the French-English "Entente"—and their allies (including the Russian Empire and the United States). Blooded a good portion of the European continent, involved Africa, and the principal seas of the world. Exiled the Tsar of Russia and founded the new Russian Republic. Sixty-five million soldiers were mobilized during this war. According to conservative estimates, it resulted in the death of 18.5 million Russians.

**Foch, Ferdinand (1851-1929):** Marshal in the French army. Played an important role in the joint command of allied forces against the Germans during the First World War. Active against the Russian Revolution in 1918-1929.

**France, Anatole (1844-1924):** French writer. Author of historical novels. Participant in progressive causes.

**Freemasonry:** Unless otherwise specified, this refers to the bourgeois revolution of 1789-1815 and, more precisely, to its first, radical, years of 1789-1794. The principal stages of the French Revolution were the overthrow of the old regime in 1789, the proclamation of the republic in 1792, the government of the French Republic from 1792-1794, the "Thermidore" of 1794, the regime of the Directory in 1795-1799, the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799-1815.

**Galicia:** Former province of the Austrian empire, situated next to present-day Poland and the USSR. Not to be confused with the Galicia on the Iberian peninsula (in the Spanish State).
**Garibaldi, Giuseppe** (1807-1882): Patriot of the Italian revolution. Struggled for the unification and independence of Italy against feudalism, Austria, the Papacy, and the United Kingdom.

**Georgia** (country in the Caucasus between the Black Sea and Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. One of the fifteen federated republics of the USSR. Today independent. Around 5.3 million inhabitants. Capital: Tbilisi.

**German Revolution:** Unless otherwise stated, this refers to the revolutionary struggles which occurred in Germany from 1918 to 1923.

**Gogol, Nikolai** (1809-1852): Born in the Ukraine. Writer and dramatist, creator of the modern Russian novel.

**Gorky, Maxim** (1868-1936): Great Russian writer, sympathizer of the Bolsheviks and a friend of Lenin, although in his last years he was bitter in his critique of Communism. His novel, *New Life* (1917), went against the face of the revolution. His journal, *Novyi Zhizn* (New Life) was known for its internationalism, unified social-democratic outlook. Adopted a position of critical support to the Bolshevik regime beginning in the 1920s. He capitulated in the end to Stalin.

**Gos, Abraham** (1882-1940): Leader of the SRs. Member of the right wing in 1906. Part of Kerensky's faction. Actively opposed the October Revolution. Arrested during the civil war. Gambled to death in 1922. His sentence was commuted. Died in 1940.

**Habsburg:** The House (dynasty) of Habsburg which reigned in Austria from 1278 to 1918.

**Herzen, Alexander** (1812-1870): Russian writer and literary critic. Was one of the first socialists in Russia and one of the main representatives of the “popular current.”


**Hindenburg, Paul von** (1847-1934): German Marshal and statesman. Was given sole command of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies during World War I. Elected to the presidency of the Reich in 1925, reelected in 1932, named Hitler as chancellor (1933).

**Hiroshima:** City in Japan which was the first victim of nuclear destruction. The Japanese city of Nagasaki was also struck by an American atomic bomb in 1945.

**Hitler, Adolf** (1889-1945): Head of German Fascism (Nazism). Appointed Chancellor in 1933 by Hindenburg whom he succeeded in power after his death in 1934. Assumed total power as “Reichsführer.” Established a personal dictatorship, ruled with his “Reichsleitung.” Demonstrated the German army in 1941. Arrested in Russia in 1917. Liberated by the February revolution of 1917. Opposed the orientation of Lenin in April 1917, then the decision for an insurrectionary action. Member of the central bureau of the “reconciliators,” from the C.C. until 1918. Remained one of the principal leaders of the CPSU — and also 1924-1929, 1934. Allied with Stalin against the opposition from 1923 to 1925, went into opposition in February 1927, retired in 1928. Liquidated during the Moscow Trials.


**Kapp, Wolfgang** (1858-1922): German political figure. Led a radical organization. Organized a coup d’etat in Berlin against the Weimar Republic in 1920, with General Ludendorff. This attempted patch was thwarted by a general strike.

**Kautsky, Karl** (1854-1938): Collaborator with Engels and executor of his political. Principal theoretician of German social democracy and of the Second International before the First World War (during which he was part of the centre-left). Became a reformist.


**Kollontai, Alexandra** (1872-1952): Russian revolutionary. Member of the RSDRP in 1899. At first a Bolshevik, then a Menshevik to 1914, Internationalist during the war. Rejoined Bolsheviks in 1923. Went into exile. Returned to Russia, entered the C.C. of the Bolshevik Party in August 1917. Speaker of the Women’s Opposition in 1920-22. Under Stalin did not play any political role and retired to diplomatic activity. One of the principal leaders and theorists of Marxism-Leninism.

**Kolchak, Alexander** (1874-1920): Vice-Admiral and political figure of the Russian right. Tried to unify the White armies. Established a “voluntary army” during the civil war. Installed a bloody military dictatorship in the territories under his control. Shot after being captured in Siberia.

**Koltsov, Alexis** (1872-1920): Popular Russian poet. Self-taught. His works speak of love and liberty.

**Kornilov, L.G.** (1870-1918): Career Russian officer. Commander in Chief during July 1917. Tried to organize a coup d’état. Formed a “voluntary army” during the civil war.

**Kronstadt revolt:** Unless otherwise stated, refers to the present text to the events of March 1921: the military garrison of Kronstadt, a port on the Baltic, rebelled against the Bolshevik power. Negotiations having failed, the rebellion was crushed by the Red Army.

**Kropotkin, Peter** (1842-1921): Russian revolutionary, one of the three Baltic republics, situated on the Baltic Sea, making up 2.6 million inhabitants. Capital: Tbilisi.

**Lenin, Vladimir** (1870-1924): One of the main representatives of the second generation of Russian Marxists. First joined a Marxist circle in France. POLITICALIsm and was designed to provoke a combined struggle of communists “against concessions,” in pursuit of a defensive revolutionary war, for the extension of nationalizations and centralized control in the economic sphere, and reinforcement of Soviet power at the rank and file level.

**Left Opposition:** Also called “Bolshevik-Leninists.” Anti-Stalinist opposition (anti-bureaucratic). Formed in 1923 within the CPSU, inspired in particular by Trotsky. Gave birth in 1928 to the International Left Opposition and in 1938 to the Fourth International.

**Leninism:** Term that became prominent after Lenin’s death.

**Liberation:** Attempts to liberate ethnic minorities, especially the three Baltic republics, situated on the Baltic Sea, making up 2.6 million inhabitants. Capital: Tbilisi.


Luxemburg, Rosa Martov, Julius (1873-1923): Leader of the Mensheviks. Opposed Russia's entry into the war against Germany. Joined the Bolsheviks in 1917. Developed a critique of the Soviet regime during the civil war. Left Russia in 1920.


Mensheviks: The term for "minority." A current of "revolutionaries of the right," constituted in 1883 within the RSDLP. Opposed to Bolsheviks. During the First World War it divided between an internationalist current (Martov) and another, anti-German and favourable to military intervention (including Plekhanov). It divided in 1917 between a class-collaborationist wing, the majority (Din, Lieber, Tssetrelli) and a left splitoff (Martov, Martynov). Opposed the October 1917 revolution.

Menshevik Internationalists: Left wing split from the Mensheviks, including Martov and Martynov. Condemned Russia's entry into the war against Germany and the further pursuit of that war which was extolled by the majority of the Menshevik current.

Merimee, Prosper (1803-1870): French writer. Introduced to the court of Napoleon III. Translator of Russian novels.

Meunier, Constant (1831-1905): Belgian painter and sculptor. Seeing the miserable life of coal miners, he depicted the class struggle. This was achieved as a result of the war of 1914-1918.

Ossinsky, V. (1887-1933): Socialist, Bolshevik in 1907. Deported numerous times. President of the national economic council in 1921. Ideological leader of the "Left Communists." Alternated then member of the CC in 1921-1930. Arrested during the Moscow trials then worked in the underground. Conciliator in 1910. Elected to the CC in 1917. Defeated a battle against these perspectives (Plekhanov, Lenin). But this current had an impact on the entire Russian revolutionary tradition and, in particular, gave birth to the Social Revolutionary Party at the beginning of the 20th century.

Provisional Government: Depending on the context and without further modification, one of the governments between the February Revolution and the October Revolution in 1917 (formed at the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, and from 1917 to 1918). Opposed to the Provisional Government of the R.S.F.S.R. Established a new government in 1918.

Russsia: Former state in Northern Germany. Its origins go back to the 11th century. It became a kingdom in the 18th century. Its borders expanded over centuries. During World War II, it was occupied by the Soviet Union. After the war, it was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. Its unity was restored in 1990.

Stalin: Politician, bayat against these perspectives (Plekhanov, Lenin). But this current had an impact on the entire Russian revolutionary tradition and, in particular, gave birth to the Social Revolutionary Party at the beginning of the 20th century.
Russian Revolution...

Ernest Mandel

1945, then president of the republic.

Robespierre, Maximillian de (1758-1794): One of the principal representatives of the Jacobin current during the French revolution.

Rolland, Roman (1866-1944): French writer. Author of historical and philosophical essays, as well as a humanist and universalist content. Became a supporter of the USSR at the beginning of 1927.


Russia: Country of Eastern Europe. Became, from the tenth to the twentieth century, the center of a vast empire whose level of industrial development was quite high (as in Poland). After the revolution of October 1917, replaced by the Soviet government.

The Russians therefore dominated very diverse ethnic groups and nationalities, including the Islamic populations of Central Europe whose level of industrial development was quite high (as in Poland). After the revolution of October 1917, replaced by the Soviet government.

Russification of the Ukraine. Committed suicide.

Rykov, Alexei (1881-1938): Jousted the RSDLP in 1901, Bolshevik in 1903. Opposed Lenin's orientation to the 1905 revolution and supported the “committeemen”. Elected to the CC. Arrested during both a trial and prison) and escaped. Leader of the “committeemen” in 1930. Commissar of the Interior (1917). Member of the Political Bureau from 1923 to 1929. In 1928 joined Bukharin in opposition to Stalin. Liquidated during the Moscow Trials.

Saltkyov-Schedrin, Mikhail (1826-1889): Russian writer and journalist. Painted a satiric picture of nobility and of the provincial elite of his day.


Scrabina, Alexander (1872-1915): Russian pianist and composer. Tried to develop a universal art. Influenced by contact with oriental philosophies.

Shishnikov, Alexander (1883-1943): Metal worker. Chairman of the USSR from 1903 to 1905. Two years in prison after the 1905 revolution. Emigrated in 1908-1914. Undergound in 1915-1917. Commissar of labor after the February revolution and a coalind the Islamic populatons of the South and, in the West, the populations of Western Europe whose level of industrial development was quite high (as in Poland). After the revolution of October 1917, replaced by the USSR.

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The Japanese victory had a big impact in the Orient: it hand over a Western empire.

One of the leaders of the Social-Democratic Workers Party (going back to 1875) through a fusion of the Marxists and the Social-Democratic Workers Party. Elected to the CC in April 1917. Conciliationist in April 1914. Reared to the CC in 1901. Leader of the Left of the Bolsheviks.

Spiridonova, Maria (1882?1941?): Militant SR. Shot a general responsible for the massacre of peasants in 1906. Twelve years in prison camps. Liberated by the revolution of 1917. Leader of the Left of the Bolsheviks.

Stalinist: Dictatorial and bureaucratic regime identified with Stalin as an individual.

Stuttgart Congress: Congress of the socialist International held in Stuttgart (Germany) in 1907.

Su Ya-Tsen (1866-1925): Leader of the 1911 republican revolution in China. Founder of the Kuomintang.


Thermidor: This term originally referred to a political counter-revolution during the French revolution of 1789-1815. Beginning in July 1794 (“Thermidor” was a month on the calendar during this period) after the overthrow of Robespierre, this counterrevolution dismantled the democratic and popular forms of power born during the uprising against the old regime, without overturning the bourgeoisie characteristics of “Soviet Thermidor” described the Stalinist counterrevolution which liquified socialist democracy and instituted a bureaucratic dictatorship, without reestablishing capitalism in the USSR.

Third Reich: Hitler’s Nazi regime in Germany (1933-1945).

Tolstoy, Leo (1828-1910): World renowned Russian writer. From an old aristocratic family. Author of broad historical novels depicting life in the peasants.

Transcaucasus: One of the three natural divisions of the Caucasus, situated in its southern portion.

Russian Revolution

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the process of bureaucratization in the regime after the death of Lenin. Exiled. Founded the Fourth International in 1938. Assassinated by Stalin’s agents in Mexico.

Trudovik: See Work Libertarianism.

Tsar: Russian word indicating certain Slavic sovereigns, such as the emperors of Russia.

Two-and-a-half International: “International of Vienna,” founded in 1921 by compositors who vaccinated between the first and third internationals. Joined the reformist international in 1923.


Urquijo, Muñoz (1873-1918): Social-Democratic activist during the 1890s. Deported. Functioned on a leadership level during the 1905 revolution. Member of the Meclaner in 1907. Belonged to the PSOE and the Comintern. Defeated in 1917. Led at that time by Keenan.

Workers Opposition: Opposition group within the CP, formed in the Autumn of 1919 by Shapatyev and Koltunov. It defended the idea that control over production should be exercised by the unions, the workers, and the farmers. A main leader of the white army during the civil war.

Wright, Max (1886-1961): French general, chief of staff for Pétain.

White Russia: See Byelorussia.

William II, with the participation of numerous social democrats. After repressing the German revolution, it proved unable to manage the economic and social crisis. Hitler was handed power on the shoulders of the Duce, Mussolini, and the Chief of State in 1925.

Weygand, Maxime (1867-1955): French general, chief of staff for Pétain.

White: Term usually used to indicate the counter-revolutionaries, in opposition to the “ Reds.” A White general is a general in the counterrevolutionary army (itself called “a White army”).

White Russia: See Byelorussia.


Wilson, Thomas Woodrow (known as “Woodrow Wilson”) (1856-1924): American political figure. Elected president in 1913. Took advantage of the weakness of the European powers during the war to reinforce the position of American imperialism.

Workers: Also called Tradukovi or Popular Socialists. Petit-bourgeois current based on the peasant radicalization during the revolution of 1905. Participated in the pseudo-parliament of 1906-1914. When confronted with revolution, expressed the conservative unconcern of the petit-bourgeois in the provinces. The socialists substantially reduced in numbers in 1917. Led at that time by Keenan.

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Wrigley, Piotr (1878-1928): Russian general. Returned to Russia in 1903. Member of the Counterrevolutionary government supported by France. Defeated in 1919 with the support of England.

Writing, Ernest: See Socialist Realism.

Xuereb, Emile (1855-1916): Flemish poet who wrote in French. First a naturalist, then a mystic. Became a socialist. He celebrated the poetry of the masses and of solidarity, of industrial cities, of energy and of machines.

Volkswehr: Armed force of the Austrian social democrats.

Voigt, Heinrich (1884-1923): German sociologist of the Weimar Republic, a member of the German Social Democracy. Influenced by Western European thought. Depicted the growth of the “New Right” (Hermann Rausch). Exiled. Founded the Fourth International in 1923. After repressing the German revolution, it proved unable to manage the economic and social crisis. Hitler was handed power on the shoulders of the Duce, Mussolini, and the Chief of State in 1925.

Woesneck, Gregor (1883-1936): Joined socialist movement in 1905. Emigrated. Bolehov in 1903. Clove to Lenin during the period of exile. In October 1917 opposed the decision to launch an immediate revolution, later a puritanism of coalition government. Became one of the main leaders of the new regime. Secretary of the CI from 1919 to 1927. Allied with Stalin against the opposition from 1923 to 1925, went into opposition from 1925-27 then capitulated in 1929. Lived in Moscow Trials.

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The legitimacy of the Russian Revolution
Ernest Mandel

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Although it is no longer "fashionable" to refer to it, the Russian Revolution remains a major experience of this century. Knowledge of it is indispensable to those who wish to understand the contemporary world, or to see clearly how to proceed in the fight for socialism. Ernest Mandel here sets out to analyse it in a polemical and critical essay. Polemical because today this revolution is the target of such a strong campaign of ideological denigration that one of the formative experiences of this century has become incomprehensible. The author, acting as both historian and political activist, comes back to the most essential question: was October 1917 a totalitarian coup d'etat or a socially liberating uprising? Critical, because there is nothing less useful that an apologetic reading of history. While vigorously reasserting the deep legitimacy of the Russian Revolution, Ernest Mandel also sets out to situate the mistakes which the Bolshevik leadership made in the period 1917-21. This is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the lessons to be learnt from the history of Bolshevism.

Ernest Mandel: Involved in the revolutionary socialist movement from the end of the 1930s, he participated in the struggle against Nazi occupation of Belgium. Leader of the Socialist Workers' Party (Belgium) and of the Fourth International, he is the author of many works including Marxist Economic Theory, Late Capitalism and Long Waves of Capitalist Development. He has already published a first Notebook: The Place of Marxism in History.

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