

# What was the Russian Revolution?

A speech delivered in Copenhagen, Denmark in November 1932

**Leon Trotsky**

The first time that I was in Copenhagen was at the International Socialist Congress and I took away with me the kindest recollections of your city. But that was over a quarter of a century ago. Since then, the water in the Ore-Sund and in the fjords has changed over and over again. And not the water alone. The war has broken the backbone of the old European continent. The rivers and seas of Europe have washed down not a little blood. Mankind and particularly European mankind has gone through severe trials, has become more somber and more brutal. Every kind of conflict has become bitterer. The world has entered into the period of the great change. Its extreme expressions are war and revolution.

Before I pass on to the theme of my lecture, the Revolution, I consider it my duty to express my thanks to the organizers of this meeting, the organization of social-democratic students. I do this as a political adversary. My lecture, it is true, pursues historic scientific and not political lines. I want to emphasize this right from the beginning. But it is impossible to speak of a revolution, out of which the Soviet Republic arose, without taking up a political position. As a lecturer I stand under the banner as I did when I participated in the events of the revolution.

Up to the war, the Bolshevik Party belonged to the Social-Democratic International. On August 4, 1914, the vote of the German social-democracy for the war credits put an end to this connection once and for all, and opened the period of uninterrupted and irreconcilable struggle of Bolshevism against social-democracy. Does this mean that the organizers of this assembly made a mistake in inviting me to lecture? On this point the audience will be able to judge only after my lecture. To justify my acceptance of the kind invitation to present a report on the Russian Revolution, permit me to point to the fact that during the thirty-five years of my political life the question of the Russian Revolution has been the practical and theoretical axis of my thought and of my actions. The four years of my stay in Turkey were principally devoted to historical elaboration of the problems of the Russian Revolution. Perhaps this fact gives me a certain right to hope that I will succeed in part at least in helping not only friends and sympathizers, but also opponents, better to understand many features of the Revolution which before had escaped their attention. At all events, the purpose of my lecture is to help to understand. I do not intend to conduct propaganda for the Revolution, nor to call upon you to join the Revolution. I intend to explain the Revolution.

Let us begin with some elementary sociological principles which are doubtless familiar to you all, but as to which we must refresh our memory in approaching so complicated a phenomenon as the Revolution.

## **The Materialist Conception of History**

Human society is a historically-originated collaboration in the struggle for existence and the assurance of the maintenance of the generations. The character of a society is determined by the character of its economy. The character of its economy is determined by its means of productive labor.

For every great epoch in the development of the productive forces there is a definite corresponding social regime. Every social regime until now has secured enormous advantages to the ruling class. It is clear, therefore, that social regimes are not eternal. They arise historically, and then become fetters on further progress. "All that arises deserves to be destroyed."

But no ruling class has ever voluntarily and peacefully abdicated. In questions of life and death, arguments based on reason have never replaced the arguments of force. This may be sad, but it is so. It is not we that have made this world. We can do nothing but take it as it is.

### **The meaning of revolution**

Revolution means a change of the social order. It transfers the power from the hands of a class which has exhausted itself into those of another class, which is in the ascendant. Insurrection constitutes the sharpest and most critical moment in the struggle for power of two classes. The insurrection can lead to the real victory of the Revolution and to the establishment of a new order only when it is based on a progressive class, which is able to rally around it the overwhelming majority of the people.

As distinguished from the processes of nature, a revolution is made by human beings and through human beings. But in the course of revolution, too, men act under the influence of social conditions which are not freely chosen by them but are handed down from the past and imperatively point out the road which they must follow. For this reason, and only for this reason, a revolution follows certain laws.

But human consciousness does not merely passively reflect its objective conditions. It is accustomed to react actively to them. At certain times this reaction assumes a tense, passionate, mass character. The barriers of right and might are overthrown. The active intervention of the masses in historical events is in fact the most indispensable element of a revolution.

But even the stormiest activity can remain in the stage of demonstration or rebellion, without rising to the height of a revolution. The uprising of the masses must lead to the overthrow of the domination of one class and to the establishment of the domination of another. Only then have we achieved a revolution. A mass uprising is no isolated undertaking, which can be conjured up any time one pleases. It represents an objectively-conditioned element in the development of a revolution, just as a revolution represents an objectively-conditioned process in the development of society. But if the necessary conditions for the uprising exist, one must not simply wait passively, with open mouth; as Shakespeare says: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

In order to sweep away the outlived social order, the progressive class must understand that its hour has struck and set before itself the task of conquering power. Here opens the field of conscious revolutionary action, where foresight and calculation combine with will and courage. In other words: here opens the field of action of the Party.

### **The Coup d'État**

The revolutionary Party unites within itself the flower of the progressive class. Without a Party which is able to orientate itself in its environment, appreciate the progress and rhythm of events and early win the confidence of the masses, the victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible. These are the reciprocal relations between the objective and the subjective factors of insurrection and revolution.

In disputations, particularly theological ones, it is customary, as you know, for the opponents to discredit scientific truth by driving it to an absurdity. This method is called in logic *Reductio ad absurdum*. We shall start from an absurdity so as to approach the truth with all the greater safety. In any case, we cannot complain of lack of absurdities. Let us take one of the most recent, and crude.

The Italian writer Malaparte, who is something in the nature of a Fascist theoretician – there are such, too – not long ago, launched a book on the technique of the *coup d'état*. Naturally, the author devotes a not inconsiderable number of pages of his “investigation” to the October upheaval. In contradistinction to the “strategy” of Lenin which was always related to the social and political conditions of Russia in 1917, “the tactics of Trotsky.” in Malaparte's words, “were, on the contrary, not at all limited by the general conditions of the country.” This is the main idea of the book! Malaparte compels Lenin and Trotsky in the pages of his book, to carry on numerous dialogues, in which both participants together show as much profundity of mind as Nature put at the disposal of Malaparte alone. In answer to Lenin's considerations of the social and political prerequisites of the upheaval, Malaparte has his alleged Trotsky say, literally, “Your strategy requires far too many favorable circumstances; the insurrection needs nothing, it is self-sufficing.” You hear: “The insurrection needs nothing!” That is precisely the absurdity which must help us to approach the truth. The author repeats persistently, that, in the October Revolution, it was not the strategy of Lenin but the tactics of Trotsky which won the victory. These tactics, according to his words, are a menace even now to the peace of the States of Europe. “The strategy of Lenin” I quote word for word, “does not constitute any immediate danger for the Governments of Europe. But the tactics of Trotsky do constitute an actual and consequently a permanent danger to them.” Still more concretely, “Put Poincaré in the place of Kerensky and the Bolshevik *coup d'état* of October, 1917 would have been just as successful.” It is hard to believe that such a book has been translated into several languages and taken seriously.

We seek in vain to discover what is the necessity altogether of the historically-conditioned strategy of Lenin, if “Trotsky's tactics” can fulfil the same tasks in every situation. And why are successful revolutions so rare, if only a few technical recipes suffice for their success?

The dialogue between Lenin and Trotsky presented by the fascist author is in content, as well as in form, an insipid invention, from beginning to end. Of such inventions there are not a few floating around the world. For example, in Madrid, there has been printed a book, **La Vida del Lenin (The Life of Lenin)** for which I am as little responsible as for the tactical recipes of Malaparte. The Madrid weekly, **Estampa**, published in advance whole chapters of this alleged book of Trotsky's on Lenin, which contain horrible desecrations of the life of that man whom I valued and still value incomparably higher than anyone else among my contemporaries.

But let us leave the forgers to their fate. Old Wilhelm Liebknecht, the father of the unforgettable fighter and hero Karl Liebknecht, liked to say, “A revolutionary politician must provide himself with a thick skin.” Doctor Stockmann even more expressively recommended that anyone who proposed to act in a manner contrary to the opinion of society should refrain from putting on new trousers. We will take note of the two good pieces of advice and proceed.

## **The Causes of October**

What questions does the October Revolution raise in the mind of a thinking man?

- **Why and how did this revolution take place? More correctly, why did the proletarian revolution conquer in one of the most backward countries in Europe?**
- **What have been the results of the October revolution?**

**And finally:**

- **Has the October Revolution stood the test?**

The first question, as to the causes, can now be answered more or less exhaustively. I have attempted to do this in great detail in my *History of the Revolution*. Here I can only formulate the most important conclusions.

### **The Law of Uneven Development**

The fact that the proletariat reached power for the first time in such a backward country as the former Tsarist Russia seems mysterious only at a first glance; in reality it is fully in accord with historical law. It could have been predicted, and it was predicted. Still more, on the basis of the prediction of this fact the revolutionary Marxists built up their strategy long before the decisive events.

The first and most general explanation is: Russia is a backward country, but only a part of world economy, only an element of the capitalist world system. In this sense Lenin solved the enigma of the Russian Revolution with the lapidary formula, “The chain broke at its weakest link.”

A crude illustration: the Great War, the result of the contradictions of world imperialism, drew into its maelstrom countries of different stages of development, but made the same claims on all the participants. It is clear that the burdens of the war would be particularly intolerable for the most backward countries. Russia was the first to be compelled to leave the field. But to tear itself away from the war, the Russian people had to overthrow the ruling classes. In this way the chain of war broke at its weakest link.

Still, war is not a catastrophe coming from outside like an earthquake, but, as old Clausewitz said, the continuation of politics by other means. In the last war, the main tendencies of the imperialistic system of “peace” time only expressed themselves more crudely. The higher the general forces of production, the tenser the competition on the world markets, the sharper the antagonisms and the madder the race for armaments, so much the more difficult it became for the weaker participants. That is precisely why the backward countries assumed the first places in the succession of collapse. The chain of world capitalism always tends to break at its weakest link.

If, as a result of exceptional unfavorable circumstances – for example, let us say, a successful military intervention from the outside or irreparable mistakes on the part of the Soviet Government itself – capitalism should arise again on the immeasurably wide Soviet territory, its historical inadequacy would at the same time have inevitably arisen and such capitalism would in turn soon become the victim of the same contradictions which caused its explosion in 1917. No tactical recipes could have called the October Revolution into being, if Russia had not carried it within its body. The revolutionary Party in the last analysis can claim only the role of an obstetrician, who is compelled to resort to a Caesarean operation.

One might say in answer to this: “Your general considerations may adequately explain why old Russia had to suffer shipwreck, that country where backward capitalism and an impoverished peasantry were crowned by a parasitic nobility and a decaying monarchy. But in the simile of the chain and its weakest link there is still missing the key to the real enigma: How could a socialist revolution succeed in a backward country? History knows of more than a few illustrations of the decay of countries and civilizations accompanied by the collapse of the old classes for which no

progressive successors had been found. The breakdown of old Russia should, at first sight have changed the country into a capitalist colony rather than into a Socialist State.

This objection is very interesting. It leads us directly to the kernel of the whole problem. And yet, this objection is erroneous; I might say, it lacks internal symmetry. On the one hand, it starts from an exaggerated conception of the phenomenon of historical backwardness in general.

Living beings, including man, of course, go through similar stages of development in accordance with their ages. In a normal five-year old child, we find a certain correspondence between the weight, size and the internal organs. But it is quite otherwise with human consciousness. In contrast with anatomy and physiology, psychology, both individual and collective, is distinguished by exceptional capacity of absorption, flexibility and elasticity; therein consists the aristocratic advantage of man over his nearest zoological relatives, the apes. The absorptive and flexible psyche confers on the so-called social "organisms", as distinguished from the real, that is biological organisms, an exceptional variability of internal structure as a necessary condition for historical progress. In the development of nations and states, particularly capitalist ones, there is neither similarity nor regularity. Different stages of civilization, even polar opposites, approach and intermingle with one another in the life of one and the same country.

### **The Law of Combined Development**

Let us not forget that historical backwardness is a relative concept. There being both backward and progressive countries, there is also a reciprocal influencing of one by the other; there is the pressure of the progressive countries on the backward ones; there is the necessity for the backward countries to catch up with the progressive ones, to borrow their technology and science, etc. In this way arises the combined type of development: features of backwardness are combined with the last word in world technique and in world thought. Finally the countries historically backward, in order to escape their backwardness, are often compelled to rush ahead of the others.

The flexibility of the collective consciousness makes it possible under certain conditions to achieve the result, in the social arena, which in individual psychology is called "overcoming the consciousness of inferiority". In this sense we can say that the October Revolution was an heroic means whereby the people of Russia were able to overcome their own economic and cultural inferiority.

But let us pass over from these historic-philosophic, perhaps somewhat too abstract, generalizations, and put up the same question in concrete form, that is within the cross-section of living economic facts. The backwardness of Russia expressed itself most clearly at the beginning of the twentieth century in the fact that industry occupied a small place in that country in comparison with the peasantry. Taken as a whole, this meant a low productivity of the national labor. Suffice it to say that on the eve of the war, when Tsarist Russia had reached the peak of its well-being, the national income was eight to ten times lower than in the United States. This expresses numerically the "amplitude" of its backwardness if the word "amplitude" can be used at all in connection with backwardness.

At the same time however, the law of combined development expressed itself in the economic field at every step, in simple as well as in complex phenomena. Almost without highways, Russia was compelled to build railroads. Without having gone through the European artisan and manufacturing stages, Russia passed directly to mechanized production. To jump over intermediate stages is the way of backward countries.

While peasant agriculture often remained at the level of the seventeenth century, Russia's industry, if not in scope, at least in type, reached the level of progressive countries and in some respects rushed ahead of them. It suffices to say that gigantic enterprises, with over a thousand workers each, employed in the United States less than 18 per cent of the total number of industrial workers. In Russia it was over 41%. This fact is hard to reconcile with the conventional conception of the economic backwardness of Russia. It does not on the other hand, refute this backwardness, but dialectically complements it.

The same contradictory character was shown by the class structure of the country. The finance capital of Europe industrialized Russian economy at an accelerated tempo. The industrial bourgeoisie forthwith assumed a large scale capitalistic and anti-popular character. The foreign stock-holders moreover, lived outside of the country. The workers, on the other hand, were naturally Russians. Against a numerically weak Russian bourgeoisie, which had no national roots, there stood confronting it a relatively strong proletariat with strong roots in the depths of the people.

The revolutionary character of the proletariat was furthered by the fact that Russia in particular, as a backward country, under the compulsion of catching up with its opponents, had not been able to work out its own social or political conservatism. The most conservative country of Europe, in fact of the entire world, is considered, and correctly, to be the oldest capitalist country – England. The European country freest of conservatism would in all probability be Russia.

But the young, fresh, determined proletariat of Russia still constituted only a tiny minority of the nation. The reserves of its revolutionary power lay outside of the proletariat itself-in the peasantry, living in half-serfdom; and in the oppressed nationalities.

### **The peasantry**

The subsoil of the revolution was the agrarian question. The old feudal monarchic system became doubly intolerable under the conditions of the new capitalist exploitation. The peasant communal areas amounted to some 140 million *dessiatines*. But 30,000 large landowners, whose average holdings were over 2,000 *dessiatines*, owned altogether 7 million *dessiatines*, that is, as much as some 10 million peasant population. These statistics of land tenure constituted a ready-made programme of agrarian revolt.

The nobleman, Bokorin, wrote in 1917 to the dignitary, Rodsianko, the Chairman of the last municipal Duma: "I am a landowner and I cannot get it into my head that I must lose my land, and for an unbelievable purpose to boot, for the experiment of the socialist doctrine." But it is precisely the task of revolutions to accomplish that which the ruling classes cannot get into their heads. In autumn, 1917, almost the whole country was the scene of peasant revolts. Of the 642 departments of old Russia, 482, that is, 77% were affected by the movements! The reflection of the burning villages lit up the arena of the insurrections in the cities.

But you may argue the war of the peasants against the landowners is one of the classic elements of bourgeois revolution, and not at all of the proletarian revolution!

Perfectly right, I reply – so it was in the past. But the inability of capitalist society to survive in an historically backward country was expressed precisely in the fact that the peasant insurrections did not drive the bourgeois classes of Russia forward but on the contrary, drove them back for good into the camp of reaction. If the peasantry did not want to be completely ruined there was nothing else

left for it but to join the industrial proletariat. This revolutionary joining of the two oppressed classes was foreseen by the genius of Lenin and prepared for him long before.

Had the agrarian question been courageously solved by the bourgeoisie, the proletariat of Russia would not, obviously, have been able to arrive at the power in 1917. But the Russian, bourgeoisie, covetous and cowardly, too late on the scene, prematurely a victim of senility, dared not lift a hand against feudal property. But thereby it delivered the power to the proletariat and together with it the right to dispose of the destinies of bourgeois society.

In order for the Soviet State to come into existence, it was consequently necessary for two factors of a different historical nature to collaborate: the peasant war, that is to say, a movement which is characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development, and the proletarian insurrection, or uprising which announces the decline of the bourgeois movement. There we have the combined character of the Russian Revolution.

Once let the Bear – the peasant – stand up on his hind feet, he becomes terrible in his wrath. But he is unable to give conscious expression to his indignation. He needs a leader. For the first time in the history of the world, the insurrectionary peasants found a faithful leader in the person of the proletariat.

Four million workers in industry and transport leading a hundred million peasants. That was the natural and inevitable reciprocal relations between proletariat and peasantry in the Revolution.

### **The national question**

The second revolutionary reserve of the proletariat was formed by the oppressed nationalities, who moreover were also predominantly peasants. Closely allied with the historical backwardness of the country is the extensive character of the development of the State, which spread out like a grease spot from the center at Moscow to the circumference. In the East, it subjugated the still more backward peoples, basing itself upon them, in order to stifle the more developed nationalities of the West. To the 70 million Great Russians, who constituted the main mass of the population were added gradually some 90 millions of other races.

In this way arose the empire, in whose composition the ruling nationality made up only 43 percent of the population, while the remaining 57 per cent, consisted of nationalities of varying degrees of civilization and legal deprivation. The national pressure was incomparably cruder than in the neighboring States, and not only than those beyond the western frontier, but beyond the eastern one too. This conferred on the national problem an enormous explosive force.

The Russian liberal bourgeoisie was not willing in either the national or the agrarian question, to go beyond certain amelioration's of the regime of oppression and violence. The “democratic” Governments of Miliukov and Kerensky, which reflected the interests of the great Russian bourgeoisie and bureaucracy actually hastened to impress upon the discontented nationalities in the course of the eight months of their existence: “You will obtain what you can get by force.”

The inevitability of the development of the centrifugal national movements had been early taken into consideration by Lenin. The Bolshevik Party struggled obstinately for years for the right of self-determination for nations, that is, for the right of full secession. Only through this courageous position on the national question could the Russian proletariat gradually win the confidence of the oppressed peoples. The national independence movement as well as the agrarian movement,

necessarily turned against the official democracy, strengthened the proletariat, and poured into the stream of the October upheaval.

### **The permanent revolution**

In these ways the riddle of the proletarian upheaval in an historically backward country loses its veil of mystery.

Marxist revolutionaries predicted, long before the events, the march of the Revolution and the historical role of the young Russian proletariat. I may be permitted to repeat here a passage from a work of my own in 1905.

“In an economically backward country the proletariat can arrive at power earlier than in a capitalistically advanced one ...

“The Russian Revolution creates the conditions under which the power can (and in the event of a successful revolution must) be transferred to the proletariat, even before the policy of bourgeois liberalism receives the opportunity of unfolding its genius for government to its full extent.

“The destiny of the most elementary revolutionary interest of the peasantry ... is bound up with the destiny of the whole revolution, that is, with the destiny of the proletariat. The proletariat, once arrived at power, will appear before the peasantry as the liberating class.

“The proletariat enters into the Government as the revolutionary representative of the nation, as the acknowledged leader of the people in the struggle with absolutism and the barbarism of serfdom.

“The proletarian regime will have to stand from the very beginning for the solution of the agrarian question, with which the question of the destiny of tremendous masses of the population of Russia is bound up.”

I have taken the liberty of quoting these passages as evidence that the theory of the October Revolution which I am presenting today is no casual improvisation and was not constructed ex-post facto under the pressure of events. No, in the form of a political prognosis it preceded the October upheaval by a long time. You will agree that a theory is in general valuable only in so far as it helps to foresee the course of development and influence it purposively. Therein, in general terms, is the invaluable importance of Marxism as a weapon of social historical orientation. I am sorry that the narrow limits of the lecture do not permit me to enlarge upon the above quotation materially. I will therefore content myself with a brief resume of the whole work which dates from 1905.

In accordance with its immediate tasks, the Russian Revolution is a bourgeois revolution. But the Russian bourgeoisie is anti-revolutionary. The victory of the Revolution is therefore possible only as a victory of the proletariat. But the victorious proletariat will not stop at the programme of bourgeois democracy: it will go on to the programme of socialism. The Russian Revolution will become the first stage of the Socialist world revolution.

This was the theory of permanent revolution formulated by me in 1905 and since then exposed to the severest criticism under the name of “Trotskyism”.

To be more exact, it is only a part of this theory. The other part, which is particularly timely now, states:



The present productive forces have long outgrown their national limits. A socialist society is not feasible within national boundaries. Significant as the economic successes of an isolated workers' state may be, the programme of "Socialism in one country" is a petty-bourgeois utopia. Only a European and then a world federation of socialist republics can be the real arena for a harmonious socialist society.

Today, after the test of events, I see less reason than ever to discard this theory.

### **Pre-requisites for October**

After all that has been said above, is it still worthwhile to recall the Fascist writer Malaparte, who ascribes to me tactics which are independent of strategy and amount to a series of technical recipes for insurrection, applicable in all latitudes and longitudes? It is a good thing that the name of the luckless theoretician of the *coup d'état* makes it easy to distinguish him from the victorious practitioner of the *coup d'état*; no one therefore runs the risk of confusing Malaparte with Bonaparte.

Without the armed insurrection of 7th November, 1917, the Soviet State would not be in existence. But the insurrection itself did not drop from heaven. A series of historical prerequisites were necessary for the October Revolution.

1. The rotting away of the old ruling classes-the nobility, the monarchy, the bureaucracy.
2. The political weakness of the bourgeoisie, which had no roots in the masses of the people.
3. The revolutionary character of the agrarian question.
4. The revolutionary character of the problem of the oppressed nationalities.
5. The significant social burdens weighing on the proletariat.

To these organic preconditions must be added certain highly important connected conditions.

6. The Revolution of 1905 was the great school or in Lenin's phrase, "the dress rehearsal" of the Revolution of 1917. The Soviet's as the irreplaceable organisational form of the proletarian united front in the Revolution were created for the first time in the year 1905.
7. The imperialist war sharpened all the contradictions, tore the backward masses out of their immobility, and thus prepared the grandiose scale of the catastrophe.

### **The Bolshevik Party**

But all these conditions, which fully sufficed for the outbreak of the Revolution, were insufficient to assure the victory of the proletariat in the Revolution. For this victory, one condition more was necessary.

8. The Bolshevik Party

When I enumerate this condition last in the series, I do it only because it follows the logical sequence, and not because I assign the last place in the order of importance to the Party.

No, I am far from such a thought. The liberal bourgeoisie can seize power and has seized it more than once as the result of struggles in which it took no part; it possesses organs of seizure which are admirably adapted to the purpose. But the working masses are in a different position; they have long been accustomed to give, and not to take. They work, are patient as long as they can be, hope, lose patience, rise up and struggle, die, bring victory to others, are betrayed, fall into despondency, bow their necks, and work again. Such is the history of the masses of the people under all regimes. To be

able to take the power firmly and surely into its hands the proletariat needs a Party, which far surpasses other parties in the clarity of its thought and in its revolutionary determination.

The Bolshevick Party, which has been described more than once and with complete justification as the most revolutionary Party in the history of mankind was the living condensation of the modern history of Russia, of all that was dynamic in it. The overthrow of Tsarism had long been recognized as the necessary condition for the development of economy and culture. But for the solution of this task, the forces were insufficient. The bourgeoisie feared the Revolution. The intelligentsia tried to bring the peasant to his feet. The *muzhik*, incapable of generalizing his own miseries and his aims, left this appeal unanswered. The intelligentsia armed itself with dynamite. A whole generation was wasted in this struggle.

On March 1st 1887, Alexander Ulianov carried out the last of the great terrorist plots. The attempted assassination of Alexander III failed. Ulianov and the other participants were executed. The attempt to make chemical preparation take the place of a revolutionary class, came to grief. Even the most heroic intelligentsia is nothing without the masses. Ulianov's younger brother Vladimir, the future Lenin, the greatest figure of Russian history, grew up under the immediate impression of these facts and conclusion. Even in his early youth he placed himself on the foundations of Marxism and turned his face toward the proletariat. Without losing sight of the village for a moment he sought the way of the peasantry through the workers. Inheriting from his revolutionary predecessors their capacity for self-sacrifice, and their willingness to go to the limit, Lenin, at an early age, became the teacher of the new generation of the intelligentsia and of the advanced workers. In strikes and street fights, in prisons and in exile, the workers received the necessary tempering. They needed the searchlight of Marxism to light up their historical road in the darkness of absolutism.

Among the émigrés the first Marxist group arose in 1883. In 1899 at a secret meeting, the foundation of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party was proclaimed (we all called ourselves Social-Democrats in those days). In 1903 occurred the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and in 1912 the Bolshevik faction finally became an independent Party.

It learned to recognize the class mechanics of society in its struggles during the events of twelve years (1905-1917). It educated groups equally capable of initiative and of subordination. The discipline of its revolutionary action was based on the unity of its doctrine, on the tradition of common struggles and on confidence in its tested leadership.

Such was the party in 1917. Despised by the official "public opinion" and the paper thunder of the intelligentsia Press it adapted itself to the movement of the masses. It kept firmly in hand the lever of control in the factories and regiments. More and more the peasant masses turned toward it. If we understand by "nation" not the privileged heads, but the majority of the people, that is, the workers and peasants, then the Bolsheviks became during the course of 1917 a truly national Russian Party.

In September, 1917, Lenin who was compelled to keep in hiding gave the signal, "The crisis is ripe, the hour of insurrection has approached." He was right. The ruling classes faced with the problems of the war, the land and liberation, had got into inextricable difficulties. The bourgeoisie positively lost its head. The democratic parties, the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries, dissipated the last remaining bit of confidence of the masses in them by their support of the imperialist war, by their policy of compromise and concessions to the bourgeois and feudal property owners. The awakened army no longer wanted to fight for the alien aims of imperialism. Disregarding democratic advice, the peasantry smoked the landowners out of their estates. The oppressed nationalities of the far

boundaries rose up against the bureaucracy of Petrograd. In the most important workers' and soldiers' Soviets the Bolsheviks were dominant. The ulcer was ripe. It needed a cut of the lancet. Only under these social and political conditions was the insurrection possible. And thus it also became inevitable. But there is no playing around with insurrection. Woe to the surgeon who is careless in the use of the lancet! Insurrection is an art. It has its laws and its rules.

The party faced the realities of the October insurrection with cold calculation and with ardent resolution. Thanks to this, it conquered almost without victims. Through the victorious soviets the Bolsheviks placed themselves at the head of a country which occupies one sixth of the surface of the globe.

The majority of my present listeners, it is to be presumed, did not occupy themselves at all with politics in 1917. So much the better. Before the young generation lies much that is interesting, if not always easy. But the representatives of the old generation in this hall will certainly remember well how the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was received: as a curiosity, as a misunderstanding, as a scandal; most often as a nightmare which was bound to disappear with the first rays of dawn. The Bolsheviks would last twenty four hours, a week, a month, a year. The period had to be constantly lengthened. The rulers of the whole world armed themselves up against the first workers' state: civil war was stirred up, interventions again and again, blockade. So passed year after year. Meantime, history has recorded fifteen years of existence of the Soviet power.

### **Can October be justified?**

“Yes”, some opponents will say, “the adventure of October has shown itself to be much more substantial than many of us thought. Perhaps it was not even quite an ‘adventure’. Nevertheless, the question; what was achieved at this high cost? – retains its full force. Have the dazzling promises which the Bolsheviks proclaimed on the eve of the Revolution been fulfilled?”

Before we answer the hypothetical opponent let us note that the question in and of itself is not new. On the contrary, it followed right at the heels of the October Revolution, since the day of its birth. The French journalist, Clad Anet, who was in Petrograd during the Revolution, wrote as early as 27th October, 1917:

“The maximalists (which was what the French called the Bolsheviks at that time) have seized power and the great day has come. At last, I say to myself, I shall behold the realization of the socialist Eden which has been promised us for so many years ... Admirable adventure! A privileged position!” And so on and so forth. What sincere hatred was behind the ironical salutation! The very morning after the capture of the Winter Palace, the reactionary journalist hurried to register his claim for a ticket of admission to Eden. Fifteen years have passed since the Revolution. With all the greater absence of ceremony our enemies reveal their malicious joy over the fact that the land of the Soviets, even today, bears but little resemblance to a realm of general well-being. Why then the Revolution and why the sacrifice?

Permit me to express the opinion that the contradictions, difficulties, mistakes and insufficiency of the Soviet regime are no less familiar to me than to anyone. I, personally, have never concealed them, whether in speech or in writing. I have believed and I still believe that revolutionary politics as distinguished from conservative cannot be built up on concealment. “To speak out that which is” must be the highest principle of the workers' State.

But in criticism, as well as in creative activity, perspective is necessary. Subjectivism is a poor adviser, particularly in great questions. Periods of time must be commensurate with the tasks, and not with individual caprices. Fifteen years! How long is that in the life of one man! Within that period not a few of our generation were borne to their graves and those who remain have added innumerable grey hairs. But these same fifteen years – what an insignificant period in the life of a people! Only a minute on the clock of history.

Capitalism required centuries to establish itself in the struggle against the Middle Age, to raise the level of science and technique, to build railroads, to make use of electric current. And then? Then humanity was thrust by capitalism into the hell of wars and crises.

But Socialism is allowed by its enemies, that is, by the adherents of capitalism, only a decade and a half to install on earth Paradise, with all modern improvements. Such obligations were never assumed by us.

The processes of great changes must be measured by scales which are commensurate with them. I do not know if the Socialist society will resemble the biblical Paradise. I doubt it. But in the Soviet Union there is no Socialism as yet. The situation that prevails there is one of transition, full of contradictions, burdened with the heavy inheritance of the past and in addition is under the hostile pressure of the capitalistic states. The October Revolution has proclaimed the principles of the new society. The Soviet Republic has shown only the first stage of its realization. Edison's first lamp was very bad. We must learn how to discern the future.

But the unhappiness that rains on living men! Do the results of the Revolution justify the sacrifice which it has caused? A fruitless question, rhetorical through and through; as if the processes of history admitted of a balance sheet accounting! We might just as well ask, in view of the difficulties and miseries of human existence, "Does it pay to be born altogether?" To which Heine wrote: "And the fool expects an answer" ... Such melancholy reflections haven't hindered mankind from being born and from giving birth. Even in these days of unexampled world crisis, suicides fortunately constitute an unimportant percentage. But peoples never resort to suicide. When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution.

Besides who are they who are indignant over the victims of the social upheaval? Most often those who have paved the way for the victims of the imperialist war, and have glorified or, at least, easily accommodated themselves to it. It is now our turn to ask, "Has the war justified itself? What has it given us? What has it taught?"

The reactionary historian, Hippolyte Taine, in his eleven volume pamphlet against the great French Revolution describes, not without malicious joy, the sufferings of the French people in the years of the dictatorship of the Jacobins and afterward. The worst off were the lower classes of the cities, the plebeians, who as "sans-culottes" had given of their best for the Revolution. Now they or their wives stood in line throughout cold nights to return empty-handed to the extinguished family hearth. In the tenth year of the Revolution, Paris was poorer than before it began. Carefully selected, artificially pieced out facts serve Taine as Justification for his destructive verdict against the Revolution. Look, the plebeians wanted to be dictators and have precipitated themselves into misery!

It is hard to conceive of a more uninspired piece of moralizing. First of all, if the Revolution precipitated the country into misery the blame lay principally on the ruling classes who drove the people to revolution. Second the great French Revolution did not exhaust itself in hungry lines before

bakeries. The whole of modern France, in many respects the whole of modern civilization, arose out of the bath of the French Revolution!

In the course of the Civil War in the United States in the '60s of the past century, 50,000 men were killed. Can these sacrifices be justified?

From the standpoint of the American slaveholder and the ruling classes of Great Britain who marched with them – no! From the standpoint of the Negro or of the British working man – absolutely. And from the standpoint of the development of humanity as a whole there can be no doubt whatever. Out of the Civil War of the '60s came the present United States with its unbounded practical initiative, its rationalized technique, and its economic energy. On these achievements of Americanism, humanity will build the new society.

The October Revolution penetrated deeper than any of its predecessors into the Holy of Holies of society-into the property relations. So much the longer time is necessary to reveal the creative consequences of the Revolution in all spheres of life. But the general direction of the upheaval is already clear: the Soviet Republic has no reason whatever to bow its head before the capitalists accusers and speak the language of apology.

In order to appreciate the new regime from the stand-point of human development, one must first answer the question, “How does social progress express itself and how can it be measured?”

### **The balance sheet of October**

The deepest, the most objective and the most indisputable criterion says: progress can be measured by the growth of the productivity of social labor. From this angle the estimate of the October Revolution is already given by experience. The principle of socialistic organization has for the first time in history shown its ability to record results in production unheard of in a short space of time.

The curve of the industrial development of Russia expressed in crude index numbers is as follows, taking 1913, the last year before the war as 100. The year 1920, the highest point of the civil war, is also the lowest point in industry – only 25, that is to say, a quarter of the pre-war production. In 1925 it rose to 75, that is, three-quarters of the pre-war production; in 1929 about 200, in 1932: 300, that is to say, three times as much as on the eve of the war.

The picture becomes even more striking in the light of the international index. From 1925 to 1932 the industrial production of Germany has diminished one and a half times, in America twice, in the Soviet Union it has increased fourfold. These figures speak for themselves.

I have no intention of denying or concealing the seamy side of the Soviet economy. The results of the industrial index are extraordinarily influenced by the unfavorable development of agriculture, that is to say, in the domain which essentially has not yet risen to Socialist methods, but at the same time had been led on the road to collectivization with insufficient preparation, bureaucratically rather than technically and economically. This is a great question, which however goes beyond the limits of my lecture.

The index numbers cited require another important reservation. The indisputable and, in their way, splendid results of Soviet industrialization demand a further economic checking-up from the stand point of the mutual adaptation of the various elements of the economy, their dynamic equilibrium and consequently their productive capacity. Here great difficulties and even set backs are inevitable. Socialism does not arise in its perfected form from the five-year Plan like Minerva from the head of

Jupiter, or Venus from the foam of the sea. Before it are decades of persistent work, of mistakes, corrections, and reorganization. Moreover, let us not forget that socialist construction in accordance with its very nature can only reach perfection on the international arena. But even the most favorable economic balance sheet of the results so far obtained could reveal only the incorrectness of the preliminary calculations, the faults of planning and errors of direction. It could in no way refute the empirically firmly established fact – the possibility, with the aid of socialist methods, of raising the productivity of collective labor to an unheard of height. This conquest, of world historical importance, cannot be taken away from us by anybody or anything.

After what has been said it is scarcely worthwhile to spend time on the complaints that the October Revolution has brought Russia to the downfall of its civilization. That is the voice of the disquieted ruling houses and salons. The feudal bourgeois “civilization” overthrown by the proletarian upheaval was only barbarism with decorations *a la* Talmi. While it remained inaccessible to the Russian people, it brought little that was new to the treasury of mankind.

But even with respect to this civilization, which is so bemoaned by the white émigrés, we must put the question more precisely – in what sense has it been destroyed? Only in one sense: the monopoly of a small minority in the treasures of civilization has been done away with. But everything of cultural value in the old Russian civilization has remained untouched. The “Huns” of Bolshevism have shattered neither the conquests of the mind nor the creations of art. On the contrary, they carefully collected the monuments of human creativeness and arranged them in model order. The culture of the monarchy, the nobility and the bourgeoisie has now become the culture of the historic museums.

The people visit these museums eagerly. But they do not live in them. They learn. They construct. The fact alone that the October Revolution taught the Russian people, the dozens of peoples of Tsarist Russia, to read and write stands immeasurably higher than the whole former hot-house Russian civilization.

The October Revolution has laid the foundations for a new civilization which is designed, not for a select few, but for all. This is felt by the masses of the whole world. Hence their sympathy for the Soviet Union which is as passionate as once was their hatred for Tsarist Russia.

Human language is an irreplaceable instrument not only for giving names to events, but also for their valuation. By filtering out that which is accidental, episodic, artificial, it absorbs into itself that which is essential, characteristic, of full weight. Notice with what sensibility the languages of civilized nations have distinguished two epochs in the developments of Russia. The culture of the nobility brought into world currency such barbarisms as Tsar, Cossack, pogrom, *nagaika*. You know these words and what they mean. The October Revolution introduced into the language of the world such words as Bolshevik, Soviet, *kolkhoz*, Gosplan, *piatileka*. Here practical linguistics holds its historical supreme court!

The most profound meaning of the Revolution, but the hardest to submit to immediate measurement, consists in the fact that it forms and tempers the character of the people. The conception of the Russian people as slow, passive, melancholy, mystical, is widely spread and not accidental. It has its roots, in the past. But in Western countries up to the present time those far reaching changes which have been introduced into the character of the people by the revolution, have not been sufficiently considered. Could it be otherwise?

Every man with experience of life can recall the picture of some youth that he has known, receptive, lyrical, all too susceptible, who later becomes suddenly under the influence of a powerful moral impetus, stronger, better balanced and hardly recognizable. In the developments of a whole nation, such moral transformations are wrought by the revolution.

The February insurrection against the autocracy, the struggle against the nobility, against the imperialist war, for peace, for land, for national equality, the October insurrection, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and of those parties which supported it, or sought agreements with the bourgeoisie, three years of civil war on a front of 5000 miles, the years of blockade, hunger, misery, and epidemics, the years of tense economic reconstruction, of new difficulties and renunciations-these make a hard but good school. A heavy hammer smashes glass, but forges steel. The hammer of the revolution is forging the steel of the people's character.

“Who will believe,” wrote a Tsarist general, Zalweski, with indignation shortly after the upheaval, “that a porter or a watchman suddenly becomes a chief justice, a hospital attendant the director of the hospital, a barber an office-holder, a corporal a commander-in-chief, a day-worker a mayor, a locksmith the director of a factory?”

“Who will believe it?” But it had to be believed. They could do nothing else but believe it, when the corporals defeated the generals, when the mayor – the former day-worker – broke the resistance of the old bureaucracy, the wagon greaser put the transportation system into order, the locksmith as director put the industrial equipment into working condition. “Who will believe it?” Let anyone only try not to believe it.

For an explanation of the extraordinary persistence which the masses of the people of the Soviet Union are showing throughout the years of the revolution, many foreign observers rely, in accord with ancient habit, on the “passivity” of the Russian character. Gross anachronism! The revolutionary masses endure privations patiently but not passively. With their own hands they are creating a better future and are determined to create it at any cost. Let the enemy class only attempt to impose his will from outside on these patient masses! No, better, he should not try!

### **The Revolution and its place in history**

Let me now, in closing, attempt to ascertain the place of the October Revolution, not only in the history of Russia but in the history of the world. During the year of 1917, in a period of eight months, two historical curves intersect. The February upheaval – that belated echo of the great struggles which had been carried out in the past centuries on the territories of Holland, England, France, nearly all over Continental Europe – takes its place in the series of bourgeois revolutions. The October Revolution proclaimed and opened the domination of the proletariat. World capitalism suffered its first great defeat on the Russian territory. The chain broke at its weakest link. But it was the chain that broke, and not only the link.

Capitalism has outlived itself as a world system. It has ceased to fulfill its essential function: the raising of the level of human power and human wealth. Humanity cannot remain stagnant at the level which it has reached. Only a powerful increase in productive force and a sound, planned, that is, socialist organization of production and distribution can assure humanity – all humanity – of a decent standard of life and at the same time give it the precious feeling of freedom with respect to its own economy. Freedom in two senses – first of all man will no longer be compelled to devote the greater part of his life to physical toil. Second, he will no longer be dependent on the laws of the market, that is, on the blind and obscure forces which work behind his back. He will build his economy freely,

according to plan, with compass in hand. This time it is a question of subjecting the anatomy of society to the X-ray through and through, of disclosing all its secrets and subjecting all its functions to the reason and the will of collective humanity. In this sense, socialism must become a new step in the historical advance of mankind. Before our ancestor, who first armed himself with a stone axe, the whole of nature represented a conspiracy of secret and hostile forces. Since then, the natural sciences hand in hand with practical technology, have illuminated nature down to its most secret depths. By means of electrical energy, the physicist passes judgment on the nucleus of the atom. The hour is not far when science will easily solve the task of alchemists, and turn manure into gold and gold into manure. Where the demons and furies of nature once raged, now reigns over more courageously the industrious will of man.

But while he wrestled victoriously with nature, man built up his relations to order men blindly almost like the bee or the ant. Slowly and very haltingly he approached the problems of human society. The Reformation represented the first victory of bourgeois individualism in a domain which had been ruled by dead tradition. From the church, critical thought went on to the State. Born in the struggle with absolutism and the medieval estates, the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people and of the rights of man and the citizen grew stronger. Thus the system of parliamentarianism arose. Critical thought penetrated into the domain of government administration. The political rationalism of democracy was the highest achievement of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

But between nature and the state stands economic life. Technical science liberated man from the tyranny of the old elements – earth, water, fire and air – only to subject him to its own tyranny. Man ceased to be a slave to nature to become a slave to the machine, and, still worse, a slave to supply and demand. The present world crisis testifies in especially tragic fashion how man, who dives to the bottom of the ocean, who rises up to the stratosphere, who converses on invisible waves from the Antipodes, how this proud and daring ruler of nature remains a slave to the blind forces of his own economy. The historical task of our epoch consists in replacing the uncontrolled play of the market by reasonable planning, in disciplining the forces of production, compelling them to work together in harmony and obediently serve the needs of mankind. Only on this new social basis will man be able to stretch his weary limbs and – every man and every woman, not only a selected few – become a citizen with full power in the realm of thought.

### **The Future of Man**

But this is not yet the end of the road. No, it is only the beginning. Man calls himself the crown of creation. He has a certain right to that claim. But who has asserted that present-day man is the last and highest representative of the species *Homo Sapiens*? No, physically as well as spiritually he is very far from perfection, prematurely born biologically, with feeble thought, and has not produced any new organic equilibrium.

It is true that humanity has more than once brought forth giants of thought and action, who tower over their contemporaries like summits in a chain of mountains. The human race has a right to be proud of its Aristotle, Shakespeare, Darwin, Beethoven, Goethe, Marx, Edison and Lenin. But why are they so rare? Above all, because almost without exception they came out of the middle and upper classes. Apart from rare exceptions, the sparks of genius in the suppressed depths of the people are choked before they can burst into flame. But also because the processes of creating, developing and educating a human being have been and remain essentially a matter of chance, not illuminated by theory and practice, not subjected to consciousness and will.



Anthropology, biology, physiology and psychology have accumulated mountains of material to raise up before mankind in their full scope the tasks of perfecting and developing body and spirit. Psychoanalysis, with the inspired hand of Sigmund Freud, has lifted the cover of the well which is poetically called the “soul”. And what has been revealed? Our conscious thought is only a small part of the work of the dark psychic forces. Learned divers descend to the bottom of the ocean and there take photographs of mysterious fishes. Human thought, descending to the bottom of its own psychic sources must shed light on the most mysterious driving forces of the soul and subject them to reason and to will.

Once he has done with the anarchic forces of his own society man will set to work on himself, in the pestle and retort of the chemist. For the first time mankind will regard itself as raw material, or at best as a physical and psychic semi-finished product. Socialism will mean a leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom in this sense also, that the man of today, with all his contradictions and lack of harmony, will open the road for a new and happier race.

---

### Notes

**Bonaparte, Napoleon I (1769-1821):** Seized power in a *coup d'état* in 1804, proclaiming the French empire and himself emperor.

**Clausewitz, Karl Von (1780-1831):** Prussian army officer, military theoretician.

**Duma:** Parliament in Russia before 1917.

**Jacobins:** Popular name for members of the Society of the Friends of the Constitution, who were the radical wing of the French revolution.

**Kerensky, Alexander (1882-1970):** Reformist Prime Minister in Russia in 1917, overthrown by the October Revolution.

**Liebkecht, Wilhelm (1826-1900):** Alongside Bebel founder of the German Social Democracy.

**Liebkecht, Karl (1871-1919):** Leader of the left wing of the German Social Democracy, opposed World War One, founded Spartakusbund with Rosa Luxembourg. Murdered by counterrevolutionary troops in January 1919.

**Mensheviks:** Reformist wing of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDLP), until 1912 when it and the Bolsheviks became separate parties. The Mensheviks opposed the October 1917 revolution.

**Miliukov, Paul (1859-1943):** Leader of the capitalist Cadet Party in Russia. Minister of Foreign Affairs until May 1917.

**Poincaré, Raymond (1860-1934):** President of France, 1913-20, Prime Minister 1912, 1922-24, 1926-29.

**Social Democratic International:** Historically Social Democratic was the title adopted by many workers' parties. The International collapsed in 1914 when a majority of its parties supported the imperialist war.

**Social Revolutionaries (SRs):** Peasant socialist party. Split in 1917, the Left SRs participated for a period in the Soviet government; the rightist SRs opposed the revolution.

Previous (Russian Orthodox Church). Next (Russian Symbolism). The Russian Revolution of 1917 was one of the seminal events of the early twentieth century. In the face of mounting opposition and disastrous defeats in World War I, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated power and was replaced by the Provisional Government. It was not able to successfully disengage from the war or resolve the economic chaos that resulted from the collapse of the old regime. Because of these failures, the Provisional Government was

### When Did the Russian Revolution End? - Controversy.

Strictly speaking, the duration of a revolution is timed from the complete overthrow of the established government by those who were previously subject to it, to the successful formation of a new form of government and a general return to a structured life. For historians this last part, the general return to a structured life after the Bolshevik Revolution, is a head scratcher. Therefore, it is a matter of debate when exactly the Russian Revolution ended. The Russian Revolution was a pair of revolutions in Russia in 1917 which dismantled the Tsarist autocracy and led to the rise of the Soviet Union. The Russian Empire collapsed with the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II and the old regime was replaced by a provisional government during the first revolution of February 1917 (March in the Gregorian calendar; the older Julian calendar was in use in Russia at the time). Alongside it arose grassroots community assemblies (called 'Soviets') which contended for authority. The Russian Revolution inspired a generation of artists to create new forms of artistic expression. In the first of a series of illustrated articles Paul Rouhan explores the art of the revolution. The October Revolution: lessons and legacy. The Revolution 1917 event is this Saturday 25th February at Rich Mix London. Louise Bryant, an American radical and journalist, wrote a stirring account of what she witnessed in revolutionary Petrograd. This is an excerpt from her book "Six Red Months in Russia" Lenin's State and Revolution.