



THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917

A Speak Out Now Pamphlet

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Introduction

The Beginnings of the Liberation of Humanity

The 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution celebrates that the Russian working class, fed up with the misery of capitalist rule, overthrew the capitalists and launched a workers' state. The Russian workers led the people of Russia in an effort to build a better world, and they reached out to help the rest of the international working class to do the same. The workers of Russia created their own system to govern the country, guaranteeing that the majority would have the final say. They created this system to solve the severe social crisis that Russia suffered as a result of World War I, a war fought by the major capitalist powers to redivide the world's resources among themselves. In achieving this victory, the Russian workers showed how the working class might begin to solve the problems of modern society.

However, the Soviet Union no longer exists, and capitalists continue to rule the world today. So what can we learn from the Russian workers' experience 100 years ago that can help us in our own struggles today?

Prelude to Revolution

At the turn of the 20th Century, Russia was just entering the Industrial Revolution. The vast majority of the population were poor peasants; they were ruled by a nobility headed by a dictatorial hereditary ruler, the Tsar (king). Until 1861, peasants (called serfs) were obligated by law to till the land for their noble masters. Fearing serf rebellions, the Tsar abolished serfdom in 1861, but little changed in the living conditions of the poor peasants.



*1905 Bloody Sunday massacre of workers –
painting by Ivan Vladimirov*

By 1900, the tsars had built a modern standing army, roads and railroads, and developed a military industry. Neighboring countries such as Georgia and Ukraine were invaded and swallowed up into the Russian Empire; Siberia was colonized. The peasants were taxed heavily to pay for these developments, and it was the peasantry that built the roads and fought in the army. Capitalists based in England, France, and other countries were investing in modern factories in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities. Many peasants went to the cities to work in the factories. The industry and military of the Russian Empire was built on the suffering of the Russian people.

The millions of peasants who moved to the cities were hoping for a better life. But they were frustrated by low wages and terrible working conditions. High prices and the lack of land for subsistence had caused enormous famines and peasant uprisings throughout the 1890s. Workers and peasants all over the country were rebelling. Large strikes took place in the cities. In 1902, workers started a wave of illegal strikes across the country. In 1903, fully one-third of the army was engaged in holding back this revolutionary tide. There were no political rights and there was no democracy. All political organizations were forbidden, and trade unions were outlawed.

The Tsarist government attempted to shore up the country's political situation by invading and seizing the territories of Manchuria and Korea. In February of 1904, this provoked a bloody war with imperial Japan, which also sought control over the Asian mainland. The war, while generating an initial spark of patriotism, failed to unify the country behind the Tsar and only served to deepen the turmoil.

In December 1904, citywide strikes practically shut down St. Petersburg, where the Tsar's government was headquartered. A mass march on the Tsar's winter palace in January 1905 was met by gunfire from the Tsar's troops, killing hundreds. This led to nearly a year of mass strikes and peasant uprisings. In the process of the struggle, workers organized themselves into workplace and citywide democratic councils (called "soviets" in Russian) to plan and carry out their activities. Many members of the soviets came from several different political parties,

representing different sections of the workers as well as soldiers, sailors, and peasants. The revolutionary movement of 1905 was defeated within the year, largely because the workers had failed to see the importance of linking their fight with that of the peasants. The Tsar's army was composed mostly of peasants, who did not yet see that they had common interests with the workers. This allowed the Tsar to use them as a force against the workers. The 1905 revolutionary movement ended with severe repression and with a series of token reforms by the regime, including the creation of a powerless legislative body called the Duma.

Socialist organizations were illegal and by necessity operated underground. They came to the fore as leaders and organizers when the workers themselves were ready to fight. While these fights generated few gains and were always met with intense repression, they showed the workers which organizations could be relied on to support and perhaps lead their struggles. Between 1905 and 1917, there were periods of workers' strikes and peasant uprisings. The Duma had no real power. Unlike other revolutionary parties, the Bolsheviks had no illusions about the role of the Duma. They ran candidates for the Duma because the speeches of representatives to the Duma could be published, while the newspapers of workers' organizations were banned. The representatives could expose the conditions in the factories. They could discuss the struggles of the workers and lay out their programs through speeches. This helped keep political discussion alive in the working class.

Revolutionaries differed on perspectives and tactics, and they were split into three main political groupings: the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks were two factions of the same party, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. They agreed that the immediate task of the coming revolution was to do away with the Tsarist state and to expropriate the large landlords so the peasants could take the land. The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks both expected that through the revolution, the workers would be able to win reforms like the eight-hour day. They differed on matters of party organization and their analysis of the role that the working class would play in the Russian Revolution.

The Mensheviks argued for a party of all who agreed in principle with the ideas of socialism. They had many

workers in their ranks but they were loosely organized alongside their middle-class members. They believed the working class would participate in the coming revolution in an alliance under the leadership of the Russian capitalists, following in the tradition of the French Revolution.

The Bolsheviks were more closely linked to the industrial working class. They organized into the party only those who were participants in revolutionary activity among the workers – those who were professional revolutionaries. They understood that if the working class were to play a role in the revolution, it would need to struggle for leadership of that revolution, against the capitalists, and in alliance with the peasantry.

The Socialist Revolutionaries were descended from the older Russian non-Marxist revolutionary movements called the Populist or Narodnik movements. These were made up of young revolutionaries from the nobility and the middle class who had gone to the countryside to organize the peasantry. Their theories put forward a utopian socialism of Russian peasant communes, freed from the influence of Europe. They demanded land reform and a democracy based on peasant communes.

Because British and French capitalists had invested so much in Russia's industrial modernization, the Tsar was the loyal servant of these countries in their conflicts with the capitalists of Germany and Eastern Europe. World War I (1914-1918) was a fight among capitalist powers to take colonies and markets from each other. Russia was aligned with England, France, and their allies against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and others. Workers and peasants on both sides were sent by the millions to the trenches to die so the capitalists could enhance their profits. The war meant millions of lives lost in Russia alone through combat and starvation.

1917: February to June

In early 1917, after three years of horrific war, a mass movement of workers, peasants, soldiers, and sailors overthrew the Tsar's government, demanding an end to the war. It started in February when strikes broke out in the major factories, including the Putilov iron works, the largest factory in Petrograd (St. Petersburg's new name since 1914). Enormous demonstrations filled the streets. The Tsar's troops, sick of the war, refused to fire on the

people. They mingled with the crowds and dissolved into the population.

On February 23, International Women's Day (a day of protest begun by women workers in the U.S. in 1909 that became an international workers' holiday), the women of Russia demonstrated against the slaughter of the war, calling for bread and peace. They marched to where the Tsar hid in his palace in Petrograd and rallied there. The Tsar was unable to rely on his soldiers to break up the demonstration. Without anyone obeying his orders, the Tsar's power dissolved and he fled the city.

Workers and their allies responded to the disintegrating social and political situation by organizing soviets like they had in 1905. The property-owning classes feared the soviets, and with their remaining legitimacy, they created a Provisional Government of pro-capitalist politicians. It promised democratic elections, but it continued the Russian alliance with the English, French, U.S., and other capitalists in the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Provisional Government was built on top of what remained of the Tsarist state apparatus: its police, its bureaucracy, and portions of the army. It was set up by representatives of the same classes that had ruled before, with the addition of some moderate middle class democrats. It promised democracy and land reform but only after the "experts" sat down to write a constitution. Until then the Provisional Government would rule. The war policy and starvation would continue.

The situation was dire, but the prospects for a working-class revolution were uncertain. In fact, even many Bolsheviks believed the most that could happen in Russia would be the establishment of a pro-capitalist liberal democratic government. A number of Bolshevik leaders, including Vladimir Lenin, were in exile in other countries. With the overthrow of the Tsar's regime, they made their way back into Russia. Lenin arrived in April.

Many workers were active in or followed several different political parties; all of the parties participated in the soviets, including the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries. Lenin realized that even a majority of Bolsheviks did not yet believe that the working class could lead the revolution beyond liberal democracy. The working class was a minority of Russian society, while poor peasants in the countryside were the largest social class. So one of the key problems was for the workers to win the confidence of the peasants. Lenin



Striking women in Petrograd, February 1917

argued that the working class could win the peasantry to its side by making confiscation of the estates of the landed nobility (the big land owners) a key element of the revolutionary program. He called for no confidence in the Provisional Government and for its replacement by the direct rule of the workers' and peasants' soviets, and through them the withdrawal of Russia from the war, the nationalization of the banks, and workers' control of industry. His ideas took root in the Bolshevik Party and began to influence the soviets.

Lenin called for the building of a new International (an organization of socialist parties from around the world), one that was not compromised by alliances with the capitalists during their bloody competition for domination through World War I. The Bolsheviks recognized that a working-class revolution in Russia or any country could not survive on its own. Socialism would be built in an advanced industrial economy, using the world's resources under the control of the international working class. But they also believed that a Russian workers' revolution could be the spark to ignite revolutions in Germany, England, and other more industrially advanced countries.

June to September

Very quickly the revolutionary tempo picked up. In June, the Provisional Government ordered a major new war effort. They tried to mobilize demonstrations in Petrograd in favor of the war. But the workers organized a larger demonstration, opposing the war and opposing the capitalists. A million armed workers marched in the streets of Petrograd.

The mood of the Petrograd workers was revolutionary. They felt power within their reach and could hardly bear

to suffer the existence of the war-mongering Provisional Government any longer. They demanded an end to the Provisional Government, demonstrating under banners that proclaimed the Bolshevik slogan “All Power to the Soviets!”

The Bolsheviks, however, through the network of their organization, were more keenly attuned to the mood of the rest of the country. They believed that an uprising in Petrograd would be premature. Workers in Moscow and other urban centers were not as organized, confident, and ready to take power into their own hands. Most importantly, the growing peasant movement was not ready. And that meant that the army would likely oppose an insurrection.

Despite their concerns and their opposition to a demonstration that openly challenged the power of the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks participated in the Petrograd demonstration. The demonstration was a show of the workers’ strength and the Bolsheviks could not stand on the sidelines. They went through this experience alongside the rest of the working class. The demonstration did not break out into an open confrontation with the Provisional Government. Those in the Provisional Government clearly understood the threat that was posed to their continued rule. They turned their attention to the Bolsheviks, using their police to harass and imprison many known Party members. The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, with their ministers and functionaries in the government, proved their loyalty to the Provisional Government by actively supporting the repression of these so-called “dangerous extremists” who stood on the side of the working class. As a consequence, they proved for all to see whose side they were really on.



1917 Petrograd Soviet assembly

Despite its attacks on the workers’ movement, the power of the Provisional Government continued to slip. More and more workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants were supporting the Bolsheviks and their program. In September, a capitalist faction tried to launch a coup and install a military dictatorship. But the military leadership couldn’t control its own troops. Rail workers mobilized and disabled rail lines to prevent the transportation of troops to Petrograd, workers’ militias blocked troop trains, and Bolsheviks agitated within the ranks of the military, encouraging desertions and the refusal to follow orders. The workers in Petrograd organized their own militias, called Red Guards, to defend the soviets in the factories. The coup failed, signaling the end of capitalist rule and the beginning of a new era.

October—All Power to the Soviets!

Arms in hand, the workers didn’t need to wait long to test their strength against the Provisional Government.

Well before 1917, the workers had begun building their own defense guards to protect strikes and demonstrations. In September, workers at 79 Petrograd factories were teaching themselves to use weapons and fight together. Workers stood guard on a rotating basis, a third of the workforce standing guard while the others worked. Regular wages were paid for hours on guard duty. Officers were elected. On the eve of the October uprising, there were 20,000 Red Guards in Petrograd, and 100,000 in the country as a whole. The people were armed and ready to build a new society. They had the means to back up their demands for “All Power to the Soviets!”

Clearly, the Soviets and the Provisional Government could not coexist. The working class anticipated the coming national Congress of Soviets on October 25. And with a Bolshevik majority, they would make a clear break with the Provisional Government and dissolve it, placing state power directly in the hands of the workers. But circumstances didn’t wait for the 25th. The decisive moment came a few days earlier. On October 22, Soviet power was put to the test when the Provisional Government ordered the Battleship Aurora to leave the harbor of Petrograd. The crew of the Aurora was known to all. The sailors, many having been skilled factory workers, were some of the most committed revolutionaries. If the revolutionaries lost their control of this modern warship, it would be a decisive defeat for the workers’ revolutionary



Red Guard detachment in Petrograd, October 1917

movement. The crew took control of the ship, positioning it across from the Winter Palace where the Provisional Government was meeting in support of the Revolution. Quickly the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries mobilized and sent armed detachments to the hall where the Provisional Government was meeting. The Red Guard announced that the old government served no purpose and was ordered to retire. The Provisional Government dissolved just as the Tsar's government had. It had no choice; its troops would no longer follow its orders. The Congress of Soviets met two days later with full power and authority. All power lay in the hands of the workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants.

What the Workers Did

The Soviet government was the first example of what workers can do on a national scale with the power in their hands. They withdrew Russia from the war. They offered national independence to the peoples subjugated by the Russian Empire. They supported the peasant movement which had already begun to redistribute the land. They took over the factories, sending their Red Guards to defend striking workers in every dispute with the old bosses. The workers' police force was for protecting people, not rich people's property. They established fair and open courts for the first time in Russia. Judges were elected rather than appointed, and trials were held before juries of ordinary people. They separated church and state while recognizing the rights of all to freedom of speech and belief. They established equal rights for women, legalizing abortion and setting up communal day care, public laundries, and public kitchens, to liberate women

from housework. They ended the persecution of Jews, gays and other oppressed members of society.

Ordinary people participated in culture and politics. Organizations of working people took control of the print media proportional with their support. For example, if a political organization or newspaper had 1000 supporters, it would be given a certain amount of ink and paper and access to printing. If it had 10,000 supporters it would get ten times as much. This is the opposite of the so-called "free press" under capitalism, in which audiences are force-fed misinformation by corporations who own every aspect of the media. Workers actively sought out information. Meetings ran non-stop on political and educational themes. Libraries were open seven days a week and 15 hours a day. Museums, previously the realm of the rich, were open to all.

Perhaps most importantly, the Russian working class offered the rest of the world's workers aid and partnership, forming the Communist International, a network of revolutionary workers' parties, to spread the revolution. This body called together the revolutionary tendencies from socialist organizations and militant unions all over the world. Together they would coordinate their activities, forming revolutionary Communist organizations in their respective countries.

The "Civil War": The Revolution Under Siege

Russia suffered immensely from World War I. Millions died in the bloody conflict. The population faced a situation of collective desperation. The economy was in shambles and starvation was rampant. The response of the capitalists in the major centers of power to the Revolution was to join together and send their armies to destroy the workers' state. Revolutionary Russia was invaded by 14 countries, including Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Italy, Canada, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, China, and Serbia. Some reactionary layers of the peasantry, led by former members of the aristocratic land-owning class, organized remnants of the Tsarist army into the White Army to fight against the Revolution. The Revolution faced a civil war. But it was largely an attempt by the imperialist powers to overthrow the Revolution and put the country back under the control of the Tsar's old generals.

The country was blockaded, starved, and battered. Many of the best revolutionary organizers and workers,

educated by the process of revolution, volunteered for and died on the front lines. Workers, who had been the driving force of the Revolution, found themselves unemployed and starving thanks to the ravaged economy. Many left the cities to return to their ancestral villages in search of food. The soviets ceased to meet and oversee the functions of the state. Without the active participation of the population, the Bolshevik Party became not only the source of state personnel, but also the decision-making body as well. The Party had fused with the state.

Without aid from workers' revolutions taking over other parts of the world economy, Russia was doomed to reproduce all of the pettiness and degradation that hopelessness and long-term scarcity can inflict on people.

Internationalism

The workers' leadership in the Bolshevik Party knew that the workers couldn't hold power for long in a poor and devastated country without support from similar revolutions in wealthier countries. Following the workers' victory in Russia, between 1917 and 1927 workers all over the world felt a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm, and they responded to their own oppression. There were workers' uprisings of one sort or another—from strikes to general strikes to revolutionary attempts—from Europe to North America to Asia. The slaughter and insanity of World War I proved to many that the capitalists were incapable of running the world for the benefit of humanity.

The leadership of the Russian working class sought to support workers' movements in other countries. But their resources were very limited and the revolutionary attempts in other countries failed, largely because they lacked revolutionary parties like the Bolshevik Party. A revolution in an industrial powerhouse such as Germany would have changed the course of history. Another revolutionary power, especially an industrialized country, would be able to lend its technological and industrial strength to Russia's recovery. As it stood, all the Russian workers had to share was poverty and the hope for revolution elsewhere. Without the high level of technology and material wealth generated by the world market – the material basis for socialism – the people of Russia faced a situation of desperate poverty. For most, their first thought was to survive.

Disappointed and frustrated, the workers fell away from the government they had created to concentrate on their own individual survival. This created a situation where those in the governing apparatus made an increasing number of decisions without the consultation of the majority of the people. Unchecked, this led to the development of a bureaucracy that gradually grew, until it eventually assumed control of the country, taking more and more privileges for itself and ruling in its own interests. The soviets became rubber stamps for a bureaucracy that replaced the revolutionary organization that had been the Bolshevik Party.

Stalin was the leader of this reactionary bureaucracy. With no perspective of the essential need for a world revolution, Stalin put forward the theory of "socialism in one country": that Russia by itself could build a socialist society. This was the negation of the basic tenets of socialism that had been developed in the workers' movement and developed by Marx, Lenin, and the Bolshevik Party.

At its core, the bureaucracy represented a truce with capitalism so that it could stay in power. The international working class remained in chains, but the "Soviet" state withdrew from the working-class fight to liberate humanity through the overthrow of the capitalist order. To achieve a truce of sorts with the capitalists, the Russian state couldn't be seen as a threat to imperialism. The Stalinist policy attached the Communist Parties around the world to capitalist parties, especially those that were seen as being more "progressive." This meant dissolving the revolutionary forces into nationalist movements in the colonized world, instead of fighting for the working class to lead the revolutions and take power as it had in Russia. It threw its support behind the left-wing bourgeois parties of the capitalist countries, which manipulated the militancy of the workers into struggles through their unions or hopes in elections in the capitalist governments. And when the workers were hesitant to follow a path of mild reforms, the governments and the Stalinist organizations didn't hesitate to suppress the revolutionaries. In China and in Spain, in Britain and in France, mass movements of the working class were strangled, and revolutionary attempts by the workers were sabotaged. The bureaucrats in the Soviet Union presided over a decimated working class, and betrayed the

international working class by turning the Communist International into a brake on the world revolution.

The Bolshevik Party was not dead, however, nor were its allies in other countries. Many revolutionaries struggled against the odds to reverse this degeneration. The International Left Opposition was formed as a means to attempt a regeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Revolution. With the leadership of Leon Trotsky, it collected some of the most devoted and politically conscious of the revolutionary generation. In Russia, they organized meetings in the unions, in the Party, and among workers who were no longer in these organizations. In other countries, they set out to win the revolutionaries in the Communist Parties away from the counter-revolutionary policies of Stalinism. Against all odds, they continued the Bolshevik legacy, attempting to explain what was happening in Russia and the international workers' movement. They fought against the demoralization encouraged by Stalinism, arguing that the working class could return to power in Russia and win power in other countries by organizing under

their own banner. The revolution did not spread, and the international working class suffered many defeats.

The success of the Russian workers opened the door to the possibilities of a livable future for all of humanity. The incredible gains of the working class and peasantry in one of the poorest of the newly industrializing countries began to show what is possible when the working class takes power. The Russian workers ended a bloody imperialist war. They shattered the traditions of Russian feudalism that had kept tens of millions of people mired in an oppressive social order. Women, members of minority groups, gays and others trapped in the prejudice and exploitation of Tsarist rule got their first taste of freedom. For the first time, the workers and other oppressed members of society began reorganizing society along cooperative and truly democratic lines in the interest of the majority rather than a minority. They began the task of organizing the international revolution along with revolutionaries from other countries. We can learn and take inspiration from their example.

The Bolshevik Party

A Party of the Revolutionary Working Class

The Bolshevik Party was a reflection of its time. Its organizational structures, the perspectives of its leaders, and its interventions and activities in the working class were all conditioned by the situation of twentieth-century Russia. But the Bolshevik Party also serves as a concrete example for revolutionaries today of how a revolutionary organization based in the working class can lead a successful socialist revolution.

The history of the Bolshevik Party is often distorted. The Bolsheviks are portrayed as a rigid top-down organization controlled by one leader, Vladimir Lenin. This is the story told by historians, who defend the capitalist system and whose perspectives are hostile to socialism and the working class. Their writings repeat the version told by the Russian bureaucrats led by Joseph Stalin; amidst the devastation and chaos resulting from World War I and three years of civil war, they consolidated power in their hands in the most brutal fashion. The original members and leaders of the Bolshevik Party were either killed or imprisoned and tens of thousands of workers and peasants who resisted met a similar end. Both

of these sources put forward a history of the Bolshevik Party to show that Stalinism and dictatorship are built into socialism and Marxism, and were essential to the Bolshevik Party itself. When we look at the real history of the Bolshevik Party, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Bolshevik Party was as democratic as the society it hoped to create. The Bolshevik Party had political factions who fought over slogans, tactics, and overall political perspectives. Lenin was a respected leader with recognized capacities, but he was by no means a dictator. Bolshevik policies were debated, voted on, and carried out, based on the will of the majority. There were harsh arguments and criticisms and leaders like Lenin did not always win out. The self-sacrifice and dedication of Bolsheviks to carry out the Party's politics came from the fact that they themselves had democratically participated in formulating those politics. How else could an organization of the most rebellious and independent-minded individuals be built?

The Early Russian Revolutionary Movement

The Russian revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century arose from two sources. The first and most important source was the anger and misery of millions of Russians, the majority of whom were impoverished peasants bound to the land and forced to work for a small aristocratic class of landlords – the rulers of Russia. Throughout Russian history, there were repeated peasant uprisings against the landlords. But those ended as much from the necessity of the peasants returning to plant and harvest the land as from the Tsarist regime's brutal repression.

The second strand of the Russian revolutionary movement came from intellectuals, the sons and daughters of the aristocrats. Young Russian elites were sent to Germany or France to study in prestigious universities. They compared the relatively free and open culture of their host countries to the narrow traditions of Russia. They learned about constitutions, democracy, freedom of speech and assembly, and even socialism. Some brought these ideas home with them.

In the 1860s and 1870s the growing ranks of these young dissidents worried the authorities, who were often their parents. They called these young people “nihilists,” saying that they believed in nothing – no tradition, no god, no authority. The young people proudly took up this label. There was a rebellious youth culture, and while for many this was just a youthful episode, some returned to Russia as revolutionaries.

These two strands of the Russian revolutionary movement came together in a movement known as “going to the people.” Intellectuals abandoned their aristocratic lives and went to the peasant villages to educate and organize “the people.” They did this by preaching the radical ideas they learned in Western Europe. They came to be known as “Narodniks,” coming from the term *Narod* which means ‘people’ in Russian. The Narodniks viewed the Russian peasantry, which made up 80% of the Russian population, as the class that was most capable of the revolutionary overthrow of the Tsar's regime.

In general, the attempts to educate and organize the peasantry fell flat. Peasants focused their anger locally, at their immediate landlords, and often romanticized the Tsar, imagining that if he only knew what was really happening he would put a stop to it. When the Narodniks showed up in the villages preaching the overthrow of

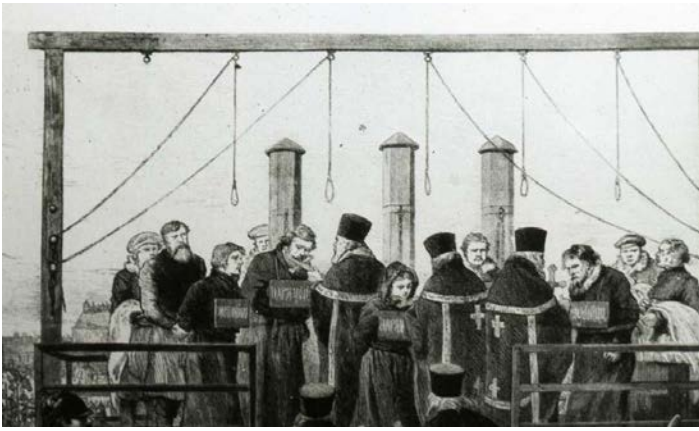


“Barge Haulers on the Volga” by Ilya Repin (1873)

the Tsar, the people they hoped to educate and organize would often run them out of town or turn them in to the authorities. In despair, a section of the Narodniks formed an underground organization, called “Narodnya Volya,” or the “People's Will.” They set out to assassinate the Tsar and do for the peasants what the peasants were unwilling to do for themselves.

One of these militants, George Plekhanov, took another path. He had been part of a Narodnik effort to “go to the people,” in an organization called “Zemlya i Volya” (Land and Freedom), which formed in 1876. In 1877 Plekhanov was tasked by the organization with building up an urban section of Land and Freedom (there was also a peasant and a youth section). In 1878, soon after he began his political activity, there was an explosion of strikes. Inspired by the strike wave, Plekhanov helped form a new group called Black Repartition, which supported a mass propaganda campaign among workers and peasants and opposed acts of terrorism against the Tsar's regime.

In 1880, facing capture by the police, Plekhanov and others close to him were forced to flee to Europe, where they were exposed to the European socialist movement. The socialist movement was made of mass working-class parties in Germany, France, Belgium and England, with regular international conferences and meetings, dozens of theoretical journals, and most importantly a tradition rooted in working-class struggle. Their connection to the socialist movement had a transformative impact on these exiled and isolated Russian socialists. Exile afforded them time to read and discuss ideas. It was during this time that Plekhanov became a convinced Marxist. Marx argued that the working class has the unique capacity to lead a revolutionary movement of all the oppressed,



*Execution of Narodnaya Volya members for assassinating
Tsar Alexander II*

seize power, and abolish exploitation. Marxism provided a theory to explain the emerging movement of workers that Plekhanov had witnessed and that had shaped his political outlook.

But during that same time in Russia, the *Narodnaya Volya* terrorists carried out attacks on government officials and ultimately assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881. After the assassination, repression shattered the revolutionary organizations. The assassination of the Tsar had the opposite of the intended effect – peasants mourned the Tsar and dozens of revolutionaries were hanged. In disarray, the revolutionaries questioned their methods and ideas to consider where they had failed. Most Narodniks rejected Marxism and continued to focus on the peasantry, eventually winning some influence and forming the Socialist Revolutionary Party. A whole section of the Narodniks followed Plekhanov in adopting Marxist ideas. The influence of Marxism in Russia grew and many revolutionaries began to look to the working class as the class with revolutionary potential. In 1883 Plekhanov helped form the first Russian socialist organization, “The Emancipation of Labor.”

The repressive atmosphere in Russia posed many challenges for revolutionary activity. The Narodniks had developed methods to communicate with their comrades in prison, in exile or in other regions of Russia. Their methods were taken up by Marxist revolutionaries. They developed encryption systems and invisible ink. They built false compartments in suitcases to hide documents and literature. In exile in Siberia, they created centers of revolutionary recuperation and education, using books and newspapers that were smuggled in. Workers would

enter prison without much exposure to revolutionary ideas and would come out as Marxist revolutionaries.

1890s – From Propaganda Circles to Agitation

A new generation of revolutionaries was emerging. At first, in the 1880s, this movement numbered less than a hundred. They began activities in working class districts across the Russian empire, forming small underground revolutionary circles. Due to police repression, revolutionaries went to great lengths to remain clandestine. They would use the pretense of organizing adult literacy classes or Sunday schools or tutoring sessions to meet with workers. Revolutionaries would meet workers to read and discuss all sorts of ideas from revolutionary theory to history, science and more. By the end of the 1880s there were hundreds of Marxist propaganda circles reflecting this hunger in the working class for revolutionary ideas. Plekhanov describes a typical worker interested in the circles like this:

After working at the factory 10-11 hours a day, and returning home only in the evening, he would sit at his books until 1 o'clock at night...I was struck by the variety and abundance of the theoretical questions which concerned him...political economy, chemistry, social questions, and the theory of Darwin all occupied his attention...It would have taken decades for him to assuage his intellectual thirst.

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known by his revolutionary nickname, Lenin, was a talented young student organizer in the Emancipation of Labor group. Lenin had been expelled from Kazan University for his revolutionary student activity. Another event that greatly affected him was the execution of his elder brother for a failed assassination attempt on Tsar Nicholas II in 1887.

In 1888, Lenin joined his first propaganda circle to study Marxism. He continued his revolutionary education, moving from one Marxist circle to another as the police broke them up. The struggles of the working class were heating up and as a consequence the education circles were evolving from a discussion of ideas to a discussion of the workers' daily concerns and how to organize a response. Revolutionaries from both the intelligentsia and the working class wrote leaflets describing workers' experiences and concerns, tying them

to a general critique of society. They secretly printed the leaflets or often wrote the leaflets by hand. Then the leaflets would be delivered to the workers to pass out inside the factory.

In 1895, Lenin participated in building the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, consisting of about twenty people, from both the intelligentsia and the working class. It saw its primary task as building broader links to St. Petersburg factory workers using agitational leaflets. Within months, the main leaders of the group were arrested, including Lenin, but the seeds they planted bore fruit. In 1896 a massive strike wave broke out in St. Petersburg. The workers demanded shorter hours and higher wages. It lasted three weeks, spread to over twenty factories and involved about 30,000 workers. The leaders of the strikes were workers educated in the revolutionary circles.

Iskra – From Disconnected Groups to a Revolutionary Party

Even though the strike wave was enormous, it was not able to spread to other cities. There was little to no communication between revolutionaries in different cities allowing them to share experiences and learn from each other's successes and failures. They needed a national organization that could bring all of the circles together, allowing for greater collaboration and division of labor.

In 1898, nine delegates from different groups organized a conference to form the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). The goal was to build a mass workers' organization, modeled on the European social democratic parties. They agreed on the need to create a central committee to facilitate communication between the various regional committees, to establish methods to fund the committees and to produce literature. But about a week after the first congress met, most of the delegates were arrested, along with two of the three members of the central committee. Nevertheless, the idea of a party had taken hold.

While in exile, Plekhanov joined forces with Lenin and his co-thinker Ivan Martov, the two principle leaders of the

League of Struggle. They formulated an organizational strategy to cohere a revolutionary party. They saw the publication of a national newspaper as an important step. It could connect revolutionaries scattered abroad with those in Russia. It would solidify a national organization of revolutionaries that could intervene politically in the class struggle, and also allow its members to engage in political debate on important questions. The first newspaper of the RSDLP, *Iskra* (The Spark), started publication in December of 1900. The editorial board in Europe consisted of Lenin, Plekhanov, Martov and three others. After about three years of publishing *Iskra*, the RSDLP began to cohere a national organization and grew to a few thousand revolutionaries and supporters.

The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks

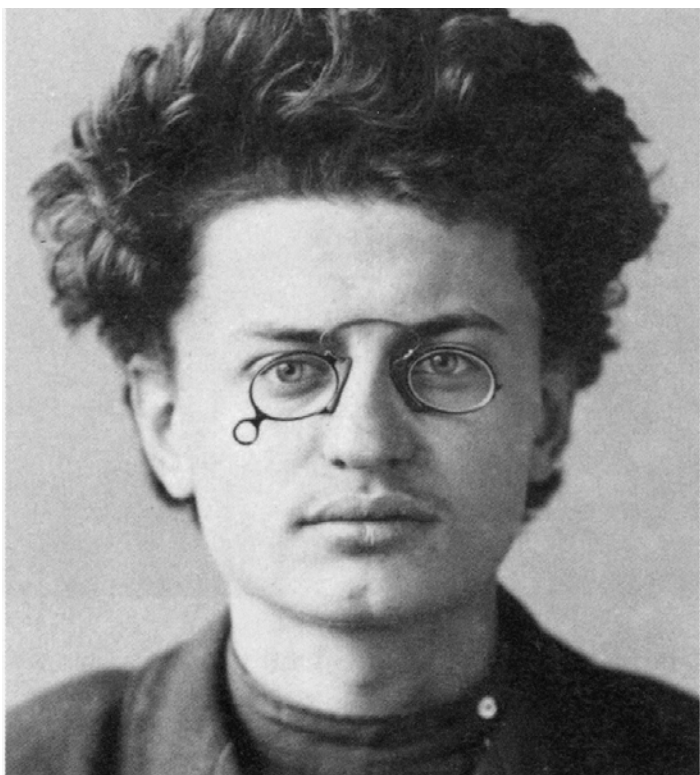
Between 1901 and 1903, the number of strikes increased and grew to involve tens of thousands of workers. In July and August of 1903, the Second Congress of the RSDLP met in London. A majority of the Second Congress' delegates were supporters of *Iskra*, and everyone anticipated the formation of a unified party organization led by the *Iskra* team. However, instead the Second Congress marked the beginning of what would become a major split in the organization. Ivan Martov proposed a loose definition of membership that would allow anyone who supported the organization to vote on organizational decisions. Lenin wanted only active members who did work to be able to vote, not those who he labeled "chatter boxes." The RSDLP split into two factions over

this question: the Bolsheviks (from the Russian word for 'majority') around Lenin, and the Mensheviks (from the Russian word for 'minority') around Martov.

Both factions believed that the primary goal of the revolution would be to overthrow the Tsar and abolish the landlord class by dividing the land among the poor peasants. Both factions believed it was likely that after the overthrow of the Tsar, Russia would enter a period of capitalist development during which time the workers would build their organizations in the open as



Iskra, issue no. 1, 1900



Leon Trotsky, 1902

workers had in Europe, and prepare for the future socialist revolution.

The Mensheviks adopted the position that capitalists would lead the revolution at the head of a coalition of all of those who were oppressed by the Tsar and the landlords. According to the Mensheviks, the task of the revolutionaries was to operate as the leftwing in coalition with the capitalists against the monarchy and to defend the workers against any attacks by the new ruling class of capitalists.

The Bolsheviks shared the analysis that the primary task of the revolution was to smash the Tsarist state and the landlords. But they argued that because the small class of capitalists was so weak and so tied to the old Tsarist regime, they would end up siding with the monarchy, and try to crush any revolutionary attempts by the working class. The Bolsheviks believed that the only social force capable of overthrowing the Tsar was the working class united with the peasantry. The working class would have to form its own revolutionary government in alliance with the peasantry.

Leon Trotsky, a young revolutionary organizer in the Ukraine, opposed the theories of both factions. Trotsky agreed with the Mensheviks on the question of

organization. But he agreed with the Bolsheviks on the question of the seizure of power by the working class. He went even further, arguing that the working class could not limit itself to abolishing the landlord class and the Tsar's state. If the workers gained power they would have to begin transforming society in a socialist direction, and the Russian workers' revolution would be the first in a chain of workers' revolutions in other countries. This theory of "permanent revolution" was seen by both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks as a wild fantasy, but actually turned out to be an accurate forecast of later events.

Organized as two factions, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks cooperated as two wings of the same party, working together in most day-to-day activities. Yet the split was important because it began to draw the lines between those preparing for workers' power and those preparing to organize the working class to support the capitalists.

The 1905 Revolution

In 1904, the Tsarist government provoked a war with Japan over control of territory in Mongolia and Korea. The demands of the war intensified the exploitation of workers, who responded with new strike waves. By January of 1905, thousands of workers marched to the Tsar's palace with a petition demanding an 8-hour day, pay increases and other demands. The Tsar ordered the palace guards to fire on the workers, killing about 1,000 people. The event became known as Bloody Sunday.

Soon strikes spread to other cities involving tens of thousands of workers. A new form of workers' organization was born: the workers' soviet ('soviet' means 'council' in Russian). The soviet emerged as a way for the working class to organize itself and coordinate the new movement. Workers elected their own representatives to a council; these delegates were known militants, elected and recallable at any time. Decisions were taken openly and democratically by a majority vote in assemblies where all questions were thoroughly discussed. The soviet entered into the revolutionary toolkit of the Russian working class.

Workers elected representative to the soviets from the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists and even members of religious cults. Some Bolsheviks, not seeing the potential of this new

organizational form, walked out of the St. Petersburg¹ Soviet. But the majority of socialist militants were swept up in the movement and took their places as representatives of the workers in the soviets. Trotsky was elected president of the St. Petersburg Soviet, the heart of the workers' movement.

Reaction and Retreat

The 1905 Revolution was a massive challenge to the Tsar. The soviets organized strikes and marches, demanding a constitutional government, democracy, freedom of speech and organization. The navy, recruited mainly from the industrial working class, mutinied to support the Revolution. The naval battleship Potemkin was taken over by its crew and sailed into the Odessa harbor to support the Revolution. The sailors of the Kronstadt naval fortress, the main protection from invasions from the sea for St. Petersburg, formed a soviet and took control of this key military installation. But the workers' movement was isolated from the peasantry, who made up the bulk of the army. The Tsar was able to call upon the troops, and the army put down the 1905 Revolution. The delegates to the Soviet were arrested; in a dramatic trial they denounced the Tsar's regime. During the trial, workers snuck into the courthouse and left flowers on the Soviet delegates' chairs. The revolutionaries were sent into prison and exiled, but the memory of their accomplishments remained.

The failure of the 1905 Revolution led to a massive retreat for the revolutionaries and the working-class movement as a whole. Revolutionaries were hunted down by the police, thrown in prison, exiled, and executed by the thousands. Large sections of the RSDLP and the workers around it became disillusioned. There were years of significant economic depression with high unemployment and growing poverty. It was difficult to maintain communication between the Party sections in the different cities. The majority of the central leadership fled to Europe.

At the same time, the Revolution of 1905 confirmed the Bolshevik hypothesis that the capitalist class would prove to be counter-revolutionary and side with the monarchy. As the strength and revolutionary confidence of the working class grew through the soviets, the Russian bourgeoisie clung to the Tsar. The 1905 Revolution also confirmed the hypothesis that the working class could

only be victorious if it found a way to forge an alliance with the masses of the peasantry and seize power. Rather than "stopping half way," Lenin argued, "we stand for uninterrupted revolution."

The Tsar's government carried out intense repression combined with a series of reforms hoping to separate the masses from the revolutionaries. The Tsar created a parliament, the Duma, where each sector of the population could elect representatives – the workers, the peasants, the aristocracy, and so forth. The Duma could hold debates and pass resolutions, but it had no real power. The Tsar's officials hoped that workers would be duped by this parliament and focus on electing powerless representatives. The revolutionaries also began to use the Duma. While the revolutionary organizations and their publications were outlawed, the Duma provided a legal loophole for political expression. If Duma representatives gave speeches exposing the working conditions and living conditions of the working class, or denouncing the failures of the Duma, they could be printed and distributed legally. Badayev, a Bolshevik worker activist from the huge Putilov iron works, which had played a leading role in the workers' revolutionary movement, described it like this:

We used the Duma rostrum to speak to the masses over the heads of the parliamentarians of various shades. But this was only rendered possible by the existence of our workers' press, as the so-called liberal newspapers devoted only a few lines to our speeches and sometimes passed them over in silence. Had there been no workers' Bolshevik paper, our speeches would not have been known of outside the walls of the Taurida Palace [the Duma].

At the same time, trade unions and mutual aid associations were legalized. The police hoped that legal unions and associations would elect non-revolutionaries to represent the workers. Needless to say, these measures failed to contain the revolutionary movement. If trade unions were legal, the revolutionaries participated in them and ran candidates for positions. They also organized underground groups within the unions to politicize workers around them and coordinate between different workplaces. From women's groups, to workers' co-ops, to

¹ renamed Petrograd in 1914

social insurance groups – the socialists tried to connect with the working class in order to organize and argue for a revolutionary perspective. The Tsarist police noted that in all of these activities, the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP was the most active, organized, and militant, therefore causing them the biggest problems.

By 1911 working class militancy was slowly spreading across the country. It was clear that another wave of revolutionary struggle was on the horizon. The disagreements in perspectives for the coming revolution weighed on the minds of Lenin's Bolshevik faction. After years of attempting to keep the Party unified, the Bolsheviks called for an official break with the Mensheviks. In January of 1912, the Bolsheviks declared themselves a separate party, openly explaining their choice to workers.

The year 1912 saw massive strikes centered in the Lena River gold mining area. In April 1912, Tsarist troops fired upon 6,000 striking miners, killing hundreds; it was like Bloody Sunday all over again. This time, Bolshevik militants were able to organize strikes and demonstrations, and to challenge the perspective put forward by those who wanted to contain the movement. Young working-class militants that were politicized by the growing class struggle increasingly began to see the Bolsheviks as the most militant party.

War and Revolution

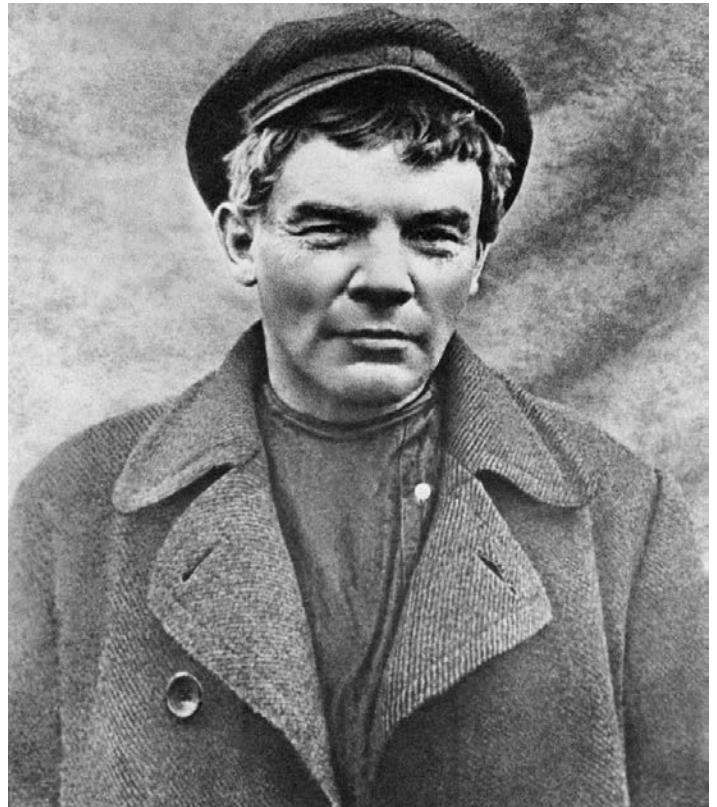
The Tsar's regime was drawn into World War I on the side of France and Britain, whose economic investment and military and technical support had all been designed to strengthen Russia as a weapon against Germany. When World War I broke out, the Tsar launched a full assault on Germany and its Austrian allies. The peasants and workers of Russia were drafted into the army and thrown into the bloody conflict.

The war stirred up patriotic and nationalist feelings in the Russian population, even infecting the working class. The Mensheviks declared their support for the war. Their policy mirrored that of socialist parties of the Second International around the world that had shamefully surrendered their internationalism to nationalism and urged their workers to fight the war based on the interests of the ruling class of their nations. The Bolshevik Party called for workers and peasants, drafted into the army, to turn the guns the other way – to turn the imperialist war

into a civil war. During the war, the Bolsheviks organized conferences with other revolutionaries to oppose the policies of these socialist traitors and begin to build the foundation for a new revolutionary international.

The realities of war were quick to break the patriotic mood. Working families in the cities were hungry for bread and tired of waiting in lines for crumbs. By 1915, the working class began to fight back. From August to October 1915 there were 340 strikes, involving an estimated 246,000 strikers. In many of these strikes, the Bolsheviks played a key role. Increasing numbers of soldiers turned against the war and took any chance they could to desert. And peasants too began to see nothing to be gained from this horrible war except the slaughter of their sons.

On February 23, 1917 International Women's Day in Petrograd (formerly called St. Petersburg), women textile workers went out on strike and sent delegates to other workplaces to ask other workers to join them. About 90,000 workers went out on strike. They marched to the Duma and demanded bread, and an end to the monarchy and the war. The strikes and demonstrations continued and increased over the course of the next few days, spreading to other cities. The turning point was when the



Lenin in Finland, weeks before the October Revolution

Tsar's troops were ordered to crush the workers and the troops refused. Soon after, the Tsar abdicated the throne. A monarchy that had lasted for centuries was gone within a few days.

But who would rule in the Tsar's place? The workers on strike began forming Soviets, as they had in 1905. The Soviets quickly became the organizing center for the workers' movement. But at the same time, some former Tsarist government officials declared themselves in support of the revolution. They formed a Provisional Government and proposed to write a new constitution. The important positions in this Government were held by members of the capitalist class, alongside a few token socialists. The workers, wildly enthusiastic about the promises of the Provisional Government, voted in the Soviets for the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries who supported the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government, with full support from the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, launched a new offensive in the war, but told the peasants they would have to wait for the passage of a law to re-divide the landed estates. They told the workers to continue to work in miserable conditions to support the war. On all the key issues that mattered to people, the Provisional Government offered nothing new. What was beginning to emerge was a situation described as "dual power," with the Provisional Government representing a modification of the old order and the soviets representing the true democratic expression of the interests of the majority.

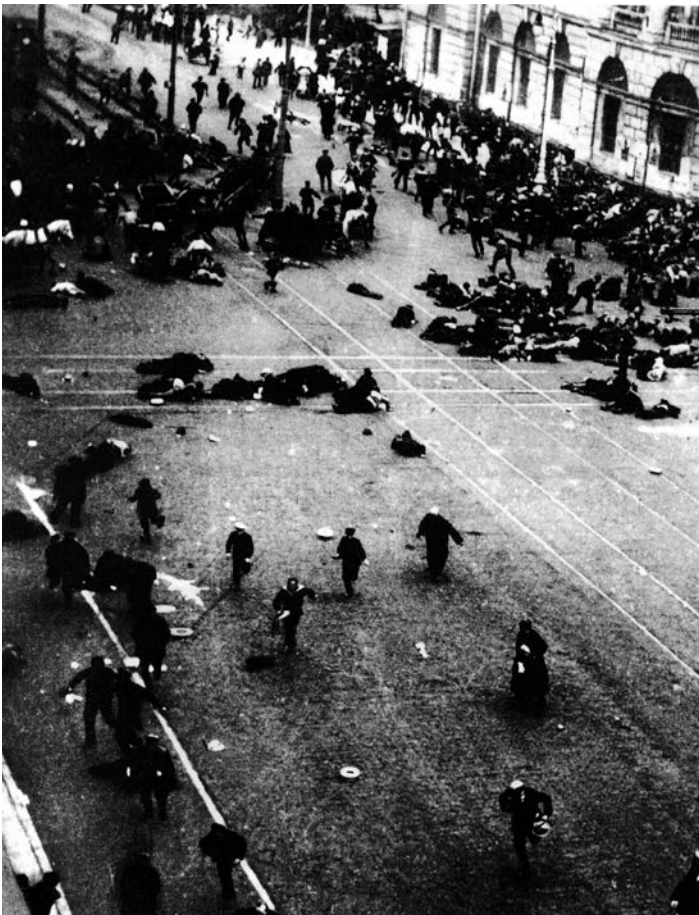
The April Theses

In early March, some leaders of the Bolsheviks wrote in Pravda, the Bolshevik newspaper, that they supported the Provisional Government *"in so far as it struggles against reaction or counter-revolution."* Lenin was still in exile at the time and when he read the articles in Pravda supporting the Provisional Government, he was outraged. He returned to Petrograd on April 3 and fought to change the Bolshevik position towards the revolution. Upon his arrival, Lenin announced what became known as his April Theses, arguing that there were two powers in society: the power of the capitalists in the Provisional Government and the power of the working class, soldiers and poor peasants, organized in the Soviets. He argued that the Bolsheviks should call for a boycott of the

Provisional Government and a seizure of power by the working class and the peasantry through the soviets. At first the Bolshevik Petrograd Committee voted against his proposals 13 to 2. Lenin threatened to resign his position and take his case to the rank and file of the Party. But Lenin steadily won his comrades over to his positions. The surging strike wave gave a strong support for his case. In April, 79 delegates representing about 79,000 Bolsheviks voted in favor of *"no support for the Provisional Government...the illusion-breeding government of the capitalists"*; and *"that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government."*

The Bolsheviks were joined by former Mensheviks who were disgusted with their party's policy. Trotsky's organization, the Mezhrainontsy, fused with the Bolshevik Party, and thousands of other individual militants joined too. The Bolsheviks had succeeded in becoming a pole of attraction for other militant forces in the working class that stood for soviet power. But they recognized that within the various soviets their position was not yet the majority position. The perspective of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries still held sway among the masses of workers. Lenin argued that the main task of the Bolsheviks was to expose the errors and betrayals of the Provisional Government, until the majority in the soviets agreed with the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the setting up of a government based on the soviets. This perspective was summarized in the Bolshevik slogan: "All Power to the Soviets."

From April to October, the Bolsheviks followed through with their policy of "patiently explaining" as the Provisional Government continued to betray the working class, the soldiers and the peasants. The Bolshevik slogan, "Peace, Land, Bread!" expressed what the workers and peasants wanted – an end to the war, land to the peasants and food for the hungry. More and more the masses of people were taking matters into their own hands. The soldiers were deserting the front, and refusing to follow their officers' commands. The peasants were seizing the land. They were deeply opposed to the war, tired of seeing the suffering it caused and the deaths of their sons in the army. The workers and soldiers increasingly looked to the soviets for leadership. It was only through their own activity that the oppressed masses of workers and peasants were winning real gains. With every betrayal by the Provisional Government, new soviets of soldiers



The July Days - Provisional Government troops fire on protesters

and peasants formed throughout the country. The patient explaining was working. Bolshevik militants like Shlyapnikov the metalworker and Raskolnikov the Kronstadt sailor carried out a tireless campaign in the soviets to combat the illusions in the Provisional Government and win the workers and soldiers to the direct struggle for power.

The July Days and General Kornilov's Revolt

By July the tension peaked. The Bolsheviks did not yet have majority support in the soviets. They won only one out of seven delegates to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets held in early July. But the Petrograd Soviet overwhelmingly supported the Bolsheviks. And when the Provisional Government agreed to send more soldiers from Petrograd to the front, it infuriated many soldiers and convinced large sections of the Petrograd Soviet that they needed to organize the insurrection now, even without the support of the majority of the soviets.

At meetings of soviets of workers and soldiers, a call was made for an armed demonstration in Petrograd.

For some this was understood as the beginning of the insurrection to overthrow the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks opposed what they viewed as a premature insurrection, one that did not have the support of the majority of the soviets in the country and thereby the majority of the working class and peasants. The Bolsheviks understood that a premature insurrection could be seen as a coup and could provoke an unnecessary clash with forces still aligned with the Provisional Government. They argued against this armed demonstration. But once it was clear it was going to take place anyway, and support for it was growing outside of Petrograd, they had no choice but to march with the revolutionary workers and soldiers. Their plan was to join the demonstration, not in order to carry out the insurrection but to restrain the workers from a premature rising, while they continued to argue for the need to wait until there was a majority of support for an insurrection in the soviets.

The armed demonstration happened. It remained mostly peaceful. The insurrection was not attempted. But the Provisional Government used this demonstration as an excuse to slander the Bolsheviks, spreading lies that they were German agents trying to destroy the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government ordered the arrest of the Bolshevik leaders, imprisoning some while others went into hiding.

As the war dragged on, support for the Provisional Government dissipated. By August the Provisional Government appointed a new general, Kornilov, to head the military. Kornilov recognized that either the soviets would overthrow the Provisional Government, or the generals and sections of the army would stage a coup and drown the soviets in blood.

In August, Kornilov prepared a coup, and by September, he thought he had enough support to take power and crush the soviets. But his plans were leaked. The Provisional Government was so discredited that it could not organize the population to defend it. The Bolsheviks helped organize the resistance through their massive networks of rank-and-file workers and soldiers. They organized a united front of the revolutionary parties. Workers were let into (and broke into) the government arsenals, and armed themselves to defend the revolution against the Kornilov coup. The coup failed, outmaneuvered by detachments of workers and soldiers who dismantled troop transports, won soldiers to their

side, and outnumbered the isolated forces of the coup. After the failed coup, the workers and soldiers, arms in hand, now turned to the soviets as the leadership of the revolution. The influence of the soviets continued to expand. The Bolsheviks were confident they now had a majority in the soviets to organize the insurrection to seize power.

October – The Insurrection

The Bolsheviks voted in their Central Committee to organize an insurrection and put the soviets in control. However, this presented a problem – organizing an insurrection before it was voted on by a soviet congress could seem like the Bolsheviks were making a bid for power for themselves. But waiting for a congress of soviets to vote on an insurrection provided one last opening for counter-revolution. The Bolsheviks responded to this problem with a brilliant plan put forward by Trotsky. The Bolsheviks formed the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), composed mostly of Bolsheviks but also revolutionaries from other parties and some anarchists, who opposed the Provisional Government. The MRC was set up to respond to any counter-revolutionary move by the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government ordered revolutionary soldiers back to the front, hoping to disarm the soviets. The MRC responded by signaling the insurrection. Workers’

detachments and revolutionary soldiers stormed the Tsar’s Winter Palace and arrested the Provisional Government. The insurrection spread across the country, with soviets taking power and replacing the authority of the Provisional Government.

The convening of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets followed the insurrection. On October 27, the first revolutionary workers’ government of Soviets was formed. It called for bread for the poor, an end to the war, workers’ control of the factories, land to the peasants, freedom for the oppressed, and the organization of the international socialist revolution. The goal was to transform Russian society along socialist lines with the help of workers’ revolutions in the more advanced European countries. This was the only way the gains of the first workers’ revolution could be maintained and spread throughout the world.

Conclusion: The Revolutionary Party

The Bolshevik Party succeeded in doing something that had never been done before, leading a successful revolution that culminated in the first workers’ state. At every twist and turn of the class struggle, they provided the leadership necessary to prepare the working class for the seizure of political power. The Bolsheviks were able to play this role because, from 1903 on, they were preoccupied with building a revolutionary party that based itself on the self-activity of the working class. The Bolshevik Party proved its ability to lead workers’ struggles in two revolutionary periods and to withstand and continue its work during long periods of repression. It was able to influence revolutionary activists all over the world.

The revolutionary parties of the 21st century will not be identical to the Bolshevik Party. Much time has passed and many things are different about the context we are active in today. But the Bolshevik Party remains a model for revolutionary socialists because it stood fast for workers’ taking power themselves and for international socialism. The Bolsheviks showed how a party can democratically define its principles, strategies and tactics and also carry these policies out in a disciplined way. For all these reasons, it is essential to study the history of the Bolshevik Party as we take on the challenge of overturning the capitalist order that dominates the world today.



Workers and soldiers arresting the Provisional Government during the October insurrection – painting by Mikhail Sokolov

Soviets

What Does Workers' Power Look Like?

The Russian Revolution demonstrated that the working class, through its own self-activity, is able to take control of society and begin to transform it in the interests of the majority. In particular, the Revolution showed that in order for its revolutionary struggle to succeed, the working class needs to take state power. In the Russian Revolution of 1917, this mechanism arose in the form of the soviets.

The soviets were the main weapon of the workers. They were adopted by the Russian working class as a way to organize its struggle and, ultimately, take power. But what exactly were the soviets? How did they form and what made them so distinctive? How did they function and why were they seen as the embodiment of working-class democracy?

Origin of the Soviets

The soviets first appeared during the Revolution of 1905. This revolution was triggered by a disastrous war with Japan that pushed the working class of Russia to the breaking point. Strikes erupted throughout Russia and workers began forming elected councils to coordinate their struggles. These councils, or soviets (the Russian word for council), evolved into organizing centers for

the workers' growing revolutionary movement against the Tsarist autocracy.

Soviets were created in almost all the large industrial cities. The Revolution of 1905 was ultimately defeated. However, the soviet experience left such a deep impression on workers that when revolution broke out again in 1917, the soviets reemerged as the main form of workers' organization. Workers began forming soviets throughout the country.

The revolutionary mood inspired all of the oppressed in society, fueling the creation of soldiers' and peasants' soviets. For the soldiers, the soviets became symbols of the Revolution, and their organizations were modeled on the workers' soviets. The peasantry, motivated by their old demand for land reform, also formed soviets throughout the provinces, districts, and villages.

As the revolutionary movement progressed, the soviets became not just organizations for the coordination of struggle, they came to be seen as an alternative government representing all the poor and working masses. The soviets were recognized as the real authority in revolutionary Russia. With this realization, the workers opened the way for the soviets to take all power



Meeting at Putilov factory to elect members of the Petrograd Soviet

in the October Revolution and to become the governing foundation of the new workers' state.

Nature of the Soviets

Prior to the 1905 Revolution, there were no effective organizations to unify and represent the interests of the working class. Though some still managed to operate underground, labor unions and political parties were illegal; therefore, their ability to organize and fight for workers' rights was limited. However, the 1905 Revolution forced the Tsar's government to make concessions to the workers, including the right for them to form trade unions. Union membership increased significantly after 1905. However, though they were a powerful tool for workers to learn to organize, unions only engaged the most active workers, who assumed union positions and responsibilities. Most workers were preoccupied with their daily lives.

The Revolution threw hundreds of thousands of workers into action. The revolutionary upsurge overflowed the structure and routines of the unions and took on a political character. The movement required coordination on an entirely new scale, which fostered the formation of soviets.

The feature that made the soviets distinct from other forms of organization was that soviets were elected by workers in struggle. Unlike the unions and political parties, which represented workers during normal times, the soviets were a means for workers to take direct control of their own battles and submit their unions and political parties to the decisions of the movement, breaking any routines or conservatism that could hold the movement back.

The soviets were true organizations of workers' democracy. There was no distinction between leaders and followers. All workers who supported the soviets took part in them, both in leadership as well as in action. The masses didn't simply offer their opinion on matters or elect people to do the organizing work for them; they were actually engaged in the work themselves. Workers thought and made decisions on their own, discussed key issues with each other, and voted actively and openly. They took on tasks willingly and according to each of their capacities. No organizations as democratic and unified as the soviets had ever existed in Russia, or in the world at large.



Meeting of workers and soldiers in the Tauride Palace, 1917

Activity of the Soviets

The soviets were able to change their role and function according to the changing circumstances and consciousness of the workers. The soviets proved to be responsive to the popular will of the masses, which changed very quickly during the Revolution.

When the soviets first emerged in the form of strike committees, they were mainly used by workers to demand economic rights from their exploitative employers. This included the right for an eight-hour work day, better working conditions, higher wages, and union recognition.

Later on, however, the role and function of the soviets changed. Workers became more politicized and began putting forth political demands from the government, including the establishment of parliamentary elections, the removal of the police, freedom of speech and press, and the right to form political parties. What began as organizations to address workers' economic and civil discontent, gradually matured, evolved, and took on new forms as general and political representatives of the workers. The soviets also found themselves taking on a revolutionary role. With the influence of revolutionary parties like the Bolsheviks, workers became increasingly conscious of their political independence and the need to take power themselves.

The revolutionary activity of the working masses transformed the function of the soviets from organizations of struggle to the framework for a new revolutionary workers' government. A central role of the soviets became the defense and consolidation of the Revolution itself.

The Petrograd Soviet

In 1917, the most important soviet was the Petrograd Soviet. It had the most combative and class-conscious workers in all of Russia. Even before the overthrow of the Provisional government, the Petrograd Soviet had taken charge of things. It coordinated the activities of people, organized production, formed workers' military units, and, above all, ensured the endurance of the Revolution. This showed the workers the effectiveness of the soviets and the inability of the Provisional Government to address their needs. More importantly, it revealed to them that in order to get what they wanted, they needed to turn the soviets into organizations that could govern.

In October 1917, that's exactly what happened for the first time. All power was put into the hands of the soviets, and they became the building blocks of the first workers' state in history.

Once in charge, the soviets were a conscious "dictatorship of the proletariat"; that's to say, the majority of the population had control against the interests of the exploitative and oppressive ruling class. Thus in no way did "dictatorship" mean the rule over the majority of people. Rather, it referred to the disarmament and expropriation of the capitalist class through the worker's new state power. The soviet state became a much more genuinely popular form of democracy — a worker's democracy.

Structure of the Soviets

There was no standard way of organizing the soviets. Their form of organization depended on the location, circumstances, and people being represented (workers, peasants, soldiers, etc.). However, workers' soviets, for the most part, were organized as follows:

- Workers' soviets were based on deputies, or delegates, that were elected by workers from each workplace. The rules for electing delegates varied by locality but all workers were allowed to participate in the elections and were given proportional representation. Workers elected representatives from among their ranks, people they knew and trusted, and who had proven their competency to lead worker's struggles.
- Delegates were paid a worker's wage, were required to organize their own work, and were directly accountable to the workers who elected them.
- Representatives were not elected to a specific term, and those that did not satisfactorily perform their duties were recallable at any time. In such a way, the soviets were directly accountable.
- Elections to the soviets were held on a regular basis and were usually based on people's workplaces (factories, workshops, etc.). Any citizen over the age of 18 (male or female), who had earned their living through productive and socially useful labor, had the right to vote. Those that employed workers or lived on unearned income, merchants, clergy, and agents of the former Tsarist regime were not allowed to vote. This ensured the working class was fully in charge of its own organizations.
- Almost all of the soviets were headed by an executive committee made up of several members that would address the day-to-day affairs of the soviet. All important matters were discussed with delegates and workers in biweekly plenary sessions where they voted on decisions publicly with a show of hands.
- A national coordinating body, called the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, was established in June of 1917. Composed of delegates who were elected at least twice a year from soviets throughout Russia, it was created to help centralize the organizing activities of the growing establishment of soviets. It became the largest democratic representative body in Russia. At its head was the Central Executive Committee which served as the supreme soviet organ throughout Russia. It had the right to decide on basic political questions so long as these were within the guidelines established by delegates of the All-Russian Congress.
- There was no separation of legislative and executive functions of the soviets. On all levels, the legislative resolutions were adopted by the executive committee and were executed by the soviet members themselves. This insured that those who passed laws

were also responsible for carrying them out. This unification of powers was voted on and enacted by the All-Russian Congress.

- The soviets had several active political parties which workers could follow. These included the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries. All the parties were given the opportunity to run candidates for the various positions available in the soviets. This way workers were not only able to analyze and judge the different political perspectives put forth by the parties, but also the people who stood for those perspectives as well.

The Soviet Idea and Its Implications

The soviet form of organization emerged in Russia, but workers and oppressed people around the world quickly took notice. Workers in Germany formed their own councils, or *Räte*. In Spain workers led a general strike and formed councils, or *juntas*. And in Britain, a movement of rank and file union militants set up committees of independent shop stewards. In each of these examples, workers began to submit the unions and political parties

to the control of the movement through soviet-style councils. The soviet idea had gone global.

While soviet-style councils were formed in many countries, nowhere but in Russia did the councils succeed in seizing power. This failure of the working class outside of Russia condemned the Russian Revolution to isolation. The failure of the Revolution to spread from Russia to other countries was a defeat, but it was in no way a failure of the working class or the idea of a democratic workers' state based on councils or soviets.

In struggles big or small, and in the crises that capitalism is producing and will produce in the future, there is only one meaningful solution, the seizure of political power by the working class, the dictatorship of the working majority over the exploiting minority, and the socialist reconstruction of society.

For this reason, in every struggle revolutionary socialists fight for the direct, democratic control by workers over their own struggles. We fight to put unions, political organizations, and our own efforts under the democratic control of workers in struggle. In this way, even in the smallest instances, we are laying the groundwork for workers' democratic government in the tradition of the soviets of 1917.

The Revolt of the Peasantry in Russia

In 1917, the working class led a socialist revolution in Russia. But this was not a revolution that was just for the interests of workers, but rather a revolution for the entire society, particularly the peasantry. At the time of the revolution, Russia was an overwhelmingly peasant country based on agriculture, with the peasantry representing roughly 80-85% of the population. This meant that it would have been impossible for it to be successful without the peasantry. An alliance between the two classes was essential for a socialist revolution to be successful. Therefore to understand the Russian Revolution, it is vital to understand the role of the peasants.

For most of its history, Russia was a feudal society dominated by a system called serfdom. Feudalism is a system based on traditional agreements. In the case of the countryside, the serf is obligated to work for the landlord while the landlord is expected to "provide" a piece of land

for the serf to work. By the 1860s, divisions between rich and poor peasants began to develop with the introduction of markets in the *mir* (peasants' communal villages). Members of the Russian ruling class saw this process taking place and began to see that serfdom had to become a thing of the past if Russia were to transition from a feudal society into an industrial capitalist one. They hoped that the abolition of serfdom would jumpstart this transition. In 1861, the Tsar (the king of Russia) abolished serfdom, centuries after other countries. The abolition of serfdom was both a response to the waves of peasant rebellions and riots, as well as a political move led by members of the ruling class, particularly landlords who owned factories. With the abolition of serfdom, the landlords were compensated for any land they lost; meanwhile, the peasants had to take on burdensome debts to purchase tiny plots of poor-quality land that yielded small harvests. Many of the former serfs, who could no



Russian peasants, circa 1900

longer survive on the land, were pushed into the cities looking for jobs. This met the needs of the factory owners, as the growth of capitalism required a replacement of the serf with a “free” worker, that is, someone who was free to sell their labor.

After the emancipation of the serfs, they were forced to pay enormous “reparations” to their former owners through heavy taxes, trapping them in poverty. It was normal to see people walking around unpaved streets barefoot with no shoes. They were isolated in small villages, completely at the mercy of their landlords. To modernize agriculture, from 1906 to 1914, members of the ruling class wanted to break up the *mir* communal villages, so that a new layer of small landowners could emerge. One result of the privatization of the *mir* was that the “emancipated” peasants no longer had access to pastoral land to graze their animals and forested areas to collect firewood. Because many peasants did not have enough land to support themselves and their families, the struggle for land in the face of such inequality was a fundamental reason for the revolutionary ferment. By 1917, 90% of all arable land was controlled by wealthy landowners called “kulaks,” with most peasants forced to work on their land.

What Kind of a Revolution Would Take Place in Russia? The revolutionary movement in Russia began with dissident intellectuals, often the sons and daughters of the ruling class, or at least the better off sections of the peasantry. These young people looked at feudal Russia,

and compared it to Western Europe where they often spent time as students in the universities. A section of young people decided that a revolution was needed to overthrow the Tsarist system and create something new. But what kind of revolution? The working class was nowhere near as numerous as the peasantry. There were debates among radicals about how a revolution would take place in Russia. The first wave of Russian revolutionaries looked to the peasants in the countryside. These “Narodniks” (coming from *narod*, the Russian word for “people”) were children of the elite who saw no future for themselves in the backwards feudalism of Russia and were attracted to revolutionary ideas from the West. There was a movement to “go to the people” in the countryside and encourage them to rise up against the oppressive order. When the peasants didn’t rise up as the Narodniks hoped, some felt compelled to rise up for them. They came to believe that peasant uprisings could be inspired by revolutionary violence and assassinations of members of the ruling class such as large landowners, generals, judges and even the Tsar himself. These Narodniks formed a party called *Narodnaya Volya* (“People’s Will”). As brave and selfless as they were, and as horrible as the people they targeted were, they did not inspire mass uprisings and only invited extreme repression on themselves.

By 1902, after the repression, the disparate groups of Narodniks evolved into the Socialist Revolutionary Party. The Socialist Revolutionaries rooted themselves in the peasantry, especially taking part in elections to the *zemstvos*, elected councils in the rural districts that held no real power. This led the Socialist Revolutionaries to draw closer to the rich peasants than the poor peasants. With real divisions between wealth and power, the wealthier peasants dominated the villages. The Socialist Revolutionaries romanticized the villages and maintained that peasants, rich and poor, all had the same interests. This was a viable political position before the revolution as most of the time the poor peasants followed the lead of the richer peasants. But as the revolution threw the peasantry into motion, the Socialist Revolutionaries would split along the same lines as the peasant village – between the richer and the poorer peasants whose interests diverged.

World War I and Revolution

When world war broke out in 1914, the leadership of the Socialist Revolutionaries tabled their vision for peasant communes and supported the monarchist government that was leading the Russian war effort. The desire to win the war meant leading the peasants and workers to their slaughter at the front.

Following the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, a Provisional Government was established. It was made up of capitalist politicians and former members of the Tsar's regime. They were soon joined by the Socialist Revolutionaries and other moderate socialists. After the February Revolution, the Socialist Revolutionary Party became extremely popular and experienced massive growth. Thousands of new peasants, workers, soldiers and intellectuals joined the party. The SRs played a leading role in the Provisional Government. One of their members, Alexander Kerensky, became the head of the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government debated the "agrarian question"—what would happen to peasants and the land. But in fact, many peasants were beginning to decide their future for themselves. What began as disputes over paying rent, or taking lumber from the landowners' estates, developed into much more militant action. Peasants took over the land of wealthy landlords and drove them out where the landlords hadn't left already.

Because most of the military was overwhelmingly composed of peasants, many of them supported this direct action. Soldiers, who were peasants in uniform, were fed up with the war and hundreds of thousands of them simply walked away from the front. These soldiers often became the armed protectors of the peasant movement when they returned to the countryside.

The Struggle in the Countryside

The revolutionary changes in the countryside were sometimes led by whole communities of peasants and sometimes with peasant women in the leadership. Soviets (workers' councils), which had been integral in the struggle in 1905, were recreated in the cities. Peasants began forming their own soviets in the villages to collectively determine the direction of their struggle and how these struggles would be carried out. During the land revolts of 1917, the Socialist Revolutionaries went

through a polarization. The rich peasants feared the poor peasants and opposed immediate land distribution. The rich peasants also supported the war, much like their cousins in the capitalist class. As a result of this, the Socialist Revolutionaries split into two parties. The Left Socialist Revolutionaries represented poorer peasants, calling for a re-division of the land and an end to the war. The majority, or Right Socialist Revolutionaries, were much more tied to the wealthier peasants. They opposed immediate land division and supported the war.

The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks did not have a fully worked out program to address the peasantry before 1917. They were forced by the events of the revolution to develop one. Because the Mensheviks supported the Provisional Government led by capitalists, they opposed land distribution and supported the war. This made them natural allies of the Right Socialist Revolutionaries.

On the other hand, the Bolshevik Party saw the necessity of pushing for a total transformation of society led by the working class with the support of the peasantry. Up until 1917, the Bolsheviks advocated for the collectivization of the land. But it became clear that the poor peasants overwhelmingly opposed this. Even the poorest peasants wanted to become the proprietors of their own piece of land, not to share and cultivate it collectively. Acknowledging this, the Bolsheviks adopted the program of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, which was to let the peasants form land committees to immediately divide up the land. One of the first acts of the new government after the October Revolution was to issue the "Decree on Land," which transferred privately held land to the peasants. In many ways, the decree just legitimized what was already taking place; the peasants had already seized most private land themselves by



Russian peasants revolt in 1917

October. But the decree was very important because it showed the small peasants who were unsure about the revolution whose side the Soviet regime was on.

By adopting the program of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks cemented the alliance that was made possible by a unity of interests between the working class and the peasantry. Without making

this alliance, and supporting the most radical measures of land distribution in the countryside, the October Revolution would have been impossible. The struggles of the peasantry in Russia showed us that even the most oppressed people can take their destiny in their own hands and transform society, and that the working class is capable of leading this transformation.

With Guns in Their Hands

This way we can go no farther, we must break a road into the future.

–Trotsky

We are at our posts, ready to conquer or die.

–The Petrograd garrison of soldiers

On a crisp October evening, shots ring out across Petrograd. Boots strike the ground in a staccato rhythm, piercing the inky blackness of the night. A rag-tag assembly of factory workers clutch rifles and pistols pilfered from the deposed Tsar. They are standing guard at the Liteiny Bridge, running off the Loyalist forces that threaten the Revolution. Their pockets and bellies might be empty, but they are full of pride. They are the Red Guard: the workers' militia, the people's army.

Birth of the Red Guard

The Red Guard was born in the factories and working-class neighborhoods of Russia in 1905. Factory workers armed themselves during this first attempt at revolution, but were ultimately crushed by the counter-revolutionary forces of the Tsar. In 1917, the soviets (local councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers) decided to revive these fighting units. Although the Red Guard emerged spontaneously and was not initially bound to any particular party, the Bolsheviks spearheaded its centralization.

Members of the Red Guard trained to defend their factories from sabotage by owners and to act as security for committee meetings; they guarded the factories day and night and were paid their regular wages when they trained or were on guard duty. Workers elected their officers, and a court of workers judged all disciplinary violations; anyone who had more than three absences

was dismissed. Women workers established Red Cross divisions and trained to care for wounded comrades.

A Worker's Militia:

A Nightmare for the Ruling Class

This workers' militia was a direct threat to the dominance of the ruling class. The power of the bourgeois state, which represents the wealthy ruling class, comes from the army, the police, and the prison system. They are what Friedrich Engels, co-founder of Marxist theory, called "special bodies of armed men." The army and the police protect the private property of the 1% and enforce the iron law of exploitation. They break up strikes, rain bullets and batons on workers and the poor, and ensure that a tiny elite remains in power. If the masses are armed and ready to defend themselves, the balance of forces tips in the direction of workers. After all, what are a few thousand policemen in the face of millions of class-conscious, armed workers ready to demand an end to wage slavery? Thus in 1871, when workers seized power for the first time by creating the Paris Commune, they knew exactly what they needed to do with these special bodies of armed men. Their very first decree was "the eradication of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people." The existence of a standing army means the rich rule. The armed people means we decide our future.

The creation of the Red Guard also echoed the Bolsheviks' emphasis on the self-organization of the working class. Lenin, one of the leaders of the Bolshevik Party, pressed the workers and the party to focus their energies on building this force from the bottom up: "Set up a militia that will really embrace the entire people, be really universal, and be led by the proletariat!" This militia would be a collective effort of the toiling masses,



Red Guard posing in the streets of Petrograd, 1917

and would “draw the women into public service on an equal footing with the men.” Unlike the Socialist Revolutionaries, a socialist party that trained a few dozen militants in the art of assassination, the Bolsheviks realized that only a movement of the masses would topple the capitalist system. Hence the Red Guard: the armed defense of the working-class movement by the workers themselves.

The Red Guard in Action

By August 1917, the political situation in Russia was precarious. In February, the people overthrew the Tsar, and two governments competed for power. On the one hand, the Soviets were elected across Russia by workers, peasants, and soldiers. The Provisional Government, on the other hand, represented the interests of the rich and the middle classes. As Russia’s participation in World War I dragged on for a third year, it was wracked by famine, poverty, and chaos. Amidst this turmoil, General Kornilov planned to march on Petrograd in an August coup attempt. The Provisional Government and the Soviets turned to the workers for protection. The Bolsheviks eagerly agreed to direct these efforts, on one condition: they wanted the largest possible mobilization of the people from the ground up. In other words, the workers must be armed! Forty thousand people enthusiastically registered for the workers’ militia, and they got to work immediately. They dug trenches, built barricades, hung barbed wire across the roads, and kept the factories humming non-stop to produce supplies for the fight.

Their activity soon spread far beyond Petrograd; at Yamburg and Vritsa, workers tore up the rails so that Kornilov’s troops couldn’t reach the city. In these same towns, stranded troops were greeted by crowds of workers and radical soldiers who demanded that they abandon the coup. Meanwhile, in Luga, an entire division of revolutionary troops surrounded the First Don Cossacks, the elite shock troops of the Russian Empire, and stopped them from joining Kornilov. Bolshevik militants agitated from within the ranks, and many soldiers deserted while entire regiments refused to participate. Mass mobilization saved Petrograd: the blood and sweat of workers and soldiers stopped Kornilov cold in his tracks, and he never even reached the city. The participation of so many people is an important reminder that the Russian Revolution was driven by the masses; the decisive action of everyday people is what prevented the destruction of Petrograd and the workers’ movement.

The October Revolution

This success paved the way for the October Revolution; it showed the workers their numbers, their power, and their resolve. It showed them that through collective action and organization, they would emerge victorious. As one revolutionary observed, “When the Kornilov adventure was over, our next task was to see that the arms remained in the hands of the workers and so create an armed force which we could use to seize the reins of government... Thus a close, purposeful military network, built up by us according to plan, came into existence.”

Of course, the workers were not alone in this revolutionary undertaking. Soldiers and sailors became increasingly radicalized by the slaughter taking place on the battlefields of World War I. As workers blew each other to bits to advance the interests of their respective national ruling class, the ideas of revolutionary socialism gained ground. Russian and German soldiers crossed the blood and bones of no-man’s land to fraternize with each other. They broke bread, drank, and laughed with each other to resist the barbaric carnage of the war. Desertion was widespread; by July 1917, entire regiments were completely radicalized. On the fourth of that month, as many as 500,000 soldiers, sailors, and workers marched through the streets of Petrograd, weapons in hand as they demanded “All power to the Soviets!” Again, it was



Red Guard of Vulcan factory, Petrograd, 1917

the workers and the soldiers who pushed the movement forward through mass mobilization.

After they crushed Kornilov's coup attempt at the end of August, the Red Guard and the revolutionary units in the Russian army seized power for the working class just a few weeks later. While the party guided and centralized the insurrection, it was the participation of workers and soldiers that sealed its success. In the words of Trotsky, another Bolshevik leader, "The initiative in getting possession of institutions came in most cases *from below*...It was only necessary to appeal to the committee of the soldiers, workers or clerical employees of the given institution or store, and the resistance of the administration would be immediately broken."

And the Bolsheviks did appeal to the workers and soldiers before planning the insurrection against the Provisional Government and the ruling class. At this point, they formed the Military Revolutionary Committee (the MRC) to defend the workers from counter-revolutionary forces. In an extraordinary incident, Trotsky appeared at the Peter and Paul Fortress, one of the most important military installations in Petrograd, and debated the garrison commanders. Their words spilled over the soldiers; it was Trotsky that spoke straight to their deepest hopes for human dignity. The answer was clear: by the end of the night, almost every single soldier at the fortress voted to follow orders from the MRC, and to ignore any commands from the Provisional Government. The soldiers chose insurrection with their eyes wide open, in front of their very commanders. Of course, this was the case

throughout the country, as the Bolsheviks now held a majority in the soviets. In the army and navy, it was the same story. Soldiers and sailors elected committees, and in the next set of elections, there was a hard turn toward the Bolsheviks.

On the night of October 25, workers, soldiers, and the Red Guard quickly and bloodlessly took control of the electric station, the railroads, the army garrison, the post office, the telegraph stations, and other key locations throughout Petrograd. When units of the Military Revolutionary Committee arrived at the Petrograd State Bank, the regiment that was posted there stood by and let them assume power. With the Provisional Government holed up in the Winter Palace, radicalized sailors on the navy cruiser *Aurora* mutinied, elected a revolutionary committee, and sailed up the Nava River to support the takeover of the palace. It was the last place to fall, and with its seizure, the workers and soldiers dealt the death blow to the Provisional Government and fulfilled the cry of "All power to the Soviets!"

After the success of the October Revolution, the Red Guard became the foundation of the Red Army. Its ranks swelled with soldiers who disobeyed their generals; they flocked to the promise of a new world, one in which a tiny elite no longer controlled the destiny of millions. Together, these workers and soldiers were transformed into the fighting force of the revolution. And when the bankers and landlords assembled the forces of reaction, the Red Army ensured the victory of the first workers' state.

Legacy of the Revolution

During the heady days of the Revolution, the opportunists "made straight for the corridors of power; the Bolshevik for the workers' districts." This is the revolutionary tradition we must uphold. We don't dream and scheme for a handful of revolutionaries to seize power in a conspiracy of the few. Instead, we must organize and prepare for the day when the majority actively decides to take power from the ruling class and establish a socialist society. This is the task we face. The Red Guard stands as an inspirational reminder of the tremendous creativity and self-activity of the working class, and of the potential for revolutionary change when that energy is linked with the organizing force of a workers' party.

Workers of the World Unite – You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Chains!

The revolutionaries who led the Russian Revolution of October 1917 hoped the Russian victory would be the first in a series of workers' revolutions that would sweep across Europe. Capitalism had spread its oppressive and exploitative tentacles across the globe for centuries, and they strongly believed that its domination could only be removed by an international revolutionary victory of the working class. The workers would then be able to reorganize the global political and economic system in the interest of the majority of the world's people. This had been the perspective of revolutionaries since the time of Karl Marx and *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

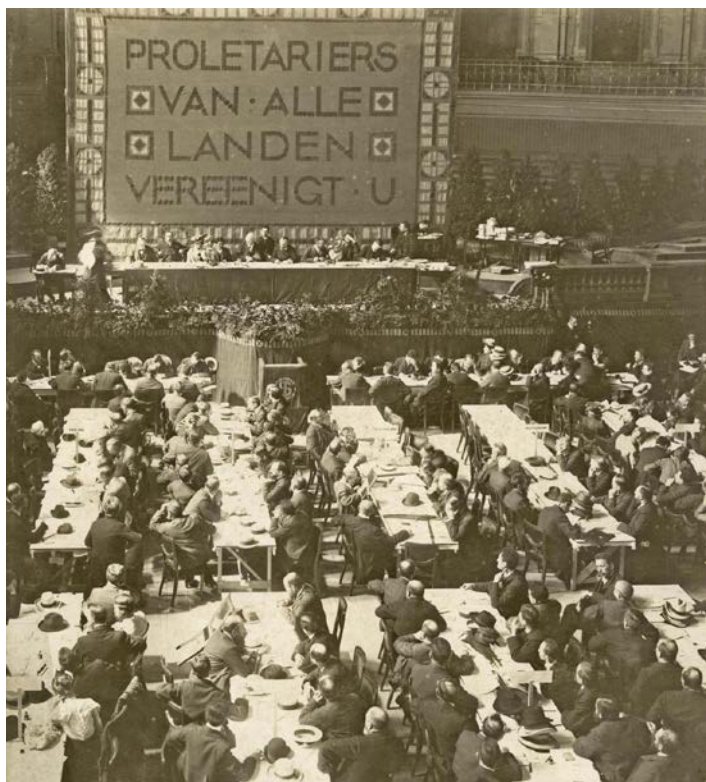
This tradition of internationalism had been carried on by the Second International, the organization of socialist parties around the world, which had stood for international revolution and against imperialist wars. Many of the parties of the Second International were mass parties with significant influence, but they had failed to stand up to the national pressures of World War I. Almost all of the Second International's parties

had supported their own capitalist classes and defended their respective nations' participation in the Europe-wide slaughter, instead of saying that workers everywhere have no interests in common with the capitalists. The German Social Democrats had even voted war credits, funding the German war effort in their parliament.

During World War I, sections of these parties opposed this capitulation to nationalism. The socialist movement was divided between the revolutionary left, who were internationalists, and the reformist right, who were the national chauvinists, that is people who supported their national government. New revolutionary organizations were born. Small international conferences were held during World War I in Switzerland, a neutral country, at Zimmerwald and Kienthal. These conferences were attended by socialists who disagreed with the nationalist positions of the Second International and issued manifestos opposing the war and calling for an immediate peace. But they didn't agree on how to bring peace about. The strongest anti-war position was that of the Bolshevik Party with the slogan "Turn the guns around," that is turn the imperialist war into a class war, expressing that the workers of the world had no reason to fight each other, that their real enemy was their own ruling class in each country. These anti-war conferences began to lay the groundwork to create a new international revolutionary organization.

The Russian Revolution of 1917: A First Step to International Revolution

When Vladimir Lenin, one of the most important leaders of the Bolshevik Party, and a major figure in the Russian revolutionary movement, returned to Russia in April of 1917, he stated clearly that the question of building a new international party of the working class was linked with the Russian working class and peasants taking power. For the Russian Revolution to succeed, to begin to construct a socialist future, the revolution would need to spread, and gain international support and aid from the European working class. In his address to the victorious soviets in Petrograd in October of 1917,



Second International conference in Amsterdam, 1904



Trotsky at Brest-Litovsk peace talks

Lenin proclaimed: “We will now begin to construct the world socialist order.” Internationalism was the banner of October 1917, as it was in 1871 for the Parisian working class when it created the Paris Commune, also in a time of war. Russian revolutionaries never believed that socialism could be constructed in one country, but rather that it must be brought into being by an extension of the Russian Revolution to other countries.

No sooner had the workers taken power in Russia than they immediately acted as internationalists. A decree on peace, on October 26, called upon “all the belligerent peoples and governments to start immediate negotiations for a just and democratic peace.” They proposed a peace with no indemnities or fines and no annexations of other countries or territories. They published the secret treaties and intelligence gathered by the Tsarist government. They pledged no more deals behind the backs of the people.

The Brest-Litovsk peace talks between Germany and revolutionary Russia to end Russian involvement in World War I were quite an unusual event. Victor Serge, a lifelong revolutionary activist and supporter of the Russian Revolution, describes the incredible character of these negotiations between the new order in Russia and the old order in Europe in his book, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*. He writes:

These negotiations were a sort of duel. It was the first time in modern history that men so different, representing not

hostile states, but warring classes, faced each other calmly across a green tablecloth: polite, reserved, observant, dominated by a coldly calculating hatred. On the one side, embroidered uniforms, sparkling with decorations, the decorations of princes and generals: on the other the insolence of a sailor’s jerkin, a peasant’s smock, a trooper’s greatcoat, the blouse of a perpetual student-girl, somber garments without a badge of rank, the plain dress of yesterday’s exiles, who now had the sober bearing of victorious insurgents.

At Brest-Litovsk, the Russian revolutionaries were caught between two contradictory goals. On the one hand they felt under great pressure to quickly make a deal to end the German offensive. While this would end the bloody sacrifice caused by the war and help the Russian Revolution to survive, it would also mean ceding territories of the former Tsarist Russian Empire to Germany which they would then continue to occupy. On the other hand, the Russian revolutionaries knew that there was a real potential for a socialist revolution in Germany, and they felt if they could stall the talks this could help the German revolutionaries. So the question of internationalism was a very serious and vital question for them, even if it meant a high cost and sacrifice for the Russian Revolution.

Workers and Soldiers of the World Revolt

There was good reason for the leaders of the Bolshevik Party to believe that international revolutionary change was possible. The horrendous conditions of World War I had left millions dead, millions maimed, millions starving, and countless homeless in a bloody confrontation on a scale never seen before. Workers all over the world were radicalized by the World War and capitalist crisis. They responded with celebration and support for the revolution of October 1917. Between 1918 and 1920, there was a wave of working class activism in cities on a global scale – from sit-down strikes, general strikes, and occupations, to the formation of workers committees in Glasgow, Belfast, Winnipeg, Seattle, and Barcelona. There were revolutionary crises that posed the question of workers’ power in Finland, Germany and Hungary. In 1918 the German workers formed councils, overthrew the last vestiges of absolutism and fought hard battles against the old army. In Italy, workers formed councils

and peasants began seizing land from the big landowners. In Finland, industrial and agricultural workers fought to establish a workers' government. In Japan, workers seized rice that the capitalists were hoarding. In Britain, workers launched a wave of strikes led by committees of shop stewards. In Ireland, workers took over factories and formed workers' councils like the Russian soviets.

In the United States, workers seized the city of Seattle and ran it for three days during the course of a strike. Workers demanded an end to the attacks on revolutionary Russia; as the capitalist and imperial powers of the world prepared to invade Russia and crush the revolutionaries, workers refused to load arms bound for the invasion. In the colonial world, movements to break free of imperialism also raged. A huge general strike wracked British-occupied Palestine in 1919. There were major anti-imperialist demonstrations in China, Egypt, and Iraq, and massive civil disobedience against colonial power in India. In China, the growing revolutionary movement would culminate in an attempted revolution in 1925-27.

Faced with the war's carnage and devastation, there were mass desertions, strikes, and demonstrations across the European continent by soldiers of all countries, who turned towards revolutionary solutions. Neil Faulkner, a Marxist historian, gives a vivid picture of this opposition in his book *A People's History of the Russian Revolution*:

Two-thirds of the French army on the Western Front mutinied and refused to mount further attacks. The Italian army fled the battlefield at Caporetto, and tens of thousands threw away their rifles and headed for home singing the Internationale and shouting "Viva Russia!" From late 1918 onwards, the revolutionary contagion spread through the former Central Powers... German sailors mutinied when ordered out to sea and triggered a revolution that ended the war and brought down the Kaiser within a fortnight. By the end of 1918, red flags flew over Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and Budapest. Everywhere, in the forefront of the revolt, were soldiers and sailors. Quite literally, millions of men across Europe broke discipline to join mass revolutionary movements of workers and peasants directed against their own political and military elite.



Second Congress of the Communist International

A New International Was Born But Lacking a Revolutionary Leadership

A new revolutionary communist international was being organized. But this task did not mean starting from scratch. Despite the betrayal by the leadership of the Second International, it had educated and assembled the oppressed classes of Europe in one international body and had passed on a rich set of ideas, analyses and organizational experience. Revolutionary tendencies from within the discredited Second International flocked to support the victory in Soviet Russia. Revolutionary committees and organizations were formed around the world. The First Congress of the new Communist International took place in Russia, in March of 1919, during the Russian Civil War. Fifty-one delegates attended from 33 countries. Given the difficult conditions, many delegates were unable to reach Russia and attend the conference. The Fourth Congress in 1922 had 408 delegates from 61 countries.

While there was a great degree of enthusiasm and talent, there was also a real lack of tried and experienced leadership in the revolutionary organizations outside of Russia. In country after country, the masses of workers and soldiers were ready to fight, but what was lacking was a real leadership. In other words, workers lacked a revolutionary organization like the Russian Bolshevik Party, one that had deep roots in the working class, with militants who had been active for years and had won the

workers' confidence and the confidence of large sections of the soldiers and peasants.

And the influence of the parties in the Second International continued to be felt in horrendous ways. The German Social Democrats actively worked to prevent revolution from taking place in Germany on three occasions. They were even willing to bloody their hands with the murder of two of the most important revolutionaries of the time, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, former leaders of the German Social Democratic Party, who had formed a new German revolutionary organization, the Spartacus League. Social democracy also engineered the fall of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet in 1919. These defeats dealt big blows to the hopes for international revolution.

Revolution Betrayed by Stalinism

Following the successful revolution in October of 1917, Soviet Russia faced an invasion by 14 imperialist powers and a civil war supported by the former Russian Tsarist forces and capitalists. Many of the most revolutionary workers fought on the front lines and lost their lives. After the devastation of World War I and a year of revolutionary activity, the Russian economy nearly collapsed. Socialism is supposed to mean a better life than capitalism. But the Russian population faced poverty and scarcity instead. While the Soviet leadership negotiated an end to World War I and eventually, after much suffering, won the civil war, the attempts to spread the revolution had failed. The dreams of October lay in tatters.

Isolated, faced with poverty and exhaustion, the workers lost their hold on the democratic collective power they had created. A bureaucracy, led by Joseph Stalin, arose and imposed dictatorial powers through the new workers' state. Stalin proclaimed that socialism could exist in one country and turned his back on and even opposed international revolution. The actions of Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy, who now controlled the Communist International, led to the defeat of revolutions in Germany in 1923 and in China in 1927, as well as to the victory of fascism in Germany and the defeat of the Spanish Revolution in 1939. Instead of supporting international revolution, the bureaucracy tried to co-exist with the imperialist powers of the world. The Communist International became a rubber stamp for the Russian bureaucracy's foreign policy.



Stalin's propaganda falsely portraying him as continuing the socialist tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin

There was a major opposition to the bureaucracy in Russia, led by Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the October Revolution. Once again there were splits and the formation of new revolutionary groups around the world who defended the international banner of October 1917 and who tried to intervene in the revolutionary struggles of the 1920s and 1930s. But they were defeated, and the bureaucracy won and held power for decades. The bureaucracy betrayed the Russian Revolution of 1917. It gave an ugly and distorted picture of socialism and revolution. Instead of an internationalist perspective it defended the narrow interests of the new bureaucracy itself.

Nonetheless We Celebrate 1917

One hundred years later, those of us who want a different world still look to the October Revolution of 1917 and the international revolutionary upsurge it inspired for almost a decade afterwards. The struggles of this period showed that millions of ordinary people around the world could stand together and do extraordinary things. They could and did create a just and collaborative society. They showed that they could overcome the divisions of different languages, of gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture and religion – and join together. For a short time, a new world order seemed imminent, one in which the domination of capitalism, its lust for profits and disregard for decency, could be defeated.

Today the proletariat exists all over the world, concentrated often in cities of tens of millions. A new, just, and equal world, run by and for the great majority of the world's people, is both possible and necessary. Now it remains for us to complete the work begun in 1917.

The “National Question” and the Right of Nations and Peoples to Self-Determination

The nation that oppresses another nation forges its own chains.

– Karl Marx, Konfidentielle Mitteilung

The National Question

The Russian Revolution of 1917, like all revolutions, confronted the problems inherited from the regime it was replacing. Tsarist Russia was not a cohered nation state, but a vast empire stretching over two continents and comprised of many different peoples and nationalities. It occupied nearly one-sixth of the earth’s landmass – an empire nearly as large as the British Empire. It included part of Poland and Ukraine, Finland, Siberia, and nations on the Baltic among others. Ethnic Russians made up 45% of the population of the Empire. The majority of the Empire was comprised of diverse societies with different languages and ways of life – nomadic herders, agriculturalists, and people who lived by a mixture of hunting, gathering, fishing and agriculture. Nearly a decade after the Revolution, the first complete census listed 194 ethnic groups, that is, people with distinct languages and cultures.

The Russian Empire had been called the “prison house of nations.” Tsarist rule had followed a policy of rigid Russian domination and oppression of the groups and

nations of people who found themselves trapped within the Empire. This produced a deep and profound mistrust and often hatred of all things Russian. This is what is often referred to as “national feelings,” even though people were not organized into nations, but often in tribes or other kinship-based groups.

Not all questions the Revolution faced were ones that directly confronted the seizure of power by the working class, but they were consequences of class domination. The Revolution confronted the many inequalities of the Tsarist regime, including oppression of women, the persecution of gays, of Jewish people and other religious groups, the impoverishment of the peasantry as well as the oppression of the large non-Russian population, most of whom lived far from the urban centers of the Revolution. The situation of the people of these societies and the roles they would play in the Revolution were of great importance to the success of the Revolution and the beginnings of the construction of a socialist society. The “National Question,” that is, the situation of the various minorities who together made up the majority of the Russian Empire’s population, was a major question. How was the new society to be organized? How would the relations of the many diverse populations evolve? Would the right of self-determination of the majority of the people, to allow them to decide their future for themselves, undermine or shatter the gains of the first successful workers’ revolution?

The National Question was not a new question, but one that had already been posed for decades to the revolutionary movement in Europe. It had been taken up before, with far-ranging discussions and positions on the question of colonized peoples and those who found themselves trapped in the larger empires. In Marx’s time in the 1800s, the debates included the discussion of the rights of the people of Ireland, who had been subjugated by the British for centuries, to the question of the rights of the people of Poland, whose country had been partitioned between Prussia, Austria and Russia since 1795. Independence for Poland was a key demand of Marx and Engels and other revolutionaries of their time.



Rosa Luxemburg speaking in Germany in 1907



Delegates to the All-Russian Muslim Congress in Moscow, 1917

By the beginning of the 20th century, the analyses developed by Marx and Engels had largely been forgotten. The parties of the Socialist International, the international grouping of all socialist parties, argued mechanically that socialists should oppose nationalism at all costs. This perspective had two sources. First, the reforms that the socialist movement won through bitter struggle had resulted in an uneasy truce between the working class and capitalist class of the imperialist countries. Some socialist leaders shied away from criticizing the imperialist and colonial policies of the capitalist class to avoid endangering the reforms they had won and ending that uneasy truce. Some socialist leaders even went so far as to argue that the domination of so-called “backwards nations” by advanced capitalism was a progressive step that workers of the imperialist countries should support. This was certainly not the only perspective held by those in the socialist movement. Revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg, a founder of the Polish Socialist Party and a major theoretician of the Socialist International, condemned the imperialist governments’ domination of other nations in moral terms. But her perspective, the perspective held by the Polish Socialist Party, converged with the mainstream of the Socialist International in opposing the right of national self-determination. Socialists from countries that were subjugated or dominated by more powerful nations were often totally opposed to nationalism because the capitalists of their nations were their main opponents and competitors for political leadership of the working class in these countries. This was the second source of the perspective

that dominated the Socialist International – the socialists of the subject nations themselves. In fact, the Bolsheviks, confronted with the National Question in Russia, were unique in seeing that the right of self-determination was a necessary principle of the socialist movement, as Marx and Engels had originally argued.

Stalin, who was the People’s Commissar on Nationality Affairs, Lenin, and others in the Bolshevik Party, had participated in these discussions prior to the Revolution. But most members of the Party hadn’t considered this to be essential to the making of the Revolution. But for Lenin it was a central question linked to the success of the Revolution, beyond the seizure of power. The debates in the Socialist International focused largely on the right to nationhood or self-determination of peoples or nations who were colonized or trapped within larger nations or empires, such as Poland. In Russia, the debate included discussions of the societies that existed on the margins of capitalist development and were not identified with the nation states of Europe. Some maintained the position that if the people of those societies weren’t to be fully integrated into the structure of socialist society, it would be divisive and weaken the efforts to build socialism. Lenin and his co-thinkers had a different view. Lenin’s position was that, since there were many peoples with distinctively different cultures and social organization trapped within the vast Russian Empire, it had to be their decision how they would relate to a socialist society and its state. In his work, *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, written in 1916, Lenin argued that “mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion of nations only through a transitional period of the complete freedom of all oppressed nations.” That is, people in the previously dominated societies had to experience for themselves the advantage of affiliating with and eventually integrating into the socialist economy. Disagreements on this question existed within the Bolshevik Party. But, as it was not viewed as being as important as other questions, discussion was often limited, with Lenin’s perspective usually winning out but not fully understood or agreed upon.

The “Right of Nations or Peoples to Self-Determination” was a popular concept promoted by many with very different meanings and intentions. The Russian Provisional Government of 1917 paid lip service to this democratic idea, while continuing to carry out the

policies of the Tsar. In 1918 the U.S. President, Woodrow Wilson, talked about the right of “self-determination” when he elaborated his fourteen-point Program for Peace. Wilson’s so-called Program for Peace was largely in response to Lenin’s “Decree on Peace.” In November, immediately following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks exposed the secret treaties between Russia and its wartime allies. These secret agreements detailed the plans to carve up the territories controlled by the defeated nations at the end of World War I. The Russian, British and French governments planned to divide up the territories and resources of Central Asia, Europe and the Far East. This exposed the real motivations behind dividing up of these regions by the victorious capitalist regimes who claimed they were freeing people from their former oppressors.

The goals of those pursuing the maintenance of the capitalist order and the goals of their enemy, the Bolsheviks, whose goal was to bring about the socialist order, were made clear to all. Those defending the interests of capitalism wanted people freed from the domination of their past exploiters so new systems of exploitation and control could be fastened over them. Wilson spoke in favor of freeing the colonies of Europe because it would allow U.S. corporate and financial interests to access the natural resources and labor power controlled by European colonial powers. And for Britain and France, it was a divide-and-conquer strategy: take German-controlled regions and divide the Austro-Hungarian Empire to unseat those who controlled the wealth.

For the Bolsheviks, the goal was the opposite – to build a socialist society based on the self-activity of oppressed people under the leadership of the working class. The Bolsheviks had no interest in maintaining the oppressive features of the Tsarist Empire. As Lenin wrote in 1915, “That is why we must declare to the other nations that we are out-and-out internationalists and are striving for a voluntary union of the workers and peasants of all nations.” And that possibility was realizable in Russia. Following the ouster of the Tsar by the February Revolution, in the months leading up to the October Revolution, people in the farthest reaches of the Empire began to mobilize and organize themselves as part of the revolutionary wave that was sweeping the country. The Revolution offered hope for the long-awaited freedom

from the repressive bonds of the Empire. Like other political choices at the time, the Bolshevik position on the National Question was a practical recognition of the realities of the situation in revolutionary Russia.

As Trotsky wrote in his history of the Russian Revolution on *The Problem of Nationalities*:

The Bolshevik Party did not by any means undertake an evangel of separation. It merely assumed an obligation to struggle implacably against every form of national oppression, including the forcible retention of this or that nationality within the boundaries of the general state. Only in this way could the Russian proletariat gradually win the confidence of the oppressed nationalities.

Freed from National Oppression

The following excerpts from China Miéville’s *October* presents a vivid account of the upsurge throughout the country as the oppressive conditions of Tsarist rule were eliminated:

March 1917

The Provisional Government abolished the loathed police department.... It began to dismiss Russia’s regional governors. Cautiously, it probed concessions to and accommodations with the empire’s regions and minorities. Within days of the Revolution, the Muslims in the Duma formed a group calling for a convention on 1 May, to discuss self-determination. On 4 March, in Kiev, Ukrainian revolutionaries, nationalists, social democrats and radicals formed the Ukrainian Central Rada, or council. On 6 March the Provisional Government restored partial self-rule to Finland, reinstating the Finnish constitution after thirteen years of direct rule, and announced that a forthcoming Constituent Assembly would finally decide relations – such deferral emerging as the favoured technique for evading political difficulties. On the 16th it granted independence to Poland – though Poland being occupied by enemy powers, this was a symbolic gesture.

April

Nor were such probings towards progress only in

the arena of nationhood. The All-Russian meeting of Muslims, called for by Muslim Duma deputies immediately after the February Revolution, was fast approaching – but before this, on 23 April, delegates gathered in Kazan in Tatarstan for the All-Russian Muslim Women’s Congress. There, fifty-nine women delegates met before an audience 300 strong, overwhelmingly female, to debate issues including the status of Sharia law, plural marriage, women’s rights and the hijab.

May

Between 1 and 11 May, Moscow hosted the convention demanded by Muslim Duma deputies in February. Nine hundred delegates from Muslim populations and nations arrived in the city – Bashkirs, Ossets, Turks, Tatars, Kirghiz and more. Almost a quarter of those present were women, several fresh from the Women’s Muslim Congress in Kazan; one of the twelve-person presidium committee was a Tatar woman, Selima Jakubova. When one man asked why men should grant women political rights, a woman jumped up to answer. ‘You listen to the men of religion and raise no objections, but act as though you can grant us rights,’ she said. ‘Rather than that, we shall seize them!’

Up until the seizure of power the revolutionary fervor and sense of freedom spread across the country with soviets and revolutionary committees formed in Siberia, Uzbekistan.

September

From the 8th to the 15th, the Ukrainian Rada provocatively convened a Congress of the Nationalities, bringing together Ukrainians, Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, Tatars, Turks, Bessarabian Romanians, Latvians, Georgians, Estonians, Kazakhs, Cossacks and representatives of various radical parties.

It was the recognition of this reality – of people in struggle throughout the former empire – that solidified the Bolshevik’s position on the National Question and laid the basis for the formation of the socialist society to be constructed. An end to the war meant an end to the Russian Empire, which meant freedom of choice for those

peoples who had found themselves trapped inside that empire, their cultures dismissed and dominated by Great Russians (the term used to describe ethnic Russians). And with the victory of the Revolution and the declarations and policies that followed, the Revolution began to deliver on the promises it held out.

1917 – The Soviets’ Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia

In response to the movements throughout Russia, in June 1917, the first Congress of Soviets proclaimed the right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination. These were only statements of intent, as the soviets had not yet exerted their power and the Provisional Government was largely maintaining the policies of Tsarist Russia.

In October 1917, the Second Congress of Soviets passed the following resolution:

The united will of this Congress, The Councils of the People’s Commissars, resolved to base their activity upon the question of the nationalities of Russia, as expressed in the following principles:

- 1. The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.*
- 2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state.*
- 3. The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.*
- 4. The free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.*
- 5. The concrete decrees that follow from these principles will be immediately elaborated after the setting up of a Commission of Nationality Affairs.*

*In the name of the Russian Republic,
Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, V.
Ulyanov (Lenin).*

*People’s Commissar on Nationality Affairs, Josef
Dzhugashvili (Stalin).*

Following the Revolution To Construct a Nation

Following the successful seizure of power, the Russian working class was soon faced with a counter-revolution of Tsarist forces, aided by the armies of the major imperialist countries. This made defending the gains of the Revolution a military question. But the Revolution could not be defended by military means alone. The socialist revolution could only win if it was international and the role of this first workers' revolution was to expand and support the world revolution. The policies toward "nationalities" in Russia were guided by that perspective.

Lenin understood the depth of what was called "Great Russian chauvinism" – the belief that Russian culture and society was superior to that of non-Russians. He recognized its existence throughout Russian society and even in the Bolshevik Party (renamed the Communist Party in 1918). In a sharp exchange with opponents of his perspective at the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, Lenin argued,

We concluded a treaty with the Red Finnish government, which existed for a short time, we consented to make certain territorial concessions, on account of which I have heard not a few purely chauvinistic objections, such as, 'There are excellent fisheries there, and you have surrendered them.' They are the kind of objections of which I have said: Scratch some Communists and you will find Great Russian chauvinists.

The policy Lenin fought for was to provide populations that had suffered under the yoke of Tsarism a wide-ranging territorial autonomy that could range from organization through soviets to independence from Russia – as long as the independence didn't give the forces of Tsarism or imperialism a base for counter-revolutionary activity. Class, Lenin argued, would become the politically dominant social identity only if national identity was given proper respect. That is, the realities of an oppression imposed on the minorities of the former empire by the capitalists of their territories, would increase class antagonisms and class-consciousness. This meant that those living within the formal territory of the newly formed RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist

Republic) would not be automatically integrated into the state or governing apparatus, nor was there a pressure for them to integrate themselves.

The Bolshevik policy was put to the test following the successful revolution with the demands of people, often led by their own ruling class, to break free from the prison house of nations. Finland was the first test. As Trotsky wrote later, "The proclamation of equal rights meant nothing to the Finns especially, for they did not desire equality with the Russians but independence of Russia." The Senate of Finland declared independence on December 6, 1917 under the leadership of the Finnish capitalists. The Soviet Government recognized Finland's independence 12 days later with formal approval by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, the highest Soviet executive body, early in January.

There were four basic forms of nationhood that were recognized and guided policy: national territories, national languages, national elites and national cultures. This meant that people's customs were not marginalized and viewed as inferior. The preservation of culture was essential. Local territorial autonomy was guaranteed and local elites were not to be overthrown by outside forces, but could be replaced by the people themselves. Schools were built and classes taught in the languages of the region. Books were written and printed in local languages and, if a written language did not exist, a written form was developed. The land taken by Russian colonists was returned to native peoples, and those who had been forcibly removed from their lands were provided the means to return home, if they wished. There was an effort to cultivate and develop local leadership to provide direction to these new formations.

The seizure of power by the working class and its allies did not go unopposed. The Civil War in 1918 was the attempt by the White Army, which represented the big landowners and others linked to the former Tsarist regime, to institute a reconstituted prison of nations under the control of the Russian capitalists. This was backed by the imperialist powers of the world, 14 of which sent their own armies against the new workers' state. Many of the formerly oppressed groupings joined with the forces of the Red Army to hold on to their newfound freedoms. Trotsky, as head of the Red Army, helped form detachments made up of national groups.

They were some of the most steadfast and heroic fighters in the defense of the Revolution against the White Army and the invading forces of imperialism.

By June 1923, with the end of the Civil War and the victory of the workers and poor peasants, the new Soviet state was taking shape. This was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union. It was already comprised of two federal republics (including the RSFSR), five union republics, twelve autonomous republics, and eleven *autonomous oblasts*. (The *autonomous oblasts* were administrative units created for a number of smaller nations, which were given autonomy within the various republics of the Soviet Union.)

The National Question – A Fight to Defend the Revolution

Because the long civil war compounded the destruction suffered in World War I, the ranks of the revolutionary workers and peasants were decimated. And, as often is the case when optimism sinks into despair, old prejudices and cynicism rose to the surface again. This was reflected in the National Question and the attitude toward the autonomous organization of the minority groups in the new socialist state. Lenin, who was the central figure in the fight to defend the right of minority populations, faced serious health problems, compounded by a nearly successful assassination attempt and finally a number of serious strokes. With Lenin largely sidelined due to his health, the isolation of the Revolution, and Stalin's tightening grip on the Party, Great Russian chauvinism raised its ugly head.

Despite his declining health, one of Lenin's last political fights in the Party was over the National Question, which was tied to the bureaucratization of the Party. He focused on Stalin's policies toward the non-Russian territories within the Soviet Union and his attitude toward leading Party members in Georgia. Stalin's plan was to make the independent republics part of the Russian republic – in direct contradiction to the policy of the right of nations to self-determination. In 1922, Lenin wrote, "a distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation." His words echoed those of Marx decades before when Marx directed his

words toward the English working class. Marx said that the English working class would give up any hope for its own liberation if it did not join in the fight to free Ireland from English domination. It was the same in Russia. To block the freedom of choice for minority populations of Russia would be to sabotage the struggle for socialism.

Because of a third debilitating stroke, Lenin was forced to withdraw from political activity in 1923. He died the next year, in January 1924. By the end of the year, Stalin had openly adopted Nikolai Bukharin's theory of "Socialism in One Country." This was a nationalist policy implemented under the guise of defending the Soviet Union from the attacks of imperialism. This nationalist stance abandoned the internationalist perspective that had guided the Revolution in all its aspects, including "the National Question."

It laid the basis for the imposition of Russian language and culture throughout the Soviet Union – a "Russification" of non-Russian people within its borders. But, just as other gains of the Revolution were greatly distorted and undermined but not totally lost through the degeneration of the Revolution, the gains for minority populations across the former "prison house of nations" were not completely lost. This could be seen some 70 years later with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the emergence of 15 states, including Russia. The people of those regions had maintained a sense of themselves, their cultures, and their languages over decades of bureaucratic rule.

The lessons, accomplishments and failures in the policies addressing "the National Question" remain important for us today. Every corner of the planet is dominated by imperialism, and cultures are destroyed and undermined in a myriad of ways. The controlling forces of imperialism go beyond its militarized state apparatus. It penetrates every aspect of our lives – creating divisions among people around the world. And those divisions extend into every society, infecting the working class and other parts of the population with racism, ethnic and religious prejudices, and other divisions that tie us to the current order. And as Lenin heeded the words of Marx, we must be aware of the many traps that stand in our way in bringing an end to the chaos and cruelty of the current social order imposed on us.

What was attempted 100 years ago shows a major effort to respond to the divisions created by the hierarchical system of capitalism. The Bolsheviks' response to "the National Question" reflected a confidence that the vastly superior organization of socialism would not have to rely

on the coercion that is a necessary feature of capitalism. Socialism is the beginning of the development of a society genuinely based on the free association of equals.

Women in the Russian Revolution

In the wealthiest country in the world, in 2017 – 100 years after the Russian Revolution – what are women up against? Misogyny is still commonplace, as are the dangers of domestic abuse, harassment and rape. In Trump, we have a president who defends his right to grab any woman, and a Secretary of Education who protects the rights of rapists on college campuses. Abortion is under attack, with clinics impossible to access in an increasing number of states.

Today under capitalism, our lives as women are organized for us rather than by us: at our jobs we fit into what suits our bosses or their state. What and how we produce, time off for maternity leave, our pay, our sick time, and the organization of childcare are outside our control. Corporations suck our energy dry; state workers find that the budget is a fraction of what is needed – and what is available if we consider what has been stolen from the working class every day for generations – for our care. Capitalist exploitation continues to deliver economic conditions for working-class women that are harsh: long hours at work, or underemployment, and frighteningly expensive childcare and rent, just to mention a few. As working-class families struggle to make ends meet, women are pulled in all directions, often finding themselves trapped in bad relationships for economic reasons, working one or two jobs, usually topped off by the traditional burden of housework and childcare.

Women Before the Revolution

What better time to look back at the Russian Revolution for inspiration? Gathering together in meetings and conferences, women old and young, from the fields and the factories, questioned life as it was and began reorganizing social life to suit their own needs. It's hard to believe that the first country in the world to legalize abortion did so 98 years ago, in a land where 80 percent

of the people were peasants raised in a culture of extreme disdain for women, in conditions of terrible poverty, and on the background of a brutal war. A census shows that in 1907, only 17% of Russian women were literate. For men the percentage was 45%. The traditional oppression of women was so extreme that Russian marriage ceremonies at the time included the bride giving her husband a whip, sometimes braided by her own hands, sometimes passed from her father to her husband, with which the groom stroked the bride's shoulders to symbolize her total submission to him.

In the countryside, peasant women, by far the majority, did the brutal work of the farm together with the men. Along with plowing the fields and harvesting the crops, they were charged with tending the vegetable plots the family depended on, sowing and mending the clothes, cooking the meals, turning milk into butter and cheese, canning, and all this, of course, in addition to bearing and caring for children. It was a culture of obedience to the Tsar, to God, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and more immediately, to fathers and husbands.

The development of industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s transformed the lives of millions of peasant women as their families were drawn to the cities by industrial jobs. Factory owners pulled women into the industrial workplaces by the tens of thousands, happy to have laborers that were considered docile and compliant, resulting in more work for less pay. But this docility and compliance were traits that the social struggles of the late 1800s and the early 1900s would alter. From the late 1800s, through the failed revolution of 1905, and to the beginning of World War I, there were waves of conflict in the cities: strikes and protests against brutal conditions that transformed many of these women. These were fights that created a culture of organizing and solidarity among the working class.

To add to the brutality of the world of work, by 1917, urban as well as peasant women found themselves profoundly impacted by World War I. Many were alone with their children, as their brothers and husbands were conscripted in the war. Women went days without eating at times, and spent hours waiting in line for food.

The February Revolution

How did the February Revolution of 1917 begin? January and February were marked by strikes in Petrograd, but on International Women’s Day, March 8, 1917 (February 23 by the old Russian calendar), the working women in an industrial district of Petrograd left their factories to fight for an increase in their rations to feed their families. They poured out into the streets, and marched through their neighborhood and other working-class districts nearby. As they marched they called on others to join them, and attracted thousands onto the streets. Later that day and the next there were confrontations with the police, soldiers, and Cossacks. Women organized “flying pickets,” groups of women who went to defend the demonstrations; when they were attacked they convinced the soldiers and Cossacks to hold their fire and swords. His power having crumbled, the Tsar fled the city. This strike of the women was the fight that set the February Revolution into motion, launching Russia into its first experiment with democratic rule. Though it eliminated the Tsar, it did not eliminate the power of the factory owners and landowners, nor their alliance with the international capitalist – their allies in the World War – and so the conditions of the women were not transformed either. The oppression and the hunger continued.

The Revolution: A New World for Women

The position of women in society changed dramatically in October when the soviets, the Russian name for the councils of workers, peasants and soldiers, seized the power from the Provisional Government established in February. The new workers’ state gave women the

opportunity to make changes that would be enviable in our place and time.

Just as the October Revolution was taking place, the First All-City Conference of Petrograd Working Women was being held. The conference was attended by 500 delegates, elected by 80,000 working women, organized by the Bolshevik women’s journal *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker, started in 1914). Their goal was to prepare women who were not in the Bolshevik Party to think about women’s welfare and the program that could be implemented by the workers’ state. Of course, the conference was suspended while the delegates joined the armed uprising. Women dug entrenchments, bore arms, stood guard, and nursed the wounded.

Immediately after the workers seized power in the October Revolution, the Bolshevik Party (renamed the Communist Party in 1918) introduced a series of laws

that gave women new rights. The Revolution abolished the inferior legal status of women and imposed equality in the workplace for the first time, with equal wages for equal work. The Family Code of 1918 established civil, non-religious marriages, and gave men and women the right to a divorce on demand, initiated by either partner. Illegitimacy was abolished, so that both men and women would both be responsible for all of their children. Women benefited from the introduction of the 8-hour day, but at work new rules also forbade pregnant women working overtime and at night. For nursing women, a

30-minute breast-feeding break was required every three hours. The Soviet government created a paid maternity leave program, allowing working mothers eight weeks paid leave and other benefits. In addition, it created the Matmlad, a department “for the Protection of Mothers and Infants.” This department provided maternity clinics, daycares and homes for single mothers in Russian cities and large towns.

In 1920, the Family Code was updated; abortion was legalized and made free on demand. Can we imagine such a thing in the United States in 2017? As to sexuality, the



*“Women workers, get your guns!” –
a Civil War poster*

Revolution eliminated all references to sexual practices in the Criminal Code in 1922. After this date the only kind of sex crime was one that violated the individual's right to "life, health, freedom and dignity." There was even a court case that confirmed the right of two women to marry!

The organization that sought to transform the lives of women was the Zhenotdel, the women's section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In the fledgling workers' state, the Zhenotdel became the first Government Department ever to be established to care for the welfare of women. Its first leader, Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party since 1899 and a Bolshevik since 1904, had long written about her notion of free love: a relationship between men and women that was completely liberated from any kind of social or economic compulsion. She believed society needed a revolution in attitudes toward sexuality. She and the other leaders of the Zhenotdel, the Bolshevik leaders Inessa Armand and Konkordiiia Samoilova, imagined the end of marriage, to be replaced by free unions, and even the end of the family itself with communal childcare, nurseries, restaurants, laundries: all traditional women's work being carried out communally with individuals paid for their work. From these ideas followed experimentation. Rather than convincing men to share the drudgery of housework, the feminists of the day thought that paid labor in a communal setting was the answer. Communal nurseries, laundries and dining rooms were established. Our modern models of co-housing had a precedent in Soviet architects' designs for new homes that took into account plans for communal facilities. The Zhenotdel was the power-house of action that encouraged women and men to re-think their social lives.

The volunteers from the Zhenotdel traveled throughout Russia to spread their revolutionary ideas. They had special trains and ships dubbed "agit-trains" and "agit-ships" to bring their vision to peasant villages far from the centers of power. To communicate their vision they used art, posters, and song and dance troupes; they held meetings and showed films and plays. They taught women how to read and write, establishing over 125,000 literacy schools.

In the Bolshevik Party the percentage of women was small – about 10% – but they had an enormous influence on the new workers' state. Women in the Bolshevik Party such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Alexandra



Women in the Red Guard, 1917

Kollontai, and Konkordiiia Samoilova were leaders of tens of thousands more, and carried out an experiment that gave us a glimpse of where workers' power and imagination could take us.

The new Communist Party government not only changed the situation of women but challenged and eradicated the old laws regarding sexual relations, effectively legalizing homosexual and transgender activity within Russia. Under Lenin's leadership, homosexuals were allowed to serve in government.

The time these revolutionaries had and the circumstances they faced as they tried to implement these changes were very limited. Many of their experiments with change were stopped by the rise of Stalinism. Nonetheless these changes point the way forward and show how the fight against oppression and exploitation translates to all areas of life and social relations.

The Possibilities for Women Today

Working women in the 21st century would certainly envision changes that would differ in many ways from those imagined 100 years ago by our sisters in Russia. We will make a new and different revolution. But having the power to decide, to experiment, and to organize, without capitalists sucking us dry for their profits, will be an extraordinary liberation. We can use our massive social surplus, which is hoarded today by the .01%, to revolutionize the way we meet our social needs, with a blossoming of local communal experiments. The socialist women of today may be the visionaries that reinvent their liberation under socialism.

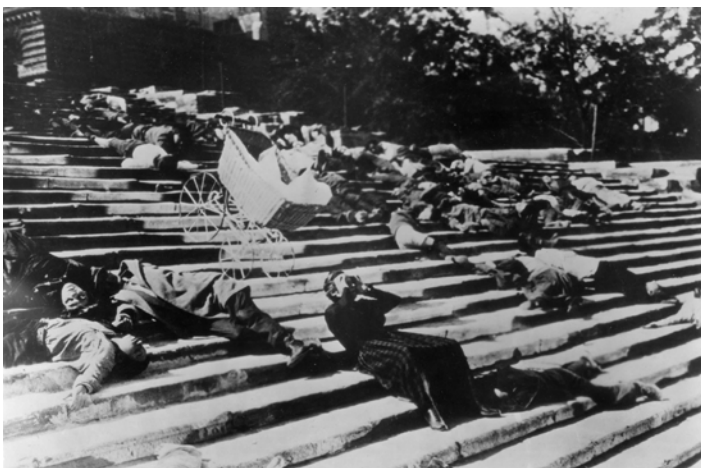
Culture, Arts, and Education in Revolutionary Russia

In the modern world, our culture is dominated by the forces of capitalism and the overwhelming wealth of a tiny minority. From the corporate-owned news and entertainment media to the realms of art, music, film, and even social media, much of what we see and hear represents the views and ideas of the 1%, or is simply designed to keep us shopping as much as possible. Even our education, from pre-school to grad school, is shaped by this system. College education is turned into an expensive product to be sold to a population desperate to improve their options to sell their labor to the bosses. Even when education is free, it's a method of training people to be obedient and competent only in the skills which the job market requires.

We have seen multiple times throughout history that during social movements, when more and more people are involved together in the struggle to change their lives, old assumptions are called into question and whole new worlds are within reach. Even the way people interact with each other in public changes.

Culture and the Arts

The Russian Revolution was no exception; it ushered in a blossoming of public artistic expression and the exchange of knowledge. In the years following October 1917, streets, public squares and buildings became canvasses for Expressionist paintings and constructions. Monuments commemorating different moments of the Revolution were common sights, often built spontaneously by



The "Odessa Steps" scene from Sergei Eisenstein's classic 1925 film 'Battleship Potemkin' about the 1905 Revolution

amateurs using the materials that were ready at hand. Meanwhile, the Revolution inspired countless works of literature and poetry, though some poets and authors were so busy participating in the remaking of society that they hardly found time to write as they used to.

Performance art also became accessible to workers and the poor in a way it never had been before. In the major cities, concert venues were opened to the public with free admission, and the workers' state set aside funds for artists. Even when Petrograd was under siege during the worst days of the Civil War, ballet companies and theater companies performed for crowds of workers and soldiers, in the same grand halls where not long before they had performed only for the upper classes of the Tsarist regime.

Museums too were opened to the public, and their collections were greatly expanded as the private art collections of aristocrats were carefully expropriated. Access to cultural heritage was likewise expanded by the construction of new libraries in poorer neighborhoods. In the two-year period from October 1917 to October 1919, the number of libraries in Petrograd doubled, while in Moscow it tripled. Meanwhile, post offices became distribution centers for free literature of every description. And as rapidly as public access to knowledge was expanding, it was matched every step of the way by people's appetite for it.

Education

We can see this when we look at the way education was transformed following the Revolution. The old system provided inferior schools for the general population, while high schools were in practice reserved for the children of the capitalist class. This was all replaced by a unified system, which included a joining of formal education to practical education in "labor-schools." While religious freedom was guaranteed in Soviet Russia, religious indoctrination was taken out of schools. As the contemporary revolutionary Victor Serge remembers in *Year One of the Russian Revolution*:

The old syllabuses, which trained subjects for the Tsar and believers for the Orthodox Church, were replaced by a necessarily improvised scheme which was anti-religious,

Socialist and based upon the educational role of work – the aim was to train producers who would be conscious of their role in society. Projects were drawn up to unify the school and the workshop. In order to implement sex equality from childhood onwards, co-education was frequently introduced in the schools. But everything had to be organized from scratch.

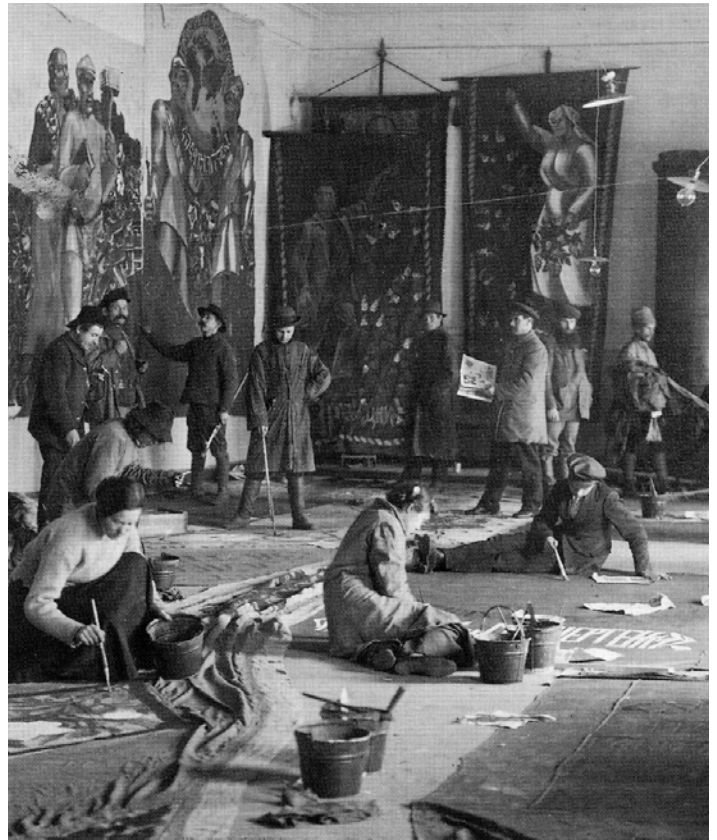
In addition to introducing co-education, the workers' state built pre-schools to help lessen the burden on mothers, as well as schools for children with disabilities. State funds were set aside for schools to offer free meals to all children, as well as clothes and shoes for those who needed them.

But the expansion of education was not limited to children. Free adult schools and colleges were set up throughout the country to offer special courses for workers, in consistently packed lecture halls. In the two years following the October Revolution, the number of universities in the country (each free and open to all) grew from 6 to 16, and university enrollment doubled.

The accessibility, the content, and even the purpose of public education were all transformed by the Revolution and the policies of the workers' state. But these were not the decrees of some distant dictatorial power – the workers' state expressed the will of the working class itself. While elected leaders and revolutionaries provided the framework for change, at every stage the energy and initiative behind putting such policies into practice had to come from below, from people throughout society taking charge of these tasks.

The New Life for Which We Labor

All this cultural rebirth and artistic blossoming, all the transformative accomplishments of the workers' state, are especially remarkable given the fact that they were happening in one of the most socially and economically backward countries in Europe, in a period wracked by foreign invasion, civil war, famine and terrible deprivation. Artists and scientists continued their work under food rationing; pencils had to be passed around among students in classrooms warmed by furniture used for firewood. This society run by and for the working



The St. Petersburg Photograph and Cinema Committee painting banners at the Smolny Institute, 1918

class, under the most challenging circumstances and in the midst of mass poverty, demonstrated its priorities in addressing not only the material needs, but the cultural needs of the majority. We can draw inspiration from this extraordinary spirit of optimism and determination. In the words of Maxim Gorky, one of the first well-known literary artists won over to the Revolution:

The experiment now undertaken by the Russian working class and by those intellectuals who have fused spiritually with it, this tragic experiment which will perhaps drain Russia to the last drop of her blood, is one of greatness, from which the whole world can learn. Almost every people in its time feels a Messianic mission, feels itself called to save the world, to breathe new life into its best forces. Come with us in our journey towards the new life for which we labor.

The Stalinist Bureaucracy

Gravedigger of the Russian Revolution

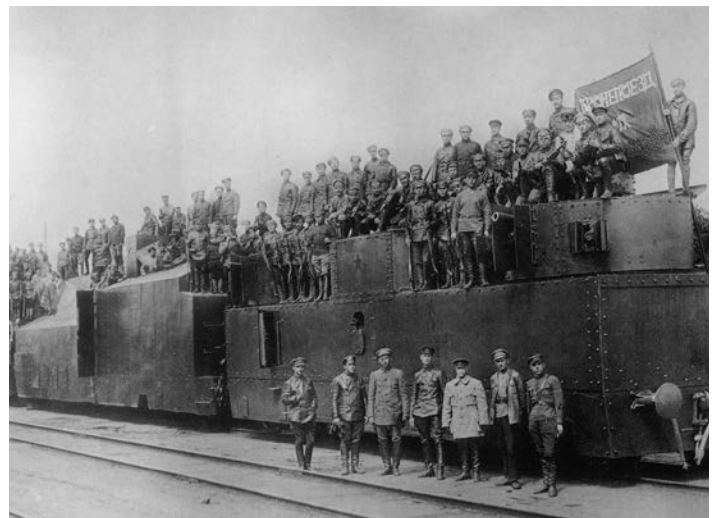
The Russian Revolution of 1917 produced the first state of its kind, a workers' state based on the working class organized through a system of democratic councils, the soviets. From bottom to top, the soviets were elected from the ranks of the workers in a directly democratic process that could not have been more transparent and open. Within a few short years though, that system had been hollowed out and replaced with a stifling bureaucracy. This was in no way a choice made by the Bolshevik Party in its role as the leading party of the working class and the Revolution. It was a consequence of the dire conditions of war, famine, and economic collapse. The hope that revolution would spread to neighboring countries was crushed as workers' revolutions from Finland to Germany to Hungary failed to take and hold power. The Russian workers and peasants were left with nothing but shattered hopes and material deprivation. This deprivation gave rise to a bureaucracy led by Joseph Stalin. For most of the 20th century, these bureaucrats spoke in the name of socialism and the Bolshevik Party and called their system socialist. The capitalist countries were happy to agree that this grim, grey, regimented system was socialism. Beneath these lies, the facts could not be clearer. The bureaucrats were not representatives of socialism or the Bolshevik Party; they were the gravediggers of the Russian Revolution.

Russia After 1917

As soon as the workers took power through the soviets, they were faced with an array of military and economic attacks from the world's capitalist powers, hell-bent on destroying this new manifestation of workers' power. From late 1917 to 1921, civil war raged across the former Russian Empire from Ukraine to Siberia. In fact, this was a civil war and an invasion at the same time, as armies composed of former Tsarist military troops and peasants were joined by forces from 14 different capitalist countries armed and funded by the major capitalist powers. These forces, called the White Armies, fought to establish a military dictatorship and drown the Revolution in blood. Against this threat, the Soviet state formed the Red Army,

five million strong, led by Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky. In a matter of months after October 1917, the workers who had struggled for revolution, and who had built the soviets and infused them with democratic life, were mobilized on a military footing to staff the administrative institutions of the new state and the Red Army.

The capitalist powers also set up an economic blockade of Soviet Russia, which shattered the economy and put industry at a standstill. The once-thriving factories and workers' districts slumped into inactivity. In multiple regions of Russia, people resorted to cannibalism to survive during the period of the Civil War. A system of starvation-level rationing was imposed in order to keep the cities, the army, and navy fed. This system was necessarily unequal as the remaining industrial workers, along with the soldiers and sailors, received barely adequate rations, while the unemployed and workers in less essential industries were given little more than crumbs. The peasants would have fared somewhat better than the workers due to their access to land, and their capacity to feed themselves. However, in order to maintain the necessary provisions for the urban population and the military, the Soviet government was forced to send grain requisition squads into the countryside to simply take grain and other produce. This brutal necessity generated bitter anger among the peasants, who were forced to



One of the Red Army's armored trains used to win the Civil War



Trotsky speaking to Red Army troops during the Civil War

go hungry to feed the workers and received nothing in return.

While most politically conscious workers had been absorbed into the state and military apparatus, those who remained struggled to survive. Many workers simply left the cities to rejoin their peasant relatives on newly-acquired plots of land in the countryside, abandoning the soviets, collective life, and revolution. Many more who chose to remain in the cities turned to the black market, crime, and prostitution to survive. The working class of Petrograd, the heart of the Revolution, was reduced to almost one-third of its former size. The absence of the most conscious, revolutionary workers, and the desperate conditions of life eroded the class consciousness of those workers who remained.

The soviets were no longer the rich democratic organs of power that they had once been. The workers who had organized and facilitated soviet democracy were dying by the thousands on the front lines of the civil war or were active as administrators in the new state. Many of the remaining workers had lost hope that the Revolution would provide them a better life. As the workers lost confidence in the Revolution, the parties that represented the peasants, small business-owners, and middle-class professionals lost confidence in the workers. These were the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties, who demanded a retreat from soviet to liberal capitalist democracy. They turned to open rebellion rather than simply arguing for this position in the soviets. The Socialist Revolutionaries launched an armed rebellion in 1918, leading peasant uprisings in the countryside, some going as far as joining up with the counter-revolutionary

White Armies. Socialist Revolutionary activists carried out terrorist attacks against the Soviet government, including an assassination attempt on the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. The Mensheviks supported a counter-revolutionary regime in Georgia that used police methods to kill Bolsheviks, anarchists, and other revolutionaries. After months of pleading with them to end their open hostilities against the Soviet state, the Bolshevik Party government outlawed the Socialist Revolutionary and Menshevik parties. Their newspapers were suppressed, and their activists were thrown in jail. A special police force was formed and given extraordinary powers to seek out insurgents. This police force was called the “Cheka,” derived from the Russian for “exceptional commission,” words that signified that this unfettered police force was by no means meant to be a permanent feature of the Soviet state.

These measures, taken to defend workers’ democracy against capitalist restoration, had dire consequences. The Bolshevik Party remained as the only political party, with no democratic check on its power coming from other parties. The Bolshevik leaders were conscious that this situation was a danger to the Soviet regime, not in any way a strength. Of these policies, Lenin wrote, “It was like a car that was going not in the direction the driver desired but in the direction someone else desired; as if it were being driven by some mysterious, lawless hand, God knows whose, perhaps of a profiteer, or of a private capitalist, or of both.”

Critics from the left – anarchists and many Bolsheviks – raised an alarm against this consolidation of power. These left-wing critics proposed artificial solutions to the problems of the economy. They called for legalization of some or all of the other parties in spite of what they had done. They called for new large-scale democratic structures to run the economy in spite of the shattered state of the working class. Some even called for the expulsion of the Bolshevik Party from the government. These ultra-left activists joined with the remaining militants of the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary parties and led workers’ strikes in Petrograd and ultimately an armed uprising in the naval garrison of Kronstadt, which was suppressed militarily by the Soviet government.

The fact is, many of the criticisms raised by these leftists were as justified as their solutions were unrealistic.

The Bolshevik leaders, Lenin and Trotsky, shared their criticisms against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution. But Lenin and Trotsky knew the problem of bureaucracy could not be solved by drawing up utopian schemes. The working class was shattered. Who would replace the Bolsheviks? What would their replacements possibly do differently? In fact, the only real answer to who would replace the Bolsheviks was another regime led by the anti-Soviet parties who sought a capitalist restoration and a bloody vengeance against the working class.

The Bolshevik Party was under huge stress, and its role in governing the country without the support of other parties placed it under even greater pressure. The debate over what to do threatened to tear the party itself apart. As a means of forestalling this danger and keeping the party together in spite of these internal conflicts, the Bolsheviks temporarily suspended the right of groups within the party to form factions and criticize the overall party policy. This was seen as a temporary measure put in place to help the party weather a particularly difficult moment. This measure, imposed by circumstances, was one more step in the collapse of workers' democracy, this time in the heart of the workers' own revolutionary party.

The Consolidation of the Bureaucracy and the Rise of Stalinism

By the early 1920s, not only was the vibrant democracy of 1917 nowhere to be seen, but a creeping corruption was eating away at the machinery of the Soviet state and the Bolshevik Party itself. In order to carry out the technical tasks of the state, of industry, and of the army, thousands were recruited to the Bolshevik Party. Many of them were not as reliable as the revolutionaries who had participated in a wide range of political activities before the Revolution. The conditions of starvation and rationing created the basis for a system of corruption within the ranks of the Party and the state. A network of these functionaries used their positions to guarantee the basic means of survival to their friends and families. Some began to consciously defend this emerging bureaucratic order. Critics were removed from positions of responsibility, and workers who spoke up were threatened with the loss of their rations. Workers quickly learned that the road to a full belly was to follow the bureaucrats and not raise any criticism. The bureaucracy was reshaping the



Marching to the Workers' and Soldiers' Council in Berlin during the German Revolution, 1919

state and the Party itself in its own interests, to defend its privileges. Lenin was horrified. In 1922 he wrote,

If we take the huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can be truthfully said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth, they are not directing, they are being directed.

Joseph Stalin was the leader of this “gigantic heap” of bureaucracy. Stalin had been a long-time member of the Bolshevik Party, but unlike Lenin, Trotsky, or the other well-known Bolshevik leaders, Stalin was never a prominent political strategist or mass leader elected by workers. Stalin was a man of the party machinery. He played a prominent role in the internal life of the Bolshevik Party as an organizer, not a political leader. Stalin was an excellent judge of people and what they could do, and he was an extremely energetic worker. During the pre-revolutionary period, Stalin's talents were used to organize the distribution of materials and to carry out bank robberies to fund Party efforts. By 1917, Stalin was included in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party where he could be relied on to marshal the necessary personnel to carry out the decisions and policies shaped by the political leadership of the Party, leaders like Lenin.

Stalin's strengths were also his defects. His skill with people crossed over into manipulation, his energy was a

reflection of his personal ambition, and he was known to be rough and cruel in his behavior. These negative aspects were kept in check by the democratic traditions of the Party and its leadership. This was the case with many other talented members of the Bolshevik Party whose useful qualities came along with personal defects. How could it be otherwise in a party of imperfect human beings? Democracy and control from below are the best insurance against individual defects, but by the 1920s this democracy had disappeared, in the soviets and in the Party. The general deprivation of the working class opened up possibilities for corruption and, in this situation, Stalin began to assume a new and deadly role. In 1922, Stalin assumed the title of General Secretary, the most important administrative role in the Bolshevik Party. In Stalin, the bureaucracy found a champion in the Central Committee – someone who was rough and manipulative, power-hungry, and whose personal ambition was not limited by methodical political analysis or political principles.

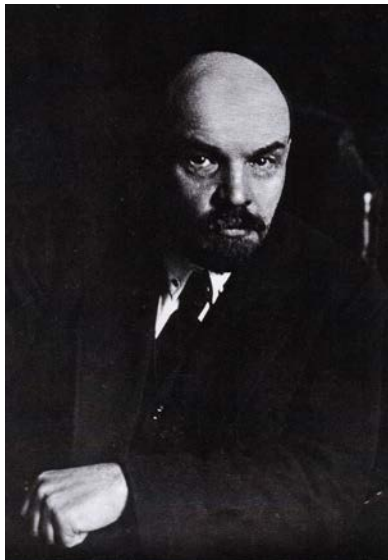
Lenin was the first leader of the Bolshevik Party to begin an open struggle against the bureaucracy. As the leading personality of the party leadership that had carried out the revolution, Lenin had an immense role in holding back the tide of bureaucratic degeneration. After the Civil War, Trotsky had immersed himself in the industrial reconstruction efforts. He initially decided not to confront the problem of bureaucracy but with Lenin's urging, Trotsky joined the fight.

Lenin and Trotsky could not abolish the social conditions that gave rise to bureaucracy. But, while they remained in the leadership of the Party, the bureaucracy could not change the overall policy of the Party where it mattered: the international revolution. Inspired by the Russian example, workers in Hungary, Finland, Italy, China, and above all, Germany made revolutionary attempts, aided by the newly established Communist International. Another workers' state anywhere, but especially in an industrialized country, would be able to lend its technological and industrial strength to Russia's recovery, and bring immediate economic relief. And even a little hope that Russia's isolation was about to be broken

might have given workers the confidence to raise their heads against the bureaucrats who were taking over their state from within. A successful revolution in an industrial powerhouse such as Germany, the leading manufacturer of heavy machinery, could have changed the course of history.

The Death of Lenin

The failure of the revolutions in other countries ensured the survival of the bureaucracy, but it was the death of Lenin that cemented its victory. Lenin suffered from arteriosclerosis, a hardening of the arteries. The damage from the bullet that remained in his body after the



Lenin, 1919

Socialist Revolutionaries' assassination attempt made his condition worse. In 1922, he began to experience strokes that put him in the hospital and took him out of regular Party work. After his second stroke, Lenin understood his days were numbered and redoubled his efforts against the bureaucracy. He dictated a message to the Central Committee assessing the problems faced by the Party. In this message, he demanded the removal of Stalin as General Secretary, and the appointment of a comrade "who in all other respects differs from Comrade Stalin." By that time, Stalin had manipulated and blackmailed the other

Central Committee members and Lenin's last wishes were suppressed.

Finally, in 1924, Lenin suffered a fatal stroke and died. Stalin took advantage of Lenin's death to expand his base of support in the bureaucracy. In a false tribute to Lenin, Stalin proposed a "Lenin Levy," a recruitment to the Party of 240,000 new members, increasing the party membership by over 50%. These new members were for the most part recruits to the bureaucracy, people who joined to secure a position and ensure their own survival, not people who joined because of their political convictions.

With the bureaucracy massively reinforced, Stalin launched an assault on the international perspective of revolution that had been the foundation of Bolshevism. Stalin put forward the absurd theory of "socialism in one country": that Russia by itself could build a socialist

society. This had nothing to do with the theories of Marx or Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. At its core, “socialism in one country” represented an attempted truce with capitalism, an abandonment of internationalism, and a complete betrayal of socialism. The international working class remained in chains, while the Soviet state withdrew within itself.

The Menshevik policy of following after the capitalist class was reborn on the world scale as Stalinist policies attached the Communist Parties to the left-wing capitalist parties. This meant dissolving the revolutionary forces into nationalist movements in the colonized world, and supporting the left-leaning capitalist parties of other countries in their manipulations, posing as “progressive” forces. The Stalinists urged workers to become uncritical followers of capitalist politicians from Chiang Kai-Shek and the Guomindang in China, to the Roosevelt administration and the Democrats in the USA. In China, in Spain, in Britain and France, mass movements of the working class were strangled, and revolutionary attempts by the workers were sabotaged. The Stalinist bureaucracy betrayed the international working class by turning the Communist International into a brake on the world revolution.

Nationalized Property and the Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy thrived on the preservation of inequality and the international isolation of the Russian working class. In fact, the bureaucracy itself acted against the interests of the working class. However, it presided over a nationalized, collective economy, the product of the October Revolution. The Soviet state was produced by the working class, and the transformations the state made to the economy were marked by the state’s origin in a workers’ revolution. This remained the case even after the bureaucracy took control.

In 1917, the working class took political control through the soviets, but this did not immediately result in the workers taking control of the economy. During the Revolution itself, some major factories were seized by the workers, but many more were still operating under capitalist ownership. Immediately after the Revolution, most of the remaining owners of private industry actively worked to sabotage the economy, hoping to use their economic power as a lever to overthrow the working class. The only recourse for the working class was a

step-by-step seizure of control of the major industries. Factories and firms were either seized out-right by shop-floor committees, or these committees took over day-to-day management of the factories that were still privately run. As the workers’ state undertook construction of new industries, these were not handed over to private capitalists, but were directly controlled by the Soviet state. Over the course of the 1920s, private ownership of industry in Soviet Russia was extinguished and private industrial property was nationalized.

The question of land and agriculture, the biggest and most important part of the Russian economy, presented even greater challenges and dangers. The October Revolution had unleashed a massive land reform. The peasants of Russia formed committees to redistribute the land of the big landowners. The land reform won the peasants to support the Soviet regime. But the result was that the countryside became a patchwork of individual peasant farms of various sizes. The peasants produced their goods to meet their own needs, and anything beyond this they sold on the market. In other words, a peasant economy was an economy of small capitalists.

Almost immediately after the Revolution, the working class came into conflict with the peasantry. The workers in the cities needed to eat. The Red Army needed provisions. But industry had been thrown into crisis by capitalist sabotage from within, as well as by an international blockade and the boycott of the capitalist countries of the world. Russian industry was crippled. The result was that the working class had nothing to offer the peasantry in exchange for their agricultural products. Initially, during the Civil War, the recourse of the Soviet state was to take control of the markets and set prices. In 1921 this regime of “War Communism” was replaced by the New Economic Policy, a relaxation of state control and a reintroduction of the market within the Russian economy. The New Economic Policy (NEP) succeeded in jump-starting the economy as peasants’ self-interest was allowed to drive production. However, this also accelerated the rise of the “kulaks,” peasant proprietors who took advantage of land redistribution to amass large landholdings and push out smaller peasants. They enriched themselves in the new conditions set by the NEP. But they also bitterly resented the fact that the Soviet state retained a monopoly on foreign trade so that



Leaders of the Left Opposition with Trotsky in the center

foreign capital could not manipulate the Soviet economy or cultivate independent links with the kulaks.

The kulaks dreamed of becoming like the large landowners of the past. As they grew rich under the NEP, they grew bolder. They began to plot a counter-revolution to overthrow the Soviet state and its monopoly on foreign trade. The Stalinist bureaucracy ignored this threat until it was almost too late. In 1928, the bureaucracy shifted from toleration of the kulaks to a campaign of extermination, forcing all peasants into collective farms and massively industrializing the economy to shift the balance of economic forces away from the peasantry into the hands of the state. This policy was carried out with a maximum of brutality, stupidity, and incompetence, resulting in famine, the deaths of millions and, as Trotsky put it, “dragging the name of socialism through the mud.”

The gradual nationalization of the economy under the Soviet state, for all its flaws, flowed from the logic of the class struggle of the working class against the capitalist industrialists and against the peasants with large landholdings. At each step of this struggle, the workers’ state took control against the resistance of private owners of capital or land. But this does not change the fundamental fact – the nationalized property in the Soviet Union was a product of the seizure of political power by the working class. This was a fundamentally different process than what occurred in other countries such as China, Yugoslavia, or Cuba, where popular revolutions produced nationalist regimes that called themselves communist and that used the state to take control of the economy and develop industry and infrastructure.

The Left Opposition and the Socialist Consciousness of the Working Class

Lenin began the open struggle against bureaucracy in 1922 and convinced Trotsky to support him. After Lenin’s death in 1924, Trotsky carried on the fight, forming the Left Opposition, gathering thousands of Bolshevik militants opposed to Stalinist policies. In Russia, the Left Opposition organized meetings in the unions, in the Party, and among the workers. They met in workers’ houses at night, or deep in the forest, reviving the underground revolutionary methods of the Bolshevik past. They were hounded, persecuted, thrown out of Party meetings, and deprived of rations by the bureaucrats. Worker-oppositionists risked their lives and their families’ lives to stand up for their convictions. Against all odds, they continued the Bolshevik legacy, attempting to explain what was happening and point towards the only solution: that the workers could return to power in Russia and win power in other countries by marching under their own banner again.

The bureaucracy consolidated its privileges by police methods but it could not rule by police methods alone. It had to claim the mantle of the October Revolution, the Bolshevik Party, and socialism. The working class retained a consciousness of the Revolution’s socialist nature. Russian workers, or at least their parents, had a living experience of soviet democracy in the days of 1917. The Revolution, in which the working class had fought for a socialist reorganization of society, was a living memory. The bureaucrats derived their privileges, which they enjoyed at the workers’ expense, by their control of the state. Unlike capitalists, who own the means of production outright and do not hide this fact, the bureaucracy controlled the means of production through the state in the name of society, and had to hide or justify their privileges in the name of socialism.

Trotsky argued that a revolutionary policy in the Soviet Union would be based on a reform of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state – a political, not a social revolution. The working class would carry out its struggle in the name of a return to the principles and practices of the October Revolution. The starting point of this struggle would be the socialist consciousness of the population. If such a struggle were successful, the nationalized property would not be handed back over to the capitalists or peasant

proprietors. Instead, the working class would use the nationalized property as the basis for meeting the needs of the whole population. In other words, a regeneration of the Soviet state would take the nationalized property and the socialist consciousness of the working class as its starting point. The Left Opposition called for a merciless criticism and struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. But at the same time, Trotsky called for an unconditional defense of the Soviet Union to preserve the gains of the Revolution against any attack by imperialism.

The Left Opposition in the World Communist Movement

The 1920s and 1930s saw massive social struggles and revolutionary attempts break out around the world. Germany saw the rise of the Nazis battling against the Communist and Socialist parties. In France, the election of a Socialist Party-led government was followed by a wave of strikes and factory occupations. In the United States, massive sit-down strikes led to the creation of industrial unions. And in Spain, the fascist rebellion led by General Franco began a revolutionary conflict and civil war. The possibility existed for another workers' revolution, another October.

Since 1917, the revolutionary forces of the working class had regrouped themselves around the banner of the Russian Revolution and everything it stood for. Many of these forces had been organized in the Communist International. The result, with a few exceptions, was that in most industrialized countries, thousands of revolutionary workers were gathered in the Communist Parties and millions looked to the Communist Parties for leadership. But these parties were misled by the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Everywhere the Communist Parties led the workers, not to prepare for the seizure of power, but instead into coalitions or "popular fronts" led by capitalist parties with a nationalist policy. Everywhere the revolutionary forces were being dissipated, disorganized, and decimated.

In Trotsky's analysis, the Communist Parties, like the Soviet Union, had a dual nature – they were full of the best and most conscious revolutionary forces in the working class. But they were led by a corrupt bureaucracy that relied on support from the Soviet bureaucracy and therefore served its interests. The Stalinists feared a new revolutionary victory for the working class, because it

would certainly result in a new wave of revolutionary energy in the Soviet Union. Instead, they used their influence via the Communist Parties to block this possibility at all costs.

The problem for the Left Opposition was to expose the bureaucratic leadership of the Communist Parties and to win over the workers to a revolutionary policy. The Left Opposition began as a real current among the parties of the Communist International. Some leaders with real influence in the working-class movement rallied to the Left Opposition in Italy, Belgium, Germany, Spain, China, and the United States. Other parties in Bolivia, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka were built by, or won to, the Left Opposition. The hope was that a new revolution, led by these forces, could show the way forward to the world communist movement. This would give the Russian working class the confidence to defeat the police apparatus of the bureaucracy, and carry out a thorough top-to-bottom reform of the state and the Party.

But the Left Opposition faced enormous difficulties, especially in its strongest base of support, Russia. Trotsky himself was exiled in 1927, but thousands of Left Oppositionists remained in Russia. As the bureaucracy grew more confident the harassment of oppositionists led to outright repression. Thousands of oppositionists were sent to prison camps and to exile in Siberia, where they were worked to death or executed. The Russian section of the Left Opposition was shattered by this repression. Elsewhere in the world, oppositionists were hunted down by Stalinists. Trotsky's son Leon Sedov was assassinated by Stalinist agents in France. The result was that the ideas of the Left Opposition were cut off from the mainstream of the Communist movement. Only Stalin's distortions and lies were allowed through the filter of the bureaucracy.

It was not enough for Stalin to physically repress the Left Opposition. Trotsky had a significance for people in the Soviet Union even though the Left Opposition there had been obliterated. Everyone in Russia knew that Trotsky was alive in exile in Turkey, then France, then Norway, and then finally in Mexico. It was not just a question of personality; Trotsky represented a genuine alternative to Stalin's policies, and everyone understood this as well. If Stalin led the Soviet Union into a catastrophe, who was to say that even the most staid bureaucrats wouldn't consider supporting Trotsky's revolutionary policies to save their own skin from the

dangers of war and from indignant workers fed up with the bureaucrats' sabotage? Who was to say that some of the Red Army generals wouldn't recall Trotsky's leadership of the Red Army during the Civil War and decide they preferred a leader who had already proved his capacities in wartime?

A catastrophe was looming as the capitalist powers were preparing a new worldwide slaughter, World War II. The period of 1936-1939 saw Stalin eliminate one by one, not only the Left Opposition, but anyone who had played a role in the Bolshevik Party. The Moscow trials of 1936-1939 saw the execution of 600,000 people, with many more harassed and imprisoned in work camps called "gulags." Just before the war, Stalin launched a purge of the Red Army. He eliminated officers and soldiers who had worked personally with Trotsky. Finally, in 1940, Stalin sent an assassin, Ramon Mercador, to assassinate Trotsky in Coyoacán, Mexico. With every last potential opponent out of the way, Stalin's regime survived World War II without being overthrown from within or from without. Stalin and his bureaucratic caste stood victorious over the battered and distorted workers' state, and the corpse of the Bolshevik Party.

The Legacy of Stalinism

Stalinism not only persisted for another 50 years after the death of Trotsky, its worst features became identified with socialism and communism. Stalin created a cult of personality around Lenin, who Stalin portrayed as the infallible disciple of Marx and Engels. Stalin set himself up as the high priest who could interpret the teachings of these great socialist prophets. Stalinists treated the words of Marx, Engels, and Lenin like religious texts, but twisted their meanings to justify Stalinist policies. All of the exceptional measures taken by the Bolsheviks during the Revolution were made into virtues of the monolithic Stalinist state. Brutality, terror, hypocrisy, and bureaucratic indifference to suffering became the norms of everyday life.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary foundations of the Soviet state carried the Soviet Union forward on the economic plane despite its isolation. The nationalized, planned economy enabled underdeveloped Russia to become an economic and military powerhouse, the second super-power next to the United States. The Soviet Union went from a peasant country with medieval



Trotsky, murdered by one of Stalin's agents – 1940

technology to an advanced industrial power sending people into space. Even capitalist economists remarked at the economic power of the Soviet planned economy.

The Stalinist regime and Stalinist methods persisted even after the death of Stalin in 1953. Through the role it played internationally, the Soviet Union was both a barrier to workers' revolution and a counter-weight to imperialism. The threat of war, especially nuclear war, made it much more difficult for capitalist countries to carry out their wars for profit. Soviet weapons as well as economic and technical aid were made available to national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Thousands of nationalist revolutionaries studied politics and military techniques in the Soviet Union. This led to revolutions and parties, while not based in the working class, that took power under the banner of socialism and communism. The so-called socialist regimes in Cuba, China, Vietnam, North Korea and elsewhere took Stalinism as a model and created their own bureaucratic regimes. Unlike Russia, the working class never played a leading role and never created a democratic workers' state in any of these places. The economies of these countries were nationalized in a way that resembled the Soviet Union's economy, but without the working class ever coming to power.

Finally, beginning in the 1980s, the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union took the final step in its evolution towards integration into the capitalist system. They began to privatize the economy under their personal control and eventual ownership. This led to the dissolution

of the Soviet Union, the shedding of any pretense of socialism, and the creation of today's Russian Federation – a capitalist state. The inability of the working class to oppose these privatizations indicated that their socialist consciousness had faded sufficiently for the bureaucrats to seize the opportunity. It is no surprise that today's leading Russian politicians and billionaires are the former bureaucrats who were trained in the Stalin school of brutality. Vladimir Putin, himself a former officer in the Soviet secret police, is the leader of this new generation of rulers. The bureaucracy developed into a full-blown capitalist class by taking the wealth of Russian society and making it their own private property to be bought, sold, and traded on the market.

What was Stalinism?

It is important to see Stalinism for what it was, and to extract the real history of socialism, Marxism, and the Russian Revolution from the myths – the myths told by anti-communists, and the myths told by those who claim to be socialists but make excuses for the Stalinist

bureaucracy and its imitators in other so-called socialist countries. Stalinism was not a political choice made by the working class; it arose from the condition of isolation imposed on the Russian Revolution. While Stalinism emerged from the Soviet state and the Bolshevik Party, it was not in any way the logical product of either the soviets or the Party. The Stalinist bureaucracy in its rise to power subordinated the soviets and the Party to the will of the bureaucracy. For a significant time period, after eliminating all its opponents, the bureaucracy was still obligated to extend and maintain the economic foundations of the Revolution. It was dependent on the existence of this state that the imperialist countries were determined to smash. To defend itself, the bureaucracy used the power of the Soviet state to reinforce movements against imperialism, so long as they were led by forces other than the working class. Finally, in seizing the means of production as private property, the bureaucracy revealed the logical outcome of its evolution. It became the Russian capitalist class of today.



Stalin speaking to his circle in 1935 – those with scratched-out faces were later executed by him.

Timeline of the Russian Revolution

- 1861 Serfdom is abolished in Russia: Serfdom was a legal and economic system dating back to the Middle Ages in which serfs (an underclass of farm laborers making up over a third of the country's population) were legally attached to the land as part of the property of the landowner.
- 1874 The Narodniks, a politically mixed movement of pro-democracy urban middle-class intellectuals, decide to “go to the people,” leaving the cities to “educate” the peasants on their need to revolt.
- 1881 Alexander II, Tsar (or king) of the Russian Empire, is assassinated by Narodnaya Volya, a small offshoot of the Narodniks who believed that by performing assassinations and acts of terrorism against the government, they could spur the peasants of Russia to rise up and create an agrarian form of socialism.
- 1883 Georgi Plekhanov, an influential revolutionary known as the “father of Russian Marxism,” co-founds the “Emancipation of Labor” group in Geneva, Switzerland.
- 1891-1903 Sergei Witte, Finance Minister of the Russian Empire, oversees a series of economic reforms and infrastructure projects designed to bring some capitalist development into pockets of the empire on French and British investment.
- 1895 The “St. Petersburg League of Struggle for Emancipation of the Working Class” is founded by Vladimir Lenin, Julius Martov, and other Marxists in the city wanting to organize agitation among workers.
- 1898 First Congress of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party) in Minsk:
A new socialist party forms to unite various revolutionary organizations across Russia. Its first leaders include Plekhanov, Lenin, and Martov.
- 1900 First publication of *Iskra*, a revolutionary newspaper put together by Lenin as a tool to unify different party activists into a nationwide organization.
- 1902 Lenin publishes *What Is to Be Done?*, in which he states that a revolutionary Marxist party is necessary for the working class to take power, and outlines what form such a party should take.



Many beggars roamed the countryside for alms before the Revolution

The Socialist Revolutionary Party (or the “SRs”) is founded, a mixed political grouping of middle-class urban intellectuals who are inspired by the ideas of the Narodniks

before them, and are willing to commit assassinations and acts of terrorism to overthrow the Tsarist regime. Some believed that the peasant farmers of the Russian countryside would be able to create a new socialist society once the Tsarist regime was overthrown.

1902-1903 Waves of strikes take place across the Caucasus region of the Russian Empire.

1903 Second Congress of the RSDLP, in which it splits into a majority faction (“Bolsheviks”) and a minority faction (“Mensheviks”). One of the key dividing issues is that the Bolshevik faction wants to keep stricter standards for party membership, while the Mensheviks want to allow non-committed sympathizers in the party. Plekhanov sides with Lenin on the Bolshevik side; Leon Trotsky sides with Martov on the Menshevik side. Plekhanov later switches to the Mensheviks. Trotsky will later leave the Mensheviks and remain in the RSDLP without belonging to either faction.



In the St. Petersburg slums, a mother teaches her daughter how to read using a street advertisement.

1904 Strike waves spread across the Caucasus and Ukraine.

February* Beginning of the Russo-Japanese War (Feb 1904 – Sept 1905): The Russian Empire anticipates an easy victory but is crushed by the Japanese military in every battle.

December Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers of St. Petersburg: In an attempt to placate and control the labor movement in St. Petersburg (the capital of the Russian Empire), the Tsarist regime and police organize a meeting where they invite elected representatives of the workers from different workplaces to come together and air their grievances. Unfortunately for the Tsarist regime, the workers learn a lot from the experience of electing workplace representatives to a city-wide council, or soviet.

1905-1907: Russian Revolution of 1905

1905

January 9 Bloody Sunday: Father Georgy Gapon, a socially conscious priest, leads a peaceful march of thousands in St. Petersburg to the Winter Palace to present a petition to Tsar Nicholas II. The Imperial Guards fire on the unarmed protesters and hundreds are killed.

January-February Strikes and protests erupt in cities across the Empire.

* Specific dates pertaining to events in Russia are provided in the “old style” Julian calendar because that was the calendar used in Russia at the time. Old style dates were 13 days behind the “new style” Gregorian calendar which we use today and which most of the world was using by that time. New style dates, for events taking place outside of Russia, are marked with an asterisk.

- February** Under increasing pressure to give concessions to the people, the Tsar promises at some point to create a State Duma (parliament). The proposed Duma would have no real power and the right to vote would be limited to a tiny population of wealthy men.
- April-May** Third (mostly Bolshevik) Congress of the RSDLP meets in London to discuss the escalating revolutionary situation in Russia.
- May 11-June 27** Miners strike in Ivanovo and establish a soviet.
- June 14** Potemkin mutiny: Sailors on the battleship Potemkin mutiny while in port and are put down by the army.
- June-July** Peasant uprisings take place across the country.
- October 10-21** St. Petersburg general strike
- October 13-December 10** St. Petersburg Soviet: Striking workers around the city elect representatives to a council that takes responsibility for managing and defending the strike, and then begins to act as an alternative government for the city. The Mensheviks have significant influence in the Soviet, and Leon Trotsky is soon elected chairman of its Executive Committee.
- October 14** October Manifesto: The Tsar promises to create a Duma with more political power and broader suffrage.
- December** General strikes sweep across the empire and are brutally repressed.
- December 9-17** An armed insurrection takes place in Moscow and is crushed by the Tsar's forces.
- 1906** Peasant uprisings continue for months but remain isolated and are eventually crushed.
- April-July** The Constitution of 1906 establishes the First State Duma, which in practice has no real power and is dissolved by the Tsar after three months.
- 1906-1911** Stolypin Regime: Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin institutes martial law, organizes political repression of revolutionary groups, and enacts agrarian reforms to try to placate the peasantry and modernize the economy.



*Bloody Sunday: Imperial Guards
massacring protesters*

1906-1907 RSDLP “unity” congresses (Fourth Congress in Stockholm and the Fifth in London): In the wake of the Revolution of 1905, some Bolsheviks and Mensheviks attempt to resolve their differences and reunite the party. Sporadic collaboration between the two factions continues for years, sometimes involving joint participation in Duma elections.

1907 Second State Duma meets from February-July before being dissolved by the Tsar. Lenin leaves Russia.

1907-1912 Third Duma meets, elected based on greater voting power for the rich.

1912 “Prague Conference” of the RSDLP: Bolsheviks split completely from Mensheviks and officially establish a separate party.

1912 *Pravda* is organized as the official newspaper of the Bolshevik Party.

1912-1914 A renewed period of mass strike waves takes place across Russia.

1912-1917 Fourth Duma meets, with even less power than the Third Duma.

1914

July 300,000 St. Petersburg workers strike for three weeks.

July 28* Beginning of World War I (1914-1918): 100,000 German workers demonstrate against the war.

August 4* In Germany, parliamentary leaders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the largest and most powerful socialist party in Europe, vote to support the war.

August Socialist parties across Europe vote to support the national cause of their own countries in the war, in a policy known as “Revolutionary Defencism.”

November After convening a meeting to discuss their policy towards the war, the five Bolshevik members of the Duma are arrested, charged with high treason, and expelled to Siberia.

1915

April-September 400,000 workers participate in a strike wave across Russia.

September 5-8* Zimmerwald Conference: In Zimmerwald, Switzerland, Lenin proposes a policy of “Revolutionary Defeatism” to a meeting of the socialist parties of Europe, but the proposal is rejected. The policy would have involved each socialist party undermining their own country’s war effort and using the crisis of the war as a jumping-off point for international revolution.

1916

- January - June** Lenin writes *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in which he describes the imperialist nature of the war and argues that a socialist revolution in Russia is both possible and necessary.
- June - September** Brusilov Offensive: The Russian General Brusilov leads a renewed military operation against Germany. It proves to be extremely costly and destructive for both Germany and Russia.

1917

- January 9** Amid mounting disgust for the Tsar's government, 150,000 workers in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) march in demonstrations commemorating the anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

February 23 - March 2: The February Revolution The Tsar is Overthrown

- February 23** An International Women's Day demonstration marches on the Winter Palace and is joined by numerous anti-government demonstrators. 90,000 workers in Petrograd go on strike and take to the streets.
- February 24** 180,000 workers strike in Petrograd.
- February 25** 240,000 workers strike in Petrograd.
- February 26** Soldiers are deployed against Petrograd workers.
- February 27** In Petrograd, the military garrison and 150,000 soldiers mutiny; 400,000 workers strike. The State Duma establishes a Provisional Committee to form a new government. Petrograd workers and socialist leaders establish the Petrograd Soviet. Strikes begin in Moscow.
- February - April** Petrograd workers begin organizing the Red Guard, an armed militia of workers to defend the Revolution.
- March 1** Soldiers issue Order Number 1 at a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet's Executive Committee, stating that soldiers have the right to elect and recall their own officers.
- March 2** Tsar Nicholas II abdicates. The Provisional Committee forms the First Provisional Government, with Prince Georgy Lvov (the Tsar's cousin) as president. This Provisional Government is dominated by members of the Constitutional-Democratic Party ("Cadets"), an established "centrist" liberal capitalist party led by Pavel Milyukov, who takes the position of Foreign Minister.

February 27 – July 24: First period of “Dual Power” The Provisional Government and the soviets share power.

- March** Lenin, in Switzerland, writes his “Letters from Afar” to *Pravda*.
- April 3-4** Lenin returns to Russia and publishes his April Theses, in which he argues for Revolutionary Defeatism and “All power to the Soviets.”
- April 20-21** “April Days” demonstrations are held against the Provisional Government and the war.
- April 21-27** The First Provisional Government collapses and Milyukov resigns.
- April 24-29** “April Conference” of the Bolshevik Party in Petrograd: At the first Bolshevik Party conference to meet openly, delegates from across the country representing the party’s now 80,000 members discuss their attitudes toward the war, the Dual Power, the other socialist parties, and the peasantry. They adopt “All Power to the Soviets” as the new party slogan and set the policy for “patiently explaining” to the workers why it’s necessary to overthrow the Provisional Government.
- April-July** An anti-war, anti-Provisional Government, internationalist minority faction begins to emerge among the Socialist Revolutionaries, known as the “Left SRs.”
- May 5** The Second Provisional Government is established. This new formation, known as the “Coalition,” brings in some socialist politicians to placate a frustrated population. One of these is Alexander Kerensky, a popular speaker from the Socialist Revolutionary party who was already active in the Petrograd Soviet. He becomes the Provisional Government’s new Minister of War.
- May - June** First Conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd: Factory committees were newly elected workplace councils which negotiated with management on behalf of workers, or in some cases managed the workplace itself.
- June 3-24** First All-Russian Congress of Soviets takes place.
- June 16 - July 2** Kerensky orchestrates his “June Offensive” against Germany and Austria.
- June 18** 400,000 pro-soviet workers demonstrate in the streets of Petrograd.



Workers dismantling the statue of the Tsar

- July 2** Trotsky joins the Bolshevik Party.
- July 3-7** “July Days” uprising: 500,000 armed semi-insurrectionary demonstrators in Petrograd are suppressed. The Bolsheviks, as the only party to endorse the uprising, are blamed.
- July 6** A German/Austrian counterattack at the front crushes Kerensky’s June Offensive.
- July - August** Following the July Days, the Provisional Government represses the Bolshevik Party. Hiding out in Finland, Lenin begins writing *The State & Revolution*.

July 24 - August 26: The Second Coalition Kerensky heads the Provisional Government

- July 26 - August 3** Sixth Congress of the RSDLP (Bolshevik) in Petrograd: The Bolsheviks merge with the Mezhrayontsy, a faction of the RSDLP which had existed between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.
- August 12** In Moscow, 400,000 workers protest the Provisional Government.
- August 21** Riga falls to the German army.
- August 27-30** Kornilov Affair: With confused partial approval from Kerensky, General Kornilov attempts a coup to become dictator of Russia, but is defeated by the organized and armed population of Petrograd.
- August 31** An “All Power to the Soviets” resolution passes in the Petrograd Soviet.

September - October: Bolsheviks win majorities across the country

- September 5** A Bolshevik resolution regarding the government passes in the Moscow Soviet.
- September 19** The Moscow Soviet elects a new presidium with a Bolshevik majority.
- September 20-
October 25** Soviets of Tashkent, Kaluga, and Kazan clash with Provisional Government forces.
- September 25** Trotsky is elected president of the Petrograd Soviet.
- September 27** An “All Power to the Soviets” resolution passes with a majority in the Reval Soviet.
- October** Peasant uprisings erupt across the country.

Lenin returns to Petrograd from exile.

Moscow holds its Municipal Duma elections:
Bolsheviks win 350 out of 710 seats.

- October 10** The Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party votes for insurrection.
- October 16** The Petrograd Soviet forms the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), the military arm of the Soviet designed to defend it against the Provisional Government. The soldiers' section of the Petrograd Soviet votes to obey only MRC orders.
- October 17-22** First All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees meets in Petrograd. With Bolsheviks making up 62% of the delegation, the conference endorses workers' seizure of state power.
- October 18** At the Petrograd Garrison Conference, a majority of delegates representing the soldiers stationed in Petrograd vote for armed insurrection against the Provisional Government.
- October 20** Trotsky is elected chair of the Petrograd MRC.
- October 21** Petrograd Garrison Conference votes to obey only MRC orders.
- October 22** In Petrograd, hundreds of thousands attend mass meetings to endorse Soviet power.
- October 25** An insurrection led by the Petrograd MRC overthrows the Provisional Government.
- October 25-27** The Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets meets in Petrograd.
- October 31** An insurrection led by the Moscow MRC takes control of the city.



Lenin speaking in Moscow



Speak Out Now

Revolutionary Workers Group

Where We Stand

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities: the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction — increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

The Force For Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

We Stand For Socialism

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people — not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.

- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

Our Political Heritage

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

We Must Go Beyond Reforms

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism — be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people — wage and benefit cuts, attacks on health care, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must

be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

What Is Needed To Bring This Change About?

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

Who We Are

Speak Out Now/Revolutionary Workers Group is a revolutionary group. We believe that a socialist world is possible and can be brought into being by the active

struggles of the majority of the people of the world. We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason our group aims its activity primarily at large workplaces. Our newsletters are distributed at several workplaces every two weeks.

We think it is important to both analyze the current world situation as well as to know and understand the history of past struggles. We have forums on current events and political topics and a yearly weekend called the Revolutionary University. We organize Marxist discussions and classes. We have pamphlets on past working class struggles, the revolutionary movements around the world and the current problems we face. We organize with others around many issues – racism, immigrant rights, climate change, police brutality, and more.

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