

# Reflections on the Russian Revolution of 1917

Essay by Roger Annis (4,700 words)

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Without question, that upheaval was the most important event of the 20th century. It was and remains a milestone in humanity's long struggle for national sovereignty and social justice in this epoch of capitalist imperialism.

Much will be written in the coming months about the October Revolution, as it was also named, for the pivotal date of October 25 in the old Russian calendar (November 7 in the modern calendar) when a new political power was born. Many detractors will continue to dismiss it as a flawed, totalitarian experiment. Amongst more serious observers, some of what will be written will be informative, but a lot will be less than informative if not downright misleading.

Many political and academic careers and reputations have staked claims to the mantle of the Russian Revolution, so the competition to speak in its name can be expected to be strong on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This essay attempts an interpretation that is cleared of the ultraleftism which, in this writer's view, has dominated many 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretations.

## Achievements

As flawed as the Russian Revolution became through the course of the 1930s, and notwithstanding the Revolution's ultimate demise during the decade of the 1980s, the Russian Revolution transformed the world. It was not the fully *socialist* transformation that its leaders and masses of participants hoped for and anticipated, but it was a profound transformation nevertheless, with vast, international repercussions.

- The Revolution of 1917 was an *antiwar revolution*. It immediately ended Russia's participation in the imperialist bloodletting of World War One. It went so far as to publish Tsarist Russia's secret diplomatic documents showing how Russia and its imperialist allies had conspired among each other before and during the war to carve up the world into respective spheres of influence.
- The Russian Revolution was a *national liberation revolution*. One of the first acts of the new revolutionary government was to grant independence to Finland and the Baltic countries. A vast program of national liberation was pursued by the new, revolutionary government in the years following, including the founding in 1921 of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. (See book and essay listings below.)<sup>1]</sup>
- *Ukraine* was the largest of the oppressed nations under the Tsarist Empire to be liberated. Its 1917-18 revolution has its own unique dynamics as part of the broader revolution termed the 'Russian' revolution. The post-1917 revolutionary government paid particular attention to the development of a sovereign Ukraine, for example including the

industrialized Donbass region in a Ukraine that was otherwise overwhelmingly agricultural.

- *Peasants* on the land achieved a vast land reform enshrining the right to landholding and providing the means, such as they were, to improve appallingly poor agricultural production and living standards.
- *Factory workers* gained meaningful rights. Through trade unions and factory councils, workers began to exercise a voice and power in economic planning, unheard of in the world to that date.
- *Vast social and economic rights* were won by the population, including globally unprecedented rights for women, literacy, expansion of public education and public health, and the world's first laws protecting the rights of homosexuals.
- *Scientific advancement* occurred in industry and agriculture, while a deepgoing *cultural revolution* burst out.
- A vast *political democracy* was established, even if the conditions of civil war (1918-1921) and imperialist blockade hampered its development and expansion.
- The Russian Revolution reverberated *worldwide*. It inspired proletarian-led revolutions in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, while for many decades afterward it inspired and made possible *anti-colonial and anti-imperialist revolutions* throughout the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America.
- The Revolution *aided the struggles for social improvements by workers and other oppressed classes* even where revolutions were not successful, for example in the imperialist countries. Capitalists were obliged to grant social and economic concessions to the working classes in order to forestall social upheavals inspired by the Russia Revolution.

## **Transforming the world**

It was the fervent wish of the Revolution's participants that it open the possibility of a socialist, egalitarian transformation of the entire world. But this was not to be. The main reasons why this did not come to pass were threefold:

1. Revolutionary upheavals in Europe seeking to emulate Russia--notably in Germany (1919-1923), Italy and Hungary (1919-20), and Bulgaria (1923)--were not successful. Their defeats were followed by terrible repression, including the rise of fascism in Italy and later in Germany. Part of the reason for the defeats was the relative inexperience of the leadership of these proletarian upheavals. They lacked the experience of the leaders of the Russian Revolution that had been acquired through several decades of hard-fought struggles and underground existence. Key errors were made at decisive moments, usually a result of misguided, ultraleft impulses.
2. From 1918 to 1921, the imperialist countries of the world, in alliance with the surviving military forces of the Tsarist regime, waged a cruel and violent civil war against the new government and populations in Russia and its neighbouring republics. They also imposed an economic embargo. Russia was already drained and exhausted by three years of participation in World War One, with much of its industry and agriculture already damaged or destroyed. The combined effects of civil war and embargo were quite serious:

- Social and economic reform was slowed or stalled. Large sections of the Russian population became further impoverished. Morale was correspondingly sapped.
- Many outstanding political leaders were killed in the civil war, and not only from the Bolshevik Party.
- The Bolshevik Party itself underwent a significant membership transformation. As Moshe Lewin describes in the introduction to his 1985 book *The Making of the Soviet System*, by the end of the civil war in 1921, most of the members of the Bolshevik Party were new members who had joined since October 1917. They had not lived the time of intense and freewheeling party democracy characteristic of the underground, pre-1917 party. Instead, in their time, due to the exigencies of war, party membership was often distinguished by the capacity to receive orders and carry them out.
- These and other harsh conditions of civil war contributed to trends towards authoritarian government under the regime of 'war communism' (the policies that guided the Revolution's war of survival from 1918-21).
- In 1921, a disastrous famine struck, killing millions. It was a result of the extensive damage to industry and agriculture of World War One, the underdevelopment of agricultural science and production inherited from Tsarism, and cyclical drought.

3. By 1923, the advanced capitalist economies of Europe, the United States and Japan were stabilizing, permitting the capitalist classes to restore corresponding degrees of political and social control and stabilization.

The effect of all this and more on the morale and fighting spirit of the Russian (soviet) workers and peasants was considerable. In a few years time, a rising bureaucracy personified by Joseph Stalin began to argue that the dreams of 'world revolution' which animated the 1917 revolution were no longer realistic and possible. Stalin and his cohorts argued that the USSR had to instead turn more inward to chart the country's future and tone down or leave behind the role of leader of a worldwide struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

### **Contributing errors**

These factors are the key reasons why the revolution of 1917 ebbed and, by the late 1920s, entered a violent, conservative phase focused on internal, national development. Another way of viewing this is that capitalism--its armed might and its ruthless law of value governing how economic decisions are made--proved more powerful and more adept at absorbing blows and recovering than the Marxist theoreticians of the day imagined possible.

*Within this framework*, certain errors and misestimations by the Russian revolutionaries are important to identify. These contributed to the political and economic stalemate in which the Revolution found itself by the late 1920s. While they are not the principle reason for the stalemate, they are important to study in order to correctly interpret the key lessons of the 1917 Revolution and find their relevance to today's conditions.

One, the leaders of the Russian Revolution and their international partners made *key ultraleft errors* in attempting to assist and guide the rebellious European working class and peasants in the tumultuous years following World War One. The Russian revolutionaries overestimated the

revolutionary potential, which in turn fed into adventurist tactics by the newly forming communist parties. Anything less than all-out 'revolutionary' tactics and verbiage were frowned upon by the leaders and activists of the newly forming communist parties. Lenin polemicized sharply against this, including in his 1920 pamphlet [\*Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder\*](#).

Two, the Russian (Soviet) leaders underestimated the economic, social and political obstacles standing in the way of a transformation to socialism in Russia and its allied republics. The makeshift policies of 'war communism' arose out of necessity to defend the Revolution in the face of civil war imposed on the country, but they began to receive a theoretical construct. Bolshevik leaders began to theorize that the workers and peasants of Russia could 'leap over' the inherited conditions of poverty and underdevelopment in Russia and proceed directly to a socialist transformation.

Every leader of the Bolshevik Party was tempted by this idea of rapid socialist transformation along the lines of war communism. Most recognized the error and pulled back. Lenin and most of the party leadership declared in early 1921 for a 'New Economic Policy'. NEP was in many respects a return to Lenin's thinking following the winning of power in 1917, when he said revolutionary Russia may well be in for a prolonged period of 'state capitalist' development, particularly if revolution in western Europe did not come to pass. He [told a conference](#) of the Russian Communist Party in October 1921:

When in the spring of 1918, for example, in our polemics with a number of comrades who were opposed to concluding the Brest peace [with Germany in March 1918, formally ending Russian participation in World War One], we raised the question of state capitalism. We did not argue that we were going back to state capitalism, but that our position would be alleviated and the solution of our socialist problems facilitated if state capitalism became the predominant economic system in Russia.

Later in the same speech:

By the spring of 1921, it became evident that we had suffered defeat in our attempt to introduce the socialist principles of production and distribution by "direct assault", ie in the shortest, quickest and most direct way. The political situation in the spring of 1921 revealed to us that on a number of economic issues, a retreat to the position of state capitalism, the substitution of "siege" tactics for "direct assault", was inevitable.

And further:

The New Economic Policy was adopted because, in the spring of 1921, after our experience of direct socialist construction carried on under unprecedentedly difficult conditions--under the conditions of civil war, in which the bourgeoisie compelled us to resort to extremely hard forms of struggle--it became perfectly clear that we could not proceed with our direct socialist construction and that in a number of economic spheres we must retreat to state capitalism.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) encouraged private, capitalist production and marketing for small industrial enterprises and in agricultural production and distribution. The socialist character of the developing state and economy was maintained through nationalized finance and large industry, a standardized currency (under a gold standard), and government control (monopoly) of all foreign trade. Foreign capitalist investment was welcomed (though few foreign capitalists took up the offer). The policy had many detractors in the Bolshevik Party. But Lenin and the rest of the Bolshevik Party leadership viewed the new policy as a necessary stage of development. Lenin told the 1921 party conference:

If this transition calls forth complaints, lamentations, despondency and indignation among some people, we must say that defeat is not as dangerous as the fear to admit it, fear to draw all the logical conclusions from it...

The 'defeat' to which Lenin referred was the defeat of misguided estimations of war communism. A modern country and economy, it turned out, could not run on revolutionary will and sacrifice alone.

In the main report on NEP delivered to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November 1922, Leon Trotsky explained:

Our New Economic Policy is calculated for specific conditions of space and time: it is the manoeuvrist policy of a workers' state still living in a capitalist encirclement and banking firmly on revolutionary developments in Europe.

Internationally, social-democratic opponents of the Soviet government, along with other, Western capitalist ideologues, mocked NEP, calling it a "capitulation" presaging an inevitable return to capitalism. Trotsky answered the accusation in his report:

... By vanquishing the bourgeoisie in the field of politics and war, we gained the possibility of coming to grips with economic life and we found ourselves constrained to reintroduce the market forms of relations between the city and the village, between the different branches of industry, and between the individual enterprises themselves.

Failing a free market, the peasant would be unable to find his place in economic life, losing the incentive to improve and expand his crops. Only a mighty upsurge of state industry, enabling it to provide the peasant and agriculture with all its requirements, will prepare the soil for integrating the peasant into the general system of socialist economy...

As well:

The New Economic Policy does not flow solely from the interrelations between the city and the village. The policy is a necessary stage in the growth of state-owned industry. Between capitalism, under which the means of production are owned by private individuals and all economic relations are regulated by the market – I say, between capitalism and complete socialism, with its socially planned economy, there are a number of transitional stages; and the NEP is essentially one of these stages.

The brilliant economist Yevgeny Preobrezhinsky, author of the influential *The New Economics* (1924), termed NEP "the stage of primitive socialist accumulation".

### **Errors and corrections**

It is understandable that the revolution's leaders made errors in estimating the prospects for revolution in Europe and the path to socialist transformation in Russia. They were embarked on an unprecedented socialist course--in conditions of civil war and economic breakdown, no less. Going into the 1917 revolution, there was no immediate, economic blueprint to follow. *Guidelines* such as land reform to benefit the small and middle peasants, nationalization of industry and finance, and workers control of industry helped to guide early economic policy. But these were guidelines, not *policy* per se. There was little or no actual societal experience from which to draw.

As for the generations of radicals and Marxists who followed, that's a different story. Many of their historical accounts have rendered the misestimations of the Bolsheviks into lessons to be emulated.

That is the path followed by much of the fractured constellation of forces that came to be known as 'Trotskyism'. They elevated the civil war period to heroic status to be emulated by other revolutions, although civil war is a very unfavorable circumstance for carrying out social revolution and is to be avoided, not emulated, if at all possible. Added to this, the formal resurrection in 1929 by Trotsky and his followers of the ultraleft theory of 'permanent revolution' left a permanent stamp on Trotskyism.

The Trotskyist misinterpretations only deepened over the decades. Since Trotskyists were among the few forces trying to hold onto something resembling Marxism in the face of Stalinist distortions, their ideological influence was compelling and, considering their small numbers, quite large. In the absence of substantive, alternative historical explanation, this remains so.

The ultraleft impulses of early communist political theory and practice were not insurmountable. Lenin fought successfully, for example, against the ultraleft tactics being pursued by the communist parties founded in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 revolution (argued in the aforementioned *Left-Wing Communism*). In Russia, he guided the New Economic Policy into place.

But Lenin's absence from 1922 onward due to illness was especially tragic and disastrous. Doubly so in that the Revolution was becoming cruelly isolated on the world stage. To the defeats mentioned above during the immediate, post-WWI revolutionary impulses in Europe was added the tragic defeat of a rising national revolution in China in 1925-27.

Unfortunately, most Marxist historians, or those aspiring to such, have passed along inaccurate or downright falsified versions of what actually happened during the 1920s and 1930s. War communism was misread, and NEP has been all but forgotten. Each successive generation added to the misreading, sowing yet more confusion and disorientation. By the time of the dissolution of the USSR and the rise of a new, capitalist Russia in the early 1990s, most historians claiming

a Marxist or even radical mantle had long since ceased thinking and writing about the Soviet Union and what its successor was becoming. This explains, in part, why we saw such a lamentable response amongst the Western left to events in Ukraine in 2013-14.

Ostensible Marxists interpreted the multi-class and politically diverse 'Maidan' movement in Ukraine as an authentic, democratic revolution. Their flawed understanding of the actual history of the Soviet Union and then Russia and Ukraine adapted comfortably to the virulently anti-Russia ideology of the right-wing nationalists who consolidated power in Kyiv through a coup d'etat in February 2014.

The Maidan counter-revolution served to spark a renewal of the historic drive of the imperialist NATO military alliance that has aimed to weaken and dismember first the Soviet Union and now the Russian Federation. Yet, the by-now degenerated Trotskyists, almost to the person, have turned a blind eye to NATO's offensive or have decided that it isn't important enough to write about or act upon (for example, by speaking out against the Western sanctions against Russia and Crimea). Making a mockery of Marxism itself, many term Russia a rising, 'imperialist' power, engaged in a struggle for 'global rivalry' with the *real* imperialist countries--those grouped in NATO, along with Japan, Australia and New Zealand. (See below a weblink to my co-authored essay on this specific topic.)

### **Looking back on the 1920s**

A recently published essay by a Trotskyist historian, Paul LeBlanc, reviews the Russian Revolution and provides insight into the oft-distorted interpretations of events following 1917. His essay, [The Russian Revolutions of 1917](#), provides an informative description of events leading up to the Revolution's triumph. But the description of the history following 1917 is very inadequate, if not misleading. It says little of the actual policies that guided the revolution post-1917, and is focused almost exclusively on a *description* of how the rising Soviet bureaucracy *acted* but not *how it came about*, that is, its social and economic roots. This hole in post-1917 history is common to Trotskyist historical accounts.

The three fundamental stages in the decade following 1917 are almost entirely missing from LeBlanc's historical narrative. Those were:

- The policy of '*war communism*' that guided the Revolution in its first four years. As it turns out, war communism was no more than a set of defensive policies to guide the revolution against the foreign, imperialist intervention. As Trotsky described it in the aforementioned report, "We never had socialism, nor could we have had it. We nationalized the disorganized bourgeois economy and during the most critical period of life-and-death struggle, we established a régime of 'communism' in the distribution of articles of consumption."
- The *New Economic Policy*, initiated in early 1921 and lasting until 1928.
- The abrupt ending of NEP in 1928 and the beginning of a violent, forced march of industrialization and of collectivization of agriculture.

NEP addressed the central issue confronting the Russian Revolution, which was the indispensable need to forge a lasting *alliance* (*smychka* in Russian) between the workers and peasants. The need for this alliance had been the central preoccupation of Lenin and other theorists of the Bolshevik Party from the time of the founding of the party at the turn of the 20th century.

The key challenge of the *smychka* in the time of NEP was to provide compelling material as well as socio-political motivation for peasants on the land to improve agricultural productivity and production; to feed the country and provide surpluses for revenue-generating exports.

For NEP to succeed (meaning, for the Revolution to survive and prosper), industry had to provide sufficient products to the peasants for agricultural production--fertilizers, machinery, scientific input and guidelines, improved transportation, etc. As in the cities, provision of *social advancements* was also crucial to provide--literacy programs, public education and health care, equality between men and women, electricity. Expansion of political rights was needed not only on moral-political grounds but also as a pre-condition for successful economic development. The 'whip' of capitalist production—fear of unemployment, fear of poverty--had to be supplanted by altogether different forms of 'incentives': voluntary participation in creating a new, socially just order.

None of this was easy to accomplish. In particular, NEP was marked by the 'scissors' effect in the war economy--unequal exchange between the high-prices of industrial products needed for peasant production, on the one hand, and typically low prices on offer for agricultural production, on the other.

The complex choices over where to devote limited resources--to industry or to agriculture, in which proportion?--were never easy to make nor entirely resolved. The debate over how to draw the balance consumed the years of NEP. Tragically, debate and practical experience was cut short, not only by the sharp turn to forced industrialization and collectivization beginning in 1928 but also by the factionalizing of the debate from early on. One example of that factionalizing was the labelling of Bukharin and other proponents of NEP as being 'right-wing' (as opposed to the so-named party 'center' led by Stalin and 'left-wing' led by Trotsky, Preobrazhensky and others of the Left Opposition). In reality, the situation was far from being a simple left-right divide. Bukharin and his pro-NEP co-thinkers held deeply to the *smychka* as the fundamental guideline of government policy and direction. That could hardly be described as a flaw and this was quickly proven by the terrible harshness and excesses of collectivization.

The period of NEP did see modest social and economic advances for the Soviet populations. But gains were unevenly spread, with urban populations tending to benefit more and faster than their counterparts in the countryside, while there was much resentment against the well-to-do peasants, artisanal producers and traders who benefitted materially much more from the new compared to factory and office workers, ordinary peasants, and agricultural labourers.

NEP was also a time of modest recovery of socialist democracy in the nascent USSR. But many of the authoritarian routines of the period of war communism became entrenched, notably the

restrictions against tendencies and factions within the governing Bolshevik Party and the banning of opposition political parties.

The destruction of NEP by the Stalin-led forced march in industry and agriculture became a social and political disaster. NEP had not yet exhausted its positive role. In 1927, for example, all sides in the party and government agreed that much more attention and resources were needed to spur industrialization and (on a voluntary foundation) accelerate collective agriculture (co-ops, credit unions, beginnings of collective farms).

Bureaucracy was on the rise during the time of NEP, but the primary cause was not the malevolence of this or that leader, as Paul LeBlanc's essay intimates. It was, as Leon Trotsky later explained in his 1936 book *The Revolution Betrayed*, a consequence of the widespread material and cultural poverty inherited from the Tsarist times (including the destruction of World War One) which was then amplified by the destruction of the civil war. The material shortages could not be wished away and presented harsh choices: in conditions where minimal, material sustenance in food, housing, clothing, and social programs could not be provided sufficiently to all, who decides who gets what? Increasingly, a bureaucratic apparatus made those choices, making sure its own interests got first priority.

### **The end of NEP**

Personified by Joseph Stalin, a conservative bureaucracy came to dominate and control the USSR. This bureaucracy lost faith in the possibility that the example of the Russian Revolution could be emulated in more developed countries and permit, via economic alliances, a more substantive and rapid economic and social development in the USSR itself. Instead, the bureaucracy turned inward.

Despite it all, and at huge human cost, the Soviet Union made significant social and economic advances during the 1930s and then during the decades following the disastrous World War Two. But the workers and peasants had been largely disenfranchised politically. It was a distorted social economy that developed, in which inordinate attention and resources went to a privileged minority holding power and making the key decisions.

Economic growth rates slowed during the 1960s and 1970s. Socialism is the only answer to the destructiveness and endless growth of capitalism. But it requires an informed, engaged and empowered working class in industry, social services and agriculture. A disenfranchised working class began to doubt the superiority of Russia's conservative and bureaucratized economy compared to the seemingly more dynamic capitalist economies of the West. Significant sections of the working class came to believe in the siren song of capitalism during the 1980s and 1990s or they lacked the power and experience to act and defend what remained of the social economy. Sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy made the decision to revert the economies of the Soviet republics to capitalism. Many of the Soviet officials joined the plunder of the accumulated social economy and became the new capitalists of Russia, Ukraine and the other former Soviet republics.

Could the Russian Revolution have survived and avoided the Stalin-led counter-revolution of the late-1920s and 1930s? If so, how exactly? Historians should continue debating these and related questions because the answers will help aid contemporary processes in socialist transformation, including in present-day Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba.

Many of the great revolutions the world has known have a large element of being ahead of their times. The overriding explanation for why Soviet socialism ultimately succumbed to capitalist restoration is that the capitalist economic system proved powerful and resilient--more so than the leaders of the 1917 Revolution imagined—while the anticipated 'solidarity' in the form of parallel revolutions elsewhere in Europe did not materialize. But the revolutionary and anti-capitalist achievements of the 20th century—beginning in Russia and its neighbouring republics and passing through eastern Europe, China, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam and other countries proved that capitalism is not invincible. Cuba's ongoing success, in particular, is proof that the triumph of capitalism is not pre-ordained and that socialism offers an alternative to humanity.

A triple menace from capitalism threatens all of humanity today—war and militarism; global warming and associated ecological destruction; and rising social inequalities. For the sake of the children of tomorrow, we are compelled to redouble the fight against the capitalist system and replace it with a planned, socialist order.

#### **Further suggested reading:**

Speeches and report on NEP by V.I. Lenin and L. Trotsky:

- [\*Report on the New Economic Policy to the 7th Moscow Gubernia Conference of the Russian Communist Party\*](#), by V.I. Lenin, Oct 29, 1921
- [\*Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution\*](#), report by V.I. Lenin to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, November 13, 1922
- *The New Economic Policy of Soviet Russia and the perspectives of the world revolution*, report by Leon Trotsky delivered to the Fourth World Congress of the Communist International, session of Nov 14, 1922 ([here, in pdf](#))

Books (more detailed book information [here](#)):

- *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923*, by Jeremy Smith, 1999
- *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography*, by Stephen Cohen, 1973
- *The Prophet Unarmed, 1921-1929*, by Isaac Deutscher, 1959 (volume two of his three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky)
- *The Russian Revolution, from Lenin to Stalin*, by E.H. Carr, 1979 (a summation by Carr, 191 pages, of the first four volumes of Carr's 14-volume *History of Soviet Russia*)

Essay:

- [\*The myth of 'Russian imperialism': In defense of Lenin's analyses\*](#), by Roger Annis and Renfrey Clarke, Feb 29, 2016

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