

MARXIST

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IRFAN HABIB is Professor Emeritus at the Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

AMAR FAROOQUI is Professor of History at the University of Delhi, Delhi.

FIDEL CASTRO RUZ (1926-2016) was the leader of the Cuban Revolution who served as the President of Cuba (1976-2008) and the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba (1961-2011).

For subscription and other queries, contact

The Manager, Marxist, A.K.Gopalan Bhavan, 27-29 Bhai Veer Singh Marg, New Delhi 110001
Phone: (91-11) 2373 8725. Email: pdpbln@gmail.com

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IRFAN HABIB

The Road to the October Revolution in Russia, 1917

After the British Empire, it was the Russian Empire before 1917 which by territorial extent formed the largest state in the world. Within it, Russia was both in extent and population the dominant country. Going by its European part alone, it also formed the largest country of Europe, containing in 1913 some 120 million Russian-speaking people, dwarfing the population of every other European country. Yet Russia was in terms of every economic index among the most backward and poorest of European countries. Its per-capita income in 1913 was about 102 rubles, compared to that of England, 463 rubles, France, 355, and Germany, 292. It depended mainly on agriculture, which contributed 51.3 per cent of the total national income, while industry contributed only 28.0 per cent. Modern industry had developed, but in so large a country pig iron production in 1913 amounted only to 4.6 million tons, compared to Germany's 16.8 million tons. Converted into rates per capita, Russia smelted only 30 kg of pig iron, compared to Germany, 250 kg, and England, 206 kg. The industrial working class, counting only people dependent on factory-manufacturing and mining, comprised only 2 per cent. of the population, i.e. only 3.3 million spread all over the Russian Empire. Eighty per cent of the population was dependent on agriculture, and less than a fifth of the population lived in towns.

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Industry in Russia was, as elsewhere, largely under the control of private capitalists. There was a strong degree of concentration and various 'syndicates' controlled different sectors of industry and commerce. There was also much foreign capital: in 1914 direct foreign investments in industry and mining amounted to 2.3 billion rubles, and total net foreign debt to 7.5 billion roubles or US \$ 3.8 billion. In agriculture landlords occupied large areas of land with extensive tenantry. The so-called communes (mir) where land was periodically redistributed began to be abandoned as a result of 'Stolypin Reforms', 1906-12, which greatly encouraged farming by rich peasants (kulaks) and increased the number of landless labourers.

Over and above this lop-sided backwardness was the system of autocracy headed by the Tsar who governed through a landed nobility and bureaucracy and a large army. The parliamentary trappings of European countries were absent until 1906, whereafter too the Duma (Russian parliament) had little real power.

With all its backwardness, Russia had one redeeming feature. It had a fairly extensive educational system: In 1913, as many as 68 per cent of its military recruits (mainly from amongst peasants) were found to be literate. It had a large intelligentsia including scientists and engineers and a large body of technically competent intellectuals, who closely followed the ideological and cultural trends of Western Europe.

It was the existence of such an intelligentsia that explains an early presence of socialist ideas. The Populists ('Narodniks') were followers of Herzen (1812-70), who came to believe that the Russian village commune could be converted into a nucleus of socialist society so that Russia might be able to avoid the exploitative system of capitalism once it had liberated itself from Tsarist autocracy. Marx's critique of capitalism naturally attracted the attention of Herzen's followers. Danielson, a Narodnik, translated Marx's *Capital*, Vol. I, into Russian, publishing it in 1872, within four years of the original German edition. Karl Marx (d. 1883) himself

in his late years thought that given its peasant unrest, Russia was the country where a revolution was then impending, so that it is wrong to hold that the October revolution of 1917 occurred in contradiction to Marx's own predictions. However, despite the Narodniks' efforts to go among the people — a deliberate campaign to physically do so was launched by them in the 1870s — their unrealistic commune-oriented romanticism and resort to individual terror ultimately undermined their movement, and they ceased to be important well before 1900. (Their ideological positions were heavily attacked by Lenin in *What the 'Friends of the People' Are*, 1893, and *Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 1899).

The space vacated by Narodniks was then occupied from about 1890s, by three trends, all owing allegiance to Marxism. The 'Legal Marxists', led by P. B. Struve, claimed that by simply bringing Marx's doctrine to the notice of the Russian public, without indulging in any revolutionary activity themselves, they were still serving to spread its message. The second trend, dubbed 'Economism' by Lenin, was that of people who thought that the revolution could be only brought about by the working class and, therefore, the main field of action lay in organising trade unions and fighting for the workers' day-to-day demands. This, in Lenin's view, meant ultimately that the working-class movement would just remain confined to winning some concessions from capitalism. But the Russian Revolution of 1905 was in fact ignited by the practically spontaneous actions of workers, who rose against the Tsar's government and created the 'soviets', or workers' councils as organs of workers' power, however short-lived these might have been at that time.

The third trend was a fully Marxist one of which the founder was G. V. Plekhanov (1856-1918), an important Marxist thinker, who helped to organise, first, the Emancipation of Labour Group and, then, in 1903 at its "second" congress (after an abortive one in 1895) the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. Much ground

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for it was prepared by V. I. Lenin's tract *What is to be Done?*, 1902, in which he had criticised the positions of the Legal Marxists and Economists, and urged the need for a political party of professional revolutionaries, who would infuse the workers with a socialist consciousness, while maintaining discipline and secrecy so necessary under an authoritarian regime.

The Social Democrats who thus came together in 1903 believed that Russia would need to have two successive revolutions. In the first, categorised as 'bourgeois-democratic', something akin to the French Revolution of 1789, Tsardom would be overthrown and replaced by an elected Parliament; and landlords' estates would be divided up among peasants, as had happened in France. There would also be some relief gained for the workers (e.g. limited working day, right to organise, etc.). In the main, capitalism would be strengthened since it would be provided with a mass consumer market in the countryside, and by full protection of capitalist property everywhere. A socialist revolution must therefore follow the bourgeois-democratic revolution in order to overthrow the regime of the capitalist class.

Given this broad perspective, right from 1903, two trends developed within the Social Democratic Labour Party, though it took some time for the differences to crystallise. With regard to the two successive revolutions, Lenin and his supporters argued that the revolutionary Social Democrats should themselves work to bring about a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and for this purpose not only rely on workers, but also rally the poorer peasants, among whom landlords' lands would be distributed. This would place the Social Democrats in a position to create a favourable situation for a subsequent socialist revolution, in which the working class (the 'proletariat') would have the poorer strata of peasants and landless labourers as its allies. For such revolutionary activity, it would be necessary to build a disciplined workers' party based on "democratic centralism". Broadly this position was supported by

the majority of delegates at the second Party Congress in London in 1903 whence the name 'Bolshevik' (majority) becoming the common designation of those who accepted this perspective. The Social Democrats who did not subscribe to it came to be called 'Mensheviks' (minority).

The Mensheviks' views varied. Most of them believed that the bourgeois-democratic revolution would occur because the growth of capitalism was making it inevitable. The task of Social Democrats should be to prepare essentially for the next socialist revolution. Thus unlike Lenin they saw little necessity of making concessions to the peasantry, with its petit-bourgeois ambitions. Nor did they see the need for a well-knit centralised party on which Lenin insisted. In actual fact the issue of the nature of the Party came first, provoking Lenin to issue a pamphlet *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904).

The 1905 Revolution was remarkable for the fact that a series of spontaneous actions like the mutiny of battleship Potemkin and workers' strikes in the capital St. Petersburg and other cities led to the creation of the 'soviets of workers'. The first of these was the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies which came to have the fiery Trotsky as its leader. Lenin too returned from exile. But the army still remained with the Tsar, and in December the revolt was forcibly suppressed, while a new 'constitution' was announced creating the Duma or Russian Parliament. Its elections were so structured that one elector would be chosen by 2000 landowners, whereas 30,000 peasants chose one, the number being 90,000 in case of workers. A Duma so elected could only be a rubber-stamp one, but Lenin was to declare later that it had been a mistake to have boycotted the 1906 elections (first) to the Duma.

An obvious reason for the defeat of the 1905 Revolution was the relative passivity of the peasantry; there was also the fact that neither the Bolsheviks nor Mensheviks yet had extensive organisations among workers. Given the authoritarian nature of

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the Tsarist regime, Lenin wished the Party to take advantage of every means to spread its message. The Bolsheviks took part in the 1906 (second elections) and subsequent elections (1907 and 1912) to the Duma, despite their securing very few seats owing to the skewed electoral system. But still they had a rostrum, which the Government could not shut them out from, despite the regime of censorship, exile and imprisonment that prevailed in the Stolypin period (1906-12).

In this period the Bolsheviks worked out their strategic position. Lenin wrote a defence of Marxist philosophy in his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, 1909. In 1913 he made clear his position on the question of national independence for all countries, including those in the Russian empire, in his *Critical Notes on the National Question*, which J. V. Stalin supplemented by his *Marxism and the National Question* the same year. Up till now in the Second International, to which the Bolsheviks too owed allegiance, the principle of national self-determination had not been conceded, in the name of international solidarity; and even Rosa Luxemburg, the future Communist martyr, criticised Lenin's position. But Lenin believed that true internationalism demanded precisely such a policy; and he was surely mindful also of the grievances of the nationalities in the Russian empire, from Central Asia to Poland. Stalin added another dimension to it, when he saw it as a necessary part of a policy of worker-peasant alliance, arguing that the national question was in effect a "peasant question".

While such ideological clarification was going on, the Bolsheviks decided to abandon the nominal adherence to a single party jointly with the Mensheviks. They took this decision at a conference in Prague (then in Austria-Hungary) in January 1912, hereafter calling their Party "Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks)".

This decision came none too soon, for in July 1914 the First World War broke out, in which Russia joined France and England in a war against Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. The

danger of such a war breaking out had loomed for some time, and so as early as 1907 the Second International had resolved that in the event it did break out, the working-class parties must “utilise the economic and political crises caused by the war to... hasten the destruction of the class domination of the capitalist class”. This position was repeated still more firmly in its Basle Manifesto of 1912. But when the war broke out in 1914, all workers’ parties in the belligerent countries hastened to support their own national governments, most surprisingly of all, the German Social Democratic Party, whose leaders, with Kautsky at their head, had been so far regarded as the high priests of Marxism. Mensheviks too, with the venerable Plekhanov at the head, rushed to support the Tsar’s government in the war it had recklessly embarked upon.

Only Lenin and the Bolsheviks stood firm and never wavered. The Bolshevik deputies in the Duma refused to vote for war credits, and were for their recalcitrance put in prison. Lenin denounced the war, but did not, like the dissident Mensheviks, call simply for peace; he called for civil war, for the defeat of the government of one’s own country. In the prevalent spate of jingoism such a position could hardly be popular, and even some Bolshevik leaders like Kamenev demurred. Lenin not only stuck to his position, but wrote perhaps his most influential work, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) in which he showed how the war was the result of the drive for monopoly over the world market and for destruction of rival capitalist competitors.

Two and a half years of war on an unprecedented scale brought havoc upon the country and its population. A few statistics can best tell the story. Russia’s national income fell from 15.8 billion gold rubles in 1914-15 to 12.2 billion in 1916-17, a fall of nearly 23 per cent, but civilian consumption dropped from 11.5 billion gold rubles to 7.3 billion, a fall of nearly 37 per cent! As between 1 July 1914 and 1 January 1917 currency circulation increased 5.6 times, and the price index rose 7.0 times. Since wages in all industries in current rubles rose from an average of 218 to 406, a rise of less

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than 1.9 times, one can see that a huge fall in real wages must have occurred over the period.

The Tsarist army, 12 million strong in 1917, was mainly an army recruited from peasants. Some early successes in the war were followed by repeated defeats at the hands of German and Austro-Hungarian troops. By the end of 1916 Poland, Lithuania, much of western White Russia and western Ukraine had been lost, with huge casualties among the soldiers.

The impoverishment of civilians and hardships among soldiers engendered a huge loss of popular confidence in the Tsarist administration, a feeling which extended to the capitalists, many of whom had benefited so much from war contracts, and even to the landed aristocracy. The loss of the Tsar's moral authority was intensified by the affair of an illiterate swindler Rasputin (assassinated, December 1916), and the constant changes of ministries at the Tsar's whims.

While popular unrest grew, as indicated by workers' strikes, the mass influence of Bolsheviks was still limited even among workers. They had, by their hostility to the war, become the target of government oppression, their leaders thrown into prison or exile in Siberia, and their newspapers like *Pravda* (established, 1912) closed and publications seized. It was with great difficulty that leaders like Stalin who remained in Russia, eluding the police as much as they could, were able to preserve the Party structure intact. The most popular 'Left' party was that of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR), who had their base mainly among the peasants, while the Mensheviks too, being "Defencists" or supporters of the War, had obtained considerable official tolerance for their activities.

Popular unrest broke out in the capital, Petrograd (changed name of St. Petersburg, the later Leningrad), and the Petrograd Soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies was formed on 27 February 1917. On the same day a Provisional Committee of the Dissolved Fourth Duma claimed to take over power and on 1 March 1917

a Provisional Government was formed, consisting of landlords, and capitalists, representing the major bourgeois parties, viz. Octoberists and Cadets, supported by Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, who had a single representative in the ministry, Kerensky. The Ministry was headed characteristically by Prince Lvov, a landlord. Politically, this meant the end of Tsardom. Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, in favour of his brother Michael, who also abdicated. Ultimately, a republic was proclaimed.

Initially, the February Revolution seemed to carry out some elements of a bourgeois-democratic platform. Civil liberty was established, political prisoners were released, and censorship was abolished. The Bolsheviks like others could carry out their activities. Even the working class seemed to have obtained a share in power, as Soviets of workers and soldiers (and, later, of peasants as well) arose everywhere, and a "Dual Power" was established: the writ of the Provisional Government was modified by that of the local Soviets in most areas. It was clear that what Lenin and others had been stressing was at play now; viz. the political weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie owing to the limited nature of the development of capitalism, a weakness shown previously in relation to the land-owners and now in confronting the working class.

What, however, reinforced the position of the Provisional Government was the cooperation it obtained from both the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks who initially controlled the Soviets, the Bolsheviks constituting only a small minority in them. Both these parties supported the war against Germany, and this meant that the major cause of economic distress and soldiers' grievances would continue. As a result of reckless war expenditure, prices rose by 67 per cent between 1 January and 1 October 1917, and real wages declined to 57.4 per cent of the 1916 level.

As the Bolshevik centre was re-established after the February revolutions, Bolshevik leaders within Russia tended to think that

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with the overthrow of tsarism, a defensive war could be supported and the provisional Government did not need to be directly opposed. These views were, however, rejected by Lenin when he returned to Russia from exile in April 1917. On 17 April at Petrograd he presented his 'April theses', in which he first of all rejected the theory of "revolutionary defencism" to justify support of the war carried on by the Provisional Government. He pointed out that the war still remained an "imperialist war". Secondly, he said, "no support must be given to the Provisional Government". It had only been the ideological and organisational weakness of the proletariat that had allowed the bourgeoisie to take power. Given this reading, it followed that the working class should organise and press on to convert the bourgeois-democratic revolution into a socialist revolution.

The 'April Theses' henceforth became the main basis of Bolshevik policy, and in July-August 1917 at the sixth Party Congress an economic programme was worked out, which in the main combined bourgeois-democratic features with major socialist elements. Thus landlords' land was to be confiscated and disposed of among poor peasants and labourers, but, by implication, kulaks' lands would not be touched. On the other hand, banks were to be nationalised and "control" established over insurance companies and the large capitalist syndicates. Only by a gradual transformation thereafter was full workers' "regulation of production" to be established.

Almost during the same period, August-September, Lenin sat down to compose his *State and Revolution* (actually published next year, 1918). For our present purpose it is important because it underlined the necessity of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' to be established after a socialist revolution. It is the working class, created by capitalism, on which the responsibility of building socialism would fall, and so after the revolution it must totally reorganise the state for its own purposes. The proletarian state

would ‘wither away’ only when socialism got transformed into communism in the future.

It was thus clear to Lenin that the responsibility for carrying out the socialist revolution and pursuing revolutionary objectives after its success lay on the shoulders of the working-class and its party, which, in the case of Russia, was that of the Bolsheviks. In June 1917 at the first Russian Congress of Soviets, when the Bolsheviks were still behind Mensheviks in strength with 105 seats against their 248, Lenin had boldly retorted, “There is such a Party — the Bolshevik Party”, in response to the Menshevik Tsereteli’s claim that there was no party in Russia willing to take the place of the Provisional Government. Incidentally, at this Congress Trotsky with his group solidly supported the Bolsheviks and subsequently, despite his previous invectives against Lenin, he was admitted to the top leadership of the Bolshevik Party, to play a leading part in the October Revolution.

In July the Provisional Government ordered the arrest of Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders, Lenin going underground. The Sixth Party Congress of the Bolsheviks was held in July-August, largely guided by Stalin, who made it clear that a socialist revolution in the near future was on the Party’s agenda.

An episode hastened the pace of events. On 25 August the recently dismissed Commander-in-Chief Kornilov attempted a coup against the Provisional Government, now headed by Kerensky. The Bolsheviks, fearing a royalist restoration, mobilised workers in Petrograd, formed armed Red Guard detachments and had railway workers help stop or divert military trains carrying Kornilov’s troops. Kornilov’s coup collapsed as many of his troops themselves abandoned his cause.

Success in the Kornilov affair showed how strong the Bolsheviks had become. In April 1917 the Party membership was barely 80,000; by middle of August it had risen to 250,000; and at the beginning of October it reached 400,000 — growing five times

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within six months. By now the Bolsheviki had obtained majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets, and they also were expected to command majority support at the Second Congress of Soviets due to meet on 25 October (old calendar) corresponding to 7 November by the new or international calendar adopted after the October Revolution. Red Guards, armed workers and soldiers under the banner of the Petrograd Soviet overthrew the Provisional Government and installed the Bolshevik Government under the slogan "all Power to the Soviets". The story of the stirring events that now took place and the superb leadership displayed by Lenin and his colleagues is brought out by an American eye witness, John Reed in his *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

While the heroism and determination with which the revolution was carried out, which Reed so well brings out, will remain an ever-alive epic, we must also take a view of what the balance of forces was in the political sphere in the country at large. One index of this is offered by the elections to the Constituent Assembly held under the old bureaucracy all over the country within a week of the revolution.

These elections showed that the Bolsheviki had practically ousted the Mensheviki from the ranks of the working class. They obtained 175 seats to the Mensheviki's 16. But among the peasants they had yet to obtain a foothold. The Socialist Revolutionaries got only 4,696 votes (against 424, 027 for the Bolsheviki) in the capital Petrograd, but were massively favoured by the peasants, obtaining 410 seats in the Constituent Assembly. An effort by Bolsheviki to take into alliance the Left Socialist Revolutionaries as representatives of the poor peasantry was only partly and temporarily successful. It was clear that if the Bolsheviki wished to secure peasant support in order to defend the Revolution itself, the socialist revolution would in part have also to complete, the bourgeois-democratic revolution and give peasants their rights. Thus on the very second day of the Revolution came the decree on land. All lands and livestock, farm buildings and implements

owned by the landlords were held forfeit without compensation to be managed or distributed by Land Committees or Peasant Soviets. All rents paid by peasants to landlords were abolished. Peasants thus gained 150 million hectares of land, and were relieved of a rent burden of 500 million gold rubles a year. The other decree (in fact the first) was on peace, demanding a cessation of war without annexations and allowing national self-determination. Such peace was exactly what the peasants in uniform also wanted.

For workers came a decree of 12 November imposing an eight-hour working day. The first real step towards creating a socialist sector in the economy was taken on 10 November a decree on worker's control over factories. Other measures extending state control were followed by a decree on 14 December nationalising all banks.

Another important decree was issued on 2 November 1917 by which Russian colonial rule stood abolished and all nations within Russia were given the right of self-determination. Soviet Russia thus became a beacon-light for national liberation movements throughout the world.

The power of the Soviets quickly spread all over the country. This was real democracy at work, as workers and peasants freely took decisions subject to the centre's decrees. But after a very unfavourable treaty with Germany (Brest-Litovsk, March 1918) came the Allied Intervention and the Civil War that the Allies instigated. The Red Army was created to defend the Soviet fatherland and, at enormous human cost, it defeated thirteen foreign armies and the troops of the revolting 'white' generals. By 1920 all enemies had been suppressed or driven out. Soviet Russia at last could now restore its economy under Lenin's New Economic Policy. Lenin himself died in January 1924, but the Soviet people continued on the path he had set them on. In 1928 began the epic construction of a state-owned industrialised economy and collective farming, without any element of exploitation or private profit. Socialism was thus fully established in the Soviet Union

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when the First Five-year Plan ended in 1933. This was a unique achievement in world history and marked the fulfilment of the main object of the great October Revolution.