

Originality of the October Revolution **Aijaz Ahmad**

"The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead shall not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious"

Walter Benjamin, The Concept of History

Introduction

There is something strangely obsessive and pathological about the manipulation of human memory by the counterrevolutionary forces of capital in our time. One should have thought that with the victory of the United States—of NATO, of finance capital—in the so-called 'Cold War', and with the dissolution of the Soviet system as well as the territorial dismemberment of the USSR, the storm of anti-communism that had raged all through the Short Twentieth Century (1917-1989) would subside. After all, the enemy had been vanquished, the object of that storm no longer exists and liberal ideologues had jubilantly announced the 'End of History'. Quite the opposite has happened. Arguably, there is more anti-communism today than there was during the Soviet period. The famous opening line of The Communist Manifesto—"A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism"—is probably more straightforwardly true today than it was at the time of its writing, not only of Europe but of all parts of the world, including, notably, the states that have arisen out of the dissolution of socialist systems across the former Warsaw Pact countries and Yugoslavia. In several quite distinct ways.

First, an American-style, virulent anti-communism is now far more pervasive among liberals and even left-liberals across the world than it ever was while the Soviet Union still existed as a real power in the world. Even in countries like India where that kind of anti-communism was until the 1990s a property only of the rightwing, it is now a pervasive current in liberal discourse. Second, all across liberal historiography, there is now an easy, bizarre identification between Nazis and Bolsheviks, between Hitler and Stalin, despite the fact that 20 million Soviet citizens lost their lives during the war against the Nazis and despite the fact that it was with their defeat in the legendary Battle of Stalingrad that the Nazis began to lose the War—all this in the period when Stalin was at the helm of the Soviet state. Third, and along with this particular falsification of history, there is, all across liberal historiography—not to speak of the sectarian Left and the high-minded postmodernists in the Euro-American zones-- a systematic campaign to suppress all that was good in the Soviet system in a discourse

that converges with Ronald Reagan's characterisation of the Soviet Union as an 'Evil Empire'. Finally, this increased intensity in the anti-communist propaganda that is carried out in the name of scholarship has two sides that seem not to cohere. On the one hand, there is unbridled triumphalism: communism is dead, really dead, really really dead; triumph of capitalism is final and permanent! On the other hand, the constant need to keep on denouncing communism in increasingly preposterous forms—the proposed equivalence between the Bolsheviks and Nazis is patently a form of hysteria in the Freudian sense—seems to suggest not only that the capitalist imagination is somehow permanently traumatised by its confrontation with communism but also that somewhere deep down this imagination is really not convinced that communism is nearly as dead as it is claimed.

Which is of course true. In two different ways. One is that it is simply, factually incorrect to identify the demise of the Soviet state system with the hastily pronounced death of communism as such. There has been a defeat, and revolutionary forces are very much on the retreat, but communism continues to exist in many forms and in countless places on earth—as we know well within India. But there is also a second, broader fact: attempts to revolutionise society beyond the rule of capital have been a punctual feature in modern history, the defeat of such a revolutionary tendency has been announced countless times, but it has resurfaced time and again, taking different practical forms. Marx and Lenin were profoundly aware of the fact that the modern proletariat had inherited a rich revolutionary tradition that had first triumphed in the shape of the French Revolution of 1789, a bourgeois revolution that itself included a communist tendency represented more specifically by Babeuf and his "Conspiracy of Equals" which sought to represent the Parisian working class, advocating the idea of "egalitarian communism" as the more advanced form of "pure democracy," a phrasing later echoed by Marx himself. More broadly, however this tendency was also present among the Jacobins (full name of the organisation: "Society of Jacobins: Friends of Liberty and Equality") who commanded, at their peak, a force of roughly 500,000. The defeat of these tendencies spelled the beginning of the end of the revolutionary tide and its eventual consolidation of bourgeois rule in the form of the Napoleonic state. However, the revolutionary logic proved to be irreversible and has surfaced time and again, before Red October as well as after it. Lenin himself thought that the Bolshevik Revolution was rooted in the previous experiences of the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution of 1905 as well as the February Revolution of 1917 itself. 1905 was, he said, a "dress rehearsal" for October 1917. The Paris Commune of Spring 1871 was made to drown in rivers of blood but it provided many lessons for the discovery of a new revolutionary form which Marx studies very closely and which Lenin then used rigorously and brilliantly as guide to making not only the revolution itself but also the political form for the state that would emerge out of the revolution.

Counterrevolutionary forces are in this sense correct. No great revolution ever really fails; what is best in it simply becomes a permanent part of the reality that emerges out of the revolutionary upheaval, and its limitations become the ground upon which the next revolutionary edifice is then sought to be built. If the history of the last two hundred years is any guide, the revolutionary mole is in all likelihood burrowing and digging deep, only to resurface in ways, times and places that cannot be predicted. Therefore, every attempt at revolutionary transformation must be quashed with maximum force. Even little Grenada, an island nation of less than a lakh inhabitants, must be invaded and occupied by the US Armed Forces (1983) because, after all, no one knows just where Lenin's proverbial "weak link in the capitalist chain" will break down next, where the spark will come that sets the prairie fire going again. The US is still traumatised, half a century later, by the fact that the revolution in Cuba, another small island nation, survived all attempts at counterrevolutionary sabotage, to provide revolutionary inspiration for countless millions across the globe and to light numerous revolutionary fires on both side of the Atlantic. The Soviet state system was not the only form in which Red October founds its longer lease on life. Life forms released by that October are continuing realities in our own time.

Looking at the history of the present, it can perhaps be proposed that we are going through a pronged period of an interregnum when the classically Bolshevik revolutionary form (frontal attack; seizure of the Winter Palace) seemsto be no longer available as the normal form for capturing power but no new form has yet been found for the present, historically novel phase of an imperialism that is rooted in globally integrated finance capital on the one hand, and in which, on the other hand, the singular power of the United States functions both as the state of its own corporate bourgeoisie as well as the unifying force for the military apparatuses and economic structures of this transnational imperialism as a whole. The result is that a vast number of local forces across the world are carrying out all manner of experiments that have two features in common: massive and escalating rage against the existing realities of exploitation and oppression, and a will to change that is still groping very much in the dark. One thing can be said with fair certainty: whatever form the next revolutionary cycle takes, it is from within the predicates set by the October Revolution that the new form will arise.

Historical Background

In order to grasp the roots of the revolutionary upheavals in Russia during early years of the 20th century, it is necessary to grasp something about the social structure.

First of all, there was an enduring crisis in the vast agrarian economy. Russia was the last of the European countries to legally abolish feudalism, when serfdom was ended with an Emancipation decree as late as 1861 (some other parts of the Empire had witnessed abolition of serfdom at earlier dates in the 19th century). By then, the feudal system had itself reached such a point of crisis that the nobility had to be rescued from its own misdoing; thanks to a highly unproductive system of landownership as well as the lavish and dissolute ways of the feudal class, a mountain of debts had forced this class to mortgage a third of its lands and roughly two-thirds of the serfs at its command to the banks and state agencies. Peasants were freed from serfdom and they were supposedly given land. In the process, the relatively small feudal class, now turned into big landowners, retained half of the land, including the best and most fertile parts of it, while the newly emancipated peasants, the bulk of the Russian population, gained roughly 15 per cent. The ownership was nominal, however. The land was in fact transferred to the commune, a traditional feature of Russian rural economy, which now allotted plots of land to individual peasants with use rights. The peasant, however, had to pay for the land in a complicated system of instalments extending over 49 years (the instalments were abolished 35 years later, in 1907, in the wake of the 1905 Revolution). The plots were much too small for most peasants even for bare subsistence, instalments were too high, and ownership rights were largely fictional. Most peasants experienced scarcely any material difference in their life as compared to the days of serfdom. Life was precarious, a spirit of rebellion was always seething just under the surface, local peasant uprisings were common; every revolutionary stirring in the cities had sympathetic repercussions in the countryside. Much of the soldiery in the Armed Forces tended to be drawn from this destitute peasantry. Wartime conscription meant more peasants in army uniform, disciplined into obedience while also carrying peasant rage in their hearts. In the 1905 Revolution which coincided with later phases of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, those habits of obedience largely prevailed and, compared to what was to happen during the October Revolution, relatively few soldiers joined the attempted Revolution of 1905. The Russo-Japanese War was comparatively more limited in scale, duration and the distress it caused to the peasantry; the Bolshevik party was at that time much smaller, much less experienced, had done much less work among the soldiers, and neither the issue of the war nor direct opposition to monarchical rule reaches nearly as explosive proportions in 1905 as they were to do in 1917.

Capitalist social relations of production were widespread in Russian agriculture by the beginning of the 20th century but largely in very backward form. That was not the case with industrial production which involved relatively small section of the population but produced a proletariat that was concentrated in industrial cities and constituted a very significant part of the urban population, particularly in the larger cities such as Moscow and St.

Petersburg itself,ⁱ the Czarist capital. Much of the industrial plant was, by the standards of its time, technologically quite advanced. I might add that with millions of men conscripted for military service during World War 1, women came into the proletariat in huge numbers and played a crucial role in igniting the fire of the February Revolution. Capital accumulation in this industrial sector was really quite considerable and yet Russian capital always played a role distinctly subordinate to that of French and British capital. Domestically, the Russian bourgeoisie was a new class comprised of upstarts, wealthy in money but greatly impoverished in culture and self-confidence, hence with no distinctive politics of its own, always cowered by the aristocracy, clamouring for liberal reform out of the fear of revolutionary possibility that it could see everywhere but it always did so as modest supplicant in the court of the Czar. A historically useless class, in short (as Frantz Fanon characterised the national bourgeoisies of the Third World). When the crunch came, with all kinds of possibilities opened up by the February Revolution, the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs, the political descendants of the Norodniks) and other 'moderate' socialists contrived to believe that this class was capable of making a revolution for itself. Much of the Bolshevik leadership itself wished to compromise with this defunct class in pursuit of the positivist abstractions of a theory which held that all countries must go through a bourgeois revolution before attempting a proletarian one. Lenin alone, the most astute student of Marx that we have ever known and the very embodiment of what Lukacs called "permanent readiness", held on to the lucid belief that a proletarian revolution is a possibility throughout the epoch of capitalism, and all the more so in the epoch of imperialism. Whether or not a particular situation is ripe for such a revolution can only be decided through what he called "concrete analysis of concrete circumstances." That "concrete analysis," leading to an insistence on the imminence of revolutionary possibility, is what he offered in 'Letters from Afar' and 'The April Theses' which had their theoretical basis in what came to be published later as *State and Revolution* but which he had already drafted in manuscript form during 1916 after an intensive study of Marx, Engels and Hegel.

Russia was, in short, a bundle of contradictions. It was a colonial empire that was in its territorial expanse second only to that of the British but one that was too weak to acquire colonies too far from the Russian territory; the ones that it did acquire were contiguous with its own lands and were acquired mostly to serve as buffer zones against foreign encroachment. Russia had a well-established unity of Church and Crown of its own; a magnificent aristocratic culture; highly developed artistic traditions in literature, music, dance, and the whole range of the visual arts, that was the envy of all Europe. Yet, all of this was so concentrated within the privileged classes that little of it seeped through into the life of the rural hinterlands or even much of the urban proletariat; Lenin was to bemoan until his dying day

the *cultural* backwardness of the very revolutionary cadres who were to now administer the socialist society (read Lenin's very last piece of writing from his deathbed, "Better Fewer, but Better", in which he laments not the lack of revolutionary fervour or devotion but lack of practical capacity on the part of the new ruling class of the revolution, the proletariat, because never in the past did it have access to the high culture that the previous ruling classes of property owners reserved strictly for themselves). However, this very high level of culture and intellectual sophistication that was concentrated in the big cities produced a powerful intelligentsia that was deeply rooted in the conditions of its own country but had also imbibed the most advanced philosophical, political and cultural currents from Germany and France. Large sections of this modern, cosmopolitan intelligentsia were enraged by the autocratic rule of the monarchy, the backwardness of most of the country, and the virtual permanence of social crisis of one kind or another. All manner of dissident and subversive political tendencies grew in the latter part of the 19th century: communists ('social democrats' in the language of those times), anarchists, revolutionary terrorists, Populists (the 'Nirodniki' in Russian), constitutional socialists, liberal democrats etc—and diverse grouping among each of these tendencies. It was a time of great ferment. By the beginning of the 20th century Russia had a more advanced stratum of Marxist intellectuals than any other country except Germany, and revolutionary terrorism was far more widespread there than anywhere else in Europe. No wonder that the Russian 20th century began not only with the 1905 Revolution but, even before that, in 1902, the publication of the first great political classic in what was to eventually become the Bolshevik tradition: Lenin's *What Is To Be Done*. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was founded in 1898, bringing together many of the Marxist militant group spread across the country. At the Second Congress of the party in 1903, fundamental disagreements emerged over questions of strategy and the character of the party itself, and the party split into two factions, the Menshevik and the Bolshevik, with Lenin leading the latter. The two factions continued to work together, however, and the Bolsheviks became officially a separate party only in 1912, on the eve of the First World War.

Russian Revolutionary Experience, 1905 and February 1917

The 1905 Revolution erupted in the middle of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, just as the February and October Revolutions of 1917 were to burst forth in the middle of the First World War. This was a classic inter-imperialist war fought between imperial Russia and imperial Japan for division of spheres of influence and domination in the vast region of Manchuria (which includes northeastern China) and the seas adjoining Russia, Japan, Korea and China. That war provided the initial impetus for the theory that Lenin was to formulate more fully on the eve of the First World

War which postulated that inter-imperialist rivalry was a permanent feature of imperialism in that epoch as well as the true underlying cause for wars among the Great powers-- between those who had already possessed colonial empires (such as Britain, France and Russia) as well as those who were seeking new colonies for themselves (such as Germany, Japan and Italy).

1905 began with a massive proletarian strike and remained predominantly a revolution of the working class which united very large sections of the masses, particularly urban masses, behind itself. Roughly half of the industrial working class in the European part of Russia and virtually all the workers in Russian Poland went on strike at one time or another during the year, as did workers in other Russian possessions on its European periphery. The year also witnessed an accelerated rate of workers' unionisation in which hundreds of new unions sprang up, the formation of impressively large Soviets (in St. Petersburg and Moscow in particular), and the willingness of the Soviets to create armed militias of their own. Workers were joined by impressive naval mutinies in the major port cities. There was also some unrest among the soldiers but the army remained largely loyal to the Czarist regime. This year-long revolutionary upheaval also provided conditions for nationalist agitations in a variety of Russia's colonies, on the European side as well as in (predominantly Muslim) Central Asia. There were peasant uprisings but on a relatively modest scale, not large enough, widespread enough or militant enough to greatly disturb either the Czarist state or the landowning aristocracy as a whole. However, it did become clear that in any crisis that became acute for them, large sections of the peasantry were also joining the revolutionary ranks. The very last general strike, in December, was crushed with brute military force and thousands of workers were killed, after which the revolutionary forces remained substantially active for the next two years until they had to retreat into the underground or go into exile as repression was by then greatly intensified. There was a correspondingly great rise in revolutionary terrorism in years immediately after the Revolution receded, almost as a direct response to the intensifying Czarist violence. Virtually the only concession the regime made was the promulgation of the Constitution of 1906 which contained a modicum of liberal reforms including some limited right to vote and the creation of a Duma, not so much a legislative as a consultative body, half of whose members were elected and half appointed by the Czar.

Lenin thought deeply and wrote copiously on the 1905 Revolution. A collection of all his writings on the subject is comprised of almost 400 pages. Some of the conclusions he drew from that experience were as follows:

- That the proletariat had emerged as the decisive revolutionary class in Russia, capable of leading other oppressed classes and uniting the masses, including the peasant masses, under its own leadership.

- That the peasantry could only become the social base for parliamentary democracy if left to the mercies of the property owners but was potentially a major revolutionary force if led by the working class and guided by the party of the proletarian vanguard.
- That the Russian bourgeoisie was really not a class-for-itself, was much too subservient to the Czarist regime and therefore hardly a class that could lead a bourgeois revolution against monarchical autocracy.
- Unlike the Mensheviks who insisted on the intrinsically "conservative" nature of the peasantry, Lenin posited the necessity of a worker-peasant alliance as a revolutionary bloc against monarchical autocracy and the underdeveloped bourgeoisie subservient to the monarchy.
- That the naval mutinies and unrest among sections of the army showed that, given the right circumstances, sections of the armed forces could be potentially won over to the side of the revolution.
- And that, contrary to Menshevik argument in favour of working toward a whole historical phase of capitalist development for the creation of a bourgeois democratic order prior to a proletarian revolution, the balance of class forces in Russia showed that only the proletariat was able to lead a revolution if guided correctly by a party of the revolutionary vanguard.

The strategy that he would seek to implement in 1917 was thus already in the process of formulation a decade earlier. No wonder that he regarded the 1905 Revolution as a "dress rehearsal" for 1917. Nor is it surprising that when another Revolution suddenly erupted in February 1917 Lenin, having in hand the immense theoretical labour that he had undertaken over more than a decade, since 1905, was entirely lucid in proposing a clear-cut reading of the developments to be expected and firm in proposing a strategic line that was to be followed.

Well before the outbreak of the February Revolution, Lenin, and under his leadership the Bolsheviks had made two fundamental strategic decisions, which proved of primary importance when the Revolution began to unfold. The first was to break from the Mensheviks fully and constitute themselves as a separate party. The result was that in the aftermath of the fall of the monarchy and the advent of the Provisional Government, Lenin was no longer encumbered by the task of having to haggle with the Mensheviks over their opportunistic line of reasoning and was free to concentrate on persuading only the Bolsheviks themselves to adopt his own line of argument. Even more fundamental was the more recent, monumental decision heard his party made, namely to withdraw from the Second International when virtually all other parties—notably the German, French, Belgian etc—chose to support their own respective national governments in the First World War, essentially adopting the national-chauvanist position of

"Defence of the Fatherland." The crunch came when the German Party, by far the largest and the most prestigious party in the International, voted to approve the War Credits to the government for enabling it to fund the war. Kautsky, the most prestigious leader of the party and once a close colleague of Engels, went so far as to declare that it was Germany's "defensive war" against Czarist Russia. Virtually all parties were in fact acting in violation of the International's own previous resolutions committing all parties to oppose the war.

Ever since war clouds had begun to gather, Lenin had been firmly opposed to any support for the upcoming war on grounds of political principle as well as strategic possibility. He had always characterized it as an "inter-imperialist war" in which the respective countries would indulge, at the cost of millions of human lives, for extending their colonial possessions and for re-division of the world for their own advantage. Strategically, he believed that a war on such a scale would lead to great internal crises in each of the countries, opening up the possibility of revolutionary transformation of the countries involved. Hence his advocacy of "turning the inter-imperialist war into a civil war," a slogan that, in Lenin's own words, "follows from the experience of the Commune." Withdrawing from the International meant immense isolation for the Bolsheviks from all the major currents in the international socialist movement, with the exception of such smaller parties as the Italian Socialist Party (not even a properly communist party) or the relatively small group of dissidents that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had led out of the German party. This decision had come partly out of the fact that Lenin had a much stronger position on the question of imperialism, colonies, the national and colonial question etc, than most socialists, especially outside Russia. Matters of principle and strategy were in any case paramount.

Lenin's prediction that the war would produce a massive crisis that would be potentially revolutionary in character came true, not only in Russia but also in many other parts of Europe including Germany, Italy and Austria— of a kind that western Europe was never again to witness— although all other revolutionary uprisings were beaten back. The German events are particularly instructive in understanding what might have happened if Lenin had not fought hard against unity with the Mensheviks who were roughly the Russian counterparts of the German Democrats (the SPD). As postwar crisis exploded in Germany, SPD was catapulted into government after declaring that (a) the most urgent task was to save the Weimar republic against "attacks from the Left and the Right" and that (b) "there was no difference between Communists and Nazis." Friedrich Ebert, the SPD leader, became Chancellor of the Republic. It was under this dispensation that the German Revolution was suppressed with utmost violence, using the Far Right terror squads of the Freikorps to kill thousands of workers; there is reason to believe that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl

Liebnecht were murdered on orders issued directly by the Interior Minister, also a leader of the SPD . (The Nazis would soon draw freely on the Freikorps for recruitment into their own paramilitary forces). Now, if the primary task was to carry out a bourgeois revolution and create a stable bourgeois republic, as SPD advocated in Germany and Mensheviks in Russia, then would it not make sense to violently suppress the Bolsheviks and kill their leaders, as had been done by the SPD in Germany in collusion with the very Far Right elements that eventually became part of the Nazi stormtroopers.

The Russian Revolution of February 1917, which erupted in the middle of the war, was a direct result of the multi-faceted crisis that arose in consequence of the war. Only in Russia, however, did this essentially anti-monarchical Revolution lead directly to a proletarian revolution. This was possible for a variety of reasons. The working class had gained enormous revolutionary experience during the year-long Revolution of 1905 and had by now grown in militancy as well as numbers; years between 1914 and 1916 had witnessed many expressions of that militancy. The economic crisis was steep, condition of life for the masses had deteriorated beyond endurance. Peasantry was restive thanks to requisitioning of food for the war front and the conscription of millions of their sons into the army to become cannon fodder. Dissatisfaction in the Armed Forces was growing so rapidly that soldiers were deserting by the tens of thousands. These and many such factors had gone into the making of the February Revolution and the whole system had become even more unstable under the impact of the Revolution. Objective conditions were thus ripe for further revolutionary advances. Subjectively, however, most of the Bolshevik party was inclined to first help stabilise the Provisional Government and secure conditions for a reform-minded bourgeois democratic regime, the convening of a Constituent Assembly, writing of a new liberal constitution, elections to a new parliament etc. The makeshift leadership of the St. Petersburg Soviet was bristling with the meekly reformist Socialist Democrats, the populist Socialist Revolutionaries (SR)ⁱⁱ and Mensheviks, while a strong tendency among the Bolsheviks was itself ready to explore some form of unity, possibly even a united party, with the Mensheviks despite differences on a host of issues. This is where matters stood when Lenin started sending his 'Letters from Afar' to *Pravda* for publication and then returned to argue in favour of his own line that positing any kind of trust in the Provisional Government would be suicidal for the revolutionary cause and that the party must oppose the offer of support to the self-declared Provisional Government that the leadership of the Petrograd Soviet had made. Instead, he argued that Bolsheviks must adopt a comprehensive programme and a clear strategy to intensify the struggle for a proletarian Revolution. A number of his close comrades such as Zinoviev and Kamenev were stunned. Even Krupskaya—his wife, comrade and closest of confidantes—is said to have declared that

"Ilich seems to have gone mad." *Pravda* published only the first letter and that too in a truncated form.

How had the situation evolved until then, and what was Lenin's argument?

The February Revolution was swift. It began on 23rd February with a very big march of working class women on the International Women's Day through the capital, protesting high prices for food and great scarcity of bread, going then to factories and exhorting industrial works to join the marches.ⁱⁱⁱ This march came after great deal of unrest among workers throughout 1916 that was followed by a huge strike wave in January 1917 which had drawn 270,000 workers into it, about 150,000 in Petrograd itself. On the day of the Women's March, various revolutionary groups began organising for larger actions and some 200,000 workers came out in the capital itself with slogans demanding "Bread" and "Peace," while also shouting slogans against Czarist autocracy itself. The turning point came quickly, over 25-27 February, when troops ordered by the Czar to fire on the demonstrators began to fire on the police itself, with soldiers joining the striking workers.. By the end of those two days, the capital with virtually all its strategic points was in the hands of the workers and their allies. With memories of 1905 still fresh, Soviets of workers and soldiers had started cropping up and, on 27th February, a group dominated by rightwing socialists— SRs, Mensheviks etc—constituted itself into the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers. The Czar was advised by his Ministers and Generals to abdicate, and a centuries old dynastic rule ended after a week of revolutionary upheavals. On 2nd March, the Speaker of the otherwise ineffectual Duma constituted a Provisional Government and appointed a group of aristocrats and industrialists to the Council of Ministers. In one sense, there now existed a situation of "Dual Power," with two different centres of power. More concretely, though, the Soviet was persuaded by its more or less self-appointed leaders to offer cooperation to the provisional government and even authorise the participation of figures like Kerensky to join that government. So, one side of this "Dual Power" was already becoming stronger than the other. The programmatic slogan Lenin proposed, "All power to the Soviets," was designed to address precisely this precarious and shifting balance within "Dual Power."

Lenin's Wager: "Letters From Afar" and the "April Theses"

Trapped in his Zurich exile, isolated from the actual revolutionary events and basing himself largely on newspapers and individual communications, Lenin drafted four letters between 7 and 12 March, the first of which was published in *Pravda* (in truncated form) on March 20th; the others were not to see the light of day until 1924. He then returned from exile on 3rd April and addressed two meetings the next day, one of

Bolsheviks alone and another a joint meeting of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, where he read out the text famously known as the "April Theses". He was careful to say that these were his "personal theses," implying that he was not speaking in his capacity as the head of the party and that the theses did not represent the party position. The designation of the theses as "personal" was meant to serve partly as a plea, partly a directive, knowing that he did not yet command a majority even among his closest comrades.

What was the burden of his argument? That consisted of two parts: observations on the prevailing situation and the positions to be adopted in that situation; and, some theoretical formulations regarding the larger objectives of the proletarian revolution as he envisaged them at that point. The latter part of the argument overlapped significantly with what he was to spell out at far greater length in his famous book *State and Revolution*. That book itself has a rather interesting status. In an effort to think through the very intricate problems of revolutionary strategy, Lenin had devoted most of the 1914-16 years to a rigorous study of Marx's political writings and of Hegel's philosophy, particularly his *Science of Logic*. This reading of Hegel had helped him in refining his method of dialectical reasoning and he deduced many lessons for future revolutionary strategy from Marx's writings, particularly the two seminal texts, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *The Civil War in France*. *State and Revolution* was the crowning achievement of that labour. Lenin seems to have drafted the manuscript substantially in 1916 for publication in the very near future, but it reached its full form only later and got published only in 1918, after the Revolution had triumphed and was then beginning to face all the difficulties that ensued subsequently, difficulties that served to thwart much of the revolutionary project as he had spelled it out in that great book.

I have put together the following summary of his argument in March-April 1917, giving just the gist on most points but also directly quoting in other instances:

- 1- The February Revolution was directly engendered by the imperialist war.
- 2- That was the first phase of the Revolution and would be immediately followed by a second, proletarian phase.
- 3- The proletariat had matured during the 1905-7 Revolution and was now ready to take up its leading role in the transition from the first to the second proletarian phase of the Revolution.
- 4- The monarchy fell so quickly partly because the British and French capitalists conspired with the weak Russian bourgeoisie, its representatives in the Duma as well as a section of generals and military officers to overthrow the Czar and contain the ongoing revolution within the liberal, constitutional confines of a bourgeois democracy and a handful of cosmetic reforms to assuage some of the popular discontent.

- 5- In advocating a stable bourgeois democratic phase of the revolution before any advance toward a socialist revolution, the Mensheviks, SRs etc were acting objectively as allies and servants of this combination of domestic and foreign capital.No unity with them was possible.
- 6- Russia was the most backward among the imperial combatants in the war, while the Russian proletariat was the most experienced in revolutionary struggle. Naturally, the crisis broke out here before anywhere else.
- 7- The Provisional government was going to do its best to take immediate control of the army and the bureaucracy, and to dominate all levels of government from the central to local. If allowed to continue, it would become far more powerful than the embryonic workers' government that exists in the shape of the Petrograd Soviet and would eventually devour the Soviet.
- 8- The Provisional government could not end the war because it was dependent on the more advanced capitalist classes Britain and France and shared the aims for which the war was launched in the first place.
- 9- The monarchy itself might then be restored at some future point. Negotiations in favour of such an outcome were already afoot.
- 10- Under no circumstances can the Provisional government be supported or the war allowed to be continued in the name of defending the country.
- 11- Two slogans were imperative. "All power to the Soviets" and "Peace, Bread and Freedom".
- 12- The objectives would include
 - ". . . the formation of a militia embracing the entire people and led by the workers is the central slogan of the day . . . (which) must be a mass organisation to the degree of being *universal*, must really embrace the *entire*-bodied population of both sexes; secondly it must proceed to combine not only purely police, but general state functions with military functions and with the control of social production and distribution."
 - "Not a parliamentary republic . . . but a republic of Soviets and Workers', Agricultural Labourers', Peasants' Deputies throughout the country"
 - Abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy."
 - "Confiscation of all landed estates."
 - "A Commune state" (Lenin added in a footnote" "i.e., a state for which the Paris Commune was the prototype.")

There is much, much else but this bald summary should suffice to give a sense of what Lenin had in mind when he came face to face with the actual possibility of leading a successful revolution. His idea of a true revolutionary

freedom was grounded concretely in Marx's close analysis of the real meaning of the Paris Commune, a real historical event, and yet the vision was so radical—the whole population turned into an armed militia; abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy—that even Krupskaya, his most intimate comrade, wondered if he had gone mad.

Upto the making of the revolution, seizure of power and creation of the first socialist state in human history, Lenin's wager worked. In April, he described his party as a minority, a small minority (though confident that the party would be able to lead so historic a revolution, so soon); most estimates put the number of members at the beginning of 1917 at around 8,000. By September that year, the number had swelled to 300,000 and the Bolsheviks held the majority in virtually every Soviet, thanks mainly to the fact that under Lenin's unswerving pressure and resolve, the party had adopted a militantly revolutionary line of action as well as a concrete programme that appealed to the urgent needs and therefore the political imagination of vast masses of people: workers, peasants, soldiers, women, the oppressed nationalities, even much of the vacillating petty bourgeoisie. Very little of the political programme and very few of the slogans were really new. Large sections of the masses of people were already clamouring for those sorts of solutions. The party— with impressive number of highly trained, competent and experienced cadres —performed the task mainly of concretising their demands and organizing the requisite structures. The promise to end the highly unpopular war won over large numbers from the Armed Forces to the side of the Revolution and proved highly popular among the peasantry that had suffered from the war in great many ways. By October, 20 million had been organized into Soviets that were designed to address all aspects of social organization, self-defence, production of goods and their distribution, local administration etc.

Lenin's genius as a dialectician was many-sided. More perhaps than any other practical leader in an actual revolution, with possible exception of a couple of others like Mao, Lenin undertook very arduous theoretical labour over many years to chart out the actual trajectory of the revolution, the modalities of the seizure of power and a conception of the kind of society and state that were to follow. He analysed correctly the whole range of contradictions that might make it possible to make a worker-led revolution in a predominantly agrarian society, and he grasped that the further contradictions released by a war of inter-imperialist rivalries had created a unique situation to undertake a revolutionary seizure of power in the very country that was "the weakest link" in the chain of imperialist powers. He was that rare strategist in whom the capacity for the most breathtaking audacity was combined with the most calculated and cold logic of pure realism. Thus it was that he insisted on going forward with the making of a proletarian revolution when none of his comrades thought it possible; but then, at the height of his power and achievement after making the

revolution, he was realistic enough to force his reluctant comrades to accept the most humiliating terms in signing the peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk because the new revolutionary state desperately needed an end to the war and had no cards to play for getting better terms from a ruthless enemy. At a later stage, after the hope for revolutions in the advanced capitalist West had receded and the isolation of the Soviet Union had to be faced, he wondered if there may well be the possibility of alliance between the revolutionary government of "backward" Russia and the emerging revolutionary nationalisms in the colonised countries.

After October

Factual details regarding the expansion of revolutionary forces and their power, or of the day-by-day making of the revolution, are beyond the scope of this article. The Bolshevik advance was inexorable. In August that year, the Generals tried to impose a military dictatorship to confront the revolutionary forces but to little effect. By October, the imperial army had largely disintegrated and soldiers were joining the revolutionary movement in great numbers. The ease with which the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace and occupied all levers of power seemed to suggest that not just the state had simply collapsed but also that any large-scale armed opposition to the revolutionary government would now be impossible. Most of the problem seemed to be of a different kind: the complete collapse of the productive system largely under the impact of the war but ill effects augmented by also the strike of the capitalists after the February Revolution; the refusal of the bulk of the technocracy to cooperate with the new revolutionary government; the fact that very few among those who had made the revolution really knew how to administer a society, and so on. And, indeed, the White Counterrevolution that subsequently fought such a bitter civil war was nowhere in sight until a coalition of twelve states (Britain, France, the United States, Canada, Japan, China, Poland, Greece, Italy, Romania, Serbia and Estonia) started encouraging them and then started landing their own troops in various parts of the revolutionary state that was still getting assembled into a Soviet Union. Under patronage of the coalition of invading forces which organised and weaponised them, the Whites hastily announced a new Provisional Government and a whole range of forces began joining them to benefit from that patronage from imperialisms superior to even the Czarist one: remnants of the imperial army, the propertied classes that had lost their properties to the revolution, the Orthodox Church which hated the Bolsheviks for their atheism, sections of the Mensheviks and the SRs, and monarchists of various hues. Meanwhile, troops from the twelve invading states entered the Soviet territory from great many points across both the Eastern and Western fronts. Winston Churchill spoke for the whole of the international counterrevolution when he said that the invasions were necessary for "strangling" the revolution "at its birth." The combination of

those external and internal forces was at least very crippling, if not devastating. The Bolsheviks knew how to fight while making a revolution; they scarcely knew how to fight a war against armies spread over so vast a territory and on so many fronts. Even so, the Red Army had assembled a force of about half a million by mid-1918, even though, lacking trained officers of its own it had to work with a corps of officers 40 per cent of whom had served previously in the Czarist army. The best of the party cadres were at the forefront of the fighting, so that much of the party had been decimated by the time the victory was won. The Soviet state was built with the meagre resources that remained.

Under the pressure of these multifarious challenges, Lenin and his comrades had to drastically alter the whole of their vision. Before the revolution, Lenin had sometimes warned of the possibility of a foreign invasion. On the whole, however, there seems to have been an expectation, at least the hope, that the war would have devastated the various combatants so very much that revolutionary Russia might have a period of reprieve in which to build the kind of polity he had outlined under the broad heading of "a commune state." This expectation was strengthened also by the assumption that there would be a revolution at least in Germany if not in several European states simultaneously, which would then shelter and assist the Russian Revolution. Those revolutions were defeated and the Soviet Union had to face a combination of internal counterrevolution, multilateral invasion, a permanent military encirclement, economic boycott, while a perennial threat of new wars was imposed on it. Before the revolution, and expecting a future of peace and sovereign right to build one's own society, Lenin had imagined a form of polity so free—a "commune state", a republic of Soviets comprised of associated producers-- that it would need no police, no army, no bureaucracy. In the revolutionary state that actually emerged out of the First World War, the counterrevolution and foreign invasion, what was needed, instead, was an iron discipline and unimaginable levels of sacrifice to just survive. Lenin was forced to say that material conditions did not permit even socialism—what he, like Marx, described as 'the first stage of communism'— to be built under the circumstances, and that several stages would be required before one could realistically speak of reaching communism. After all, the levels of economic production did not reach even pre-war levels by the time Lenin died. It was nothing short of miraculous that the Soviet Union became so very powerful over the next twenty years that it could then play the leading role in saving the world from Nazi plans for establishing a global empire of their own.

The October Revolution was the first socialist revolution that imperialism sought to strangle at birth, through outright invasion and by assembling a vast network of internal subversion. The state that arose out of that revolution survived to defeat fascism, inspire numerous socialist revolutions elsewhere, help any number of anti-colonial movements in their

quest for freedom, assist the countries of Asia and Africa in their struggles for independent development, and to itself become not only a great industrial power but also a society far more egalitarian than was the case in any other industrialised country. One must not forget, though, that any society—China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, or any other-- that has ever attempted to make a transition to socialism had had to face imperialism's ferocious will to strangle the revolution at the very time of its birth. Communists have always and everywhere lived in a state of siege and have never been allowed to build the kind of society that they have envisioned since the time of Karl Marx and which Lenin spelled out in his texts that we have discussed briefly in this article. It is a great irony that the man who had wanted to build a revolutionary society that had neither army nor police has gone down in imperialist historiography as a supreme dictator.

In Conclusion

Precisely because the liberal-imperialist world is so determined to suppress even the memory of what was good in the October Revolution and its legacies, keeping alive those memories is an urgent and permanent task. The Revolution, and the state that arose out of it, stood at the conjunction of the two fundamental realities of the 20th century: the attempt in diverse corners of the earth to abolish capitalism and to build a system beyond capital and commodity, for which the operative word was socialism; and the attempt to dismantle the colonial empires that straddled the earth and subjugated vast majority of humanity at the time of the Revolution. A comprehensive treatment of so vast a subject is beyond the scope of this article. Nor has it been possible to assess developments in Soviet history beyond the moment of revolution and counterrevolution. Instead, we have explored only some of the salient features of the period preceding the October Revolution and then some aspects of the period between 1917 and 1924, from the February Revolution up to the illness and death of Lenin, the chief theorist, strategist and architect of the Revolution. As for the historical grounding and the main legacies of the October Revolution, I conclude with the following propositions:

- 1- The October Revolution was entirely unique in revolutionary history but, at the same time, it was also, in many ways, the point of culmination in the cycle of European revolutions that began with the French Revolution of 1789.
- 2- Contradictions of imperialism were central in creating the conditions objectively necessary for the making of the revolution but it was also imperialism's united and many-pronged military intervention which thwarted the possibility of rapid advance toward creating the kind of socialist system—the first stage of communist society—that had been envisaged in Lenin's key texts of that time, ranging from "Letters for Afar" to *State and Revolution*.

- 3- This pattern of imperialist aggression, war and counterrevolution was to be repeated in all subsequent revolutions, a fact that Lenin had foreseen and which then accounts for subsequent convergences between Marxism, communism and revolutionary nationalism.
- 4- The October Revolution inaugurates a historically unprecedented and still ongoing revolutionary cycle in which the peasantry makes its advent as an indispensable revolutionary force.
- 5- Consequently, and for reasons summarised earlier, the October Revolution signifies the moment when the revolutionary dynamic begins to shift from the colonising heartlands of the industrially advanced West to the largely agrarian colonies and semi-colonies of the Tricontinent.
- 6- Almost the most surprising thing about the October Revolution is that it happened at all. As of 3rd April, when Lenin returned to Russia from the last of his many exiles, the overwhelming majority of the party, including most of its senior leaders, were committed to stabilising the gains of the February Revolution instead of moving forward, uninterruptedly, to destroy the emerging power of the liberal bourgeoisie and make a socialist revolution led by the proletariat, as Lenin proposed and insisted so very audaciously.
- 7- Perhaps the best way to approach the question of the October Revolution is to read closely Lenin's key texts of that year. It is in those texts that the very conception of the envisioned revolution had been worked out in meticulous detail, well before conditions were available for their implementation.

ⁱThis city has had different names at different times, creating some confusion in the writings about it. St. Petersburg was its original and remained so until 1914 when the name was changed to Petrograd. In 1927, during the Soviet period, the name was changed to Leningrad. After the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the original name, St. Petersburg, was restored, as a symbol of the restored power of Russian capitalism and the Russian Orthodox Church. In informal usage, the city is sometimes called 'Petersburg' without the 'St.'

ⁱⁱThe Socialist Revolutionary Party, commonly referred to as SRs, had arisen by drawing its cadres from several different tendencies, especially the old agrarian Populists generally known as the Nirodniks and some of the groupings of revolutionary terrorists. They commanded a considerable constituency in Russia and many among them later joined the White Counterrevolution.

ⁱⁱⁱThere is a great confusion of dates regarding events in Russia before February 1918 when the Soviet Union switched over to the much more widely used Gregorian calendar (the one we use in India). Until then Russians followed the Julian calendar which is 14 days behind the Gregorian. Thus, the February Revolution that started on 23rd February by the Julian calendar can also be said to have started on 8th March (by the more common Gregorian calendar), which in fact is the International Women's Day all over the world.