A People's History of the Russian Revolution

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Introduction

The Russian Revolution is probably the most misunderstood event in world history. This book aims to mark the centenary of the revolution by setting the record straight. It is an attempt to describe a lived experience of mass democracy and popular revolt that 'shook the world'; an attempt to show that it was the collective action of millions of ordinary men and women that powered the historical process between 1917 and 1921; and an attempt to show a new generation of people eager for change that another world is indeed possible, and that it all depends on what we, all of us, rising from our slumber, choose to do.

In essence, the Russian Revolution was an explosion of democracy and activity from below. It transformed the millions of people who took part in it, and inspired tens of millions who watched. It shook the world capitalist system to its foundations and came close to bringing it down. It offered a tantalising glimpse of a radically different world – a world without bosses and police, a world of democracy, equality, and peace.

But, sadly, only a glimpse. In the end, the forces defending the system – the millionaires, the statesmen, the generals, the churches, the tabloid press, the fascist squads, the fake 'socialists' in red ties, the 'sell-out' union bureaucrats – these forces, across most of Europe, proved too powerful. The revolutionary tide receded. The Russian Revolution was left isolated and besieged. And eventually – impoverished, devastated by war, threatened with invasion – it fell to pieces and was

consumed by the most murderous counter-revolutionary terror in history.

This book sets out to nail three bogus arguments about the Russian Revolution – arguments we are likely to hear repeated many times this centenary year. It aims to show that:

- Lenin was a democrat, not a 'democratic centralist', and that the Bolshevik Party was a mass democratic movement, not a pseudo-revolutionary sect.
- The revolution was a mass movement of the people based on participatory democracy, not a coup to set up a dictatorship.
- Stalinism was a counter-revolutionary movement that destroyed the Bolshevik Party and Soviet democracy.

This does not mean that the book is original. This is an odd thing for an author to admit, since we mostly want to claim 'originality' for our work. Why read it otherwise? Let me explain.

Readers who like this book – especially readers interested in the lessons for present-day activism – should immediately consider reading Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. It is very long, but it is written with such style and panache, the story it tells is of such drama and significance, and the author, a leading participant as well as the revolution's supreme historian, was gifted with an intellect of such astonishing interpretive power, that you are likely to find it one of the most important books you ever read. It is not simply the greatest narrative of one of history's most earth-shaking events; it is, quite simply, a complete manual of revolutionary strategy and tactics.

I cannot claim originality because Trotsky has been my guide throughout. I have, of course, read much else. Some of this wider reading I have drawn upon and referenced. But much I have not. This is because much of it is poor fare. The reason is political. Until the end of the Cold War, Western scholarship was dominated by a caricature of the Bolshevik Revolution which saw it as a 'Leninist' coup to install a dictatorship, while Eastern scholarship provided a distorted image of this caricature by proclaiming the monstrous Stalinist dictatorship of the 1930s to be a lineal descendant of the workers' state of 1917–21.

Since the Eastern European revolutions of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, archives have opened and scholarship has become more relaxed. Much good, honest, fresh research has been done. But this has either amplified aspects of the interpretation offered here, or, following the principle 'better informed but none the wiser', has been deployed in the service of the dreary conspiracy theories of the Cold War past.

Here, on the other hand, we celebrate the creative power of the common people when they organise together and rise in struggle against their oppressors. For revolution is essentially a concentrated expression – concentrated in time and space – of the common people's age-old yearning for freedom, justice, and decency. It is a moment when the drip-drip of partial reform in normal times – always too little, too late – accelerates into a sudden cascade of change, a torrent of transformation, that 'shakes the world' and threatens to 'turn it upside down'.

This is a book about the past for the present. It is not a book for academics who merely study the world, but one for activists who want to change it. And we must change it, for, a century on, the world capitalist system that the Bolsheviks attempted

to destroy now constitutes an existential threat, a clear and present danger, to the well-being, even survival, of humanity and the planet.

So the book is weighted heavily towards the lead-up to the revolution as opposed to its aftermath. That reflects our place in history, standing before the revolution we need to make, not after it. The immediate questions we face concern how you make a revolution, not what you do during one, let alone how you remake the world after one.

I find a lot of contemporary discussion about how we should reconfigure the world – about what a 'post-capitalist' world will be like – wearisome. I suspect a lot of it amounts to little more than a retreat into utopian fantasy among activists daunted by the power of capital and the state. I suspect it is a way of avoiding facing up to the real political task of building mass movements on the scale necessary to take on the rich, the banks, and the corporations.

So this is a book that focuses on just that. It is not utopian, because it describes the most powerful revolution from below in history; a moment when the common people, organised in their millions, marched onto the stage of history and took control of their own destiny. While it lasted, the Russian people 'stormed the heavens' – as Marx described the experience of the Paris Commune in 1871 – and showed the world what was possible when you did so. The Russian Revolution revealed the enormous potential for social transformation – for attempting to solve all of humanity's problems – inherent in mass popular democracy. It showed us what we can achieve when we take the power. But precisely because anti-capitalist revolution is, at this moment, despite being an imperative need, still only a distant possibility, the focus of the book is on the preparation for revolution as much as on the event and the aftermath.

PART ONE

The Spark, 1825–1916

CHAPTER ONE

The Regime

Medieval mysticism. Russian soldiers – peasants in uniform – kneel as the Tsar passes by waving a holy icon.

The war was going badly, so the Tsar, the supreme ruler of 130 million Russians, had gone to the front to assume personal command. 'A new page begins, and only God Almighty knows what will be written on it', he announced. The Tsarina, who had stayed behind at the palace, wrote reassuringly: 'It will be a glorious page in your reign and Russian history.' He had nothing to fear, she added, because 'Our Friend's prayers arise night and day for you to Heaven, and God will hear them.' She reminded him that he had been supplied with a holy icon by this 'Friend' before setting out – 'to guard and guide you' – and later she sent an apple from the hands of the same, one Grigori Rasputin, a Siberian peasant faith-healer, urging her husband to eat it to strengthen his will. Rasputin was a drunkard, a lecher, and a charlatan. With a display of piety and a claim that he could cure her son's haemophilia, he had insinuated his way into the Court and become the Tsarina's closest advisor.[1]

When did this happen? A monarch going to war waving holy icons and eating sacred apples. Not in the twelfth century, but at the beginning of the twentieth.

Tsar Nicholas II, the last of the Romanovs, was a bloodless non-entity riddled with prejudice and superstition, a weak man paralysed by his own stupidity as the fires of war and revolution rose around him. His German wife, the Tsarina Alexandra, was equally benighted and gullible, yet more wilful. Men of talent were dismissed from Court and their places taken by fawning favourites, the appointees of the Alexandra/Rasputin clique, what one former minister called 'the leprous court camarilla'. In the shallow mind of the Tsarina, this was interpreted as strength. 'Being firm is the only saving', she told the Tsar. 'You are autocrat and they dare not forget it.' He was to 'crush them

1. Trotsky 1932–3/1977, 85; Lincoln 1986, 160–1.

all', for he was 'the autocrat without which Russia cannot exist'. As this German aristocrat in a Russian palace explained it: 'Russia loves to feel the whip. That is her nature. Tender love, and then the iron hand to punish and guide.'[2] Thus did the last of the Romanovs meet the challenges of a world of railways, steelworks, and howitzers: with the barbarism of the Middle Ages.

How to explain this travesty? Georgi Plekhanov, the founder of the Russian socialist movement in the late nineteenth century, considered Russia 'too Europeanised in comparison with Asia, and inadequately Europeanised in comparison with Europe'.[3] It was, he implied, an historical hybrid which had entered the industrial age still saddled with an absolute monarch and a state-feudal social structure inherited from the sixteenth century.

To understand the revolution that exploded inside Russia in 1917, we must begin with a 'deep time' perspective – a sense, that is, of what the French historians of the *Annales* tradition call *la longue durée*. If revolution is 'compressed' history – the progress of a century becoming the achievement of a year – it becomes so only because long-accumulating contradictions have reached a critical mass.

The autocratic rule of the Tsars – and the militaristic manner in which Russia came to be ordered – was the result of the interaction of three factors: the backwardness of the economy; the weakness of civil society; and competition with rival powers. Let us consider this interaction in detail, for it provides the seed-bed of the revolutionary crisis to come.

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2. Trotsky 1932–3/1977, 73–81; Lincoln 1986, 29.
3. Chamberlin 1935/1965, 2.

Old Russia

Tsarist Russia eventually comprised a vast territory of diverse geography, multiple ethnicities, and only the most rudimentary communications. It stretched from Poland and the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, from the icebound wastes of the Arctic in the north to the baking steppes of Central Asia in the south. The continental climate – cold in winter, hot in summer – was harsh. Great tracts of the country – the frozen tundra and taiga forest of the north – remained uncultivated wilderness. Much of the rest was poor land. The belt in which Moscow stands, the historic heart of Old Russia, where the taiga grades into mixed forest, is a region of sand and clay, bogs and marshes, with acidic soils low in humus. Further south again, where the woodland opens into vast expanses of steppe, lies the 'black earth' region, where the soil is better, but agriculture is hampered by unreliable rainfall, a short growing season, and, in the past, primitive technique.

Because land was plentiful but poor, Russian agriculture developed extensively: peasant pioneers from the old regions would trek into the wilderness to hack out new farms in successive waves of colonisation. Low yields also encouraged diversification: agriculture was supplemented by fur-trapping, fishing, bee-keeping, and cottage industries producing tools, household goods, clothes, icons, even musical instruments. Village people might be poor, but they were fairly self-sufficient.

This, combined with distance and lack of easy transport, meant that trade and towns were little developed. Most Russians lived in relative isolation. Civil society remained fragmented and unorganised.[4] The yeomanry and

4. Pipes 1974/1977, 3–22.