

Centenary of the Russian revolution

By Lal Khan

One hundred years ago the Bolshevik revolution took place in Russia. It was the most decisive victory of the toilers in the class struggle since human society was first divided into classes, with exploitation and oppression of the ruling elites several millennia ago. Through this insurrection, the Bolsheviks led the proletariat and peasantry to vanquish the minority and thus laid the basis for the rule of the majority of society over their destinies.

The Russian revolution of 1917 was an unparalleled historical leap for humankind and it changed the course of history. Such were its impacts that the ruling elites across the planet felt the tremors as they sat quivering their citadels of wealth and power. The revolutionary American journalist John Reed, who witnessed the stormy events of the revolution first hand, wrote in his graphic work, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, "No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism, it is an undeniable fact that the Russian revolution is one of the greatest events in human history, and the rule of the Bolsheviks is a phenomenon of worldwide importance."

According to the Russian Orthodox calendar prevalent at that time in Tsarist Russia, the revolutionary insurrection and the capture of power by the Bolsheviks took place on the night of October 26. This date falls on the equivalent of November 7, according to the more modern Gregorian calendar, later adopted by the Soviet Government.

This Revolution appropriated the rule of one oppressor class who were a tiny minority of society and transferred it to the vast majority of the working classes in society. The process of the overthrow of the bourgeois state and capture of power by the leading party of the proletariat had a massive conscious involvement and participation of the vast majority of toilers. It is the only revolution hitherto that took place on classical Marxist lines.

Lenin explained what real change this revolution ought to bring. He wrote, in December 1917, "One of the most important tasks of today, is to develop [the] independent initiative of the workers, and of all the working and the exploited people generally, develop it as widely as possible in creative organisational work. At all costs we must break the old, absurd, savage, despicable and distinguishing prejudice that only the so-called upper classes, only the rich, and those who have gone through the school of the rich, are capable of administering the state and directing the organisational development of socialist society."

The most distinguishing feature of the Bolshevik Party was that they subordinated the subjective goal, the guarding of the interests of the toiling people, to the dynamics of the revolution as an objectively hardened course. The party's strategy was based on the scientific discovery of the laws that govern mass movements and upheavals. The oppressed and

exploited masses are guided in their struggle not only by their demands, their desires and their needs, but above all by the experiences of their lives. The Bolsheviks were never under any snobbish prejudice or held any patrician derision for the independent experience of the people in struggle. On the contrary, they took this experience as their starting point and built upon it. Where the reformists and the pseudo-revolutionaries moaned and groaned about the hardships, obstacles and difficulties, the Bolsheviks took them head on.

Trotsky defines them in his epic work, *History of the Russian Revolution*: “The Bolsheviks were revolutionaries of deed and not gesture, of the essence and not the form. Their policy was determined by the real grouping of forces, and not by sympathies and antipathies...Bolshevism created the type of authentic revolutionist who subordinates to historic goals irreconcilable with contemporary society the conditions of his personal existence, his ideas, and his moral judgements. The necessary distance from bourgeois ideology was kept up in the party by a vigilant irreconcilability, whose inspirer was Lenin. Lenin never tired of working with his lancet, cutting off those bonds that a petty bourgeois environment creates between the party and official social opinion. At the same time Lenin taught the party to create its own social opinion, resting upon the thoughts and feelings of the rising class. Thus, by a process of selection and education and in continual struggle, the Bolshevik party created not only a political but a moral medium of its own, independent of bourgeois social opinion and implacably opposed to it. Only this permitted the Bolsheviks to overcome the waverings in their own ranks and reveal in action the courageous determination without which the October victory would have been impossible.”

After the victorious insurrection, Lenin spoke to the All Russia Congress of the Soviets: “We shall now proceed to build, on the space cleared by historical rubbish, the airy, towering edifice of socialist society.” The revolution ushered in a new era of socioeconomic transformation. Landed estates, heavy industry, corporate monopolies and the commanding heights of the economy were expropriated by the nascent workers’ state. The dictatorship of the financial oligarchy was broken; the state had a monopoly on all foreign trade and commerce. Ministerial perks and privileges were abolished, and the leaders of the revolution lived in the most modest conditions.

Victor Serge, in his, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* wrote: “In the Kremlin Lenin still occupied a small apartment built for a palace servant. In the recent winter he, like everyone else, had no heating. When he went to the barber’s he took his turn, thinking it unseemly for anyone else to give way to him.”

The democratic approach of the Bolsheviks was indubitable. Initially, the new government was a coalition of Bolsheviks, Left Social Revolutionaries and Menshevik Internationalists. Only the fascist Black Hundreds were banned and even the Kadets, the bourgeois-liberal party, was allowed to operate after the revolution. The new government was based on the most democratic system ever seen in history, the *soviets*, i.e. workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’ *councils*, which at grassroots level were devised to manage and democratically control the

economy, agriculture, industry, the army and society. Lenin laid out the main guiding principles of this soviet system of governance unambiguously:

- Free democratic elections to all positions in the soviet state;
- Right of recall of all officials;
- No official to receive a higher wage than a skilled worker, and
- Gradually, all tasks of running society and the state to be performed by everyone in turn.

What this revolution really meant for the oppressed and exploited working classes of Russia was portrayed in an inspiring anecdote captured by John Reed: “Across the horizon spread the glittering lights of the Capital, immeasurably more splendid by the night than by the day, like a dike of jewels heaped on a barren plain. The old workman who drove the wheelbarrow held in one hand, while with the other he swept the pavement, looked at the far gleaming capital and exclaimed in an exulted gesture, ‘Mine!’ he cried, his face all alight. ‘All mine now! My Petrograd!’ The revolution had instilled a social, cultural and psychological surge of working class consciousness unforeseen in history.

If the revolutionary victory can be explained from a scientific analysis, Marxists also have a historical responsibility to give a scientific explanation of the later degeneration and collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, the leader of the revolution, Vladimir Lenin, working from a Marxist standpoint, had never envisaged the accomplishment of socialism *in one country*. Internationalism for Lenin was not merely a sentimental phrase. He understood the need to spread the revolution to the more economically advanced Western European states, and he understood the inevitability of the degeneration of the revolution, in the event that it became isolated in backward Russia. Thus, in a very real sense, the Marxists predicted the decline of the Soviet Union far in advance.

On March 7, 1918, Lenin weighed up the situation, “Regarded from a world-historical point of view, there would be no hope of the ultimate victory of our revolution if it were to remain alone, if there were no revolutionary victories in other countries... our salvation from all these difficulties is an all-European revolution. At all events, under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come, we are doomed.”

Leon Trotsky, who along with Lenin led and orchestrated the Revolution, analysed the degeneration of the Revolution under Stalin, in his profoundly researched work, *The Revolution Betrayed*, published in 1936. From an analysis based on scientific Marxism, Trotsky predicted more than fifty years before the gigantic events of the late 1980s that the Soviet Union would collapse if the revolution in the advanced capitalist countries was not victorious and if a *political revolution* did not restore workers’ democracy in the USSR.

Ted Grant, in his outstanding 1943 work, *Marxist theory of the state*, further elaborated and analysed this process. His perspectives, albeit in a negative sense, were vindicated by the events following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Russian revolution of 1917 was not an isolated national event but had immense international repercussions. It not only overthrew capitalism and landlordism in Russia but also smashed the shackles of the imperialist stranglehold. It triggered revolutionary upheavals far beyond the frontiers of the USSR, particularly in Europe. The imperialist masters were terrified by these mass revolts that threatened capitalism in its bastions.

The British Prime Minister Lloyd George wrote in a confidential memorandum to Clemenceau, his French counterpart at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, "The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent but of anger and revolt amongst the workmen against the present conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other."

To crush the epicentre of the rising tide of the revolutionary upheavals these 'capitalist democracies' launched a massive attack on the nascent Soviet state with the aggression of twenty-one imperialist armies. Although the revolution itself was a relatively peaceful affair as only nine people died during the actual insurrection, the imperialist belligerent militaries, supporting the reactionary white armies, brought drastic carnage, bloodshed, mayhem, starvation and destruction to an economically backward country already devastated by the First World War.

On the basis of extreme deprivation and the pulverisation of the masses, aggravated by the civil war and an economic blockade, the "struggle for individual existence", in the words of Karl Marx, did not disappear or soften, but assumed a ferocious character. The defeats of revolutions – in Germany (1918-19 and 1923), China (1924-25), Britain (1926) and several other countries – were enormous blow to the Bolshevik Revolution. These defeats intensified the isolation of the Russian Revolution and induced nationalist degeneration.

The combination of the heroic fight by the Red Army and support of the proletariat and the soldiers of the invading states defeated the imperialist aggression. Trotsky raised a revolutionary Red Army of five million from the remnants of a war-torn Tsarist Russian army numbering only three hundred thousand at first. Innumerable Bolshevik cadres and many of the most class-conscious workers perished in this imperialist intervention and civil war. This created a vacuum in leadership, which was filled by opportunist and careerist elements who came to penetrate the Party and the Soviet government. The shortages and dearth of commodities, the collapse of industry and agriculture due to the war brought a generalised misery that played an important role in the *bureaucratic degeneration* of the revolution.

Lenin struggled against this degeneration before his early death in 1924. His last testament, which called for a struggle against this bureaucratic deformation, was concealed by Stalin in the

iron vaults of the Kremlin. (It was only finally exposed to the world in 1956 at the 20th Congress of the CPSU.)

But the hostile objective conditions, the exhaustion of the proletarian vanguard due to war and revolution, created a situation where a bureaucratic regime began to emerge around state power, under Stalin. Trotsky created a Left Opposition and put up a valiant resistance against this degeneration. But it was brutally crushed, as little resistance was put up by the ebbing tide of the revolution with the proletarian vanguard exhausted in titanic wars and struggles.

This led to the consolidation of a bureaucratic totalitarian apparatus with huge perks and privileges. The maximum wage differential of 1:4, which had been established under Lenin, was abolished. This political reaction against the October revolution was so repressive that by 1940 out of the original Bolshevik Central Committee of 1917, which had led the Revolution, there was only one survivor – Stalin, himself. Most of the rest had been exterminated: shot by Stalin's firing squads, 'disappeared', assassinated or had committed suicide. Only a tiny number had died natural deaths.

However, despite this Stalinist degeneration, the economy remained state-owned and planned. The bureaucracy was not a *class* that owned the means of production but was a *caste* or a clique that controlled and usurped the surplus. In spite of these severe setbacks, the economy of the USSR grew at a pace that capitalism never achieved anywhere.

Ted Grant wrote in his enlightening book, *Russia — From Revolution to Counter Revolution*, "In the fifty years from 1913 (the height of pre-war production) to 1963, despite two world wars, foreign intervention and civil war, and other calamities total industrial output rose more than 52 times. The corresponding figure for the USA was less than six times, while Britain struggled to double its output. In other words Soviet Union was transformed from a backward agricultural economy into the second most powerful nation on earth, with a mighty industrial base, a high cultural level and more scientists than the USA, Europe and Japan combined. Life expectancy more than doubled and child mortality fell by nine times. This massive economic advance, in such a short period, has no parallel anywhere in the world."

The equality and full involvement of women was ensured by the revolution and the planned economy. In all spheres of social, economic and political life — the provision of free school meals, milk for children, pregnancy consultation centres, maternity homes, crèches and other facilities, free at the point of use, were provided by the workers' state. The superiority of the planned economy over the market economy was proved to the world not in the language of dialectics but in the language of unprecedented social and material advances.

However, as the economy expanded rapidly it became more sophisticated, complex and advanced. An economy producing one million commodities cannot be run by the same methods as those for an economy producing 1,500 items. Trotsky had once said that, "For a planned economy, workers' democracy is as essential as is oxygen for the human body." By the late 1960s the economic growth had begun to falter. By 1978 it plummeted to zero. The dead

weight of mismanagement, waste, corruption and bureaucracy weighed down heavily on the economy, eventually dragging it to a standstill. The isolation of the revolution, nationalist caricature of socialism and the lack of workers' democratic control and management of the economy were the real causes for the collapse of the USSR, not the so-called 'failure of socialism'. What had actually existed in the Soviet Union at the time of its collapse was not socialism or communism but its *caricature*, Stalinism.

Today, with the crisis of capitalism on a world scale, there have been massive upheavals against this harrowing system that has plunged the vast majority of mankind into the pit of misery, poverty and disease. It is a historically doomed system and can only worsen the pain, agony and grief to the human race. Marx and Engels understood from the beginning that the crisis of the capitalist system is the crisis of overproduction or overcapacity. Even the most far-sighted bourgeois economists acknowledge this crisis.

The most daunting problem for these movements and mass revolts in the present period is the search for an alternative system. Innumerable ex-socialists and ex-communists are in the forefront of outright condemnation of revolutionary socialism. They have capitulated to the reactionary theories of 'end of history'. But the greater damage being done is trying to 'modernise' Marxism by cavernous revisionism. In 1917 it took about two weeks for the news of the revolutionary victory in Russian to reach the left-wing activists in the Indian subcontinent. Now the masses can watch revolutions live on television and Internet. At this juncture in human history if there is another victorious revolution such as the October Revolution, it would not and could not be confined to national frontiers.

Despite its subsequent degeneration and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik revolution still stands as the greatest icon for the struggle to emancipate the human race. More than quarter of a century since the fall of the USSR there has been a ferocious campaign to malign and desecrate socialism and communism by the corporate media. The capitalist politicians and intelligentsia, from the religious fundamentalists to the secular liberals, have denounced Marxism as a failed ideology and economic system.

However, the serious strategists of the capitalism are deeply worried and aware of the veracity that only genuine threat posed to capitalism is revolutionary socialism. *The Economist's* prestigious annual magazine, '*World in 2017*' had to acknowledge the significance of the Russian revolution's centenary this year. It wrote, "Centenary of the revolution is too big an event to cover up... Mr Putin has ignored Lenin and rehabilitated Stalin. For him, the difference between them was their attitude towards the Russian state and its imperial inheritance...His main disagreement with Lenin concerned Lenin's organisation of Russia as a union of ethnic republics with the right to self-determination.... Yet as the economy stagnates and Mr Putin's megalomania worsens, the ghosts of the Bolshevik revolution are getting restless. Lenin might allow himself a smile."

They may be referring specifically about Putin's capitalist Russia, but they are also well aware that it is true for every country, as the capitalist decay on a world scale is undermining and afflicting all societies in different forms in the present epoch.

Lenin had pledged that the Russian Revolution would expand and grow across the world uniting the peoples of this planet into one USSR. In the present epoch the revolutionary victory of socialism in any one country would unleash a mighty storm across the whole planet. Thus, Lenin's pledge would be redeemed and the ultimate objective of humanity's cosmic existence – the conquest of universe by the human race shall commence.