

The Russian Revolution

S.Fitzpatrick

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The Russian Revolution took place in 1917, or to be more exact October 1917 (O.S.). This is simplistic. There was of course a pre-ambler, which one has to take into account; but more to the point a period of consolidation, which according to the author took some twenty years.

The pre-ambler was of course of much longer duration. The idea of rousing this backward country from its sleep had a long pedigree. Peter the Great and his father, may be cited as the first concerted case, but if so from imposed from above. The 19th century was the century of the Russian intelligentsia. In fact I believe that the notion of an intelligentsia is a Russian one, denoting a class of people set apart from society, reflecting on it and committed to its change. As generally known, the Russian intelligentsia tended to be split. Some wanted to keep the special Russian nature, believing that Russia had a special destiny. Others were for westernization, seeing the West as a source of not only inspiration but emulation. Needless to remark, both camps were deeply influenced by the West. The first were known as Slavophiles, taking their cue from German Romanticism; the others from the Enlightenment. The emerging Bolsheviks would in many ways combine both camps. Some would even say their worst aspects to boot.

One unifying aspect of the intelligentsia was the theoretical bent, which was not too surprising given their denotation. As a consequence they quarreled incessantly between themselves accusing each other of utopianism. Opposed to the thin stratum of intellectuals was the large mass of peasants, who in some way or another had to be roused. That could be done in many ways, one direct way was taken by the Populists in the 1870's, who went out to the peasants trying to educate them. The experiment was not very successful, as they were met with suspicion often resulting into expulsion. Another tack was taken by the Terrorists, who in the spirit of demolition of buildings, aimed at focused attacks on key structural elements, the destruction of which would cause the whole structure of society to implode. The most spectacular case being the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the doings of a more active faction of the Populists. It had little effect apart from the spectacular nature of the deed.

The French Revolution was the unrivaled model for all modern revolutions. And like every upheaval it had had its after-shocks of less import, such as the uprisings of 1830 and 1848, which far from transforming society in any fundamental way, had at least brought about various concessions. The lasting influence of the French Revolution was the rise of Socialist ideas. Those did of course not originate with Marx and Engels but can be traced far back in history, some would even try to enlist Plato as their intellectual father, although this is highly ironic, given his basic aristocratic outlook. On the other hand the history of ideas is replete with ironies. Yet the Communist Manifesto of 1848 provided a rallying cry, and has in retrospect assumed a singular importance it might not otherwise have had, had history taken another turn. It is hardly surprising that Marx would have Russian

disciples. Its main attraction apart from the moral one associated to any socialist thought of egalitarian justice and redistribution of wealth, was its scientific pretensions. In other words it was hard-nosed and materialistic as opposed to idealistic and although utopian in its ultimate vision, not so in its methods. Of those disciples Lenin stand out combining a penchant for theoretical and strategical speculation and down-to-earth tactical common sense, although the latter aspect would only become manifest through the course of events that would later unfold, and of which he had no control.

To the Russian Marxists Russia was embarrassingly backward. It was not even capitalistic, a necessary condition for the rise of the proletariat. Capitalism and modernity were inseparable, and some one like Lenin approved of the former as an inevitable manifestation of the latter. Until the very end Lenin never seem to have seriously thought that Revolution in Russia would be a reality in his own life-time, and furthermore that any revolution in Russia would not be internally initiated and instigated, but would follow from external pressures caused by a World Revolution, Thus Marxism very much became a theoretical concern ideal as an intellectual pre-occupation. Lenin's Bolsheviks did not come into existence until 1903 when the Social Democratic Party split into two, with the Bolsheviks being the spurious majority on a particular issue, the dissenters appropriately known as the Mensheviks. Shortly thereafter the first Russian Revolution, or attempt at that occurred in 1905 triggered by the disastrous war with Japan in the Far East. The Russian autocratic society was shaken but not toppled. Major concessions were made as the establishment of a Duma and a first attempt to supplement the power of the Tsar with a semi-popular representation. To the revolutionaries this was a severe set-back and the mood definitely became pessimistic. Much of the revolutionary intelligentsia, including Lenin, were sent into exile, the Tsarist secret police not surprisingly being intolerant of any attempts at insurrection. Harsh as those agents of Tsarist repression no doubt were, not refraining from occasionally blooding their hands, they seem in retrospect quaint, and their persecution idyllic, sending many of the future revolutionaries to summer camps where they could in peaceful surroundings educate themselves and others as well as to plan future strategies.

Russia was backward, but far from stagnant at the time. Industrialization had arrived late, as it had done all over Northern Europe, as exemplified by Sweden, but that had its advantages. Foreign Capital existed in abundance and was willing to travel east. The Foreign minister Witte was in particular very active in trying to attract much needed capital and as a result stimulate industry, which developed at a healthy pace. Still of course the overwhelming majority of the population was to be found rurally, the industrial workforce only making up a numerically marginal section of the population. The major political issue of the 19th century was the emancipation of the serfs, which finally came about in the 1860's, but the ramifications of which had not yet been fully worked out. Unlike the feudal system in Western Europe, the bondage of the peasant to the land and ultimately to his lord, was of a rather recent vintage, the result of the power and privilege thrust upon the aristocracy in the 18th century, although the basis for it had always been present if not formally rigidified. The chief minister - Petr Stolypin was involved in bringing about deep-going rural reforms, which ultimately would have had as fundamental effect on the rural life as the more violent methods ultimately favored by

Stalin. First he wanted consolidations of peasant holdings into contingent pieces of land making for a more efficient tillage, secondly he wanted to dismantle the traditional *mir*s around which village life centered. Similar measures had been taken in Sweden in the early 19th century and fundamentally transformed rural life and providing a basis for a subsequent industrialization at the end of the century. Lenin approved of such measures naturally, as they would make agriculture more efficient and liberate a large section of the population from actual bondage to the earth and make them available for industrial work. In short such measures would stimulate capitalism of which Lenin was an ardent supporter seeing it as a manifestation of modernity.

The First World War gave hope to the more farsighted revolutionaries, such as Lenin, and indeed just as previous Russian military setbacks had provoked reforms in the past, the truly momentous debacle of the Great unfolding war promised a real destabilization of society, as it would prove to do. As we all know the Tsar was pressured to abdicate in February 1917 as a result of the collapse of the war effort, of which he was ultimately responsible. Normally he would have abdicated in favor of his son, thus preserving the monarchy, but as his son was sickly he did design his brother, who more or less immediately stepped down. The Monarchy was dead, the Romanovs disposed. Nicholas II thought that he would have a peaceful life as a private citizen able to devote himself fully to his family, but the disposal of the former Royal family was fraught with diplomatic complications. They were held in custody, and after the Bolsheviks came to power, Lenin had them summarily shot. But as we learned in elementary school the new provisional government insisted in continuing the war, while Lenin dismissed it as an imperialistic venture, which would collapse, leading to world revolution. Now the events of February nevertheless took Lenin with some surprise leaving him restless in Swiss exile. To go back to Russia was not simple but imperative would the Bolsheviks have any chance to take active part in the events. As the pacifist ambitions of Lenin were known to the German authorities, they were more than happy to assist in his transfer, the results of which could prove beneficial to their aims, and he and a few of his cohorts were allowed to travel through Germany in a sealed car. The collusion of the Germans did of course make Lenin somewhat suspect in the eyes of other revolutionaries, and the charge of being a German spy, was not entirely unfounded. Thus Lenin had to act with a certain circumspection as he introduced himself on the scene, well aware of the vulnerability of his position, including his physical, sending him occasionally into hiding or during the summer upheavals into temporary Finnish exile.

A lot of parties and factions were fighting for dominance. Most of those were on the Left and socialist in outlook, including the very ineffectual Kerensky. The Bolsheviks stood out by their refusal to compromise in the political game, a stand very much enforced by Lenin. By standing above the fray of the political 'kalabalik' the Bolsheviks earned the respect and admiration of the urban proletarians, and as the struggle were done under the slogan of 'All power to the soviets' the increasing Bolsheviks representation in those various soviets, contributed essentially to their power, or rather their claim to power. The actual seizing of power in October, which was a gamble and left prominent men such as Kamenev and Zionev off the scene by request while it attracted the former Menshevik - Trotsky to action, was but a tenuous hold in dire need of consolidation. It has often been pictured as a simple Coup d'etat, which might have some justification, but basically it was

the case of a strong, disciplined body taking charge in a political power vacuum caused by confusion.

The Bolshevik seizure of power was not unopposed but resulted in a Civil War which was to last for two years. Given the fragility of the new regime it might seem remarkable that it was not toppled and ousted by the formidable forces opposed to it. But those formidable forces were uncoordinated and the Red Army, a creation basically brought about by Trotsky, was able to withstand the onslaught. True there were even foreign intervention, but it also suffered from a lack of real commitment, and eventually petered out. The Civil War resulted into a consolidation of Bolshevik power as well as a brutalization of its cadres. Trotsky played a pivotal role. Due to his eventual losing out to Stalin, and due to the catastrophic effects of Stalinism, he has often been portrayed as the 'Good Communist' and the one who would have been true to Lenin's heritage. I would be wary of such idealization, nothing in the biography of Trotsky would contradict the assumption that he too would have proved to be a ruthless dictator. In effect being more charismatic than Stalin, of a more idealistic and visionary bent, as well as being more intelligent and intellectual, the chances are that he might have proved even more of a disaster. History served him well by putting him on its dust heap, making his ultimate contribution fictional rather than factual¹. The Civil War was a triumph for Bolshevism, and a disaster for society, which Lenin clearly understood. As a tactical retreat, forced by a desperate situation, a New Economic Policy was introduced. This was of course a glaring euphemism which fooled few. Private economic initiatives were not only tolerated but encouraged, although the major industry as well as transportation was in state hands. Lenin rationalized it that socialist economic ventures would prove their superiority in the market place. As a result the economy revived, and as the author points out, there were quite a lot of continuity between pre-revolutionary Russia and Russia in the 20's. Capitalism thrived, and many an enterprising fellow - known as a Nepman, made a fortune. Capitalist economy worked very well with vibrant Socialist rhetoric, as it has always done in the West. Furthermore there was a need for expertise, especially bureaucratic such. To the intellectuals bureaucracy was below contempt, and Lenin warned against communist deceit, i.e. the belief that by virtue of political sophistication one was able to sidestep more mundane matters by assuming as a matter of course the appropriate expertise. As a consequence the old Tsarist apparatus survived. The 1920's were later to be seen as the Golden Age of the Revolution, when there was a lot of radical ideas in politics and the arts, and when the party itself was split into factions and supporting a vigorous internal debate. Russian society was really avant garde. However, one should be wary of thinking of it as idyllic. As noted Lenin could be quite ruthless, and there were repressions of many aspects of society, in particular the orthodox church, involving murders of priests, although the full extent of this persecution and repudiation would follow later.

Was this Lenin's vision? Did he think of the NEP as a more or less permanent feature, which maybe in the long run would pave the way for a true Socialist society? One can never know. He himself was riddled with bad health, suffered a few debilitating strokes, and gradually faded out.

Stalin would eventually prevail, in spite of warnings as to his unsuitability by the

¹ As the saying goes the one who digs a whole falls into it himself. The same seems to hold for heaps!

declining Lenin, and more to the point in spite of being considered by the many as a non-entity. But as we are continually reminded, one should never underestimate your enemies. Stalin was the general secretary of the party, and as such he was in an undisputed position to manipulate party opinion by deposing those whose opinions he did not like and replacing them with men of more congenial ones, and who as a consequence would be indebted to him. When it came to dealing with the stronger opponents in the Politburo, whose prestige derived from their very presence, he was a master manipulator, never committing himself to an opinion until he was sure it would carry the floor, and always dealing with his opponents one by one in isolation. Thus he used Kamenev and Zionev to attack and isolate Trotsky. When that was accomplished he allowed Kamenev and Zionev to ally themselves with the vanquished foe, and thus making themselves look ridiculous. Other favorites, such as Bukharin emerged on the scene, only to be discarded when of no use no longer. Trotsky was eventually expelled and ultimately killed, while Kamenev, Zionev and I believe Bukharin as well came to grief during the purges of the 30's.

One may argue with a lot of conviction that the real Russian revolution did not occur in 1917 but in 1929 as the first Five Year plan was starting to be implemented. Stalin took power based on the idea of 'Socialism in one country' thereby repudiating not only the Internationalism of Trotsky but also distancing himself from the original idea that a socialist revolution in Russia would only be possible as part of a general world revolution. As pointed out the original revolutionaries had little self-confidence in their project and only pursued it believing that external events would buttress their ambitions. The Civil War and the concomitant petering out of revolutionary ardor in the advanced Capitalist countries deprived the Bolsheviks of this desperate illusion, but allowed them to muddle through nevertheless. This platform of Stalin was a masterly one, and provided the basis for his subsequent success. What did it mean in practice?

It meant that Russia could be self-sufficient, that it did not need the outside world, but in order to maintain this independence it had to become strong and modernize. This focusing on Russia also brought in a strong patriotic element, which in time would allow for a partial rehabilitation of the church. It also brought about an isolation from the outside world which was seen as hostile. In the 20's there were still possibly to travel in and out of the Soviet Union, that would eventually change, as international contacts were kept at a minimum. In particular it would become no longer possible for Russians scientists to publish internationally. It is this isolation and closing into itself of Soviet society that tied up with the xenophobic aspects of Slavophilia. But above all it called for a rapid, and hence brutal, industrialization. This forcing of Russia into the modern world was something a Trotsky no doubt would have approved of, and in fact Stalin short of ideas of his own, was very much reduced to reuse old ideas, be they of friend or foe. The rapid industrialization required a plan. But this was a plan in name only, the whole purpose of which was exhortational. Things were not meant to go according to plan, but instead ahead of plan. Nothing was allowed to be in the way for outdoing set production goals. In fact even the plan itself was not allowed to run for its entire five year but was aborted prematurely on the basis of the goals already having been reached. It was not rational, it was not efficient, but numbers did indeed go up, and there were, at least on paper, an impressive growth. One may argue that the same kind of growth might have been

achieved by allowing the NEP to continue. After all planning needs to take into account of the interconnectedness of various enterprises, something that was willfully ignored, and which would have been taken care of in a more spontaneous unplanned economy.

Now a prerequisite for industrialization is food. The workers have to be fed. Any army has to be fed and the solution is so called requisition, which is a technical word for plain theft. Requisition is fine during exceptional circumstances such as war, but in peacetime? NEP policies in the agricultural sector had worked fine. True some people had done better than others and a class of well-to-do peasants, so called kulaks, had emerged. This tolerant policy had many advocates, and the task Stalin set himself was to crush this opposition on the right. This was easy to do at party level. War was waged against the kulaks. They were deprived of their possessions, killed or forcibly expelled to Siberia. The remaining peasants were forced into collective farms. This was a slow project fraught with opposition and obstruction. The peasants had their animals butchered rather than relinquishing them. The production of tractors was not enough to make up for this loss of hauling power, which would have dire consequences also on industrial production, being dependent on transport. But worst of all it resulted in a catastrophic decline in productivity causing a severe famine which claimed millions of lives.

Concurrent with the early phase of the industrialization was a replacement of the bourgeois intelligentsia with a proletarian one, as people of humble backgrounds had priority to higher education. Now when all of those draconian measures had been implemented, the country had indeed moved to socialism. If this was socialism, was it worth it? The country was in misery saddled with abject poverty, but more or less thoroughly proletarian. Was it worth it?

What would follow was in many ways ironic and paradoxical. As the country had moved radically and by violence to an entirely new phase. And indeed as the author remarks, while a pre-revolutionary resident would very well find himself at home in the 20's, he would be totally lost in the 30's. Streets had changed names, private stores disappeared, no advertisements, no telephone directories. Russia had indeed isolated itself from the rest of the world. Socialism in one country. Then there followed a backlash, a reaction. The egalitarian policies of the past were abandoned. To stimulate higher productivity differential wages were introduced based on performance. The old bourgeois elite was readmitted, not being a member of the party was no longer an impediment to a career. While the elite in the party enjoyed unheard of privileges. And history which previously not been taught as being useless experienced a renaissance. Old Tsars such as Peter the great and Ivan the Terrible were reintroduced. Patriotism was once again in. And the Sovietunion started to have imperial ambitions.

Making up the last part of the revolution, as understood by the author, were the purges of the late 30's. Maybe modeled on the French reign of terror, with the significant exception that Stalin, unlike Robespierre would never taste his own medicine. What were the reasons behind those charades? Could not the party elite being purged in a more straightforward way? Even if the party elite may have been the most conspicuous victims of the purges, as we all know they were far too few to make up the total number of victims. The country really ate its own children, and the great mystery is why it survived, why it did not implode from its own internal contradictions. There is more to the stability and

survival of a society than meets the eye.

March 14, 2011 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se