

The Russian Revolution Unfinished

SK

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“Whether one chooses to examine the opening phases of the French Revolution of 1789, the revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune, the 1905 revolution in Russia, the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the French general strike of 1968, the opening stages are generally the same: a period of ferment that explodes spontaneously into a mass upsurge.”

—Murray Bookchin, “Myth of the Party: Bolshevik Mystification and Counter-Revolution,” *Fifth Estate* #272, May 1976 and in our anti-Marx issue, #393, Spring 2015.

2017 marks the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. This world-shaking upheaval occurred at the end of World War I, a time of self-emancipating uprisings in several countries that challenged the rule of capitalism and the state.

Peasants and workers in Russia first went into the streets to demand bread and an end to involvement in the War, but the demonstrations and strikes quickly transformed from riot to rebellion and from there to a full scale revolution that very many hoped would lead to freedom and equality, challenging centuries of hierarchies of domination and economic exploitation.

Although anarchists were in the minority in Russia, they nevertheless played a very influential and respected role alongside non-Bolshevik socialists in the discussions and actions that were taking place.

In the present century, we are once again witnessing widespread riots, rebellions, and near revolutions in many countries, most notably in the East Mediterranean region, and to some extent in Eastern Europe. Once again anarchists are actively involved.

Today’s Russia suffers from extremes of social and economic inequality, accompanied by brutal repression of individual and group freedoms of expression and association.

One contemporary Russian anarchist group, Autonomous Action, describes the country as a strongly hierarchical and authoritarian society “tightly interlaced with a repressive state apparatus, industrial capitalist economic structure and authoritarian and hierarchic relations between people.”

As in the 20th century, anarchists in Russia have been participating, through words and direct actions, in the struggles and have been suffering the consequences.

In June 2016, the Anarchist Black Cross of Moscow issued an international call for support for activists, especially anarchist, antifa comrades and those fighting for human rights and social justice. Some were imprisoned on the basis of confessions obtained under torture. Many are now in high security prisons or isolated in forced labor camps.

What is currently going on in Russia and around the world can't really be understood or adequately challenged without being aware of what happened during the past century. Part of the struggle also crucially involves the unearthing of the suppressed libertarian history of revolution, challenging the myths and lies that have been used to obscure the authentic popular insurgencies, and honoring those rebels who were active in them.

The present-day Russian government is clearly threatened by the memories of self-emancipation that the centenary might awaken in the Russian population.

It therefore intends to work at blocking such memories out with messages that emphasize the negative consequences of resorting to revolution to solve social and political problems.

The 1917 Russian Revolution needs to be remembered, honored and questioned in this context.

To begin with, it is important to remember that there was a lot more to this revolution than the October Bolshevik Party takeover of the state apparatus. The process began in February 1917, when thousands went into the streets for massive protests and strikes. The Tsarist regime, the government at the time, ordered troops to fire on the crowds in an attempt to frighten them into submission. But soon many soldiers and sailors refused to follow orders, and several regiments joined the demonstrators *en masse*.

Military discipline was also disintegrating among troops still on the battlefield, and Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate the throne. A bourgeois democratic Provisional Government took control of what was left of the state apparatus in March, but it was not able to satisfy the increasingly revolutionary demands of the insurgent population.

At the same time, outside officially recognized government control, workers and peasants were taking factories and the land into their own hands, and beginning what they hoped would be the basic groundwork for egalitarian self-governance.

Throughout 1917, workers formed factory committees in enterprises in several parts of the country. At first these committees primarily made demands on employers for better pay and working conditions. But gradually they took control of workplaces that were then run directly by the people who worked there utilizing newly-learned defiance of authority.

In the countryside, peasants were seizing land and also often creating self-governance bodies to help coordinate farming and sharing economies locally.

Soldiers who didn't desert outright began rejecting authoritarian military discipline and electing officers rather than accepting appointments from above.

Soviets (soldiers', peasants', and workers' councils) were created throughout Russia to coordinate the local self-governance that was emerging in various aspects of life.

Initially, anarchists and anti-authoritarian socialists in other parts of the world were enthusiastic about what was happening in Russia. They were excited to know that people were beginning to take control of the conditions that directly affected them. Ever since 1903, they had expressed strong concerns about the authoritarian and elitist character of the Bolshevik party. But, the wave of enthusiasm about the revolutionary possibilities caused very many anarchists to temporarily set aside these apprehensions, even after the Bolshevik takeover of the government in October.

Then, gradually, information about the repression of anarchists and non-Bolshevik socialists, and of the population in general started to leak out. Respected Russian anarchists began to report brutal and murderous crackdowns on all non-Bolshevik groups, individuals, and ideas. First private correspondence, then articles and books by authors such as Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Piotr Arshinov, Ida Mett, Voline (born Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eichenbaum) and others began to make it clear that things were going terribly wrong in several ways.

In October 1917, the Bolsheviks, led by V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, seized power from the Provisional Government and consolidated their control of the governmental machinery and economy. They quickly erected a brutal state capitalist dictatorship, all the while calling it communist.

Within a short time the new Soviet state commenced the suppression of anarchist and other non-Bolshevik publications, formed and deployed the Cheka (political police) to imprison and kill critics, repressed strikes and protests, undermined the factory committees, gerrymandered and disbanded soviets when they couldn't control them—all in the name of protecting the revolution. The justifications for these moves against the new self-governance practices were not then and are not now convincing, except to the ideologically committed.

In 1921, the Bolshevik government ruthlessly put down strikes in Petrograd which were demanding greater equality of income between ordinary working people and Communist Party bureaucrats and managers, as well as more direct democracy. The newly trained and disciplined military was also used to crush a revolt in Kronstadt, where soldiers, sailors and other city residents were daring to question Bolshevik rule and elite status. The Kronstadt rebels declared that they wanted the state to be replaced by a genuine form of working class democracy based on the councils.

As anticipated by anarchists and other critics, the Bolsheviks in power hijacked popular revolutionary activity; the people in their multitude became a single entity, the masses, whose power disappeared to be replaced by a struggle between individual party members for control of the state. By the end of the 1920s, the already authoritarian repressive regime metastasized to something even more grotesque, the reign of Stalin.

Thus, the Russian communist system enforced authoritarian centralized power and the indefinite postponement of freedom for individuals and groups who did not agree with the government's goals and methods.

The Russian state and Bolshevik party apparatus consolidated power as the central unit of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR/Soviet Union) and persisted in that role from 1922 until 1991.

The vast majority of Russian people and others in the Eastern Bloc were relieved by the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, but as memories of its reality fade and living standards for the population are eroded by the new neo-liberal regime, some have become nostalgic for the good old days, mythologizing life under the Soviet dictatorship.

From the point of view of anarchists—striving for the elimination of hierarchy, domination and exploitation of all sorts—this nostalgia and mythologization need to be challenged. The 1917 Russian Revolution deserves to be remembered and respected because the peasants, workers and soldiers succeeded in ousting the old ruling class and opening up possibilities for real societal transformation. However, the hope of overcoming capital and the state was dashed by a monstrous regime that successfully blocked the realization of anti-authoritarian revolution for 80 years or more.

While remembering and valuing the courage, dreams and ideas of those who participated in that revolution, it is also necessary to critically review the difficulties that were not overcome and the questions not resolved during or after 1917.

Some of those questions might include:

How and why were huge numbers of people disempowered while in the process of developing their capacities to take control of their own lives?

How and why was the struggle changed from one in which people were organizing their own lives in their work places and neighborhoods into battles against and between party and government functionaries?

How and why was a new ruling class able to come to power? Would similar processes have relevance for the situation today in one or more parts of the world?

As indicated above, anarchists and others fighting for a society based on mutual aid, solidarity, and freedom in present-day Russia are faced with a highly repressive state apparatus. Sadly, in a situation similar to the Cold War era, they are also met with the indifference (or worse) of foreign leftists, who find it difficult to criticize the Russian state because of its role as a strong opponent of their main enemy, the US.

Clearly, insights into what went wrong and the historical mystifications of the 1917 Russian Revolution are essential, but not enough.

As outsiders with respect to the political left and the ruling center and right, anarchists can and must go beyond this into new territories of understanding and action.

S.K. is a grandchild of the Ukrainian and Siberian popular resistance against Bolshevik authoritarian rule.

Related

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