

Anarchist Political School

The Russian Revolution



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Why Study the Russian Revolution?

The legacy of the Soviet Union looms over every attempt to argue for revolutionary socialist politics. For many, the word ‘communism’ evokes images of Stalin, the Gulag prison system, secret police, and one-party dictatorship. This is true of some who think of themselves as advocates of communism, as well.

Anarchist communists remain true to the actual definition of communism—a society without government, without classes, and without money, where people freely contribute according to their abilities and consume according to their needs. Under capitalism, the need to earn a wage forces us to take jobs with no purpose other than to expand the capitalist system and enrich a tiny minority. Communism, on the other hand, would be a free, participatory society, where we co-operatively work to produce and distribute goods in a way that maximises well-being, freedom, and happiness.

Clearly, nothing like this existed in the Soviet Union. Soviet workers had very little control over their own lives. They still had bosses who directed the economy—both in the form of managers and government officials—and they were still compensated in the form of a wage. Government was not only not abolished, but extended its power into every sphere of life, under the command of a murderous one-party dictatorship. Although the

Soviet Union offered many social services free at the point of use, the economy was not collectively self-managed to meet people's needs. Instead, it was commanded from above by a ruling bureaucracy which aimed to secure its own privileged position and make Soviet production competitive with Western rivals.

Anarchists were the first to denounce the path being taken by the Soviet Union as a betrayal of socialism. This doesn't mean that anarchists—either then, or today—reject the legacy of the Russian Revolution as a whole.

Anarchists believe that the revolutionary struggle in Russia was one of the most inspiring periods in human history, and that it stands as a testament to the validity of our ideas. For the first time—if only for a brief moment—millions of workers got organised and took control of their own lives. For this reason alone, the Russian Revolution is worth studying.

However, there are two additional lessons to consider. Firstly, the course followed by the leading Bolsheviks (later known as the Communist Party) demonstrates why anarchists reject the seizure of state power. Secondly, the many failures of Russia's small anarchist movement provide lessons which we will need to learn from if we are to avoid repeating history.

Discuss

Should we continue to discuss and debate the history of the Russian Revolution today? Why or why not?

1905: The Birth of the Soviet

In 1905, a disastrous war with Japan, a growing economic crisis, and the emergence of a newly formed capitalist class opened the door to political upheaval in Tsarist Russia.

Capitalists and educated professionals called for civil and political rights (for themselves, at least). The poor demanded the same and began to organise against the bosses in the factories and the landowners in the countryside.

On January 9, 150,000 workers marched on the Winter Palace calling for political and economic reform. They also called for the reinstatement of workers fired for being delegates to a quasi-trade union organisation ('the Assembly'). The whole city was shut down by strikes. On the orders of the Tsar's ministers, the army opened fire. 200 workers were killed and another 800 were badly wounded.

These events, later known as Bloody Sunday, initiated months of massive strikes which peaked in October.

Amidst the growing struggle, the workers of Saint Petersburg united to create a new kind of organisation: the Soviet.

Soviet means 'council' in Russian. The first Soviet was formed as a means of coordinating the activity of the mass strike movement. Delegates were elected from the factories to both represent the positions of each workplace and to help the whole working class develop a shared strategy in the struggle.

The revolutionary uprising of 1905 ended through a mixture of repression and reform. The Tsar conceded some civil liberties and established a mostly symbolic parliament, called the Duma. Revolutionaries and other radical workers faced death, imprisonment, exile, and police harassment. Yet this period also saw an explosion of worker and peasant organisation, along with the widespread adoption of socialist ideas. The Soviet form of organisation disappeared at the end of 1905. In 1917, however, reemerged as a historically unparalleled force for worker-peasant power.

Discuss

The Soviet form of organisation was revived in 1917 after disappearing for 12 years. What can we learn from this?

From World War I to Dual Power

The Tsar's reforms were unable to solve the crises which had launched the 1905 Revolution, and the problems only deepened with the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

Peasants continued to live in desperate poverty and semi-feudal conditions. Inflation was driving workers to starvation. Soldiers at the front faced the reality of a bloody, and seemingly endless, imperialist war. They were short of arms, ammunition, boots, and other basic supplies. Industry was grinding to a halt due to shortages of raw materials. Not a single problem in Russia could be solved without stopping the war.

Things reached a boiling point on February 23, 1917—International Working Women's Day. Thousands of women textile workers and housewives took to the streets of Russia's capital, Saint Petersburg (renamed Petrograd in 1914), to protest the shortage of bread. The protest won the sympathy of local workers who had been locked out of their factories.

The events that unfolded next took every political party by surprise: hundreds of thousands of workers, encouraged by militant socialists in their workplaces, went on strike, and again called for revolution. The Soviet form of organisation was quickly revived to

coordinate the struggle. This time, soldiers began to defect to the side of the revolutionaries. Seeing that the situation was getting away from them, reformist members of the Duma established their own committee for steering the revolution.

What had been resisted for 12 months in 1905 was achieved in 1917 in under 12 days: government ministers were arrested, the Tsar was convinced to give up his throne, and a number of liberal reforms were enacted. The committee established by the Duma was the basis for a new Provisional Government, which intended to govern Russia pending the election of a new parliament known as the Constituent Assembly.

The Petrograd Soviet, however, refused to disappear. In fact, the Soviet form of organisation spread throughout and beyond Russia, extending into the countryside, into Ukraine, and other distant parts of the Empire. In Petrograd alone, the Soviet quickly amassed thousands of delegates. The Soviets were understood by the workers as councils to represent their interests, and particularly their demands for “Peace, Land, and Bread”.

Meanwhile, other forms of radical organisation were appearing alongside the Soviets. Factory committees, for instance, were organised as a means for workers to challenge the authority of the bosses and exercise direct

control over their work. In some cases, bosses fled and workers were even able to take over their factories.

Increasingly, real power was being exercised through the Soviets, factory committees, and by garrisons populated by socialist soldiers. For anarchists, and increasingly for some Bolsheviks, this pointed to a world beyond capitalism and the state.

However, these structures existed side-by-side with the old state and the old capitalist ruling class. The situation was an example of what we call 'Dual Power'. Ultimately, either the ruling-class power, or worker-peasant power had to prevail.

Discuss

The outbreak of militancy on International Working Women's Day in 1917 took nearly all socialists across the world by surprise. What does this mean for our organising today?

The Socialist Factions

At the beginning of the revolution, Russia's anarchist movement was very small. Over the course of 1917, it grew, but its influence in the Soviets was initially limited. This was partly due to the Russian anarchist movement

being dominated by the influence of nihilist philosophy and anti-organisational ideas. By 1918, anarchists committed to the classic anarchist programme of class struggle had achieved a greater degree of organisation and influence, and so were able to play an outsized role in both the Soviets and factory committees.

At the time of the February Revolution, however, the main parties in the Soviets were the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs). The Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had formed out of a split in Russia's main Marxist political party, the Social Democrats.

Both believed (in keeping with Marxist orthodoxy) that a liberal, republican regime needed to precede a socialist revolution. The Bolsheviks, however, thought that the working class should independently fight to adopt a liberal constitution, rather than form an alliance with liberals. Their leader, Vladimir Lenin, also tended to insist on greater centralisation and demonstrated an intolerance for competing opinions.

The largest party, the Socialist Revolutionaries, was a party of the peasants. Their programme was defined primarily by one demand: that the peasants should control the land, and that they should not be made subservient to the urban workers. The SRs were also

known for their frequent use of assassination as a political tactic.

Initially, the Mensheviks and SRs held the majority in the Petrograd Soviet and maintained that the Soviets should merely pressure the Provisional Government, rather than overthrow it.

For a time, the Bolsheviks held similar positions, but Lenin's argument gradually changed. He had to fight several internal battles within the Party to win support for a position that, to many, appeared indistinguishable from the anarchist demand: the overthrow of the Provisional Government in favour of Soviet power.

Discuss

During revolutionary periods, anarchist communists should expect to find themselves organising alongside many other kinds of socialists. How can anarchists maximise their effectiveness within these contexts?

Growing Unrest and the Kornilov Affair

With the war effort tearing Russia to pieces, it became increasingly clear to the Russian people that the pro-war Provisional Government—now led by the reformist

socialist Alexander Kerensky—was leading the country to disaster.

By early July, the workers of Petrograd were supporting the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” and calling for an end to the war. Workers organised a mass demonstration to oppose the Provisional Government’s order for a new offensive at the front. The demonstration was brutally crushed—leaving 700 martyred. Kerensky ordered the arrest of Bolshevik leaders and Lenin fled temporarily to Finland.

At the end of August, the Provisional Government invited the reactionary General Kornilov to bring an army to Petrograd to restore order and suppress the radicals. Kornilov agreed and marched on the capital. When Kerensky suspected that Kornilov saw him as one of those radicals, he panicked and turned to the Soviet for salvation.

Coordinating through the Soviet, railway workers refused to provide transport, dissidents encouraged sabotage, and soldiers collectively deserted. The army never made it to Petrograd, except for Kornilov and his aides, who arrived under arrest. The credibility of both the Provisional Government and reactionary right-wing were shot. The Bolsheviks—now a mass party (and far more federalist than Lenin had initially argued for)—immediately won majorities in the Petrograd and

Moscow Soviets and continued acquiring majorities in other cities.

Discuss

*Are rank-and-file soldiers part of the working class?
Why/why not?*

The October Revolution

Given the Bolsheviks strong position within the Soviets, Lenin decided the time was right for Soviet power. He persuaded the Bolshevik Central Committee that an insurrection had to be organised and that the Second Congress of Soviets should be presented with an armed uprising as an inevitable event. A Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) became the means for organising the military side of the October Revolution. It was composed of 48 Bolsheviks, 14 members of the Left SRs (a left-wing split from the Socialist Revolutionaries), and 4 Anarchists. At key moments, the Bolshevik turned defensive actions of the MRC into opportunities to disempower the government.

The actual insurrection was almost an anti-climax. With the Petrograd Soviet in control of military deployments, the ability of the Provisional Government to resist the take-over was almost non-existent. The entire event was

bloodless, with only one shot fired (into the ceiling) during the storming of the Winter Palace. At 11 p.m., the Congress of Soviets opened. The MRC announced that the Provisional Government was overthrown. The Mensheviks and right-wing SRs opposed to Soviet power walked out. Some supporters of Soviet power joined them, in protest over the Bolsheviks tactics. The remaining deputies—primarily a coalition of Bolsheviks and left-wing SRs, accepted power. One chapter was over and a new one immediately began.

Discuss

Unlike the February Revolution, the October Revolution involved far fewer workers in the streets and on strike. What do you make of these differences?

The Anarchists and the Bolsheviks

Anarchists and Bolsheviks had been operating roughly in parallel (though rarely in co-operation) until the October Revolution. Both had called for Soviet power and workers' control, but they quickly and sharply diverged over what this should look like in practice.

The Bolsheviks, having declared "All Power to the Soviets", established a Council of People's Commissars to act as an executive cabinet over the Soviets.

Gradually, the Congress of Soviets began to exert power over the regional and local Soviets. Relying on their base of support in the cities, the Bolsheviks also ensured that urban workers achieved far higher rates of representation than peasants.

With the Mensheviks and Right SRs opposing the Soviet government, there was risk of serious conflict within the socialist movement, as well as the looming threat of murderous anti-communist reaction. Most parties, including the Bolsheviks, pointed to the long-awaited Constituent Assembly as the means for resolving the crisis and establishing a coalition government, as soon as elections were held in November 1917.

The only faction which had consistently opposed a Constituent Assembly was the Anarchists. Anarchists expected the Assembly—open to parties representing all classes—to produce a liberal constitution, and championed Soviets and factory committees as the only genuinely revolutionary bodies in Russia. So, in January 1918, when the Bolshevik government ordered that the Constituent Assembly be dispersed by force, Anarchists happily participated in its abolition.

For Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, disbanding the Constituent Assembly marked a serious breach of what they had long argued for. For them, the

equation only changed when the election results failed to produce a Bolshevik/Left SR majority.

Discuss

Given the threat of counter-revolution and opposition within the Left, what do you think of the choices that the Bolsheviks made?

The Construction of a New State

Subsequent events demonstrated the fateful decision to allow a new state, dominated by a single party, to be constructed above the Soviets.

The new government was terrified of losing its tenuous grip on power. It feared Anarchist influence in the factory committees and growing workers' control destabilising the Bolsheviks' plans for industry. It also feared the Left SR aligned peasant majority, who were a threat to the government's leadership. As a result, the Bolsheviks immediately set about reining in organisations like the factory committees and peasant associations.

Economic control was handed to Party-appointed bureaucrats, and before too long the state was insisting on capitalist measurements of worker-efficiency, seizing as much grain as possible to trade on the world market,

and implementing 'one man management'—often the former owner, employed as a 'specialist' on a high salary.

By 1918, the Bolsheviks were already rigging elections and manipulating results. Left-wing opposition to the peace treaty signed with Germany had caused serious tensions within the socialist movement. Many favoured a revolutionary war over capitulation to German imperialism. These developments spurred the Bolsheviks to intensify repression of opposition political groups, which they deemed counter-revolutionary.

The revolution in Russia had also failed to spread to neighbouring countries. After the collapse of the German revolution in 1919, the Bolsheviks argued that the security of their party in government had become an existential necessity for the revolution.

Serious repression of the Anarchists started in April 1918, a month before the first clashes with organised counter-revolutionary forces—the Whites. That said, the Bolsheviks would use the threat of counter-revolution as an excuse for all future authoritarianism.

The Red Terror's dictatorial methods drove increasing numbers of workers and peasants into opposition. One by one, oppositional parties were crushed. Independent revolutions in the territory of the old Russian Empire

were put down—the most notable being the free Soviets established by Anarchists in Ukraine.

The suppression of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine, commanded by Nestor Makhno, was especially grievous because they had proven their loyalty to the revolution on the battlefield. In fact, they had done the bulk of the fighting against the White armies that had invaded from the south.

And finally, in 1921, the Bolshevik (now Communist) Party ruthlessly crushed a rebellion in the naval-base community of Kronstadt, where workers called for the restoration of democracy in the Soviets and economic reform for the peasants. Immediately after suppressing the revolt, the Party instituted the New Economic Policy, a much greater compromise with the peasants than the Kronstadt sailors had contemplated. Since the Bolsheviks raised no objection to the Kronstadt rebels' economic demands, it's clear that their objections were aimed at the political demands—the call to re-establish Soviet democracy.

Meanwhile, the Party suppressed all other parties and even banned internal factions—all after the Civil War had already been won and the threat of international invasion had receded.

By 1921, the Russian Revolution was over. In time, assisted by the illness and then death of Lenin, Joseph Stalin would rise to power. Using the precedents and structures already established during Lenin's rule, he stacked the Party with flunkies, purged opposition, and turned the reign of terror systematically onto his own Party. Indigenous and minority rights were severely compromised across the USSR, with a laundry list of massacres and deportations taking place on grounds of authoritarian paranoia.

The international socialist movement was sacrificed in the name of 'Socialism in one Country'—meaning, protecting the interests of the Soviet ruling clique. The name of communism was dragged through the mud with consequences we still suffer today.

Discuss

Leninists argue that it was necessary for the Bolsheviks to crush the Anarchists and the Kronstadt sailors in order to protect the gains that they had achieved and push the revolution forward. What do you think of this?

Lessons

The first lesson of the Russian Revolution that must be emphasised is that workers can take power—we can run things ourselves, in our own interests. Mass organisations of workers which control society without bosses or governments have been built before, and in much harsher conditions. That means we can do it again.

The next lesson is that things went very wrong in Russia very soon after the October Revolution. The ‘workers’ state’ built by the Bolsheviks was an oxymoron, a repressive apparatus which, above all else, needed to reproduce itself, to impose its authority, and to direct the labour of workers from above. It was an increasingly paranoid regime of terror; the antithesis of workers’ freedom and workers’ control.

Finally, the Russian Revolution demonstrated why political organisations or parties (like the Bolsheviks) cannot lead revolutions from the top-down. Despite what some Leninists think, the Bolsheviks were an effective revolutionary group precisely because, in the lead-up to taking power, they became a far more democratic organisation. Dissenting voices could not be controlled by the central committee in the kind of ways that Lenin would employ once in power. Indeed, Lenin himself had to fight tooth and nail against party discipline to get the

Bolsheviks to adopt his increasingly radical positions. Centralisation tends to have a conservative effect on organisations and, in a political organisation, cuts them off from radical shifts in public consciousness.

However, anarchist communists also accept that we need to be better organised and more theoretically coherent than the Russian anarchists in 1917. Anarchists need to organise themselves in specific revolutionary groups and be part of mass working-class struggles. Where we differ from Leninists is in the role and structure of the specific revolutionary organisations.

We believe the role of revolutionary organisations is to urge the working class to take power itself, and not to take power 'on behalf' of the workers. We need to be exemplary militants rather than leaders directing people from above. Our means must match our desired ends.

That means building organisations of struggle which are controlled by the rank-and-file, and which coordinate activity through federalism rather than centralism.

Discuss

Stalinists often say that we Anarchists would have made the same brutal decisions as Stalin if we had been in his position. What do you think?

Conclusion

The October Revolution in Russia was a momentous event. Organisational forms like the Soviets and the factory committees were remarkable achievements of the working class, and the brief period of genuine worker-peasant power was an even greater one.

We are angered by the betrayal of the Revolution by Lenin and its total perversion by Stalin, but we are not disillusioned. Rather, we have learned lessons and work in the confident expectation that, if capitalism doesn't destroy us in the meantime, there will be another revolution, and it will be worldwide.

Unlike last time, workers won't get taken in by the siren song of leaders who tell us fairy tales about a workers' state. We won't be fooled again!

Discuss

How can the lessons of the Russian Revolution influence our organising today?

