

The Relevance of the Russian Revolution

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Lenin and Trotsky speaking in October 1917

It is self-evident that the Russian Revolution was an enormously important historical event – probably the most important of the 20th century. But the French Revolution was also an important historical event, so was the fall of Constantinople in 1453. From the standpoint of this journal, however, the Russian Revolution was important in a different way: not just because it is more recent but because it embodied goals and aspirations that are our goals and aspirations – a socialist society of equality and freedom based on workers’ democratic control from below – and because it fought for those goals and aspirations with methods that have a bearing on the methods we use today.

This why establishing the relevance of the Russian Revolution for today must start from the needs and tasks of today rather than simply from what happened in 1917.

We need a revolution

The Russian Revolution is relevant today because the world we live in is crying out for fundamental change. The need for a revolution is shown first by the obscene levels of inequality in the world: eight multi-billionaires own wealth equivalent to that owned by the bottom 3.6 billion of the world’s population – a global figure which is only the appalling apex of vast and growing inequality in almost every country in the world including, of course, here in Ireland. Second, the need for revolution is given by

the chronic economic crisis of a system which keeps threatening the mass of the people, again in almost every country, with more cutbacks and more impoverishment. Third, there is the growing inter-imperialist rivalry between the US, Russia and China, which has already produced numerous horrible regional and local invasions, wars and proxy wars (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine and Syria), and which increasingly threatens to plunge the world into devastating conflicts of unprecedented destructiveness. Fourth, the looming threat of catastrophic climate change, which is the product of capitalism’s relentless drive to accumulate and which it is proving powerless—and even unwilling—to avert, and which, in addition to being disastrous in itself, will interact with the inequality, economic crisis and imperial military rivalry with utterly barbaric consequences. Fifth, we need a revolution because the intersection of these multiple crises and contradictions is producing a global polarisation in which the rising far right — from Donald Trump to Marine le Pen — are trading on the vilest racism and other prejudices, in such a way that the shadow of the 1930s is again threatening the world. Together all of these mean that the historic alternative formulated by Rosa Luxemburg a century ago – either socialism or barbarism – assumes an ever more pressing reality.

We also need a revolution because both theory and experience show that a solution to these profound problems by means of gradual parliamentary reform is not a possibility. For example the British ruling class, which reacted with such concerted rage to the election of Jeremy Corbyn merely as leader of the Labour Party, would not be prepared to peacefully hand over their power and privileges, accumulated over centuries, to a radical Labour government. Rather they would deploy all their vast economic leverage given by their ownership and control of the major industries, financial institutions and corporate media, combined with the power of the state (civil servants,

judges, police, military) which they also control, in order to undermine such a government and defend the capitalist system to the hilt. It is also clear that the same would be true in other countries. In Greece the forces of capital represented by ‘the troika’ of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF resorted to economic terrorism rather than permit the leftist Syriza government to implement even a mild Keynesian anti-austerity programme, never mind any sort of radical transformation of the system. And this merely confirmed the historical experience reaching back to the Popular Unity Government in Chile and the Pinochet Coup of 1973, Franco’s fascist uprising against the Popular Front in Spain in 1936 and Mussolini in Italy in 1922.

The working class

The second reason the Russian Revolution is relevant today is that it was a workers’ revolution, made and led by the Russian working class. It was the workers of Petrograd who began the Revolution in February and overthrew the Tsar. It was the continuing radicalisation of the workers, particularly in opposition to the ongoing First World War, that drove the Revolution forward and it was the overwhelming support of the urban proletariat, together with the soldiers and sailors, that made possible the smooth and almost bloodless October insurrection which transferred all power to the Soviets (workers’ councils).¹ This alliance between the workers’ revolution and the peasantry enabled the revolution to hold out the against the White Guard counterrevolution, backed by fourteen imperialist powers in the desperate Civil War that followed. If we take the need for international revolution seriously then it can only be a workers’ revolution.

We have to talk about a social force that

can defeat the immense economic and political power of global capital—that is, a force capable of taking on and defeating the great corporations, the IMF, the World Bank, the US state and military, the European Union and its economic and state forces, the immense Chinese state apparatus, the Russian state, the Saudi state — and that’s just listing a few of the major players. There is only one social force remotely capable of doing this: the 1.5 billion strong international working class – in Marx’s words ‘the independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority’.

Ever since the economic boom of the Fifties and Sixties, bourgeois sociologists of one stripe or another, and some self-styled Marxists, have been regularly announcing the demise of the working class. It had been bought off and bourgeoisified by consumer goods; it was irrevocably privatised and no longer a force for social change; it disappeared with de-industrialisation; it had shrunk and been replaced by a white-collar middle class, and so on. These arguments were wrong on two fundamental grounds. First, they greatly exaggerated the decline of manufacturing and the industrial proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries and mistook the class character of white-collar workers who are, in their large majority, part of the working class. The working class is not defined by industrial or manual labour but by the sale of its labour power and its exploitation by capital. Nurses, teachers, clerical and call centre workers are part of the working class along with factory workers, miners and dockers. So the working class remains the majority of the population in all the main western capitalist countries. Second, while the debate about the western working class has been rumbling on there has been an immense growth in the size of the working class in what used to be called the Third World.

¹The working class character of the Russian Revolution is much disputed and the dominant academic narrative is that it was simply a coup imposed by Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership. For detailed refutations of this view see my forthcoming book on *Lenin for Today* and Ernest Mandel, ‘October 1917: Coup d’état or social revolution’ in Paul Le Blanc et al, *October 1917: workers in power*, London 2016. Here I will simply quote Lenin’s old antagonist, the Menshevik leader and opponent of the October Revolution, Julius Martov, Martov, wrote ‘Understand, please, what we have before us after all is a victorious uprising of the proletariat – almost the entire proletariat supports Lenin and expects its social liberation from the uprising.’ [Martov to Axelrod, 19 November 1917, cited in I. Getzler, *Martov*, Cambridge 1967, p. 172.]

In 1993 the figure for waged or salaried employees was 985 million out of a world population of approximately 5.526 billion, or about 18%. By 2013 the number of waged/salaried employees had grown to 1.575 billion out of a total of 7.086 billion or just over 22%. And significantly this figure constituted just over 50% of the world's total labour force of about three billion. Of course not all these waged employees were workers (a minority would be managers) but most of them were, and this meant that for the first time in history Marx's proletariat really did constitute something like a majority of society globally.

Even more important than the absolute figures is the trend. In the twenty years between 1993 and 2013 the number of waged/salaried grew by 589,814,000 (a staggering 60% of the 1993 figure). An average of 29 million people joined the waged labour force each year. Moreover the growth of waged labour was concentrated in the developing countries. In the developed countries, the salaried/waged employee figure rose slowly from 345 million (1993) to 410 million (2013). In non-developed countries the growth was explosive, from 640 million (1993) to 1,165 million (2013). On its own the non-developed world waged labour force is bigger than the entire global waged labour force of twenty years ago. An estimated 445 million waged or salaried employees were in East Asia in 2013, i.e. more than in the whole of the developed countries! The largest contingent of this global proletariat is, of course, in China, where there is a working class of somewhere around 400-500 million—by far the largest national proletariat that has ever existed, and fifty to a hundred times larger than the entire international proletariat in Marx's day. In addition to the size of the global proletariat another important factor, indicative of its immense potential social and power, is its increasing concentration in great cities.

The World Bank's list of countries by degree of urbanisation shows over 30 countries that are more than 80% urban including Argentina (92%), Australia (89%), Belgium (98%), Brazil (85%), Chile (89%), Netherlands (90%), Qatar (96%), Saudi Arabia (83%), UK (82%), US (81%) and Uruguay (95%).² The World Atlas lists 69 cities with a population over 5 million and 26 over 10 million.³

And again China, because of its huge population and massive economic growth, is the most important example. The last twenty-five years have seen a vast and intense migration from the countryside to the towns – especially of young women.⁴ In 2010 China became a predominantly urban society and it now has more than sixty cities of over a million including such giants as Shanghai with about 24 million and Beijing with over 21 million. Perhaps the whole development is best expressed in the example of Guangdong (formerly Canton), which has become a vast urban sprawl and the most populous province in China with a population at the 2010 census of 104 million. It is estimated that Guangdong now contains 60,000 factories 'which every day produce some \$300 million worth of goods and account for about 30 percent of China's exports and one-third of the world's production of shoes, textiles and toys'⁵.

It is in these great cities – Guangdong, Shanghai, Seoul, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Cairo and the rest – that is concentrated the great global social force, that along with the working people of Los Angeles and Chicago, Birmingham and Berlin, Paris and Barcelona, alone has the power to defeat international capital.

It is these fundamental facts about the world we live in today that determine the relevance of the Russian Revolution. For those who reject revolution, such as the majority of former Stalinists and Eurocommunists, the Russian Revolution is a closed

²<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>

³<http://www.worldatlas.com/citypops.htm>.

⁴For a vivid description see Leslie T.Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (2008).

⁵Hsiao-Hung Pai, 'Factory of the World: Scenes from Guangdong'. https://placesjournal.org/article/factory-of-the-world-scenes-from-guangdong/?gclid=CjwKEAji4yuBRDX_vq07YyF718SJAAhm0rpS_Q8iewicCnJSqeVgHzf54GjIjd7nQsV2

episode of history, consigned to the archives, to be recalled only for reasons of sentimental attachment and nostalgia for ‘the good old days’. For revolutionaries, however, it remains an inspiration and guide to action which it is vital to pass on to the new generation of activists now joining the fight against capitalism.

This absolutely does not involve any notion of mechanical imitation, which is not possible even if it were desirable. What it means is drawing on this incredibly rich period of working class struggle so as to derive lessons that can be applied to the concrete realities of today.

Broadly speaking I suggest there are six main ‘lessons’ from the Revolution, which for all the very real differences between then and now, remain useful and applicable today. These are 1) the power and creativity of the workers; 2) the organisational form of workers’ power; 3) the working class as leader of all the oppressed; 4) the dynamics of revolution; 5) the role of the revolutionary party; 6) the international nature of the revolution. I shall discuss them in turn.

The power and creativity of the working class

The Russian working class was small in absolute numbers and relative to the Russian population as a whole: between three and ten million (depending on how it is defined), which was much less than ten percent of the population. It was also largely of recent origin, retaining strong ties with the peasantry and the countryside from whence it came and it was widely considered to be uneducated, with low levels of literacy compared to the working class in Western Europe. Yet in 1917 it displayed miracles of revolutionary initiative and organisation.

In February, in a week of striking, demonstrating and street fighting spear-headed by women textile workers and women in bread queues, the working class of Petrograd won over the soldiers and the Cossacks and brought down a dynasty that had ruled Russia for three hundred years, and an institution—the Tsarist autocracy—which had lasted four hundred years. Trotsky in

his great *History of the Russian Revolution* offers a wonderful description of how this was done. Space permits me only to quote a couple of extracts:

On the 25th, the strike spread wider. According to the government’s figures, 240,000 workers participated that day. The most backward layers are following up the vanguard. Already a good number of small establishments are on strike. The streetcars are at a stand. Business concerns are closed. In the course of the day students of the higher schools join the strike. By noon tens of thousands of people pour to the Kazan cathedral and the surrounding streets. Attempts are made to organise street meetings; a series of armed encounters with the police occurs. Orators address the crowds around the Alexander III monument. The mounted police open fire. A speaker falls wounded. Shots from the crowd kill a police inspector, wound the chief of police and several other policemen. Bottles, petards and hand grenades are thrown at the gendarmes. The war has taught this art. The soldiers show indifference, at times hostility, to the police. It spreads excitedly through the crowd that when the police opened fire by the Alexander III monument, the Cossacks let go a volley at the horse “Pharaohs” (such was the nickname of the police) and the latter had to gallop off....

The police are fierce, implacable, hated and hating foes. To win them over is out of the question. Beat them up and kill them. It is different with the soldiers: the crowd makes every effort to avoid hostile encounters with them; on the contrary, seeks ways to dispose them

in its favour, convince, attract, fraternise, merge them in itself... The masses try to get near them, look into their eyes, surround them with their hot breath. A great rôle is played by women workers in the relationship between workers and soldiers. They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: "Put down your bayonets – join us." The soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened; a joyous and grateful "Hurrah!" shakes the air. The soldiers are surrounded. Everywhere arguments, reproaches, appeals; the revolution makes another forward step.⁶

The Tsar fell because after five days of this sort of thing he had no one left to defend him, and the ruling class thought it better to sacrifice their figurehead than lose their system. But in the course of these days the workers of Petrograd also managed to revive and organise their own democratic assembly, the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which convened on the 27 February, and was destined to be of world historic significance. More on that later.

In the months that followed the workers who had made the February Revolution but then handed power to the bourgeoisie became ever more radical, especially under the lash of the continuing war. What this meant in terms of everyday life in those heady days has been vividly described by the revolutionary American journalist, John Reed.

All around them great Russia was in travail, bearing a new world. The servants one used to treat like animals and pay next to nothing were getting independent. A pair of shoes cost more

than a hundred rubles, and as wages averaged about thirty-five rubles a month the servants refused to stand in *queue* and wear out their shoes. But more than that. In the new Russia every man and woman could vote; there were working-class newspapers, saying new and startling things; there were the Soviets; and there were the Unions. The *izvoshtchiki* (cab-drivers) had a Union; they were also represented in the Petrograd Soviet. The waiters and hotel servants were organised, and refused tips. On the walls of restaurants they put up signs which read, "No tips taken here –" or, "Just because a man has to make his living waiting on table is no reason to insult him by offering him a tip!"

At the Front the soldiers fought out their fight with the officers, and learned self-government through their committees. In the factories those unique Russian organisations, the Factory-Shop Committees gained experience and strength and a realisation of their historical mission by combat with the old order. All Russia was learning to read, and *reading* – politics, economics, history – because the people wanted to *know* –. In every city, in most towns, along the Front, each political faction had its newspaper – sometimes several. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were distributed by thousands of organisations, and poured into the armies, the villages, the factories, the streets. The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute alone, the first six months, went out every day tons, car-loads, train-loads

⁶L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, London 1977 p.127-9

of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water, insatiable. And it was not fables, falsified history, diluted religion, and the cheap fiction that corrupts—but social and economic theories, philosophy, the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky...

Then the Talk, beside which Carlyle's "flood of French speech" was a mere trickle. Lectures, debates, speeches—in theatres, circuses, school-houses, clubs, Soviet meeting-rooms, Union headquarters, barracks. Meetings in the trenches at the Front, in village squares, factories. What a marvellous sight to see Putilovsky Zavod (the Putilov factory) pour out its forty thousand to listen to Social Democrats, Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, anybody, whatever they had to say, as long as they would talk! For months in Petrograd, and all over Russia, every street-corner was a public tribune. In railway trains, street-cars, always the spurting up of impromptu debate, everywhere.⁷

It was this great revolutionary democratic process that enabled the Bolsheviks to win a majority in the soviets and, finally, in the October insurrection, take power with almost no resistance.

What is important is that this process and this atmosphere, this creativity of the masses, was not unique to 1917. *Something like it*, to some extent, appears in every great uprising of the working class. The comment about the rejection of tipping by the waiters is repeated, almost word for word in George Orwell's account of workers' power in Barcelona in 1936 in *Homage to Catalonia*. The torrent of 'Talk' and debate is something I myself witnessed in Paris in May '68.

A similar mood gripped the masses in Egypt as the Revolution brought down the dictator, Mubarak, in 2011. What this signifies is not just 'excitement' at dramatic events but a deeper response to the partial overcoming of alienation that arises from starting to take control of one's life, one's city and one's world.

Thus, overall what the Russian Revolution proved was what Marx had first identified in 1844: the capacity of the working class to overthrow capitalism and begin the construction of a new socialist order of society. This remains its single most enduring legacy.

Soviet power

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 Marx proclaimed the revolutionary mission of the proletariat to overthrow bourgeois society but he did not – and could not at that time – specify the form that workers' power would take. He spoke vaguely about the working class 'winning the battle of democracy'. In an 1852 letter to his friend Weydemeyer, Marx stated that 'the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*'.⁸ But it was in the Commune of 1871 that the workers of Paris gave Marx a more concrete idea of what that meant in organisational terms. On the basis of the experience of the Commune, which lasted only 74 days, Marx identified three key principles of the dictatorship of the proletariat: the election and *recallability* of public officials, the payment of representatives at ordinary *workers' wages* and the Commune being 'a working, not a parliamentary body—executive and legislative at the same time'.

The Russian Revolution built on this foundation but also moved beyond it. First in St. Petersburg in 1905 and then, again, in Petrograd in February 1917, the Russian workers established a new form of representative body, the Soviet (Council) of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. In the weeks that followed Soviets sprang up across Russia,

⁷John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, Ch.1. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1919/10days/10days/ch1.htm>

⁸Marx & Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol II, Moscow 1962, p.452.

and by the 29 March an All-Russian Conference of Soviets was convened. The Soviet was an important advance on the Commune because the Commune was based purely on geographical constituencies (like contemporary bourgeois parliaments) whereas the Soviets had delegates from factories and soldiers' barracks. This made the Soviets much more organically organisations of working class power; it gave them deep roots in the working class, made the workers and soldiers identify with them and regard them as their own. It made it easier to translate the decrees and decisions of the Soviets into action in the workplaces and the army.

Thus, for example, the famous Soviet Order No.1 which was issued on 1 March called for every unit of the army to elect its own council of representatives, for army units only to obey such orders from the State as did not conflict with the decisions of the Soviet, to retain control of all armaments, to abolish saluting, or honorary titles (officers to be addressed as Mister Colonel, etc.) and prohibiting all rudeness by officers towards the ranks. It also declared that 'The present order is to be read to all companies, battalions, regiments, ships' crews, batteries and other combatant and non combatant commands'⁹. And this was done. 'It was printed in large numbers and distributed along the entire front within days'.¹⁰

It also made the Soviets more genuinely democratic than any parliamentary set-up because it made the crucial principle of recall a more practical proposition – one that could be exercised rapidly and easily by organising a workplace or barracks meeting. In one of the best accounts of how the soviets actually worked, John Reed wrote:

No political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented. And this was necessary, for in time of revolution the popular will changes with great rapidity. For example, during the first week of December 1917, there were parades

and demonstrations in favour of a Constituent Assembly – that is to say, against the Soviet power. One of these parades was fired on by some irresponsible Red Guards, and several people killed. The reaction to this stupid violence was immediate. *Within twelve hours the complexion of the Petrograd Soviet changed.* More than a dozen Bolshevik deputies were withdrawn, and replaced by Mensheviks. And it was three weeks before public sentiment subsided – before the Mensheviks were retired one by one and the Bolsheviks sent back.¹¹

And on 19 November 1917 Lenin drafted a 'Decree on the Right of Recall' which began:

No elective institution or representative assembly can be regarded as being truly democratic and really representative of the people's will unless the electors' right to recall those elected is accepted and exercised. This fundamental principle of true democracy applies to all representative assemblies without exception, including the Constituent Assembly.¹²

'All Power to the Soviets!' was the central slogan of the Revolution. It was this slogan which prepared the ground for the October Revolution and under which the October insurrection itself was conducted. Its timing, as determined by Trotsky, was to coincide with the Second National Congress of Soviets so that when the Provisional Government was deposed power could be handed to the Congress. It was precisely as the establishment of 'soviet power' that news of the revolution flashed round the world and seized the imagination of the international working class, with the result that workers'

⁹Cited in T. Cliff, *Lenin: All Power to the Soviets*, London, 1985, p.192.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p.192.

¹¹John Reed, 'Soviets in action' <https://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/1918/soviets.htm>

¹²Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, Moscow 1972, p.336.

councils or soviets appeared in Germany, in Italy and even in Limerick!¹³

Of course today there can be no question of mechanically copying the exact form of the Russian soviets. The soviets of 1917 were created by the working class of that time to meet the concrete needs of the struggle at that time and it will be the same for any future workers' councils or similar bodies. But it is clear that time and again when the working class has made a revolutionary challenge for power it has started to form, and needed to form, 'councils' of some sort; in Chile in 1972 they were called cordones—or industrial belts; in the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 there were soldiers councils; and in the Iranian Revolution there were 'shoras'.¹⁴ Even in the lower level struggles of the Indignados and Occupy movements there were the assemblies' in the squares, and in the water charges movement, at its height, it was possible to start talking about 'people's assemblies'.¹⁵ In the future the idea is certain to reappear.

The working class as leader of the oppressed

That the working class should lead all the oppressed in the revolution was an idea expressed repeatedly by Lenin from the 1890s onwards. This was not an authoritarian or elitist idea – quite the opposite. He did not mean the working class should command the oppressed; he meant the economic position of the working class in big factories and cities enabled it to be in forefront of fighting all forms of oppression and championing the rights of all the oppressed and that it was the job of socialists to see that it did so. Lenin was emphatic on this point:

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are

trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter ¹⁶ is affected¹⁷.

And again

The Social-Democrat's (revolutionary socialist's) ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects.¹⁸

And this was precisely what happened in 1917. The urban proletariat through the soviets, and guided by the Bolsheviks, made common cause with what was by far the largest oppressed group in Russian society, namely the peasants. They did this by championing the peasants' elemental struggle for land and the great peasant revolts that broke out across the country. On 26 October, the day after the Insurrection, the new revolutionary government issued a decree written by Lenin which read:

(1) Landed proprietorship is abolished forthwith without any compensation. (2) The landed estates, as also all crown, monastery, and church lands, with all their livestock, implements, buildings and everything pertaining thereto, shall be placed at the disposal of the volost land committees and the uyezd Soviets of Peasants' Deputies [i.e. handed over to the peasants – JM] pending the convocation of the Constituent Assembly.¹⁹

¹³See Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets*, London 1985, Antonio Gramsci, *Soviets in Italy*, and Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland*, Cork, 1996.

¹⁴See Colin Barker ed. *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, London 1987.

¹⁵See John Molyneux, *People Power and Real Democracy*, Dublin 2014.

¹⁶what class

¹⁷Lenin, *What is to be Done?* Peking 1975, p.86

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.97.

¹⁹Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow 1972, Vol.26. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26d.htm>

The other way the workers and the Bolsheviks championed the peasants was by opposing the War. The majority of the army and, therefore, of the casualties were conscripted peasants. On the same day as the Soviet passed the above decree on land it also issued a Decree on Peace.

Decree on Peace The workers' and peasants' government, created by the Revolution of October 24-25 and basing itself on the Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, calls upon all the belligerent peoples and their government to start immediate negotiations for a just, democratic peace. By a just or democratic peace, for which the overwhelming majority of the working class and other working people of all the belligerent countries, exhausted, tormented and racked by the war, are craving – a peace that has been most definitely and insistently demanded by the Russian workers and peasants ever since the overthrow of the tsarist monarchy — by such a peace the government means an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign nations) and without indemnities²⁰.

Another huge group suffering particular oppression were the non-Great Russian national minorities – Latvians, Poles, Finns, Estonians, Georgians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, etc. – who together made up 57% of the population of the Russian Empire. That empire was rightly known as the 'prison house of the peoples', and these national minorities had long been subject to all sorts of prejudice and discrimination. From its foundation the Bolshevik

Party had stood for the right of nations' to self-determination, i.e. the right of these nations to secede from Russia if they wanted to. Lenin had fiercely defended this position against all-comers,²¹ and in 1917 it paid great dividends. Lenin believed in and wanted unity between the Russian people and all these oppressed nations but he insisted it had to be freely agreed unity, and that required guaranteeing the right of every national minority to secede if they chose to do so. The adoption of this policy against the Provisional Government which rejected it assisted the victory of the October Revolution. At the same time implementation of the policy by the new Soviet government was a major factor in holding the different nationalities together against the Whites in the Civil War.

Another major oppressed group in Russia was, as everywhere, women. I will say little about this here because this issue is discussed elsewhere in this journal but simply note that the workers' revolution in Russia did more to realise womens' equality than any bourgeois liberal democracy had ever done. Similarly the Revolution rapidly moved to decriminalise homosexuality.

In the century since the Russian Revolution the socialist movement's understanding of a variety of issues of oppression, for example racism, LGBTQ oppression (including especially the trans issue), disability and so on, has widened and in different countries there are bound to be different specifically oppressed groups such as Travellers in Ireland, Aborigines in Australia, Native Americans in the US, and Palestinians and Kurds in the Middle East. But the general principle established by the Russian Revolution that the workers' movement must stand at the forefront of all resistance to oppression remains of great importance.

The dynamics of revolution

The Russian Revolution is a brilliant example of the fact that every revolution passes

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Most notably Bukharin and Pyatakov within the Bolshevik Party and the great Rosa Luxemburg internationally. See Lenin, 'On the Right of Nations to Self Determination', *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1972, Volume 20, pp. 393-454. In the polemic against Luxemburg Lenin debates the question of Irish independence, which he supports, with the aid of Marx.

through an internal dynamic development. Revolution is a process, not a single event, but it is a process with certain decisive turning points. The first such turning point in 1917 was the fall of the Tsarist regime in February. This was greeted by (almost) the entire country with an outburst of joy and ‘national unity’. The political expression of this euphoric national celebration was the working class (who had made the February Revolution) voluntarily handing over power to the Provisional Government through the medium of their political representatives. This produced the extraordinary spectacle of ‘Dual Power’ – with the workers’ soviets and the bourgeois government, united and cooperating; self-styled socialist revolutionaries and Cadet capitalist ministers, all together.²² But this could not and did not last. What drove the revolution from below, in the factories and barracks, was not the aim of achieving ministerial posts for liberals or even political democracy as an end in itself, but the need for bread and — above all — an end to the ruinous war. But an end to the war, and through it relief from hunger, was something which the bourgeois government — tied by a thousand strings to French and British capital — would not deliver. Instead they pressed on with patriotic rhetoric and new military offensives. The result was a rapid process of political differentiation in which the workers and soldiers, especially in Petrograd, moved rapidly to the left.

By the 20 April there were armed demonstrations on the streets of Petrograd against the pro-war Foreign Minister, Miliukov. By the end of April, the Bolshevik Party, under the inspiration of Lenin, had declared in favour of a second revolution to establish workers’ power on the basis of ‘All Power to the Soviets.’ On 17 May the Kronstadt Soviet proclaimed itself the sole governing power in Kronstadt.²³ On 18 June mass assemblies in Petrograd called by the Soviet turned into pro-Bolshevik demonstrations. Overwhelmingly the Petrograd pro-

letariat now supported the Bolsheviks and demanded an end to the Provisional Government. Dual power turned from cooperation to antagonism, and the choice became clarified as one offering either revolution or counterrevolution.

On 3-4 July the Petrograd workers, soldiers and sailors attempted, more or less spontaneously, to take power by means of armed demonstrations. But the attempt was premature because the rest of the country was not yet ready. Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders persuaded the workers to step back. This was the second key turning point. The impatient revolution had overreached itself and the counter-revolution now went on the offensive. On 5 July the government issued a call for the arrest of Bolshevik leaders and Lenin was forced to go into hiding. On 12 July the government restored the death penalty in the army, and four days later the arch-Tsarist General Kornilov was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army. On 23 July Trotsky was arrested.

Now it was the turn of the counterrevolution to overreach itself. On 27-30 August Kornilov attempted to stage a coup by marching his army on the capital with the intention of crushing the soviets and burying the revolution. Kerensky, the head of the Government, realized at the last moment (previously he had schemed with Kornilov) that a Kornilov coup would take him down too; he was therefore compelled to turn to the Bolsheviks and the workers for help. The Bolsheviks defended Kerensky without giving him political support, and the coup was rapidly routed. Railway workers blocked the trains transporting Kornilov’s troops, and agitators dissolved his army at the base. This was another critical turning point.

Within days the mass of the Russian working class went over to the Bolsheviks, who now won a majority in the Soviet, with Trotsky elected its President. With the peasant revolt in the countryside intensify-

²²In the first elections to the Soviets the newly awaked masses voted largely for the best known opponents of Tsarism who were the peasant based Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and Mensheviks. At this stage the Bolsheviks were a small minority. It was the SR and Menshevik leaders who handed power to the bourgeoisie, though at this point even the Bolsheviks were prepared to compromise.

²³Kronstadt was a naval base on an island in the Baltic at the entrance to Petrograd.

ing, the terrified bourgeoisie began to discuss the idea of surrendering Petrograd to the German army to let them suppress the revolution. Lenin now decided that the hour of insurrection had struck; either the Bolsheviks would take power or the Revolution would be drowned in blood. But he still had to persuade the Party leadership of this, and there was a strong faction in the central committee (led by Zinoviev and Kamenev) who were opposed to insurrection. It took Lenin a month or so of intense pressure and debate to win the argument. Then on 25 October, at Lenin's urging—but on a plan drawn up by Trotsky—the Winter Palace is stormed and the Provisional Government arrested.

'History doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes,' said Mark Twain. There has not been and there will not be a repetition of the sequence of events of 1917, but anyone who studies the workers' revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries cannot fail to be struck by various 'rhymes'.

In the German Revolution the crisis was more protracted than in Russia—rolling out over five years (1918-23) rather than eight months—but the parallels are clear: between Petrograd's half-rising of July and the premature Spartacist Rising of 1919, which claimed the lives of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht; the Kornilov Coup and the Kapp Putsch; the decisive moment of September/October and the failure to seize that moment in Germany.²⁴ In Russia the nominally socialist head of the Provisional Government, Kerensky, 'flirted' with General Kornilov before the latter turned on him in his bid to destroy the revolution; in Chile in 1973 the Socialist President Salvador Allende tried to keep General Pinochet on board by inviting him into the government, only for Pinochet to murder Allende and 30,000 Chileans. In the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 the youthful ultra-leftism that was seen in Russia and Germany was much in evidence after the fall of Mubarak, while President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood adopted the same collaborationist attitude towards General Al-Sisi and the military as did Allende, and met the same fate.²⁵

Overall, however, the central lesson of the dynamic of 1917 is that a revolutionary crisis in society is of limited duration and its outcome is not mechanically predetermined; either the revolution will go forward to victory or it will be thrown back by counterrevolution. The price of failure, will very likely be paid in blood. The moment has to be seized, and above all that requires decisive revolutionary leadership.

The role of the revolutionary party

Again and again in history the working class has risen against capitalism and mounted a serious challenge for power: Paris in 1848 and 1871; Germany 1918-23, Italy 1919-20, Finland 1918, Hungary 1919-20, China 1925-7, Spain 1936-7, Greece and Italy 1944-45, Hungary 1956, France 1968, Chile 1972, Portugal 1974-5, Poland 1980, etc. On only one occasion has the working class been victorious – in October 1917. What made the difference was the existence in Russia of a well-prepared revolutionary party that was able to unite the working class, rally around it all the oppressed and give a decisive lead at the crucial moment.

How the Bolshevik Party did this and thus enabled the revolution to win is the focus of James O'Toole's article elsewhere in this issue, so I will deal briefly with the question here.

The Bolsheviks had contributed to the socialist consciousness of the Russian working class through many years of agitation and propaganda, especially in the period 1912-14, when they built a mass readership for Pravda. They continued this work consistently after February 1917, engaging in what Lenin called 'patient explanation,' particularly over the question of 'All Power to the Soviets' from April onwards. But there were three moments when the role played by the party was of decisive significance.

The first was during the premature uprising of the July Days. If the Bolsheviks had simply gone along with this it is likely that power would have been seized in Petrograd

²⁴See Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918-23*, London 1982.

²⁵See John Molyneux, 'Lessons from the Egyptian Revolution', *Irish Marxist Review* 13.

but it is also overwhelmingly likely that this revolutionary power in one city would have met the tragic fate of the Paris Commune and been put to the sword by the forces of reaction in the country as a whole. The Bolsheviks were therefore correct to demobilise the uprising and prevent it from developing into a full scale armed confrontation or Civil War. By doing so they saved the revolution.

The second was in response to the Kornilov Coup. If the Bolsheviks had reacted in an ultra left way and refused to defend Kerensky and the Government on the grounds that Kerensky was a supporter of the War, a persecutor of the Bolsheviks and a traitor to the working class – all true, of course – the probability is that Kornilov would have destroyed the revolution there and then. If they had simply supported Kerensky and subordinated themselves to him, there would have been no revolution two months later.

The third was in October itself. The decision to launch the insurrection was taken by the leadership of the Bolshevik Party – and had to be. To have debated it publicly in the Soviet would have a) alerted the Government and all the forces of counterrevolution who would not have sat around waiting to be deposed and b) created a huge element of doubt and vacillation even among the revolutionary forces²⁶. If the Bolshevik leadership had not acted it is overwhelming probable that the window of opportunity for workers' revolution would have closed and the counter-revolution once again been able to go onto the offensive.

To this it must be added that the Bolshevik Party was only able to play this crucial role at these turning points because it had acquired the necessary critical mass and implantation among the masses and the necessary political maturity through many years of work and struggle *in advance of the revolution*. For example, if in the July Days, Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik cadres had not had the respect and trust of the militant workers (such as the Kronstadt sailors) they would simply have been brushed aside and been unable to prevent catastrophe.

²⁶As we know there was massive vacillation even within the Bolshevik Central Committee. See Leon Trotsky, *Lessons of October*.

None of these points are in any way academic. All the possible mistakes referred to were made by revolutionaries in subsequent revolutions with disastrous results. Thus the Bulgarian Communist Party foolishly sat on its hands during a coup from the right directed at the Stambuilski government in 1923. Much more recently, in the Egyptian Revolution many genuine revolutionaries failed to understand the need to defend the Muslim Brotherhood government against the military coup in 2013, and the same mistake was committed by many Turkish 'lefts' in the 2016 attempted military coup against Erdogan. On the other hand, in Germany between 1930 and 1933 and in Spain in 1936 there were groups of Trotskyists with formally correct positions but completely lacking the size and relationship with the working class to have any serious influence on events. In short the Russian Revolution is a compelling demonstration of the need to build a revolutionary party and that is a lesson that retains all its relevance today.

The international nature of the revolution

Before 1917 all Russian Marxists agreed that Russia was too economically underdeveloped to sustain socialist relations of production. From this the Mensheviks drew the conclusion that the coming revolution would be a bourgeois democratic revolution led by the bourgeoisie. Lenin and the Bolsheviks accepted that the revolution would be bourgeois democratic but believed this revolution would be led by the proletariat. Trotsky believed that if the proletariat led the revolution the bourgeois democratic revolution would 'grow over' into a socialist revolution, i.e. the working class would take power, but he too accepted that a socialist revolution in Russia would not be able to maintain itself unless the revolution spread to other countries. This became known as Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' — one of his singular contributions to revolutionary Marxism. By early 1917 Lenin

had, in effect, adopted Trotsky's position and this became the basis for the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' and, later, for the October insurrection. At this time — namely before and after October — Lenin, Trotsky and all the Bolshevik leaders argued that a successful establishment of workers' power in Russia would act as a spark inspiring an international wave of revolution. But they also accepted that without this the Russian Revolution would be doomed. In 1918 Lenin told the Third Congress of Soviets:

The final victory of socialism in a single country is of course impossible. Our contingent of workers and peasants which is upholding Soviet power is one of the contingents of the great world army...

It is the absolute truth that without a German Revolution we are doomed.²⁷

In the event both these predictions — that the Russian Revolution would inspire a revolutionary wave across Europe and that without its victory they would be defeated — came true. In March 1919, Lloyd George wrote to French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau:

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 pre-war conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the mass of the population from one end of Europe to the other.²⁸

In 1919 there were revolutionary or near revolutionary struggles taking place in Hungary, Italy, Ireland, and Germany, with large scale revolts in Britain and France. But everywhere the revolution was beaten back. The decisive defeat was in Germany in the autumn of 1923, when the opportunity of revolution was missed. When Lenin and the

Bolsheviks said that without international revolution they were doomed, they thought of that doom in terms either of military defeat by imperialism or open counterrevolution (probably based on the richer peasants or kulaks) within Russia.

But neither of these scenarios materialised. By 1921 the Bolsheviks were victorious in the Civil War. Tragically the price they paid for this victory was the virtual destruction of the small Russian working class. The class that made the revolution in 1917 more or less ceased to exist and in that situation the upper ranks of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state became rapidly transformed into an unaccountable bureaucracy. Then, under pressure to defend the Soviet state against western capitalism, this bureaucracy began to compete with western capital on capitalism's own terms. This meant becoming, in the years 1928-9, a state capitalist ruling class committed to the rapid industrialisation of Russia at the expense of the working class, i.e. carrying through an internal counterrevolution. But this was a counter-revolution in the name of socialism and Marxism.

The relevance of this experience for today is again compelling. In today's globalized world economy the possibility of building socialism in one country is even less plausible than it was in 1917 or 1923. It is not just a question of military intervention against any successful revolution or would-be socialist government — though that would remain a possibility; rather it would be the effectiveness over time of the economic terrorism and boycott that would inevitably be imposed by international capital. The example of what was done by the Troika to the mildly reformist Syriza government is a clear warning in this respect.

But this very same globalisation which would be such a powerful weapon against an isolated revolution would also make it much easier to spread the revolution than it was in 1917-23. This can be seen in what happened with the Arab Spring in 2011. We are dealing here with democratic revolutions that did not reach the stage of workers' power.

²⁷Lenin, cited in T.Cliff, *Lenin: The Revolution Besieged*, April 1987, p.208

²⁸Quoted in E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-23*, Vol.3, Harmondsworth 1966, pp.135-6.

Nevertheless the international dynamic was extraordinary. The Tunisian Revolution began on 18 December 2010 and culminated in the flight of the dictator, Zinedine Ben-Ali on 14 January. The Egyptian Revolution began on 25 January and saw the fall of Mubarak on 11 February. A week later revolts had broken out in Bahrain and Libya, followed by Yemen and then Syria in March. By May the movement, albeit in the form of mass protests rather than revolutionary challenges for power, had leapt across the Mediterranean to Spain in the shape of the Indignados mass occupation of the squares, and that in turn spread to the US as the Occupy Movement in the autumn.

Manifestly the immense improvement in international communications facilitates this process. As I have written elsewhere:

When the revolutionary journalist John Reed, author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, traveled from America to Russia in 1917 the journey took him over one month and then another two months to return to America in early 1918. Antonio Gramsci was not able to read the writings of Lenin until 1919 or later. By contrast the great street battles of the Egyptian Revolution were live streamed round the world on Al Jazeera and the revolutionary, Hossam el-Hamalawy, had tens of thousands of Twitter followers, world wide.²⁹

It requires only a little political imagination to see the use that could be made of modern communications by a real work-

ers' revolution. Let us suppose that workers' power is established first in Guangdong. The ability to broadcast appeals to the international working class of every country to follow suit would be backed by vast global reach of the Chinese economy and the Chinese people. If the revolution first succeeded in a European country its international impact would be equally great. The international nature of socialist revolution, borne out by the experience of the Russian Revolution, is thus a lesson whose relevance has not diminished but greatly intensified with the passing of time

Again on revolution today

The other articles in this special edition of the *Irish Marxist Review* will explore further the themes and issues discussed here: the role of the Bolshevik Party, the struggle for women's liberation, the revolution and sexual liberation, the revolution's impact and reception in Ireland and how the revolution was lost.

But, as I said at the start of this article, all of this makes sense only from a political perspective focused on the necessity of making revolution in our own time. Without this the Russian Revolution is either a lot of trouble in a faraway country of which we know and care little or else some kind of dreadful warning about a what terrible thing it might be to risk any experiment with socialism. The latter view, which is sure to get a substantial hearing in the media, actually relies on bad history and ignorance. In contrast those willing to fight for a better world will find in the Russian Revolution an historical event not only to be celebrated but also to be seriously studied.

²⁹John Molyneux, 'Lessons from the Egyptian Revolution', *op. cit.* p.25.