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The Russian Revolution of 1917 went down in history as yet another classic example (after the French Revolution) of the general logic of the unfolding of the revolutionary process, starting with the proclamation of liberty and equality (in February) and ending with one-party dictatorship and terror (in October). The present article argues that the common cause of all revolutions is the absence of a legal and legitimate means of obtaining power by the political opposition. This forces the opposition to resort to force, even armed methods of capturing power, which in turn generates a new cycle of violence, sometimes exceeding the previous one. The only alternative to this development of events is the democratic procedure of free elections, which allows those fighting for power to shift from an illegal to a legal opposition, and thereby transform themselves from professional revolutionaries into professional politicians.

Keywords: *revolution, power, violence, people, opposition, democracy, the February Revolution, the October Revolution*

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Translated by Peter Golub.

In Russian history, the main event of the twentieth century was undoubtedly the revolution, which had started at the beginning of the century. It did not begin in October, nor was it carried out only by the Bolsheviks. Since 1905, over the course of twelve years, there were three revolutions in Russia, the first of which ended in defeat. These revolutions can be considered distinct, but they can be also seen as the successive phases of a single revolutionary process. February¹ gave victory to moderate forces, while October² gave rise to radical forces. It merely completed the process that began in February. The Russian revolution spanned the full arc—from the short, in the words of Pitirim Sorokin, “democratic overture” to the terrible finale of a one-party dictatorship. Not the Bolsheviks, but the revolution that began in February predetermined this finale. Berdyaev was right when he called the Bolsheviks not the creators but the instruments of revolution, which always leads to a culmination.

Its importance and necessity are debated to this day, and from diametrically opposite positions. Such a discrepancy is not surprising: the revolution arose as a result of extremely acute social conflicts and contradictions, and therefore did not reconcile the warring parties but divided them into winners and losers. It is not surprising that the first saw in it a triumph of reason and will, while the second saw a national tragedy and catastrophe. Even in our time, it is difficult to definitively resolve this dispute. The Russian revolution is still evaluated in different ways: some see in it light, others a dark shadow that has been cast over all subsequent Russian history. It is also difficult to judge its reality, because, although it began a hundred years ago, it did not accomplish its task—the transition from an autocratic form of government to a more democratic one. A similar task, albeit in a slightly different form, remains only a desired goal for Russians today. The Bolsheviks did not start the Russian Revolution, and it seems that they will not be the ones to finish it.

But before evaluating the significance of the Russian Revolution in Russian history, it is necessary to first determine the nature of revolution in general by understanding its historical inevitability and justification. Any revolution is like a social earthquake: it is difficult to foresee and even more so to prevent. Events should not escalate to the level of revolution, but when the escalation occurs, everything else is inevitable: violence, terror, civil war—everything is fully justified from a revolutionary point of view. It is pointless to hold revolution morally accountable, to accuse it of cruelty and inhumanity. This is the same as condemning war, slavery, and exploitation—this will not solve the problem of their existence in history. Essentially, revolution is not moral or legal, but forceful. There are no kind or non-bloody revolutions. To condemn the revolution would be to condemn the entire revolutionary movement in Russia, which captured

several generations of the Russian intelligentsia, and simultaneously all of Russian history, which became the soil for this movement. If the soil produces revolution, it will sooner or later provide it with blood.

The French Revolution that erupted at the end of the eighteenth century posed a question that the best philosophical minds of Europe at that time tried to answer: Why did the revolution start with the demand for freedom and end with terror? Being in many ways an expression of a spontaneous protest against the old order, they usually lead to chaos and anarchy, which can be stopped with the use of violence, but only from above, carried out by the new order. The scale and duration of this new wave of violence largely depends on the social composition of the popular masses participating in the revolution. Usually revolutions are headed by people from privileged and educated sections of society who have at least some preliminary experience of personal freedom, but most of its ordinary participants remain at the mercy of the experience and habits of the old society, which, naturally, leaves its imprint on the final outcome of the conflict. Such people can destroy the old order, but it is difficult for them to replace it with a new one. What they present as a new order is often painfully reminiscent of the old.

Something similar occurred in the Russian revolution. Beginning as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, it quickly developed into its opposite—an anti-bourgeois and anti-democratic revolution. Things could not have been otherwise in a country with a predominantly peasant population. Even Marx believed that if a revolution took place in Russia, it could only be that of the peasant and, therefore, far from democratic. “There will be a Russian 1793,” he warned, “the reign of terror of these half-Asian serfs will be unprecedented in history.”³ Engels also expressed a similar sentiment: “It [the Russian revolution] will begin, in spite of Bakunin’s predictions, from above, in the palace. But once started, it will encompass the peasants, and then you will see such scenes that 1793 will pale in comparison.”⁴ Already in the late 1890s, in a letter to the Russian correspondent, Engels wrote that the revolution in a backward country with a large peasant population can only be accomplished “at the cost of terrible suffering and turmoil.”⁵

The arrival of the Bolsheviks to power cannot be considered a mere coincidence. They are not the reason but the consequence of the traditional undemocratic nature of the country, which largely explains the two unanswered questions of Russian history. In the majority of European countries these questions were resolved long before the establishment of the democratic order.

The first question concerns the peasant. The majority of Russian peasants lived in *obshchina*-patriarchal villages, which obstructed modernization even more than autocratic rule. Is it possible to resist the *obshchina* with democratic means? Even Stolypin's reform, aimed at independent farming and farmerization of the rural population, was largely coercive. The voluntary exit from the *obshchina*, as corroborated by world history, would last for centuries.

Subsequently, this issue was resolved by the Bolsheviks in a purely Russian way. Beginning in the years of the civil war with the forcible removal of agricultural products from the peasantry (the *prodrazvyorstka*) under the policy of "war communism," and after a brief pause during the New Economic Policy (which was not particularly democratic considering the party's continual oversight and the direct instructions of Stalin, who succeeded Lenin as the party's main leader), the Bolsheviks conducted in a short time the policy of *dekulakization*; that is, the ruin and death of the more prosperous parts of the peasantry and the forced collectivization of the rest, turning all into a class of state serfs. The peasant Russia was liquidated by forceful coercion and the suppression of any resistance.

The second question is that of the nation. The issue is not that Russia is a multiethnic country (there are many such countries), but that each of these peoples live on their own territory; keep their own gods, language, traditions, and culture; and have not coalesced into a single melting pot. What kind of democracy can make them live in one state? The experience of creating the USSR with the aim of preserving the integrity of the state formed by a multitude of peoples was also not particularly democratic. The function of the binder of all centers was taken over by the ruling and unelected Communist Party.

None of the parties that existed in prerevolutionary Russia ever managed to find a democratic solution to these issues. And from the beginning, only the Bolsheviks relied on purely forceful methods of achieving their goals, which in a peasant country was initially met with much greater understanding and approval than all the calls for democracy. This calculation turned out to be correct, and allowed the Bolsheviks to defeat their opponents first in the revolution and then in the civil war. Their victory may be referred to as the proletarian or socialist revolution, but such names do not explain the real essence of their victory. Perhaps the Bolsheviks themselves sincerely believed that they were opening a new page in human history—the transition from capitalism to socialism—however, the system they established had no more to do with socialism than our present system of "sovereign democracy" has to do with democracy as it is understood in the rest of the world.

In order to justify himself historically, the founder of the Bolshevik Party, Vladimir I. Lenin, constantly referred to Marx, considering himself a faithful disciple. According to him, Marx was not merely a brilliant thinker, but above all a revolutionary—a theorist of the proletarian *revolution* and proletarian *dictatorship*. The words “revolution” and “dictatorship” are key. For Lenin, they became the solution to Russia’s problems, and the word “proletarian” in combination with them meant that Russia in its final form could be neither peasant nor bourgeois. Peasant Russia was synonymous with backwardness, the past, and bourgeois Russia had not yet appeared and it was pointless to wait until it did.

But where would the revolutionary proletariat—the product of mature capitalism—come from in Russia? What dictatorship of the proletariat can there be in a country where the working class had not formed on a national scale? At this point, Lenin, who considered himself an orthodox Marxist, tried to pass off as Marxism what is clearly contrary to Marx. In the absence of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, the revolutionary party of the proletariat may well replace it. If the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* consider the party a political organization encompassing the entire working-class movement, then Lenin turned the party into an independent political force at the head of this movement. For Marx and Engels, there is no party without a revolutionary proletariat; for Lenin, there is no revolutionary proletariat without the party. In the connection of *class* and *party*, Lenin puts the party first, seeing in it the main condition for the transformation of the proletariat from a “class in itself” into a “class for oneself.”

According to Lenin, the party’s first task should be the “introduction of revolutionary consciousness” into the working masses, to which they themselves will never arise. Such a formulation of the issue is far removed from Marx, who had a far more appreciative view of the possibilities of the European proletariat. For a time, the Leninist formulation was tolerable in the environment of Russian Social-Democracy, although it had already led to a schism between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. With the growth of revolutionary sentiments in the country, the more profound implications of Lenin’s intention become clear—to turn the party from an agitator and propagandist into the main leader of the revolution. Lenin was perhaps the first Marxist to see in the revolution a special kind of professional activity, and to consider the people who undertake it as professional revolutionaries. Revolution can be accomplished only by those who are prepared to take power by force. Little depends on the proletariat itself. On its behalf, one can create parties and proclaim slogans; the proletariat can be agitated, called upon, and appealed to, but it alone cannot produce a revolution. The

reliance not on class, but military organization and force, formed illegally underground, is a clear indication of what Lenin understood by revolution. In essence, it is identified with political conspiracy and a military coup. The October Revolution, which the Bolsheviks referred to as the revolution of the proletariat, was conducted precisely according to this scenario.

The main issue for any revolution, according to Lenin, is the question of power. Proclaiming freedom as the ultimate goal, all revolutions, as a rule, are undertaken in the name of seizing power by those who direct them, be it a party or simply a group of individuals who pretend to be representatives of a particular class or nation as a whole. And in October, Bolshevik leaders and party functionaries came to power, declaring themselves to be the vanguard of the working class. The seizure of power by the revolutionary party leadership, and its retention under the guise of the people's power, embodies the revolutionary quality that Lenin understood as no one before him and that ultimately brought him victory.

From the very beginning of his arrival on the revolutionary scene, Lenin declared that the ultimate goal of this movement was the conquest of political power in Russia. The main goal is to seize power, everything else would follow. All organizational, theoretical, and agitational activities had to be subordinate to this goal. The revolutionary nature of any party, according to Lenin, is very doubtful if it is not guided by this goal. The Narodniks replaced the struggle for power with individual terror, which was the reason for their almost complete extermination by the Tsarist regime. Bourgeois parties live in expectation of their legalization by this regime or its fall by peaceful means. Even the Bolshevik's closest allies in Social Democracy (the future Mensheviks), on the eve of what they considered to be the inevitable bourgeois revolution, preferred to confine themselves to propaganda and outreach, which in Lenin's opinion was mere prattle. To all this, Lenin opposed the idea of a party ready to seize power at any moment and to keep it until the victory of the world revolution. In Russia, even if the bourgeois revolution occurred before the proletarian revolution (which Lenin did not really believe, considering the Russian bourgeoisie weak and incapable of revolutionarily overthrowing the autocracy without the help of the proletariat, i.e., the Bolsheviks), it would have to immediately give way to the revolution of the proletariat, which would once and for all resolve the question of power. This nearly literally came true, which indicates that Lenin understood something about the nature of revolution.

When considering the European revolutions, it is clear that revolutions are conducted not so much in the interests of the masses, but in service of those who intend to lead the masses and who previously existed underground and had been overtly opposed by the presiding government. All

revolutions were carried out in the interests of the existing political opposition in society, deprived of the legal means of coming to power. Of course to win, this opposition needs the support of like-minded social strata, creating the illusion of a mass or popular revolutionary movement. Revolution is the price a society pays for its political injustice, for the lack of legal opportunities for coming to power.

In his revolutionary strategy, Lenin adhered precisely to this rule: might makes right, and there is nothing more important in politics than the seizure and retention of power. In the struggle for power, any means, including the most extreme, are permissible. This was how Lenin operated practically throughout his whole life, considering this mode to be worthy of the title revolutionary, beyond which nothing existed. Therefore, the coup carried out under his leadership went down in history as a classic example of genuine revolution. After all, it was October that was perceived in the world as an event of world-historical significance, in comparison to which even February seemed a mere episode in the revolutionary struggle that took place in Russia.

Of course, we cannot forget that the Bolsheviks believed the October Revolution was prologue to the world revolution of the proletariat. None of the Bolsheviks gave serious thought to what needed to happen after the revolution. To prove the possibility of a revolutionary break of the weak link of the chain of world capitalism was, at least in its prerevolutionary form, the essence of Leninism. The Bolshevik Party was to become the tool for accomplishing this break. It geared itself not toward building socialism, but toward taking power by non-democratic, forceful means. Disguised as Marxism, Leninism is the Russian version of the armed seizure of power by the party of “professional revolutionaries,” claimed by its leaders as the victory of the revolution of the proletariat.

But was not Marx himself the author of the theory of class struggle, proletarian revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat? Yes, but he formulated his theory in relation to European history, which is why during his time and immediately afterwards it evolved differently than in Russia. Marx lived in an era when democracy in many European countries had become a reality. In the last period of his life, he and Engels concluded that in the presence of a democratic order, workers can gain power not revolutionarily but peacefully—through participation in democratic elections. Democracy as it already existed within the boundaries of bourgeois society could be used to implement socialist reform. This idea became the program for many contemporary social democratic parties in the West. Subsequently, Western Marxism would in general reject the idea of a violent seizure of power, as long as a democratic form was possible. Violence is justified in

the struggle against tyranny, but not when democracy has already taken hold.

A similar logic was applied by Marx and Engels's German social democratic friends and compatriots: the final political revolution with historical significance would be the bourgeois-democratic revolution, after which a time of peaceful, evolutionary development would begin. The political revolution is justified as a means of transitioning from absolutism to democracy, but with the establishment of the latter, revolution ceases to be "the locomotive of history," and fades into the background. Any attempt at a revolutionary seizure of power after democracy is established is fraught with the most serious consequences for democracy.⁶

Contrary to Lenin, the October Revolution confirmed this conclusion. He did not conceal the anti-democratic nature of his coup, or else had a very peculiar conception of democracy—as a dictatorship of the proletariat led by his party, based on force, and unchecked by law. He contrasted the reformist (Western) version of Marxism with his own radical version of revolutionary development, which was unhindered by either rights or morals.

It should be recognized that the revolution that began with the abdication of the tsar in February did not fulfill the task of establishing a new democratic order in Russia. It is spontaneous [Here the author is referring to the concept of *stikhiinost'*.—Trans.] because it unfolds not according to a plan, but as a result of exceptional circumstances (which in the case of Russia was World War I), and often occurs well before the general public is ready for social change. As a result, it led to tremendous upheaval and loss of life, a move toward an even greater lack of freedom. This spontaneous impulse toward freedom on the part the enlightened elite was reined in by the iron hand of "proletarian discipline."

The political regime established by the Bolsheviks did not merely restore the old order, but in many ways surpassed its level oppression. In the political lexicon of the twentieth century, it went under the name of totalitarianism. Ultimately, it led to the collapse of the USSR, which was at the same time the end of October, which left Russian history with the state it had created. It seemed that its end would return the country to the beginning of the revolution and the attempt to undertake bourgeois-democratic change. But the return never occurred and it is important to understand why. The superficial reason is that there was no one to return: the Soviet government did not leave behind people who could implement the necessary changes.

If at the beginning of the twentieth century, there existed a kind of "third class" in the large Russian cities (in the form of industrialists and the urban

intelligentsia) who in February welcomed the fall of autocracy, by the end of the century it had disappeared completely. It is well-known what happened to it. During the years of industrialization, the urban population was turned into a huge army of state employees, which had been deprived of private initiative and even of the civil rights that wage laborers have in capitalist countries. How could a quick return to the bourgeois order be possible in such a situation?

Equally groundless was the hope of a quick victory for democracy. The post-Soviet Democrats were unable to overcome the traditional Russian paternalistic relation of the state to the majority of the population, which only intensified after the fall of the Soviet Union. No less traditional for Russia is the constant suppression of the opposition. Even in prerevolutionary Russia, for most of its existence, opposition to the official Church or the monarchy was considered dangerous sedition, and the oppositionists themselves were labeled as “dividers,” “agitators,” and “insurgents.” The opposition underwent schisms, was driven underground and outlawed, and bore the stamp of illegality. In Soviet times, the stigma of opposition was tantamount to a death sentence, and was associated in the public mind with treason and betrayal. During perestroika the political opposition was legalized and people no longer shunned it morally. But already in 1993, its role in the country’s political life began to weaken. Formally, the opposition still exists today in the legislative branch, but its impact on the country’s ongoing politics has been virtually reduced to zero. It is referred to as the “systemic opposition,” but it is understood that this opposition exists in words only. It is not taken seriously, nor does it particularly insist upon this. Hostility towards the opposition has once again been introduced into the mass consciousness through television and the press, and the so-called non-systemic opposition is labeled as a “fifth column,” “traitors,” “foreign agents,” “Russophobes,” and so forth, which is reminiscent of the darkest years of Soviet history.

Some pin their hopes on democratic change resulting from a schism in the elites, on the advent of new people close to power, on new reformers. This has even been called Perestroika 2.0. However, in Russia the rise to power of people like Mikhail S. Gorbachev is a historic miracle, which at the time we did not appreciate and are still paying for to this today. Today, few believe in the possibility of a repetition of such a miracle.

It is, of course, wrong to call people to a violent seizure of power in the name of democracy. The time of such revolutions is long gone. Such a call is meaningless, not only because the present regime is now powerful enough to suppress any protest, but also because of the ineffectiveness of this method of coming to power. Revolutionary violence is not the best way

of fighting for democracy. It can result in more violence, as was demonstrated by the October Revolution. It seems that nowadays democracy does not require a party of *professional revolutionaries* like the one formerly established by Lenin, but a party of *professional politicians*, even if they have different ideological orientations. Unlike the former, they conduct the political struggle via exclusively legal means; that is, they resist the established authority as an intellectual and moral, but not military, force. This opposition is unable to prevent a revolution, but this is not what it sees as its goal.

Foremost on any politician's agenda is to attain power. But the professional politician achieves this by victory in the elections by democratic means. They have no other means. To await revolution or to prepare it is the job of the revolutionaries, but not professional politicians. Those who attain power indirectly, without revolution or elections, are not politicians but bureaucrats who make a career out of party intrigue and bureaucratic rearrangements. Lacking the experience of public activity, they understand politics only as the right to give orders and commands. This is the power of arbitrary people whose personal qualities, attitudes, political views, and outstanding government achievements are unknown to the public. The mechanism of their rise to power is hidden from the public eye, and is entirely the result of personal connections and internal agreements. No order, other than that of the police, can they offer society.

Lack of professionalism is a threat to any activity, but it is especially dangerous in politics. The main indication of political incompetence is the inability to engage in public dialogue with political opponents. Once in power, such an individual sees all opposition as something extremely dangerous and believes that the only acceptable language in this case is that of threats and intimidation. For the sake of his power, he is ready for the most extreme measures. Power obtained in circumvention of the law can only protect itself illegally.

For the purposes of self-justification such power typically uses the following argument: it alone can bring order to the country, prevent chaos and anarchy, the disintegration of the state, and the harm of revolution and civil war. In the short term this may be the case, but in the long term it is this kind of power that leads to revolution. What country with a developed democracy is threatened by revolution? Of course, even in a democratic environment overthrows and military coups are possible, but this is evidence of the immaturity and incompleteness of the democratic process. The level of a country's democracy can be judged by how the established powers relate to the right of the people to carry out legal political

opposition, and, therefore, the people's demand for lawful change of government in a timely manner.

But what is to be done if all forms of opposition are prohibited, and elections, if they occur, are merely perfunctory and entirely controlled by the government? As the experience of the twentieth century has shown, these types of regimes end not as a result of internal national revolutions, which are completely blocked, but unravel in the process of starting and then losing “hot” wars (e.g., Germany, Italy, Japan) or “cold” wars with arms races and the constant growth of military spending (e.g., USSR). However, after the appearance of weapons of mass destruction, such an outcome is deadly for all involved parties and cannot be included in the calculations of any serious opposition.

The opposition of an undemocratic government in general cannot prevent either a revolution or a war, but this is not its purpose. Both can only be avoided by a democratically elected government, which to this day has yet to be established in Russia. In the history of Russia, including the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, there has never been a truly democratic change of power. It was either inherited, seized by force, or handed down by a narrow group of people or by the mandate of the predecessor. What can the opposition do in this case? Who needs it in such conditions?

I will express an assumption: the opposition is needed in any situation, above all, to itself; that is, to those who are dissatisfied with the status quo and want to change the vector. This is enough to justify its existence. The rest depends on its own strength, its ability to persuade others of its cause, to attract them to its side. Thus far, this has not occurred, not in February when it replaced the tsar (largely due to objective reasons), or after the failure of the State Committee on the State of Emergency and the collapse of the Soviet regime (due to their own lack of democracy; that is, subjective reasons), and now, when it is pressed by the established powers and forced to exist under very adverse conditions that are particularly difficult. If the established powers completely cut off its oxygen, which is equivalent to the abolition of the constitution and the revival of totalitarianism, the country will be completely isolated from the world, at which point no amount of opposition will be able to stop the degradation. But while some oxygen is still available, the opposition should do what it is meant to—provide constructive criticism of the authorities and educate the public—that is, what used to be called “bringing awareness to the masses,” the only difference being that this awareness does not have to be revolutionary and appeal should be made not only to the workers. In this sense, the alternative to revolution (and its devastating consequences) is legal political opposition. Only the transition of the opposition from illegal to legal status

can put an end to the extremist, revolutionary, and violent methods of gaining power, and, therefore, will be the real completion of the revolutionary movement in Russia.

The only alternative to the destructive forces of revolution are fair and free elections that give everyone an equal chance to come to power. History has yet to produce a more effective antidote to revolution. Whoever is in power, its critics cannot be driven underground, be forced to live as political outcasts, or be prosecuted as a conquered or defeated party. In any case, they should remain in politics as a legitimate and recognized opposition fighting for victory in the elections. That is democracy. In contrast to revolution, it is a peaceful means of resolving social issues via competition for votes. It is only when the value of the opposition is equal to the value of the established power, and when the transition from one state to the other becomes a normal part of political life, will the Russian revolution that began one hundred years ago come to an end.

Notes

1. This is a reference to the Russian February Revolution. Known in Soviet historiography as the February Bourgeois Democratic Revolution, it was the first of two Russian revolutions in 1917.—Ed.

2. The October Revolution of 1917.—Ed.

3. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Sobr. soch.* [Collected works] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1958), vol. 12, p. 701.

4. *Ibid.*, vol. 20, p. 124.

5. *Ibid.*, vol. 39, p. 35.

6. For more on this theme, see T.I. Oizerman, *Marksizm i utopizm* [Marxism and Utopianism] (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2003).