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Reflections on the Russian Revolution

IZVLEČEK

REFLEKSIJE O RUSKI REVOLUCIJI

Ruska revolucija iz leta 1917 je bila ena od prelomnic svetovne zgodovine, čeprav se je izkazalo, da je bila njena radikalna (komunistična) faza zgodovinska slepa ulica. Revolucija je bila ena sama – nista se zgodili dve revoluciji, kot je v preteklosti razlagalo sovjetsko zgodovinopisje. Edinstvenost ruske revolucije izhaja iz dejstva, da se je radikalni prevzem oblasti novembra 1917 izkazal za začetek dolgega procesa totalitarne diktature, ki je trajal več kot 70 let. Danes je dediščina zmage v drugi svetovni vojni tista, na kateri temelji ustanovni mit moderne ruske države.

ABSTRACT

The Russian revolution of 1917 was one of the turning points in world history, even if its radical (communist) stage proved to be a historical blind street. There was just one revolution – not two, as it had been interpreted by the Soviet historiography. The uniqueness of the Russian revolution results from the fact that the radical seizure of power in November 1917 turned to be the beginning of a long process of totalitarian dictatorship, which lasted for more than seventy years. Today, it is the heritage of the victory in the Second World War that constitutes the founding myth of modern Russian state.

From the perspective of one hundred years, the Russian revolution of 1917 remains one of the crucial events in world history. In contemporary Russia it is condemned by both the liberal democrats and conservative nationalists, while idealized by Russian (and foreign) communists. Some see it as a blind street in Russian history, which brought nothing but great human sufferings. Some see it as the event which turned Russia into a great power, victorious in the World War Two and capable of standing

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up to the West during the cold war. Still others, while recognizing the tragic cost of the revolution and of the tyrannical regime created by it, stress the impact the revolution had on the mentality of the working masses giving them hope that there can be a way out from capitalist oppression.

For decades, historians of the revolution discussed the question of its “inevitability”. Communist authors argued that the revolution, and particularly its radical (Bolshevik) stage were the inevitable consequences of the “law of combined development” which made the capitalist periphery the cradle of the anti-capitalist revolution. “The law of combined development in backward countries – Trotsky wrote – in the sense of a peculiar mixture of backward elements with the most modern factors – here rises before us in the most finished form, and offers a key to this fundamental riddle of the Russian revolution. If the agrarian problem as a heritage from the barbarism of the old Russian history, had been solved by the bourgeoisie, if it would have been solved by them, the Russian proletariat could not possibly have come to power in 1917, In order to realize the Soviet state, there was required a drawing together of mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historic species: a peasant war – that is, a movement characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development – and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signaling its decline”¹.

Socialists (Karl Kautsky in particular) saw in it a gross mistake made by ambitious politicians in search for power.² Between these extremes I should like to argue that the Russian revolution – while not inevitable (since nothing is inevitable in history – has become the most likely outcome of the existing conditions: (1) the sclerosis of the tsarist regime, deepened by the failure of the moderate reformists after the first revolution (1905), (2) the mistake of going to war when the Russian state was unprepared for it, and (3) the unwillingness of the Provisional Government to end the war. I agree with Richard Pipes who writes that “while the collapse of tsarism was not inevitable, it was made likely by deep-seated cultural and political flaws that prevented the tsarist regime from adjusting to the economic and cultural growth of the country, flaws that proved fatal under the pressures generated by World War I”³.

More complicated is the question of the “inevitability” of the Bolshevik seizure of power. It is true that the revolution of 1917 experienced the process of polarization, natural for all great revolutions. The counter-revolutionary (unsuccessful) military coup of general Lawr G. Kornilov in August weakened the Provisional Government and helped the Bolsheviks to build their military formation (Red Guard). Nonetheless, it was still possible to rescue the Provisional Government by accepting defeat in the war and accepting peace (with armistice) with Germany. Such a move would deprive the Bolsheviks of their most powerful weapon: the support of the demoralized army, demanding the end of hostilities at any cost.

Were there two revolutions (as the orthodox Soviet history claimed) or just one? The former communist Issac Deutscher, in his lectures delivered on the fiftieth

1 Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1952), 50, 51.

2 Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of Proletariat* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

3 Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 497.

anniversary of the Russian revolution, argued that “the February revolution of 1917 holds its place in history only as a prelude to October”.⁴ I doubt it. What happened in February (old style) marked the definitive end of the old, tsarist Russia and opened the long process of transformation, which takes more than a century and is still not yet finished. What happened in February 1917 (old style) was in the full meaning of the term a popular, spontaneous revolution of the masses contrasting with the October seizure of power which was more a coup d'état, carried by well-organized party, than a popular revolution. The Bolshevik seizure of power could be compared to the radical shifts in the history of earlier revolution (like the Jacobinian stage of the French Revolution) from which it differed only in one respect: the Bolsheviks defeated their enemies and stayed in power for more than seventy years. The consequence of their victory was the establishment of a totalitarian regime.

The reasons for the Bolshevik victory in the civil war were far from obvious. Originally, Lenin and his colleagues themselves were convinced that without the victory of the revolution in the West the Russian revolution was doom to defeat. The outcome, however, was paradoxical: the communist revolution failed in the West but won in Russia. Was such an effect result of the objective factors: the fact that the Bolsheviks controlled the most populated central parts of Russia and that their adversaries were divided into several groups with differing programs.⁵ Undoubtedly, these factors did play a role, but there have not made the victory of the Bolsheviks inevitable. There were two other factors, both of subjective character. The first was the unwillingness of the West to fully engage in the Russian civil war. Contrary to the official myth of the Soviet historiography, the Western powers offered the “Whites” only limited support. Part of this was the decision made in 1919 by the Polish head of state Jozef Pilsudski to stop the military activities in the undeclared war with Russia until the Bolsheviks were able to defeat their “white” adversaries, whom the Polish marshal considered dangerous for Poland's newly regained independence.⁶

The second “subjective” factor working for the Bolsheviks was ideological: the weakness of the republican faction in the opposing camp. Most of the “whites” fought under the banner of the restoration of the tsarist regime, deeply compromised in the eyes of the majority of the Russian population. In addition, the Bolsheviks skillfully exploited the unwillingness of the “whites” to offer independence to the non-Russian peoples of the old empire. To the ethnic minorities Lenin and Trotsky declared support for their right of self-determination, which they eventually violated – but only after the victory in the civil war.

While the revolution and the victory of the Bolsheviks were not inevitable, the emergence of the totalitarian regime was the only alternative to defeat of the revolutionaries because of (1) the intensity of mutual hatred born during the civil war

4 Isaac Deutscher, *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia 1917–1967* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 7.

5 Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 9, 10.

6 Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War 1919–1920*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972). Marian Kamil Dziewanowski, *Poland in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

and making impossible the establishment of even elementary forms of democratic rivalry, and (2) the isolation of the Soviet Russia in world politics, resulting from the collapse of revolutions in Central Europe (Germany, Austria, Hungary) and the failure of the attempt to export the revolution “on bayonets” (as the result of Soviet defeat in the war against Poland in 1920).

The establishment of the totalitarian regime opened the way to its extreme degeneration in the form of Stalinist “terror state” – a combination of the pathological personality of its leader⁷ and the psychology of the new power elite. Disillusioned communists saw this as the betrayal of the revolution, something that could have been avoided had a different faction won the internal struggle for power within the ruling party. The winning faction has been described as the new privileged stratum of bureaucracy, which captured political power from the proletariat.⁸ Consequently, Trotsky based his hopes in the perspective of a new, anti-bureaucratic revolution.⁹ Years later, the Slovenian historian Marjan Britovšek provided a different interpretation of the “Stalinist Thermidor”, in which he saw the consequence of the defeat of the more moderate Bolshevik faction led by Nicholas I. Bucharin.¹⁰ Communist critics of the Stalinist regime tend to see it as a consequence of the dilemma in which the isolated Soviet state found itself after the civil war. Simultaneously, however, great emphasis has been put on the role of Stalin, whose personality was presented by his successor Nikita Khrushchev as the sole reason of mass terror. Alternatively, it has been argued that the terror state was an inevitable consequence of totalitarianism.¹¹ This view has been revised by in the aftermath of post-Stalin changes in the USSR and in the other communist states.¹²

Critics of the Russian revolution considered the terroristic regime born by it as an inevitable product of the revolution. To my way of thinking, it is largely a simplification. Some elements of totalitarianism were inevitable in the post-revolutionary state, in which the ruling party was losing popular support but continued to promote radical transformation to which it had been committed. Ideology provided the rationale for using state power to promote radical social transformation, even against the will of the majority. The psychological make-up of the Bolshevik cadres made the acceptance of such policies easy. This does not mean that all crimes of Stalinism were historically inevitable. The pathological psychology of the dictator explains the extreme brutality of the regime, particularly the purge of the most devoted communists. Post-Stalin history of the communist states showed that a totalitarian system could survive for several decades without mass terror.

7 Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalinism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971).

8 Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed. What Is the Soviet Union And Where Is It Going?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1937), 277–79.

9 *Ibid.*, 288.

10 Marjan Britovšek, *Stalinov Termidor* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1984).

11 Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), 9, 10.

12 Carl J. Friedrich, “Totalitarianism: Recent Trends,” *Problems of Communism* XVII, No. 3 (1968).

In late thirties, the Soviet state was in serious crisis. The mass purge of the old generation of communist leaders and of the great part of the military created a highly volatile situation in which power rested mostly on naked fear. Such a situation normally leads to the breakdown of the regime caused by internal tensions and by the dissatisfaction of the people. 1941 changed everything. Soviet Russia faced the mortal danger not only to her regime but to the very existence of the Russian state. The "Great Patriotic War" changed the nature of relations between the Soviet people and its leader, making Stalin the symbol of resistance to the foreign invader and of final victory.

Could the communist regime survive without another war? The *ex post facto* speculation cannot provide a definitive answer. What seems to be unquestionable is that in the World War Two the Soviet Union not only avoided defeat but won the greatest victory since the defeat of Napoleon's France in the wars 1812-1814.

The Second World War serves as the ideological justification for the Soviet regime. Confronted with by far more powerful adversary than the imperial Germany of 1914, the USSR was able to stand up to the aggressor and to make the decisive impact on the final outcome of the war. Indirectly, this serves as the main justification of the revolution. Partly it is true, that the Soviet regime in spite of all its crimes was able to mobilize the patriotic sentiments of the people to the degree unthinkable for the tsarist system. It must, however, be remembered that Nazi Germany with her racists policy was a different kind of adversary than the old German state.

On November 7, 2017 Russia celebrated not the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution but the anniversary of the day on which the military units after having taken part in the parade on the Red Square (on the anniversary of the revolution) marched to the front to take part in the battle of Moscow – the first battle lost by Nazi Germany, rightly considered now the turning point in the Great Patriotic War. It is not the revolution but the war that serves now as the founding myth of contemporary Russian state.

Victory in the war not only made the Soviet Union one of two superpowers but also provoked a chain of revolutionary upheavals in East- Central Europe and in Asia, the most consequential among which has been the Chinese revolution. In this, the revolution of 1917 became one of the great turning point in world history. While its impact on Eastern and Central Europe was temporary, its role in the victory of the revolutionary upheavals outside Europe (particularly in Asia) cannot be denied. In this, the events of 1917 must be considered one of the crucial turning points in world history.

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