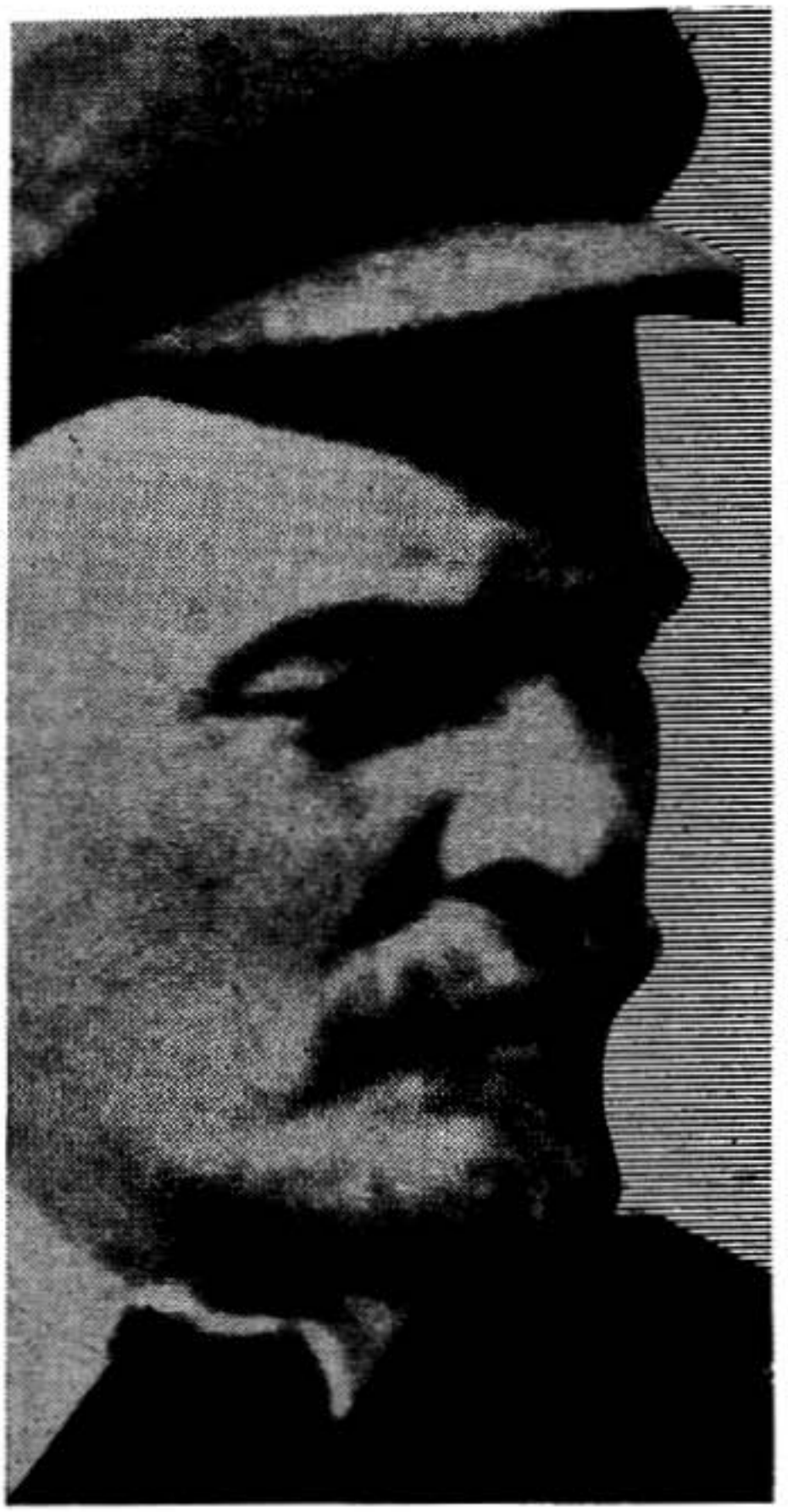

50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT OCTOBER SOCIALIST REVOLUTION

I: The Background

TERENCE AFRICANUS

FIFTY YEARS AGO an event took place which decisively altered the course of human history. The workers and peasants of the former Russian empire ended the rule of the capitalist bosses and landlords in a vast area covering one-sixth of the world's land surface. This tremendous revolution marked the beginning of a new era: the era of socialism and communism.

This event is known as the Great October Socialist Revolution. Yet it took place not in October, but on November 7th, 1917. The old Russia at that time followed a different calendar to other countries. Nearly all countries had long abandoned the old Julian Calendar (Italy did so in 1582, and Britain in 1752) in favour of the present-day one. But Tsarist Russia still clung to the old calendar, which was eleven days behind, and there November 7th was October 25th. There is, in this circumstance, something deeply symbolic.

For it was not only in the matter of the calendar that old Russia lagged behind.

THE BOURGEOIS DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONS

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the continent of Europe emerged from the long night of feudalism. In one country after another the bourgeoisie—the town manufacturers and merchants—headed an alliance of the farmers, peasants and the small shopkeepers and urban poor in a series of national and democratic revolutions. Nationalism and democracy were the powerful concepts with which the propagandists of the bourgeoisie rallied the masses to topple the old order: liberty, equality, fraternity, their slogans. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident', proclaimed the American Declaration of Independence, 'that all men are created equal. . . .' Similar splendid principles were pronounced by the victorious revolutionary leaders and in the constitutions of all the new states that arose from the overthrow of the stifling feudal order, with its rigorous and degrading insistence on the hereditary right of the few to be lords and masters over the many destined by law and religion to be their slaves. To many of the best minds of the day, it seemed that the bourgeois revolutions answered all the problems of human injustice and oppression. Of the French Revolution, the English poet Wordsworth wrote ecstatically:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
But to be young was very heaven.

To Africans, Asians and others these rhapsodies contained a bitter irony. It seemed that all the great phrases about the Rights of Man meant only the Rights of the White Man. Under this banner, the trade in African slaves proceeded apace; with a savagery and efficiency exceeding that of the feudal conquistadores in Central and South America, the North Americans proceeded to decimate and dispossess the redskins; the West Europeans built huge empires, exceeding any hitherto known, in Asia and Africa.

In its home countries too, the capitalist system created by the bourgeois class failed to realise the great hopes for which the masses had fought and sacrificed in the fight against feudalism. Driven from the land, masses of the peasants found themselves transformed into a propertyless proletariat, who could only live by selling their labour power to the new masters, the factory-owners. The former personal relationship between masters and the 'lower classes' was transformed into an impersonal relationship—the 'cash nexus' between man and man, as Marx put it. Once they had achieved their objective, the conquest of state power, the new capitalist rulers showed little sympathy with the masses in whose name they had overthrown the former aristocracy. They exploited them without mercy; they lost their revolutionary

idealism and became a conservative and reactionary force, resisting the people's demands and brutally suppressing their radical movements.

Nevertheless, within these limitations, the bourgeois European (and North American) revolution was a great liberating force. It laid the basis for a tremendous increase in the output of wealth, the process of mass production of goods of all kinds and the system of free exchange of commodities on the market, both within each region and internationally. It broke down the Europe of a thousand warring little principalities, and established viable, modern nation-states. It smashed the political and mental prison-house of feudalism, with its rigid censorship and doctrines such as the divine right of kings, and the hereditary caste system. It spread the revolutionary doctrines of democracy and the equality of human rights—doctrines which socialist thinkers applied in the added dimension of economics to synthesise a new philosophy of human emancipation. By creating the modern working class, capitalism created its own grave-diggers, the pioneers of a new society.

TSARIST ABSOLUTISM

To a very large extent this vast, liberating tidal wave by-passed the old Russian Empire. The absolute Tsarist autocracy, which was closely linked with the Orthodox Church, governed this vast country with an iron hand. In the extreme east of Europe and sprawling over the whole of northern Asia, this vast country was largely insulated from the democratic wave which had begun in the West. Feudalism and serfdom prevailed in the vast estates of the aristocracy long after they had been overthrown elsewhere. Economic development was very slow and limited. The peasants were victims of grinding poverty, illiteracy and oppression.

New, democratic and liberatory ideas were vigorously suppressed. Thousands of the best thinkers were persecuted and imprisoned, rusticated to the remote wastes of Siberia or forced into exile. Progressive and socialist parties and trade unions were banned and driven underground.

The numerous non-Russian peoples who lived in the Tsar's domains were subjected to gross national oppression. Their territories were conquered and kept down by force; their local institutions, languages and cultures suppressed. They were economically colonised and looted; there were frequent massacres ('pogroms') of Jews and other minorities. Tsarist Russia was known as 'the prison of nations'.

In its foreign policy and activities, Tsarist Russia played an extremely reactionary role. It annexed border countries like Poland and Finland;

and interfered to support counter-revolution in every European country. It played the part of 'the policeman of Europe' and Marx wrote (in the inaugural address of the First International in 1864) of 'that barbarous power whose head is at St. Petersburg* and whose hands are in every Cabinet in Europe'.

It is true that the best elements within Tsarist Russia fought hard and bravely against this stifling dictatorship, which did not even make a pretence at parliamentary democracy but was governed by absolute decrees by the Tsar. Russia in the nineteenth century produced outstanding revolutionary democrats like Herzen, Belinsky and Chernyshevsky, whose ideas were in advance of those of the bourgeois-democratic theorists in the West. But, backed up with force and terror, and a vast bureaucracy, the regime succeeded for many years in suppressing rebellions and staving off revolution.

Thus it was that Russia entered the twentieth century in a state of characteristic *backwardness*. Its political structure lacked even those elements of democracy however incomplete (elected parliaments, freedom of speech and organisation, etc.) which prevailed among most of the West European powers. Its agriculture was primitive; industrial development was slow and uneven, and marked by widespread penetration of foreign finance-capital which, in partnership with the Russian bourgeoisie, occupied an important place in the country's economy and were beginning in Russia the practices which we now characterise as neo-colonialism.

Beneath the surface of this regime, there was simmering a tremendous amount of resentment, grievances and rebellion among the revolutionary workers, peasants and intellectuals of Russia and the oppressed masses of the Asian and other non-Russian nationalities. This revolutionary spirit boiled over in the *Revolution of 1905*.

The Russo-Japanese war had revealed the incompetence, corruption and inner weakness of the regime, as well as causing an economic crisis which brought new misery to the people. Many currents demanding change arose to the surface. One of these was represented by a priest, Father Gapon, who had won a widespread following among the people by his demands for reform. In 1905 he led a mass demonstration before the Tsar's palace in St. Petersburg, petitioning for some elementary demands of the people. The demonstration was peaceful and humble, the workers came unarmed, accompanied by their wives and children. But the authorities were not prepared to tolerate even so moderate a demonstration. Troops opened fire, killing a great many

---

* St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) was the capital of the old Russian Empire.

peaceful and unarmed working people. This bloody massacre precipitated a series of general political strikes all over the country, culminating in a mass uprising. The Tsar promised democratic reforms including the calling of an elected parliament (the Duma). But this was neither representative nor did it enjoy real power. The people were not satisfied, and it was not until 1907 that the revolution was crushed. A period of intensive reaction followed.

Though it was not successful in toppling the regime, the 1905 revolution had far-reaching effects and several highly significant features. One of these was the appearance of 'Soviets'*—councils of peasants and workers spontaneously created in many regions on the basis of direct election. Another was the emergence of the industrial working class as the most dynamic, revolutionary and determined section of Russian society. More particularly was this true of those who followed the line of the *Bolshevik party*, the most advanced and clear-sighted workers' political party.

To understand the significance of this name, as well as the background of the parties involved in the upheavals of 1917, it is necessary briefly to trace the development of the various political organisations in the country.

REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS

The very harshness and inflexibility of the autocracy, the obvious need for radical change if Russia were to get rid of backwardness and raise the people's standards of living and culture, and the impossibility of bringing about such change by constitutional means, meant that all the best, most patriotic and courageous representatives of the toiling masses and the enlightened intellectuals turned their minds towards revolution.

The problem was not whether there should be a revolution, but how to bring it about. Every possible theory of political change was considered and tested. Some believed in anarchism or nihilism. Some thought that acts of individual terrorism and the assassination of the tsar or his ministers would precipitate a change. Others, like the famous writer Tolstoy believed in passive resistance. Some thought that the peasantry—who had conducted frequent peasant revolts—would lead the Russian revolution, others placed their confidence in the liberal bourgeoisie. And these theories were not merely discussed eagerly in revolutionary circles: they were attempted in practice, at the cost of

---

* Soviet, a Russian word meaning 'Council'.

great losses to the brave freedom fighters. Russia became a veritable laboratory of revolution. Lenin later wrote that:

> Russia achieved Marxism, the only correct revolutionary theory, virtually through *suffering*, by half a century of unprecedented torment and sacrifice, of unprecedented revolutionary heroism, incredible energy, devoted searching, study, testing in practice, disappointments, checking and comparison with European experience.

If Russian Marxist organisations were formed later than in the West European countries it was due to the belated development of capitalism, and hence of the working class, and also to the ferocious repression of tsarism and the efficiency and huge size of its secret police. The first such group was established in exile by the famous Marxist philosopher Plekhanov. It was called the Emancipation of Labour Group. This was the forerunner of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

One of the first theoretical tasks of the young Party, at the beginning of the present century, was to counter the incorrect theories of a group known as the Narodniks (populists) which were widespread among the intellectuals and a section of the masses. They believed in a sort of special kind of 'Russian Socialism', based on the peasantry and the system of communal land ownership which was characteristic of the country and continued side-by-side with feudalism. They had no confidence in the working class and rejected the Marxist philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism. Their hopes were placed not in class struggle, but in the role of individual 'heroes', the saviours of the 'mob', whose role was merely to follow them. Even as late as 1917 some of these erroneous ideas were reflected in the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which enjoyed a good deal of support among the peasants.

The party of the capitalist class in Russia was the Constitutional Democrats (called the 'Cadets', from their initials in Russian). They opposed the excesses of tsarism, called for economic reform to facilitate capitalist development, and proposed that Russia be transformed into a parliamentary democracy on the lines of Britain or France.

Although they shared a common hostility to tsarism, unity between these opposition groups on most questions was precluded not only by profound differences of aims and outlook, but also by their very different conception of the road to change, differences sharpened by the difficulties of illegal work and exile, and by the very acute and inescapable problems of the course of the struggle itself.

Sharp differences also appeared within the ranks of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. From its very first Congress it became clear that there were two groups, each with its own, diametrically opposed, conception of what form the Marxist Party should take. The

first group wanted a loose, formless type of organisation on the lines of the British Labour Party and other Western Social-Democratic parties which they greatly admired. Their conception was one of aiming at a parliamentary capitalist republic in which the workers' representatives would become junior partners in a coalition headed by the bourgeoisie. They considered the peasantry to be a reactionary force.

The second group had a very different conception of the nature and role of the workers' Marxist party. Led by Vladimir Lenin, they emphasised that the Party should be a highly disciplined and centralised body of dedicated revolutionaries. They by no means considered that the forthcoming revolution, coming in the completely changed conditions of the twentieth century, could be a copy of previous bourgeois-democratic revolutions; they believed that the peasantry, in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class, was not at all 'reactionary' but had tremendous revolutionary potential. They considered that the proletariat could, with such an alliance, lead the democratic revolution, isolate the bourgeoisie, and advance rapidly towards socialism.

When a vote was taken at the Congress, the second group won the majority of votes. That is how the two groups came to be called 'Bolsheviks' and 'Mensheviks'—from the Russian words for 'majority' and 'minority' respectively. All the European parties showed similar differences at that time, with the emergence within them of 'Right' (reformist) and 'Left' (revolutionary) wings. In Russia both the exceptional sharpness of the conflict and the requirements of security, in conditions of illegality, led to an organisational separation into two distinct parties.

All parties and all theories were to be subjected to the most searching test in the first great clash of rival imperialist powers that slaughtered millions, shook imperialism to its foundations, and sent Tsarist Russia crumbling in ruins: the war of 1914-18.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The first world war was conducted between two major groupings of European powers (the U.S.A. only came in towards the end). On the one side the main participants were Britain, France and Russia. On the other, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Whatever reasons were put forward by apologists for either side, the main reasons for the war were economic and quite clear to the Marxists. As capitalism developed into its final stage of monopoly-capitalism, imperialism, every imperialist power sought eagerly for colonies in the

countries which were rich in raw materials but backward in economic development—principally Africa and Asia. The main imperialist powers divided the whole world out between them. But as capitalism developed unevenly in different countries, some had not been strong enough at the time of the 'sharing' to get any, or many, colonies. Becoming stronger, they demanded more. The established colony-owning powers resisted. This—and not any fine talk about 'British democracy', 'German culture', or 'French civilisation'—was the real issue of the war.

All the European socialist parties, organised in the Second International, had foreseen the coming war and diagnosed its character. Under pressure of revolutionary elements like Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, they had adopted resolutions calling on all affiliated parties to resist the preparations for war and to try to prevent it. Should these efforts fail, and war nevertheless break out, they were pledged to oppose their own governments and to utilise the social and economic crisis which would result from the war to bring about the overthrow of capitalist class rule.

But when the war came, most of the right-wingers who led the various labour parties, betrayed these correct resolutions. The German, British and French labour leaders took part in the wave of chauvinism, inciting their followers to join up and shoot down their fellow-workers in other countries, and voting in their parliaments in favour of the war budgets of the bourgeois governments.

But there were exceptions: true Marxists and working-class fighters who remained faithful to the decisions of the International. One of the very few Parties which stood absolutely solid against the war was the Bolshevik Party, though minority groups in other parties did the same, such as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany (both were jailed) and the internationalists such as Andrews, Jones and Bunting in the South African Labour Party.

With the exception of the Bolsheviks, the anti-Tsarist parties in Russia were infected with war fever. They decided to 'put the revolution in cold storage' and support the tsarist government's war effort.

But as the war continued, it became more and more clear to the Russian masses that the war was not in their interests.

The tsarist government and its generals poured millions of ill-equipped, ill-armed men (the 'Russian steamroller') into vast and suicidal battles on the Eastern Front. Incompetence, corruption and backwardness of industry and transport meant that the men were often ill-fed or even starving in the trenches, armed with defective weapons, and poorly led. As the war dragged on, Russia stood on the brink of disaster. Tsarism was completely discredited among the masses. The

reformist parties, though forced to press for an end to tsarism, advocated continuation with the imperialist war. Only the Bolsheviks voiced the demand for an end not only to tsarism, but also to the war itself, and the capitalist system which had bred it.

By the beginning of 1917 the Russian soldiers began to show which view they supported. In the absence of parliamentary elections, they 'voted with their feet', deserting the front in tens of thousands.

THE REVOLUTION OF FEBRUARY 1917

The vast crisis erupted in the revolution of February 1917, which marked the end of the tsarist autocracy.

The chaos at the front, the partial breakdown in the country, the utter inability of the regime to cope with the rapidly developing crisis led to the most widespread dissatisfaction. The Tsar, Nicholas, and his wife were deeply under the influence of a charlatan religious fanatic, the monk Rasputin whose power was such that he could make or break Prime Ministers and Cabinets. All except extreme monarchists and members of the 'Black Hundreds' (the Russian fascist organisation) agreed on one thing—the Tsar must go.

On February 27th, 1917, amid universal rejoicing, the Tsar abdicated.

Everyone was agreed—the Tsar must go, and go he did. But, what next? On this there was no such general agreement.

Immediately, as in 1905, the masses began forming revolutionary Soviets of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies, which had their central committee in Petrograd, and to a large extent commanded the loyalty of the people of the country. It was plain that the Soviets had many of the characteristics of a revolutionary government.

But at the same time, the right-wing socialists and bourgeois elements established their own organ of government—the Provisional Committee of the State Duma (a sort of Advisory Board without legislative powers, permitted by the Tsarist government from 1906 to 1917). This Committee was headed by a member of the Black Hundreds, Rodzyanko. But it also contained Mensheviks like Chkheidze and the Socialist-Revolutionary Kerensky.

Thus, for a while there was in effect a dual power in the capital, whose name had been changed from St. Petersburg to Petrograd; two rival governments, each with its own policy.

At the time of the February revolution a good deal of confusion prevailed. Most of the members of the Petrograd Soviet were not Bolsheviks but Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries. Therefore there were many crucial areas on which both the Soviet and the

Provisional Committee agreed, because these Parties were in favour of Russia taking the capitalist road of development, agreed with the idea of continuing to participate in the imperialist war, and opposed radical measures of land reform. The masses of workers and peasants, filled with joy at the overthrow of the Tsar, still had confidence in the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois parties, and in the right-wing socialists.

Therefore at first the Soviets supported the Provisional Government, and called on the workers to do the same. This was a betrayal of the revolution, a betrayal of the interests of the masses. For a while, they could get away with it. One of the main reasons for this was that the Bolshevik Party—though many of its members had played an outstanding role in the February revolution—was scattered and disorganised; many of its members had been conscripted into the army, or were in prison or in exile.

But things began rapidly to change.

In March, the Party newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) which had been suppressed by the Tsarist government, resumed publication.

The Bolshevik Central Committee came together to assess the situation after the fall of the Tsar. Lenin was in exile in Switzerland, and there was no way of his returning home immediately in the wartime conditions which still prevailed. Nevertheless he studied the situation closely and sent the C.C. detailed theses arguing that the bourgeois Provisional Government could not possibly satisfy the demands of the masses for peace, bread and land. He urged that the struggle should go on, the workers should establish Soviets everywhere, see that the masses were armed and win over the soldiers and peasants to the cause of socialism.

Through the secretary of the Swiss Socialist Party, negotiations were opened with the German ambassador to allow Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries to travel through Germany in a sealed train to return home (the British and French governments refused to allow them to pass through their countries). On April 3rd in the evening, after a long journey through Germany, Sweden and Finland, Lenin arrived at Petrograd. A vast gathering of workers and soldiers came to the station to meet him.

From then on events began rapidly to move towards their climax in October, the 'ten days that shook the world'.

In succeeding articles we shall survey the events of those ten days, and consider what effect the Great October Socialist Revolution has had on the subsequent course of human history.