

# 1. About the Russian Revolution of 1917

## The Russia's Maturity Level

Traditional concepts of Russian history, still current in historiography today, point to the Emancipation Reform of 1861, which abolished serfdom, as the start of a half-century of economic, social, and political change. This reform, however, was not the consequence of a peasant groundswell; rather, it arose from Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War of 1853–1856. The war laid bare the developmental chasm that existed between Russia and countries such as Britain and France. It was apparent in the economy, in transportation, and in the military. But it was especially obvious in the realm of education, culture, and social life.

The substance of the defeat the country had suffered was overshadowed soon enough by fresh events. These included the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, which significantly weakened Austria, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. The latter had curtailed the might of France, in the process clearing the way for Prussia to create the modern German Empire. An entirely new constellation of powers thus came into being, characterized by the signal rise of the Germans, and temporarily obscuring the drop in power and influence of Russia. This loss of standing was soon reflected in Russia's catastrophic defeat in its war with Japan (1904–1905) and in a sharp loss of influence in Europe, particularly in the Balkans.

As Dietrich Geyer noted, in a monograph on Russian imperialism excellent for its time, the freedom accorded Russian peasants was far from adequate to allow for the modernization of Russian life.<sup>5</sup> It was not just that the Emancipation Reform had not gone far enough; other requisites for the development of a modern market economy and society were also missing. These included a stable, convertible currency; a balanced state budget; a mature banking network; opportunities for loans; an adequate legal basis to establish a market economy; willingness on the part of the populace to adopt a new lifestyle and play an active role in the market; a developed railway system; water transport; and other factors. But what took place in Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century's did not represent the birth of a market economy. Rather, it involved the transition from a system in which serfdom and aristocracy were

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5 Geyer Dietrich, *Der Russische Imperialismus: Studien über der Zusammenhang von innerer und auswärtiger Politik* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck a. Ruprecht, 1977).

bound as intimately as communicating vessels to one dominated by a multisector economy. Over time, market relationships gradually gained in strength and reach, but they still failed to permit the progress toward modernization vital for the formation of the economy, and for the social and educational organization of the populace. This was testified to by low population numbers and social segmentation inadequate for a modern society. The populace also lacked political experience and organization. Meantime, Russia's share in the global economy was vanishingly small compared to that of the other superpowers of the time: the USA, England, Germany, France, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The logical conclusion would seem to be that the essential components of a modern society had failed to develop in Russia pre-1917. But this can only be confirmed by further research, for these requisites were partially in place in the leading cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as in the towns of central Russia, the central Volga watershed, the Urals, Kiev, Kharkov, and Odessa. This still left seventy to eighty percent of the population wanting for adequate development.

It is in this context that we must approach Lenin's thesis on Russia's ripeness for a socialist revolution, a concept which was featured prominently in communist and left-wing literature in the twentieth century, and which came under a great deal of criticism. Lenin founded his maturity thesis upon primarily political arguments, setting to one side the niceties of social issues and the economy. Originally, he invoked a 'lack of revolutionary spirit' on the part of the Russian bourgeoisie, which would enable an alliance to form between peasants and the proletariat and lead to a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and to 'building socialism'. But Trotsky likely had the greater portion of the truth. He noted that disparities between the interests of workers and peasants would allow them to rule jointly only with the support of victorious revolutions in developed countries—the potential for whose occurrence he grossly overestimated. In practice, Lenin's concept suppressed the political independence of the peasantry from the outset.<sup>6</sup>

His notion of the worker, one fully embraced by Soviet historiography, warrants close scrutiny. Available data shows that the number of industrial workers in pre-revolutionary Russia was well under ten million, and during the 1920 civil war this figure dropped even more precipitously—according to Trotsky's estimate, to seven- or eight-hundred thousand.<sup>7</sup> Before the revolution, most

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6 This particularly refers to suppressing peasant soviets and peasant organizations after November 1917, unequal voting rights for peasants, etc.

7 Information indicated by Trotsky at the IXth Congress of RKP/b (Stenograficheskiy otchet, Moscow. Gospolitizdat, 1960, s. 93).

industrial workers had maintained strong ties to the countryside, and were socially positioned midway between the factory and the field. The last batch to come streamed into the cities just before World War I as a result of the Stolypin's reforms.<sup>8</sup> There was already an undeniable presence of industrial workers in large industrial and urban centres such as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Donbas, and Baku. But many in the urban lower echelon might be better classed as urban *plebeians*: in addition to the industrial workforce, unskilled and seasonal workers, craftsmen, the business and transport rank-and-file and minor intellectuals also played a major role. During the First World War, the stratum was reinforced by the presence of soldiers in garrison towns, navy men and women, and the young men who had replaced the soldiers in some industrial works. Many of these people were partially illiterate, some entirely so, and their understanding of politics was minimal. When we speak about this lower stratum of city dwellers as a significant force in the Russian Revolution of 1917, we must understand them as plebeians, and the revolution as a plebeian revolution, without intending the label pejoratively.

## **The Russian Revolution of 1917 and Its Causes. Russian Marxism and the Bolshevics as a Political Party**

Investigations into the immediate causes of the 1917 revolution in the older literature were strongly coloured by the political and ideological exigencies of the time. There is no doubt today that the revolution ignited spontaneously from the tinder of grudges held by soldiers and workers in St. Petersburg, joined by those of other towns and regions, by the Baltic Navy, and later, by soldiers on the front lines. Despite this reality, Soviet historians portrayed the revolution as the well-planned outcome of Bolshevik policy, allowing spontaneity only a minor role. Even liberal and left-wing historiography that was not outright Bolshevik, and that emphasized the spontaneity of the revolutionary outburst itself, attributed its subsequent radicalization to Bolshevik actions. Some pointed to the Germans and 'German' money supplied to the Bolsheviks.<sup>9</sup> Conservative Russian historians implicated the Freemasons—a code word for liberal politicians inside and

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8 Bonwetsch B., *Die russische Revolution 1917: Eine Sozialgeschichte von der Bauernbefreiung 1861 bis zum Oktoberumsturz*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 71–79.

9 Regardless of the fact that this was said to relate chiefly to the Czarina and her circle during the war.

outside the Duma—and attributed the revolution and its radicalization to external politics hostile to ‘Russia.’

These interpretations are challenged when one explores the events of the time in greater depth. As noted, government policy gave rise to the grudges of workers and soldiers that served as the flashpoint for the revolution; so did the despotic attitude of the owners of Putilov, St. Petersburg’s largest machine works, and the shortage of bread in the stores of the city’s working-class districts. Even here though there is room for greater precision. In addition to the aforementioned causes, the unsuccessful conduct of the war had sapped the country’s capacity. By 1917, a major segment of Russian society knew that Russia had already lost the war, and that even a potential victory by the Allies would not bring the promised profit nor see Russia restored to its pre-war geographic extent. Since there was no point in continuing to fight, Russians became convinced that only the rapid conclusion of an armistice and peace would save the country from catastrophe. This gives some insight into why the Russian provisional government resisted separate peace negotiations with Germany. The Allies rejected peace with Germany and the Triple Alliance on any basis other than the latter’s defeat. The provisional government could not cope with this attitude, but by deciding to respect it in the end, it lost the chance to significantly influence domestic political events.<sup>10</sup>

These facts are not entirely decisive for assessing the nature of the Russian Revolution. Russia was a country, as we have noted, which lacked an economic and social structure adequate for establishing an industrialized society. Nor, on the same basis, could a political democracy based upon civil freedoms take root. The revolution did not ameliorate this situation; indeed it exacerbated it in many respects, particularly when it came to the standard of living and respect for civil rights. From the Marxist standpoint, even in its Russian incarnation, this meant long-term priority for tasks the Russian Marxists had defined even before the revolution as ‘bourgeois democratic’. Socialism became a realistic goal only once prerequisites were set in place to overcome capitalism ‘at the level of the social productivity of work’. The wait for these prerequisites to be met, as we now know, stretched to more than a century. ‘Socialist concepts’ could and did influence the manner and methods by which problems were resolved in Russia. But they could not in any principled way change their content. The radicalization of the revolution and the Bolsheviks’ seizing of power did not alter the basic tasks the country

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10 However, it may be claimed that the policy exercised by the Allied powers did not allow for any other option.

had to resolve; rather, the result was a faulty assessment of economic and social reality and the opportunities for initiating change.<sup>11</sup>

This is key in understanding the events of 1917. The March revolution was not the starting point of a bourgeois revolution that 'expanded into' a socialist revolution, as Soviet ideology held. It was instead a confluence of civil and plebeian revolutions whose guiding ideas determined the developmental level of the economy, the education of citizens and the social relations between them. These two revolutionary streams were separated by the fact that different social strata had formulated their goals, and by the variant ideas and methods to be used in meeting them.

Because Russian capitalism and its social structures were inadequately developed, the civil stream came into the revolution relatively weak. Its social and political base was narrow and its national composition fragmented. Its impact was made chiefly at the level of cities and national regions, and only to a minor extent beyond those borders. From the very outset, the plebeian stream of the revolution was broader-based and more radical than the civil stream. Its members, as noted, were workers, or were drawn from the amorphous lower classes of the cities, or from the ranks of soldiers in the city garrisons, or of sailors serving in the navy. The movement was clustered around city soviets, and was characterized by the radicalism it demanded of members, a radicalism which cared less and less for the current state of things in the country. It was also distinguished by the blurred focus and short-lived nature of its interests. The interests expressed by members from the lower strata of the cities differed stridently from those of the village, and this was reflected in the structure of the soviets. There were worker and soldier soviets, and there were farmer soviets. Two centres came into being, each independent, each spanning the country. These two centres had originally been able to collaborate because each had a strong presence of moderate socialists willing to work with liberals. Support for them grew out of the initial mood of the soldiers and minor urban intellectuals.

The radical stream comprised Bolsheviks, albeit not exclusively. They strove to anchor their influence with the industrial workforce and urban plebeians. In St. Petersburg, they also sought out sailors working for the Baltic navy and soldiers in garrison units. They were distinguished from the moderate socialists by their opposition to the war, with which they could make no headway in an alliance with the liberals, or with Russia's war allies, as has been discussed. The

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11 We are setting aside the question of whether "socialism" as understood by Russian Marxists and, in particular, by the Bolsheviks, was attainable.

moderate socialists were therefore unable to distance themselves from the liberals' war policy, causing their defeat in the soviets and in the revolution itself.

In autumn of 1917, after a failed attempt of a military coup by Lavr G. Kornilov aimed at suppressing the revolution in the key centre of St. Petersburg, the civil revolution was overtaken by a plebeian revolution. The government was now headed by a new segment of society, one that did not understand the prospects or capabilities of the revolution, that totally lacked experience, and had no knowledge or factual qualifications needed to conduct a war or manage the country. Its power was solidified by its brutality, by the mass terror it employed against opponents, real or imagined, by the zeal with which it cast off the burden of war even at the cost of losing it, and dismantled the old, now disintegrated army. It was shored as well by removing the explosive peasant issue. The government began forthwith to divide farms, no matter its impact on crops or the food production market, and to persecute the wealthier peasants—the 'Kulaks'. It also sidestepped the national issue by allowing, or at least not blocking, the origin of new national states within the former empire. This loosened prior restrictions and allowed the country to take shape as a single, pan-national power and to win the civil war over its opponents, whose power lay strictly in the border regions of the state.

But the Russian revolution cannot be discussed simply in terms of the processes and events which led to it. Beyond having brought a socialist party to power—however we may evaluate its brand of 'socialism'—it is also noteworthy for being the first revolution to take place in a backward country far removed from having the social and educational structure of an industrial society. In hindsight, the discussion of 'bourgeois' versus 'socialist' society in that era and later was timeless. It obscured the real substance of the thing: a new type of revolution had been born that was typical for underdeveloped countries where the prerequisites for a modern civil society were lacking. It was in countries such as these that the disparity between development and lack of development, between the developed world and the underdeveloped world, was worked on, and this proved to be defining for a pivotal century.

## **The Russian Revolution as a Plebeian Revolution**

The victory of the plebeian revolution in Russia in 1917 brought no change to the long-term tasks the country had before it, but it did usher in radical transformations to the social environment, and to the ideology and methods used to carry out these tasks. Russia's ties to the external world also changed radically, as did relationships within areas of the country. Its Western part, home to 30 million

people with a European orientation—Russian Poland, the Baltics and Finland—were lost. St. Petersburg, both the product and the source of Russian Europeanization, was deprived of its role as an administrative and cultural centre. The majority of the country's centre of power and culture was distanced from Europe both socially and in how people thought about it, and in terms of space and transportation, as well. For their part, the newly created states on the western border of Russia had no interest in maintaining Soviet Russia's influence, now threatening to their existence in the free European space. This reinforced the provincial background, traditional culture, and impact of lifestyle of Russia's Asian population. Further barriers sprang up, to rapid economic development and modernization that later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were behind an acute state of crisis in the Soviet system.

Changes to social power were crucial, and for making it impossible to create a political and social system like those of the West, civic politicians held the Bolsheviks to blame. But the roots of the divide were in fact well in place prior to November 1917. They lay in the weakness and immaturity of the civic society, as attested to by those powers' defeat in the civil war, which could not be forestalled even with support from the Allies. Long before decisions about the civil war had to be made, most recognized civic politicians had fled the country. It thus remains uncertain whether the outcome would have differed had the Bolsheviks' opponents won the war. That the regime that did arise was authoritarian was not an exclusively Russian matter; it stemmed as well from the lack of stability of a long line of successor states to Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Germany, in the east, the centre, and the south of Europe.

The Bolsheviks themselves were originally aware that Russia was underdeveloped, an awareness that formed the basis for Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov and other Bolshevik representatives to take a stand against an exclusively Bolshevik government and strive instead for a coalition of socialist parties in November 1917. Lenin also noted the 'bourgeois content' of the revolution at the Eighth Bolshevik Congress in discussing measures taken by the post-revolution Soviet government,<sup>12</sup> and the subject also came up in a number of statements he made in 1921 justifying the need for introducing the NEP.<sup>13</sup>

His thinking on the issue was not impromptu. It was built upon the preceding course of the Russian revolutionary movement, which formulated its objectives

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12 *Vos' moj sjezd RKP/b: Protokols.* Moscow., Gospolitizdat, 1959, pp. 20–21.

13 The abbreviation for the New Economic Policy, justifying the need for market relationships within the Soviet Union.

in terms of Marxist ideology without regard to the country's underdevelopment. From its very start in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this brand of Marxism deviated substantially from the European version. First came Lenin's statement claiming capitalism as the basis of the Russian economy,<sup>14</sup> thereby opening the opportunity to paint specific events and phenomena caused by the country's lack of development as characteristic manifestations of capitalism. In the West, Marxists maintained that all the capitalist development options needed to be exhausted before socialism could take hold. It could not do so within a single country, they believed, but only after the majority of developed capitalist countries had ascended to a new developmental level. In Russia's case, Lenin was satisfied with finding that capitalism, or the 'market', had become the predominant component in the economy, taking that as proof of the country's maturity.

European socialists believed that before a worker government could take power, workers must become the dominant component of society. But in Russia, the social base was too narrow to accommodate this concept of worker government. As of March 1917, the Bolsheviks had approximately 40,000 members and insisted on the party's selectivity,<sup>15</sup> and their concept of a party was a de facto national concept that saw in the party an association of 'the chosen'. Lenin emphasized the position of the intelligentsia, assigning it the role of creator and bearer of socialist ideas he denied workers.<sup>16</sup> The party concept was crowned by the notion of 'democratic centralism, a principle which placed the 'bearers of socialism' in a hierarchy which subordinated lower bodies to higher bodies, and which bound those lower bodies to fulfil unconditionally the dictates of the higher. A hierarchy of positions and people is a factor in most political parties. But its Bolshevik conception guaranteed no room for democratic party decision-making. Many decisions were strictly subject to secrecy, often even from party members, and not always in connection with illegal goings-on. Then there was the conflict noted between ideology and social reality. This became a pervasive element in Bolshevik thinking, leaving attempts to resolve particular social situations short of means. Paradoxically, the

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14 Here we refer especially to Lenin's work *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

15 They could not maintain this concept in 1917. Statistically, the party grew by a multiple of five that year, with about 200,000 members.

16 We intend here Lenin's "*What Is To Be Done?*" and his "*Where To Begin?*" from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lenin stated that workers by their own effort may create only "trade union consciousness", while the intelligentsia is charged with creating and introducing a socialist consciousness into the workers' movement.



Bolsheviks produced a socialist vision without creating socialist relationships in daily practice.

Let us examine in this context the special characteristics of the social structures that grew out of the Bolshevik revolution. They were typical for Russia as well as for other underdeveloped countries that took the Russian revolution as their model. In all these cases, power was seized by members of the poorly structured lower strata of society. The army and its officer corps played an active role in some of these revolutions, which is an important exception. The corps had its own structure built on organizational experience and discipline, unidirectional though it was, that was transferred to the social structure. At the highest ranks were usually revolutionaries and functionaries, and revolutionary organizations. These people did not necessarily belong to the lower social strata but, as their predecessors in revolutionary Russia had, they lacked the knowledge and experience needed to resolve social and factual issues to do with governance.<sup>17</sup>

A negative of the Russian development was that those few members from the country's educated class were excluded from participation on a mass basis, left with only an 'auxiliary role' instead of being able to take part in running the state, cities and towns as economic and social leaders. Only a handful was spared, 'experts' and artists willing to heed the party's notion of how they should proceed professionally and creatively. Even at that, the party engineered poorer conditions for their accommodation, their supplies, and their personal safety. It subjected them to despotic rule at both the central and local levels, restricted the space available for their artistic or scientific work, and frequently limited the education of younger members of their families. All told, this drastically curtailed the influence of the educated in the Soviet state after 1917.

The new source of power relied instead upon plebeian society, which had little structure. This translated into a power base that was adequately broad but wanted for structure and was therefore ill-prepared to govern. Under such conditions, the vertical layers of Russian society were based not on assets or knowledge, but mostly on power. They evolved based on a hierarchy of authority, economic and social functions whose structural skeleton was the highly decentralized, often militarized state system. That reliance upon the plebeian strata was preferred strongly marked the political culture. No social customs, no culture of governance inherited was taken into account; that inheritance had derived in any event

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17 We are setting aside the special case of revolutions influenced by religious considerations, typical for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and for Islamic countries. There, social and political solutions are tied to religious concepts and have a different developmental framework than do revolutions following from Russian examples.

from an autocratic state. Instead, there was a tendency to violent solutions and the dictates of power. Developed countries shunned collaboration with the governing powers in resolving economic, social, and cultural issues.

If we speak specifically of Soviet Russia and the social patterns to which it gave rise, we discover the vertical stratification of society was based almost entirely on the positions of individuals and groups within the power structure, that is, on their positions in public administration. Key in this was the ranking of party functions. The party stood over all other entities and organizations in the Soviet state, and in this respect, it was in its very origins a party state. The vast majority of members of the new social elite were in fact plebeians who had neither acquired nor strived to acquire private assets. Their newly-won social position was based upon the collective right to manage state-owned or other public assets. The ability of individuals to use these assets corresponded to their position within the hierarchy of power and social functions. This made the power vertical the base for social stratification in post-revolution society, something reinforced when Stalin and Molotov began to build the party vertical as a bureaucratic vertical. The actions and social standing of those in its lower ranks depended entirely upon the party bodies. Any loss of function made for a precipitous drop in social position, and this was true not only for those at the lower levels of the ranking system. It applied as well to those in the upper echelons of the power hierarchy who, in times of discord, frequently tumbled from their perch at the top down to the level of ordinary citizens or prisoners, or even found themselves facing a firing squad. This was the fate that befell those in the USSR who opposed the Communist Party or who fell out of grace with Stalin.

This type of society, growing as it did out of a plebeian revolution, was doubtless predestined from the start to give rise to authoritarian and totalitarian power structures. The social stratum now in control of government had no roots in any traditional counterpart. Rather, it built its position mostly if not entirely by controlling the power pyramid and its individual levels. Originally, it was possible to see in this pyramid the modernization of a vertical social structure, since it did enable movement and changes in its composition. This modernization connected the governing stratum to vertical networks of social and interest groups, but it was negative in many ways and had many negative outcomes.

The new government rendered the existence of 'non-Bolshevik' political parties and Communist 'deviations' impossible, thus leaving no one in opposition, but it did not forget the existence of interest-based, professional, or other public organizations. Members of the governing party had helped establish and operate these organizations in the past. They could therefore sense their potential social

role, and used them to anchor their influence in society. The network composed of these organizations thus became an idiosyncratic replacement for a true 'civil society', assumed some of its functions, and bound a significant portion of the citizenry to the existing powers, making of them an organized 'backup' resource. Post-revolution organizations of this type functioned in society as further agents in the 'modernization' of authoritarian power structures, creating tools for mass influence over a large segment of the population in a scope that had been unavailable to earlier authoritarian systems and regimes. In a century characterized by mass political movements, this took on extraordinary importance. Recent historiography and political science rightly emphasize the conflict between the Soviet model of society and the interests of large segments of the population. But to gloss over the ability of Soviet-style political regimes to ensure and mobilize mass support from a large segment of their population for extended periods would be to gravely misapprehend the nature of these regimes.

