

# O legado histórico da Revolução de Outubro

## *The Historical Legacy of the October Revolution*

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**Resumo:** Hoje, o legado histórico da Revolução de Outubro é profundamente ambíguo, mas um elemento claramente se destaca: Outubro fornece o exemplo de um partido que teve a coragem e a desenvoltura para proporcionar aos trabalhadores da Rússia a liderança que eles precisavam e queriam a fim de salvar da derrota a revolução que começou em fevereiro de 1917. A Revolução de Outubro não foi um salto quiliasta na utopia, como é muitas vezes foi retratado. Foi, de fato, uma decisão difícil, adotada depois de muita hesitação e pesagem das alternativas. Os que realizaram a Revolução de Outubro fizeram-no em plena consciência das probabilidades temíveis que enfrentavam. Mas eles também sabiam que não agir significaria a derrota certa e renovada escravização do povo pelas classes privilegiadas. Hoje, quando a humanidade mais do que nunca é confrontada com a dura escolha de “socialismo ou barbárie”, as forças progressistas podem procurar inspiração para seu pensamento estratégico na coragem e na determinação dos Revolucionários de Outubro de 1917.

**Palavras-chave:** Outubro 1917; Bolcheviques; Legado.

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**Abstract:** The historical legacy of the October Revolution today is deeply ambiguous. But one element stands out clearly: October provides the example of a workers' party that had the courage and resourcefulness to provide Russia's workers with the leadership that they needed and wanted in order to save from defeat the revolution that had begun in February 1917. The October Revolution was not a chiliastic leap into utopia, as it has often been portrayed. It was, in fact, a difficult decision, reached after much hesitation and weighing of the alternatives. Those who made the October Revolution did so in full awareness of the fearful odds they faced. But they knew also that not to act would mean certain defeat and renewed enslavement of the people to the privileged classes. Today, when humanity more than ever is confronted with the stark choice of "socialism or barbarism," progressive forces can look for inspiration in their strategic thinking to the courage and determination of the revolutionaries of October 1917.

**Keywords:** October 1917, Bolsheviks, legacy.

## Introdução

The question of the legacy of the October Revolution for our time is not an easy one. For that revolution was followed, within less than a decade, by the rise of Stalinism, one of the twentieth century's most oppressive regimes. And in the end, Soviet society opted for the restoration of capitalism, or, at least, it proved incapable of resisting it.

As part of the revolution's positive legacy, one could mention the Soviet Union's decisive contribution to the defeat of fascism in the Second World War and the space that its competition with the capitalist world opened for anti-imperialist struggles. And the very existence of an alternative economic system that advertised itself as socialist undoubtedly contributed to the bourgeoisie's fear of the workers' movement, making capitalists more amenable to concessions when facing pressure from workers.

But those elements of October's legacy are not without ambiguity. For the "third period" policy that Stalin imposed upon the Comintern facilitated Hitler's rise to power. And his bloody purge of the Red Army's officer corps on the eve of the war, as well as his many strategic errors, greatly increased the price of victory for the Soviet people. As for third-world struggles, Soviet support was, in fact, quite selective and always subordinate to the bureaucratic state's narrow geopolitical interests. Moreover, it came with conditions that did not favour the socialist development of liberated countries. Finally, although the Soviet Union's existence undoubtedly made the threat of socialism more tangible to the bourgeoisie, its totalitarian regime also provided capital's ideologists with a most potent argument against socialism.

The ambiguous nature of this legacy reflects the contradictory nature of the Soviet system itself, which was neither socialist nor capitalist but an incoherent, and ultimately unviable, mixture of elements drawn from both systems. Such was the analysis of the Left Opposition to Stalinism, ultimately confirmed by history.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, one important element of the Revolution's legacy that is not marked by ambiguity. It can be summed in two words: "They dared". The Bolsheviks dared to provide the Russian workers and peasants with the leadership that they desired and that the circumstances demanded that they, as a genuine workers' party, provide. As such, the October revolution, despite very different circumstances, can still serve as an inspiration to progressive political forces.

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<sup>2</sup> For this analysis, see L. Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*.

That legacy, however, requires some explanation. For what the Bolsheviks dared to do is rather different than what is often believed. Contrary to a widely held view, the Bolsheviks' decision to take power at the head of the soviets in October 1917 was not motivated by some ideological project, the expression of their chiliastic aspiration to realize the socialist dream. It was not, as some contemporary Russian historians have put it, the expression of a desire to carry out a "socialist experiment" on Russian society.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than a millenarian leap into utopia, the decision to overthrow the Provisional Government, dominated by representatives of the propertied classes, was the conclusion of a fundamentally rational process, in the sense of a careful weighing of means and ends. And it was not taken lightly, but after considerable hesitation, since it was clear to all that it meant civil war under very unfavourable odds.

The immediate and the main goal of the October Revolution was to forestall a counterrevolution that threatened to wipe out the democratic gains and promises of the February Revolution. It would have kept Russia involved in the imperialist slaughter of the world war and inflicted the bloody vengeance of the offended propertied classes on the workers and peasants.

As for socialism, the Bolsheviks were, of course convinced socialists. But all currents in Russian Marxism were agreed that Russia lacked the conditions for socialism: it was a poor, overwhelmingly peasant society, with a small working class, however militant and class-conscious. To be sure, there was the hope that the October Revolution would encourage workers in more developed countries to rise up against the war and against capitalism, thereby opening broader social perspectives for Russia. But that was a hope, not a certainty. The October Revolution would have taken place even had that hope not existed.

Historians have laid the blame for the civil war on the Bolsheviks and on the October revolution, which, they argue, diverted Russia from its "normal" path of development, which would have been toward a liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> But the present article argues that the Bolsheviks' and their worker supporters' path to October was, in fact,

<sup>3</sup> [http://rushistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Koncepcia\\_final.pdf](http://rushistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Koncepcia_final.pdf) (consulted May 9, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> See for example, historian O. Figes' course outline: "For the Bolsheviks the civil war was a necessary phase in the revolution, a violent intensification of the class struggle. Lenin was prepared for a civil war and perhaps even welcomed it as a chance to build his party's tiny power base. The effects of such a conflict were predictable: the polarization of the country into 'revolutionary' and 'counter-revolutionary' sides; the extension of the state's military and political power; and the use of terror to suppress dissent. In Lenin's view all these things were necessary for the victory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." [http://orlando-figes.info/section7\\_TheRussianCivilWar/index.php](http://orlando-figes.info/section7_TheRussianCivilWar/index.php) (consulted May 8, 2017).

marked by much caution, by a concern to avoid civil war, and, when that came to be seen as inevitable, by the desire to minimize its severity.<sup>5</sup>

The desire to avoid civil war was why most Bolsheviks, as well as most workers who were not party members, gave support to “dual power” in the first weeks and months following the February Revolution. This political arrangement entailed conditional support for a provisional government consisting of liberal representatives of the propertied classes, but which would be “overseen” by the soviets, councils elected by the workers and soldiers (the latter being overwhelmingly peasants).

For the Bolsheviks, as well as for most urbanized workers (that is, not those recently recruited from the peasantry into wartime industry), that position marked a radical retreat from their longstanding rejection of the bourgeoisie as a potential ally in the struggle against the autocratic tsarist regime. The rejection of political alliance with the bourgeoisie – or, formulated in positive terms, class independence – was the fundamental principle of Bolshevism, which had become the hegemonic political current among workers in the prewar upsurge of labour struggles. That political position was based upon the workers’ bitter experience of the intimate collaboration between the bourgeoisie and the autocratic state against their democratic and social aspirations.

Conditional support for the liberal provisional government thus expressed a willingness on the part of most Bolsheviks and workers to give the liberals a chance, since the propertied classes, however belatedly, appeared to have rallied to the revolution. That shift on the part of the propertied classes had facilitated the victory and consolidation of the revolution, which was relatively bloodless. “Dual power” thus offered the hope of avoiding civil war, even while it expressed the workers’ continued mistrust of the bourgeoisie. Hence, the “oversight” by the Soviet.

The subsequent rejection of that political arrangement by the Bolsheviks and the mass of workers in favour of the transfer of power to the soviets did not occur as some sort of automatic response to Lenin’s return to Russia and the publication of his April theses, another widely held misconception. Those theses were, in essence, a recall to the party’s traditional position, but reformulated under the new conditions created by imperialist war. If the position put forth in the April theses prevailed quite quickly, it was because the Bolsheviks, and a fast-growing number of workers, reached the conclusion on their own experience that that the propertied classes were hostile to the popular, democratic goals

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<sup>5</sup> The following analysis is based largely on my forthcoming *The Petrograd Workers in the Russian Revolution*, Haymarket Press, 2017.

of the February Revolution (democracy, land reform, a just, democratic cessation of the imperialist war, the eight-hour workday).

Already in April, the liberal government made clear its continued support for the war and its imperialist aims. Even before that, the bourgeois (non-socialist) press had begun a campaign aimed at turning the soldiers against the workers, falsely accused of pursuing narrow, greedy interests at the expense of war production, thus endangering the army at the front. At the same time, and not unrelated to the press campaign, workers began to suspect the industrialists of planning a hidden lockout through neglect or outright sabotage of production. Mass lockouts had long been a favourite weapon of the industrialists against the workers' movement. Meanwhile, the liberal ministers vetoed proposed measures to regulate the economy that was faltering badly under the burden of war. And soon, prominent political figures from the propertied classes began to call publicly to suppress the Soviets that were allegedly holding the government prisoner. Finally, under pressure from the allies, the government began preparations for a renewed military offensive, thus ending the de facto cease-fire on the eastern front.

As a result, already by early June, a majority of workers, at least in the capital and in certain industrial centres of central Russia, had rallied to the Bolsheviks' call for the transfer of power to the soviets, that is, for a decisive political break with the propertied classes and the formation of a government in which only the toiling classes, the workers and peasants, would be represented. To that extent, the Bolsheviks, and a fast-growing number of workers outside the party, had accepted the inevitability of civil war.

But they still had to confront the threat of civil war within the ranks of toiling classes themselves, since the moderate socialists, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), dominated most of the soviets outside the capital and had the support of the peasantry. And those parties were adamantly opposed to exclusion of the liberals from government.

The threat of civil war within the ranks of toiling classes themselves arose in the most concrete form in early July 1917, when the capital's workers, together with some units of the garrison, organized massive demonstrations with the aim of pressuring the Congress of Soviets, dominated by moderate socialists, to assume power directly on its own. The demonstrations were marked by the first serious bloodshed of the revolution, instigated by right-wing provocateurs, and they were followed by a wave of repression against the Bolsheviks but also non-party workers. These repression had the tacit, and to some extent also the expressed, approval of the moderate socialists.

This turn of event was completely unexpected and deeply traumatic for the Bolsheviks and their worker supporters. It left them without a clear vision of the way forward in face of the growing threat of counter-revolution. Following the July Days, the Bolshevik party formally adopted a new formula, proposed by Lenin: a “government of workers and the poorest peasants” – without mention of the soviets. In principle, it was a call to prepare an insurrection, bypassing the soviets, and even in opposition to them. But in practice, neither the party nor the workers who had participated in the July demonstrations could accept that position, since it meant acting against the popular masses who continued to support the moderate socialists, that is, it meant civil war within the ranks of the popular classes, or “revolutionary democracy” (as it was called at the time).

Of particular concern to workers was the hostility of the vast majority of the socialist intelligentsia<sup>6</sup> to the idea of soviet power. For the bulk of the left-leaning intelligentsia, itself only a minority of the educated, sided with the moderate socialists. And contrary to what is often thought, the Bolsheviks were an overwhelmingly plebeian party. The same is true of the other far-left party, the Left Social Revolutionaries, a predominantly peasant party that finally broke off from the SRs in September 1917 and in November 1917 formed a coalition Soviet government with the Bolsheviks. For the Bolsheviks, an overwhelmingly workers’ party, the prospect of having to run the state, and possibly also the economy, without the support of the educated elements of society was deeply worrying.

And so in early September 1917, in the wake of General Kornilov’s abortive counterrevolutionary uprising, when the Mensheviks and SRs appeared ready to give up on the liberals (their support for Kornilov was no secret to anyone), the Bolsheviks and their worker base breathed a sigh of relief: they no longer had to fear isolation, and the way now seemed open to move forward together with those among the toiling masses who supported the Mensheviks and SRs. And so the Bolsheviks offered their support as a loyal opposition, if the moderate socialists took power at the head of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets.

But Mensheviks and SRs would not break their alliance with the propertied classes. After some wavering, they gave their consent to a new provisional government

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<sup>6</sup> In common contemporary usage, *intelligentsia* meant people with higher, or even secondary, education, although the term sometimes also carried certain moral connotations. On the relationship between the workers and the intelligentsia, see my “The Intelligentsia and the Working Class in 1917”, in *Critique*, volume 14, no. 1, 1984, pp. 67-87.

that included bourgeois political actors, including several who were particularly odious to workers, such as S.A. Smirnov, a textile magnate who had only recently locked out the workers of his mills. Meanwhile, by the end of September, through the process of recall of delegates, the Bolsheviks had won majorities in the major soviets throughout Russia. That meant they would be the majority at the Congress of Soviets, which the moderate socialists reluctantly called for October 25.

Lenin, still hiding from arrest in Finland following the July Days, began to insist that the party's leadership prepare an insurrection. But in majority of the central committee wavered, some wanting to await the Congress of Soviets, others - a Constituent Assembly. It went so far as to burn one of Lenin's letters. But to await the soviet congress would have afforded the Provisional Government time to prepare, exposing the delegates to mass arrest, a fate that had befallen the Petrograd Soviet in December 1905. The government's repressions following the July Days left no doubt about the reality of that threat. And the same was true for a constituent assembly, were it to vote for soviet power. Besides, elections to a constituent assembly had already been postponed three times. It was an illusion to believe that the property classes would accept their exclusion from power. Their sympathy for general Kornilov's cause was well-known.

But one can understand the central committee's hesitation – an insurrection was a leap into the unknown that would undoubtedly unleash the still largely latent civil war in full force. However, one had to be blind to doubt that civil war was inevitable. Russian society was deeply and irretrievably polarized, and had been so for many years. The real question was only whether the workers and peasants would be able to organize themselves into a force capable of defending the revolution or whether they would be crushed by superior forces in a series of uncoordinated, isolated uprisings.

If in the end the Bolshevik leadership decided for insurrection, it was not mainly because of Lenin's personal authority, but rather under the pressure exerted by party's middle and lower ranks, to whom Lenin appealed. In the capital alone, the party numbered in October 1917 approximately 37,000 (with an additional 5800 Bolsheviks in the garrison). Three quarters of these were workers.<sup>7</sup> The party was "flesh of the flesh" of the working class, and that was its major source of strength.

As for the mass of workers outside of the party, they also wanted the soviets to take power. On the Sunday two days before the insurrection, the Petrograd Soviet organized

<sup>7</sup> Z.V. Stepanov, *Rabochie Petrograda v period podgotovki i provedeniya Oktyabr'skogo voorsuzhennogo vosstaniya*, , Leningrad, 1965, pp 46-7/

a “Day of the Soviet” in the form of mass indoor (to avoid premature street clashes) meetings across the city. This was aimed as a show of popular forces in support of soviet power. Even the Menshevik newspaper, bitterly hostile to Soviet power, wrote of that day: “And so it has begun. The Bolsheviks gave the signal for the “insurrection.” At the Sunday meetings, the masses of soldiers and workers, electrified by the “revolutionary” speeches of the Bolshevik leaders, vowed to ““come out” [*vystupat’*] at the first call of the Petrograd Soviet.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the popular mood was more complicated. The overwhelming mass of workers did want the soviets to take power and to be rid of the hated liberal government. But they were not about to take action themselves. Bolshevik activists reported that the mood among the masses was hesitant, “wait-and-see.”

This was in sharp contrast to the first five months of the revolution. In the February Revolution, in the April protests against the government’s war policy, in the movement for workers’ control to prevent a “creeping” lockout by the industrialists, and then in the July days, which were aimed at forcing the moderate socialists to take power at the head of the soviets – in all these actions, the initiative had come from the masses; the party had followed.

That changed after the July Days, which gave workers their first real taste of civil war and drove home their political isolation. And although the situation had evolved markedly since then - by the end of September the Bolsheviks held majorities in virtually all significant soviets in Russia - the non-Bolshevik press across the entire political spectrum was confidently predicting an even bloodier defeat for the workers, should they take action in October to force the question of power.

Another important source of hesitation was the looming threat of mass unemployment. The economic dislocation caused by the war, the liberal government’s rejection of meaningful state regulation of the economy, and the industrialists’ passive and active sabotage of their enterprises – all heightened the workers’ sense of insecurity and undermined their determination; while, at the same time, the deteriorating economic situation was the most compelling argument for an immediate insurrection.

And so the initiative in October fell to the party. And it was not as if Bolshevik workers were free of doubt themselves. But they possessed certain qualities, forged

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<sup>8</sup> *Rabochaya gazeta*, oct. 25, 1917. But not long after, the same newspaper would claim that the workers had not supported the insurrection, which the paper portrayed as a military coup carried out behind the people’s back.

over the prewar and wartimes years of intense struggle with both the autocracy and the industrialists. The older workers had also participated in the Revolution of 1905, although it was now the younger generation at the forefront.

A fundamental element Bolshevnik workers' worldview was their aspiration to class independence and its negative expression – an implacable hostility toward the bourgeoisie. These workers were adamant that workers' organizations - whether political, economic or even cultural – remain free of bourgeois influence in any form. And that attitude was not merely a mechanical reflection of Bolshevnik propaganda: it resulted from the workers' experience, when they faced an implacable bourgeoisie that collaborated intimately with the tsarist regime to thwart the workers' economic and political aspirations. If Bolshevism became the hegemonic current in the labour movement in the prewar years, it was because it corresponded to the worker's lived experience: bolshevism meant a rejection of political alliance with the bourgeoisie against the autocracy, a strategy promoted by the Mensheviks. It called instead for a worker-peasant alliance to make the democratic revolution.

Another characteristic of Bolshevnik workers, itself intimately related to their aspiration to class independence, was a deep sense of dignity, both individual and class dignity. This, too, was the product of years of intense collective struggle against both the autocracy and the industrialists. One of its most striking expressions was the demand for "polite address," a demand that figured in virtually all lists of strike demands.<sup>9</sup> This was a demand to be addressed by management in the respectful second person plural, rather than in the usual singular, a familiar form used for underlings, children or close friends. In its compilation of strike statistics, the Ministry of Internal Affairs listed that demand as political, presumably because it expressed the workers' rejection of their subordinate position in society.

Responding to a Menshevik's warning that the Bolshevniks would be crucified by the worker masses if they took power at the head of the soviets, since they lacked the knowledge and skills for managing state and economic affairs, a Bolshevnik worker responded: "The bourgeoisie fully understands the situation and has expressed itself very clearly in the words of Ryabushinskii<sup>10</sup>, who said that they had to wait until hunger seizes the working class by the throat and destroys all its gains. But while they are reaching for

<sup>9</sup> On this, see H. L. Haimson, "The Workers' Movement After Lena," in *Russia's Revolutionary Experience*, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2005, 179-85.

<sup>10</sup> P.P. Ryabushinskii – banker, textile magnate and well-known liberal political figure.

our throats, we will still be fighting, and if we perish, then it will be in an honest fight. But we will not back away from that fight.”<sup>11</sup>

The October insurrection was universally greeted by workers, even by most of the printers, who had traditionally been close to the Mensheviks. But immediately, the question of a coalition government of all the socialist parties arose. That idea drew the support of all Bolsheviks (with the exception of Lenin and Trotsky, who consciously stood aside), as well as by the workers’ organizations, which by then were all under Bolshevik leadership. This support for a broad left coalition reflected concern for unity of the toiling classes: civil war could not be averted, but a correlation of class forces that favoured the popular classes would limit its severity. And a coalition with the moderate socialists held out the prospect of the new government winning the support of the left-leaning intelligentsia.

But that was not to be. The negotiations on forming a left coalition soon broke down over the issue of Soviet power: the Bolsheviks, as well as the vast majority of workers outside the party, insisted on a government responsible to the Soviets, that is, a government that excluded the propertied classes from representation. But the moderate socialists argued that the Soviets were too narrow a political basis for a viable government. They continued to insist on the inclusion, albeit in somewhat camouflaged form, of representatives of the propertied classes. And the Bolsheviks, though a majority in the soviets, would be only a minority in the government. In essence, this was a demand to annul the October insurrection.

When the real nature of the differences became clear, workers’ support for an all-socialist coalition evaporated. Soon afterwards, the Left SRs joined the Bolsheviks in a coalition government, and a national peasant congress merged with the Central Executive Committee of Soviets. Unity was thus achieved, but from below.

This then is the meaning of “they dared”, as the legacy of the October Revolution. It was not a headlong “rush to utopia,” on the part of the Bolsheviks, but a party acting according to the French dictum “Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra” (Do what one must; what can happen will).

The subsequent history of the twentieth century is replete with examples of left parties that did not dare when they should have. One could begin with the German Social Democrats in 1918, who not only did not dare, but actively organized the revolution’s

<sup>11</sup> *Oktyabr’skaya revolyutsiya i fabzavkomy*, vol. I, Moscow, 1927, p. 208.

suppression. The refusal to dare is, of course, the very essence of social-democratic reformism that would defend workers' interests but only up to the point when that requires a serious confrontation with capital and its state. And so capital's power economic and political power is never seriously challenged.

Today, when the options are more than ever polarized, the legacy of October should speak to progressive political forces. More than ever, the alternatives today are, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, socialism or barbarism. And that calls on left forces to dare to think strategically, to develop strategies whose end goal is not some illusory restoration of a Keynesian welfare state, a strategy bound to fail and to further demoralize, but the revolutionary wresting of political and economic power from the bourgeoisie, as distant and as daunting as that goal might appear at the present moment.