

A Workers Guide to the 20th Century

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Amid carnage of World War I, the dream of socialism comes alive in Russia

The 20th century ended as it started, with crisis in the Balkans threatening to develop into world war, tempting some to wonder if humanity had really made any progress over the last hundred years. We have! But the advances have been the work of people whom official history ignores: the “troublemakers” who think society can and should operate in the interests of the majority. As Malcolm X said, “Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research.”

Read on and be rewarded!

These articles first appeared as a 5-part series in the *Freedom Socialist* newspaper from April 1999 to July 2000.

In this era of 30-second sound bites, the past struggles and achievements of common people can't compete with the quickstep parade of celebrity infotainment. So it's a safe bet that amid the current millennial hype, there will be little serious coverage of *the* key date of the century: March 8, 1917.

On this day, at the height of World War I, women workers in Russia launched a revolution that would open up a brand-new vista for the entire human race.

Rulingclass optimism proves hollow

As the century began, European imperialism was at its zenith. Britain was a vast empire with outposts on every continent, and nations like France and Germany also reaped the rewards of colonial plunder. Across the Atlantic, the United States had consolidated its hold on North America and was expanding into the Pacific and Latin America.

Piracy and pillage had given imperialist countries the

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capital to build huge factories which churned out commodities in unheard-of volumes. At the same time, most of the world's population lived in grinding poverty, with no spare cash to spend. This chilling contradiction, the infamous capitalist crisis of overproduction, triggered a deep recession in 1913.

The great European nations desperately needed to find new markets for their goods, but were hampered by ancient treaties which had carved up the globe into spheres of influence. They hit upon a horrifying new solution: world war, which broke out on July 28, 1914.

Europe was transformed into a vast killing field, where tens of thousands often perished in a day. And the Russian army — poorly equipped, ill-fed, sometimes shoeless, and made up largely of homesick peasant farmers — suffered an astounding 40 percent of the total Allied deaths. By 1917, Russia had lost all of its European territories.

Capitalism's weak link

The capitalist class in Russia "appeared in the world too late," as Leon Trotsky writes in his absorbing and definitive *History of the Russian Revolution*. A poor cousin dependent on bigger and better foreign capitalists, Russia's ruling class had no hope of meeting the workers' and peasants' growing demands for bread, land, and peace.

For the spirit of revolution to catch fire, it needed only a spark in the right place.

On International Women's Day — February 23 according to the calendar then in use in Russia and March 8 to most of the world — women textile workers from several factories in Petrograd, the capital, defied the cautions of labor leaders and went out on strike. They marched through the city, appealed to other workers for support, and got it; 90,000 workers left their jobs.

By the third day of the uprising, most of Petrograd was

in the streets, and strikers were clashing violently with police. On the fourth, decisive day, battalions of soldiers began to mutiny and came over, with their arms, to the workers.

On March 15, the despised Tsar Nicholas II "decided to abdicate the throne he no longer possessed," in Trotsky's words. The fantastically outmoded monarchy was finally dead, and Russia was a republic.

As it turned out, however, the revolution was just beginning. With the Romanov regime deposed, the question became: Who would hold power, and over what kind of state?

Who will rule?

At the time, most socialists, even the visionary V.I. Lenin, believed that it was impossible for a revolution to catapult a backward, autocratic society like Russia directly to a situation where workers took power in their own name and began to build socialism. It was thought that an intermediary stage, that of increased democratization under a capitalist government, was a given.

Trotsky disagreed. He argued that capitalism had essentially spent itself as a democratizing force, and that only with working people in charge would societies be able to move forward.

When the February revolution exploded, many respected Russian socialists, including Lenin and Trotsky, were exiled or in prison. The socialists who *were* present allowed capitalist politicians to take the lead in the new, hastily formed Provisional Government.

But a profound discrepancy existed here between form and reality. The Provisional Government was not representative of the people who were making the revolution, and much of the administration of the country was going on without it and around it. The body that *did* represent the

workers and peasants was the Petrograd workers' council, or soviet — whose leaders were those very same socialists who didn't think workers should take over!

This unstable situation of dual power could not last.

Enter Lenin, with a bombshell. Arriving from exile in April, he announced that the workers and peasants must toss out the bourgeoisie and move toward socialism; it was obvious to him that the Provisional Government was not about to meet even the most basic needs of the people.

This declaration caused quite a tempest in the Bolshevik Party. But Lenin was persistent and persuasive, and he quickly won his comrades over.

Planting the red flag: the majority in power

The initial resistance by Lenin's colleagues to his April Theses was not just due to a rigidity about theory. The Bolsheviks were a minority on the left scene, and by calling for the workers to seize power, they were committing themselves to guiding a titanic endeavor.

Somebody had to organize it. It was one thing for working people to spontaneously rise up against the decrepit, anachronistic regime of Nicholas II. It would be quite another for them to dislodge the Provisional Government and take control of the whole machinery of state for the first time in history — to be the first pioneers to embark on the socialist experiment.

This task would require a vanguard party, as described by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?* — a disciplined combat organization with a definite political program, whose members make decisions together democratically and then act together as one united force.

Lenin believed that the small size of the Bolshevik Party would not prevent it from leading the workers and soldiers to victory, because the people were more than ready to act. All they needed was direction, and this the party

could provide.

Trotsky agreed. When he arrived from the U.S. in May, the two revolutionaries immediately began a close collaboration.

The Bolsheviks agitated, prepared, and gained the firm allegiance of burgeoning workers' soviets across the country. In November, Lenin realized they were ready.

By then, support for the Bolsheviks was so strong, and the Provisional Government so isolated, that the conquest of the capital happened almost without a fight. On November 7 (October 25 on the Russian calendar), the revolutionaries began their successful siege of the Winter Palace. The government collapsed — as Trotsky writes, “going out like an oilless lamp.”

Lifting up the world's workers and oppressed

Immediate, sweeping change became the order of the day.

On the very night of victory, the new Soviet government declared its intention to make peace and grant land to the peasants. It shortly thereafter revoked all legislation restricting voluntary sexual conduct, including homosexuality. Divorce was made simple and abortion legalized. The vote for women was instituted, several years before it was won in Britain and the U.S., and the rights of national minorities were guaranteed. Elimination of the profit system, socialization of the country's wealth, and a brilliant flowering of science, technology, art, and culture were on the near horizon.

But with the Soviet triumph came swift attack by the major capitalist nations, which provoked years of civil war and paved the way for the rise of Stalinism.

The horrors that would later be instituted under Stalin, however, do not alter the fact that the Russian Revolution opened up a new door for humanity.

And not just for the Russian people. All around the world, the revolution directly inspired revolts by working people against their bosses and by colonized nations against their masters, changing the course of history fundamentally and forever.

What began in 1917 still lives — socialist revolution is the unfinished business of the wretched of the earth.

The harvest of WWI: revolt, counterrevolution, and new seeds of war

The triumph of the world's first socialist revolution in Russia in 1917 may have seemed improbable, but the effort to *build* and *sustain* that revolution raised the odds to nearly impossible. To realize a socialist democracy, material and cultural conditions had to be lifted to an ambitious new level — in a country that was backward, isolated, and devastated by World War I and then by counterrevolution.

More than 70 percent of the population could not read. Soviet industry stood at one-fifth of its prewar capacity, food reserves were gone, and the railway system was destroyed. Famine forced people into the countryside searching for food. By 1921, the population of Moscow was cut in half, and that of Petrograd reduced by 67 percent. Typhoid and other epidemics raged.

The Soviets looked west for help, expecting that the horrors of the imperialist war would spark revolutions and the creation of sister workers states in Europe. These states could then provide the USSR with support, trade, and technological exchange. But, fatefully, these revolts did not immediately occur.

Seeking breathing space, V.I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks

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