



Bolshevism

the road to
revolution

Alan Woods



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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Why Study the History of Bolshevism?

“In the year 1917, Russia was passing through the greatest social crisis. One can say with certainty, however, on the basis of all the lessons of history, that had there been no Bolshevik Party the immeasurable revolutionary energy of the masses would have been fruitlessly spent in sporadic explosions, and the great upheavals would have ended in the severest counter-revolutionary dictatorship. The class struggle is the prime mover of history. It needs a correct program, a firm party, a trustworthy and courageous leadership—not heroes of the drawing room and of parliamentary phrases, but revolutionists, ready to go to the very end. This is the major lesson of the October revolution.”¹

A revolution, by definition, represents such a turning point whereby the process of human development is given a powerful new impetus. Whatever one thinks of the Russian revolution of October 1917, there can be no question about its colossal historical significance. For more than three quarters of its existence, the 20th century was dominated by it. And even now, at the dawn of a new millennium, the world is still affected by its reverberations in a most fundamental way. The study of the Russian revolution therefore requires neither explanations nor apologies. It belongs to that category of great historic turning points that compels us to speak in terms of a before and an after, like Cromwell's revolution in England or the great French revolution of 1789-93.

There are many points of similarity between the October revolution in Russia and the great bourgeois revolutions of the past. At times these parallels seem almost uncanny, even extending to the personalities of the principal *dramatis personae*, such as the similarity between Charles I of England and Louis XVI of France and tsar Nicholas, together with their foreign wives. But for all the similarities, there is a fundamental difference between the Bolshevik revolution and the bourgeois revolutions of the past. Capitalism, unlike socialism, can and does arise spontaneously out of the development of the productive forces. As a system of production, capitalism does not require the conscious intervention of men and women. The market functions in the same way as an ant-hill or any other self-organising community of the animal world, that is to say, blindly and automatically. The fact that this takes place in an anarchic, convulsive and chaotic manner, that it is endlessly wasteful and inefficient and creates the most monstrous human suffering, is irrelevant to this consideration. Capitalism “works” and has been working—without the need of any human control or planning—for about two hundred years. In order to bring such a system into being, no special insight or understanding is called for. This fact has a bearing on the fundamental difference between the bourgeois and socialist revolution.

Socialism is different from capitalism because, unlike the latter, it requires the

conscious control and administration of the productive process by the working class itself. It does not and cannot function without the conscious intervention of men and women. *The socialist revolution is qualitatively different to the bourgeois revolution because it can only be brought about by the conscious movement of the working class.* Socialism is democratic or it is nothing. Right from the beginning, in the transitional period between capitalism and socialism, the running of industry, society and the state must be firmly in the hands of the working people. There must be the highest degree of participation of the masses in administration and control. Only in this way is it possible to prevent the rise of bureaucracy and create the material conditions for the movement in the direction of socialism, a higher form of society characterised by the total absence of exploitation, oppression and coercion, and therefore by the gradual extinction and disappearance of that monstrous relic of barbarism, the state.

There is also another difference. In order to conquer power, the bourgeoisie had to mobilise the masses against the old order. This would have been unthinkable on the basis of the declared aim of establishing the necessary conditions for the rule of Rent, Interest and Profit. Instead, the bourgeoisie put itself forward as the representative of the whole of suffering humanity. In the case of 17th century England it was supposed to be fighting for the establishment of god's kingdom on earth. In 18th century France it advertised itself as the representative of the rule of Reason. Undoubtedly, many of those who fought under these banners sincerely believed them to be true. Men and women do not fight against all the odds, risking everything, without that special motivation born of a burning conviction of the rightness of their cause. The declared aims in each case turned out to be pure illusion. The real content of the English and French revolutions was bourgeois and, in the given historical epoch, could have been nothing else. And since the capitalist system functions in the manner we have already described, it did not make much difference whether people understood how it worked or not.

The present work, unlike most others on the subject, does not set out from the view that revolutions belong only to the past. On the contrary. The present world situation provides ever more proof that the progressive role of capitalism is now completely exhausted. The material conditions for socialism have long been mature on a world scale. The possibility exists for creating a world of undreamed-of plenty. Yet countless millions live in abject misery. Looking round the world today, Lenin's book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* has a specially modern ring. The power of the big banks, monopolies and multinational companies has never been greater. And they have no more intention of surrendering it without a fight than the degenerate absolute monarchs of the past. The first condition of human progress is to break the power of these modern overlords. In order to bring this about, it is first necessary to defeat and overthrow the resistance of that class which holds power in present-day society: the bankers and monopolists who dominate not only through their economic power but also through their control of the state and their monopoly of culture.

In order to accomplish these tasks, it is necessary that the working class possess a party and a leadership which is adequate to it. Unlike the French and English revolutionaries of the 17th and 18th centuries, the modern working class can only transform society on the basis of a scientific understanding of the world in which it lives. This is provided by Marxism, the only really consistent and scientific kind of

socialism. The history of Bolshevism provides us with a model of how this can be achieved. In all the annals of history it would be difficult to find another example of a growth so astonishing as that of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, when it passed from 8,000 to more than a quarter of a million members in the space of nine months. Yet this feat did not occur as the result of spontaneous combustion. It was the end result of decades of patient work, commencing with small circles and passing through a whole series of stages, in which spectacular advances were followed by bitter defeats, disappointment and despair. The life of every man and woman knows similar moments. The sum total of such experiences is life itself, and the way in which an individual overcomes the problems of life and absorbs the lessons of all kinds of different circumstances is what enables him or her to grow and develop. It is just the same with the party. But individuals also learn valuable lessons from the experience and knowledge of others. How difficult life would be if we insisted on ignoring the accumulated knowledge of those around us! And in the same way it is necessary to study the collective experience of the working class in different countries and thus to avoid mistakes that have already been made, for, as George Santayana once pointed out, “he who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it”.

Is a Party Needed?

The whole history of the class struggle over the last hundred years provides the answer to this question. Marxism does not at all deny the importance of the role of the individual in history, but only explains that the role played by individuals or parties is circumscribed by the given level of historical development, by the objective social environment which, in the last analysis, is determined by the development of the productive forces. This does not mean—as has been alleged by the critics of Marxism—that men and women are merely puppets of the blind workings of “economic determinism”. Marx and Engels explained that men and women make their own history, but they do not do so as completely free agents, but have to work on the basis of the kind of society that they find in existence. The personal qualities of political figures—their theoretical preparation, skill, courage and determination—can determine the outcome in a given situation. There are critical moments in human history when the quality of the leadership can be the decisive factor that tips the balance one way or another. Such periods are not the norm, but only arise when all the hidden contradictions have slowly matured over a long period to the point when, in the language of dialectics, quantity is changed into quality. Although individuals cannot determine the development of society by the force of the will alone, yet the role of the subjective factor is ultimately decisive in human history.

The presence of a revolutionary party and leadership is no less decisive for the outcome of the class struggle as is the quality of the army and its general staff in the wars between nations. The revolutionary party cannot be improvised on the spur of the moment, any more than a general staff can be improvised on the outbreak of war. It has to be systematically prepared over years and decades. This lesson has been demonstrated by the whole of history, especially the history of the 20th century. Rosa Luxemburg, that great revolutionary and martyr of the working class, always emphasised the revolutionary initiative of the masses as the motor force of revolution.

In this, she was absolutely right. In the course of a revolution the masses learn rapidly. But a revolutionary situation, by its very nature, cannot last for long. Society cannot be kept in a permanent state of ferment, nor the working class in a state of white-hot activism. Either a way out is shown in time, or the moment will be lost. There is not enough time to experiment or for the workers to learn by trial and error. In a life and death situation, errors are paid for very dearly! Therefore, it is necessary to combine the “spontaneous” movement of the masses with organisation, programme, perspectives, strategy and tactics—in a word, with a revolutionary party led by experienced cadres.

A party is not just an organisational form, a name, a banner, a collection of individuals, or an apparatus. A revolutionary party, for a Marxist, is in the first place *programme, methods, ideas and traditions* and only in the second place, an organisation and an apparatus (important as these undoubtedly are) in order to carry these ideas to the broadest layers of the working people. The Marxist party, from the very beginning, must base itself on theory and programme, which is the summing up of the general historical experience of the proletariat. Without this, it is nothing. The building of a revolutionary party always begins with the slow and painstaking work of assembling and educating the cadres, which forms the backbone of the party throughout its entire lifetime. That is the first half of the problem. But only the first half. The second half is more complicated: how to reach the mass of the workers with our ideas and programme? This is not at all a simple question.

Marx explained that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. The mass of the working class learns from experience. They do not learn from books, not because they lack the intelligence, as middle class snobs imagine, but because they lack the time, the access to culture and the habit of reading that is not something automatic, but is acquired. A worker who returns home after working eight, nine or ten hours on a building site or on a conveyor belt, is not only physically but mentally tired. The last thing he or she wants to do is to study or go to a meeting. Far better to leave such things to “those who know”. But if there is a strike, the whole psychology is transformed. And a revolution is like a huge strike of the whole of society. The masses want to understand what is going on, to learn, to think and to act. Of course, the actions of the masses, bereft of experience and the knowledge of tactics, strategy and perspectives, find themselves at a disadvantage when faced with the ruling class, which, through its political and military representatives, has had a long experience and is far better prepared for such situations. It has in its hands a whole battery of weapons: control of the state, the army, the police and the judiciary, the press and the other mass media—powerful instruments for moulding public opinion and for slander, lying and character assassination. It has many other weapons and auxiliary forces: control of the schools and universities, an army of “experts”, professors, economists, philosophers, lawyers, priests and others willing to swallow their moral scruples and rally to the defence of “civilisation” (that is, their own privileges and those of their masters) against “chaos” and the “mob”.

The working class does not automatically arrive at revolutionary conclusions. If that were so, the task of party- building would be redundant. The task of transforming society would be a simple one, if the movement of the working class took place in a straight line. But this is not the case. Over a long historical period, the working class

comes to understand the need for organisation. Through the establishment of organisations, both of a trade union and, on a higher level, of a political character, the working class begins to express itself as a class, with an independent identity. In the language of Marx, it passes from a class *in itself* to a class *for itself*. This development takes place over a long historical period through all kinds of struggles, involving the participation, not just of the minority of more or less conscious activists, but of the “politically untutored masses”, who, in general, are awakened to active participation in political (or even trade union) life only on the basis of great events. On the basis of great historical events, the working class begins to create mass organisations, to defend its interests. These historically-evolved organisations—the trade unions, co-operatives, and workers’ parties—represent the germ of a new society within the old. They serve to mobilise, organise, train and educate the class.

The masses, newly awakened to political life, must seek out that political party that is most capable of defending their interests; the party that is most resolute and audacious, but also that shows itself to be most far-sighted, that can point out the way forward at each stage, issuing timely slogans that correspond to the real situation. But how to decide which party and programme is the right one? There are so many! The masses must test the parties and leaders in practice, for there is no other way. This process of successive approximation is both wasteful and time-consuming, but it is the only one possible. In every revolution—not only Russia in 1917, but also France in the 18th century and England in the 17th century—we see a similar process, in which, through experience, the revolutionary masses, by a process of successive approximations, find their way towards the most consistently revolutionary wing. The history of every revolution is thus characterised by the rise and fall of political parties and leaders, a process in which the more extreme tendencies always replace the more moderate, until the movement has run its course.

In all the voluminous history of the world working class movement, it is impossible to find a history so rich and variegated as that of the Bolshevik Party before 1917. A history that spanned three decades and included all the stages of development from a small circle to a mass party, passing through all the stages of legal and illegal struggle, three revolutions, two wars, and was confronted with a vast array of complex theoretical problems, not only on paper but in practice: individual terrorism, the national question, the agrarian question, imperialism and the state. And it would also be impossible to find anywhere else such a vast and rich treasure house of Marxist literature dealing with the whole gamut of problems from A to Z with such astonishing profundity as in the writings of the two greatest revolutionaries of the 20th century—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Leon Davidovich Trotsky. Yet the modern reader who wishes to acquaint him- or herself with this material will come up against an insurmountable problem. Almost the entire literature on the history of Bolshevism has been written by hardened enemies of Bolshevism. With a very few honourable exceptions, such as the work done by the French Marxist historians Pierre Broué and Marcel Liebman, it is impossible to find a history of the Bolshevik Party worth the trouble of reading. But both Broué’s and Liebman’s subject matter is somewhat different to that of the present work, and, while their works can be recommended, they deal only partially with the subject with which we are concerned here, namely how the Bolsheviks prepared themselves for the task of taking power in 1917.

About the Present Work

The present work is written by a committed Marxist who has devoted the whole of his adult life to fighting for the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. In thus declaring an interest, I do not regard it as a disadvantage, but quite the contrary. My standpoint is one that does not regard the history of Bolshevism as a merely academic interest, but as something living and relevant to the present day. My acquaintance with the history of Bolshevism is not confined to book knowledge. Forty years of active participation in the Marxist movement provide one with many insights which are not available to the writer whose interest is merely academic. Karl Kautsky, in the days when he was still a Marxist, wrote a book which must surely be one of the finest examples of the method of historical materialism—*The Foundations of Christianity*. In that book he describes the early Christian movement in a way that was only possible for someone who had had first-hand knowledge of the German Social Democracy in its heroic early days, when it was struggling in harsh underground conditions against the Anti-Socialist Law in Germany. True, the social content of both movements was radically different, as was the historical moment in which they were developing. Yet for all that, the parallels between these revolutionary movements of the dispossessed against the state of the rich and powerful are just as striking as the differences.

Many of the situations that faced the pioneers of Russian Marxism are very familiar to me from personal experience: not just the work of fighting for the ideas of Marxism in the British Labour movement, but experience of the revolutionary movement in France 1968, in Portugal in 1975, and in Spain during the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the underground movement against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile—all these provided me with ample occasions to observe at first hand precisely the kind of situations that confronted the Bolsheviks in their long fight against the tsarist regime. In addition, I have had personal experience over many years with the work of revolutionaries in Third World countries in Latin America and Asia—especially Pakistan, which presents the features of a semi-feudal society strikingly similar to tsarist Russia. In addition, thirty years ago as a student in the USSR, where I obtained a lot of material which I used in writing this book, I was able to meet and talk to people who had participated in the Bolshevik Party, including, on one occasion, two old ladies who had worked as secretaries for Lenin in the Kremlin after the revolution. I believe that these experiences have provided me with many insights of the true nature of Bolshevism. Finally, I owe a great deal to Ted Grant, my comrade, friend and teacher for the last forty years. I consider Ted not only to be the greatest living exponent of Marxism, but also a direct link—one of the last surviving links—with the great revolutionary traditions of the past: the Left Opposition and the Bolshevik Party itself. Thanks to his work over the past sixty years, the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky—the theoretical and practical leaders of October—have been kept alive, extended and developed. The present work is intended as a companion volume to *Russia—From Revolution to Counter-revolution*, in which Ted traces the processes that took place in Russia after the October revolution. I believe that, between them, these two volumes provide a comprehensive history and analysis of Bolshevism and the Russian revolution, from its earliest beginnings to the present day.

I am conscious that it is not the custom of academic historians of Bolshevism to “declare an interest”, as I have done here. That is unfortunate, since the vast majority of them, despite a superficial veneer of impartiality are, in fact, clearly motivated by prejudice against, or even outright hostility to, Bolshevism and revolution in general. Moreover, commitment to a definite standpoint by no means precludes objectivity. A surgeon may be passionately concerned with saving the life of his patient, but for that very reason will distinguish with extreme care between the different layers of the organism. I have attempted to deal objectively with the subject under consideration. Since the purpose of this book is to allow the new generation to learn all the lessons of the historical experience of Bolshevism, to gloss over the problems, difficulties and errors would be both stupid and counterproductive.

When Oliver Cromwell had his portrait painted, he sternly admonished the artist to “paint me as I am—warts and all!” The same truthful attitude, the same forthright realism always characterised the thinking of Lenin and Trotsky. Where they made mistakes, they did not mince words in admitting it. After the revolution, Lenin said on one occasion that they had committed “many stupidities”. This is a far cry from the histories of the Stalinists which presents a false picture of the Bolshevik Party that was always right and never wrong. The present work outlines the strong side of Bolshevism, but does not hide the problems. To do so would be to do serious damage to the cause of Leninism not in the past but in the present and the future. In order that the new generation should learn from the history of Bolshevism it is necessary to paint it as it was— “warts and all”.

I have deliberately used non-Bolshevik sources as much as possible, particularly Menshevik authors like Dan, Axelrod, and Martov, and also the Economist Akimov. At least some bourgeois writers, while critical of Bolshevism, have taken the trouble to cite a lot of relevant material. Books like David Lane’s work on the early history of the Russian Social Democracy, or Robert McKean’s *St Petersburg Between the Revolutions* contains a wealth of material that cannot be found easily elsewhere. McKean’s book is no doubt intended as an antidote to the exaggerated picture of the strength of the Bolsheviks in the years before 1917, and would be far more valuable if the author had not been swayed by his hostility to Bolshevism. Most of the others are far worse.

Having studied this material for more than thirty years, the conclusion I have come to is this: the best source for re-discovering the history of Bolshevism is the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. They are an inexhaustible treasure-house of information and ideas which, taken together, make up a detailed history of Russia and the world for the entire period under consideration. The problem is that it is a vast amount of material—45 volumes of Lenin in English, and about ten more in Russian. Trotsky probably wrote even more, but the publication of his works is more scattered. His brilliant autobiography *My Life*, the monumental *History of the Russian Revolution* and his under-rated last masterpiece *Stalin* provide a wealth of material for the history of Bolshevism. The problem is that the aspiring student of Bolshevism who attempts to read all this material would require an enormous amount of time to do so. I have therefore deliberately included a large number of quite lengthy quotes from these sources, although this has made the text both longer and more cumbersome. Despite these objections, it seemed necessary to me, for two reasons: 1) in order to avoid any

suggestion of inaccuracy in quoting and 2) to stimulate the interest of the reader in reading the originals. For, at the end of the day, there can be no substitute for reading the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

Without the Bolshevik Party, without the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Russian workers, despite all their heroism, would never have taken power in 1917. That is the central lesson of the present work. If one examines the history of the international workers' movement, one sees a whole series of bloody and tragic defeats. Here for the first time, if we exclude the brief but heroic episode of the Paris Commune, the working class succeeded in overthrowing their oppressors and beginning the task of the socialist transformation of society. As Rosa Luxemburg expressed it, *they alone dared*. And they succeeded brilliantly. This is the "crime" for which the bourgeoisie and its hired apologists can never forgive the Bolsheviks. To this day, the ruling class lives in mortal fear of revolution and dedicates no small amount of resources to combating it. In this, their task has been greatly facilitated by the crimes of Russian Stalinism. The betrayal of the ideas of Lenin by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia finally led to its logical conclusion—the greatest betrayal in the whole history of the labour movement—the destruction of the USSR and the attempt of the ruling bureaucratic caste to move in the direction of capitalism. Now, 80 years after the revolution all of the gains of October are being destroyed and replaced with "free market" barbarism. But it is never sufficient for the ruling class to overthrow a revolution. They must eradicate its memory, cover it with dirt and lies. In order to accomplish this feat, they require the services of faithful academics who are eager to place themselves at the service of maintaining the "free market economy" (read: "the rule of the big banks and monopolies"). This is what explains the blind hatred of Lenin and Trotsky that still characterises the writings of all the bourgeois historians of the Russian revolution, ill-concealed behind a mask of false impartiality.

How the Bourgeois 'Explain' October

The Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle, when he wrote about the great English revolutionary Oliver Cromwell, complained that before putting pen to paper he first had to dig out Cromwell from under a mountain of dead dogs. History in general is not impartial, and the history of revolutions least of all. Ever since the October revolution, the Bolshevik Party and its leaders have been the object of particular hatred of all the forces hostile to the revolution. That includes not only the bourgeoisie and the Social Democrats, but all kinds of petty bourgeois anarchist and semi-anarchist elements, and, last but not least, the Stalinists who rose to power over the dead body of Lenin's party. It is impossible to find a single decent history of the Bolshevik Party from any of these sources. Though the Western universities continue to churn out a never-ending stream of books on this or that aspect of the Russian revolutionary movement, the hostility towards Bolshevism, and a poisonous attitude towards Lenin and Trotsky, are present from first to last.

The most common explanation for the October revolution that is given in Western history books is that it was not a revolution at all but only a coup d'état carried out by a minority. But this "explanation" explains precisely nothing. How is it to be explained that a tiny handful of "conspirators", numbering not more than 8,000 in March, were

able to lead the working class to the seizure of power only nine months later? This implies that Lenin and Trotsky were possessed of miraculous powers. But to resort to the supposedly miraculous powers of individuals as an explanation of historical events again provides us with no explanation, but only refers the inquirer to the only place where superhuman (that is, supernatural) qualities can originate—namely, the realm of religion and mysticism. We are far from denying the vital importance of the individual in the historical process. The events of 1917 are perhaps the most striking confirmation of the fact that, under certain circumstances, the role of individuals is absolutely decisive. Without Lenin and Trotsky, the October revolution would have never taken place. But to say that is not enough. The same Lenin and Trotsky had been active in the revolutionary movement for almost two decades before the revolution, and yet for most of the time were unable to carry out a revolution and for long periods were without any influence with the masses. To attribute the victory of October solely to the genius (benevolent or malevolent, depending on your class point of view) of Lenin and Trotsky is clearly nonsense.

The proof that the Russian revolution involved an upsurge of the masses virtually without precedent in history is too voluminous to quote here. Thirty years ago, while I was a post-graduate student in Moscow, I recall a conversation I had with a woman, then very advanced in years, who had participated as a member of the Bolshevik Party in the revolution somewhere in the Volga region. I cannot remember the exact place, or even her name, but I remember that she had spent 17 years in one of Stalin's labour camps, along with so many other Bolsheviks. And I remember another thing. When I asked her about the October revolution, she answered with two words, which cannot be adequately translated: "Kakoi pod'yom!" The Russian word "pod'yom" has no equivalent in English, but means something like "spiritual upsurge". "Such uplift!" would be a lame rendition of this phrase, which, more than a mountain of statistics, conveys the intensity with which the mass of the population embraced the revolution—not just the workers, poor peasants and soldiers, but also the best representatives of the intelligentsia (this woman had been a school teacher). The October revolution attracted all that was best, all that was alive, progressive and vibrant in Russian society. And I remember how this woman's eyes shone as she relived in her mind the joy and the hope of those years. Today, when all the usual gang of professional cynics are lining up to pour dirt over the memory of the October revolution, I still recall the face of that old woman, heavily lined with long years of suffering, yet radiant in her memories in spite of all that later befell her and her generation.

One strand of bourgeois history in the last period was to attack Bolshevism by resurrecting its political enemies, Economism, and particularly, Menshevism. One of the principal "resurrection men" is Solomon Schwarz. His basic thesis is that "fundamentally Bolshevism stressed the initiative of an active minority; Menshevism, the activation of the masses." From this initially false assertion the author derives his conclusion quite naturally that "Bolshevism developed dictatorial conceptions and practices; Menshevism remained thoroughly democratic."² The present work will show that this assertion is baseless. It will show that the Bolshevik Party was characterised throughout its history by the widest possible internal democracy. It is a history of the struggle of ideas and tendencies in which everyone spoketheir mind freely. Internal democracy provided the necessary oxygen for the development of the

ideas which ultimately guaranteed victory. This is a very far cry from the totalitarian and bureaucratic regimes of the “Communist” parties under Stalin.

The latest offering from the school of anti-Bolshevik history is Orlando Figes’ book *A People’s Tragedy, the Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, (London, 1996). Here we are presented with a vision of the revolution straight out of Dante’s *Inferno*. This objective and scientific academic describes the October revolution variously as a “conspiracy”, a “coup”, a “drunken rampage”. It was “more the result of the degeneration of the urban revolution (?), and in particular of the workers’ movement, as an organised and constructive force, with vandalism, crime, generalised violence and drunken looting as the main expressions of this social breakdown.”³ Figes is well aware that the outbreaks of disorder and drunkenness perpetrated by backward elements were rapidly suppressed by the Bolsheviks. They constituted *episodic incidents* of no importance, yet here the *incidental* is presented as the *essence* of the revolution. Naturally, for a “scientific” defender of the established social order the essence of any revolution must be disorder, madness and chaos. What else can be expected from the masses? They are too ignorant and backward to understand, let alone rule. No, such a responsible task should be left to those of us who are intelligent. Let the hewers of wood and drawers of water attend to their business and leave the running of society to the graduates of Cambridge University.

Are we being unjust to Mr Figes? Maybe we are misreading the message of his very thick book? Let the author speak for himself. At the Congress of Soviets, a decisive majority voted for the transfer of power to the soviets. This is a slight difficulty for Figes’ central thesis (not characterised by excessive originality) that the October revolution was just a coup. But not to worry! Orlando has the answer to every conundrum. The reason why the masses voted for soviet power was that *they were too ignorant*: “The mass of the delegates, who,” writes Mr Figes, “*were probably too ignorant to comprehend the political import of what they were doing*, raised their hands in support (weren’t they in favour of soviet power?).”⁴

It should be noted in passing that the argument that the majority of people who vote in elections are “probably too ignorant” to understand the political issues involved is *an argument against democracy in general*. What is Figes trying to say? That up until the time the Bolsheviks and their allies got a majority in the soviets, the workers and soldiers were fully aware of what was required, but in October they were suddenly “*probably too ignorant*” to know what they were doing? Such an argument will fool no-one. That the delegates at the Congress of Soviets had not the benefit of a Cambridge education has, regretfully, to be admitted. In compensation, they had learned a few things in the course of a bloody war and nine months of revolution. They knew quite well what they wanted: peace, bread and land. And they knew that the Provisional Government and its Menshevik and Social Revolutionaries backers would not give them what they wanted. They also learned in the course of experience that the only party that would give them these things was the Bolsheviks. All this they understood pretty well without passing any exams.

Of course, anyone is entitled to write history from an anti-revolutionary standpoint. But then it would be far better to declare from the outset that the real intention is to show that revolution does not pay, and that consequently, convince the reader that he or she would be far better off accepting the capitalist system for fear of worse to come.

Alas, human frailty being what it is, such an admission seems rather more than these historians can cope with.

The Stalin School of Falsification

The other main source of the history of Bolshevism is the huge body of literature on the subject that was published over decades in the USSR and widely disseminated in the past by the Stalinised Communist Parties abroad. From all this, it is equally impossible to obtain a truthful impression of the history of Bolshevism. Having usurped power in conditions of backwardness where an exhausted working class proved unable to keep control in its hands, the bureaucracy was compelled to pay lip service to Bolshevism and October. In the same way the bureaucracy of the Second International paid lip service to “socialism” while carrying out a bourgeois policy, and the Pope of Rome pays lip service to the teachings of the early Christian Church. The ruling bureaucracy in the USSR, while placing Lenin’s body on a mausoleum, betrayed all the basic ideas of Lenin and the October revolution, covering the spotless banner of Bolshevism with filth and blood. In order to consolidate its usurpation, the ruling caste was forced to exterminate the Old Bolsheviks. Like all criminals, Stalin wanted no witnesses who could speak out against him. This fact determined in advance the destiny of history books in the USSR.

It is frequently asserted that Stalinism and Bolshevism are basically the same thing. Indeed, this is what lies behind all the calumnies of the bourgeois historians of Bolshevism. But the democratic workers’ state established by Lenin and Trotsky in October 1917 had absolutely nothing in common with the bureaucratic-totalitarian monstrosity presided over by Stalin and his successors. The victory of Stalin and the bureaucracy, the result of the isolation of the revolution in conditions of crushing backwardness, poverty and illiteracy, meant the wholesale abandonment of the ideas, traditions and methods of Lenin and the transformation of the Third International as the vehicle of world revolution to a mere instrument of the foreign policy of the Moscow bureaucracy. In 1943, having been cynically used by Stalin as an instrument of Moscow’s foreign policy, the Communist International was ignominiously buried, without even calling a congress. The political and organisational heritage of Lenin was dealt a heavy blow for a whole historical period. This fact has heavily coloured the view that many people have of the history of Bolshevism. Even well-meaning writers (not to mention the malicious ones) cannot help reading into the past all kinds of elements from the horrors of the later Stalinist regime which are entirely alien to the democratic traditions of Bolshevism.

In order to triumph, Stalinism was obliged to destroy every last vestige of the democratic regime established by October. The Bolshevik Party inscribed on its programme in 1919 the famous four conditions for Soviet power:

1. Free and democratic elections with right of recall of all officials.
2. No official must receive a salary higher than that of a skilled worker.
3. No standing army but the armed people.
4. Gradually, all the tasks of running the state should be performed by everyone in turn. When everybody is a bureaucrat, no-one can be a bureaucrat.

These conditions, which are spelled out in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, are based

upon the programme of the Paris Commune. As Engels explained, this was no longer a state in the old sense of the word, but a semi-state, a transitional regime intended to prepare the way for the transition to socialism. This was the democratic ideal which Lenin and Trotsky put into practice after the October overturn. It had absolutely nothing in common with the bureaucratic and totalitarian monstrosity that replaced it under Stalin and his successors. Moreover, that regime could only be brought about on the basis of a political counterrevolution, involving the physical extermination of Lenin's party in the one-sided civil war against Bolshevism—the Purge Trials of the 1930s. Let us just cite one figure to prove the point. By 1939, of Lenin's 1917 Central Committee, only three were left alive: Stalin, Trotsky and Alexandra Kollontai. The rest, apart from Lenin and Sverdlov who died naturally, were either murdered or driven to suicide. Kamenev and Zinoviev were executed in 1936. Bukharin, whom Lenin described as "the Party's favourite" was executed in 1938. The same fate awaited tens of thousands of Bolsheviks under Stalin. One lone voice remained to denounce Stalin's crimes and defend the genuine heritage of Bolshevism. That voice was stilled in 1940, when Leon Trotsky, lifelong revolutionary, leader of the October insurrection and founder of the Red Army, was finally murdered in Mexico by one of Stalin's agents.

To those who persist in identifying Stalinism with Leninism, we are entitled to direct the following question: if the regimes of Lenin and Stalin were really the same, *how did it come about that Stalin could only come to power by physically annihilating the Bolshevik Party?* Under Stalin and his successors, everything connected with the October revolution and the history of Bolshevism was shrouded in a thick fog of distortion by the official mythology that passed for history in the USSR after Lenin's death. The real traditions of Bolshevism were buried under a thick layer of lies, slanders and distortions. The relation between the party and the class, and also, crucially, between the party and the leadership, was presented in the form of a bureaucratic caricature. The official Soviet histories present an over-simplified and one-sided picture of the relation between the Bolshevik Party and the mass movement. The impression is created that at every step the Bolsheviks were the commanding force that led and directed the revolution with the ease of a conductor waving his baton before an obedient and disciplined orchestra. From such versions one can learn nothing about either the Bolshevik Party, the Russian revolution, or the dynamics of revolution in general. This is, of course, no accident, since the purposes of history under the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy was not to teach people to make revolutions, but to glorify the ruling caste and to perpetuate the myth of an infallible leadership at the head of an infallible Party, which had nothing in common with Lenin's Party, except a usurped name. In the same way all monarchies, but especially a dynasty that has usurped the throne, seeks to rewrite history to present its predecessors in the most superhuman and awesome light. Needless to say, any resemblance to the truth here is purely accidental.

The old Stalinist histories are virtually worthless as sources. To depict the history of Bolshevism as these people did— i. e. as a perfectly straight ascending line, leading irresistibly to the assumption of power—is to leave behind the realm of serious history and enter that of hagiography. I have used only one Soviet history here: the multi-volumed *Istoriya KPSS* (History of the CPSU) published in the USSR under the

relatively “liberal” regime of Nikita Khrushchov in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is probably the most detailed history of the Party published in the Soviet Union. It is useful for the mass of material it contains, much from unpublished party archives. But basically it is as one-sided as all the other Stalinist histories, and even the factual information should be treated with care.

‘New Lies for Old!’

This is not the place to deal with the events in Russia from Lenin’s death to the present day. That subject is the theme of the companion volume to the present work, *Russia—from Revolution to Counter-revolution*, already referred to. Suffice it to say that the isolation of the Russian revolution in conditions of frightful economic and cultural backwardness led inevitably, first to the rise of a privileged bureaucratic ruling caste that completely eradicated the traditions of Bolshevism and physically annihilated the Bolshevik Party, and finally liquidated the only progressive conquests of October that remained—the nationalisation of the economy and the plan. The result, as predicted by Trotsky in 1936, has been the most terrible collapse of the productive forces and culture. The Russian people have paid an appalling price for the attempt of the bureaucracy to transform itself into a ruling class and to reinforce its power and privileges by moving in the direction of capitalism.

As we predicted from the beginning, this would inevitably meet with the resistance of the working class at a certain stage. True, this process has been retarded. How could it be otherwise? The long period of totalitarian rule, the partial discrediting of the idea of socialism and communism as a result; the immense confusion and disorientation caused by the collapse of the USSR; and then the unprecedented collapse of the productive forces which stunned the workers for a time. Finally, and most importantly, the absence of a real Communist party standing on the programme, methods and traditions of Lenin and Trotsky—all this has thrown the movement back. But now things are changing in Russia. Despite the lack of leadership, the working class is gradually drawing the necessary conclusions on the basis of experience. Sooner or later the movement of the workers will place firmly on the agenda the need for a genuine Leninist programme, policy and leadership.

With the collapse of Stalinism, the old histories have been consigned to a well-merited oblivion. But their place has been taken by a new and even more odious form of anti-Bolshevik falsification. The movement towards capitalism in Russia has spawned a new breed of “historians” anxious to do the bidding of their new masters by publishing all kinds of alleged “revelations” about the past. The fact that what they write now completely contradicts what they wrote yesterday does not appear to bother them in the slightest, since the aim is not (and never was) to establish the truth, but only to earn a living and please the Boss (which is pretty much the same thing here). For decades, these creatures churned out falsified histories of Bolshevism and the Russian revolution, representing Lenin much as the Orthodox church produced the lives of the Saints, complete with miracles, and with just as much scientific validity. They fawned on the Stalinist bureaucracy that paid them handsomely for producing this rubbish to order and generally conducted themselves as model servants of the totalitarian regime. Now the Master has changed, they have jumped with the alacrity

of a performing dog at a circus. From singing panegyrics to Stalin, Brezhnev and Gorbachov, they have graduated to singing the praises of the “Market”.

These modern Russian writers share the morality and values of all the other “new Russians”—the values of the market, that is to say, the jungle. In order to ensure the new-found wealth obtained by the simple expedient of plundering the people of Russia, it is necessary to pour dirt on Russia’s revolutionary past, for fear that it may also represent Russia’s future. Just as there is a ready market in Russia for Mercedes Benz and pornography, so there is money to be made in slandering Lenin and the October revolution. And where money is concerned, the “new Russian” intellectuals are no less enthusiastic than the assorted thieves, speculators and spivs who now call the shots in Moscow. A whole new literary genre has evolved, which entails the following: a former Party or KGB hack “discovers” in the archives some “startling new revelation” relating to Lenin. This is then presented to the public in the form of a “learned” study signed by some academic or other who invests the “new” information with a spurious halo of “scientific objectivity”. After a few months, the “startling revelations” are published in the West, to an approving chorus. Then the comments from the Western media are published in the Russian press, but not before being suitably embellished by all sorts of lurid and quite fictitious additions. In fact, practically nothing of these “revelations” is new, and absolutely nothing is startling, unless it be the willingness of some people to believe anything at all.

Among other things, Lenin stands accused of advocating the use of violence—*during the Civil War!* But what is war, except the utilisation of violence to some end or other—the continuation of politics by other means, in Clausewitz’s famous dictum? True, the Bible informs us that to take the life of another is a mortal sin. But this dictum never prevented Christian monarchs and politicians from employing the most violent means to support their own interests. Those who weep crocodile tears over the fate of tsar Nicholas conveniently ignore the bloody cruelty that was the hallmark of his reign from the first day. Maybe the present work will jog their memory. And perhaps they will be surprised to learn that the October revolution was a relatively peaceful affair, and that the terrible bloodshed occurred only as a result of the slaveholders’ rebellion of the White Guard, backed by world imperialism. In the three years after the October revolution, the Soviet republic was invaded by no fewer than 21 foreign armies: British, French, German, American, Polish, Czech, Japanese and others. As always, when it is a question of putting down a slave uprising, the ruling class acted with the most appalling cruelty. But this time it was different. The former slaves did not meekly submit but fought back and won.

The violence of the landlords and capitalists was met by the violence of the oppressed workers and peasants. And it is this that they cannot forgive. Trotsky organised the working class into the Red Army and, by a combination of military skill and courage with a revolutionary and internationalist policy, succeeded in defeating all the forces of the counterrevolution. This undoubtedly involved the use of violence that was not strictly in accord with the Sermon on the Mount. The enemies of the revolution pretend to be horrified. But their rejection of violent means is not at all absolute. The same people who slander the memory of Lenin and Trotsky do not bat an eyelid when they mention an American President who ordered the atom bomb to be dropped on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or a British Prime

Minister who ordered the incineration of men, women and children in the blanket bombing of Dresden. Such actions, you see, are not only acceptable, but praiseworthy (“they shortened the war and reduced Allied casualties...”). The organisers of the campaign against Lenin and the Bolsheviks are well aware that the October revolution was fighting a desperate war of *self-defence*. They know that, if the Whites had won, they would have implanted a ferocious dictatorship in Russia and the workers and peasants would have paid a terrible price. Therefore, the hullabaloo about Lenin’s alleged violence must be seen for what it is: cynicism and hypocrisy of the lowest order.

This slander is not only baseless, but frankly stupid. If Lenin was really an agent of German imperialism, it is impossible to explain the behaviour both of Lenin and the German army in the period after October. In fact, it was not Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but the Russian bourgeoisie that longed for the intervention of the German army in 1917. There are plenty of witnesses to prove that the propertied classes in Russia would have preferred to surrender Petrograd to the Germans rather than see it fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks.

True, the German general staff hoped that Lenin’s return to Russia would help to destabilise tsarism and weaken it militarily. It is not unusual for imperialist powers to see in internal disorders a means of weakening an enemy. In the same way it is the duty of revolutionists to make use of all contradictions between the imperialists to further the revolution. Lenin was well aware of the calculations of Berlin. That is why, when he was blocked by England and France from crossing Allied territory to return to Russia, forcing him to return through Germany, he imposed the strictest conditions, specifying that no-one should either enter or leave his train en route. He knew that the enemies of Bolshevism would brand him as a “German agent.” But he took the necessary steps to answer this calumny in advance.

As Trotsky explained years later to the Dewey Commission: “He explained openly to the workers, the first Soviet in Petrograd; ‘My situation was such and such. The only way possible was to go across Germany. The hopes of Ludendorff are his hopes, and mine are totally different. We will see who will be victorious.’ He explained everything. He concealed nothing. He said it before the whole world. He was an honest revolutionist. Naturally, the chauvinists and patriots accused him of being a German spy, but in his relationship with the working class he was absolutely impeccable.”⁵

Throughout the First World War, not only the Germans but the Allies also used their stooges in the labour movement to buy support among left groups in other countries. But to allege that the Germans had bought the Bolsheviks with gold and that there existed an actual bloc between the Bolsheviks and German imperialism is not only monstrous but extremely stupid. It flies in the face of all the known facts about the political conduct of the Bolsheviks both during and after the war. For example, Volkogonov tries to show that German money was channelled to the Bolsheviks via Sweden when it can easily be shown that Shlyapnikov, the representative of the Bolsheviks in Sweden, publicly denounced the activities of the pro-German wing of the Swedish Social Democracy and would have nothing to do with the German agent Troelstra, whilst Lenin’s attitude to Parvus during the War is documented in the relevant chapter of the present work. One could say a lot more on the subject of Mr

Volkogonov's lies and distortions, but, as the Russian proverb says: a fool can ask more questions than a hundred wise men can answer. And this observation holds good, not just for fools, but for far less well-intentioned people.

Leninism and the Future

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the bourgeois critics of Marxism were jubilant for a short time. But all their euphoria has quickly turned to ashes. The crisis of capitalism reflects itself, at this stage, in the pessimism of the strategists of capital. But as the crisis unfolds, it will also be reflected in the crisis of the mass organisations of Labour which over the last decades have experienced a process of reformist and bureaucratic degeneration far worse than that suffered by the Second International in the period prior to 1914. For a long time the Labour leaders treated Marxism as a dead dog. They whole-heartedly embraced the market and all the latest economic nostrums of the bourgeoisie. The apparent vitality of right-wing reformism in the post-war period, at least in the advanced countries of capitalism was merely an expression of the fact that capitalism went through a prolonged period of expansion, similar to the twenty years or so before the First World War. But this period is now at an end. As I finish the closing chapter, the news is everywhere of a developing crisis in world capitalism.

Never since 1945 has the world been in such a state of ferment. Long ago Marx and Engels predicted that capitalism would develop as a world system. Now this prediction has been fulfilled in almost laboratory conditions. The crushing domination of the world market constitutes the most striking fact of our epoch. The triumph of globalisation has been heralded as the final victory of the market economy. But this victory carried within itself the seeds of a catastrophe. Far from overcoming the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, globalisation merely creates a new and vastly greater stage upon which the contradictions are manifesting themselves. The deep slump in Asia manifests itself as an unprecedented accumulation of unsold goods (overproduction, or "overcapacity") is accompanied by a paralysis of what used to be the main motor force for world economic growth, Japan. On the other side of the world, the uncontrolled upward movement of the stock exchange is provoking fears of a financial collapse in the USA. The nervousness of the bourgeois finds its expression in constant alarms on the world's stock markets.

The old argument about the alleged superiority of the "free market economy" now sounds like a sick joke to millions of people. Under the banner of "privatisation", the big banks and monopolies are engaged in looting the state; under the banner of "liberalisation", they force the weak bourgeoisie of the ex-colonial countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to open their markets to the exports from the West with which they cannot compete. This is the real reason for the chronic indebtedness of the Third World and the permanent crisis that afflicts two-thirds of the world's population. Everywhere we see wars and conflicts over markets and meaningless frontiers for which the peoples must pay a dreadful price for the world crisis of capitalism. This situation bears a far greater resemblance to the world as it was one hundred years ago than the period of relative stability that followed the Second World War. The convulsions in Asia, Africa and Latin America are not as far away as they seem in Europe and North America. The catastrophe that resulted from the break-up of

Yugoslavia shows that the same processes can affect the supposedly civilised peoples of the West unless the jungle logic of capitalism is eliminated and replaced with a rational and harmonious system on a world scale.

Ironically, the main detonator of the present crisis was the spectacular collapse of “free market” policies in Russia. This represents an important turning-point not just for Russia but for the whole world. The temporary mood of exultation which predominated among the strategists of capital after the fall of the Berlin Wall has evaporated like a drop of water on a hot stove. In place of the old song about the alleged death of Marxism, socialism and communism, they are now singing a very different refrain. The writings of the bourgeois economists and politicians are filled with forebodings and dark warnings about the clock being put back. In Russia, a social explosion is being prepared which will place on the order of the day a return to the traditions of 1917. On a world scale, the crisis of capitalism is entering a new and convulsive stage. The revolution in Indonesia is only the first act in a drama which will unfold over the coming months and years and will find an expression, not only in Asia, Africa and Latin America but in Europe and North America too.

In this revolutionary re-awakening, Russia will not occupy the last place. Lenin was fond of a Russian proverb: “Life teaches”. The lesson of the attempt to move towards capitalism in Russia has been a brutal one. But now the pendulum is beginning to swing in the opposite direction. The alarm of the capitalists and their Western backers is well founded. If the leaders of the CPRF were genuine Leninists, the Russian workers would now be on the eve of taking power. The working class is a thousand times stronger than in 1917. Once they started to move, nothing could stop them. The problem, as in February 1917, is the lack of leadership. The role being played by Zyuganov is even worse than that played by the Mensheviks in 1917. In all the speeches and articles of the leaders of the CPRF there is not one atom of the ideas of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. It is as if they had never existed. That is an indication of how far the Stalinist reaction against October has thrown the movement back. The regeneration of the Russian workers’ movement can only be brought about by a return to the genuine traditions of Bolshevism. The history of Bolshevism remains the classic model of the theory and practice of Marxism in its struggle to win the masses. *It is necessary to go back to Lenin, and also to the ideas of the man who, together with Lenin, stood at the head of the October revolution and guaranteed its success, Leon Trotsky.*

The conduct of the leaders cannot hold back the movement forever. The workers are striving to find a way out of the crisis through their own class action. In so doing, they are re-discovering the revolutionary traditions of the past—the traditions of 1905 and 1917. The re-emergence of soviets, although they are variously styled: committees of action, strike committees, committees of salvation, is a clear proof that the Russian proletariat has not forgotten its revolutionary heritage. The movement will continue and grow, despite Zyuganov and co. —with the inevitable ebbs and flows. Was this not always the case? That is precisely the main lesson of the present work. And there is another lesson which we must never forget. Nothing can break the unconscious will of the working class to change society. Bolshevism is merely the conscious expression of the unconscious or semi-conscious strivings of the proletariat to change the fundamental conditions of their existence. No force on earth can prevent the inevitable