Premature – And Diseased From Infancy?

DURING the whole period I was active in the Trotskyist movement, I accepted the view that the revolution of October 1917 was a great leap forward on the road to socialism, and that the regime it established was a healthy workers' state until it started degenerating from 1923-24 onwards with the ascendancy of Stalinism and the defeat of the Trotskyist opposition. Since then a closer examination of the actual history of the revolution has led me to question this view. As early as the summer of 1918, the Bolsheviks had lost the support of large sections of the working class and of the peasantry, and were ruling dictatorially.

Let me first dispose of the argument that the October Revolution was nothing but a coup by the Bolsheviks carried out behind the backs of the working class. It is true that the actual operation was decided on by the Bolsheviks' central committee and carried out by them, though under the cover of the Military Revolutionary Committee set up by the Petrograd Soviet at the instigation of the Bolsheviks. As Trotsky himself admitted, the military operations took place whilst Petrograd, including the workers' districts, slept. The next morning, the Military Revolutionary Committee handed power to the Second Congress of Soviets as a fait accompli whilst the Bolshevik Red Guards were still assaulting the Winter Palace and arresting the ministers of the Provisional Government.

However, to leave it at that would be to give a one-sided picture. It is also a fact – acknowledged even by their opponents – that the Bolsheviks' demand for the Soviets to take power had the support of large numbers, if not the majority, of the workers and soldiers, as was confirmed when the Second Congress of Soviets met and accepted the power.

The Provisional Government was so discredited and had so few forces at its disposal (all the major military units in and around Petrograd had already decided to obey orders only if approved by the Soviet organs) that the preliminary military operations by the Bolsheviks were superfluous, and a mere vote by the Soviet Congress and its dispatch of troops to occupy the Winter Palace might have been sufficient. Insofar as the Congress of Soviets did reflect the feelings of the majority of workers, soldiers and peasants, and that it did accept power, it could be said that the working class and peasantry did exercise power through the Soviets as a result of October 1917.

But we must immediately add the proviso that this could only be true on two conditions. Firstly, that the Soviets remained democratic bodies elected under conditions of freedom of expression and assembly of all the left-wing groups and parties, and, secondly, that the government reflected the balance of forces in the Soviets and the country, and was subordinate to the Soviets.

None of these conditions lasted for more than a few weeks. Within months of October, opposition papers had been suppressed and opponents arrested, the Cheka created, and strikers and peasants who resisted the requisition of grain arrested and killed.

As Trotsky himself admitted, only a minority of delegates to the Congress of Soviets in October were in favour of a purely Bolshevik government. The overwhelming majority were for a coalition government comprised of all the parties represented in the Soviets: Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. The right-wing Mensheviks and SRs must bear prime responsibility for the failure of such a coalition government to emerge. They opposed the assumption of power by the Soviets, and walked out of the congress.

Nevertheless, even after that, a coalition was still a possibility. An attempt by the railwaymen's union, Vikzhel, to get the three Soviet parties into negotiations was wrecked by the mutual intransigence of the three parties. The Mensheviks and SRs posed conditions the Bolsheviks would find it difficult to accept, and, despite a willingness on the part of some Bolsheviks to have a coalition, Lenin and Trotsky were opposed to the negotiations from the start. The five-man minority on the Bolshevik central committee (Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Miliutin and Nogin) were threatened with expulsion from the party, and resigned from the central committee on 4 November 1917. In an open letter, they stated that a purely Bolshevik government could be

maintained only by means of "political terror", and would lead to "the establishment of an unaccountable regime and to the destruction of the revolution".

Within weeks of the October Revolution, the subordination of the government to the Soviets was ended, and the power of the Soviets was eroded from both top and bottom. By December 1917, the Council of Peoples Commissars was taking decisions without reference to the Soviet executive committee.

Another milestone on the road to a Bolshevik dictatorship was the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. In the elections, the parties that could have formed the socialist coalition demanded by the railway unions – the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and SRs – between them received over 77 per cent of the total vote. A confirmation that such a coalition – based either on the Soviets or the Constituent Assembly, or a combination of both – would have had the support of a majority in the country. But again the intransigence of the Bolshevik hard-liners and the equal obduracy of the SRs and Mensheviks precluded this. The Bolsheviks were in a minority in the Constituent Assembly. They disbanded it.

As the economic situation continued to deteriorate, the Bolsheviks found themselves in conflict with both workers and peasants. Faced with the refusal of peasants to sell foodstuffs to the towns, since they could buy no manufactured goods in exchange, the Bolshevik government sent armed detachments to requisition grain by force. The peasants resisted. Bolshevik commissars were beaten up and murdered. There were reprisals and atrocities by both sides. The Bolshevik government found itself in a state of civil war with the peasants.

Workers' control in the factories in the conditions of economic breakdown could not prevent anarchy and chaos. The workers' bodies in control of the factories often voted themselves pay rises, fuelling inflation. The flight or chasing away of the old managers and technicians disrupted production already hit by shortages of fuel and raw materials. The workers' committees were unable to reverse the decline in labour discipline and the constant pilfering of equipment and raw materials by the workers to make cigarette lighters and other illegal good to barter for food with the peasants. Conveyor belts used to drive the machines were cut up for leather to make shoes. At any one time, half the workforce was absent from the factories visiting the villages to collect food.

The workers could hardly be blamed for this in the circumstances. To expect them to exercise self-discipline when starving implied a very high degree of social consciousness – which just did not exist. Nor, for that matter, could the Bolsheviks be blamed either. They could not wave a magic wand – either to produce bread or to raise immediately the cultural level of the masses so as to overcome the conflict between the individual workers' desire to feed themselves and their families, and the overall interests of the revolution which required them to remain at work.

Strikes and protests engulfed all the country's major industrial districts, including the former Bolshevik strongholds in Petrograd and Moscow. The disillusion of the workers was expressed in a declaration by the striking workers at the Sormovo factory in June 1918: "The Soviet regime, having been established in our name, has become completely alien to us. It promised to bring the workers socialism, but has brought them empty factories and destitution." A workers' protest movement, the Extraordinary Assemblies of Factory and Plant Representatives, was formed in March 1918 with a membership of several hundred thousand at the height of its influence in June.

The response of the Bolsheviks was to nationalise the factories, replace workers' control by one-man management, and dissolve the oppositional Soviets. By the summer of 1918 with the departure of the Left SRs from the government and the suppression of their uprising, and the Red Terror unleashed by the Cheka, the Bolshevik one-party dictatorship was in place. Any popular control from below of the Soviets or the government had disappeared.

In addition, there is ample evidence that the hard core of devoted self-sacrificing Bolshevik party cadres were already being swamped by careerists and corrupt elements in the party and Soviet institutions. In September 1919, a report landed on Lenin's desk showing that the Smolny was full of corruption.

Conclusion and Unanswered Questions

In the light of these facts, one can no longer uphold the Trotskyist thesis that from 1917 to 1923-24 the Soviet Union was a "healthy" workers' state, and that the degeneration into bureaucratic dictatorship took off only afterwards.

So were Kautsky and the Mensheviks right to oppose the October Revolution from the start, as an attempt prematurely to go beyond the bourgeois stage of the Russian revolution? Were they right to declare a socialist working-class revolution in a backward Russia premature and doomed to failure because the conditions for socialism were not ripe – both as regards the economic base and the social and cultural level of the working class? On the face of it, subsequent history would seem to justify them.

Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks and the supporters of the October Revolution could – and did – argue with some justification that the Mensheviks were looking at Russia in isolation, and ignoring the international context. The war of 1914-18 had demonstrated the terminal crisis of

imperialism – the last stage of capitalism – on a world scale. Proletarian revolutions in several advanced capitalist countries were an immediate possibility; the mass slaughter of the imperialist war was driving the proletariat of the belligerent countries to revolution. Tsarist Russia was the weakest link in the chain. The October Revolution would trigger further revolutions in Europe.

If these assumptions were correct, then the Bolsheviks were justified. And one must admit that in 1917-18, these assumptions seemed reasonable. Within a year of the assumption of power by the Bolsheviks, revolutions erupted in Germany and Austria. In 1919, Hungary had its revolution; in 1919-20, the Italian workers occupied factories. If these revolutions had succeeded in establishing long-lasting Soviet republics, and if, as a result, the revolutionary tide had also engulfed Britain and France, then indeed the October Revolution would have been justified, and the degeneration of the revolution might have been prevented.

But, with hindsight, we now know that capitalism survived. It was not in terminal crisis. It survived the revolutionary wave of 1917-23, and survived the slump of the 1930s and the Second World War to enjoy a prolonged boom. It is today beset with difficulties and problems, but is not in imminent danger of giving way to socialism. It has proved more resilient and longer-lived than revolutionary Marxists expected. The standard argument put forward by we Trotskyists to explain this is that capitalism *would* have been overthrown had it not been for the repeated "betrayals" by the reformists. This begs the question – why, despite their repeated betrayals, have the reformists continued to have far more support among the workers than the revolutionaries with their "correct" policies?

All one can say is that the "workers' state" that was born in October 1917 was premature and infected from infancy. Unfortunately, as it degenerated, it infected the working-class movement internationally, and proved an obstacle on the road to socialism.

My old comrade, the late Alex Acheson, who joined the movement in the 1930s and remained a committed Trotskyist till his death last year, once said to me: "It might have been better if the October Revolution had never occurred." What factors or actions by the participants might have resulted in the non-occurrence of October and a different outcome?

Assuming that nothing is inevitable until it has happened, and that "men make their own history", there are three possibilities.

Firstly, that Lenin's *April Theses* that set the Bolshevik party on the road to the October insurrection had been rejected by the party. Let us recall that up till Lenin's arrival in Petrograd, the Bolshevik leadership was pursuing a policy of critical support for the Provisional government. They felt this was consistent with the view that since the Russian bourgeoisie was incapable of bringing about a bourgeois revolution, this task would have to be carried out by the proletariat supported by the peasantry, but that the revolution could not go immediately beyond the stage of establishing a bourgeois republic. In February, the Petrograd proletariat had carried out this "bourgeois revolution" with the support of the peasant soldiers. Now that the bourgeois republic was in place, the next stage was not the immediate struggle for working-class power, but a relatively prolonged period of bourgeois democracy. Lenin now abandoned this view which he had himself defended under the slogan of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry", and argued for no support for the Provisional Government, and for agitation for power to the Soviets. He swung the Bolshevik party to this policy. But it was not inevitable that he should have done. The Bolshevik party might have continued its policy of critical support for and pressure on the February regime.

Secondly, even after his steering the party on its new course, Lenin had to fight again in October to commit the party to insurrection against the opposition of Zinoviev, Kamenev, etc. It is not inconceivable that Zinoviev and Kamenev might have carried the day. Then there would have been no October.

Thirdly, even after October there was, as I have pointed out, a very real possibility of a coalition Bolshevik-Menshevik-SR government, based either on the Soviets or a combination of the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets as organs of local power and administration. This possibility foundered against the mutual intransigence of the Bolshevik hardliners on one side and the Menshevik and SR right-wing on the other. But in both camps there were conciliatory wings, the Menshevik Internationalists and some Left SRs and the Bolshevik "moderates" – Kamenev, Rykov, Nogin, etc.

It will be argued that, given the objective situation and the acuteness of class conflict, any such compromise regime, either in the form of a continuation of the February regime or in the form of a coalition of Soviet parties, would have been torn apart and incapable of resolving the problems of peace, bread and land – and that their policies on these questions were too far apart to be reconciled.

This was not necessarily so. Take the question of peace or war. True, the Bolshevik government signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty which ended the war with Germany in March 1918. But any other government would have been obliged sooner or later to sue for peace – even if only because of the disintegration of the Russian armies. After all, the World War itself ended in November 1918 for all belligerents; Russia under the Bolsheviks had to

endure the war with Poland in 1920 and the Civil War till 1921.

On the land question, it is true that the procrastination of the February regime on this fuelled the peasant opposition to it, and the peasants support for a Soviet regime in October 1917. But would a Bolshevik-Menshevik-SR coalition have foundered on this issue? Hardly! The Bolsheviks had already taken over the SR's policy. The Mensheviks, it is true, were for the municipalisation of the land, but they would surely have accepted the Bolshevik-SR policy as a price for inclusion in the government. Such a coalition government would still have been faced, as the Bolsheviks were, with the reluctance of the peasants to supply food to the towns in exchange for worthless paper money. But could they have dealt with this question in any worse way than the Bolsheviks did – by civil war against the peasants and terror, and (later in 1929) by forced collectivisation? In any case, the Bolshevik policy of War Communism and forcible requisition failed in the end, and had to be replaced by the New Economic Policy. It is arguable that with the SRs in the coalition, the excesses of War Communism might have been avoided and a policy similar to the NEP adopted earlier.

As regards policy on industry, workers' control, private ownership or nationalisation, would the policy differences between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks have been irreconcilable in the circumstances of 1918 onwards? It is worth recalling that during the first months of their rule, the Bolsheviks refrained from nationalising the factories – content to leave them in the nominal ownership of capitalists, but under workers' control. In fact, the Bolsheviks hoped at first to win the acquiescence or at least the neutrality of the defeated bourgeoisie in return for concessions. It was only from the summer of 1918 onwards that the Bolsheviks, under the combined pressure of the sabotage of the owners, the threat of the takeover of German-financed enterprises under the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and the collapse of labour discipline, started large-scale nationalisations and introduced managerial control.

A coalition government of Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and SRs, having a much broader based support than a purely Bolshevik one, would have been able to confront the White Armies more successfully, and thus shortened the Civil War, and reduced the destruction of the economy.

Marxists, Plekhanov for example, have argued that history is determined by large-scale impersonal social forces, and that the actions of individuals – and by implication, groups of individuals in the leadership of parties – are powerless to alter the course of events. It can also be argued that the attitudes and actions of the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, SRs, their leaderships and individuals, were themselves determined by the whole of their past histories and ideological roots, and they could not have acted otherwise than they did. That what happened was inevitable. But this is to look at events from a distance and with the hindsight of 1997. What happened happened. But in 1917-18, these parties, leaderships and individuals *did* have a choice of actions.

Even if I have been too optimistic about the possible alternative scenarios outlined above, could anything have been worse than that which actually occurred following October 1917; the Civil War, the Cheka terror, the concentration camps, the forced collectivisations, the deportations, the famines, cannibalism, the Stalinist purges – all ending in the collapse back into mafia-capitalism, and the discrediting of the very idea of socialism?

The assumption that the only alternative to Bolshevik rule was military dictatorship was based on the overall assumption that capitalism, internationally, was in terminal crisis. Therefore the development in Russia of a capitalist economy under a parliamentary democracy was impossible. Similar assumptions were made by the Trotskyists in 1945 for Europe after the Second World War. The epoch of bourgeois democracy and reforms was over. Either successful revolutions would overthrow capitalism under the leadership of the Fourth International, or capital would rule through military or Bonapartist dictatorship. There followed several decades of boom, increasing prosperity and bourgeois democracy under either reformist or plain bourgeois governments!

Was the assumption of the impossibility of a post-1917 parliamentary democracy in Russia just as mistaken?

Let us hope that when the next infant socialist state is born, those that bring it into the world and tend it will have learnt from the tragic fate of its predecessor – and that their actions will be guided by the experience of 1917!