

## THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

*Обрисовываются в общих чертах четыре аспекта социалистических революций, изученных в контексте Октябрьской революции: динамика политического восстания; политика повстанцев и учреждений и интересов, которые обусловили их политику; успехи и провалы революционных событий; контрреволюция, которая демонтировала социалистическую систему. Ввиду отсутствия революций в индустриально развитых странах Европы перед большевиками встала задача строительства социализма при неблагоприятных условиях. Значительный прогресс был достигнут в экономическом планировании, которое было базой индустриализации, урбанизации и формирования социалистического государства всеобщего благосостояния. Важные достижения были сделаны в сокращении неравенства; при этом в разных формах продолжались репрессии, дискриминация и тому подобное, что оформилось в систему. Эти события привели к значительному международному эффекту. Продолжаются споры, разрушилась ли социалистическая система или была сознательно демонтирована? Усиление внутренних классовых противоречий, поддержанное внешними дестабилизирующими силами, создало условия для демонтажа социалистической системы.*

**Ключевые слова:**

*демонтаж СССР, динамика революции, классовый конфликт, Октябрьская революция, репрессии в СССР, советское благосостояние, советское планирование.*

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The right wing historian, Niall Ferguson, positively quotes Stefan Zweig's, *Decisive Moments in History* (1927) to rank Lenin's return to Russia in October 1917 as one of the three most decisive 'moments' in recent world history; the others were the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 [8]. It was decisive only because of what followed: the Revolution of October 1917 and later the formation of the USSR. The question which I will address in this paper is whether the October Revolution was an event which has benefitted human history or presents a serious miscalculation to the detriment of human well-being – not only in Russia, but in the world. Finally, I consider what lessons can be drawn, not only from the dismantling of the European socialist societies but also for the future.

I outline the October Revolution in the context of the revolutionary process which has four related components. First, the dynamics of the process of political and social insurrection. Second, the underlying social, political, ideological and organisational forces which conditioned the

policies that the insurgents sought to initiate. Third, the aftermath and impact (both domestically and internationally) of the new order which was introduced. For the October Revolution, we may add yet a fourth dimension: the process by which the new social order was dismantled.

### **The October Revolution and the Immediate Aftermath**

A major dilemma facing socialists is the extent to which the October revolution was a moment in the creation of a socialist society. The early twentieth century social-democrats believed that the Tsarist political order and the peasant-based agricultural economy lacked the social basis of capitalism from which socialism would arise. Lenin had a different vision. Russia he saw as a weak link in the imperialist capitalist system. Imperialism is 'that stage of development in which domination of monopoly and finance capital has taken shape; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world by international trusts has begun; and in which the

partition of all territory of the earth by the greatest capitalist countries has been completed' [20, chapter 7]. The uneven development of capitalism had created a weak bourgeoisie in Russia concurrent with an exploited class of industrial workers and landless agricultural workers.

The Tsarist state's weaknesses were amplified by war. For Lenin, the 1914 World War not only destabilised capitalism economically and politically but was also transforming the political consciousness of the Western European working class. While power could be seized in Russia by a social-democratic party, Lenin was insistent that it would be a spark for the '... the rising world-wide socialist revolution of the proletariat ... We are for the war being ended, as it will be, by a revolution in a number of countries, i.e., by the conquest of state power by a new class, not the capitalists, not the small proprietors... but by the proletarians and semi-proletarians' [21]. The Russian revolution was to be the prelude to the socialist revolution on a European scale. That this did not happen had momentous consequences both for the future USSR and world politics.

The successful seizure of power in October was in no small measure due to Lenin's vision of a 'party of a new type' – the Communist Party [23]. He emphasised the role of organisation in forging and leading a revolutionary movement. Following 1917, the paradox of Russian development was that a social-democratic party (as it was called then) came to power in a country with a low level of productive forces and a relatively small working class. Here again the specific character of Tsarist Russia shaped socialist politics. Until February 1917, rights of association and parliamentary representation of civil society in the Duma had been absent. Organised competing political parties were illegal and its members were subject to arrest and exile. Under such conditions, Lenin contended that the working class had to be led by a revolutionary social-democratic party (the 'Bolsheviks' since 1903). In October, Lenin's strategy successfully mobilized the uprooted peasant army disenchanting with the war, the discontented urban masses – including significant sections of the proletariat- and the disgruntled intelligentsia, into a revolutionary force.

It was not, however, the classic Marxist revolution envisaging the introduction of socialism led by the working class, Lenin's objective was to 'bring social production under the control of the Soviet of Workers' deputies' [22].

The Bolshevik faction was an effective instrument to seize power under autocratic conditions. The new leadership was not without support but from the very beginning communists were a minority – albeit a powerful one. The Bolsheviks received nine million votes – some

25 per cent of the votes – in elections to the Constituent Assembly in November 1917 which gave the new regime a critical mass of support. We now know that at the time Lenin's view of imperialism included an over optimistic analysis of the potential for world revolution. Imperialism was not a 'moribund' form of capitalism. It held immense possibilities for further development of the world's productive forces.

### **The Russian Legacy and Bolshevik Policy**

This absence of the crucial consequential contingency of a workers' revolution in Europe has bedevilled the socialist movement ever since. After 1917, Soviet Russia stood alone. The post-October regime inherited systemic dislocations caused by a society in transition from feudalism to capitalism, and by economic collapse consequent on the 1914 war. Soviet Russia also faced foreign intervention, internal revolts and civil war.

The cultural heritage of Russia, already apparent politically in Lenin's theory of the Party, had a major impact on Bolshevik policies. There were critical limits on the ability of the leaders to effect their policies. These stemmed from the immense land mass, the inhospitable climate and the low level of economic resources. The country was at an early state of capitalist development, very much below that of capitalist states. In 1913, for instance, Russian industrial large-scale output was only 6.9 per cent of American gross industrial output. There were other relatively autonomous social forces which challenged the political leadership. The mores of the peasant family continued and the new incumbents of power found difficulties for many years to penetrate the traditional family structure. Under the Tsars, there was no division between state and society: religion had no autonomous sphere of operation and the Orthodox Church, sanctioned by the Tsars, asserted a monopoly over religious organisation.

Until 1917, there was no right to combination – political parties were illegal, as were independent trade unions, and workers associations operated under government auspices. The weakness of civil society inherited from Tsarist Russia also perpetuated a parochial political culture which was not conducive to the introduction of a socialist democratic order. The social base on which the Soviet regime developed included a numerically small intelligentsia and urban working class and was largely composed of poorly educated people. The low level of literacy created problems of communication compounded by poor infrastructure such as roads and telephone links. Russia, economically, politically and culturally, was unready for a socialist revolution.

Moreover, many factors impelled by the revolution itself created disruption. Revolutions

occur in polities that are unable or unwilling to change gradually under conditions of instability. The post-revolutionary years were ones like those following the French Revolution – and marred by internal war and oppression. Two major political forces opposed the Bolsheviks and have proved to be persistent opponents of the socialist political order. First, nationalist groups provided armed resistance in Ukraine, Georgia and Central Asia where sovereign states had been declared. Nationalism later became a political vehicle for anti-communism.

Second, armed intervention by American, British Empire, Czech and Japanese troops illustrated the ways in which the Western powers sought to reverse the changes brought in by October. Statesmen in the West envisaged a Soviet threat and mobilised troops and public opinion against the Bolshevik order. The Paris Peace Conference convened in 1919 by the victorious powers (Lenin's Russia was not represented) considered ways in which the Western European states could intervene against the new Republic.

Winston Churchill is representative of many virulent critics. In January 1919, he is reported to have thrown 'the whole of his dynamic energy and genius into organising an armed intervention against Russia'\*. Later, in April 1919, he made clear his political opposition: 'of all the tyrannies in history, the Bolshevik tyranny is the worst, the most destructive, and the most degrading. It is sheer humbug to pretend that it is not far worse than German militarism'\*\*.

As Engels earlier had pointed out 'The spectre of communism was haunting Europe'. But the spectre only materialised into state power in some parts of the former Russian Empire. While significant revolutionary uprisings took place in Europe, they were all successfully suppressed. Churchill's views are symbolic of the opposition which has existed against Soviet Russia since October: autocratic states are not democratic but can be reformed, totalitarian communist states are unreformable.

Consequently, the Bolshevik leadership was confronted with numerous dilemmas: the Tsarist legacy of empire against socialist internationalism; the reconciliation of socialism with nationalism; the maintenance of Bolshevik power against foreign armed opposition; the expectation that a socialist political order could be built under conditions of a society emerging from feudalism. In all these antinomies, the leadership adopted a politically realist position by adapting socialist presuppositions to political reality.

\* Foreign Office document, cited by [6, p. 310]. It is fair to say that later, when confronted with Germany in the Second World War, Churchill took a more favourable view of both Stalin and Soviet Russia.

\*\* Cited by [16].

The Bolshevik leadership must be credited with extraordinary courage and political skill in maintaining political power. Not only had they to deal with internal revolt, civil war, famine, foreign armed intervention, and a lack of international recognition but also with all the accumulated problems of Tsarist backwardness and the effects of the First World War.

The character and significance of what followed the consolidation of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union and later the socialist states are matters of considerable disagreement, not only in the West but also in the countries of the former USSR.

### Three Interpretations of October

The October revolution is perceived from three different and conflicting positions which are not mutually exclusive. First, there are those who emphasise the economic, social and cultural advances. Some here insist that the USSR created an early stage of socialism or more modestly an industrial society with socialist characteristics.

Second are critics who reject the Bolshevik order on the grounds of its dictatorial and repressive rule. This group emphasises the absence of representative democracy and the uncontrollable power of the state. Its frame of reference is repression starting from the suppression of Kronstadt uprising, the murder of Tsar Nicholas II, the crushing of the peasants during the collectivisation campaigns, and the terror instituted under Stalin. These early seeds of anti-communism germinated later into an American led ideology of totalitarianism.

The third approach is shaped by international affairs and the role of hostile foreign powers. The perception here is that of capitalist encirclement and military aggression, of which military intervention in the Civil War was the first manifestation. There is also, in the West, the ideological condemnation of international communism which led eventually to the dismantling of the USSR. The fear of communism was fuelled by the views articulated by Lenin in *The Proletarian Revolution* and the Renegade Kautsky that the Bolshevik revolution of October would be the model for other countries and would hasten the victory of the proletariat in the capitalist countries.

Such critical views were not only held by the dominant classes in the West who condemned and labelled the socialist states as totalitarian, but also by some socialists who considered communist leadership to have introduced not socialism but state capitalism. There has always been a strong criticism of the October Revolution from social-democratic leaders.

I would however make a plea to consider the consequences of the Revolution in Russia

34 | in terms of the conditions both domestically and geo-politically in which the revolution took place. One must acknowledge the mistakes and condemn the crimes which have seriously defaced the socialist project; but also consider the positive aspects in the context of world politics at the time.

How then can we judge the consequences of the October Revolution? Its socialist character and intention should be the criteria on which the Revolution should be judged.

### **Evaluating the October Revolution**

The crux of the dilemma for socialists was whether the Socialist Republics and later the Soviet Union could succeed in moving to an economic and political stage qualitatively higher than capitalism, or at least to supersede it in significant respects. I would define six major objectives on which the October revolution might be evaluated.

– First, the claim that hierarchical political economic coordination was an effective alternative to individualist market competition; that planning was superior to the market.

– Second, the assumption that social class is the major actor in politics.

– Third, the promotion of political altruism: that all citizens would participate in the affairs of society as ‘comrades’ and leaders would act in the interest of society; that society could be organised on rational forms of collectivism and cooperation without the need for private property and profit.

– Fourth, that a just society could be better ordered on the basis of actual equality rather than equality of opportunity.

– Fifth, it endorsed a secular society. People would be able to shape their own wills based on human reason independently of gods and religion.

– Finally, October provided a focal point for socialism as a world movement for all working people (*trudyashchiesya*). It provided an alternative socialist model of political control, economic planning and social welfare superior to capitalism.

In this paper I can only consider one or two of these propositions.

### **Building the Soviet Union**

In the years that followed 1917, Soviet policy evolved from the footprint of Tsarist Russia. I have defined the ensuing political formation as a state socialist society. The economy was organised on the basis of a plan, central control and direction rather than through a market. Led by the Communist Party, the objective was to create a communist society\*. Similar to Russian Orthodoxy and the peasant

commune, Soviet Russia shared a collectivist and public form of personal integration rather than an individualist one manifested in an autonomous civil society. The Bolshevik regime extended state ownership and control which was similar in some ways to the pre-Soviet economic and political formation.

Faced with the backwardness inherited from the Tsars and the continuing confrontation with the Western powers, the Communist leadership embarked on a policy of industrialisation and modernisation. Marxism which had arisen as a critique of bourgeois society became transformed into Marxism-Leninism – an ideology of development which provided an intellectual rationale for the economic and political action later undertaken under Stalin. State socialism, as it evolved between the two world wars, became a coherent alternative to the capitalist-market and private-ownership form of industrialisation. Whether one likes it or not, Bolshevism was an alternative to market capitalism – something which its Marxists critics have never achieved.

Comprehensive central planning was adopted. Distribution and production were controlled by the bodies of central planning. The market and its institutions, such as independent banks, and monetary indicators (the rate of interest) were abolished. The market system was replaced by a centrally organised and government controlled economy – a ‘command economy’. The government channelled resources towards rapid industrialisation – rather analogous to Western governments under a war economy. The rate of capital investment was high: it flowed to heavy industry rather than to consumer goods. The social infrastructure of education, health and culture was also developed.

Moreover, the institutions of Soviet society in which industrialisation was carried out were quite different from those of Western capitalism and the previous Tsarist order. It was not a form of state capitalism because there was no production of exchange value. There was complete public ownership of the means of production; the state directed economic surplus for developmental investment; the outflow of profits was prohibited. Such measures demanded administrative direction and control in the place of the market mechanism.

### **Policy in the Countryside**

Agriculture had been the mainstay of the Russian population. The October Revolution resulted in land reform (nationalisation of land by the government which abolished the large estates) and an equalisation of holdings (as land had been seized and divided for use by the peasants). This gave rise to a large number

\* Details see: [18, pp. 6–7].

of peasant farmers with less capital per unit than before the Revolution. State farms (large scale agricultural units under state management) favoured by Lenin, were few in number. On the contrary, in the place of the pre-revolutionary large estates, there was a reversion to small scale peasant agriculture.

Collectivisation of agriculture took place in 1929. The political leadership considered that such a course of action in agriculture was necessary for two principal reasons. It enabled resources to be channelled to the towns to feed the newly mobilised working class – surplus derived from agriculture rose from 20 per cent in 1913–4 to 36 per cent in 1939. And, at considerable political cost, collectivisation crushed the traditional peasantry – who were considered to be a potential counter-revolutionary group. It secured urban economic and political power over the village.

By 1937, 235,000 collective farms had replaced the 26 million peasant productive household units existing in 1929. The costs were high and millions of peasants were displaced; moreover, in retaliation many slaughtered animals and burnt crops. Cooperative production of agriculture was organised: peasants were put under the management of collective farm chairpersons who, as agents of the central planners, controlled the product mix and, most important of all, the surplus produce. The system had parallels with the Tsarist system of estates, as collective farmers were 'tied' to the collective farm and could not leave for the towns without the collective's permission.

The economic effects of Soviet developmental policy were positive and narrowed the gap with capitalist type economies. Estimates by Gerschenkron show that output of Soviet large-scale industry increased at an annual rate of between 15 and 17 per cent between 1928 and 1938; Soviet industrial output as a ratio of American output rose as follows: 6.9 per cent in 1913, 27.3 per cent 1932, 45.1 per cent 1938 [10, Supplement, p. 166].

Consequently, the defence capacity of the Soviet Union was greatly enhanced and the armed forces had an economic base on which to fight the Second World War. By 1943, the USSR already exceeded Germany's production of armaments. This was an enormous achievement.

The USSR copied advanced technological processes and organisational techniques from the core capitalist countries. By the end of the 1950s, the USSR had been transformed from an agricultural to an industrial country producing aircraft, advanced military equipment and later computers, space satellites and electronic systems. And a good system of comprehensive public health and education had been introduced as the basis of a welfare state.

### Social Progress

While the USSR (and after the Second World War other socialist countries) had levels of gross domestic product per capita ranging from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of that of Western European countries, their human development index was comparable and nearly all the European socialist societies were in the high development bracket\*. Life expectancy in the USSR in 1990 for example was 70.6 years; for the UK 75.5 and for the USA 75.9\*\*. The statist socialist system was able to direct resources into education and human infrastructure raising human development to levels higher than suggested by the figures for GDP.

Political mobilisation was achieved through exposure to the mass media which was utilised to further economic development and political solidarity. The media sought to organise loyalties around an image of a supra-national socialist USSR. After the Revolution, the old system of titles and honorific awards were abolished. They were replaced with orders and medals bestowing social and political recognition on servants of the Soviet state. Women were given legal equality with men. Divorce was made easy. 'Socialist' ceremonies of marriage and of initiation into the working class were instituted. Public holidays celebrated things socialist and Soviet (the October Revolution and May Day) replacing religious ones. The objective was to create a climate of expectancy and change in which people could be assimilated into a newly constructed Soviet society. To a considerable extent old beliefs were destroyed by the new symbolic forms state socialism.

An enduring feature was that the centre of revolutionary socialism shifted from the West to the East; from Germany to Russia. The formation of the Third International (the Comintern) in 1919 defined a communist alternative to reformist social-democracy headed by Russia's state power. Whereas the success of October had the effect of splitting social-democracy in Western Europe, it had a positive impact on revolutionary movements in colonial countries, which also had large agricultural populations. Soviet Russia had cut free from the world capitalist system but had to make its own way as a post-revolutionary power. The Russian Revolution became a beacon for countries experiencing development under conditions of imperialism.

\* Data based on: life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, school enrolment (later mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling) and gross national income per capita (PPP\$). For detailed figures on the standards in different countries see: [13, pp. 128–129; 14, pp. 119–121].

\*\* Data from [15, p. 127].

There was a hidden and negative side to October. The absence of a market led to the growth of a state administrative system. This included not only the economic and welfare ministries but also 'power' institutions which sought to protect the state from internal sabotage and external attack. A huge state structure (with no division of powers) as under the Tsars came to characterize state socialism – though significant federative administrative divisions (Soviet Socialist Republics within the USSR) coinciding with national and ethnic divisions, were set up.

The need for political surveillance to guard against real and supposed adversaries led to the creation of a comprehensive web of police and security services. These in turn matured into important political and economic formations: security became detached from Party control and accrued considerable economic powers from the forced labour camps which came under their jurisdiction. Political purges, including the murder of leading Bolsheviks, were important features of Stalinist rule\*. Repression became a feature of Soviet society under Stalin. While the exact numbers of victims are unknown, during the 'Great Terror' of 1937–38, it has been estimated that 1.5 million people were arrested of whom some 700,000 were executed\*\*.

This oppressive system was due to a combination of factors. Social revolutions are always accompanied by internal civil war: in Cuba and China it preceded the seizure of power; in Soviet Russia and France it followed it. The political culture of Russia traditionally had not developed controls and checks over administrative rule. There was an absence of a democratic culture. As critics of Bolshevik power point out: 'Centuries of serfdom and autocratic rule had prevented the ordinary people from acquiring the consciousness of citizens... The popular notion of power in [Soviet] Russia continued to be articulated in terms of coercive domination and quasi-religious authority derived from the traditions of serfdom and autocracy rather than in terms of a modern law-based state distributing rights and duties between citizens' [9, p. 809]. The centralisation of the Party and its claim to political hegemony provided a legitimisation of central control (though not violence).

The country was always under external threat – by invasion of foreign forces during the civil war, by the menace of Hitler's Germany and in the post-World War II period by

US and NATO encirclement. One effect of the success of Soviet power was that it had galvanised adversarial right-wing forces in Europe and the USA. 'Anti-communism' became a counter ideology and led to the rise of fascist powers in Italy, Austria, Germany and Spain which in turn provided a base for the ruthless and savage invasion of the USSR in 1941. Even in 1923 when the imprisoned Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, he considered the 'Russian Bolsheviks' as 'blood-stained criminals' and Germany was 'the next battlefield for Russian Bolshevism' [12, pp. 538, 539].

The country's management was in the hands of the harsh and uncompromising personality of Stalin and the people promoted by him. The absence of adequate legal procedures led to many injustices and criminal deaths.

All these factors in combination contributed to the creation of a regime which, under threat, relied on repression to forestall potential opposition. Explaining the context of repression, however, does not entail the legitimisation of criminal actions which have to be condemned. The image of socialism, both domestically and abroad, suffered greatly as a consequence of these crimes.

### **The Socialist Welfare State**

While forms of oppression figure prominently in critical accounts of the Soviet model of socialism, the administrative system secured many advances which moved significantly away not only from the Tsarist system but also from the ways that capitalist market systems performed. In the years following 1917, many more ostensibly socialist measures were taken by the government. Three major developments may be mentioned here: first a great equalisation in income and wealth; second, the abolition of structural unemployment; and third, the introduction of a comprehensive welfare state.

In addition to the seizure of the landed property of the aristocracy and the economic assets of the bourgeoisie, the personal possessions of the rich were expropriated. An attempt was made to enhance the status of manual labour. A remarkable long term equalisation of income was achieved. As shown in Figure 1, the top 1 per cent of the population possessed 18 per cent of the national income in 1905; from 1927 onwards it fell to between 4 and 6 per cent. During this time the comparable share in the USA was around 22 per cent between 1916 and 1935.

There was an unprecedented levelling up of the income of the manual working class. Figure 2 shows the trend from 1932 to 1986: the average pay for manual workers is shown at 100 with ratios for office workers and non-manual technical employees. While these data

\* See particularly, [17; 27; 28].

\*\* Estimate based on Andrei Zhurkov's study of NKVD archives, cited by [29]. For an overview see [25].

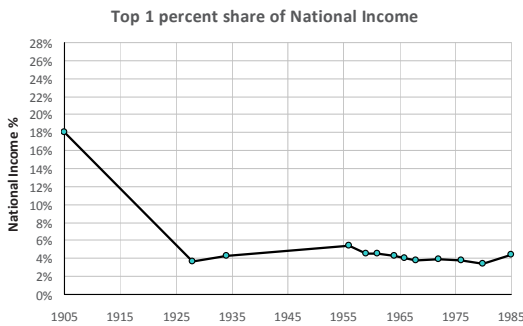


Figure 1. Russia: Share of Top 1 per cent of families of national income 1905–1985. Source: [26, Figure 8A, Data for Russia, pre-tax income].

are for employees in industry they truly reflect general changes in Soviet society. Moreover, in all the European state socialist societies, pre-war differentials between salaries and wages, male and female, skilled and unskilled, industrial and agricultural earnings all fell considerably\*.

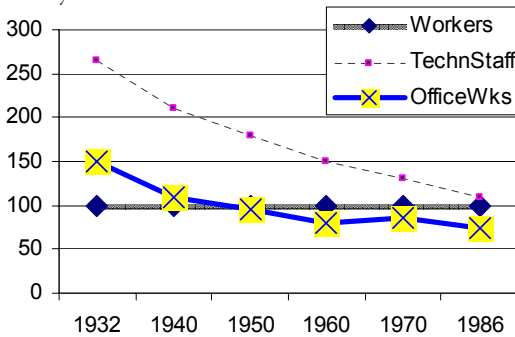


Figure 2. Income Differentials in Industry: USSR 1932–86. Data based on [2, p. 431; 4].

Money wages, of course, were not the only determinant of income. Many of the elite, not only politicians, but famous authors, musicians and film stars, were able to receive better accommodation\*\*, access to quality food, medicine (and their children, better schools). Such administrative perks were important. Workers had access to supplies which could be pilfered. However, money wages were the most important component of income for the population as a whole and wage-ratios are still the best guide we have to relativities. The lower relative pay of the professional and technical classes indicates the desire on the part of the political leadership to enhance the position of

\* Data cited in [5, pp. 26, 27]. See particularly note 2 ([5, p. 26]) for comparisons between 1937–39 and 1948 in Czechoslovakia.

\*\* Relative to the West, such advantages were relatively modest. They also had access to state provided chauffeured cars, good hospitals and holiday homes (though they did not own them).

manual workers at the expense of non-manuals. This policy caused resentment on the part of professionals who rightly believed that under capitalism their differential and real income would be much higher. At the other end of the scale, poverty continued, especially for people who had an incomplete labour record and who received lower than average pensions; this included people with disabilities and single parent families who were likely to be poor. This was a reflection of their employment record which generally determined pension payments.

The second achievement was that structural unemployment was averted; social policy had as one of its goals the maintenance of a fully employed labour force with security of tenure. This had the consequence of reducing considerably the amount of poverty compared to capitalist societies. The advocates of state socialism pointed to the absence of a reserve army of labour which gave the working class security of living standards. Women increasingly became an important part of the labour force with exceedingly high rates of paid employment. By 1986, women constituted 51 per cent of the employed labour force [2, p. 416]. This gave women greater independence and there were usually two income earners in the family. Child care for working mothers was provided on a comprehensive scale in the USSR well before the welfare states of the West. On the other hand, it often left women with dual responsibilities – in the home as well as the place of employment. In many sectors (particularly in politics) a glass ceiling operated resulting in male domination in positions of power.

### Cultural Revolution

Thirdly, the Soviet Union pursued a policy of cultural revolution and social development. The objective was to introduce comprehensive mass social services and to capture the minds of the people. Welfare (education, health) and state benefits (pensions) and subsidies (for housing and food) became significant components of the standard of living. In place of the stratified system of education inherited from Tsarist Russia, comprehensive and poly-technical education was introduced with a common syllabus for all pupils. Mass literacy campaigns were instigated. In 1926, the Soviet authorities claimed that 51.1 per cent of the population aged over nine years was literate and by 1939, the figure reached 81.2 per cent [1]. Yet by 1959, the census showed that by far the largest group of the population had received only an incomplete secondary education. However, a massive change had taken place in the social structure which was to have profound demands on the political system. In

38 | 1939 in the Soviet Union only 1.2 million people had completed higher education; by 1982 the number had reached 76 million, just under half of whom were women [3, p. 42].

Compared to other countries at similar levels of development, spectacular advances were made in the field of public provision. The number of physicians per thousand of the population rose from 0.17 in 1913 to 0.74 in 1940 and 1.97 in 1961; in India in 1956 the ratio was 0.17, in Japan in 1959–60, 1.09 and in the USA in 1961, 1.28\*. Public goods were highly subsidised. Books, theatres, cinema, art and newspapers were considerably cheaper than in market societies. The market was substantially weakened as a distributive mechanism and replaced by administrative redistribution.

However, Soviet society disappointed many egalitarian socialists and idealists. Distribution was according to work performance, not to need. There was an unequal distribution of commodities and services and status differentiation between social groups continued. But income differentials were relatively narrow and there was no private ownership of wealth. Even if one takes account of benefits in kind which were enjoyed disproportionately by the administrative classes, the gap between the richest and poorest was relatively low and at a qualitatively different level to differentials in the advanced capitalist states.

Research has shown that, with some notable exceptions, the ranking of the desirability of jobs followed a similar scale as that in the capitalist West, though the income relativities did not. The exceptions were the position of groups of manual workers (such as miners) who were ranked higher, and farmers (in practice peasants in collective farms) who had less status\*\*. Even though the money incomes of professional workers, such as physicians, lawyers and artists were severely depressed and were not much more than the wage of the average skilled industrial manual worker, their status ratings remained relatively untouched\*\*\*. This kind of 'status incongruence' led to domestic discontent and was a major stimulus for reform.

### Soviet State-Socialism

While the system of state socialism had many imperfections and inadequacies, Soviet Marxists, some confidently and others reservedly, claimed that the October Revolution had succeeded in transcending capitalism and had

completed the building of the first stage of socialism. Their main argument was that the means of production were collectively owned thus ensuring the absence of a capitalist class, and that economic coordination was achieved through planning rather than the market. Most would agree that, even though this system was not socialist in an ideal sense, state socialism acted as a powerful tool to integrate the socially and geographically mobile population into a stable society. At least, one might conclude that the Soviet Union had constructed an industrial society with socialist characteristics.

Its effects, as an economic and political model for countries, were uneven and varied over time. During the period up to the 1950s economic planning was well received and stimulated policies of West European social-democratic parties after World War II. Nationalisation of assets and government controls of capitalist economies were widely adopted.

But the Soviet system was strongly opposed by Western liberals and critical Marxists who contended that exploitation and conflict of one form or another continued in Soviet-type societies and that the Revolution had failed to surpass capitalism. It was also strongly denied by the opponents of socialism in the West, who considered that Soviet power was a form of administrative domination. A ruling class, it was contended, had arisen based on the control of the means of production. Even in the Soviet Union, a counter ideology of market reforms and electoral democracy was promoted by the movement for radical reform under Gorbachev.

### Consequences of October

How then can we evaluate the consequences of the October Revolution? The crux of the dilemma is whether the Socialist Republics and the Soviet Union succeeded in moving to an economic and political stage qualitatively higher than capitalism, or at least to supersede it in significant respects. Here I turn to examine the extent to which the six major aims of Soviet power (defined above) had been achieved by the mid 1980s and what deficiencies spurred the reforms undertaken by Gorbachev.

**First**, there is the claim that hierarchical political economic coordination is an effective alternative to individualistic market competition. This objective was vindicated by the experience of the Soviet bloc. Modern societies can be organised effectively on the basis of rational forms of planning and without the need for private property and profit. A caveat here is that the planning system became less efficient as the economy became more complex and developed. Nevertheless, the Soviet Un-

\* Data based on Soviet and Western sources, cited in [30, p. 166].

\*\* There were regional variations: the position of priests in Poland reveals only a slight decline though in Czechoslovakia, it was considerable.

\*\*\* See details in [19, Chapter 3] and [7].



ion had narrowed the gap with the Western states. One important drawback, moreover, is that consumer satisfaction was considerably higher in the Western market economies than in the socialist ones.

**Second**, there is a contention that abolition of classes is a necessary condition for a planned socialist economy. Soviet type societies were indeed classless and, in a Marxist sense, economic exploitation had been abolished. However, such classlessness was not a sufficient condition to abolish inequalities in the exercise of economic and political power. Patriarchy, derived from the Tsarist family heritage, and bureaucratic control continued. Factors other than property ownership have to be taken into account in the analysis of political power.

**Third**, October claimed to enhance democracy. Here significant strides were made to increase participation in society, and the political leadership secured advances in promoting equality of income and social conditions. However, politically, bureaucratic control exerted a form of administrative domination commanded, not by economic classes, but by elites whose power derived from control of economic and political resources. The political system had not realised the political potential of a more highly participant political culture.

**Fourth**, October promoted social equality. In this respect all the state socialist societies sponsored real equality of outcomes rather than, as under Western social-democracy, the pursuit of equality of opportunity. Differences in levels of real income were significantly diminished compared with both pre-October Russia and Western capitalist countries. While inequalities continued with respect to access to scarce goods and services, social equality was a significant achievement of the socialist regimes. One consequence was that in comparisons with the more highly paid executives, owners, managers and professionals in the West, many like statuses in the socialist states felt undervalued. The political leadership was unable to contain public aspirations for a consumer society.

**Fifth**, the revolution rejected religion. Secularism strengthened the linkage between promise and reality; rewards would not be forthcoming in another world. Consequently, a secular society was achieved without any serious lack of moral or social sensibility. Socialist rituals and ceremonies, commemorating May Day and the October Revolution, effectively replaced religious ones. However, as the socialist states developed economically, a socialist ethic, the aspiration for a 'world of comrades' was overpowered by an ideology of consumerism.

**Finally**, October sought to establish a focal point for socialism as a world movement. In this respect, the revolution succeeded in providing an alternative socialist model of political control and economic planning. The USSR stimulated the introduction of state planning and welfare state provision after the Second World War in many Western European countries. Of greater importance, October was an immense stimulus for socialism as a world movement for all working people (*trud'yashchisya*), and particularly in countries (such as India and China) opposing colonialism. But the Soviet forms of coordination both in politics and economics were increasingly open to criticisms of over-centralisation and an absence of real democratic participation. Consequently, the economic and political model introduced in Soviet Russia and the USSR had greatest appeal to the developing world.

### Internal Critique and Dismantling of the Soviet System

The reform movement led initially by Mikhail Gorbachev sought to address some of these deficiencies. In 1986, he launched his programme of *perestroika*. This policy led to the dismantling of state socialism and a reversal of many of the economic and political objectives of the October Revolution. It was nothing less than a counter-revolution from within the state socialist formation rather than, as expected, from the global forces of capitalism. In December 1991, the world's first communist state, the USSR, was dismembered into 15 sovereign states. The critical mass of the world communist system was dissolved. Despite the catching up achieved in the socialist industrialisation periods, the socialist societies had not reached a similar economic level to the advanced capitalist states. The level of technology fell below that of the West and the 'technology gap' was not closing\*. It is true that the socialist bloc experienced falling rates of growth from 1970 onwards. In this context, the reform leadership of Gorbachev sought to join the world market in order to improve their technological capacity.

Gorbachev precipitated change not only in alliance with domestic strata seeking a shift to a market system but also he had to cultivate dominant exogenous support. As a consequence of opposition to its policy, the Soviet leadership was pushed into dependence on outsiders to sustain the move to a market economy. As a former adviser to Gorbachev has cogently put it: '...[T]he task of [Gorbachev's foreign policy] was not to protect the USSR from the outside threat and to assure the internal stability but almost the opposite: to use rela-

\* See [24].

40 | tions with the outside world as an additional instrument of internal change. He wished to transform the West into his ally in the political struggle against the conservative opposition he was facing at home because his real political front was there' [11, p. 3].

The politics of the radical reform leadership, first under Gorbachev and then under Eltsin, sought a pact with foreign world actors. This process again illustrates the incursion of external actors in Russia. The latter insisted on a policy of competitive markets in the polity (parties and competitive elections) as well as in the economy (privatised production for exchange, and money which would be negotiable in international markets). This would be assured by establishing the rule of law to guarantee rights to property and its proceeds. These policies had clear implications for 'transition' in the USSR and later in the Russian Federation. A marketised form of exchange paved the way for the induction of Western products, capital (to purchase domestic assets) and the exploitation of the indigenous labour force.

The state-owned and centrally planned system introduced by the October Revolution was reversed and the political leadership of the post-communist states turned to introduce markets, private property and competitive party democracy as ways to transform the communist societies.

In doing so they reversed many of the achievements of the October Revolution. Not only did the reformers repudiate the claim that the USSR had any political pretensions of extending its power internationally but the USSR joined the world market system on terms laid down by the West. This moved October to the unexpected and unanticipated fourth stage of revolution: counter-revolution.

The Soviet Union can claim a fourth 'decisive moment' to update Stefan Zweig's list: the deletion of the 'leading role' of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from the Constitution of the USSR in March 1990. This action decisively ended the epoch promised by October and heralded a return to capitalism.

### Conclusion

The capture of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 was dependent on two major precipitants: the dislocation caused by the war with Germany which significantly weakened the incumbent power of the Tsarist order and its foreign allies, and Lenin's political strategy which provided an organisational, ideological and social basis for the Bolshevik insurgents. The conditioning factors which later constrained the revolutionary leadership were domestically, a backward peasant based

economy and, internationally, a hostile political environment. Lenin's assumption that a successful uprising in Russia would be followed by a socialist revolution in Europe did not materialise.

Consequently, the Russian communists came to power in one of the most politically, economically and socially underdeveloped countries in Europe. These conditions were exacerbated by the chaos created by the consequences of the First World War and civil war. Economic backwardness and traditional social mores required the socialist political leadership to effect economic development similar in character to the form industrialisation took in other countries, and to devise a cultural revolution to overcome traditional ways of thinking about family, work and authority. The constant fear of foreign intervention gave rise to a fortress state.

A great and lasting achievement of the October Revolution was to demonstrate that an industrial society could be constructed without a capitalist class and a market economy. The resulting society built in the post-1917 era had many hallmarks of a socialist order in terms of social equality and welfare, though some of the traditional forms of authority and personal relations continued. Industrial relations devised under capitalism were also copied as part of the rapid industrialisation drive. The USSR provided a model of a state-led planned economy which was initially imitated extensively in many countries, including China and Cuba which, in turn, influenced other political movements in Asia and Latin America. The introduction of planning and welfare state provisions had a considerable influence in shaping public policy in European states, particularly in France, the United Kingdom and initially in the European Union.

The Soviet period of economic development greatly enhanced the USSR's economic power. All the state socialist societies experienced significant advances in living standards, life expectancy and particularly the provision of social goods and services. However, the countries of the Soviet bloc could not match the consumer society of the West. Moreover, the political antagonism of Western governments, defending a capitalist form of economic order, continued. The political and economic conditions inherited in 1917 left a mark. The political isolation of the USSR making it a fortress state was a major factor forging a threatened and defensive political leadership and the political order began to take on some of the repressive characteristics of a Tsarist autocracy which became amplified under the Stalin regime – though these were renounced by later Soviet leaders.

The consequences of state led industrialisation ensured far-reaching changes in the class structure which gave rise to contradictions between occupational and administrative groupings. These provided the basis for a class of radical reformers who, allied to external interests, undermined the socialist system in the USSR and the states of Eastern Europe. Attempts by successive Soviet leaders to match, and even surpass, Western life-styles (particularly mass consumerism) as well as efforts to break the political deadlock with, and military threat from, the leading capitalist states, led to the dismantling of the socialist planned economy and to the ending of Communist Party hegemony. Consequently, the political chal-

lenge to capitalism was replaced by efforts to join the capitalist world system.

The socialist block did not spontaneously 'collapse'. The socialist project heralded by October was ended as a consequence of policies of the Soviet Union's political leadership to return to the world capitalist economy. But we have to remember that the radical reform movement, which undermined state socialism, was not just orchestrated from the top, but received at the time considerable public approval. State socialism failed to mobilise sufficiently solidarity networks in society. In this respect the political leadership in the socialist states failed to keep pace with the demands of its modern educated population.

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