

A Russian Revolution, 1917

Contributed by Lawrence Jorgensen

1917 was the year of the Russian Revolution; but that Revolution, the Russian Revolution, contained two phases, or two specific revolutions. The first, or April Revolution, took place one evening in April, 1917; on that night, the Imperial Russian Empire, the autocratic and orthodox Russian monarchy known as Tsarism "simply ceased to exist." As revolutions go, this was a rather bloodless one; the autocracy had few supporters willing to shed their blood to preserve it.

Into the place of the now dead autocracy stepped a temporary Provisional Government, and as you no doubt already know, it proved to be quite temporary. Through a succession of personnel and policies, none of which managed to attract the support of the Russian people, the Provisional Government staggered on until November, when the Bolsheviks and their allies simply thrust it aside in an even less bloody, less violent revolution -- the November, or Bolshevik, Revolution.

Now

what is generally overlooked by partisans and opponents of these two revolutions, the Revolutions of April and November, 1917, is that both of these specific revolutions were but phases of a larger, more significant, and more historically profound event -- the revolution of the Russian people, the real Russian Revolution of 1917.

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July, 1914, Imperial Russia declared war upon Germany and Austro--Hungary, and thereby signed its own death warrant. Indeed, the destruction of the autocracy was inevitable. If the government had been able to stave off the pressures from the military and from the ultra--nationalists, if the ruling classes had been enlightened enough, intelligent and sophisticated enough to realize the inability of Russia to conduct a war against Germany and Austro--Hungary, and had they been able to pressure the hopelessly stupid and incompetent Tsar, Nicholas II, to stand firm against the military and the ultra--nationalists, it would not have mattered in any case.

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autocracy, the Tsarist Russian Empire, was doomed. Had the Russian government in 1914 abandoned the Serbs; had the government refused to honor its treaties to its allies and its promises to the extreme nationalists within Russia, the strongest domestic supporters of the regime, the resulting diplomatic defeat for the Russian government would have dealt a probably fatal blow to the prestige of the Tsarist regime among that regime's strongest, and most vital, supporters: French and British imperialists, Serbian nationalists, and within Russia, the slavophiles, the ultra-nationalists, and the military establishment.

Governments are not ordained from God. Heaven cares little one way or the other

about governments. No, clearly, governments are the creation of men, and they last only so long as the ruled are willing to submit or the rulers are strong enough to impose. That is, all governments require popular support, approval, acquiescence, or -- at the very least -- a sort of grudging through tolerant submission. Failing this, a government -- any government, any time in history, anywhere in the world -- requires an armed might sufficient to subdue and cower into submission those to be ruled.

A government or regime that comes into power and somehow manages to remain in power for any length of time acquires certain strong advantages: most people suffer from inertia -- that is, they tend to submit to "that which is," hoping that "that which is" does not strike them personally. The Russian government in 1914 had that advantage. In addition, it had the advantage of over 1000 years of tradition inculcated into the masses of Russians. Tradition tends to perpetuate tradition. The longer people assume that someone "up there" in authority knows what he is doing and that he is doing what is best, or that God wills it anyhow -- even if things are not working out too well, the stronger and stronger becomes that assumption.

However, numerous events of the nineteenth century, the War and Revolution of 1905, and then the conduct of the War of 1914 --1917, all acted to critically undermine that tendency of the Russian people to assume the all important assumption -- that assumption, remember, without which no government can hope to rule with the approval, support or acquiescence of the people.

Lose the faith of the masses, lose their support, lose their grudging toleration of your continual rule, and you have to resort to armed might. Remember, most people are ruled by others throughout human history, and ruled through their own minds. Ideology is generally far stronger than swords and guns, tanks, and bombers. Years, decades, centuries of education, inculcation, socialization, indoctrination -- or whatever you choose to call the process -- produces a faith in the system, produces a consensus on the shared values of the society, the basic values of the social order whatever they happen to be, whichever social order about which you happen to be talking. Autocracy, Nationalism, and Orthodoxy -- the slogan and the ideology of Tsarism -- had been the basis of continual popular acceptance of the regime by the Russian masses. Handfuls or even thousands of agitators -- nihilists, populists, socialist revolutionaries, bolsheviks, mensheviks, or liberals -- cannot destroy the basic value system of a culture, or a society.

Assassinations of Ministers of Interior, or Police Commissioners, of military commanders, of Tsars even, do not destroy a system, do not overthrow a society -- any more than killing or imprisoning the leaders of the revolutionary movement will stop the revolution. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was not a simple changing of the guard, a palace coup d'état, this group of rulers for that group of rulers. It was not simply a political revolution. The entire society was in revolt, in revolt against the centuries old traditions and values -- against the culture itself. It was a total revolution.

Quite clearly, then, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was much more than a Communist or Bolshevik Revolution. The makers of the revolution were the Russian people, for only the people can overthrow that in which they have always believed, not a small number of armed and dedicated radicals. The point of all this, I think, is clear. The Russian autocracy, the ruling classes, the establishment of 1914, destroyed itself. Of course the War did not do it. The War accelerated and finished that which was already being done by a dynamic, by a process, that probably could not be stopped without a total reconstruction of Russian society--a Revolution in itself.

History, Russian History, the History of the Russian Revolution, is the history of what various leaders wrote, said, did, and did not do. History is not, and it probably cannot be, what is actually going on in the minds of the millions of Russians, of Americans, of human beings generally. History simply records the obvious changes in those minds; thus and very obviously, in 1917 the Russian people finally withdrew their approval, their support, their toleration of that regime, of that system, of those values, by which they had for centuries been ruled. Autocracy, Nationalism and Orthodoxy became an empty slogan spoken by empty men in empty rooms, suddenly hundreds of years removed from the people over which they had once ruled -- and ruled, remember as the "anointed of God."

At this point in a revolution, all that remains to maintain the regime, the system, is armed might. Without the support or approval of the people, the government--any government, any place in time or space -- must rely upon the armed strength which it possesses, not only to combat the small minority of activists actually engaged in acts of subversion, but to re--demonstrate to the masses, to the people, its ability to maintain itself, to enforce the essential values of the society over which it presides, to re-establish credibility, to restore, in a word, faith.

But of course because the Russian autocracy was the Russian autocracy, because the military leaders were the military leaders, because Tsar Nicholas II was Nicholas II -- all had to do that which they did. You see, they truly believed that they knew what they were doing; they too were the products of centuries of education, of inculcation, of indoctrination. They were even more the captives of their ideology than were the Russian masses. They could not step out of themselves and look at what they were. Perhaps no one is able to do that; perhaps, that is to be God. Perhaps, that is why one can always count upon the ruling regime, and the ruling classes, to do the correct thing, correct from the point of view of the revolution.

And thus the Russian autocracy, with the support of the military, the ruling classes, the ultra-nationalists, the big capitalists, and everyone else with a vested interest in maintaining the Tsarist regime -- all urged war in 1914. They urged a war that brought about the destruction of the Russian army, the destruction of the armed might required to hold control in the absence of popular support, approval, or acquiescence.

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January 12, 1917, with evidence abounding of the eminent collapse of the entire system, the British Ambassador to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, urged the Tsar to try and break down the barrier between himself and his people, to try "to regain their confidence." Nicholas, the "anointed of God" and "autocrat of all of Russia," angrily replied, "Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain my confidence?" At that point in the war, almost two million Russian soldiers had died and some five million had suffered wounds; and Nicholas thought the Russian people should regain his confidence! Within two months, with not one garrison or regiment willing to defend him or the autocracy, Nicholas II was forced to abdicate. The holy and orthodox autocracy was dead.

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Provisional Government which attempted to rule Russia after the abdication of the Tsar and the destruction of the autocracy was more of a government in name than in fact. With its effort to continue the hopelessly unpopular war against Germany, its real authority continually decreased until by November, it exercised authority only over the office space it in fact occupied. In St. Petersburg, on the night of November 7, the Bolsheviks and their allies stepped in and seized even that space. The relative ease with which the seizure was accomplished indicates the almost total unwillingness of Russians to defend the Provisional Government led by Alexander Kerensky.

In

Moscow more fighting and more casualties resulted as the Bolsheviks consolidated their seizure of power. Nonetheless this was still a relatively bloodless transfer of power, and had this trend continued, all of Russian, Soviet, and World History might have been different.

Instead, a civil war began, a civil war initiated by non-Russians; a civil war financed, armed, fed, and participated in by over a dozen countries or non-Russian peoples -- all of whom and in varying degrees being motivated by either a desire to seize Russian territory or to destroy the Bolshevik regime, or to do both. The United States acted in essentials no differently than the rest of the looters and imperialists.

And

how it all began is the next question to which this essay is directed, for the Allied invasion of Russia, an invasion of money, materials, and men -- an invasion of which the United States was a part -- initiated the western attack upon the Bolshevik regime of Soviet Russia, initiated the attack upon the Russian Revolution itself. And thus, began the disastrous 70 years of wars both hot and cold. mmm