

**THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT OCTOBER SOCIALIST REVOLUTION OF 1917.**  
**An appreciation by Jack Simons, Department of Political Education, ANC.**

**Three Revolutions**

The Russian Revolution is the most important event of the century. In terms of content and consequences it far outstripped the impact of the other great revolutions of the modern age - the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. They also contributed much to the shaping of our world, but not nearly to the same extent as the Revolution of 1917. This is a bold statement that calls for justification.

The American Revolution struck a great blow against the colonial system by raising the banner of national self-determination, majority rule and equality before the law, concepts implied in the Declaration of Independence adopted on July 4, 1776. Its opening paragraph asserted that "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator <sup>with</sup> certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". <sup>(1)</sup> Brave words, indeed; but they ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> far removed from the harsh realities of America's slave society and the inequalities of a social order based on the private ownership of the means of production.

American <sup>Slavery</sup> ~~society~~ continued for nearly 80 years after the achievement of independence from Britain in 1783. It took 4 years of bitter civil war from April 1861 to April 1865 to defeat the southern slave owning states and put a formal end to slavery. There followed 100 years of gross discrimination against Afro-Americans, indigenous Indians, Mexicans and other dark skinned migrants who entered the United States in search of jobs and homes. In this period the USA became the top ranking imperial power, a great bully of small socialist countries and a menace to world peace.

America's freedom fighters took up arms against a far-distant colonial power. French revolutionaries in contrast revolted against an autocratic king, a feudal nobility and a backward-looking clergy. The Revolution was led by members of the Third Estate, commoners who were neither noblemen nor clergy. Like P.W. Botha's Tricameral Parliament, the three Estates were supposed to meet separately. The Third Estate, however, objected and on June 17, 1789 declared itself a National Assembly qualified by popular acclaim to speak for all French patriots. The storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 - from then on France's National Day -

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(1) FLYNN, E.G. On the Declaration of Independence. In Political Affairs, New York, March 1982, p 28

encouraged the Assembly to issue its famous Declaration on August 26, calling for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and to draft a constitution. Its final version adopted in September 1791 was a 'bourgeois' constitution that benefited the bankers, businessmen, manufacturers and shopkeepers who dominated the Third Estate but made no concessions to the working people. A new constitution adopted in 1793, promising them the right to vote, was put in cold storage and never allowed to operate.

Denied recognition of rights as "men and citizens", cheated of their share of the fruits of the revolution, sections of the urban poor moved towards a revolutionary demand for political equality linked with demands for work and bread. Reflecting a widespread mood of discontent a small group of revolutionaries formed the Conspiracy of the Equals with a programme that included demands for the enforcement of the 1793 constitution, a worker's dictatorship pending the introduction of a democratic government, confiscation of large estates and communal ownership of the means of production. Francois Noel Babeuf (who gave himself the name of Caius Gracchus) led the Conspiracy and was executed in 1797 for plotting to overthrow the Directory, an executive of five members formed in 1795 to defend the Revolution against the Royalists and their Western allies. By this time Napoleon Bonaparte was beginning his rise to the position of army chief and in May 1804 to the throne as Emperor of the French. The Revolution gave way to an aggressive imperialism and intense nationalism.

The Conspiracy of the Equals went down in history as the first appearance of the proletariat in revolutionary action. Marx and Engels included Babeuf among the earliest Communists who advocated "social levelling in its crudest form".<sup>(2)</sup> Yet the Conspiracy's manifesto is rightly regarded the first pronouncement calling for public ownership of land and industry, a universal obligation to labour, the universal right to education and universal manhood suffrage. These first seeds of an advanced socialism were to bear fruit only 120 years later in the Russian Revolution to which we now turn our attention.

### The Immortal Lenin: Architect of the Revolution

Its official date is October 25, 1917, the day when the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party proclaimed the downfall of the Provisional (Kerensky) Government

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(2) MARX, K. & ENGELS, F.: Manifesto of the Communist Party. Progress Publishers Moscow, 1986 p 64

and called on revolutionary workers, soldiers and sailors to take the Winter Palace by storm and arrest the Government. The success of this undertaking marked the victory of the armed uprising in St. Petersburg. The Second All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies met at night on the same day. It voted by a big majority to support the Bolsheviks and proclaimed that the power of the State had passed to the Soviets.

On the night of the following day the Congress formed the first Soviet Government consisting of a Council of People's Commissars. Lenin was elected Chairman. The Congress also adopted a Decree on Peace and a Decree on Land. The one called on the warring nations to conclude an immediate armistice; the other proclaimed the abolition of "landlord ownership of land without compensation".<sup>(3)</sup> The estates of the Tsar's family, the nobility and the monasteries were to be distributed among the landless peasants for their free use.

Lenin had spent most of his working life preparing for just such an historical breakthrough in Russia's chains of feudal remnants, quasi-colonial oppression, expanding industrialism and dependence on international monopoly capitalism. Born on April 22, 1870, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (his family name) was 17 years of age when his elder brother Alexander went to the gallows for taking part in an attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander III. Lenin entered Kazan University later in the year 1887, joined a group of radical students, was arrested, expelled and exiled. Refused permission to study abroad, he translated the Communist Manifesto in 1890 and enrolled as an external student in the Law Faculty of St. Petersburg University. He qualified two years later, was admitted to the junior Bar and granted the right to practise law. His main concern, however, was to study Marxism and organise left-wing factory workers. A biographical note on his activities in 1893 - 1894 records that he became the recognised leader of St. Petersburg revolutionaries by reason of his "profound knowledge of Marxist theory, his ability to apply Marxism constructively to Russia's economic and political situation, his fervent and unshakeable belief in the victory of the workers' cause and his outstanding organisational talent".<sup>(4)</sup> These qualities, plus a remarkable talent for polemics, are clearly visible in the 45 volumes of his Collected Works, spanning a period of 30 years from 1893 to 1923.

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(3) LENIN, V.I.: Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. October 25-26 (November 7-8) 1917. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964. Volume 26, p258

### Prelude to Revolution

Lenin called the First Soviet Revolution of 1905 - 1907 a "curtain-raiser" because of the insights and practical experience it provided were of immense value to the revolutionaries of October 1917. Its immediate causes were a severe economic crisis in 1900 - 1903, followed by a humiliating defeat inflicted by an expanding Japanese imperialism in the war of 1904 - 1905. Russia, or rather the Tsarist regime, lost the war and was forced to surrender Port Arthur and half the Island of Sakhalin to the victors.

All classes took the defeat badly but only the workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors showed their anger in strikes, revolts, demonstrations and demands for political changes as well as economic improvement. Higher wages to the workers, land to the peasants, democratic rights for all! The cry went up from towns, villages throughout the country. Backed by strikes and revolts, the burning of manor houses and seizure of landlords' lands, the demands could not be ignored. The Tsarist government instructed Bulygin, a Minister of State, to summon a State Duma but insisted that it was to have no legislative powers. The Bolsheviks decided to boycott the Duma.

The revolutionary movement had swept through the whole country by the beginning of October 1905 when strikes started on the Moscow railway, spread to railways throughout Russia, penetrated the postal and telegraph services, and inspired factory workers, students and professionals. It developed into an all-Russia political strike which forced the Tsar's hand. He issued a manifesto promising civil liberty, human rights, freedoms and a legislative Duma based on a popular franchise.

The manifesto turned out to be a fraud. Instead of granting civil rights, the regime organised anti-Jewish pogroms and the "Black Hundreds", like South Africa's "witdoek" thugs and mercenaries. The Bolsheviks responded by calling on the workers to prepare for an armed uprising led by Soviets of Workers' Deputies - the forerunner of the Soviet power that achieved the October socialist revolution. Without legal authority they acted as centres of government, introduced an 8-hour working day and freedom of the press, called on the people to boycott the payment of taxes - but failed to coordinate their efforts and adopt a common plan. The government concluded a peace treaty with Japan in August 1905, declared martial law in provinces where peasants had revolted, and ordered the dispersal of the Soviets.

The Moscow Soviets started a political strike in December but received inadequate support in other centres and were crushed after nine days of bitter fighting by the Tsarist troops. The autocracy succeeded in putting down the armed revolts in a number of other urban centres and national communities. The uprisings of December 1905 was the climax; thereafter the revolutionary tide subsided though strikes continued well into 1907 while the peasant revolt flared up again in 1906.

Taking advantage of the retreat the government called elections to the State Duma in early 1906. They were indirect, involving electoral colleges at primary and secondary levels; and heavily weighed in favour of landowners and peasants. The contradictions between them proved to be insoluble; the government dissolved the Duma and convened another Duma in 1907. It was more radical than the 1906 assembly and was replaced in November by yet another in which landlords and capitalists held the upperhand.

Workers and peasants nevertheless made some gains: limited political rights, recognition of the right to form trade unions and relaxation of the press censorship. More important, however, were gains made outside the parliamentary and official structures. The 1905 - 1907 revolution showed that a militant, politically conscious working class, acting in unison with poor peasants and soldiers (who were mostly peasants in uniform) could bring about a national democratic revolution. Another lesson, drawn from the in-fighting between the Bolshevik and Menshevik parties within the R.S.D.L.P., was that the party by Lenin had a virtual monopoly of revolutionary theory and practice, whereas "the Mensheviks sank into the morass of compromise and became vehicles of the bourgeois influence on the working class, virtual agents of the bourgeoisie within the working class."<sup>(5)</sup>

#### The Two-Stage Revolution

Lenin's influence was decisive at all stages of the Revolution. More than any one else he shaped the formation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), the triumph of the Bolsheviks over their opposing factions within the Party and the theoretical basis of its programme adopted in 1902 - 1903. We shall take a closer look at the programme.

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(5) History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. 1939, p 95

It consisted of a "maximum" set of long term objectives and an immediate list of aims known as the "minimum". The ultimate aim was to do away with capitalism, introduce socialism, promote the abolition of social classes and eliminate all inequality arising from the class system. To bring this social revolution into being, political power would have to be placed in the hands of the proletariat, making it master of the situation. "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>(6)</sup> Marx had used the phrase in his Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875) to describe his idea of the form that the state would take in the period of transition from capitalism to communism - at some point in which the state would "wither away". Lenin explained the proposition in some detail in his work *The State and Revolution* (1917).<sup>(7)</sup> In 1903, however, his immediate concern was with the "minimum programme". It called for the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy, creation of a democratic republic, an 8-hour working day and the return of expropriated land to the peasants.

The first stage was accomplished in February 1917. It began with strikes in Petrograd that spread to other main industrial centres. On International Women's Day, March 8 (February 24 old style) the Bolshevik Party regional committees called on the working women of Petrograd to take to the streets in demonstrations for bread, peace and the downfall of the autocracy. They came out in large numbers and were reinforced by factory workers who downed tools in support. This display of solidarity spread to other industrial centres and turned into a political strike which became an uprising. Workers disarmed the police and national guards; soldiers turned their guns on the mounted police; while women called on the troops to join the revolt. The Party's Central Committee issued a manifesto urging the formation of a provisional revolutionary government. Workers and soldiers went into action, arresting the Tsar's ministers and freeing political prisoners. The news of the Petrograd revolution spread to other towns and the battle front. Soldiers turned against their officers; Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies took shape; the Tsar was deposed; and the bourgeoisie formed a Provisional Government on February 27, 1917.

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(6) MARX, K.: Critique of the Gotha Programme. In: *The Socialist Revolution*. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 2nd Printing 1981, p232

(7) LENIN, V.I.: *The State and Revolution*, Collected Works Volume 2. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964, pp 459 -474.

Autocratic Tsarism had doomed the social revolutionaries to a condition of perpetual illegality. They escaped only when the February Revolution set them free. "Russia", said Lenin in April 1917, "is now the freest of all the belligerent countries in the world."<sup>(8)</sup> The Bolsheviks took advantage of their found freedom with great energy -organising, agitating, teaching and recruiting. Their membership rose from a mere 24,000 in late February to over 100,000 by the end of November and to 240,000 by the time that the Party's Sixth Congress met in secret on July 26 in Petrograd.

Lenin had returned from exile on April 3, 1917 to a tumultuous welcome. Losing no time he delivered his famous April Theses. They outlined a programme for a transition from capitalism to socialism, from a capitalist parliament to a Republic of Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies. His economic programme included nationalisation of the land, the management of big estates by local Soviets, the merger of commercial banks into one national bank, and control of production and distribution by the Soviets - the organs of people's power. He proposed a change in the Party's name because the familiar title - Russian Social Democratic Labour Party - had been discredited and no longer suited. He preferred "Communist Party", the name used by Marx and Engels for their own party; and suggested the formation of a new association of like-minded revolutionary socialists in all countries, to be called the Third Communist International, quite distinct from the Second International of Social Democrats who had betrayed their trust by siding with their national capitalist governments in the imperialist war of 1914.

War or peace was the overriding issue. The Bolsheviks worked hard to convince workers and soldiers that they could not expect peace, bread or land unless their Soviets ousted the Provisional Government. This, the Bolsheviks said, was not a call for an immediate revolution. They wanted a peaceful process of change and for this purpose launched a drive to persuade a majority of deputies in the Soviets to approve the policy of taking State power into their own hands.

#### Political Dualism

On April 18 the Provisional Government assured the Allied Powers in confidence that Russia would fight to an end on their side. A week later the Seventh

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(8) LENIN, V.I.: The tasks of the Proletariat in the present revolution.  
CW Vol 24, p 22

All-Russia Conference of the Bolshevik Party - meeting in public for the first time in its history - unanimously endorsed the April Theses. Lenin elaborated that the Party's task was to bring about change from the first stage of the revolution "which placed the power in the hands of the bourgeoisie" to the second State power to workers and the poorest sections of the peasantry, represented in the Soviets of Deputies. Their growth had given rise to a political dualism - the main feature of the revolution. The dualism was evident in the parallel existence of two centres of political authority: one, the real government of the bourgeoisie, the Provisional Government, which held all State institutions in its hands; the other, the Petrograd Soviet of Deputies, without state power but resting on the support of the majority of the people, on the armed workers and soldiers. The dualism had a class basis and constituted a transitional phase since "two powers cannot exist in a state".<sup>(9)</sup> The only way to end Russia's participation in the war was to change the class composition of the State authority.

One member of the dualism, the All-Russia Congress of Soviets, met for the first time in Petrograd on June 3. The Bolsheviks could muster only 100 delegates as compared with 700 who followed the lead of Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. They voted for a resolution affirming support for the Provisional Government, which had allocated seats in the cabinet to members of the factions opposed to the Bolsheviks. The latter, sticking to the policy of a peaceful transition to Soviet rule, called on the people to abide by the decision pending its review by another Congress of Soviets and continued their work of agitation and propaganda in trade unions, factory committees and the army.

The Provisional Government, relying on the support it received from the Congress of Soviets, decided to launch an offensive against the German army. The offensive failed. Soldiers refused to fight, complained of scarcities of arms, ammunition, boots and uniforms and turned against their officers. The collapse of the offensive aroused widespread indignation in the capital. Separate demonstrations in various parts of the city merged into a big general demonstration demanding the transfer of the State's power to the Soviets.

The Bolsheviks, while still opposed to an armed seizure of power, took part in the demonstrations with the aim of ensuring their orderly and non-violent character.

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(9) LENIN, V.I.: The peculiar nature of the Dual Power and its class significance. In: Collected Works, Volume 24, pp 60-61

The Provisional Government ordered the army to suppress the demonstrations, blamed the Bolsheviks and ordered the arrest of the Party's leaders. "And so, five months later the overthrow of Tsardom, the Bolsheviks were compelled to meet in secret, while Lenin, the leader of the proletarian party, was forced to go into hiding and took refuge in a shanty near Razliv"<sup>(10)</sup> from where he guided the work of the Party's Sixth Congress.

#### All Power To The Soviets

It met in secret from July 26 - August 3 and concluded that the period of dual power had come to an end because the Soviets, led by the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, had refused to seize power, leaving the Provisional Government in full control. Lenin concluded that "All hopes for a peaceful development of the Russian revolution have vanished for good".<sup>(11)</sup> The slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' was a signal for peaceful development but power had passed into the hands of the military dictatorship. The alternative was to: "...muster forces, reorganise them, and resolutely prepare for the armed uprising. .... The aim of the insurrection can only be to transfer power to the proletariat, supported by poor peasants, with a view to putting our Party programme into effect."<sup>(12)</sup>

From then on Lenin bombarded the Central Committee with advice, exhortations and even threats to bring reluctant members to the boil. He wrote on September 12-14, 1917 that "The Bolsheviks, having obtained a majority in the Soviets and of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, can and must take state power into their own hands".<sup>(13)</sup> He produced a formula on September 13-14 for a successful insurrection: it must rely not on a conspiracy or single party but on the advanced class; secondly it should grow out of a revolutionary upsurge of the people; thirdly it should take place at the crucial point when the intensity of the revolution is at its height and when vacillations in the ranks of the enemy and of half-hearted friends of the revolution are strongest. These objectives conditions for a successful insurrection existed. The time had come for a truly revolutionary war.<sup>(14)</sup>

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(10) A History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. 1939 p 195

(11) LENIN, V.I.: Draft statement by the CC of the RSDLP (B) and the Bureau of the Bolshevik Group to the All-Russia Congress of the Soviets regarding the ban on the demonstration. CW, Vol 25 p 179

(12) Ibid; p 180

(13) LENIN, V.I.: The Bolsheviks must assume power. CW Vol 26 p 19

(14) Ibid, pp 22-25

His celebrated article "The Crisis has Matured" written on September 29<sup>(15)</sup> argued that a peasant revolt was developing in a peasant country governed by capitalists and landlords with the backing of Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. Incredible, but true! The Bolsheviks together with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries had a majority in the Soviets, the army and the country. Yet, he complained, some members of the Party's Central Committee were allowing themselves to be caught in a trap of illusions about the forthcoming Congress of the Soviets and the holding of a Constituent Assembly. In view of the unwillingness to even consider the points he raised he was "compelled to tender my resignation from the Central Committee, reserving ... freedom to campaign among the rank and file of the Party and at the Party Congress".<sup>(16)</sup>

Thus admonished the Central Committee meeting on October 10, 1917 adopted by 10 votes to 2 a resolution instructing all Party organisations to start immediate preparations for an insurrection under the direction of a Political Bureau headed by Lenin. He arrived secretly at Smolny on October 24 and took over the leadership of the uprising. On the same day he wrote yet another letter to Central Committee members warning them that "...to delay the uprising would be fatal. .... We must at all costs, this very evening, this very night arrest the government, having first disarmed the officer cadets".<sup>(17)</sup> On the next day, October 25, he wrote a proclamation addressed to the "Citizens of Russia" informing them that the Provisional Government had been deposed; State power had passed into the hands of the Revolutionary Military Committees, organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies. He added triumphantly: "The cause for which the people have fought, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landed proprietorship, workers' control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power - this cause has been secured".<sup>(18)</sup>

### Towards Equality

Both the American and French Revolutions of the 18th Century had more to do with economic restructuring than the reshaping of human relations. They left intact the pre-revolutionary class system, merely substituting capitalist authority for the

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(15) LENIN, V.I. In: CW Vol 26, pp 74-85

(16) Ibid, p 84

(17) LENIN, V.I. Letter to the Central Committee. CW, Vol 26 p 234

(18) LENIN, V.I. To the Citizens of Russia! CW Vol 26, p 236

semi-feudal government of absolute monarchies, and brought no relief to the slaves of North America or the working people of France. This is what Georgi Shakhnazarov, President of the Soviet Political Science Association, has in mind when noting that "The passage from feudalism to capitalism was confined to the framework of similar, related social and political structures. The change mainly concerned the form of exploitation."<sup>(19)</sup>

The Russian socialist revolution was very different. It set out to make a clean sweep of repressive institutions inherited from the Tsarist autocracy. Fought under the banner of equality, the Revolution of October 1917 was planned to do away with class distinctions and social discriminations of all kinds. The passage from capitalis to socialism, observes Shakhnazarov "is a change to a qualitatively new social structure that rules out exploitation of man by man and nation by nation, and paves the way to complete social equality and other communist principles".<sup>(20)</sup>

Changes of such a magnitude could not be brought about by decrees and enactments alone. These are important declarations of intent, institutions to the state authorities and instrumental aids to fundamental social changes. To become effective, however, they need the willing approval of the bulk of the people and a corresponding change in their life-styles, attitudes and value systems. to achieve socialism a cultural revolution with its own moral code is no less necessary than structured changes.

The Russian revolutionaries lost no time in tackling the big structural problems of withdrawing from the war and restoring land to the peasantry. As was mentioned earlier in this essay, the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets adopted decrees on these vital issues on October 26, 1917. Both were speedily carried out; withdrawal from the world war under a peace treaty with Germany on March 3, 1918; and in late 1917 and early 1918 the confiscation of landlords' estates with their implements and livestock. Other important demands were attended to immediately; an 8-hour working day, a ban on the employment of children under the age of 14 years; the introduction of unemployment insurance and free medica aid and on November 15, 1917 the publication of the celebrated Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia. It proclaimed an end to inequality among nations and the forming of a "voluntary and honourable union

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(19) SHAKHNAZAROV, G.: The Destiny of the World. The Socialist Shape of Things to Come. (tri. from Russian) Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979 p 49

(20) Ibid

of the peoples of Russia", assuring them them of equality, sovereignty, free self-determination and secession, abolition of national privileges and restrictions and the free development of national minorities.

### Equality of Nations

White Russians were a "master race" before the Revolution. Like White South Africans under Apartheid they bullied and coerced the millions of darker-skinned peoples inhabiting the vast territories of the Russian Empire. They were not "racists" in the strict sense; showed no prejudice against persons of a different physical type; imposed no bans on marriages or sex between members of different race and national communities. Yet Lenin called the Tsarist empire a "prison house of nations" which prevented non-Russians from developing their language and cultures and set groups of the oppressed against another under the familiar policy of "divide and rule". "Tsarism incited the Russian people against the non-Russians, the Armenians against the Turks, the Russians against the Jews, and so forth. This enabled Tsarism maintain its domination over both Russian workers and peasants and the numerous non-Russian people."<sup>(21)</sup>

Lenin recognised the link between national oppression and working class oppression from the beginning of his political career. His Draft Programme for the Social-Democratic Party, written in prison in 1895-1896, demanded universal suffrage for all citizens 21 years and over, irrespective of religion or nationality; abolition of social estates; complete equality of all citizens before the law; freedom of religion and equality of all nationalities.<sup>(22)</sup> His pamphlet entitled The Tasks of the Russian Social Democrats, written in exile in Siberia in 1897, declared that Social-Democrats "support every revolutionary movement against the present social system, all oppressed nationalities, persecuted religions, downtrodden social estates, etc. in their fight for equal rights".<sup>(23)</sup> The Party linked the two oppressions by taking advantage of every act of police tyranny to demonstrate its effects on both the working class and the oppressed nationalities. A declaration to this effect, the first of its kind, was included in the programme adopted by the 1903 Congress of the RSDLP. It affirmed the principle of equal rights including the right to self-determination for all citizens and nations belonging to the state. The Bolsheviks took this

(21) SCHMIDT, S. TARNOVSKY, K., & BERKHIN, I.: A Short History of the USSR p 176

(22) LENIN, V.I.: CW Vol 2 pp 97-98

(23) LENIN, V.I.: CW Vol 2 p 2

message to meetings of the Second International Socialist Congress; and applied its principles in systematic work among the oppressed nationalities of Tsarist Russia.

The ground was therefore well prepared for the adoption of the declaration of November 15, 1917 on the rights of nations to self-determination. The fate of the revolution depended largely on the support of all nationalities and ethnic groups for the building of socialism and its defence against imperialist aggression. The way chosen to achieve this goal was the formation of sovereign nation states. The Soviet Government actively promoted the formation of national republics in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was proclaimed in January 1918 while Turkestan, Tartar, Bashkir, Karelian and other republics were formed within its boundaries in 1918-1922. Four republics - the RSFSR, Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Transcaucasian Federation - united at a congress held on December 30, 1922 under a Constitution approved in January 1924 by the Second Congress of Soviets of the USSR. Other additions were made in later years to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics which today includes 15 equal Union Republics.

### International Communism

The formation of the Communist International (Comintern) in March 1919 was a natural outgrowth of the communist ideal as well as an important element in the Soviet policy of mobilising forces within and outside the Soviet Union in its defense against the imperialist onslaught. Preconditions for the emergence of the CI were fulfilled by the emergence of communist parties in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America that responded with revolutionary zeal to the events of October 1917. The Comintern's First Congress resolved to support national liberation movements and form a broad anti-imperialist front of oppressed people against colonialism. This process has an important historical significance for South African revolutionaries who owe much to the Comintern for the impetus it gave to the formation on July 30, 1921 of the Communist Party of South Africa, section of the Communist International.

South African revolutionaries had reason enough to become involved in the Comintern's affairs. One of the big issues facing it at the outset was the relation between communism and national liberation. Delegates from Asian countries - Turkey, China, India, Korea - wanted to bypass the struggle for national independence and turn it into a socialist revolution. They were well aware of the weakness of the working class section of the population in their countries

and the political immaturity of the peasantry and expected the Red Army (heavily engaged in the Civil War at the time) to come to their aid.

Revolutions were not for export, said Lenin; they could take place only when necessary conditions had fully matured. For one thing, working people should be ready to take charge of the struggle independently of the employing class. He told the Eighth Congress of the R.C.P. (B) that it would be wrong to intervene against the priests of such peoples as the Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, who were "entirely subordinated to their mullahs. ... In such cases we have to wait until the given nation develops, until the differentiation of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie elements, which is inevitable, has taken place".<sup>(24)</sup>

His Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions presented to the Second Congress of the Comintern in June 1920 outlined the principles that should regulate the approach of communists to national liberation movements. It should be based "...on precise appraisal of the specific historical situation and, primarily, of economic conditions." Secondly, the aim should promote "... a closer union of the working people of all nations for a joint struggle to overthrow landowners and capitalists".<sup>(25)</sup> The form of this alliance should be determined by the level of development of the communist movement and the national democratic movement in semi-colonies and colonies. The duty of providing assistance to the national liberation movement rested primarily with the workers of dominant colonial power; and should be given only on condition that members of the emerging working class are brought together and trained for struggle against the national bourgeoisie. While communists should enter into a temporary alliance with the bourgeois democracy in colonial countries they should not merge with it but in all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even though it is in an elementary stage.<sup>(26)</sup>

#### South Africa's "Black Republic"

Eight years later the Sixth Congress of the Comintern meeting in July 1928, gave special attention to the relation between class struggle and national liberation in South Africa. Its statement on "The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies"

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(24) LENIN, V.I.: Eighth Congress of the R.C.P. (B) March 18-23, 1919. CW  
Vol 29 p 172

(25) LENIN, V.I.: CW Vol 31 p 145

(26) Ibid, pp 144-145

For survey of Comintern's policy towards liberation movements see  
ULYANOVSKY, R.A. (ed.) The Comintern and the East. Progress Publishers,  
Moscow, 1979

accurately pinpointed the depressed condition of the African people; expropriated from their land, deprived of political rights and freedom of movement, subjected to the most brutal forms of racial and class oppression, they "suffer simultaneously from pre-capitalist and capitalist methods of exploitation and oppression". This analysis was expanded in a special resolution in 'The South African Question' adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in 1928. It described South Africa as "a British Dominion of the colonial type" in which British capitalists and the white South African bourgeoisie form a united front for the exploitation of the native population. The correct policy, it suggested, was crystallised in the slogan of "An Independent Native South African Republic as a stage towards a Workers' and Peasants' Republic with full, equal rights for all races".<sup>(27)</sup>

Delegates from the CPSA put up a strong resistance to the proposed strategy. Class struggle and not national liberation they argued was uppermost in South Africa. The CP was "itself the actual or potential leader of the native nationalist movement". Though unconvinced by the Comintern's proposed formula, the delegates faithfully reported its findings on their return to South Africa. At the seventh annual conference in 1929, the CPSA affirmed the Comintern's policy after much debate and some opposition. A new programme approving the Comintern's approach was adopted and implemented.<sup>(28)</sup> Its essential feature - a two pronged struggle combining the dual aims of national liberation and socialism - has remained the Party's guideline for 60 years and is incorporated in its most recent programme, 'The Road to South African Freedom' adopted in 1962.<sup>(29)</sup>

### Cultural Revolution

Formal declarations of equality, though absolutely necessary, are only a first step to actual equality. To achieve this, revolutionaries must remove the material, social, political and psychological causes of inequality. Some aspects of this tremendous undertaking have been touched on in this essay, in references to public ownership, nationalisation of land, collective farming, industrialisation, comprehensive and regional planning, and the provision of social services - education, health, housing, pensions and the like - for all citizens. In this last section

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(27) LERUMO, A. (pseud. for Michael Harmel): Fifty Fighting Years. Inkululeko Publications, London, 1971, Appendix A pp 62-63  
South African Communists Speak. Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party 1915-1980. London 1981 p 91-97

(28) South African Communists Speak. pp 100-106

(29) Ibid., pp 284-320

I propose to discuss the Soviet Union's success in bringing about a thorough going cultural revolution, regarded by Lenin as one of the important conditions for achieving socialism.

A cultural revolution involved in the introduction of total literacy by means of adult education, universal primary schooling and later secondary education for all persons. All socialist countries from the Soviet Union to Cuba and Nicaragua abolished illiteracy within the space of one or two generations. To master the arts of reading, writing and arithmetic is not enough however to break down barriers of ignorance, superstition, tribalism and prejudice that keep races and nations apart.

The revolution itself was a school and instrument for spreading political knowledge, teaching formerly oppressed nationalities to assert their claims to equality and impressing the idea of proletarian internationalism. Men and women of different cultures learned the lesson of international solidarity by working together in factories, mines, railways and construction. They learned to understand one another, speaking the common language of cooperative labour for common goals of Soviet construction. All were encouraged to take part in the business of political administration from an early age in such bodies as the Pioneers, Youth organisations and the Party. Opportunities for leadership and self-government were available in the Soviets of the USSR, autonomous republics and autonomous regions.

A notable feature of Soviet national policy is the care taken to preserve and develop traditional cultures during the process of modernisation. Tsarism had tried to "Russify" the peoples of the Ukraine, Transcaucasus, Central Asia and other "non-Great Russians" by using coercion and repression, restricting the use of their languages, holding them in a state of ignorance and crippling their culture. The Russian Communist Party Congress of March 1921 noted that the effects of tsarist policy were "reflected in the low level of development and political backwardness of these people".<sup>(30)</sup> About 30 million had remained outside the influence of urban-industrial society and preserved "the pastoral and patriarchal tribal form of life". The border regions, especially Turkestan, were in the position of colonies, supplying raw materials for manufacture at the centre. This was the cause of their chronic backwardness and the absence of

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(30) STALIN, J.: *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*. Laurence & Wishart, London 1936. See appendix for the text of the resolution adopted at the Tenth Congress of the RCP; pp 270-279

an industrial working class. To remedy the weakness and eliminate all remnants of national inequality the Congress proposed the creation of industries in the border regions by transferring factories to the sources of raw materials and helping the national groups to make full use of their right to free development.

The Party's assistance would enable "the toiling masses of the non-Great Russian peoples to catch up with Central Russia" and develop their own Soviet state system in keeping with their national cultures. Courts of law, administrative bodies, economic and government institutions should function in the spoken language of the region and recruit personnel from among the local population. An extensive programme of education and cultural development would be introduced in the local languages "in order to accelerate the training of native cadres of skilled workmen and Soviet and Party workers in all spheres of administration, particularly in the sphere of education."<sup>(31)</sup>

How successful were these efforts? Well, one important index, the elimination of illiteracy, reveals great progress through the combined work of volunteers, Young Communist League members, trade unions and government agencies. More than 87 million people learned to read and write between 1929 and 1939. The introduction of universal elementary education in the national languages in the early 1930s put a stop to the spread of illiteracy among children. The USSR achieved almost complete literacy by the end of the decade.

#### A Balance Sheet

A capacity to survive is the supreme test of success of a nation, its social system and culture. Judged by this standard, Soviet socialism receives a high rating. The early born Soviet state endured three years of civil war and armed intervention in 1917-1920 and emerged the victor. It defeated imperialist attempts to restore the rule of capitalists and landowners; blocked plans to carve up Russia into numerous independent states - resembling Bantustans and the Balkans; and won the battle of a united, independent, socialist state. The victory was won by the combined force of workers, peasants, their allies in the armed forces and members of the Communist Party who organised, planned and led the offensive.

Twenty-one years later, on June 22, 1941, German armies launched a treacherous attack on the Soviet Union in violation of a non-aggression pact entered into in 1938. Once again Soviet citizens of all nationalities and social strata rose in

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(31) Ibid, p 27<sup>f</sup>

defence of their fatherland and routed the invaders in what came to be known as the Great Patriotic War. It came to end in great battles in 1944-1945. The Red Army and Soviet guerrillas liberated Soviet territory from Nazi occupation, went on to free European countries and helped to put an end to the Nazi dictatorship.

These victories and the progress of socialism in the Soviet Union on all fronts changed the balance of power in the international political system. Imperialism suffered a severe setback. The emergence of the USSR as a great world power, its stand on behalf of oppressed peoples, small nations and colonies inspired them to struggle for liberation from foreign rule. It was the persistent stand and might of the Soviet Union that brought independence and self-determination to millions of people in Asia, the Pacific and Africa. The socialist system spread in Eastern Europe and Asia, penetrated South America and gained foothold in Africa.

More than 20 million Soviet citizens - men, women and children - died at the hands of the Nazi invaders. An estimated one third of the country's national wealth was destroyed. Yet the core of the socialist society stood firm. In practice and theory the superiority of socialism's ownership, planned production, equality and self-determination could not be denied. Slowly, step by step, it overcame the backwardness inherited from the tsarist autocracy and developed into a top ranking world power. The socialist system enabled it switch its economy to meet military needs during the war years and to make spectacular advances in restoring the social fabric after the war. In 1946 Soviet scientists succeeded in producing nuclear energy, thereby breaking the monopoly of nuclear weapons held by the United States. Corresponding progress was made in a short time in the economy, science, culture and the daily lives of the people.

Some of these gains were recorded in a new Soviet constitution adopted on October 7, 1977. It reflected a steep rise in living standards, education, technical and scientific competence, participation in political activity and voluntary social service. Increased mechanisation on farms reduced the ratio of peasants to the general population from 47% in 1939 to 15.7% in 1977. Every fifth rural worker was a machine operator; every other rural employee had a secondary or higher standard of education. The gap between urban and rural living patterns getting smaller in terms of cultural activities, political awareness and life styles.

The biggest relative growth took place in the number and importance of the "intelligentsia", the "professionals" and intellectuals. Their share of the total population

rose from 16.7% in 1939 to 22.7% in 1977. They had become efficient and contributed much to the laying of a foundation for a future communist society. The Constitution described the main thrust in the political sphere as "...the extension of socialist democracy, namely ever broader participation of citizens in managing the affairs of society and the state.....strengthening the system of people's control.... greater openness and publicity, and constant responsiveness to public opinion". (32)

Not all goals are reached overnight. The gap between promise and performance may persist for years, even decades. As fast as some problems are solved, new ones arrive. These weaknesses are part of human condition and its inherent tendency to make mistakes. In the last years of his active life - he died on January 21, 1924 at the early age of 53- Lenin gave much of his attention to cultural brakes on progress. Raising the cultural level, he told the Second All-Russia Congress of Political Education Departments in October 1921, was their chief function "...because political education is the sum total of everything.". He cited the appointment in July 1920 of an Extraordinary Commission for the abolition of illiteracy as evidence that Russians were "...something like semi-savages". In more advanced countries illiteracy is abolished. An enormous proportion of Communists - let alone peasants - did not know how "... to combat red tape and bureaucracy, or such truly Russian phenomenon as bribery". He hoped that the Commission for Purging the Party would expel a hundred or two hundred thousand "...latter Communists" who attach themselves to the Party and were a hinderance in the fight against red tape and bribery. The three chief enemies confronting the political education alist were communist deceit, illiteracy and bribery. "We must not only abolish illiteracy and the bribery which persists on the soil of illiteracy, but we must get the people really to accept our propoganda, our guidance and our pamphlets, so that the result may be an improvement in the national economy, These are the functions of the Political Education Departments. (33)

In a widely acclaimed article "Better Fewer, But Better" he wrote in March 1923 about the objectives of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection. The state apparatus was deplorable, not to say wretched. Riddled by defects rooted in the past, the Soviet system fell far short of a really new state apparatus worthy of a socialist society. He advised the formation of a Central Control Commission

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(32) SCHMIDT, S., TARNOVSKY, K., & BERKHIN, I.: A Short History of the USSR. Chapter 28 pp 288-296

(33) LENIN, V.I.: The new economic policy and the tasks of the Political Education Departments. CW Vol 33 pp 60-79

to supervise the Inspectorate which was hopeless and lacking in the slightest authority. "We must reduce our state apparatus to the utmost degree of economy We must banish from it traces of extravagance, of which so much has been left from tsarist Russia, from its bureaucratic capitalist state machine". (34)

The appointment of untrained, unskilled personnel to key positions or middle range posts had deplorable results. Lenin listed them in a key speech to the Party's Eleventh Congress in March-April, 1922 - the last he attended. "It must be admitted, and we must not be afraid to admit, that 99 cases out of a 100 the responsible Communists are not in the jobs that they are now fit for; that they are unable to perform their duties, and that they must sit down to learn". (35) There were good, responsible Communists in all parastatal companies and "mixed" firms of public and private entrepreneurs but did not know how to run the economy and trade; and they did not want to learn from the beginning. In that respect they were "inferior to the ordinary capitalist salesmen, who received their training in big factories and big firms." (36) He warned delegates against false pride: "...do not be conceited because you are a Communist while there is some non-Party salesman, perhaps a white guard ... who can do things which economically must be done at all costs, but which you cannot do". (37)

In his closing speech he emphasised the importance of training the younger generation and regretted that "...we have nothing to train them with. Indeed, from what can the younger generation learn the social sciences? From the old bourgeois junk? This is disgraceful. And this at a time when we have hundreds of Marxist authors who could write textbooks on all social problems, but cannot do so because their minds are taken up with other things". (38)

Well, that weakness has been overcome, thanks to Marxist writers in the USSR and other socialist countries. We have on hand many books on economics, politics and the whole range of social sciences. Regrettably, most of us take this literature for granted, we do not bother to read - let alone study - the Marxist textbooks, and would rather die of intellectual thirst than drink the pure waters of scientific socialism.

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(34) Ibid., pp 487-502

(35) Ibid., pp 308-309

(36) Ibid., p 275

(37) Ibid., p 276

(38) Ibid., pp 311-312

### From Lenin to Gorbachev

The price of safety is eternal vigilance! To this maxim one might add "openness" the word that has gained international currency in the Russian equivalent of glasnost from its frequent use by Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the CPSU's Central Committee, in his campaign to restructure (perestroika) the social order. Speaking in the Leninist tradition of self-criticism and frankness he told the Committee on January 27-28, 1987 that they, the leaders, were to blame for failing to see in time the need for change. (39)

He explained that the theory of socialism in the Soviet Union had remained largely unchanged since the 1930s - 1940s and had consequently lagged behind actual development of social conditions. Instead of lively discussions and creative ideas in social sciences and management, social arteries hardened, people got stuck in a rut and the rate of economic growth slackened, dropping by more than half since the early 1970. Research and development failed to keep pace with the highest international standards of science, technology and culture. Socialism in the USSR failed to realise its enormous potential for improving housing, food supply, transport, health care and education.

The most important principle of socialism - distribution or payment according to work done - was broken, giving way to unjustified bonuses, favouritism and irregular methods of providing emulation incentives. Good workers were often penalised while life was made easy for the idle. Reliable rules regulating relations between production and consumption was set aside. As a result the growth of productive forces dropped, concepts of social justice were discredited and a moral rot set in at the cost of a decline in standards of morale, dedication, productivity and patriotism.

The number of self-seekers, whose main aim in life was to satisfy their greed by any means increased, their cynical stand became more pronounced and aggressive triggering a wave of consumerism, alcoholism, drug abuse and a rise in crime. Bribe-taking, flattery and disregard for laws took the place of real care for the well-being of people. Demoralised groups staged celebrations and parties that disguised serious shortcomings in ideological and political education. All this rejection of socialist culture created a vacuum for the invasion of vulgar primitive tastes and moral bankruptcy from the capitalist mass culture. Editors

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(39) GORBACHEV, M.: Reorganisation and the Party's Personnel Policy. Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, Moscow 1987

of literary journals, critics, men of letters and artists often failed to give enough attention to important issues but allowed red-tape and formalism to flourish.

Many primary Party units ignored principles and duties; not all conducted a firm struggle against the spread of drunkenness, mutual cover-up, permissiveness and symptoms of local nationalism. Authoritarian tendencies spread among senior officials who in some cases suppressed criticism, sought gain and took part in criminal activities. The Party as a whole resisted and expelled many renegades including people guilty of embezzlement, bribe-taking and heavy drinking. Dishonest pushing, self-seeking careerists were admitted to the Party in breach of the rule that quality is more important than quantity.

Gorbachev took pains to assure the Party and the public that the process of reorganisation now taking place will strengthen both socialism and democracy by raising people's participation in decision-making to higher levels. This was wholly in agreement with Lenin's ideas. He was the first to put forward the idea of self-government under socialism. This aim would be carried out by delegations of decision making to collectives - work units - in factories, plants and farms. These units will take charge of production, exchange, social and personal affairs. All top executives in enterprises from managers to foremen will be appointed by way of election.

I have condensed only a small portion of the General Secretary's striking review and expect readers to study the full text individually or in groups. Careful note should be taken especially by the remarks on PERSONNEL POLICY IN CONDITIONS OF REORGANISATION in Part III of the Report.<sup>(40)</sup>

The General Secretary told the Central Committee that "Many errors could have been avoided if Party bodies had consistently pursued a principled effective personnel policy ensuring high efficiency of all links in Party leadership and economic management".<sup>(41)</sup>

Changes of this kind had been made at the very top, involving the replacement of a large part of the Secretariat, Heads of Departments and nearly all members of the Presidium. So drastic a purge, warned the General Secretary, should not be repeated. To ensure continuity the top-most ranks of the Party and State apparatus should be made open to fresh faces and talents. "Doing this fully corresponds to the Leninist understanding of personnel policy, to the interests of the Party and the people".<sup>(42)</sup> A process of reconstruction that starts from the top is bound to work its way through all levels of the organisation.

(40) Ibid., pp 44-45

(41) Ibid., p 44

(42) Ibid., pp 68-69

Lusaka, October 10, 1987.