

Opinion

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Recalling the Russian Revolution

By Edwin Madunagu

THE aim of this condensed article is not to invite readers to join me in remembering the late Soviet Union. Rather, the aim is to recall the thunderous birth, a hundred years ago, of a state which put **workers' power** and **socialism** on the agenda of global political contestation, a mighty revolutionary event which sharply changed the course of world history. But I am recalling that event not nostalgically. I am recalling the birth of the Soviet state for the enduring lessons which its 74-year history offered to humankind, lessons that are continually renewed and expanded especially for those segments of the young generations aiming at, rather than dreaming of, transforming the world into a more human, humane, egalitarian, democratic and, hence, safer and happier place for all its inhabitants.

On November 7, 1917, the largest and the most autocratic and backward state in Europe, the Tsarist state of the Russian Empire, ceased to exist. Its definitive overthrow and abolition were proclaimed in the capital, Petrograd, after two days of street fighting in which workers, peasants, students, soldiers and sailors were involved. The proclamation was issued simultaneously by two centres: the revolutionary high command and the Petrograd Soviet (Delegates' Assembly) of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers. The revolutionary high command was the Central Committee of the Bolshevik (majority) faction of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Party headed by Vladimir Illych Ulyanov, a 47-year old professional revolutionary, a genius in organization, tactics and persuasion known to the world as **Lenin**. The Petrograd Soviet was headed by a man born as Lev Bronstein - but known to the world as **Leon Trotsky**: a 38-year old romantic and oratorical face of the insurrection that brought the revolution to power. The Bolshevik Party, the vanguard of the revolution, was a highly disciplined party simultaneously above ground and underground. Its organizing

principle, its distinctive contribution to the theory of organization, is known as **democratic centralism**.

The November 7 proclamation ended with a summary of the revolution's manifesto: "The cause for which the people have fought, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of rural and urban landlord ownership, workers' control over production and the establishment of Soviet power - this cause has now been secured. Long live the socialist revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants". This was followed by another resolution of the Soviet: the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government, headed by Lenin, to govern the country until the inauguration of an All-Russian Congress of Soviets. The new government was to be known as the Council of People's Commissars. This twin announcement - the proclamation and the resolution - was the opening of what an American journalist, John Reed, later called the **ten days that shook the world**.

One of the questions which have been repeatedly asked in the last one hundred years by revolutionaries, non-revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries and liberal truth-seekers alike is this: Was what happened in Petrograd on November 7, 1917 a **revolution** or an **insurrection** or a variant of the latter? Leon Trotsky provided an answer in his 3-volume **History of the Russian Revolution**: "Armed insurrection stands in the same relation to revolution that revolution as a whole does to evolution. It is a critical point when accumulating quantity turns with an explosion into quality ..." I may explain further: Every victorious revolution ends in an insurrection, but not every insurrection is a culmination of a revolution. What happened on November 7, 1917 was an insurrection by which a revolution which had been going on for 8 months (specifically since March 8, 1917) and which gave birth to the insurrection came to power. Political power is the main question in a revolution, and it is achieved through an insurrection.

The Russian Revolution - and this is often missed or forgotten - started in Petrograd with women's demonstration on 1917's "Women's Day". Between March 8 when Tsar Nicolas II effectively lost his throne and capital and November 7 when the Bolsheviks assumed power, what the world witnessed was a historic and classic **dual power** and **power struggle** between half-hearted, confused and opportunistic reformers and determined and single-minded revolutionaries.

The Russian Empire whose seizure the Bolshevik revolutionaries announced from a girls' secondary school in Petrograd was a huge territory covering one-half of Europe and a third of Asia. The empire was a study in tyranny, autocracy and police state. From the reign of Tsar Peter the Great in mid-18th century until the Russian Revolution the State was, as historian Alan Moorehead put it, like a "private domain, a country estate of the Romanov family, or perhaps just simply a school for mentally backward children. Beneath the Tsar there were three great institutions: the bureaucracy, the army and the Holy Synod, and the officials within them were tightly organised like ants in an ant-hill. The peasants were ruled by the police who were responsible to the local governor who was responsible to the Minister of the Interior who was responsible to the Tsar; and the Tsar was responsible only to God".

Erupting in the fourth year of the First World War, the Russian Revolution can also be seen as having started in 1905 when, as in 1917, an external war (in this case with Japan) worsened the peoples' material conditions and deepened mass discontent and anger against the Tsarist autocracy. Although the 1905 uprising was defeated, it appeared 12 years later as a "dress rehearsal" for the 1917 Revolution. Several revolutionaries who played leading roles in 1905 simply went back to their posts in 1917. The 10-day political actions that "shook the world" were captured by the slogan: "Power to the people, Freedom, Bread and Democratic Peace", that

is, "peace without indemnities, annexations or reparations". The more administrative actions taken during this period included the change of the Russian calendar to correspond with the Western version - which, for instance, changed the date of the revolution from October 25 to November 7 - and the movement of the capital from Petrograd to Moscow to protect the regime and its headquarters from counter-revolutionaries and foreign invaders.

For the next five years, (1917-1922), the revolutionary socialist regime confronted all sorts of turbulence including counter-revolution, civil war, foreign armed interventions and famine. It had to institute an economic programme now known to the world as "war economy". Eventually, in 1922, having freed all the nations imprisoned in Tsarist Russia, the government was able to announce the establishment of a new state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR, on new foundations. A new constitution appeared two years later, in 1924. A critical article in the 1924 Soviet constitution was the right of each constituent republic, including Russia, to self-determination up to and including political secession. For the enforcement of this right to be practicable, the country was structured in such a way that every constituent republic shared borders with at least one foreign country. In other words, no constituent republic was enclosed by the others.

The enduring lessons which history has extracted from the 1917 Russian Revolution, its trajectory and its collapse 74 years later, in December, 1991, can be grouped under three broad headings: **Ideology, Democracy** and the **National Question**. Readers will immediately notice the absence of issues such as the role of imperialism and "wrong" economic strategies and policies. They are missing because they are effects and results rather than causes. My analyses and propositions will be sketchy and will merely indicate areas where grave errors were committed.

To be continued tomorrow.

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Ideology: My main proposition here is that socialism or, more strictly and correctly, socialist revolution is not and has never been in "competition" with capitalism in the manner of two football teams, under the same rules, entering a field of play to decide which side is stronger or better. No! Socialism is essentially, in its Marxist conception, a theoretical and practical revolutionary critique of capitalism, a total critique - ideological, political, economic and cultural - aimed at supplanting capitalism by dismantling it. Socialism aims at creating an entirely new world on entirely different foundations. It can therefore not go into competition with capitalism on the grounds of capitalism.

The socialist critique of capitalism emerged historically from the logic and contradictions of capitalism. Having emerged from the womb of capitalism, socialism became the only system that can terminate its logic, end its contradictions and irrationalities, and abolish the exploitation which is its essence. That is, dismantle it. History has now confirmed that this revolutionary process will, of necessity, be long and continuous. It has to be continuous because history has again confirmed that a revolution will either move forward or slide backward. Trotsky called it the permanent revolution. It is a continuous process "whose every successive stage is rooted in the preceding one and which can only end in the complete liquidation of class society."

Democracy: Socialism, as understood and advocated by Marx, Marxists and revolutionary socialists, is a higher, deeper and wider form of democracy, not a negation of it. The revolutionary concept of democracy is what has been called popular democracy. But under class rule - which capitalism and early stages of socialist transformation are - democracy is a contradictory regime at best and a false, deceptive and cynical claim at worst. Revolutionary socialists, rather than denying this, should admit it, explain the bases of the contradictions and measure the advance to socialism by the degree to which these contradictions are resolved, and impediments to full-blown democracy removed, in favour of the people. Advance to democracy is also measured, in particular, by the way the revolutionary regime treats its opponents. As Rosa Luxemburg, the martyred co-founder of the German Communist Party warned the Russian revolutionary leaders during the turbulent period following the revolution, political freedom is essentially freedom for the opponents of the government. Why? Because, as she wrote from her prison cell in Germany, "government supporters already have that freedom". And for

revolutionary socialists, the horizon of democracy extends from the polity and the political parties to the political economy, gender relations and culture.

The National Question: In the years following the 1905 uprising in Russia, but before the 1917 Revolution, European revolutionaries of Marxist persuasion vigorously debated the national question. The concrete question before revolutionaries especially those of Russian, Polish and German origins can be put like this: "What should be the platform of revolutionary parties struggling for workers' power and socialism in countries where there are oppressed nationalities fighting for autonomy or independence?"

Three broad answers can be articulated from this debate: a debate which was not only acrimonious but often bitter. I present them in the order of their complexity. The first is simply that self-determination struggles are by nature and definition reactionary and should therefore be opposed by revolutionary movements fighting for socialism. The second broad response is that revolutionaries should support national unity but assuring minority ethnic nationalities that the victory of socialist revolution - by removing capitalists and ethnic chauvinists from power - would create the condition for achieving freedom and equality for all nations and peoples. History has definitively falsified and discredited the first position and consigned it to the dustbin. The second position, as it stands, has become mechanical, that is, undialectical. And history has made it progressively unconvincing because it has not stood the test of actual historical experience. It has to be re-formulated.

The third response can be separated and stated in three lines. The first line was a warning to Marxists and revolutionary socialists to treat all political questions concretely, that is, not abstractly, but with the consciousness of time and space. This was what Lenin called the categorical imperative. The second line was that Marxists and revolutionary socialists should, in principle, endorse and uphold the right of nations and peoples to self-determination up to and including the right to political secession. The third line was that without prejudice to the second line, revolutionaries fighting for socialism were obliged to support their comrades in oppressed nations fighting for both socialism and national unity, that is, national unity under socialism.

But suppose revolutionary socialists in an oppressed nation are split: one side supporting secession and the other supporting national unity? This is a real-life situation where the demand for concrete analysis of concrete reality becomes stronger. The analysis should lead revolutionary socialists to a political decision - a political decision that goes back to the fundamentals, including the proposition that

the socialist revolution was not conceived simply as a national project; rather, it was conceived as a simultaneously national and international struggle for peoples' liberation from capitalist exploitation and oppression and the promotion of unity and solidarity of working peoples world-wide. And in this struggle victory in a single country can be guaranteed only if it expands to other countries especially the neighbouring ones.

This complex third line is a general advice against unprincipled positions. The line, however, emphasizes three points. One, where the struggle for socialism and the struggle for self-determination are simultaneously raging, revolutionary socialists are obliged to adopt a political position which strengthens the struggle for socialism conceived as an international and continuous project. Two, under no circumstances should revolutionaries go into alliance with capitalists, reactionaries and ethnic hegemonists who may be carrying the banner of "national unity" or with anti-socialist opportunists and ethnic chauvinists who may be carrying the banner of "self-determination". Three, in certain concrete situations, depending on the correlation and balance of forces, but always with the strategic aim of socialism in view, revolutionary socialists may propose or endorse the replacement of "demand for self-determination up to and including political secession" with "demand for enforceable right to freedom from national or ethnic domination and oppression."

Taking a long view of history and with the benefit of hindsight, what can we now say about the monumental setbacks suffered by socialism since the late 1980s, especially between the middle of 1989 and the end of 1991 - setbacks which included the defeat of communist - party governments by essentially anti-socialist forces in eastern and central Europe? My summary answer here is in two parts: First, that the monumental setbacks were the cumulative results of huge errors committed by socialism in the three dialectically connected areas of ideology, democracy and the national question. And secondly, that what happened, rather than being a "defeat" of socialism as a logical-historical project, was simply a definitive and categorical verdict that socialist struggle against capitalism can no longer proceed along the path defined principally by the trajectory of the latter Soviet Union. The search for a new path has been going on across the globe. No one can say where the new rupture will take place or how it will take place or when it will take place. In 1917 the rupture took place not in Germany or England or France, as "expected", but in Russia, the most backward country in capitalist Europe. The new rupture may take place anywhere and anytime on this globalised, but deeply endangered planet.

Concluded.