

Red Star Over the Third World

RED STAR OVER THE THIRD WORLD

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Preface

Tensions ran from one end of the Tsarist Empire to another at the start of 1917. Soldiers at the front, fighting a war that seemed to go nowhere, were in the mood to turn their guns against their rulers. Workers and peasants, struggling to make ends meet, had their hammers and sickles ready to crash down on the heads of their bosses and landlords. The various socialist groups and their clandestine organizations struggled to build momentum amongst the people against an increasingly disoriented and brutal Tsarist regime.

On March 8, 1917, Petrograd faced a shortage of fuel. Bakeries could not run. Working women, in the queues for bread, had to go to their homes and factories empty-handed. The textile women – angered by the conditions – went on strike. It was International Working Women’s Day. ‘Bread for our children’ was one chant. Another was ‘The return of our husbands from the trenches.’ Men and women from the factories joined them. They flooded Petrograd’s streets. The Tsarist state was paralyzed by their anger. These working women began the February Revolution of 1917, which culminated in the October Revolution of 1917 and with the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

A hundred years have passed since the October Revolution. The USSR, which it inaugurated, only lasted for little more than seventy years. It has been a quarter-century since the demise of the USSR. And yet, the marks of the October Revolution remain

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– not just in territories of the USSR but more so in what used to be known as the Third World. From Cuba to Vietnam, from China to South Africa, the October Revolution remains as an inspiration. After all, that Revolution proved that the working class and the peasantry could not only overthrow an autocratic government but that it could form its own government, in its image. It proved decisively that the working class and the peasantry could be allied. It proved as well the necessity of a vanguard party that was open to spontaneous currents of unrest, but which could – in its own way – guide a revolution to completion. These lessons reverberated through Mongolia and into China, from Cuba to Vietnam.

When he was a young émigré in Paris, Hồ Chí Minh, then Nguyễn Ái Quốc, read the Communist International's thesis on national and colonial issues and wept. It was a 'miraculous guide' for the struggle of the people of Indo-China, he felt. 'From the experience of the Russian Revolution,' Hồ Chí Minh wrote, 'we should have people – both the working class and the peasants – at the root of our struggle. We need a strong party, a strong will, with sacrifice and unanimity at our centre.' 'Like the brilliant sun,' Hồ Chí Minh wrote, 'the October Revolution shone over all five continents, awakening millions of oppressed and exploited people around the world. There has never existed such a revolution of such significance and scale in the history of humanity'. This is a common attitude in the Third World – sincere emotions that reveal how important this revolution was to the anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggles that broke out in the aftermath of 1917.

In September 1945, when Hồ Chí Minh took the podium to declare freedom for Vietnam, he said simply – 'We are free.' And then, as if an afterthought, 'We will never again be humiliated. Never!' This was the sound of the confidence of ordinary people who make extraordinary history. They refuse to be humiliated. They want their dignity intact. This was the lesson of October.

This is a little book to explain the power of the October Revolution for the Third World. It is not a comprehensive study,

PREFACE

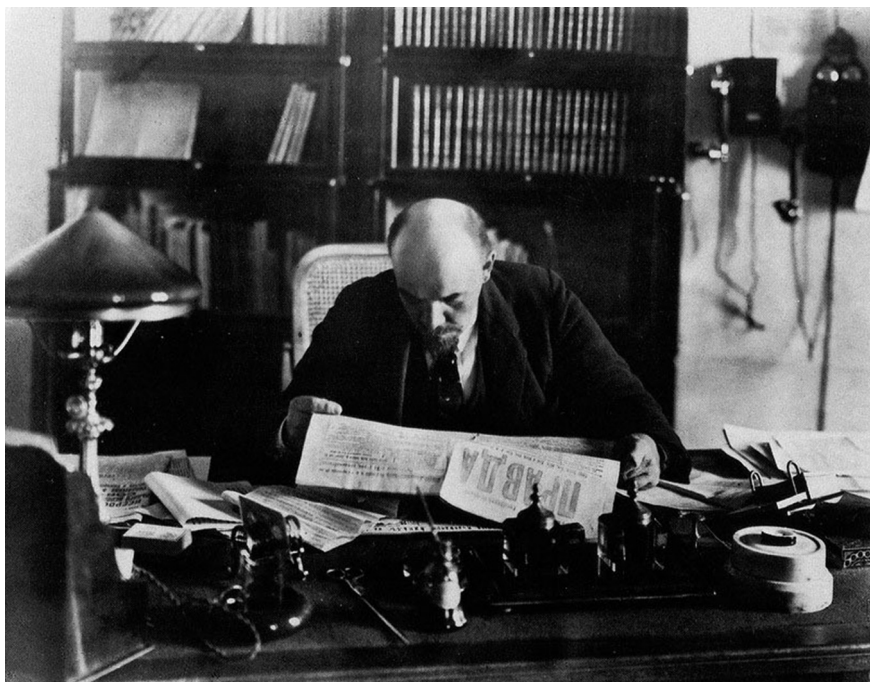
but a small book with a large hope – that a new generation will come to see the importance of this revolution for the working class and peasantry in that part of the world that suffered under the heel of colonial domination. There are many stories that are not here and many that are not fully developed. That is to be expected in a book such as this. But these are stories of feeling, mirrors of aspirations. Please read them gently.

The LeftWord Communist History group (Lisa Armstrong, Suchetana Chattopadhyay, Archana Prasad, Sudhanva Deshpande) put this book in gear. Our first volume included essays from the core members as well as from Fredrik Petersson, Margaret Stevens and Lin Chun – all key scholars of the legacy of the October Revolution. Grateful for the guidance and friendship of Aijaz Ahmad, Andrew Hsiao, Brinda Karat, Cosmas Musumali, Githa Hariharan, Irvin Jim, Jodie Evans, Marco Fernandes, Naeem Mohaiemen, P. Sainath, Pilar Troya, Prabir Purkayastha, Prakash Karat, Qalandar Memon, Robin D.G. Kelley, Roy Singham, Sara Greavu, Subhashini Ali, Vashna Jaganath and Zayde Antrim. This book would not have been possible without the theoretical and practical work of my comrades in the Communist Party of India (Marxist). And grateful to Zalia Maya, Rosa Maya, Soni Prashad and Rosy Samuel who made writing most of this book in Kolkata a treat.

The book relies upon a great deal of secondary reading, but also on material from the National Archives of India, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the British Library, the National Archives of the UK, the Russian State Archives for Social and Political History and the Library of Congress. I have also used – extensively – the collected works of Lenin, Marx and Engels, Mao and others. I am grateful to the many scholars who delved into the archival record to produce important work on communists

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from Chile to Indonesia (thinking of our Communist History group and people such as Amar Farooqui, Ani Mukherji, Barbara Allen, Chirashree Dasgupta, Christina Heatherton, John Riddell, Marianne Kamp, Michelle Patterson, Rakhshanda Jalil, Rex Mortimer, Shoshana Keller, Sinan Antoon, Winston James). The format of this book would be overwhelmed if I had included citations. References for any part of this book are available upon request (vijay@leftword.com). Thanks to Nazeef Mollah for a close reading of the manuscript.



Lenin reading Pravda in his study at the Kremlin, Moscow (October 16, 1918).

Eastern Graves

Soviet leaders sat in old Tsarist offices, lush with the architecture of autocracy, but now crowded with the excitement of their socialist ambitions. Lenin would tell Nadezhda Krupskaya that he rarely had a moment of peace. Someone or the other would rush in with a decree to be considered or a crisis to be averted. In June 1920, two Japanese journalists – K. Fussa and M. Nakahira – arrived in Moscow after a long journey across the Asian region of the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They were eager to see Lenin but were not confident that he would have time for them. After a brief wait in Moscow, they were allowed to interview him. Nakahira remembered the interview in his dispatch to the Japanese readers of *Osaka Asahi*. ‘I interviewed Mr. Lenin at his office in the Kremlin,’ he wrote. ‘Contrary to my expectation, the decoration of the room is very simple. Mr. Lenin’s manner is very simple and kind – as if he were greeting an old friend. In spite of the fact that he holds the highest position, there is not the slightest trace of condescension in his manner.’

Lenin was interested in Japan, asking Nakahira a series of pointed questions about Japanese history and society: ‘Is there a powerful landowning class in Japan? Does the Japanese farmer own land freely? Do the Japanese people live on food produced in their own country, or do they import much food from foreign countries?’ Lenin asked Nakahira if Japanese parents beat their children as he had read in a book. ‘Tell me whether it is true or not. It is a very interesting subject,’ he said. Nakahira told him that there might be exceptions, but on the whole ‘parents do not beat their

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children in Japan.' 'On hearing my answer', Nakahira wrote on June 6, 1920, 'he expressed satisfaction and said that the policy of the Soviet Government is to abolish this condition.' The Soviets had banned corporal punishment in 1917. On October 31, 1924, the USSR's penal legislation would further lay down that punishment of children, in particular, should not be for the purpose of 'the infliction of physical suffering, humiliation or indignity'.

Other foreign journalists found Lenin to be erudite and honest. He seemed to have nothing to hide. There were problems in the new USSR – the white armies of the imperialist countries had rattled its frontiers, while the older problems of starvation and indignity could not be easily overcome. Impatience with the new regime was in the air. It was to be expected. But high expectations can also produce grave disappointment. This is what Lenin had told the American, the British and the French journalists who had previously come to see him. W.T. Goode of the *Manchester Guardian* found Lenin to have a 'pleasant expression in talking, and indeed his manner can be described as distinctly prepossessing'. The entire office where Lenin worked, Goode wrote, had 'an atmosphere of hard work about everything'.

To the Germans, he bemoaned the failure of the German uprising in 1918-19 to create a social revolution. In October, a million German workers went out on strike and formed *Räte* (Councils), the German equivalent of the Soviets. Sailors of the main German naval fleet in Wilhelmshaven refused to weigh anchor. Their mutiny threatened the German imperial monarchy to the core. Their slogan – again an echo from the Soviets – was *Frieden und Brot* (Peace and Bread). The unfolding of this revolution led to the abdication of the petty German monarchs and, eventually, the emperor. The social democrats proclaimed a republic but halted the revolution by guile and violence. The formation of the Communist Party of Germany in late 1918 came as a result of the revolutionary tempo and the betrayal of the social

EASTERN GRAVES

democrats. A mass demonstration on January 5, 1919, brought hundreds of thousands of people to Berlin, where they wanted to proclaim a revolutionary government. The soldiers in Germany, unlike in Russia, did not walk over to the masses. They remained loyal to the social democratic government of Friedrich Ebert. The two leaders of the Communist Party – Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – were killed ten days later. The revolution failed.

In a letter to the workers of Europe and America published in *Pravda* in January 1919, Lenin wrote that the USSR is a ‘besieged fortress so long as the armies of the world socialist revolution do not come to our aid’. Lenin’s prose is strong here, as he condemns the ‘brutal and dastardly murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg’ by the social democrats. ‘Those butchers’, he writes, had gone to the side of the enemy. Germany could have had a revolution if the social democrats had not been congenital betrayers of the cause of the people. If only another European country had broken its capitalist chains, Lenin mused to Nakahira and Fussa, the USSR would not be so isolated.

Inevitably, Fussa asked Lenin, ‘Where does communism have more chance of success – in the West or in the East?’ Lenin had given this question a great deal of thought, at least since the 1911 Chinese, Iranian and Mexican revolutions. These had overthrown forms of autocracy to produce the fragile republics of Sun Yat-Sen, the Iranian Majlis and Porfirio Díaz. These uprisings had inspired Lenin to write an article in 1913 with the provocative title, ‘Backward Europe and Advanced Asia’. No such energy for rebellion seemed available in the United States or Great Britain (except in Ireland during the 1916 Easter Rising), in France or Germany. ‘So far’, Lenin told Nakahira, echoing the old certainties of European Marxism, ‘real communism can succeed only in the West’. But, given the 1911 uprisings from Mexico to China, his own 1916 studies of imperialism and of the use of colonial armies in the Great War of 1914-18, he added, ‘it must be remembered that

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the West lives at the expense of the East; the imperialist powers of Europe grow rich chiefly at the expense of the eastern colonies, but at the same time they are arming their colonies and teaching them to fight, and by so doing the West is digging its own grave in the East.'