

THE FIRST EXPERIMENT ON EARTH OF A SOCIETY
NOT MOVED BY PERSONAL GREED



November 2017

Voice of the South African Communist Party

Umsebenzi

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE

GREAT OCTOBER REVOLUTION

South African communists salute the world's first socialist state



The Russian Revolution – an SACP perspective

November 7 marks the centenary of the Great October Revolution. On this day in Petrograd, then the capital city of Russia, armed soldiers, sailors and workers, led by the Bolsheviks, seized control over the Winter Palace in which a conservative bourgeois Provisional Government was holed up. This was the start of a largely bloodless and remarkably quick insurrection – a revolution described as “Ten days that shook the world” by American journalist John Reed, who was present.

The Bolshevik-led October Revolution emerged from the slaughter-house of World War I, in which conscripted workers and peasants from different countries butchered each other on behalf of their respective ruling classes. Lenin and the Bolsheviks had consistently opposed the war. They characterised it as an inter-imperialist struggle, a fight among thieves to monopolise colonies and global resources. The Bolsheviks urged soldiers to turn their rifles against their own oppressors, rather than slaughter fellow workers across the trenches.

The plight of Russian conscripts was particularly dire. The army was brutally commanded by an officer corps from the feudal classes, it was poorly equipped, and demoralised. The message spread by Bolshevik agitators at the front for unilateral peace and desertion gathered support. Meanwhile, back at home in Russian cities like Petrograd and Moscow there were chronic food shortages. In the countryside grinding feudal oppression of the peasantry prevailed.

The first spontaneous waves of uprising began in February 1917 in Petrograd with factory strikes and mass demonstrations, including a women’s march. The Tsar was forced to abdicate. A Provisional Government, headed by liberal conservatives, Alexander Kerensky among them, sought to restore order, while across the sprawling Russian empire, from Central Europe to the Pacific, popular forces formed boisterous local organs of popular power, soviets (or councils).

Kerensky’s Provisional Government proved hopelessly incapable of respond-

ing to the growing crises. The people demanded food, land and, above all, peace. The Provisional Government tried to prolong the war, defending Russian imperial interests with an army that was increasingly mutinous.

Between February and October things played out in an unstable “two centres of power” tension between a nominal government and popular power. Initially, within the revolutionary formations (the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Social Revolutionaries), there was general agreement that consolidation of democracy and economic modernisation would have to be led by an emergent Russian bourgeoisie. The working class was a tiny minority lacking the experience of its counterparts in Germany or France. This belief informed the unstable dual power reality, with popular councils deferring to an inept Provisional Government.

Lenin turned the backwardness argument on its head. Yes, Russia is a backward semi-periphery, he argued. Precisely therefore, a marginal and feudally compromised bourgeoisie, unlike its earlier French counterpart, was incapable of leading a democratic breakthrough into modernity. That responsibility lay with the workers in alliance with the peasant majority.

Lead by knowing how to follow

The overthrow of the Provisional Government in the October Revolution marked the decisive start of the Bolshevik revolution. Unlike February, the October revolution was not unplanned. It was a deliberate insurrection, but it was not an elite coup. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm puts it: “Contrary to the Cold War mythology... the only real asset he (Lenin) and the Bolsheviks had was the ability to recognise what the masses wanted; to, as it were, lead by knowing how to follow.”

In 1917 the Bolsheviks saw their revolution as a holding operation. The overthrow of a tottering bourgeois government in backward Russia could only be a precursor. It would be impossible to defend this breakthrough unless the rev-

olution spread rapidly westwards. There was every expectation socialist advances would be made in the more developed parts of Europe, especially Germany.

This didn’t happen. Civil war within Russia was fomented by the imperialist powers, with several of them actively invading Russian territory. Remarkably this counter-revolution was defeated, testament to the fact that there was overwhelming popular support for the revolution. But the country was now in ruins. Lenin introduced a brief period of market reforms, a necessary breathing space. There was also the hope that foreign investment would be obtained. This also was not to be. Russia was isolated.

What was the way forward for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (as the country became in 1922)?

Lenin, incapacitated by a stroke following an assassination attempt, died in 1924. Some communists, like Nikolai Bukharin, possibly supported by Lenin, urged a pragmatic approach to building socialism in alliance with the peasantry. Others, notably Stalin, argued for a top-down, forced march into socialism, coercively extracting surplus from the peasantry, with military-style discipline imposed bureaucratically upon workers.

Stalin’s line prevailed. The focus was on mass production of machinery and industrial infrastructure, not consumer goods. But there were also important social advances, unprecedented at the time – mass literacy, free health care, subsidised housing and something capitalism has never achieved: full employment. There was also recognition of the rights of numerous nationalities – something that deeply impressed ANC President Josiah Gumede when he visited Asiatic regions of the USSR in 1927. “I have seen the New Jerusalem,” he said.

While the capitalist world plunged into economic crisis following the 1929 Wall Street crash, and Spain, Germany, Hungary, Japan lurched into fascist barbarism – the USSR appeared to have escaped this turmoil. In the 1930s its growth rates surpassed those of all major capitalist economies.



Petrograd Red Guards hours before storming the Winter Palace

A young South African studying at Oxford visited the Soviet Union in 1932. Like many other intellectuals and progressives of the time, he was deeply moved by the massive socialist modernisation and cultural advances underway. Bram Fischer became a committed communist.



Bram Fischer: Became a committed communist

But there was a terrible underside to the heroic advances. Mass purges directed, in the first place, against Party cadres themselves, the gulag, and famine in the countryside caused millions of deaths. Much of this can be understood, if not excused, if we remember the sense of being continuously under siege from imperialism. Throughout its 70 years of existence there was unceasing imperialist-driven destabilisation directed against the Soviet Union – from Civil War, to isolation, to the Second World War in which the Soviet Union bore the brunt of Nazi aggression. 20-million of its citizens were killed and the majority of its newly constructed factories and infrastructure razed to the ground in that war.

Stopping the Nazi war machine

But it was also in the besieged cities of Stalingrad and Petrograd (then named

Leningrad) that the Nazi war machine was finally stopped, often in house-to-house battles. In the winter of 1943 Red Army defenders went on to the offensive. The offensive became a rout of Hitler's formerly unbeatable army. The rout rolled all the way back to Hitler's bunker in Berlin.

With the end of the war in 1945, socialism in one country had become socialism in a major global bloc that stretched from the Elbe river in Germany to the Pacific in the east and, soon, into China, after communist victory there in 1949.

But the imperialist attempts to roll back the gains of socialism continued unabated with a Cold War, a nuclear arms race and regional hot wars. Emerging out of the ruins of the Second World War, the Soviet Union felt compelled to devote scarce resources to arms production.

Looking back over these last 100 years we should ask: in the context of the times, was a different approach to socialist construction possible? Maybe. Would the Red Army have saved the world from fascism without the Stalin's brutal forced march into modernity? Probably not.

Without a powerful socialist bloc centred on the USSR, would decolonisation in Africa have occurred after 1945? Without a countervailing Soviet bloc, would the ANC have recovered from its strategic mid-1960s defeat and go on to lead the abolition of apartheid? Almost certainly no.

Whatever its grievous deformations, the Russian Revolution gave hope and practical support to the struggles of millions upon millions of the world's oppressed. We, as South Africans, should affirm this with great appreciation.

In 1990, against the backdrop of a collapsed Berlin Wall, Joe Slovo penned a pamphlet: *Has socialism failed?* Absolutely no, he answered. However, he added, the lesson to be learnt is that capitalism can hold sway for centuries without substantive democracy. But socialism, lacking capitalism's whip of unemployment to coerce workers into productive effort, needs to deepen (not suppress) democracy. Failing which, socialism will inevitably suffer declining productivity, popular demoralisation, and bureaucratic stagnation.

Bolshevik lessons for this century

In its achievements, its stoic heroism, even failings, the Bolshevik revolution holds lessons for our new century as we struggle against deepening inequality, new wars and devastating climate change.

We live now in a different epoch from that which confronted Lenin and his comrades a century ago. But the challenges we face have at the root exactly the same capitalist system in its imperialist phase.

Whatever the differences in our current reality, as communists in South Africa we need once more to assert with Lenin and the Bolsheviks that, in a semi-peripheral society like our own, a supposed patriotic bourgeoisie is incapable of leading the consolidation of a democratic revolution.

That task falls to the working class and the popular masses.

And that further implies an uninterrupted advance from our "own February", our 1994 democratic breakthrough, towards socialism. ★

TIMELINE OF THE RU

1917

8 March

• February revolution begins with a general strike in Petrograd (St Petersburg) and mass demonstrations triggered by food shortages. Within a week soldiers mutiny and support the Petrograd Soviet.

12 March

• Workers and soldiers break into the Peter and Paul Fortress to release the Petrograd Soviet leadership

15 March

• Tsar Nicholas II abdicates

16 April

• Lenin arrives home.

16 April

• First meeting of All Russian Congress of Soviets

16 July

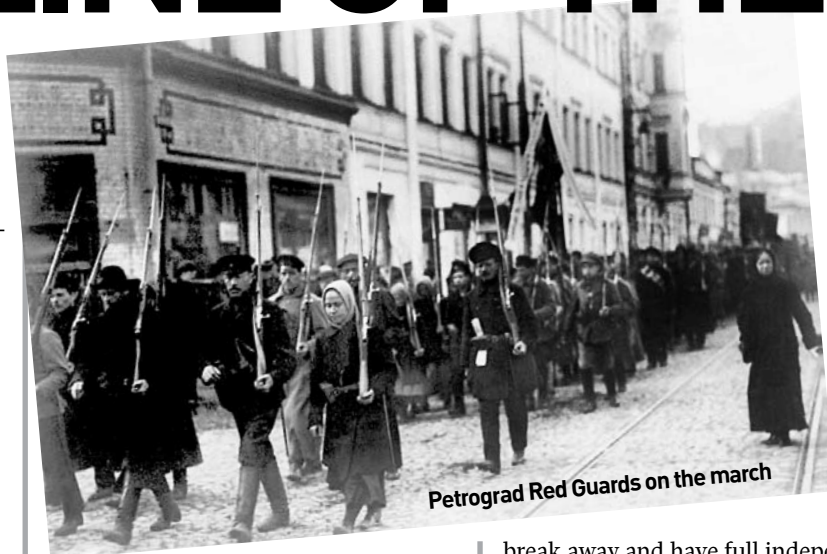
• Petrograd rising against coalition government over its attempts to continue Russian involvement in World War I

21 July

• The uprising is crushed, Alexander Kerensky takes over as formal head of the provisional government. Lenin is forced into hiding

10 September

• General Lavr Korniloff, commander in chief of the Russian army marches on Petrograd (St Petersburg) to overthrow the Petrograd Soviet and Kerensky's



provisional government. Bolshevik Red Guards are key to defeating Korniloff

7-8 November

- Soviet Revolution
- Overthrow of Provisional Government
- Winter Palace taken
- 2nd Congress of Soviets convenes, passes decrees on peace and land, decides on formation of revolutionary government

9 November

• Troops under command of General Krasnov and Alexander Kerensky drive towards Petersburg to crush revolution Soviet power established in most main cities

11 November

• Insurrectionary attempt in Petrograd put down by Red Guards.

13 November

• Revolution wins in Baku – now holding a total of 17 provincial capitals. Red Guards defeat General Krasnov's troops outside Petersburg and the opposition dissolves.

14 November

• Revolution wins in Tashkent. In the North, General Krasnov is taken prisoner, Kerensky escapes.

15 November

• Soviet Government proclaims the Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia, allowing nationalities of Russia to

break away and have full independence. Red Guard reinforces Moscow workers, breaks the back of the counter-revolutionary forces.

16 November

• The Kremlin in Moscow is secured, ending the battle for Moscow. Split in Bolshevik party where a minority refuses to co-operate in the new government, Lenin issues an ultimatum: either split and create a new party, or adhere to democratic centralism.

18 November

• Lenin proclaims the victory of the revolution, and adds: 'Remember that now you yourselves are at the helm of state. No one will help you if you yourselves do not unite and take into your hands all affairs of the state. Your Soviets are from now on the organs of state authority, legislative bodies with full powers.'

22 November

• Brest-Litovsk negotiations begin

29 November

• The Soviet Government publishes a decree allowing citizens to recall politicians from office

6 December

• Finland declares independence, officially recognised by the Soviet government on 31 December

10 December

• Nationalisation of Land Decree



Bolshevik cannon outside the Winter Palace

November 2017

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

1918

15 January

- Red Army established

18 January

- Constituent Assembly open

9 February

- Ukraine separate peace

2 March

- Brest Litovsk peace treat signed with Germany

13 March

- Germans in Odessa

5 April

- British and Japanese troops land in Vladivostock, far-eastern Siberia

1 May

- British, French, US, Canadian and Australian troops land in Murmansk in northern Russia

2 May

- Rightwing 'White dictatorship' in Finland

14 October

All Russian Directorate formed at Ufa

- 11 November
- Armistice signed

18 November

- Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak launches anti-Soviet campaign in far-eastern Siberia



Lenin greets supporters in Moscow

1919

6 March

- Third Socialist Internation formed

19 March

- Hungarian Soviet established

20 May

Kolchak defeated at Samara (south-eastern Russia)

1 August

- Hungarian Soviet resigns

27 August

- Interventionist forces withdraw from Archangel

23 December

- French President Georges Clemenceau proposed a 'barbed wire fence' of anti-Soviet states, centred on Poland, in Eastern Europe



Red Guards and soldiers patrol Petrograd on 7 November 1917

1920

6 January

- General Anton Denkin, overall commander of the anti-Soviet 'White' forces, defeated south of Moscow and retreats south. Denkin, who oversaw massacres of tens of thousands of Jews and pro-Soviet civilians, resigns in April and flees into exile

20 January

- Soviet forces take Archangel

24 January

- Polish and Ukrainian forces attack the Soviets

18 May

- Soviet halt Polish forces

10 June

Baron Pyotr Wrangel's Caucasus Volunteer Army advances north from the Crimea



Soviet poster reads: Wrangel lives: finish him

12 October

Soviet-Polish armistice signed

14 November

Soviets capture Sebastopol and defeat Wrangel
1921

16 March

Soviets sign trade agreement with Britain

September

The famine

Soviet roots & the roots of 'Soviet'

★ WORKERS' COUNCILS

"The origin of Soviet power is not in a law previously considered and passed by Parliament, but in the direct initiative of the masses from below, everywhere." – Lenin, April 1917

The Russian word soviet – the basic unit of Russian revolutionary collective decision-making – literally means workers' council or committee.

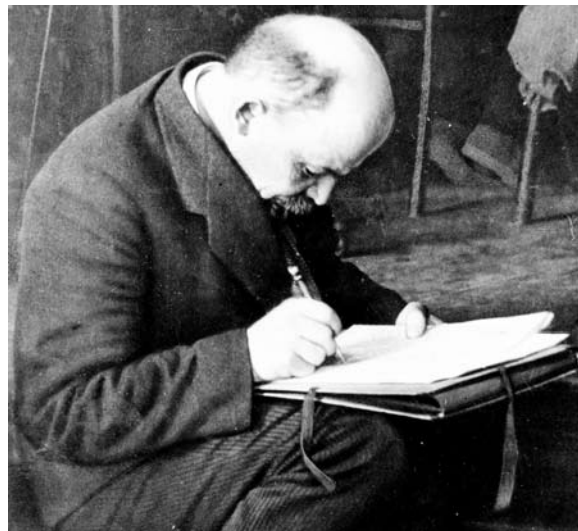
Soviets were first established in Moscow and Petrograd factories during the failed 1905 revolution against the tsar, and in 1917 workers drew on this experience of factory-based democracy for collective decision-making and action – first on the February Revolution, but increasingly on all matters the working class engaged. All decisions were made after discussion and a show of hands.

The idea – and its implementation – spread rapidly: to military units, to peasants communities and to all spheres.

The next inevitable step was for individual soviets to elect delegates to a soviet of soviets, and upwards to a city soviet – the Petrograd Soviet of Soldiers and Workers – until the ultimate, national

soviet congress of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies (delegates). The system developed extremely rapidly in 1917.

Lenin recognised the soviet structure as more representative – and class-explicit – than constituency-based democracy, and infinitely more representative



Lenin prepares speech notes for an address to the Soviet Congress

than the self-appointed Provisional Government that replaced the tsar. Thus his demand for "all power to the soviets". He didn't feel that the Bolshhevik's minority representation in the soviets in mid-1917 was an obstacle – the point was to gain a majority by force of argument, which is what happened by November 1917.

At all levels, but particularly at the upper end of the soviet chain, party-political positions were reflected in debates – and in who was elected to represent a soviet as a delegate to the next tier, and to soviet executive structures.

Both wings of the divided Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) – the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, were represented at all levels of soviet. Bolshevik and Menshevik literally mean "majority" and "minority" – terms dating back to the RSDLP's second congress in 1903.

Generally, the Mensheviks believed a peaceful route to socialism was not only preferable, but possible, and that, because its class interests were distinct from those of the peasantry, needed distinct, proletarian political representation. This aligned them broadly with the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), traditionally speaking on behalf of Russia's majority peasant communities, which believed peasants had unique class interests needing discrete political representation. The SRs too were split between left and right wings. At key points the Left Social Revolutionaries allied with the Bolsheviks – the Left SRs were the first non-Bolshevik party to endorse the October Revolution and were represented in the first post-Revolutionary government. The Mensheviks took several years to accept the legitimacy of the October Revolution.

Other political hues were represented in the soviets, including anarchists.

Nationally, and specifically in the Provisional Government, the middle and upper classes were represented by liberal and rightwing parties – including the explicitly bourgeois Constitutional Democrats (shortened in Russian to Kadets). ★

The Great November Revolution?

The October Revolution took place in Russia on 25 October 1917 – but under an outdated calendar system, still in use by the Russian tsars, after being abandoned by the rest of Europe centuries earlier.

Most of the rest of the world had replaced the 2 000-year-old Roman Julian calendar with the Gregorian calendar (the first to include leap years) 400 years earlier.



By 1917, Russia, without the leap years, was 13 days behind – so 7 November everywhere else was 25 October in Russia. Within days of taking power, the Bolshevik-led government replaced the Julian calendar with the Gregorian calendar. But it retained the "Great October Revolution" title. All dates in this Umsebenzi centenary edition are given in the "new style" Gregorian calendar. ★



Part of the mass demonstrations in Petrograd in the first days of the February Revolution

March – a giant awakes

★ FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

These seven pages of the centenary edition of Umsebenzi highlight nine key developments in the first successful socialist revolution – from the February Revolution to the Russian civil war

A wage strike on 3 March 1917 by workers at Russia's largest industrial plant, the Putilov Mill in Petrograd, triggered the first phase of the turbulent, eight-month march towards the Great October Revolution.

When the mill owners locked out 20 000 workers, they and thousands of other workers – their spending power also slashed by rampant inflation – took to the streets in sympathy. Within 48 hours 200 000 workers were out – joined by thousands from Petrograd bread queues to protest the introduction of food rationing, which hit Petrograd particularly hard because of its distance

from food-producing areas. By 8 March – International Women's Day – more than 500 000 were on the streets, now including women demanding equal rights. The actions quickly transformed into a general strike that closed down Petrograd, with demands including an end to Russia's involvement in World War I.

The "Tsar of All the Russias", Nicholas Romanov, ordered troops to fire on the strikers. But most mutinied, joining the strikers. The revolt spread like a bushfire from Petrograd – first to Moscow but rapidly across much of the country – and to millions of military conscripts suffering and dying in the trenches in Russia's war against Germany and its allies.

Drawing on their experiences in the unsuccessful revolution in 1905 – and after nearly a century of viciously suppressed protests, revolts and uprisings – workers formed themselves into workers' councils (soviets). Local military units, no longer accepting the chain of command, followed suit, ultimately merging into a single Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies to control virtually all activity in the capital city and, as the revolt spread, to similar soviets in many other Russian cities, towns and rural areas.

Just 11 days after it began, the February Revolution forced the political elites to pressure Nicholas to abdicate. Liberal and right-wing members of the Duma (parliament) formed a Provisional Government under liberal aristocrat Prince Georgy Lvov.

The Provisional Government had taken political power from Nicholas. But real power – in the factories and workplaces, in the streets and, vitally, in the ranks of Russia's army and navy – lay with the Soviets.

An uneasy state of "dual power" emerged, although the Petrograd Soviet clearly recognised where the balance of power lay: its first decree, Order No 1, stated: "The orders of the Military Commission of the State Duma shall be executed only in such cases as do not conflict with the orders ... of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies."

Without clear political leadership, the Soviets could not break the stalemate. But dual power could not last: the political, aristocratic and capitalist elites were already plotting. And elsewhere, many exiles had heard the news and were hurrying home. Among them, from his isolated exile in Switzerland, was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin ... ★

The April Theses: Enter Lenin, stage left

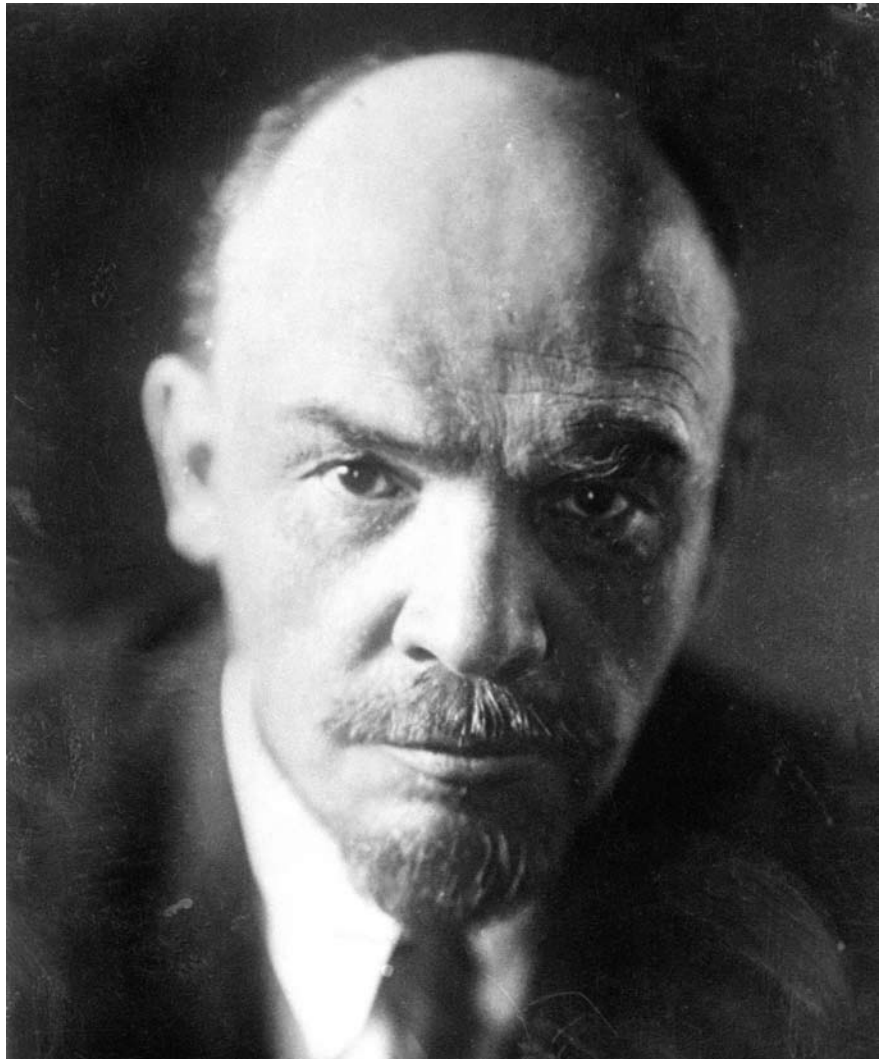
★ REVOLUTIONARY LOGIC

The April Theses – officially The tasks of the proletariat in the present revolution – are the 10 directives Lenin issued on his return from exile via Finland on 16 April (3 April) 1917.

His aim was to convince fellow Bolsheviks, but also Mensheviks and others in the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP), of the need to go beyond the scope of the Provincial Government, in office since the February Revolution, toward soviet power. He read the theses to two meetings of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks on 17 April. He later expanded on them in pamphlet form, and they became the ideological groundwork for the revolution in November (October).

In the theses Lenin argued that the revolution of 8-16 March was a first stage of revolution that placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. This must proceed to a second stage of revolution “which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants”. Lenin urged “no support for the Provincial Government”.

Lenin argued in the theses against seeing the war, in which Russia was mired together with 13 other capitalist powers, as having any revolutionary value. The view of many revolutionary forces at the time was that the war could be a means of triggering revolutions in the other warring countries. No way, said Lenin: the war is an imperialist one based on conquest. The link between capitalism and imperialist war was inseparable. If the war was taking place under conditions of proletarian power, the situation would be different. But



Lenin: set out the tasks for the proletariat and for the Bolshevik party

it wasn't. The Provincial Government supported the continuation of the war because it was in its bourgeois interest to do so.

He argued that in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies the Bolsheviks were at that point in a minority. The majority position was held by “petty bourgeois opportunist elements”. But the masses must be made to see that the soviets were “the only possible form of revolutionary government”. Therefore the Bolsheviks must “present a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation of the errors of their tactics.” By the time of the November Revolution, this patient work had paid off, and the Bolsheviks held majorities in all the largest soviets.

Lenin stressed that soviet control must not take a “retrograde step” by becoming a parliamentary republic, but must be a republic of soviets of workers', agricultural workers' and peasants' deputies. The soviets must take over

agrarian policy, and all lands must be nationalised. Also, all banks must be amalgamated under soviet power into one bank. The job of the soviets would not be to “introduce” socialism but to bring social production and the means of distribution under control of the soviets – in other words paving the way for socialism.

Lenin also outlined the tasks for the party, including upgrading its programme on the question of imperialism and the imperialist war, on the demand for a “commune state”, and changing the party's name to the Communist Party.

Lastly, he proposed creating a new revolutionary International. This was to become the Communist International, Comintern, established in 1919.

Fleshed out more fully by Lenin in preparation for the Sixth Congress of the RSDLP (Bolshevik), much of the content of the April Theses was adopted by this congress, held in Petrograd 8 – 16 August 1917. ★

The people's patience is not endless

★ JULY DAYS

By mid-1917, the uneasy dual power standoff between the soviets and the Provisional Government has dragged on for four long months. Fuelled by Lenin's April theses, and his Land, Bread and Peace! slogan, the Bolsheviks are gradually gaining influence over soldiers, workers and peasants.

Across the political divide the Provisional Government is attempting a complex balancing act. Prince Georgy Lvov's administration is holding firm on land (property rights are inviolate, as the Tsar said), bread (there isn't any for the Petrograd proletariat, as the Tsar said), and peace (we stay in the war the Tsar started). The rightwing Kadet Ministers in the coalition government are demanding that loyal regiments "restore order" in Russia, crushing what they regard as the uppity lower classes. Lenin notes this, and in the Bolshevik Pravda warns: "The proletariat and our party must be as cool and collected ..., Let the future Cavaignacs begin first.' (Cavaignac was the French general who smashed the Paris Commune 70 years earlier)

On Monday 15 July the Kadet Ministers walk out of the Provisional Government over its refusal to act against the soviets. The next day tens of thousands



Demonstrators flee as loyalist regiments open fire, killing 700 people

of factory workers take to the streets, spurred on by a failed military offensive ordered by War Minister Alexander Kerensky and by the failure of the February Revolution to improve their lot. On Wednesday soldiers join the protesting workers, marching under the banner All power to the soviets! They urge the Bolsheviks to lead the overthrow of Lvov's tottering government. Lenin addresses them, but declines. "Not yet," Bolshevik writer Victor Serge interprets Lenin.

Kerensky unleashes loyal regiments, slaughtering 700 demonstrators and arresting 1 000. His forces begin disarming workers, disbanding revolutionary mili-

tary units, and suppressing the Bolsheviks. On Thursday his forces destroy the Pravda offices and the headquarters of the Bolshevik Central Committee. Lenin goes into hiding to avoid arrest, as loyalist troops Kerensky has recalled from the front arrive in Petrograd.

Kerensky takes over the Provisional Government, restoring the death penalty. The SR-Menshevik leadership of the soviets admire his "unlimited powers".

With "dual power" ended, Kerensky eases his restrictions. But Petrograd workers and soldiers remain unbowed. Kerensky secretly asks army commander-in-chief, General Lavr Kornilov to send any army back to Petrograd. When it becomes clear Kornilov intends to suppress not only the badly weakened soviets but also Kerensky's administration, the new premier is forced to rearm the workers and soldiers in Petrograd and to use them to confront the advancing army and persuade it to halt. The dual power impasse resumes.

Lenin proposes a compromise: A soviet government – still led by the Right Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks – to replace Kerensky's as the only means of securing "the peaceful advance of the whole Russian Revolution ..."

Both the rightwing socialists in the soviet and Kerensky's government reject the idea. The road to the Winter Palace beckons ... ★



Red Guards keep themselves warm guarding a Petrograd intersection in July 1917

Extract from Victor Serge's
'Year One of the Russian Revolution'

At the beginning of October the insurrection broke out everywhere, spontaneously; peasant risings spread all over the country. The provinces of Tula, Tambov, Ryazan and Kaluga are in revolt. The peasants have been expecting peace and land from the revolution. They have been disappointed; and so they rise, seize the granaries of the landlords, and burn down their houses. The Kerensky government represses the risings wherever it has the force to do so. Fortunately its resources are limited. Lenin warns: "to crush the peasant upsurge means the murder of the revolution".

Within the Soviets of the cities and the armies, the Bolsheviks, until recently a minority, become the majority. In the Moscow Municipal Duma elections, they win 199 337 votes out of 387262. Of the 710 members elected, 350 were Bolsheviks, 184 Kadets, 104 Socialist-Revolutionaries, 31 Mensheviks and 41 other groups ...

On the eve of civil war, the moderate parties fall back, and the extreme parties gain. When the Mensheviks are losing all real influence, and the governing S-R party, which only a short while before appeared to carry immense weight,

Snapshots from a revolution

★ RED MOMENTUM

is reduced to the third place, the Kadets – the bourgeoisie's own party – acquire new strength as they line up to face the revolutionaries.

At the last elections in June the S-Rs and the Mensheviks had obtained 70% of the vote: their share now is 18%. Of the 17 000 soldiers who vote, 14 000 are for the Bolsheviks.

The Soviets are becoming transformed ... new majorities form in them. On 31 August in Petrograd and on 6 September in Moscow, Bolshevik resolutions obtain a majority for the first time. On 8 September, the Menshevik-S-R executives of the two Soviets resign ...

On 20 September, the Soviet in Tashkent takes power. It is suppressed by the troops of the Provisional Government. On 27 September, the Soviet in

Reval decides in principle for "all power to the Soviets". A few days before the October Revolution, Kerensky's "democratic" artillery fires upon the revolutionary Soviet at Kaluga.

At Kazan, the October insurrection triumphed before it had even begun in Petrograd ...

All over this immense country, the whole labouring masses are moving towards revolution: peasants, workers, soldiers ...

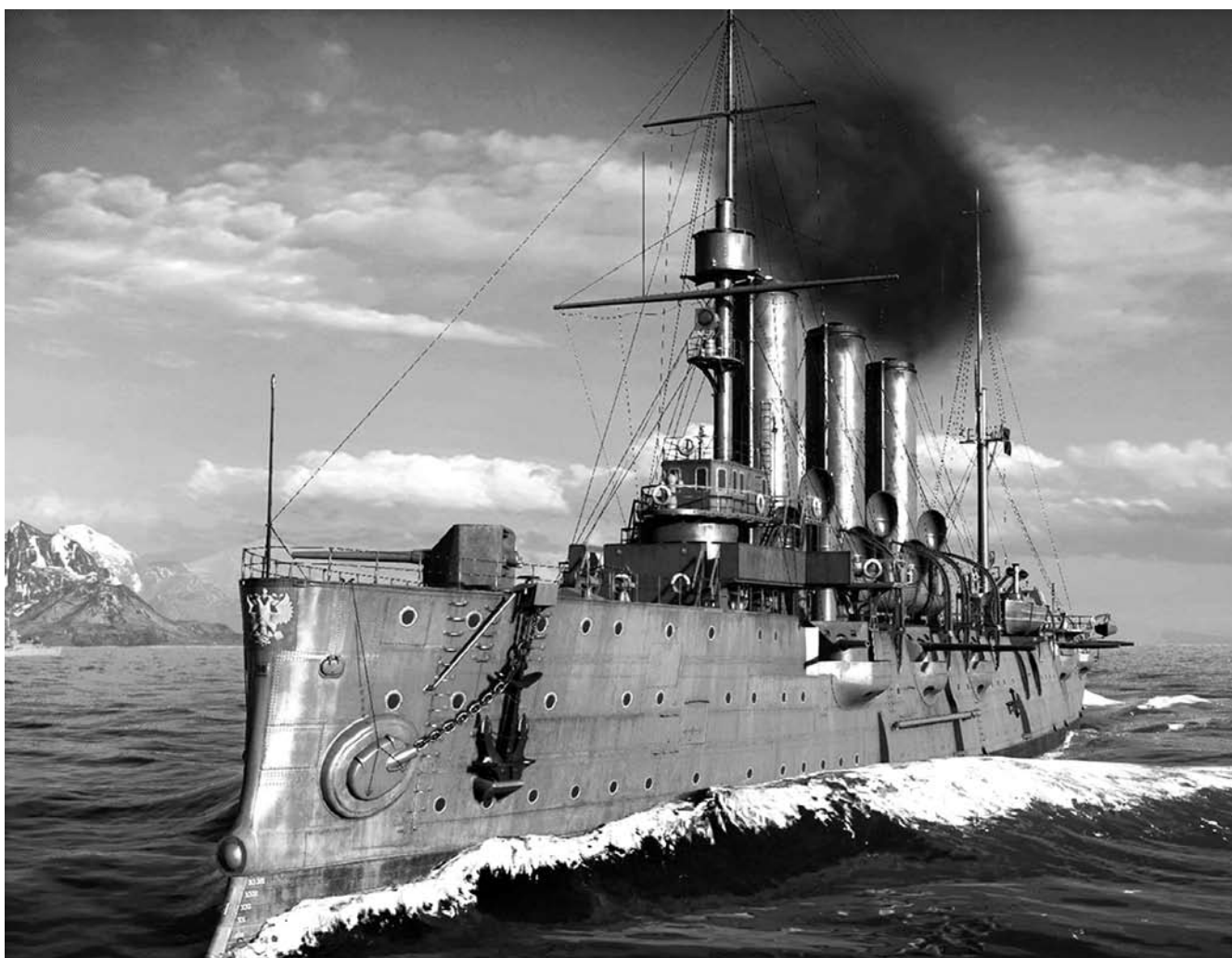
The initiative in forming the Red Guards in Petrograd came from the factory workers, who began it instinctively after the fall of tsardom. In disarming the old order they had to begin to arm themselves. In April, two of the Bolshevik militants ... began to put the spontaneous organisation of the Red Guards into a systematic shape ... Formed on a factory basis as a volunteer army ... During the July riots the Vyborg Red Guard section kept the troops sent by Kerensky at a respectful distance ...

By September, the use of weapons was being taught in 79 Petrograd factories. The military organisation of the Bolshevik party could not find enough instructors for these masses. ★

Victor Serge was a Russian revolutionary and writer. He joined the Bolsheviks five months after arriving in Petrograd and later worked for the Comintern



Bolshevik-supporting soldiers and sailors flood the Petrograd streets in September 1917



Russian cruiser Aurora – fired the shot that signaled the start of the storming of the Winter Palace

Firing the starting gun

★ TAKING POWER

At precisely 9-45 pm on 7 November 1917, the crew of the Russian cruiser Aurora – most of them Bolsheviks – fired a blank shot from one of the ship’s 152 mm guns to signal the climax of the Great October Revolution: the storming of the Winter Palace, seat of Alexander Kerensky’s liberal-dominated Provisional Government, by soldiers, sailors and Red Guard workers sympathetic to the Bolsheviks.

Occupation of the Winter Palace, at 2am the next morning, was largely symbolic – for most of the previous 48 hours Red Guard workers had been occupying major government facilities,

key communication, installations and vantage points with little opposition.

The Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee had released a pamphlet, To the Citizens of Russia, declaring that the Provisional Government had been overthrown, and the army’s Petrograd Garrison and most of the city’s military units had supported the insurrection.

At the 2nd Congress of Soviets meeting in Petrograd, the 649 elected delegates (390 of them Bolsheviks and nearly 100 members of its allied Left Socialist-Revolutionaries) responded to the news of the storming of the Winter Palace by adopting a decree transferring power to the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies – thus ratifying the Revolution.

The next day the Congress elected a Council of People’s Commissars

(equivalent to our Cabinet) with Lenin as leader, as the basis of a new Soviet Executive, pending the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, and passed the Decree on Peace and the Decree on Land.

The decision to seize power, taken by the central committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party three days before the October Revolution – on the basis that “an armed uprising is inevitable, and that the time for it is fully ripe” – was partly in response to steady move to the right by Alexander Kerensky’s Provisional Government and its attempt to suppress the Bolsheviks and halt their growing popularity.

Today the Aurora is a tourist attraction as a museum ship in St Petersburg. ★

To the Winter Palace

★ EYE WITNESS

American socialist and journalist John Reed gives some sense of the confusion in Petrograd on the night of the October Revolution in this account of his attempt to get to the Winter Palace

We hurried out ... stopping for a moment at the room where the Military Revolutionary Committee worked. We caught a glimpse of dishevelled men bending over a map under the glare of a shaded electric-light ... when we came into the chill night, men were tossing bundles into a great motor-truck ...

“Where are you going?” I shouted. “Everywhere!” answered a little workman, grinning. “But there’ll probably be shooting.”

We climbed in. The great car jerked forward, we all toppled backward on top of those who were climbing in. One man began to hurl handfuls of papers into the air. We imitated him, plunging down through the dark street with a tail of white papers floating out behind. I picked up a copy of the paper:

To the citizens of Russia!

The Provisional Government is deposed. State Power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, the Military Revolutionary Committee, which stands at the head of the Petrograd proletariat and garrison...

The cause for which the people were fighting: immediate proposal of a democratic peace, abolition of landlord property-rights over the land, labour control over production, creation of a Soviet Government—that cause is securely achieved.

LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION!

The nearer we drew to the Winter Palace the more deserted were the streets. The machine slowed down. We climbed out to an astonishing scene. A cordon of armed sailors was drawn across the Nevsky, blocking the way to a crowd of people. There were about 400 of them, men in frock coats, well-dressed women,



Red Guards on their way to the Winter Palace



American reporter and author John Reed

officers. Among them we recognised leaders of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.

At the head white-bearded old Schreider, Mayor of Petrograd, and Prokopovitch, Minister of Supplies in the Provisional Government, arrested that morning and released. From the front of the procession came loud argument. Schreider and Prokopovitch were bellowing at the big sailor who seemed in command. “We demand to pass!” they cried. “These comrades come from the Congress of Soviets! Look at their tickets!”

The sailor was plainly puzzled. He scratched his head with an enormous hand: “I have orders from the Committee not to let anybody go to the Winter Palace,” he grumbled.

“We insist upon passing! We will march on whether you permit us or not!” cried old Schreider, very much excited. “Shoot us if you want to! We will pass!” came from all sides. “We bare our breasts to your guns!”

“No,” said the sailor, looking stubborn, “I can’t allow you to pass.”

“What will you do if we go forward? Will you shoot?”

“No, I’m not going to shoot people who haven’t any guns. We won’t shoot unarmed Russian people.”

“We will go forward! What can you do?”

Another sailor came up, very much irritated. “We will spank you!” he cried, energetically. “Go home now!”

At this Prokopovitch mounted some sort of box, and, waving his umbrella, he made a speech: “Comrades and citizens!” he said. “Force is being used against us! We cannot have our innocent blood upon the hands of these ignorant men! It is beneath our dignity. Let us return to the Duma!”

Whereupon, in dignified silence, the procession marched back up the Nevsky. And taking advantage of the diversion we slipped past towards the Winter Palace. ★

John Reed, who travelled to Russia as correspondent for US socialist newspaper, The Masses, later wrote Ten Days that Shook the World, arguably the leading English-language eyewitness account of the October Revolution

The 2nd Congress of Soviets

★ DECLARING VICTORY

'We will proceed to construct the Socialist order'

The 2nd All-Russian Congress Of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviet Deputies opened in the evening of 7 November (25 October) at the Smolny Institute in Petrograd as the revolution was unfolding.

There were 649 delegates elected to the congress. They represented 318 provincial and local soviets. The congress comprised a range of factions and groupings. Of the delegates, 390 were Bolshevik, 160 Socialist-Revolutionaries (about 60 of whom were Right Socialist Revolutionaries), 72 Mensheviks, 14 Menshevik Internationalists, and 13 of various other groups.

The Provisional Government was collapsing. A blank shot fired at 21.45 from the *Aura* cruiser anchored close to the port was the signal for taking the Winter Palace, HQ of the Provincial Government. In the early hours of the next day, 8 November, the 2nd Congress received the news that the Winter Palace had been taken by Bolshevik regiments and the Red Guards.

The Congress began with speeches by the Mensheviks and Right Social Revolu-



Lenin addressing soldiers and sailors outside the Congress of Soviets

tionaries for negotiations with the Provisional Government. The majority of delegates voted down the call. The Congress next turned to discussing a resolution on peace, to end the First World War by starting talks among all countries involved. The Mensheviks and Right Social Revolutionaries and some others walked out, refusing to recognize the authority of the Congress.

Congress adjourned just before dawn. Lenin had yet to make an appearance. He had been working on the decrees on peace and on land (see separate items). Victor Serge wrote:

"Lenin did not come to the rostrum until the session of the following morning, when the great decrees on land, peace and workers' control of production were voted. His appearance set off an immense acclamation from the whole hall. He waited for it to end, looking out calmly over the triumphant crowd. Then, quite simply, without any gesture, his two hands resting on the stand, his broad shoulders leaning forward slightly,



Painting of Lenin declaring that power is in the hands of the soviets

he said:

"We will proceed to construct the Socialist order."

The Congress adopted the decrees on peace and land. This was preceded by the proclamation that all power would pass to the Soviets: "Backed by the will of the vast majority of the workers, soldiers and peasants, backed by the victorious uprising of the workers and the garrison which has taken place in Petrograd, the Congress takes power into its own hands."

The Congress also adopted draft regulations on workers' power: "Workers' control over the production, storage, purchase and sale of all products and raw materials shall be introduced in all industrial, commercial, banking, agricultural and other enterprises employing not less than five workers."

The Congress then moved to the formation of the workers' and peasants' government, which it named the Council of People's Commissars. The 13 commissariats corresponded to government departments or ministries. Lenin was elected as the Council's chair. ★



The Congress of Soviets



100TH ANNIVERSARY

The Great October

Revolution



**The South African Communist
Party salutes the world's
first socialist state**

'Strangling the Bolshevik beast at birth'

★ INVASION

History remembers “international intervention” as a military drive to realise Winston Churchill’s dream of “strangling the Bolshevik beast at birth”.

Churchill unsuccessfully lobbied other Western allies to form a European army to “liberate” Russia (although even he generally favoured shedding “foreign”, not British, blood). And British intervention actually began even before the Bolsheviks took power – a British armoured car squadron, dressed in Russian uniforms, accompanied General Lavr Kornilov’s abortive, September 1917, march on Petrograd.

The international intervention was alarming – but never a serious *military* threat: the 140 000-strong, three-pronged invasions were too small to threaten even the new-born socialist state. Half the invasion forces anyway comprised Japanese troops deployed entirely in the far eastern Siberian ports to prevent the export of revolution 300km across the Sea of Japan. While some units in Siberia and southern Russia engaged in direct combat with soviet forces, most were used to hold Russia’s ports – blockading trade and facilitating a flood of weapons to anti-Bolshevik White Russians.

They invaded in the dying days of



British troops at Archangel in north-west Russia in 1919

World War I (to far eastern Siberia, to the northern Russian Arctic ports near Petrograd and into the southern Russian Caucasus and modern-day Ukraine) and were gone by late 1920. Japan’s 70 000 were forced out in 1922 by the Red Army.

Economically, though, the intervention was a triumph – the blockade, with the disruption of transport it achieved, crippled the young socialist state.

By 1918 imports were down to just over 1% of 1914 levels and exports to a tenth of one percent. A year later, at the height of the international intervention, nothing moved at all. Industrial and agricultural production, in sharp decline since 1913, plummeted: coal to 58% of

1913 output, iron ore to just 3% and steel to 10%.

Destruction of transport infrastructure in the vast country – 15 South Africas would fit into it – compounded the problem, with food in agricultural regions unable to reach urban populations who needed it.

Without markets inside Russia or abroad, industrial enterprises collapsed or cut back massively, while workers fled the cities for the countryside where food

was at least available – surging inflation doubled urban wages, but food prices exploded to dozens of times their pre-war levels. Moscow and Petrograd lost half of their populations.

Russia’s national income tumbled, while costs surged. By 1919 the soviet state was spending three times what it earned, creating a colossal deficit. The civil war took 34%-plus of the national budget – more than food, industry and agriculture together. The central state administration took less than 0,1%,

Imperialism couldn’t strangle the young state at birth. But it learned how to cripple “the Bolshevik beast”. On and off, it kept at it for the next 70 years ... ★



RED OCTOBER RALLY

10-00 SUNDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2017

Sugar Ray Xulu Stadium, Claremont eThekweni KwaZulu-Natal

100th anniversary of the
1917 Great October Socialist Revolution

Fight women abuse and gender-based violence through mass activism





Above: White unit commander Erik Grotenfelt stands over the corpses of some of the 60 suspected socialists he and his unit executed in May 1918 Below: Red Army poster celebrating advances into Ukraine and the Caucasus

Crushing the counter-revolution

★ CIVIL WAR

Russian attempts to stangle the Bolshevik baby at birth began on the day of the October Revolution and continued until the Red Army extinguished the finalembbers of resistance in central Asia and far eastern Siberia nearly six years later – although by late 1920 the Red Army had broken the back of the counter-revolution.

Most of the fighting was between soviet forces (initially the Red Guards, but from 1918 the Red Army, established by Commissar for War and the Navy Leon Trotsky) and a loose alliance of counter-revolutionary “White” military forces. But other forces also took part: the “Black” anarchist army in Ukraine (usually in alliance with the Red Army), “Green” army units – peasant forces active across much of

the country (and usually sympathetic to the Social Revolutionaries) – *Basmachi* Islamic guerrilla units in central Asia and others. Fighting was widespread: in the north and west, in Siberia, and, with great ferocity, in the south – in Ukraine, the Caucasus and Crimea.

The tide of fighting turned often: in October 1919 a 20 000-strong force under former Russian Imperial Army General Nikolai Yudenich, powerfully armed by

Britain and backed

by six British tanks, reached the outskirts of Petrograd before being turned back by armed residents, reinforced by Moscow workers. In the same month General Anton Denikin led a White force to within 300km of Moscow (just established as the soviet capital) be-

fore being blocked and forced to retreat back south to his Crimean stronghold.

The White assault on the young socialist republic reached its high watermark at this time: thereafter the Red Army began to slowly force the Whites and their allies back. In May 1920 it expelled invading units from the recently established Polish republic from soviet soil.

The human cost of the civil war was horrendous. Militarily, losses were relatively light after the wholesale butchery of World War I – soviet academics later estimated about 300 000 lives lost in battle. But a further 450 000 soliders on both sides died of disease. And civilians casualties ran into the hundreds of thousands – anti-Bolshevik forces in Ukraine alone slaughtered 100 000 Jewish Ukrainians and similar numbers of Bolshevik supporters. A “White terror” campaign accompanying military advances claimed 300 000 lives in all, with a “red terror” response claiming between 12 000 and 50 000.

But with the country exhausted and near ruin, a major 1920 drought triggered famine the next year: in 1920 alone nearly 3-million civilians died of typhus – unsurprisingly, as Victor Serge wrote of the 1919-1920 winter in Moscow and Petrograd: “Water-closets (toilets) no longer worked: piles of excrement accumulated in the courtyards, shielded by constant snow-falls but storing up epidemics for the spring”.

But, for now, the military threat to what was about to become the USSR, had been seen off. ★



All land to those who work it

★ LAND

These seven pages of the centenary edition of Umsebenzi focus on revolutionary policy innovations by the Bolshevik-led government

Peace, Bread, Land” was the rallying slogan of the Revolution. ‘Bread’ and ‘Land’ both demanded, needed urgent action to improve peasant rights and tackle food shortages that had led to mass protests throughout 1917.

About 85% of Russia’s population (122-million in 1897 in the Russian empire) were rural workers, peasants. Protests over lack of bread and other food supplies in the cities played a key role in the February Revolution that deposed the tsar. But lack of action on land reform and peasant rights by the Provisional

Government increased anger among the rural poor. And the food crisis worsened all year.

The 2nd Congress of Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies, 6-7 November (25-26 October), passed decrees on peace and land, which Lenin presented to the delegates. Peace was essential, partly to stop the channelling of food for troops at the front and to return peasant soldiers to work the land.

The Decree on Land abolished private ownership of land – without compensation and with immediate effect. All crown and church lands and everything on them were put under the control of Soviets of peasant’s deputies and land committees.

The Decree on Land incorporated all the demands of the Congress of Peasants’ Deputies held earlier in 1917 – known as the Peasant Mandate on Land. They detailed the takeover of lands, livestock and sites of specialised agriculture and

animal husbandry.

The decree stated, “The right to use the land shall be accorded to all citizens of the Russian state (without distinction of sex) desiring to cultivate it by their own labour, with the help of their families, or in partnership, but only as long as they are able to cultivate it. The employment of hired labour is

not permitted.”

The decree did not solve the problem of food shortages, but it did improve the bread supply to the cities by meeting peasants’ demands on their rights to land. It was replaced by the 1922 Land Code to regulate land tenure by local communities. ★



Above: Barefoot peasants in pre-revolutionary Russia in 1913 Top: The Congress of Soviets’ decree on land, published on the front page of the Bolshevik Pravda newspaper



Soldiers of the tsar's Imperial Russian Army near the frontline in World War I

Prioritising peace

★ PEACE

The second Congress of Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies' first decision – after accepting the seizure of state power undertaken in its name – was to unanimously adopt Lenin's Decree on Peace on to end all involvement in the ruinous First World War

The war was caused by intense inter-imperialist rivalry over territorial claims among 15 powers. Russia under the tsar had entered the war with Britain and France against the so-called Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Turkish Ottoman Empire). The Provisional government, which ruled from the Tsar's abdication in March 1917 until the October Revolution, continued to prosecute the war.

More than 12-million Russian men were called up between 1914 and 1917. 1.7-million of them were killed and 5-million were wounded. Total casualties, including missing men and prisoners of war,

were greater for Russia than for any of the 14 other countries involved in the war.

Just taking care of the war wounded was a massive undertaking for the new socialist government. It became a focal point of the welfare system it planned.

The decree set out immediate goals for ending the war – not just Russia's involvement in it. It influenced not just later ideas on international relations but – with its emphasis on people's involvement – the peace movements of the future. It called the continuation of the war “one of the greatest crimes against humanity” – the first such characterization of a war.

It called on “all the belligerent peoples and their governments to start immediate negotiations for a just, democratic peace ... Everywhere there are differences between the governments and the peoples, and we must therefore help the peoples to intervene in questions of war and peace.”

It proposed an immediate armistice “open negotiations for peace”. The new Soviet government was “ready to con-

duct these negotiations ... by telegraph, and by negotiations between representatives of the various countries, or at a conference of such representatives”.

The decree stated that the new government would abolish all secret diplomacy “and conduct all negotiations quite openly in full view of the whole people”. To back this up, it declared that all secret treaties between Russia and its war allies would be annulled and their content made public. Serialised publication of all the secret treaties made by the tsarist and Provisional governments started in the newspapers Pravda and Ivestia two days after the adoption of the Decree on Peace by the Congress of Soviets.

On 15 December 1917, the Soviet government and the Central Powers agreed an armistice and fighting stopped. Peace talks began at Brest-Litovsk on 22 December – but neither Russia's former allies, nor its former enemies planned to leave the new-born socialist state at peace. Britain's Winston Churchill spoke of “strangling the Bolshevik beast at birth.” ★

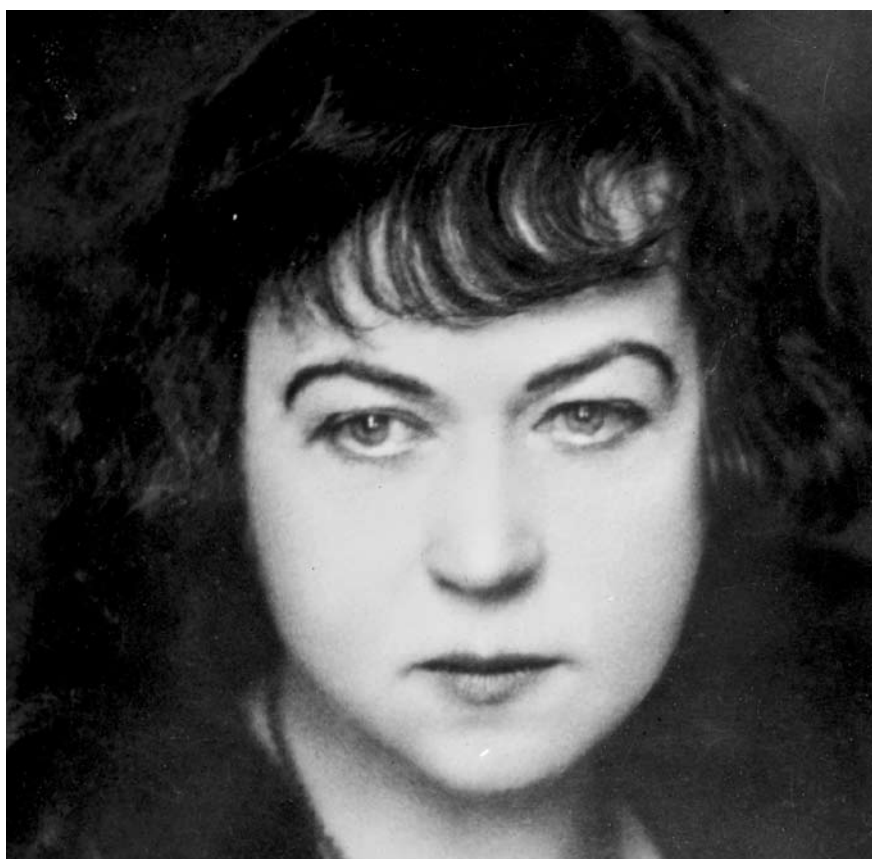
The lynchpin of revolutionary social justice

★ WELFARE

In its first weeks, the Soviet government created commissariats for every branch of government activity – akin to South Africa’s government departments. They included the People’s Commissariat for State Welfare, headed by Alexandra Kollontai, a CC member of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (Bolshevik) – the first woman in the world to be appointed to a Ministerial position.

The demands for welfare on the revolutionary government were massive. World War I, in which Russia was still mired, created an urgent need for a welfare programme for the millions of war disabled. The commissariat also had to develop an integrated welfare structure that included a pensions system, elderly institutional care, orphanages and foundling homes, hospital care for the poor, workshops making artificial limbs, and clinical hospitals for women.

A major focus of the commissariat was to create a system of maternity and infant care. Childbearing was recognised



Commissar for Welfare Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the central committee and the first woman ever appointed to a Ministerial position

as a social role for which the state must provide all necessary support – a revolutionary innovation unheard of elsewhere. Maternity and childcare were the centrepieces of the effort to build a welfare system, and Kollontai viewed them as the greatest achievements of the commissariat in its early days.

In the midst of revolutionary struggle, women workers organised by the Bolshe-

viks met in Petrograd just after the 7-8 November 2nd Congress of Soviets to set out the basics for maternal and child welfare under the nascent socialist order.

Kollontai played a key role in organising the conference, attended by 500 women delegates from factories in Petrograd, Moscow and other industrial areas. But, she noted in her autobiography, “the initiative on the issue of protection and provision for mother and child came from the working women themselves”.

“The first concern of the People’s Commissariat for State Welfare was to maintain and rebuild the huge children’s homes in Petrograd and Moscow to convert these ‘angel factories’ into homes for mother and child,” Kollontai wrote. The commissariat also “took control of all the existing crèches, consultation centres and children’s homes (very few in number) that had been founded before the revolution by charitable organisations.”

The Commissariat for State Welfare was also tasked with creating a free public health system for the whole country. It set up a committee of physicians in late 1917 to plan its organisation. A separate commissariat for health was established shortly afterwards to continue this work. ★



Wounded Russian soldiers – among the millions whose treatment was a priority for the Welfare Commissariat

Education and literacy – a frenzy of expression

★ EDUCATION

The Soviet government's policy on education was to open up the system to all people as widely as possible, regardless of age, and to increase the numbers of places of learning.

The Commissariat for Education was established 9 November 1917, along with the other organs of government. It was split up into 17 sections, dealing with different areas of education in its broadest sense – not just schools and general education, but also adult education, theatre, professional education, science, literature and publishing, and eradication of illiteracy. Later, many of these were put under independent government departments.

All fees payable for education were abolished. Schools were standardised into primary (for 7 to 12-year-olds) and secondary (13 to 17-year-olds) classes. In 1919 a billion roubles had been assigned to feeding children in schools (at that time 500g of bread was 450 roubles, and a nurse's pay was 2 600 roubles a month). Shoes and clothing were given to children who needed them.

Preliminary examinations for people wanting study were abolished in 1918. The point was to allow people who had been prevented by war or pre-revolutionary social barriers from studying for preliminary exams to nevertheless attend and benefit from lectures in places of higher education. The numbers of people attending Moscow University more than doubled.

At the start of the revolution there were six universities in Russia. This was increased to 16 over the next two years, and polytechnics were also opened. In Moscow, the number of educational institutions increased from 369 in 1917 to 1 357 two years later.

Work on fighting illiteracy was reflected in the explosion of interest in reading and in literature. In October 1917 there were 23 libraries in Petersburg and

30 in Moscow. Two years later the cities had 49 and 85 libraries respectively. In rural areas, libraries and reading rooms increased in number at a similar rate.

John Reed wrote in his account of the revolution *Ten days that Shook the World*: “The thirst for education, so long thwarted, burst with the Revolution into a frenzy of expression. From Smolny Institute (a former college, HQ of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd) alone in

the first six months went out every day tons, car-loads, train-loads of literature, saturating the land. Russia absorbed reading matter like hot sand drinks water, insatiable. And it was not fables, falsified history, diluted religion, and the cheap fiction that corrupts—but social and economic theories, philosophy, the works of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorky.” ★



1920 Commissariat for Education poster reads: Literacy is the road to communism

The revolutionary vanguard

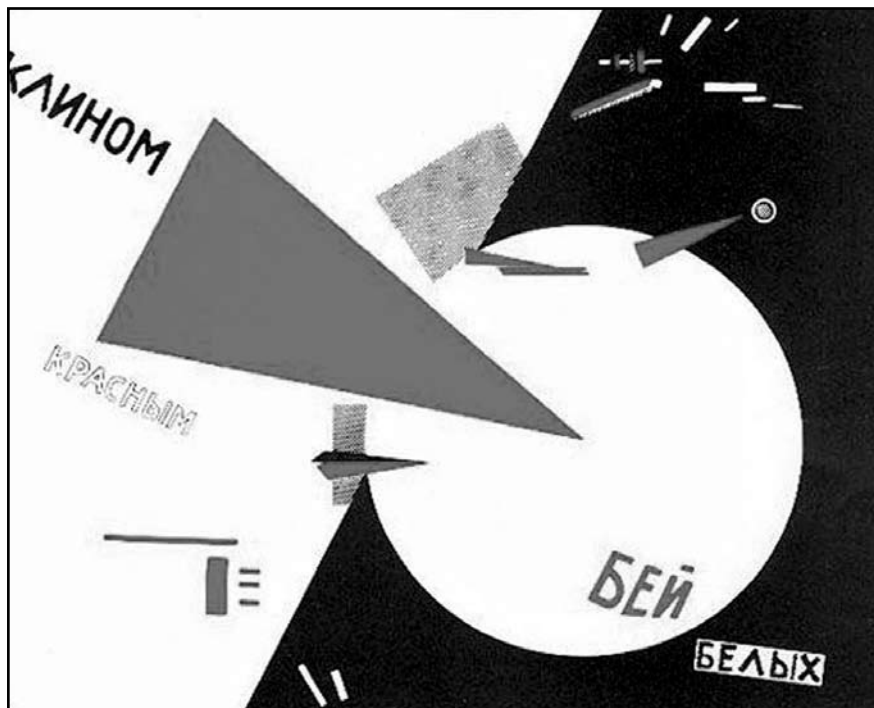
★ ART

The revolution of 1917 was not only an explosion of political liberation. It also saw a surge of artistic creativity that spread the message of the revolution throughout the world. The avant-gardes (French for vanguard) of politics and art fused and played off one another dynamically. Revolutionary futurist writers Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Velimir Khlebnikov stretched the boundaries of poetic expression. Mikhail Bulgakov and Mikhail Zoshchenko did the same with fantasy and satire, and the poets Alexander Blok and Sergei Yesenin produced their best work in this period.

Cinema was undeveloped in Russia in 1917, and most movies were imported. But cinema was quickly to become a huge art form in the 1920s. The news-reel series Kino-Pravda (film truth) used experimental techniques that were later developed in epic movies such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.

Music too went into experimental overdrive, drawing on jazz, using improvised performance, and even orchestras without conductors. Dmitri Shostakovich's use of atonality, striking contrasts, and grotesque in his work from the late 1920s onward retained the cutting edge that the revolution stimulated in music.

Suddenly, the modernist influences seeping into Russia and taken up by many artists earlier in the new century, became the revolution's outward



El Lissitzky's renowned civil war poster: Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge

visual expression. Constructivist artists and designers Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Liubov Popova and Aleksander Rodchenko put art at the service of the people, using bold, abstract geometric designs and photo montage.

Their view was that art should not be an expensive, private commodity for elites to admire in private. The art market was abolished; museums were put into public ownership. Art would from now on be among the people. "The streets are our brushes, the squares are our palettes", wrote Mayakovsky. "No artistic

success has given me such satisfaction as the sight of a peasant or a worker buying a length of material designed by me," said Popova.

The constructivists and other artists created agitprop (agitation and propaganda), decorating buildings, trains and boats, and producing the striking Soviet posters that we're all familiar with. El Lissitzky's famous poster on the civil war *Beat the Whites with Red Wedge* used simple geometric shapes and text to get the message across.

Lissitzky and others believed ordinary people could easily understand abstract designs and that their simplicity and directness spoke to all. Art could be a mass event. In 1920 a bunch of artists and 2 000 workers in Petrograd recreated the taking of the Winter Palace, creating the stage sets of this giant, real outdoor theatre by decorating buildings and using factory sirens and arc lights.

Other influential artists, no less committed to the revolution, countered that ordinary people should be given easily understandable representative "realistic" art that described life literally, exactly as it is. The tensions between them and the avant-gardists peaked bitterly, but the influence of the latter persisted in Soviet art down the decades. ★

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Surviving the war – and surviving the peace

★ WAR COMMUNISM

It was the war and ruin that forced us into War Communism,” Lenin wrote in 1921. War Communism was an emergency measure of the Soviet government to offset the chaos caused by the Civil War between the Red Army and anti-communist “White” forces and the economic damage of international intervention.

The point of War Communism was to intensify and concentrate agricultural and industrial production to ensure the urban centres and the Red Army had sufficient food and weapons. The measure was introduced in 1918 and ended in 1921.

War Communism included the nationalisation of all industries and centralised management, state control over foreign trade, a ban on strikes, labour duty for non-working class, the appropriation of agricultural surplus grain from peasants, food rationing and centralised



Lenin in a rare moment of relaxation in Moscow (below) in 1918, starting his workday with Pravda

distribution, a ban on private enterprise, and placing the railways under special control.

These moves succeeded in ensuring that the Red Army was able to beat the Whites and see off the foreign intervention. But it led to a decline agricultural and non-military industrial output, a loss of stable currency. Crop failure and fodder shortage in 1920 increased the hardships the peasants faced. The economy needed a shot in the arm to stimulate economic development and reduce tensions between peasants and industrial workers that had grown under War Communism. One answer was to learn from

capitalism.

Enter the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Adopted by the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March 1921, to replaced the requisition of surplus grain from peasants by a tax. This allowed them to keep and trade a greater part of their produce. In a country where 80% of the population worked the land as peasants, this meant the creation of a sizeable market force. NEP restored a certain amount of capitalist enterprise through mixed companies in other areas of the economy too. Here, as Lenin put it, “private capitalists – Russian and foreign – and Communists participate” providing “one of the means by which we can learn to organise competition properly”. The aim was also to boost foreign trade and investments, provide incentives and use limited forms of capitalism. The policy resulted in an increase in agricultural production by 40% after the drought and famine of 1921-22.

It was not enough to simply be a “good Communist”, Lenin told the 11th Congress in 1922. Communists must learn business, but “they are not businessmen, they have not learnt to trade, and do not want to learn and do not understand that they must start learning from the beginning.” This was essential to create the material prerequisites of modernisation and industrial development that socialism required. ★





Russian peasants admire an electric lightbulb – the first they'd ever seen – installed in their home in 1922

Greased lightning – planned

★ ELECTRICITY

We must snatch away God's thunderbolts," wrote the poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovski in his 1920 drama *Mystery-Bouffe*, which debunked religion and urged audiences to look at what was behind the smoke and mirrors. "Take them/We can use all those volts/for electrification."

And Lenin told the 8th Congress of the Russian Communist Party: "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country."

"Otherwise the country will remain a small-peasant country, and we must clearly realise that. We are weaker than capitalism, not only on the world scale, but also within the country... Only when the country has been electrified, and industry, agriculture and transport have been placed on the technical basis of

modern large-scale industry, only then shall we be fully victorious."

Electrification was the spearhead for developing Russia and improving the quality of life, production, and infrastructure. Just as since 1994 democratic South Africa has provided millions of homes with power that under apartheid had to make do with fire, so the Soviet government recognised the empowering nature of electrification. Even more so.

At the time electrical power was still a novelty, something found in the richer parts of the most developed countries. The Soviet government wanted to electrify every shack, home, shop and factory. The national plan for electrification was the first national strategy for economic recovery and development ever anywhere in the world.

In those days countries did not have national plans to further the social and

economic development of their entire populations. Instead, they had policies that benefitted different classes of people unequally.

The Soviet government had something else in mind: development that benefitted everyone, particularly the workers and the poor, equally. Electricity for everyone was a great leveller at a higher level of development.

The plan included construction of a network of 30 regional power plants, including 10 large hydroelectric power plants and numerous electric-powered large industrial enterprises.

Electrification was planned to be carried out over 10-15 years. Most of it was completed by 1931. The structure for doing this was the State Commission for the Electrification of Russia. It became the prototype for the Five-Year Plans the Soviet government later used for developing socialism. ★

The first experiment of a society not moved by greed

Cuban ambassador Carlos Fernández de Cossío pays tribute at the SACP Red October launch to the continuing impact of the October Revolution on revolutionaries through the world

★ CUBAN PERSPECTIVE

Today is the 50th anniversary of the day in 1967 when Che Guevara was captured in combat, while leading a guerrilla liberation army in Bolivia. Years later we learned that on the following day, he was assassinated in cold blood by order of the US government through the CIA.

Like many revolutionaries of his generation and of the 20th century, Che Guevara was inspired by the Great October Revolution.

The same occurred with Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Amilcar Cabral, Aghostino Neto, Samora Machel, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Moses Kotane, JB Marks, Bram Fischer, Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Chris Hani, Ahmed Kathrada and many others, including Oliver Tambo, whose centenary we commemorate this year.

All of them were influenced by the teachings of the first experiment on earth of a society not governed by a privileged class; not organised on the basis of the exploitation of men and women; not moved by personal greed or ambition; not motivated by the idea that man is the wolf of man.

No event in history has had such an impact on the liberating forces of justice and revolution. No event has provoked greater impulse in answering the needs of the working class, of the poor, of the marginalised, of the forgotten people of the world.

The struggle for liberation in many parts of the world, the fight for decolonisation, particularly in Africa, and the defeat of Nazi-fascism in Europe could not be conceived without the immense contribution of the Soviet State and the new



Ambassador Fernández: *Socialist influence*

paradigm that resulted from the October Revolution, led by Vladimir Ilich Lenin.

The Cuban Revolution came to power in 1959 without contact and without any support from the Soviet Union.

Yet the subsequent survival and development of the revolution, and its capacity to confront the onslaught of US imperialism, could not be explained without the solidarity, the generosity and the valuable support of the Soviet Union. Cuba's commitment to internationalism could also not be explained without considering the role of Soviet internationalism. That is factual truth.

Cuba's social and economic development enjoyed during several decades a type of economic relationship with the USSR that was based on just terms, on mutual complementarity and on the recognition of the special circumstances of

underdevelopment in Cuba. It also recognized the damaging effect of the US economic blockade.

It was an association only conceivable under the conditions of socialism resulting from the revolution of October 1917. It was a relationship based on trust, but not without contradictions, disagreements or contrasting views, many times relating to the struggles for liberation in the colonial or neo-colonial world.

History has allowed us to learn of the mistakes and the regrettable deviations that occurred within the glorious Soviet revolutionary movement. As revolutionaries, we cannot hide and we cannot ignore the harm caused by what is identified as Stalinism, the personality cult, the forced collectivisation, the dogmatic approaches to Marxism-Leninism and to the role of the Party in society, the impositions on international communist organisations and other realities that damaged the international revolutionary movement.

But none of these setbacks or contradictions is able to erase or to overshadow the international significance of the October Revolution in the quest for a better world and for the benefit of human kind. Imperialism would want us to believe that the Soviet Union collapsed because it was a failed experiment, because socialism is intrinsically flawed; that the USSR imploded on its own.

Here are the words of Margaret Thatcher, one of the most reactionary personalities of imperialism on her after-thoughts about the Soviet Union: "The USSR constitutes a serious threat to the Western world. I am not referring to the military threat; in reality this did not exist. Our countries are sufficiently well armed, including with nuclear weapons. I'm talking about the



Che Guevara: Murdered in Bolivia on the orders of the US Central Intelligence Agency 50 years ago on 9 October

economic threat. Thanks to the planned economy and this particular combination of moral and material incentives, the Soviet Union managed to achieve high economic indicators. The percentage growth of its gross national product is almost double that in our countries ... That is why we have always adopted measures aimed at weakening the economy of the Soviet Union and creating economic difficulties, where the main role is played by the arms race. An important place in our policy is to take into account the weaknesses of the Constitution of the USSR ... Unfortunately and for all our efforts, the political situation in the USSR remained stable for a long period of time."

These remarks speak for themselves. They are frank observations of an enemy of the Soviet Union, shared without the usual narrative of western propaganda.

The truth is that socialism in the USSR, with its social justice, its solidarity, its emphasis on the wellbeing of society as a whole, contrasts with conditions intrinsic to capitalism, where the norm is exploitation, exclusion, inequality, plunder, accumulation of wealth for the few

and poverty for the many; where corruption undermines the fabric of society.

Today, as revolutionaries, we face challenges that invite us to look back at the experiences of the last 100 years, since the world was impacted by the Bolshevik insurrection and the birth of the first socialist state.

In the context of this 100th anniversary, it is worth reiterating the firm commitment of the Cuban Revolution to uphold, defend and further develop socialism in Cuba. Everything that we do and every step that we are taking is aimed at ensuring the sustainability of socialism and the impossibility of reversing the achievements that our people have accomplished – at the cost of great sacrifice.

We have learned that our Revolution can succeed if we maintain clarity of purpose, commitment to our people and unity of action. We have understood that we can mobilise the support and the active participation of the masses when our vanguard group, the Communist Party, is ready to lead by example.

We ratify this commitment under the most difficult of conditions. US imperialism has not stopped one day in mak-

ing life difficult for the people of Cuba. Recent hostile actions are describing the attitude of a particularly reactionary US government, keen on erasing any notion of civility or respect in its interaction with Cuba. The goal, as has been the case for more than 58 years, including under the Presidency of Barak Obama, is to destroy the Cuban Revolution and to erase its example. It is part of the same approach imperialism is taking against Latin America, where legitimate governments are experiencing constant aggression in economic, political and diplomatic fashion. It is also part of the policies aimed against Africa.

Let us celebrate this 100th anniversary with a revolutionary commitment to continue the struggle.

I would like to quote the commitment made by Che Guevara in his farewell letter to Fidel Castro: "I carry to new battle fronts the faith that you taught me, the revolutionary spirit of my people, the feeling of fulfilling the most sacred of duties: to fight against imperialism wherever it may be." ★

This is an edited version of Cde Fernández' speech

★ GENDER EQUALITY

The October Revolution and women's emancipation

At the Second International Women's Conference of 1910, the 100 delegates from socialist parties and labour movements from 17 countries (among them the first three women elected to the Finnish Parliament), resolved to establish an International Women's Day.

The resolution read: "In agreement with the class-conscious, political and trade union organisations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully."

Against the backdrop of the imperialist war – against which socialist women in Europe had been organising since 1913 – on International Women's Day February 1917, Russian women protested and went on strike for "Bread and Peace". A massive demonstration by the women of Petrograd, led by Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, protested deteriorating living conditions, lack of basic food supplies and the shortages of goods. The protestors were mainly but not exclusively women.

This mobilisation by women played a key role in the February 1917 Revolution and helped to define the agenda and the strategies of revolt. They approached the soldiers deployed to suppress the protest to say: We are your sisters and mothers, do not turn your guns on us; turn your guns on those who oppress us. The four day February Revolution forced the tsar to abdicate. The Provisional Government established to fill the vacuum, immedi-



Soviet civil war poster (1920), exhorting: 'Women workers take up your rifles!'

ately granted women the right to vote.

The particular experience of the impact of capitalist exploitation, working

class and poor women are a significant catalyst globally in revolutionary situations – those situations where Lenin says, "tens of millions of people conclude it is impossible any longer to live in the old way."

The February Revolution unleashed processes that fell short of the working class demands, causing dissatisfaction among the working class and creating conditions for a further revolution in October 1917 – the Socialist Revolution that initiated the transition to socialism.

The Great October Socialist Revolution was the single most impactful event of the 20th century, giving birth to the first socialist state in history. That state has served as an inspiration and concrete vision that continues to inspire the world over and to teach us invaluable lessons. The socialist political economy was based on ensuring from every person according to his/her capacity and to every person according to her/his needs, under the motto "all for each and each for all".

The theory of socialist revolution is a major element of Marxist-Leninist science, developed initially by Marx and Engels in mid-19th century, developed

Revolutionary feminist

Alexandra Kollontai, a member of the Bolshevik Party by 1908, returned from exile to join the revolutionary movement. In March 1917 she was elected a member of the executive committee of the Soviet in Petrograd – nominated by an army unit. Later that same year, while detained for involvement in July Days demonstrations, she was elected in her absence to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and honorary chairperson of the 6th Party Congress.

She helped produce the Bolshevik women's paper *Rabotnitsa* and organised the first Petrograd conference of working women – and later co-founded the first All-Russian Congress of Working and Peasant Women. The Congress of Soviets elected her Commissar of Social Welfare in 1917. In the next 18 months she simultaneously served as People's Commissar of Propaganda and Agitation of the Ukraine



1914 German international women's day poster (left) - banned in Germany - and Soviet international women's day posters

further through practice by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and then through communist parties and socialist states in the 20th century.

It was directly relevant to South Africa: "... the Bolsheviks had to grapple with more than the class-on-class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the workers," said the *The Red Flag in South Africa: A Popular History of the SACP 1921-1990*. "The tsar's Russian Empire, stretching from eastern Europe to far east Asia, included very many oppressed nationalities. (It) was known as "the prison house of nationalities". In this situation, the revolutionary struggle of the working people in 1917 also unleashed a wave of national liberation struggle against the common enemy – tsarist autocracy."

Out of these experiences arose the Third Communist International (the Comintern), the first genuine international that reached out to include millions of oppressed working people in the colonies. It paid great attention to the role of the anti-colonial national liberation movements in the overall struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

Apart from the mass mobilisation role of women in the revolution, women were also taking their place in leadership roles – among them the Alexandra Kollontai (organiser of the march that triggered the February Revolution) Inessa Armand and Nadezhda Krupskaya

The new socialist state passed a number of decrees and laws in the interests of working women, establishing economic, political and civil equality,

regardless of sex, race and social origin. Women were granted equal pay for work as men. The state introduced social insurance system covering both men and women. It introduced paid maternity leave for mothers, with departments set up under the executive bodies of soviet power to care for mothers and children.

The Soviet administration introduced new civil marriage and divorce laws in December 1917, based on equality between men and women within the family. It legalised abortion in 1920. The socialist state enabled transformation of family relations but found that "it is one thing to proclaim equality of women and men but quite another to achieve it in practice". For this, it was essential not only to create the necessary material conditions, but also to mould public opinion.

In the Central Asian republics, for example, the establishment of equal relations was largely hindered by age-old traditions and prejudices. "Older people, living for many years lived according to the laws of their ancestors, closely adhered to tradition. Young people, naturally, broke with humiliating traditions more readily;" Women in the modern world (Korchagina, M and Sorokina,Y) in 1985. Women were gradually drawn into social production, supported by the development of a network of crèches, kindergartens and women and children's health centres, and raised levels of education of girls and women, enabling Soviet women to participate ever more actively in the country's political life.

Unfortunately, in the Stalin era many

of the gains made for women were reversed, and it was only in the mid-1950s that women reclaimed had made in the decade some of the original gains made after the socialist revolution.

"Revolutions are not made to order, they cannot be timed to any particular moment," said Lenin, "they mature in a process of historical development and break out at a moment determined by a whole complex of internal and external causes." What is clear from the Great October Socialist Revolution is that the level of mobilisation of working women into the revolutionary forces, the promotion of women into leadership of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government, created a massively changed lived reality for working women. What is also clear is that gains made can readily be rolled back as circumstances and priorities change. Strong organisation is needed to ensure forward movement of the economic, social and political development of a country.

It is only when women are mobilised and organised into revolutionary forces that the interests of the working class as a whole will be protected, given women's unique child-bearing function, the impact of poverty, low wages, joblessness, and oppression that working class women feel most acutely. It is only under a socialist political economy that the conditions are created for all women to be able to develop to their full potential. ★

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★ BOLIVARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Venezuela – following the October Revolution example

At the Red October campaign launch, Venezuelan ambassador M J Moreno-Merida outlined the similarities between pre-1917 Russia and Venezuela before the Bolivarian Revolution

Today we commemorate the centenary of the Great Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 – a revolution driven by oppression by Tsar Nicholas II. The tsarist regime had the population mired in poverty, health and safety conditions at work were precarious, and wages were falling. These factors contributed to a growing discontent among the Russian citizens, and would later lead to the Revolution. The Bolivarian Revolution arose for the same conditions and with the same principles as the Great Bolshevik Revolution October 1917.

Venezuela is a country rich in natural resources, particularly in oil; but all these riches were monopolised by political elites and transnational corporations until 1999 – our country received only crumbs. Governments alternated between two political parties, both corrupt and subject to the markets; they privatised all the state enterprises, and over 70% of Venezuelans were living in poverty by 1996.

The October Revolution had an impact both in Europe and in America. It did not expand communism with immediate effect, but it was an example – as was the Cuban Revolution. Likewise the revolution led by Commander Hugo Chavez in Latin America was the driving force for changes in several countries of our continent.

In December 1998 Commander Chavez triumphed in the elections. Supported by constitutional mandates, the Bolivarian government has been dedicated to the promotion of social and economic development of the people, and to the deepening of the rights and political, economic and civil liberties, through a series of successful public policies which

have enabled it to achieve all the Millennium Development Goals in full before the deadlines, reversing the poverty in which we found ourselves.

The Venezuelan government has created general support programmes for the elderly, children, single mothers and people with disabilities, among other vulnerable sectors. It has also:

- Made Venezuela one of the least materially unequal countries on the American continent ;
- Allocated 73% of our budget allocated to social investment
- Ensured that nine out of 10 people entitled to a social security pension enjoy this as a right;
- Achieved free and quality primary health care coverage off 100% of our compatriots;
- Introduced a free national public health system;
- Ensured that food available to families is 60% cheaper than in the private supermarkets;
- Through the “Venezuela Great Housing Mission” has increased housing construction – in the last five years, more than 1,8-million homes have been built and provided;
- On the educational level, Venezuela sees education as a human right and as a fundamental social duty, inherent to the democratic system, free, compulsory, quality and diverse in the cultural principles in their system. Today Venezuela is free of illiteracy (declared by UNESCO in 2005). It has the second highest rate of schooling in the region, and the highest proportion of students in higher education after Cuba – fifth in the world.

Internationally, Chávez paved the way for the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance

for the Peoples of Our America (Alba), the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), Petrocaribe and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Celac). He contributed to the formation of the Association of countries of South America-Africa (ASA), where priority was given to south-south cooperation. These achievements are, for the Venezuelan people, part of the model of inclusive government we have today.

The current counter-revolutionary actions started shortly after the physical departure of Commander Chavez. It started with the refusal to recognise the election victory of Chavez’s successor, President Nicolás Maduro. Violent attacks against Venezuelan democracy have been carried out by the extreme and violent right, aimed at destroying the stability of the democratic system.

Venezuelan has also been, for the last four years, under sustained economic, psychological and media assault, greatly affecting the Venezuelan population, leading to shortages and hoarding food, medicines and other essential inputs, causing discontent in the population. It led many people to abstain from voting in December 2015 elections parliamentary – and many who participated did so against the revolutionary process.

Once the new parliament took office in January 2016, they promised to overthrow President Maduro in the next six months, launching a wave of protests in middle and upper class areas, whose mayors belong to the opposition. The strategy behind the protests was massive civil disobedience, confrontation with the security forces and widespread destruction of public property to spread the protests to the poorer areas. This



Venezuelan ambassador M J Moreno-Merida addressing the Red October launch

failed to remove Maduro, so the sponsors of Venezuela's right wing took the battle to the international arena, seeking regime change through external pressure. Between April and July 2017, social sectors opposed to the Maduro government encouraged of political violence – using firearms, barricades and deadly booby-traps (homemade weapons and explosives, injuring civilians and security officers alike).

They killed more than 120 people, injuring more than 829 security officers (including 73 with gunshot wounds). They staged 913 attacks on hospitals, schools, food-distribution centres and human rights institutions – even resorting burning people alive because of their political views and their race.

Venezuela has also been subjected economic sabotage – including illegal mining activities; manipulation of international oil prices; attacks on our currency; sabotage of the pricing system; economic and financial blockade; among other measures which aim at stopping Venezuela's economic development process. These have been part of a plan. The US obsession for destroying Venezuelan

peace, democracy and institutions is behind all these actions, aspiring to control the largest oil reserves on the planet, our gas, gold, diamonds, coltan, thorium, our water reserves and the most important biological diversities.

On 11 August, US President Donald Trump threatened to use military force against Venezuela. On 25 August, the imperial (US) government imposed unilateral and coercive measures against Venezuela, formalising the mechanisms of economic aggression imposed against us since 2013.

These measures, which harm our financial instruments and oil industry, also undermine our people's human rights, just as the illegal blockade against the sisterly Republic of Cuba – extended in September for another year – has violated the human rights of the people of Marti for more than 55 years.

In spite of the imperial aggressions, Venezuela has continued to develop its human rights protection model.

Venezuela today has a solid model of participatory democracy, where the people define and govern the destinies of our nation. The most recent electoral

process, on 30 July 30, elected members of the National Constituent Assembly, and next Sunday (15 October) the Venezuelan people will exercise their right to vote again in state elections..

The Constituent Assembly election has brought peace to our country, after more than four years of opposition violence. This Constituent Assembly is the ultimate expression of the sovereign power of the people and is entitled to transform the State, creating a new legal system and drafting a new Constitution.

Venezuela is a reference for Latin America and the world. Chavez always spoke very clearly of constructing the Bolivarian socialism of the 21st century.

The American empire tries to stop the changes in our countries.

We are going through difficult times but the Venezuelan people are betting on this socialist construction. We never surrendered under Chavez and we will not give up under Maduro. We have resisted, and we will continue to win because Venezuela is not alone. ★

This is an edited version of Cde Moreno-Merida's speech