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REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA AND CHINA: 100 YEARS

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Summary

The Russian and Chinese revolutions are closely related in a number of important ways. This year, in the Peoples Republic of China, the 100th year anniversary of the events of 1917 in Russia will be commemorated officially as an historical antecedent and a political foundation. The further study of this relationship in history is needed to better understand how each revolution unfolded. The future direction that China will take, politically and economically, will to a large extent depend on this understanding. Observers in Hong Kong and Taiwan will be especially attentive to the discussions this year about how the events and outcomes of the last 100 years should be evaluated.

Key Words: Russian Revolution, Chinese Revolution, democracy, Constituent Assembly.

Introduction

This year will be marked in China by the first of three related centennials: the Russian Revolution (1917), followed by those of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (1921). Not only does China's governing party trace a direct historical continuity to the October 1917 Revolution, it is the largest and most prominent remaining political party to receive this inheritance, now carrying its ideological mantle forward first among all others, so to speak. Worldwide, the celebrations in China will be the most important, for many reasons, to be followed closely by its citizens, and by observers around the world.

The following study is meant to serve as a proposal for discussion. Before starting at the beginning, our account should take note of the authoritative history of the May Fourth Movement by Chow Tse-tung (1960). All of the important tendencies of the Wuchang Uprising and the new

Republic, democrats, nationalists and socialists, looked to the Russian Revolution as a guiding example and reached out to it for support. Sun Yat-sen welcomed aid and guidance from the Comintern. The betrayal by China's Western Allies at the Treaty of Versailles Conference, following World War I, only served to confirm the alternative of seeking alliance with the Russian revolutionaries. They too had just overthrown a centuries-old monarchical system, thus presenting Chinese republicans and revolutionaries with a model immediately at hand. Looking back on these years, it is important not to underestimate the influence of the Russian Revolution, and in turn important to understand it more completely. The massive outpouring of student protest, repudiating the imposition of the terms of Versailles in May of 1919, marked the culmination of the New Culture Movement (NCM). Today, the framers of Charter 08 correctly evoke the NCM and its program for "science and democracy."^[1] In this historical reference, they present a challenge to the current regime regarding who speaks for the ideals of the most representative political and cultural movement of the new Republic soon to commemorate one hundred years.

Until its eclipse and dissolution, the movement gathered together the broadest mobilization of discussion and debate on the construction of Chinese society in its struggle to form a unified, democratic and modern republic. They were years of experimentation, a renaissance in literature, and the reform of language and writing itself. The proposal for discussion of this essay is that the NCM and its culmination in May of 1919 finds analogy in the February democratic revolution in Russia, before its own eclipse and dissolution. The stages of revolution in Russia were sharply telescoped; in China, for historical reasons of overriding force of civil war and foreign invasion, they came to be drawn out over a period of many years (1911—1949). Nevertheless, a striking parallel in how events unfolded in both Russia and China, according to Professor Chow, was the weakness of the democratic/liberal coalition, in both cases its inability to galvanize popular support around a coherent political program.

February to October: Nine months that shook the world

Aside from its immediate impact on the fate of the fledgling Republic of China, more than any other single event of the 20th Century the Russian Revolution has shaped the international political landscape of our time. The disbandment of the Constituent Assembly in January of 1918 established a one-party regime, soon leading to the consolidation of a remarkably stable dictatorial system that expanded to Eastern Europe in 1945 and to East Asia in 1949. Even more remarkably, in Russia and Europe, it collapsed of its own weight fifty years later. Last year marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the failed coup d'état against the democratization of Russia and the independence of the nations that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union starting in 1922.^[2]

While many will still celebrate in October, the proposal of this retrospective is that the more meaningful commemoration was in February. The short-lived February Revolution of 1917, while it failed, is where the story should begin. In history, as elsewhere, failure is usually more important to study and understand. The lessons to be learned come forward for reflection more clearly. Related to the study of the failed revolution is the tracing of events that led to its degeneration and corruption. A commonly held view marks this breakdown at the late 1920s, after Lenin's death, accompanied by the rise to power of undemocratic leaders and a "Stalinist" bureaucracy that then proceeded to "betray" the revolution. The historical evidence, however, shows that by that time the Russian Revolution had already been corrupted and overthrown; the promises of February along with its transitional democratic institutions had already broken down. There is an account, once widely influential, today marginal, that the Soviet system did not suffer degeneration and corruption, and

was not “betrayed” until the years 1989—1991 (fall of the Berlin Wall – collapse of the USSR). For now, we will set consideration of this viewpoint aside, as well as the more nuanced version that calls attention to the “mistakes” and “deviations” of the Soviet leadership under Stalin, current explanation given by the Chinese Communist Party, for example.

Of the democratic revolutions of the modern era, considering its short duration, it was the most sweeping and ambitious, organizing Russia’s first national election and convoking the elected representatives in less than a year. Upon abolishing the monarchy, the elections were the most democratic of Europe of the time, male and female suffrage preceding that of the United States by three years. It was no coincidence that the event that marked the outbreak of the Revolution was the February 23rd International Women’s Day march. The following day, an estimated 200,000 workers demonstrated against the war and called for the end to Tsarist rule. Seven days later, the manifesto of abdication was drafted. The caretaker Provisional Government, charged with calling the national elections and convening its delegates, represented the broad coalition of parties that would oversee the transition from absolutist monarchy to representative democracy. Along with democracy, the ideal of the Revolution released across the former empire the hope for freedom of the non-Russian peoples (in the form of autonomy within a national federation), for land reform to take down the surviving fetters of pre-capitalist economy in the countryside, the recognition of union rights, and an end to the war. These aspirations were given form in the unprecedented mass mobilization of the nationalities, peasants, workers and soldiers.

This view is not new, conclusion of many historians, participants and observers who witnessed the unfolding of the Revolution and its aftermath from within the countries of the Soviet Bloc and from the outside. However, today, their contribution to our understanding remains understood only in part. A major roadblock to drawing the lessons of history has been the more than seventy years of control over archives dating from 1917, and the inability of Soviet citizens to independently investigate the crimes of the dictatorship,^[3] to give one example. For seven decades, researchers did the best they could with the information made available from one historical period to the next. Even so, prior to 1991, enough evidence had come forward to put most of the puzzle together, including valuable testimony provided by reporters, participant observers and émigrés (Gorky, 1917[1968]; Kautsky, 1920; Serge 1951[2012]) from the very first months after the fall of the Tsar. The official Soviet version, supported by the vast resources of the state and sympathetic academics in the West, nevertheless, greatly complicated the task of gathering up all the pieces to see where they should fit.

Outside of the Soviet bloc, public intellectuals who knew, or should have known, better often remained in complicit silence, bowing to persistent and long term assumptions widely taken for granted both inside and outside of academia. Many, in turn, even apologized for the dictatorship, lending active endorsement of the oppressive regimes. The humanities have been especially affected by this influence, most puzzling in some ways given the early and deep-going censorship, beginning in 1918, reaching beyond newspapers to include state control over literature, in 1922 (Echavarren, 2011; Ermolaev, 1997). Writers who spoke out early in their careers, André Gide, Albert Camus, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, among the relatively few, often against the current in their respective fields, faced isolation and condemnation (see Francis, 2015, for a review). Still to this day, frank and open discussion of the core issues (often with a certain preference for euphemism) sometimes triggers discomfort and even denial.

Government from coalition to one party

Historians disagree on some of the important details of the final months of the Provisional Government leading up to its overthrow in October: the underlying intentions and dispositions of the leading actors, the level of preparation and pre-planning on the part of the Bolsheviks during the period preceding the seizure of power, the symbolic storming of the Winter Palace, the degree of erosion of Provisional Government authority prior to its replacement, the significance of its own internal disintegration, crisis and fatal errors. Another way to think about these questions is to ask: to which best corresponds the description of coup d'état – the deposing of the Provisional Government ministers in October or the closing of the Constituent Assembly the following January?

The first crisis of dual-authority (coalition/caretaker government—Petrograd Soviet) turned on opposition to the war. A popular view was that of the moderate socialist bloc's call for a decisive and active approach to negotiating a separate peace with Germany under the slogan of "without annexations or indemnities," in opposition to the policy of "war to victory" that tied Russia to the Western Allies. The later view was supported by most Constitutional Democrats, other liberals and in different versions by some figures on the left. A popular demonstration against the war resulted in a greater representation from Soviet parties in the coalition caretaker government. In addition, around the problem of the war coalesced ever mounting demands on the full range of pressing social and economic problems, rapidly deteriorating, that the Provisional Government was in no position, between incapable and unwilling, to resolve. Support surged by the end of August for the Bolsheviks and their radical allies, along with sentiment for a transfer of authority to an all-Soviet caretaker government. Inept bungling, confusion, naiveté, and inability to act on their own platform for negotiating an end to the war, reduced the standing of the moderate socialists, now leaders of the new Provisional Government, even further.

By September, Lenin had rejected the idea of a governing coalition even with the moderate socialists, the Constitutional Democrats the first to be excluded as "enemies of the people." Against leading figures in his own party, he called for armed seizure of power at the earliest possible opening. The Bolshevik Central Committee, on October 10, reaffirmed the intention of installing a Soviet government by force of arms, by dispersing the Provisional Government. Its toppling turned out to be the low-hanging fruit, dropping with barely a serious skirmish. So ripe the opportunity and so confident was the core party leadership in its decision that the taking of control of the strategic points of Petrograd was ordered just ahead of the previously scheduled meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Carried out in the name of the Congress, at the opening session the large representation of Mensheviks and right-Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) denounced the armed take-over and walked out. With an absolute majority and full control, October 25th, in effect, marks the beginning of virtual single-party rule. All of the commissars of the hastily formed new Provisional Government, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), to serve until the convening of the Constituent Assembly, were members of the Bolshevik party, Lenin appointed as chairman. Measure of the discredit into which the previous, now dispersed, Provisional Government had fallen is that in Petrograd news of its demise came and went with little outward concern, one way or the other. Within weeks, local soviets throughout Russia lent their support to the new "caretaker" authority (Wade, 2001).

Returning to our questions, and looking ahead a few months, a focus on the immediate

aftermath of October essentially clears away the problem of assigning motivation and intention. We can grant, for example, that the Bolsheviks “unexpectedly” came to hold a monopoly of power at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets which in turn endorsed the overthrow of the former Provisional Government and installed in its place the Sovnarkom. The real surprise, for all but a few of the inner circle, however, was the unambiguous rejection of any variant of coalition among the other socialist and democratic parties of the February Revolution, or even of a united block of left-wing parties of the Soviets. The negotiations with the left-SR supported rail workers union for a broad socialist front (based on the argument that only such a representative ruling coalition could lead the nation as a whole) were simply abandoned. In the same way, similar demands by the Mensheviks, right-SRs and other moderate socialists were rejected. Whatever their intention or plan was at the beginning of October, by November the decision to impose a single-party government, for all intents and purposes, had been taken (Swain, 1996). On October 27, the decree on censorship of “counterrevolutionary” newspapers was signed, and on December 7 the Cheka was formally established. With selective repression in force a full four weeks before the convening of the Constituent Assembly, there remained only one trigger for the forces of civil war to be set into motion. The record of the seventy two days of October 25—January 5 reveals the cascading sequence that in all essential features cemented the dictatorship that would weather internal factional struggle but would maintain remarkable stability for the next seventy-three years.

The question about the exact date of the coup d'état can now also be set aside as less interesting. At some point prior to January 5th, if (as many hoped or expected) it were possible to mobilize a united front of the democratic forces of the February Revolution, we could debate whether October 25th was an attempt, successful in part, a prelude, or a fortuitous turn of circumstances. As events actually unfolded, the clearest characterization is that of a *coup* [blow] against a democratic revolution that took 72 days to be fully consummated.

Elections

A brief outline of the events from October to January deserves closer reflection. All parties and organized factions without exception claimed publicly to support both the elections of November and the seating of the elected representatives. The Sovnarkom, in particular, presented itself as its most effective guarantor. But from what we know today from studying the systematic blocking of coalition, even of a restricted all socialist coalition, there can remain no argument that the Bolshevik party leadership did not project and deliberately prepare for the armed deposing, now, of the Constituent Assembly. The results of the voting are stunning: over 47 million ballots were cast; in Petrograd and Moscow participation reached approximately 70%. In many rural areas the turnout was higher. Not only were the elections the most complete popular expression of any European or Asian people in history, the assembled delegates consisted of the most progressive plus left-wing founding national congress ever: Socialist Revolutionary Party – 40.4%, Bolshevik Social Democratic Party – 23.2%, Menshevik Social Democrats – 2.9%, Non-socialist supporters of the February Revolution (liberals) – 4.6%. The remaining were divided among other socialist formations – 14.2%, parties of the national minorities, and other liberals (Kowalsky, 1997: 102).

The hard core of the Bolshevik party (its majority) was evidently unwilling to form a social democratic government, supported by a national legislative assembly with a socialist majority of over 75%. Could these delegates really have been: “...the hirelings of bankers, capitalists and landlords...the slaves of the American dollar...enemies of the people...the most evil enemies of

socialism,” as the headline the next day in *Pravda* announced? They were called to order on January 5th at the Taurida Palace, surrounded by pro-Bolshevik military units. An unarmed demonstration in support of the Assembly was fired upon and broken up with fatal casualties as it approached. Troops occupied the auditorium and closed the proceedings of the first session at 6:00 AM, January 6th. The same day the Assembly was dissolved by decree of the Sovnarkom. As Lenin famously remarked to Trotsky: “The dispersal of the Constituent Assembly by Soviet authority [was] the full and open liquidation of formal democracy in the name of the revolutionary dictatorship” (Trotsky, 1924, *O Lenine: Materialy dlya biografii*, p. 94, cited in Volkogonov, 1994, p. 176).

At a meeting of the Sovnarkom Central Executive Committee (CEC), just prior to dissolution of the Assembly, a left-SR delegate objected to the decree on press censorship and the arrest by the Cheka of suspected opponents of the new Bolshevik-led government; that the approval by the CEC “was support for a system of political terror and [for] unleashing civil war.” Responding to protests of subsequent arrests of Constitutional Democratic leaders, Trotsky proclaimed the right of the proletariat to “finish off” the class that is collapsing:

You wax indignant at the naked terror which we are applying against our class enemies, but let me tell you that in one month’s time at the most it will assume more frightful forms, modeled on the terror of the great French revolutionaries. Not the [prison] fortress but the guillotine will await our enemies (In Keep, 1979: 177—178).

After January 6th, the Council of People’s Commissars was no longer called a *provisional* governing authority. As months passed, the Soviet themselves began to lose their deliberative and legislative prerogatives, passing over to become instruments for implementing decisions taken by the party, for motivating them and for organization and mobilization. Again, it is important to point out that, as with the replacement of the Provisional Government in October, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly did not spark spontaneous popular opposition in the urban centers. The absence of immediate public protest is only partially explained by the order of martial law in effect days prior to the January 5th session and the warning that public gatherings in the vicinity of the palace would be dispersed by force.

From a review of the events from October to January, Pipes (1996: 150—167) characterizes the public reaction in Petrograd and Moscow as “surprising indifference” (p. 163). Already by the end of the summer, with the war-time social and economic crisis deteriorating by the day, Russia was exhausted. The most disciplined and well-organized party, by far, placed its bet on this mood. The most interesting reaction came from the leadership of the non-Bolshevik socialist parties that, together, had just won the majority of seats in a national election. They attempted to mount a resistance to the overthrow of the Constituent Assembly, but it failed to mobilize an effective coalition of the democratic forces brought together months later in Samara. Their military organization was no match for either the White or Red army detachments sent out, in turn, to crush them. While the socialists abhorred the methods of Lenin and Trotsky, and tried to gather an army to defend the Assembly, they feared the possibility of a “counterrevolution” from the right even more. After their defeat in 1918, they came to harbor a hope that the “excesses” of the dictatorship would eventually be harnessed and corrected by the rank and file and by the masses of workers and peasants, as the threat of reaction subsided. Unable or unwilling to exercise their legal and moral authority, they “denounced [the Bolsheviks] as usurpers but treated [them] as comrades” (p. 164). To be fair, by that time their options had pretty much run out. During the (anti-White) Civil War

period, the Mensheviks and SRs returned to the Soviets, long after their democratic character had been completely eroded (Kowalski, 1997), with the idea that by working within the system they could perhaps influence the course of events. By then they all faced a common foe in the White armies. With time, despite the initial acquiescence, top-down and bottom-up, single-party rule against the democratic forces of the Revolution turned out to be implemented by increasing force of violence and conquest. Allowing the socialist parties to return and participate in the Soviets also turned out to be temporary, even for the left-SRs.

The civil war(s)

The left-SR delegate to the Sovnarkom CEC warned his revolutionary allies of the imminent consequences of a coup d'état, to be carried out in two cities of a former empire that in 1917 was the world's second largest. Historians differ in describing the Russian Civil War as a single complex conflict, or as parallel civil wars overlapping in time. To get a better idea of this complexity we need to return to three of the five axes of the mobilization of the previous February mentioned at the beginning of this essay: for democracy, freedom for the nationalities, and land reform. Recall that the other two were: the right of workers to organize independent unions and an end to the war.^[4]

Against democracy

The Red Terror against the regime's political opponents can be considered the first civil war (or "phase of," as it were) in its repression of democracy, beginning even prior to the formal cancelling of its highest and most authoritative expression on January 6. The Terror's primary instrument, the Cheka, specialized in the fabrication of conspiracies (the nonexistent "Petrograd Armed Organization," the "Anti-Soviet Tactical Center Group," the "Union for the Regeneration of Russia," the show trial conducted in 1920), extrajudicial mass execution, and the administration of the Gulag, established in 1918, not during the 1930s as is often assumed (Pipes, 2014). Among its victims not only counted professors and writers sympathetic to the Constitutional Democrats, but moderate socialists opposed to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, and other class enemies, including, by firing squad, ex-Tsar Nicolas, his wife, their five children and four members of the domestic staff. By the winter of 1919, individual assassination and hostage-taking began to take the place of large scale and indiscriminate repression, with some exceptions (as in the case of the "Taganstev conspiracy" of 1921 in which the approximately 60 victims were executed at the site of their unmarked grave on the outskirts of Petrograd).

By the conclusion of the Civil War against the White armies, marked by the sentences carried out against the rebellious Kronstadt sailors and the exile to detention camps of the survivors, Russia had become a police state in every sense of the term. The GPU succeeded the Cheka in 1922. Setting aside for now the casualties among protesting peasants (see the "third civil war" below), the repression against opposition parties and government opponents (the "first civil war," in large part urban) could have numbered between 100,000 and 150,000 non-combatant civilian deaths previous to, during, and after the conflict with the White generals. Neither an aberration nor an "excess," the decision by the party to rule alone apparently left the leaders no other alternative, as their left-SR friends and allies had warned them. Looking back, years later, Trotsky explained why this was so, giving the example of the execution of the Tsar's family: "...not only to frighten, horrify and instill a sense of hopelessness in the enemy but also to shake up our own ranks, to demonstrate that there was no retreating..." (1935[1956]:81).

The first five demands in the petition of Kronstadt were for: (1) genuine secret ballot elections to the Soviets, which had become simple transmission belts, by hand vote, for party decisions, (2) freedom of speech, (3) right of assembly (especially for trade unions), (4) a conference for non-party workers and soldiers, and (5) release of political prisoners of the socialist parties (*Pravda o Kronshtadte*, 1921, in Avrich, 1970: 73—74). Trotsky (1921[1979]) responded in the March 23 issue of *Pravda*: “The counterrevolutionary riffraff, the SR blowhards and simpletons, the Menshevik garbage...all of them...perform one and the same historical function: they support every attempt to establish the unlimited sway of the bandits of world imperialism...The backbone of this dictatorship is the Communist Party. There is no other party that can play this part, *no can there be*. If you wish to break this backbone, do you, dear sirs of the Menshevik and SR parties? The experience of four years of revolution is not enough for you, then?” (emphasis added) (p. 73).

Against the national minorities

The second civil war was fought against the nationalities who took for good coin the declarations in favor of the right to self-determination. Each case was different, one more complicated than the next, and all intersecting with other aspects of the breakdown of the February Revolution and the war against the actual counterrevolution. For Lenin and Trotsky, this Civil War (in caps now) was the pretext for everything, even after it was effectively over; “counterrevolutionary” the ideal epithet to vilify and convict. A summary glimpse at only the most representative cases, against Poland and the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia, gives us an idea of what actually was, or should have been, at stake for Russia. The price that the Russian people paid, the unnecessary casualties and diversion of military resources suffered by Red Army troops, to point out only one example, was far from negligible (Swain, 1996).

The Baltic offensive of November-December 1918, followed by the short-lived “socialist governments” proclaimed in Narva, Riga and Vilnius, is generally forgotten because it ended with the Treaties of Tartu, Riga and Moscow (with Lithuanian), and Soviet recognition of independence. But that was because Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania prevailed in their determined defense against invasion. Clearly made possible by complex foreign, and shifting and confusing, foreign intervention (most notably Britain), Baltic forces were compelled to fight on two fronts, against both the Soviet invading armies and German forces who opposed their sovereignty as well. German units were finally expelled by force of arms by Estonian and Latvian fighters with the help of British diplomatic pressure. Recall that the nationalities had favored autonomy within a democratic Russia, in part as a guarantee against German domination (Wade, 2001). Independence came forward as a national aspiration as the Revolution descended into one-party autocracy enforced by the methods of the Cheka. For example, carrying out the first phase of the Red Terror in Estonia and Latvia, especially brutal and costly for the latter, between October and the overthrow of the Constituent Assembly in January, decisively swayed public opinion toward independence (Lieven, 1993).

The futile assault by the Red Army on Warsaw was not a defense of the workers’ state against the advance of the White armies either, but part of an irresponsible adventure driven by the idea of exporting, by invasion, world revolution to Central Europe (Volkogonov, 1998), wasting the lives of 20,000—30,000 Russian and Polish soldiers in the siege and defense of the city alone. Poland was not just another minority ethnic group of the former empire, but prior to its subjugation by Tsarist Russia, an independent country and a proud nation. Nineteen years later, Stalin and Hitler, in concert, would be successful in subjugating Poland and the Baltics. In the meanwhile, as was the case for all the other nationalities, the opposition of the Whites to independence actually contributed

in the end to the Whites' defeat. The Polish pro-independence leadership, in negotiations with the Red Army, gave them a free hand against (White general) Denikin's forces in critically important operations in the Ukraine.

Foreign intervention in the failed Ukrainian War of Independence was even more complicated than in the Baltics, not to mention the bloody military operations and pogroms of the Russian White army and others. The Ukrainian Central Council (Rada), arising from the February Revolution with its social democratic majority, in like manner as all other nationalities, initially favored autonomy within a federated Russia. The first Provisional Government in Petrograd half-heartedly accepted the principle. The Rada protested its dissolution in October 1917, refused to recognize the Sovnarkom, rejected the Bolsheviks ultimatum, and moved closer to declaring independence with the calling of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR). Upon the final overthrow of democratic institutions with the closing of the Constituent Assembly, the UNR declared independence two weeks later (temporarily, Soviet Russia in fact recognized it as one of the concessions of the short-lived Brest-Litovsk Treaty). Large pro-independence majorities in the Ukrainian congresses resulted in the walkout of Bolshevik supporters, the establishment of competing congresses (by all accounts minority, and drawing mainly from the ethnic Russian population), followed soon after by the invasion of the Red Army. The moderate socialist government, which unsuccessfully attempted to implement political pluralism and application of the rule of law, in an emerging nation of undefined borders, splintered (and in perpetual chaos) with claims on it by powerful neighbors on all sides, weakened by internal division, some bad political choices, and an untested, barely cohesive, and undisciplined military compared to the Red Army, went down to defeat (Kamenetsky, 1977). Of course, the most speedy, effective and lasting strategy to defeat the real counterrevolution, the armies of Denikin, Wrangel and Drozdovsky, would have been for the Bolsheviks to honor the recognition of the UNR (respecting the right of self-determination, by the way) and propose a united front with the majority socialist Rada (which would have been immediately accepted) in defense of the gains of the democratic Russian Revolution. But the formation of such a united front would have meant walking back the program of single-party rule. On the matter of long-term strategies, we will return to the Ukraine one last time in the section on the civil war (the third) against the peasantry.

The Georgian Soviets and subsequent local congresses were also led by socialists (the Menshevik Party). They protested the October take-over of the Provisional Government in Petrograd; and the overthrow of the Constituent Assembly ended the hope of resolving the pressing challenges of democratization and self-determination of the peoples of the Caucasus by an elected national Russian authority. The Democratic Republic of Georgia was declared five months later. Of all the independent nationalities, it was able to govern most successfully with some measure of stability, carrying out an ambitious land distribution and nationalization of industry and transportation. Interestingly, up until the end, party officials in Moscow debated and openly disagreed on how to deal with the Georgian socialists, in part because of diplomatic pressure from abroad, including positive international assessments of the Tiflis government (Suny, 1994). Nevertheless, by the second half of 1920, the now practiced procedure of takeover was already in motion: local pro-Bolshevik factions challenge the governing majority of a congress or soviet, walk out to establish a competing entity, conduct subversion and violent upheaval, foment uprising in ethnic Russian enclaves, and invite intervention to rescue loyalists from "the counterrevolution." On February 16 a mechanized invasion force twice as large as the Georgian national militia crossed the border. Despite a courageous defense, within a week the capital was taken.

Against the village

The third civil war, against the peasantry, was part of the campaign (a political mobilization), of the so-called “War Communism.” This political campaign coincided, in time (and also with the various confounding military objectives), with the Civil War against the White armies. It was completed, reaching its climax (essentially after the defeat of the Whites) during the fierce military incursions into the countryside of 1921—1922. The three year ultra-radical economic program that preceded the temporary concession to the free market (the New Economic Plan, promulgated in 1921) is often presented as a necessary excess, unavoidable wartime measure, to save the Revolution. Rather, evidence shows that its extreme and fanatical, ideologically-driven, methods to forcefully and rapidly eradicate all vestiges of capitalist relations and bourgeois culture greatly hindered the struggle against the Whites. Industrial and agricultural production plummeted from pre-1917 levels. The top to bottom socialization of the economy imposed compulsory labor service linked to party control of trade unions and massive nationalization of economic activity, the attempt to abolish money, private trade, the price system and the market, the provision of goods and services free or at nominal cost, including housing, and government distribution and rationing of food. The appropriation of food by the state for its distribution was made possible by its forced requisition from producers in the countryside. In comparison to the first wave of expropriations, every successive foray into the villages by militarized grain collectors and local squadrons of enforcers netted less and less. The vicious cycle of retribution against the peasant “hoarders” and resistance to the injustice resulted in grave shortages of the “free and subsidized” bread in the city, and outright famine in the countryside. Aside from the disruption to the economy, this aspect of “War Communism” in an even more obvious way obstructed the objectives of the Civil War as the Red Army was forced to engage both the Whites and veritable armies of peasants resisting requisition and repression by the Cheka. The complexity here is analogous to the situation of the national minorities who found their forces divided between the struggle against the invading Red Army, the retreating/advancing Germans and White armies (even as alliances shifted constantly, cooperating with the latter against the Red Army, and vice versa). Requisition, resistance and spiraling shortage affected the Russian agricultural provinces across the board, among which the most productive were the hardest hit (Swain, 1997). Returning to the example of the Ukraine from the previous section, regarding the long-term consequences of the imposition of Bolshevik one-party rule, with the first dress rehearsal nationalization came the widespread hunger and famine of 1921 (followed by a reprieve of the NEP). With the second appropriation, in the form of collectivization (1932—1933), came the near genocide of the Holodomor.

The cycles of violence, in fact, reached historical proportions. In the winter of 1920—21, with the White armies effectively defeated, a renewed military campaign was directed against the peasant uprisings (the so-called Green armies) in Western Siberia, Middle Volga, Ukraine and the Don and Kuban regions, the most infamous targeting the organized revolt in Tambov province (Volkogonov, 1994: 338—355). The effects of so-called “War Communism” had been accumulating from 1918, of government control and confiscation coupled with the fomenting of “class-warfare” within the peasantry. The villages had been reduced to desperate poverty. Their resistance was met with the same level of brutality as was met the rebellion of the Kronstadt sailors, but on a massive scale. In the Tambov region alone, estimates of total casualties among the local population included over 200,000 killed. In the end, the irony was that as the defeated leader of the revolt who had called for the reconvening of the Constituent Assembly and professed allegiance to the SR party, A. Antonov, was being hunted down, the Bolsheviks conceded to the peasants’ key economic demands

with the inauguration of the NEP (Kowalski, 1997: 231—235). Nevertheless, as retribution, the second show trial of the Bolshevik period was held the following year against the remaining national leadership of the SR party.

Lessons of February and October

We can only speculate about what the outcome of the Civil War to defeat the Whites would have been under different circumstances, i.e., unimpeded by the civil wars of choice. A united democratic coalition government with full authority vested in it by the overwhelming majority vote of the Russian people would have faced a very different task. Militarily and politically, it would have been one task, not four, precluding: the organization of the mass Red Terror against democracy, export of the civil war (the Bolshevik political program) to Poland and Germany and denial of self-determination to the nationalities, and the war to impose requisition/pre-collectivization on the countryside and rationing/militarization of labor in the city. Then there are the problems of the lead up to single-party rule, by January of 1918 under the conditions and requirements of dictatorship. These were the contexts and imperatives that recommended to Lenin and Trotsky the option of the multi-front civil wars. The majority parties of the February Revolution, in particular the moderate socialists, also failed the test of leadership; we might grant that they didn't count on previous historical example.

True enough, the Bolsheviks prior to October, without the administrative responsibilities of a caretaker government, could promise everything. The slogan and call to arms can be short on the details, summed up in 1917 in just three words, rather than: civil war and internationalization of the class struggle, pre-collectivization of land, and rationing of bread. But the democratic parties, including the non-socialist, also bear responsibility for the breakdown of the February Revolution, of a different kind. Indecision and stalling on immediate priorities could not wait for the deliberations of a national congress: recognizing the right to autonomy of the nationalities, decisive initiatives to satisfy the demand for land reform and for basic rights of the workers (Kowalski, 1997), implementation of their own program of defense coupled with immediate negotiation to end the war, to mention just a few measures that were both just and reasonable. The most costly error was Kerensky's unprincipled maneuver to gain military advantage at the war front in the July offensive, ending in miserable failure. Small wonder that the Mensheviks so rapidly lost their majority in the Soviets, ceding the field to forces that offered the most sweeping solutions (by appearance simpler and more direct) to a crisis spinning out of control. The same indecision marked their unwillingness to call for and organize a mass mobilization and armed defense of the transitional democratic institutions against the coup d'état as it was unfolding. Months after the fact, the attempt at formation in Samara of the Committee for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly (Komuch) was already too late.

Whether the outcome of the confusion and disintegration of 1917—1918 was inevitable or not we will leave for historians to take up, an important debate in its own right. But the more interesting question, the more practical one in some ways, is the following: what is the Russian Revolution, in its different stages, a model for today when we think about democracy and progressive social change? Despite the lessons learned from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet system, many still look to the first overthrow of Russian democracy as a positive model. This point of view remains a mystery today, especially after all that we have learned since the years 1989—1991. Most interestingly for the purposes of our topic, of the five remaining single-party regimes that trace their political heritage to October 1917, four are clustered together

geographically in East Asia.

There is one last observation that is relevant to the comparison between the early and later Russian Soviet regimes. Setting aside the deaths in excess caused by government policy during the respective famines of each period, the total calculation of the number of extra-judicial executions and murders of non-combatants during the Red Terror (1918—1922, of Lenin and Trotsky) and the Great Terror (1936—1938, of Stalin) is roughly equivalent.^[5] What many among the defenders of the former seem to have found perverse and scandalous was the execution by Stalin of long-time loyal *party members* and the erratic and idiosyncratic nature of the repression (e.g., targeting the senior officer corps of the Red Army on the eve of the Nazi invasion), not the repression itself.

The next installment of this discussion will return to the topic that introduced this paper: how 1917 influenced the May Fourth Movement of 1919, leading to the successful founding of the Chinese Communist Party two years later, today with a membership of over 88 million active members. From a small and persecuted minority in 1921, it formed a revolutionary government in Beijing twenty eight years later, exercising virtually undisputed rule over the mainland ever since. Most importantly, how is it that, despite the historical parallels, it did not collapse as did the Russian party that inspired its founding? The Communist Parties of the USSR and Eastern Europe fell from power virtually without a struggle together with the fall of their system.^[6]

^[1]The English translation of Charter 08 is available in the January 15, 2009 issue of the *New York Review of Books*: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/01/15/chinas-charter-08/>

^[2]For now, the political and moral crisis into which Russia has descended in recent years, since the 1990s, is a separate topic that needs to be deferred.

^[3]See reports of recent activity by the St. Petersburg Memorial Research and Information Centre, example among other groups of descendant families to rescue the approximately 4,500 remains from the mass graves of the Kovalevsky Forest, dating from period of the Red Terror:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/catriona-bass/national-museum-to-victims-of-stalinist-repression-words-not-deeds>

^[4]With the regimentation of the work force, independent trade unions essentially ceased to exist by 1921 (now superfluous in a “workers’ state”). With conclusion of the Civil War, compulsory labor service and the militarization of labor were elevated to a principle of socialist organization of society (Trotsky, 1922: 128—176). In his memoirs, Serge (1951[2012]) recalls: “The social system in these years was later called ‘War Communism.’ At the time it was called simply ‘Communism,’ and anyone who like myself went so far as to consider it purely temporary was looked upon with disdain. Trotsky had just written that this system would last over several decades if the transition to a genuine unfettered Socialism were to be assured” (p. 135). The implementation of the program of turning the “imperialist war into civil war” (Lenin, 1915 [1939]), carried out with specific and ambitious political objectives in large part unrelated to defense against the White counterrevolution, cynically turned the tables on the aspiration of the Russian people for peace (“...Land and Bread” was the

other part of the slogan of 1917).

^[5]See Volkogonov (1994, 1998) on the leaking and subsequent opening (by 1991) of the Soviet archives, allowing, first and above all, for the rehabilitation of accused conspirators, framed by the security services during the Red Terror, revelations in which he himself, clandestinely, played an important role during the 1980s.

^[6]I take responsibility for the limited number of citations in this essay, for neglecting to cite the contribution of writers and scholars who have helped to form what some day might be the emerging consensus on the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and its extension to Eastern Europe: Svetlana Alexievich, Anne Applebaum, Vadim Birstein, Vladimir Bukovsky, Robert Conquest, Orlando Figes, Ziva Galili, Robert Gellately, Bengt Jangfeldt, George Leggett, Martin Malia, Evan Mawdsley, David Sattler, Robert Service, Nicolas Werth, Alexander Yakovlev, and for failing to mention the example of many others.

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