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LENIN AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

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This year, you all must know it, is an anniversary. A hundred years ago, Russia experienced the most significant and the most shattering revolution of our modern age. It was not a single event – no revolution ever is. The most heroic moment came in early March.

First, crowds turned out in Petrograd – protesters braving a repressive, violent regime.

Within a week, the tsar had abdicated and three hundred years of Romanov autocracy had come to an end. The snow was still deep on the streets, but this was Russia's spring.

It was a heady moment – unforgettable, but by autumn the picture had darkened. As the days grew shorter and a new, cold, wind blew in along the Gulf of Finland, the Russian capital braced itself for another upheaval. Everyone knew that change was in the air. When it came, it did not prove to be the revolution that most people had been hoping for.

On 7 November – or 25th October by the calendar that the Russians used, the Bolshevik Party came to power.

It is that second revolution – the one that the Soviets would always call the Great October Socialist Revolution - that I shall focus on tonight. I will look at what happened and how it came about. I will look at the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and see what we have learned about his victory, what was so special about him.

I will also ask what we should make of today's Russian government – a very different animal indeed - as it struggles with the issue of commemoration.

Let us set the scene, though, by reminding ourselves about the regime that took over when the Romanovs were gone.

It is relatively easy to bring down a government. The challenge is to shape and build a state that can take over afterwards. In Russia, as so often is the case, there wasn't any obvious successor to the autocracy.

For several days the situation was chaotic: there was no competent leadership. Anarchy like this would always have been dangerous, but what made it really deadly was the fact that the Russian army was still committed to a major war. Russian troops – Russian peasant boys and men - faced German and Austro-Hungarian forces all along the Eastern Front of Europe's First World War. The Russian economy – those factories, those railway-yards – was also fully engaged in war production. Without some clear direction, the Russians risked a national catastrophe.

It was to save the nation at its hour of danger that a group of politicians – former members of the State Duma, or parliament – agreed to act as a caretaker Provisional Government. But working people did not merely sit and wait. In Petrograd, the workers rushed to elect deputies of their own and these assembled on the first night of the new age as a much larger and noisier body called the Petrograd Soviet. So there were two new governments.



In the class-based language of the times, the Provisional Government represented the bourgeoisie. As you can see, its members were well-fed, well-barbered and devoted to expensive suits. Its first chairman was a Prince, Georgy Lvov.

By contrast, the Soviet spoke for ordinary working citizens, what Karl Marx called the proletariat. It included intellectuals and journalists as well as workers and soldiers, but what mattered was that people felt that it belonged to them. As a body, it was massive – its numbers soon exceeded a thousand and it was a model for popular politics right across the Russian empire. There was only ever one Provisional Government. But within days, less than a week, there were soviets – the Russian word means council – in almost all large towns, including Moscow. To have two governments at any time is tricky, but to have two entirely different ones at a time of national crisis will create endless challenges.

The two bodies met in one building in those early months. They might have shared a great deal more. But relations were never easy.

This is the Tauride Palace in St Petersburg, a draughty barn of a place on the edge of the marshes. In March, the new ministers – that so-called bourgeoisie - occupied a suite of splendid rooms in its right wing. Rather reluctantly, they assigned a bleaker and less accessible set in the left wing to the people's noisy parliament. There were soldiers sleeping on the stairs, young men eating sardines in the grand ballroom, unwashed, exhausted strangers everywhere. Somehow this chaos had to be reduced to streamlined administration with a clear chain of command.

The answer was dictated by another gentleman with splendid hair. Karl Marx had insisted that revolutions should always follow a specific pattern. Each state would have to undergo a democratic phase to prepare its people and economy for the bliss of proletarian revolution. On this model, Russia, as a largely peasant country, was not ready to be ruled by its workers. It may have been a crude reading of Marx, but it was what people chose to believe throughout that spring. Most Russian socialists were certain that their revolution was a bourgeois-democratic one.

You can imagine the delightful hours that members of the Soviet passed on their first night as they debated this. After a lot of wrangling and endless jargon-ridden tirades, the Soviet accepted the sovereignty of the Provisional Government, at least in the short term. They urged the ministers to carry on. They were convinced that history required this. But they did not go home and leave it there. In the new bourgeois-democratic world, the Soviet's job was to fight for workers', soldiers' and peasants' rights.

So far so good. But then the politicians had to try to govern. They had to agree what to do about workers' conditions, food prices, and discipline in the Petrograd garrison. The toughest question of all was what to do about the war. The crowds who made the revolution were expecting a solution there. The dearest hope of many hungry, tired civilians was that someone would manage to make peace. Petrograd's garrison soldiers – many of whom were raw cadets - tended to share that hope.

But Russia's old political class were men of the world. They knew the rules of international diplomacy, they held significant corporate stocks. Several members of the new cabinet had made their money out of selling guns and they expected to continue with the war until a diplomatic settlement was reached. The most extreme position here was that of the first Foreign Minister, who saw no need to deviate from war aims that had been negotiated by the Tsar.

The outcome was a fudge. After another night of wrangling between the cabinet and the Soviet, the Provisional Government told the world that Russia recognised its duty to fight on. It would do so, however, in the name of freedom and democracy, to put an end to Prussian militarism and achieve a just peace for the working people of the entire continent.

That clumsy compromise was fine for a few weeks that spring. What spoiled it was a brute infusion of reality.



In late June 1917, the Minister of War, Alexander Kerensky, approved a fresh offensive in Galicia. This was not a defensive operation but theatrical heroism. It was a stunt, really, and its purpose was to capture the national imagination and rally faltering support for the Provisional Government and – I have to say it – for Kerensky personally.

Since he is to play such a large part in the story, we should be introduced to him, I think. Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky was a lawyer and a socialist, but you need to know more than that. He is modelling his trademark military tunic, but I prefer to picture him in the kaftan and silk Turkish slippers that he wore so much in the spring of 1917, theatrical even when recovering from a major kidney operation. His illness had left him pale and gaunt, but nothing could stop him from taking centre stage. ‘He looks as if he were in pain,’ a British diplomat recalled, but all the same, ‘he gives an impression of energy.’

And the young Kerensky – he was thirty-six in 1917 - put that energy to full use throughout the revolutionary year. On public occasions – which he loved – he could mesmerise a crowd with his oratory. Behind the scenes, he could fix quick deals through an extensive network of contacts. He was the sort of person revolutions always favour for a while. Lenin hated him.

Kerensky’s June Offensive started well. Led by the brilliant General Brusilov, it opened with artillery bombardment – always a good way to make an impression. But even Brusilov could not hold the Russian army together for long. Morale had been flagging for months – the revolution had not solved the soldiers’ basic problems and it had often made them worse. Mass-desertion was already causing entire regiments to fall apart. The campaign turned into a rout. In a few days, around 400,000 men were lost. Defeat brought desertions on an even grander scale, humiliation for the Russian army and shame to the revolution – in short, Kerensky’s gamble had failed.

The news sparked rioting in Petrograd. Pitched battles between right-wing Black Hundreds and red-banner waving socialists left 700 dead in three days of fighting. This harrowing interlude went down in history as the July Days.

Production came to a halt, shops were boarded up. There were barricades across the streets. The trams stopped running, nervous people stayed at home. In answer, Kerensky called fresh troops into the city. These quashed the insurrection pretty fast, but now people began to whisper that a counter-revolution might be planned.

To stave off its complete collapse, the Provisional Government regrouped. Kerensky himself became Prime Minister on a promise of order, stability and the efficient management of the war.

The July Days marked a watershed. At the time, a good many socialists – that is, revolutionaries – believed that political life had shifted to the right. Kerensky’s government called for an end to strikes. As the summer wore on, lock-outs became more frequent. August and September saw a reversal of earlier workers’ gains as employers introduced wage-cuts and repeatedly extended the working day in a vain effort to meet the demands of war.

And that brings me to Kerensky’s relationship with the far left. The July Days gave the Provisional Government the excuse it had been looking for to make some high-profile arrests. The list included a string of leading socialists.

Of those they actually caught, the most prominent was this man – Lev Trotsky. He was imprisoned on 7 August on vague charges of counter-revolution. Lev Trotsky was to play a central role in October’s events. Born in 1879 – he was thirty-seven at the time of his arrest – he was a maverick revolutionary, a brilliant speaker and Kerensky’s true nemesis. But he was stubborn, unconvinced by Lenin’s leadership or Bolshevik ideology. It was the crisis that July that propelled him into the Bolshevik Party, and right up to the top of it. As he recalled much later, the conversations he had with the comrades in prison ‘established moral bonds of the sort that are forged only under the enemy’s heaviest blows.’ Those moral bonds were very strong. Though Stalin



tried to write Lev Trotsky out of history, the Great October Revolution, Lenin's revolution, would have been unthinkable without him.

But that is to anticipate. We still have to deal with Lenin. Kerensky's Justice Department had been collecting evidence against him for weeks, and now it brought a charge of treason. In fear for his life, Lenin fled to Finland. It was not a dignified exit. For several nights, in fact, he and his friend Grigory Zinoviev went into hiding in a haystack near the factory-town of Sestroretsk on the Russo-Finnish border. In Soviet times, that haystack became a revolutionary shrine – the fence that you can see around it helps to keep the donkeys off.

With Lenin gone and insurrection discredited, that marked shift to the right was real. Ultra-nationalists began to call openly for a military coup. The rhetoric of the Provisional Government turned sterner, with a war-like ring. But rhetoric was useless in the medium term. While Kerensky struts in yet another natty uniform, let us pause and consider what was really going on.

First, there was that clumsy Dual Power. The Executive Committee that ran the Petrograd Soviet had continued to acquiesce in Kerensky's regime.

But the nature of politics was changing. The Soviet itself had moved to a new address, a former girls' school called the Smolny Institute. The move gave it more space, but Smolny was a long way from the city-centre; in every sense there was a growing distance between the Soviet and the bourgeoisie.

Though no-one was quite ready to say it yet, the Dual Power had already failed. The only remaining question was about what should replace it.

The revolution was unravelling under Kerensky's nose. His type of bourgeois compromise was never going to satisfy the hopes that February had raised.

His war required the factories to run white-hot.

But he could give back nothing in return. There was no extra money to pay wages and no guarantee of food.

Meanwhile, in the countryside – which was where the food came from – the peasants gave up waiting for his land reform. They started claiming title to the land themselves, driving local landlords out and seizing animals and tools. In many places, former country mansions burned. The army was dissolving by the hour. Most soldiers were peasants, so any news of change in the villages had them dashing home to make sure they weren't being robbed. But disillusionment – lack of hope – drove even more to abandon the front lines. In the summer of 1917, the Russian army melted away. There was no way that Kerensky could honour his commitment to the war.

In different circumstances, these things might well have brought about a military coup – there were some officers who talked of that. But the crucial thing about Russia in 1917 was that there were already organised and energetic groups campaigning for another option.

Russia's revolutionary parties had been building up mass followings. For years, the most active had nurtured a wide, committed, grass-roots base. I will come to the leaders in a moment, but it is worth remembering that the largest parties – the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in the towns and the Socialist Revolutionaries across the whole society – had activists in many thousands of communities. Of course they could be mocked as utopians and black-coated intellectuals – the classic image of the Dostoevskian revolutionary with his fizzing bomb.

But the Bolsheviks – to take the most conspicuous example – had members in key factories. These were not do-gooders from the universities but working people who had become convinced by the ideology and promises of Marxism. They spent their spare time reading and discussing politics and – significantly – helping fellow-workers with matters like health, labour rights and social insurance. They might be young, they might be male,



but they were on the spot, in touch with life, and they represented the germ of an alternative civic and political system.

The Socialist Revolutionaries – the SRs – had a similar network in the countryside, though it was patchier. Huge parts of the empire remained to be reached by any party – think of reindeer herders in the north or silkworm farmers in the blazing heat of Samarkand. Where there were party members, though, the talking and the meetings had been going on for years. This matters because revolutions have a duty to rebuild. As I said right at the beginning, it is hard to do this and you need a culture of shared hope.

October's revolution was not made by a few famous individuals standing on a platform in the middle of a square. It also drew upon the hope and energy of millions. That is not, of course, to say that everyone agreed on the way forward. The very radiance of dreams is dazzling. For Russia's peasants, utopia meant the undisputed ownership of village land and a communal life that was governed by moral, deeply religious, norms. The red star of Marxism looked very pale in the blinding gold of their imagined cornfields and their sunlit, self-governing communities.

They were not happy with the status quo. Getting rid of unjust debt and bureaucratic interference, those were things a man could fight for. And getting their soldier-sons safely home, that was another.

But there were as many ideas about the future as there were human beings talking at those endless meetings. The workers could be even more diverse. Some wanted to run their own factories, perhaps on scientific lines, some wanted to end the evil of industry altogether. Some wanted free love and some wanted a classic list of rights for women. Some wanted to safeguard legal structures and property-rights, others pressed for communal ownership of wealth. And that is before we start on religion, the afterlife, or self-determination for the scores of national minorities inside the Russian empire.

But what was clear, even in the midst of this cacophony of voices – eager, urgent, hopeful, terrified – was the growing belief that the people's soviets would have to take power sooner or later. This was not what was planned, of course.

The Provisional Government was already organising elections for a Constituent Assembly – a body whose purpose would be to draw up a new constitution for bourgeois-democratic Russia. But there was a growing conviction, especially among the more radical socialists of Petrograd, that the soviets - elected at the workplace and speaking directly for the masses – were the only viable government for a country in revolution. Every anti-worker move Kerensky made helped stoke this mood, this thirst for soviet power. But it was all theoretical, and the debate might still have dragged on into the next year. Given time, it might have ended with a bloodbath and a right-wing counter-coup.

Instead, the answer came from this unappetising man.

It is no exaggeration to say that the October revolution would not have occurred without Lenin.

Among the many reasons, we should focus on two.

First, Lenin was the only Russian politician to regard revolution as his sole purpose in life. There is not much else to say about his personality, in fact: no fascinating private weaknesses (unless you count his fondness for chocolate) and no lurid sex life. He was married and he had a mistress who later became a family friend. In that regard, he was more respectable than many members of the so-called bourgeois Provisional Government. As to hobbies, he gave them up the minute they distracted him from politics, so that put paid to Beethoven and then to chess. He still did press-ups in his room – even if that room was a prison-cell – but he did them to keep fit for the day when the call to revolution came.



When he was still a youngish emigre, a Menshevik called Pavel Axelrod summed Lenin up by describing him as ‘the only man for whom revolution is the pre-occupation 24 hours a day, who has no thoughts but of revolution, and who even in his sleep dreams of nothing but revolution.’

During the First World War, when the German Foreign Ministry was looking for a Russian who might undermine the Romanov war-effort, its secret agents were unanimous in pointing to Lenin. He was the only revolutionary who preferred action to talking, the only one ruthless enough to deliver on his promises. And after February, as Russia began to dissolve into chaos, Lenin was one of the very small number of human beings who actually wanted power. He dreamed of nothing else, in fact.

It is one thing to dream, of course, and another to have any real competence. The second point about Lenin is that he shaped his party into an effective revolutionary force. Imagine a ball of energy in human form and add a beard and you will have a picture of the man.

But now dismiss the idea that his trick was to create robotic uniformity within the party’s ranks, that is a myth about the Bolsheviks in 1917. Remember the grass-roots, those activists – they were not forced to think like zombies during 1917. The party’s very flexibility, in fact, was one of its most potent strengths.

So we should be specific about Lenin’s role. The leader made two crucial interventions in 1917 and both were dazzling and dramatic.

His first and greatest coup took place in April. Many of you will know that the Bolshevik leader had been in exile in Switzerland throughout the First World War. Getting home from landlocked Zurich was not straightforward. In the absence of viable aeroplanes, he needed to cross Europe overland, and in the end he had no choice but to steam through Germany via Berlin. His route took him from Zurich to the Baltic coast and then through Sweden. But it was the German stretch that was really controversial, opening him to a charge of treason for consorting with his country’s enemy. The Germans, of course, helped him precisely because he was known to be a five-star troublemaker. Everyone knew it – the British would probably have interned him if he had opted for a route involving the English Channel.

In the circumstances, the Provisional Government might well have called for his arrest. But in the springtime of hope, members of the Soviet could still insist that every honest revolutionary had a right to return to Russia. It was time to reject those years of Tsarist repression. The Finland Station in Petrograd saw welcoming ceremonies almost every night. There were brass bands and bouquets and red flags – it was like a rolling street party.

And the welcome for Lenin was unforgettable.

The Bolshevik leader’s train arrived from Finland at 11.10 pm on Orthodox Easter Monday, 3 April by the Russian calendar. The band struck up, the welcoming committee’s chairman cleared his throat for the usual speech...

But there was nothing routine about what happened next. Tired though he must have been – he had been travelling for eight days solid - Lenin used the opportunity to launch his new political programme, the so-called April Theses.

It was so shocking that even his wife decided he had gone mad.

If you remember, April was still a time when Russians were attempting to support the war. By contrast, Lenin called for an immediate peace. He even advocated fraternisation with German soldiers at the front. This war, he said, had nothing to do with working people – it was a war between bankers, a war for profit – and patriotism was redundant at a time of international proletarian uprising.

This statement shocked his audience and led to renewed calls for his arrest. But there was more to come.



At a time when the Soviet was trying to work with the Provisional Government, and at a time when the Soviet's leaders were still secretly glad that established politicians were running everything, Lenin condemned all collaboration with the bourgeoisie and called for a transfer of power to the soviets. And while property rights were still essential for the liberals, Lenin called for the nationalisation of land.

On that first April night, the whole programme seemed crazy, the work of an exile who was out of touch. No-one thought that Lenin understood the situation in the capital. But just three weeks later his whole party was on board. He got them there by persuasion, he also had a flexible approach to details. He drew on the support of radicals in the rank and file – that rag-bag party, not zombies - who had been thinking the same things but had not been able to speak.

And the effect was to reshape his party as the true voice of the revolutionary vanguard, the group that talked the toughest line. There was no doubt now that the Bolsheviks were the extreme left. And extremism was a good image for a revolutionary party to have when springtime's hopes began to fade. When Lenin came home on that train, the war might still have seemed a sacred cause, but from July almost everyone regarded it as a disaster.

His party had the kudos of its opposition from the start. Similarly, the Provisional Government's stock was falling fast. It might have looked all right to everyone in its first hopeful weeks, but by July it had started to behave like the working people's enemy, their betrayer. And only one revolutionary party had refused all close engagement with it.

Support for the Bolsheviks grew steadily in the late summer. It did not matter whether people understood the finer details of their full revolutionary programme – almost no-one did, in fact. What counted was that they appeared to be the real tough men. The Bolsheviks' success was the work of thousands. It was a matter hard graft at the grass roots. It was also fostered by creative propaganda – newspapers, speeches and posters - and those were funded handsomely by German gold.

The Bolsheviks would always deny this – it would have looked like treason – but when it came to German cash, Lenin had a most original excuse. His ultimate aim, after all, was to destroy capitalism on a global basis. To him, there was a poetry in the idea that someone like the Kaiser might have paid for that.

The trouble was that German money also brought him to the brink of real defeat.

The July Days came close to wrecking everything. Amid suspicion of treason, the Bolsheviks' main newspapers were shut down and their leader, the great lion of the left, went into hiding.

Sitting under all that hay, a lesser politician might have given way to understandable despair. But the real coup was yet to come. And what made it a huge success was that it didn't go the way poor Lenin planned.

The Bolshevik leader spent August and most of September 1917 in Finland. This wasn't a great hardship – it was warm and tranquil there in summer – but Lenin wasn't the type to relax. In the course of just a few weeks, he wrote one of his most surprising texts – the near-ecstatic *State and Revolution*. He also kept a close eye on events across the border back in Petrograd.

He still remained a wanted man. He probably enjoyed reading about alleged sightings of him. The manhunt ranged from Switzerland to Suez; some people even thought that he was dead. That was fun in itself, but it must have been even more delightful to follow the faltering career of Kerensky's Provisional Government as it lurched from crisis to crisis.

On the ground, the revolutionaries in Petrograd believed they were living through a backlash, perhaps a permanent defeat. But by mid-August it was clear that Kerensky could not manage the war effort, or even the unrest in his own capital. It is hard to isolate one fatal mistake among the many that he made, but his request for military reinforcements in Petrograd to shore up his government certainly stands out. In late August, he



requested back-up from the patriotic troops of General Lavr Kornilov – the tsarist officer who will forever be remembered as the man with a lion’s heart and the brain of a sheep.

Kornilov hated leftie-softie Mr Kerensky, so this was a chance to be seized. Instead of coming to the Provisional Government’s aid, he started preparing a coup of his own. Instead of walking at the head of loyal troops, Kerensky was suddenly faced with the task of resisting a different kind of military takeover. And his first instinct was to set up a dictatorship – a directory – of his own.

It was the response of a desperate man. And it was utterly irrelevant. The people themselves would repel Kornilov, and they did it without him.

Alarm whistles went off in the factories, railway workers prepared to take up track, sailors at the Kronstadt naval base set out to join their comrades on the streets of Petrograd. In almost every workers’ district, armed detachments of activists began to practice military drill.

The Kornilov coup collapsed under overwhelming pressure from the organised forces of the left. It was a multi-party, socialist initiative, a proof of the strength of soviet power.

The Petrograd Soviet saved Kerensky. Then it presented its bill. It demanded the release of its leading members, the prisoners who had been held since the July Days. On 4 September, Trotsky was freed.

The collective action against Kornilov had shown how powerful the workers’ movement truly was, how like a shadow-government in all but name. As Trotsky became the Soviet’s new Chairman, there was increasing talk of introducing soviet power. And people thought that they could see an opportunity to do just that. An All-Russian Congress of Soviets, the second since the revolution, had been scheduled for 20 October. With delegates arriving from the whole country, this could well vote to take over the government of Russia in the name of the entire revolution.

Out there in Finland, Lenin’s initial attitude was cautious. He couldn’t risk a second defeat like the July Days. He warned against the temptation to seize power before everything was right. But his patient, conciliatory mood changed suddenly in mid-September. News may have reached him of a fresh round of proposed peace-talks with Germany. A liberal peace would be so popular that it would blunt his party’s obvious political edge.

He must also have noted that support for his Bolshevik Party was growing. On 5 September 1917 the Bolsheviks finally achieved a majority in the Petrograd Soviet. They were becoming the voice of the revolutionary left, but that might change; delay might cost them everything.

No-one is sure of Lenin’s reasons. What is certain is that he began, quite suddenly, to call for an armed uprising. His letters even outlined the strategic moves. His followers, predictably, were horrified. As he had done when he reshaped his party’s policy in April, Lenin faced the task of convincing them.

His second coup, then, began when he pulled a wig over his bald head and set off back across the Russian border. He arrived in deepest secrecy in late September 1917. Most of his comrades knew nothing of his movements until the night of 10 October. In the hours of darkness, the Bolshevik elite assembled upstairs for a meeting in this wonderful gingerbread house in the woods. They were completely stunned when Lenin joined them, beardless and dressed as a factory-worker. His presence was disruptive, shocking.

But from his comrades’ point of view, it was what he said that did the damage. As he had put it in a recent letter from Finland: ‘History will not forgive us if we do not take power now!’

That meeting ended up agreeing that an insurrection was the order of the day.

But no-one dared to set a date.



Lenin was impatient, anxious to move before the 20 October, the date when the Congress of Soviets was likely to step in and take power. He did not want to have to compromise, to cut deals with the Mensheviks or wait for the completion of some bourgeois-democratic revolutionary phase.

What he wanted was an insurrection in the name of the proletariat and – crucially – on behalf of the world revolution that he thought would follow.

Since this was heresy to Marxists – to say nothing of personally hazardous – it needs some explanation. Most still believed – you will remember – that Russia was in the throes of bourgeois revolution. So how did Lenin justify what looked like a pre-emptive strike?

The ideas that he had been working on were crucial here. In 1916, he published an essay called *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. It amounted to a blueprint for his later life. In it, he argued that the Marxist scheme of revolution: that neat schedule of successive political and economic transformations – feudal – bourgeois – proletarian – had become outmoded.

Basically, capitalism had gone global. This wasn't new where Western Europe was concerned – Marxists had suspected for some time that the English proletariat, which was well overdue for revolution by their calculations – had been bought off by the profits of empire. The British ruling class was bribing its proletariat at the expense of India's poor.

But Lenin took the idea further. He saw the system of empires and imperialist world trade as a chain – imperial powers with developed economies selling their products to their colonies, colonies supplying industrialised super-powers with raw materials – and a chain, he pointed out, was only as strong as its weakest link.

Being Lenin, he placed himself at the heart of things by insisting that the weakest link was Russia. Its factories were huge, its railways growing at an epic rate – it was suffering all the disruption of an advanced industrial power. But it was also a colony in the sense that it provided Europe with timber and grain. It was a predominantly agrarian economy, a land of peasants. That contradiction – Marxists love contradictions – was what made it unstable. With its industrialised urban centres, marooned like islands in a sea of agrarian backwardness, it was the weakest link in the world economic chain, and when it broke the entire system of international capitalism would fail.

In the advanced countries – Germany, Britain – proletarian revolutions would follow Russia's – Lenin's – almost immediately, hastened by the hardships that the First World War had caused.

Lenin's vision then grew wilder. The next stage, he dreamed, would be a war against oppressors everywhere. The workers and soldiers would turn their weapons on their enemies at home. Pacifism, for Lenin, was anathema.

It was all theoretical, of course, and he had no intention of stepping into a river of blood in person.

But he did not see the planned October insurrection as a purely Russian matter. In his view, it would be the first act in the drama of global liberation. He would be the impresario, but what was at stake was the liberation of the world proletariat, the freedom of mankind.

So that's the theory. The insurrection Lenin got, though, was not the one he had expected.

The theme that October was not a triumphant Bolshevik march but rather a complex duet between Kerensky's ministry and the workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd. It was not a world civil war that Russian workers rallied to create. All they wanted was to save the revolution they already had.

The news from the front lines was growing desperate. In early October, the Germans captured a string of vital Russian bases in the Baltic. Petrograd itself was genuinely under threat. Kerensky's response – or one of them



– was to stiffen the existing garrison in the city with loyal troops and move the weaker, Bolshevised elements to the front line. He presented this as a purely military matter, but it looked like a move against the extreme left.

The rumours provoked outrage among socialists. People believed Kerensky was preparing for a coup. Now more disgruntled radicals began to pin their hopes on the forthcoming Congress of Soviets. The Congress itself, meanwhile, was put off till the twenty-fifth, a deferral that would soon play into Lenin's hands.

In Petrograd itself, it was Lev Trotsky who would take the real lead. Lenin was still a wanted man, and scarcely dared to leave the suburban apartment where he was hiding. It was Trotsky's Soviet that set up a Military Revolutionary Committee to prevent a coup against the garrison. The MRC was a multi-party body – not merely Bolshevik. It was also very effective. On 22 October, the garrison agreed to recognise its orders rather than Kerensky's. The clock was ticking.

Each of Kerensky's moves from then was blocked by Trotsky's MRC or other revolutionary forces loyal to it. On 23 October, the MRC took over the Peter-Paul Fortress and the nearby arsenal, effectively placing the city-centre under its guns. From his office in the Winter Palace, Kerensky was struggling to draw up a military counter-plan. He did not know it, but he was already doomed. What sealed his fate forever was his order to shut down the revolutionary press. At dawn on 24 October, Provisional Government soldiers closed the offices of two Bolshevik papers. A few hours later, at 9.00am, Trotsky's troops reopened them. Kerensky's leadership was worse than merely anti-democratic. It was completely impotent.

By now, Lenin was pacing his suburban flat in what must have been volcanic impatience. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks should take power urgently, before the Congress met and all those other fuzzy-thinking Marxist windbags got their hands on government. But it was not he who shaped these events. The Military Revolutionary Committee was in charge, and Trotsky, urging caution, was in overall control.

To stave off a full-scale revolt, Kerensky ordered that the bridges in Petrograd should be raised. This would have cut off the traditional routes between the workers' factory districts and the city-centre, which was where the government was based. The order was issued on the night of 24 October. It was the MRC that overturned the plan. This time it only needed peaceful action, talking, crowding round government troops. A new player in the drama was the battleship, Aurora, whose crew joined the revolutionary side. The sailors refused their orders to steam out of Petrograd and turned their guns on to a crucial city-centre bridge to keep it open.

Unimpeded, free to move, armed workers now appeared at the main telegraph and telephone stations. Another group cut the electricity supply to the Winter Palace.

None of this was a purely Bolshevik campaign. It was the work of the organised revolutionary masses of Petrograd, among them Bolsheviks but also anarchists, socialist revolutionaries and many others. Most believed they were preparing for the soviets to come to power, and that meant multi-party socialism, not Bolshevik rule. By the night of 24-25 October, Lenin could bear it no longer. While his hostess was out, he pulled on a disguise – he wound a bandage round his chin – and set off for Smolny. The guards had no idea who he might be, so they refused to let him in. He had to wait for an opportunity to sneak through the cordon. It was one of many moments of pure farce. Once he was inside the building, however, he made his way to the third floor where the action was. As the leader of the largest party in the Soviet, his moment had finally come.

On the morning of 25 October, Petrograd was presented with the manifesto that Lenin had drafted that first night.

'Citizens of Russia', it read. 'The Provisional Government has been overthrown. 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'.

Lenin had not claimed the triumph for his party, not quite yet. But he had achieved another goal. What mattered was that the manifesto was printed and posted up around the streets before the Second Congress of



Soviets could open. Indeed, when the Congress did begin, at 10.40 that morning, the opening speeches were interrupted by sporadic artillery fire.

The Menshevik and SR delegates walked out in protest. By doing that, they abandoned any hope of multi-party soviet rule, slender though it was. The principle of proletarian revolution, of an immediate transition to Soviet power, had won another victory.

The first revolutionary government of the new order came into being that same day. Lenin was in charge, Trotsky had responsibility for Foreign Affairs, and a young chap called Stalin was given the nationalities portfolio. It was not an avowedly Bolshevik regime. It ruled in the name of the soviets. Its first manifesto called for an immediate democratic peace – which was pure Bolshevism – but its call for a transfer of land to the peasants was borrowed from the left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries. For a few weeks that autumn the new regime was greeted with almost euphoric enthusiasm by the working people who had put it there.

But Lenin never saw his government as a broad church. This revolution was a thing that he intended to guide – not for his own sake, of course, but for that of the entire world. Convinced he had been called by History – with a big H – he was prepared to make any sacrifice it took to bring his vision into being. He also had to run a country that faced mortal crisis and a ruinous defeat.

He worked all hours – he slept at Smolny – destroying his health.

Everything went wrong, from the punitive terms of his peace with Germany to crop failures, complex multi-front armed conflict, terrorist attacks and even pandemic flu. Holding on to power – and even holding on to territory – required a focus and discipline that even Lenin must have found hard. But he consistently believed that a world revolution would rescue Russia and liberate working people right across the globe. By 1921, he was still holding on to that hope through what, effectively, was a single-party dictatorship. Lenin called it the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The rest, we know, is tragedy. It is easy to blame Lenin and it is right to do so – to a point. His impatience helped to drive through the October days, his ruthlessness was stamped on the new soviet leadership. His response to opposition was intolerance, his answer to violence was terror.

In December 1917, just weeks after he came to power, his new government established an Extraordinary Commission with sweeping powers to stamp out counter-revolutionary crimes. It would become infamous as the Cheka. In the ensuing months and years, the Russian empire tore itself apart. The murder of the Romanovs was but a moment in this tale of slaughter, torture, hunger, terror, slow death by disease.

When the civil war was over, both ruling party and society had hardened, coarsened, learned to hate.

But there is far more to the story than the guilt of one man or even of one party.

There were so many crucial turning-points that we can take our pick. The moderate left, for instance, need not have walked out of the Congress in October 1917. Kerensky need not have called on Kornilov, nor yet begun that fateful new offensive at the end of June. The right – the counter-revolution – remained blinkered and inflexible, at least as stubborn as the Bolsheviks themselves.

And while we're on inflexibility, the allied governments, Britain and France, must take some blame for their short-sightedness throughout the crisis.

Not surprisingly, their one priority was to keep Russia in the war. But they made no significant allowance for the scale and meaning of the revolution that had toppled the Romanovs in the spring.

And the autocracy was almost criminally culpable. The war was the immediate cause of Russia's revolution, and it was Nicholas II who led the Russian empire into it. But there are other charges to lay at his door. The deep



divisions in Russian society, and the anger and desperation of the poor were not new things – they had been there in 1914, 1905, 1896. Determination was a trademark of the revolutionaries – their enemies might call it ruthlessness, even cruelty – but it had been forged in decades of injustice.

And that brings us on to the dreamers, the tens of thousands of workers and conscripts whose hopes created Russia's revolutionary tide. Many were naïve, unrealistic and impatient. We can tear holes in almost all their schemes – sometimes it's even tempting to laugh at them. But they were not, in general, powered by hate. This may have been a revolution built on dreams, but those were all most ordinary people had. The very wildness of Russian socialism was a response to injustice, exclusion and state violence. It was born in the underground, raised in the cold and dark. In the circumstances, its hopefulness and decency ought to amaze us.

So what are Russians making of this now? The answer, I'm afraid, is not a great deal.

The trademark image of the revolution used to be the great Red Square parade. By the 1930s, the Soviet government had created a splendid foundation myth for itself, a story of Lenin's heroism and the people's joyful, honourable fight. Trotsky's role was edited out and the Congress of Soviets vanished like a mirage as the celebrations on Red Square grew ever more militaristic. Above all, though, it was a holiday – 7 November by the new calendar – and if you weren't involved in marching you could spend it getting drunk. The thing was so familiar that it was like a children's story – and as saccharine as one.

And then, when Soviet power collapsed and all its dreams were opened up to ridicule, the holiday began to seem a sham. People still got drunk, of course, but no-one knew what they were toasting as they did. In 2005, a very old tradition was revived to take its place. Russian Unity Day, which you are meant to celebrate on 4 November, remembers the liberation of Moscow at the end of the Time of Troubles in 1612. The new patriotic holiday is roughly at the same time as the old socialist one, so everyone can go on drinking and there's still a day off when people need one the most.

But that does not quite deal with the problem, especially this year. For one thing, Lenin is still a real presence in the middle of it all – his mausoleum is more or less under President Putin's office window.

So things have turned a little awkward on the commemoration front. For one thing, Putin's government is keen on law and order and the power of the state. The image of a population taking to the streets, of soldiers helping people to remove a hated regime and a tsar – this isn't quite the thing to celebrate in Russia now. To some extent, the problem is that communism turned out to be so divisive and so dark. But it's also true that significant portions of the Russian population actually want it back. Better not to open that whole can of worms.

The one creation of the revolution that the present government approves is the Cheka. Lenin's secret police morphed into Stalin's OGPU and NKVD and then into the KGB, which was where Putin cut his teeth. Powerful security forces are something that the Russian government can celebrate, and today's FSB still traces its ancestry to Lenin's Cheka. Look out then, this December, for a surreal centenary bash. The guest-list will be most exclusive – but the budget will be huge.

And that is not the only bit of surreality on offer. Since the centenary of 1917 cannot be swept under the carpet totally – it might be taken over by some foreigner, or even by the communists – there have been some official moves. A new Cathedral has risen in Moscow, dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution. It's not quite clear exactly which martyrs are meant, but to start with the entire Romanov family – including Nicholas II - are now officially saints.

What's odd here is that the new cathedral is just one block north of Lubyanka Square, the headquarters of the Cheka, the very body that created almost all the martyrs that the new cathedral is meant to commemorate. It's an irony at the very least, some might call it a cruel joke.



But most of the events that I've discussed with you tonight have not enjoyed much media-time in Russia. The big push, I think, comes next year, when the whole nation will be asked to mourn the death of St Nicholas the Martyr, forgetting everything that led to the Tsar's death and the part that so many ordinary people played. Russia sits uneasily with its communist past. There was a time when it was proud to have been a beacon of liberation, the leader of international socialism. Now what people remember from that distant time are red flags, ice-creams and the jeans that didn't fit. The current Russian government is as eager to make use of history as Lenin was, but the history it likes people to focus on is all about the mighty state, the great orthodox Russian one, the state that won the Second World War. Poor Lenin has been cut adrift.

I got a vivid sense of this when I passed through the Swedish city of Malmö a few months ago. In April 1917, Lenin passed through Malmö on his way from Switzerland to St Petersburg. There was a gala dinner at the grand Savoy Hotel. Knowing that there used to be a plaque commemorating this, I asked the receptionist at today's Savoy if I could photograph it. Can I see the plaque about Lenin, I asked her. But she looked surprised. Lenin? She queried. You mean John Lennon? She simply did not make the connection.

And what amazed me most was that she was Russian – she was from Moscow.

You have to look quite hard to find the traces of the Russian revolution now. In Moscow, certainly, they've built all over it. You can buy a Mercedes or a sleek black armoured car, but red flags are at a premium.

So let us reflect here, now, on what that long-dead revolution means. It has been an ideological football for a century.

But let us remember not just how it happened but above all why.

Russia's Great October Revolution was born in darkness and exclusion, nurtured by emergencies and wars. It was the product of thousands of dreams, but it was followed by hundreds of thousands – millions – of deaths. The lessons for us are not about Lenin, nor even Marx.

I think they are about securing inclusivity, equality and social responsibility, about not sitting back and letting injustice and corruption become entrenched.

A century on from the Russian Revolution, there are still pressing questions about capitalism and global inequality. The mere pursuit of wealth is surely not the best way to create a fair and healthy world. In the face of climate change, capitalism may well be poised to cost us the entire planet. In the past year, as I have read his writings once again, I have learned to respect some of Lenin's perceptions of problems like this. But he got all the answers wildly wrong. We know for certain that his Russian Revolution did not work.

So the questions remain. I think it is our duty to take them seriously. If we do not, the violence of revolution may not remain a thing of the past. We don't want that, I promise you, so where does our path lie? Or is this it? I do hope not.