

The Russian Revolution: Historical Reflections



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The Russian Revolution:

Historical Reflections,

Platinum Jubilee Commemorative
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Editors Note

The Russian Revolution of 1917 decreed the demise of the old Tsarist regime and in its nature and sweep, proved to be the greatest social upheaval since the days of the French Revolution. The Bolsheviks, who seized power in October that year, proceeded to establish the world's first Communist State covering nearly one-sixth of the globe. Their Revolution, it has been argued, proved to be the most momentous event of the twentieth century inspiring communist movements and revolutions across the world, notably in China, provoking a reaction in the form of fascism, and after the end of the Second World War, having an insightful influence on the many anti colonial movements and shaping the architecture of international relations in the course of the Cold War. The Bolsheviks continued in power for over seventy years until the structure which they had so assiduously built up collapsed under its own weight in 1991. This allowed historians to see the history of the Russian Revolution (following the work of Russian scholars who were finally freed from the trammels of Soviet censorship) in its entirety for the first time.

Since then, scholarship on the historic event has advanced in research and interpretation, particularly in the sphere of social and cultural history. Now, on the cusp of the centenary of the significant events that once unfolded in Russia together with its far reaching reverberations that has and has been affecting humankind suggests that as students of history it is a good time to reflect more philosophically on the tumultuous event.

With this aim in view, the Department of History, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, BelurMath, Howrah in collaboration with the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Kolkata, Gorky Sadan, organised a one day international seminar on the theme, 'The Russian Revolution: Historical Reflections.' The seminar was held on the 15th of February, 2017 and was part of the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, BelurMath Howrah.

The essays that appear in this volume were presented in the seminar. The editor is grateful to Dilorom Karomat, independent research scholar from Uzbekistan, now associated with the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies Kolkata, Prof. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta and Prof. Kunal Chattopadhyay, all resource persons in the seminar who agreed to contribute to this volume. The ideas and arguments expressed in the various essays is that of the respective authors and the editor and the publisher of this volume are in no way responsible for the same.

The first article by Sobhanlal Datta Gupta focus on the role of the Communist International (Comintern), which for the first time not only highlighted the importance of the colonial question internationally as it connected the colonial question with the problem of world revolution, but under the aegis of Lenin in 1919, the strategy and tactics of anti-colonial struggle were worked out in great detail, providing direct support to the struggling people in the colonies in the 1920s and 30s. The paper also identifies three problems which the Comintern had to confront despite the assistance given to the struggle of the colonial people by it. The final section of the

paper talks very briefly about the impact of the Russian Revolution on the colonies. The second, by Dilorom Karomat is dedicated to the Russian Revolution and its role in supporting revolutionary movement in India at the time of Third Comintern. The next essay by Kunal Chattopadhyay provides a quick survey of the historiography of the revolution over a century. In the light of his short survey which point to how the writing of history has been used to serve political goals, the paper looks at the course of the revolution with certain specific questions in mind; for example "Was there a "Democratic" alternative to the Soviets and the Bolsheviks? His answers and arguments that follow are thought provoking and should interest anyone seriously engaging with the revolution. The paper by Ananda Bhattacharyya deals with Bolshevism, Bolshevik Revolution, and its relation with the Indian Revolutionaries both in India and abroad as also its impact on the Indian subcontinent. Through a study of primary sources, he shows how the British reactions were multi-dimensional which were reflected in the contemporary papers and official documents. The essay by Saptadeepa Banerjee situates Mikhail Bakunin and his anarchist ideas in Revolutionary Russia of the nineteenth and twentieth century to examine his political philosophy in the context of the political and intellectual developments that took place in Russia during that phase. The next essay by Subrat Biswal also looks at the event and its impact but this time on Indian national movement. The paper by Soma Marik argues that Bolshevik theory and practice concerning the organization of women workers, the struggle for women's emancipation, and the definition of equality for women underwent transformation in course of their

engagement in struggles and observes ironically that while women were not exactly pushed back to the Tsarist age, inequality and male domination was nonetheless established substantially. The next essay by Moumita Chowdhury analyses the Russian Revolution through the prism of real politik and focus on the relation between state, power and force. She argues that the establishment and maintenance of statehood has little to do with ideology, rather ideology is often moulded and re moulded to serve political and military purpose. By analyzing the role of the army and the impact of wars on the Russian state and society, the essay show that it was the combination of power and force that underlined the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution. The last essay by Biswajeet Mukherjee and Subhadip Das concerns with a series of letters exchanged between Francois Furet and Ernst Nolte over the impact of the Russian Revolution as the later emphasizes on succession (Bolshevism preceded Fascism) and gives it the role of causal nexus while the former dismiss it as too simplistic. The paper argues that the letters between Nolte and Furet raises questions that should concern each and every one of us.

As convener of the seminar, I have received invaluable help from many people. I convey my gratitude and thanks to all of them. I remain grateful to Mr.Yury Dubovuy, Vice Consul and Director, Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Kolkata, Gorky Sadan for agreeing to collaborate with us and also to grace the event as an invited speaker. I extend my appreciation to Irina Malysheva for coordinating between Gorky Sadan and the Department of History, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira and also for presenting a short paper. I

remain grateful to Dr.Dilorom Karomat, research scholar of Uzbekistan, and now associated with the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata for agreeing to deliver the keynote address of the seminar. I offer my reverence to my teacher Prof.Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty who agreed to attend and chair a session in the seminar in spite of his busy schedule and other preoccupation on that day. Finally I express my gratitude and thanks to the authorities and support staff of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, my students both present and ex students, and my colleagues in the Department of History for their plenteous support and cooperation in making this seminar successful.

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March, 2017*

The Russian Revolution and the Colonial Question: The Lessons of History

Sobhanlal Datta Gupta

I

The Russian Revolution of 1917, despite many of its pitfalls and shortcomings, will be remembered for ever by the oppressed people engaged in the struggle against colonialism. This refers to two issues. First, under the auspices of the Communist International (Comintern), which was established in Moscow on the initiative of Lenin in 1919, the strategy and tactics of anti-colonial struggle were worked out in great detail, providing direct support to the struggling people in the colonies in the 20s and 30s. Second, what impact did the Russian Revolution make on the struggle against colonialism?

As regards the first issue, it needs to be kept in mind that, prior to the formation of the Third International, the colonial question did not engage the attention of the Second International (1889-1914). The Comintern for the first time highlighted the importance of the colonial question internationally as it linked the colonial question with the problem of world revolution. This was evident already in the inaugural Congress (First) of the Communist International in 1919. The Third International, in fact, provided a new dimension to the understanding of the colonial question by focusing on organization and ideology. Organizationally, it provided a major booster to the formation of Communist Parties across the globe, while ideologically it highlighted the point that anti-colonial struggle would reach its fruition only if the struggle against colonialism is linked to the struggle for socialism. Mere nationalist rhetoric would limit anti colonialism to the establishment of bourgeois rule in the aftermath of colonialism and unless this is superseded by the establishment of socialism, anti-colonial struggle would lose

its significance. Historical evidences show that already by 1921 communist parties were established in China, Korea, Indonesia, Egypt, South Africa, Argentina and Turkey. Besides, archival research of U.S. historian Richard Pipes and Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov now has established the point that immediately after the Russian revolution Lenin categorically issued the directive that it would be the responsibility of the Bolshevik Party to send its representatives to the countries of the East for providing military and financial assistance to the struggling people in the colonies. The records of the Comintern indicate that the colonial question was particularly highlighted in the Second (1920), Fourth (1922), Fifth (1924) and Sixth Congress (1928) , apart from the Baku Congress (1920), which was especially devoted to the understanding of the colonial question in the aftermath of the Second Congress.

However, despite the assistance given to the struggle of the colonial people by the Comintern there were at least three problems which it had to confront.

II

First, in the resolutions of Comintern it was very explicitly stated that in the interest of deepening the anti-colonial struggle, the communist parties of West would have to extend material and moral support to this cause. But, in practice, this did not happen. In the case of India, archival records of the British Communist Party now reveal that, despite repeated appeal of the CPGB leadership (which included Rajani Palme Dutt, Ben Bradley, Sapurji Saklatvala), they had to lament that the ranks of the CPGB could not be persuaded to be engaged in the struggle against colonialism, since they suffered from a feeling of "Empire consciousness" and racist supremacy. In Algeria and Morocco, the French Communist Party's position vis-à-vis anti colonial struggle against French colonial rule was rather passive. In Portugal, the Communist Party's position was that its main agenda was to fight against the fascist rule of Salazar and this demanded a kind of joint struggle of the Portuguese working class and people in the African colonies of Portugal.

Second, this created a problem in the Comintern in the sense that on a number of occasions Comintern congresses witnessed sharp debates among the delegates of the Western and non-Western countries. Thus, M.N. Roy, Ho Chi Minh, representatives of Korea and Turkey strongly reprimanded the West European communist parties for their rather passive stand on the question of colonialism and on this question the Russian Communist Party leadership wholly sided with the Eastern representatives. As early as 1920 Lenin in a directive concerning the nationalities and the colonial question highlighted the importance of the colonial question, reminding the West European communist parties of their special responsibilities in this regard. Trotsky in the Fourth Congress of Comintern (1922) fully endorsed the position of the Eastern delegates. Besides, what is important is to remember that for a proper analysis and understanding of the

colonial question the Comintern had taken a series of measures by setting up an Eastern Department, the Indian Commission, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Baku (KUTV) and a research institute. It is in these institutions that Roy, Ho Chi Minh and thousands of representatives of the Eastern countries received their political and military training. In the case of India, a number of Ghadar revolutionaries who secretly went to Russia were trained in the Comintern.

Third, the communist parties that emerged in the East under the auspices of the Communist International were by and large guided by two interrelated ideas, which they picked up from the Russian Revolution. First, genuine anti-colonial struggle precluded any alliance with the nationalist forces, since bourgeois nationalism was a spent force, as it believed in a compromise with imperialism. Second, in their understanding the Russian revolution, with its focus on armed struggle under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, was the model which had to be followed in the colonies. In the case of India the attitude of the communist party toward Gandhi and other nationalists was reflective of this position. This was not endorsed by Lenin and it is precisely this position which was shared by M.N. Roy in his debate with Lenin in the Second Congress of Comintern in 1920. In fact, although in the initial years of Comintern Lenin himself dreamt of a world revolution, the defeat of the German Revolution in 1919 and the collapse of workers' uprisings in central Europe and Italy in 1918-1919 led him to revise his stand and by 1921, when the Third Congress of Comintern was held Lenin called for a broad anti-imperialist united front, contesting the position of the communist parties in the colonies that bourgeois nationalism was a spent force. He made it clear that the communist parties would have to simultaneously join hands with nationalism in the fight against colonialism in the colonies and fight against their compromising position. In

1935, this position of Lenin was further legitimized when Georgi Dimitrov in the Seventh Congress of Comintern called for popular front/united front against the rising menace of fascism across Europe. For many communist parties this position was difficult to accept, ie. the communist parties in the French colonies of North Africa vis-à-vis Arab nationalism. Within the communist parties of India and Indonesia there were sharp differences on this question. One exception, at least to a large extent, was the Syrian Communist Party. Despite this confusion and differences within the Communist International one point stands vindicated. The communist movement in the colonies was tremendously inspired by the victory of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and that is why, rightly or wrongly, they considered the Bolshevik Party as the model to be followed.

III

Finally, as regards the impact of the Russian Revolution on the colonies, one has to look at the years 1945-1991. This was a time when anti colonial struggle was transformed into what came to be characterized as the national liberation movement. Throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s national liberation movement gained momentum in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was Soviet economic and military assistance which tremendously contributed to the unfolding of struggle in Angola, Mozambique, Sudan and Ethiopia in Africa, Vietnam in Asia, Cuba and Nicaragua in Latin America. In Cuba and the aforesaid African countries radical regimes, professing socialism took shape. Besides, the Soviet Union's role in accelerating non-aligned movement was a major factor. What is especially significant is the fact that within the third world the impact of the Russian Revolution was two-fold. There were countries like Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia which fully subscribed to the ideology of revolutionary socialism and considered the Soviet Union as their great ally. But there were also countries like India, Egypt and Indonesia which were ruled by nationalist leaders like Nehru, Nasser and Sukarno. But they too were deeply influenced by the Russian Revolution and looked towards the Soviet Union in times of crisis. In the bitter moments of Cold War, in times of Suez crisis, Bangladesh War, on the Kashmir question these nationalist leaders looked towards the Soviet Union as their only support against imperialism.

The Russian Revolution and Indian Revolutionaries in Central Asia

Dilorom Karomat

The approaching ... anniversary of the October Revolution brings to mind many episodes connected with it. This... takes us back to the blessing of our own national liberation struggle which was then intensifying.

Shaukat Usmani¹

The year 2017 is significant as the centennial year of the Russian Revolution. Significant as nowadays, not only historians and researchers, but most post-Soviet Republics are trying to analyse and understand what happened in the

¹ Shaukat Usmani, *Russian Revolution and India*, in *Mainstream*, July 1, 1967, p.13;

Shaukat Usmani (1901–1978) had been a very early leading activist of the Communist Party of India (CPI), formed in October 1920 in the Soviet city of Tashkent and a founding member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) when it was formed in Kanpur in 1925. He was also the only candidate to the British Parliament contesting elections, while he was residing in India—that too in a prison. He was sentenced to a total of 16 years in jail after being tried in the Kanpur (Cawnpore) Case of 1923 and later the Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929. Usmani has published several books. He was able to publish his "Four Travellers" [Karachi, Usta Publications Corp. 1950; First English Edition (originally published in 1939 as "Char Yatri" in Hindi and "Char Musafir" in Urdu)] An account of a journey through Jagdalak, Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Tirmiz, Comsomol, Bukhara and Samarkand, this was a fact based novel about the trip of four Indian revolutionaries to the Turkestan republics, the central Asian part of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Other his book was "Historic Trips of a Revolutionary - Sojourn in the Soviet Union", New Delhi: Sterling Publishers - privately published limited edition, 1977).