

# An exchange on Bolshevism and revolutionary violence

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*Below we are posting a letter from a WSWs reader on the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks and the execution of Czar Nicholas II and his family, followed by a reply by Peter Daniels.*

Dear WSWs,

Marxists such as Lenin and Trotsky like to compare the working class vanguard to the petty middle-class mountain vanguard of the French Revolution. The Jacobin club, in my humble opinion, executed horrific acts upon the populace of France, murdering the Austrian harlot of France (she definitely was something debauched), and her innocuous son, which were unwarranted. Historical characters such as the philosopher killer Marat got what he deserved when he was slain in his bathtub and when Mr. Incorruptible was decapitated.

The Bolshevik tradition, as defined by Lenin, declares that the true proletarian leadership is analogous to the Jacobin party, in that they both represent the most progressive class at two distinct points in the historical process, one being the town and country poor at the dawn of capital, and the other the industrial working class, and the radicalized elements of the peasantry at the dawn of socialism. But, in his attempt to distance himself from the Jacobin example of revolutionary terror, Lenin asserts in his article to *Pravda* that to follow a good example is not to copy it verbatim, especially in the use of certain tools (guillotines, mass shootings, etc.). I detect hypocrisy in this, for local Bolsheviks did kill the Czar and his family. The other exploits of terror were induced by the ruthlessness of the Russian reactionaries, but this does not excuse the liquidation of the Czar and his children by local Bolsheviks.

I hope you don't condemn this as "Richard Pipes" or "Robert Conquest" gall, but I must ask, what is your opinion on revolutionary violence in the context of history and in today's terms? I know that the ICFI [International Committee of the Fourth International] dismisses Fetishism of the gun as Maoist garbage, but what should a workers state do in order to protect itself from devolution? I am left-wing and I do consider myself a neophyte Marxist (I'm only 17, and the Tony Cliff state capitalist thesis compared to the Trotskyist parasite/bureaucratic thesis is still perturbing me a bit), but I'm not radical enough to condone this type of homicide.

It seems as if the Bolshevik leadership flirted with Maximalist league notions of how to deal with the "degenerate classes." Solzhenitsyn quoted several passages from Lenin's "How to Organize Competition" to demonstrate that Lenin manifested the same callous tendencies as Stalin would resurrect in his reign of parasite reaction. So the question is, fundamentally, do you admit that what the Bolsheviks did in killing the Czar and his family was immoral, deny that Lenin sent the order, or accept that (in paraphrasing Shaw) when a socialist regime carries out in a judicious manner the eradication of malignant elements it's okay. Or you may find this an insignificant subject, for history will one day absolve and cleanse the Marxist-Leninist faction for its errant tendencies (like for instance Stalinism, no fault of their own, due to subjective not objective factors particularly in the mass aggregate of peasants in conflict with the socialist process, the civil war, the failure of exporting socialism, the

growth of bureaucracy and the crushing of the Left Opposition, which I must learn more about).

Sincerely,

HF

Dear WSWs reader,

Thank you for your recent letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Let me reply briefly to your questions.

There are two major issues that you raise. First, you indict the Jacobin leadership of the French Revolution; second, you suggest that the Bolsheviks are guilty of similar "horrific" acts of violence, such as the execution of Czar Nicholas II and his family.

We do not agree with either of these conclusions. Your appraisal of the Jacobins is abstract and ahistorical. Our focus must be, not on the fate of someone like Marie Antoinette, who symbolized the cruelty of an oppressive and outmoded social system, but on the necessary historical struggle against this system. The historical record is clear. This struggle was led by the Jacobins. Our aim should be to understand how and why they played that role.

It is not necessary to agree, more than 200 years later, with every measure taken by the Jacobins to grasp the fact that they represented the most consistent revolutionary tendency at the time. Jacobinism reflected the most revolutionary sections of the petty bourgeoisie. In their radical egalitarianism, they played a crucial role as the vanguard and shock troops of the French Revolution, embodying the then-revolutionary role of the rising bourgeoisie. In the end, their role was limited by the historical limitations of the bourgeoisie itself. The rising bourgeoisie drew back from the most radical conceptions of equality raised during the revolution. The Jacobins, in turn, were criticized from the left by more radical and egalitarian elements, tendencies that anticipated the later struggles of a working class that was only in the early stages of its formation. After the high point of the Revolution, the Jacobins were removed from power as the bourgeoisie began to consolidate its rule.

Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolshevik leaders placed themselves in the Jacobin tradition, notwithstanding the necessary historical limitations of that analogy. Trotsky quoted opponents of the October Revolution, such as the Cadet leader Miliukov, who acknowledged that the Bolsheviks "knew where they were going, and they went in the direction which they had chosen once for all, toward a goal which came nearer and nearer with every new, unsuccessful experiment of compromise." Trotsky added, "You may say of the Bolsheviks with still more justice what was said... about the Jacobins. They were adequate to the epoch and its tasks."

There was nothing hypocritical about Lenin's comments on the Jacobins, as you suggest. He was not called upon to endorse every action of the Jacobins, but neither did he join in the hypocritical complaints of latter-day reaction against Jacobin "bloodthirstiness." The Bolsheviks, as a genuine Marxist leadership, opposed both individual terror and pacifism. They certainly understood the necessity, under definite and specific conditions, for revolutionary violence. As Trotsky later declared, "...no ruling class has ever voluntarily and peacefully abdicated." This

was so in 1789, and in 1917.

When you assert that Bolshevik terror was “induced by the ruthlessness of the Russian reactionaries,” but that this was not the case in relation to the execution of Czar Nicholas II, you are drawing a distinction where none exists. The execution of the Czar and his family was an extreme measure forced upon the Revolution when it was fighting for its life against a savage and ruthless enemy, backed by the armies of all the major imperialist powers.

Trotsky, the towering historian of the Russian Revolution as well as its co-leader, describes the conditions in the summer of 1918, at the time of this execution, in his autobiography, *My Life*. “All the aftermath of the war was then just beginning to make itself felt.... One wondered if a country so despairing, so economically exhausted, so devastated, had enough sap left in it to support a new regime and preserve its independence. There was no food. There was no army. The railways were completely disorganized. The machinery of state was just beginning to take shape. Conspiracies were being hatched everywhere.”

In mid-1918, only the first steps had been taken to build the Red Army. The counterrevolutionary forces were stepping up their campaigns, in growing cooperation with the imperialist capitals of Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo. The Japanese attacked Siberia and occupied Vladivostok. The Germans occupied all of the Ukraine, the Crimea, and the coasts of the Black and Azov Seas. The British, French and Americans landed at Murmansk.

The Czech Legion, formed earlier in the war by prisoners of war who were eager to fight against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were now stirred into rebellion against the new Soviet power by rumors that they were going to be extradited to Germany. The Czechs made common cause with the White Guards under the command of Admiral Kolchak, and these forces directly menaced the Revolution by occupying huge sections of central Russia, including Samara, Ufa, Simbirsk and Ekaterinburg.

Ekaterinburg was where the Czar and his family were being kept in internment. The Bolsheviks had proceeded quite objectively up to this point against the old royal family. There were plans to set up a revolutionary tribunal to try the Czar. The advance of the Czechs and Kolchak created a new and very dangerous situation, however. The Bolsheviks feared, with good reason, that Nicholas II or his family might be rescued and utilized to rally and unite all the forces of the counterrevolution. As Trotsky later wrote, “The civil war front was taking more and more the shape of a noose closing ever tighter about Moscow.” The decision was therefore taken to execute the Czar and his entire family.

Trotsky discussed the fate of the Czar in entries in his diary from April 1935. He explained that the executions took place when he was at the front, in this most critical period of the Civil War. He found out when he returned to Moscow that the decision had been made by the Bolshevik leadership under Lenin. “[T]he decision was not only expedient but necessary,” Trotsky wrote. “The severity of this summary justice showed the world that we would continue to fight on mercilessly, stopping at nothing. The execution of the Tsar’s family was needed not only in order to frighten, horrify, and dishearten the enemy, but also in order to shake up our own ranks, to show them that there was no turning back, that ahead lay either complete victory or complete ruin.”

This was not the first time that such measures of revolutionary terror had been required in history, and it had nothing to do with acts of individual terror, which Marxists irreconcilably oppose. Extraordinary measures are sometimes needed in civil war conditions. Without the ruthless measures of the Bolsheviks, the counterrevolution would have triumphed, with incalculably tragic consequences for the worker and peasant masses. The Bolsheviks were fighting an international counterrevolutionary conspiracy, in which all the imperialist powers, including the United States, were determined to strangle the Revolution at

birth. The Bolsheviks were no more “immoral” than Abraham Lincoln, under whose command General Sherman marched through Georgia in 1864 in a campaign of calculated and ruthless destruction designed to demoralize and shatter the Confederacy.

There is another related issue that is posed by the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century. You refer to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the notorious chauvinist and anticommunist who looks back nostalgically to the days of the Czarist Empire. Solzhenitsyn, unsurprisingly, equates the revolutionary methods of Lenin with the counterrevolutionary Stalin. You also imply, paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw—who became an apologist of the Stalinist regime in Moscow—that perhaps the Bolsheviks’ measures during the Civil War were defensible, but then so also were the policies of the Stalin regime.

Here again, this is an ahistorical approach that proceeds from conceptions of an abstract morality, rather than a morality that is rooted in the class struggle and the logic of revolution. All the opponents of revolution claim that Stalinism is the logical outgrowth of Bolshevism. This leads to the reactionary conclusion that there is no fundamental difference between the execution of the Czar, on the one hand, and the assassination of Trotsky and the frame-ups by the Stalin regime of virtually the entire Bolshevik leadership, on the other.

One of Trotsky’s most important contributions to Marxism during the period of his final exile was his tireless political exposure of the calumny that Stalinism and Bolshevism were the same. This exposure was a crucial component of Trotsky’s principled struggle against the nationalist Soviet bureaucracy. The Trotskyist movement steadfastly fought imperialism without making any concessions to Stalinism, and fought Stalinism—in the final analysis, an agency of imperialism—without making any concessions to capitalist reaction. I would particularly recommend two short pamphlets written by Trotsky in 1937-38: *Stalinism and Bolshevism* and *Their Morals and Ours*.

Stalinism “grew out” of Bolshevism, not as its logical fruition, but as its counterrevolutionary opposite. Whereas the Bolsheviks told the truth about the role of Czarism and took the most ruthless measures to defend the Revolution, the Stalinists framed up the revolutionary leaders in the interests of a new ruling stratum, the Soviet bureaucracy, which was mortally hostile to the Revolution and to the interests of the working class.

I hope that this explains the position of the WSWWS on these major events of the twentieth century, and I strongly urge you to deepen your study of this subject, including the major works of Trotsky on the struggle against Stalinism.

Peter Daniels, for the WSWWS editorial board

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