Lecture one: The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century

Part 4

By David North
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This is the fourth and final part of the lecture “The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century” delivered by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Parts 1, 2 and 3 were posted August 29-31.

Beginning Friday, September 2, we will post, in three installments, the second lecture given at the school, also by David North, entitled “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International has never sought to deny that the dissolution of the Soviet Union signified a major defeat for the working class. But that event, the product of decades of Stalinist betrayals, did not invalidate either the Marxist method or the perspective of socialism. Neither the latter nor the former were in any way implicated in the collapse of the USSR. The Marxist opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy emerged in 1923 with the formation of the Left Opposition. Trotsky’s decision to found the Fourth International, together with his call for a political revolution within the Soviet Union, was based on his conclusion that the defense of the social gains of the October Revolution and the very survival of the USSR as a workers state depended upon the violent overthrow of the bureaucracy.

The International Committee emerged in 1953 out of the struggle within the Fourth International against the tendency led by Ernst Mandel and Michel Pablo which argued that the Soviet bureaucracy, in the aftermath of Stalin’s death, was undergoing a process of political self-reform, a gradual return to the principles of Marxism and Bolshevism, which invalidated Trotsky’s call for a political revolution.

The entire history of the Fourth International and the International Committee testifies to the political perspicacity of the analysis of Stalinism developed on the basis of the Marxist method. No one has demonstrated to us how, in what way, Marxism has been refuted by the betrayals and crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy. We are told by one representative of the leftist academic fraternity that “To argue that the collapse of organized communism as a political force and the destruction of state socialism as a form of society have no bearing on the intellectual credibility of Marxism would be rather like arguing that the discovery of the bones of Christ in an Israeli grave-yard, the abdication of the Pope, and the closure of Christendom would have no relevance to the intellectual coherence of Christian theology.”[28]

This metaphor is poorly chosen, for the Marxist opponents of Stalinism, i.e., the Trotskyists, did not view the Kremlin as the Vatican of the socialist movement. The doctrine of Stalin’s infallibility, if my memory serves me correctly, was never adhered to by the Fourth International—though the same cannot be said of the many left petty-bourgeois and radical opponents of the Trotskyist movement.

It is difficult to satisfy the skeptics. Even if Marxism cannot be held responsible for the crimes of Stalinism, they ask, does not the dissolution of the Soviet Union testify to the failure of the revolutionary socialist project? What this question betrays is the absence of 1) a broad historical perspective, 2) knowledge of the contradictions and achievements of Soviet society, and 3) a theoretically-informed understanding of the international political context within which the Russian Revolution unfolded.

The Russian Revolution itself was but one episode in the transition from capitalism to socialism. What precedents do we have that might indicate the appropriate time frame for the study of such a vast historical process? The social and political upheavals that accompanied the transition from an agricultural-feudal form of social organization to an industrial-capitalist society spanned several centuries. Though the dynamic of the modern world—with its extraordinary level of economic, technological and social interconnectedness—excludes such a prolonged time frame in the transition from capitalism to socialism, the analysis of historical processes that involve the most fundamental, complex and far-reaching social and economic transformations demands a time frame substantially longer than that which can be used for the study of more conventional events.

Still, the lifespan of the USSR was not insignificant. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, few observers outside Russia expected the new regime to survive even one month. The state that emerged from the October Revolution lasted 74 years, nearly three quarters of a century. In the course of that time, the regime underwent a terrible political degeneration. But that degeneration, which culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by Gorbachev and Yeltsin in December 1991, does not mean that the conquest of power by Lenin and Trotsky in October 1917 was a doomed and futile project.

To deduce the final chapter of Soviet history directly, and without the necessary mediating processes, from the Bolshevik seizure of power is an extreme example of the logical fallacy, Post hoc ergo propter hoc (After this, therefore because of this). An objective and honest study of the history of the USSR does not permit such a facile conflation of events. The outcome of Soviet history was not preordained. As we will explain in the course of this week, the development of the Soviet Union could have taken another and far less tragic direction. Though objective pressures—arising from the historic legacy of Russia’s backwardness and the fact of imperialist encirclement of the isolated workers’ state—played

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an immense role in the degeneration of the Soviet regime, factors of a subjective character—that is, the mistakes and crimes of its political leadership—contributed mightily to the ultimate destruction of the USSR.

However, the Soviet Union’s demise in 1991 does not dissolve into historical insignificance the mighty drama of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. It was certainly the greatest event of the twentieth century, and among the very greatest of world history. Our opposition to Stalinism is not lessened by acknowledging the colossal social achievements of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding the mismanagement and crimes of the bureaucratic regime, the October Revolution released extraordinary creative and profoundly progressive tendencies in the economic and social life of the Soviet people.

Vast and backward Russia underwent, as a consequence of the Revolution, an economic, social and cultural transformation unprecedented in human history. The Soviet Union was not, we emphasize, a socialist society. The level of planning remained of a rudimentary character. The program of building socialism in one country initiated by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924—a project which had no foundation in Marxist theory—represented a complete repudiation of the international perspective which inspired the October Revolution. Still, the Soviet Union represented the birth of a new social formation, established on the basis of a working class revolution. The potential of nationalized industry was clearly demonstrated. The Soviet Union could not escape the legacy of Russian backwardness—not to mention that of its Central Asian republics—but its advances in the sphere of science, education, social welfare and the arts were real and substantial. If the Marxist-Trotskyist warnings of the catastrophic implications of Stalinism seemed so implausible even to those on the left who were critical of the Stalinist regime, it was because the achievements of Soviet society were so substantial.

Finally, and most importantly, the nature and significance of the October Revolution can be understood only if it is placed within the global political context within which it emerged. If the October Revolution was some sort of historical aberration, then the same must of be said of the twentieth century as a whole. The legitimacy of the October Revolution could be denied only if it could be plausibly claimed that the Bolshevik seizure of power was of an essentially opportunistic character, lacking a substantial foundation in the deeper currents and contradictions of early twentieth century European and international capitalism.

But this claim is undermined by the fact that the historical setting of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power was World War I. The two events are inextricably linked, not merely in the sense that the war weakened the tsarist regime and created the conditions for revolution. At a more profound level, the October Revolution was a different manifestation of the deep crisis of the international capitalist order out of which the war itself had emerged. The smoldering contradictions of world imperialism brought the conflict between international economy and the capitalist nation-state system to the point of explosion in August 1914. Those same contradictions, which more than two years of bloody carnage on the war front could not resolve, underlay the social eruption of the Russian Revolution. The leaders of bourgeois Europe had sought to resolve the chaos of world capitalism in one way. The leaders of the revolutionary working class, the Bolsheviks, attempted to find a way out of that same chaos in another.

Understanding the profound historical and political implications of this deeper link between the World War and the Russian Revolution, there have been many attempts by bourgeois academicians to emphasize the accidental and contingent aspects of the First World War, to demonstrate that the war need not have broken out in August 1914, that there were other means by which the crisis unleashed by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo could have been settled. Two points must be made in response to those arguments.

The first is that while other solutions were conceivable, war was the resolution that was quite consciously and deliberately chosen by the governments of Austro-Hungary, Russia, Germany, France, and, finally, Great Britain. It is not necessarily the case that all these powers desired war, but in the end they all decided that war was preferable to a negotiated settlement that might require the surrender of one or another strategic interest. And the leaders of bourgeois Europe continued the war even as the cost in human lives mounted into the millions. No serious negotiations to restore peace were conducted among the belligerent powers until the outbreak of social revolution, first in Russia and then in Germany, created a change in class relations that forced an end to the war.

The second point is that the outbreak of a disastrous world war had long been foreseen by the socialist leaders of the working class. As early as the 1880s, Engels had warned of a war in which the clash of industrialized capitalist powers would lay waste to much of Europe. A war, wrote Engels to Adolph Sorge in January 1888, “would mean devastation like that of the Thirty Years War. And it wouldn’t be over quickly, despite the colossal military forces engaged... If the war were fought to a finish without internal disorder, the state of prostration would be unlike anything Europe has experienced in the past 200 years.” [29]

A year later, in March 1889, Engels wrote to Lafargue that war is “the most terrible of eventualities... there will be 10 to 15 million combatants, unparalleled devastation simply to keep them fed, universal and forcible suppression of our movement, a recrudescence of chauvinism in all countries and, ultimately, enfeeblement ten times worse than after 1815, a period of reaction based on the inanition of all the peoples by then bled white—and, withal, only a slender hope that the bitter war may result in revolution—it fills me with horror.”[30]

For the next 25 years, the European socialist movement placed at the center of its political agitation the struggle against capitalist and imperialist militarism. The analysis of the essential link between capitalism, imperialism and militarism by the finest theoreticians of the socialist movement and the innumerable warnings that an imperialist war was all but inevitable refute the claim that the events of August 1914 were accidental, unrelated to the inescapable contradictions of the world capitalist order.

In March 1913, less than 18 months before the outbreak of the World War, the following analysis was made of the implications of the crisis in the Balkans:

“... [T]he Balkan War has not only destroyed the old frontiers in the Balkans, and not only fanned to white heat the mutual hatred and envy between the Balkan states, it has also lastingly disturbed the equilibrium between the capitalist states of Europe... “European equilibrium, which was highly unstable already, has now been completely upset. It is hard to foresee whether those in charge of Europe’s fate will decide this time to carry matters to the limit and start an all-European war.” [31]

The author of these lines was Leon Trotsky.

From the supposedly accidental and contingent character of World War I, the academic apologists of capitalism deduce the coincidental nature of every other unpleasant episode in the history of twentieth century capitalism: the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the outbreak of World War II. It was all a matter of misjudgments, unforeseeable accidents and, of course, various bad guys. As we have been told by the French historian, the late Francois Furet, “A true understanding of our time is possible only when we free ourselves from the illusion of necessity: the only way to explain the twentieth century, to an extent an explanation is possible, is to reassert its unpredictable character...” He declares that “the history of the twentieth century, like that of the eighteenth and nineteenth, could have taken a different course: we need only imagine it without Lenin, Hitler, or Stalin.”[32]

In a similar vein, Professor Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. of Yale University
devoted an entire book to demonstrating that the coming to power of Hitler was largely the outcome of accidents. Yes, there were certain longstanding problems in German history, not to mention a few unfortunate events like the World War, the Versailles Peace and the world depression. But, far more importantly, “Luck—that most capricious of contingencies—was clearly on Hitler’s side.”[33] There were also “personal affinities and aversions, injured feelings, soured friendships, and desire for revenge”—all combining to influence German politics in unforeseeable ways. And yes, there was also “the chance encounter between Papen and Baron von Schröder at the Gentlemen’s Club” that ultimately worked to Hitler’s advantage. [34]

One wonders: if only von Papen had caught a cold and stayed in bed, rather than go to the Gentlemen’s Club, the whole course of the twentieth century might have been changed! It is equally possible that we owe the entire development of modern physics to the glorious apple that just happened to fall on Newton’s head.

If history is merely “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” what is the point of studying it? The premise of this week’s lectures is that the solution to the problems of the world in which we live—problems that threaten mankind with catastrophe—require not only an exhaustive factual knowledge of the history of the twentieth century, but also a profound assimilation of the lessons of the many tragic events through which the working class has passed during the past 100 years.

As the year 2000 approached, a large number of volumes devoted to a study of the departing century were released onto the book market. One of the characterizations of the period that obtained a notable degree of popularity was that of the “short twentieth century.” It was promoted particularly by Eric Hobsbawm, who argued that the characteristics that defined the century began with the outbreak of the World War in 1914 and ended with the demise of the USSR in 1991. Whatever Hobsbawm’s intentions may have been, this approach tended to support the argument that the decisive events of the twentieth century were a sort of surrealistic departure from reality, rather than the expression of historical law.

Rejecting this definition, I think that the epoch would be far better characterized as the “uncompleted century.” To be sure, from the standpoint of historical chronology, the twentieth century has run its course. It is over. But from the standpoint of the great and fundamental problems that underlay the massive social struggles and upheavals of the period between 1901 and 2000, very little was resolved.

The twentieth century has left the twenty-first with a vast unpaid historical bill. All the horrors that confronted the working class during the last century—war, fascism, even the possibility of the extinction of all human civilization—are with us today. We are not speaking, as the existentialists would have it, of dangers and dilemmas that are immanent in the very nature of the human condition. No, we are dealing with the essential contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, with which the greatest revolutionary Marxists of the twentieth century—Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky—grappled at a far earlier stage of their development. What could not be solved in the last century must be solved in this one. Otherwise, there is a very great and real danger that this century will be mankind’s last.

That is why the study of the history of the twentieth century and the assimilation of its lessons are a matter of life and death.

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