

British Library exhibition treats Russian Revolution from a hostile standpoint

By Thomas Scripps and Paul Mitchell
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The British Library's centenary exhibition, "Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths," on display until August 29, includes notable documents and exhibits.

The most poignant items include letters of Lenin and Trotsky, an original tattered *Budenovka* cavalry cap and a handmade Soviet banner bleached white with time and ceramics.

These artifacts are intrinsically valuable and interesting, but their presentation is fundamentally undermined by an ahistorical—and in some cases directly hostile—presentation of events.

The introductory text on the first display board sets the tone for what follows. It describes how the Bolsheviks' efforts to create an "ideal social order ... provoked the tragedy of a civil war."

That is, the Bolsheviks were guilty of provoking the forces of bloody counterrevolution because they made a revolution!

The organisers create a narrative that ultimately sidelines the complex evolution of events, or the ideas of their participants.

The very first document on display is a first edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, published in London in 1849, accompanied by the explanation that Karl Marx had never expected revolution to erupt first in Russia. This is a philistine "myth" or over-simplification in its own right.

In fact, as anyone who has studied his writings should know, Marx was never so prescriptive. He explained in his preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Manifesto*, "If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development."

Marx's early theorising on this point might have been an excellent starting point for a discussion of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution—of fundamental significance to the events of 1917. However, neither Trotsky's nor any other political tendency's ideas are shown serious attention.

One can already hear the response: that this exhibition aims to explore the cultural experience and moral response to the events of everyday Russians, not to focus on the political programs of "a few intellectuals," or worse still, 70 years of narratives "determined by the political views of the interpreters."

But what the organisers actually do with their claim to be giving a "voice to the people" is pursue their own partisan political views and interpretations.

A whole chapter in the exhibition catalogue, for example, is given over to authors such as Boris Pasternak, Ivan Bunin and Alexander Solzhenitsyn to prove the "tragedy of revolution" and then postulate the supposedly inevitable rise of Stalinism.

Just one fleeting reference is made to American socialist journalist

John Reed and his first-hand account of the revolution, *Shook the World*, in which he memorably wrote, "Think of the hundreds of thousands of Russian men staring up at speakers all over the vast country, workmen, peasants, soldiers, sailors, trying so hard to understand and to choose, thinking so intensely—and deciding so unanimously at the end."

It is not only the thoughts of political leaders that are ignored, therefore, but the participation of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of workers and peasants in the socialist movement. In regard to the events of 1905, for example, the revolutionary "dress rehearsal" for 1917, the exhibition does not even mention the Petrograd Soviet.

Meanwhile, the policy of bloody class repression embarked upon by the Russian government is whitewashed with a reference to "the Tsar's poor handling of Bloody Sunday," when at least 1,000 protesters were massacred on January 9 (22), 1905.

The few short scenes on display from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) provide, by themselves, a more insightful commentary on the period—presenting the solidarity and struggle of the impoverished masses against the Russian elites and their police protectors. By contrast, the exhibition's handling of sources and events transforms the revolution, which proceeded with a political logic well understood by its leaders, into a hodgepodge of accident and happenstance.

The February Revolution of 1917 therefore arrives as something of a surprise, but is welcomed by the organisers and proclaimed to be what should have been the conclusion to the struggle for bourgeois democracy against autocracy. What followed—the October Revolution—is portrayed as a huge mistake. How astonishing that the British cultural establishment feels this way!

The rise of the Bolsheviks and their eventual seizure of power is characterised as a counterrevolution against the Provisional Government. October is summarised as a process whereby "optimism turned into revolutionary violence," aided by soldiers returning from the front who had lost any sense of the value of life and of "Mother Russia."

This formula, so beloved of nationalist reactionaries, introduces a rehash of the old right-wing lie that the Bolsheviks triumphed because they were the most violent and ruthless. It signals a shift in gear, as the exhibition gets into its central theme: the suffering of the civil war.

The civil war is portrayed as if terrible suffering were the inevitable product of the revolution itself. In fact, the war was forced on the Bolsheviks by White (counterrevolutionary, but here characterised as "liberal") armies, financed and armed by the imperialist powers, which launched a series of attacks on the new Soviet democracy.

Given the exhibition's location, a detailed examination of the

British government's efforts, in the words of Winston Churchill, to "strangle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle" would be in order. The details of foreign intervention, however, are for the most part ignored. Nothing is said, unsurprisingly, of British imperialism's campaign to protect its oil assets in the Caucasus.

Again, the sources speak with more historical truth and power. On display in this section is a leaflet headed, "All-Lies" . It was distributed by the Red Army to intervening British soldiers, exposing their government's true motivations and the lies told about the Bolshevik regime.

Among those lies was the claim that the Bolsheviks ruled through the dictatorship of a narrow cabal, enforced by the Cheka secret police. Little mention is made of the attractive power of the democratic and social rights granted by the Soviet regime versus the return to Tsarist—and worse—conditions threatened by the Whites. The creation of the Cheka and other emergency measures—forcible grain requisitioning, for example—are discussed in detail in a separate section to the Civil War, as if such policies were the Bolsheviks' intentions regardless of the perilous military context.

In the catalogue, historian Jonathan Smele takes the supposed perfidious aims of the Bolsheviks a stage further. He dismisses the claim propounded by "the strictures of anti-imperialist Soviet ideologies" that the outbreak of the civil war originated with the 1918 revolt of the Czech Legion, which had made common cause with Admiral Kolchak's White Guards and occupied huge sections of central Russia.

Smele claims what was happening were a series of civil wars for independence launched by states oppressed by the Russian Empire, beginning with the 1916 Turkestan revolt against the tsarist regime. The Bolsheviks, Smele declares, weren't really interested in their self-determination, but their "subjugation" into a new Soviet Empire. So much for the earlier invocations of "Mother Russia," as glorifying one nationalism gives way to a glorification of many nationalisms!

Smele repeats the old lie that Bolshevism naturally gave rise to Stalinism. He writes off the intense debates in the Bolshevik party over what sort of federative relationship should be established between the various soviet republics that had emerged. There is no consideration of the bitter struggle launched by Lenin against the advocates of Great Russian chauvinism, represented above all by Joseph Stalin and his actions in Georgia, where he ordered in the Red Army, without the knowledge of its commander, Trotsky, to brutally suppress a minor uprising.

In one of his last commentaries, *On the Question of Nationalities or "Autonomisation"*, in December 1922, Lenin declared that, whilst it was of the utmost importance to "maintain and strengthen the union of socialist republics," the right to autonomy or secession for the national minorities of Russia was absolutely necessary. In Georgia, he explained, Stalin's chauvinism had damaged working class unity by imposing the interests of a big nation over a smaller one.

The inclusion of a large animated map in the exhibition to plot the course of the battle-lines in the Civil War is a plus, primarily for the way in which it exposes the narrative put forward by the organisers. The viewer can see the enormous challenges faced, and overcome, by the fledgling Soviet State and the Red Army across such a huge territory and the near disastrous position in which it found itself at times.

Having considered this map and its implications, it seems appropriate to ask how a regime that apparently maintained itself through the repressive mechanisms of a fanatical few was able to win

such immense victories.

At this stage, the organisers appear to have decided some semblance of "balance" was needed and turned to the positive efforts of the Bolsheviks to create a new society. All they could muster, however, was back-handed praise for the Soviet state's effective propaganda, which did well to create a "compelling alternative reality" to the chaos.

Moving to the final section on the international impact of the revolution, posters are displayed from the Social Democratic Party and Spartacus League of Germany and the Hungarian Communists led by Bela Kun; memoirs from a fighter in the Bavarian Red Army; a pamphlet from the Limerick Soviet in Ireland; and a banner presented to the British Young Communist League by the Soviet Union. These are testament to a global movement of working people and undermine the idea that the Bolshevik revolution was a conspiratorial coup hatched by a small clique.

Leaving the exhibition the question arises—why organise an examination of such world historic events in this distorted way?

The exhibition's final comment says it all. Revolutions, it warns, reveal the "vulnerability of democratic procedures in the face of organised violence" and the "challenge to humanitarian values posed by civil strife." In other words, revolutions are bad—inspired by ultimately doomed ideas and led by bloodthirsty tyrants.

Such moralistic drivel is answered by Trotsky in "What is a Revolutionary Situation" where he explains, "The revolutionary situation ... begins only from the moment that the economic and social premises of a revolution produce a break in the mentality of society and its different classes."

Revolution arises from objective processes—the breakdown of the economy, the pressures of war, the impossibility of reforms. Revolutionary parties do not conjure up these circumstances, they intervene in them as the vanguard of the working class and the decisive element in its struggle for power; just as organisations of the old order intervene to crush that struggle.

Had the Bolsheviks been defeated in 1917, the ruling elite would have reasserted its power through bloody repression, as the civil war proved. The people of Russia would have experienced the world's first fascist state under the heel of counterrevolutionary White Generals.

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