

German Historical Museum exhibition presents the October Revolution as an event of world-historical significance

By Verena Nees
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An exhibition opened October 18 at the German Historical Museum (DHM) in Berlin celebrating the centenary of the October Revolution. Entitled “1917. Revolution. Russia and Europe,” the exhibition is certainly worth a visit. It runs until April 15, 2018.

There are certainly elements of the exhibition that need to be criticised, in particular superficial and somewhat misleading texts that could lead to an ambivalent or even hostile interpretation of the 1917 events.

However, set against the background of anti-Communist tirades and derogatory articles in the media, which have sought to depict Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks in the worst possible light, the Berlin exhibition is a healthy antidote.

The DHM show provides a sober, documentary presentation of events and makes two things clear:

First, the establishment of the first workers state was not a coup carried out by a small band of violent supporters of Lenin, but was rather the product of the struggle of millions of workers, impoverished peasants and war-weary soldiers, who joined the Bolsheviks because they regarded the party as the most consistent defender of their interests.

Second, the October Revolution was not an isolated Russian phenomenon, but rather a world event that shaped European and international developments throughout the 20th century and continues to do so today. The cannon shots from the Aurora battleship, which gave the signal for the uprising on the night of October 25 (November 7, according to the modern calendar), led—in the phrase of the American chronicler of the revolution, John Reed—to “Ten Days that Shook the World.”

It is precisely these two points that have provoked angry responses in the German media. A number of commentaries accuse the DHM of not devoting enough space to the “atrocities” carried out by the Bolsheviks.

Bernhard Schulz in *Tagesspiegel* regretted the absence of a sound bite which included “the shots and explosions” of the revolution and the “screams of its victims.” *FAZ*’s Andreas Kilb accused the exhibition of being “provocatively downright factual.” Jens Bisky in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* claimed the exhibition poses the “wrong questions” and he revives yet again the claims about the identity of Lenin’s and Stalin’s policies. Arno Widmann in the *Berliner Zeitung* was particularly angry, and claimed the exhibition should feature a wall dedicated to the memory of the “millions of victims of the revolution, civil war and Stalinism.” There was “not a single second” when “the October Revolution could be considered an act of liberation.”

The Berlin exhibition was prepared in cooperation with the Swiss National Museum, but had a different focus from the exhibition in Zurich, which ended last June and concentrated on the relationship between the October Revolution and Switzerland.

According to its team of curators, the Berlin exhibition sought to show the “world-historical significance” of the Russian Revolution and

especially its impact on Europe, based on the experience of six countries—Germany, Hungary, Poland, Italy, France and England. Reactions in these countries ranged from “fascination and hopes for a better future” to “fear of violent radicalisation and attempts by the communists to overthrow governments.”

The exhibition’s documentation of the November Revolution of 1918-19 in Germany, the short-lived Soviet republic in Hungary and the massive strike waves in Italy, France and England confirms the perspective of the Bolsheviks themselves, who regarded the Russian Revolution as part of an international revolutionary development.

Many visitors paused for some time to watch a rare film of a mass rally in Berlin in 1918 at which Karl Liebknecht spoke, and another from the same period in Munich. The suppression of the German Revolution with the help of the Social Democrats was undoubtedly a major factor in prolonging the bloody civil war in Soviet Russia.

The exhibition features 500 items, including 180 on loan from museums and historical institutes in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The various items include many previously unknown film clips, photos, sound documents and posters, as well as imposing works and architectural designs by Soviet avant-garde artists such as Tatlin, Goncharova, Kandinsky and Malevich. Visitors can also hear songs and music by Soviet composers such as Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin.

“From February to October 1917”

The exhibition depicts the social situation in Russia prior to the 1917 revolution. It features a large painting, “The Pilgrim” (1894) by Robert Büchtger, illustrating the miserable conditions prevailing in the Russian countryside. A little girl leads an old, blind peasant across a muddy field, an image aimed at portraying the hopes of an end to Russian backwardness, which evidently motivated itinerant painters such as Büchtger.

The court of the tsar and the Orthodox Church overflows with pomp and wealth, while bitter poverty prevails in the countryside and harsh exploitation in urban factories. Photos show workers at the Putilov factory. Day labourers unload a barge, homeless workers sleep on the streets. Other photos portray the brutality of the tsarist army during the revolutionary unrest of 1905. Another filmstrip from the First World War shows poorly clad Russian soldiers, advancing under withering fire while their wives and children queue for bread and starve on the home front.

The subsequent section, “Utopia and Reality,” seeks to illustrate the period between February and October 1917, but it is sketchy and eclectic. A photo of the women’s demonstration that advanced on the Tauride Palace in February 1917 and triggered the February Revolution, is followed by a display devoted to Lenin’s famed “April Theses,” issued after his return to Russia from exile in Switzerland. This is then followed

by an item dealing with the period of dual power exercised by the provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet. In quick succession, the DHM exhibition treats the July demonstration, the seizure of power in October and the civil war.

There is no treatment here of the counterrevolutionary General Lavr Kornilov and his preparations for a military coup in October, and no documentation of the fierce internal party debates inside the Bolshevik party over the “April Theses,” in which Lenin and Trotsky opposed Kamenev and Stalin’s defence of the provisional government and support for continuation of the war. Other important developments that played a crucial role in the decision to take power in October—the increased militancy of millions of peasants and the growing resistance by the international working class to the war, e.g. the strike by German sailors—are not documented. One comment in the exhibition visitors’ book reads: “There are many interesting items, but I cannot find a common thread.”

These weaknesses open the door for anti-communist ideologues intent on portraying the revolution as a coup by the Bolsheviks. One text reads: “In October, the Bolsheviks were able to grab power.”

The documents themselves, however, tell a different story: the audio documents and film excerpts from speeches by Trotsky (“To the Fraternal Union of Soviet Republics,” April 1919) and Lenin (“What is Soviet Power?” March 23, 1919) make clear their close links to the population.

This is also evident from the depth of feeling on the faces of workers at Lenin’s funeral in 1924. In addition to photos of the horrors of the Civil War and the final stages of the great famine, the exhibition features illustrations of the famous train that carried Trotsky, leader of the Red Army, during the civil war. The exhibition quotes from Trotsky’s autobiography, *My Life*: “The train crew performed many other tasks besides their special duties. They lent their help in time of famine, during epidemics of disease, in propaganda campaigns, and at international congresses. The train was the honorary head of a rural district and of several children’s homes. Its communist local published its own paper, *On Guard*.”

At one point, a film clip shows a labour camp from 1918. It is accompanied by an outrageous text claiming the subject of the film to be “forced labour in a concentration camp” run by the Bolsheviks. The exhibition here echoes here the claims by far-right extremists such as the Humboldt University professor Jörg Baberowski that mass shootings by Bolsheviks and the setting up of concentration camps were taking place in 1918. This absurd claim is then used to draw a parallel to the Nazi Holocaust.

In fact, the clip obviously shows workers in their traditional gear forcing a former exploiter to perform physical labour, in this case loading wood. The latter, dressed in a suit and collar, is unused to such work and drops a log, which his supervisor, in almost jovial fashion, then picks up. No doubt some visitors to the exhibition might be amused at the thought of his or her boss getting his or her hands dirty. “Forced labour” in Nazi concentration camps, however, looked very different.

Peace, bread and land

One highlight of the exhibition is undoubtedly the display of the decrees and proclamations of the workers government issued on the day of the seizure of power and the days immediately after. These include decrees on peace, land ownership, workers’ control of the banks and factories, the separation of church and state and the rights of the peoples of Russia.

What other revolutionary government acted with such audacity to fulfil the demands of workers and the poor rural population?

Lenin and the new workers’ government, the Council of People’s Commissars, began work to resolve the most pressing social problems of the population during the night of October 25. Continuing the war is a “crime against humanity,” Lenin told the Second All-Russian Congress,

in justifying the Decree on Peace, which ordered immediate peace negotiations and the preparation of a ceasefire. At the same time he appealed to workers in all the warring countries of Europe to rise up against the war.

Just a few months later, on March 3, 1918, the Soviet-Russian negotiating delegation under the leadership of Trotsky, signed a peace treaty in Brest-Litovsk, which heralded the end of the world war. The original agreement is on display at the exhibition in Berlin.

Visitors can study the original decrees or text excerpts displayed on columns. As one proceeds further into the exhibition one encounters many posters, often the work of avant-garde artists, which the Bolshevik government utilised in campaigns against illiteracy, anti-Semitism and to promote equality for women. (A speech by Lenin opposing anti-Semitism with German subtitles can be found on YouTube.)

The Soviet Union, founded in 1922, had broad international appeal. A wonderful painting by Heinrich Vogeler, “Red Metropolis” from 1923, testifies to this appeal, alongside photos of construction projects, in which workers and engineers from abroad took part. The appeal of the Russian Revolution endured, even in the period of degeneration under Stalin’s regime. A copy of the “International Monthly Paper on the Problems of Cultural Reorganisation” features an article entitled: “Germans are building in the USSR. The New Frankfurt” from the year 1930.

A special attraction in the center of the exhibition is a huge oil painting by Isaak Brodsky (1924), on loan from the Moscow State Historical Museum, showing the opening of the Second Comintern Congress in 1920. The founding of the Communist International in 1919 was a major project of Lenin and Trotsky, who regarded the Russian Revolution to be the initial spark for the overthrow of capitalism worldwide.

Each delegate to the congress is clearly recognisable: along with Lenin, who is speaking, the portrait features Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Radek, as well as numerous well-known international figures—including the German delegates Paul Levi, Ernst Meyer, Willi Münzenberg and Clara Zetkin, the American journalist Reed and the British leader of the Suffragettes, Sylvia Pankhurst. Stalin is also visible, staring grimly at the viewer.

In the course of the 1930s the international perspective of the revolutionaries of 1917 increasingly came into conflict with the policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which not only placed this picture in special keeping for fifty years, but also dissolved the Communist International in 1943. The overwhelming majority of the 1920 delegates later fell victim to Stalin’s terror.

Fortunately, the painting was not destroyed or retouched, as was the fate of many other pictures and photos in which Stalin sought to erase the leading role played by Trotsky in the October Revolution. The most famous photographic example, the speech given by Lenin on May 5, 1920 on Moscow’s Sverdlov Square, can be seen in two versions, one featuring Trotsky and Kamenev, and another where both men have been eliminated.

Ambiguity and compromises

In the midst of all the interesting details and documents on display in the German Historical Museum, one searches in vain for a political explanation of the October Revolution and its subsequent degeneration under Stalin. Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism and the building of the Left Opposition are simply not addressed.

The only guidelines seems to be, ‘Many were in favour, Many against’, or the revolution as the source of ‘Both fascination and violence and terror.’

Apparently there were conflicts surrounding the orientation of the exhibition within its Advisory Board, which includes, among others, the right-wing extremist Baberowski. His essay in the exhibition’s accompanying catalogue, “Russia and the Consequences,” which he had already prepared for the Zurich exhibition, describes the Russian

Revolution as the “birth of fascist movements.”

Baberowski asks, “Who could have tamed and controlled the angry masses?” He even accused the tsarist regime of failing to use sufficient violence in suppressing revolutionary movement. “Everything would have been different if the Tsar had acted resolutely,” he wrote.

In the introductory article to the catalogue, Helmut Altrichter, another historian on the DHM Advisory Board, writes of the “Revolution as an orgy of hunger, death and violence.” Both declare that the violence of the world war was seamlessly carried forward by the Bolsheviks during the civil war.

The exhibition does not refute this claim. The real causes of the civil war are ignored. The armies of intervention, which, together with the counterrevolutionary White armies, attacked the workers’ state on many fronts, are barely mentioned.

At the same time, one item in the Zurich exhibition that presented Lenin as a “pencil pusher”—featuring a series of small grey desks proceeded by a large statue of Lenin—is not on show in Berlin. When asked, Kristina Janecke told the WSWs that Zurich sought to portray Lenin as the source of bureaucracy, but “We discussed it a great deal and deliberately decided not to include it in Berlin. Personally, I found the presentation rather unfortunate.”

To the extent that the exhibition remains silent about the struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, it muddies the waters regarding the emergence of the Stalinist dictatorship and adapts to right-wing historical revisionism. The appearance of the virulent anti-communist Wolf Biermann at a DHM discussion was no coincidence. Biermann summed up the theories of Baberowski and Altrichter in his own crude manner, employing language usually used in connection with the Nazi Holocaust and declaring that Karl Marx had sought to attain a “final solution of the social question.” Those who sought today to eradicate social inequality were “enemies of humanity “ and a threat, he declared. No one, including representatives of the DHM present, objected to this outrageous statement.

There is considerable interest in the exhibition with many visitors drawing parallels to the present time based on the items and documents on display. The drive towards war, raging inequality and the escalation of the same capitalist contradictions that led to the October Revolution in 1917 are once again placing revolution on the agenda.

In this respect the lack of response to the speech by Russian professor of philosophy Mikhail K. Ryklin at the opening of the exhibition on October 18 is revealing. In his remarks, Ryklin stated that Stalin had tried to wipe out the legacy of the October Revolution with a “red hot iron” He then referred to Stalin’s “greatest enemy, Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Red Army and Lenin’s closest collaborator.” The accusation of Trotskyism had been used to “obliterate all of Lenin’s companions.”

In Russia today, there are no major celebrations to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution, Ryklin said regretfully. “Today’s rulers seem to fear that the genetic memory of the masses might cause them to recall the liberating effect of the revolution.” But the October Revolution cannot be banished to an archive and “dismissed as a mere historical event.” To considerable applause from those in attendance, he concluded: “In its homeland—and not only there, I believe—it is part of the political struggle today.”

He is undoubtedly correct. An understanding of the October Revolution is essential for all those determined to fight war and poverty today.

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