

# October 1921: Lenin looks back

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*At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18–21, Platypus hosted a conversation on “Lenin’s Marxism.” Panelists Chris Cutrone of Platypus, Paul Le Blanc of the International Socialist Organization, and Lars T. Lih, the author of Lenin Rediscovered: “What is to be Done?” in Context, were asked to address, “What was distinctive about Vladimir Lenin’s Marxism? What was its relationship to the other forms of Marxism and Marxists of his era? Was Lenin orthodox or heterodox? Was there a ‘unity’ to Lenin’s political thought, as Georg Lukács argued, or do his major works—What is to Be Done? (1902), Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916), The State and Revolution (1917), “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920)—express distinctive and even contradictory phases in Lenin’s political development? How did Lenin’s Marxism overcome—or not—other competing forms of Marxism? How should we understand Lenin’s historical contribution to Marxism, today?” Lih retranslated “Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution,” a Pravda article by Lenin published October 18, 1921, and presented his commentary as way of addressing the prompt. A condensed translation, prefaced by Lih’s commentary, follows. In Russian, the text can be found in Lenin, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii, 5th ed., 44:144-52. The full text in English can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/14.htm>.*

**LATE 1921 MARKED THE BEGINNING** of the health troubles that eventually put an end to Lenin’s political career. Lenin was now forced to abstain from direct governmental activity for long periods, returning only for a month or two in the spring and once more in the fall of 1922. The term “last writings” is usually applied to Lenin’s writings in late 1922 and early 1923, but this article from October 1921 can usefully be viewed as the first of the last writings: the first attempt by Lenin to assess what the revolution had

accomplished and what still needed to be done.

In early 1921, the Soviet government had introduced the New Economic Policy, or NEP, a set of policies that officially accepted the continued existence of various capitalist institutions in Soviet Russia for the foreseeable future. Naturally these policy changes had an impact on Lenin’s later assessment of the socialist accomplishments of the revolutionary period. Nevertheless, Lenin’s deep sense of disappointment about this issue can be traced back at least to 1919 and therefore it should not be tied too closely to the changes that accompanied NEP.

The most striking feature of Lenin’s retrospective look at the October revolution after four years of hard-fought civil war is the contrast in his tone when talking about the “bourgeois-democratic” accomplishments of the Russian revolution in comparison to its accomplishments when viewed as a socialist revolution. Lenin is chipper, proud, and even boastful about the radical democratic aims of the October revolution. He stresses in particular the achievements of basic equality: peasants are regarded as full citizens, women have full legal equality, national oppression is ended, religion is no longer accorded state privileges. In all of these areas, Soviet Russia has accomplished the program of earlier “bourgeois” revolutions in a more conclusive fashion than the bourgeois revolutions themselves were able to do. In accordance with prewar “Old Bolshevism,” Lenin argues that only a proletarian revolution could have accomplished “bourgeois-democratic” aims in so sweeping a fashion. One major plank of Old Bolshevism, however, is conspicuously absent from Lenin’s litany: political freedom, as manifest in such things as freedom of the press, assembly, association, and the like.

In contrast, Lenin’s attitude toward the socialist program of the October revolution is one of grim determination. The determination is real, but so is the grimness. Lenin is defensive and even worried about the revolution’s socialist tasks, and he admits freely that real socialist accomplishments lie mostly in the future. He shows most confidence about those “socialist” accomplishments that most resemble “democratic” ones, like the soviet system as a type of democracy, and pulling out of the world war. Economic transformation, which Lenin identifies as “our most important and most difficult task,” is also “the one we have come least close to accomplishing.” Lenin plainly has no convincing answer in his own mind to socialist critics such as Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, who argued that Bolshevik agrarian reforms had created obstacles to future socialist transformation. The strong emphasis in the section on socialist revolution is on failures, mistakes, and the long and uncertain road ahead.

Lenin is vague about exactly when, in his view, the

Bolsheviks had miscalculated the chances for socialist transformation, as described in the last paragraph of Lenin's article, below. His critique, however, makes best sense when applied to his own 1917 vision of "steps toward socialism," as set forth in *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It* and other works.

Aside from its own merits, I have chosen to retranslate this article because the Soviet-era English translation is seriously misleading in certain matters of content and tone. In contrast to that translation, I have brought out Lenin's repeated use of the phrase "to the end" (*do kontsa*), since "carrying the democratic revolution *to the end*" was a defining goal of pre-revolutionary Old Bolshevism. In April 1917, the Old Bolsheviks who challenged Lenin claimed that Russia's democratic revolution had not *yet* been carried out "to the end." In response, Lenin argued that the goal of carrying the democratic revolution to the end no longer made sense. He seems to have changed his mind on this point. For more on the debates of April 1917, see my article "The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism" in *Russian History*, 38 (2011), 199-242. Further context useful for the interpretation of Lenin's 1921 article can be found in my recently published book *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

## Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution

N. Lenin, October 1921

The fourth anniversary of October 25 (November 7) is approaching. The farther that great day recedes from us, the more clearly we see the significance of proletarian revolution in Russia, and the more deeply we reflect upon the practical experience of our work, seen as a whole.

### Bourgeois-Democratic Revolution in Russia

The immediate and most urgent task of the revolution in Russia was a bourgeois-democratic task, namely, to destroy the survivals of medievalism and sweep them away to the end [*do kontsa*], to purify Russia of this barbarism, of this shame, and to remove this immense hindrance to any kind of culture and to any kind of progress in our country. And we can justifiably take pride in having carried out this purification much more decisively, rapidly, boldly and successfully, and—from the point of view of its effect on the very depths of the mass of the *narod*—much more widely and deeply, than the great French Revolution over one

hundred and twenty-five years ago.

The bourgeois-democratic content of the revolution means that the social relations (systems, institutions) of the country are purified of medievalism, of hangovers from serfdom, of feudalism. What were the chief manifestations, survivals, remnants of serfdom in Russia up to 1917? The monarchy, the system of social estates [i.e., legally recognized differences in citizenship rights], landed proprietorship and land tenure, the status of women, religion, the oppression of nationalities. Take any one of these Augean stables, which, incidentally, none of the more advanced states really fully cleansed when they accomplished *their* bourgeois-democratic revolutions one hundred and twenty-five, two hundred and fifty and more years ago (1649 in England); take any of these Augean stables, and you will see that we have utterly cleansed them.

Take religion, or women's lack of rights, or the oppression and inequality of the non-Russian nationalities. These are all problems of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. We have fought and are fighting religion in earnest. We have granted *all* the non-Russian nationalities *their own* republics or autonomous regions. We in Russia no longer have anything so base, mean and repellent as the lack or the inequality of rights for women, that disgusting survival of serf society and medievalism, which is being refurbished by the avaricious bourgeoisie and the dull-witted and frightened petty bourgeoisie in every other country in the world without exception.

### Agrarian Reform

We left not a stone, not a brick of that ancient edifice, the social-estate system (even the most advanced countries, such as Britain, France and Germany, have not completely rid themselves of traces of this system to this day!). We tore out the deep-seated roots of the social-estate system, namely, the remnants of feudalism and serfdom in the system of landownership, to the end [*do kontsa*]. "One may argue" (there are plenty of *littérateurs* abroad—Cadets, Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries—who can indulge in such arguments) as to what will result from the transformation of land relations carried out by the Great October Revolution "in the long run." We have no desire right now to waste time on such disputes, for we are deciding this dispute, as well as a mass of connected disputes, by struggle. But the fact cannot be denied that the petty-bourgeois democrats "made a pact" [*soglashalis*] with the landowners, the custodians of the traditions of serfdom, for eight months, while in a few weeks we swept the landowners and all their traditions from Russian soil to the end [*do kontsa*].

All this goes to make up the content of the bourgeois-

democratic revolution. One hundred and fifty or two hundred and fifty years ago, the progressive leaders of that revolution (or of those revolutions, if we consider each national variety of the one general type) promised to rid mankind of medieval privileges, of the inequality of women, of state privileges for one religion or another (or for the *idea* of religion in general), and of unequal rights for nationalities. They made promises, but they did not fulfill them. They could not fulfill them, for they were hindered by their “respect” for the “sacred right of private property.” In our proletarian revolution there was none of this accursed “respect” for this thrice-accursed medievalism and for the “sacred right of private property.”

### Socialist Revolution in Russia

The correctness of our understanding of Marxism on this point—our estimate of the experience of former revolutions—has been completely confirmed during the last four years. We have carried the bourgeois-democratic revolution *to the end* [*do kontsa*] as nobody has done before. Completely purposively, firmly and unswervingly we are moving *forward*, toward the socialist revolution, knowing that it is not separated from the bourgeois-democratic revolution by a Chinese wall, and knowing too that (in the last analysis) *struggle alone* will determine how far we shall move forward, what part of this unimaginably lofty task we shall accomplish, and what part of our victories we shall consolidate. Time will show. But even now we see that a tremendous amount—tremendous for this ruined, exhausted and backward country—has been done in the matter of the socialist transformation of society.

### Soviets

The soviet system is one of the most vivid confirmations, or manifestations, of this growing-over [*pererastanie*] of one revolution into another. The soviet system provides the maximum of democracy for the workers and peasants. At the same time, it marks a break with the *bourgeois* form of democracy and the rise of a *new*, epoch-making *type* of democracy, namely, the proletarian form of democracy, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We do not forget for a moment that there really have been a lot of failures and mistakes and there continue to be many. How can failures and mistakes be avoided in a matter so new in world history as the creation of an unprecedented *type* of state system? But we have a right to be proud and we are proud that to us has fallen the good fortune to *begin* the building of a soviet state, to *begin* a new era in world history, the era of the rule of a *new* class.

### Imperialist War

Ever more clearly, more distinctly, more inevitably does the grim truth arise before the millions and millions who are pondering the causes of the recent war and of the approaching future war. It is impossible to escape imperialist war, and the imperialist peace which inevitably engenders imperialist war. It is impossible to escape that hell, *except by Bolshevik struggle and Bolshevik revolution*.

This first victory is *not yet the final victory*, and it was achieved by our October Revolution at the price of incredible difficulties and hardships, at the price of unprecedented suffering, accompanied by a series of serious failures and mistakes on our part. Without failures and mistakes, how could a single backward *narod* be expected to achieve victory over the imperialist wars of the most powerful and most developed countries of the world! We have begun this job. It is not important which proletarians of which nation will carry this business to the end [*do kontsa*], nor when (at what date and time) they do it. The essential thing is that the ice has been broken, the road is open, the way has been shown.

### Transformation of the Economy

Lastly, our most important and most difficult task, the one we have come least close to accomplishing: economic construction, the laying of economic foundations for the new, socialist edifice on the site of the demolished feudal edifice and the semi-demolished capitalist edifice. In this most important and most difficult business, we have sustained more failures than anywhere else, more mistakes than anywhere else. How could anyone expect that a task so new to the world could be begun without failures and without mistakes! But we have begun it. We shall continue it.

Borne along on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm, rousing first the political and then the military enthusiasm of the *narod*, we thought we could rely directly on this enthusiasm to accomplish economic tasks that were just as grand as our military and general political ones. We calculated—or perhaps it would be truer to say that we presumed without adequate calculation—on using the commands of the proletarian state to arrange state production and state distribution of products in communist style in a country of small peasant farms. Life has revealed our mistake. |PR

*Translated by Lars T. Lih*