INTRODUCTION
I

1917: THE PROBLEM OF ALTERNATIVES

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The revolution in Petrograd which overthrew the Romanov régime in February 1917 unleashed one of those great seismic upheavals which so drastically reshaped the history of the world during the twentieth century.

And like the other major revolutions of the modern era (the English in the seventeenth, the American and French in the eighteenth and the Chinese in the twentieth century) it has from the first been the object of the most intense interest and debate. The pivotal episodes, the political parties and leaders, the mass movements, the classes and nationalities caught up in the turmoil of the period, 1917 to 1920, have all been described and analysed in innumerable memoirs, biographies, surveys, monographs and articles. Moreover, as the Soviet archives continue to be opened up, and as the Russian state once again enters an era of rapid change, so the examination and re-examination of 1917 will become still more intense.

But while it is no doubt true that every generation sees the past in the light of the present and rewrites history accordingly, it is no less true that the basic questions endure even while the answers change.

The central issue which has always engaged the historians of 1917 is whether or not the ultimate outcome, the Bolshevik seizure and retention of power, was preordained. Given the history of the Russian state and society in general, and the conditions prevailing in Russia at the end of February 1917 in particular, was any other outcome possible? Should the Russian revolution be seen as working its way, like some Sophoclean drama, to its inexorable climax; or was it, rather, open-ended, determined ultimately by the interaction between great social forces on the one hand, and such contingent factors as individual judgement and leadership qualities on the other?
Surprisingly perhaps, the responses prompted by this question do not always divide neatly along party lines. Leon Trotsky, the true-believing Marxist, could, after all, maintain in his monumental history of the Russian revolution that the Bolshevik triumph in October might well have been impossible without Lenin in command to direct the decisive events.¹ And Mikhail Gorbachev in an article published in Izvestiia late in 1989 chose to justify the October revolution in terms not of inevitability but, rather, of ‘counter-factual’ historical analysis. ‘Nowadays’, he there wrote,

as we attain a deeper understanding of what is essential in our own history, it becomes still more evident that the October revolution was not a mistake – after all, the only real alternative was not (as some would seek to have us believe even today) a bourgeois democratic republic, but rather anarchist chaos and bloody military dictatorship, the establishment of a reactionary régime opposed to the people.²

This interpretation of 1917 has long been held by many historians in the West who similarly have argued that, with the conditions prevailing in Russia in 1917, there was simply no chance of establishing there a parliamentary and pluralistic political system and that the basic choice was bound to reduce itself to that between either a socialist or a military dictatorship.³ And many arguments can be marshalled in support of this hypothesis.

The Muscovite state had grown since the fourteenth century, after all, on strictly autocratic foundations; the period of mixed government and limited constitutionalism had been in existence for a mere eleven years by 1917. Tsarism had swung between its despotic, at times capriciously despotiv, and its enlightened periods, but neither the occasional anarchic eruptions (the Time of Troubles, Razin, Pugachev) nor the revolutionary politics of the intelligentsia had threatened its survival until the early twentieth century.³

And when the revolutionary wave finally swept over Russia in 1905 it broke at last against the inner defences of the Tsarist system and had ebbed away by 1907. Many harsh facts had been revealed in that testing time. A deep gulf had been exposed dividing the liberal from the revolutionary socialist camps. Their united front did not survive the Tsarist manifesto of October 1905, the liberals choosing to participate in, and the socialists (for the most part) to boycott, the Duma elections of April 1906. Peasant violence and the spectre of a full-scale
Jacquerie had immeasurably strengthened ultra-conservative as opposed to constitutional sentiment among the land-owning nobility (reflected in the collapse of Kadet representation in the zemstvo assemblies). Again, fear that the heterogeneous and far-flung empire could well shatter along national lines brought with it an upsurge of Great Russian nationalism not only within the ranks of the nobility but also within the urban middle class as demonstrated by the vacillations of the Octobrist and Kadet parties.

Set against this background, it is hardly surprising that the armed forces, a few exceptional incidents apart, remained loyal to the régime enabling it to weather the storm – nor that Stolypin could rely during the years 1906–8 on widespread support for his political programme based on the defence of Tsarism (moderated by a much attenuated constitutionalism); of private property; of Russian nationalism and of empire.

Throughout the revolution of 1917 there was a deep-rooted belief not only on the right but also among many on the left, Lenin himself included, that for good or for evil the only factors which ultimately could provide a bulwark against social revolution were Russian nationalism and the armed forces or, more specifically, the officer class. Miliukov, the Kadet leader, sought, in the early days of the revolution, to preserve the Romanov dynasty, albeit in the form of a fully constitutional monarchy, and later to rally support by his call for war until victory in proud defence of Russian imperial greatness. Kerensky undertook the June offensive on the assumption that only some dramatic military success could prevent the disintegration of both the army and the governmental coalition. And when word spread that the commander-in-chief of the army, General Kornilov, was about to stage a coup in August, many in the Kadet leadership (and no doubt in the party membership at large) were ready to greet him with open arms as the one strong man capable of saving the empire from its final slide into anarchy.

Such strategies, of course, failed utterly during 1917 itself, but they came into their own during the Civil War. Increasingly, the opposition to the Bolshevik régime became concentrated in the hands of the generals and the officer corps. By late 1918 the attempts made by some of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and liberals to turn the defence of the Constituent Assembly into a general rallying cry against the Communist régime had been brushed aside by the new military régimes of Kolchak and Denikin which preferred to fight in the name of ‘Russia, one and indivisible’.
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If the White armies which seemed to many observers (including the Bolshevik leaders themselves) so close to victory in October 1919 had, in fact, won the Civil War the result would then, in all probability, have been the establishment of a right-wing dictatorship in one form or another (with or without a monarchical restoration). The centre had failed to hold; in the chaos of the Civil War the basic choice, so the argument goes, which had been implicit in the 1917 revolution now became explicit: the Whites faced the Reds in their final titanic struggle.

And did not the experience of inter-war Europe totally confirm this hypothesis? In East-Central and Central Europe, the parliamentary régimes established after the First World War had all, with the single exception of Czechoslovakia, been swept away by the 1930s to be replaced by right-wing authoritarian régimes (whether of the radical-Right or the ultra-conservative varieties). And the civil war in Spain, a country like Russia on the periphery of Europe and comparable in many other ways, likewise ended up as a polarised struggle between the extremes of Left and Right, victory going in that case, of course, to the generals.

Nonetheless, however persuasive this line of thought may be, it is certainly not beyond question. First, it must be asked whether, in reality, the nationalist Right did constitute not merely an embryonic but a viable, real, alternative to the extreme Left in the circumstances prevailing in Russia in the months and years after February 1917. It can be argued that given the structure, both social and national, of the Russian state, the monarchist and conservative forces in general, and the officer stratum in particular, were at a hopeless disadvantage throughout.8

The peasantry still constituted the great majority of the population even in 1917. And the peasants, with their age-old conviction that the land of the nobility was theirs by right, could only regard the prospect of a White victory as truly disastrous. Stolypin’s attempt to build up a strong and numerous proprietorial peasantry had only had a few years to take effect by 1914 and had in all probability served primarily to increase rural resentment against the ancien régime. Once the landed estates had been divided up finally after October 1917 the resistance to any threat of a return to the status quo ante was bound to be fierce – and this, surely, was the case despite all the terrible hatred aroused during the Civil War by the forcible expropriations of livestock, grain and every other form of food by the Communist régime.
Then, too, although the Russian empire was still not a highly developed country in economic terms, its industries tended towards the large scale and were heavily concentrated in areas of great strategic importance: Petrograd, Moscow and the Donbass–Krivoi Rog region of the Ukraine. As opinion polarised during the revolution and Civil War, the industrial working class rallied increasingly to the Bolshevik cause, ensuring their hold over the key industrial and urban centres of the country. The Red Army could thus count on a steady supply of weapons and ammunition, especially as the major arsenals of the (by then defunct) Tsarist army were likewise situated in heartland Russia.

Again, the members of the core population – the Great Russian national group – made up no more than half the population of the pre-1914 empire. The fierce Russian nationalism which developed as the primary cementing force within the White armies was enough to ensure that they would under no circumstances receive any major support from the subject nationalities which since 1917 had come to see independence as within their grasp. Here, too, the Bolsheviks succeeded, for the most part, in seizing the high ground as the lesser of the two evils.

Such deep-rooted structural causes apart, many contingent factors served to weight the scales in favour of Bolshevism. Thus, to take just one example, the officer corps, which had entered the war in 1914 as a professional and elitist stratum, had been decimated by 1917 and the newer recruits constituted a far more heterogeneous social grouping, politically fragmented. Tens of thousands of officers who had served in the Tsarist forces fought within the ranks of the Red Army during the Civil War, many coerced into so doing, but many others from choice.

The case for the idea that once the Tsarist régime had fallen nothing ultimately could stand in the way of full-scale social revolution was formulated in the by now famous memorandum drawn up early in 1914 by Durnovo who from his stance on the extreme Right (he was a bitter opponent of Stolypin whom he regarded as far too liberal) foresaw the future course of events with extraordinary prescience. ‘In the event of defeat’, he had there written, *inter alia*,

the possibility of which in a struggle with a foe like Germany cannot be overlooked, social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable.

It will start with all disasters being attributed to the government. In the legislative institutions, a bitter campaign against the government will begin, which will result in revolutionary agitation throughout the country. There will immediately ensue
socialist slogans – which alone are capable of arousing and rallying the masses – first the complete re-apportionment of land and then the re-apportionment of all valuables and property.

The defeated army, having lost its most dependable men during the war, and carried away for the most part by the tide of the general elemental desire of the peasant for land, will prove to be too demoralised to serve as a bulwark of law and order. The legislative institutions and the opposition intelligentsia parties, having no real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stem the rising popular tide.9

The victories won in the period since 1945 by the indigenous forces of the Left in marginally developed or still essentially agrarian countries – China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cuba, to name just the most obvious – give force to the argument that in their eagerness to overturn the foundations of traditional society, the mass of the people had to find dictatorial leadership. Given such leadership, and ceteris paribus, victory was assured. If Lenin and the Bolsheviks had not existed, they would thus have had to be invented.10

When all such factors have been given their due weight, though, the lingering doubt remains. Is it really so self-evident that a priori the hope for a parliamentary régime in Russia in 1917 was doomed from the start?

The argument based on history, on the nature of the Russian political culture, is in itself a matter of much controversy. There is an entire school of thought, after all, which traces the growth of what it describes as an increasingly sturdy liberal tradition back as far as the eighteenth century and which sees in the establishment of the Duma in 1906 not a new beginning but the culmination of a long process. The so-called ‘liberation of the nobility’ (by the acts of 1762 and 1785); the emancipation of the peasantry; the establishment of the zemstva; and the creation of the independent judiciary, all formed, so the argument goes, milestones on the road towards what could eventually have become a Rechtsstaat and a fully fledged democratic system.11 And this gradual evolution at the political level was matched and underpinned by far-reaching socio-economic change, by the growth of an industrial and commercial middle class as well as by a vast expansion of the educational system.12 By 1914, in this view of things, the patrimonial and autocratic political culture was in permanent retreat and a constitutional ethos – shared by liberals and the moderate wing of the
socialist camp alike – was striking deep roots in Russian consciousness.

Nor, it must be said, does the inter-war experience in Europe demonstrate as conclusively as at first appears that the cause of parliamentary democracy was bound to be swept aside in the Russia of 1917. Would not the constitutional régimes established throughout Central and East-Central Europe in the wake of the First World War have had a far greater chance of survival if a similar system of government had consolidated itself in Petrograd?

Beyond doubt, many factors contributed to the polarisation of opinion in Europe and to the destabilisation of the post-1918 order. The unprecedented loss of life and the catastrophic suffering caused by the First World War itself; the bitter hostility to the Paris peace settlements on the part of key states (Germany, Italy, Hungary) with the concomitant fears induced in neighbouring countries; and the economic crisis which followed the Wall Street crash of 1929, were clearly all of paramount importance.

But the existence of the Communist régime in Soviet Russia, imbued as it was with quasi-Messianic zeal, and the establishment of the Comintern to disseminate the message of socialist revolution across the world, certainly did much to increase the pervasive sense of impending collapse in which the extremes of both Left and Right could flourish, the one feeding on the hatred for the other. Seen in this light, then, the October revolution can be interpreted as not just a symptom of the weakness endemic to political pluralism when transplanted beyond the West, but also as itself a basic cause of that weakness in the Europe of the inter-war period.

But even if the Provisional Government and the liberal–labour bloc were then, perhaps, not condemned from the outset by macrocosmic forces, did they have even a hypothetical chance of grappling successfully with the immediate and utterly intractable problems facing them in 1917 itself? Could the Kerenskys, Chernovs and Tseretelis, the Lvos, Nekrasovs and Tereshchenkos – or their equivalents – acting differently within the same objective parameters, have escaped the collective fate which overtook them? Could firmer and more far-sighted leaders have made qualitatively different choices and, in turn, would those choices have made an essential difference to the outcome?

Although, as already elaborated here, there are many reasons to answer in the negative, this is not an entirely clear-cut issue. So, for example, the repeated decisions to postpone the elections to the Con-
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STITUENT ASSEMBLY from the summer of 1917 until the late autumn very possibly constituted a decisive error. When the elections were finally held in November, they produced a major victory for the parties of moderation, specifically for the Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries. A few months earlier, moreover, the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary Parties would have been far less divided internally between their right and left (‘internationalist’) wings. And the Bolsheviks would have received much less than the approximately one-quarter of the total vote which they gained in the actual elections.13

A democratically elected government might well have felt strong enough to act with greater decision than a largely random conglomeration of politicians brought together on an avowedly provisional basis. In particular, a régime dominated by the Socialist Revolutionaries and answerable to a democratically elected Constituent Assembly could hardly have avoided action on the issue of land distribution to the same extent as the Provisional Government chose to do.

More important, the first government to be formed in Russia on the basis of universal suffrage would certainly have enjoyed far greater legitimacy than the succession of short-lived administrations which sought to rule between February and October 1917. And this fact, in turn, would have made it much more difficult to win support for a second revolution. Even as it was, Lenin found it no easy task to rally his own Central Committee behind his plans first for the seizure of power and then for the one-party dictatorship.

However, most historians are agreed that it was the intolerable burden of the never-ending First World War which brought down both the Tsarist and the Provisional Governments. And when it came to the issue of the war, the options open to the politicians of the Centre and moderate Left were very limited. Calls for a separate peace with Germany were held to be little short of treasonable in both the political world and on the street. It is no coincidence that the Bolsheviks denied with the greatest vigour, during 1917, that they were advocating any such idea. The establishment of a proletarian dictatorship in Russia, Lenin then argued, would force the imperialist powers to choose between a general, ‘democratic’ peace (without annexations, without indemnities) and a general wave of revolution throughout Europe. If all else failed, he declared, there might well be no choice but to fight a ‘revolutionary war’.

Nonetheless there was no necessity for the Provisional Government to have launched its military offensive in June. Given the fact that the
German strategy in 1917 and 1918 involved a massive concentration of manpower on the Western front, hostilities could well have been kept to a minimum in the East, thus sparing both the army and the Provisional Government one of their greatest humiliations. In order to gain time and to put more pressure on its allies to seek peace actively, a post-election (and hence more authoritative) government, rather than escalating the hostilities, could have threatened to open armistice talks with Germany and Austria–Hungary. It was the necessity to begin winding down the war effort in order to halt the headlong slide into chaos that constituted the strongest point in the case so vociferously advocated by such socialist ‘internationalists’ as Martov throughout 1917.

A parliamentary régime which thus survived into 1918 would presumably have avoided the Civil War which resulted, after all, from the Brest-Litovsk treaty. And by the end of that year the country would have found itself among the victorious powers. Under those totally changed circumstances, a parliamentary régime in Russia would surely have had a fighting chance of indefinite survival.

‘Counter-factual’ history can, of course, only advance hypotheses; it cannot finally prove them right or wrong. It can separate out the different factors at work but it cannot decide conclusively which were the independent and which the dependent variables; nor can it assess the relative weight to be assigned to them. But within every attempt to write empirical history, to describe the past wie es eigentlich war, the problem of possible alternatives will always be immanent.

In 1917, were the ‘losers’ faced by hopeless odds from the start? Or did they let their greatest opportunity slip through their fingers?

For that matter, though, who were the primary losers? Which force was it that represented the greatest threat to the Bolshevik challenge for power: the extreme Right; the forces grouped around the Provisional Government; or perhaps, as some suggest, the non-Bolshevik (‘internationalist’) Left?

Beyond this question there lies still another. In a world ever in flux, is not defeat ultimately implanted in the very act of victory – and vice versa?

**NOTES**

1 E.g. ‘Lenin was not a demiurge of the revolutionary process . . . he merely entered into a chain of objective historic forces. But he was a great link in that chain . . .’ Is it possible, however, to say confidently that the party