

Marx and Lenin on the European Revolutions of the 19th Century

Marx did not think that the failures of 1848 were due to a lack of terror, though terror was a well known aspect of his early poetry. There was plenty of violence, as there was in the English and French Revolutions. Both England and France had revolutions that developed into oligarchy and authoritarianism. Cromwell in England and the French Directory showed the trajectory of all revolution regardless of its aims.

Marx did, however, take one lesson from the problems of 1848: that western parliamentarianism was a failure. In Marx's mind, there was now no question as to the significance of liberalism's failure and Engels held that the failed revolutions were against liberal democracy as he writes, "Our age, the age of democracy, is breaking. The flames of the Tuileries and the Palais Royal are the dawn of the proletariat. Everywhere the rule of the bourgeoisie will now, come crashing down, or be dashed to pieces."

While both Marx and Engels held publicly that the movements in 1848 were against the bourgeoisie, they were not. Socialism, often of a Proudhonian sort, was only a small fraction of the movement. Much of it was basically reformist and the only lesson that could have been taken from these earlier revolutions is that the existence of a disciplined "vanguard" was essential.

In Marx's writings concerning the following generations of violence in 1871, a similar view is heard as he states"

If you look up the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire, you will find that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is the precondition for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting.

Unfortunately, Marx had no real mechanism for this. The future was vague, which seems odd for a political ideology of such systematic fervor. Marx stated elsewhere on 1871:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at any time. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The police, which until then had been the instrument of the Government, was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen's wages. The privileges and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves.... Having once got rid of the standing army and the police, the instruments of physical force of the old government, the Commune proceeded at once to break the instrument of spiritual suppression, the power of the priests.... The judicial functionaries lost that sham independence... they were thenceforward to be elective, responsible, and revocable.

And again,

If the political struggle of the working class assumes revolutionary form, and if the workers set up their revolutionary dictatorship in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, they commit the terrible crime of violating principles, for in order to satisfy their wretched, vulgar everyday needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeoisie, they give the state a revolutionary and transient form, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state (All quoted from Lenin, 1917).

These quotations show several things. First, that violence and dictatorship were required for any revolution. Dictatorship, of course, was to be temporary as the remnants of the old order were swept away. No one knew how this was to be “temporary” If the adherents of non-socialist movements were substantial, then even tighter centralization was needed to smash them. Marx says above that it is not so much the state that matters, but rather the people who control it. Police are needed, but not those who serve the present government that is allegedly opposed to him. In other words, while there is some vaguely stated anarchist rhetoric above, Marx holds that the true revolution removes the present bureaucratic establishment and replaces it with one of their own choosing (Lenin, 1918).

To smash the bourgeois system requires discipline, a strong military force, ruthlessness, centralization, and violence. This is the very definition of authoritarianism and the last set of qualities one would desire in a ruling class. Therefore, it is clear that there was nothing special about the October revolution in Russia since it followed the same pattern (Lenin, 1921).

The revolutions of 1848 and 1871 were similar in that they took in mutually contradictory demands within the same movement and used violence, or so it seemed, to paper them over. The middle classes wanted free trade and an end to the nobility once and for all. Some factions of labor wanted better working conditions, while citizens in general wanted more voting rights, and basic freedoms (Dowe, 2001). This is the idealization, however, as proof of these clear “demands” is lacking.

But even if the above were not true, it remains that in both failed revolutions, violence was liberally used, a vanguard, of sorts, took over, and, at least for a time, revolutionaries ruled in an authoritarian manner, even despite themselves. At a minimum, some kind of authoritarianism was needed in order to defend the movement and destroy its enemies. The same occurred in 1789 and 1688. No lesson was learned and the socialist movement was successful in making their views mainstream, diverting attention from its ethnic flavor, destroying the many idealistic, older form so socialism and importantly, developing strong ties to the London banking establishment.

Socialism has a long history, but was only accepted by the western establishment when God was purged and became an ideology of atoms-in-the-void. Prior to that, it was agrarian and pro-family as in Gerald Winstanley or PJ Proudhon. Each and every church father was communal and socialist in his economic understanding. That Marxism and socialism are the same has no foundation, and the same could be said about Bolshevism. These are three distinct ideologies. Since Bolshevism had no interest in labor and had little ideology to guide its policy at all, any means to destroy, humiliate or liquidate Christianity or agrarianism was accepted. That remains the only consistent idea in Soviet history.

The revolutions of 1848 and 1871 were inherently authoritarian for several reasons:

1. There is no way to know how many enemies the commune might have, and these enemies were not going away soon;
2. Many workers are simply not ready to exercise any authority. This was the root of the nasty fight between Marx and Bakunin, but it also suggested that again, the vanguard can rule indefinitely;
3. The revolution of 1871 was run by a vanguard movement of intellectuals and the upper classes (often of Jewish origin) and were exclusively urban. Workers were rarely to be seen;
4. Given that Marx was working for the New York Times (suggesting the bourgeoisie's real feelings about socialism were ambivalent, if not positive), he was quite aware that the commune was made up of petty bureaucrats, tradesmen and intellectuals.
5. A materialist holds that the human person is a bundle of nerve endings which register desires in a chaotic manner. Therefore, human life is not sacred. Man is a machine that produces goods that he needs and anything beyond this is “mystification.” Killing for the sake of revolution is a moral act.

As far as its application to 1918-1921, Lenin states:

You must not forget the bourgeois character of this 'democracy,' its historical conditional and limited character. . . . The dictatorship of the proletariat alone can emancipate humanity from the oppression of capital, from the lies, falsehood and hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy — democracy for the rich — and establish democracy for the poor, that is, make the blessings of democracy really accessible to the workers and poor peasants, whereas now (even in the most democratic — bourgeois — republic) the blessings of democracy are, in fact, inaccessible to the vast majority of working people.

Trotsky said the same and, along with Lenin, was responding to Karl Kautsky's contention that socialism requires some level of democracy and basic liberal freedoms. In fact, Trotsky advocated the selective use of terror to shock the middle classes. The fact that Trotsky wrote an article called “The Defense of Terrorism” should prove, by itself, that Lenin's dictatorship was quite intentional.

Marx himself wrote: “There is only one means to shorten, simplify and concentrate the murderous death throes of the old society and the bloody birth pains of the new, only one means — revolutionary terrorism.”

G. Zinoviev writes, justifying this approach:

The fact that we now face a titanic struggle, that now the hour really has struck when the sword speaks against the bourgeoisie, gives us cause to say, in relation not only to the national parties but also to the International: “We need a centralized organization with an iron military discipline.” Only then will we achieve what we really need. In this respect we must learn from our enemies. We must understand that, in this extremely difficult situation, we can only win if we are really well and tightly organized. We will speak about this in more detail when we come to work out the Statutes of the Communist International and have to discuss the question on an international scale (Zinoviev, 1920).

There is a single authoritarian and terrorist strand from 1688 to Khrushchev. A true revolution is one that overturns the existing order – not merely the existing government. Therefore, to do this, revolutions must be violent and centralized. The facts, however, strongly suggest that this was not a “worker's movement” and that the Jewish, urban, financial and elite elements in this mainstream movement had much to hide. Bakunin made that clear.

Writers such as E. Carr has a tendency to romanticize Lenin, as do the bulk of American university professors. The centralization of power in Moscow was not a reaction to theoretical debates over the Commune, but a realization that European revolutions were not forthcoming, he claimed, echoing the mainstream. Germany and Hungary were exceptions, but these were short lived. If anything, these post war movements had more of an impact than 1871, and both were highly authoritarian. Kuhn's red terror in Hungary certainly is proof of that. Yet, Carr states, it was precisely at this time that the NEP was instituted. This was a temporary measure to a) gain the support of the peasants, b) rebuild the economy, and c) imitate a “capitalist” period in Russian history so as to remain faithful to the uniformitarian historical view of Marx (Carr, 1985). The cynicism here is unmistakable.

To hold that Marx did not think a Russian revolution possible is belied by a letter Marx wrote to the famed Vera Zasulich, Marx writes:

There is one characteristic of the “agricultural commune” in Russia which afflicts it with weakness, hostile in every sense. That is its isolation, the lack of connection between the life of one commune and that of the others, this localized microcosm which is not encountered everywhere. . . Today it is an obstacle which could easily be eliminated. It would simply be necessary to replace the *volost*, the government body, with an assembly of peasants elected by the communes themselves, serving as the economic and administrative organ for their interests.

Thus, not only does Marx see the possibility of a Russian revolution, but that Russia is well positioned to have one soon. For their part, the Old Bolsheviks held that the 19th century revolutions were not to be imitated. Lessons cannot be taken from them because they were merely prefatory stages, the process of politicizing “progressive elements” into a more or less coherent single party.

There have been different interpretations of the prehistory of Leninism in political theory. Hannah Arendt was famous for holding that such revolutions are inherently bloody because of the tremendous range of what was to be transformed. If all life is influenced by capital and that capital was to be transferred to the party, then there is no aspect of life that is not in the hands of the revolutionary elite. Why this elite would not merely take their loot and live as they pleased was never addressed. Violence and centralization are inevitable under these circumstances.

Michael Oakeshott argues that Bolshevism demanded a state of affairs that the Russian people were either hostile or indifferent to. There was a huge gap between the reality of Russian life and the ideals of the Bolsheviks, since so many were not Russian. This gap needed to be filled, and the centralized state and Gulag were the means to fill it.

Richard Pipes argues that the centralized state of Lenin was a means to defend the seizure of power as well as to destroy the remnants of the old system. Of course, this too had to be authoritarian, since the overwhelming majority of Russians were opposed to what later, the

Communists revealed as their true agenda. While Lenin used the cynical slogan “peace, land and bread,” the party he headed neither desired nor supplied any of those. War was a continuous state within the USSR, providing a cover for the collectivization of agricultural land. Pipes' analysis is particularly useful because he only deals with the centralization and violence of Lenin's era.

Orlando Figes makes the claim that Bolshevism was authoritarian from the start. Using primary source documents from 1891 onward, the mass slaughter of religious people, middle class peasants, royalists and others was on the table from the beginning. Lenin was no less bloody than Stalin, Lenin just lived under his own system for 4 years. Even in that time, Lenin's body count was impressive.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn argues that revolution, regardless of the source, is violent and authoritarian. Violence means that the most ruthless will take over. It means that whoever kills his way to the top will not take kindly to competition. Revolution does not bring prosperity, but more poverty and finally, it kills off the best in the local population.

Solzhenitsyn also reminds the reader that the Bolsheviks faced numerous uprisings against their rule. Peasants rioted against the seizure and closure of churches. In Tambov province in 1920-1921, peasants armed with clubs and a few older rifles attacked a detachment of Bolshevik party officials and soldiers. They were cut down with machine gun fire. In western Siberia, where land was free, saw a revolt of the free Cossack population. In Tambov, the rebellion held out for eleven months, being joined by many sympathetic peasants from elsewhere. This was the Russian version of the Commune, though this time, it was religious. Solzhenitsyn argues that these uprisings were the justification, not the cause, of centralized power (Solzhenitsyn, 1993).

The above were mainstream scholars, but these were not the majority. The elite in the west were enamored with Bolshevism almost to the extent they knew little about it. Skocpol was more mainstream in her assertion that Marxism was about “labor.” Worse, that the USSR built an industrial regime from almost nothing.

One glaring problem with the entire charade was the lack of a class basis for Bolshevism. Another was the fact that the USSR did not create an industrial powerhouse. Soviet industry, mining and oil production came from the west, its alleged enemy. This is probably the best kept secret of world politics. The US built the USSR from the ground up (See section V. below). GE provided Russia's electric grid under Lenin and Early Stalin. Ford build Russia's trucks from Ukraine. Oil was pumped by several Alaska oil firms, and the USSR's credit came from France and Germany until 1936 (Levine, 1974; Dienes, 1971; Erickson,1991; Carley, 1997; Lonsdale, 1960).

Russia was in no crisis before 1905. It was doing so well that the British financed any and all anti-Russian movements from the Mountain Turks to the Japanese. Skocpol is incorrect that Russia was in debt, she was not. Agricultural productivity skyrocketed rather than being in decline. Grain production increased by about 500% between 1900 and 1914. Skocpol is woefully misinformed about the condition of Russia in 1914, but such misinformation is necessary for the official story to “work out.”

Skocpol is correct in asserting the Petersburgian bureaucracy was separate from Russia, or hardly Russian at all. She does not reach the necessary deduction, however, namely that the tsar no longer ruled, but the administration. True, peasant problems could be severe. They however were aimed at the zemstvo, not the monarchy. They were certainly not pro-Bolshevik, since they wanted additional land, a universal desire of all farmers. Nikolai II responded by cutting taxes

and ending all redemption payments (Phillips, 2003).

The myths of Marxism and Communism can fill hundreds of volumes. In the papers “Russia under Western Eyes” (RR, 1957) and “40 Years under Soviet Communism (RR, 1958) show that neither Marxism or Bolshevism was “against inequality.” The USSR rejected all forms of labor control over enterprises and no freedoms whatsoever were granted to worker unions or the workers themselves. In addition, “The Russian Revolution” (RR, 1942) makes it clear from primary documents that the rhetoric of the party was to have no relation to the reality.

In “10 Fallacies of Soviet Communism” (RR, 1953), it is clear that the Reds were erecting an oligarchy where the new ruling class would not just “use” the state for their own purposes, but to actually become the state. In that article, the western love of Marxism is shown by the citations of hundreds of newspaper articles praising the new “free Russian government.” The fact that both Marx and Trotsky worked for American capitalist newspapers seems strangely ignored by western writers, then and now.

The uncomfortable truth is that Marxism in the USSR depended on aid from the US to function. It was never meant to manage an economy or “represent labor.” It was only a wealth transfer in that Marxism had nothing to do with labor and was entirely about the Party's ownership over all capital. Partial proof of this is the total destruction of any other, non-Red socialist movement anywhere. National communist movements like the Borotbist' Christian Socialist communes, Old peasant communes or labor unions were liquidated with extreme violence. This is odd behavior from a faction dedicated to “labor.”

Wages plummeted, all independent labor action was violently liquidated, and most of the actual workers in Russia were silenced. This did not stop Lenin from issuing is “Declaration of Rights of Working and Exploited People” which includes private property in land and “worker's control.” As it was being written, plans for its liquidation were already in motion. “Workers councils” in factories had to be chosen from party members. This suggests that their purpose was to streamline and micro-manage the transfer of productive capital to Lenin, Sverdlov and Trotsky. If that was not the case, then labor as such would be on the councils, not party intellectuals, most of whom have never worked. This system soon was called “War Communism.” This is was a play on words, it was a war on labor and the capital it created. Some interpret it as communism that took place during World War I, but the war had already ended.

Lenin took power against the proletariat is one of the more ironic elements of Russian history. Immediately upon taking power in a coup, Lenin shut down all independent labor unions. It was these unions – that is, labor itself – that served as Lenin's primary opposition. On July 7th of 1918, Lenin telegraphed Stalin: “We retain hundreds of hostages from the Left SRs. Everywhere you must ruthlessly suppress these pitiful and hysterical adventurers who have become a tool in the hands of the counter-revolutionaries. . . be ruthless against the Left SRs.”

Several observations are required here: first, comments like this effectually end the debate on whether Stalin was different from Lenin. Second, that since the Left SR was the labor party with a similar (public) agenda to the Bolsheviks, there is no interest in creating a mass party or a labor dictatorship. All Cadets, anarchists and Mensheviks were banned, regardless of their views on socialism. The Red oligarchy resurrected the death penalty and banned all newspapers, especially those put out by labor collectives. Nothing here makes sense. Its almost complete absence from historical treatments of the era is curious.

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