

## **Revolution and Democracy**

One hundred years ago, in St. Petersburg, crowds of women went out on the street to protest the conditions in which they and their families were living. Within days that simple act of defiance turned into open revolt as workers from dozens of factories joined their ranks. Within a week, when soldiers turned their guns against the imperial regime, it had become a revolution and the centuries-old tsarist autocracy fell. The revolution was a moment when ordinary people made history and changed the world. The consequences of their desperate actions could not be foretold. For the year of the revolution itself, 1917, activists inaugurated a festival of freedom and radical democracy. Anyone interested in politics or simply improving their lives joined committees, held meetings, marched in demonstrations, and voted repeatedly for representatives to factory committees and councils of workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies (Soviets).

But war, social chaos, and economic breakdown rapidly radicalized the lower classes and drove a widening chasm between those at the bottom of society and those in the middle and at the top. Social polarization destroyed the hopes of liberals and moderate socialists to contain the revolution within the bounds of a "bourgeois" liberal democracy. More militant socialists, led by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik (later Communist) Party, rode the wave of anger at people of property and hope for a truly egalitarian and socially just society. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks seized power in the name of the Soviets and carried the country into civil war and ultimately a one-party dictatorship.

Historians have debated for a century why the revolution founded in aspirations for freedom and democracy degenerated so rapidly into civil war and dictatorship. Was it the fault of power-hungry leaders like Lenin or were there broader and deeper social causes? Was it the inherent character of revolution itself or the national makeup of Russians who were thought to be by nature lovers of authority and order? No answer to those questions will satisfy all people of different political preferences. The Russian Revolution and the experience of the Soviet Union are among the most controversial topics in the academic world, rivaling those of the other great revolutions – the French Revolution of 1789 and the Chinese Revolution of 1949. One is reminded of the Chinese

Communist premier Zhou Enlai's famous reply in 1972 to a question about the impact of the French Revolution: "It is too early to say."

Revolution is fundamentally a break with the past, a chaotic series of events that tears up the old while attempting to create something new. It is similar to trying to rebuild a ship while it is being tossed about in turbulent seas. The actions of individuals, ethnic groups, and social classes are unpredictable and lead to unintended outcomes. Yet people make choices along the way that have consequences. Choosing terror, for example, as a tool of governance as Lenin did is incompatible with democracy. To hold power and gain victory during a bloody civil war the Bolsheviks employed violence against their enemies, the Whites, who in turn used indiscriminate killing against the Reds. War itself—class struggle, ethnic conflict, and international warfare—work forcefully against the kinds of compromise and negotiation that characterize democratic politics. With the deep social divisions in Russia that existed before and only widened during the revolution, the aspirations of liberals and moderates to unify "the vital forces of the nation" became less and less possible. The Bolsheviks banked on a government representing only the workers, peasants, and soldiers and excluding the middle and upper classes. Their vision prevailed in October 1917, but during the civil war (1918–1921) democratic choices and popular participation in decision-making steadily gave way to direction from above. Military necessity combined with an ideological vision of government by a single party ostensibly representing the masses of working people worked to eliminate democratic practices that had flourished in the revolutionary year of 1917.

One lesson to learn from the Russian Revolution is that democracy is fragile. It needs care and attention. It requires democrats, people dedicated to the empowerment of all the people. While the survival of democracy in times of civil war might be extraordinarily difficult, in more peaceful times it survives and flourishes ONLY when people play by the rules of democratic politics. The logic of war—destroy your enemy at any cost—must be replaced by the logic of democracy—negotiation, compromise, rational engagement, and give and take. Democracies work when people in power recognize and respect the rights of the opposition. They fail when the opponents of the

government are demonized, treated as pariahs, and threatened with imprisonment or death.

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