

The Russian Revolution and Anticolonialism

The Russian revolution was, among other things, a postcolonial moment. Nicholas II, whose abdication ushered in the revolution, ruled over a vast multinational empire in which non-Russians comprised more than half the population. From the outset, activists from various non-Russian groups saw the revolution—i.e., the abdication of the Tsar—as a chance to seek recognition of their existence as national groups and to renegotiate their position in the Russian state. National movements were able to create an enormous mobilization in the first weeks of the revolution. In distant Tashkent, crowds of 30,000 gathered at meetings to discuss the new order and to demand new rights. By early April, activists had organized a congress of the indigenous population of Turkestan that declared that Turkestan should be territorially autonomous in a federal Russian republic. Developments in Turkestan were part of a broader national mobilization that swept the non-Russian parts of the empire in the spring and summer of 1917. Not all national movements were alike, of course. Some represented highly mobilized, urbanized populations; others were politically nascent and spoke on behalf of rural or nomadic communities without widespread national sentiment. But they all had in common a search for autonomy and remaking the state order in Russia. Outright independence was not on the agenda. In the enthusiasm unleashed by the fall of the monarchy, most national activists hoped that national self-determination could function in a multinational state if proper arrangements were in place. Russia would have been turned into a federation that would legally recognize the existence of nationalities (something the Tsarist authorities had always avoided) and guarantee linguistic and cultural rights to the nations. Self-determination and the autonomous development of nations had been put on the agenda by the nations of the Russian empire well before Woodrow Wilson came to be associated with it.

Mainstream Russian parties were extremely cool to this challenge to the nature of the Russian state and saw the aspirations of the non-Russians as highly problematic. The only party to take the national question seriously was that of the Bolsheviks, who spoke of the right of nations to self-determination. Once they had taken power in October (for reasons that had little to do with the non-Russians), they sought to ride the tiger of

national determination and to put it to their own use. They promised national rights within the revolutionary order and extended them to the colonial world at large. In November 1917, the Bolsheviks issued a proclamation “To All Toiling Muslims of Russia and the East” that exhorted them to support the new government with the promise that “henceforward your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions, are declared free and inviolable!” Combined with the Bolsheviks’ publication of the secret treaties signed by the Allies during the war, this early revolutionary rhetoric positioned the Bolsheviks as champions of anticolonialism and challengers to the global imperial order. It made the Russian revolution a truly global phenomenon.

These proclamations attracted numerous anticolonial actors to the land of the Soviets. Between 1918 and 1922, not just Moscow but also Tashkent and Baku became crossroads of (often) self-proclaimed revolutionaries from the colonial world who were enthralled by the idea of revolution as a modality of change and as a solution to their problems. Erez Manela has written of a “Wilsonian Moment” in the aftermath of the First World War, a brief period when many people in the colonized world hoped that Wilson’s rhetoric of national determination would apply to them too and lead them to independence. The same years also saw what we might call (albeit with some hesitation) a “Leninist Moment,” in which other kinds of activists from the colonial world pinned their hopes on the idea of revolution to deliver them from colonial subjugation. True, it was revolution, not Bolshevism, that drove them. They seldom understood revolution in the way the Bolsheviks did—most of them had little use for class antagonism as a driving force of history—but they were keen on an alternate politics of mass mobilization and military preparation that would overthrow colonial and semicolonial rule across Asia. Activists from many different strains of a large Indian diaspora converged in Tashkent in 1918–22, where they rubbed shoulders with Afghan, Iranian, and Turkish actors who had various plans for reshaping the political order in their lands. A soviet republic was proclaimed in Gilan in northern Iran in 1921, the same year a Communist Party of India was formed in Tashkent, where the Comintern briefly operated a bureau to do “Indian work.” As we can imagine, the hopes of colonial activists fit the Bolsheviks’ plans only imperfectly. The collaboration was fitful and seldom sustained, but it nevertheless gave anticolonial activists a new political vocabulary.

This “Leninist Moment” passed, as did the Wilsonian. The postwar status quo that emerged had little space for anticolonial activism in either mode. But the Russian revolution continued to have an anticolonial meaning for much of the twentieth century, whether invoked by the Soviet regime or imputed to it by colonial thinkers and activists.

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