

Murray Smith's Greetings on Behalf of the Brock Socialist Club to "Living Legacies of Russia's Socialist Revolution – A Century of Struggle, 1917-2017," a November 11, 2017 Conference at Brock University

A video of two sessions of the conference can be accessed at the 'Important Links' page at www.murraysmith.org

One hundred years ago, on November 7, 1917, the Russian working class seized power in the Russian capital of Petrograd and constituted a new, revolutionary workers government, which soon proclaimed as its goal the achievement of a classless, socialist society on a world scale. This extraordinarily audacious, world-historical event – a victorious proletarian-socialist revolution that succeeded in expropriating the property of Russia's capitalists and landlord class – has never been replicated since.

The leadership of the revolution, the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, understood from the outset that the fate of the Russian workers' state – of this first attempt to begin the construction of a new 'socialist order' – was inextricably linked to the spread of socialist revolution to other countries, above all the more industrially advanced countries of capitalist Europe.

With this in mind, and with the support of revolutionary socialists from across Europe and around the world, the Bolsheviks launched the Third, Communist International as a party of world socialist revolution in 1919. Despite major working-class uprisings in Germany, in Italy, in Hungary and elsewhere in the immediate aftermath of World War One, however, Russia's socialist revolution remained isolated. Civil war ravaged the territories of the former Tsarist Empire until 1921, pitting the Red Army of the nascent Soviet government against an alliance of counter-revolutionary 'white' armies and fourteen foreign armies of intervention. Due to the determination of the Russian workers and peasants to defend their revolution, the forces of capitalist counter-revolution were decisively defeated on the battlefield. But the civil war further impoverished an already backward country, exhausted its working people, and planted the seeds of a bureaucratic counter-revolution within the revolution itself.

As early as 1920, Lenin insisted that the workers' state was succumbing to severe 'bureaucratic deformations' – the combined result of extreme economic scarcity, the decimation of many of the most advanced and most class-conscious workers by the civil war, and the demoralization engendered by the revolution's continuing isolation. By 1924, the year of Lenin's death and just months after the defeat of a great revolutionary opportunity in Germany, the bureaucratic degeneration of the revolution was all but sealed. Despite the efforts of Trotsky and his Left Opposition to carry forward Lenin's 'last struggle' against bureaucratism and for revolutionary internationalism, the leadership of the Soviet Communist party passed into the hands of the arch-bureaucrat Joseph Stalin, whose doctrine of building socialism in one country signaled the party-state bureaucracy's decisive repudiation of Marxism.

The Soviet Union survived as a workers' state until 1991, registering many great achievements, against great odds. But throughout most of its existence, it was a *bureaucratically degenerated* workers state, dominated by a venal, essentially conservative and often criminal oligarchy, which played no small role in preventing the great ideals, principles and example of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution from spreading to other countries. As Leon Trotsky noted in his 1936 work *The Revolution Betrayed*: "Having strangled independence and initiative in the lower ranks of the people at home, [the Soviet bureaucracy] naturally cannot provoke critical thought and revolutionary daring on the world arena." The following year Trotsky added: "The bureaucracy, which became a reactionary force in the USSR, cannot play a revolutionary role on the world arena."

Objectively, the Stalinist bureaucracy, in Stalin's time and in the post-Stalin era, maintained a symbiotic relationship with world capitalism. While seeking to defend many of the conquests of the revolution, however inadequately and incompetently, it sought above all to appease the imperialist bourgeoisies by deflecting the most class-conscious workers' movements of their countries away from a truly revolutionary course.

The Brock Socialist Club welcomes you to this celebration of the centenary of the greatest event in human history. We view this as an occasion to reflect on the audacity and inspiring example set by a workers' revolution that vanquished the propertied classes of a vast and oppressive empire; that transformed privately owned means of production into social property; that demonstrated in life that a planned, collectivized economy was not only possible, but that it could rapidly transform a backward and overwhelmingly agrarian society into one of the most powerful countries in the world, despite the determined efforts of powerful forces commanding many times its resources. At the same time, this is an occasion to consider the tragic fate of that revolution; to discuss and debate its contested and controversial legacies; and to draw out its most important lessons – both positive and negative – for contemporary socialists. For if one thing should be crystal clear to us in this centennial year of the Russian Revolution, it is this: the problems, contradictions and iniquities that gave rise to that revolution – growing material deprivation, intensifying class inequality and antagonism, political instability and war – are still very much with us. Indeed, the capitalist system that breeds such conditions is now preparing still greater calamities than those witnessed in the first half of the 20th century. Humanity can no longer afford the ever-mounting costs associated with maintaining and perpetuating the capitalist class. We can do better! We must do better!

A socialist revolution is no easy task. Its costs and risks are considerable. But the costs and risks of a failure to carry such a revolution through to the end are incomparably greater. Rosa Luxemburg, the great revolutionary Marxist, partisan of the Russian Revolution, and founder of the German Communist Party, proclaimed in 1919 that humanity faced a choice between socialism and barbarism. Our situation is even more perilous today – for today we must choose between the building of a world socialist order and an otherwise almost certain fate under a decaying capitalist one: the extinction of our species.

Russia's October socialist revolution offers us precious, indeed indispensable lessons, as we steel ourselves for the great struggles that lie ahead.