A Blunder of History, Accident, or Necessity?

THIS CHAPTER'S TITLE states three of the various explanations for the October 1917 revolution and its place in history. Discussion and disagreement over these different versions continue, with virtually endless variations on these themes. Everything or anything can be found here—from the assertion that October was merely a successful putsch by a handful of revolutionaries headed by Lenin to the claim that it was the result of a secret plan by the German General Staff.

Today, after eight decades, with the enormous amount of material available to researchers, one thing may be stated absolutely and definitively: *In the specific situation that arose in Russia and around it, the October revolution was historically inevitable.*

Russia was pregnant with revolution from the beginning of the twentieth century. This does not mean that the revolution necessarily had to take such a destructive, and veritably apocalyptic form.

We need to go back a little at this point and ask what Russia was like before World War I. There is a commonly encountered opinion—it was virtually the official line in the Soviet era—that, back then, Russia was a slumbering, backward, savage or semisavage country, one that was vast and powerful but at the same time impoverished and miserable. That is not true—or to put it more precisely, that is not the full truth.

The phenomenal growth of Russian industry during the decade and a half before World War I, especially after 1906, would today be called an "economic miracle." The gross national product increased by 220 percent. The most advanced types of production were introduced as industry was rapidly modernized. Russia outpaced the West in the degree of concentration found in the primary sectors of its economy. Fixed capital was expanding three times faster than the rate of such expansion in America. The

growth of savings bank deposits was indicative. In 1914 they had reached 1,704 million gold rubles. The internal market was expanding swiftly, not only in the production of producers' goods but in items of mass consumption, such as sugar, butter, kerosene, footwear, and clothing.

The cooperative movement in the countryside was the second largest in the world, second only to the movement in Great Britain where this form of organization had originated. Siberia was being colonized at a furious pace. Its population doubled during the nine-year period between the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. Agricultural production increased more than threefold, and agricultural exports rose tenfold. Siberia had entered a genuinely "American" period of economic and cultural development.

In the eight years before World War I there was an increase of 12,000 versts of railroad track, bringing the total to 64,500 versts of track for the country as a whole. The profitability of the railroads tripled in a period of three years, reaching a level of 449 million gold rubles in 1912.

Preparations for the introduction of a system of compulsory public education had begun. Before war broke out in 1914 there were 122,000 primary public schools in Russia with eight million pupils. Each summer, school teachers had the opportunity to travel to Italy, France, Germany, and other European countries to gain wider experience and learn about setting up a system of secondary education for Russia.

In the prewar years, especially under the impact of the 1905 revolution, Russian society acquired the features of a distinctly organized system. Political parties and elections to the Duma raised the level of political consciousness. The court system, which began to operate more and more independently, attained a level of authority that was unusual for Russia. There were significantly expanded opportunities to exercise freedom of speech, to criticize the authorities, and to criticize government policies, not only in the Duma. Newspapers were sprouting like mushrooms after rain.

There was still, of course, a great deal of lawlessness and arbitrary rule. But from the point of view of social activism and the involvement of large numbers of people in public activity, Russia was no longer what it had been.

As for culture, this was the time of the celebrated "Silver Age" in Russia, when our country played a vanguard role in world art and literature, creating new schools and trends that lasted for decades.

All the testimony of people at that time tells us that no one was thinking about having a war. No one wanted it, up to and including a significant portion of the higher imperial aristocracy. Until the last moment no one knew

that the rulers in St. Petersburg had become entangled in a web of military intrigue. The tsar himself, for a period of several days, a long time under the circumstances, hesitated on whether to respond with a military mobilization to the ultimatum issued by the tsar's relative and "friend" Kaiser Wilhelm II.

This look backward at Russia before World War I is not out of place, I think, as a confirmation of the thesis that objectively it was not necessary for Russia to become involved in World War I. It could have remained on the sidelines, as the United States did. It was only as the curtain was falling, in 1917, that the United States entered the war.

Nevertheless, we should not allow anything said here to lead us astray in our image of Russia at the turn of the century. At the time of the revolution it was by no means a country of "prosperous capitalism." It was true that Russian capitalism, which began its journey belatedly in comparison with the West, was moving ahead at an intense pace. But society as a whole remained semifeudal, with an archaic sociopolitical system that gave rise to very sharp class antagonisms. From the beginning of the twentieth century Russia found itself in a condition of profound crisis. The need for change was felt tangibly in all strata of society. Attempts at reform were undertaken in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, but they went nowhere because they did not dare infringe on the power of the autocracy, the rule of the tsar. History teaches us, however, that when the times are ripe for change and the government refuses or is unable to change, either society starts to decay or a revolution begins.

Something further should be added on this point. A crisis-filled or critically explosive potential had built up almost everywhere in the world by the beginning of the twentieth century. The tension in social relations was reflected in a rising wave of strikes by workers, protest actions by farmers, and the increased influence of socialist parties in many countries. The first anticolonial revolutions in the outlying areas of the world capitalist system had already taken place. In relations between the most powerful countries the time had grown ripe for a redivision of spheres of influence around the world. Germany had made a great leap forward in economic development, and its military potential was being promoted openly, including in the realm of naval power. An increasingly aggressive German foreign policy resulted in tough and knotty international crises, one after the other.

World War I laid bare the crisis of international relations in all its intensity. The contradictions that had built up erupted in a tremendous explosion, and during the war these contradictions continued to develop new modifi-

cations, which varied with the changing fortunes of war. For Russia, the war into which the tsarist government plunged our country, flying in the face of its real national interests, when it could have stayed on the sidelines, soon provoked an internal explosion that spread through the entire nation.

The beginning of 1917 saw the spontaneous outpouring known as the February revolution. For a long time in our country it was customary not to acknowledge the full significance of this revolution, to dismiss it merely as a prologue to the October revolution. In fact it was a major event in and of itself. The "great empire of the tsars" was overripe for change on a colossal scale, and the February revolution made the breakthrough toward the changes that were needed. At the time that this revolution succeeded, the further course of events was by no means fatally predetermined.

February was a revolution of the masses in the full sense of the word. The people of Russia, its citizens, who were yearning for freedom, peace, and bread, made this revolution. Hunger protests by the women of Petrograd were the spark that ignited the flame. As John Reed wrote, "it was the masses of the people, workers, soldiers, and peasants, which forced every change in the course of the Revolution." The political groups were caught off guard. Today the unfalsified documents of the Russian political parties of that time are being published—ranging from the left to the extreme right—and it is evident how unprepared the politicians were for the actions of the masses. On the very eve of February 1917, Lenin, who was then in Zurich, said that the present generation was not fated to see the revolution. Confusion and dismay are the most appropriate words with which to characterize the attitudes prevailing in the headquarters of the various political parties at that time. February was a proclamation of freedom. The three-hundred-year-old monarchy collapsed. A republic came into being, and the possibility of democratic change emerged. For a short time Russia became the freest of all the countries in the war.

But the February revolution quickly played itself out. Those who came to replace the tsar proved to be helpless, cowardly, and self-seeking; they were unable to rise to the historical needs of the time. Consequently the war continued, although it was universally hated. Neither peace nor relief from hunger and economic dislocation was granted to the people. Even democratic liberties began to erode. Antigovernment demonstrations were dispersed by force of arms. Troublesome newspapers were simply closed down. Political opponents of the government were persecuted and arrested. It was at that time, not only after the October revolution, that there appeared food-requisitioning units, which took grain from the peasants.

Russian democracy—which had great diversity but was fragmented and divided—was unable to take realistic action toward resolving all the problems that had come to a head. It was unable to bring the country out of crisis and back to normalcy.

The Provisional Government proved incapable of implementing fundamental change. Expectations were left hanging. Under these conditions October was inevitable. Of course the February revolution and its subsequent development deserve continued study. But taking into account everything we know today, certain conclusions seem evident.

One of the main conclusions is this: *The October revolution undeniably reflected the most urgent demands of the broadest strata of the population for fundamental social change*. The central slogans of the revolution, which arose from below and were not manufactured by anyone, were for freedom, for peace to all, for the factories to go to the workers, for the land to go to the peasants, for bread to go to the hungry. These slogans concisely stated the basic demands of the people.

A question arises: Was there, could there have been, an alternative to October? Could events have developed differently?

A democratic alternative, in the form of a positive development of the February revolution, as we have said, was buried as the result of the weakness of the post-February regime. It was not possible to go back to the first days of the February revolution, and the tsarist regime had completely discredited itself. Only one alternative remained—as many even in monarchist circles admitted—and that was a new, more radical revolution.

Nevertheless, another variant potentially existed—that of an extreme, right-wing, reactionary military dictatorship. I will cite the authoritative testimony of General Denikin, who was, of course, a leader of the Whites. Referring to the attempt by General Kornilov to carry out a coup d'état in August 1917, Denikin wrote: "By his own firm and sincere conviction and under the influence of public opinion, Kornilov saw in a dictatorship the only way out of the situation created by the spiritual and political prostration of the [Provisional] government." Denikin stated further: "Kornilov, and especially those in his immediate entourage, were inclined toward a one-man dictatorship." It must be said that this kind of "solution" to the problem was regarded as virtually the optimal solution by many on the right and even by some liberal bourgeois politicians. The Bolsheviks presented their variant in opposition to these plans for a coup and in opposition to the helplessness of the Provisional Government. And they were victorious.

This, of course, created a tremendous rift in Russian society, one fraught with civil war. Could that kind of war have been avoided? Let us turn to the authority of Vladimir Lenin. Here is what he wrote on this question: "If there is one absolutely indisputable lesson of the revolution, one absolutely demonstrated by the facts, it is that only and exclusively an alliance of the Bolsheviks with the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks and exclusively an immediate transfer of all power to the soviets could have made a civil war in Russia impossible" (Lenin, *Collected Works* [Russian ed.] 34:222). No such alliance, however, was formed. One may scrupulously follow the course of events day by day and hour by hour to determine who bore the responsibility for this failure. The general conclusion will be that all those to whom Lenin referred were responsible—that is, the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries.

A certain parallel suggests itself here, or if not a parallel, at least a consideration. The February revolution did not produce the expected and possible results, because Russian democracy was weak and fragmented. Rivalry and ideological prejudice proved to be stronger than the need for unification of all democratic forces on a national basis to win peace and land and to combat hunger and economic ruin. After October the civil war broke out for the same reason. In the years since October—in other countries and in other situations—has it not been true that the inability to come to agreement has prevented leftist and democratic parties, including Communists, from uniting to forestall a negative course of events—as, for example, in Germany before Hitler's rise to power?

I will go further. During the years of perestroika the fragmentation of the democrats, the back-biting among them, the attempts by each group to show that it was "more democratic" than the others, ultimately became one of the reasons for the undermining of democratic change and then the interruption of perestroika as a result of the August 1991 coup attempt. The same has happened in Russia since 1991. Our country has not accepted Yeltsin's reforms nor does it wish to return to the past, but a democratic alternative has not been created among the divided and fragmented democratic forces, and a destructive rivalry among leaders of tiny parties disrupts the democratic part of the spectrum in Russia.

This is a lesson for everyone who is seriously concerned about the future prospects of their own country and of the world community. Even today the wearing of ideological blinders, adherence to abstract schemes, and egoistic concern exclusively with gaining advantage for one's own party in many

cases prevent a genuinely democratic choice. Yet history, with rare exceptions, contains many possible variants and is by no means lacking in alternatives.

There is, of course, another aspect of the truth regarding the civil war in Russia. It would unquestionably have been less savage, and would not have lasted so long, if not for foreign military intervention. In seeking to prevent the spread of the "Bolshevik infection" (and that was standard terminology among leaders of the Entente), the West did not hesitate to send interventionist forces from fourteen different countries. This was in response to the Bolshevik calls for, and practical actions promoting, the bonfire of world revolution. That is all true, but it had far-reaching consequences.

The goal that was openly proclaimed in the West at that time was to strangle the infant Soviet republic, and this goal persisted even after the civil war. In later times this allowed Stalin and the government subordinated to him to portray any opponent of his regime, any political opposition, even those who simply disagreed with him within the ranks of the Communist Party, as "foreign agents" and to whip up the "patriotic wrath of the masses" against them. Actually it can be said that the West lowered an iron curtain against Russia long before Churchill's speech in Fulton, Missouri. Indirectly this provided powerful nourishment for the Stalinist dictatorship and helped to preserve it, enabling it to justify not only errors but crimes as well.

The civil war, without question, was a colossal tragedy for our country and our people. The human losses were enormous. More than two million citizens emigrated, creating a "second Russia" outside our country. The question remains: Was the civil war inevitable?

The harsh and embittered feelings of that time are understandable of course. Maxim Gorky, in his *Thoughts Out of Season*, wrote that "war brought out naked, bestial instincts." A huge number of people lost everything they had. Hundreds of thousands were left without a shred. From then on they had nothing to lose. Others took up war as a profession. And all this—on both sides—was reinforced and illuminated by ideology, with colorful and dramatic slogans used to stir up frenzied passions. Also, there were vast quantities of weapons, and it became an everyday affair to put them to use for almost any reason. Physical losses were not the only result. The moral damage was tremendous. Our people suffered a psychological degradation that left a very deep imprint on the whole subsequent history of our country.

The Reds, who were defending the cause of the revolution, were fighting for Russia and for its future. But the Whites, who preached a different

set of ideals, were also fighting for Russia, for what they considered its salvation. In this case patriotism did not unite but separated the two sides. In fact, however, ideological fanaticism suppressed true patriotism. Our country reached the brink of destruction as a result of this double-headed "patriotism." And our population found itself fragmented and divided for decades afterward.

I am not in any way questioning the feelings or motivations of Red Army fighters—they were sincere. The "Soldiers of October" believed in the rightness of their cause. Their exploits deserve to be honored and memorialized. But the soldiers on the other side, the Whites, also believed in their cause.

During the Great Patriotic War [the Nazi-Soviet phase of World War II, from 1941 to 1945], many White émigrés sided with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. Thousands of them perished. They did not (in most cases) give up their faith in Russia, although they had lost their country, nor did they give up their views. Their feelings for their native land took precedence.

Is this not a lesson for the present time and for the future—in Russia but not only in Russia? Ideological and political intolerance, even with the best and most sincere intentions, produces results that are the direct opposite of those intended.

The outcome of the civil war was, of course, the victory of the Bolsheviks. Why? Let us listen to someone who was by no means "Red"—Leonard Shapiro. In his book *The Russian Revolutions of 1917*, he wrote:

> . . . the people as a whole, in spite of the unpopularity of the Communists, preferred the Soviet regime to the available alternatives. The peasants disliked both sides and wanted above all to be left alone; but when it came to the choice, they preferred the Communists who gave them land to the Whites who took, or threatened to take, it away.

Despite an element of oversimplification, this explanation goes to the heart of the matter.

The slogans of the October revolution, especially those that were put into practice in the early period of the revolution, were decisive in bringing victory to the Bolsheviks. The historical necessity embodied in these slogans is confirmed by this fact; that is, there was a necessity for a profound transformation of the country along the lines indicated by the slogans call-

ing for bread, peace, land, and so forth. This has enormous significance in and of itself, not only for Russia. Nevertheless, in reflecting on the revolution, its course of development, and its gains in comparison with its losses—and in comparison with the experience of other revolutions—one is drawn to the conclusion that the general question of the role of revolutions in history needs further, serious study.

Marx's formula that revolutions are the locomotives of history was very much in vogue for a long time and remains so even today. Nevertheless this formula is worth rethinking. Have revolutions really been the locomotives of forward or upward movement by society? Or have they been extreme solutions to situations in which the ruling powers were incapable of solving problems that had come to a head while the masses were no longer able to endure the existing situation?

Revolutions have undeniably been the sources of great change in the life of society. But they have also been very costly. Revolutions have been referred to as festivals of the oppressed and exploited masses. But haven't these same masses suffered great losses as a result of revolutions? Moreover, revolutions have often been followed by retrogressive movements. The term *Thermidor* has entered the vocabulary of political science as a kind of symbol for such retrogressive movements, which have sometimes been quite painful and unhealthy.

At the very height of perestroika I, as general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, stated publicly from the highest public platform in the Soviet Union: "I renounce revolution as a means of solving problems," although our country was ripe for change to such a profound extent that it was truly in need of a revolution. My concern was that a new revolution might cause destructive upheavals as in the past—or worse, since this is the atomic age.

In my view, the optimum form of social development, corresponding to the interests of all citizens, is *evolutionary reform*. When the necessity for change arises, the pace at which reforms take place, as experience has shown, depends on many factors. But it depends primarily on the level of maturity of civil society, the degree of responsibility among the ruling circles, and a general agreement to renounce intolerance and extremism.

What has been said is not intended to deny the unquestionably great significance of, let us say, the French revolution or the October revolution. They occupy an unshakable place in history. The main question is this: Did these revolutions, especially the October revolution, set an example as the

optimal way of resolving the social problems which had come to a head at that time? Did such revolutions provide the most suitable and advantageous means for resolving the actually existing conflicts and contradictions? Did these revolutions in fact bring about what they had promised?