

The varied legacy of Russia's October revolution

In this photo taken in Oct. 1917, provided by Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, armed soldiers carry a banner reading 'Communism' march along Nikolskaya street towards the Kremlin Wall in Moscow, Russia. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was long before the digital revolution allowed anyone to instantly document events, but the clumsy cameras of the time still caught some images that capture the period's drama. (Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive via AP)

A century ago, on November 7, [the world was shaken by a revolution in Russia](#). Public recollection on the centenary has been scanty in India thus far, perhaps out of the fear that remembering the Russian Revolution is tantamount to endorsing its outcomes. But that would be a sentimental approach to history. Historical events are to be evaluated in terms of their consequences.

Most of it horrific

There is no gainsaying that the revolution in Russia was momentous (*Picture, taken in October 1917, shows armed soldiers, with a banner reading 'Communism', marching on Nikolskaya street towards the Kremlin Wall in Moscow*). However, if we are to think of a legacy we might say that it has been both horrific and benign, much of it having been horrific for the people of Russia and some of it benign for the rest of the world. After a brief interregnum of endless possibilities in the early 1920s, the vacuum created by the death of Lenin was taken advantage of by Josef Stalin to assume power. For the next three decades, his role was not unlike that of the Tsar who had been deposed. The opposition was annihilated, labour camps for dissidents established, the free press disbanded and the peasantry dispossessed.

Among the nationalities, the Ukrainians who had once dreamt of independence were suppressed. The method was not just ruthless, it was innovative. Upon Stalin's orders, grain was shipped out of their country to the rest of the Soviet Union, causing famine and deaths. A people were crushed. What the Ukrainians faced as a people was the treatment meted out to individual Russians who opposed the dictator. Termed 'enemies of the people', they were stripped of all human agency when they were not marched off to Siberia. There among the tasks assigned to them would be to work nickel mines with their bare hands in sub-zero temperature. In a history reminiscent of the Third Reich, gypsies, Jews and homosexuals found themselves in Stalin's labour camps, the only difference being that Hitler had reserved a place also for the communists in his.

It may be said that some of Stalin's actions were no different from those of the European regimes in their colonies. While this is indeed correct, the colonial powers had not come into being promising emancipation of the oppressed. Churchill may have sucked grain out of Bengal thus tipping it into famine, but then he was unabashedly racist. On the other hand, the communist movement that eventually gave birth to the Russian Revolution was premised on the promise of power to the people. Instead, under Stalin, it gave rise to a bureaucracy, the rationale of which was to maintain the regime perpetrated by the communist party.

Despite the avowedly internationalist stance of the Comintern, Stalin was not sympathetic to the Indian national movement, painting it as bourgeois in character. It is odd therefore that the Communist Party of India chose to support the British government during the Quit India movement launched by the Congress, ostensibly on grounds that an Allied Victory held out greater prospects for Indian independence. Perhaps they were unaware of Churchill's speech in the House of

Commons in 1942: "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire...." Or perhaps the Indian communists just chose to follow their captain, who having once signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, was later to fall out with him.

Sets of reforms

After the death of Stalin, the former Soviet Union went through two rounds of reforms. The first was under Khrushchev and the other under Gorbachev. Following the latter, the country imploded and we are now left with Russia alone, most of the republics having gone their own way. The diminution of the former Soviet Union is of lesser importance than the fact that the political climate in what remains of its core, namely Russia, did not change.

It is moot whether the Russia under Vladimir Putin today is a major change from the Russia under the Romanovs. A once-proud civilisation is now ruled by a former secret-service agent. Mr. Putin represents the very spirit that the revolution had tried to expunge, a reactionary combination of nativism and authoritarianism. He was able to rise to power due to Soviet communism's success in preventing the creation of a free and vibrant civil society. At the ending of the former Soviet Union, the only free agents around were the communist apparatchiks and the crime syndicate. Together they divided the assets of the country built by the toil of the Russian people. This is the tragedy of the Russian Revolution.

While the very people whom it was meant to serve suffered unimaginably in the cataclysmic events in the former Soviet Union, elsewhere in the world there were to be benign consequences. Of these, the rise of social democracies across Europe. In their 'Communist Manifesto' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had written: "A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism." While they may have been right when they wrote this, it was a while before the vision could have an effect. It took the Russian Revolution to bring home to the ruling classes of Europe the urgency of making concessions to workers, and that too only after the Second World War and the consequent incorporation of almost half of Europe into a Soviet bloc. These took the form of the public provision of health, education and housing. Underlying this is the brilliant Marxian construction that all value is created by labour, entitling them to a larger share of the surplus than the bare necessities for their reproduction. Europe's social democracies have combined prosperity and freedom, and provided an alternative to raw American capitalism and repressive Soviet communism. They have also demonstrated an imaginative response to the ecological constraint on mankind, something that the communist model was incapable of imagining.

The other consequence of the Russian Revolution was for Europe's colonies. While Stalin's initiatives for ending colonialism were notably absent, the early communist movement had a global ambition aiming for the emancipation of all subject peoples. This was to have an impact on India. Though the communists never had a hold on the British working classes, the latter supported the revolution in Russia as did the British Labour party, which drew its support from the workers. It was natural that its commitment to socialism would extend to Indian independence. The Labour Party was to redeem its pledge. Winning the elections after the Second World War, the party withdrew British rule from India. Though the subsequent return to power of the Conservative Party under Churchill was to, predictably, delay the decolonisation process, Indian independence had a domino effect on Europe's colonial possessions.

To end on a more mundane note, for almost three decades after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, India enjoyed warm relations with the former Soviet Union. We received loans and other forms of economic assistance and political support in a notoriously partisan UN Security Council. An aspect of the former was the rupee-rouble trade whereby the Soviet Union accepted payment in rupees in exchange for vital goods needed by India, including defence equipment, oil and fertilizer. This mattered for the economy, for otherwise hard currency would have had to be earned

on the international market before these goods could be had.

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, its erstwhile republics lost their confidence and India's power elites turned the country westward for approbation. And a brief moment in history, when a rare friendship between diverse peoples had flourished, evaporated into thin air.

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