

## An idea dead & alive

World history is a history of big ideas. Big changes have always needed big ideas capable of appealing to the hearts and minds of the multitudes and energising them into action. Karl Marx, the originator of one such Big Idea — the theory of communism that envisioned a society based on equality and free of exploitation, and a state that would ultimately wither away — said it best. “Material force (violence used by guardians of the old social order) must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”

A hundred years ago, Marx’s theory gripped the Bolsheviks in Russia, who, led by [Vladimir Lenin](#), acted like a material force to overthrow the Tsarist empire and established the first communist-ruled state. The Russian Revolution influenced the spread of the Big Idea. In 1919, Lenin founded the Communist International or Comintern, a coalition of national communist parties that advocated world communism. Even though Joseph Stalin dissolved Comintern in 1943, the revolution in China in 1949, led by [Mao Zedong](#), marked Marxist theory’s next major success. In the 1980s, communist parties in India used to proudly claim that “one-third of the world is already under socialism; and the rest of the world will follow.”

But where, a century later, is the Russian Revolution? Russia consigned it to history in 1991 when the Soviet Union, a child of the revolution born in 1922, died, and each of the 15 constituent “socialist republics” became independent nations. Russia itself overthrew communist party rule. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last communist ruler, had embarked on a reformist initiative called glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), but there was nothing left to restructure by the end of his five-year rule. Under Boris Yeltsin, his successor, Russia aggressively dismantled most parts of the communist state and economy. For a few years, it seemed the Russian state had actually “withered away”. Crony capitalism and corruption led to a massive transfer of national wealth to oligarchs. Hyper-inflation made life for most Russians miserable. Russia’s international glory faded. Journalist Artemy Troitsky, writing in Moscow News, has described those chaotic years thus: “If you want to see what a big, truly anarchic country is like — look no further than Yeltsin’s Russia. I called it ‘the land of unlimited impossibilities’ — people were free to do whatever they wanted.”

In came another Vladimir (Putin) in 2000. He has rescued and salvaged the Russian state in his strongman rule. He has attempted to make Russians proud again by reviving nationalism and the orthodox church at home and by militarily resisting the US in Europe and West Asia. According to Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” However, he has not restored Russia’s continuity with its revolution. There has been no official commemoration of its centenary. Most young Russians I spoke to said they have no emotional connect to Lenin and his revolution.

I witnessed something ironical, albeit unsurprising in Yalta, where I was visiting to participate in a conference of the “International Friends of Crimea Forum”. In the morning I had not seen anything in the conference hall remotely suggestive of the centenary. In the evening banquet, however, many Russians were wearing an attractive badge in blazing red, with a hammer and sickle at the centre and “The Great Russian Revolution (1917-2017)” inscribed in Russian and Chinese. The badges had been given to them as gifts by the Chinese participants. It looked as if China is more interested than Russia in keeping alive the memory of the first Marxist-Leninist revolution.

Not surprising, because the Communist Party of China (CPC) continues to swear by Marxism-Leninism, although it also extols Mao, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping. Soon after he became party chief in 2012, Xi told his colleagues that the Soviet Union had collapsed “because nobody was man enough to stand up and resist”. As is amply clear from his speech at the 19th CPC congress

last month, where he was re-elected, Xi sees himself as someone who would “stand up and resist” any attempt or reform that could possibly lead to the end of the CPC rule. He has audaciously announced that China’s own “Two Centennial Goals” — 100 years of the founding of the CPC in 2021 and, in 2049, of Mao’s revolution that founded the People’s Republic of China — would serve as major milestones in the triumphant march of “socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era”. With the US and Europe in decline, the world will surely look to follow, or create, new models of equitable development.

This begets the question: Whither Marx’s Big Idea? The short answer — it’s both dead and alive. All history-changing ideas undergo change themselves. China has changed Marx by Sinifying him. In Russia, I met several intellectuals who said, “Not everything about the revolution and the Soviet era was wrong. What was wrong was the horrific use of violence by the communist state against its own people, the brutal suppression of freedom and democracy, and the ubiquitous personality cult of Lenin and Stalin. But we don’t forget that it was also the era when we defeated Hitler, when we made much progress in education and scientific research, and when most citizens shared both limited prosperity and limited poverty, without the kind of disparity we now see in Russia and in many countries. We should learn from our past mistakes and attempt to create a better future.”

As I looked at the vastness of the Black Sea in Yalta, where Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill — three victors of World War II — met in February 1945 to design a new global order, I was overwhelmed by a sobering reflection: We imperfect humans create, destroy, and strive to re-create our dreams and revolutions... again and again and again.

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