

Bolshevism: A hundred years on

The Great October Revolution of 1917 in Russia began with a minor revolution in February of that year. Tsar Nicholas II, who had ruled since 1894, was forced to abdicate his throne by Petrograd insurgents and a provincial government was installed. The last tsar was brought to that situation by factors that included the bloody suppression of a revolution in 1905, anti-Semitic pogroms, a Bloody Sunday in 1905 in which the Imperial Guards fired on unarmed demonstrators, and defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. The Bolsheviks were themselves a ragtag team of anti-imperialists. Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky were not united or cohesive in their violent protests against the establishment. Lenin's *April Theses* eventually became the foundational principle for the Soviet worker councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies and they seized power from the liberals in early November 1917 (the Gregorian calendar records the October revolution as having started on 7 November). Political communism in Soviet Russia, which was to last 72 years, was born.

Lenin's *April Theses* called for power to pass to the proletariat and away from the bourgeoisie. He called for all land to be nationalized and for banks to be consolidated into a single Soviet-controlled entity. Importantly, he also advocated a Comintern, or an organization created to spread communism internationally. This last edict, to create a de facto "marketing" department, led in the following decades to Mao Tse-Tung's revolution in China, and the advent of political communism in many countries like Spain (the only Western European country to have a Communist revolution), Vietnam, North Korea and India.

Indian communism was born in the first plenums of the Comintern. M.N. Roy attended the second world congress of 1920 as a delegate of the Communist Party of Mexico (which, bizarrely, he helped found). Roy was also the common link between Marxism and the Anushilan Samiti, a revolutionary nationalist organization born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) that advocated violent overthrow of British rule. Other members of Anushilan and its sibling Jugantar group were also converted to Marxist-Leninist thinking during long periods in jail. A separate strand of Indian communism was born in Maharashtra with Shripad A. Dange, who, having become disillusioned with Gandhianism, wrote a pamphlet titled *Gandhi vs Lenin*. The pamphlet led to a meeting between Roy and Dange and the Communist Party of India (CPI) was activated. This organization gained prominence and notoriety when Roy, Dange, Singaravelu Chettiar and others were charged in 1924 under the Cawnpore Bolshevik Conspiracy case with seeking "to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of British India, by complete separation of India from imperialistic Britain by a violent revolution". A third thread to Indian communism, banned during British rule, came from those who were persuaded by Marxist-Leninist thinking but were part of the mainstream Congress Socialist Party (CSP). The ban was lifted during World War II when Britain and Russia became allies against Nazi Germany.

Caught between the diktats of Moscow and a national cause, the CPI made a major decision to abstain from the Quit India Movement, believing the freedom struggle would compromise its fight against fascism. This marginalized the CPI as India proceeded towards independence. When China and the Soviet Union broke with each other in the early 1960s, the CPI split as well, adding CPI (Marxist), or CPM, as a more moderate and national version relative to the internationally guided CPI. Dange and the CPI lost steam after the split and the party splintered and drifted into extremism. The CPM became a mainstream political party that has had continuing influence in the state politics of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

Even as the All India Trade Union Congress threatens strikes and information technology workers in Bengaluru contemplate a new union, the CPM's influence on national politics has been waning. Bolshevism, and more generally communism of the Marxist-Leninist variety, which defined the

major political competition of the 20th century, has receded. China is the only large country to hang on to the tag, but its political practice today is that of a one-party state with a unique combination of central political control and market economics. As the world evolves from the industrial age to an information age and more workers become freelancers, the very nature of a “soviet” has become obsolete. Paradoxically, tsar-like authoritarians, professing to speak for the people, have filled the void.

The defining political competition of the 21st century is likely to be between populist-nationalism (Pop-Nat) and liberal democracy. Even though Bolshevism is probably dead, both the populist-nationalists and the liberals are likely to borrow strands from Marxism to address issues of inclusion and inequity. Neither the fully collective view nor the unbridled free-market view, both of which held sway for periods in the 20th century, is likely to prevail for decades to come.

We will have a very different political fight between the haves and the have-nots in this century, but that basic tussle that forced Nicholas to abdicate a century ago is set to continue. It is endemic to the human condition.

P.S. “The worst form of inequality is to make unequal things equal,” said Aristotle.

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