



Socialism and the legacy of the Soviet Union

By Brian Becker

The single biggest event that shaped global politics in the 20th century was the Russian Revolution of 1917, which gave birth to the Soviet Union. The first socialist government's existence was the pivot for world events in history's most turbulent and dynamic century. The destruction of the Soviet Union 74 years later in 1991 has been the dominant factor shaping global politics in the nearly 17 years since.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote in 1848, "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism." However haunting the specter of communism may have appeared to the European bourgeoisie in the mid-1800s, it would seem mild compared to the undiluted hysteria directed by all the imperialist powers and old ruling classes against the actually-existing Soviet Union throughout the 20th century.

The victory of the Russian Revolution transformed the presentation of communism from an idea or an ideology into a living, breathing social and political experience. It was an attempt to consciously build a society based on the interests and needs of the working classes.

Communism's new identification with a state power was extremely positive for the world communist movement. The domestic programs, the radical reorganization of constitutional law



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and the revolutionary foreign policy of the new Soviet state spread the appeal of communism to nearly every corner of the globe. Millions of people were drawn into political life and the communist movement as the idea of workers' power took on flesh and bones.

In the colonized world, the Soviet message of self-determination and freedom drew the most advanced youth directly into newly founded communist parties. From China to Vietnam to South Africa, the banner of Soviet communism became synonymous not just with socialism but with the aspirations for national independence.

As the influence of communism spread throughout the 20th century to all corners of the world, every capitalist power brought to bear the weight of its media, politicians, universities and especially armies in a global struggle to counter Soviet influence.

The identification of communism with a state power expanded later to its political association with the governments in Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba, along with newly founded revolutionary governments in Africa that were also trying to take a socialist road. Communism became inseparably connected to what was known as the "socialist bloc" governments. As the first, largest and most powerful socialist power, the Soviet Union was identified as the anchor of this global camp.

Politics, ideology and state power

Conflating the historical ideology and perspective of communism with a government or a bloc of governments also created a tremendous disadvantage, in spite of the material advantages that came from possessing state power. Every setback, weakness, retreat, defect and deformation suffered by the Soviet Union was also identified as an inherent negative feature of communism.



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That the socialist revolutions took place in poor countries instead of the rich imperialist countries gave the capitalist propaganda machine ready-made ammunition to argue against socialism. Anti-communist literature could point to the relative affluence of the imperialist countries and assert, "Socialism or communism is nothing but the equality of poverty for the people while 'officials' and 'bureaucrats' enjoy privileges based on their association with the ruling communist party."

This same anti-communist propaganda, spoon-fed to the people of the United States, obscured and falsified every real social and economic achievement made by the Soviet Union, China or Cuba. Nowhere was it mentioned that every Soviet worker had a legal right to a job, free health care and free child care. Rent was a small fraction of income. Every worker was guaranteed one month of paid vacation.

These social rights were maligned or hidden in the West. In every instance, the propaganda emphasized that the capitalist United States was rich and affluent, with ordinary workers having access to all sorts of goods and services that were not accessible in the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union was overthrown in 1991, capitalist propaganda highlighted one theme: The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that communism itself was now dead. The dream of poor and working people was vanquished forever. "The end of history," was the theme of a best seller in 1992 written by academic Francis Fukuyama. The essence of this argument was that capitalism and the rule by a class of billionaires of and over society was the natural order of things.



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No anti-communist uprising

The Soviet Union was not overthrown by foreign military intervention. Nor was it brought down by an uprising of discontented workers as happened with the October 1917 revolution. In fact, nine months before its dissolution, 77 percent of the people in the Soviet Union voted to maintain the country in a referendum taken as part of the March 1991 election.

That result did not interest the pro-capitalist “democrats” in the least. In December 1991, the leaders began the process that would see the USSR dissolved within the next year.

It was leaders from within the summits of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that led the offensive to destroy the Communist Party and dismantle the Soviet Union. This initiated the sale and looting of publicly owned factories, real estate, oil, gas and mining enterprises; and collectively owned agricultural lands and farms.

The wealth of society—at least significant parts of it—was turned over to a new class of private capitalists who soon became notorious for their opulence, decadence and theft. The legal social status of the working class was diminished and the standard of living of almost all workers plummeted.

The loss of factory jobs and access to medical care coupled with the attendant social problems and demoralization led to disastrous consequences. For example, a March 11, 1998, article in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported a drop in life expectancy for Soviet males from 63.8 years in 1990 to 57.7 years in 1994. The population in Russia actually dropped by over 500,000 people in the first eight months of 2000—the steepest drop ever during peacetime.



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All the while, U.S. propaganda proclaimed that democracy and freedom had come at last to Russia.

A revolution like no other

The Russian Revolution marked the first time in human history that the working classes, those without property, took the reins of power and held them. All previous revolutions in human history had transferred social and political power from one class of elite property owners to another.

The great French Revolution of 1789-93, for instance, had destroyed the power of the monarchy, feudal lords, landed nobility and aristocracy. The working classes had been the vanguard fighters in that revolution. But that revolution led to the French bourgeoisie taking power. The feudal mechanisms of exploitation based on serfdom were uprooted and destroyed, but were replaced by a new system of exploitation based on wage labor or wage slavery.

The October 1917 insurrection was altogether different from earlier revolutions. The social aims of the revolution, led by workers and poor farmers or peasants, were explicit about their class content.

Earlier revolutions masked their class character with broad slogans of freedom and equality "for all." The Russian Revolution, by contrast, explicitly proclaimed that eliminating all exploitation of the laboring classes was its principal objective on the road to achieving a society without classes.



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[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)

Operating under the Marxist conception that society was divided into antagonistic classes driven by mutual and irreconcilable differences, the explicit goal of the revolution was to achieve the political and social supremacy of the working classes over their former exploiters.

The banal slogan of “liberty and justice for all” was considered a mask concealing the true picture that the rich and privileged owners of private property had dominated society.

A workers’ constitution

The victory of the Russian Revolution was based on the soviets—workers’ councils that were the basic fighting organizations of the Russian workers. After the revolution, the soviets became the basic units of government. The first constitution adopted by the Congress of Soviets on July 10, 1918, set out the “fundamental goal” as “suppressing all human exploitation, abolishing forever the division of society into classes, ruthlessly suppressing all exploiters, bringing about the socialist organization of society and the triumph of socialism in all countries.”¹

None of the victorious revolutionary bourgeois governments from earlier epochs, even in their most revolutionary phases, would have thought of declaring this “fundamental goal” in their constitutions.

“As a first step toward the complete transfer of factories, works, shops, mines, railways and other means of production and of transport to the ownership of the workers’ and peasants’ Soviet Republic and to insure the supremacy of the laboring masses over the exploiters, the Congress ratifies the Soviet law on workers control of industry,” reads another key provision in the constitution.²



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What is to be Done

Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries

Anticipating that the resistance of the overthrown exploiters would be greater following the revolution and that they would be aided by the imperialist governments of the world, the constitution declared that, "In order to secure the supremacy of the laboring masses and to guard against any possibility of the restoration of the power of the exploiters, the Congress declares the arming of the laboring population."³

This clause might have seemed to be written by people with a crystal ball. Within months after the 1918 Constitution was adopted, the country was plunged into a bloody civil war pitting class against class. Fourteen imperialist armies, including the United States, invaded Russia between 1918 and 1920. Three million people died.

And yet, to the amazement of all, the new workers' state survived the onslaught.

Problems of socialist development

A huge part of the politicized and consciously communist working class of Russia died as volunteers fighting for the new social order, however. By the close of the civil war, the cities were decimated by hunger and disease. The factories were without raw materials. The urban proletariat started to return to the countryside in search of food.

The economy had contracted by nearly 90 percent compared to the 1914 pre-World War I level. In order to resume production, Lenin and the Russian communists retreated in 1921 and allowed the return of capitalism and capitalists—but under the "supervision" of the Soviet state. The New Economic Policy was presented as an emergency step away from the communists' goals—to bend so as not to break. While it did stimulate production in both the countryside and the cities, it also led to a re-polarization of social classes, especially in the countryside.



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[What is to be Done](#)

[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)

It was not until 1928, when the economy was getting back on its feet, that the Soviet government resumed the push toward rapid socialization in the factories and the countryside.

In spite of these difficulties—all amid severe economic sanctions and blockade by the imperialists—the Soviet Union grew into the second largest economy in the world. Old, backward Russia entered the modern world using socialist methods of public ownership and central economic planning. It went from semi-feudalism in 1917 to a position where it launched the space age, putting the first spacecraft into orbit in 1957.

The Soviet people were among the most educated and cultured in the world. They accomplished in decades what had taken centuries to achieve in capitalist Europe.

For the most underdeveloped Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the Caucuses, the rate of economic and social development was even greater than that of Russia, although they still lagged behind. The Soviet Union's policies of prioritizing economic and social development in those regions were in effect the largest affirmative-action program in history.

In 1940, Hitler tried to re-impose capitalism in the Soviet Union by military force. Twenty-seven million Soviets died repelling and defeating fascism and liberating eastern and central Europe from the yoke of Nazi occupation. The Soviets never had a moment of reprieve following that awful carnage that devoured not only lives but the Soviet economic achievements of an entire post-revolutionary generation.

The Cold War with the United States—which began even before World War II had ended—required a massive diversion of funds from the civilian economy to the Soviet military. Despite these setbacks and non-stop drain on resources, the Soviet economy grew quickly using socialist methods.



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[What is to be Done](#)

[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)

Behind Gorbachev's retreat

The eventual overthrow of the Soviet Union was not caused by economic catastrophe. The growth rate in the economy had indeed slowed by the late 1970s. The high-tech revolution that led to an across-the-board restructuring of the industrial societies in Western Europe and the United States did in fact highlight a structural problem unique to the Soviet economic system.

The widespread transfer of the newest technologies in computers and electronics into industrial production in the western capitalist powers allowed for a major contraction of the work force. Millions of industrial workers in capitalist societies lost their jobs.

In the Soviet Union, a job was a right and the government was not legally entitled to deprive workers of employment. A careful process of job training and re-location for all workers whose jobs had become redundant slowed the pace of the introduction of the new technologies. Neither Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, nor the captains of industry, experienced these inhibitions.

This structural issue came on top of the enduring problem caused by the anti-communist economic blockade that prevented any transfer to the Soviet Union of technology that was revolutionizing the means of production in the advanced capitalist societies.

Gorbachev's economic reforms known as "perestroika" were intended to use market competition as a way to end or radically diminish the Soviet government's obligations to the working class. Market forces, rather than the enshrined legal rights of the working class, would determine employment patterns.



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[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)

This section of the Soviet bureaucracy represented by Gorbachev identified socialist property relations and the Soviet Union's isolation from the locomotive of the world economy as the central obstacles impeding the country from sharing in the fruits of the revolution in technology that was sweeping the world in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Gorbachev and the Soviet reformers were convinced that only by ending the Cold War and liquidating centralized economic planning would U.S. imperialism accept the Soviet Union's entry into the rapidly accelerating model of a global economy.

Instead, the reforms set forces into motion inside and outside of the Soviet Communist Party who were completely bourgeois and pro-imperialist in their orientation. The pre-existing Soviet political system had driven them underground or into the Communist Party itself.

This relatively narrow stratum, as it struggled to de-legitimize and end Soviet power, did not promise the workers that they were about to loot their factories and society's wealth. They carried out the destruction of the existing government instead with a promise of ending corruption and bureaucratic abuse and bringing an end to the Cold War, which in turn would allow the people to enjoy the fruits of the world economy.

The 1917 Russian Revolution transformed private capitalist property into public property. That raised the possibility for the transition to socialism—but it hardly settled the question. It is evident by the overthrow of the socialist government that classes and class struggle do not disappear but take new forms during the post-capitalist period.

Pro-capitalist propaganda paints the high point of the 20th century as the "end of communism." Partisans of the working class and those who yearn for genuine equality will remember the Soviet Union not as the end of communism but as its first grand, real-life experiment. Its strengths and weaknesses will be assessed and incorporated by all future generations as



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[What is to be Done](#)

[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)

invaluable lessons in the struggle to replace capitalist brutality, unemployment and poverty with a rational system that organizes and distributes the bounty of the world economy to meet the needs of human beings.

Endnotes

1. 1918 Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, Chapter 2, Article 3.
2. 1918 Constitution, Chapter 2, Article 3, point c.
3. 1918 Constitution, Chapter 2, Article 3, point g.

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<http://www.pslweb.org/party/why-socialism/3e-socialism-and-the-legacy-of-ussr.html>



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[What is to be Done](#)

[Part IV: Organization of Workers and Organization of Revolutionaries](#)