

Centenary of the Russian Revolution (October 2017)

"One Hundred Years," poem by Steve Bloom



*And over the evening forest
the bronze moon climbs to its place.
Why has the music stopped?
Why is there such silence?*
—Osip Mandelshtam (1891-1938)

One Hundred Years

Prologue

How long is a century?

First allow me to note that mine
is not a name which appears
in your great books of history—
as they recount events
which are now that far
in the past.

Yet others who,
today,
find themselves proclaimed
in this way would never have had
the opportunity
without my name,
without my deeds,
or those
of my comrades.

We numbered in the millions.

How long is a century?

Long enough that long ago
all who survived
the great war

and then
the great civil war

and then
the great purges

have long since joined
the crowd of the dead, and so

far too many among the living
reach the present moment
with no understanding of how—
and, perhaps more important, why—
one name
in our books of history
came to be changed
over the course of a few
tumultuous years
from “Petrograd”

to “Leningrad.”

It is, however, a story you should know.

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Websites which are participating
in the October 7, 2017 launch
of the poem "One Hundred Years"

stevebloompoetry.net
[Old and New Project.](#)
[Links, Australia](#)
[International Viewpoint](#)
[Ecosocialist Horizons](#)
[Lalit, Mauritius](#)
[Radical Socialist, India](#)
[Socialist Party, Sweden](#)
xspiritmental.com
[Jozi Book Fair, South Africa](#)
janinebooth.com
[Workers Liberty, Britain](#)
[Marxist Study Group, Namibia](#)
[Solidarity, USA](#)

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I. February 1917

We march in the streets for bread;
it is a simple beginning.

We march in the streets
because we have no bread
and we are starving.

We march in the streets
because we have no bread
and our children are starving.

“We are starving,” we cry out as we march,
“give us bread.”

“Here we are,
and our children too.
Kill us in the street for marching
if you will.
Better to die here, now, quickly,
than slowly, from starvation,
because we have no bread.”

Tsar Nicholas, however, lacks
troops in the city willing to do
the necessary killing.
So he calls upon the Cossacks.
Yet when the Cossacks arrive
they refuse to fire upon our demonstration
or use their swords,
cross the plaza instead
to simply mingle amongst us.

* * * * *

Some days later we gather again
in Znamenskaya Square.
We gather, too, near the Nikolaievsky
railway station.
We have begun to arm ourselves:
no longer lambs willing
for the slaughter.

The government sends
as many police as can be mustered
and two cavalry regiments
it believes can be trusted.
The police officer in command
orders his men to charge and disperse
our demonstration.
The cavalry officer in command
orders his forces
to charge the police,
and so it is the police
who are dispersed
instead of us.

Elsewhere in the city
more regiments mutiny,
come over openly
to the side of the people;
crowds storm the armory,
the Kretsky prison,
the main artillery depot.

And the poet Mayakovsky will write:
“Beat the squares with the tramp of rebels!
Arise, while holding high your heads!
Wash the world with a second deluge;
For ours is the hour whose coming it dreads!”

* * * * *

The Tsar tries withdrawing troops
from the front.
As they approach Petrograd, however,
railway workers
refuse to transport them
to their destination.
These soldiers, too, express support
for our demonstrations before
returning to the front,
or else simply going home.

Nicholas then attempts his own
journey to our city by train, but
his passage is blocked at Dno station,
by other railway workers
who deliver him, instead, to Pskov.

There, a few days later,
he capitulates to the inevitable
and abdicates his throne.

And the poet Mayakovsky will write:
“Our gold is in our voices—just hear us sing!
Meadow: lie green upon the earth!
Line the remainder of our days with silk!
Let the rainbow offer us its color, and its girth!”



Petrograd: February 1917



Soldiers demonstration, February



Tsar Nicholas II

II. Our March to October

We are hoping to see the rainbow.

Who will give us peace?!
Who will give us bread?!
Who will give us land?!

For these are the things we demand
of our revolution.

Who will take the power
into their hands?
In whose interests
will they use that power?

* * * * *

Politicians establish
a “Provisional Government,”
naming Alexander Kerensky
as Prime Minister.

We, on the other hand,
revive the soviets—
popular assemblies first created
in our failed uprising
of twelve years before.
And from that moment
the entire problem of our revolution
might be reduced
to the question of power.

Yet I am able to say this to you now
only with hindsight,
because at first we fail to understand
that this is the question.

We do not even begin
to understand
until Lenin arrives from exile,
disembarks at the Finland Station,
and proclaims his “April Theses”
to a conference of the Bolshevik Party
the following day:

“All power to the soviets!”
the man for whom our city
will one day be renamed
says to the Bolsheviks
in his “April Theses,”

“because the entire problem
of our revolution,
at the present moment,
can be reduced to the question of power.”

For Lenin, at least, all is now clear:
No one will give us peace,
bread,

land.

We will have to take these things
for ourselves.

“All power to the soviets!”
at first merely a cry
in the wilderness by Lenin
along with a tiny minority
among the delegates
at the Bolshevik conference.

“All power to the soviets!”
After a few days of debate
an idea that becomes
the new agitational slogan
of the Bolshevik Party,
though still a minority view by far
within the soviets.

“All power to the soviets!”
Some months later
a dominant sentiment within the soviet
of Petrograd, but not yet
for the people of our nation.

“All power to the soviets!”
Finally—as we march into October:
an unstoppable tide
reflecting the will
of an overwhelming majority.

* * * * *

It has, of course, not been a straight line
from April until this moment.
No real revolution unfolds
in a straight line.

Our premature armed demonstration
during July in the streets of Petrograd,

the attempt by General Kornilov
to advance upon the capital, drown
the revolution in blood—
in our blood—
then crown
himself emperor,

here we find two episodes in particular
that are of considerable interest
to a more rounded history.

But I compose a poem for you,
not a rounded history,
and so we won't trouble ourselves
with a detailed description
of these events. (Instead
you may refer once again
to the great books.)

* * * * *

Meanwhile we have been living
through a time unlike any
we have known before.

In the workplace,
in the barracks,
on the street corners,
in railway carriages,
on the tram,
in shops,
homes,
schools,

we talk with each other.

We talk with people we know
and we talk with strangers.
Spontaneous debate,
discussion breaks out
everywhere.

In parks nannies exchange views
about which way forward for the revolution
as the children they care for lie asleep
in their prams.

You would be amazed to see the workers—
forty thousand workers—at the Putilov factory
who will stop what they are doing and listen
whenever an orator comes to speak to them:

Menshevik orator
Bolshevik orator
Social-Revolutionary or
anarchist orator

it makes no difference.
The workers will stop and listen
because someone has come to speak:
to speak to them.

And then they will talk
about whatever it is
this orator has had to say.

We are reading too:
leaflets, newspapers, pamphlets, books.
Everything of interest is devoured.
“And it is not,” the journalist John Reed
informs the world,

“fables, falsified history, diluted religion,
and the cheap fiction that corrupts—
but social and economic theories,
philosophy, the works
of Tolstoy, Gogol, Gorky.”

“We come down to the front of the Twelfth Army,”
the journalist's narrative continues, “back of Riga,
where gaunt and bootless men sicken in the mud
of desperate trenches; and when they see us
they start up, with their pinched faces,
and the flesh showing blue through
their torn clothing, demanding eagerly,
‘Did you bring anything for us to read?’”

* * * * *

And thus we learn,
by talking,
by listening,
by reading.

More important still,
we learn
by our own experience:

with generals
who prefer a defeat
at the hands of the Germans
to our revolution;

with mine owners
who flood their own mines,
with factory owners
who sabotage their own machines,
with railway supervisors
who disable locomotives—
rather than allow these things
to pass into the hands
of our revolution;

with speculators who hoard
food and everything else we lack,
stash their profits in foreign bank accounts;

with the Provisional Government
which pursues its policy
of compromise with those
who prefer a German victory,
who sabotage mining, industry, transport,
who hoard and pillage for profit.

* * * * *

Finally, if you truly want to understand
consider
the simple ways
in which daily life is transformed:

The rich cannot now, for example,
even get their servants
to stand in line for them.
(Imagine that!)

On the walls of restaurants signs appear:
“No tips taken here. Just because
a man has to earn his living
by waiting tables, that is no reason
to insult him by offering a tip.”

* * * * *

“All power to the soviets!”
Because only soviet power,
will bring us peace,
bread,

land.

No one,
we have come to understand
will give us these things!
We must take them
for ourselves:

and in this truth
you may now locate the essence
of every genuine revolution.

“All power to the soviets!”

Because the entire problem of our revolution,
during these eight months,
might be reduced
to the question of power.



Petrograd Soviet



July, streets of Petrograd



Lenin speaks at the Putilov factory
(painting by Isaak Brodsky)

III. October, Insurrection

It is a question we will answer soon.
Kornilov has been turned back and
our strength is at its peak.

The capitalist and monarchist parties
still call loudly
for an end to the revolution.

But we are in no mood
for an end to the revolution.

The moderate socialist parties
still attempt to moderate.

But there is no compromise
except capitulation.

The Bolsheviks
call for a national congress
of soviets
which will declare itself
the government.

And so new elections
sweep the Bolsheviks to a majority
in the Petrograd Soviet, as well as
in Moscow, Odessa, Kiev,
and other cities.

* * * * *

At the Cirque Moderne a rank and file soldier speaks
to an overflow crowd:

“Comrades, the people at the top are always
calling on us to sacrifice more, sacrifice more.
But those who have everything are allowed
to keep everything.

We are at war with Germany.
Would we invite the German generals
to serve on our staff?

Well, we are at war with the capitalists too,
yet we invite them into our government!

“When the land belongs to the peasants,
when the factories belong to the workers,
when the power belongs to the soviets,
then we will have something
we can surely fight for.”

* * * * *

John Reed visits the Smolny Institute,
on the outskirts of Petrograd,
once a religious school for upper-class women,
now organizing center for the revolution:

“More than a hundred huge rooms,”
he writes, “on their doors enameled plaques
still informing passersby that within was

‘Ladies’ Class-Room Number 4’ or
‘Teachers’ Bureau’;

but over these hang crudely lettered signs,
evidence of the vitality of the new order:

‘Central Committee of the Petrograd Soviet’
‘Union of Socialist Soldiers’
‘Central Committee of the All-Russia Trade Unions.’”

“You are always welcome at Smolny
if you are poor and hungry,”

Louise Bryant, another journalist from the USA
who travels to Russia along with Reed informs her readers.

“All we have to eat is cabbage soup and black bread.
We are always thankful for it, however,
afraid that perhaps tomorrow
even this will no longer be available.”

Meetings at Smolny often last
until four in the morning.

No matter how late they go
the street-car workers keep
the line to the institute open.

And even when snow shuts down
the rest of the city,
these trams continue to run.

At Smolny Reed interviews Leon Trotsky.
“I went up to a small bare room in the attic.
Few questions from me were necessary”:

“Now, during the revolution,” Trotsky tells him, “one sees revolts of
peasants who are tired of waiting for their promised land, and all over
the country, among all the toiling classes, the same disgust is evident.
. . . The Kadet Party represents the counterrevolution. On the other side
the soviets represent the cause of the people. Between the two camps
there are no groups of serious importance. *C'est la lutte finale.*”

* * * * *

After German warships attack the Russian Navy
in the Gulf of Riga
rumors abound that the Provisional Government
will soon retreat from Petrograd.

Mikhail Rodzianko,
leader of a constitutional-monarchist faction,
writes openly in the newspaper

of the Kadet Party: “The taking of Petrograd
by the Germans

would be a blessing, because it will destroy the soviets
and rid us of the revolutionary Baltic Fleet. . . .

Some fear that if Petrograd is lost
the central revolutionary organization
will be destroyed. To this I answer

that I will rejoice
if all these organizations are destroyed.”

* * * * *

Meanwhile “these organizations”
begin to consider the question
of an armed uprising.

At an all-night meeting
of the Bolshevik Central Committee,
Lenin and Trotsky alone, among the party leaders,
speak for this alternative.

A vote is taken.
Insurrection is defeated.

At the same meeting there are, however,
also delegates
from the Petrograd workers, and from the garrison.
One takes the floor, face livid:

“I speak for the Petrograd proletariat.
We favor insurrection.
Have it your own way,
but if you allow the soviets to be destroyed
we’re through with you!”

Another vote is held.
Insurrection carries the day.

Lenin publishes his
“Letter to the Comrades,”
presenting the matter
in its simplest terms:

“Either we must abandon our slogan
‘All Power to the Soviets,’
or we must make an insurrection.
There is no middle course.”

* * * * *

In an attempt to disarm the revolution
The Provisional Government orders the Petrograd garrison
to the front.

The garrison refuses to leave the city.

Delegations of soldiers arrive, each
carrying the same message from the rank and file
in the trenches: “Yes, the front needs reinforcements.
But it is more important for you to remain where you are
to defend Petrograd,
to defend the revolution.”

The Soldiers’ section of the Petrograd Soviet elects
a “Military Revolutionary Committee”
which rejects any allegiance
to the Provisional Government.

A meeting at Smolny attended by many soldiers
adopts a resolution:

“Saluting the creation
of the Military Revolutionary Committee. . . .”

* * * * *

Let us pause for a moment
at this point
to remind ourselves
that although I recount for you,
as I must, of course,
the history of October 1917
as it is told most often—
a saga of “leaders,”
of committees,
of formal assemblies,
of official decrees—
this is only one part of the story,
and not the most important part by far

because each of the leaders,
each of our committees,
and formal assemblies,
is merely enacting
the will of a mass movement
which—now as in February—
seeks no one’s permission
before deciding what to do.

As early as September peasants,
tired of waiting for leaders,
committees,
assemblies,
begin taking matters into their own hands:
seizing land,
executing landlords,
burning down their houses.

A delegation from the front
delivers a message to the Petrograd soviet:
“How much longer is this unbearable reality going to last?
The soldiers have mandated us to tell you that if peace proposals
are not presented immediately and seriously
the trenches will empty and the whole army
will simply come home. . . .
If you cannot find the solution
we shall chase out our enemies ourselves,
at bayonet-point—but you will be chased out with them!”

Alexandra Kollontai—
the mad female Bolshevik”—
who was among the earliest supporters of Lenin’s call
for “power to the soviets” back in April,
the only woman member of the Petrograd Soviet Executive Committee
and of the Bolshevik Central Committee,
also an advocate for the social
and sexual emancipation of women
in terms more liberating
than even most Bolsheviks
are prepared to accept,
describes the reality:

“Is there altogether a single human being
who does not bow to the general will?
No, there are only masses of people,
either for or against the revolution,
for or against ending the war,
for or against power to the Soviets;
only masses of people in struggle,
and in action.

“There are no heroes or leaders.
It is the people, the working people,
in soldiers’ uniform or in civilian attire,
who control the situation and who
record their will indelibly
in the history of the country
and of humankind.”

In the city of Kazan
the insurrection triumphs even before
it begins in Petrograd.

A participant answers the following question
and answer:

“What would you have done had the Soviets
not taken power in Petrograd?”

“It was impossible for us to refuse power.
Forty thousand soldiers
in the Kazan garrison
would not allow us to refuse.”

* * * * *

Delegates for the All-Russia Congress of Soviets
now begin to arrive in our city.
Four hundred are needed for a quorum.
A few days before it is scheduled
one hundred seventy five
are already present:
sixty percent of them Bolsheviks.

* * * * *

Troops loyal to Kerensky occupy the Winter Palace,
seat of the Provisional Government.

The morning of the day
the Congress of Soviets is scheduled to convene
they are waiting for an attack
by the revolutionary forces.
Kerensky, however,
has already fled the city.

That evening—
while a few blocks away
cafes and theaters are filled with people—
the streets adjacent to the Winter Palace
remain empty except for installations
of revolutionary soldiers.

At 10:40 pm the Congress of Soviets
opens, with election
of a presidium
based, as is the custom,
on proportional representation
for those parties which have sent delegates.
Fourteen Bolsheviks are elected.
Eleven other places are divided
among three other parties.

Delegates to the congress who are not Bolsheviks
complain loudly
that the insurrection
is already happening in the streets.
Soviet power is thus a *fait accompli*,
not a choice
for the Congress to make.

Several dozen walk out in protest.

The majority of delegates, however,
jeer at those
who walk out.
“Power to the soviets”
is not a choice for the Congress to make.
It is the will
of an overwhelming majority
of workers, peasants, soldiers.

The sound of a blank cannon round
fired at the Winter Palace
by the battleship Aurora
is heard at the soviet congress
and throughout the city.

Later that night
the palace surrenders,
with only a handful of casualties
on either side,

and a leaflet is distributed
in the streets of Petrograd:

“TO THE CITIZENS OF RUSSIA

“The Provisional Government is deposed.
The state power has passed
into the hands
of the Petrograd Soviet,
and the Military Revolutionary Committee. . . .

“The cause for which the people have been fighting:
immediate proposal of a democratic peace,
abolition of landlord property rights over the land,
labor control over production,
creation of a soviet government—
that cause is securely achieved.

“LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION
OF WORKERS, SOLDIERS, AND PEASANTS!”

* * * * *

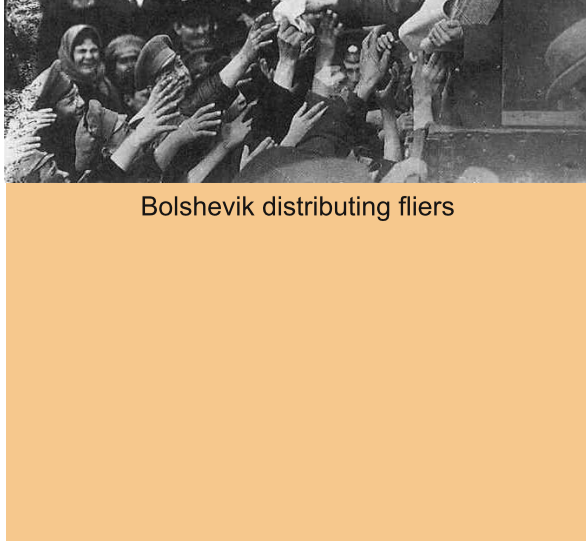
The next day Lenin
addresses the Congress of Soviets:
“We will now” he says,
“begin to construct the socialist order.”



Bolshevik soldiers



Russian troops at the front



Bolshevik distributing fliers

IV. Aftermath, Part One: “Flame on the Snow”

Now, however,
is when our troubles truly begin,

for we have taken power
convinced that the workers
of Western Europe—
the workers of Germany in particular—
will follow our lead and come to our aid.

The workers of Germany try.

But the workers of Germany
do not succeed.

And so, now, our troubles truly begin.

* * * * *

Allow me to illustrate for you
by quoting the poet and novelist,
the honest participant in
and chronicler of our revolution,
Victor Serge, who,
during the winter of 1920-21
composes these lines:

“This crowd wants to live, to make life. But how many of those who are here have already been killed?”

...

“The poor tattered people, many teenagers, some children, all bearing rifles, with the straps often replaced by string. The hands numb with cold of these poor people. Their gray wretched crossing of the Liteyni prospect, in a determined step. At the end of a bayonet a red flag: Workers' battalion from the Narva district.”

...

“This crowd in snow, under the midday sun, following coffins covered with branches of fir trees. Red ribbons, flags. A gold ray is posed on the arrow of the Admiralty. Songs—the song which soars. There are prayers and sobs in this farewell from a living crowd to a crowd of the dead. Here they sleep, behind a granite rampart: those hung, shot, whose throats were cut, those who died of typhus, who all gave freely and with their souls. Died for the revolution. So often these funerals on the Field of Mars.”

...

“Four thousand soldiers, peasants from Viazma, Ryazan, Tver, Orel, Viatka, Perm. . . . Four thousand soldiers nourished on dry herrings—hard like stone, that make the gums bleed—fed on four hundred grams of black bread per day, dressed in this icy winter with the old coats of the great war, beating their hands like children and laughing and shouting and humming. The room, made from the velvet blue-gold of the imperial theater vibrates suddenly with this clear human joy, because a sovereign artist sings for them.”

...

“A young girl—seven years old—with very large black eyes, encased in a fine, small Kalmuk face, a tiny refined spirit, precocious, sensitive, encased in a thin body, slowly debilitated by the hunger: Tatiane, the daughter of an aristocrat, whom you fondly call Tania, Tanioucha, Taniouchetchka. She says:

““Since you are a Bolshevik, answer me! Why was Lavr Andreievitch shot?”

“I am a Bolshevik, little Tania, and I do not know why Lavr Andreievitch was shot.”

...

“Contempt for words—for the old words. Contempt for the ideas which mislead. Contempt for the hypocritical and cruel West which invented Parliaments, the public press, the asphyxiating gases, the prison system, after-dinner literature. Contempt for all that vegetates in satisfaction with these things.

“Hatred for the formidable machine used to crush the weak—all disarmed humanity—for the vice of Law, Police, Clergy, Schools, Armies, Factories, Penal Colonies. Hatred for those who need this system, the rich, class hatred.

“The will to undergo everything, to suffer everything, achieve everything in order to finish. Inexorable will. The will to live finally according to the new law, equal work, or to die showing the way.

“Consciousness that the present hardly exists; and that it is necessary to give everything, at this hour, to the future so that there may be a present. Consciousness that all of us are nothing if we are not with our class, its humanity rising. Consciousness that the work ahead does not have limits, that it requires a million arms and brains, that it is the only justification of our lives. Consciousness that a world collapses and that you can live only while giving yourself to the new world which waits to be born.”

* * * * *

Please, as we contemplate this picture
of a winter which I live through
but you
can only imagine
let me suggest that we recall other words
already quoted above:

“When the land belongs to the peasants,
when the factories belong to the workers,
when the power belongs to the soviets,
then we will have something
we can surely fight for”—

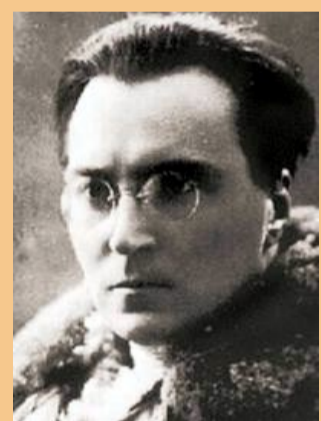
words which were true enough
when first proclaimed
some days prior to our insurrection.

Yet how much truer are they now?

How much truer
are they now?



Funeral, Field of Mars



Victor Serge

V. Aftermath, Part Two: Revolution and Counterrevolution

Revolution tests the meaning
of all of our truths.

We pass through
this flame on the snow
and emerge, still breathing, after defeating
each of the armies arrayed against us.
The flame has, nonetheless,
scarred substantial portions
of our flesh,
while many fingers and toes
are absent now due to the sharp bite
of the Russian frost.

Without our missing fingers some things
become harder for us to grasp.

Lacking certain toes we have more difficulty
maintaining our balance.

* * * * *

When our trial by fire begins
(almost immediately)
the boldest fighters,
the most committed
and far-sighted,
those who truly comprehend
what will be lost
and, therefore,
what can be won—
all who are able and can be spared—
rush to the front lines against the White armies
in order to help give birth
to the future.

A majority do not return.

Those, on the other hand,
who were merely swept up
in the euphoria of October
but subsequently lose their nerve,
those of a naturally administrative
or bureaucratic disposition to begin with,
as well as the outright careerists—
whose sense of history extends
no further than their next evening's meal
(such individuals, I am sorry to report,
are attracted to *our* power too)—
these remain at home,
and thus survive,
creating an imbalance
which deeply affects
the future course of events,
as we are soon to discover.

* * * * *

Ambitions for the revolution
have not diminished.
The means to carry them out, however,
are still scarce.

Louise Bryant recounts a conversation
with Alexandra Kollontai,
now Minister of Public Welfare:

“One day when I go to see her a long line of sweet-faced old people are standing outside her door. They have come as a delegation from one of the old people's homes. Kollontai explains their presence:

“‘I have removed those who used to be in control and turned their institutions into little republics. They come every day now to express their gratitude. They elect their own officers and have their own political fights; choose their own menus. . . .’

“I interrupt her. ‘What would that consist of in the present day?’

“Kollontai bursts out laughing ‘Surely,’ she says, ‘you must understand that there is a great deal of moral satisfaction in deciding whether you want thick cabbage soup or thin cabbage soup!’”

Everywhere we confront the contradictions
of being in power.

When first appointed Kollontai
must deal with a strike
of civil servants in her department
who remain loyal to the former regime.
They hide records, the keys to the safe,
engage in other acts of sabotage.

“I kept saying to myself:
‘Is this you, Alexandra Kollontai, ordering arrests?’
Afterwards I used to lie awake nights
and wonder how I did it.”
But she brings a halt
to the sabotage
in less than 24 hours.

And yes, in response to your question,
we do understand that the revolution,
its leaders in particular,

have made mistakes—
too many mistakes.

Kollontai once again expresses
the prevailing sentiment:

“I will never desert
the ranks of the proletariat,
even if they make
every mistake on the calendar.”

* * * * *

A law of social change
that would assert itself in any case
asserts itself with greater force
in our case

because our means are so scarce
(mostly—though it is also amplified
by the contradictions,
and by the mistakes),

not exactly the same
as Sir Isaac Newton's third law
but close enough:

“For every revolution
there is an opposite counterrevolution,”

perhaps “equal and opposite” but,
sometimes, when we are lucky
less than equal,

and at least a portion
of the revolution
is able to survive.

Still, if we are not so lucky,
more than equal is possible too.

And so we discover one way
in which laws of social change
differ from the laws of physics.

Can you, likewise, identify for me ways
in which the counterrevolution
differs from the revolution?

Perhaps it will help if I offer you a list of eleven names:

Jan Berzin: arrested December 1937,
dies in the Gulag the following year.
Andrei Bubnov: sentenced to death August 1938,
shot the same day.
Nikolai Bukharin: put on trial March 1938,
executed later the same month.
Lev Kamenov: executed August 1936.
Nikolay Krestinsky: executed March 1938.
Vladimir Milyutin: arrested 1937,
dies in prison a few months later.
Alexei Rykov: executed March 1938.
Ivar Smilga: executed 1938.
Grigori Sokolnikov: dies in prison, 1939.
Leon Trotsky: killed by a hired assassin, Mexico City, 1940.
Grigory Zinoviev: arrested 1934,
executed 1936.

These are, you will need to know, all members
of the Bolshevik Central Committee
elected at the party congress of August 1917:
eleven out of a total of fifteen central committee members
who survive until a decade after the insurrection.

By 1940 each of them is dead,
and not, as we see, from natural causes.

Can you now identify for me
one or more ways in which the counterrevolution
differs from the revolution?

On this list of eleven you will also find
five out of seven members
of the Bolshevik Political Bureau
who served during October 1917:
Bubnov, Kamenev, Sokolnikov, Trotsky, Zinoviev.

What, you ask, might be the names
of the other two?

First let us remember Lenin,
who dies in 1924—

and, only days later,
has a city
renamed in his honor.

Yet Nadezhda Krupskaya, his widow,
subsequently tells us to have no illusions.
Had Lenin lived even a few years more
he, too—far from having a city
renamed in his honor—

would have ended up in prison,
or in exile (an observation she makes before
the purge trials and executions begin).

There is, then, only Stalin.
Alone, of our original seven
Political Bureau members,
he survives beyond 1940.

Take heed, therefore, as the poet Osip Mandelstam
describes this man:

“He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.
He wishes he could hug them like best friends from home.”

Can you now identify for me
one or more ways in which the counterrevolution
differs from the revolution?

* * * * *

Neither Victor Serge nor I know why Lavr Andreievitch was shot.
Yet I can tell you why the eleven on my list are killed.

They have to be killed
in order to extinguish the October Revolution.

They have to be killed
along with hundreds of thousands more
sentenced to death

or who simply perish in the camps
because so many struggle
throughout the 1930s
throughout the 1940s
even into the 1950s and 1960s,
to preserve whatever might be left
of October 1917.

This single fact should allow you to comprehend
just how strong
our revolution was:

strong enough
that all of these human beings
needed to be killed
for the counterrevolution to triumph.

And now, therefore, is when you might recall
those who rushed off to help
give birth to the future
as soon as the civil war began
and are therefore present no more.

How differently might this history have turned out
had they been with us still?

Even more important:
recall the faint-of-heart,
and careerists
who survived,

because the victory here
is not Stalin's alone.

No single individual could ever have achieved
what Stalin achieved
without the active support,
and collaboration
of so many others.

“Who else will you kill?
Who else will you worship?
What other lie will you dream up?”

The poet Osip Mandelstam poses
these questions,
demanding an answer from each
and every one of them.

Then he, too, perishes
in a transit camp
on his way to Siberia.

* * * * *

Our great humanity
is exhausted now
after so many years of struggle—
struggle with an enemy
we could send an army to repel,
struggle with an enemy
that gnawed at the revolution
from within,
struggle just with the difficulties
of daily existence:

enslaved once again in the factories,
or by the re-imposition of enforced motherhood
and the drudgery of housework,
the need to stand in line for everything.

Many have had to abandon the city,
return to the countryside
in the search for something to eat.

And thus the life-blood of our revolution—
the vigilance by a mobilized people
acting for themselves, without deference
to leaders or official decrees—
has been drained away.

In its place, the death-blood of bureaucracy,
and of secret-police terror,
is transfused, at first merely drop by drop
but then, and soon, in a freely flowing stream
coursing through every artery and vein
of our new nation.

* * * * *

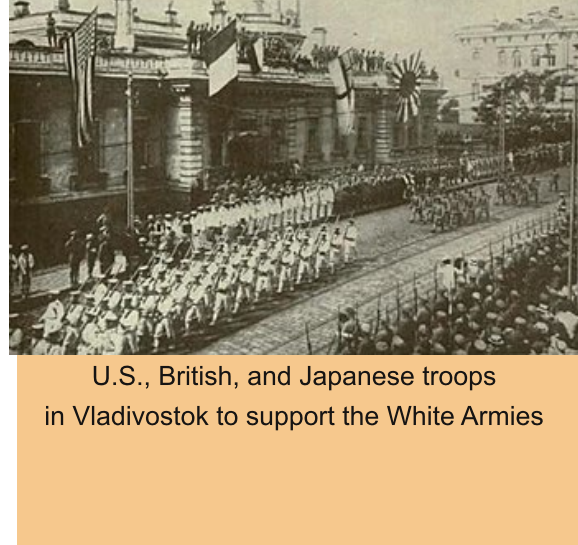
There is no need to wonder why
enemies of the USSR proclaim
the sole surviving member
of the October 1917 Political Bureau
to be the rightful heir of Bolshevism
rather than its assassin.

The promulgation of such a myth
allows them to discredit a Russian revolution,
to discredit all revolution.

Nor do we have to ask why Stalin himself
makes the same claim
about himself
up until the moment of his death.

But please explain to me (it has always
seemed a puzzle) why so many
who imagine themselves to be great friends
and defenders of Bolshevism, remain,
for so many decades, unable
to tell the difference

between the revolution,
and the counterrevolution.



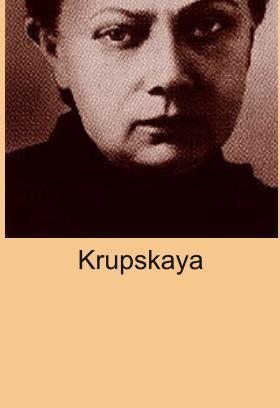
U.S., British, and Japanese troops
in Vladivostok to support the White Armies



Trotsky reviews Red Army soldiers



Alexandra Kollontai



Krupskaya

Epilogue

The poet Mayakovsky committed suicide in April, 1930,
but not before he would write:

“The enemy
of the massed working class
is my enemy too
inveterate and of long standing.

“Years of trial
and days of hunger
ordered us
to march
under the red flag.

“We opened
each volume
of Marx
as we would open
the shutters
of our own house;
but we did not have to read
to make up our minds
which side to join,
which side to fight on.

“Let fame
trudge
after genius
like an inconsolable widow
to a funeral march—
die then, my verse,
die like a common soldier!”

* * * * *

Mayakovsky and his verse were,
as we know from all
that is recounted above,
not the only ones to perish
by the year 1930.

Many more will die—
we now understand at least a bit
of the how
and the why—
in the decades to come.

By the time a new century arrives
everything is dead!

Even the name of our great city
has been turned back—
back beyond “Petrograd,”
all the way to “St. Petersburg.”
(But let that be another story,
for another time.)

* * * * *

How does your present now judge our revolution?
Is it by all of the death,
all of the misery?

Well, allow me to challenge any version of history
which takes not into account the even greater
death and misery
that would have been inflicted
by Kornilov, or by any successor to Kornilov
who might have taken power
had the Congress of Soviets refrained
in October 1917.

For when there is no middle ground
then there is no middle ground.

When you must choose one side or the other
then you must choose one side or the other.

When years of trial
and days of hunger
order us
to march
under the red flag,
there is nothing to do
except march
under the red flag.

I and my multitude of comrades
took a great gamble with history.
It is a gamble we lost.
And yet our willingness to accept that risk
at least gave us a chance to win.

At least we gave ourselves
a chance,

and I can, therefore,
look back now
even after all that has transpired
without regret—or,
at least, with far fewer regrets
than had we allowed the tide of history
to simply pass us by.

* * * * *

I have been told that it is brave
to end a poem with a question.
Yet doesn't every revolution
end with a question?

And isn't every revolution,
for this very reason—
along with so many other reasons,
of course—
brave beyond measure?
as brave as the poet is brave?

How else, then, to end
this poem
about a revolution—
in which it was my privilege
to march
side by side
with comrades
named “Lenin” and “Trotsky,”
named “Kollontai,” “Krupskaya,”
“Serge,” “Bryant,” “Reed,”
“Mandelstam,” and “Mayakovsky,”
side by side
with all those,

the named
and the unnamed,
who were,
no matter how great or small
our names might have been,
never much more
than the common soldiers
of history;

how else to end this poem
except by posing for you, today,
the bravest of the questions
we asked ourselves:

When your moment arrives,
when your Tsars—
as haughty as ours
and seemingly even more untouchable—
send their Cossacks
against your demonstrations,
and yet by a renewal of the ancient miracle
these soldiers open
the shutters of their house
(instead of opening fire),
cross the plaza, mingle with you
in support of your demands,
can you comprehend
that the entire problem of your revolution,
at that moment,
might be reduced
to the question of power?

that there is no longer any way
for you to live
except by sacrificing yourself to a world
which *still* waits to be born?

that no one will give you anything;
you will have to take it for yourselves?

that you must undergo everything,
suffer everything,
achieve everything
in order to finish—
or else die
showing the way?

When once again
there is the need
for inexorable will,
can you find the courage to engage
the same gamble
we made with history
one hundred years ago—
a gamble our future humanity
may yet hope to win
but only if you too
are prepared to accept the risk?

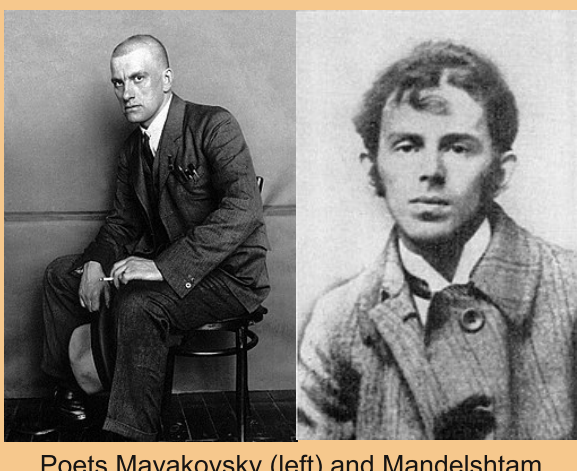
Will you take the power
into your hands and, thereby,
renew the long-cherished vision
shared by so many poets
and revolutionaries alike:
our vision
of a time
when the meadow may finally
lie green upon the earth,
our days
lined with silk

as we listen to the golden sound
of voices singing
songs which echo
from a distant past,

wrapping ourselves in the colors
and in the girth
of a rainbow
that we will see
at last

because only
such a storm as this—
only
such a storm
as this—
can
ever
give it birth?!

Stefan Abramovich Bloom,
October 2017



Poets Mayakovsky (left) and Mandelstam



Bryant and Reed

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- 8) Victor Serge: “Flame on the Snow”
- 9) Victor Serge: *Year One of the Russian Revolution*
- 10) Leon Trotsky: *The History of the Russian Revolution*
- 11) Howard Zinn: “Anarchy and Revolution”
- 12) Wikipedia (various entries)



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