

THE BEAUTIFUL DREAM

On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution

by Boris Yelensky

In the middle of July 1917, we reached the eastern border of Russia. After that we were faced the necessity of traversing a part of Manchuria, all of Siberia, a portion of Central Russia, and then Ukraine as far as the shores of the Black Sea.

As soon as we had crossed the border, we sensed immediately what the February Revolution had accomplished for the Russian people. There was tremendous rejoicing; the air was suffused with the exuberance of spring—such a spring as history has seldom recorded. It seemed as if Mother Nature had joined in the rejoicing over the mighty victory. Flowers were blooming in the fields; the trees in the forests seemed to vie with one another to exhibit their loveliness. One could almost imagine seeing a fairy fluttering in the breeze, clad in white, endlessly repeating the refrain summed up in these three words: “Peace, Bread and Freedom.”

It was in such an atmosphere that the Russian Nation lived during the honeymoon months of the February Revolution; only once throughout the course of centuries can a people experience such a mood.

It stands to reason that it was not just the several demonstrations by hunger-stricken persons in the streets of Petrograd that were instrumental in hurling Czar Nicholas II from his throne and shaking Russian society to its very foundations. The awesome revolutionary hurricane had begun to gather momentum a full two centuries before.

As far back as in the days of Catherine the Great, the first “tender shoots” of revolt sprouted in the initiatives undertaken by Pugachov and Stenka Rozin. Decades later, under Czar Nicholas I, came the ill-fated uprising of the Decembrists—a group of brilliant army officers and intellectuals inspired by the French Revolution, who demanded an end to Czarist absolutism. Not many years later came the Polish rebellion, as well as a series of little-publicized peasant uprisings. A mighty revolutionary wave swept over the surface of Russia, gradually winning more and more supporters among the intelligentsia, the workers, and peasants. The hurricane was gathering momentum. The heroic revolutionary outbreak of 1905 was drowned in the blood of its heroes and was followed by black reaction. Yet there was a general feeling that the Russian people were resolved to rid the land of tsarist tyranny and of the dark forces that surrounded the tsar. It took 12 more years, and the First World War (which cast a lurid light upon the total corruption of the regime), the notorious scandals involving Rasputin, as well as a series of lesser scandals—it took all this and more to pave the way for the prodigious, irresistible hurricane.

All this is well known. What is not entirely clear to the public at large are the motives and the reasons which led to tragic failure of a revolution so long in the making. In the numerous

volumes concerning Russia which I have had occasion to read, I have found scarcely any indications or comprehension of the true causes of this fiasco. Virtually all writers are content to blame the Bolsheviks for this—and to be sure the Bolsheviks deserve plenty of criticism. However, let it be recalled that the Bolsheviks did not constitute all of Russia; they were not even the most numerous among the revolutionary movements of that era. For instance, the Socialist Revolutionary Party alone had several times as many followers as the Bolsheviks. Similarly, the Mensheviks were a force to reckon with. And, if the truth be known, the Anarchists of that period were by no means in the front ranks or on the summit of events; otherwise, the Bolsheviks could not have captured power as they did.

These introductory remarks were necessary before I proceed to record my impressions and experiences of that period. For even our own colleagues—with the exception to some extent of Volin, Makhno, but including even Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, confined themselves to a criticism of the Bolsheviks, and appeared to overlook the universal blindness of all the revolutionary movements that preceded this prodigious, epic explosion.

Most of all I must reproach our own comrades, who should not have been taken by surprise; for long before the Revolution of 1917 it seemed obvious as to what was the trend and what would be the outcome of all those “State Socialists,” including the Bolsheviks. Our foremost thinkers perceived clearly and explained lucidly what the perilous consequences would be if mankind allowed itself to be misled by the “authoritarian socialists.”

Suffice here to mention Bakunin’s aphorism: “Socialism without freedom is a pigsty.” Nor can we have forgotten the outcome of Bakunin’s debate with the elder Liebknecht; when the latter ran out of arguments and was unable to refute Bakunin’s logic, he exclaimed: “In spite of you we shall have the State.” To which Bakunin replied: “I don’t doubt that, but by the same token you will forfeit Socialism.”

I remember reading, some 50-60 years *ago*, a pamphlet by an Austrian Socialist (If I recall correctly, his name was Atlanticus), in which he portrayed what a Socialist State would look like—and that proved to be an accurate image of the Bolshevik regime!

In passing, I want to remark here that it was not a case of the Bolsheviks seizing power, but of power being handed to them on a silver platter. Let us now cite a few facts which will help the reader evaluate better the situation on the eve of the Revolution.

Disregarding for the present the Liberal parties and the millions who sympathized with the overthrow of tsarist oppression, there existed three major Socialist parties, namely: first, the Socialist Revolutionaries, with more than 300,000 members. This Party had the support of the Russian peasantry ... who in reality constituted the backbone of the Revolution.

The second Party in importance were the Social Democrats, whose membership included approximately 70 to 75 thousand Bolsheviks; however, the Mensheviks likewise had a substantial

following. Then came the Maximalists—with a rather modest following but highly militant with a strong revolutionary fervour.

In addition to these parties, there existed in Russia a number of Anarchist factions and federations, whose precise number cannot be estimated. However, they were highly militant, and their presence was strongly felt. Then there appeared on the scene the “Nestor Makhno Army.”

All these factions and parties played a leading role in that vast and tragic drama—and all of them are responsible for the failure of the noble aspirations and of the stupendous possibilities inherent in the great Russian Revolution. It is they who brought Russia to its present state of affairs....

In the innermost depths of the Russian soul there had long been stirring powerful aspirations which the above-mentioned revolutionary movements sought to bring to the surface. These aspirations found expression in two slogans: First: BREAD AND FREEDOM—a cry which resounded through every town and village; Second: LAND AND FREEDOM, and these were demanded by tens of millions of Russian peasants. When these potent yearnings reached the bursting point, there was no power in the world which could resist them; and anyone who might attempt to check this eruption by force, was doomed to destruction.

All that was lacking was the spark that would ignite this accumulated dynamite, and this spark of destiny was set off at the beginning of 1917.

What actually happened in Russia during that epoch?

The Russian people were bleeding and starving at the time of World War I. To make matters worse, there reigned unbridled corruption among the bureaucracy which surrounded the tsarist government, whilst the sinister priest Rasputin, and the tsarina over whom he had so much influence, exerted pressure on those who held the reins of power in the Government.

Tsar Nicholas II was a weakling and lacked the strength of character to restrain the horde of bureaucrats who “engaged in revels in the midst of an epidemic,” and paid slight heed to the agony of blood and tears endured by the Russian masses.

In February 1917, women and children began to stage demonstrations spontaneously in the streets of Petrograd. The Czarist officials paid little attention to these hunger demonstrations; they probably reasoned that the undernourished women would soon tire of demonstrating. But their reasoning was faulty: instead of abating, the demonstrations became more formidable with every passing day. As far as I could ascertain when I was in Petrograd, neither the tsarist officials nor the populace of the city dreamt that these hunger protests would build a foundation for the overpowering storm of a Social Revolution.

The Tsar at the time found himself at the front. The authorities finally decided to suppress these manifestations and pressed into action a regiment of soldiers. (If I mistake not, it was the notorious Semyonovsky Regiment, which in past years had shed so much innocent blood of workers and peasants.)

The desperately brave and hungry women, however, did not turn and run; they rushed at the troops and, with tears in their eyes, clamoured that they wanted bread, that they were starving. For a moment the Regiment paused as if frozen at their posts; then suddenly a great cry was heard: "We are with you!" Thus, the soldiers of the Semyonovsky Regiment joined the demonstrators, and a joyous mass spread out in a demonstration throughout the city. News of this event spread like lightning throughout Petrograd, and the miracle had occurred: Russia was on the brink of revolution. The news traveled swiftly through the country and soon reached the battle front, where the example set by that Regiment had tremendous impact. The wheels of the Revolution had begun to turn.

In the Duma, or Parliament, debates were raging as to what should be done. The factions on the right became alarmed, but at first could not even harbor the thought that the days of tsarism in Russia had come to an end. The leftist elements of all shadings demanded that Nicholas should abdicate, and that the monarchy should come to an end.

But this bickering and quibbling did not last long, for the revolutionary tidal wave engulfed the entire country. Hence the Duma decided to send a delegation to the Tsar and demand that he abdicates and that the Duma take over the government.

One of the delegates was Guchkov, a spokesman for the "Center," which leaned considerably to the right. The Tsar agreed to abdicate, but he proposed at first that his minor son should accede to the throne, under the regency of the Tsar's uncle. Guchkov made clear to him, however, that the Duma was determined to bring an end to the tsarist regime, and that the armed forces were more and more coming over to the support of the Revolution. Consequently, the Tsar, found himself obliged to sign all the documents handed to him, and thus the 300-year-old dynasty of the Romanovs came to an end.

The wheels of the Revolution commenced to turn with a mighty momentum and swiftness, and anyone who sought to oppose this juggernaut was ground to dust beneath its wheels.

When Guchkov returned from his interview with the Tsar, the Duma decided to establish a provisional government constituted of right and centrist elements. The participants in this coalition regime were not interested in mere reforms; it was their intention to set up in Russia a Constitutional system, but the wheels of the Revolution before long began to crush this provisional coalition regime.

The revolutionary tidal wave engulfed the entire land with lightning rapidity. As if overnight there sprang up throughout the country and at the war front Soviets of workers, soldiers and peasants. And there echoed one mighty outcry: We do not want any Central Government ... we demand Soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers—All Power to the Soviets!

In the meantime, all the leftists, radical political groupings, including the Anarchists, began to expropriate palaces, mansions, and printing plants for their organizations and for propaganda

purposes. The Coalition Regime, bewildered and unable to cope with this situation, collapsed. A new government of the leftist wing of the Duma, with Kerensky at its head, was formed.

One of the first acts of the new regime was to proclaim complete amnesty for all political prisoners and emigrés. Soon there began to stream from Siberia as well as from abroad thousands of revolutionaries, who constituted a potent revolutionary force.

In countless towns and villages all these revolutionary factions staged meetings and assemblies day after day. Propaganda fluttered in the air; newspapers and proclamations by the hundreds appeared spontaneously. With the arrival of Lenin, the Bolsheviks applied themselves to the task of organizing the masses and prepared for seizing power. Willingly or grudgingly, credit must be given them; for they were the only ones who knew exactly what they wanted—even though they resorted to means not fit for revolutionaries.

Shortly afterward there occurred an event which most likely made it possible for the Bolsheviks to seize power later on—I refer to the profound schism or split which took place in the most numerous Socialist party—namely the Socialist Revolutionary party. It was the oldest radical movement and, as stated above, enjoyed the following of the peasants and the intelligentsia. However, it appears that when they came face to face with what they had advocated for many decades, they became frightened.

A small portion split off and combined with the wing which sought to intensify the Revolution; another segment later combined with those who opposed the Revolution. As a result, the political party which everyone had expected to play the leading role in the Revolution, destroyed itself; in this manner the door was left open for the Bolsheviks to enter and seize power. Despite the fact that more than half a year had passed since the February Revolution and that the government was composed of revolutionary parties, the peasants were still waiting impatiently for the distribution of the land that had been promised them. Similarly, the workers were clamoring for reforms in industry and control by workers themselves of mill, mine, and factory.

Thus, the mood became more tense, the entire country hovered on the brink of famine, the army on the German front was bewildered, and entire regiments began to desert the line of battle. It was in that critical period that Kerensky and his colleagues chose to play a Napoleonic role and continue the futile fighting instead of improving the conditions of the masses. Consequently, at the urging of the Allies, they decided to launch an offensive on the German front—a blunder which served the interests of the Bolsheviks.

All the protests, demonstrations and petitions failed to sway the Kerensky regime to begin the division of the great estates. The “revolutionary” government maintained that the distribution of the land must proceed in a legal manner, with the Constituent Assembly preparing the project. It seems that Kerensky, Martov, Tsereteli, Abramovich, and others in a position or leadership failed to comprehend that with their vacillating “principles” they were playing into the hands of the Bolsheviks.

Inevitably the Russian peasantry lost patience, and in countless places the peasants spontaneously began to take over the landed estates and farms without waiting for “legal authorization,” and divided up the land among those who wanted to cultivate it. The influence of the Government declined rapidly, and the Soviets were swiftly gaining the upper hand.

There was a feeling in the air that climactic events were in the offing. The ill-fated offensive on the German front and the uprising among the peasants who undertook to divide the land among themselves lent encouragement to the Bolsheviks to launch their October Revolution, when they succeeded in capturing Moscow. Before long the entire country followed Moscow’s lead and the foundation beneath the Kerensky regime collapsed.

Indeed, the entire country was in a state of ferment and upheaval at that time. The Bolsheviks themselves seemed frightened for a time when the still insecure power fell into their hands; there is even a belief in some quarters that the Bolsheviks sent spokesmen to the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries with a proposal to stop fighting and to organize a coalition government. But the latter declined the offer, thus losing both the battle and a place in the government.

At the outset the Bolsheviks displayed some leniency. They took into the government the left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and admitted the Anarchist Karelin into the Central Soviet. They even permitted for a time a session of the Constituent Assembly, which had been elected prior to the October Revolution. In this Assembly the Bolsheviks had gained but a small number of Deputies and therefore knew that they could not control it legally. For a time, they adroitly played the role of “democrats.”

At that time a partisan group of Baltic sailors was active under the leadership of an Anarchist named Zheleznikov. Unfortunately, he was too naive to realize the dastardly purpose for which the Bolsheviks were exploiting him. Thus, with a band of Partisans, armed to the teeth, he broke into the meeting hall of the Assembly and violently dispersed it.

In this manner there came to an untimely end the noble dream, and the fond hopes reposed in the February Revolution were extinguished.

The following day the Bolshevik newspapers broadcast the “great” news, that the Anarchist partisan band had dispersed the Assembly and of course the Bolsheviks were quite “innocent” in the matter.

In retrospect it should be noted that the October uprising and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks marked the beginning of the end of the mighty Russian Revolution.

And now I should like to call attention to the main factors which made it possible to arrest the advance of the Great Russian Social Revolution and to nullify its vast potentialities not only for Russia but for the world as a whole. That country had for many years, as previously indicated, harbored a classical revolutionary movement, in which all levels of the Russian population participated. It seems, however, that, notwithstanding the enthusiasm and devotion of the revolution-

aries, they lacked a clear image of what a true Social Revolution entails. The truth is that the Liberals, who for so many years had supported the revolutionary movement both morally and financially, in large part got “cold feet” when they sensed they were losing their privileged positions. The Mensheviks, on the other hand, who agitated among the working class and promised them “the stars and the moon” when the Revolution should triumph, actually hesitated or feared to deviate from their pet political dogmas and from the dalliance of Parliamentarianism. They wanted the workers, hungering and restless, to wait till the Mensheviks were in power, and then one would see what could be done for them.

However, the greatest physical and moral blow, one might say the death blow or *coup de grace*, was delivered to this Social Revolution by the heirs of the old traditional popular movement, the Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries. Their slogan of “Land and Freedom” caught the imagination of most of the peasants. For the land question was by far the cardinal issue in Russia, and an immediate solution was imperative.

Immediate agrarian reforms would have strengthened the revolution and would have averted a Bolshevik takeover. Alas, the traditional “Revolutionaries” acted exactly like the Mensheviks and bade the masses “wait for appropriate legislation.” This tragic miscalculation led, in time, to the deaths of millions of innocent persons in the ensuing civil wars and purges and culminated in the “death of the Revolution.”

The other revolutionary forces, who if they could not entirely overcome the Bolsheviks at least might have wielded some control over them, were obliged to wage a war on two fronts: against the Bolshevik dictatorship and against the White armies, which sought to bring back hated Tsarism.

These revolutionary forces consisted of three groupings, of which the largest was the Anarchist one, along with the formidable partisan movement of Nestor Makhno. Doubtless the Anarchist movement was in a mood to fight but was also permeated by a romanticism which left no room for broad, constructive activity. Furthermore, their opposition to the dictatorship came too late, at a time when the Bolsheviks were already entrenched and held in their hands all the instruments of power.

The same fate was shared by the other two kindred movements: the Maximalists and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. Worst of all, it proved impossible to co-ordinate the resistance of these forces to present a united front against the Bolsheviks.

Fifty years have passed since the outbreak of the Great Social Russian Revolution. The black forces of State Capitalism ground under their filthy boots all the noble aspirations evoked by that Revolution – all its exalted ideals. The Russian people remain enslaved ... but the last word has not been spoken. The robust Socialist seed is planted deep in the fruitful soil; a time will surely come when it will sprout and produce a sturdy growth which will liberate the Russian people and

civilization as a whole. Then the Russian nation will no longer be a destroyer but will become the great builder of a new and better world.

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