

I *Russia*

The revolutions analysed in this work are merely a sample of the revolutions which the twentieth century has seen, but they are some distance from being a random sample. Russia, China, Vietnam, Yugoslavia and Cuba all experienced revolutions which were in a conventional (though rather extended) sense 'Marxist' revolutions, though even in this sense of the word only that of Russia was explicitly Marxist in inspiration and leadership from start to finish.¹ The remaining three revolutions were decidedly more heterogeneous. Mexico, Turkey and Algeria were none of them especially Marxist in the initial orientation of their revolutions and two of them, Mexico and even more Turkey, are now rather close allies of the leading anti-revolutionary power in the world today, the United States. The revolutionary regimes in Russia, Mexico and Turkey have held power for long enough for it to be possible to judge their capacity to cope with the problems of their country (though all in fact continue to trespass on the charity of their adherents by pinning their legitimacy firmly on the less than immediate future). The other revolutions, with the possible exception of Yugoslavia have either been successful for too short a time or else have so extended their objectives since their initial achievement of power that it is still hard to make out what sort of impact they are eventually going to have had on the condition of their peoples. In important respects half at least of these revolutions are still incomplete and from one perspective all of them are still incomplete. From the viewpoint of revolutionary Marxism it was perfectly appropriate for the late Isaac Deutscher to title the Russian revolution the 'unfinished revolution',² in that it is still some way from realizing the promises of the theory under whose auspices it was originally carried out. But from other more prosaic viewpoints it seems clear enough that the

Russian revolution is finished.³ Anything less revolutionary in character than the day-to-day working of the Soviet state it would be difficult to imagine. Electrification today has come in abundance, as Lenin promised – even if the Soviets are hardly what they were. The leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union preside over an empire of impressive stability and undeniable achievement. But ‘preside’ over is the appropriate verb. One does not preside over a revolution.

The revolution which Lenin and his followers made in Petrograd and Moscow in October 1917 was an attempt, as all Lenin’s thought had been since the beginning of the twentieth century to answer two very different questions. The first question was a question entirely within the tradition of revolutionary Marxism: how can the European revolution at large be caused to happen? It had been made considerably more urgent around the turn of the century by the suggestion put about by Eduard Bernstein, that perhaps it *could* not be made to happen at all.⁴ Bernstein, a leading member of the German Social Democratic party and a former secretary to Marx’s coadjutor Friedrich Engels, had drawn attention to the growing disparity between Marx’s socio-economic expectations and the character of social and economic development in the advanced societies of western Europe.⁵ As he put it tartly in a note scribbled on an envelope: ‘Peasants do not sink; middle class does not disappear; crises do not grow ever larger; misery and serfdom do not increase.’⁶ Since society was not dividing ever more sharply into the two hostile groupings – the exploiters and the exploited – it no longer in his view made sense to expect a violent revolution as the pathway to Socialism. Furthermore the growing constitutionally legitimate power of the party of the working class made this crude method of political progress eminently dispensable. Revisionism promised Socialism (in the fullness of time) without the tears of revolution. In his polemic against Revisionism in *What is to be Done?* and in later writings Lenin was facing not merely a set of tactical precepts which implied a long and gloomy future for Socialists with the misfortune to be born Russians, but more importantly, as he saw it, a betrayal of the ideals of western Socialism as a whole, an abandonment of the transformational struggle by parts of the most advanced portion of the working-class movement. Revision-

ism, viewed parochially, was a threat to the Russian revolutionary movements but viewed more broadly, as Lenin did view it for far the greater part of his active political life, in the context of Socialism's international prospects, it seemed to him to threaten not just the prospective success of the Russian movement but the entire meaning of its struggle. Lenin's intellectual and political energies were devoted to confronting these twin threats. Eventually he succeeded in meeting the parochial challenge and triumphing over it, but the ecumenical challenge was one he never contrived to meet – and despite Mr Deutscher's resolute optimism this failure continues to call into question the meaning of that struggle. The revolution whose occurrence in Russia it is here attempted to explain is the revolution which *did* take place in Russia, a finished revolution, a revolution in one country which became very much a revolution *for* one country, a nationalist and anti-capitalist revolution, a revolution in the cant phrase of 'modernization'.

In October 1917⁷ quite a small group of men seized power in a great, if crumbling, empire. One feature of the revolution which must be explained is *why* it was possible for quite a small group of men to seize power in these conditions. Another feature, perhaps harder to assess fairly, is simply why it was, given that a small group of men could seize power in a great empire at that time, this was the small group of men which did do so. A third feature which requires explanation is how such a small group of men could *keep* power. None of these questions has much to do with classical Marxism which is a theory in which small groups of men do not seize power from the controllers of the bourgeois or pre-bourgeois state apparatus, let alone hang onto it indefinitely after they have done so. There are, plainly, many other questions which arise in any attempt to understand what happened. The question, for example, of why the Russian empire did reach such a point of disintegration in the course of 1917 is a very complex question of historical development and one which, unlike the question of the immediate preconditions for the seizure of power, can hardly be answered effectively within a short space.⁸ Even given that the Bolsheviks did succeed in seizing power, it remains equally necessary to explain why they put

it to the sort of use which they did. The extreme ambiguity and the obvious political delicacy of this last question make it particularly tricky to handle. In the course of more than fifty years many different Bolsheviks have put that power to many different uses and for exceedingly diverse reasons. The collectivization of the peasantry might have been expected in due course from any Marxist government (in itself a slightly paradoxical category) which had had the nerve to take power in a peasant country, though the methods and eventually the speed with which it was carried out were much more specifically chosen by the ruling elite. By contrast certain features of the purges⁹ were clearly irrelevant to any rational set of ends served by the Bolshevik regime and in no way contributed to such continuing efficacy as it succeeded in displaying. However, insofar as the question of why the Bolsheviks used their power as they did can be answered at any level of generality, be answered by anything more schematic than a history of all that they proceeded to do or even an entire history of modern Russia, it seems plausible that this answer is implied in the answer to the second and third of the questions indicated. That is to say: what the Bolsheviks did with power was a product of the characteristics which distinguished them as a group which *could* seize power, when confronted with the difficulties involved in retaining it in the conditions in which they had to make the attempt to retain it. Very abstractly this view is much the same as that of Soviet historiography (unlike the interpretation of the first question, the question of why it was possible for such a small group of men to seize power in the circumstances). More concretely, it is also the explanation of the Soviet Union's thus far decisive abandonment of the liberating promise of Marxism, of why it is so difficult to imagine a future for it which is more than Marxism with the politics left out, the material abundance which industrialism really can bring, even if it has not quite done so yet.

It is simplest to begin with the crumbling empire and its problems: all revolutions which do take place take place in particular locations. Vast in scale but ethnically heterogeneous, administratively chaotic, economically backward and politically riven, the empire presented a formidable array of challenges to anyone who attempted to rule it, still more to change it in any extended fashion. With many nations, many

languages and a populace largely illiterate, the marvel, as Sergei Witte remarked in 1905 in the aftermath of the disastrous Russo-Japanese war, was that the country could be held together even by autocracy. 'If the Tsar's government falls you will see absolute chaos in Russia and it will be many a long year before you see another government able to control the mixture which makes up the Russian nation.'¹⁰ The geographical control of the Tsarist government had increased greatly over the preceding hundred years – the Russian empire had never been so massive as it was in 1900. But its political viability both internally and externally was becoming increasingly questionable.¹¹ In a sense the reasons for these difficulties were mostly external to it – outside its direct control. But they posed problems which were very much within it and which it proved increasingly incapable of solving. Historically Russian culture had been obsessively introverted, a world sufficient unto itself, the Third Rome, and even in the nineteenth century there were men of imagination and energy determined that it should remain so. Frequently the Tsar's government was in the hands of men of this persuasion dedicated above all to the preservation of the traditionalist autocracy. But the rest of the world would not stand still. The Tsars were happy to use the most advanced military and communications facilities in their expansionist efforts, as they had been since the days of Peter the Great. But the progress of industrialization and modernization made it increasingly difficult to detach these technical developments from much broader changes in social training and attitudes. Guns could be purchased abroad; even armaments factories could be purchased abroad. But modern armies could only be developed at home and armaments factories could not be operated without a disciplined industrial labour force. As the Russo-Japanese war showed all too clearly the Russian state could not organize effectively for the stern disciplines of modern warfare without extensive transformations in Russian society. These transformations, industrial, educational,¹² agrarian, did not readily harmonize with the crudity of the prevailing system of social control,¹³ though as the experience of both Germany and Japan had already shown and as the Bolsheviki themselves were to show in due course, autocracy and rapid industrialization were not in themselves by any means incompatible.

Both industrialization and educational expansion were in the end attempted, but both contributed to the weakening of the structure of social control. In the aftermath of the revolution of 1905 an attempt was made belatedly at transformation even in the agrarian field under Stolypin;¹⁴ but it was still in its early stages when the outbreak of war subjected the entire social fabric of Russia to strains which it proved quite unable to bear.

Throughout the nineteenth century the Russian government wavered between the determination to modernize Russian society in order that the Russian state should be able to compete effectively with the other great world powers and the conflicting determination to maintain intact the autocratic structure of social control. But the initial scale on which the energies of the government had to be deployed meant that these twin objectives encroached violently upon one another. The autocracy was too traditionalist, too dedicated to its own perpetuation in detail, to be prepared to buy off the opposition of the educated classes through political reforms. At the same time it was too preoccupied with dynastic ambitions of expansion to avoid the necessity of making some efforts at modernization. Russia was, as Witte then Minister of Finance observed in 1899 in a memorandum to the Tsar,¹⁵ in a relationship to the European economies which precisely paralleled that between colonial countries and their metropolises. It imported western manufactures and exported primary products. But there was one radical difference between the position of Russia and that of a colony: Russia was a politically independent and mighty power. It wanted to be a metropolis itself. Applying the ideas of Friedrich List, the theorist of the autarkic German industrialization, Witte set himself to industrialize the empire. For a time he enjoyed dramatic success. But eventually the economic crisis of the turn of the century, aggravated by the savage pressure on the purchasing power of the peasantry led to Witte's own downfall and subsequently to a vast peasant revolt. In due course it was to be a peasant revolt on an even vaster scale and at a point in time when huge masses of peasants in uniform with weapons in their hands had in large measure replaced the relatively disciplined professional army of the empire which made it possible for the Bolsheviks to use their support among the proletariats of

Moscow and Petrograd to take power. It was three factors taken in conjunction, peasant insurrection, proletarian revolt and military collapse which caused the empire to crumble. Peasant insurrection and proletarian revolt had both been impressively evident in 1905. Together they had forced the Tsar into making a rather exiguous set of constitutional concessions. But despite their fervour and geographical extent, their power was eventually destroyed with remarkable ease by the rifle fire of the soldiery. As long as the army remained loyal, liberal constitutionalists could hardly hope to be conceded full political power and revolutionaries had certainly not the least chance of seizing it. A correct understanding of this point leads historians sympathetic to the old regime like George Katkov¹⁸ to see the fall of the empire as a ghastly but largely accidental drama, the product of cowardice, stupidity and personal ambition distributed among crucial members of the elite (valiantly assisted by the machinations of the German intelligence service). Historians sympathetic to the revolution by contrast are reduced either to assuming the First World War as an intrinsic aspect of the internal development of Russia or as an inevitable consequence of the character of international capitalism. The latter view, where held theologically, is no doubt irrefutable. But it is certainly not a very deft articulation of the present state of historical knowledge about the circumstances in which the war broke out. There is, however, one perspective which avoids the more desperate of these shifts with reasonable completeness. It was assuredly *not* a mere accident that the Tsarist empire was involved in the First World War and it was surely not a mere accident that after three years of unrelenting struggle against the armies of imperial Germany Russian military, political, economic and social organization should all have been savagely scarred. The Tsarist empire had neither the will nor, in the face of the German threat, the capacity to retire from the strains of international power competition. It lacked the level of social integration and economic modernity necessary to support the costs of this competition in a modern war. It was not a viable modern state in the final test of a modern state's viability. To see this weakness, though, as fitting it particularly for a Marxist revolution would be to espouse an extreme version of the heresy which Lenin himself most ab-

horred: Defensism. The military weakness of the Russian state stemmed from its economic and social backwardness. It made it in the aftermath of massive defeat liable to proletarian revolution, but it assuredly did not make it in Marxist terms *fit* for it. Military efficacy turned out in the circumstances of the First World War, perhaps rather unsurprisingly, to be a product of advanced – and thus at the time of advanced capitalist – industrialization. The existence of a proletariat sufficiently hostile to the nation state to be prepared to tear it apart even in the face of enemy invasion (together with a much greater liability to military collapse) turned out to be a product of a much earlier stage of industrialization.

The total size of the Russian proletariat was not large at the time of the revolution when compared with the proletariats of other great world powers and it was even less large as a proportion of the total working population.¹⁷ Russia remained a predominantly peasant country. The proletariat was, however, highly concentrated geographically and in terms of units of employment.¹⁸ The Putilov works in Petrograd was the largest in the world and the proportion of the proletariat employed in really large factories was the highest in the world. Marx had pointed in *Das Kapital* itself to the importance of concentration of production in increasing the strength of the working-class movement, but he had seen its main importance perhaps in the disciplined and organized character imparted to it by this experience, in a sense a genuinely civilizing process, if a highly coercive one.¹⁹ The Russian proletariat had not, however, on the whole benefited from this aspect of its concentration.²⁰ It had grown in size too rapidly and in too coercive conditions to display the intuitive commitment to industrial society as a going concern which western European Marxists had come to assume in it, the expectation which is made overt, for instance, in Engels's discussion of authority and which lies behind much of Lenin's own argument in *The State and Revolution*.²¹ It was this largely anarchic quality which made the post-revolutionary situation so grossly chaotic and it explains the frenzied tone of many of Lenin's statements during the heroic period in which he began to reimpose order on the chaos.

The proletariat had grown most rapidly in two periods, the

first from the early 1890s to the turn of the century during Witte's efforts at forced industrialization, the second starting around 1910 during a boom which was, from a purely economic point of view, rather better balanced than the first. The proletariat which had been created in the 1890s had not on the whole been organized into a labour movement under Socialist leadership, though the Jewish workers in the Pale had begun to be.²² The most effective union movement in this early period was started and indeed largely controlled by a secret police official, Zubatov; and the first great workers' demonstration in 1905 was led by a priest, Gapon.²³ But during the 1905 revolution large sections of the proletariat, particularly in Petrograd itself, had come under the sway of the Social Democrat movement. In the aftermath of the revolution this control was naturally extensively disrupted. The vast and increasingly politically orchestrated strike movements fell away to nothing. At the same time the near common front of all elements hostile to the absolutist regime which had appeared briefly during the revolution came to an end which proved to be permanent; and the splits in the Social Democratic movement itself widened alarmingly once again. When industrial activity expanded sharply from 1910 onwards and the proletariat grew rapidly in size with it, the development of a disciplined and politically responsive Russian labour movement of a western European type which it had been the ambition of the Menshevik section of the Social Democratic movement to create²⁴ became more and more obviously a mirage. From the mass shootings in the Lena goldfields in 1912 onwards there was a steadily increasing swell of strikes in which political and economic demands were inextricably entwined and which broke out erratically, often without discernible purpose.²⁵ At the same time larger and larger numbers of peasants, many of them possibly driven out of their villages by the impact of the Stolypin land reforms,²⁶ were recruited into the proletariat, increasing both its size and its touchy belligerency towards the rest of the society. Some of the resulting strikes were definitely led by the Bolsheviks, and Bolshevik influence in general spread rapidly in the union movement at the expense of the Mensheviks.²⁷ Increasingly the working class turned its back on the rest of society in bitterness and struck out more or less blindly at the immedi-

ate symbols of authority in its daily environment. A large proportion of the proletariat remained semi-migrant in attitude, far from fully integrated into urban society and culture and some of the dynamic hostility of the working class in this period clearly came from such men. But Bolshevik influence was far from confined to these most immature sections of the working class. In this period the party even came to control the union of the most advanced workers in Russia, the pride and hope of the Mensheviks, the Metal Workers' Union.²⁸ So while there was, if anything, increasing disunion among elite sections of the society hostile to the Tsar, and while the government remained in the hands of men who were for the most part mediocre as well as bigoted, the proletariat was becoming increasingly overt in the violence of its opposition to the autocracy and insofar as it was under any sort of leadership increasingly under the leadership of the most autocratic and extremist section of the hostile elites, the Bolshevik party. It was not a particularly glorious phase for the Bolsheviks – their leading member inside Russia had just been exposed as a police spy and Lenin himself was the only major intellectual figure still to belong to them, but there does seem much reason to suppose that the outbreak of war did avoid a major proletarian uprising and one in which the Bolsheviks would undoubtedly have enjoyed something of a leading position.²⁹ But there is not much reason to suppose that this would have enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power. The Tsarist regular army could have shot down the workers in 1914 or 1915 or 1916 as readily as it had in 1905 or 1906. If it had done so, it is even possible that the Mensheviks would have enjoyed something of a revival. The fear of military repression constituted the most immediate and in some ways the most conclusive argument for the virtues of the Menshevik view of proper proletarian strategy. The experience of military repression might have discredited the Bolsheviks as the Blanquist adventurers which their opponents saw them as being. Whether or not a proletarian revolt would have occurred spontaneously in this way and been duly repressed, had the First World War not broken out in 1914 (an idle question in any case), there is little reason to suppose that the future of Russia would have been liberal democratic. The Russian road to modernity would have been

a hard road, whether or not the Bolsheviks had contrived to seize power in 1917. The liberal democratic interlude in Russian history ran from February to October 1917. It was a brief and inglorious interlude, lauded since only by participants like Kerensky and to a lesser extent Miliukov³⁰ and scorned both by the men who destroyed it and their inheritors and by the admirers of the autocracy who saw the Provisional Government as founded upon treachery. It was assuredly not a fair test of the merits of liberal democracy nor even perhaps of its capacity as a system of rule to handle the problems of Russia. But it was the only test which history permitted and its outcome gave a clear and rather icy answer to a question which had been central to the interpretation of Russian society and its problems for more than a century: did Russian development, political, economic and social, have to parallel the development of western Europe, the heartland of advanced capitalism, stage by stage?

It was a question which Marx himself had been asked directly and had attempted to answer.³¹ It was also a question which his writings had raised for many Russian thinkers in a particularly acute form.³² Indeed, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and from 1900 on, the controversy over the opportunities for and constraints on the social and economic development of Russia revolved essentially around Marx's own theories. Leading populist thinkers like Mikhailovsky and Danielson drew their understanding of the meaning of capitalist development from Marx's works; indeed Danielson went so far as to translate *Das Kapital* into Russian. The notion that Russia might enjoy a distinctive mode of development was widespread among the intelligentsia, going back as far as gentry radicals like Herzen.³³ The confrontation with Marx's analysis of capitalism made the appeals of such an idiosyncratic route still more obvious, at the same time as it made it still more difficult to identify any alternative route as being plausibly open. The threat faced by Russian society in the later nineteenth century was, from the point of view of the most penetrating of the Populist analysts a twin threat. In addition to the proletarianization of the peasantry as a class, an inevitable concomitant in some of its aspects of *all* industrialization on a simple reading of Marx and certainly an inevitable concomitant of capitalist industrialization on

any reading of his works, there was considerable risk of the proletarianization of the Russian nation as a whole. Russian industrialization had to be carried out, if carried out at all, in the teeth of the advanced industrial competition of other capitalist powers. Unlike the first industrializing nations Russia could not rely on a large and uncompetitive foreign market for its industry. Instead it had to face in the early stages of industrialization severe competition in its own home market from foreign products.³⁴ In their analysis of these difficulties in the particular form in which they confronted Russia, Populist thinkers achieved at times a highly sophisticated analysis of the distinctive problems of Russian social development. But they failed to develop any particularly cogent solution to these problems, either at a theoretical level or in the domain of practical politics. In terms of political strategy they wavered between the attempt to educate and lead the peasantry in revolt against the autocracy and the attempt to use autocratic power to govern the country on behalf of the peasantry. Their tactical alignment towards the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century led them to espouse essentially democratic goals as far as the protection of peasant interests was concerned. They defended the rather battered institutions of peasant communalism against the efforts of the autocracy to speed the development of rural capitalism. Even in 1909 Lenin saw their espousal of essentially 'petty-bourgeois' capitalist ends as progressive in the Russian context: 'American capitalism', he called it, as opposed to the 'Prussian capitalism' of the autocracy.³⁵ Marx himself had agreed earlier with some of the theorists of the People's Will in seeing the possibilities of preserving the peasant commune as a component of a non-capitalist road to modernization. He had indeed written with savage scorn of the absurdity of assuming a necessarily uniform developmental process in all societies as later Russian Marxists like Struve or even Plekhanov were in effect to do.³⁶ Mikhailovsky, Marx complained, felt 'himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in western Europe into an historic-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself. . .'.³⁷ One will never attain scientific understanding of particular

instances of social evolution 'by using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical'.³⁸ Most of the Populists' social policies were developed for purely defensive purposes, to protect the peasantry from the worst strains of processes to which it was already being subjected. It is not surprising in consequence that they can hardly be claimed to have charted a bold and realistic plan for the future social development of Russia. They saw the tragic dilemmas of Russian development more clearly than most of their Marxist opponents, but ironically their only legacy to Russia today was a style of political action which could be – and was – used to further a form of social transformation which would probably have seemed to them, given their peasant allegiances, infinitely more appalling than the worst tragedies of British or French or German industrialization on the capitalist model. After the gentry conspiracy of the Decembrists in 1825 all major Russian political reform movements in the nineteenth century were largely Populist in inspiration and membership. Though the Social Democratic Party at the turn of the century was conceivably the largest and certainly the most dynamic mass political movement, it was easily surpassed in the scale of its appeal, eventually, by the recrudescent Populism of the Social Revolutionaries.³⁹ It could hardly have been otherwise in an overwhelmingly peasant country. The tactics espoused by Populists at different stages varied enormously. Some, like Lavrov, saw the essential goal of Populist activity as a massive educational effort which would haul Russian society out of its barbaric backwardness into the light of modern civilization. The political endeavours which went with such a view were often touchingly naive. Going to the People was as inscrutable as a project from the viewpoint of the peasantry into whose villages the bright-eyed students came, as it was risible as a political threat to the autocratic government.⁴⁰ It was hardly surprising that sharply contrasting styles of political action, better adapted to face the repressive capacities of the government, should have gained in appeal as a result of the fiascoes of more liberal Populist ventures. Elite bands of terrorists, autocratic in organization and autocratic in their intended political impact on society were formed on several occasions. Men like Chernyshevsky

dreamed of the slow growth of civilization in a Russia in which total power had been seized by a small revolutionary elite, though later, when in prison himself, he did come to believe that personal freedom was a necessary condition for civilization to develop.⁴¹ Conspiratorial organization and terrorist activity of the sort in which Lenin's elder brother took part were a natural response to the political climate of the autocracy; but they were also politically ineffective, as Lenin himself very early realized.⁴² Conspiratorial organization was indispensable before (and it turned out to some degree after) the seizure of power, but terror had better be postponed until after power had been safely seized. It was too capricious in its incidence and, even in Russia, stuck in too many people's throats. It made more enemies for the revolutionaries than it won friends.

Lenin adopted a form of conspiratorial organization which had been to some degree pioneered by earlier Russian revolutionary elitists like Tkachev. Like Marx himself, Lenin had great admiration for the extent to which many of the earlier Populist revolutionaries had taken revolution seriously. Some of the technical problems which they faced were necessarily still problems which any serious revolutionary in Tsarist Russia was equally bound to face. But the elitist stamp which he gave to his party was a product also of his characteristically rationalist and dogmatic view of Marxism, at a time when it was threatened internationally by the canker of Revisionism.⁴³ It was however also a response to a crisis which had begun to appear throughout Russian Social Democracy.

Russian Social Democracy, like all European Socialist parties, was a party of intellectuals and workers. The major opposition to the autocracy throughout the second half of the nineteenth century had come from intellectuals and above all from students. The Populist students had been paladins for a peasantry whose capacity for political action did not rise above (or indeed until 1917 reach) the level of the *jacqueries* of Stenka Razin or Pugachev. The appearance on the Russian political scene of a nascent industrial working class provided the student and intellectuals with long overdue mass support, but in doing so they also raised problems. The peasantry from one point of view posed few problems for their

intellectual protagonists, simply because they betrayed for the most part not the least flicker of interest in these protagonists. The workers proved not only more interested – and hence more responsive to intellectual political initiatives – but also much more specifically recalcitrant. Because Social Democracy was a real social and political movement, its purposes and organization provided something real to argue about. The structural character of worker – intellectual conflict within the early Social Democratic movement has recently been suggestively explored⁴⁴ and it has become clear that Lenin's organizational programme of 1902 presented in *What is to be Done?* was in fact common in several respects to nearly all sectors of the *intellectual* wing of the movement. The conditions in which the movement operated were such that frequent strike action often on directly political grounds was inevitable. Much of the behaviour of the Social Democratic movement would have remained more or less unaltered whichever of the two main currents of Economism or revolutionary agitation had gained the ascendancy. But the way in which the movement was organized and consequently the uses to which it could be put in the event of revolution, as Lenin clearly saw, would be decided largely by which of these currents prevailed. The first impact of Socialist intellectuals on the labour movement had created a body of educated and articulate working men committed to the steady organization of the movement for economic action in the factories and for the spread of Socialist understanding. The product of this method of organization would have been a steady increase in the ascendancy of working-class militants⁴⁵ inside the movement at the expense of intellectuals, the development of a measure of 'trade-union consciousness', an increased stress on economic gains and disciplined action to secure these, in brief to the development of the party as an adaptive organization for accommodating proletariat and factory more comfortably to one another. The worker elite dedicated to the spread of Socialist education amongst the proletariat at large and to the parochial concerns of the factory clashed repeatedly with the intellectuals over the control of funds and tactics, offended at being, as they thought, ignored by the intellectuals, and distrustful of them as men whose own interests were not involved in day to day industrial conflict and whom they

suspected (in a sense correctly, if without undue dishonour to either party) of wishing to manipulate the workers for their own ends. Lenin was concerned above all else, as many Populist revolutionaries had been before, with the struggle against the autocracy. He saw quite correctly that the autonomous development of a workers' movement as a defensive organization was likely in the long run to damp down the explosive potentialities of the most revolutionary section of the Russian population. The 1905 revolution, occurring at a time when the Bolsheviks had had little impact in Russia, established that Economism was not in the short run a severe threat to the revolutionary energies of the proletariat. But the repression in the aftermath of the revolution gave the most advanced sectors of the working class good reasons for retiring to lick their wounds. Menshevik tactics which demanded, as soon as political conditions permitted this, the emergence of a disciplined, democratic and open mass working-class movement on the western European model might have had some appeal had this sort of interlude continued for some time, and the Bolsheviks were in fact extensively discredited at this stage. But as the Russian economy began to expand once more in 1910, as peasants flooded into the factories and industrial and political unrest increased sharply, the exotic character of the Menshevik ambition became increasingly obvious.

Russian industrialization was taking place in a highly autocratic and prodigiously inefficient administrative setting. This long-standing pattern of autocracy and incompetence had developed a powerful tradition of violent resistance, above all among the belatedly much expanded student population.⁴⁶ The combination of massively alienated half-peasant, half-proletarians in increasing numbers and the final collapse of the autocracy in February 1917 gave the Bolsheviks their chance to make a bid for power. They appear to have done nothing to bring on the revolution of February 1917 and in the defensist climate of the war, their power even to make trouble was initially minimal. In the preceding month of January 1917, Lenin himself had said gloomily at the end of a lecture: 'We of the older generation may not see the decisive battles of this coming revolution.'⁴⁷ Even after the fall of the autocracy in February the Bolshevik triumph was very far

from being a foregone conclusion. It required a far more complete collapse of the armies at the front, together with a massive peasant insurrection, before power could be seized; and, above all, it required the return of Lenin. It required him partly, as Trotsky said, because the party could fulfil its mission only after understanding it, and for this Lenin was needed.⁴⁸ But more importantly perhaps it required him simply in order to exploit the full possibilities of the revolutionary situation.⁴⁹ Indeed for those who view the party's mission as extending beyond the seizure of power there is an obvious sense in which the party could hardly have afforded to understand its mission, if it was indeed to fulfil it. But the extraordinary skill and tenacity which characterized Lenin's leadership in the period leading up to the seizure of power was clearly a necessary condition for the party to have the least chance of success. The programme which Lenin advanced, Peace and Bread, Peace and Land, was from a long-term point of view opportunist. It marked a precise reversal of the classic proposals of the *Communist Manifesto*, the distribution of land to the peasantry and the nationalization of industry, in place of the nationalization of land and the government supervision of capitalist industry.⁵⁰ But if it was opportunist in motivation it was also supremely successful in effect, simply from the viewpoint of seizing power. Lenin was determined to seize and to keep power and he did precisely what was necessary in order to do so. By the time that the Bolsheviks moved, not only the provisional Kerensky government but all other political forces had discredited themselves by their inability to confront the imperatives of the situation. The Bolsheviks succeeded in capturing the Petrograd Soviet politically and Trotsky used it as a political cover for the insurrection. It was the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet which formally led the revolution. It was possible for the Bolsheviks to employ it for this purpose because of Lenin's political triumph in defining the situation as a choice between Bolshevik dictatorship and counter-revolution and in offering as a reward of Bolshevik dictatorship, the only programme which could cope with the chaos: armistice and distribution of land. Lenin remained in power, as Dietrich Geyer has said, 'because he dared to do what had become a necessity'.⁵¹ The Bolsheviks took power because

power, by October 1917, was there for the taking and they were the only group with the nerve to take power on the terms on which alone it could be taken. In themselves these terms did not represent bold initiatives. The efforts to obtain an armistice and the acceptance of peasant seizure of land both merely required a surrender before what were already *faits accomplis*. The detailed study of the collapse of the Tsarist armies is still in its infancy but the broad reasons for it were intrinsic to the character of the Russian regime: its social backwardness, its chaotic administration and its largely preindustrial economy, all subjected to the massive impact of the imperial German armies. Lenin's acceptance of the sheer necessity for peace was genuinely in the context a response to national need and not solely to agitational convenience. But from the perspective of today it is possible to see how heavy were the costs of this decision. It was not merely that the inglorious annexationist terms of the peace of Brest-Litovsk came as a disagreeable shock to many of the leading Bolsheviks who had assumed that German insistence on such crude truncation of Russian soil would be met by a recourse to a revolutionary war of national liberation.⁵² Nor was it merely that the bitterness of conflict within the Bolshevik party itself and between it and the other Socialist parties over this issue provided the occasion, if hardly the excuse, for the erosion of such remnants of Socialist democracy as still survived.⁵³ The most important cost was the loss of the only opportunity which a proletarian movement in a predominantly peasant country can have to establish itself unequivocally in the eyes of the majority of the population as the legitimate representative of the nation. Defensism, the decision of the great European Socialist parties to put the military requirements of their fatherlands above the cause of international Socialism was, in Lenin's eyes, the vilest of all vile heresies within the Socialist movement – and Lenin's sensitivity in detecting, and virulence in assailing, heresy would have done credit to Torquemada. But since 1917 such Communist revolutions as have been made have been made as wars of national liberation and the legitimacy which this has given to them has been of enormous importance in their subsequent careers. It has been 'People's War', to use the cant phrase, which has made the Communist Party into a national party in Yugo-

slavia, in China, in Vietnam. The rejection of a war of national liberation by Lenin, a leader who was genuinely cosmopolitan in vision and sympathy as perhaps no successful Communist revolutionary leader since has been, kept the Russian regime as the dictatorship of a party over a largely hostile or indifferent people for decades.⁵⁴ It was not really until the second German invasion, in 1941, that the Bolshevik government clearly established itself as a genuinely national government. It was Stalingrad which belatedly gave national legitimacy to the Bolshevik rule. By then the costs of the nervy dictatorship of the party had become appallingly heavy.⁵⁵ In practical terms Lenin was plainly correct in rejecting the possibility of fighting a revolutionary war. The Bolshevik rule would have been most unlikely to survive such an enterprise. But the very fact that from his point of view he was so *obviously* right to do so exposes still more clearly the extreme ideological fragility of the regime which he established.

This regime had become a dictatorship over the working class quickly enough, but the class over which its power was exerted most strenuously and with most ghastly results was clearly the peasantry.⁵⁶ The Bolsheviks were able to take power because they were prepared to give the peasants their land (or, more accurately, to accept temporarily the fact that the peasants had taken their land). They used power eventually to take all the land back again and in doing so they crushed the peasantry without pity. The reason why the Bolshevik regime was victorious in the civil war and hence was in due course in a position to reappropriate the land was the extent to which the peasantry preferred them to the white armies which threatened to reappropriate it at once. This preference, which had been rendered precarious by the systematic pillaging of the villages for food supplies for the cities in the period of war Communism, was reinforced by the reversion to a comparatively free market in agricultural produce in the New Economic Policy – in fact to what Maxim Gorky insisted on referring to as the ‘Old Economic Policy’.⁵⁷ The Bolsheviks were able to take power because they accepted, as the imperial regime and the other Socialist parties did not, the peasant seizure of lands. They kept it because they were prepared, when the choice came, to accept the real obstruc-

tive power of the peasantry and to make terms with it for as long as proved necessary. There was little sympathy either way between Bolsheviks and peasantry; the peasants, other things being equal, would often no doubt have gladly massacred the urban revolutionaries. The forces of the country in the old war between town and country had served in altogether more advanced countries like France to keep the revolutionaries in their place. The purpose of the Stolypin land reforms had been to establish a more contented and stable basis of peasant support for the autocracy. It was the failure of these reforms which in the chaotic circumstances of 1917 produced a peasant revolt which toppled the autocracy.⁵⁸

The Russian agrarian problem under the old regime was extraordinarily intricate and even now many aspects of it are not well understood.⁵⁹ The situation of the peasantry in 1917 derived from a system of serfdom, of labour tied to land. The Russian nobility had been converted into a service nobility by the Tsars in the effort to face the military threats of Mongol, Lithuanian and other invaders. In return for their military and administrative services the nobles received land rights. In order to make these land rights of some economic use to their beneficiaries and in order to consolidate the defence of the empire, the free peasantry were barred from the seductions of the open land frontier and tied down to given units of land. They cultivated this land in return for labour services on the manorial demesnes or for fixed payments in money or kind. The system favoured depended upon the fertility of the soil. In the rich black-earth lands of the south labour services predominated. In the poorer soils to the north, fixed payments were normally required. In both, the state serfs, rather under half of the total around 1800, owed fixed payments at a relatively moderate level. Besides the tenurial role of the serf, another set of institutional relations, those of the peasant commune, the *mir*, determined the economic and social position of the peasants. The greater part of the lands in European Russia were held in repartitional tenure. The *mir* did not merely control the methods of exploitation of the largely unconsolidated family plots; it also redivided the land at intervals and retained a general right to control the peasants' sale, mortgage or inheritance of land. The emancipation of 1861 may well on the whole have worsened the economic

position of the peasants, despite the legal improvement in their status, decreasing their individual holdings in the fertile black-soil areas where there were rich returns on the investment of labour.⁶⁰ It burdened the former serfs as a whole with a level of repayments for their lands which forced them steadily further and further into arrears as the century wore on. The government retained and strengthened the commune as an instrument of social control. Yields remained extremely low and technology remained backward; only one peasant holding out of two even had an iron plough as late as 1917.⁶¹ Social relations inside the villages worsened under increasing pressure of population. The general problem of peasant indebtedness grew more severe and skilful peasant exploiters, 'eaters of the *mir*',⁶² manipulated the communes in the service of their own interests. Rumours of a possible second emancipation swept the villages at intervals and archaic memories of a time when land was not yet private property recurred insistently. There was a growing surge of peasant unrest in the first years of the new century, culminating in the massive uprisings of 1905–6. These movements were semi-millenarian in character, as was natural in a peasantry which lived in near isolation from both Orthodox Church and State, practising its own semi-pagan rituals or drawn into strange and multifarious sects. But the final cause of the uprising was simply the massive economic failure of Russian agriculture.⁶³ Certainly it was little affected by revolutionary agitation. As a peasant said in 1902 to an examining magistrate who was inquiring into one of the outbreaks of that year: 'No rumours came to me about any little books. I think that if we lived better, the little books would not be important, no matter what was written in them. What's terrible is not the little books but this: that there isn't enough to eat.'⁶⁴ Terrified by the scope of the 1905 uprisings, the Tsarist government under Stolypin set itself to destroy the *mir*, which had shown itself a seedbed of revolution, rather than an effective instrument of control. The new policy was avowedly a wager on the strong.⁶⁵ It encouraged consolidation of holdings and a general development of capitalist relations in the countryside in a system of private landholdings. The peasants were not given the land – indeed some millions of the poorer of them seem to have been eased out of the villages into the once again ex-

panding factories from 1910 on. What Stolypin hoped to do was to develop a sense of private property in the peasantry, to teach them not to *take* the land.⁶⁶ Despite this purposeful dissolution of the communes, under a quarter of the peasant allotments had been consolidated in 1914.⁶⁷ Individual consolidation was not confined to any economic level of the peasantry, certainly not to the richest sections of it, but nowhere had it gone very far by the outbreak of the war. In the conditions of 1917, especially from February to October, as the army split up, the strike movement spread and peasant soldiers began to trickle back to their villages, the peasant communes reconstituted themselves and took back not just the lands of the nobility (which had in fact already shrunk extensively since the emancipation)⁶⁸ but those of many of the separators. While the Provisional Government wavered and the Bolsheviks seized power, built up the Red Army and held power against the white armies, the villages of Russia realized their ancient dream and became once again a world sufficient unto themselves, virtually independent of the state. The Tsarist government was broken by the last and greatest of Russian peasant risings. It was replaced in due course by a government which succeeded in subjecting the peasantry to the control of the state to an extent no Tsar had dreamed of, though the peasantry to some degree have taken their revenge by keeping Russian agriculture drastically the least successful sector of Soviet production.

Lenin had realized as early as 1907 that the Russian revolution could only come with a peasant agrarian revolution.⁶⁹ But he had still assumed, in *Two Tactics of Social Democracy*, in 1905, that the post-revolutionary government would be what he called a democratic, not a Socialist, dictatorship. It would not 'extend beyond the scope of bourgeois social and economic relationships'.⁷⁰ It would carry the revolutionary conflagration to western Europe and the socialization of the economies of advanced capitalist societies in the west would enable Russian social and economic development to proceed in conditions of unique ease. But Russian industrialization would still be in essence capitalist in character. The theory of permanent revolution developed by the German Marxist Parvus⁷¹ and extended by Trotsky as a response to 1905 implied that a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat with

the aid of the peasantry, if it contrived to seize power, would be able to consolidate its power and eventually to pass over to a Socialist regime, as a result of the 'direct state support of the European proletariat'.⁷⁵ Lenin, seeing as Marx and Engels had clearly before him, the services to international revolution that a Russian revolution could bring, preserved a relatively modest view of the internal social advantages which the revolution could bring to Russia itself. Trotsky, a decidedly more prominent actor in the conditions of 1905, concentrated more on the distinctive opportunities for a seizure of political power by the proletariat led by Socialist intellectuals which Russia offered. When Lenin in his April Theses announced his programme for Bolshevik seizure of power to set up a revolutionary dictatorship of proletariat and peasantry, with the slogan 'All power to the Soviets', a Menshevik bystander shouted out, 'But this is nonsense: insane nonsense.'⁷⁶ Four years later when the European revolution had clearly fizzled out, Lenin took a more sober view of what he had brought about. 'It was a fantastic idea for a Communist to dream that in three years you could drastically change the economic structure of our country; . . . let us confess our sins: there were many such fantasy-makers in our midst. But how can you begin a Socialist revolution in our country without fantasy-makers?'⁷⁶ How indeed? Lenin could scarcely be blamed for the error in his prediction of a Socialist revolution in western Europe, but in itself the fantasy that industrialization could come blithely to Russia under the egalitarian rule of a vigilant proletariat and as a result of a generous foreign-aid programme from a Socialist World Bank must rank among the most *outré* fantasies of this or any other century.

The adventure of the Bolshevik regime has been a great adventure, a great and in some ways a terrible one. The change in the atmosphere in Petrograd, as indeed the whole history of the Bolshevik Party, made it evident that, whatever happened in Russia, without Lenin and indeed without his return in 1917, there would have been no Bolshevik revolution.⁷⁵ Even Kerensky in a sense grasped this when he told a meeting of the Provisional Government hysterically in March: 'Just wait. Lenin himself is coming. Then the real thing will start.'⁷⁶ Lenin made the Russian Revolution. No

one else would have quite had the nerve. But, as might be expected from a revolution dependent on the daring of one man, it was not a very Marxist revolution which he made. The dictatorship of a party over a backward country has provided a political elite like many other political elites, autocratic, ruthless, supremely dishonest. It has certainly had great achievements to its credit, but it still displays in the light of the Marxian heritage what Lenin himself identified in 1922 as 'our main deficiencies: lack of culture and that we really do not know how to rule'.⁷⁷