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Review: The Russian Tragedy

by Alexander Berkman (Phoenix Press)

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Contents

REVOLUTION	5
DISILLUSIONMENT	6
STATE CAPITALISM	6
BEST COMMUNIST?	7

read of how under the direct command of Trotsky, the demands of the Revolutionary Committee (for such democratic rights as free speech, free elections to the soviets etc.) were portrayed to the Russian working class as White reaction and the Rebellion was crushed with brutal and bloody force, will understand that Stalinism is not a radical break with Leninism/Trotskyism but rather a logical continuation.

ALEXANDER BERKMAN was no mere theorist. All his life he was an active anarchist militant. Born in Russia, by the age of fifteen he had been expelled from school for membership of a group which met to read radical books. By the age of nineteen he was in America and active in a revolutionary anarchist group.

In 1892 during the Homestead Steel strike the industrialist H C. Frick hired Pinkerton detectives who murdered eleven strikers, including a ten year old child. He then declared that he would sooner see every striker dead than accede to a single one of their demands. For his part in an attempt to assassinate Frick, Berkman was sentenced to seventeen years in jail.

REVOLUTION

He second American jail sentence was for work with the No Conscription League during the First World War. Following this he went to Russia where the revolution had begun. While initially supportive, he was soon sickened by the Bolshevik duplicity and especially the events around the Kronstadt revolt in 1921. Forced to leave Russia he went to France where he remained active until his death at the age of sixty six in 1936.

This book is a must for anyone who is confused as to why the Russian Revolution went wrong, for anyone who feels that to explain the aberrations and atrocities perpetrated by the Bolsheviks as necessitated by imperialist blockades or 'objective circumstances', when the USSR spans half the Northern hemisphere, is a bit incredible. This book is a must for anyone who has bought the lie that Stalin single handedly changed the essential ideology of bolshevism.

DISILLUSIONMENT

This book is made up of a recent introduction, which places the essays in context, and three essays written by Berkman in the immediate aftermath of his intense disillusionment with the way in which the Bolsheviks steadily rolled back the gains of the Revolution — on the way making more concessions to the pressures of international imperialism than to the Russian proletariat who had made the Revolution.

In broad sweeps, the introduction charts the period from early 1917 when the peasants seized the land and the workers the factories to October 1917, when the Bolsheviks used the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” to mobilise the masses behind them and from there to the establishment of secret police forces under the control of the ‘Cheka’ which in turn ruthlessly destroyed the power of the same soviets they had opportunistically supported, culminating in the savage suppression of the Kronstadt Revolt (1921) which made such mild demands as free elections to the soviets.

STATE CAPITALISM

Feeling secure in their dictatorship, they then denounced the previous excesses of “War Communism” and proceeded to establish the New Economic Policy which amounted to a reinstatement of capitalism — though this time in a Stateist rather than a Private guise. Not that this made much difference to the organisation of work: from early 1918 on (when they dissolved the Constituent Assembly which they had first opposed and then supported), the Bolsheviks had been replacing the workers councils with individual managers, often the identical managers who had run the factories in the Tsarist period!

The Russian Tragedy is the essay in which Berkman charts his progress from one who arrived in Russia ‘not to teach but to learn; to learn and to help’ to one who left Russia believing that ‘the Revolution in Russia had become a mirage, a dangerous deception’ The key to Berkman’s analysis is his understanding that revolutions are made ‘not by any political party, but by the people themselves’ This is the understanding which enabled him to perceive the root cause of the Revolution’s decay in Bolshevik ideology and action — rather than in the backwardness of the Russian people or external circumstances.

BEST COMMUNIST?

One of the guises under which the Bolsheviks fooled people into accepting their dictatorship of all-powerful secret Police’ increasingly powerless soviets, mass executions and imprisonments etc. etc. was the label War Communism. Yet, when the USSR was no longer threatened by internal reaction or imperialist aggression, the long awaited fruits of the Social Revolution proved to be the reintroduction of private ownership and the reestablishment of free trade (10th Congress, 1921). In Lenin’s own words, ‘Henceforth, the best communist is he who can drive the best bargain’ The final section of this essay looks towards a new Revolution in Russia, which unhappily we are still awaiting 70 years later.

The second essay. The Russian Revolution and the Communist Party, deals in much greater depth with Bolshevik ideology and the changing pronouncements of Lenin. Again, it puts the blame for the Revolution’s failure firmly where it belongs. It will give the reader an understanding of the real nature of Bolshevism which is hidden by those Trotskyists of today who describe Russia as a “deformed workers’ state”. The third essay, The Kronstadt Rebellion deals with events that occurred in that garrison town, near Leningrad (then Petrograd). Anyone who