

“The 1917 Revolution was the inevitable outcome of the First World War”. Discuss.

Benjamin Eskola

8 December 2016

What does it mean for events to be “inevitable”? For E. H. Carr, the claim of inevitability in a strict sense is vacuous, since, “for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different”; this is, of course, true of everything. In a more general sense, he argues, there are always alternative courses of action available; nothing is inevitable until it has occurred. A less pedantic meaning (as he himself acknowledges) might be “extremely probable” or that the “conjunction of factors ... was overwhelmingly strong”.¹

Thus, a methodology for establishing the “inevitability” of the revolutions as a result of the war may be to determine on the one hand whether or not, had the war not occurred, the revolutions would have occurred, and on the other hand, given that the war did occur, whether or not it could have been averted. However, there is a risk here: this line of reasoning can easily lead into speculation, relying on counterfactual assumptions rather than evidence. Carr dismisses such hypotheses as “parlour games”, a critique expanded on by Richard J. Evans, who suggests the use of counterfactuals can be “...an attack...on any concept of causation at all.”²

Thus an essay such as this must limit itself to facts: an analysis of the causes of events which actually occurred, their importance relative to one another, and the potential in reality for their having been averted, without speculation as to what may have occurred in their place. In particular, this essay will argue that the conditions in Russia and worldwide were such that the survival of the Tsarist regime was increasingly unlikely, and that while the war provided a trigger for the events of 1917, it did not constitute the

¹E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 96.

²Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts* (London: Abacus, 2014), p. 65.

root cause.

The roots of social discontent in Russia dated back decades by the time of the First World War. Conflict between the autocratic Tsarist regime and liberalizing movements, in particular within the army but also the intelligentsia, had been growing since the early 19th century. Most significant in the context of the revolution of 1917 was the abolition of serfdom in the 1860s. The abolition, forced through against the wishes of most landowners, could only take place due to the political weakness and indebtedness of that class, and the transition to a reliance on wage labour rather than serf labour weakened and impoverished them further, despite the favourable conditions of the sale, by which the land cultivated by peasants was reduced by 13% on average.³ Further, it created a large class of newly free peasants, whose political and economic interests would come increasingly into conflict with those of the landowners and aristocracy over the coming decades.⁴

The position of the peasantry was exacerbated in the early decades of the twentieth century by the agrarian reforms under Prime Minister Stolypin. The growing peasant population, in contrast with the fixed area of land available for peasant ownership, produced ever greater levels of poverty, particularly in years of famine. The modernizers in the government saw the communal ownership of land by peasant communities as part of the problem. Land was periodically redistributed among members of the commune on the basis of need, and this, it was thought, undermined any incentives to control the size of a family or to improve the land or the process of cultivation; instead, the available land was simply divided up into smaller and smaller parcels in each generation. This, in turn, led to a process of migration into the cities, fuelling in part Russia's industrialization; this process was, however, seasonal as those who lived in the city for part or most of the year would often return to the country for the harvest.

The solution implemented by Stolypin was one of reforming land tenure, in the form of a shift from communal to private ownership. In this sense it was the logical continuation of the 1861 emancipation, in that it constituted a move towards a capitalist land tenure. However, although a significant proportion of land was transferred into private ownership by the outbreak of the war in 1914, it fundamentally failed to address the root of the problem, whereby the peasants and Cossacks (combined, around 80%

³N. S. Trubetskoi, quoted in Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 6.

⁴Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 46–47.

of the population by 1897) held only 68% of the non-state-owned land in 1905, while nobility (under 1.5% of the population at the same time) held around 22%, more than seventeen times the area per capita.⁵

Perhaps more significantly, regardless of whether the discontent was justified, the attempts at reform did nothing to alter the perception of injustice. This perception of injustice was further cemented by the fact that most noble-owned land was not used directly but rented out to peasants (around half of the non-peasant-owned land was rented to them) and much of the remainder was worked by peasants as wage labour.⁶ It is this perception of injustice, whether based in fact or simply imagined, that the socialist radicals were able to use to mobilize the peasantry behind them. Transfer of “all privately owned lands” to “democratically organised communes” was part of the Socialist Revolutionary manifesto from 1905.⁷

The development of industry and thus of an urban proletariat had also been taking place over the decades prior to the revolution, and in turn contributed to the social conditions that produced the revolution. Not the least of these was the interrelation and interdependence between town and country, with significant seasonal migration by peasants. Added to this was the significant concentration of urbanization within Petrograd and Moscow. These were the only two cities in the Empire that had more than one million people in 1897; only five others were over two hundred thousand, and all five were in Poland, Latvia, and the Ukraine, rather than Russia proper.⁸ Thus, unrest in a relatively small number of industrial areas could have a disproportionate impact on the nation’s industry.

This centralization was also reflected in the development of railways, which were designed primarily to transport grain surpluses to the ports and major cities, not towards the western border.⁹ Transport to and from the front during the war had to go via the termini in the cities, with incoming supplies from the countryside blocking outgoing ones to the front.

The war led to major upheavals within Russian society. The requirement

⁵Teodor Shanin, *Russia as a Developing Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 62, 137.

⁶Shanin, p. 136.

⁷Socialist Revolutionary Party, *Programme of the Socialist Revolutionary Party*, 1905 <<https://community.dur.ac.uk/a.k.harrington/srprog.html>>.

⁸J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812–1980* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 603.

⁹David Christian, *Imperial and Soviet Russia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 165.

for soldiers meant a massive campaign of recruitment and mobilization, exacerbated by the significant rate of attrition. The standing army had been around 1.4 million men at the outbreak of the war, with another 4 million mobilized shortly afterwards; in total between 1914 and 1917 over 15 million served in the army (around 18% of the male population).¹⁰ This army service had several effects on Russian society by the time of the revolutions.

First of all, a significant proportion of the army (and, indeed, of the population in general) consisted of peasants. Thus, the service in the army brought together a range of people from across the country, who otherwise would have remained either in their rural locality or, perhaps, worked seasonally in the city. It allowed them to meet others who shared, in many cases, the same problems of land, poverty, and famine. Any hope that army service would have strengthened a Russian, rather than regional, identity was, in a sense, justified; however, it allowed this identity to be built around shared grievances as well as shared service to the Empire.

Secondly, the logistical and organizational problems faced by the army solidified a new range of grievances against the Tsarist regime. Again, rumours of insufficient guns, ammunition, and rations may have been exaggerated, but were in any case widely believed, breeding widespread discontent particularly after the February Revolution and the failed offensives of that year. The far left was able to use this in the process of radicalization within the army itself, along with the process of building solidarity with the army among the civilian population.

The initial trigger for the February Revolution was industrial unrest in Petrograd organized on International Working Women's Day, 23 February, with marches and strikes for "bread and peace". This quickly merged with disaffection in the army, exacerbated by the army's discomfort with being deployed against Russians, against civilians, including — some believed — their own families.¹¹ Without army support, the Tsarist regime collapsed in a matter of days.

However, as we know, the abdication of the Tsar was not the end of the conflict. A rapid transition from autocracy to constitutional monarchy to a nominally democratic republic (retaining the undemocratically elected pre-revolutionary government as a "provisional government", accountable in theory to the people rather than the Tsar) did nothing directly to address the grievances of the majority of the population. Heedless of the promises

¹⁰Westwood, p. 190.

¹¹Figes, p. 313.

of a “constituent assembly” at an unspecified date in the future, workers of Petrograd, along with the soldiers of the Petrograd garrison, began to organize themselves into a self-governing soviet, a model soon emulated (at least in name) across the country. The continuance of soldier’s grievances was reflected in the first decree of the Petrograd Soviet, which both attempted to address the army’s perceived culture of disrespect towards soldiers by officers, and more significantly made it clear that orders of the State Duma were to be carried out only if they did not conflict with those of the Soviet, and that in particular all political actions were the responsibility of the Soviet.¹²

Throughout 1917 disagreement continued over the continued participation in the war. The Bolsheviks, under the renewed influence of Lenin after his return from exile, increasingly agitated for withdrawal from the war. By the time of the renewed unrest in July they had adopted, and built upon, the demands for “peace and bread” by the Petrograd workers, promoting the slogan of “peace, bread, and land” in a combined formulation that appealed to the (mainly peasant) soldiers as well.¹³ Also by July the Bolsheviks had begun demanding the transfer of “all power to the soviets”, preceding (and perhaps contributing to) their own consolidation of a majority in the urban soviets by several months.

Conclusion

To return to Carr’s dictum, “for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different”. For the Revolutions of 1917 to have been avoided, the social and economic makeup of Russia would have had to have been very different, requiring fundamental changes to land ownership, political participation, and many other factors, going back decades. Successive governments under the Tsars had failed to address these problems; the provisional government of 1917, too, was unable to make sufficient changes to placate the population, and unable to prevent the Bolsheviks from winning power, due in part to their own failure to build any significant level of unified popular support.

It is futile to speculate as to whether, had the war not taken place, either of

¹²Petrograd Soviet, *Order No. 1 of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies to the Petrograd District Garrison, 1917* <<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/03/01.htm>>.

¹³Service, p. 48; Vladimir Lenin, ‘The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (the April Theses)’, in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917), XXIV <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>>.

the revolutions would have taken place, just as it is impossible to say with any certainty what would have taken place had Lenin not returned in April, for example. However, it is possible to observe that almost no country in Europe that experienced a socialist uprising in the half decade after the war managed to avoid further strife before 1939. The German revolution (or indeed revolutions) were perhaps the most notable of these, and the ongoing unresolved conflicts within German society were a contributory factor to the later rise of the Nazi party. Italy and Hungary, too, had failed socialist revolutions followed by Fascist governments. Even Great Britain, though it experienced no revolution outside of Ireland, was not free of left- and right-wing agitation over the following two decades. It seems reasonable to expect that, had one or both revolutions in 1917 been averted, it would be only a matter of time before social unrest broke out again.

References

- Carr, E. H., *What Is History?* (London: Penguin, 1987)
- Christian, David, *Imperial and Soviet Russia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997)
- Evans, Richard J., *Altered Pasts* (London: Abacus, 2014)
- Figes, Orlando, *A People's Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1996)
- Lenin, Vladimir, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (the April Theses)', in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917), XXIV <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>>
- Petrograd Soviet, *Order No. 1 of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies to the Petrograd District Garrison, 1917* <<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/03/01.htm>>
- Service, Robert, *A History of Modern Russia*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 2013)
- Shanin, Teodor, *Russia as a Developing Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985)
- Socialist Revolutionary Party, *Programme of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, 1905* <<https://community.dur.ac.uk/a.k.harrington/srprog.html>>
- Westwood, J. N., *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812–1980* (Oxford: OUP, 1984)