



The socialist regime: The intellectual origin of the images

Dmitry Shlapentokh

Indiana University South Bend, Indiana, USA

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ABSTRACT

Every phenomenon exists in several dimensions. It has several ontological attributes, so to speak, which provide opportunities for a variety of interpretations. The Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet regime could be an example. At the beginning of Soviet history the revolution was seen as the beginning of a worldwide revolution opening an era of liberation for workers all over the world. As the Soviet regime solidified its position, the hope for worldwide revolution faded. In the new context, observers, especially outside Russia, looked at the regime from a different perspective. For them it represented the country's national interests, and its socialist slogans should not be taken at face value. Some believed post-revolutionary Russia was similar to post-revolutionary France and was experiencing its "Thermidor." Others assumed the revolution showed Russia as a "Eurasian" state where all ethnic/religious groups lived in "symbiosis." Finally, some assumed the Soviet regime would lead to the transformation of the human species and the human conquest of cosmos. This transition from one image to another does not mean that one illusion, one "wrong" image, follows another. It also does not mean the very notion of true meaning is meaningless simply because no reality exists as a fixed entity, and one could therefore "construct" any type of reality. It simply means that there are many attributes of the revolution, which are revealed in the course of time.

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1. The image of the Russian Revolution

Through most of the twentieth century, the Russian Revolution was a living event, part of the political and intellectual life of the Soviet regime. But by 1991 the revolution had died as an ongoing process. It received its final coup de grâce on November 7, 2005. For the entire Soviet era, November 7 had

been an official holiday commemorating the Bolshevik Revolution. In 2005, it was replaced by November 4, which memorialized the defeat of the Poles at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Revolution had finally become history—a historical image, a true artifact. We can now approach the Russian Revolution from this vantage point.

It is beyond the scope of this essay, indeed, beyond the scope of a long monograph, to examine how the image of the Russian Revolution changed in Russian thought over a few years. The modest goal here is to outline the major changes in perceptions of the Revolution and of socialism in Russian thought between the late nineteenth century and the late 1920s, and to deal with some related subjects.

It is obvious that the image of the Russian Revolution and socialism—like that of any historical phenomenon—changed in the course of political development. This

E-mail address: dshlapen@iusb.edu.

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essay also demonstrates something that is less obvious to many. First, most mainstream social scientists and politicians can hardly predict the future. This inability to understand the nature of coming events is not always reducible to a problem intrinsic to the historical process, as some postmodernists might argue. For them, history is “text,” and the interconnection between events is arbitrary. This makes prediction impossible. This assumption could be partly true because it indicates the multiplicity of historical options. However, the creativity of the historical process alone does not explain why social scientists failed to consider the possibility that socialism would rise and then collapse. Well-established mainstream scientists/politicians usually dominate visions of the past, present, and future. Often, they fail to consider seriously the views of those outside the establishment, e.g., academia or the government, especially if those views differ markedly from their own. Indeed, until the Russian Revolution, members of the establishment viewed socialism mostly as a pipe dream, an abstract theory with no chance of materializing. The experiences of the Paris Commune had little impact on their attitudes, despite fears of popular violence. Radical Marxists, who believed socialism could be materialized, were ignored or seen as eccentrics. Indeed, mainstream social scientists and political pundits continued to ignore thinkers who predicted the collapse of the USSR in the last decade of the Soviet regime. There are other, less obvious aspects of the study of the image of the Revolution.

Every historical phenomenon has a multitude, even unlimited number of attributes, revealed over the historical process. From the outset of their rule, Bolsheviks viewed the revolution as the beginning of the worldwide liberation of workers. This image survived until the end of the regime; other features emerged along the way, revealing other attributes of the regime. Some groups—usually called National Bolsheviks—saw the Bolsheviks as a true national power. Others saw them as opening a new era in the history of the human species—human mastery over nature. It would be incorrect to view these changes in the image as shifts from one illusion to another, lapsing into absolute relativism. Rather, they revealed the multiple attributes of the historical phenomenon over time. Indeed, there are many Bolshevik revolutions/Soviet regimes in the historical contexts in which these phenomena are located; each of the theoretically endless multitude of images could be related to practice, events, or, implications of the Revolution and the regime that followed.

2. Socialist regime: the intellectual origin

Perceptions of the Soviet regime in the process of its historical changes depend on the historical origin of the image. This short history thus begins with the term’s origins. The word “socialism” has various meanings in different political doctrines. Most envisaged it as a society of social and political harmony. In the great religious doctrines, such as Christianity, “socialism” also implies solving the ultimate problem—the resurrection of the dead. This dream of the ideal society is as old as human civilization. For most of history, socialism has been mostly a cultural and philosophical abstraction. Many groups have

tried to follow its dictums, to live in a society without private property, but until the Bolshevik revolution no one believed such a society could be constructed worldwide. It is no accident that *Utopia*, the major work of Thomas More (1478–1531, a founder of modern socialism), portrays Utopia as impossible to create,¹ or at least the distant island suggested this. In the nineteenth century, even after the Paris Commune, violent establishment of a society without private property was not perceived as an immediate threat by most of the West European elite. Revolution was not so much the creation of a new society as the rule of the brutal mob—“gorillas,” as Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) put it. Even most social democratic parties in the West regarded the victory of socialism as a distant, semi-Utopian future. The motto of the West European socialist movement was Eduard Bernstein’s (1850–1932) famous slogan: “movement is everything, the goal is nothing.”²

As a philosophy, socialism differed little from More’s *Utopia*. It was a political abstraction *related to, or more precisely, unrelated to* real political life, like “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” on the façade of French government buildings. For most European socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even for those claiming to be Marxists, socialism was not real politics. The Russian elite generally held the same view. Russian authorities had experienced a wave of revolutionary terror since 1866 and during the first Russian Revolution in 1905–1906. Yet socialism was not what they feared most. Acts of violence per se concerned authorities above all, since they endangered the lives of the elite and threatened the collapse of tsardom. In terms of a system that could replace tsardom, violence might prolong or abort anarchy and lead to complete restoration, possibly a constitutional monarchy or the Western-style capitalist democracies members of the imperial elite had witnessed. A prophetic vision emerged of a near-term socialist society, including plans for how it would materialize. Konstantine Leont’ev (1831–1891), a conservative intellectual, envisaged the coming of a socialist society; in his view, a tough disciplinary regime, not social harmony, would result. In fact, his vision of the future would later be called “totalitarian.”³ Although he was truly a prophetic visionary, the conservative elite hardly understood or took note of his work.

3. Changes in the image: from political abstraction to a plan of action

Most members of the elite in the West and Russia did not believe in the creation of a socialist society, and yet a

¹ More, Thomas; Adams, Robert Martin, *Utopia: a New Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 1975.

² Bernstein, Eduard, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation*, New York: Schocken, 1961; Bernstein, Eduard, *Ferdinand Lassalle as a Social Reformer*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1969.

³ Leont’ev, Konstantin, *Against the Current; Selections from the Novels, Essays, Notes, and Letters of Konstantin Leontiev*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969; Leont’ev, K., *Vostok, Rossiia i slavianstvo: sbornik statei K. Leont’eva*, Osnabrück: O. Zeller, 1966.

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