

The Evitability of War, Revolution, Socialism

This will be a meandering, leisurely and irritating look at the Socialist/Communist/Trotskyist movements of the past hundred years. The territory covered will be from the 19th century to the present. This particular analysis was set in motion as the serendipitous result of a small faction fight in the Socialist Party. There will be something here to outrage, or at least intrigue a number of you and of interest to my fellow pacifists. And, particularly in the first pages, material for historians.

As a preface to this, and as grounding for any discussion of the fierce conflicts of the last century, which saw the rise of an energetic capitalism in the US, of a murderous fascism in Germany, and the totalitarian regime of Stalin, these three groupings are not as separate as we make them out to be. They are all, in different ways, a response to the extraordinary pace of history from the 18th to the 20th century. Nothing in all recorded history equals what happened in that space of time. When the 18th century began no one could travel faster than a horse could run, no message could be sent more swiftly than the sound of drums or the sight of smoke signals. Yet by the end of the 20th century we had been almost overwhelmed by the speed of travel and communication. The industrial revolution yielded almost at once to the technological revolution, which in turn gave way to a cybernetics revolution. Those changes continue even as I type this out on a computer.

On which I need to say that, at 79, I know something I had already learned years ago. Memory is a dicey thing, the past more variable than we realize. This record is as truthful as I can make it - but that doesn't mean it is correct. The teller of a tale always has a bias, even unconscious.

Gabe Ross is an activist in Johnstown, Pa., site of the great Johnstown flood. Gabe, now in middle age, was a very young member of the old "Socialist Party - Social Democratic Federation". In 1972 that group, the SP-SDF, had a convention in which a majority of delegates voted to change the name to Social Democrats USA, (SDUSA) and to end the Socialist Party's tradition of running candidates. SDUSA saw itself as a part of the "left" of the Democratic Party. But it turned out the majority of delegates at the convention did not, in fact, express the majority view of the SP-SDF membership. Shortly after the convention Michael Harrington, split away to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), while almost all of the "old time" SP members, including Frank Zeidler, former socialist mayor of Milwaukee, split to re-organize the Socialist Party USA (SP-USA) early in 1973.

Gabe held membership in all three groups. There is a political background to that split which is as complex as the plot of a John LeCarre novel. And this in itself requires we go back to 1936 and 1937. In 1936 the Socialist Party, which had been led by Eugene V. Debs, and was, in 1936, led by Norman Thomas, suffered a major split. A group of moderate socialists, seeing hope in the New Deal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, did not favor Thomas' 1936 Presidential campaign. They split to form the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). (There were, at the time, several

“language federations” which united to form the SDF). The Socialist International, hoping the two groups might re-unite, granted “half-recognition” to each.

Now we detour to look at the Trotskyists, expelled from the Communist Party in the late 1920's, and led by James Cannon and Max Shachtman. In 1928 this group took the name “Communist League of America”. In 1934 they merged with the American Workers Party led by A.J. Muste (who was, incidentally, one of the two major mentors of my own political life - the other being Bayard Rustin). That unity resulted in the U.S. Workers Party. In 1936, just as the Social Democratic Federation was leaving the Socialist Party, the U.S. Workers Party entered it. My own reading of history suggests that James Cannon had entered the Socialist Party to “raid it”, and if possible wreck it, since he viewed the Socialist Party as a roadblock in the building of a genuine revolutionary organization (keep in mind, this was the middle of the Great Depression). Muste had serious doubts about this tactic. He went to Norway to discuss the matter with Leon Trotsky. He then visited Paris, and, while there, had a religious experience, returning to his roots as a Christian radical.

When he returned to the United States he left the Marxist/Leninist movement and joined the staff of the pacifist organization known as the Fellowship of Reconciliation. For the purposes of this article, at least for now, we leave Muste to one side and return to the Trotskyists. The SP expelled them, but James Cannon had his victory - he captured most of the Socialist Party's youth. Once the Trotskyists were out of the SP, they took a new name, which they still use today - Socialist Workers Party (SWP). (And it was this group which helped in the founding of the Fourth International).

Soon enough James Cannon had to deal with a split of his own, when, in 1940, Max Shachtman, who had been a youthful leader in the Communist Party in the US, and had suffered expulsion from it for his support of James Cannon and Leon Trotsky, came to ideological blows with Cannon over the invasion of Finland by the Soviet Union. Cannon felt the Soviets were a degenerated workers state (no sexual connotations) but still a workers state, and had to be defended in all conflicts with the capitalists. Shachtman felt he couldn't support the Soviet invasion of Finland. Shachtman split, taking about 40% of the SWP members with him, as well as the youth organization.

We can now leave James Cannon and the SWP. They do not appear again in a serious way in this article. They have become something of a cult under the leadership of their Chairman, Jack Barnes, and have largely abandoned their claim to represent Trotsky.

We return to the split between the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Federation. In 1956 there were moves by the Social Democratic Federation to unite with the Socialist Party. I was a young firebrand, a polemic-breathing militant in Los Angeles, and tried to rally the SP's membership to reject the unity in a referendum of the SP membership. (I had joined the Socialist

Party in 1951). But the referendum carried, I myself was soon in New York to work for *Liberation* magazine (edited by A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, Sid Lens, Dave Dellinger, and Roy Finch).

Even before leaving Los Angeles I had been in discussions with Dorothy Healey of the Communist Party, and also with the West Coast representatives of Max Shachtman, who was making his first tentative moves toward joining the Socialist Party. I'll take up Dorothy Healey and the Communist Party later - it is Shachtman to whom I must give attention now. I knew him quite well and worked with members of his group, the Independent Socialist League (ISL), to help prepare the way for their entry into the Socialist Party in 1958. Shachtman was a very funny speaker - comedy missed a star when Shachtman went into politics. His speeches were very long (though I never heard those - I was spared the four hour speeches because I was in Socialist Party). My impression of Max was that he was bright but not particularly deep. He was also extremely destructive toward those who disagreed with him. I will give just one example out of several that I experienced. About 1960 Irwin Suall, a personal friend of mine, a centrist socialist, had backed the ISL entry into the Socialist Party in hopes that, using the name of Norman Thomas, and the heritage of the SP, we might be able to reach out to the students of the sixties who were looking for something on the political scene which might be, perhaps, a bit like what the early *Village Voice* had been to New York City culture.

Irwin, Max, and I were among the members of the "National Action Committee" (NAC) which ran the Party between meetings of the National Committee. I think we met weekly but my memory is surely wrong - every two weeks is more likely. At one of the meetings Irwin disagreed with Shachtman on some point, and they voted in opposite ways on the issue. It wasn't important and I've long since forgotten what the issue was.

But after a subsequent NAC meeting, Irwin and I walked home from the party office (on 23rd St. and Park Ave.) toward the Lower East side. I lived on East Fourth, Irwin further South in the union coop housing. He suggested we stop for a beer. As we sat with our beers Irwin said "Dave, I didn't bring Max into the Party because I agreed with him but because I thought we might really get something new going. But I don't know what to do. I need Max's advice - I don't feel able to run the Party alone. But since I voted against him on that motion he won't talk to me. I call him (Max lived on Long Island) and he says 'Irwin, you can deal with this, I'm busy working on a book' - he just cuts me off". At this point Irwin began, literally, to weep, saying "I don't know what to do - I think if I don't agree with him on everything he won't help".

Irwin did shift, joined the "Shachtman" side, eventually drifted into work with the Anti-Defamation League (where he got into some nasty trouble on the West Coast - the ADL has for some time been primarily concerned with anyone remotely critical of Israel, and has made that it's main concern). In short, I watched Shachtman "break" Irwin. Some he broke, others broke with him. It was clear from the years I knew Max that while he insisted he had become a

believer in democratic socialism, he hadn't the vaguest idea what a democratic process was. There were, of course, debates permitted in the ISL - Shachtman eventually won them, or the opponents drifted out. It was very much a one-man show. There was a side of Shachtman which won't easily be caught in books about him. He was very physical toward those he wanted on his side - he punched you on the shoulder, pinched your cheek, brought you "into his space". And of course, if you disagreed with him, all of this withdrawn - you could ride in an elevator with him and he wouldn't acknowledge your existence.

His political life carried him from the Communist Party, which he joined in the early 1920's, through to the Trotskyist movement, to the split from the main Trotskyist movement in 1940 when, as noted, he opposed the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland. He set up the "Workers Party", and in 1948 dropped the word "Party" and took the name Independent Socialist League. He still considered himself a Trotskyist but insisted he had moved toward democratic socialism and with that understanding he and his members came into the Socialist Party in 1958.

There was a certain sadness to his position as the key - dominant - figure in the ISL, in that by the time the ISL dissolved into the Socialist Party it had not more than two or three hundred members. Whatever Shachtman's limitations, he was a gifted writer and speaker and had it not been for the fact the ISL was on the subversive list (one reason Shachtman wanted into the SP), he ought logically to have a more significant figure with a broader following.

But, from the moment he joined the Socialist Party, the trajectory of his politics seemed to follow some path of doom, as if a bullet fired in a great revolutionary battle decades earlier was at last to fall gently at the foot of the system itself. He supported the Bay of Pigs in 1962, he supported the US in Vietnam, and by the time of his death in 1972 it would be difficult to argue he was even a social democrat. He had become what the system most needs - a figure from the Left who would act as an apologist for the crimes of the system.

I've known several great men, Norman Thomas, A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, and the mystery remains as to why Shachtman went as far right as he did. Bayard Rustin followed a similar path, and worked with Shachtman in the late 1960's, but before his death he was moving back, and even during his period of support for the neo-conservatives, he remained in friendly contact with those of us from the War Resisters League. Both Muste and Thomas moved to the left in their final years.

There is one book on Shachtman - Peter Drucker's biography *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialists's Odyssey through the American Century*. While Drucker gives the essential facts, he does not explain the "why" of Shachtman's strange trajectory from a young Communist to one of the first neo-conservatives.

One last note on Shachtman. In 1958, as "our side" was working feverishly to win a referendum

of the Socialist Party's membership, and to bring the ISL members into the SP, Max called for a special meeting. ("Our side" consisted of Irwin Suall, then the National Secretary, Gus Gerber, a leader in the Social Democratic Federation, myself, and Maurice Spector, who had been a key figure in the Trotskyist movement and who had come to the US from Canada to help bring Shachtman's group in. We would meet downtown at Gerber's law offices in the evening, moving the mimeograph machine from the Socialist Party office down by taxi, if we needed it. We had also copied the SP's membership list in case, as the vote neared an end, the "old guard" tried to seize the lists).

Shachtman was at the meeting, along with Joan Suall, and Sam Bottone, both in the ISL, Irwin Suall (Joan's brother-in-law), myself, and Maurice Spector. It was held at Maurice's apartment. I don't think Gus Gerber was there. My list may be incomplete, but it was a small meeting. Shachtman began by saying that the last thing he wanted, by asking for entry into the SP, was to cause a split, and wondering if perhaps the bid for entrance should be put off. I said that as far as I was concerned if the ISL withdrew at this point, I'd never lift a hand in the future to get them in. But more directly, Shachtman didn't seem to understand that the mail referendum of the party membership was in progress, votes were coming in, and those votes would be tabulated and announced, whether or not the ISL would take advantage of a positive vote. (As I said earlier, Shachtman did not really understand democracy).

The meeting was inconclusive. Irwin was concerned about a possible split in the Party but it was clear that neither Maurice nor I would support a "premature withdrawal" by the ISL. As the group broke up Maurice asked me to stay behind for a moment. He was a great bear of a man, I liked him though I don't think we ever met again after that night. He said to me "David, I owe you an explanation. I'm out of this after tonight. Max is going so far to the right you'll never recognize him". I remonstrated that I thought "surely not", but Maurice said "I'm an old Trotskyist and I know what will happen". He was right. (I think I saw Maurice late one night on a lonely walk on the promenade in Brooklyn Heights but I wasn't sure and didn't approach him).

So, shortly after the entrance of the ISL members in 1958, they began to disintegrate. Sam Bottone, Julie Jacobson and his wife, Phyllis, Hal Draper - all key players in the old ISL - broke with Shachtman. By the time the 1972 convention came, when Shachtman's people took full control of the Socialist Party - Social Democratic Federation, the three way split discussed earlier took place. By the end of the year, I think in part because Michael Harrington had finally broken with him, Shachtman died.

Harrington's new group, Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, retained a "half-recognition" in the Socialist International, because Harrington had been a key player in the internal politics of the SI.

As I said at the beginning, this is a long and wandering journey, not yet half begun. When Gabe

Ross raised the idea of a unity of the three groups that split in 1972 I don't think he had any real idea of the history of how that split occurred, or, for that matter, how the original unity was achieved.

But, as I thought about Gabe's project, I thought "why stop with the possible merger of the groups that broke apart in 1972?". If we can leave aside (and frankly, I cannot) the record of support for the Bay of Pigs, the US role in Vietnam, the attack on Iraq, and the uncritical support of Israel, by the old SDUSA, and the social democratic politics of DSA which sprang from its side in the 1972 split, then, despite their common Trotskyist roots, both groups were clear that if socialism was not democratic, it was not socialist. If any regime came to power, claiming to rule in the name of the workers, but outlawed unions, the right to strike, etc., it was a betrayal of socialism.

These were certainly crucial affirmations of what had been at the heart of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels - but other groups have now moved toward this position (the split from the US Communist Party, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism, Solidarity, and at least one part of Freedom Road Socialists) so why dream of unifying only three parts of the broader democratic left?

But at a deeper level, what good does it do to pass harsh judgments on the Vietnamese Communist movement (as the old SDUSA had done) for their failure to recognize some version of a union movement free of government control, when at the same time the SDUSA people were supporting the bloody actions of Reagan against various Central American movements in which the Communists were playing a key role. Or the support these "democratic socialists" were giving the State Department in its opposition to Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress? At what point does the distinction between "totalitarian" and "authoritarian" governments lose meaning? (Shachtman argued, that, bad as the South Vietnamese government was in 1963, it still tolerated some form of independent trade unions, so that political struggle could continue, but if the Communists won, then all political power would be consolidated in the State and any hope of an independent trade union movement would be gone).

What can we say when we realize that in the 1970's dissidents were safer in East Berlin, Warsaw, Budapest, and Moscow than they were in Central America? This is not to say the fate of dissidents in the Soviet Bloc was good - it was risky and difficult. But in Central America even nuns were raped, Archbishops assassinated. The most terrible tortures had become routine.

What do we say if we look at the role of the South African Communist Party played within the African National Congress, and realize that the CP's "non-racialist" position was crucial to the kind of peaceful transition that occurred under Nelson Mandela?

And if we look at the Socialist International of which SDUSA had been a part, and of which

DSA is a part, aside from many good things which I believe must be said about the various member parties, how can we overlook the failure of the French Socialist Party to demand an end of the Indochina War? The withdrawal of France from Indochina was not achieved by the French Socialists, but by that great French Statesman, Pierre Mendes-France. How can we overlook the support Harold Wilson of Britain's Labour Party gave to the US in Vietnam? (The honor of the SI was redeemed in large part by the stubborn, public opposition to the US by the Social Democratic government of Sweden, led by Olaf Palme). What can we say about an International which includes the Labour Party in Israel, a party which helped expand the Jewish settlements, driving Palestinians from their land, and was supportive of the indefensible Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza? (An Occupation which makes the Soviet control over East Europe shine as if it were peaceful and democratic - which it emphatically was not). What can we say of Tony Blair and his Labour Party, so proud to stand at the side of George Bush in his criminal aggression against Iraq? Why, in short, seek affiliation with one wing of the historic left while denying any legitimacy to the other wing of the historic left?

To ask this question, to realize the moral ambiguity which has entered the politics of the Left, is to return to the original fire, that volcano of hope and revolution which was the broad socialist movement at the end of the 19th Century.

When I read current material from young socialists, they do not realize that, in 1890, or the early years of the 20th century, socialism was not "an option" - it was inevitable. 19th Century socialists could breathe it, feel certain that the oppressive order of war, militarism, grinding factory labor, a "justice system" totally stacked against the poor - that all of this was living on borrowed time, that the "revolution", in one form or another, could almost be touched. (One comparison would be to the early Christians, who believed Jesus would return "at any moment", that the "Kingdom of God was near at hand" - it was this certainty which gave the early Christians such courage and determination). We knew (even those of us who did not come along until nearly the middle of the 20th century) that capitalism was about to collapse from its contradictions, the most terrible of which were the extended periods of economic depression, when there was no unemployment compensation, no social security, no medical program, nothing at all standing between having a paycheck one week and having nothing at all the next week, only a family which needed food, shelter, clothing. When I joined the Socialist Party in 1951 the memory of the Great Depression still gripped the memories of Americans, and those of us on the Left were sure that another depression would come along at any moment. (As indeed may be happening now! Alas, without a Left to respond).

To realize that this period of hope and anticipation is over is true, but it doesn't mean that the discussion of socialism is over - anymore than Christians surrendered their beliefs when, after several centuries, it was clear the Second Coming was a theological issue, not a prediction about current events. It is important, as we look at the broad socialist movement at the close of the 19th century, that we understand it was seized with the certainty that a vast social upheaval was soon

to arrive. In part this was because the work of Marx and Engels sought to give a scientific basis for socialist thought. This was occasioned by the division between the utopian socialists, who had felt that by outlining the future society, by “giving the present a vision of the future”, society would “be drawn into the future”. As Marx realized, the utopians skipped over the problem that while their dreams would clearly benefit the overwhelming majority of working people (and of farmers, of small merchants, tradesmen, etc.), they would threaten the ruling class, and would thus be blocked by all the forces at the command of the State.

Socialism would come only through struggle. Marx and Engels saw that this struggle was already in the works, that as the industrial system had produced factories, and factories had brought forth the labor movement, and the workers were - through conscription and the wars the industrialists waged - gaining military training. Soon enough the workers would realize they had but to reach out their hands and seize the means of production, establish a State based on the working class, and the transition to socialism would be achieved. This is an enormous condensation of many ideas, but I’m engaged in sketching out a framework in order to get at a few key points.

What was not clear was whether this revolution would be violent or could be achieved by such peaceful (if militant and well organized) means as trade unions, strikes, and the ballot box. Marx’s view was that the birth of the new order would be, as any natural birth is, bloody. Marx did hint that perhaps in Great Britain and the United States, because of the roots of bourgeois democracy, and the gradual extension of suffrage, the change might come through a strong political party of labor.

But whether by a violent upheaval, or by political actions, the assumption of Marx and Engels was that the shift would involve *the whole of the working class*. Political forms were needed to educate workers, but cadres of intellectuals could not substitute themselves for the workers. In this sense the view of Marx and Engels was profoundly democratic, even though the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” was used by Marx and has been misunderstood (rather deliberately) by critics of Marxism. All that Marx and Engels were saying was that in the 19th Century the whole of society was under the control - the “dictatorship” - of those few who owned the means of production, and in consequence controlled the State, the “executive committee of the ruling class”. The terms may be rather 19th century but they were clear enough in their meaning - capitalism did not mean democracy at all, but the dictatorship over the many by the few. Socialism would mean that in some transitional stage the working class - the vast majority of the people - would “democratize” the already existing dictatorship. If you want, you could say Marx and Engels proposed a “dictatorship of the many” instead of the then existing “dictatorship of the few” - a more democratic dictatorship. I very much wish that Marx had used a different phrase - this one was used by Lenin to justify the establishment of absolute control of Soviet society by a single party, which was not Marx’s intent.

To sum up at this point, by the end of the 19th Century there was a feeling on the part of socialists

(I use the term socialists here as interchangeable with communists) that the transformation of society would occur “at any moment”. It needed but one more depression, one more cycle of wars, and the Paris Commune of 1871 would become a universal event, the workers of the world would unite, throw off their chains, seize power and liberate the human race. We would move from the “Kingdom of Necessity to the Kingdom of Abundance”.

While not all socialists were followers of Marx and Engels, there was a sense that socialism was “scientific”, that the development of capitalism would lead inevitably to the development of a socialist society. We may, viewing the past from the vantage point of the 21st century, fail to grasp how deep this sense of inevitability was, or quibble about what was meant by “scientific socialism”. But since the use of that term had much to do with the events in Russia, it is clear many socialists felt that Marx and Engels had hold of great truths which could be mastered by a careful reading of *Das Kapital*, and the application of those truths to events of the time.

It is worth a moment to look at the weight the word “science” carried in the 19th century. There has always been of “set of skills” to any human activity, from weaving cloth to making shoes to constructing homes. One “learns the science” of that activity. But in its more precise meaning, science refers to the ability to predict and replicate. It is the use of such science that allows engineers to start the building of a bridge on both sides of a river and know it will meet in the middle. It is science which allows us to predict the next eclipse. It was science which permitted us to build nuclear weapons.

In this more precise sense, a scientific experiment can be duplicated anywhere in the world, and will produce precisely the same result. And this is what lifts science above philosophy - or witchcraft. By the 19th Century “science” had gripped the human imagination. Telegraphs allowed almost instantaneous communication. For the first time in history it was possible for humans to travel at speeds faster than that of a horse. Trains moved across continents, steamships crossed oceans. A new world was being created. Science, swiftly replacing God, had the force of a new religion. It was thus not an accident that Marx and Engels sought to make their theories more than mere philosophy, to make them engines of social change. (The same was certainly true in other fields - Freud sought to give his theories the credibility of science, and political philosophy became “political science”).

However Marxism is not scientific in the rigid sense of science. It cannot predict. If we look at the history of the movement for human rights in the United States all of us who are “Marxists” can tell you precisely why the Civil Rights movement emerged, we can point to the integration of the American armed forces in 1948, to the rise of industrialism in the previously rural South, to the growth of urban centers to replace the previous rural life, to the impact on American blacks of the anti-colonial movements in Africa, to the Supreme Court decision of 1954 on segregated education.

But what none of us could do was give the date of December 1, 1955, when the Civil Rights Revolution would begin. Nor would we have dared to guess it would not be in a liberal Northern State but in Montgomery, heart of the Old Confederacy. Marxism is a very useful tool in examining events, and it is a useful general guide as to what can be done. However it cannot predict. It is not a science.

Yet, in the late 19th century it was believed to be a science. The new world was about to be born. How it would be born was not clear. Marx, to his credit, believed in process, not in knowing what the future would look like, or how it would arrive. Capitalism was in crisis, its end was certain - but how the transition to socialism would occur was not clear.

There was extended debate among European socialists about the “how” of the transformation - some argued socialism could occur through the triumph of workers’ political parties, some argued it would only be possible by a revolution. But even those who felt a workers’ uprising was essential were not clear how to move beyond rhetoric to the reality.

It is at that point that Lenin enters the picture and lays the basis for what would become an international split in the socialist movement. Lenin argued that a revolution required a political party which would act as the vanguard for the workers, that it would seize power in their name, would take control of the State. Lenin’s party - the Bolsheviks - was made up of professional revolutionists, whose purpose in life was to serve the cause of the revolution, to be both the foot soldiers in the struggle, and also the generals on the front line. (These men and women - both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks - were remarkable people, intelligent, disciplined, courageous, putting the revolution ahead of their own lives. To be critical of their theories is not to make light of the almost saintly quality of many of the old revolutionists).

Lenin was not at all sure the revolution would occur in his lifetime. After the failure of the Revolution of 1905 he felt unsure of when it would come - only that it would come. Students of history know of the events of 1917, the April Revolution in Russia, the Bolshevik seizure of power in October of that year, and the establishment of the Soviet Union. But the general public - including many on the left - are not aware of the Russian Revolution of 1905 which began in the middle of winter (January 22) in St. Petersburg when Czarist troops fired on a defenseless crowd of workers (led by a priest). The revolution spread in the weeks and months that followed, strikes, riots, assassinations, a naval mutiny, peasant unrest, and in October a General Strike.

The 1905 Revolution shook Czarist rule to its foundations but it failed, suppressed with violence, which put many of the leaders into exile in Siberia. War has often been the midwife of revolution. This was true of 1905 (the disaster of the Russo-Japanese War had just ended) and it would be true of 1917 as well.

For this part of the story, we must look to June 28, 1914, when the bullets of a young Bosnian

patriot killed Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and set in motion a chain of events which proved what a fragile hold reason has on civilization.

In itself, the murder was a tragedy for his immediate family - no more. But, within days, the assassination had set in motion the war which all observers had been sure would not occur - the "Great War", (which we know as World War I). The first genuine world war, in which at least twenty million people lost their lives. Before June 28, 1914, Czarist Russia was allied with France and Britain against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. Everyone knew war would not occur - for at least two reasons. First, the royal families of Europe were all related. Second, the level of arms was so high that everyone agreed a war would destroy Europe as it then existed. (As, indeed, it did). Aside from the appalling tragedy of twenty million dead, and the loss of a generation of youth from Germany, Great Britain, France, and Russia, the war cost the Germans their claim to empire, ended the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, and so bankrupted Great Britain and France that the loss of their vast holdings in Africa and Asia was only a matter of time. Soon enough Gandhi would appear on the scene, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao.

Barbara Tuchman's book, *The Guns of August*, is instructive of the madness of the war, both the extraordinary ease with which all of Europe embraced the event once it began, and the horrendous military mistakes on all sides. The United States entered the war in 1917, under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson. But 1917 would, of course, also mark the date of the Russian Revolution. An unintended war would soon result in an accidental revolution.

When the war broke out in 1914, the question was what the powerful socialist parties of Europe would do. What they did, in a rush of nationalism, was to abandon their claim to international solidarity, and instead embrace their respective flags, vote war credits, and join the conflagration. In the United States the Socialist Party, led by Eugene V. Debs, opposed US entry into the war (for this Debs was sent to prison and the Socialist Party suffered heavily). In Italy, and in one or two other sections of the Socialist International. In Russia, both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks opposed the war.

Thus the outbreak of war was also the death of the socialist international. Lenin himself was in Switzerland at the time but was sent in a sealed train by the Germans to Finland in hopes that he might possibly create some diversion on the Eastern front. Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* catches that moment when Lenin crossed the border from Finland into Russia (let it be noted, in defiance of the orders of his own Bolshevik Party's Central Committee!) and began organizing for the Revolution.

But the revolution had already occurred, in February of 1917. The Czar's armies, hungry, without ammunition (and in some cases even without guns), ended the war on the Eastern Front by simply crossing the lines to embrace the German troops. Hundreds of thousands of Russians of

all political views, from anarchists to Bolsheviks, from temperance leagues to moderate reformers, poured into the streets of every major city. A provisional government was formed, headed by Kerensky. It made a futile attempt to continue the war against Germany. The failure of the provisional government, (formed after Tsar Nicholas abdicated), to deal with the issues of the war or to organize a coherent government, left the door open to what can be called either a "Bolshevik coup" or the second stage of the Russian Revolution, which came on October 25 of 1917 when the Bolsheviks took power.

Even then, accidental as these events were (the irrational outbreak of World War in 1914 making possible the collapse of the Tsar's regime in 1917, the risky gamble of Lenin in October of 1917), the revolution was still by no means certain. Primarily with British support there was a counter-revolution which led to a civil war in which the cadre of the Bolsheviks were in the front lines of the battle. When I visited Baku in 1987 I found out that White Russians, with the aid of the British military, had captured Baku and executed the "26 Baku Commissars" that had been part of the Baku Soviet Commune established after the Revolution. There were 26 streets named after the murdered commissars, a grim reminder that there, in the South of Russia, British intervention had briefly overthrown the Revolution.

The civil war was not only against White Russians - there was an important Ukrainian anarchist movement under Nestor Makhno which cooperated with the Bolsheviks but were eventually crushed when they refused to merge with the Red Army. And this is only a "partial and incomplete" account of the turbulence of the Civil War and the October Revolution.

We, looking back at the early days of the Revolution, find it hard to realize that Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin - all the leaders of the Bolsheviks - were totally unprepared to run a nation. They were intellectuals who suddenly, and as a result of great courage in combat (where Leon Trotsky had played a crucial role) found themselves in charge of an enormous nation, largely made up of peasants, and largely illiterate.

By 1920 the Revolution had consolidated its hold on power - the "State" was in the hands of the Bolsheviks. But how could one move from the "Kingdom of the Tsar" to the "Kingdom of the Working Class"? Again, at the risk of monumental simplification, the revolution had occurred where it should not - by Marxist logic - have taken place, in backward, largely agricultural, Russia, not in a country with a politically conscious and well organized working class, as in Germany.

Lenin clearly had counted on the revolution moving west, into Germany. Russia, by itself, with a small working class, was not in a position to carry the burden. But by the early 1920's, even before Lenin's death, (January 21, 1924) it was clear that a world revolution would not follow the end of the first World War. Germany, in defeat, was in no condition to lead any revolution. France, Britain, Italy, had been so weakened by the war and its horrendous loss of life, that

revolution was not in the cards.

There was the famous conflict of views between Stalin and Trotsky, of which one might say both were right. Trotsky maintained that without a world revolution the Soviet Revolution would be bureaucratic, isolated, and paranoid, that Stalin's effort to "build socialism in one country" would result in a dictatorship. He was certainly right on all counts. But who can fault Stalin for arguing that, unless one proposed the Bolsheviks resign from power, they had no choice but to defend the regime against enemies eager to destroy it. For this purpose the Soviet Union needed heavy industry and a military. And as a practical matter, one has to wonder what else could have been done?

From the point of view of those of us in the historic "democratic left", the Bolshevik Revolution was headed toward dictatorship as soon as it outlawed opposition political parties, and that even within the Bolshevik Party there would be no factions. Listening, as I write this, to the old collection of songs, *Ballads for Sectarians*, it is clear that for those my age and from my part of the left, the Russian Revolution was an extraordinary moment in history, but we too often got lost in the cross currents of who led which faction fight, and fail to see that for all its mistakes, crimes, and tragedies, the Revolution was just that - a remarkable unleashing of human potential. Yes, it failed to democratize the means of production., but in that brief period in the early 1920's there was a burst of energy in all the fields of art unlike anything we had seen up to that moment. Soviet films from that period were as good as (or better than) anything Hollywood was producing. Listening to Shostakovitch's First Symphony is to hear music unlike anything in the West. The poets, the painters, the whole of the community of artists and intellectuals, were free from the past and sought to create a future.

All of this had nothing whatever to do with the internal party fights. It was an historic moment when the backward Russians suddenly became a new people. I remember reading an account of a young Russian in Paris, who had been in exile, and was about to return to the revolutionary Soviet Union (where already there were reports of repression). His Bohemian Paris friends held a going away party for him, commiserating with him over the fact he would be leaving the freedom of Paris for the dangers of the Revolution. To which the young artist responded that in going to the Soviet Union he was embracing true freedom, the freedom to change history, while the freedom in Paris was that of sterile dissent. There was truth in this response, though it is too likely that the young artist would soon enough be among the dead in Stalin's cultural purges. But for that moment the Revolution held all the wonder which some of us can remember of the great moments of the Civil Rights revolution in our own country, when the Old South gave way.

Many of us have left matters at that point. As the Soviet Union grew more repressive, as the rule by Stalin became more terrifying, as the purge trials went on, our hostility deepened. It was certainly true that in 1917 virtually every radical in the world felt, as Eugene Debs did, when he said "I'm a Bolshevik from the tip of my head to the tips of my toes". I have no doubt at all I

would have joined millions of others in the socialist movement in hailing the Russian Revolution, had I been alive at the time. But those who so eagerly quote Debs from 1917, forget that when, in 1919, Lenin issued his call for all socialist parties to accept the “21 demands” of the Bolsheviks as a precondition to joining the Comintern - the Communist International - Debs categorically rejected Lenin’s demand. (Worth reading, by students interested in that period, would be Bertram Wolfe’s *Three Who Made a Revolution* - a study of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, published in 1948).

I want to stand back for a moment, an old anti-Communist who has been as sectarian, and dogmatic on this issue as anyone, to suggest that my part of the Left never gave the Soviet Union a fair look after Stalin took power. Such a look would suggest that Communism was hardly the failure we have been told it was.

Russia, defeated in the First World War, wracked by a terrible Civil War, stumbling blindly into the complex problems of what a “socialist market” would look like, tripping over the folly of Stalin’s early efforts at collective farming, dealing with the mass starvation caused by the efforts to crush the power of the rich peasants - the true miracle is that Russia actually had, between the time of Lenin’s death and the time Hitler’s armies launched their attacks on the Soviet Union in 1941, built an army, established a cohesive government able to defend itself (even if, as we saw in films such as *Alexander Nevsky*, with music by Prokofiev, it rushed to embrace “Mother Church” and to reach back to the legends of Peter the Great, tapping into all-Russian patriotism).

Seen in this light, and given the extraordinary chaos introduced into Russia by the events of October 1917, it is, on the one hand, no surprise that Western observers thought Hitler would wipe out the Soviets in six weeks - the great surprise came when Hitler was stopped cold, on a line from Leningrad in the North (immortalized by Shostakovich’s *Seventh Symphony*), through to Moscow in the center (I remember on my first visit to the Soviet Union noting the anti tank barriers a few miles outside of Moscow, as we came in from the airport, realizing the Nazis could, at night, see whatever lights might be on in the Kremlin), down to Stalingrad, a city of courage and suffering which I think should not have changed its name (it was “Volgograd” when I saw it). Everything in the Soviet Union West of this line lay bombed, burned, destroyed by retreating Russians, invading Germans, retreating Germans - a wasteland of roads, airports, power stations, dams, train stations, housing. All reduced to rubble.

No wonder that my primary feeling on my few short visits to Moscow was one of an exhausted nation. In the space of forty years, from 1917 to 1947, the Soviets had suffered Revolution, Counter Revolution, Civil War, terrible economic mistakes, purge trials, and a war so vast that it consumed the lives of an estimated 27 million people, leaving millions more as orphans, widows, wounded veterans.

If one pauses for a moment to think about this, the miracle is that the Soviets won. We can now

easily understand the Litvinov Mission to the West, in hopes of building an alliance with the West against Hitler, and, when that failed, the Hitler/Stalin Pact, which so shocked us at the time but in the terrible calculus of war, was to buy time for the Soviets.

How little I know of how the Soviet economy worked. We know the jokes (which were true enough) that consumer goods were in a short supply and rarely worth the bother. When I went to Moscow for a peace demonstration in 1978, Norma Becker was having her period and found that, not even in Moscow, crown jewel of the Soviet State, was sanitary napkins available. In 1987 when I went back, and lost a bit of luggage including my toothbrush, I found there were no toothbrushes, not even in the tourist shops, except for ones which shed their bristles at first use. Everyone carried a shopping bag with them because if one saw a line, one joined it - whatever the shop had, you would get, and trade later with neighbors. Any consumer goods were in demand.

But the key thing is that, however badly it worked, *it did work*. It worked without any infusion of Western capital. It worked despite the "cordon sanitaire" of the West, to block trade with this new Revolutionary State.

I don't say that the Soviet Union produced socialism - I do say that it produced enough food to feed its people, and enough weapons for them to defend themselves against the Nazis. And following the end of the Second World War, it worked well enough that the Soviet Union developed a nuclear bomb ahead of schedule, and that it put Sputnik into space (October 4, 1957).

There are certainly lessons for those of us concerned with socialism - how did a command economy work, which parts failed, which parts were successful. And the haunting questions which cannot now be answered: what would have been the fate of the Russian Revolution without the White Russians and the Civil War, without the "cordon saniatire", without the horror of the Second World War.

I'd note that on the matter of the US role in the Civil War, the late George Kennan argued that the initial concern of the West, in 1917, was much less to suppress the Soviet Revolution, which wasn't taken that seriously at the time, than to bring Russia back into the war - that the willingness of Lenin to sign a separate peace with the Germans had meant Germany could send its troops on the Eastern front to the Western front. Britain and France were desperate to keep Russia in the war. Kennan argued that as the US at that time did not see itself as a major world player, it had little to do with the intervention, which was largely British, and which, once begun, took on a life of its own. It has been estimated that Britain spent over a billion dollars in backing the White Russians. In fairness to the West, if one takes Lenin seriously - as I certainly do - he was clear from the moment of the Revolution that he saw it only as a first step toward the overthrow of capitalism and in this sense one can hardly be surprised if the West sought to choke the revolution at its birth. But in October of 1917 the Russian Revolution was much less on the

minds of the West than the World War.

What we had, after October of 1917, was a new word - Marxism/Leninism. For many in the West this became the only Marxism they knew. It was the Marxism of Lenin triumphant, of the Communist International. It was the new world religion, with Moscow as its center, all the member parties of the Comintern pledging their allegiance to the "line" as laid down by the Soviet Union. This was the "first worker's state", and those who supported Lenin's position felt that at any cost this new state had to be defended.

Yet Leninism was an accident. Had the World War not happened when it did, the Russian Revolution of April 1917 would not have happened. Had the Germans not sent Lenin by sealed car to Finland, the October Revolution would not have happened. Leninism - combined with the myth of the science of Marxism - gave us the vanguard party. Whatever the other changes in the world of Marxists/Leninists, there was agreement that a revolution required a disciplined party which would act as the vanguard of the working class, and which, as in Russia (and later in China) would substitute itself for the working class, governing on its behalf (and creating in the process a "new class", which did not own the means of production but managed them).

A word on these vanguard parties. If Marxism is a science, then problems can have only one correct solution. The central committees of vanguard parties became "collectives of scientists" debating the correct, scientific solution. Where, in the past, the term vanguard might apply to all who were on the cutting edge of social change, a broad, democratic term, for Leninists there could be only one vanguard, and only one correct solution, one party.

And since these parties were often forced to work underground, as they had in Russia, (an excellent book on the Russian conditions which shaped Lenin's thinking was recommended to me by the late I. F. Stone - *The Origin of Russian Communism*, by Nicolas Berdyaev), it was crucial they be disciplined, that after a full discussion of the line of the party, there had to be a total acceptance of that line by all members - a term which was called democratic centralism. A friend of mine, who left the Communist Party in 1990, commented in one of the internal documents in circulation during that time, that he had seen a great deal of centralism, but very little democracy during his time in the CP.

Lenin himself was a fascinating figure. He wrote with a sense of authoritarian certainty, convinced he understood the situation best. He was totally committed to the revolution, opposed to any cult of personality. If you want to see the human side of Lenin, a man much maligned by his opponents, find a copy of *Impressions of Lenin* by Angelica Balabanoff. Balabanoff was an Italian socialist who acted as a secretary in Lenin's new international. She gradually found herself in disagreement with him, and returned to Italy, where she remained active in the socialist movement until her death. Those who want to see the high drama of the early days of the Revolution, and get a sense of Lenin as a human being, should track down the book.

So . . . out of the accident of the First World War came the accident of the Russian Revolution. And out of that Revolution came the concept of Leninism, of the vanguard party, of an oppressive democratic centralism (which, I might say, is of great comfort to small minds, giving personal lives a drama they might otherwise lack, and making unnecessary real intellectual search for the truth of a matter).

There have been variations on Leninism. With the exile of Leon Trotsky we saw the rise of “Marxism/Leninism/Trotskyism”. With the triumph of Mao in China we saw the rise of “Marxism/Leninism/Stalinism/Maoism”. Trotsky’s followers saw a limited success in areas as widely separated as parts of Latin America, and Sri Lanka. The reason Trotsky’s international (the Fourth International) appealed to people in Latin America and Asia was simple - where Stalin felt all other movements should be subordinate to Moscow and the need to defend the “Worker’s State”, Trotsky had called for the permanent revolution. In geo-political terms Soviet Communism followed a predictable path. In the beginning it did seek to spread Communism, sending agents into China, and elsewhere, to build revolutionary movements. But very soon Soviet Communism began to reflect historic Russian national interests. I would argue that in the immediate period after World War II, when it might have been possible for the Communist Parties of France and Italy to seize power, they were held back by the Soviet Union, which feared the dangers of a US reaction, the one nation at the time which possessed the nuclear bomb.

The Maoist movement is interesting in that Mao never sought to build a “Chinese International” to compete with the international communist framework the Soviet Union had set up, financed, and controlled. There were various parties around the world which, when the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China split, had pro-Chinese splits. Most of those died out, but the Maoist theory of “people’s war” appealed to radicals in India, the Philippines, and Nepal, where there are strong Maoist movements. These parties may have contact with each other, but, with the political shift within China toward capitalism, they are not allied with the Chinese government.

All of these movements share in common an origin with the events in Russia in October of 1917. All of these movements - Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist - are patterned on the vanguard party, on democratic centralism, and on some form of violent “coup” as the basis of social change. The seizure of state power in order to carry through the revolution.

For me, as an old socialist, there is a terrible sadness to see young radicals working at the task of social change as if the answer could be found in the events in Petrograd in 1917, the failure to realize how accidental was Lenin’s triumph.

There have been many other serious thinkers in the socialist movement. Figures, forgotten today, were, in another time, well known. Take Bela Kun, the Hungarian revolutionist, who was closely allied with the Soviet Union’s Bolsheviks but, while on friendly terms with

Lenin, disagreed with him on several key questions and, on March 21, 1919, established the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the second Communist government in Europe after Russia itself. Bela Kun's revolution lasted only 133 days before it collapsed. Yet, suppose that Lenin had failed and Kun had succeeded - would we have then had "Marxism/Kunism"?

I do not suggest this to diminish Lenin and his contributions. Only to underline the accidental nature of the events between 1914 and 1917.

There are some clues - however scant - about where we should go today. Lenin succeeded because he worked within the framework of Russian culture. Lenin had defied Marx, who saw a politically conscious working class as a pre-condition for revolution. Lenin substituted the vanguard party of professional revolutionists, few of whom were workers. Mao, in turn, based his revolution on the peasant class and made such a total break with Moscow that, at one point early in the history of the Chinese Revolution, Stalin had sought to eliminate him. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh came to power by waging war against a foreign occupier (first the French, then the Japanese, and finally the Americans). No question that Hanoi and the Vietnamese Communist Party led the struggle, but no question either that it was a struggle based on Vietnamese nationalism. Fidel Castro relied on neither workers nor peasants, but on a small band of armed men who defied all the odds and overthrew Batista. (At one point during the Cuban struggle, Castro was denounced by the Communists for trying to substitute the drama of a handful of armed men for the necessary work of winning over the working class).

In India, Mahatma Gandhi, whose approach to social change was entirely different from that of Lenin, (and it is Gandhi's approach which I most admire), rooted his movement in the culture of India.

So here, in the US, we need to look to our own society, our own history. It is frustrating that there may be as many as a dozen small Trotskyist sects in the US today - for reasons not worth going into, there is something about Trotskyism (and I don't blame Leon Trotsky for this) which leads to endless splits, splinters, retreats from reality. There is the old joke (perhaps a true story) of an American Trotskyist sect which got steadily smaller until at last it was reduced to a man and his wife. When, due to political disagreements, they divorced, as a kind of ultimate political split, the main issue was which spouse would get the mimeograph.

Among those on the Left who sought to build an "American" socialism, was Eugene V. Debs, who had the great advantage of having become a socialist leader *prior to the Russian Revolution*, so there were no other existing models. A.J. Muste sought to build on the American experience and, in one of the few interesting breaks from the Trotskyist movement, Bert Cochran and his publication, the *American Socialist*, tried to seek "an American answer" (though without success, the magazine folded). Readers will need to turn to Google to get information on Cochran.

In the year since I started this piece, the Gabe Ross who launched me into thinking about the serendipity of social change, and to ask myself the question of why stop at trying to re-unite the parts of the Socialist Party which split in different directions in 1972 – why not, instead, go back and ask how much sense the original split of 1917 made, has, himself, gone to the far right and has a small internet organization with perhaps a dozen members. If he reads this he may wonder at the journey on which he so accidentally launched me.

In reading the marvelous mini-memoir *A Fine Old Conflict*, by Jessica Mitford, who was active in the Communist Party in California about the same time I got active in the Socialist Party, I found how much we had in common, how far from monolithic the Communist Party really was, how courageous its members were. I'd pay the same tribute to the old revolutionists I've known from the Socialist Workers Party, the Independent Socialist League, and even the right-wing Social Democratic Federation. Time doesn't heal all wounds, the fights were often valid, over real issues. But all of those fights are in the past. And every one of those groups contained heroic figures (as well as some unpleasant ones).

We must, looking back, admit to the terrible cost of Marxism/Leninism in the Soviet Union - but also take into account, as I've tried to do, the special circumstances. We must also accept the profound failings of democratic socialism - the twin of Leninism. If Lenin tried to build a worker's state and failed, so too have the socialist parties of the West failed and far too often become part of the problem (one thinks of the British Labour Party, the Israeli affiliate of the Socialist International, the French Socialist Party, and the largely vanished Japanese Socialist Party).

If we look at "my part of the Left" today - the groups that have rejected the vanguard theory, and democratic centralism, there are very few. The Socialist Party, the Democratic Socialists of America, the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism (I belong to the three just named), Freedom Road Socialists, and Solidarity. And if one believes what I've heard about the Communist Party today, I think it might well be part of this same loose parcel of organizations seeking change through peaceful means. I suspect there may not be many real divisions between, let us say, Democratic Socialists of America and the Communist Party USA.

Taken all together, the membership of all of these groups is less than 20,000. In addition there are the "Leninist" groups - Workers World Party, Party of Socialism and Liberation, Freedom Socialist Party, and the Revolutionary Communist Party (a strange little remnant from the Maoist period, it sets up very effective front groups) - and if you added all their members to the 20,000, you would get a total of, on a good day, 22,000.

I do not want to spend any time trying to unite any two or more of these groups - "unity" is a false path to anything but time wasted. But dialogue is important. Joint action is possible. And

breaking out of isolation is imperative - reaching out not to the left, but to the new social forces which are often using new technologies such as the internet. I may have no interest in mastering Face Book or learning about Twitter, but put that down to my age, not to wisdom.

I do have a few closing thoughts. One is on anti-Communism itself, which has proven surely as great an evil as any other. There are, in my view, three different "anti-Communisms". The first, and earliest, was clerical anti-Communism, which saw in Marxism a denial of God, the triumph of atheism, of an effort to establish the Kingdom of God on earth - a heresy. This form of anti-Communism existed as soon as Marx and Engels issued the Communist Manifesto, and had nothing to do with Lenin or the Russian Revolution. I call it "clerical" because I think, with all deference to the Protestants, it is the Vatican which "thinks" in the most organized manner, and had, in the 19th century, and much of the 20th, the most cohesive framework. Catholics saw in Marxism the ultimate danger and opposed it from the beginning.

Religious bodies are, pretty much without exception, partnered with the governing elites in whatever country they are found. It is possible to look at Gandhi and forget that while he found his inspiration in his Hindu faith, he was to many Hindus a heretic, and was assassinated by a devout young Hindu. In Europe and the United States, while you have had the Catholic Workers, the Worker Priests, Liberation Theology, the Social Gospel of the Protestant Church, these are all outside the religious mainstream. The established churches long since made their peace with the State. If there was a wise and tolerant revolution, one can be sure that the churches would all make their peace with it. (One remembers how eagerly the Kremlin turned back to "Mother Church" during World War II, when it needed every possible ally against the Nazis). Of this general "clerical anti-Communism" there isn't much hope for peace. Those of us who are influenced by Marx will continue to try to make the human condition more humane, to build a society where, while disease will still visit us, and death remain a certainty, poverty will be a memory, and the humiliation of work that is alienating and dehumanizing, something of the past.

The second anti-Communism began in 1917, and it is what might be called a "Red Anti-Communism". Long before Joe McCarthy, those of us in the socialist movement were at odds with the international Communist movement. In fairness, both sides were right. Lenin looked at the Second International and its contemptible failure to call for general strikes in Germany and France and England in 1914, he saw millions of who died as the capitalists profited from an insane war. And we, for our part, saw dissidents fairly early in the Revolution. What horrified us was the destruction of the labor movement in the Soviet Union, and the public executions of the old Bolsheviks. (After the end of World War II, when Stalin's rule extended into Eastern Europe, then we saw the arrest and murder of socialists). The struggle between Stalin's efforts to control the international communist movement, and the socialist determination to maintain the option of "socialism with democracy" made for bitter conflict.

The third anti-Communism began with the break of Trotsky with Stalin and it might be called a

“familial anti-Communism”. Nothing is more bitter than a family fight. The Trotskyists do not hate the democratic centralism of Lenin, nor the concept of the vanguard party - they simply feel the wrong side came out on top. There is no major disagreement on matters such as Kronstadt, etc. It was really a struggle over who should have had power - Stalin or Trotsky. Sadly, of the Trotskyist movement generally, it must be sad that they have never suffered the pains of actually holding power. Political purity comes easily to those who have never had to make compromises, as the Soviet Union did, and as all the Western socialist parties did. In one sense, all of us were broken by history, humbled by events. But the Trotskyists never held power, and thus were not broken. Of this particular conflict, there is no hope for an end - the divisions were never a moral issue.

But for the “Red anti-Communism” there is hope for a re-examination, a realization that both of us have failed, that if there is still a hope (and need) for socialism, it will require of us that some old divisions be seen with compassion, and that from the horrors of the Gulag, or the horrors of the First World War, we learn something. For us, for me, and my comrades, “anti-Communism” must be a sword we lay down.

On the matter of how society is changed, a subject which has been my concern since my days in college, I much prefer it be changed with as little violence as possible. No true revolutionist has ever romanticized violence. There is nothing romantic about the loss of a single human life. There is much to be learned from looking to our South, to the shifts in Central America from bitter guerilla wars, to a struggle at the ballot box. To the victories in Venezuela and Bolivia and Brazil. These are, like all victories, imperfect. But they were not achieved by coups, they were not led by vanguard parties.

There is, I realize, another problem from the past, an unhappy debt from Lenin, and that is on the matter of “morals”, or as Trotsky once summed it up in a pamphlet of his, “Their Morals and Ours”. Essentially it was the belief that the end justified the means. If the end was truly good - feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, healing the sick - what did it matter if there were a few “collateral” casualties in the process? After all, isn’t war the same thing - the decision that once States engage in conflict, the “end” of victory justifies the “means”, of killing large number of perfectly innocent people?

There isn’t a simple answer to this. One can believe, as I do, in absolutes, yet know that since absolutes are an infinite concept, and we are finite, we will never be absolutely certain what the absolutes are. Or as Bayard Rustin once said to me, some absolutes are more absolute than others. To take a case in point, to me, as a believer in the teachings of Gandhi, truth is an absolute value. But if the year is 1942, and the place is Holland under Nazi Occupation, and I have hidden Jews in my basement, if the Gestapo stops to ask if I have any knowledge of Jews being hidden in the area, isn’t it more true to say “no”, which is in fact a lie, but in defense of life, than to say “yes”?

However Trotsky's (and Lenin's) assumption was that "our morals" (that is mine, stemming from a democratic socialist background) are sophistry, and should not be allowed to stand in the way of the revolution. That, for the sake of the revolution, truth is what is expedient. No! I would quote the poet Kenneth Patchen who wrote "How can any man lie when all are lied to?". One of the more painful experiences in my life was working (or trying to work) with the Trotskyists - the Socialist Workers Party - during the Vietnam War. It was painful to me to be lied to, to deal with people who felt all of the rest of us - socialists, pacifists, communists, liberals - were merely part of a process which could be manipulated.

One result of this is that while the naive beginner in politics may feel that groups such as ANSWER, or the International Action Center, or the World Can't Wait, are genuine, and those of us with more political knowledge know they are front groups controlled by others, the naive beginner may be totally turned off the politics of social change when they realize they have been cynically used, treated as means, not as ends.

A. J. Muste was a unique figure in the mid-1960's when the mass Vietnam Peace Movement took shape - because, while his radicalism could not be questioned, neither could his honesty. He was the only person who, in 1965, could chair meetings of the emerging peace coalitions which brought together in the same room Trotskyists, Communists, Catholics, Jews, Democrats, Pacifists, Socialists, Liberals, etc. Because everyone knew that even though they did not agree with Muste, they could trust his honesty.

I think this is a point on which we should seek agreement, whatever our pasts, Communist, Socialist, Trotskyist, etc. - that if we want a society of honesty, then we must not make an art of lying skillfully. If we want a movement worthy of commanding our allegiance, it needs to treat each one of us as an end, never as a means. On this point, Lenin and Trotsky were profoundly wrong in thinking revolutionists could have some exemption from certain moral values.

But let me bring this to an end. The issue had not been whether or not the Russian Revolution was justified - as silly a question as debating the morality of an earthquake. These things happen. The issue for me had been the tragedy of the international division between the two approaches to deep social change. I recognize and salute the courage of many of those who chose to follow the pattern set out by Lenin. Yet it would be foolish to dismiss the parliamentary socialists too quickly. As an old friend once reminded me, the triumph of Gandhi's nonviolent liberation of India was rooted not only in Gandhi's own actions, but in the endless and endlessly boring meetings of the British Labour Party, the leafleting, the rallies, the educations, which, in 1945, brought the Labour Party to power and gave Gandhi an ally.

Even those of us who are more drawn to Rosa Luxemburg than to Lenin know that the issue is not so simply "reform or revolution". The historic failure of those who advocate change entirely through the electoral system is that they think the "revolution" will come when they have 50% of

the vote plus one. While those who think a simple coup to achieve State Power will make it possible to impose a revolution need only look at the Soviet experience. Social change must come on many fronts, some electoral, some educational, some by mass action, civil disobedience, and, drawing not only on Gandhi, but on Ho Chi Minh, the building of the “alternative society” within the framework of the old - co-ops, worker-owned factories, neighborhood associations. Marxists should surely know more than others than it is the slow accumulation of many small changes that results at last in a dramatic shift.

David McReynolds, 9/11/09