

# USSR and imperialism: Back to the future\*

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1. When the newborn Soviet Socialist Republic in Russia was alive only one day more than the short-lived Paris Commune, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin celebrated the event by going outdoors dancing in the snow.

It seems a paradox such an apparent outburst of joy by a great revolutionary, generally known for his sober, self-controlled attitude towards an ever-changing reality. But precisely for this reason, his legitimate expression of joy was not simply spontaneous but a *thoughtful* reaction to the unfolding of events. Lenin's dance in the snow is no other than what the Marxist philosopher Bertell Ollman had called *Dance of the Dialectic!*

The vitality and resilience showed by the first Workers' State, born by the October 1917 socialist revolution, was *the first confirmation in practice of the historical legitimacy of the victorious socialist revolution*, considered then (but also even now) by many in the Left and by everybody in the Right, as an aberration of History, or as a premature miscarriage.

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## Revolutionary Marxism 2021

For Lenin, such first confirmation in historical praxis was not an empirical-pragmatic evidence that “it works”. It is an experience to be studied dialectically. Based on his previous, intense, on-going theoretical research on materialist dialectics and his work on imperialism, during the First World War, against the mechanical evolutionism of the Second International and its capitulation to clashing imperialist interests, Lenin recognized the historical process manifested by the resilience of the young Soviet Socialist Republic: *The nature of the contradictions driving the new transitional epoch in history manifested with the eruption of the imperialist Great War and the Socialist Revolution in Russia.*

Imperialism, Lenin had demonstrated in his famous pamphlet, is not a policy but a *specific economic stage of capitalist development*, the “highest stage” of world capitalism, the *epoch* of its *historical decline* and, thus, of *transition* beyond its limits, towards *world communism*.

Lenin’s strategic project for a socialist revolution, as it was presented in his *April Theses* of 1917, converging with Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution and adopted not without resistance by the Bolsheviks, led, after the victory of the October 1917 Revolution to the foundation of a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The USSR is unthinkable without this Marxist estimation of the character of the new epoch, the international perspective for a world socialist revolution, and a clear, uncompromising proletarian internationalist orientation.

It was a project not confined to national frontiers, clearly opposed to national supremacy or bureaucratic domination. Its strategic goal was to end all forms of domination and exploitation worldwide. In other words, it was *a strategic project for universal human emancipation, as Karl Marx had called communism.*

From this vantage point, the resilience, the potential, and, at the last instance, the fate itself of Soviet Russia, or, later, of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics-USSR, of the building of Socialism *were tied to the contradictory relation to its opposite, imperialism, and subsequently to the international revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and oppressed peoples to overthrow imperialism.*

The contradictory interrelation *USSR/Imperialism* is central to this project. The role and actual movement of the one pole of the contradiction cannot be grasped without the other. It is always necessary to discover concretely their interconnections and interactions, in every changing conjuncture, never forgetting their irreconcilable opposition, to be able to advance the struggle for world Socialism.

2. USSR and imperialism represented much more than two incompatible social systems existing side by side. October 1917 is not only the birth date of the first workers’ State but, together with it, and above all, *the epochal beginning of the transition to a radically New World.*

The world character of modern productive forces was expressed in their rebellion against the historically outdated capitalist productive relations that led to the First imperialist World War. The exploding world contradictions, in their uneven and combined development, had broken “*the international imperialist chain in its weakest link*” Russia, according to Lenin’s famous metaphor.

Lenin’s formulation, very rich in determinations, encapsulates his scientific assessment of the Event that gave birth to the Soviet Union. Seven aspects should be stressed:

- a. Capitalism in the imperialist epoch of its historical decline is a ***world*** system, an interconnected ***international chain***.
- b. The imperialist war is an explosion of insoluble ***world*** systemic-structural contradictions that breaks the chain.
- c. Russia’s historic specificity as a social formation makes it the most vulnerable ***weakest link*** of the international chain, the site of its break.
- d. Lenin insists: It is not just a localized national link that has been broken, it is the ***international chain itself***.
- e. This break of continuity produces a ***permanent structural damage to the world system***, preventing its re-stabilization and,
- f. opening ***an epoch of wars and revolutions***.
- g. The break up of the chain by the October Revolution makes this revolution the “*first act of a world socialist revolution*”.

This is ***the birth certificate of the Soviet Union***. Going ***back*** to it, we could trace the general tendencies of the dynamics towards the ***future***.

3. For imperialism, declining capitalism as a world system, is a matter of life and death to restore and keep restored the integrity of its broken international chain. It was vital to crash the October Revolution and the Soviet Union by all means, including the most barbaric.

This vital need was the driving force for the war intervention by fourteen imperialist armies assisting, in the Civil War, the White counter-revolution against Soviet power.

In that early period of the formation of the Red Army of Workers and Peasants, during its asymmetric heroic battles, his founder and leader Lev Davidovich Trotsky, in the debate on the role of military specialists had stressed:

... We are in an epoch of transition from bourgeois rule to the socialist order [...] This is a duality or contradiction, which is inherent in the very essence of our revolution. It is not a question of the regime, of its political form or of the principle on which its army is constructed, but of the clash between two formations, the bourgeois-capitalist one and the socialist-proletarian one. This contradiction can be overcome through protracted struggle. We are merely trying to create the weapon for waging this struggle and trying to ensure that this weapon shall conform to the requirements and obligations of the regime which we are called upon to defend.

The same imperialist war drive to restore the broken continuity of the world capitalist system by destroying the new socialist formation emerging in the USSR was behind fascism and the Nazi invasion, and, later, in the so-called “Cold War” combined with “hot”, devastating, wars against colonial peoples, from Korea and Vietnam to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

The Soviet Union, the international working class, the entire humanity paid an enormous price in this ongoing struggle for world Socialism.

3. Tragically, the defeats of the world revolution, particularly the defeats in Germany and Europe in 1919-23, compounded by the defeat in China in 1927, left isolated the first workers state in a relatively backward agrarian country, nearly ruined by the world war and civil war, encircled, under gigantic imperialist pressures.

Bureaucratization, Stalinism, the tragedies in the 1930s and beyond, the demise itself of the USSR in 1991, were *not* the product of revolution and Socialism. On the contrary, they were the results of the unstoppable, asphyxiating pressure of imperialism, and the protracted isolation by the delay of socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. The treacherous role of the leaders of European social democracy in the first wave of the world socialist revolution, the immaturity of the young Communist parties, the bureaucratization of the Comintern itself contributed enormously to the perpetuation of imperialist aggressive encirclement, exacerbating all the internal contradictions of the USSR.

*“The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable,” wrote Trotsky later “One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces created by it can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state. [...] The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”*

The Soviet Union, as the first moment of a world-historical cycle of a transitional epoch opened in 1917, was a *transitional society itself*; a complex, contradictory

unity of dominant socialist tendencies, originating in the revolution and manifesting their potential in great achievements, and of capitalist tendencies generating from internal commodity-money relations and the world capitalist market.

Despite its relative isolation, the Soviet Union was vulnerable to fluctuations and crises in the world market and world capitalist economy. The law of value is functioning on a world scale, and it cannot be abolished in a single country - against what the doctrine of “socialism in a single country” and Stalin’s textbook on the *Economic Problems of Socialism* claim.

Trying to balance between foreign imperialist pressures and the social base of its privileges at home, born out of defeats of the international socialist revolution, the conservative bureaucracy, led to more defeats internationally, to State repression at home and a disastrous administrative command mismanagement of the planned economy, leading finally into a catastrophic impasse.

The impasse, at the last instance, reflected not particularly an overgrowth of capitalist tendencies but rather the urgent needs for further development of the *socialist* tendencies clashing with the bureaucratic barriers and lacking access to the world productive forces still under imperialist capitalist control.

The uncompleted transition became a *blocked, paralyzed* transition. The only way to break this crisis of transition was the active mobilization and participation of the working masses to break the bureaucratic straitjacket and to unleash the potential of the blocked socialist tendencies.

But the bureaucratic nomenklatura, separated from and afraid by these masses, looked to save its own self-interest and self-preservation. After attempted failures to “reform” or to “re-structure” the existing impasse, from above, the nomenklatura turned to capitalist restoration, to capitulation to Western imperialism - and to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

4. The initial triumphalism in the imperialist West for its so-called “victory” in the Cold War with the demise of the USSR and nonsense celebrations for the “end of history”, “of communism”, etc. have dissipated long ago and they turned now into its opposite, to the deepest historical pessimism and disarray.

As we have insisted in other occasions, after the 1991 imperialist Hubris and the *Ate/Folly* of the so-called imperialist “war on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, Nemesis came to bring punishment by successive blows, the one more devastating than the other: The 2008 Global Crash, the implosion of finance capital globalization, followed by a Great Recession, and a still insoluble global capitalist crisis, immensely exacerbated by the 2020 Global Pandemic Shock and its on-going course and dramatic consequences.

Insofar as it concerns the madness of the 20 years “war on terror” in Afghanistan, launched by the US, NATO and their “willing allies” led to the most humiliating defeat of US imperialism after Vietnam, the chaotic withdraw of American troops, and what the former leader of the German right-wing CDU and candidate for Chancellor has called “*the worst defeat of NATO from its founding*”.

At the same time, during the last 20 years, the unprecedented rise of China as a world economic superpower challenging an American capitalism in decline, as well as escalating tensions between US/NATO imperialism and the post-Soviet Russia, particularly after the fascist coup in Ukraine and the war in Donbass, made Washington and the US Pentagon target China and Russia as America’s “*primary systemic rivals*”. A *New Cold War* has been declared by imperialism internationally, from the former Soviet space and the borders of Russia to China, from the Baltic and the Black Sea to the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea.

A strange feeling of *déjà vu* is widespread, a replay of weird versions of the American films *Dr. Strangelove* or of *Back to the Future*.

A recent essay published in the *Foreign Affairs*, a well-known voice and think tank for State Department - the same *Foreign Affairs* where George Kennan had published in 1946 his infamous document on “Containment”, the doctrine for the Cold War- had warned about “*The Myth of Russian Decline*” and “*Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power*”. Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, the authors of the essay, insist: “*Even if China proves to be the more significant long-term threat, Russia will remain a long-term challenger too*”.

An important and puzzling question has been raised by Foreign Affairs authors: “*Why the victors of the Cold War have lost the post-Soviet peace?*”

To start answering it, they turn to the approach introduced by the Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokyh, now in the Harvard University, an academic far from any suspicion for communist or even pro-Russian sympathies: “*The former Soviet space remains a tinderbox, still reckoning with **the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which should be thought of not as an event but as a process**, as the historian Serhii Plokyh has aptly put it*”.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the aftermath of the demise of the USSR, had developed an entire geopolitical doctrine stressing that this dissolution was not sufficient for the strategic needs of US imperialism. To eliminate forever the “threat” Russia and the entire former Soviet space had to be fragmented and subjugated. The developments that followed with the extension of NATO to the Russian borders, the “color” counter-revolutions, wars in the Caucasus, the Ukrainian Maidan, the “hybrid” war in Donbass, the new US/UK “Atlantic Charter”, the Australian-Anglo-American alliance AUKUS, etc. show that the paranoid Brzezinski doctrine did not die with him.

The warning by Trotsky in 1929 is more actual than ever: The process of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union does not mean a return to pre-1917 conditions. It means its fragmentation, colonization, and rule by a semi-fascist regime. A warning which applies to China as well.

5. The seven points that we have referred before to be included as the “birth certificate of the Soviet Union” are crucial today too:

a. Global capitalism is *a much more integrated international chain*.

b. *The world systemic-structural contradictions are globalized into extreme by capital globalization and exploding with its crisis*. The capital globalization of the last forty years is clashing with its historic limits in the 21<sup>st</sup> century producing the post-2008 global crisis, the Covid 19 pandemic, the threat of climate catastrophe.

c. *Post-Soviet Russia*, because of its historic particularities as a social formation, shaped by a protracted *uncompleted transition*, leading to *dissolution as a process*, with enormous national and international consequences, becomes a *persistent, potentially explosive site of confrontation with Western imperialism* in the context of the deepening global capitalist crisis.

d. *The integrity of the international imperialist chain has not yet been restored* by colonization and full subjugation of the former Soviet Union or China.

e. *The structural damages in the world capitalist system remain permanent and widening* producing world wide a combined financial, social-economic, political, and geopolitical *destabilization* of all relations,

f. leading to *wars and revolutions*,

g. and proving that ***the world-historical spiral. initiated by the October socialist revolution has not been closed.***

6. From this vantage point, all emancipatory forces worldwide should take an active stand. In a recent International Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in August 2021, we had stressed:

Restorationist regimes and oligarchs are neither able nor even willing to defeat the imperialist offensive. They seek an improbable compromise and an impossible accommodation with the aggressor enemy of their peoples, in the name of “international cooperation”, “multipolarity”, a “win-win agreement”, etc., all avatars of the old failed formulas of “peaceful coexistence”, and bureaucratic “socialism in a single country”.

Without any support with restorationist regimes, oligarchs, or Bonapartes, the international working class and its vanguard should not remain neutral

## Revolutionary Marxism 2021

in face of imperialist aggression but fight to defeat it. It has to manifest solidarity in action supporting a political mobilization of the masses themselves in these countries to defeat imperialism. The anti-imperialist struggle to be victorious is necessary to not be trapped in a blind nationalism serving the ruling elites but to acquire a **permanent** character until the defeat of the capitalist restoration process itself, which opens the road to imperialism and colonization, the expropriation of oligarchs, for a socialist reconstruction of the economy under workers control, all power to genuine soviets without bureaucrats, full workers democracy, and an active internationalist policy of support to all revolutionary and liberation movements in the world.

7. We can see that the Soviet Union does not have another inert ruin among the ruins of a dead past. Neither it is a passive object of contemplation nor of sheer nostalgia. To use the language of Walter Benjamin's dialectical, non-linear, materialist conception of history, it belongs to the *oppressed* past of the working class and of humanity struggling for emancipation, against the threat of imminent catastrophe. The USSR of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not an immaterial ghost but an unfulfilled material-historical potential, an uncompleted, blocked transition that led into a collapse as a still-ongoing process. Even now, especially now, it poses against imperialism *the revolutionary possibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to liberate the oppressed past and fulfill its potential for world transformation.*

***A World Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, extending both in the Global North and in the Global South, stands in current and coming struggles as the strategic project for the future of humanity.***

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