

Antonio Gramsci 1918

One Year of History

Source: Il Grido del Popolo, March 16, 1918;

Translated: by [Mitchell Abidor](#);

CopyLeft: [Creative Commons](#) (Attribute & ShareAlike)

marxists.org 2008.

One year has passed since the day when the Russian people forced Tsar Nicholas to abdicate and take the road of exile. The commemoration of the anniversary is hardly merry. Sorrow, ruin, the appearance of collapse, the bourgeois counter-offensive with German bayonets and guns.

Is the Russian Revolution finished? Has the proletariat in Russia failed in the greatest experiment in history? The look of things doesn't give comfort: the German generals have arrived in Odessa, the Japanese are said to be ready to intervene, fifty million citizens are have been torn from the revolution, and with them the most fertile lands, the ways to the seas, the roads of civilization and economic life. The Revolution was born in pain and despair, and continues in pain and suffering, gripped in a ring of enemy power, immersed in an economic world refractory to its ideal, to its goals.

In March 1917 the telegraphs announced that a world had collapsed in Russia, a world already ephemeral, the inanimate shadow of a power that was surging up, which was growing stronger, which dragged itself along with bloody violence, with the repression of spirits, with the torture of flesh torn to pieces. This power gave life to a huge state machine. 170 million human creatures were forced to forget their humanity, their

spirituality in order to serve. To serve what? The idea of the Russian Empire, of the Great Russian State which had to reach the warm and open seas in order to secure an outlet for its economic activity from every size of competitor, from the surprise of war. The Russian Empire was a monstrous necessity of the modern world. In order to live, to develop, to ensure a life of activity ten races, 170 million men had to submit to a ferocious state discipline; had to renounce their humanity and be pure instruments of power.

In March 1917 the monstrous machine collapsed, rotted, decomposed by its congenital impotence. Men rose up, looked each other in the eye. Human values took the upper hand. Exteriority no longer had any value: too much wrong had been done, too much pain had been caused, too much blood had been spilled. History, true history had begun. Everyone wants to be the master of his own destiny, wants society to be molded in obedience to the spirit, and not vice versa. The organization of life in common in society should be the expression of humanity, should respect autonomy and liberty. The new history of humanity had begun; a new experiment in the history of the human spirit had begun. These coincided with the expressions that the socialist ideal had given to man's elementary needs. The socialists as a political class reached power without too much effort; the words of their faith coincided with the confused and vague aspirations of the Russian people.

They had to make the new organization a reality, had to pass new laws, stabilize the new regulations. The past continued to exist, but it was falling apart. It gave the appearance of collapse, disorder, confusion. It seemed as if they were returning to barbarian society, that is, to non-society. The past continued to live beyond the land of liberty and sought vengeance.

The new order was slow in being realized. Slow? O skeptical wicked men, it wasn't slow, for one doesn't remake society by fiat, because the evil of the past is not an edifice of papier-mâché that is brought down in an instant. Life is a painful effort, a tenacious struggle against habits, against bestiality and the coarse instincts that continuously make themselves known. A new human society isn't created in six months when three years of war have exhausted a country, have deprived it of the mechanical means needed for civil life. Millions and millions of men aren't organized in freedom just like that, when everything is against it and all that is left is the indomitable spirit. The history of the Russian Revolution hasn't been closed and will not close with the anniversary of its beginning.

In the same way that a canto exists in the imagination of the poet before it does on the printed page, the arrival of a new social organization exists in consciousnesses and wills. They are changed men; this is what is important. They want exteriority, the words on the page. They cry out at every failure, at every apparent reverse.

Historians ask of the Russians what has never been asked of past revolutions: the immediate creation of a new order. They devise plans that have never existed, hopes that have never been dreamed of. And these plans, these hopes confront a current reality to end in failure, in collapse. With a reality which is said to issue from a year of new history, but which issues from centuries of the most bestial repression in human history. The impossible is asked of them, which has never asked of the men of the past.

How many times did the French Revolution see Paris occupied by the enemy? And the occupation came after Napoleon had dictatorially organized the revolutionary forces and led the French armies from victory to victory. And France was a small thing compared to the exterminated Russia.

No, mechanical force has never prevailed in history; it is men, it is consciousness and the spirit that molds external appearances and always triumphs in the end. A year of history has closed, but history continues.
(The next six lines were censored.)