

## What is a Successful Communist Revolution?

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At a minimal level, it is a revolution that has been able to withstand and defeat the counter-revolution (inevitably heavily supported by international capital, as with the 'civil' war in Russia). When it has done so, it can gain some precious space to begin the process of constructing socialism.

But I suggest there is another part to the answer: a successful revolution provides inspiration for other revolutionary movements. Let me give one example, from the 1930s in China and the sheer inspirational power of the Russian Revolution among Chinese communists.

America, England, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, and other capitalist or imperialist powers had sent thousands of political, cultural, economic, or missionary workers into China, actively to propagandize the Chinese masses with credos of their own states. Yet for many years the Russians had not had a single school, church, or even debating society in China where Marxist-Leninist doctrines could legally be preached. Their influence, except in the soviet districts, had been largely indirect. Moreover, it had been aggressively opposed everywhere by the Kuomintang. Yet few who had been in China during that decade, and conscious of the society in which they lived, would dispute the contention that Marxism, the Russian Revolution, and the new society of the Soviet Union had probably made more profound impressions on the Chinese people than all Christian missionary influences combined (Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, 352-53).

Let us consider in a little more detail the Russian Revolution. After seven decades of unrelenting polemic against the USSR and the communist states of Eastern Europe, after 1989 a new term was added: communism in Eastern Europe and Russia has 'failed'. The most astounding feature of this narrative is how vast numbers on the Left swallowed this story. By contrast, let us see what actually happened.

To begin with, the Russian Revolution was the first successful communist revolution. With a mixture of extraordinary planning, unbridled optimism, sheer guts and deal of good luck, the communists succeeded in overthrowing the provisional government set up after the February Revolution of 1917. Lenin became the most read author of the first half of the 20th century, and revolutions won through in Eastern Europe, China, Cuba, Vietnam and so on. They were the defining feature of the 20th century.

Further, the fact the communists were able to weather attacks from all sides in the so-called 'civil' war – USA, UK, France, Germany, Canada, Japan et al supported Kolchak, Denikin and others as they attacked in wave upon wave from all directions. At times the new RSFSR was a rump of its final extent, losing the Ukraine, the whole east, Belorus and much more. Any other army would have given in, but the new Red Army – built almost from scratch after the mass and undisciplined demobilisation of the Russian Army in the later years of the First World War. Above, they had widespread popular support among both urban and rural workers.

But didn't the USSR finally fail in 1989, since it came to an end? Given the immense pressures from the capitalist world, the construction of the Cold War by the USA, the continued economic sanctions and drain on vital resources, it is a surprise that the USSR lasted as long as it did. Lenin and all those following dreamed of peace that would allow the building of communism. In the absence of that peace, their achievement was stupendous.

But probably the biggest success of the USSR and other communist states in Eastern Europe is that they gave us a sustained example of how difficult it is to construct communism after the revolution, how devilishly complex such a process is. To be sure, they made plenty of mistakes, only to learn from them and try something else. Until then, revolutionaries had dreamed, romanticised, formulated ideal blueprints, as they tend still to do today (especially in the West). Here was a moment when a revolution succeeded and communist construction began. The USSR gave the capitalist world the biggest fright it ever had. I would add: at least until China.