

Ireland and the Russian Revolution

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In February 1918, an estimated 10,000 people packed into the Mansion House in Dublin to 'hail with delight the advent of the Russian Bolshevik revolution'.¹ The speakers included some of the most prominent figures in the Irish revolutionary movement such as Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz, Tom Johnston of the Labour Party, a representative of the Soviet government and the meeting was chaired by William O'Brien, one of the leaders of the 1913 Dublin Lockout. The Red Flag was sung and thousands marched through the streets of Dublin afterwards.

A few weeks later *The Irish Times* warned against the danger of Bolshevism:

They have invaded Ireland, and if the democracies do not keep their heads, they may extend to other countries in Europe. The infection of Ireland by the anarchy of Bolshevism is one of those phenomena which, though almost incredible to reason and experience, are made intelligible by the accidents of fortune or human folly.

But it was not only in the South that radical ideas were catching fire.

A general strike in Belfast in 1919, led by the shipyard and engineering workers, and bringing together Protestant and Catholic workers, saw the formation of a strike committee which effectively ran the city, controlling the movement of goods and the distribution of electricity and other essential supplies.

The Belfast *Newsletter* was quick to point to the danger of revolution:

One of the (strikers) deputation boasted that they had set up a

'workers' parliament'. That is the language of the Bolsheviks and Sinn Féiners and it should open the eyes of the authorities, and also of the vast majority of the men, who are loyal and law abiding, to the real objectives of the strike committee. These objectives are not industrial, but revolutionary, and if they were attained they would bring disaster to the city.²

On May Day 1920, a few months after the general strike, 100,000 workers marched in Belfast, under red flags. On the same day, tens of thousands marched in towns and villages across the whole of Ireland. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) which had called for the marches, declared itself in favour of the 'soviet system'.³

In 1918, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George wrote to his counterpart Clemenceau in France:

The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense, not only of discontent, but also of anger and revolt amongst the workers. The whole existing order, in its political, social and economic aspects, is questioned by the mass of the population from one end of Europe to the other. Bolshevism is gaining ground everywhere.⁴

The head of the British army, General Sir Henry Wilson, warned the king and the British government that 'a Bolshevik rising was likely' and wrote 'I have not been so nervous about the state of affairs in the British empire since July 1914, and in many ways I

²²I would like to thank Shaun Doherty, Andy Brown and Julie Sherry for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Dave Sherry for access to the manuscript of his forthcoming book on the Russian Revolution.

¹E O'Connor, *Reds and Greens*, Dublin: UCD press, 2004, p.15

²*Newsletter*, February 4, 1919.

³Martin Upchurch, *Syndicalism and the transition to Communism*, p.186

⁴Quoted in E H Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, (London, 1966) Vol. 3, pp.135-6

am more anxious today than I was even in that fateful month'.⁵

Yet the impact of the Russian Revolution on Ireland, this mortal danger to the whole of Europe and the British Empire, is barely remembered in the official history of either the Northern or the Southern states in Ireland.

The Russian Revolution had a deep impact on Ireland, with waves of strikes and workplace occupations declaring themselves 'soviets', as well as four general strikes 'more powerful and radical than those in the cities of Britain'⁶ and numerous attempts to seize landed estates between 1919 and 1922.

The parallels with the massive social upheaval in Russia were not lost on the workers and poor farmers and landless labourers who drew inspiration from the new Soviet government, nor on the wealthy farmers, industrialists and church leaders who were terrified of the implications for their property and political power. The Russian Revolution drew the attention of the early Dáil which set out to gain recognition from the new Bolshevik state, and the whole question of Irish independence and its violent suppression by the British government exerted a profound influence on the revolutionary policies of the early Bolshevik government in its attitude to national freedom.

This article will examine these three aspects of the relationship between the Russian revolution and Ireland in an attempt to rescue some of the lessons of those revolutionary moments from the condescension of history.

The international revolutionary wave

In the hands of nationalist or bourgeois historians, the history of any country is narrowed, constricted, proceeding in roughly a straight line, towards a unique national destiny.

Wars, great economic recessions, international treaties, colonial empires may come and go, but the explanation for what oc-

curred in the historical development of the country is the unfolding of a unique historical narrative, arising from a national character or peculiar national circumstances.

This is true of the mainstream and official narratives of the Russian revolution itself, which is generally portrayed as due to Russian exceptionalism, or the uniquely ingenious (or, more commonly, disingenuous) figure of Lenin.

It is also the case with the years of revolutionary upheaval in Ireland after WWI in Ireland.

The states that grew out of a divided Ireland after partition, dominated on both sides by the interests of landlords and big employers, had a keen interest in promoting their own, separate, national myths. Class politics went against their need for 'national unity', on both sides of the border.

Episodes which revealed the deep class divisions and explosive social forces, such as the Belfast General Strike of 1919 or the Limerick Soviet, which pitted northern and southern workers against their respective bosses, politicians and religious leaders, are written out of mainstream history and even for writers who are sympathetic to them, treated as a temporary blip in an otherwise uninterrupted story of bitter civil war and sectarian pogroms that could only have ended in the entrenched division of Ireland.

This general contempt for working class history is even more hostile to the notion that 'foreign ideas' like socialism and communism would have had any bearing on events in Ireland, much less that they may have pointed to an alternative strategy for liberation for the working class.

The Irish revolution took place in the context and aftermath of a world war which demonstrated the interconnectedness of the world.

Working class families in every corner of Europe and its empires saw the massacres in the trenches of France devour almost a whole generation of their young men. The war led to desperate suffering at home too and to pressure to intensify work in the fac-

⁵ *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshall Sir Henry Wilson, 1918-22*, (London, 1985), pp177-8

⁶ C. Harman, 'Ireland: The Missing Key', *Socialist Worker Review*, December 1984, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1984/12/ireland.htm>

tories, especially those connected to war production, as they watched the wealthy factory owners make fortunes from the carnage. The Russian Revolution itself and the great wave of revolts that swept the whole of Europe in these years, from Berlin to Barcelona, from Glasgow to Turin, are only understandable as part of a great period of crisis for international capitalism and the immense social upheaval unleashed by war.

In the run up to the 1916 Easter Rising, James Connolly, the great revolutionary socialist, outlined his hope that a revolt in Ireland might be a spark 'that may yet set a torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last warlord'.⁷ Connolly's execution after the Rising robbed the working class movement of its foremost radical leader. But the great wave of revolt that brought the war to an end was exactly what he had hoped for and ushered years of upheaval in which the promise of massive social transformation was closer than at any time before or since.

Writing on the Easter Rising, while the war in Europe still raged, Lenin argued against those, including some socialists, who dismissed struggles for national self-determination and who failed to see such revolts in the context of wider struggle against imperialism and capitalism. In terms which echo Connolly's vision, Lenin saw such revolts not as isolated expressions of specific national grievances, but related to a more general crisis and connected to the international struggle against capitalism:

Owing to the crisis in imperialism, the flames of national revolt have flared up both in the colonies and in Europe, and that the national sympathies and antipathies have manifested themselves in spite of the Draconian threats and measures of repression. All this before the crisis of imperialism hit its peak: the power of the imperialist bour-

geoisie was yet to be undermined (and this may be brought about by a war of 'attrition' but has not yet happened) and the proletarian movements in the imperialist countries were still very feeble. What will happen when the war has caused complete exhaustion, or when, in one state at least, the power of the bourgeoisie has been shaken under the blows of proletarian struggle...The struggle of oppressed nations in Europe, a struggle capable of going all the way to insurrection and street fighting, capable of breaking down the iron discipline of the army and martial law, will 'sharpen the revolutionary crisis *in Europe*' to an infinitely greater degree than a much more developed rebellion in a remote colony. A blow delivered against the power of the English imperialist bourgeoisie by a rebellion in Ireland is a hundred times more significant politically than a blow of equal force delivered in Asia or Africa...The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene.⁸

It was this outlook which was confirmed by the scale and ferocity of the revolts which shook Europe as the war ended. The writer Victor Serge, an anarchist who became an active Bolshevik during the revolution, captured the scale of the turmoil in 1918 and the hopes it raised:

Revolution descended on the streets of Vienna and Budapest. From the North Sea to the Volga

⁷ *Irish Worker*, 8 August 1914

⁸ V I Lenin, 'The Irish Rebellion of 1916', in *Collected Works*, Vol 22, pp. 353-358 available at www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm

the councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies – the soviets – are the real masters of the hour. Germany's legal government is a council of People's Commissars made up of six socialists... The newspapers of the period are astonishing... riots in Paris, riots in Lyon, revolution in Belgium, revolution in Constantinople, victory of the soviets in Bulgaria, rioting in Copenhagen. The whole of Europe is in movement. Clandestine or open soviets are appearing everywhere, even in the allied armies; everything is possible, everything.⁹

The great tumult and convulsions were just as much present in Ireland and their outcome and eventual suppression revealed that the same political and social forces that were at play in Russia, Germany, Italy and elsewhere were present in Ireland too.

Reform or revolution?

Before the war, Europe had been convulsed by a rising wave of strikes, known in Britain as 'the Great Unrest', of which the great revolt of the 1913 Lockout in Dublin, involving mass militant strike action by largely unskilled workers was typical.

In the two decades prior to this, trade unions and socialist organisations had grown rapidly into mass organisations of the working class, such as the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the British Labour Party. They were linked together in the Socialist International which claimed to stand for the overthrow of capitalism. As the threat of war approached, they passed numerous resolutions demanding peace and pledging to stand against the workers of one country fighting workers of another country in the interests of imperialism.

But the war exposed the gap between the official policy of the Second International and the gradualist, reformist practice of its main organisations, which aimed at winning socialism through taking control of national parliaments.

It brought to the surface a deep cleavage in the workers' movement. The leadership of the mass reformist organisations, like the British Labour Party (who's MPs joined the National Government during the war in 1915) and the German SPD, almost without exception, collapsed behind their respective ruling classes when the war broke out. The tiny minority of radical anti-war and anti-capitalist socialists and organisations seemed isolated and on the margin of events.

The political collapse of the International at the outbreak of the war left many socialists, Connolly included, disorientated and despairing. Only a handful of representatives could be gathered in 1915 in Zimmerwald in Switzerland to convene a conference of anti-war socialists. But among them were people like Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht from Germany. And out of these small and seemingly marginal forces, who took a consistent stand against the war and capitalism, would emerge the political leadership which would seek to focus and direct the revolts which began to break out after three years of previously unimaginable slaughter and deprivation.

The war had largely suppressed the impulse of revolt in 1914. Strikes were immediately outlawed in most countries and 'agitators' sacked or sent to the front. But it re-emerged with enormous force to bring the war to an end.

The combination of mass struggles over economic demands, such as the strikes begun by women textile workers in Petrograd in February 1917, in the context of the war, rapidly fused with political demands. Within days, the Russian army, already riven with mass desertions and mutinies, refused orders to fight the strikers and marchers and the Tsar's regime was brought down.

It was a pattern that was repeated throughout Europe. Everywhere, the demand over economic questions, such as bread and wages, rapidly crossed over into political demands for an end to the war and for real democracy. The entire French Army on the Western Front refused to fight in May

⁹Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, London 1966, Vol3 pp.135-16

1917. French women textile workers in Paris were on strike in that spring of 1917 and plans for a new military offensive in May produced a strike of over 200,000 workers at Paris' car factories. At the huge Renault Billancourt factory, a strike rally ended with chants of 'Down with the war!'¹⁰

British soldiers mutinied in their tens of thousands, while engineering workers in the Midlands and north-east and women factory workers in England, dockers and shipyard workers in Glasgow and Liverpool all struck in defiance of the government, the police, the Labour Party and the trade union leaders.

Women workers in Turin in August 1917, faced with bread shortages, began a strike which closed the whole city. Bosses at one factory promised bread if they went back to work. They responded with chants of 'To hell with the bread! We want peace! Down with the profiteers! Down with the war!' and stayed out on strike.¹¹

In Germany in 1918, a sailors' mutiny which began in Kiel quickly spread to Hamburg and then Berlin, fusing with strikes in by coalminers, dockers and engineers and brought the war to an end. The German Kaiser fled.

The eruption of revolts in Egypt, India, Afghanistan and elsewhere across the empires, often involving mutinies by British garrisons, showed how the sudden shifts of consciousness produced by the war had profound effect on previously settled social relations.

It brought 'political' and 'economic' questions together, the fight for the means of life with the fight against war and foreign oppression.

It was the form of workers' organisation that emerged in these mass struggles that was the crucial factor. This was about more than simply voting in a polling booth every five years or joining a trade union. The Councils of Workers', Sailors' and Soldiers' Deputies in Germany, the factory commissions in Italy, the Soviets in Russia, were

about direct democracy. They were the means by which workers could collectively take economic power from the capitalist class, soldiers and sailors could defy military orders, debate and vote on their demands, co-ordinate with others and take all decision making into their own hands.

It was this organic process that the Bolsheviks were able to relate to, seeing in this direct workers' democracy the basis for working class power and the overthrow of capitalism. Their growing strength during 1917 was a result of their clear demands for 'Bread, Peace and Land' and the means of achieving it was 'All power to the soviets'.

It was this idea which caught the imagination of workers and soldiers engaged in their own battles in other countries. In August 1917 Turin factory workers, called to a mass meeting to meet Russian representatives of the Kerensky provisional government, which had taken power after the February revolution and who were there to urge them to keep production up for the war effort, instead chanted 'Viva Lenin'.¹²

In 1919 10,000 British soldiers mutinied in Folkestone in Kent. They set up a union and their mutiny spread, along with their popular chant 'Come on you Bolsheviks'.¹³

Just as in Russia after the February revolution, the old parties of the bourgeoisie and the reformist socialists sought to hold back the revolution, protect 'private property' and prove their credentials to the great powers by returning to the war.

The combination of the mass, often spontaneous revolts and their conscious direction towards the seizure of state power by workers' organisations was the crucial question of these years and, with the exception of Russia, the existing socialist organisations were either too inexperienced or stood aside from the growing revolt.

As Chris Harman explains, the deep legacy of gradualism in the workers' movement did not suddenly disappear:

...the heritage of fifty years of

¹⁰Dave Sherry, *Russia 1917: The Unfinished and Unforgotten Revolution*, (forthcoming), p. 116-117

¹¹Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets: Workers Councils versus Parliament, 1915-20*, (London, 1985), p.170

¹²*Ibid.* p.178

¹³John Newsinger, *Them and Us: Fighting the Class War 1910-19*, (London, 2015, p.70

gradual development was not to be erased so rapidly. The old Social Democratic and trade union leaders moved into the gap left by the discredited bourgeois parties. The Communist Left on the other hand still lacked the organisation to respond to this. It acted when there was no mass support; when there was mass support it failed to act.¹⁴

The Irish Soviets



Workers Soviet Mills: 'We make bread not profits'

The revolutionary years in Ireland contained all the basic features of the wider revolutionary wave. The war caused mass upheaval in Ireland. The old certainties began to break apart.

One indication of the scale of the upsurge was the massive growth in trade union membership, especially with the ITGWU, from a low point of 6,000 in 1916 to over 100,000 by 1920.

In Ireland, as in Russia, the industrial working class were a minority, concentrated in a few towns and cities. Most heavy industry was concentrated in the north-east, around Belfast, with some manufacturing in centres like Derry. Much of the rest of the country was underdeveloped, acting as a huge producer and supplier of agricultural produce for the British market. But this gave transport workers, dockers and railway workers, and workers in local creameries, bacon factories and so on a disproportionate and central role in the social revolt.

The role of railway workers was a key factor. As in Russia, their action could prevent the movement of army regiments hostile to the revolution.

Action by Irish rail workers, often in defiance of their British-based union leaders, was an enormous concern to the British administration.

Irish railway workers, inspired by the example of British dockers refusing to load ships with munitions to attack the new Russian workers' state, similarly began to refuse to carry British soldiers or transport munitions in Ireland.

The surge of patriotism that led tens of thousands of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers to sign up for the war, had turned by 1917 to war weariness and passive resistance.

The Unionist leaders in the North openly worried about the slowing of recruitment among Protestant workers and feared that they may have to rely on Catholics.¹⁵

When the British government threatened to introduce conscription in Ireland in 1918, huge demonstrations and a general strike, led by the ITGWU, brought it to a halt.

The reason the shift in mood was twofold: the sheer fact of the slaughter in the trenches and the intensification of work and pressure of supplying the war effort. Factory workers, especially, faced constant demands for longer hours and speed-up. The end of the war unleashed a wave of pent-up demands that produced open revolt in industrial centres like Glasgow, Liverpool and Belfast, often led by militant shop stewards.

In the lead up to the 1919 General Strike, Willie Gallacher, who would later be one of the founding members of the Communist Party, addressed mass meetings of shipyard workers in Belfast, despite being openly against the war and facing an organised group of loyalist workers who tried to shout him down.

Gallacher was one of the most prominent leaders of the Clyde Workers' Committee, a network of hundreds of rank and file socialist militants which had co-ordinated strike ac-

¹⁴Chris Harman, *How The Revolution Was Lost*, Autumn 1967 available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1967/xx/revlost.htm>

¹⁵Fergal McCluskey, *The Irish Revolution, 1912-23: Tyrone*, Dublin, 2014

tion against attacks on their working conditions during the war, before being violently suppressed, and was at the forefront of the strikes which broke out in engineering after the war.

The 1919 General Strike in Belfast grew out of a strike for shorter hours, which spread from heavy industry and engineering to bring the whole of the city to a standstill and place power in the hands of a strike committee of trade union leaders. The hold of loyalism was weakening in the face of a struggle which drew Protestant and Catholic workers into battle against mainly Unionist employers and the British government.

The strike in Glasgow was suppressed by British troops, backed up by tanks parked in George Square. Such was the threat posed by the Belfast strike that there were more British troops in Belfast to 'maintain order' than in the whole of the rest of Ireland, despite the outbreak of the War of Independence in the rest of the country.

The great wave of revolt was not just about economic questions. The spark for the Limerick Soviet was the killing by British soldiers of an IRA leader, Robert Byrne, during an escape attempt. In response to protests the British army imposed martial law on Limerick and the trade unions in the town called an all-out strike in response. The leadership of the strike movement, calling itself the 'Soviet', took the key decisions over production and food supplies into its own hands.

The use of the strike weapon, and in particular, the occupation of pivotal workplaces in rural areas such as creameries, intensified alongside the guerrilla war being fought by the IRA and the violent reprisals by the British government.

This was especially true in Munster throughout 1919 and 1920, where a chain of creameries owned by the Cleeve family, were taken over by their 3,000 workers. At Knocklong the workers raised the banner outside the creamery 'We make butter, not profits'. The growth of militant strikes and their spilling over into episodes of workers'

control spread to such unlikely places as an asylum in Monaghan and the Arigna coal mine in Leitrim.

It also fuelled attacks on the big landed estates, often abandoned by their English landlords, and to attempts at land seizures. This social revolt was a much bigger threat to the British at the time than the sporadic guerrilla campaign being fought by the IRA.¹⁶

The highpoint of this use of workers' action against the British suppression of the independence struggle came with the 1921 general strike to free republican prisoners being held in Mountjoy prison.¹⁷

The potential for this experience to generalise opposition to the British government in both the North and the South was never realised however.

The union leaders in Dublin did not call for any solidarity action with the strike in Belfast, even when railway workers were ordered to move troops to Belfast to suppress it.

Similarly, the influence of the labour leaders on the Limerick Soviet was disastrous. They talked of a general strike, but under the influence of the Sinn Féin leadership in Dublin, fearful of the escalation of the strike, instead called for an evacuation of the city, and the strike effectively collapsed.

Despite this general approach of caution and timidity on the part of the labour leaders, the potential for revolt continued.

Dáil and Russia Treaty

The key weakness of the most prominent labour and union leaders was their inability to break from the Irish nationalist movement. And the new Dáil government, dominated by Sinn Féin, consciously set out to incorporate them and suppress the threat of class conflict. Sinn Féin had swept the board at the 1919 Westminster elections, and instead of taking their seats as MPs in London, set up their own parliament, the Dáil in Dublin.

Providing they supported 'phys-

¹⁶Conor Kostick, *Revolution In Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 1923*, London, 1996, Ch 5

¹⁷For a more detailed account of the role of workers in the Irish revolution see Conor Kostick, 'The Irish Working Class and the War of Independence', *Irish Marxist Review* 14, November 2015, pp18-29

ical force' it did not matter to rank and file republicans what their other views were. So in the first Dáil (i.e. the republican parliament) of 1919 nearly two thirds of the members were from the urban professional and white collar class, another quarter were capitalists and the remaining 10 percent farmers.¹⁸

The new government struggled to establish its legitimacy and authority.

The potential for class conflict to undermine the national struggle by threatening the interests of the wealthier classes was alluded to by the Secretary of the Dáil: 'The mind of the people was being diverted from the struggle for freedom by class war... There was a moment when it seemed nothing could prevent wholesale appropriation'.¹⁹

The new Dáil set up its own Dáil courts, which were aimed at establishing its governmental authority, collecting taxes and so on, but ended up preventing the wholesale seizure of landed estates.

As the Free State was established after the signing of the Treaty, Free State soldiers marched the length of the Shannon, suppressing the different worker occupations as they marched.

The struggle against radical movements pre-occupied the Dáil domestically, but the new government was also seeking international recognition, which led it to adopt radical and even socialist phrases in its public statements, seeking the endorsement of the new governments brought to power after the war.

The war and the revolutionary upheavals which ended it had brought turmoil for nation states throughout Europe. In Germany, the Kaiser had been overthrown and replaced with an interim government, which struggled to withstand the immense workers, soldiers and sailors revolt. The Austro-Hungarian empire and the Ottoman empire had both collapsed. The victorious nation states, especially the newly emerging United

States, sought to bring some order to the chaos, and arranged a conference at Versailles outside Paris to establish the terms of the peace and set rules for what might replace the old states.

The Free State craved recognition from the great powers as the legitimate government of Ireland. To this end, it sent a representative to attend the Versailles Peace talks, but he could obtain no credentials, with the big powers not wishing to go against Britain, and spent weeks wandering the corridors excluded.

The first Dáil also went to great lengths to seek recognition from the new Bolshevik government, which was the first government to officially recognise the republic.²⁰ They also drew up detailed plans for trade and other treaties with them.

This had two purposes, neither of them revolutionary. First, it was a useful bargaining chip when it came to the major negotiations with the big powers and especially Britain. The new Russian government was pioneering a new form of open diplomacy, opening the previously secret files of the Russian state, negotiating peace treaties with Germany that were debated widely and openly in Russian society.

Russia was being invaded by 14 separate armies, who aimed at the restoration of the old regime, under the leadership of various right wing generals, and Russia was desperate for some international relief.

The negotiations opened by the new Irish government, through various supporters in the US, proposed various joint trade and diplomatic arrangements, opposition to arms being sent to Russia, the hope that 50,000 rifles might be sent to Ireland and so on.

But it had a second purpose, which was to further compromise and neutralise the leaders of the labour movement in Ireland. This is, in part, the meaning of the constitution of the first Dáil, drawn up in consultation with labour leaders Thompson and O'Brien, and delivered to the reconvened

¹⁸Chris Harman, *Background to the Crisis*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1974/06/nireland.htm>

¹⁹Quoted in Chris Bambery, *Ireland's Permanent Revolution*, London: 1986, p.75

²⁰P Beresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class*, London, 1984, p.247

Second International meeting, with an eye to getting official state recognition by the new social democratic forces vying for power in Germany.²¹

In notes attached to the draft of the Treaty with Russia, advising those charged with negotiating it were even more explicit. ‘...you should arrange to have a strong labour man, for example, Johnson or O’Brien, with someone whose tendencies are not so socialistic and who knows industrial conditions’. Referring to the sections of the Treaty which agree to oppose all military intervention in Russia and in Ireland, it notes that, ‘Under these clauses we may be able to help them here, and they may be able to help us in England. The treaty itself is bound to affect both of us in this respect on account of the germ noticeable in all labour organisations’.²²

The crucial role of the labour leadership in downplaying the interests of the working class in deference to the nationalist leadership was praised by De Valera:

When we wanted the help of Labour against conscription, Labour gave it to us. When we wanted the help of Labour in Berne [to get recognition from the Second International], Labour gave it to us and got Ireland recognised as a distinct nation. When we wanted Labour to stand down at the election and not divide us, but that we should stand foursquare against one enemy, Labour fell in with us.²³

What this betrayed is that the key focus for the nationalist movement was recognition as one of the nations of the world; all else was subordinate to this. How little the phraseology of the first constitution mattered was revealed when it came to the real negotiations which began in London in 1921. The construction of the Treaty with Britain made little or no mention of the cherishing

of all the children of the nation equally. Instead, it gave up the North and came down to a calculation of relative military strength.

The contrast with the approach of the new Russian government is useful. Rather than rely on peace treaties with hostile powers, it openly appealed to German workers to revolt against their own government, and mounted a massive campaign, based on an appeal to an exhausted working class to defend the new society of workers control that they had brought into being. In areas that were won back from control by the White Armies, the Red Army immediately established a local soviet and took control of factories and large estates from the landlords.

The Russian Revolution and national liberation

The early years of the revolution inspired a generation of socialists, not just with the promise it held out of direct workers’ democracy, but also the liberation of previously oppressed nations.

From before the war, Lenin had argued that socialists, rather than engaging in a blanket condemnation of nationalism, needed to distinguish between the nationalism of the oppressor nations and the nationalism of the oppressed nations and take a clear position of endorsing and supporting the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. The fight for national liberation was a part of, not separate to, the fight for socialism.

The proletariat cannot achieve freedom other than by revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the tsarist monarchy and its replacement by a democratic republic. The tsarist monarchy precludes liberty and equal rights for nationalities, and is, furthermore, the bulwark of barbarity, brutality and reaction in both Europe and Asia.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Intercourse between Bolshevism and Sinn Féin*, HMSO, London available at <https://archive.org/details/details/op1256928-1001>

²³ Quoted in P Beresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class*, London, 1984, p.245-6

This monarchy can be overthrown only by the united proletariat of all the nations of Russia, which is giving the lead to consistently democratic elements capable of revolutionary struggle from among the working masses of all nations.

It follows, therefore, that workers who place political unity with 'their own' bourgeoisie above complete unity with the proletariat of all nations, are acting against their own interests, against the interests of socialism and against the interests of democracy.²⁴

Without this attitude, Lenin argued, the immense resentment towards the imperialist power and the rising anger against deprivation would forever be left to be articulated by the leadership of the nationalist movement, led by the middle class and professionals, whose interests were limited to the establishment of capitalism in 'their own' national territory.

Lenin uses the example of Ireland to argue for the right to secession and for a break with national chauvinism.

Lenin's views on the 1916 Easter Uprising, where he disagreed with those who dismissed it as a 'mere putsch' was a continuation of this debate within the socialist movement, taking on the views of prominent socialists such as Karl Radek, who would later become a minister in the Soviet government.

But what Lenin insisted upon was socialists maintaining their own independent organisation, based on the working class, that could challenge the middle-class nationalists for leadership of the revolt and argue that the only way to freedom was through international revolution.

This had practical consequences for the early Bolshevik government. Tsarist Russia was the heart of an empire that dominated and oppressed nations throughout Central Asia. The demands for national freedom in its colonies produced sharp debates within

the Bolshevik party and among those drawn to the Communist International. Lenin vigorously argued that the new Soviet government must make good on its promise to liberate oppressed nationalities, but must guarantee their rights to freedom to practice religion and use their own language.

This was the origin of the title 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics', a free union of socialist countries (and a title that was later to be drained of any meaning as Stalin reimposed the most monstrous tyranny and forced collectivisation on the former Tsarist colonies).

Lenin also argued that this approach had practical consequences for socialists internationally, especially for those in the imperialist countries. Socialists, he argued, could not confine themselves to simple economic questions and trade union struggles, but must take up, in a practical way, the struggle against all injustice and forms of oppression. To do so, he argued, would draw a clear distinction between revolutionaries and reformists, who at the crucial moment, would always fall in behind the demands of imperialism and capitalism. The revolutionaries had to set themselves the task of winning the majority among workers and the oppressed so that they could provide a consistent leadership of the struggle when it came to war and revolution.

During the congresses of the Communist International, Lenin engaged in a particularly sharp debate with the British delegation, which included Sylvia Pankhurst and Willie Gallacher, warning of the dangers of not taking national liberation seriously, and of engaging in mere revolutionary phrases, instead of socialists engaging in the practical work of trying to convince workers and soldiers not to fight in imperialist wars.

In Ireland, for instance, there are two hundred thousand British soldiers who are applying ferocious terror methods to suppress the Irish. The British Socialists are not conducting any revolutionary propaganda among these soldiers, though our resolutions

²⁴V I Lenin, *Theses on the National Question*, 1913, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/jun/30.htm>

clearly state that we can accept into the Communist International only those British parties that conduct genuinely revolutionary propaganda among the British workers and soldiers.²⁵

James Connolly's son Roddy, travelled to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920 in Petrograd and presented a report on the situation in Ireland, which drew out the class contradictions of the struggle.²⁶ Roddy Connolly was involved in the struggle within the Socialist Party of Ireland, initially dominated by the leadership of O'Brien and Thompson, to transform it into a radical socialist organisation. The new Communist Party was eventually formed in 1920, but with few forces and very little influence. As the Civil War following the signing of the Treaty took off, Connolly travelled to see Liam Lynch, the leader of the anti-Treaty forces to urge him to adopt a policy that took up social and workers' issues, but Lynch dismissed his suggestions as a 'waste of time'.²⁷ The result was that the campaign against the Treaty was reduced to an entirely military question, against far superior forces.



Lenin (centre) with Roddy Connolly (centre-right)

The need to link the struggle for indepen-

dence and the class struggle was one of the most distinctive features of the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks took the position of supporting national liberation and guaranteeing freedom for religious and national languages precisely in order to undermine the appeal of bourgeois nationalism in the colonial countries and appeal to the working class to see their interests as best defended by allying with the socialist revolution. It is very notable, especially given the rise of Islamophobia in recent decades and the inability of large sections of the left internationally to separate their views on religious and sexual freedom from the need to confront it that the early Soviet regime guaranteed religious freedom to Muslims, encouraged practicing Muslims to join the Communist Party and the Red Army, especially in the oppressed countries of Central and East Asia and recognised Sharia common law. The subsequent overturning of all these freedoms under Stalin's rule is another example of the degeneration and betrayal of the revolution.²⁸

The lessons of October

The victory of workers' power in Russia was propelled by immense, often unco-ordinated revolts but it was also a conscious process. It required a political organisation that could give expression and direction to the immense social revolt.

In the absence of such parties, other social forces would come to dominate, frustrate and ultimately drive back the revolutionary wave.

The Cadets, Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who made up the caretaker Provisional Government in Russia after the fall of the Tsar, could only envisage a change in government from Tsarism to parliamentary democracy and at the first opportunity sought to restore the rights of landlords,

²⁵V I Lenin, *The Second Congress of the Communist International*, July 19-August 2 1920, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm>

²⁶Lenin warmly welcomed him, saying that he had read his father's *Labour In Irish History* and rated him 'head and shoulders' above all his European contemporaries. C. McGuire, *Roddy Connolly and the Struggle for Socialism in Ireland*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2008, pp. 20, 31-32

²⁷Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*, Dublin:2016, p.103

²⁸D Crouch, 'The Bolsheviks and Islam' *International Socialism* 110, 2006 available at <http://isj.org.uk/the-bolsheviks-and-islam/>

hand control of the factories back to the capitalists and return to fighting in the world war. This was the great contradiction, the clash between rising expectations of a risen people and a mass of workers and soldiers who refused to continue to fight that drove the explosive events of 1917 and deepened the revolutionary wave in Russia.²⁹

The growth of Bolshevism during the war, and especially in 1917, was really the experience of the need for centralised direction of the mass revolts, peasant uprisings, strikes and mutinies towards the confrontation for state power.

What Lenin had was an organisation in Russia, connected by regular newspapers, involving thousands of activists based in workplaces, towns, army barracks and villages, who had been forged in the struggles and defeats of previous years, which was able to connect with the rising outbreaks of strikes in the cities and the growing mutinies among soldiers and sailors and to give it direction. In July 1917, for instance, this meant restraining the demands by Petrograd workers and soldiers, on massive armed demonstrations, to immediately seize power from the Provisional government. Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued that if they didn't win support in the rest of the country they would be isolated, surrounded and defeated. The roots of the revolution were spontaneous revolts, spurred by the immense social crisis caused by the war, but they required conscious direction and co-ordination to bring to victory.

This was the over-riding lesson of the Russian Revolution, the need for a strategy and organisation that sought to replace the rule of the bourgeoisie with the democratic rule of the workers organisations, the 'soviets' or workers' councils.

The lack of direction of the workers' revolts in Ireland, their subordination to the leadership of the national movement, highlights the absence of a political force in Ireland (and also Britain) which might have brought together the various struggles of this period, particularly by making a connection between those in the North and the South,

into a coherent strategy that might have provided an independent, class-based alternative challenge to both nationalism and unionism that, at least, might have survived the revolutionary period.

Despite the magnificent and path-breaking contribution of James Connolly to the development of socialist ideas and organisation in Ireland, and the enormous gap left in the leadership of the socialist movement in Ireland after his execution, the experience of the years of revolution bear out the warnings that Lenin had tried to sound to the international socialist movement.

In Ireland, the movement veered between syndicalism, the belief that militant, direct action trade unionism could by itself result in the eventual victory of socialism, to collapsing politically behind the leadership of the nationalist movement, deferring the struggle for an improvement in workers' lives and postponing the resolution of workers' interests.

The huge wave of class struggle in Ireland took place at a time when Connolly's Irish Citizens Army had effectively dissolved itself into the IRA, when the ITGWU came under the leadership of a layer of cautious, essentially conservative trade union officials and when there was a mere handful of revolutionary socialists, who played a key role in many of the struggles, but were barely able to co-ordinate their organisation.³⁰

In the absence of an alternative pole of political attraction within the movement, the radicals and trade unionists were unable to withstand the overshadowing of the class struggle as unionist reaction turned to pogroms against Catholics and 'rotten Prods' in the shipyards of the North and areas such as Lisburn, nor the breaking of workers' struggle by the new Free State regime as recession bit deep in the South.

The attempts to establish a communist political organisation in Ireland came too late and when they eventually did were overshadowed by the defeat of the Russian Revolution at the hands of Stalin.

With the isolation of the Russian revolution and especially after Lenin's death

²⁹Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1977

³⁰See Conor Kostick, *Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917 to 1923*, London:1996 Ch, 7

in 1924, the influence of the new Russian government on the Communist Parties of the rest of the world was almost everywhere disastrous. The new Stalinist bureaucracy reacted to the isolation by rejecting the idea of international revolution and attempting to build up the Russian economy through increasing exploitation of Russian workers. This ushered in the era of mass forced collectivisation, constant speed-ups and repression in the factories, the show-trials and witch-hunts of anyone opposed to the party leadership. All the hope of the flowering of workers democracy, the liberation of women and freedom for oppressed nationalities, were completely overturned.

The isolation and subsequent degeneration of the Russian revolution and the emergence of Stalinism, with all its tyranny and oppression, especially of the former colonial

nations, represented a massive reversal of the initial promise of the revolution and bent the development of revolutionary politics in Ireland out of all recognition.

The Stalinism of what became known as the Eastern Bloc never inspired or enthused more than a small minority of the working class in Ireland and was a gift to those who denounced socialism from the pulpit or the platform of Orange marches. But the initial promise of the Russian Revolution, the idea of international workers' revolution, and the liberation for all oppressed nations and oppressed groups, was an electrifying idea among Irish workers. The potential for that hope to be translated into conscious revolutionary organisation, capable of influencing the struggles of the future, is a task that confronts the socialist movement in Ireland today.