

Review

1917

Why the Russian Revolution Matters

Directed by Ceri Dingle

Contributors: Dr Philip Cunliffe, Professor Frank Furedi, James Heartfield, Professor Alan Hudson, Mick Hume, Eve Kay, Dr Norman Lewis, Dr Tara McCormack

WorldWrite_CD: Format HD Running time 1 hour 16 minutes

By Don Milligan

This is a crowdfunded educational video about the Russian Revolution. It runs for a little over an hour. It has no narrator, but is composed of a stream of brief comments and observations by ‘talking heads’ interspersed with newsreel clips and still photographs gathered together from archives around the world of the Irish Rebellion 1916, the German Revolution 1918, Hungary 1956, and Russia 1917-1919. The early Russian clips are often intercut with modern colour film taken at the same locations in St Petersburg (Petrograd). Good use is also made of scenes from Sergei Eisenstein’s movies, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928).

Little attention is paid to the sequence of historical events in favour of comments concerning the transformative nature of the Revolution and the ambition and daring of the Bolshevik leaders. There are some ham-fisted comments about the “weirdness” of the Tsar made in an attempt to describe the character of Russia’s *ancien regime* to a modern audience. However, the contributors do well in striving to convey the startling and unlimited possibilities promised by the revolution, and of the global reach of its impact. They are particularly good at dispelling the notion that the Bolshevik seizure of power was simply the product of a small group of party schemers, by describing the

wholehearted and active engagement in the revolutionary process of hundreds of thousands of ordinary workers, soldiers, and sailors in Petrograd and Moscow.

Above all the contributors wish to emphasise the importance of mass political participation because 1917 reveals to us that what we see in front of us in society today as substantial and unalterable, is not solid at all, but is on the contrary, subject to change and challenge by the initiative, creativity, and actions, of ordinary people.

In an important sense this approach represents well the prior commitments of the film's contributors but does little to introduce the uninitiated into the complexity of the events of 1917. If one knew little or nothing about the Russian Revolutions of February or October this film would bewilder more than it explained. However, as a teaching aid contextualised with other materials and discussions it might be useful.

Unfortunately, in adopting a fundamentally defensive posture, the contributors have avoided all criticism of the Bolsheviks, and have opted for the usual tactic of consigning their opponents to the silence of Trotsky's "dustbin of history". Consequently, the revolution in the countryside and the destruction of Russia's aristocracy brought about by the peasants' revolt which swept across the Russian Empire between May and October 1917 warrants barely a mention – because, of course, the Bolshevik desire for land nationalisation ran counter to the desire of four fifths of the population who wanted to defend the family-owned farms they had carved out of aristocratic and monastic estates.

The isolation of the Revolution is presented as the work of international and reactionary forces as if the Bolsheviks had no hand in the matter. The fact that the Bolsheviks opted within a month of the seizure of power for rule by decree enforced by a ruthless police tyranny, which by the middle of 1918 had killed, imprisoned, or driven into hiding or exile, or armed opposition, a clear majority of Russia's revolutionary forces – the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and the anarchists – is not discussed as an

important element in the Bolshevik party's subsequent isolation.

Similarly, the manner in which the Bolsheviks compounded the destruction of the country's war-torn economy by their abolition of all private commerce, the nationalisation of more or less all enterprises, the suppression of all market trading, the arrest, execution, imprisonment, or exile, of factory owners, and business people of all sorts, is not thought worthy of comment. Nor is the Bolshevik practice of confiscating grain and other foodstuffs at gunpoint from peasant farmers, thought to be worthy of note in consideration of why the Revolution was clutched by starvation and fell into a torrent of blood. The viciousness and barbarism of the 'White' opponents of the fledgling Bolshevik state – the armies of Admiral Kolchak, and Generals Yudenich and Denikin – are not in doubt, but it is surely worth mentioning that the Bolsheviks had a big hand in the downfall of their own revolution.

Above all the October Revolution cannot be discussed properly without recognition of the fact that clear majorities of Russia's population in 1917 and 1918 believed that the revolution was a both a workers *and* a bourgeois revolution – and could not be turned into a purely socialist one by violent fiat. The Bolshevik seizure of power in October and the failure of their project during the course of the Civil War and the following decade cannot be understood without reference to the fact that four fifths of the population – at least eighty per cent of Russia's working people – were resolute opponents of the suppression of private commerce, of land nationalisation, and the broader agenda of the Communist Party. The wholehearted but temporary support that the Bolsheviks won amongst the urban working class – perhaps two per cent of Russia's population – in the heady days between August 1917 and January 1918 did not survive beyond the middle of 1918. The result was the dictatorship of the Communist Party rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In its defensive and uncritical approach to its subject this film does not explain why the Russian Revolution matters

much beyond banal observations about international reverberations and the difficulty of the historical conditions. Above all the film fails to note that it was precisely because of Lenin's decision to ride roughshod over the existing conditions that led the Bolsheviks into the morass of voluntarism and the unbridled exercise of police power. Extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary imprisonment were institutionalised from around the middle of December 1917 and became an integral and essential feature of the soviet state founded by Lenin, Trotsky, Dzerzhinsky, and Stalin.

Karl Marx's observation that . . .

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

. . . should not be deployed, as the makers of this film do, to justify the voluntarism of those who, like the Bolsheviks, ignored the historical constraints of the circumstances that they actually faced by attempting to shoehorn the entire society at gunpoint into the socialist future. Consequently, this film is worth watching in the context of wider discussion and engagement with the topic, but its explanation of why the Russian Revolution matters is undermined by vague and sometimes slipshod assertions, and above all by its defensive silence on the permanent repression ushered in by Lenin's revolutionary state.