CHAPTER 12

The First World War, Classical Marxism and the End of the Bourgeois Revolution in Europe

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Introduction

At approximately 9.00 pm on 8 November 1917 (new style), Vladimir Illych Lenin rose in the meeting hall of the former Smolny Institute for Noble Girls and began his address to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Lenin’s arresting opening line – ‘we shall now proceed to construct the socialist order’ – was only reported two years later by John Reed, and its content may have involved a certain amount of journalistic licence on his part. Nevertheless, the startling central fact remains: Lenin was able to announce that Russia had begun the transition to socialism on the basis of a successful insurrection, an outcome that he had only concluded was possible six months earlier and of which it then took several months to persuade the overwhelming majority of Bolshevik Party members. Prior to Lenin’s arrival at the Finland Station in April only Trotsky had seriously argued that the Russian Revolution could become a socialist rather than a bourgeois revolution, through the strategy of ‘permanent revolution’.

What converted other Russian revolutionaries to Trotsky’s conclusion, if not to his reasoning, was the crisis brought about by Russian involvement in the First World War. Russia was not of course the only Eastern European state in 1914 where the bourgeois revolution had still to be accomplished against an absolutist (Austro-Hungarian) or tributary (Ottoman) regime, and in which permanent revolution as Trotsky conceived it might have been possible. But those other countries never moved beyond bourgeois revolutions and that outcome effectively signalled the completion of the process in Europe, if we understand its eastern boundary to be the new Turkish state consolidated by 1923.

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1 Reed, 1977, p. 129. Trotsky, who was not present, later commented: ‘That initial statement which John Reed puts in the mouth of Lenin does not appear in any of the newspaper accounts. But it is wholly in the spirit of the orator. Reed could not have made it up’. Trotsky, 1977, p. 1168.
For some writers, Arno Mayer above all, it was the Second World War which in fact brought an end to the pre-bourgeois order in Europe. According to Mayer, until the conclusion of what he calls ‘the Thirty Years’ War of the general crisis of the twentieth century’ [1914–45], Europe was still dominated by an order ‘thoroughly pre-industrial and pre-bourgeois’: ‘The Great War was an expression of the decline and fall of the old order fighting to prolong its life rather than the explosive rise of industrial capitalism bent on imposing its primacy’. Mayer even extends his analysis to what had once seemed the obvious exceptions, writing that, ‘[n]either England nor France had become industrial-capitalist and bourgeois civil and political societies’. During the thirty years between 1914 and 1945:

The elites and institutions of Europe’s embattled old regime were locked in a death struggle with those of a defiant new order: in the economic sphere merchant and manufactural capitalism against corporate and organized industrial capitalism; in civil society prescriptive ruling classes against university trained elites; in political society land-based notables and establishments against urban-based professional politicians; in cultural life the custodians of historicism against the champions of experimentation and modernism; and in science the guardians of established paradigms against the pioneers of the world’s second great scientific and technological revolution.

By the end of the Second World War the struggle was over: ‘Throughout most of Europe the old regime was either decimated or cast off by 1945’.

I want to dispute this conclusion. It was the 1914–18 War, rather than its successor, which sealed the fate of the old regimes. Even conservative historians are aware that the First World War involved a decisive shift in the nature of European state forms, although they tend to see this in purely political terms; Niall Fergusson, for example, writes that, ‘the First World War turned out to be a turning point in the long-running conflict between monarchism and republicanism; a conflict which had its roots in eighteenth-century America and France, and indeed further back in seventeenth-century England’. But why did the revolutions which occurred from October 1918 onwards not emulate the Russian experience, even though many – if not all – of the same conditions

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3 Mayer 1981, p. 3.
4 Mayer 1990, p. 32.