

The Russian Revolution (1917-1921), Vol. II
By William Henry Chamberlin. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1935

Book Review
By Daniel Kendie, Ph.D.

This extremely educational book is a historical account of the Russian Revolution from 1917-1921. More specifically, it narrates the struggle waged between the Bolsheviks, who wanted to create a new social and economic order, on one hand, and the "counter-revolutionaries," who desired to restore the old order. Whether all those who opposed the Bolsheviks could be described as "counter-revolutionaries" is hard to determine. After all, Chamberlin has no revolutionary theory by means of which the information he has gathered can be evaluated. In such a set-up, what could be the difference between an adversary, a reactionary, and a counter-revolutionary?

The prominent counter-revolutionary camp is the camp of the "White Russians." It is led by men of "resolute courage," in so far as they established seven counter-revolutionary fronts. But at the same time, the author admits that they had no clear-cut plans for ousting the Bolsheviks. Moreover, argues Chamberlin, their authoritative tendencies, the harsh treatment they visited on non-Russian minorities like the Jews, and their unwillingness to leave the peasants in possession of their land, had alienated them from most of the people.

The anti-Communist Czarist military officers who led the counter-revolutionary camp included Admiral Kochak, whom the author describes as "a man of passionate integrity," and who operated from Siberia; General A. Denikin, described as a man devoted to the ideals of patriotism (p. 252), and who had his base at the Don; General N. Yudenich and P.N. Wrangel, who operated from the Baltic and the Crimea, respectively.

By the author's account, one of the major causes of the Russian Revolution was the oppressive Czarist system itself, with all its economic, social and political implications (p. 452). In this respect, it should be borne in mind that any force which attempted to restore a discredited system can do so only at its own peril.

Two factors that assisted the counter-revolutionaries were: (a) the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, and (b) foreign interventions. With regard to the Treaty, Chamberlin argues that Brest Litovsk compromised the Bolsheviks, even if temporarily. They had to surrender the Baltic Provinces, Poland, the Ukraine, Finland and the Caucasus to Germany, Austria and Turkey, respectively. Yet, he also admits that when Germany was defeated during World War I, realizing the war was lost, the occupying German troops had no stomach for fighting. As a result, the Bolsheviks could take back much of the land.

With regard to foreign intervention, Chamberlin points out that the French and British were irritated at Russia's withdrawal from prosecuting the war against Germany, and provides the different reasons for the intervention of USA, Japan, France, Britain and others, and their

support for the counter-revolutionary elements. He admits that their major objective was to destabilize the Bolshevik Revolution.

Woodrow Wilson had proposed a peace conference on Russia. However, the "Whites," backed by Premier Clemenceau of France and British War Secretary, Winston Churchill, rejected the idea. Later, even Poland, backed as it was by France, raised a border dispute with the Bolsheviks and, using that as a pretext, invaded Russia and routed the Red Army. Despite all this pressure, says the author, the Bolsheviks were not overthrown. He even raises two fundamental questions: (a) How could such a system survive under the pressure of civil war and blockade? (b) Why did it not simply topple over from its own inherent elements of futility and decay? (p. 347). Chamberlin describes a triumphant revolution as "decadent" and "futile." To say the least, this is a contradiction in terms. To go into it will sidetrack us from the task at hand; nevertheless, if one has to attempt to address the two questions, one can do so by utilizing the author's observations.

First, the Bolsheviks provided a strong and immensely gifted group of leaders. There was Lenin, who remained unshaken in his faith in the fundamental rightness of his cause and in its ultimate victory (p. 64). Chamberlin admits that the formidable problems Lenin faced in those days would have broken a less resolute leader. Then, there was Trotsky, "fiery," and "dynamic," and a gifted "orator" who rushed from front to front; Voroshilov, the military strategist; Stalin, cool and resolute; Dzerzhinsky, a fanatical and devoted man who ran the Cheka, which shot 50,000 counter-revolutionaries, and who ran the Red Terror to extirpate any opposition to the regime. There were also others like Bukharin, a leading theoretician; Karl Radek, Pyatakov, Joffe; and in the diplomatic front, skillful diplomats like Chicherin and Litvinov.

Second, they had a closely-knit organization with a formidable political program. Chamberlin, for instance, sees a problem in the Bolshevik proclamation of the principle of self-determination. The "Whites" exploited this proclamation. So did local nationalists in many of the regions. But ultimately, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, and others were recovered precisely because Lenin made this timely proclamation. Certainly, Finland was given independence.

Third, the Bolsheviks had the advantage of interior communications. They were fighting against foreign enemies who had invaded their country. They were not agents of any foreign power. As a result, they could create an army, in Trotsky's words, "that could obey orders and fight." Strange as it may sound, some 50,000 pre-Revolutionary army officers were recruited to train and fight with the Red Army (p. 32). All internal counter-revolution was defeated, and external intervention, at least in the military field, was considerably reduced, and territories ceded during the Brest Litovsk Treaty were re-occupied.

Fourth, the peasants, "the great majority of the population, were too ignorant and backward to act consciously on behalf of their own interests" (p. 19). If what the author says is true, how was it possible for the Bolsheviks to win? On the contrary, when the peasants took the land, including the big estates, the Bolsheviks went along and supported them. In this, the interest of the Bolsheviks was the need for political support of the peasants. They did not want

to antagonize them. That is why the peasants supported the Bolsheviks. And that is one of the reasons, which also made the Bolshevik Revolution a success. Given this observation, could we say that the peasants were not acting on behalf of their own interests?

Fifth, most of the workers, by Chamberlin's account, paid their allegiance to the Bolsheviks because it was the party of the working class. Half starved though they were, the majority of the workers were still ready to take up arms for the Bolsheviks (p. 29). In all this, argues Chamberlin, the Communists have proved that a relatively small but disciplined body of human beings, welded together by fanatical faith in an idea, can achieve results that seem out of all proportion to their numerical strength, and can overcome obstacles that seem insuperable (p. 376). Most significant for their success was the fact that in those days, there was far more freedom of speech within the Party than one could observe in the Party Conferences between 1927 and 1934 (p. 369).

Finally, there are two issues that the author discusses: (a) "War Communism," and (b) the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The former was created in order to channel the country's resources and efforts into victory in the civil war. The Bolsheviks adopted a pattern of coercion and centralization. The state became the sole producer and distributor of goods and services, and there was not much that could be called private. Grain was requisitioned. Workers were provided with rations in kind; free streetcar tickets and confiscated apartments were provided. Money was abolished altogether. Since the economy was paralyzed, says the author, by the end of 1920, "War Communism" was brought to an end.

With regard to the New Economic Policy (NEP), which could be described as a partial restoration of capitalism, Chamberlin observes that the restoration of money as an important factor in economic life was recognized. Food requisitioning was suspended. The market economy and taxation in kind were restored. While the commanding heights of the economy were still kept under state control, much small-scale industry was denationalized. Lenin called this system "State Capitalism."

Biographical Sketch

Daniel Kendie graduated (M.Sc. honors, Economics), from the University of Prague, and then from the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands, (M.A. Sociology & Political Science). Subsequently, he was awarded a three-year Fellowship by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, New York, where he completed a major study on the problems of peace and development in Africa. Having been granted a scholarship and a fellowship by Michigan State University, he completed his Ph.D. there, specializing on the modern history of the Middle East, Africa and Russia/the Soviet Union.