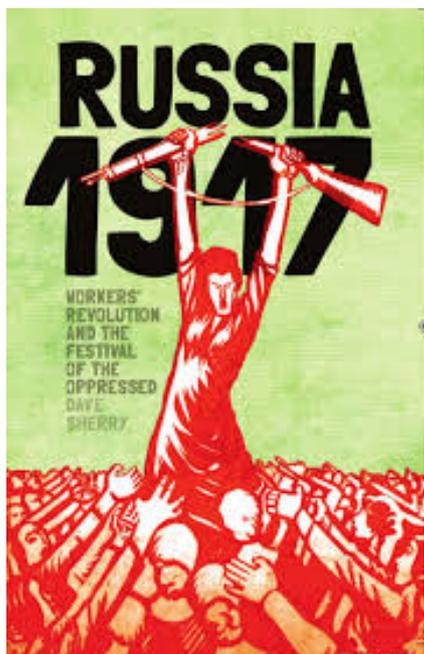


## Review: Dave Sherry, *Russia 1917*

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Dave Sherry, *Russia 1917*, Bookmarks, London, 2017 £12.99

The upcoming centenary of the Russian Revolution will see shelf-loads of books published about the great events in Russia in 1917. Many will be openly hostile; arguing that the workers revolution led to the horrors of the Stalinist dictatorship and the gulag. Desperate to discredit the idea that workers can transform society, they will claim it was just a coup that brought dictatorship and oppression. Others will portray it in purely historical terms, as an extension of the social upheavals thrown up at the end of World War One.

The advantage of Dave Sherry's new book on the Russian Revolution is that it places the revolution in its historical context and also in the wider context of a world gripped by war and economic crisis. That is why this book matters. The neo-liberal consensus of the last thirty years has

been thrown into confusion. The emergence of popular alternatives is an ambiguous response that can move to the left such as with Podemos in Spain, People Before Profit in Ireland and Corbyn in Britain, or to the right in the case of Trump or Le Pen in France. That is why the Russian Revolution matters. It provides an alternative view of what is possible in a chaotic world; if socialists organise and offer hope and unity in place of fear and division. The 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution gives socialists the world over the chance to rediscover these momentous events, which have inspired generations of workers.

Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary said: 'The history of a revolution is first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny'.

This was the case in Russia. The immediate spark for the February Revolution was women textile workers striking on International Women's Day<sup>1</sup> to demand bread. A strike against victimisation at the Petrograd steel works also fed into this. On 23 February a mass demonstration clashed with soldiers - but a substantial chunk of the troops broke and joined the side of the demonstrators. Singing revolutionary songs, they ransacked bakeries and grocery stores and redistributed the goods. The workers and the Bolshevik party worked hard to spread the action. Red banners began to appear in different parts of the city echoing the women workers' demands. Within five days the Tsar was gone and a new power known as the Provisional Government<sup>2</sup> took over.

By the time of the October Revolu-

<sup>1</sup>'How radical socialists began the tradition of International Women's Day' *Socialist Worker* [socialistworker.co.uk/art/30194/How+radical+socialists+began+the+tradition+of+International+Womens+Day](http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/30194/How+radical+socialists+began+the+tradition+of+International+Womens+Day)

<sup>2</sup>'Dual Power' in our hands' *Socialist Worker* [socialistworker.co.uk/art/10185/%E2%80%98Dual+Power%E2%80%99+in+our+hands](http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/10185/%E2%80%98Dual+Power%E2%80%99+in+our+hands)

tion<sup>3</sup>, the masses were demanding radical change, the parties supporting parliamentary democracy were discredited and the old order was desperate to reassert itself. The Bolsheviks popularised the demands of peace, bread and land. But they argued that only by seizing political power could the working class achieve them, and raised the slogan, 'All power to the soviets'.

Peasants made up the largest group in Russia at the time, but workers drove the revolution forward. The working class had grown rapidly, with some estimates putting it at around 15 percent of the population. The revolt was most powerful in the capital, where working class organisation was strongest, but it quickly spread across Russia.

The revolution flowed from a deep crisis<sup>4</sup> that affected the whole of Russian society. The new Industrialists wanted to develop a modern capitalist system. Workers were sick of the war, of poverty, and the lack of democracy. The peasants wanted land. No one was prepared to defend the old order, but there were disagreements over what should replace it.

The Bolshevik<sup>5</sup> party played a key role. Thousands of workers and soldiers rushed to join it in the run-up to the revolution. By 1917 it was a mass party. They won support because while other formerly radical politicians called for restraint, the Bolsheviks stayed out on the streets with the irresponsible and belligerent revolutionary crowd.

In the months following the February Revolution, class and political divisions increasingly came to the fore. Workers and soldiers became more radical; and eight months later, another revolution put them

in charge. When workers seized power in November 1917; they ushered in a totally different sort of society. Within days of workers taking control of the capital Petrograd, measures were brought in to meet these demands and give ordinary people control over their lives.

Women were guaranteed the right to a divorce, abortion on demand and the vote. Russia became the first country in the world to legalise homosexuality; rights that we in Ireland are still fighting for. Outside of the cities land was taken from the old estates and given to the mass of peasants. These important gains weren't just decrees from above. Russian society and ordinary people's ideas changed during the revolution.

This was part of a much bigger process of human liberation. Lenin argued that revolutions are 'festivals of the oppressed and the exploited' and this is the subtitle of Dave Sherry's book. The revolution unleashed people's creativity as they struggled to build a better future for themselves. After 1917 there was flourishing of art, literature and culture.

After 1917, a revolutionary wave swept through Europe, with revolutions first in Germany<sup>6</sup> in 1918 and then Hungary and Slovakia in 1919. Workers struck and took to the streets. Soldiers mutinied in the trenches. Unfortunately, these revolutions were pushed back, broken, and defeated, which left the Russian Revolution isolated and under attack from the western powers. Ultimately, the workers' revolution was defeated, despite the efforts of Lenin, Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks. Socialism was not possible in an economically backward country; the revolution needed to spread across Europe in order to sustain it and create the

<sup>3</sup>'Russia 1917: was it a revolution or a coup?' *Socialist Worker* [socialistworker.co.uk/art/2242/Russia+1917%3A+was+it+a+revolution+or+a+coup](https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/2242/Russia+1917%3A+was+it+a+revolution+or+a+coup)

<sup>4</sup>'How crisis can lead to revolution from below' *Socialist Worker* [socialistworker.co.uk/art/725/How+crisis+can+lead+to++revolution+from+below](https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/725/How+crisis+can+lead+to++revolution+from+below)

<sup>5</sup>'The birth of the Bolshevik party' *Socialist Worker* <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/26747/The+birth+of+the+Bolshevik+party>

<sup>6</sup>'Germany's Forgotten Revolution' *Socialist Worker* [socialistworker.co.uk/art/23670/Germans+Forgotten+Revolution](https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/23670/Germans+Forgotten+Revolution)

space and time for the Russian revolution to develop its full potential. Unfortunately, the Stalinist bureaucracy that emerged at the end of the 1920s destroyed the last vestiges of what had been achieved in those few glorious years.

The argument for socialism has never

been more important. Understanding 1917 and the movements and ideas that gave rise to it are vital today if we are to offer the prospect of a better world, before we are overwhelmed by a system that is in the process of destroying the future.