
Lessons from Revolutions

Development Takes Time

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JERRY F. HOUGH

A scholar of the Bolshevik Revolution and the evolution of the Soviet Communist regime must be extremely selective in choosing a focus when considering their implications, and so my essay reflects the law of comparative advantage. I studied the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1961 at a university where the intellectual atmosphere was dominated by development thinkers such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Alexander Gerschenkron, Samuel Huntington, Barrington Moore, and Talcott Parsons, and so, not surprisingly, this essay focuses on the Bolshevik Revolution as the product of Russia’s development process and its implications for development theory.

The Bolshevik Revolution certainly needs to be analyzed in development terms, but there are different time frameworks for which this can be done. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Russian Revolution from 1904 to 1917 (really to 1921) was traditionally seen as one of the “great” European revolutions: the English of the 1640s, the French of the 1780s and 1790s, and the German–central European of 1848 and 1849. The sequence of these revolutions corresponds to the order in which the countries began to industrialize. Although the Italian revolution of the early 1920s and the Spanish Civil War of the mid-1930s also fit within this pattern, they were seldom included in the discussion in this period of scholarship.

During the late 1930s, Western scholars and especially American scholars began to describe the Bolshevik Revolution in different terms. To say that the Russian Revolution was one in a series of European “great revolutions” was to imply, the new argument

Jerry F. Hough is James B. Duke Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Duke University.

The Independent Review, v. 22, n. 2, Fall 2017, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2017, pp. 207–214.

went, that the leaders who eventually emerged from all those revolutions were similar. The other revolutions eventually produced relatively moderate dictators—what came to be known as traditional dictators. Vladimir Lenin and especially Joseph Stalin did not correspond to this pattern.

The traditional dictators just wanted to consolidate their power in countries where rising new elites were beginning to promote commercial and industrial development. They rested on the support of such elites. By contrast, the Bolsheviks wanted to destroy the rising new elites and to use the state to promote industrialization. The mainline scholars of the 1940s and 1950s argued that Lenin and Stalin were totalitarian dictators and fundamentally different from the traditional ones.

The theorists of totalitarianism went one step further. They argued that Lenin and Stalin were not unique in one respect but were quite similar to another dictator of the time, Adolf Hitler. The prevailing image of political parties put the Communists on the extreme left of the political spectrum and the Nazis on the extreme right. The theorists of totalitarianism said that the extreme left and the extreme right were essentially the same.

Although the point was not expressed formally, the theory of totalitarianism was developed at least in part as a political answer to the conservative Republicans of the 1930s and then to Friedrich Hayek in 1944. The conservatives insisted that communism was the natural consequence of the inevitable evolution of moderate socialists leftward on the political spectrum to the extreme left. But if the Communists were not on the extreme left but were in the same class as those on the so-called extreme right, why should moderate socialists evolve to communism? How could the conservatives be correct if communism was not even on the extreme left?

The original theorists of totalitarianism were interested primarily in what made totalitarian regimes distinctive and what drove the totalitarian leaders to follow the path of extreme oppression. How did the totalitarian leaders achieve a level of oppression qualitatively different from the level achieved by the traditional dictatorships of the past and present?

The major explanation for the unusual level of repression was that the rulers had an ideological drive to transform society in an “unnatural” way. If rulers had an obsession with creating a racially pure society or with transforming human nature so that people would act in the way assumed by Karl Marx’s goal of a Communist society, then their control had to be far more intrusive than that needed by a traditional status quo dictator. It had to extend to the level of the individual citizen. If the ideology insisted that a perfect society was possible, then this possibility justified the payment of an extremely high price to achieve that society. The deaths of millions of Jews or peasants in collectivization were an example of such a price.¹

1. The foremost postwar theorist of totalitarianism was Carl Friedrich. See Friedrich 1954 and Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956.

The scholars of totalitarianism answered the “how” question in ways that were both simple and complex. One answer was that the leaders had mechanisms of technological, educational, and media control that earlier dictators had not possessed. Although the point was seldom made in these terms, the Russian state in 1520 was already much stronger than the English state of Henry V. The Prussian state of 1933 was still stronger than the Russian state of 1917.

Another answer to the “how” question was that the totalitarian dictators had learned to use terror to create a sense of insecurity and that this insecurity led people to embrace both an all-powerful leader and a rigid ideology in order to overcome it. This psychological theory was associated most closely with Hannah Arendt (1951) but also in part with scholars such as Erich Fromm (1941), Teodor Adorno (1950), and William Kornhauser (1959).

The postwar theory of totalitarianism was basically developed in the last years of Stalin’s life, and it almost immediately lost much of its relevance to the post-Stalin Soviet Union, let alone to the Communist regimes in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia after 1955. The transforming ideology became less rigid and the terror less extreme.

Moreover, Western social democrats and New Dealers became more moderate and were seen as less of a threat, especially as the likelihood of a second Great Depression faded. This moderation made the dire conservative predictions of the 1930s and by Hayek seem increasingly excessive.

At precisely the same time, however, a new danger arose. It obviously was, of course, utterly taboo to discuss, but during the early stages of World War II Stalin made a sphere-of-influence deal with Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in which they gave Stalin eastern Europe, permanent military control of Prussia (Roosevelt consciously did this in 1942 and 1943), and a sphere of influence in China. Stalin in turn gave the United States and Britain all of western Europe, permanent military control of the Rhineland and Bavaria (including in his explicit offer of the Rhineland and Bavaria’s membership in a Western federation in December 1941), and control of the developing world other than China (including Turkey and Iran).

Stalin and the Western allies had observed the sphere-of-influence agreement quite faithfully, but his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, broke it in 1954 and especially 1955 in the developing world, most spectacularly in the old British strongholds of Egypt and India. This challenge, combined with the new Communist regimes in China, Vietnam, and then Cuba, increased the fear that the Soviet Union would be attractive in the developing world as an alternate path to industrialization that seemed to produce rapid economic growth.

At this time, scholars began to define the Soviet model primarily as a different path of industrial development based on a far greater role for the state. This model was quite different from the model Hitler followed. The new definition had a major impact on the perception of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Karl Marx had called the early “great” European revolutions “bourgeois,” and Marxists of the twentieth century had applied that name to the Russian Revolutions of 1904–5 and March 1917.

In fact, of course, the so-called bourgeois revolutions in Europe occurred in countries where industrialists had not yet become a major force. Scholars of the Vietnam generation recognized this point when they called these revolutions “peasant revolts,” but the real peasants—those still in rural villages—usually remained largely conservative. The revolutions were instead based on peasants who were exposed to the city for the first time either as full-time “proletariat” (or their children) or as workers in the city between the harvest and spring planting.

Russia was typical. The Industrial Revolution began there in the early 1890s and drew an increasing number of people from the countryside into the city. Moreover, the winters in central Russia were long and intense, whereas the growing season was short, and the soil was of low quality. Hence, the peasants had a special need to supplement their income during the winter and a prolonged period in which to do it.

In a free election in January 1918, the Bolsheviks received only one-quarter of the total vote, but that portion came from a majority of the population in the large cities and of the peasants in the villages within a broad orbit around big cities.

The essence of the developmental theory of totalitarianism, although it was seldom expressed explicitly in such terms for political reasons, was that the insecurity that Arendt thought was created by the rulers’ terror was instead produced by the acceleration of urbanization in the early stages of industrialization. Peasants used only to the restrictive village world and infused with Max Weber’s traditional personalistic values were terrified by a new world that was totally strange, bewildering, and impersonal. This fear caused them to seek simple, dogmatic answers to alleviate their insecurity and an authoritarian figure to protect them.

In this view, Lenin and Stalin did not betray a democratic revolution but expressed a revolution based on the newcomers to the city, who found these men’s authoritarian personality, political party, and ideology comforting. The actual Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 was seen as the product of the German destruction of the Russian army and of Lenin’s daring willingness to take advantage of the brief vacuum of power created with that destruction. Yet the real Bolshevik Revolution came to be seen as more prolonged in time, at least including the Russian Civil War of 1918–21 but also including, according to historian Sheila Fitzpatrick (1982), the transformation of 1929 to 1932.

Nevertheless, the passage of time after the 1950s affected not only the questions about the Bolshevik Revolution that were of interest to society but also the nature of the scholarly community interested in the revolution. The Bolshevik Revolution became more the “property” of historians, and their professional bias left them little inclined to theory building. Political scientists became more interested in the future and in new questions.

From 1965 to 1982, the Soviet ruler was Leonid Brezhnev, who was born the son of a peasant in a steel industry city in 1906 and who surrounded himself almost entirely by men of his generation. As these men passed from the scene, they would be replaced by a new generation who took urban society for granted and who had been protected from uncertainty by the ideology taught them in school and by the barriers created to the entry of most modern culture.

Those whose interpretation of the Soviet Union reflected the old totalitarian model—most famously, Jeane Kirkpatrick (1982)—saw the controls in a totalitarian system so strong that the Soviet Union could not evolve in a more democratic direction or even toward the more liberal dictatorship England had become after the Restoration of 1660 and toward modern dictatorship.

Those whose interpretation reflected the developmental totalitarian model noted that the supposedly all-powerful controls of a totalitarian system had not prevented the collapse of totalitarian systems in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia until Soviet troops intervened. Why should the Soviet Union itself not be affected by the same political forces when it was controlled not by the pre-revolutionary generation but by those raised within the more stable Soviet system? Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, top party officials of the next generation, were born in 1931.²

The course of events in the 1980s did, of course, correspond to the predictions of the development model of totalitarianism, not of the static model. Clearly, the former is the model of the Bolshevik Revolution that we need to examine to judge the relevance of the Russian experience for the twenty-first century.

The English, French, and central European revolutions took place when solid states had already been formed. They still were developing countries, but the development of a state comes relatively late in the process. As Douglass North and Oliver Williamson have emphasized, the development process takes vast amounts of time—“centuries or millennia,” in Williamson’s words (2000, 596; on North, see Wallis 2008).

A large part of this process precedes the formation of a stable state over a relatively large territory. “Large” in this context can be quite small. England had a smaller territory than New York and Louisiana, and the warlord in London did not really gain control of those in the interior until 1600, over 500 years after the Norman invasion. Even then it took 100 years after 1600 to create the liberal state produced by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and nearly 250 years for the partial democratization of 1832.³

We should be aware that many countries still have decades to go before their period of mass movement from the countryside to the city is over. The population of Bangladesh was 66 percent rural in 2015, that of Pakistan 61 percent rural, that of the Philippines 56 percent rural, and that of Indonesia 46 percent rural.

The percentage of the rural population in most African countries is even higher. By contrast, 8 percent of the population in Argentina was rural in 2015, 14 percent of the population in Brazil, and 21 percent of the population in Mexico.⁴

2. See Hough 1980. For a retrospective analysis from this perspective, see Hough 1997.

3. For a detailed examination of the development process from 1000 to 1800 in England, Spain, and their colonies, see Hough and Grier 2015.

4. These and many other figures for every country in the world can be found in U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 2013.

“Countries” such as Afghanistan and Yemen as well as many in sub-Saharan Africa still do not have control of regional warlords, and if they are on the English timetable, they should achieve stable democracy sometime after 2250. No doubt, it will not take so long in the modern era, but presidents surely must be taught not to expect miracles in eight years.

The examples of Lenin and Hitler show that dogmatic ideologies can come in quite contrasting forms. We cannot comfort ourselves with the thought that Hitler’s ideology and Marxism-Leninism seem dead. There are many dogmatic ideologies that try to soften the pain of urbanization and the insecurity of the market with an ideology of community and family (now defined as a nation).

In the 1980s, I once wrote briefly about Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the Lenin of Iranian history (Hough 1988), and, in fact, Islamic fundamentalist ideology has many of the general characteristics of that of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The twenty-first century will surely feature a variety of such ideologies in Asia and Africa that demagogues will try to use to mobilize the insecure.

But the experience of the demagogic revolutions in Europe and the seventy-five years of the Bolshevik Revolution shows us that this twenty-first-century version too will pass. The mild liberalization that began with the death of Stalin in 1953 began thirty-six years after the revolution. The Iranian Revolution occurred thirty-eight years ago. We should not dismiss the likelihood of some liberalization in the medium-term or exaggerate the probability of rapid democratization.

One should not think that the development of a nontotalitarian state in a country, even a democratic one, shows that the danger of totalitarianism is over. Indeed, when the original theorists of totalitarianism said that technology was necessary for a truly totalitarian state, they were also saying that a state was necessary. Hence, the development of a strong state is the precondition of creating a state that is capable of totalitarianism.

Today we see India almost as an industrial giant, and it is unique in reaching the stage of development at which it has had a stable democracy. Yet 67 percent of its population still lived in rural areas in 2015. The census of 2011 found that India had 833 million people living in rural areas and 377 million in urban areas, and many of the “urban” areas were in fact small towns. Of the rural population seven years and older, 31 percent were illiterate; of the urban population, 15 percent were illiterate.

The American Civil War occurred eighty-five years after the American Revolution, and the United States was fortunate in the moderation of the leaders on both sides of that later war and in the weakness of its central state and army. India was given its independence in 1947. If India were on the American timetable, it should have its civil war in 2032, eighty-five years after independence.

It is even easy to see the base for a totalitarian movement in India. Fluency in English is a requirement for an elite job, and those who are raised in an English-speaking home have a great advantage in getting a good job. The rest of the population could easily support a revolution against the English language that would be just as strong as

the century-long revolution in Europe against the Latin language from the beginning of the Reformation to the end of the Thirty Years' War.

We need to be extraordinarily careful about rushing the process of democratization. War destroyed the Russian army in 1917 at the same time that partial democratization gave free rein to demagogues. In the post–Cold War period, many in the American elite supported a crusade, even one conducted by military action, to destroy the armies in the Muslim world and to introduce democracy.

The tragic results of the overthrow of the modernizing dictators Mohammad Najibullah in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and then the attempted overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in Syria provide strong support for the analysis given by the first major development theorist of the 1960s, Samuel Huntington (1968). Huntington emphasized the need for a regime based on a strong army or non-Communist one-party system to maintain control of popular-backed demagogues who were likely to come to power in countries with elections but without the demographic base for stable democracy.

The modern development theorist Douglass North in his most recent work published in 2009 and 2013 (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009; North et al. 2013) implicitly agreed with Huntington that the primary problem in development is the control of violence. First, a warlord must create firm control over the “capital” (usually the major trading center). The warlord of the “capital” must create an army capable of destroying the military force of the warlords and militias (the creation of the “state”) at any distance from it, and then the central army must be brought under control. In the roughest terms, the consolidation of London warlords' power took 200 years after 1066 in England, the destruction of regional warlords took another 300 years until 1600, and control of the military took more than another 150 years.

North warns that premature attempts at democratization are particularly dangerous. We consider the Athens of Plato to be the height of civilization, but its people were uneducated peasants, shepherds, and fishers who were coming into contact with a strange and frightening city peopled by men with upsetting ideas, such as Socrates. It is not an accident that the ancient Greeks used the word *demos* as the root both of *democracy* and *demagogue*.

The Greeks' insight needs to be remembered today. David Laitin summarized the thesis of North's book *In the Shadow of Violence* (North et al. 2009) in a blurb on the back cover: “Attempts to transform countries into ‘open access orders’ [democracies with free markets] typically yield more violence than development.” In the preface to the paperback edition of *Violence and Social Orders*, North and his coauthors John Joseph Wallis and Barry R. Weingast use more pithy language: “the world continues to be full of Arab springs and, unfortunately Arab winters” (2013, xv).

Indeed, although the pluralist, semidemocratic countries of the West no longer have the grounding for a revolution based on rural-to-urban migration, it should not be assumed that they are immune from the appeals made by totalitarian or semitotalitarian demagogues. Mass social insecurity can come from many causes. In 2008, Barack

Obama said in what he thought was a private setting that people cling to their guns and Bibles because of feelings of economic insecurity. Donald Trump and even the populists of Europe pose little danger, but others may follow.

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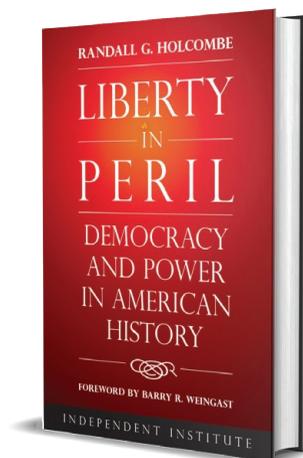
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