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SAVING, STRENGTHENING OR DESTROYING? THE USSR AND THE FATE OF THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION UNDER JOSEPH STALIN

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The October Revolution was the result of a crisis of world war

- It was led by doctrinaires who had a jumbled idea of the future based on European socialist revolution – Russia as a vanguard but not the main locomotive of change.
- It was enabled by the administrative, economic and – eventually – military dissolution of the middle months of 1917.
- It was recognised as an unprecedented event – the first socialist state in world history; but few people gave it a chance of surviving and succeeding. Sitting on suitcases.
- Most people had their thoughts on the geo-military conjuncture: how would Russian withdrawal from the War affect the two sides in the coalition. If Germany won, eastern Europe would become a German protectorate and the Bolsheviks hanged from lamp-posts. If the Allies succeeded, Soviet Russia would be an enemy.
- The Bolsheviks thought optimistically: let's use the popular support and build on it: workers and soldiers and, soon, peasants too. European socialist revolution, they argued, would resolve any lingering underlying difficulties.

But the October Revolution did not spread successfully

- Brest-Litovsk (1918) – Hungary/Munich (1919) – battle of the Vistula (1920).
- Workers were divided about the OR – no unilinear progress, and peasants were not grateful enough to release their harvest.
- Religious faith was predominant – local traditions were strong – people had voted socialist without endorsing the developing Bolshevik creed...
- The urban economy continued to collapse, partly because of inefficient nationalisations, and the rural sectors sealed themselves off from the towns.
- White Armies formed in Urals, southern Russia and Estonia.

So the Bolsheviks had to improvise a survival strategy:

- Party was the main dependable institution in contrast with Soviets, TUs, etc. No plan, even though the idea of vanguardism was to the fore.
- Nationalisation of banks, large factories and state control over the rest of the economy.
- Cultural quarantine, culminating in the establishment of Glavlit in 1922.
- Social mobilisation – the mass of citizens were to be used as a manipulable resource.
- Internal conquest of the party itself: no factions.



But victory in the Civil War and the NEP did not stabilise did not stabilise the Revolution

- Stalin resolved that stability would come through a reversion to the architecture of War Communism, but with a view towards advance, not retrenchment as in 1918-1920.
- The foundations were rapid industrialisation, agricultural collectivisation, intensified internal discipline and the Stalin cult, and eventually the promotion of the Russian people in status and postings.
- But the party's vanguard role meant that communist party officials had the confidence to criticise Stalin. And there were many others in public and professional life who were also envenomed against him.
- Out of this came the Great Terror of 1937-1938 – there was reason behind the madness.
- Stalin was raised to a pinnacle that was no longer subject to dispute.

The Revolution was stabilised at last...

- It had the same basic party-state structure, cadres and ideology, but each of them had undergone a peculiar twist that no one could have imagined back in 1917.
- Abroad, it was widely underestimated, notably by Adolph Hitler.
- But the Soviet state proved its capacity to defend itself against the Third Reich and build a nuclear bomb, and indeed become the world's second biggest industrial power.
- But the 1930s expansion depended crucially on German and then American technology, and the CoCom embargo system after World War Two restricted its integration in the world economy.
- In the long term it was a doomed experiment, which was inadequate in the tasks of providing Soviet citizens with the consumer products that even Stalin thought essential for the USSR to claim that it could mount to a superior form of modernity. And many of the ideals that even Stalin had espoused in 1917 lay bloodied on the floor of history.

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