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Russia

The War Comes Home to Russia; Could it Open the Way to Revolution?

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Russian dictator Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine has, as wars often do, come home. A rebellion led by the perhaps even more rightwing and authoritarian Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Russian Wagner Group, is leading his mercenary army to Moscow, saying he wants to talk with the generals, but he could try to take Moscow to overthrow Putin. There is little chance that Prigozhin's little army of a few thousand could take power, but it could unleash a political process that cannot be contained by Putin. The most important question at this moment is: Can this struggle in the Russian elite lead to the collapse of Putin and the oligarchy and could it make it possible for the Russian people to rise up and overthrow them all

The conflict between Putin and Prigozhin, the two dominant figures in the prosecution of the war on Ukraine, demonstrates the depth of crisis in both the military and political situation in Russia. Their conflict, which could become not just a military uprising but perhaps the beginning of a civil war, makes possible both a victory for Ukraine if it can take advantage of the events to drive the Russians out of all of their territory, and also could lead to the toppling of Putin.

Russia experienced two similar moments, one when after losing the war with Japan of 1904-95, a revolutionary movement developed among returning soldiers, workers, and peasants that threatened to overthrow Tsar Nicholas II. And then again, as World War I continued to slaughter millions, in 1917 Russian soldiers began to march home, peasants and workers rebelled, and Nicholas was overthrown by a liberal government in February and that government, as the revolution deepened, overturned by a coup by the Bolshevik Party in October.

In 1941, however, when Hitler's Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the Communist dictators Joseph Stalin took advantage of the crisis to strengthen his strangle hold on Soviet peoples. Stalin not only survived, but after the war extended his rule and the Communist system to the Baltic State and Eastern Europe. The war did not come home to overturn either Stalin or the bureaucratic Communist state.

Today, the circumstances are very different than in either of those cases. While Russia in 1917 had had thirty years of revolutionary organizing by anarchists and socialists who had constructed bases among the country's working people, today in Russia the revolutionary left is tiny. Every critical thinker or activist has either been imprisoned or fled the country, as half a million have. As best we know, no public demonstrations have yet taken place against Putin. There is the danger that a sector of the society, disgusted with Putin, might turn to the vile Prigozhin and his murderous Wagner mercenaries.

And unlike 1941, Putin's rule, unlike Stalin's, was not preceded by twenty years of repression an even more severe repression in which at least 100,000 died and hundreds of thousands of others went to the Gulags.

History has shown, in Russia and everywhere else, that ordinary working people can and will intervene from below to resist oppression and exploitation and to assert their desire for peace and justice. Until they do, we stand with the Ukrainians in their war against Russia and with the Russian people in the struggle for democracy and peace.

24 June 2023

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