

**The Bolshevik Revolution, a Hundred Years After: The Experience of 'Real Socialism' and the Dilemmas of the Contemporary World.**

**International Conference: Santiago de Chile, October 23-25 2017**

Organizers:  
Humanities Institute  
School of Social Science and  
History,  
Universidad Diego Portales.

On November 7<sup>th</sup> 1917, amid the complete political, economic and military breakdown of the Czarist Empire, the Bolsheviks took the government by assault. The new Soviet Power had to deal with blockade and civil war. The following years of apprenticeship were marked by the defeat of the German Revolution: by the deeply anomalous fact that the German working class had missed its appointment with history, opting for the way of gradual reforms within the capitalist system.

The founding fathers of Marxist Socialism understood that the material foundation of developed capitalism was the necessary condition for the passage to a classless society; in its place, their Bolshevik heirs had to deal with a backward Asian empire. Marxist ideas were exposed to the rigorous test of reality in those years that left a deep imprint in the historical undertakings of 'real socialism', as it came to be adequately labelled. Thenceforth, the thesis of 'socialism in a single country', the newly arisen Soviet Union, becomes central to the Marxist-Leninist creed, bringing with it an inevitable break with 'Western Marxism'. In it, the democracy of the Soviets gives way to the strict dictatorship of a bureaucracy ('Better fewer, but better': this is the title of Lenin's last article published in the press before his death). In addition, when the time for the crucial process of industrialization arrives, this bureaucracy will show no mercy: the 'policy of hastened industrialization' will crush any obstacle it finds on its way.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, for most of the Twentieth Century, the Bolshevik Revolution appeared as the event that had split human history in two, before and after those 'ten days that shook the world'. In fact, as early as the decade of 1930, the achievements of the revolution could hardly be ignored. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics seemed to have found a novel political solution to the question of nationalities, so that national liberation movements in peripheral

regions were keen to see it as its natural ally. Likewise, a mostly uncultivated population by European standards was attaining an education, and swiftly rising to the upper echelons of culture and the professions. In 1937, Pushkin's Centennial was celebrated by crowds in the whole Union, and the vision of a people gaining access to books, to the radio and the cinema triggered admiration and sympathy from artists and intellectuals all around the world, inclining them to ignore the purges through which, during the same years, the Bolshevik Old Guard was beginning to be systematically eradicated. Those were also the years in which the USSR was turning into a techno-scientific, industrial and military super-power: it would not be very long before it played a decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany and in the subsequent division of the world between the two victorious coalitions.

Through this division, a socialist block of nations emerged, comprising a significant part of Europe. And, notwithstanding the Cold War and the equilibrium of terror imposed by nuclear weapons, it was extended to Asia, to Africa and Latin America, so that, already at the beginning of the 1970's, and albeit the split within the socialist field between Moscow and Beijing, the dream of worldwide revolution seemed on the verge of its realization.

Nevertheless, precisely at that crucial instance, the strengths of 'real socialism' turned into weaknesses. The centralization of political power had generated an obsolete gerontocracy. The centrally planned economy had turned into a clamp that choked initiative and innovation, and perversely incentivized planned inefficiency. Marxism-Leninism, as a state religion providing human existence with the transcendent sense modern life lacks, was not an exception to that generalized decline: the transcendent sense, that each monument seemed to instil into every socialist 'new man', ended by being worth no more than the stone and steel contained in them. Finally, the Berlin Wall was pulled down by multitudes on the night of November 9, 1989, and not a gun was shot to defend the society it claimed to protect.

Real socialism used to be celebrated in hymns and odes. From then on, no one sings to it: it tends to be considered just a bizarre deformation of pure and humanitarian ideas, and can only inspire a sort of 'vintage' nostalgia. Moreover, in the meantime, the technological development that capitalism has succeeded to trigger has made possible the expansion and intensification of its logic, so that now it encompasses almost the whole planet, and penetrates each individual psyche. The recurrent crisis this global capitalism experiences stimulate the upraise of opposition movements and the pursuit of alternatives, so that 'the communist idea' seems to resurface. Nevertheless, this re-emergence is open to question: can it go transcend isolated provocation, playing into the media's appetite for the sensational, lacking an in-depth reflection on those decades in which the 'idea' was tested by reality?

In face of these complex questions, this International Conference and its satellite activities aims to open debate around a few fundamental questions:

- **Reasons for a failure. The USSR and ‘real socialism’ and the challenges of Twentieth Century Modernity.**
  - Centrally planned economy and the challenges of social complexity.
  - ‘Homo Sovieticus’ and communism as way of life and mass religion.
  - ‘Better fewer, but better’ (Lenin, 1923): People-Class-Soviet-Party, an unavoidable historical outcome?
- **The Revolution Betrayed? Continuities and ruptures within Marxist thought.**
  - ‘Dialectic Materialism’ and the philosophical tradition. The future of the ‘communist idea’.
  - European culture and thought in face of the challenge of Soviet Communism. Affinities and distances.
  - Art and politics in the age of ‘real socialism’. ¿Politization of art or aesthetization of politics?
- **The USSR, real socialisms, the Cold War, and revolutionary movements in Latin America.**
  - Communist parties and Popular Fronts. A non-violent path to socialism? The case of Chile’s Unidad Popular.
  - Guerrilla movements. The role of the USSR and Cuba.
  - The communist idea in Latin America after the demise of the USSR.

#### **Keynote Speakers (confirmed):**

- Sheila Fitzpatrick, Professor of History, University of Sydney; Distinguished Service Professor Emerita, University of Chicago. Dr. Fitzpatrick is a historian, specialized in the history of the USSR.
- Alan Knight. Emeritus Fellow, Oxford University. Dr. Knight is a historian, specialized in the Mexican Revolution and in the comparative history of XX<sup>th</sup> Century Revolutions.
- James Ryan, Lecturer in Modern European (Russian) History, Cardiff University.
- Beatriz Sarlo, literary and cultural critic.

#### **Round Tables**

The Conference will include a series of round tables that will address the subjects outlined above. Participants in these round tables will include Chilean and Latin American historians, philosophers, social scientists, etc., invited to speak and discuss, not as specialists in their fields, but as intellectuals concerned about the past, present and future significance of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.