

I Meet a Revolutionary: My Visit to the Residence of Lenin in Zürich, Switzerland

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Switzerland is a small country with a big past.

Among the notable people who resided in Zürich in the past was Lenin, arguably the greatest revolutionary of the world in the twentieth century. He built Russia into the world's first Communist country and initiated a legacy that, in some form or the other - in spite of the fact that Russia is no longer a Communist country, endures to this day.

I was in Zürich at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology when I visited the house where Lenin lived during his self-exile. From the road, the front of the ground floor of the building celebrates its famous resident. Noteworthy is a bust of Lenin that looks red from one side and green from the other.

Communism was first formulated in its theoretical form by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. As Russia toiled under Tsarist rule, the Communist ideology took root among the revolution-oriented people of the country. One of them, Lenin, went into self-exile in Zürich. Meanwhile, Europe had begun its slow slide towards the First World War. The Franco-Prussian War of 1871 had brought into existence the German Empire with the King of Prussia becoming the Kaiser of Germany in a glittering ceremony at Versailles, Emperor Napoleon III had fallen and the Third Republic was installed in France and France was forced to cede Alsace and Lorraine to Germany following its defeat. Among other notable events in Europe was the Russian victory over Turkey in the war of 1878. The so-called 'submerged nationalities' including the Poles, the Czechs and the Slovaks wanted to become independent and their émigrés in New World countries like the United States of America as also in other countries like the United Kingdom managed, by and large, to turn public opinion in those countries towards their side. In this milieu, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne at Vienna, by a Serb nationalist at Sarajevo in 1914 escalated into the First World War. Russia was a traditional ally of Serbia and entered the War on the side of the Allies.

Lenin viewed the war as a war among imperialist powers and wanted the Russian people to get out of it. The Germans agreed to transport Lenin in a sealed train through Germany to the Russian border, clearly seeing that Lenin would take Russia out of the War. And so it

came to pass. Although the Romanov dynasty was toppled in a revolution, the new government had decided to continue the war. But after Lenin came to the helm of affairs, the Communist government withdrew Russia from the War. According to Lenin, the War was being fought on behalf of vested interests in Russia who had nothing to lose from the War by the common Russian people who had nothing to gain from the War.

Lenin became an icon in Russia and in a number of parts of the world. When I was a young boy, there were English translations of books by Lenin in my home with Lenin's rallying cry 'Workers of the World, Unite!' on the top of the front page. I felt that it was worthwhile to learn Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet and I did learn to read and write in the Cyrillic alphabet and I also learnt some Russian grammar.

Unfortunately, the peace that emerged from the ashes of the First World War did not last. A host of factors in two uneasy decades culminated in an even greater Second World War which started on 1st September, 1939, with the German attack on Poland. Incidentally, 1st September, 2019, which passed a few days ago was the 80th Anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. My great-uncle Shaheed H.C. Bhattacharya fought against the British in the Second World War. I preserve some currency notes issued by the Japanese in Burma that were brought back to my ancestral town of Comilla, now in Bangladesh, by my great-uncle.

Lenin lies buried in Moscow, Russia. Perhaps only Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, matched his popularity in Russia at one point of time. Posterity will judge his place in history. It is perhaps too recent to say the final word on him.

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