Centenary of the Russian Revolution
(October 2017)

"One Hundred Years," poem by Steve Bloom

And over the evening forest
the bronze moon climbs to its place.

Why has the music stopped?
Why is there such silence?

—Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938)

One Hundred Years

Prologue

How long is a century?

First allow me to note that mine
is not a name which appears
in your great books of history—
as they recount events
which are now that far
in the past.

Yet others who,
today,
find themselves proclaimed
in this way would never have had
the opportunity
without my name,
without my deeds,
or those
of my comrades.

We numbered in the millions.

How long is a century?

Long enough that long ago
all who survived
the great war
and then
the great civil war
and then
the great purges

have long since joined
the crowd of the dead, and so

far too many among the living
reach the present moment
with no understanding of how—
and, perhaps more important, why—
one name
in our books of history
came to be changed
over the course of a few
tumultuous years
from “Petrograd”
to “Leningrad.”

It is, however, a story you should know.
We march in the streets for bread; it is a simple beginning.

We march in the streets because we have no bread and we are starving.

We march in the streets because we have no bread and our children are starving.

"We are starving," we cry out as we march, "give us bread."

"Here we are, and our children too. Kill us in the street for marching if you will. Better to die here, now, quickly, than slowly, from starvation, because we have no bread."

Tsar Nicholas, however, lacks troops in the city willing to do the necessary killing. So he calls upon the Cossacks. Yet when the Cossacks arrive they refuse to fire upon our demonstration or use their swords, cross the plaza instead to simply mingle amongst us.

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Some days later we gather again in Znamenskaya Square. We gather, too, near the Nikolaevsky railway station. We have been to arm ourselves: no longer lambs willing for the slaughter.

The government sends as many police as can be mustered and two cavalry regiments it believes can be trusted. The police officer in command orders his men to charge and disperse our demonstration. The cavalry officer in command orders his forces to charge the police, and so it is the police who are dispersed instead of us.

Elsewhere in the city more regiments mutiny, come over openly to the side of the people; crowds storm the army, the Krentsky prison, the main artillery depot.

And the poet Mayakovsky will write: "Beat the squares with the tramp of rebels! Arise, while holding high your heads! Wash the world with a second deluge. For ours is the hour whose coming it dreads!"

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The Tsar tries withdrawing troops from the front. As they approach Petrograd, however, railway workers refuse to transport them to their destination. These soldiers, too, express support for our demonstrations before returning to the front, or else simply going home.

Nicholas then attempts his own journey to our city by train, but his passage is blocked at Dno station, by other railway workers who deliver him, instead, to Pskov.

There, a few days later, he capitulates to the inevitable and abdicates his throne.

And the poet Mayakovsky will write: "Our gold in our voices—let us hear us sing! Meadow, lie green upon the earth! Line the remainder of our days with silk! Let the rainbow offer us its color, and its girth!"

Soldiers demonstration, February

Petrograd: February 1917
The page contains text that is not legible due to the quality of the image. It appears to be a page from a book or a document, but the content is not discernible.
IV. Aftermath, Part One: "Flame on the Snow"

Now, however, is when our troubles truly begin.

For we have taken power convinced that the workers of Western Europe—
the workers of Germany in particular—will follow our lead and come to our aid.

The workers of Germany try.

But the workers of Germany do not succeed.

And so, now, our troubles truly begin.

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Allow me to illustrate for you by quoting the poet and novelist
the honest participant in and chronicler of our revolution,
Viktor Serge, who, during the winter of 1920-21
composed these lines:

"This crowd wants to live, to make life. But how many of those who are
here have already been killed?"

"The poor tattered people, many teenagers, some children, all beating
offen, with the staffer often replaced by mining. The hands numb with
cold of those poor people. Their grey wrinkled-crawling of the Leprosy
prospect, in a determined step. At the end of a harvest, a flag:
Workers' curation from the Nievits district!"

"This crowd in snow, under the midday sun, following coffin covered
with branches of fir trees. Red ribbons, a flag. A gold ray is poised on the
arms of the Adversary. Songs—the song which lived and exist
and subs in the farewell from a living crowd to the crowd of the
dead. Here they sleep, behind a great rampart: those Long, sloe, whose
brows were cut, those who died of typhus, all who gave freely and with
their souls. God for the revolution. So often these funerals on the Field of
Mars."

"Four thousand soldiers, passers from Vserosa, Byrains, Tver, Orel,
Yaroslav, Perm. . . Four thousand soldiers shrouded in dry garments—
hand like stone, that make the godild—fell on four hundred grams of
black bread per day, dressed in this joy with the old coats of the
grand war, feeding their hands like children and laughing and shouting and
howling. The rays, made from the velvet blue-gold of the
imperial theatre vibrates suddenly with this clear human joy,
because a sovereign artist sings for them."

"A young girl—seven years old—with very large black eyes, encased in
a flap, small Kalitk face, a tiny refined spirit, processions, sensitive,
encased in a thin body, slowly dissolved by the hunger: famine, the
dughter of an aristocrat, whom you kindly call Iasia, Tatishcheva,
Taniashcheksha. She says:

"Since you are a Bolshevik, answer me! Why was Lev Andreevitch
shot?"

"I am a Bolshevik, little Iasia, and I do not know why Lev Andreevitch
was shot."

"Contempt for words—for the old words. Contempt for the ideas which
insulted. Contempt for the hypothecated and cruel West which invented
Parliaments, the public press, the apportioning laws, the prison system,
after-dinner literature. Contempt for all that vegetates in satisfaction
with these things.

"Hated for the formidable machine used to crush the weak—all
disgraced humanity—for the vice of Law, Police, Clergy, Schools,
Armed, Parties, Penal Colonies. Hated for those who need this
system, the rich, class hatred.

"The will to underlie everything, to suffer everything, achieve every-
thing in order to finish. Irresistible will. The will to live finally ac-

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Please, as we contemplate this picture of
a winter which I live through
but you

only imagine
for me suggest that we recall other words
already quoted above:

"When the land belongs to the peasants,
when the factories belong to the workers,
when the power belongs to the people,
then we will have something
we can rarely fight for—"

words which were true enough
when first proclaimed
some days prior to our insurrection.

Yet how much time are they now?

How much time are they now?