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The Russian Revolution of 1917

Prologue

Russian socialists and their relationship to the war played a key role in setting the stage for revolution in Russia. Lenin, the leader of the radical Bolsheviks, was an outlaw and actually lived in Galicia and Switzerland at the beginning of World War I. He carried on a lively debate with the more moderate wing of the Russian Social Democrats called Mensheviks. The key issue was the relationship of revolution to war. Unlike the other socialist, Lenin actually was in favor of war at this time, because he thought it would weaken capitalism and prepare the ground for revolution. But in two key votes on this issue within the party he lost.

At Zimmerwald in September 1915 the decision against Lenin was 23 to 7 within the leadership. Lenin denounced the victors as "social patriots" and "social pacifists" – terms which today have none of the derogatory ring of the time. At Kienthal in April 1916 the decision was much the same. Most of the European workers disavowed Lenin and socialist leaders said he was fanatical, romantic, and sectarian. Lenin, in turn called the socialists hopelessly bourgeois.

The Bolshevik Duma deputies, meanwhile, are arrested and indicted for treason. They are then sent off to Siberia, including Sverdlov, Ordjonikidze, and Stalin. In 1913 Stalin had been arrested for the sixth time – so this was the seventh time for him. The Central Committee of the Bolsheviks in St. Petersburg was disbanded by the police in 1912. It reorganized itself in the summer of 1916 under the leadership of Shliapnikov, assisted by Molotov and Stalin.

Lenin, still in Switzerland, writes *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. In this opus he extends the exploitation of class to that of an entire people. Yet, despite all this, Lenin is very skeptical about revolutionary situation in the early years of the war. As far as tsarist Russia and the War is concerned, the outcome of two early battles tells the whole story. The Battle of Tannenberg and the Battle of Masurian Lakes ends Russian enthusiasm for war and conquest. The collapse of the Russian front weakened the whole political structure beyond repair. The Brusilov Offensive during the summer of 1916 ends up being a

Pyrrhic victory. By November 1916 the Duma is ready to accuse the government of "high treason." But the tsar refused to yield to the liberals and thus sealed his fate.

March Revolution

Demonstrations in St. Petersburg soon broke out and started the slide to revolution. St. Petersburg garrison troops proved to be unreliable in quelling these demonstrations. The other important factor was the Duma, Russia's parliament. On March 11 the Duma ignored the tsar's order to dissolve itself, while fires in the city broke out that very night. Meanwhile, the men of the Volhynian guard regiment, elite of the elite, proceeded to murder their officers. The Duma, meeting in the Taurida Palace, made it clear that they represented the people of Russia whose will was being ignored.

On March 12 the Duma elected an Executive Committee which assumed dictatorial powers on behalf of the Duma – something like that. Most of its members were from the Progressive block. So it is clear that the revolution, now in full gear, was made by the parliament.

Also on March 12 the revolutionary instinct of the mob was released. Prisons were opened and the prisoners mingled with the demonstrators. Street fights developed with the troops and the police sent in to suppress them. Members of the cabinet were "arrested" by the insurgents.

Also on the same day, the third force in this game, the Executive Committee of Soldiers and Workers Deputies is founded. It is modeled on the one created in the Revolution of 1905 by Leon Trotsky. The Executive Committee was led by Chkheidze, a Menshevik. This Committee literally occupied the Duma and presumed to address the Russian people from that vantage point. But the Duma's own Executive Committee still retained the political initiative. The Left in the Duma Committee at this time was represented by Chkheidze and Alexander Kerensky.

Only two days later, on March 14, the Czarist Regime is overthrown in St. Petersburg while an uprising in Moscow is also successful. The Duma Committee then sent a delegation to see the tsar in Pskov and force him to abdicate – which he does on the following day, March 15. Grand duke Michael had refused the crown unless the will of a constituent assembly was heard. This, in effect, sealed the fate of the House of Romanov. On March 22, 1917, Nicholas II was arrested at army headquarters and imprisoned at Tsarkoe Selo, the famous royal palace in

the countryside. He and his whole family were killed at Ekaterinenburg in the Urals in July 1918

The Provisional Government and the Soviets

The Provisional Government which replaced the tsar grew out of the Executive Committee of the Duma. Thus Russia became a de facto Republic. A partial cabinet was created with Prince Lvov as Prime Minister. Paul Miliukov became Foreign Minister and Alexander Kerensky the Minister of Justice, representing left-wing liberals. The general aim of this government is clear enough: to make a political revolution, not a social revolution. Yet social reform if not social revolution was necessary in the existing conditions of agrarian unrest and dissatisfaction of the industrial proletariat.

On March 15 civil liberties are proclaimed and the promise of convening a constituent assembly is made. Political prisoners are amnestied and returned from Siberia. The police is replaced with a people's militia. Elections are postponed until the Constituent Assembly can meet. Its meeting is postponed until the fall. This is a tragic mistake. The authority of the government is severely limited by the Soviet, which is in direct competition with the government.

If there was any doubt about this, it soon vanished when the Soviet issued the famous "Order No. 1." This was a clarion call for soldiers' councils to be established in every military unit and for the election of officers by the troops. All of this resulted in catastrophic confusion within the army, since armies in general can hardly function as democratic institutions especially in times of war.

At this time the Social Revolutionaries dominated the Soviet since they represent the peasants, Russia's clear majority. Next in importance are the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, in that order. Members had been elected in factories, workshops, and military barracks. There were a total of 2,500 representatives: one worker for each 1000 workers and one soldier for each company. Soviets on this pattern were soon formed in many cities and rural areas. The nobility, upper middle class and the educated classes were deliberately excluded. No time limit was set on the soviets' jurisdiction, although they had a lot of moral authority since they were associated with being close to the electorate and because the executive and legislative functions had been blurred. This gave them unusual power.

In St. Petersburg a Central Executive Committee of the Soviets was formed. It contained mostly leaders of socialist parties headed by a presidium.

Provisional Government and the Allies

The big problem for the Provisional Government was the war. In the Provisional Government the moderates wanted a continuation of the war. The Bolsheviks, outside the Provisional Government, called for immediate peace "without annexations and reparations." The Soviets were uncertain what policy to adopt: they realized that the people were tired of war but did not want to risk a complete military collapse.

The Allies, of course, were sympathetic to the Provisional Government, largely because of its stand on continuation of the war. The U.S.A. was the first government to recognize the Provisional Government on March 22, 1917. The English, French and Italians soon followed suit. The Allies clearly see the necessity of tying down as many German divisions in the East as possible, so this is a strategic move. But they also suggest the broadening of the Lvov government.

Meanwhile, controversy between the Provisional Government and the Leftists soon comes into the open. On March 31 Miliukov promised that Russia would fight on. On April 9 the Soviets once more call for peace. The Provisional Government, somewhat belatedly on April 21, responds to charges of pursuing a "militaristic and imperialistic" foreign policy by also declaring itself in favor of peace without annexations and reparations.

Miliukov was thus discredited, since he continued to call for continuation of war and when he sent a note to the Allies on May 1 to this effect a storm broke loose. There soon were demonstrations demanding the resignation of Miliukov. So, the Provisional Government was forced to reorganize on May 18. The Foreign Minister Miliukov and War Minister Guchkov both were forced to resign.

Prince Lvov's second government included, for the first time, Alexander Kerensky as Minister of War and the Navy and it also included other socialists. The Miliukov note of May to the Allies is withdrawn, but the government supported the demand for peace without annexations and reparations and also called for self-determination of nations. It was quite logical, therefore that the treaties of 1914 and 1915, which made demands for the annexation of territories, were canceled as well as Russia's demand for the straits.

The Kerensky Offensive

Quickly emerging as the new leader, Alexander Kerensky's announced two goals: offensive against the Central Powers and democratic reorganization of the military command. Kerensky's "Declaration of Soldiers Rights" on May 22 included the appointment of commissars in the army to handle soldiers councils, but the councils issued orders contradicting the commanders and thus undermined the officer corps. Defeatist literature was distributed on a massive scale by radical socialists and Bolshevik agents and fraternization with the enemy hit the military ranks hard.

Kerensky then visited the front and tried to rouse the soldiers to fight on, actually launching an offensive in July 1917. A breach in the Austrian lines is actually made to everyone's surprise, but the Germans launched a counter-offensive which stopped the Russians cold. Now whole Russian regiments begin to mutiny. General Kornilov, coming out of nowhere, demanded harsh military discipline. In desperation he was made commander-in-chief on July 30, but it was too late – the people turned their eyes on the Bolsheviks now.

Lenin's Return

Since March confusion reigned in the Bolshevik Party. Party policy was directed by a temporary bureau of the Central Committee composed of Molotov, Shliapnikov and Zolotarev, all of whom were self-educated workers. All three were surprised by the March revolution. So the party has split into a Left wing and a Right wing. The temporary bureau belonged to the Left wing but was ineffective.

Pravda, the party newspaper, meanwhile carried on active propaganda against the extension of the war, attacked the Mensheviks as traitors, and called for "resignation of the provisional government and all power to the soviets." The Right wing led by Kamenev supported the government of Prince Lvov and wanted to heal the split with the Mensheviks.

Joseph Stalin, who with Kamenev returned from exile on March 25, was a senior member of the Central Committee founded in 1912. Without asking anyone's permission, he went into action by closing down the temporary bureau and taking control of Pravda, which had been more conciliatory to the Provisional Government. Lenin, from exile in Switzerland, sent a letter criticizing this particular action by Stalin. A Party Conference was then held on April 10 to straighten things out. The assumption was that they should be satisfied with the democratic results of the liberal revolution and postpone the socialist demands until later.

The moderate Bolsheviks at this time supported the Provisional Government while radical Bolsheviks insisted that the revolution must be anti-capitalist and not only anti-feudal. Stalin maneuvered between the two groups trying to prevent an open split. At this crucial moment, on April 16 Lenin returned from Switzerland in a sealed train as a hostage of the German High Command. This changed everything.

Lenin received a triumphal welcome at the Finland Station, although we know since the downfall of Communism that this welcome was artificially manufactured at the last moment. Chkheidze welcomed him in the name of the Soviets, but Lenin ignored him and addressed the people assembled to meet him. There were cheers not so much for the triumphant Russian revolution but the coming world revolution – or so at least official propaganda would have it.

On April 17 there was a Joint Meeting of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks at the Taurida Palace. Lenin announced his so-called April Thesis. This includes demands for a breach with the Provisional Government; the refusal to cooperate with the moderate socialists; an attack on Pravda and its current line defined by Stalin; and a demand that they win over the masses and work for a majority in the Soviets. The Soviets were then completely dominated by the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionary Party.

But the heart of Lenin's April Thesis was extremely revolutionary: He demanded the liquidation of the standing army; liquidation of the police; liquidation of the bureaucracy; socialization of the banks; control by the workers of production and distribution of goods; and finally the division of the land among the peasants. In the context of Russia this last one was clearly the most revolutionary.

An observer, Sukhanov, said: "I shall never forget the speech...which broke like lightning over the assembly and shook and confused not only me...it seemed as if all the elements had been let loose, as if the demon of destruction was rising from his depth."

But Lenin had a hard time convincing his party comrades to accept his thesis. The St. Petersburg party conference gave him only a majority of 20 out of 35 votes. At the All Russian Party Conference in May there were excited debates: Lenin proposed to break with the International Workers Movement and found a new international. It was turned down. He also proposed to rename the party as the Communist Party of Russia. This was also turned down. But the conference did support his stand on the right of self-determination, even the right to

secede. There was a compromise on cooperation with the other leftist parties and the relationship to the Soviets. By the time it was all over, the majority of the Party was in Lenin's hand. Only Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Bukharin oppose him consistently. On the final resolutions he got 71 votes for, 39 against and 8 abstentions.

It is clear that Lenin knew how to arouse the anarchistic instincts of the masses, how to mobilize the masses. The momentum was to be continued until the world revolution came. But the masses needed the direction and guardianship of an elite party. This was the view which Lenin imposed on the party and eventually saddled on Russia for 75 years.

Bolshevik Tactics in the Spring of 1917

The Bolsheviks soon elected a new Central Committee. The party now had 76,000 members, double what it in February. Stalin wrote a little pamphlet called "Land for the Peasants". This in essence told the peasants to "form a committee and take the land!" Trotsky returned a month after Lenin did and seeing how the wind was blowing joined the Bolshevik party.

A new coalition government was formed which included Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. So the battle with the soviets came to an end. The soviets had lost ground among the urban masses in any case. Lenin continued to cry for "All power to the Soviets!" This, however, in the new situation, became a risky ploy.

At the All Russian Congress of Soviets on June 16 the breakdown of delegates had ominous signs for Lenin. The Social Revolutionaries produced 285 delegates; the Mensheviks 248 delegates; and the Bolsheviks merely 105 delegates. Yet during street demonstrations most of the placards carried Bolshevik slogans. So, go figure! Lenin must have believed that in time he would conquer the soviets from within.

The July Uprising

This was one of Lenin's major miscalculations. He thought the time was ripe for a Bolshevik coup. But the masses were not yet ready for anything as radical as he had to offer. The uprising only brought out a few radicals besides the active Bolsheviks. It was easily crushed by the forces of the Provisional Government. Kerensky still had the muscle. Several Bolsheviks were arrested and Lenin went into temporary hiding to bide his time and recalculate the possibilities of the situation. It was not easy for him to get out of town. He had to hide and

masquerade as a peasant to get across the border into Finland.

Kornilov Revolt

The general situation was quickly deteriorating. Peasants, notorious for their lethargic impassivity, became strangely impatient. It appeared that they had been affected by the propaganda of the Social Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks. In retrospect it is easy to say that the failure to find an immediate answer to the land hunger of the peasants was the Provisional Government's biggest mistake. In industry too the Provisional Government had no constructive program to determine action. Production dropped to 30–49% of the pre-revolutionary level. A suggestion was made to turn the factories over to government control. Instead what actually happened was that the workers took over most of the factories themselves, but did not have the managerial skills to run them effectively.

Prices rose and the currency became devalued. Then emergency currency was issued, known derisively as the "Kerensky bills". This meant that the government had embarked on a path of deliberate inflation. Kerensky then called for a National Political Conference to jack up his tottering prestige. A certain General Kornilov was applauded at the conference and this led him to think he had real power. So the naive general laid down the conditions for his support of the Provisional Government: no interference in military questions and re-establishment of military discipline.

The question in most peoples' minds was: "What does Kornilov's really want?" Even now the details of Kornilov's coup attempt are difficult to interpret, but it is certain that Kerensky wanted to settle accounts with the Bolsheviks. To do this he asked Kornilov to send troops to the capital. Kornilov thought together with Kerensky he could re-establish order. That much we can safely assume. But did he seek military dictatorship? Probably not. He wanted to make the government more independent of the Soviets and more amenable to influence by the military.

Kornilov was led to believe Kerensky wanted him to establish a temporary dictatorship with Kerensky given a prominent place in the new government. When Kerensky discovered Kornilov's misconceptions he asked Kornilov to resign and come to St. Petersburg immediately. Kornilov then decided to act and began to move his Third Cavalry Division on the capital. Kerensky replied by a levee en masse in the capital. All the left-wing parties and factions cooperated, including the notorious Kronstadt sailors.

Most important, the key railroad unions cooperated with Kerensky by pulling up tracks re-directing trains. Thus the attack is stopped. Kornilov and his staff were summarily arrested. It is clear that Kornilov was obviously not a born dictator. Kerensky now felt that he was the victor. In this he was gravely mistaken – as events would demonstrate. Lenin was in exile and Kornilov was in jail, however, and so Kerensky officially declared Russia to be a republic. It was a serious self-deception: the Bolsheviks alone profited from the situation. The Allies at this point grew impatient with Kerensky.

The October Revolution

The liberals loose confidence in Kerensky after the Kornilov coup attempt as well. So Kerensky drew closer to the radicals but the rest of his cabinet turned to the right. The Bolsheviks cried conspiracy to establish monarchist dictatorship, but it was not true. Yet, the Bolsheviks did get a majority in the soviet for the first time – more than 50% in the September elections. They had had only 10% in July. Strangely enough, Trotsky was released from jail at this time only to become president of St. Petersburg Soviet. He was supported by the Bolsheviks and the left wing of the Social Revolutionary party.

"All power to Soviets" had a totally different meaning now. So Trotsky's efforts are aimed at a new revolution hidden in the slogan. Lenin wanted to make revolution NOW. Trotsky wanted to couple it with the meeting of the All Russian Soviet. Under the lawful cloak of a broadly elected, popular-representative body, the Soviets, the conspiracy could be planned and prepared with a degree of carefulness which made Lenin's plan for a spontaneous coup by the Party appear to be an irresponsible adventure.

Trotsky knew how to maneuver in the complicated alignment of power in the triangle of Provisional Government, Soviets, and Bolshevik Party. The Soviets assumed the right to decide on troop movement in St. Petersburg area without anyone being able to challenge their illegal actions. On October 26 the Soviets established a Military Revolutionary Committee with Leon Trotsky as chairman.

Thus Trotsky became the chief of the general staff of the Bolshevik insurrection. All threads of the conspiracy were now in Trotsky's hand. The Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party still debated fundamental questions endlessly while Trotsky took concrete action. Lenin tried to persuade Kamenev and Zenoviev who wanted to wait until the meeting of the Constituent Assembly took place. Ominously, on October 20 Trotsky and the Bolsheviks left Kerensky's Preliminary

Parliament. The new Bolshevik slogans were "Petrograd is in danger", "Revolution is in danger", "People are in danger"!

On October 21 Lenin returned secretly to the city to participate in the Central Committee meeting of October 23. This was a historic meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Only 12 people were present and accounted for. Ten of them voted for immediate revolution, thus completely isolating the two democratic holdouts, Kamenev and Zenoviev. A new Politburo is elected, including Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov, Bubnov, Kamenev, Zenoviev. (Kamenev and Zenoviev resign a few days later).

The All Russian Soviet Congress was supposed to meet on November 2, but the Menshevik majority decided to postpone to November 7, which enormously helped the Bolsheviks. They had a week to prepare the insurrection. The Insurrection proper took place on the evening of November 6. St. Petersburg regiments voted to take orders only from Trotsky as the representative of the Military Revolutionary Committee (November 3). This is the first step in the mutiny. On November 5 the Military Revolutionary Committee appointed commissars for all military units around St. Petersburg.

The government delivered a counter-stroke on November 6 by occupying the newspaper offices of the Bolsheviks, but this merely gave Trotsky a pretext to strike the first blow. The revolution began without a shot. Insurgent troops occupied all bridges, railroad stations, post offices and other public buildings. The Winter Palace, seat of the Provisional Government, was taken without much trouble. The cruiser Aurora in Neva river simply bombarded the Winter Palace, as the insurgents fought against a few ensigns and a battalion of women. This was all the government could get to defend itself. During the night of November 7-8 the government capitulated.

Late in the evening of November 6 the Soviet Congress met as planned. Though the Bolsheviks did not have a absolute majority, they could rely on the support of the left wing Social Revolutionaries. The sessions had hardly begun when the right wing Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks declared that the Congress could not continue to meet under the threat of arms which the bombardment of the Winter Palace had just signaled. As a protest against the insurrection they left the hall. In so doing they surrendered the field to the Bolsheviks.

With triumphant scorn Trotsky could now reject all cooperation with the moderate Socialists; "Your role is played out," he shouted. "Go where you belong from now on--into the rubbish-can of history." At this point the left wing Mensheviks under Martov had no choice but to leave the Congress too. The

Bolsheviks now had an absolute majority and could sanction what had happened. The rising in St. Petersburg had succeeded. The Bolsheviks were in power.

Send comments and questions to [Professor Gerhard Rempel](#), Western New England College.