

## 2 1917: From revolution to revolution

The overthrow of tsarism in February 1917\* was long anticipated but unexpected when it came. A Provisional Government was established under Prince Lvov that appeared to open the way for Russia's 'bourgeois' democratic development. The Bolshevik party in Russia was confused over the stance to take, with most of the leadership (including Stalin) favouring cooperation with the government as long as it sought an end to the war. On his return Lenin took a sharply critical stance, insisting that the 'bourgeois' revolution could be transformed into a socialist one, but only if certain conditions were met. The Provisional Government staggered from crisis to crisis until finally overthrown in October.

### Revolution and War

The Provisional Government, dominated at first by liberals and in particular the Constitutional Democratic Party headed by Pavel Milyukov, had to share power with the newly recreated soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies, organised by all the self-styled 'democratic' parties (the Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries – the last known as the SRs, being the party established in 1902 as the successor to the Populists). Lenin dubbed the relationship between the two sources of authority 'dual power'. The soviets came to symbolise for Lenin the kernel of an alternative form of state organisation – if only the Bolsheviks could win dominance in them, something achieved on the eve of the October revolution.

### Document 2.1 Order No. 1

The central issue was control over the armed forces, and this resolution undermined the new government's authority over the armed forces. If control over the coercive apparatus is one of Max Weber's basic defining features of a state, then according to this criterion the Provisional Government was an incomplete state in 1917.

\* March in the new style (Gregorian) calendar that came into effect on 1 (14) February 1918. In 1917 Russia's Julian calendar was 13 days behind the rest of Europe. In this chapter old-style dates are used, and when necessary new style dates are given in brackets after the old-style dates.

The Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies resolves:

- 1 In all companies, battalions, regiments, depots, artillery positions, cavalry regiments, other military service units and on the ships of the navy immediately to elect committees of selected representatives of the lower ranks of the above-mentioned military units.
- 2 In all military units that have not yet elected their representatives to the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, elect one representative from companies, who are to appear with written credentials in the State Duma building by 10 a.m. on 2 March.
- 3 In all of their political actions military units are subordinate to the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and their committees.
- 4 Orders of the Military Commission of the State Duma must be obeyed, except when they contradict orders and decisions of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.
- 5 All types of arms like rifles, machine-guns, armoured vehicles and others must be at the disposal and under the supervision of company and battalion committees and in no case to be given to officers even when they ask for them.
- 6 In line units and in fulfilling military duties soldiers must observe strict discipline, but outside service and line duties in their political, civic and private lives soldiers cannot in the slightest manner be deprived of those rights which are enjoyed by any citizen. In particular, standing at the front and the compulsory saluting on leave is abolished.
- 7 Equally, the use of titles for officers is abolished: your excellency, highness, etc. are replaced by Mr General, Mr Colonel, and so on.

Rude behaviour to soldiers of whatever military rank is forbidden, in particular the use of the familiar 'you', and any infringement of this [is forbidden], and in the event of any misunderstandings between officers and soldiers, the latter are obliged to inform the company committees.

*Source: Izvestiya Petrogradskogo Soveta rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov, 2 March 1917.*

### Document 2.2 Lenin's 'April Theses'

Lenin returned to Russia in a 'sealed carriage' across Germany – 'the bacillus of revolution' as the German High Command considered him. Arriving in Petrograd on the evening of 3 April, he immediately condemned the conciliatory attitude adopted by Stalin and Lev Kamenev towards the other socialist parties. Lenin, who had been working on these ideas in Switzerland, denounced any compromises with the new democratic government and insisted on the continuation of the revolution. Note in particular the theoretical statement in the second thesis.

1 In our attitude towards the war not the slightest concession must be made to 'revolutionary defensism', for under the new government of Lvov and co., owing to the capitalist nature of this government, the war on Russia's part remains a predatory imperialist war.

The class-conscious proletariat may give its consent to a revolutionary war actually justifying revolutionary defensism, only on condition (a) that all power be transferred to the proletariat and its ally, the poorest section of the peasantry; (b) that all annexations be renounced in deeds, not merely in words; (c) that there be a complete break, in practice, with all interests of capital.

In view of the undoubted honesty of the mass of rank and file representatives of revolutionary defensism who accept the war only as a necessity and not as a means of conquest, in view of their being deceived by the bourgeoisie, it is necessary most thoroughly, persistently, patiently to explain to them their error, to explain the inseparable connection between capital and the imperialist war, to prove that without the overthrow of capital it is *impossible* to conclude the war with a really democratic, non-oppressive peace.

This view is to be widely propagated among the army units in the field. Fraternisation.

2 The peculiarity of the present situation in Russia is that it represents a *transition* from the first stage of the revolution, which, because of the inadequate organisation and insufficient class-consciousness of the proletariat, led to the assumption of power by the bourgeoisie, to its second stage which is to place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest strata of the peasantry.

This transition is characterised, on the one hand, by a maximum of legality (Russia is now the freest of all the belligerent countries of the world); on the other, by the absence of oppression of the masses, and, finally, by the trustingly ignorant attitude of the masses toward the capitalist government, the worst enemy of peace and socialism.

This peculiar situation demands of us an ability to adapt ourselves to the specific conditions of party work amid vast masses of the proletariat just awakened to political life.

3 No support to the Provisional Government; exposure of the utter falsity of all its promises, particularly those relating to the renunciation of annexations. Unmasking, instead of admitting, the illusion-breeding 'demand' that *this* government, a government of capitalists, cease being imperialistic.

4 Recognition of the fact that in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies our party constitutes a minority, and a small one at that, in the face of the *blat* of all the petty-bourgeois opportunist elements, from the People's Socialists, Socialist-Revolutionists, down to the Organisation Committee (Chkheidze, Tsereteli, etc., Steklov, etc.), who have yielded to the influence of the bourgeoisie and have been extending this influence to the proletariat as well.

It must be explained to the masses that the Soviet of Workers' Deputies is the only possible form of revolutionary government and that, therefore, our task is, while this government is submitting to the influence of the bourgeoisie, to present a patient, systematic, and persistent analysis of its errors and tactics, an analysis especially adapted to the practical needs of the masses.

While we are in the minority, we carry on the work of criticism and of exposing errors, advocating throughout the necessity of transferring the entire power of state to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the masses might learn from experience how to rid themselves of errors.

5 Not a parliamentary republic – a return to it from the Soviet of Workers' Deputies would be a step backward – but a republic of Soviets of Workers' and Poor Peasants' Deputies throughout the land, from top to bottom.

Abolition of the police, the army, the bureaucracy. (Substituting for the standing army the universal arming of the people.)

All officers to be elected and to be subject to recall at any time, their salaries not to exceed the average wage of a competent worker.

6 In the agrarian programme, the emphasis must be shifted to the Soviets of Poor Peasants' Deputies.

Confiscation of all private lands.

Nationalisation of all lands in the country, and management of such lands by local Soviets of Poor Peasants' Deputies. A separate organisation of the Soviets of Deputies of Poor Peasants. Creation of model agricultural establishments out of large estates (from one hundred to three hundred *desiatinas* [one *desyatina* equals 2.7 acres or just over one hectare], in accordance with local and other conditions and with the estimates of local institutions) under the control of the Soviet of Poor Peasants' Deputies, and at public expense.

7 Immediate merger of all the banks in the country into one general national bank, over which the Soviet of Workers' Deputies should have control.

Source: Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution' ('April Theses'), Pravda, 7 April 1917; Robert Paul Browder and Alexander F. Kerensky (eds), The Russian Provisional Government 1917: Documents, vol. III (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1961), pp. 1206–7.

The Bolsheviks were by no means united over policy and Lenin was forced to wage a vigorous struggle to have his view accepted. The April Theses sharply rejected as outmoded the orthodox social democratic advocacy (to which the Mensheviks remained loyal) of a two-stage revolution: the 'bourgeois' revolution had to be completed before socialism could be considered. Lenin insisted that a socialist revolution was on the agenda in Russia on the grounds that (1) alliance with the peasantry would give the working class strength to overthrow the old system and (2) the theory of imperialism saw the revolution as only the first step in the world revolution, which would then come to the assistance of backward Russia. The first



all-Russian conference of Bolsheviks (7–12 May 1917) adopted, though against considerable opposition, Lenin's views on the transfer of power to the soviets, the immediate giving of land to the peasants, workers' control in industry and the end of the war by spreading the revolution. The Bolshevik slogan of 'Bread, Peace, Land' accurately reflected popular aspirations at this time.

Policy towards the war became the defining issue of the months between February and October. In a note in April 1917 to the Allies the foreign minister, Milyukov, pledged that Russia would fight until 'decisive victory'. This was misjudged, to say the least, and aroused a storm of protest and a government reshuffle. The Provisional Government considered the February revolution a protest against the inept conduct of the war by the tsarist regime and not directed against the war itself. Milyukov's note led to the fall of the government and the creation of the first coalition government, still under Lvov, which lasted from May to July. The new government included liberals and socialists, with the SR Alexander Kerensky as minister of war. The moderate socialists took a 'defencist' position in the war: insisting on the defence of Russian territory but rejecting any annexations or indemnities from the defeated powers. In June, under pressure from the French to divert German forces from the hard-pressed Western Front, Kerensky launched an ill-fated offensive in Galicia, hoping to take advantage of the expected revolutionary enthusiasm. On 15 July tensions between the moderate socialists and the bourgeois parties led to the resignation of Lvov and four Kadet (Constitutional Democratic Party) ministers and a second coalition government was formed headed by Kerensky.

The sheer scale of Russia's commitment to the war on the side of the Entente powers is sometimes forgotten. In 1917 15,798,000 people, about half of all those able to work, were servicing military needs of one sort or another, while the active army on 1 September 1917 comprised 7,060,700 men, some 45 per cent of those mobilised. Military losses were 775,400 killed, 348,000 wounded and 3,343,900 prisoners (*Svobodnaya mysl'*, no. 9, 1997, p. 102). The endless requisitions and the economic disruption of the regions along the front undermined the whole economy, provoking inflation that hit the poor particularly hard. The official Russian war aims were to destroy Germany's armed might, to incorporate the lower reaches of the River Neman, Galicia, part of Silesia and, later (as mentioned in Milyukov's note), Turkish Armenia and Constantinople and its environs. These were hardly tasks to inspire great enthusiasm among the masses, especially when offensives were launched prematurely to relieve the pressure on the Western Front – twice Paris was saved by Russia's enormously costly efforts in the East. Even this was not enough for the Entente powers (in particular France), endlessly pressurising Russia through official and informal channels to make yet more sacrifices. In this sense, it can be argued that the Russian revolution was made in Paris.

### Document 2.3 Lenin and the Imperialist War

Lenin understood that war weariness was at the root of the revolution and Bolshevik anti-war agitation found a receptive audience. For Lenin, the war, irrespective of whether it was fought by the tsar or by democrats, was a manifestation of capitalist imperialism. He continued to call for international war to be converted into class war, believing that only an international proletarian revolution could put an end to the bloodletting.

The war is not a product of the evil will of rapacious capitalists although it is undoubtedly being fought *only* in their interests and they alone are being enriched by it. The war is a product of half a century of development of world capital and of its billions of threads and connections. It is *impossible* to escape from the imperialist war at a bound, it is *impossible* to achieve a democratic, non-coercive peace without overthrowing the power of capital and transferring state power to *another* class, the proletariat.

The Russian revolution of February–March 1917 was the beginning of the conversion of the imperialist war into a civil war. This revolution took the *first* step towards ending the war; but it requires a *second* step, namely, the transfer of state power to the proletariat, to make the end of the war a *certainty*. This will be the beginning of a 'breach in the front' on a world-wide scale, a breach in the front of the interests of capital; and only after having broken through *this* front *can* the proletariat save humanity from the horrors of war and endow it with the blessings of a durable peace.

It is directly to such a 'breach in the front' of capital that the Russian revolution has already brought the Russian proletariat by creating the Soviets of Workers' Deputies . . .

Source: Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution: Draft of a Platform for the Proletarian Party', Pravda, 30 April (13 May) 1917.

### Policy Issues and the Way Ahead

The Provisional Government found itself overwhelmed by urgent domestic problems. In three areas in particular the government's response was found wanting: the nationality question, the agrarian crisis, and industrial relations.

The immediate reason for the fall of Lvov's government in July 1917 was the violent disagreement over nationality policy. A number of countries took advantage of the weakness of central authority to break away. Finland declared itself independent, and the Ukrainians set up their own government in the form of the Rada. It was disagreement over recognising the autonomy of the Ukraine that led to the fall of the Lvov government. Muslim national movements developed rapidly in the course of 1917, while in the Caucasus the foundations were laid of an independent Georgia and Armenia. Nationalist demands within a multinational