

The Road to Power

The Bolsheviks took the credit for defeating the Kornilov putsch and were rescued from the doldrums in which they had languished since the July Days. In September they gained majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow city soviets. Kerensky's attempts to broaden the base of the regime by forming a third coalition government in late September failed to overcome the alienation of left and right.

Document 2.8 The Kornilov 'Revolt'

On 26 August the military high command under General L. G. Kornilov called for the surrender of the Provisional Government and planned to form a government under his personal direction, a military dictatorship. Kerensky refused the demand and on 27 August called for popular resistance to come to the defence of the Provisional Government. Kornilov's forces were repulsed by the Petrograd soviet and the city's workers organised in Red Guard units. Kornilov brusquely rejected charges that he sought to overthrow the government, and in language remarkably reminiscent of that of the putschists of August 1991 (see pp. 474–82), he outlined his position.

People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. The hour of her death is near. Forced to speak openly, I, General Kornilov, declare that under the pressure of the Bolshevik majority of the Soviets, the Provisional Government acts in complete harmony with the plans of the German general staff, and simultaneously with the forthcoming landing of the enemy forces on the Riga shores, it is killing the army and undermines the very foundation of the country.

The heavy sense of the inevitable ruin of the country commands me in these ominous moments to call upon all Russian people to come to the aid of the dying motherland. All in whose breasts a Russian heart is beating, who believe in God, in Church, pray to the Lord for the greatest miracle, the saving of our native land!

I, General Kornilov, son of a Cossack peasant, declare to all and sundry that I want nothing for myself, except the preservation of a Great Russia, and I vow to bring the people by means of victory over the enemy to the Constituent Assembly, where they will themselves decide their fate and choose their new form of government. But it is quite impossible for me to betray Russia into the hands of her ancient enemy, the German race, and to turn the Russian people into German slaves. I prefer to die on the battlefield of honor rather than see the disgrace and infamy of the Russian land.

Russian people, the life of your motherland is in your hands! August 27 1917. General Kornilov.

Source: Browder and Kerensky (eds), *The Russian Provisional Government 1917*, vol. III, p. 1573.

Document 2.9 Lenin – *The Bolsheviks Must Seize Power*

When the soviets were dominated by opponents of the Bolsheviks, the slogan 'all power to the soviets' had been quietly dropped (although not without much resistance from rank-and-file communists), but with the tide turning in their favour, the slogan was restored.

Having obtained a majority in the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies of both capitals, the Bolsheviks can and *must* take power into their hands.

They can do so because the active majority of the revolutionary elements of the people of both capitals is sufficient to attract the masses, to overcome the resistance of the adversary, to vanquish him, to conquer power and to retain it. For, in offering immediately a democratic peace, in giving the land immediately to the peasants, in re-establishing the democratic institutions and liberties which have been mangled and crushed by Kerensky, the Bolsheviks will form a government which *nobody* will overthrow.

The majority of the people is *with* us. This has been proved by the long and difficult road from 19 May to 12 August and 25 September: the majority in the Soviets of the capitals is the *result* of the people's progress *to our side*. The vacillation of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, and the strengthening of internationalists among them, is proof of the same thing . . .

To 'wait' for the Constituent Assembly would be wrong. By surrendering Petrograd, Kerensky and Co. can always *destroy* the Constituent Assembly. Only our party, having assumed power, can secure the convocation of the Constituent Assembly; and, after assuming power, it could blame the other parties for delaying it and could substantiate its accusations . . .

We must recall and ponder the words of Marx on uprising: '*Uprising is an art*', etc.

It would be naive to wait for a 'formal' majority on the side of the Bolsheviks; no revolution ever waits for *this* . . . History will not forgive us if we do not assume power now.

No apparatus? There is an apparatus: the Soviets and democratic organisations. The international situation *just now*, on the *eve* of a separate peace between the English and the Germans, is *in our favour*. It is precisely now that to offer peace to the peoples means to *win*.

Assume power *at once* in Moscow and in Petrograd (it does not matter which begins; perhaps even Moscow may begin); we will win *absolutely and unquestionably*.

Source: Lenin, *Bol'sheviki dolzhny vzyat' vlast'* (The Bolsheviks Must Seize Power), 12–14 (25–7) September 1917, PSS, vol. 34, pp. 239, 240, 241–2.

Document 2.10 Lenin's 'Marxism and Insurrection'

Lenin's calls for an immediate insurrection to overthrow the Provisional Government became ever more insistent. On the question of ending the war, Lenin believed that the Germans would grant the Bolsheviks, at the very least, an armistice. In this, as we shall see, Lenin was wrong.

One of the more vicious and probably most widespread distortions of Marxism resorted to by the dominant 'socialist' parties is the opportunist lie that preparation for insurrection, and generally the treatment of insurrection as an art, is 'Blanquism' . . .

To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class. That is the first point. Insurrection must rely upon a *revolutionary upsurge of the people*. That is the second point. Insurrection must rely upon that *turning point* in the history of the growing revolution when the activity of the advanced ranks of the people is at its height, and when the *vacillations* in the ranks of the enemy and *in the ranks of the weak, half-hearted and irresolute friends of the revolution* are strongest. That is the third point. And these three conditions for raising the question of insurrection distinguish *Marxism from Blanquism*.

Once these conditions exist, however, to refuse to treat insurrection as an *art* is a betrayal of the revolution . . .

On 3–4 July it could have been argued, without violating the truth, that the correct thing to do was to take power, for our enemies would in any case have accused us of insurrection and ruthlessly treated us as rebels. However, to have decided on this account in favour of taking power at that time would have been wrong, because the objective conditions for the victory of the insurrection did not exist . . .

We could not have retained power politically on 3–4 July because, *before the Kornilov revolt*, the army and the provinces could and would have marched against Petrograd.

Now the picture is entirely different . . .

All the objective conditions exist for a successful insurrection . . .

And another thing. By immediately proposing a peace without annexations, by immediately breaking with the Allied imperialists and with all imperialists, either we shall at once obtain an armistice, or the entire revolutionary proletariat will rally to the defence of the country, and a really just, really revolutionary war will then be waged by revolutionary democrats under the leadership of the proletariat . . .

Source: Lenin, 'Marxism and Insurrection: A Letter to the Central Committee of the RSDWP', 13–14 (26–7) September 1917, Selected Works, pp. 357, 358, 360–1.

Document 2.11 Lenin – 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?'

In the last days of September 1917 Lenin continued to urge the revolutionary seizure of power, but he also sought to answer those who argued that the Bolsheviks had no constructive policies and would not last long in power. All that the Bolsheviks had to do, according to Lenin, was smash the 'bourgeois' democratic political system of the old regime, and convert its economic apparatus to socialist purposes. In his view, the German war economy had already shown how this could be done: this was his model of a socialist economy. This was an extraordinarily naive view of how a modern economic system works.

On what are all trends agreed . . . They all agree that the Bolsheviks will either never dare take over full state power alone, or, if they dare, and do take power, they will not be able to retain it even for the shortest while . . .

No. We must not allow ourselves to be frightened by the screams of the frightened bourgeoisie. We must bear firmly in mind that we have never set ourselves 'insoluble' social problems, and as for the *perfectly* soluble problem of taking immediate steps towards socialism, which is the only way out of the exceedingly difficult situation, that will be *solved only* by the dictatorship of the proletariat and poor peasants. Victory, and lasting victory, is now more than ever, more than anywhere else, assured for the proletariat in Russia if it takes power . . .

The proletariat *cannot* 'lay hold of' the 'state apparatus' and 'set it in motion'. But it can *smash* everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the state apparatus and substitute its *own*, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies are exactly this apparatus . . .

This brings us to another aspect of the question of the state apparatus. In addition to the chiefly 'oppressive' apparatus – the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy – the modern state possesses an apparatus which has extremely close connections with the banks and syndicates, an apparatus which performs an enormous amount of accounting and registration work, if it may be expressed in this way. This apparatus must not, and should not be *cut off, lopped off, chopped away from* this apparatus; it must be *subordinated* to the proletarian Soviets; it must be expanded, made more comprehensive, and nation-wide, and this *can* be done by utilising the achievements already made by large-scale capitalism (in the same way as the proletarian revolution can, in general, reach its goal only by utilising these achievements).

Capitalism has created an accounting *apparatus* in the shape of the banks, syndicates, postal service, consumers' societies and office employees' unions. *Without big banks socialism would be impossible.*

The big banks *are* the 'state apparatus' which we *need* to bring about socialism, and which we *take ready-made* from capitalism; our task here is

merely to *lop off* what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it *even bigger*, even more democratic, even more comprehensive. Quantity will be transformed into quality. A single State Bank, the biggest of the big, with branches in every rural district, in every factory, will constitute as much as nine-tenths of the *socialist* apparatus. This will be country-wide *book-keeping*, country-wide *accounting* of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the *skeleton* of socialist society . . .

Compulsory syndication, i.e., compulsory amalgamation in associations under state control – this is what capitalism has prepared the way for, this is what has been carried out in Germany by the Junkers' state, this is what can be easily carried out in Russia by the Soviets, by the proletarian dictatorship, and this is what will *provide us with a state apparatus* that will be universal, up-to-date, and non-bureaucratic . . .

Source: Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?', late September 1917, Selected Works, pp. 363, 366, 372–3, 375–6, 377.

Document 2.12 Lenin Again Calls for the Seizure of Power

In a letter to the Bolshevik party's Central Committee (CC) and other party organisations on 1 (14) October 1917 Lenin urged the seizure of power. The Second Congress of Soviets was due to convene at the end of October, but Lenin insisted that the Bolsheviks could not wait that long.

Dear comrades! Events so clearly indicate the task for us that any delay would be tantamount to a crime. The agrarian movement is growing. The government is intensifying wild repression, in the army sympathy towards us is growing . . . In Germany it is clear that the revolution has begun, especially after the shooting of the sailors. The elections in Moscow, with 47 per cent voting for the Bolsheviks, is a gigantic victory. With the Left SRs we are clearly a majority in the country. The railway workers and post office employees are in conflict with the government . . .

The Bolsheviks do not have the right to wait for the congress of soviets, they must take *power immediately*. In this way they will save the world revolution . . . and the Russian revolution.

Source: Lenin, 'Pis'mo v TsK, MK, PK i chlenam sovetov pitera i moskvy bol'shevikam', 1 (14) October 1917, PSS, vol. 34, p. 340.

Document 2.13 Kamenev and Zinoviev Denounce Lenin's Plans for Insurrection

Coming in disguise to the Central Committee's session of 10 (23) October 1917 Lenin urged preparations to be made for the seizure of power. It was at that meeting that a Political Bureau (Politburo) of seven leading Bolsheviks (Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov and Bubnov) was established, though the existence of such a body was only formalised in 1919. The momentous decision to launch an armed insurrection was taken by a vote of 10 for and 2 against, largely at Lenin's instigation. The resolution, however, was opposed by Kamenev and Zinoviev at sessions of the Central Committee on the grounds that the Bolsheviks had neither the mass support nor the international backing to ensure success. They continued to agitate against the motion in the following days. In an article in Maksim Gorkii's journal *Novaya zhizn'* (New Life) on 18 (31) October Kamenev denied that the party had taken any decision to launch an uprising, insisting that it would be 'inadmissible to launch an armed uprising in the present circumstances, independently and a few days before the Congress of Soviets'. In an impassioned statement on 11 (24) October Kamenev and Zinoviev argued the case against insurrection, making points that remain valid despite the success of the Bolshevik seizure of power on 25 October.

There is a tendency becoming established and gaining ground in workers' circles to see the immediate declaration of an armed insurrection as the only way out. All the timetables have now come together that if one talks of such an insurrection, it has to be fixed directly and then for the very near future. The subject is already being discussed in one form or another in all the periodicals and at workers' meetings and it occupies the minds of a large circle of Party workers. We, in our turn, regard it as our duty and our right to express ourselves on this matter with complete frankness.

We are deeply convinced that to proclaim an armed insurrection now is to put at stake not only the fate of our Party but also the fate of the Russian and the international revolution.

There is no doubt that historical circumstances do exist when an oppressed class has to recognise that it is better to go on to a defeat than surrender without a fight. Is the Russian working class in just such a position today? *No, a thousand times no!!!*

As a result of the enormous growth in our Party's influence in the towns and particularly in the army, a position has been reached at the present moment where it is becoming more and more impossible for the bourgeoisie to block the Constituent Assembly . . . Our Party's chances in the Constituent Assembly elections are excellent. We regard the talk put about that the influence of Bolshevism is beginning to decline and suchlike as totally without foundation . . . The influence of Bolshevism is growing. Whole sections of the working population are still only beginning to be swept up in it . . .

The Constituent Assembly cannot by itself, of course, change the real relationship between social forces. But it will prevent this relationship being disguised as at present. There is no getting rid of the Soviets, which have taken root in the life we live. Already the Soviets in practice exercise power in a number of places.

The Constituent Assembly, too, can only rely on the Soviets in its revolutionary work. The Constituent Assembly plus the Soviets – here is that mixed type of state institution we are going towards. Based on this, our Party's policy gets a tremendous chance of a real victory.

We have never said that the Russian working class *on its own*, relying only on its own resources, can successfully accomplish the present revolution. We did not forget, and still must not forget, that between us and the bourgeoisie stands a huge third camp: the petty bourgeoisie. This camp aligned itself with us in the days of the Kornilov revolt and brought us victory. It will join us again, more than once. One must not allow oneself to be mesmerised by what exists at a given moment. There is no doubt that now this camp is far nearer to the bourgeoisie than it is to us. But the present position is not eternal and immutable. And it only takes one careless step, some ill-considered move which makes the whole fate of the revolution depend on an immediate insurrection, for the proletarian party to push the petty bourgeoisie into Miliukov's arms *for a long time*.

They say: 1. The majority of the people in Russia are already on our side and 2. the majority of the international proletariat is on our side. Alas! Neither one nor the other is true, and that is the whole point.

In Russia we have the majority of the workers and a considerable section of the soldiers on our side. But all the rest are doubtful. We are all convinced, for example, that if things now get as far as the Constituent Assembly elections, the peasants will vote in the main for the SRs . . .

And now we come to the second assertion – that the majority of the international proletariat now supports us. Unfortunately, it is not so. The revolt in the German navy has enormous significance as a symptom. The first signs of a serious movement exists in Italy. But from this to any active support of proletarian revolution in Russia, declaring war on the whole bourgeois world, is still a very long way. It can do great harm to overestimate one's strength . . .

It is against this fatal policy that we raise our voice in warning.

Source: The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution: Minutes of the Central Committee of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (bolsheviks), August 1917–February 1918, *translated from the Russian by Ann Bone* (London, Pluto Press, 1974), pp. 89–95.

The Seizure of Power

In October the Bolsheviks cut short the evolutionary option and launched the country on the path of radical transformation. The October revolution was a classical Leninist revolution, with bodies of armed men waving red flags seizing power in violent insurrection. The weakness of the Provisional Government might not have mattered so much if it had not had the misfortune of having its own resolute executioner to hand, the Bolsheviks headed by a leader of genius, Lenin. Only they offered a clear political and social alternative, however demagogic in detail it might have been. The demand to transfer power to the soviets offered the prospect of a break with old patterns of authority. It appeared to present an opportunity of improving their economic conditions and status.

Driven by Lenin's urgings and against the warnings of Kamenev and Zinoviev, on the night of 24–5 October (6–7 November) the Bolsheviks organised by Trotsky moved to take power. Against weak resistance and with the majority of the population passive, the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd and besieged the remaining ministers in the Winter Palace which, after a few salvoes from the warship *Aurora* in the Neva, was occupied by insurgent forces on the evening of 25 October. Already by late in the evening of 24–5 October they presented the Second Congress of Soviets, meeting in Petrograd with a Bolshevik majority, with a *fait accompli*: power belonged to the Bolsheviks in the name of the soviets. In the event, the Bolsheviks struck not only against 'the bourgeoisie', but also against the soviets and the Constituent Assembly. The Petrograd soviet in effect pre-empted the decisions of the Second Congress of Soviets in voting for a proletarian government.

Document 2.14 John Reed on the Second Congress of Soviets, 25 October (7 November) 1917

John Reed (1887–1920) was an American journalist whose eyewitness account of the revolutionary events in Petrograd, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, has become a classic of the genre. On his return to America he helped establish the Communist Party of the USA in 1919. In the following year he was once again drawn to Soviet Russia, but covering a congress of the communist organisations of the peoples of the East in Baku in November 1920 he contracted typhus and died. He was buried in the Kremlin Wall in Red Square alongside other revolutionary heroes. Lenin wrote an enthusiastic introduction to Reed's account of the revolution, but later Stalin suppressed the book since the work contained powerful descriptions of Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev and others, but nothing on Stalin.

The massive façade of Smolny blazed with lights as we drove up, and from every street converged upon it streams of hurrying shapes dim in the gloom . . . There was an atmosphere of recklessness. A crowd came pouring down the staircase, workers in black blouses and round black fur hats, many of them