

The Bolsheviks Seize Petrograd

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3/29/2011

The period of time from October 24-27 marked a rapid change in the political landscape of Russia as the Bolsheviks seized power from the Provisional Government in the name of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. This October Revolution was carried out very quickly, with minimal bloodshed and violence, but the importance and implications of this event were drastic and widespread. Exactly how important and widespread is a matter of debate to this day, a debate that was given breath in the very days surrounding and including the revolution. There were those who opposed the revolution, claiming it a betrayal of the workers, as a premature revolution is one of the most damaging events that could befall a burgeoning socialist government, while others claimed that a true socialist government is exactly what the revolution achieved.

The events of that fast paced, four day period from October 24 to October 27 of 1917 was all the time needed for Bolsheviks, using the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, to seize the power and authority to govern from the Provisional Government. This 'October Revolution' in which the Petrograd Soviet, headed by the Bolshevik party, seized power, is viewed by many as the culmination of the series of events of the revolutionary year of 1917. This seizure of power placed the Bolshevik party in a position that enabled them to extend their power and establish a socialist state throughout all of Russia. Still, there are those who would suggest that this period is not entirely deserving of the title of 'revolution.' The October Revolution was a very brief affair which lacked much of the prolonged, intense conflict one usually associates with revolution. Dissenting opinions of the importance of the Bolsheviks' actions and the credibility of their stated intentions are not, however, limited to the opinions of the historians who discuss them today, but seem to have taken root in that dynamic period. The Bolsheviks, claiming to act in the interest of the bourgeoisie, only represented a small portion of the Russian people. Some scholars believe that the events following the revolution, namely the civil war, the reorganization of Russian society and the general retention of power by the Bolsheviks represent much more significant events than the October Revolution.

The major factions involved in the second revolution of 1917 were the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, under the

direction of the Bolshevik party. To understand the significance of the October Revolution, a better understanding of these two groups is required, and so a more detailed look at them is necessary. These two groups came to prominence in the period surrounding the February Revolution of 1917 in which Tsar Nicholas II abdicated and the 300 year old Romanov dynasty came to an end. Just days prior to the tsar's abdication, members of the newly dissolved Duma organized a Provisional Committee. The Provisional Committee was established by leading members of the Duma in an attempt to steer Russia through the tumultuous events of that month. On the same day that members of the Duma created the Provisional Committee, a self-selected group of soldiers, workers and the intelligentsia organized the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Following hours of negotiations with the leading members of the Petrograd Soviet, the Provisional Committee declared itself the Provisional Government of Russia.¹

The organization of these two groups led to the struggle of power that culminated in the October Revolution. The Provisional Government had some semblance of authority as it was established by leading members of the Duma, although it lacked any actual power to enforce its decisions. The Provisional Government had to rely, to a large extent, on propaganda to foster consensus and unity, as the only way it could accomplish any of its goals or directives was through the consent and cooperation of the people. The Provisional Government relied on the "good sense, statesmanship and

¹ Michael Kort, The Soviet Colossus, p. 92.

loyalty of the people” to support their legitimacy and power as the acting government of Russia.² Embracing this line of thought, the Provisional Government viewed this situation as a way to transform the peasant class, the largest strata of Russian society, and other non-elite classes into active citizens and to raise their political and social consciousness.³

The position of the Petrograd Soviet can be readily contrasted with that of the Provisional Government. The ranks of the Petrograd Soviet were filled by representatives from the factories and military units in and around Petrograd, and this gave the Petrograd Soviet a larger degree of power than the Provisional Government through popular support. The Petrograd Soviet held a great degree of influence over factory workers and soldiers due to this support, though, unlike the Provisional Government, they held no concrete authority. The power garnered by the Petrograd Soviet from the workers and soldiers of Petrograd, as well as from other soviets throughout the country, undermined the authority of the Provisional Government. This “dual power” shared by the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet placed two influential organizations at odds with each other from its inception. The presence of these two influential political entities in the Russian political system lent itself to the instability and internal struggle that plagued the country and culminated in the events

² Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, The Kerensky Memoirs: Russia and History's Turning Point (London, 1965), p. 228.

³ Orlando Figes, “The Russian Revolution of 1917 and Its Language in the Village,” *Russian Review* 56 (July 1997), p. 323.

of the October Revolution.⁴

There were many members of the Bolshevik party who desired a revolution to seize control from the Provisional Government so that they could set up a socialist state. Although creating a socialist state was the ultimate goal of the Bolshevik party, leading members of the Bolshevik party believed that seizing power would be premature as of September, 1917. It took a substantial amount of effort on the part of Lenin to convince the Central Committee in Petrograd that the time had arrived. Lenin began his attempts to persuade the Central Committee in late September and urged them to take advantage of the decay of the Provisional Government and the newly obtained Bolshevik majority in the Petrograd Soviet that effectively paralyzed the Menshevik and the Socialist-Revolutionary parties.⁵

The rapid series of events that constitute the October Revolution were set off by the events of the late hours of the night of October 23 into the early morning hours of October 24. In these early hours Alexander Kerensky, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, having heard rumor of revolution, sent a contingent of military cadets to raid, shut down and occupy two Bolshevik newspapers. On the 24th of October, Kerensky announced to a meeting of the pre-parliament that police efforts would be renewed in the search for Lenin and that Trotsky would soon be arrested.⁶ It was also

⁴ Kort, p. 92-94.

⁵ Leonard Schapiro, The Russian Revolutions of 1917, p. 132.

⁶ Esther Kingston-Mann, "Lenin and the Beginnings of Marxist Peasant Revolution: the Burden of Political Opportunity, July-October 1917," p. 585.

rumored that Kerensky had ordered loyal troops from the front to return to Petrograd in an attempt to quickly quell any sort of uprising.⁷

The events on the 24th gave the Petrograd Soviet all the excuse they needed to act quickly and decisively. On October 25 the Red Guard, a paramilitary group consisting of workers, soldiers and sailors, under direction of the Petrograd Soviet, seized key positions throughout the city of Petrograd⁸ and took over several principal stations and services. It is interesting to note that it was on this day, even though the ministers of the Provisional Government were yet free and the Winter Palace still in their control, that the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, the committee responsible for preparing for and carrying out the revolution, announced the deposition of the Provisional Government and claimed complete control throughout the capital and the entire country.⁹

The statement made by the Petrograd Soviet announcing their success over the Provisional Government was extremely short, to the point and was written in a very simple manner. The style of writing employed here is an example of the language that, as Figes claims, was the key to the cultural integration of the peasantry.¹⁰ In this concise, easily understood statement, it was established that the Petrograd Soviet was now the

⁷ Schapiro, p. 132.

⁸ E. H. Carr, The Russian Revolution, p. 5.

⁹ Schapiro, p. 133.

¹⁰ Figes, p. 324.

governing body of Russia, reaffirmed that the revolution was carried out on behalf of the people and made some substantial promises to them, including the pursuit of peace, the abolition of land ownership and workers' control over production.¹¹ It was not until October 26 that the Petrograd Soviet was able to seize control of the Winter Palace and arrest the ministers of the Provisional Government, a feat which only required a small detachment of troops.

In fact, the entire October Revolution took place with fairly little violence. In an interesting choice of phrasing, historian E.H. Carr described the events of the revolutions as a "bloodless coup,"¹² while others, such as historian Leonard Schapiro, refer to the coup as "almost bloodless."¹³ Carr also regards the revolution as a particularly important event, one that offered the first open challenge to the capitalist system,¹⁴ while other historians believe that the seizure of power was not as remarkable as the ability of the Bolsheviks to retain it.¹⁵ Carr, moreover, downplays the resistance to the Bolsheviks, even in areas that fell to them rather quickly, and that the transfer of power in remote districts and outlying regions took a

¹¹ "To the Citizens of Russia," (October 25, 1917) in Sakwa, Richard, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1911, doc. 2.15, p. 54.

¹² Carr, p. 5.

¹³ Schapiro, p. 132.

¹⁴ Carr, p. 1.

¹⁵ John L.H. Keep, The Russian Revolution, p. 252.

much longer time than in most of the major cities.¹⁶ What does seem to be the general consensus, both then and now, is that the revolutionary regime would not be able to survive for long without aid from an external source. Western powers generally believed the Petrograd Soviet would only be able to retain power for a period of days or weeks, while Bolshevik leaders thought they would soon see similar revolutions in other countries and that, once they occurred, they would gain support from those newly established governments.¹⁷

Many members of the Bolshevik party believed that uprisings would soon follow in neighboring European countries. Trotsky remarked as much in his address to the Petrograd Soviet on October 25, in which he states that “the worldwide labor movement, ... is already beginning to develop in Italy, England and Germany...”¹⁸ In the October 26 “Decree on Peace,” in which the new regime called for immediate negotiations for peace, an appeal was made to the workers of France and Germany to rise up and join the revolution.¹⁹ However, not all thought

¹⁶ Keep, p. 251,2.

¹⁷ Carr, p. 38.

¹⁸ Lenin, Vladimir, “Speeches by Lenin and Trotsky to the Petrograd Soviet,” (October 25, 1917) in Daly, Jonathan W. and Trofimov, Leonid, Russia in War and Revolution 1914-1922: A Documentary History, doc. 47, p. 109-12.

¹⁹ “Decree on Peace,” (October 26, 1917) in Sakwa, Richard, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1911, doc. 2.17, p. 57.

that this was a likely possibility. Georgii Plekhanov, a leader of the Russian Social Democracy, wrote a letter to the Bolshevik leadership on October 27 relaying his opinions of the Bolshevik revolution. In this letter, Plekhanov stated that Germany, a country with a more developed economy than Russia and one in which conditions for the “social revolution” are much closer, was not yet ready for such a revolution and that this fact was well known by members of the German Social Democrats.²⁰

Carr succinctly summarizes the opinions of those individuals contemporary to the events of the revolution when he reflects on the polarized opinions of the revolution as either a “landmark in the emancipation of mankind from past oppression” or as “a crime and a disaster.”²¹ Many Bolsheviks, including Lenin and Trotsky extol the virtues of the revolution as a means to establish a government for the oppressed, a proletarian socialist government.²² Bolsheviks would seek to support these claims by pointing out how readily other cities were stirred to revolutionary action and by the release of the Decree on Peace and the Decree on Land. The Decree on Peace called for all belligerent nations to end the war, while the Decree on Land served to stabilize the rule of the Bolsheviks in the countryside, as it gave peasant-farmers access to more land by confiscating land from current landlords but not the peasants themselves.²³

²⁰ “Plekhanov on the Bolshevik Revolution,” (October 28, 1917) in Sakwa, doc. 2.21, p. 60-1.

²¹ Carr, p. 1.

²² Lenin, in Daly and Trofimov, doc. 47, p. 109-12.

²³ “Decree on Land,” (October 26, 1917) in Sakwa, Richard, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1911, doc. 2.18, p. 58.

The Bolsheviks sought to control propaganda and act swiftly against dissenters, but there were those who were willing to express their discontent with their revolutionary activities. Plekhanov, in his letter to the Bolshevik leadership, cited Engel's observation that "for the working class there cannot be a greater historical misfortune than to seize political power at a time when it is not yet ready for it."²⁴ Because of this belief, Plekhanov viewed the revolution as a betrayal of the working class. Further dissent can be observed in the final issue of the paper *Izvestiya* before its seizure by the Bolsheviks. In this final issue, the anonymous author expressed the opinion that the uprising was nothing more than an insane venture and that, as the Bolsheviks were the only ones to have participated in the revolution, they would be the only ones who would be represented or be able to participate in this new government.²⁵ Having also realized the power of the press, the Bolsheviks issued another decree on October 27, called the Decree on the Press. This decree severely limited free press and recognized that the press could be a powerful weapon. While it was said that this would only be a temporary measure, the limitations on free press were not lifted until 1990.²⁶

It would seem that, for better or worse, the October Revolution was in fact a major turning point in Russian, and indeed world history. As the culmination of the

²⁴ "Plekhanov on the Bolshevik Revolution," (October 28, 1917) in Sakwa, doc. 2.21, p. 60-1.

²⁵ "More Warnings," (October 25-6, 1917) in Sakwa, Richard, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1911, doc. 2.17, p. 55.

²⁶ "The Sovnarkom 'Decree on the Press'," (October 27, 1917) in Sakwa, Richard, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1911, doc. 2.19, p. 58-9.

events of the year 1917, the revolution's importance would seem to be evident. The opinions of these events appear to be as diverse now as they were while they were occurring, and the debate surrounding their importance and consequences are as lively as ever.

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