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The Supposed Role of the Military Revolutionary Committee Before, During, and After October

The Russian Revolution played a pivotal role in exacerbating, if not creating, an ideological split between Russia and the westernized world in the 20th century. When the Bolsheviks rose against the Provisional Government in the fall of 1917, they utilized a hodgepodge of units, known uniformly as the Red Guard, to position themselves into a seat of power in Petrograd. From this seat the Bolsheviks vied to finally end the centuries long autocratic traditions of Russia as well as the brief experiment with a parliamentary system known as the Provisional Government. During the subsequent power vacuum, the Bolsheviks hoped to impose their vision of a socialist state on the Russian people. The Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) was vital to the success and viability of the Bolshevik cause. Vladimir Lenin, the *de facto* leader of the Bolshevik Party, had long theorized the need for a proletarian militia, a role fulfilled by the Red Guard, and the MRC was to be a serviceable interim command for the organization of the Red Guard. Officially created on October 22, 1917, the MRC was the brains behind the muscle that the Bolshevik Party was trying to flex at that time. Lasting for two months, the MRC directed the logistics behind the seizure of power by the party in Petrograd, Moscow, and other critical locations during the first days of the October Revolution. When the MRC was disbanded in December, 1917, the lessons learned from having a centralized planning committee proved to be invaluable in setting up Bolshevik bureaucracies. One of those bureaucracies was the future military arm of the party, the Revolutionary Military Council, whose goal was to exterminate any remnants of the tsarist regime and to create a new Soviet order.

The transformation of the Bolsheviks from a political party to a military party occurred over the

rather turbulent summer of 1917, but it was exactly what Lenin had long advocated for, in contrast to his more mild colleagues in the Menshevik and Social Revolutionaries Parties. In “Military Programme of Proletarian Revolution,” written in September 1916, Lenin argued vehemently against the idea of disarmament put forward by other socialists¹. Instead, he stressed the need for a proletariat force, which was to be organized by a higher body issuing orders for the revolution. Lenin saw no reason for war not to happen during the process of class struggle—in fact, he believed that war was inherently implied in the definition of struggle. He chastised the more moderate revolutionaries for refusing to accept war and dreaming of a future peace while ignoring the present struggle. He cited Marxists such as Plekhanov, Scheidemann, Legien, etc, as a class of “opportunists” who were content to work within the confines of the status quo.² Lenin argued that those “opportunists” were only pleading for disarmament because they were evading the question of revolution. Therefore, by Lenin's logic, those “opportunists” had to be anti-revolutionary and resigned to close their eyes to the unpleasant reality of the need for struggle. Even worse, a second class of “opportunists”, described as “Kautskyite Opportunists,” were even more dangerous to the revolution since they did not openly align their reformist attitudes with that of the status quo, unlike the first class of Marxists. Both classes, however, are considered to be cowards by Lenin since they betray their socialist ideas in favor of a more peaceful middle path (which Lenin believed would defeat the purpose of a socialist revolution). Peace would be another sacrifice that had to make way for the revolution. Lenin does acknowledge, however, that if socialism defeated capitalism across the entire globe, then there would be the possibility of a world permanently without war. Until then, an armed struggle must occur one nation at a time since socialism cannot instantaneously take over the mindset of the world.

Lenin's perspective on the socialist revolution across the globe seems to indicate that he was not willing to philosophically convince the bourgeoisie to step down (as his more moderate colleagues

1 V. I. Lenin, “Military Programme of Proletariat Revolution” (Sept. 1916), in V.I. Lenin: Selected Works in Three Volumes, pp. 778-787

2 Ibid.

might have been inclined to do so). Instead his idea of ideological war against the bourgeoisie is very physical: he intends to wipe them out by force, not assimilation. Furthermore, he believed that, “an oppressed class which does not strive to learn to use arms, to acquire arms, only deserved to be treated like slaves.”³ Lenin provided an explanation of why it must be so: the bourgeoisie can only subjugate the proletariat to slavery by force. In response, the proletariat has no choice but to arm itself in order to wrench the arms from the bourgeoisie, its slavers. When the bourgeoisie is entirely stripped of its arms, it will naturally succumb to the power of the proletariat. In other words, Lenin believes that power comes through arms and arms alone. Therefore, power will come to the proletarian by putting his bourgeois slaver in front of the barrel of a rifle. When the proletariat has total control of the situation, it will naturally destroy all the existing arms and thus usher in an indefinite era of peace. Lenin did not mention other forms of power, for instance, economic power or religious power or even educational power. In addition, Lenin did not bother to explain why the proletariat would even naturally give up the only source of power known to man. If the bourgeoisie had ruled the proletariat through arms, then it would be logical for the reverse to occur: once the proletariat had gained power through arms, it was necessary for the proletariat to retain power by keeping those arms. Yet, Lenin appeared to be intentionally ambiguous; he just assumed that the proletariat would destroy all arms and yet somehow retain control of society. More ominously, Lenin seems to suggest that peace will reign because there is only the proletariat class, which begs the question of what would happen to the bourgeoisie in such a scenario.

On the other hand, Lenin surmised that the bourgeoisie had been setting itself up for disaster. He mentioned that by promoting trusts and forcing women and children into the factories, the bourgeoisie had naturally created a reactionary force against itself. Consequently, as the bourgeoisie continues to subject the proletariat to poverty, the more it galvanizes the latter. Lenin referred to this as a militarizing of the population: “Today the imperialist bourgeoisie militarises the youth as well as the

3 Ibid.

adults; tomorrow, it may begin militarising the women...”⁴ Lenin welcomed this bourgeois oppression of the proletariat since it would only expedite the concept of the revolution in the minds of the general population. After all, when the day of reckoning arrives, Lenin hoped to rile up the entire population against the bourgeoisie, women and children included. Furthermore, Lenin thought that with the entire population rallying to the proletarian cause, the revolution would be of a defensive nature, and that the question was not who was for the revolution, but rather who was against it. He credited an 1882 letter written by Engels for this logic⁵. Lenin essentially saw that war on the behalf of the proletariat was justified because the proletariat both wanted war and required war to triumph.

Due to the inevitable nature of the coming revolution, Lenin elaborated on his plan to ensure the success of the socialists. Instrumental to the idea of acquiring power through arms was the idea of a proletariat militia. The militia would have to be entirely composed of the proletariat and would work to protect and educate the workers themselves. Furthermore, the militia would serve to oppose the ideas of those who represent the imperialist or capitalist way of thinking, including those “opportunists” who are content to civilly work with the bourgeoisie. In other words, Lenin seems to state that the militia is the basic unit of combat against the bourgeoisie and must be used to control the bourgeoisie. In late 1917, this idea of a proletariat militia would form the basis of the Red Guard and subsequent Red Army. Lenin argued further that it was impossible to defend the ideas of the revolution without having a militia: imperialism by nature wages a war on the people. As a result, disarmament is impossible. An exception to this, according to Lenin, is manifested in small nation states like Switzerland, where the people must live peacefully because they do not have the power to wage war. Unfortunately, sooner or later the force of capitalism and imperialism catches up and, “draws the small states into the vortex of world economy and world politics.”⁶ Even small states are not completely immune. In short, Lenin believed that the idea of disarmament was dangerous to the proletariat because it would perpetuate the

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

misery of the workers.

When Lenin wrote “The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution” in 1916, he was advocating an unflinching hard-line stance on matters concerning the future revolution. This paper served not only to reinforce his philosophy, but also as a catalyst to attack and discredit his detractors. This work was also probably written to attract revolutionaries who were on the fence about whether the idea of armed insurrection was absolutely necessary for the socialist revolution. On a more personal note, Lenin's strong stance on arming the proletariat barely hid his thinly veiled contempt for the more moderate socialists. His dedication to the creation of a militarized party is evident in his description of the working class men and women: to him, they were already militant. The Military Revolutionary Committee created in 1917 would henceforth be the organizing force of the militant proletariat.

Indeed, by the time 1917 swung around, Petrograd was pregnant with revolutionary fervor, much of which took a militant form and involved the proletariat. The subsequent events during the July Days and the Kornilov Affair convinced Lenin that the time was near for the Bolsheviks to revolt due to the militant form of the upheavals. However, while the party had swelled over tenfold in 1917, it was still relatively disjointed, much like the greater body of the Congress of Soviets.⁷ The need for a committee dedicated to the organization of the Red Guard was recognized by Lenin as the Provisional Government continued to distance themselves from the Bolsheviks during the tumultuous aftermath of the Kornilov Affair. In August, the Provisional Government had released a number of Bolshevik members and armed them in hopes of repelling Kornilov's soldiers. When that affair was taken care off, the government realized the threat that hordes of Bolsheviks running around with rifles and propaganda media posed. By early October, the Provisional Government had raised a sizable force of around 800 men and several armored cars to guard their headquarters in the Winter Palace⁸. In response, the Bolsheviks also protected their headquarters at the Smolny Institute with detachments of Red Guard. In

⁷ Michael Kort, “The Soviet Colossus”, p. 101

⁸ Photographer Unknown, “Image: As tensions rose between Lenin's Bolsheviks and Kerensky's Provisional Government in October 1917 both sides began to take precautions” (Oct. 1917), in Harrison E. Salisbury “Russia in Revolution: 1900-1930”, p. 146

the meantime, the rest of the troops stationed at Petrograd did relatively little.⁹ Although some of the soldiers did actively participate in the defense of the government, most were apathetic about the Provisional Government and many were actively looking for an excuse to side with the socialists.

Not everyone, however, inside the Bolshevik camp was as enthusiastic as Lenin about an immediate or near immediate coup d'etat. Two of the most prominent opponents of Lenin's proposed offensive were Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev. They argued that a military coup would fail because they believed that the majority of the citizens were against the Bolsheviks. Moreover, they felt that even if the coup would succeed, it was only a matter of time before loyalists regained control since the possibility of a food shortage, in the event of a revolution in Petrograd, was very high. A third point that they made was their belief that the international situation had not demanded that the Bolsheviks act at that current time and if they did, they risked being executed and setting back the international socialist revolution. Lenin, in contrast, felt that Kamenev and Zinoviev were utterly off the mark and were trying to sow disagreement within the party. To him, the points of the two dissenters were irrelevant. In his letter to the Bolshevik Party on October 16, Lenin does his best to discredit Kamenev and Zinoviev.¹⁰ His reply to their first point was that they had gravely miscalculated the power of the Bolsheviks. Lenin argued that after the Kornilov Affair, the Bolshevik Party had swelled to the point where many peasant soviets had expressed displeasure with the coalition government, a stance which directly correlated with their acceptance of the Bolsheviks. To drive home his point, Lenin insulted Kamenev and Zinoviev by saying that what the latter said amounted to mockery of their audience, the Bolshevik Party itself. His reply to their point followed the same logic: Lenin summed it up by referring to Kamenev and Zinoviev as skeptics and by extension, cowards. Finally, his reply to their third point took the form of a sarcastic remark about how the world would indeed lose such fine revolutionaries as themselves should they fail. Lenin's objective in publishing this reply was not so

9 Harrison E. Salisbury, *Russia in Revolution: 1900-1930*. (Great Britain: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1978) p.149

10 V.I. Lenin, "Letter to the Comrades" (Oct. 1917), in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*,

<<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917reply1&SubjectID=1917october&Year=1917>>

much to plead his case with the other Bolsheviks as it was to degrade and humiliate Kamenev and Zinoviev. Lenin had grown increasingly frustrated with each passing day and civil discussion was no longer accepted. His likening of the two dissenters to the moderate socialists reveals that Lenin intended to act in practice as he wrote in theory—there would be no concessions. There would only be military action.

On October 22, a vote was cast on the immediate organization of the coup, and the Military Revolutionary Committee was born. The vote was 10-2, with Kamenev and Zinoviev dissenting. The new committee was to be headed by Nikolai Podvoisky and his lieutenant Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko. Members of the committee included Lenin, Trotsky, and Felix Dzerzhinsky, who would go on to be the first head of the Cheka.¹¹ Notably absent from this committee were Kamenev and Zinoviev. On October 23, the Bolshevik newspaper *Izvestiia* reported the results of the previous day's work.¹² The initial duty given to the newly formed MRC was to study, “the defense of Petrograd and its approach and work out a plan for the protection of the city with the active support of the laboring class.” The MRC, therefore, was created with the expectation that imminent siege would be laid upon the city when news of the coup reached loyalist military units stationed elsewhere. The MRC would also derive its forces from the proletariat, which would be organized into a militia under the MRC command. This idea of a worker militia correlated quite nicely with the militia that Lenin proposed in “The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution.” At the same time, representatives were to be sent to coordinate with the troops garrisoned at Petrograd, which in essence announced the turnover of all military personnel to the Bolshevik Party. There was also an order to “clean out” the current military commanders, some of whom might have harbored sympathy for the Provisional Government.

The creation of the MRC signified a change in the way the revolution was to be run. Previously, during the summer of 1917, Bolshevik sympathizers basically consisted of loosely organized protestors

11 Valentin Astrov, ed., “Image: The Petrograd Revolutionary Committee” (1917), in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1917october&Year=1917&show=images>>

12 *Izvestiia*, “Creation of the Military Revolutionary Committee” (Oct. 1917), in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917mrc2&SubjectID=1917october&Year=1917>>

who were easily routed by the more organized forces of the Provisional Government. In what is known as the “July Days,” workers spontaneously rose up in riots on the streets of Petrograd. In one photograph from July 3, 1917, the lack of coordination of these protesters as they rioted along Nevsky Prospekt is evident¹³. There is no apparent leader and no significant amount of arms on the side of the Bolshevik sympathizers. If they had wanted to revolt, it was a terrible way to do so. Meanwhile, Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin, had not even anticipated such protests and were scapegoated for the unrest.¹⁴ October was different. By now the lessons of July had been learned and there was a transformation of the proletariat from untrained protester to disciplined soldier. This singular transformation also changed the nature of the revolution itself; the skirmishes had become battles.

Once the MRC was created, the race to the coup intensified dramatically. When Kerensky attempted to shut down several Bolshevik newspapers as well as arrest Trotsky, the MRC sprang into action. Soon the Red Guards took up strategic positions around Petrograd and disbanded the parliament (Kerensky fled via an American embassy car). On October 27, Lev Kamenev, the previous dissenter, announced at the Smolny Institute that the Provisional Government had fallen. Once the Bolsheviks had assumed control of Petrograd, the question turned towards maintaining control. An order issued by Lenin and published in *Izvestiia* (a Bolshevik publication) on November 12, called for the MRC to vigorously stamp out criminals who stole or disrupted the flow of food and other supplies.¹⁵ According to Lenin, most of the plundered goods were taken by profiteers on the railways and steamship lines. By now the MRC's role was not exclusively confined to military matters, but included the execution of Bolshevik law and the logistics of supplies. The MRC had become an umbrella organization which issued orders to different task groups. In one instance, soldiers were in charge of targeting the Russian Orthodox Church; religion had become an object of attack by socialists (Lenin had previously declared

13 Photographer Unknown, “Image: On July 3, 1917 widespread rioting broke out in Petrograd as left-wing forces associated with Lenin's Bolshevik faction demonstrated in what was widely regarded as the initial phase of a coup d'etat” (Jul. 1917), in Harrison E. Salisbury “Russia in Revolution: 1900-1930”, p. 130-131

14 Harrison E. Salisbury, “Russia in Revolution: 1900-1930”, p. 134

15 V.I. Lenin, “From the Council of People's Commissars To The Revolutionary Military Committee” (Nov. 1917), in Marxist Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/10a.htm>>

religion to be a private affair which had no place in the operation of the state¹⁶). Lenin's concern at the time was the need for total discipline by the people as well as the need for a less discontent population (one that would have basic supplies such as food and water). Moreover, Lenin probably recognized that the struggle for a Bolshevik Russia would be a protracted conflict and he did not want to get off on a bad footing. He did not want Petrograd to be isolated by anti-revolutionary forces. A keen student of the Paris Commune, Lenin desperately wanted the Bolsheviks to do what the Commune could not: survive for more than a few weeks.

By December, the Military Revolutionary Committee in Petrograd was disbanded. By March 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had been signed and the war with Germany had come to an end. The Civil War with the Whites, however, was in full swing. Determined to make the Red Army into a more effective fighting force, the Commissar for Military Affairs Nikolai Podovoiisky (previously the head of the MRC) urged the Council of People's Commissars to entrust the command of the military to the Higher Military Council.¹⁷ Podovoiisky saw the defects in the military to be of a logistic nature: there was no supreme headquarters. Furthermore, this hindered efforts to coordinate with forward attack bases because stable supply chains could not be formed. This need for a central planning committee was further exemplified in a letter from Alexander Egorov, a People's Commissar for Military Affairs, to Lenin in August 1918.¹⁸ Egorov called for the unification of two different and competing branches of the military, the Headquarters Staff of the Higher Military Council and the Operational Department of the People's Commissariat for Military Affairs. Failure to do so, according to Egorov, would result in direct consequences on all fronts and disable the Bolsheviks' war machine. Once again, this highlighted the importance of a proper chain of command. A proper revolutionary force would need a proper organ with which to fight. In any case, by September 1918, the Revolutionary Military Council was created to

16 V.I. Lenin, "Socialism and Religion" (Dec. 1905), in Marxist Internet Archive, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/dec/03.htm>>

17 Nikolai Podovoiisky, "Letter to Moscow, People's Commissar for Military Affairs, Trotsky. Higher Military Council. Council of People's Commissars" (Aug. 1918), in Jan M. Meijer "The Trotsky Papers: 1917-1922", p. 67

18 Alexander Egorov, "Letter to Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Comrade Lenin" (Aug. 1918), in Jan M. Meijer "The Trotsky Papers", p. 93-97

address the concern of dual command. The war would continue for the next five years, finally ending in 1923 with the Bolsheviks at the helm of Russia and the USSR.

The overarching theme that prevailed in the logic behind the creation of the Revolutionary Military Council was the need for a clear cut chain of command. It was a theme borrowed from the logic behind the creation of the Military Revolutionary Committee. In both cases, a command was established to create an agenda by which to wage the revolution. In both cases, the unit of the revolution became more defined: from simple protesters to professional militiamen to soldiers. It was by these incremental upgrades that the Bolsheviks managed to hone their fighting force from a group of rather chaotic idealists to a group of professionals, an objective Lenin had long sought. In the grand scheme of the revolution, the MRC and the subsequent Revolutionary Military Council could be viewed as little more than bureaucratic maneuverings used exclusively to organize a set hierarchy within the Party. However, the tradition of rigid hierarchical structure was not new to Russia and it was certainly not new to Lenin. When he had spoken about the concept of supreme rule of the people, Lenin meant that a centralized body would make decisions on behalf of the will of the people.¹⁹ Analogously, when he spoke about the proletariat militia in his military programme speech, Lenin probably did not intend for the militia to be a self-sufficient organ, but rather a body which enforced the will of the people (i.e., took orders from a central command). Thus it may not be too far-fetched to wonder just how much power Lenin would have liked to have given a military organization since the heirs of the MRC would include an oppressive security system that perpetrated some of the worst political atrocities over the course of the 20th century.

¹⁹ Michael Kort, "The Soviet Colossus", p. 65

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