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The Battle for Public Opinion in Revolutionary Russia

On March 2, 1917, as workers rioted and troops mutinied in the capital, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his throne in favor of his brother Michael, who, in refusing the throne, left the great Russian Empire without a leader after centuries of autocratic rule. In the power vacuum that resulted, several members of the Duma stepped forward to form a new Provisional Government to lead the country with promises of reforms and elections to come.

However, the overthrow of the tsar left Russia without a legitimate, widely accepted ruler. Even as the Provisional Government worked its first days to establish its new order, a new power, the Petrograd Soviet, was gaining support among the workers and soldiers and issuing its own orders. In these early months after the revolution, rival political groups had to battle for public support using the press and public speeches to convince the many dissatisfied groups that they offered solutions to their grievances. Bolshevik activists were highly successful in appealing to disillusioned peasants, soldiers, and workers, as they used speeches and the press to attack their political opponents in the government and promote their radical programs to resolve

social ills. Their willingness to address basic human needs of the people won them many supporters.

Leon Trotsky's commentary on the February Revolution was important in that it demanded further progress on behalf of the people right after the fall of the tsar. Trotsky presciently wrote from New York in March 1917 that the revolution, in his view, was as yet incomplete. He boldly predicted that "the Russian Revolution will not stop."¹ With a nod to Marx's theory of socialist revolution, Trotsky viciously attacked the liberals at the head of the new government using Marx's words and his own, taking radical stances on various issues facing the socialists of the day. He presented a highly cynical attack on the new government's decision to continue in the war, and praised the "Workmen's Committee" (probably the Soviet) for opposing the government.

Trotsky's apparent hostility and mistrust of the new government came too early to be widely accepted. In April, Lenin would present similar anti-war, anti-government sentiments which were met with fierce opposition among other socialist activists. In February, Bolshevik agitator Alexandra Kollontai, while mourning the death of Russians for the cause of the revolution, wrote joyously of the new order, describing "an exultant choir proclaiming the victory of the revolution, the conquest by the people of that freedom which alone makes it possible to wage the struggle for bread, for peace, *for the consolidation of the power of proletarian democracy today, and socialism tomorrow.*"² Even this article in *Pravda*, a popular socialist paper, by the radical Kollontai did not

¹ Trotsky, Leon (Bolshevik activist), "Two Faces" (March 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch09.htm>>.

² Kollontai, Alexandra (Bolshevik Activist), "Our Memorial to the Fighters for Freedom" (March 1917) in *Marxists Internet Archive*. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/memorial.htm>>.

openly condemn the government. However, this cautious and conciliatory pose may have been necessary for the memorial to those who had fought for the revolution. Also, though Kollontai commended the progress made in the March Revolution, like Trotsky, she urged the workers to continue the revolution to its final socialist conclusion.

Trotsky's commentary on the ineffectiveness of the Provisional Government would be echoed by Bolsheviks in the months to come as soldiers tired of the war while the government ordered a new Russian offensive and peasants awaited the land reform necessary to their survival. He demonizes the liberal politicians of the new government, chiding them as their actions have not "fed the hungry...not healed the wounds of the people" and arguing that they seized power specifically to prevent the working masses from forming their own government.³ While this criticism was published in New York while Trotsky was living outside the country, and was full of references to Marx and the failed socialist revolution in Prussia, other Bolshevik activists would echo this cry in the months to come in ways more accessible to the poor and uneducated Russians who formed the bulk of the population.

Kollontai, in a speech in December, after the Bolsheviks had at last seized power, put forth the following indictment of the defunct Provisional Government: "The old, bureaucratic, bourgeois spirit that reigned over life in Russia remained unchanged." She continued to explain how the conditions of poverty and scarcity that catalyzed the March Revolution remained unreformed by the new government, while the government pursued an imperialist war against the wishes of the people. She compellingly

³ Trotsky, Leon (Bolshevik activist), "Two Faces" (March 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch09.htm>>.

described the reforms implemented by the new Bolshevik government for the “poorest and most deprived,” despite a lack of cooperation from civil servants of the former government. In short, Kollontai presents a harsh prosecution of the government she viewed optimistically in March, and at the same time caters to the popular desire for peace, bread, land, and employment.⁴

The Bolsheviks also sought to win over the public by portraying other political parties as the oppressors of the people, leaving the Bolsheviks in the role of savior. In December, Kollontai reminded the people that “there existed in Russia only one party which, from the very beginning of the February revolution, adopted a negative attitude towards the bourgeois-imperialist policies of the Cadets and social-patriots – *and that was the Bolshevik Party.*”⁵ At this later time, early radical proposals by Bolsheviks such as Trotsky and Lenin have finally paid off – poor peasants, workers, and soldiers awaiting redress for their problems had become frustrated by the slow movement of the Provisional Government on important issues of reform, including the continued governmental support for the allied war effort in World War I. Kollontai cleverly took advantage of the atmosphere of frustration to tie political opponents, including the liberal Cadets and the other opposition Socialist parties, to the failures of the government.

More importantly, Kollontai and other activists present the Bolsheviks as an effective and honest alternative to the dirty, greedy politics of opposing parties. Kollontai noted the Bolshevik slogan “All power to the Soviets” and their antiwar stance to demonstrate that they represented the will of the people, stances which she claimed

⁴ Kollontai, Alexandra (Bolshevik activist), “Why the Bolsheviks Must Win” (December 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/bolsheviks-win.htm>>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

met with opposition in the face of the bourgeois government's instincts for self-preservation at the cost of ordinary people.⁶ Months earlier, Lenin contrasted his fellow revolutionaries in the Soviet, who in a "calm, consistent, and dignified manner have decided to 'take steps'" in response to a problem left unresolved by the Provisional Government, to the corresponding volatile and inefficient response by liberal leaders.⁷

As another part of their strategy to gain public support, the Bolsheviks sought to use the press to their advantage, in part by condemning sources of information that printed political commentary opposed to Bolshevik policies. Even from his post outside Russia, Trotsky sought to discredit the liberal press, which he said was "amazingly stupid when they come to deal with mass-movements."⁸ Trotsky seeks to portray the liberal press as ignorant of the needs of the strikers and mutinous soldiers whose dissatisfaction originally forced the destruction of the tsarist regime, and he set up his own radical viewpoint as the only one representing the revolution.

Likewise, Lenin derided publications of the liberal press. Political discourse in such publications was often quite pointed: in writing of their support for Miliukov's note that described his intention to honor tsarist Russia's treaty with the Allied Powers and continue fighting in World War I, the publication *Novoe Vremia* wrote "We think that, with the exception of the Bolsheviks, all Russian citizens will consider the basic thesis of

⁶ Kollontai, Alexandra (Bolshevik activist), "Why the Bolsheviks Must Win" (December 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1917/bolsheviks-win.htm>>.

⁷ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (Bolshevik activist), "Two Worlds", in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/06.htm>>.

⁸ Trotsky, Leon (Bolshevik activist), "Two Faces" (March 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch09.htm>>.

yesterday's note a correct one."⁹ This liberal publication often published such opinions that opposed the Bolsheviks' radical antiwar views. In response to the liberal editorial slant of *Novoe Vremia*, Lenin wrote of "the world of the capitalists, *Rech, Russkaya Volya, Novoye Vremya*, dark hints, vile insinuations against the socialists."¹⁰ In this battle of the press, he protested socialist innocence in the face of unfair slanders from these puppets of the liberal regime. In doing so, he attributed counterrevolutionary oppressive tendencies to the opposition while further lauding his own party.

Ultimately, the Bolshevik party's attempts to appeal directly to the people and control perceptions of other parties and the press were successful, particularly compared to the actions of other political groups of the time. The Bolsheviks attained a reputation as the champions of peace and the rights of workers and peasants, while other parties suffered for siding with the failing and unpopular government and attempting to restrain mass action of the people.¹¹ Throughout the period between the February and October Revolutions, ordinary Russian citizens voiced their complaints against the government, which did not provide radical enough change to suit many of their needs. One worker complained that the new government, just like the old, imposed harsh military discipline and protected the private property of the bourgeoisie, who were "greedy predators making off with the products of our labor."¹² Indeed, early in the revolution, Aleksandr Kerensky, speaking as a representative of the Provisional

⁹ *Novoe Vremia* (liberal publication) on the Miliukov Note (April 21, 1917), in Robert Paul Browder and Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents, Volume 1*, doc. 1061, p. 1236

¹⁰ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (Bolshevik activist), "Two Worlds", in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/06.htm>>.

¹¹ Kort, Michael. *Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*. 6th ed. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006. 100-04

¹² Zemskov, A. (worker and farmhand), "Letter to Minister Kerensky" (March 26, 1917) in Mark D. Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, doc. 4.1.6

Government, cautioned soldiers to maintain strict discipline within the armed forces.¹³

Such statements would validate the worker's distrust of the predatorial bourgeoisie and their representatives in the government. Thus this worker would be sympathetic to Bolshevik contention that the revolution was not over until the proletariat took control from the new liberal government, as it was clear that the Provisional Government did not represent working class interests well.

In the countryside, similar unrest occurred, along with corresponding sympathy for Bolshevik views. As peasants, frustrated by the endless war and lack of land reform, seized land from the wealthy, support for Bolshevism grew: the soldiers called themselves Bolsheviks, and informed the local peasants that "the soldiers at the front were against the government and for the Soviets. They also described the plans of the Soviet government."¹⁴ Among soldiers and peasants too, then, the Bolsheviks were effective in publicizing their particular plans for a new government, and in making these plans appealing to groups that had received little aid from the old Provisional Government. This support aided the Bolsheviks in their seizure of power when the Provisional Government ultimately fell.

As Trotsky predicted from the earliest onset of Russia's revolution against the tsar, radical socialism, as embodied by the Bolshevik party, would triumph in Russia. While the liberal Provisional Government and more moderate socialist parties floundered in their attempts to promote the new government and contain the wrath of aggravated workers, soldiers, and peasants, the Bolsheviks effectively modeled

¹³ Kerensky, Aleksandr (Provisional Government minister) on Military Discipline (March 7, 1917), in Robert Paul Browder and Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents, Volume 1*, doc. 140, p. 171

¹⁴ Naumchenkov, I.A. (Peasant), "The Year 1917 in the Village" (November 1917), in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History* <<http://soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1917village1&SubjectID=1917peasants&Year=1917>>.

themselves as a “voice of protest against the liberal attempt to rob the Revolution and to deliver the people to the monarchy.”¹⁵ By manipulating public opinion through rampant criticism of the government, other political parties, and the liberal press, the Bolsheviks managed to emerge as the representatives of revolutionary power in Russia.

¹⁵ Trotsky, Leon (Bolshevik activist), "Two Faces" (March 1917), in *Marxists Internet Archive* <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch09.htm>>.

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