

Epilogue: Lenin and the Bolsheviks Take Power

Lenin worried about entering into an alliance with the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. He thought their willingness to compromise would ruin his revolutionary agenda. His April Theses had stunned even his fellow Bolsheviks who had already pledged to support the Provisional Government. Yet Lenin believed that accommodation with the government was not possible. In fact he believed he needed to “smash” it.

The odds were against him and his party of some eighty thousand Bolsheviks. In spite of Lenin’s forceful personality, the Bolsheviks themselves had many factions and its leadership could not agree on many things. Lenin would need his vast array of political skills to move the Bolsheviks and then Russia in the direction he wanted.

What were the issues?

The continuation of the war occupied center stage of the political debate in Russia. The debate over the war took on class overtones as well. Socialists used the war to stir up further hatred and resentment of the bourgeoisie and capitalists.

“We see that the senseless slaughter and destruction of the war is essential to no one but the parasite bourgeoisie.”

—Worker’s Resolution, Dinamo Factory, Moscow

The Petrograd Soviet renounced the war aims of the former tsar and began a peace campaign that led most soldiers to declare their allegiance to the Soviet. The idea of a separate peace was dropped in favor of a position of unity for the defense of Russia while seeking a settlement.

The Provisional Government’s public declaration of its war aims were similar to those of the Soviet, but Foreign Minister Miliukov sent a note to the allies saying that Russia was

still committed to a decisive victory, thereby contradicting both the Soviet and the Provisional Government. Violent demonstrations broke out. Russia teetered again on the brink of civil war.

In the midst of this, worker and peasant unrest continued. More than half a million workers went on strike between April and July 1917 for higher wages, an eight-hour work day, and reliable supplies of food. The strikes expanded beyond the metal and textile workers to include many from barbers, to waiters, and even prostitutes. Added to this volatile mix were the Red Guards, armed groups of workers set up to protect their factories from any threat. They were heavily influenced by the Bolsheviks. By July there were some twenty thousand Red Guards in Petrograd.

Militancy also increased in the countryside. Peasants began seizing land from land-owners and the nobles and burning their houses. As land-owners abandoned their estates, peasants petitioned the Provisional Government for redistribution of land. The government decided to put off any action on the topic before a constituent assembly could be elected in November 1917.

Summer 1917

In June, Alexander Kerensky, the Provisional Government’s new minister of war, pressured the army to go on the offensive against the Germans. It was a disastrous failure. There were over 200,000 Russian casualties; the morale of the troops plummeted even further, and desertions increased.

“Why the hell do we need to take another hilltop, when we can make peace at the bottom?”

—A Russian soldier

The government had gambled that a successful offensive might unite the country in the defense of democracy. Instead they lost



Photo courtesy of Getty Images.

Demonstrators fleeing violence in Petrograd in July 1917.

hundreds of thousands of troops. Popular sentiment led to violent street protests. More than half a million took to the streets of Petrograd in early July.

The Provisional Government assumed the protests had been organized and controlled by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In fact, they had not been. Lenin was not prepared to take advantage of the angry mobs that were on the street, mobs that were filled with Bolshevik sympathizers.

The Provisional Government decided to crack down on the Bolsheviks. Orders were issued for Lenin's and Bolshevik leaders' arrests for high treason. The Provisional Government hinted that it had evidence to support the ru-

mors that Lenin was a German agent. In early August, disguised as a worker and fearing for his own safety, Lenin left for Finland and went into hiding.

“All Power to the Soviets!”

—Bolshevik Slogan

What happened when Alexander Kerensky became prime minister?

Overwhelmed by the task facing him, Prince Lvov resigned and named Alexander Kerensky as his successor as prime minister.

“The only way to save the country now, is to close down the Soviet and shoot at the people. I cannot do that. But Kerensky can.”

—Prince Lvov, July 9, 1917

The belief of the Mensheviks and the SRs that Russia was not ready for a socialist government led them to argue that some sort of national unity government with the Kadets (Constitutional Democrats) was still necessary. Nevertheless, this liberal-socialist coalition found itself in constant turmoil. The socialists were under pressure from constituents in the Soviet and the liberals by landowners, members of the military, and industrialists concerned about the breakdown of order in society. Kerensky saw himself as a national leader able to work with both the socialists and the liberal democrats. Actually, neither political group respected or trusted him.

The country continued toward disaster. Further German military successes moved them closer to Petrograd. Deserters from the Russian army roamed the streets of Petrograd.

Conservative political forces and even some Kadets longed for a restoration of law and order. In August 1917, Russian military forces led by General Lavr Kornilov moved on Petrograd in an attempted coup to restore stability and order. The bid failed in part because Petrograd railroad workers diverted and blocked the troop trains. Printers refused to publish newspapers supporting Kornilov and metalworkers rushed out to meet the troops and to explain that Petrograd was calm and they were not needed. Kornilov was arrested. The army was thrown into disarray.

“Practically speaking, in this hour of terrible danger, I can state with horror that we have no army, while the Germans are prepared at any moment, to strike the last and most powerful blow against us.”

—General Mikhail Alekseev, successor to Kornilov

How did the failure of Kornilov’s coup contribute to the rise of the Bolsheviks?

The failure of the Kornilov coup further weakened the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks played little role in resisting Kornilov, but public opinion began to swing toward them, in part because they had refused

to have anything to do with the government. Most people were sick of the war as well.

At the end of August the Bolsheviks gained majorities in the Petrograd Soviet at the expense of the Mensheviks and the SRs. By early October 1917, Bolshevik party membership had risen to about 350,000. In addition, Leon Trotsky joined the party from the Mensheviks. Trotsky was a brilliant orator and spoke nearly every day against the Provisional Government.

From Finland, Lenin sensed that the time had come for an armed insurrection and sent instructions back to Russia. Many of his colleagues doubted the wisdom of such a move. They preferred that the Soviets would simply announce that they would no longer recognize the authority of the Provisional Government. Lenin had something very different in mind.

Red October

Lenin returned from Finland and called a secret meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee on October 10, 1917. Only twelve of the twenty-one members were present. Even though many of the rank and file of the Bolsheviks were against an armed insurrection, Lenin’s powerful personality prevailed and the Central Committee voted 10-2 in favor.

Lenin imagined an immediate insurrection. Other Bolshevik leaders were not so sure that the dissatisfied masses were ready to join them.

“The resolution of 10 October is one of the best resolutions the Central Committee has ever passed, but when this uprising will take place is uncertain—perhaps in a year.”

—Mikhail Kalinin

On October 24, the takeover began. The Bolsheviks took over key government buildings, the railroad stations, and set up road-blocks around Petrograd. They also surrounded the Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government was meeting. There was almost no violent resistance and most

Petrograders did not even realize what was happening. The Winter Palace fell in the evening of the 25th; Alexander Kerensky slipped out a side door and escaped the city by car.

What happened at the Congress of Soviets?

While it was clear that the Provisional Government no longer existed, the question remained of exactly who it was who had taken power. The Congress of the Soviets met on October 25. The Bolsheviks had 300 seats out of a possible 670. Angry about the armed insurrection against the Provisional Government, Mensheviks and SRs denounced these events and walked out of the Congress. By their absence, they relinquished their chance to decide the future of the government.

“The masses of the people followed our banner and our insurrection was victorious. And now we are told: Renounce your victory, make concessions, compromise. With whom? I ask: With those wretched groups who have left us.... No one in Russia is with them any longer... here no compromise is possible. To those who have left and to those who tell us to do this we say: You are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out;

go where you ought to go—into the dustbin of history!”

Leon Trotsky, at the Congress of Soviets,
October 25, 1917

There would be no coalition of the socialist parties in the Soviet. On October 26th, it was announced that the Bolsheviks had assumed control of all government functions. Lenin was the head of the government, Trotsky became the People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs.

Civil War

Although the Bolsheviks had seized claim to the government, it was hardly the end of the struggle. In fact, it was the beginning of a civil war that would convulse Russia. Kadet newspapers called people to arms to save the revolution. Loyalist troops battled Bolshevik forces outside of Moscow.

Lenin realized that to win the Civil War and solidify his power he would have to conclude a peace with Germany and its allies, even though many of his fellow Bolsheviks opposed such a deal. In March, 1918, the treaty of Brest-Litovsk freed Russia from the war, but ceded to Germany vast swaths of the former Russian Empire including Poland, Ukraine, Finland, and the Baltic States. The Soviet Republic lost 34 percent of its population, 32

percent of its agricultural land, 54 percent of its industry, and 89 percent of its coal mines by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. For many in Russia, it was a shameful peace.

What was “looting the looters”?

The nature of the Civil War would have an important effect on how Lenin’s government would evolve. Lenin began to encourage the lower classes to take revenge against the



Photo courtesy of Jupiter Images.

Russians display placards of Lenin, Karl Marx, and Trotsky.

privileged social classes as means of enforcing social justice. This policy of “looting the looters” increased the violence and lawlessness within society. He encouraged all villages and towns to develop their own methods. This was the beginning of what would later be known as the Red Terror—a process designed to intimidate and destroy opponents of the regime.

“In one place they will put into prison a dozen rich men, a dozen scoundrels, half a dozen workers who shirk on the job. In another place they will be put to cleaning latrines. In a third they will be given yellow tickets after a term in prison so that everyone knows they are harmful and keep an eye on them. In a fourth one out of every ten idlers will be shot. The more variety the better...for only practice can devise the best methods of struggle.”

—Lenin

What forces were aligned against the new government?

In 1918, there were a number of White (anti-Bolshevik) armies aligned against the Red Armies of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks had moved their capital to Moscow, because Petrograd was under threat from one of the White Armies. In addition, Japan, Great Britain, France, and the United States sent soldiers to Russia, partly to guard war materiel sent by the allies so it would not fall into Bolshevik hands, and partly to aid enemies of the Bolsheviks. Japan was also hoping to acquire Russian territory.

Although there were White Armies in different regions of the country, they were not centrally controlled and they did not coordinate their actions. The Whites had support from the old middle and upper classes as well as the officers from the tsarist army. The Red Army also used officers from the tsarist army, but to ensure their loyalty they were paired with political commissars who had to sign all military orders and shared responsibility of military decision making. Both the Red and

White Armies conscripted peasants for their forces. In general, the peasants saw the Bolsheviks as the lesser of two evils, because of their policy of redistributing the land to the peasants. Half a million Red Army soldiers joined the Bolshevik Party during the Civil War.

What were the economic hardships of the Civil War?

Moscow and Petrograd suffered greatly during the Civil War. Millions fled from these decaying cities where there were shortages of food and disease ran rampant. Petrograd’s population decreased by 75 percent. Moscow shrank by more than a half. Huge numbers moved to the countryside where they would be closer to food supplies. Currency lost its value and barter became the primary means of exchange. Peasants hoarded grain and the Bolsheviks began requisitioning it, often by force.

“Down with Lenin and horsemeat. Give us the Tsar and pork!”

—Graffiti during the Civil War

In an effort to end these problems, the Bolsheviks introduced “War Communism.” The program aimed to end private trade, nationalize all industry, collectivize agriculture, and replace the money system with state rationing. These desperate measures were unpopular with citizens; the Bolsheviks felt their revolution was under siege. Lenin himself survived an assassination attempt in August 1918.

What was the Cheka?

In addition to having the Red Army to defend the revolution, the Soviets created the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Struggle against Counter-Revolution, Sabotage, and Speculation, otherwise known by its Russian acronym as the Cheka. Led by Felix Dzerzhinsky, it became an instrument of state terror during the Civil War. Operating outside the bounds of the law, it made arrests, tortured and executed thousands, and took hostages in areas that were suspected of favoring the Whites. One particularly frightening

aspect of the Red Terror was that at times it seemed to be applied randomly. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were trying to terrify society into submission.

“The Cheka is the defense of the revolution as the Red Army is; as in the Civil War the Red Army cannot stop to ask whether it may harm particular individuals, but must take into account only one thing, the victory of the revolution over the bourgeoisie, so the Cheka must defend the revolution and conquer the enemy even if its sword falls occasionally on the heads of the innocent.”

—Felix Dzerzhinsky, Head of the Cheka

The Cheka would become the foundation of a vast police state. Lenin did not hesitate to order the execution or deportation of his opponents. The Cheka employed more than a quarter of a million people, ran concentration camps, and executed the former tsar and his family as well as hundreds of thousands of political opponents.

What was the outcome of the Civil War?

As many as thirteen million died during the Civil War. Two million Russians emigrated to other countries. The Red Army, which had five million soldiers by the end of the war, prevailed on the battlefield.

Nevertheless, the policy of War Communism did not work. A combination of drought and the weakened economy led to widespread famine that resulted in the deaths of as many as five million from starvation and disease. Lenin was forced to acknowledge the War Communism’s failure. In 1921, he introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), which eased restrictions on private trade, and marked a tactical, temporary retreat from a socialist economy.

Against substantial odds, the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, had defeated their opponents, consolidated their power, and begun building

a new society which became the Soviet Union in 1924.

It was not to be a democracy based on civil rights and responsibilities for citizens that some had hoped for. Political parties were quickly outlawed by the Bolsheviks and political opponents were eliminated. It was the beginning of seventy years of authoritarian rule.

Stalin and the Terror

Josef Stalin succeeded Lenin after his death in 1924. Stalin ruled the Soviet Union (Russia and fourteen other republics) from 1924-53. Stalin believed that the Soviet Union had to industrialize at all costs in order to defend communism against the capitalist countries of the West. To achieve his goals, Stalin ended Lenin’s NEP and implemented a “command economy.” Under his rule, government planners in Moscow sought to control all aspects of economic activity and to direct the distribution of goods for the whole country.

Stalin was both feared and loved. Many Russians endured tremendous hardships in the name of an idealized yet unclear communist future. To strengthen his own position, Stalin carefully established himself as the ideological successor to Lenin.

Stalin succeeded in making the Soviet Union into an industrial giant. By the time of his death in 1953, the Soviet economy was second in size only to that of the United States.

What was the cost of Soviet industrialization?

Soviet industrialization was accomplished with a very high human cost. As Lenin had before him, Stalin ordered the execution or deportation of those he believed opposed him—a continuation of the Red Terror of the Civil War. Stalin directed a man-made famine against Ukrainians during 1931-1932. As many as eight million died.

In the 1930s, some ten million Soviet citizens also died in what were known as

“purges.” Perhaps a third of these were shot or perished as they were sent into exile or to labor camps in Siberia. The remaining two-thirds died of famine, cold, or abuse. Peasants suffered the most. Stalin’s policies forced them to give up their land and join huge state-run farms. In addition, peasant traditions were smashed and the Russian Orthodox Church was deprived of its authority, thousands of clergy and faithful were killed and lost property. Other religions also suffered.

Nonetheless, Soviet industrial might helped the U.S.S.R. defeat Nazi Germany in World War II. The struggle, known there as the Great Patriotic War, left roughly twenty-seven million Soviets dead. The Soviet soldiers are credited with having destroyed the bulk of Hitler’s forces at great cost to themselves.

What was the Cold War?

After the defeat of Hitler in 1945, the

Soviet Union and the United States began a confrontation that would last for four decades. This world-wide struggle pitted Marxism and totalitarianism against the liberal ideology of capitalism and democracy in a battle for the world’s hearts and minds. During this period, known as the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the West devoted vast resources to their militaries, but never engaged in direct military action against each other.

In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved and cast aside its socialist economy and government. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had implemented democratization and political openness as part of a program to restructure and revitalize a stagnant economy. These reforms did not have their intended effect. Instead, they began a series of political events that led the Soviet Union to dissolve itself. In its place were fifteen independent countries whose political ideology had collapsed.

The events of 1917-18 in Russia had profound and far-reaching effects. The Soviet Union initially followed the course laid out by Lenin and went on to utilize the state to develop mighty industrial, military, and scientific capabilities. The Soviet Union became a military superpower feared by the world. It was the first nation to put a man in space. At the same time, the power of the state over individuals was nearly absolute.

As long as it endured, the ideology of the Soviet Union presented a challenge to the political and economic values of the states of the West. To many, Marxist-Leninist ideology now belongs in the “dustbin of history.” But the effects of the Russian Revolution can be felt to this day.

History’s lessons also raise important questions. It is worth considering why those with aspirations of building a liberal democracy in Russia failed to do so in 1917. What conditions existed that allowed Lenin to grab the reins of power and put into place a totalitarian state and not a democracy? What are the roles of citizens in political transitions? What lessons exist for us today as societies undergo political change?